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Politics and Creative writry : Conrad's "Nostromo" and "The Secret Agent" & "Warren's" All the king's Men

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All through this paper, some three core texts are made use of ; namely, Joseph Conrad's Nostromo (1904) and The Secret Agent (1907), and Robert Warren's All the king's Men (1946). However, the discussion is by no means confined to these three works ; a broader outlook is in fact required to cope with the different aspects that relate to a research of this kind. This is perhaps why the present paper will have to go beyond the core texts and attempt to find elsewhere other salient points that can meaningfully add to the main ideas contained in the research.

It is perhaps clear that the phrase " political novel" can become a tricky one in a number of ways ; particulary, when the unwary might be lured to ideological generalizations only to neglect the composition of the work of art at their peril. It is therefore convenient to quote as one of the preliminaries of our discussion the definition Howe suggests for the "genre". As he writes, the purpose of the political novel should be help.

"show the way in which politics increasingly control a certain kind of novel ... [i.e., it is] a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role in which the political milieu is the dominant setting"(1).

Howe is, however, aware that the political novel is still "a work of internal tensions" ; and to be a novel at all, it will have to "contain the usual representation of human behaviour and feeling"(2) in other words, the political novel will not necessarily transform into some sort of political treatise in one way or another. On the contrary, Nostromo, The Secret Agent and All the king's Men introduce us to a complex of personal stories that remain reminiscent of the drama one finds in real life so to speak. As Warren puts it in his famous essay on Conrad a "philosophical" novelist seeks in the first degree the meaning of particular experience no matter how vivid and breath-taking the mere recounting of the experience may appear(3) Rather than resorting then to smug and safe definitions the political novel can be in many ways subsumed under the distinction which Walter Allen draws between two models of novel-writing which, by themselves, call for two types of novelists : the sophisticated and the naive :

"The old oligarchy, a dreary alliance of New Orleans businessmen and upstate planters controlled by the utilities, the railroads, and standard Oil of Louisiana, had run things without serious challenge almost since Reconstruction. No state had so high a proportion of illiteracy..... No state treated its children worse... Half a century of pent-up redneck rancor was awaiting release"(4).

In the above circumstances, pragmatism was not quite a dirty word, and the man of action rather than the man of ideas could appeal more to the

(1) Howe, Irving, *Politics and the Novel*, New York, 1960, p. 16-17.

(2) I bid, p. 20.

(3) Cf. Warren, R.P. *Selected essays*, New York, Random House, 1951, p. 58.

(4) Shlesinger, Arthur M. Jr., in, Blotner, Joseph, *The Modern American Political Novel*, Austin : University of Texas Press, 1966, p. 194.

electorate. In fact, when Senator Long ran for Governor for the second time in 1928, his slogan was "Everyman a king but no man wears a crown" ; and in a well-known lament under the Evangeline Oak, the Senator spoke : against passivity and lack of initiative :

"And it is here undr thifs oak [he declaimed] Evangeline waited for her lover, Gabriel, who never came.... but Evangeline is not the only one who has waited here in disappointment" (5).

Long's "people" had also waited for schools, roads and services ; yet, with no avail. In the end, Huey P. Long Jr. finished by carrying fifty-six of sixty-four parishes ; a landslide victory in American or any other terms.

Both Conrad and Warren have then rendered the "truth" ; yet this would not mēan an enslavement on their part to what T.S. Eliot once called the "historical fact". In All the king's Men, for example, the split between the man of idea and the man of fact... between Adam Stanton and Willie Stark... represents further the division of the age and the same split is extended in may of the other characters who seem to be two people ; including the narrator himself, Jack Burden. It is as if everyman were facing the two problems of finding identify and expiating guilt ; and in this context, one should perhaps view Warren's work against those of other Southern writers who commonly belong to the "Fugitive Group". All share neo-agrarian tendencies ; and in their bi-monthly and short-lived periodical published at Nashville, Tennessee, they have always mounted an attack on what they called "the high caste Brahmins of the old South" (6) Warren explains in 1956 some of the group's ideals :

"the machines disintegrate individuals so that you have no individual sense of responsibility and no awareness that the individual has a past and a place. He's simply the voting machine ; and he's everything you pull the lever on if there's any voting at all..."

(5) Ibid. p. 196.

(6) Cf. Hart. James. *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, New York : Oxford University Press. 1948. p. 264.

[the movement] was a protestagainst certain things : against a kind of dehumanizing and disintegrative effect on your notion of what an individual person could be in the sense of a loss of your role in society"(7).

All the king's Men protests, against most of the above things. It is no documentary work, though ; it is largely the work of a conscious artist who reiterates, in his poetry, short stories and novels, the story of man's search for identity in society. Guilt and the acceptance of the past are also an inevitable property of identity, and, consequently, they are conducive to a better tomorrow, one would say. As Warren puts it in Brother to dragons, the verse novel he published in 1953.

To Adams, my old enemy and friend, that
 gnarled greatness long ago
 I wrote to him, and said
 That the dream of the future is better
 than the dream of the past
 Now I should hope to find the courage
 to say
 That the dream of the future is not
 Better than the fact of the past, no
 matter how terrible
 For without the fact of the past, we
 cannot dream the future⁽⁸⁾

(7) Warren, R.P., in Purdy, R.R. (ed) Fugitives Reunion : Conservations at Vanderbilt, Nashville : Vanderbilt University Press, 1959, p. 209-10.

(8) Warren, R.P., in, Books, Cleanth, The Hidden God, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1963, p. 103.

At the end of All the King's Men, we are also reminded that the creation of evil is "the awful index of God's omnipotence"⁽⁹⁾ and while Willie and Adam die unfulfilled, Jack completes the spiritual voyage. He is one of the very few who manage to move from sin to recognition and from guilt to redemption and rebirth.

Earlier in Nostromo, Conrad had asserted in a similar vein the need for a humanizing ideal, a moral force without which man's actions seem pointless. This is why Dr. Monygham who, for once has had to undergo a nightmare at the hands of Father Beron, Bento's chaplain who conducted the interrogation of political prisoners, experiences rebirth in the long run. He acts disinterestedly to save another person. He is no longer the slave of his past ; and in this way, he stands in his own right to represent Conrad who attacks the malaise of the modern world ; namely, the logic of economic growth devoid of a moral principle. As Monygham puts it :

"There is no peace and no rest in the development of material interests. They have their law, and their justice. But it is founded on expediency, and is inhuman ; it is without rectitude, without the continuity and the force that⁽¹⁰⁾ can be found only in a moral principle".

In technical matters, Nostromo represents as well one further step in the deformalization of the novel which will later on attract the greatest writers in the twentieth century. In Part I of the novel, the impressionistic technique is largely made use of so much so that it is difficult at times to identify with any one figure and use him as a possible observation post, consider also in this respect the changes in the point of view that occur in the first chapter of Part III and amount to some ten times. In fact, an astute reader such as André Gide, who allegedly learned English to read Conrad, entertains some misgivings concerning Nostromo. He finds it "boring" in comparison with Lord Jim which, for him was the apex of Conrad's achievement. Conrad, in turn, replies in a letter dated June 21, 1912 :

(9) Warren, R.P., All the King's Men, New York, Harcourt, 1946, p. 462.

(10) Conrad, Joseph, Nostromo.

"Je crains, mon cher, que vous ne trouviez "Nostromo" bien mal fait et bien difficile à lire-même ennuyeux. C'était un four noir, vous savez. Moi, j'ai une espèce de tendresse pour cette énorme machine. Mais elle ne marche pas. C'est vrai. Il y a quelque chose qui empêche. Je ne sais pas quoi"(11)

Narration by "conjecture" and the method of accumulating bits of information at different stages in the novel have their advantages for a highly imaginative novelist in the way Conrad is. He does not dispense with realism because, anything, however conjectural, can still be visualized. Yet, on the other hand, the method frees the writer from the pretence that he should be giving an authentic report, as Guerard elaborates :

"The boring obligation to demonstrate authority has been largely removed. For the authority is now of the speculative mind free to wander in space and time, and always alert to potentiality as well as hard evidence"(12)

In many way, both Nostromo and The Secret Agent have indeed given Conrad the opportunity to move far beyond the ordinary sea story. The latter had been a simple affair where the main concern would be to present facts about an exotic scene. Yet, The Secret Agent, by itself, heralded in the serious psycho-political mystery novel which we know of in our time. Also, in spite of the partly irritating experimentation with the impressionistic technique in Nostromo, the novel remains readable. Conrad gives vent to some of his strong and unshakable political convictions. Some of these are his mistrust of the "military-industrial complex", so to speak, his abhorrence of autocratic and perhaps also a certain "Western bias" which Thomas Mann-did not fail to observe (13).

(11) Karl. F.R. Conard and Gide, A. "Relationship and a Correspondence". in Comparative Literature University of Oregon, vol. XXIX, Spring, 1977, n° 2, p. 157.

(12) Guerard, Albert J. The Triumph of the Novel, New York, Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 337.

(13) Cf. Mann, Thomas, "Conrad's the Secret Agent", in, Stallman, R.W. (ed). Joseph Conrad : a critical symposium, Michigan State University Press, 1960, p. 229.

In Nostromo, Conrad is in fact so confident in his attitudes that commas and other punctual pauses sometimes disappear. The rhythm flows in a way that decries the marks of punctuation as instruments of hesitation or indecisiveness. This point is pursued further by Guerard, who argues that, in that novel, one can easily recognize Conrad's "magisterial controlling voice" ; a voice "absolutely assured in its rhythms". Charles Gould, Martin Decoud or even Holroyd, as Guerard explains, are able to take a long distant view which "they express in balanced periods, and in rhythms which exhaust themselves on the final world". This is, for example, how Decoud voices his complaints against the bad lot he shares with his country men :

"There is a curse of futility upon our character : Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, chivalry and materialism, high-sounding sentiments and a supine morality, violent efforts for an idea and a sullen acquiescence in every form of corruption. We convulsed a continent for our independence only to become the passive prey of a democratic parody, the helpless victims of scoundrels and cut-throats, our institutions a mockery, our laws a farce - a Guzman Bento our master!"(14)

In Conrad, there are, furthermore, certain dislocations of time, elaborate shifts and breaks in the narration. Throughout the narrative, he transmutes the past slowly and minutely in the present in a way of lifelikeness. Ford, who collaborated with him for some time, will throw some light on Conrad's "faulty" or "eccentric" chronological order when he observes that, for both of them, it became evident that

"What was the matter with the novel, and the British novel in particular, was that it went straight forward, whereas in your gradual making acquaintanceship with your fellows you never do go straight forward... you must first get him in with a strong

(14) Cf. Guerard, Albert J. The Conradian Voice in Sherry, Norman (ed.) Joseph Conrad : a Commemoration. London, Macmillan, 1976. p. 8-10.

impression [your acquaintance or hero], and then work backwards and forwards over his past"⁽¹⁵⁾.

Conrad himself adds in the splendid preface to *The Nigger of Narcissus* that the aim of the art, as he sees it, is :

"To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour"⁽¹⁶⁾

In other words, Conrad would not let the reader see every-thing even through a fog ; and *Nostromo* or *The Secret Agent* are obviously the result of a leisurely reflective process which Conrad reserves for his ampler and more meditative novels. The reader will have to reckon with a method of narration that would not cram all information since the very start ; yet, in a way, the myriad of impressions would finally add to our understanding of the major themes in both novels.

Also, Warren in *All the king's Men* resorts to flash-backs and chronological looping with some little inside stories that may seem to branch off the main line of events. Quite a good part of the novel elapses before we are introduced to the full particulars about the relationship between Anne Stanton and Jack Burden. The Cass Mastern story - so irrelevant for the London edition that it does not print at all - is, however, central to the main theme. Man must take care to move and act, accepting the full responsibility of his acts. Further more, cass's view of the world prepares the way for Jack's view ; a world in which quiet and innocence intermingle ; in which men must live in the agony of the will and not under the spell of the Great Twitch ; Jack's belief in a mechanistic determinism exercised by the mere accident of circumstance.

(15) Ford. Madox Ford, in, Beach. Joseph Warren. *The Twentieth Century Novel*, New York : Appleton, 1932. p. 360.

(16) Conrad. Joseph. *The Nigger of Narcissus*, 1897. Preface.

For Warren, time becomes as real as history ; and Warren's men seem to be voyages in a stream of time that is always present in its continuity. For him, as for other Southern writers in the twentieth century, the setting assumes a heavy symbolic existence. The symbols are in many cases elements of the setting. When Governor Willie Stark is driving with his entourage along the road himself has been responsible for building, we are introduced, scene after scene, to the impoverished life which the rednecks of the country side lead. They constitute the major part of Willie's vote ; yet their hard life contrasts sharply with the new highway . It is Willie's limousine and the frivolous people inside it. Willie has indeed travelled a long distance up ; yet the farms with their field workers still suggest his humble origins. He might have been the man of the people ; but, whether he worked for the people or still belongs to the people is a different issue to be debated.

Apparently, the first paragraphs or pages in Warren's work introduce the major themes and symbols to be further developed. The style of prose also contributes to the mood ; a multitude of short co-ordinate clauses that come one after the other and are joined by the same conjunctions each time. The whole opening pages should convey to the reader the sense of a drive through Louisiana on a hot day with one image after another. However, All the king's Men is no discussion of American politics, no more than Hamlet is a discussion of Danish politics. It is true that the author is concerned at the outset of action with electioneering and political manoeuvring ; the real subject though is the nature of man. The "his-torical" novel remains for Warren one way of writing the serious novel of ideas. He explains in his own words why he sometimes prefers to opt for the immediacy of one particular historical event :

"Someone will say, "Why do you write historical novels ? 'I say, 'I don't. I write very few.' They say, 'All the king's Men.' Well, Historical, my foot! I was a grown man. I don't think they're historical novel. What I'm trying to find is what happened, something that has the distance of the past but has the image of an issue. It must be an image, a sort of simplified and distant framed image of

an immediate and contemporary issue, a sort of interplay between that image and the contemporary world"⁽¹⁷⁾

The sensory element and preoccupation with the setting, intensely southern in Warren, is likewise one of the traits to be found in Conrad. Conrad had earlier avowed, in the "Preface" to The Nigger of Narcissus, that what he was trying to do, was to attempt,

"by the power of the written word to make your hear, to make you feel - it is, before all, to make you see".

In fact, Part I in Nostromo abounds in pictures of the Sulaco scenery and its coastal islands, the Isabels, and all through the novel, the physical surroundings of the landscape are not missed in the slightest degree. At times, the richness of detail has even given rise to complaints that Nostromo is at least two hundred pages too long"⁽¹⁸⁾ Yet, as Warren points out, the setting of the story is highly significant :

"The serrated wall of the Cordillera, hieratic and snow-capped, behind the campo, the Azuera and the Golfo Plac define a little world that comes to us complete as a microcosm, we may say, of the greater world and its history"⁽¹⁹⁾

One would argue more that both Warren and Conrad are dealing with history and politics in under discussion ; yet, as previously hinted, both attempts to look within the self and the impressions they discover are quite unrelated to anything else that might go on in a traditional novel. Virginia Woolf, in her classic statement on the novel in Modern Fiction, her 1919 essay, had in fact dissociated Conrad, together with Hardy, from her charge against the "ill fitting vestements" of the traditional novel and of the Edwardians, H.G.

(17) Sale, Richard B. An Interview in New Haven with Robert Penn Warren, *Studies in the Novel*, vol. II, n° 3, Fall 1970, p. 347.

(18) Cf. Guerrard, Albert J. *Conrad the Novelist*, London. Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 203.

(19) Warren, R.P. "Essays", op.cit., p. 55.

Wells, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy. There might be no central figure round which the events cluster, no definitive line between the ones who "walk the line" and the others who do not ; yet, in Conrad, as well as in Warren in this respect, there is a feeling for form, an insistence on design that adds coherence to the whole work in the end. The fragmentary fashion in which the main characters are introduced in Nostromo recedes a great deal when Decoud's letter in Part II securely establishes the connections between people and interests. By the beginning of Part III, we are completely aware of the intentions of characters, and we are left to enjoy the twists of fortune during Sotillo's short sojourn in Sulaco.

In Warren as well, the parallelism that exist between many of the protagonists helps relate what might appear as a dissouant arrangement of interludes to the main theme of the work. There is, to mention but a few examples, the parallelism between Jack Burden and Willie Stark, between Willie and Adam, between Anne and Saddy Burke, and between both of the latter and Lucy Stark, the domesticated wife of the Governor. Further more, some sort of "symbolic naturalism" was required to add dramatic significance to the disparate physical details. "Symbolic naturalism" is not a contradictory term ; for as Bentley contends, "a naturalistic picture of things becomes symbolic if it well enough done. "Bentley refers also to the falsehood that the naturalistic method will have to imply "amorality, not to say prosaic dullness, excessive and mere factuality"(20).

For Warren, even such a little episode as the Lobectomy Operation performed by Adam at Stark's medical center can be taken to bear upon the main theme of the novel-that of rebirth. In the words of Simmons :

".....by its nature, the operation stands as a symbolic representation of the theme of division so pervasive throughout the book and, in retrospect, may be viewed as one step toward the

(20) Bentley, Eric, The Meaning of Robert Penn Warren's Novel's, in The Keynon Review, vol. 10, 1948, p. 422.

resolution of this conflict.....the man, in effect, has experienced a rebirth ; but, as Warren makes clear, this is an aborted rebirth, a death-in-existence"(21)

similarly, the silver of the mine, the real hero of Nostromo, is described as it descends the mountain as a "stream of silver" ; one more symbol to indicate how the phenomenal world can assume new meanings because of its association with material interests. Also, in The Secret Agent we are left in no doubt at the very ?! and about the futility of the Professor's efforts. He walks "frail" and "insignificant" ; with no future as Conrad adds. Yet, he is still a dangerous man who passes on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men".

In brief, although we may discern certain elements of naturalism in both Conrad and Warren, they would nowhere sympathize with the Naturalists' notorious hostility to form. The naturalist in both of them consists only in turning to the external world to observe life objectively and record it in an impersonal language characteristic of modern science. We have Warren's own account of how a naturalist can work :

"The naturalist novelist took science as the source of his method and his philosophy, his method was professedly, objective and transcriptive ; he was concerned with fact, not value. Motivation of human conduct was to be understood in terms of biology, biochemistry and such"(22)

The symbolist strain comes though, and impels both Conrad and Warren to turn inward onto the protagonists' ego, in an attempt to delineate what in their nature is idiosyncratic or peculiar. On the whole, the meaning of the story, for both, would not reside inside the facts only ; mostly, in fact, outside it, like a "mist lit up by a light" The actual words, according to Megroz, come in the introductory part of Heart of Darkness :

(21) Simmons, J.C., Adam's Lobectomy Operation and the Meaning of All the king's Men, PMLA, vol. 86, 1971, p. 84-88.

(22) Warren, R.P., in, Bohner, Charles H. Robert Penn Warren, New York : Twayne Publishers, 1964, p. 80.

"The Yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin the yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel, but outside, enveloping the tale, which brought it out, only as a glow b ring out a haze, in the likeness of one of those mistly haloes that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine"(23)

Furthermore, some elements of romanticism can be observed in Warren ; once more, not in the traditional definition of terms. It has to be remembered in this connection that the literary group out of which Warren sprang, the Southern Agrarians, fought a constant battle against the practice of literary romanticism ; and in a well-known essay, Warren spoke in defence of an impure poetry which would not neglect the tough complexities of experience(24) Perhaps, romanticism, ans applied to Warren, can be understood in the context of Norris's well-grounded distinction between Reallism and Romanticism. He views the situation in the following way :

"Romance, I take it, is the kind of fiction that takes cognizance of variations from the type of normal life. Realism is the kind of fiction that confines itself to the type of normal life. According to this definition, then, Romance may even treat of the sordid, the unlovely, as for instance, the novels of E. Zola (Zola has been dubbed a Realist, but he is, on the contrary, the very head of the Romanticists)..... Realism stultifies itself. It notes only the surface of things"(25)

In keeping with the above definition, All the king's Men does not exclusively provide one side of the relationship between Romanticism and reality ;

(23) Cf. Megroz, R.L., Joseph Conrad's Mind and Method, New York, Russell, 1964, p. 236.

(24) Cf. Warren, R.P., "Essays" Op.cit., p. 30-31.

(25) Norris, Frank, in, Perkins, George (ed.), The Theory of the American Novel, New York, Holt, 1970, p. XXV.

that is, the total rejection of whatever does not conform with one's own expectations of the world (the case of Adam Stanton). There is more the transcendence of the dualism between reality and romance in the long and grinding, yet finally rewarding, moral evolution of Jack Burden. He is indeed qualified to tell Willie's story, as well as his own, because both relate in many ways to the idea of redemption. The latter is only achieved when man submits to the obligation to find the truth, and consequently, "Nothing.....is lost" as Warren tells us in *Brother to Dragons* :

.....nothing we had

Nothing we were

All is redeemed,

In knowledge⁽²⁶⁾

Some four decades before Warren, Conrad exhibited on his part some elements of the romanticist in the sense that his vision and outlook would not be marred by the events of the actual present. In *The Secret Agent*, furthermore, the three "revolutionaries" are ridiculed in a way that leaves us in no doubt the contradiction between their opinions and practices and, hence, the futility of their endeavours. Comrade Ossipon believes in science ; yet, he preaches that social change can be only brought about by playing upon the emotion of the masses. Michaelis, apparently optimistic about the future of the masses, refers to chaos when he is arguing for caution. Yundt the most pathetic of the trio ; he has the most terrifying idea about social change, although he is really the most inoffensive. He has never in this whole life raised a finger against the social edifice. In a word, Conrad seems to have despised indiscipline ; yet, he would not look favourably on the idea of imposing discipline by force. Discipline, he would say, should stem from within. The present paper shares his opinion that spontaneous and internal self-discipline could be the

(26) Warren, R.P., in, Brooks, Cleanth. Op.cit., p. 103.

answer to many of the economic and social difficulties in many different parts of our globe. After all, fidelity is a key word to understanding Conrad, who puts it this way in his Personal Record :

"Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas, so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests notably among other on the idea of "Fidelity".

To conclude, one should really warn against putting both Warren and Conrad in a strait jacket having to juxtapose the two of them all the time as the topic of the research necessitates. This, we think, is no compliment to Conrad, an already-attested literary figure, nor an affront to Warren whose position in contemporary American literature remains unique in some ways. He is the only writer who is probably of the first rank in poetry, literary criticism and the novel. He received the Pulitzer Prize twice ; for poetry as well as for the novel. Also, in addition to his literary achievements, he has been for long an esteemed Professor of English in many of the American Universities. Perhaps the present work can hopefully help the reader turn with more zeal and understanding to the fruits of the activity of this many-sided artist.

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