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Benevolent Bobbies, Agents of Change, and State-Sponsored Terrorists: Conrad's Policemen in *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*

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> *"Don't you know what the police are for, Stevie? They are there so that them as have nothing shouldn't take anything away from them who have."*

This paper is less an argument than a tribute to Conrad's comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the police and the public they seek to serve or to control, focusing mainly on *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* but engaging some parts of other Conrad texts as well.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow mocks his auditors, who can't understand Marlow's behavior in the Congo:

> Here you all are, each moored with two good addresses, like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites, and temperature normal—you hear—normal from year's end to year's end. And you say, Absurd! Absurd be—exploded!

Marlow's rant establishes a community-sanctioned role for the police—to maintain the status quo, to protect society from all forms of disruption. But in this quotation the police are also lumped, suggestively, with butchers, who do another kind of dirty work for all of us.

This paper will trace the representations of the police and their relationship with, and effect upon, the public briefly in *The Secret Agent* and then in more detail in *Under Western Eyes*, concluding with some thoughts on the wider implications concerning Conrad's politics and their relevance today. I find that though Conrad exaggerated the lawlessness of state officials in late nineteenth-century Tsarist Russia, his depiction of the psychological effect of despotism is accurate, and *Under Western Eyes* anticipates life in Putin's Russia.

The police in *The Secret Agent* are sometimes a benign presence. When Stevie, the novel's holy fool and moral touchstone, becomes distressed and disoriented by fallen horses in London, "a grave and protecting policeman" brings him home. When Winnie and Stevie's mother distrust the one-handed cab driver and his poor, debilitated horse (the Charon who will ferry her on her death drive), a policeman reassures her: "He's been driving a cab for twenty years. I never knew him to have an accident." But they have a more sinister role, articulated by Winnie—policemen are employed, she says "so that them as have nothing shouldn't take anything away from them who have"—leads us to Inspector Heat and especially to Winnie's husband, Verloc, the unsavory secret agent. "All these rich people," he thinks to himself at the opening of the novel as he passes Rotten Row,

> [a]ll these people had to be protected. Protection is the first necessity of opulence and luxury. They had to be protected; and their horses, carriages, houses, servants had to be protected; and the source of their wealth had to be protected in the heart of the city and the heart of the country; the whole social order favourable to their hygienic idleness

had to be protected against the shallow enviousness of unhygienic labour.

Representations of the police in *The Secret Agent* convey Conrad's appreciative but realistic understanding of their role in a relatively democratic but classist and deeply hierarchical society. The competent but harried Assistant Commissioner solves the case of the Greenwich Bombing Outrage, but he can do nothing to alter the fundamental injustice of the system. In the end, Stevie is dead; Verloc and Winnie are dead; the novel's one thorough-going villain, Vladimir, remains active in the Russian embassy; and the Professor continues to stalk the streets, "unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in a street full of men." The London police force maintain a status quo that helps generate and even justify the Professor's outrage.

The police in *Under Western Eyes*, on the other hand, serve and protect only the rich and the well-connected. They are the teeth of the ruling classes, protecting a government whose officials are all close relatives to *The Secret Agent*'s Vladimir.

Razumov, the quasi-villainous protagonist of *Under Western Eyes*, was most likely the illegitimate son of Prince K___ and the pretty daughter of an archpriest. His mother is dead, and his father refuses to acknowledge him publicly, so Razumov's only parentage is Russia itself.

A relatively comfortable student, working to become an obscure academic, he is as unformed as his physiognomy. He had "a face modelled vigorously in wax [that] had been held close to a fire till all sharpness of line had been lost in the softening of the material." Naïve, hardworking, grateful for a fleeting moment of contact with his father, Razumov is constitutionally unprepared for Victor Haldin's appearance in his room after the assassination of Mr. de P___ and unprepared and unprotected from the trauma his contact with the Russian police cause.

In this novel, the upper echelons of the Russian police are doubles of *The Secret Agent*'s Vladimir. General T___, with the statue of a fleeing young man in his anteroom, is simply a monster. Once Razumov confirms that Haldin is locked in Razumov's rooms, the general gloats over the certain capture, torture, and murder of Haldin, the innocent assassin. Another representative of the Tsar's police is the infamous, assassinated Mr. de P___, who "was bent on extirpating from the land every vestige of anything that resembled freedom in public institutions" and who "in his ruthless persecution of the rising generation . . . seemed to aim at the destruction of the very hope of liberty itself."

Before the assassination and his fatal encounter with Haldin, Razumov had had no direct experience with these monsters or with the Russian police. Yet Conrad reveals how life in a police state warps Razumov's world view. He has been culturally conditioned to embrace either Haldin's revolt or General T___'s brutal oppression. On his long walk back from his failed attempt to facilitate Haldin's escape, Razumov reveals the psychological toll of despotism. For an instant, he considers confessing his doubts to Haldin:

> [H]e embraced for a whole minute the delirious purpose of rushing to his lodgings and flinging himself on his knees by the side of the bed with the dark figure stretched on it; to pour out a full confession in passionate words that would stir the whole being of that man to its innermost depths; that would end in embraces and tears; in an incredible fellowship of souls—such as the world had never seen. It was sublime!

He believes his choices are binary: he must side with Haldin or with General T___. But living as he does in a police state, he assigns a nearly mystical power to the forces of despotism. If he sides with Haldin, he will be ruined forever. At best, he will lead the life of the poor people he passes on the street, but he fears worse: imprisonment and torture. Betrayal of Haldin and alliance with General T___ is his only other choice.

Conrad anticipates his readers' discomfort with Razumov's reaction to his predicament. "If to the Western reader," he writes, Razumov's frantic imaginings during his walk "appear shocking, inappropriate, or even improper, it must be remembered that as to the first this may be the effect of my crude statement. For the rest I will only remark here that this is not a story of the West of Europe."

If this had been a story of the West of Europe, Razumov might have returned to his room, explained his failure to Haldin, and asked him to leave. This would incur some risk, but surely less than either passionately embracing Haldin and his cause or betraying him to the likes of General T___. Instead, Razumov's inability to imagine anything other than a total acceptance of revolution or a total embrace of despotism reveals Conrad's understanding of the psychology of people living in a police state.

Razumov's trauma is set up deliberately. He has no acknowledgeable family, no independent community that can effectually protect him from the full force of the Russian state. The consequences of that trauma play out through the rest of the novel. Razumov becomes a cynical tool of Russian despotism until the very end, when he frees himself via his nearly suicidal confession.

Conrad was the great Modernist composer of trauma, which is depicted in all of his most important fiction: in *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Under Western Eyes*. Two characters in *Nostromo* suffer torture at the hands of a police state: Don José Avellanos and Dr. Monygham. Avellanos escapes enduring trauma because of his family and his place in a supportive community. Monygham, on the other hand, never fully recovers. Razumov's situation parallels Monygham's. Both are respected, ambitious young men favored within a despotic system. Both lose their favored status through no fault of their own. Both face the wrath of the police state. Monygham longs for death during his imprisonment and emerges a broken

cynic. Razumov is partially protected by the father who won't acknowledge him, but that father is an aristocrat, too insulated by his privilege to understand the consequences of bringing Razumov before General T___. Trauma turns both men into misanthropes and both are saved by a woman: Emelia Gould in *Nostromo*, and Natalia Haldin in *Under Western Eyes*. In both novels, in other words, men are crushed by despotic police states and then, in part, rehabilitated by women.

I will bring in one more illustrative parallel between *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* by matching the Assistant Commissioner in *The Secret Agent* with the Russian Chief of Police, Councilor Mikulin, in *Under Western Eyes*. Both are competent, intelligent men overseeing extensive police forces. Both serve exacting and eccentric masters: the Assistant Commissioner serves under Sir Ethelred, the Home Secretary, while Mikulin serves the Tsar directly.

Their differences highlight Conrad's understanding of the differences between an imperfect, constitutional monarchy supported by a more or less democratic Parliament and a despotic, Tsarist Russia. The Assistant Commissioner works within clear legal bounds, served by fractious subordinates who pursue their own agendas. He must be tactful with his superior, but his potential failure, or the caprice of his master, won't lead to imprisonment or exile. Mikulin is far freer, acting as the Mephistopheles who ensnares Razumov, free to employ his own monsters such as Nikita Necator. But, like the people he oppresses, he also becomes the prey of an arbitrary despotism:

> [T]he larger world first heard of him in the very hour of his downfall, during one of those State trials which astonish and puzzle the average plain man who reads the newspapers, by a glimpse of unsuspected intrigues. And in the stir of vaguely seen monstrosities, in that momentary, mysterious disturbance of muddy waters, Councillor Mikulin went under, dignified, with only a calm, emphatic protest of

> his innocence—nothing more. No disclosures damaging to a harassed autocracy, complete fidelity to the secrets of the miserable arcana imperii deposited in his patriotic breast, a display of bureaucratic stoicism in a Russian official's ineradicable, almost sublime contempt for truth; stoicism of silence understood only by the very few of the initiated, and not without a certain cynical grandeur of self-sacrifice on the part of a sybarite. For the terribly heavy sentence turned Councillor Mikulin civilly into a corpse, and actually into something very much like a common convict.

To conclude: Conrad's representation of the police in *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* reveals Conrad's nuanced understanding of their roles in the UK's parliamentary system and in Russia's autocracy. In the UK, the police help keep an imperfect, frequently unjust order frozen in place, but they are limited by the rule of law and by the traditional rights of English subjects. In Tsarist Russia, Conrad insists there was no rule of law and no one but aristocrats and the well-connected had civil rights.

In fact, Tsar Alexander II established a rule of law and a judicial system that promised equality among all Russian citizens in the Judicial Reform of 1864. Although those rights were degraded or ignored by him and by the subsequent Tsars Alexander III and Nicolas II, Conrad's claim in the novel that the Russian police could prey unchecked on Russian citizens was exaggerated. Of course, Conrad's parents were killed, essentially, by the Russians, so we might forgive his caricatures of Russian police officials. However, Russia's current adventure in Ukraine, upheld by unrelenting propaganda, military impressments, and domestic arrests and imprisonments suggest that Conrad's depiction of a cruel Russian autocracy was essentially correct and has resonance to this day.