

# Conrad, Male Tyranny, and the Idealization of Women

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THERE IS a sharp division between Conrad's portrayals of men and of women. The male characters walk a narrow path between virtue and vice, heroism and depravity. Their capacity for action and for evil can almost eclipse the female characters, who are often blandly good with neither the audacity nor the moral failings of men. Even where Conrad allows his female characters to be wicked, their actions tend to be mean and petty; they are as incapable of monstrous depravity as they are of greatness.

Conrad naturally enough has been criticized for these apparently clichéd representations of virtuous women. Frederick Karl describes his stereotypical female characters as "disastrous" (902). Neville Newhouse speaks for many critics when he says that Conrad's descriptions of women represent "a serious failure of communication. Conrad invest[s] femininity with an aura of sacred distance. His women, just because they are women, are set apart" (74). As Susan Jones points out, for many critics the explanation for this failing is plain: in drawing on his experiences as a sailor Conrad had comparatively little experience of women (59). Other explanations range from Bernard Meyer's rather strained psychoanalytic interpretation of Conrad as a masochistic misogynist afraid of predatory females to Johanna Smith's more straightforward argument that he propounded a patriarchal ideology.

The widespread criticism of Conrad's female characters has been countered by a series of revisionist writers unwilling to dismiss his women out of hand. Susan Brodie suggests that the positive qualities Conrad ascribes to women, such as their sympathy and humanitarianism, help the pessimistic writer to present a

more positive and balanced picture of humankind, thus adding to the richness of his characterizations as a whole. Other critics, who remain troubled by what they see as patriarchal attitudes in Conrad's work, have adopted a more indirect justification of his portrayals of women, defending them through some combination of three claims. The first claim is that Conrad maintains a critical distance from condescending or patriarchal ideas about women espoused by male characters and that in particular his views are not synonymous with Marlow's. The second is that Conrad has been given insufficient credit for his depictions of powerful women acting against the men who would control them. The third is that Conrad's indirect narrative technique constructs not a picture of women, but rather of male views of women, so that he is concerned with identifying a form of masculinity through the way his male characters define what is feminine.

Armed with the idea of critical distance, Jeremy Hawthorn and Peter Hyland suggest that Conrad subtly criticized patriarchal ideology by exposing its insidious effect on women. Mahmoud Kharbutli makes a similar point in his argument that *Heart of Darkness* provides an emancipatory vision of women bound by social norms rather than the limits of their nature. Ruth Nadelhaft moves in a somewhat different direction by focusing not on how women are warped or trapped by patriarchal ideology, but how they fight back. She contends that Conrad reveals the evident limitations of male perceptions of women by juxtaposing his male characters' patronizing views of the ignorance and passivity of women, with the women characters' knowledge and action.

A particular focus of interest for revisionist writers are the comments by Marlow in *Chance*. These have been roundly condemned as "misogynistic" by almost all present-day critics. (Herbert Klein is one exception.) The unusual directness of Marlow's remarks makes this issue central to the question of whether Conrad maintains critical distance from his narrator. Several writers, including Jones (73), Helen Funk Rieselbach (87-111), and Joceyln Baines (382), contend that he does. Laurence Davies argues that the Marlow of *Chance* is a semi-

comic figure very different from the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. Andrew Roberts, somewhat more circumspect, identifies a complex and ambiguous relationship among Conrad, male readers, and Marlow. All are engaged in some form of self-investigation and adaptation of their perceptions of women in an effort to free themselves from patriarchal ideology, while at the same time the views expressed by Marlow are continually appealing to their feelings of male superiority (102). Klein makes a broadly similar point, arguing that Marlow's sometimes contradictory remarks are part of a process of investigation in which the reader is invited to join.

Several critics have seen the inadequacies of male understanding of women in Conrad's novels in the context of Western imperialism. There is wide consensus that Conrad's novels are historically accurate in depicting imperialism as a predominantly white-male affair, so that when he writes of imperial adventure his novels are bound in with contemporary Western ideals of masculinity. There is also frequent agreement that Conrad sometimes describes imperial domination as analogous to male domination over women (Bode 22; Nadelhaft 9; Elbert 134). What is more contentious is the extent to which Conrad is complicit in the process of imperialism. This question is closely tied to the question of Conrad's views on women as both imperialism and female subordination are seen as being supported and justified by a patriarchal power structure. Priscilla Walton argues that *Almayer's Folly*, Conrad's first novel, provides a covert critique of imperialism through Nina's attempt to go beyond her white and Malay parents' efforts to define her within their culture. Similarly, Rebecca Stott contends that Conrad subverts imperialism just as he subverts conventional relations of male dominance. Other critics, including Padmini Mongia, Nadelhaft, and Roberts suggest a less clear cut, more ambivalent picture, with Conrad torn between accepting and repudiating patriarchal relations with colonized subjects as with women. Beyond this middle position are the uncompromising followers of Chinua Achebe's influential criticism of Conrad as an exponent of racism. Scott McCracken, for example, contends that although Conrad's descriptions of the indigenous inhabitants of the

tropics are revealing of contemporary concepts of masculinity, they are, nonetheless, "distorted and racist" (26).

The analysts of Conrad's understanding of women and gender have illuminated aspects of his work overlooked by other critics who too quickly have condemned Conrad's female characters as insipid, without investigating why Conrad portrays them as he does. Nadelhaft's identification of Conrad's concern with women as opponents and victims of domestic tyranny is particularly telling. Where some revisionist critics have been less successful, however, is in their efforts to see Conrad's work as presaging late twentieth-century concerns and attitudes about gender relations that are derived from liberal, feminist, socialist, and postmodern critiques of society. Conrad fits uneasily into this framework. He is a writer of a deeply conservative if not chauvinistic attitude of mind. He believes that men and women are different, that action is largely a male preserve, and that women are defined by their nature in a way that men are not. He is also a believer in chivalry, and identifies, unequivocally, with Marlow's most "misogynistic" statements. Despite this conservatism, I will argue that Conrad's ideas are nonetheless profound.

The framework of assumptions used by many revisionist critics of Conrad tends to exclude such a possibility. Chivalry, for example, may not be admitted to serve any function other than in the service of the patriarchal subordination of women (Roberts 101). "Patriarchy," in turn, may never be used in conjunction with "theory" or "philosophy," but only with "ideology" and its negative connotations of legitimizing inequitable power relations. Conrad, therefore, is able to be profound only as a critic of patriarchy, never as its defender. (Nadelhaft 12; Roberts viii). Indeed, to admit that Conrad might support chivalry, and therefore patriarchy, leaves him open to a whole series of unfavorable word associations, derived from Gramsci and Foucault, which implicate him in a nightmare world of "hegemonic masculinist ideology" with its "dominative panoptical strategies" (McCracken 38; Stott 40). This tendency to reduce Conrad's thought either to support or criticize hegemonic ideology does not do justice to the lively intellectual and moral debates that took place while Conrad was writing. J. A. Hobson was criticiz-

ing imperialism; the campaign for female suffrage was gaining momentum. The list of competing ideas in circulation could be extended indefinitely, but it is enough to mention a few of the contemporaries Conrad writes or alludes to in his letters—Hilaire Belloc, Roger Casement, Maxim Gorky, H. G. Wells—to evoke something of the variety of dissenting voices during the period. Conrad's views, therefore, are better understood as being formed in an atmosphere of diversity and plurality rather than hegemony.

Some of the critics who take the position that Conrad's views on patriarchal hegemony are ambivalent adopt a teleological analysis of Conrad's thought as groping towards ideas of which he is only partly conscious. They (female critics) *know* that patriarchy in all its forms is bad, or are doing their best to know this (male critics). Conrad, it is assumed, is struggling gamely towards the same realization, while at the same time he is unable to free himself fully from the powerful grip of patriarchal ideology and periodically slips back into its sexist assumptions. This approach to Conrad does not recognize the deliberate and largely consistent manner in which he writes on women. By locating Conrad within their own intellectual paradigm, such critics tend to overlook the way in which he incorporated his conservative views on women into his own distinctive understanding of society. To put Conrad on a continuum between being supportive, ambivalent, or critical of hegemonic patriarchy is to miss his own rather different conception of the world. To understand Conrad's depiction of women, the assumption that the objectives of male power and domination invariably underlie conservative pronouncements on gender relations must be set aside. Once this is done, it can be seen that Conrad's views on the relations between men and women, and his apparent idealization of women, are not undertaken with the aim of perpetuating male domination in the age of imperialism. Neither, however, does Conrad attack patriarchy, at least not in the sense that the word is used by modern critics of hegemonic ideology. In fact, Conrad's concerns may be best understood through a classical intellectual framework rather than one that is peculiarly modern. By putting forward an idealized vision of women, Conrad is attempting in

his own idiosyncratic way to guard against the dangers of tyranny first identified by Plato.

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To begin to analyze the relationship between Conrad's idealization of women and his opposition to tyranny, it is helpful to quote some of the more notorious comments made by Marlow in *Chance*. To the ears of some modern critics, Marlow's chief offence is his repeated attacks on the feminist beliefs and objectives of Mrs. Fyne, which he caustically renders in the following terms:

No consideration, no delicacy, no tenderness, no scruples, should stand in the way of a woman (who by the mere fact of her sex was the predestined victim of men's selfish passions, their vices and their abominable tyranny) from taking the shortest cut towards securing for herself the easiest possible existence. (53)

Marlow is not wholly unsympathetic to Mrs. Fyne, who has been subject to the domestic tyranny of her father. His comment on her doctrine is not that it is wrong but that it is impossible. Despite the evangelical vehemence of Mrs. Fyne's feminism, the world need not anticipate any such action by women feminists because of the very fact that they are female: "What prevents women . . . from 'coming on deck and playing hell with the ship' generally is . . . their femininity . . . which they think they can get rid of by trying hard, but can't, and never will" (57). Women are "a force of nature" (297), and it is not in their nature to act, at least not in the sense of the active pursuit of an artificial doctrine; their only action is that which expresses their nature. "A woman against the world has no resources but herself. Her only means of action is to be what *she is*," says Marlow (171). Later he adds that "a man can struggle to gain a place for himself or perish. But a woman's part is passive" (255). These remarks are made in defence of Flora de Barral's elopement with Mrs. Fyne's brother, a very female form of action that greatly annoys the feminist:

Mrs Fyne did not want women to be women. Her theory was that they should turn themselves into unscrupulous sexless nuisances. An offended theorist dwelt in her bosom somewhere . . . And then—for Mrs Fyne was very much of a woman herself—her sense of propri-

etorship was very strong within her; and though she had not much use for her brother, yet she did not like to see him annexed by another woman. (173)

In other words, Mrs. Fyne is hostile towards Flora partly because her action is female (that is, natural) rather than feminist, and partly because despite her beliefs Mrs. Fyne's behavior towards Flora in her earlier sympathy as now in her jealousy, has been entirely in keeping with her nature as a woman.

Throughout *Chance*, therefore, Marlow is consistent in drawing out the implications of his oft repeated claim that women are ruled by their nature. This equation of women and nature is precisely the kind of "patronizing essentialism" that critics object to (Roberts 92). However, the same close association between women and nature is present in so many of Conrad's novels that it cannot be maintained that his views on the matter are disassociated from Marlow's. The recurring female imagery of tropical landscapes, for example, is based on the association between women and nature. An evocative passage, such as the one in *Heart of Darkness* in which Kurtz's black mistress appears to be viewed by the jungle "as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul" (136), is based on the prosaic syllogism that the jungle is natural, women are natural, therefore the jungle is like a woman.

Marlow's hostility to Mrs. Fyne's feminism is, in fact, thoroughly typical of Conrad's views. As Davies says, Conrad has a conservative suspicion of all who advocate programmatic change. From this perspective Marlow's attack on Mrs. Fyne's feminism is a mild example of the strongly negative depictions of Verloc's associates in *The Secret Agent*, and Peter Ivanovitch, the socialist feminist in *Under Western Eyes*. In arguing that Conrad nonetheless distanced himself from Marlow, Davies also points out that Conrad was not an avowed anti-feminist; in 1910, he publicly supported the demand for female suffrage in Britain.<sup>1</sup> But the "feminism" criticized by Marlow is of a specific kind. He disparages Mrs. Fyne not for demanding the vote but for denying all that is distinctive in female nature, including the most noble and exalted female attributes of sympathy and love.

Mrs. Fyne repudiates these natural female characteristics as inadequate to deal with male tyranny. The problem of such

tyranny, in both private and public life, is a central theme in Conrad's work; in *Chance*, he wants to show that the feminism espoused by Mrs. Fyne provides a mistaken solution to its threat. Mrs. Fyne extrapolates from her particular experience of a tyrannical father to identify tyranny as an invariable element of the relationship between the sexes. In Conrad's view, benign female traits provide a natural restraint on women's behavior; it is therefore quite correct for Mrs. Fyne to identify *men* as liable to become tyrants in the unrestrained pursuit of their appetites. Her mistake is to assume that men inevitably relate to women in a tyrannical way. Conrad argues that alongside tyrannical men are others who admire and respect the natural qualities of women (the qualities that Mrs. Fyne would do away with). A man who recognizes the value of these qualities will not be a tyrant. Further, Conrad argues that such admiration provides men with a reason to oppose tyranny and thus, directly or indirectly, to protect women, as the morality and values that women embody are the opposite of the selfish desires and moral emptiness of a tyrant.

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Conrad's concept of tyranny is similar to Plato's understanding of it in *The Republic*. Plato's analysis of tyranny is not one that is confined to public life but extends to the tyrannical character of private men driven by desire. He describes how tyrannical men act as others dream, not because they are in an enviable position of power but because all restraints on their appetites, all sense of reason and honour dissipate and their desires range unchecked, just as a dream relaxes moral inhibitions. The tyrannical man is under the illusion that this unscrupulous pursuit of his appetites makes him powerful. In fact, he is the least powerful of men for he is a slave to his own desires (571-77).

*An Outcast of the Islands*, Conrad's second novel, contains just such a tyrannical character. Peter Willems, rather like Thrasymachus in *The Republic* and Calicles in *Gorgias*, rejects ethical conduct as being confined to "fools, the weak, the contemptible. The wise, the strong, the respected have no scruples. Where there are scruples there can be no power" (8). As the plot

unfolds, it becomes clear that far from being strong, Willems is enslaved by his desires and is completely powerless. Other tyrannical characters, such as Gentleman Brown in *Lord Jim*, also follow Plato's description. Animated by an evil that is "tearing the soul to pieces, and giving factitious vigour to the body," Brown displays the insatiable appetites and bestial behavior that Plato ascribes to the tyrant.<sup>2</sup>

Plato also contends that men of tyrannical character are "faithless" (*Republic* 576). Faithlessness is a crucial aspect of Conrad's understanding of tyranny, because if men have faith they can keep their "various lusts" in check (*Heart of Darkness* 131). Conrad sees extrinsic faith as essential to civilized conduct, arguing that it is faith in an idea or another person that takes men beyond selfishness or provides ethical standards that restrain selfish desire. As he says of imperialism

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look at it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer sacrifice to. (*Heart of Darkness* 50-51)

Despite being indebted to Plato's concept of tyranny, however, Conrad diverges from him on the question of faith for he does not accept the Platonic demarcation between appearance and reality.

Conrad, like Plato, is keenly aware of the distinction between reality and appearances. *Almayer's Folly*, his first novel, portrays "the curse of facts and the blessing of illusions; the bitterness of our wisdom and the deceptive consolations of our folly" (4), a description that serves equally well for almost everything he writes. However, in contrast to Plato, who sees the faithless character of tyrannical men as bound up with their illusions, Conrad sees lack of faith as realistic. Faith is apt to prove false. To believe in something is often to have been taken in by appearances. Conversely, to grasp *reality* is to be disillusioned and to lose faith in all that was once believed. In Conrad's view, however much tyrants may be deluded about themselves, their lack of extrinsic faith is not a distorted opinion but a realistic recognition of the

lack of fixed morality and selfish motivations among men generally—unless perchance they labour under an illusion.

Here Conrad enters the Nietzschean problematic of life after the death of God. He repudiates Nietzsche's conclusions directly in a letter that refers to Nietzsche's "mad individualism" and implicitly in *Heart of Darkness*, in which the tyrannical Kurtz resembles a Nietzschean Übermensch.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche calls for a breed of New Europeans. Kurtz's "mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (117). Nietzsche's new race are to be talented and creative. Kurtz was a painter, poet, writer, orator, and musician, a "universal genius" (83, 154). Kurtz's descent into tyranny condemns Nietzsche's solution to the death of God, but it also leaves the problem of maintaining morality without faith unresolved and reopens the debate between Socrates and Thrasymachus and Calicles. Conrad, therefore, confronts a moral and intellectual dilemma: once Nietzsche's radical scepticism is accepted, how can tyranny be avoided? If all ideals and all forms of extrinsic faith can be realistically rejected, what is there to prevent a man from dedicating his life to the selfish pursuit of his appetites? It is true that there are the constraints of law and custom: "Kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you . . . the butcher and the policeman . . . the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums" (*Heart of Darkness* 116); but what if these things are removed? Conrad investigates these questions in his accounts of white men living at the frontiers of the European empires in isolated jungle conditions beyond all civilized constraints. *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, *Lord Jim*, *Victory*, and *An Outpost of Progress* all examine this theme to some extent. The seminal treatment of these questions, however, is found in *Heart of Darkness*; here the bleak picture of the tyrannical depravity of Kurtz is relieved by the values embodied in women.

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The Belgian Congo depicted in *Heart of Darkness* is subject to the wanton viciousness of faithless "pilgrims." Kurtz, the universal genius, takes this tyranny over the native population to its furthest point. Deep in the jungle, removed from all restraint, he

has come to "preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites" that implicitly involve cannibalism (118).

Kurtz's abhorrent behavior springs from his lack of extrinsic faith. His faith lies within himself, and he presents himself as someone to be venerated, as a God to whom the villagers can bow and give sacrifice. But extrinsic faith in God cannot be replaced by intrinsic faith in self. The journey upriver to find Kurtz is into a world where those who inspire faith in others have no faith beyond themselves. Despite his gifts, Kurtz's heart, like all men's hearts, is dark because it is empty. Creativity and morality require some external objective; they cannot be sustained when their only inspiration is self-deification, and Kurtz finds that his soul contains nothing more than revolting lusts. Marlow describes the scale of these "vile desires" as "colossal" (156), with the Platonic implication that it takes a powerful erotic impulse to make someone truly great or really wicked.

Women are explicitly separated from this tyrannical male world, viewing it benignly through their acceptance of facile ideological obfuscations or through the blind faith of love. Men, Marlow suggests, should keep it that way. Thus he describes how his Aunt

talked about "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways," till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit.

"You forget, dear Charlie, that the labourer is worthy of his hire," she said brightly. It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over. (59)

Later he says of Kurtz's Intended: "Girl! What? Did I mention a girl? Oh, she is out of it—completely. They—the women I mean—are out of it—should be out of it. We must help them stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse" (115). Thus, when at the end of the novel Marlow lies to the Intended by telling her that Kurtz's dying words were her name (they were in fact "The horror! The horror!"), he maintains her

illusions, ignorance, and separation from the male world, and by extension the exclusion of all women from the affairs of men (161).

It is easy to see how this lie can be interpreted as patronizing. To dismiss it in this way, however, is to miss the crucial significance of Marlow's meeting with the Intended to the problem of tyranny in a faithless age. Marlow's lie reorders conventional associations between dichotomous ideas and metaphors derived from Platonic and Biblical sources into a new configuration. In the Western philosophical and religious tradition, good, truthfulness, reality, and light are all closely connected, so that each term is opposed not only to its own antonym but to three others as well, that is, to evil, falsehood, illusion, and darkness. Conrad challenges these associations and substitutes new ones that cut across the old dichotomies. Light is still a metaphor for good but it is connected with neither truthfulness nor reality but illusion. The misplaced faith of the Intended in Kurtz lit her face like a halo, "illuminated by the unextinguishable light of belief and love" (157). This faith was the "great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness" (158). To maintain this faithfulness requires not truth but falsehood—Marlow's lie over Kurtz's last words. For Marlow to have told the truth would have been "too dark—too dark altogether" (162). Truth is dark because it substitutes the reality of evil for the illusion of good. To lie, therefore, is to preserve what is good.

By separating what is good from what is true in a way that parallels the separation of women from men, it becomes possible for men to act to avoid the moral void that might otherwise lead them into tyranny. Female faith in men may be groundless, but it still has moral worth. Men who have realized that all faiths are illusory may nonetheless affirm that faith has moral value by acting to retain the illusions of women. Marlow lies to the Intended because he recognizes the value of her love and faith in Kurtz and acts to protect it. Female love is an ideal that faithless men can never attain, for it is a love that arises out of their nature, unsullied by the questioning and doubt that pervade the male mind. Nonetheless men are able to *recognize* this love and the faith that comes with it. Women, therefore, can provide men's

actions with two guiding purposes: first, to protect them, and, second, to try and live up to their expectations.

Marlow's meeting with the Intended occurs only after the action of the novel has taken place. His chivalrous lie has no effect on tyranny in the male world but serves only to protect the Intended from it by preserving her illusions. In his later novels, however, Conrad investigates how men who no longer have faith may nonetheless be inspired not only to protect women from male tyranny but to act against tyrants in both private and public life as well as to overcome the temptations to tyranny within themselves. This can be illustrated in *Victory* (where Lena is rescued from private tyranny by Axel Heyst), in *Nostromo* (where Atonia Avellanos and Mrs. Gould inspire men to fight against public tyranny), and in *Under Western Eyes* (where Natalia makes Razumov renounce the tyrannical desire within himself).

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When Lena is threatened by the lustful attentions of the tyrannical Schomberg, in *Victory*, Heyst spirits her away to a tropical island in a chivalrous act of pity. This relationship might appear to be one-way, with the woman dependent on the man. Lena's value, however, lies in the fact that she is able to move Heyst to decisive action despite his aloof and detached view of a world in which he sees only "the negation of all effort" (131). Without beliefs or ideals of any kind, Heyst has withdrawn into contemplative inactivity. Lena rescues him from this state of inertia by embodying moral worth that he can recognize and defend. When Heyst reflects on his actions, he concludes that "there must be a lot of the original Adam in me, after all" (131). In defending Lena, Heyst realizes his primal capacity to act; in this reworking the story of Eden, Conrad wants to define action as being as characteristic of men as female nature is of women.

Conrad investigates the political implications of his recognition that the qualities of love, faith, and sympathy in women can lead men to act against tyranny in *Nostromo*—a work in which the Hegelian notion that transformative political action is based on private passion is adapted to fit Conrad's concept of gender relations (Hegel 29-43). When the civil government of

Costaguana in Latin America, is defeated by an uprising of the tyrannical Guzman Bento, the inhabitants of the province of Sulaco secede to form a new state. The creation of this state depends on Martin Decoud, who conceives of secession, and Dr. Monygham, who pursues the idea. Decoud and Monygham are both faithless men and neither therefore is moved to action by political idealism. Rather than being motivated by public interest or by some great idea, they both are stirred by private passion, for both love and admire a woman.

Decoud is a "victim of this faithless age" (197). He has neither faith nor principles, dismisses the politics of his country as a farce, and, like Heyst, has lost all interest in man's Adamite instinct to engage in action. "He was in danger of remaining a sort of nondescript dilettante all his life. He had pushed the habit of universal raillery to the point where it blinded him to the genuine impulses of his own nature" (153). Decoud is galvanized into action, however, by a letter written in the hand of Antonia Avellanos, the woman he loves, asking him to support the Costaguana government against Bento's insurrection. Decoud responds somewhat reluctantly: "His disdain grew like a reaction of his scepticism against the action into which he was forced by his infatuation for Antonia. He soothed himself by saying he was not a patriot, but a lover" (176). Despite his continued political indifference, Decoud acts vigorously against the threat of tyranny. He procures weapons for the Costaguana government and writes propaganda on its behalf. Finally, when the government faces defeat, Decoud advocates the creation of an independent state out of the province of Sulaco.

Decoud's action is motivated not by faith in some great idea but by purely personal concerns. He does not try to create a new state because he is public spirited but because he is in love. The public motives for the creation of a new state, order, and prosperity in place of what is variously described as tyranny and anarchy, are presented as coincidental with the private imperatives facing Decoud. Thus the idea of the new state is generated through personal necessity. Decoud reasons that Antonia is too patriotic to leave Sulaco; he himself will be killed if the revolutionaries take over the province. Given this, he argues: "I am in a clearly

defined situation. I cannot part with Antonia, therefore the one and indivisible Republic of Costaguana must be made to part with its Western province. Fortunately it happens to be also a sound policy. The richest, the most fertile part of this land may be saved from anarchy. Personally, I care little" (215).

Separated from Antonia, Decoud's sense of moral emptiness reasserts itself and leads him to suicide. Nonetheless, his idea of creating a new state by secession is kept alive by Dr. Monygham, who acts for similar reasons. Like Decoud, Monygham is beyond faith and cares little for public affairs. He is, however, in love with another pivotal female character, Mrs. Gould; to save her he decides he must act to bring about a new state: "His devotion was the only thing that stood between an admirable woman and a frightful disaster. It was the sort of devotion that made him utterly indifferent to Decoud's fate, but left his wits perfectly clear for the appreciation of Decoud's political idea" (431).

Antonia Avellanos and Mrs. Gould, like the Aunt and the Intended in *Heart of Darkness*, are in a world apart from male political affairs. Antonia personifies idealism; Mrs. Gould, sympathetic kindness. In this, they both embody natural qualities of women in general. Antonia Avellanos, one of the "true creators of the New State," is "like a woman, simply by the force of what she is: the only being capable of inspiring a sincere passion in the heart of a trifler" (xxi). Mrs. Gould also epitomizes womanhood through her distinctive female intelligence and her sympathy, for "it must not be supposed that Mrs. Gould's mind was masculine. A woman with a masculine mind is not a being of superior efficiency; she is simply a phenomenon of imperfect differentiation—interestingly barren and without importance" (66-67). Their peculiar intelligence and sympathy give Antonia and Mrs. Gould their exalted status apart from the political world yet make them essential to the creation of the new state. They serve as a necessary spur to action against a tyranny fundamentally opposed to the values they embody—a tyranny of men whose cynicism and lack of faith would otherwise leave them politically indifferent and inactive.

Where *Nostromo* demonstrates how women can lead men to act against political tyranny, *Under Western Eyes* portrays how men can

be saved from their own tyrannical impulses. This is revealed in the relationship between Razumov and Natalia, the woman he loves, whose brother he has betrayed. This relationship has parallels with male-female relations in *Heart of Darkness*. Natalia's guileless trust in her brother's supposed friend resembles the Intended's misplaced trust in Kurtz. Both Razumov and Marlow feel an iconographic reverence towards a woman whose faith has a value higher than anything to be found in the world of men. Thus, just as Marlow describes how the Intended's forehead was "illuminated by the unextinguishable light of belief and love" (158), Razumov exclaims in his letter of confession to Natalia: "And your pure forehead! it is low like the foreheads of statues—calm, unstained. It was as if your pure brow bore a light which fell on me, searched my heart and saved me from ignominy" (361). This "ignominy" refers to Razumov's plan to marry Natalia and so realize the "shameful desires" and "evil passions" of his heart, from which it can be surmised that he has fallen prey to the same lustful and tyrannical drives that overtook Kurtz (359). Kurtz's allegorical painting of the blindfolded woman suggests that he recognizes the illusions of female faith, but this recognition is not enough to save him from the temptation to tyranny. By contrast, Razumov is able to recognize not just the blindness but also the virtue of women's faith. Natalia's faith in him inspires Razumov's love for her; she gives him a moral point of reference outside himself that rescues him from sharing Kurtz's fate. It is true that in punishment for his betrayal of Natalia's brother Razumov is made deaf, and is then run over by a tram, but Conrad suggests (once again like Plato) that it is better to be broken in body than to yield to tyranny in the soul.

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There is a notable difference between *Heart of Darkness* and *Under Western Eyes*. Marlow is impelled to lie to protect the Intended's illusions about Kurtz; Razumov is impelled, finally, to speak the truth. The difference between the two novels indicates a shift in emphasis by Conrad, who moved away from the idea that female virtues are inextricably bound to their illusions to stress that female nature was strong enough to withstand disillusionment

about the world of men. This shift begins to become evident in the portrayal of Mrs. Gould in *Nostromo* and emerges clearly in *Under Western Eyes* and *Victory*; both Tekla and Lena have suffered disillusionment. But although he allowed women a greater sense of realism, Conrad continued to maintain that, while women could inspire men to act, they themselves could not act in the world of men, except insofar as this action was an expression of their nature.

Tekla, the abused secretary in *Under Western Eyes*, is disillusioned by Peter Ivanovitch, but there is such a gap between her female feelings of sympathy and love on the one hand and sordid reality on the other that the only way she can act on her feelings is by retreating into private and personal relations; there is no place for them in public affairs. Thus Tekla flees the revolutionaries to care for the deafened and crippled Razumov. By contrast, the sinister Madame de S— attempts to act in this world of men but in doing so loses all female attributes.

Lena, the victim of male tyranny in *Victory*, tries to take advantage of male desire when Heyst's island paradise is invaded by the devilish Mr. Jones and his "secretary" Martin Ricardo.<sup>4</sup> Like Heyst, Jones has stepped beyond civilization and conventional morality. In contrast to Heyst's contemplative withdrawal from life, however, Jones personifies unrestrained "evil intelligence" (246). A misogynist with a theatrical horror and loathing of the very presence of women, Jones's "frightened disgust" of the female sex symbolizes the power women possess to keep men from evil in an age beyond faith (288-89). Just as Jones represents the reasoning part of the soul set loose from all moral restraints, so Ricardo represents unrestrained violent desire. It is Ricardo's passion for Lena that allows her to act by tricking and disarming him. This act expresses Lena's essential female nature. She recasts the role of Eve "the tempter" (264), using her wiles neither to corrupt man nor to save herself but to demonstrate her selfless love for Heyst.

Conrad, therefore, sees the difference between women and men as based on a distinction between nature and convention. Throughout his novels, women are ruled by their nature while men are the creators of artifice and are not bound by nature.

When Conrad describes Antonia Avellanos as being a creator of change "simply by the force of what she is," or compares Axel Heyst to Adam when he acts in the world from which he has resolved to withdraw, he implies that women are defined by what they are, men by what they do.

Once it is realized that Conrad's gender distinctions refer to the division between natural woman and conventional man, it is possible to understand his concern for the male loss of faith. Where the faith of women is an expression of their unvarying nature, male faith has no such solid anchor. Female faith provides assurance and comfort to women while male faith takes the form of an objective to strive for or a spur to action. Male faith is not an expression of man's nature, but an artifice: what men believe in they must also create. The problem for men therefore is that while action is inspired by faith, it also undermines faith. This is partly because the selfishness and greed that infests public affairs are revealed to men when they act. However, action also undermines faith in a more fundamental sense in that man's very creativity, his plasticity, his ability to go beyond nature means that he has within him a "void"—the moral emptiness discovered by Marlow, Kurtz, Heyst, Jones, and Decoud. No woman ever discovers a void within herself in Conrad's novels.

\* \* \*

Joseph Conrad's idealization of women can be best understood in terms of a philosophical debate that owes its origins to Plato's analysis of tyranny, and its urgency to Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God. The loss of faith that faces reflective men, Conrad suggests, may lead them either to renounce all interest in public affairs, or to surrender to their tyrannical drives and act purely in the pursuit of their appetites. However, Conrad contends that men beyond faith are not doomed to follow either of these nihilistic courses; through their relations with women they may come to recognize the value of female faith and the best parts of female nature, sympathy and love. By attempting to live up to the expectations of women and to be worthy of their faith, love, or sympathy, as well as to protect them, men who have lost their faith may continue to oppose the threat of tyranny. Recent

critics have, therefore, been right to reevaluate the place of women in Conrad's novels. These critics have considered how Conrad's depiction of women is related to his understanding of gender relations and to broader issues of social theory. The attempt by some critics to suggest that Conrad uses his female characters and comments on women to criticize patriarchy, however, is distorted by their efforts to recontextualize Conrad's ideas in ways that are alien to his conservatism and notions of chivalry.

Conrad's conservative and chivalrous stance does not mean that his at once idealized and naturalistic portrayal of women is simply the unexamined expression of patriarchal views. Although Conrad's novels are imbued with conservatism, it is a reflective, questioning conservatism that moves in surprising directions rather than manifests itself in reflexive ideological clichés. His depiction of women is informed by the thoughtfulness that characterizes his work in general. His idealized vision of women and even their stereotypical portrayals are not unconscious aberrations in the work of an otherwise profound writer; they are the deliberate expression of an integral part of his philosophy as it relates to the problem of male tyranny.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Davies 78. See Conrad's letter to Laurence Houseman, May 1910, in Karl and Davies, IV: 327.
- <sup>2</sup> *Lord Jim* 209; cf. *The Republic* 610 and *Heart of Darkness* 135.
- <sup>3</sup> Conrad to Helen Sanderson, 22 July 1899 (Karl and Davies, II: 188). Conrad may have just read his friend Edward Garnett's recently published analysis of how "Nietzsche's audacious and narrow road . . . ended in the madness of a colossal egoism" (747).
- <sup>4</sup> Jones and Ricardo are accompanied by a third man, Pedro, described in horrifying and grotesque terms as a hairy animal with bear's eyes, monkey's paws, fang-like teeth, and a baboon's nose. Pedro, however, harms no one. It is not the reversion to animalism that threatens civilization, but the excess of civilization in the shape of the cultured gentleman Jones.

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