

Images of Conrad's Father in *The Secret Agent*

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In the final pages of *The Secret Agent*, Joseph Conrad writes as follows: "And Comrade Ossipon raised his bowed head, beloved of various humble women of these isles, Apollo-like in the sunniness of its bush of hair . . . He walked along the street without looking where he put his feet; and he walked in a direction which would not bring him to the place of appointment with another lady (an elderly nursery governess putting her trust in an Apollo-like ambrosial head)."¹

Although the book contains no other direct references to Apollo, there are a number of indirect references to this mythological god of the sun. In Chapter II, Verloc is taking a walk and repeatedly notices horses and carriages "glorified" by the sun. In particular, he observes a butcher boy who, driving with "noble recklessness," is likened to an Olympic charioteer (11-14). Verloc's walk is itself suggestive of the sun's apparent journey across the heavens: "Mr. Verloc was going westward through a town without shadows in an atmosphere of powdered old gold" (11). As Robert Schultz has recently pointed out, "Mr. Verloc is indeed moving westward throughout the book."² The horse-whipping cabdriver who plays such a significant role in Chapter VIII may also be a representation of Apollo. Finally, if we are permitted to pronounce Verloc's Germanic name in a Germanic manner, the Apollonian epithet of "Fairlock" may refer to him as well as to Ossipon.

References to mythological beings are, of course, literary commonplaces and might be most parsimoniously interpreted in Jungian terms. However, a number of considerations prompt the suggestion that if unconscious determinants are at work here, they are of an individual, rather than collective, variety. In most pictorial, sculptural, and literary representations, Apollo is portrayed in a highly positive manner. Conrad's references are quite atypical. Despite the sunshine imagery in the passages quoted from Chapter II, the context is sinister and foreboding. The cabman in Chapter VIII is taking Stevie's mother away. Ossipon, the betrayer of women, is responsible for the death of Stevie's mother-surrogate. And Stevie's own death is a consequence of the illicit acts of

The aloof distance that seems to separate Conrad from the action in the book has been noted by E.M. Tillyard and several more recent commentators.³ Nevertheless, the pathos with which the life and death of Stevie are portrayed

¹ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1925) 309-10. All references in parentheses are to this edition.

² Robert Schultz, "The Secret Agent: Conrad's Perfect Detonator," *Midwest Quarterly* 22 (1981)19.

³ E.M. Tillyard, "The Secret Agent Reconsidered," *Essays in Criticism* 11 (1961) 309-18.

suggests that Conrad may well have felt a particular sense of kinship with this victim of multiple paternal betrayal. That Verloc is intended to be viewed by the reader as a father figure for Stevie is implicit throughout the book and becomes explicit when Winnie Verloc, observing her brother and husband walking together, muses that they "might be father and son" (187). As Conrad has the Assistant Commissioner say, the ostensibly political events that give the novel its structure actually constitute a "domestic drama" (222). The familial nature of the drama is emphasized by the connections between Winnie and each of the four Apollos. The butcher boy, casually referred to in Chapter II, takes on added significance later, when we learn that the discarded suitor for whom Winnie feels twinges of regret was the son of a butcher. In Chapter VIII, when Stevie sits in the cab with his mother and sister, he does not know that the purpose of the journey is to take his mother away from him; but Winnie knows. Toward the end of the book, there is the image of Winnie "twined round him [Ossipon] like a snake" (291), recalling the mythical battle-to-the-death between Apollo and Python. Winnie's connection with Verloc is, of course, obvious throughout, perhaps most interestingly when the two are equated with Odysseus and Penelope (183), Stevie thus becoming Telemachus in search of his father.

I want to suggest that the diverse appearances of Apollo are representations of Conrad's own father, and that the "domestic drama" reflects Conrad's own childhood experiences. In May 1861, Conrad's father left his wife and three-year-old son in order to engage in "dangerous political activity."⁴ The family was reunited some months later and lived in a house that became "a clandestine meeting place for the illegal adherents of the cause of Polish nationalism" (Meyer 23). The parallel with Verloc's store is obvious. The following May, Joseph and his parents were exiled as a result of the father's activities. During their forced journey into northern Russia, the four-year-old child and his mother became seriously ill but were forced to continue. Conrad's mother never recovered. Throughout the final stages of her lingering illness, she was nursed by her husband with such devotion that he was forced to acknowledge that "our little Conrad is inevitably neglected in the midst of all this" (Meyer 25).

When Conrad was seven years old, his mother finally died. The boy's father, who "had not hitherto been distinguished by qualities of either resourcefulness or strength," reacted with despair, referring to his son as "my poor little orphan," and behaving as if he were "simply marking time until death would carry him off, too" (Meyer 26). During the next four years, father and son were close together in many ways. Young Conrad was tutored by his father and read proofs of his father's translation of Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea*--a book that apparently made a great impact on the boy. When his father died, the eleven-year-old Conrad "announced without hesitation that one day he would become a great writer" (Meyer 93).

⁴ Bernard C. Meyer, *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967) 23. Further references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

We have, then, a father-son relationship even more complicated than usual. His father's political activities were indirectly responsible for the death of his mother (cf. *The Secret Agent*), and yet there was a closeness manifested by the boy's decision to follow in his father's literary footsteps. The intensity and ambivalence of his feelings toward his father may explain Conrad's diffusing of the paternal identity among four different characters. (It is significant that, although there are several allusions to the brutality of Stevie's real father, all of the events of the "domestic drama" occur after the permanent separation of father and son.) But why, of all possible personae, did Conrad select Apollo? The most obvious explanation has undoubtedly already occurred to those readers acquainted with the details of Conrad's life and background. "Apollo" happens to have been his father's first name.