Iago and The Underground

Order and Chaos in Literature

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Shakespeare's Iago says in *Othello* that "if the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to the most preposterous conclusions". (23) Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* (UM) says that reason is "no more than some one-twentieth of my capacity for living". (31) Somewhere, the balance had lost its poise.

The balance image is essential both to the larger question of order and chaos, and a more prosaic analysis of the characterizations of Iago and UM, in their antithetical differences, their ambiguous similarities, and the notion that one is a forerunner of the other. Conceivably, given a few hundred years, Iago could go underground.

Order and chaos are two sides of the same coin. In the above example, heads is reason, tails is base sensuality. However, to use order and chaos as literary constructs can be as arbitrary as the flip of the coin, reaching the "most preposterous conclusions". It is best to view them as the coin toss before a football game, an orientation to go from, depending on which way the wind is blowing.

Thus, in essence Iago is an orderly character. He reasons, he sees, acts but not rashly, knows what he wants and who he is, and hopes for a few disruptions in his plans as possible. In essence, UM is a chaotic character. He is self-destructive, impulsive and self-consciously unrealistic. However, it is not insignificant that Iago's order propigates chaos, nor that UM is trying to come to terms with his chaos. Essences become fleeting things, better to study the trail they leave behind. And UM and Iago are,
somehow, on the same road. They can both weigh in on the same balance.

On one level, Iago is one of the "gentlemen" that UM criticizes. He is unalienated. Even as a villain, he has a sense of communal bond. Before he is exposed, he is a respected career man. He belongs.

UM's rootlessness is a part of his essence (chaos). St. Petersburg is a mass of strangers. He is parentless and familyless. He scorns those who can associate comfortably with others, especially his school mates. He has deliberately given up the "safe berth" he was trained for, and works only to survive, feeling no attachment to his work or colleagues. He has no friends only anomie.

Iago is also able to act, that is, exercise his will power (he can also play different personas with ease, UM cannot for any sustained period, but more of that later). Iago dislikes "mere prattle without practice", (2) he would have no patience with UM's monologue.

Action even makes Iago's hours seem shorter, (51) time flies when you are "doing". Time has no meaning for UM, clocks wheeze, twenty years underground equals an evening out at a cafe. He believes a "man of action is an essentially limited character". (4) Modern, "cultivated" man, realizing the futility of action, simply "can not seriously become anything". (3) Iago's response to Roderigo (and UM) for his listlessness is "come be a man". (24)

But to UM to be a man is to float in inertia, which is even a step beyond entropy. There is no will and no power. Iago's relationship to Roderigo is significant. A "man" controls the weaker elements around him. UM cannot even stand up to servant Apallon. (Although, UM imagines than he cannot live "without tyrannizing over someone", (147) again, they are not
polar opposites but continents that have drifted far apart).

Iago can practice rational self-interest (and self-love). He can distinguish between "a beneficial and an injury". (23) The best advice is put "money in thy purse". (24) UM can do neither. Moreover, he does not know what is beneficial. He is able to find a kind of "exquisite pleasure" in suffering. He is convinced that man will turn his back on what is best. Iago would want to live in the Crystal Palace, and believing in logarithms, he would be the first to have a home computer.

Iago declares "I never found a man that knew how to love himself", (23) apparently he has been to St. Petersburg. He is the prototypical self-centered Machiavellian. UM mocks those like him who believe one drop of their fat is more precious than all of Asia. UM seeks some sort of transcendence through self-sacrifice, wanting to rout the Iago's of the world "at Austerlitz". Of course to sacrifice his self he will have to discover it first.

It is in this search for the self, self-affirmation and self-identification that similarities begin to emerge. Iago is made up of certain assumptions. Most are ironclad, some upon inspection leak a little. UM has taken some of these assumptions and turned them into crises, while retaining certain basic components.

UM's searches for authenticity through true consciousness. Iago, to degrees, is both authentic and conscious. He claims he "follows but himself". Those fellows who do likewise "have some soul". (3) For expediency's sake, he'll cover his sole with the proper shoe, but even in doing so he affirms himself, "I am not what I am"; (3) negation is self-creation. (UM finds
compromise impossible, or at least beyond his capability, "prudence is for fools" who wear "lying masks". (128)

UM does not know where his authenticity lies, which of his selves is only a Piltdown Man and which is the "missing link". He is as authentic as wet snow, ready to melt or freeze. Real life recedes before him; bookish life is artificial. But, to be sure, authenticity requires consciousness.

Iago is conscious to an extent. He seems to know himself, and to be successful in villainy, he must also understand those around him. However, his desire for omniscience takes on faustian grandeur, "let me know" (86) he declares to Othello. "I am nothing if not critical" (32) is his motto. He defines himself through his ability to see others, without them the self withers.

Whether he does see others remains in doubt. His predictions are almost always right, his ability to manipulate with words unsurpassed. His strategems are as skillful as the Turks, (13) however like their fleet, his ironclad (assumptions) can not survive the typhoon. It appears that Desdemona had no inclination to be unfaithful and Cassio is an honorable man. His cynic's view failed him. In the end, he is destroyed, becoming therefore "nothing". Iago may have been wrong.

Iago's "wrongness" could be UM's impetus for his motto "consciousness is a disease". He is hyperconscious of both himself and his environment. But consciousness corrodes. His intelligence turns in on itself like a high IQ tapeworm. Iago's phrase becomes "I am so critical I am nothing".

He understands too much to be deceived by a secondary cause, and not enough to know what to do about it. He knows too much for his "own good". He suffers because of it, which only heightens his consciousness.
Yet he is convinced man (or he) "will never give up true suffering - that is, destruction and chaos". (39) He can go into the darkness under the floorboards but a "crack in the wall" will let in too much light. Iago chose a form of "cheap happiness" as opposed to UM's "noble suffering".

Noble suffering brings with it a crisis of conscience. Iago says "virtue is a fig" (23) (whose fruit he'll pretend to enjoy if necessary, while spitting out the seeds). He declares "Tis in ourselves that we are thus or this". (23)

UM agrees with the latter statement, but chokes on the seeds of virtue. He, more than anyone, believes man must be and act himself. Yet he does not like what he likes. "I know that I cannot live without power, without tyrannizing over someone... yet... no amount of reasoning can explain anything, and so there is no point in reason". (147) Reason, that one-twentieth of life, fails. His moral epiphany occurs when he weeps to Liza, "They won't let me... I can't ... be good". (145) He can not follow "their" rules, the ones determined by his social environment, nor his own. Either makes him suffer, twin eagles arriving daily, as it is with Prometheus - father of consciousness, to make his "liver hurt". (1)

In the end, some of the gentlemen's words say it best, "although your mind works, your heart is darkened with depravity, and without a pure heart there can be no complete and true consciousness". (44) They are in fact describing Iago, despite all he knows, this he does not. UM does know it, which paradoxically (his heart is surely not pure), makes his consciousness more complete.
It could be said, thus, there is a world of difference between Iago and UM. True enough, but it is the same world, removed more in time than space. Iago is a Renaissance man, UM an Existential Man. They are both, to use the existentialist's phrase, anti-heroes.

The great leap of faith (or lack of faith, as it may be) separating the two can be accounted for by centuries. Bring Shakespeare to late nineteenth century London, with Stratford-on-Avon a mill town, and Huxley preaching agnosticism, and he might instead write Waiting for MacBeth.

However, such fancy aside, Iago could be UM's grandfather, a proud Hollenzollern producing a hemophiliac exile. His rough consciousness, if refined and inbred, could yield thin-blooded neurotics who listen to mad Russian Monks.

Mere boredom is enough, if not required. Iago says he is motivated by the sport of it. (At first, UM says the same about his "sentimental" talk with Liza). Constant success dulls sport. Iago is on a collision course either with the hangman or the underground.

Moreso, Iago carries within him the message of chaos. Below the surface, he sees seething sexuality, ambition, violence, murder, evil. Even within himself, despite his reason, vengeance and hatred cloud his judgment.

He is a prophet, a fortune teller. Othello cannot say "my parts, my title, my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly", (9) without us overhearing Iago's low chuckle. His execution removes the medium, not the message.

Iago need never be declared guilty, but just feel guilt and he could become an underground man.
If he asked himself why fill thy purse, rather than how to feel thy purse, he might "from this time forth... never speak word", (126) except to imaginary gentlemen. Chaos may never be further than an unsuspected hole in own's pocket, where money, driver's license and identification fall out and disappear.

Still, order and chaos as abstract concepts, when placed on a scale or a teeter-totter, cancel each other out. But as far as literature is concerned, its heroes (and anti-heroes) teeter nervously between the two. Consciousness pokes its own eyes out. Passion seduces reason. Virtue falls to the earth like figs.

Even as its characters disintegrate, language can rebuild them stronger, faster, better. Each crisis brings its own new vocabulary to restore order. Perhaps "chaos is come again", not when love is unfaithful, but when books are unread.

But beyond those books, read or unread, the question arises, does life imitate art criticism?

Admittedly, order and chaos exist. That coin toss is exemplary of the tension existing. Ninety 200 lb. football players are willing to let the arbitrary whim of a half-dollar flipped by a 150 lb. civil engineer determine their fates. Any time, they could simply assume possession of one (or both) sides of the field, and take it from there.

The more important question may be, do I view life as orderly or chaotic? Again I must ask, which way is the wind blowing? What are the field conditions, how's my defense? In other words, it all depends.
As far as I can tell, life hangs in the balance. In a moment it is a dropped egg - splattered orange plasma everywhere. Then the yolk's not on you, it was hard-boiled after all.

Life is an almost wholly (holy?) chaotic affair. More often than not we are breaking eggs or counting them before they hatch. Life is a running, side-splitting joke. But the wonder of it is that we get the punchlines. And repeat them to our friends. (You had to have been there...)

The great mistake I make (and am trying to correct) is living my life as if it were a book, usually someone elses. That is, believing their chaos is identical to mine, and their order is ready-made for me.

It is not disimilar to reading an Ann Lander's problem that seems yours verbatim, and thinking it is yours (or imagining that they all are, or imagining that you are Ann Landers). It's not and you're not. (You might divorce the wrong wife.) It is a hint. Great literature gives hints. (criticism gives hints on hints).

Having recently been a victim (or should I say beneficiary) of a severe outbreak of chaos and undergone the painful (but pain is suffering and suffering is true consciousness) rebuilding of order. I have not yet decided if it was worth it. Certainly I have seen a new side (you don't understand what going right means until something goes wrong) of things. I have even know a little trouble. (They say the worst thing you can tell a man is that he has no sense of humor or that he's never known trouble).

Let's say my consciousness has been raised. Perhaps consciousness is a disease, but life, no matter what, is one long disease anyway. Here is to my ill-health, may I enjoy it for many years to come.
In the end I subscribe to my old-wives tale of order and chaos: Life is like unrolling balls of yarn, nothing is left over but a good story.

David - I did not comment on the margins, but this paper deserves constant reaction and praise; it is perhaps the most ingenious piece of writing I have yet gotten out of this course. Your mind and tongue are perhaps sophisticated to the point of making any statement into a game, if there is a ludic dimension to this. But that is the medium of high intelligence, so I applaud your sense of the course’s “theme,” as conventions come to be tossed, flags in the breeze. Can I have a copy of the