5 HERESTHETIC IN FICTION

Novelists hardly ever write about political events. Sometimes they do develop their subjects' characters against a political background, but even then the plots and stories are not about politics, but about love affairs, wars, getting ahead and decaying, marriage and divorce, trickery, violence, seduction, thievery, retribution, salvation, and so on. There is good reason for this. Politics is winning and losing, which depend, mostly, on how large and strong one side is relative to the other. The actions of politics consist in making agreements to join people in alliances and coalitions—hardly the stuff to release readers' adrenalin as do seductions, quarrels, or chases. Still the neglect of politics in novels is unfortunate because good opportunities are missed. As Greek dramatists and Shakespeare demonstrated, political ambition, and indeed political success, uniquely reveal tragic flaws in character and give rise to the sin of pride, thus allowing the dramatist to depict retribution.

At least one novelist, however, has recognized the literary potential of politics. He is C. P. Snow, whose novel *The Masters* is, so far as I know, the only one in which politics is not mere background but the very plot itself. Deservedly, *The Masters* made Snow's reputation. Some critics have failed to recognize it as a political novel because it is simply about an election in a college. But college politics are intense—bitter, as it is said, because so little is at stake. In Snow's story about making coalitions, pride and ambition and humiliation and failure are displayed against a background of political bitterness that renders them both necessary and poignant.

The event in *The Masters* is simple enough. Fellows in a Cambridge college learn that their Master is dying of cancer.

During his protracted illness, they form coalitions to elect his successor. One is for Jago, a warm, impulsive, proud, and uneasy man, lacking self-confidence and sympathetically concerned about his colleagues, even his enemies. The other is for Crawford, a cool, self-contained, self-confident, and arrogant man, not much interested in other people. Jago, fifty, is a humanist and a Tory, "not so distinguished academically." Crawford, fifty-six, is "one of the best biologists alive," and politically left, which in 1936 means being opposed to the spread of fascism, especially to Franco. The story is told from the point of view of Lewis Eliot who, though on the left, is committed to Jago because he likes Jago's imagination and sympathy and thinks Crawford is "devastatingly sensible," "impervious," and without "a scrap of imagination." The main protagonists are college politicians par excellence: Brown, who is committed to Jago out of long friendship, and Chrystal, who is committed to Jago only out of his friendship with Brown. They form a coalition for Jago and it is apparently successful at first. But gradually it crumbles, and in the end Crawford is elected, 7-6, with Chrystal switching to support him the day before the ballot. Altogether there are four switches and an appropriate dramatic climax in each one. Chrystal's switch is, however, definitive, so that his is the most interesting politically.

This plot enables Snow to depict a character whose merits and defects might not be easily appreciated in another setting. Even more, it enables him to display retribution not as divine decision but as a part of the natural order of the world. Jago yearns for the glory of office—for himself, to reassure himself, and for his wife, to gratify and strengthen her. He wants the glory so much that he does things shameful in his own eyes in the hope of winning. In the end, Jago's wife is excruciatingly humiliated, and he himself is no longer sure who his friends are, or, indeed, if he has any.

Here one sees the value of the political plot. In politics, when the proud are humbled, they are humbled by the very act that reveals their pride. This may, as some have said, seem to mystics a banal moralism. But it is in fact true that the

structure of society at once provokes pride and rebukes the proud. This truth of nature requires a political setting and a political plot, and this is why it is worth taking the politics in Snow's novel seriously. To grasp the moral, one must understand the politics, which I intend to elucidate here.

If we read superficially, the political theme is the contest between Jago's supporters and Crawford's supporters about which one would be the better Master. Since, however, both are adequate, this does not appear to be a profound issue. But I have found that it deeply engages readers and they take sides readily. For many years I have amused myself by recording the votes of other readers, mostly college professors. Jago has won hands down, mainly, I suppose, because most professors would like to have a warm and concerned president (or better, dean or chairman—for, in American terms, that is what the Master would be). But having served under a variety of decanal and presidential personalities, give me the Crawfords of this world every time. The Crawfords manage the organization efficiently and for the general good and, unlike the Jagos, they will not tolerate human sentiment or the impulsiveness that endangers it. Chrystal sensed this difference, which was part of his motive for defection. Knowing what I do now, after forty years in academe, brings me down on Crawford's side from the start, although I must confess that thirty years ago I liked Jago best, just as the young men in the novel do.

To read a bit more deeply than the mere contest between candidates, the story is about ordinary political events, namely wooing supporters. While the description of this routine is fascinating, perhaps because it is seldom depicted, merely building a coalition is not heresthetic. The assembling of persons already convinced doubtless requires care and tact, but it does not require the essential heresthetical skill of transforming the situation from unfavorable to favorable.

Both the coalitions in the novel were, however, built the easy way. Eliot is inclined to regard Brown as a fine political manager. But Brown is really an order-taker, not a salesman. The only adherent he brings into his coalition is Chrystal, who later defects. As can be seen in the righthand column of table 1,

TABLE 1
Members of the Two Coalitions

Name	*Academic Field*	*Age*	*Politics*	*Reasons for Favoring Candidate*
(For Crawford)				
Getliffe	Physics	34	Left	"master . . . must be a distinguished scholar" (p. 77) Jago is an "absurd conservative" (p. 78)
*Nightingale	Chemistry	43	Unknown	envy, perhaps wanted to be like Crawford (p. 161)
*Chrystal	Classics	48	Right	"Crawford will make a good master" (p. 343)
Winslow	Classics	63	Radical	dislike of Jago (p. 19)
Despard-Smith	Classics	70	Right	Crawford's "made a name for himself" (p. 324) and "a tinge of sadic warmth" in distressing his friend Jago (p. 325)
*Pilbrow	Classics	74	Left	"I can't vote for Jago. I can't vote for someone who won't throw his weight on our side" (p. 246)
(For Jago)				
Luke	Physics	24	Left	"Jago would make one of the best Masters this college has ever had" (p. 107)
Calvert	Oriental studies	27	Center	Jago's "not commonplace," Crawford's "too complacent" (p. 53)
Eliot	Law	32	Left	Jago's sympathy and imaginativeness
Brown	History	46	Right	affection for Jago (p. 57)
*Gay	Norse myth	80	Unknown	respect for judgment of Calvert and Eliot (p. 295)

*Indicates switchers

Luke, Calvert, Eliot, and Brown himself choose Jago because they liked his character. The sole convert to Jago's side is Gay, old and forgetful and incredibly vain—he boasts often of his fourteen honorary degrees. Initially, he preferred Crawford for reasons never specified. When Calvert and Eliot seek to convert him, however, he converts easily, though it is not clear whether he does so because he trusts the judgment of the young men or because he is delighted to possess (as he thinks) the casting vote.

Crawford's coalition was built the same easy way. It did not even have a manager. Winslow convened it simply out of hatred for Jago. But Winslow has no particular affection for Crawford either. Of all the fellows, Winslow alone is willing to let the selection go to the Visitor (a bishop), as it would if neither candidate got an absolute majority. Nevertheless, close to indifferent though he is, he stays with Crawford all the way. So does Despard-Smith, though he is equally ambiguous. He admires Crawford's academic success but despises him as a "bolshevik"—actually a middle-class Labourite. Despard-Smith likes Jago well enough, but he is a disappointed old man, a secret drunkard, who feels used and discarded by the college. He also feels a "sadic warmth" in bringing the same disappointment to a man he actually likes. On the other hand, Getliffe thinks Crawford the best on all counts, for his scientific achievements and for his political stand.

These three come to Crawford right away without being asked. So eventually do his other three supporters, but they take longer to find their way to him. Nightingale, a chemist, had been an innovator in his youth. Then his creativity dried up and he lived on in the vain hope of recognition. He envied and hated the successful Crawford and so initially favored Jago. Desperate for notice, he asked Jago to promise to appoint him Tutor and Jago deceitfully sought, evidently without success, to assure Nightingale that he had a chance. Then, in a bizarre reversal just as he was passed over again for the Royal Society, he fastened on Crawford as a hero. From then on Nightingale became the most ardent member of the Crawford party, circulating malicious gossip about Jago and his wife.

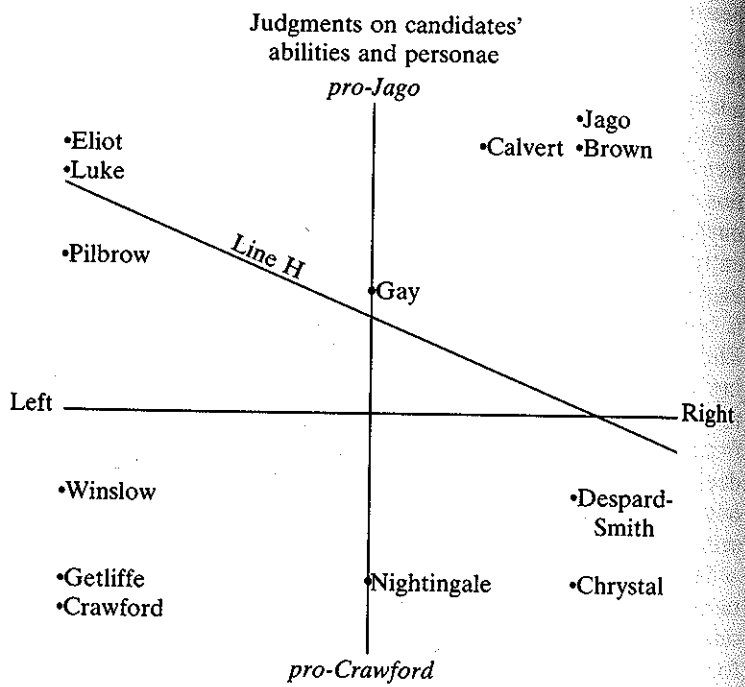
The second shift to Crawford is made by Pilbrow. He had been a fine classicist and now is an aging literary party-goer and patron in Cambridge and in Europe. By every count of personality, temperament, and style except ideology, he is for Jago. But in the end, he cares more about European politics than college politics. So he switches from Jago to Crawford as a statement against fascism.

The final switch to Crawford is by Chrystal on the day before the election. Chrystal initiates the move without solicitation by Crawford or by any manager for Crawford. Consequently it can be said that both coalitions were built up almost entirely by the private decisions of the fellows and not by logrolling or reconsiderations heresthetically generated. There is one possible exception: Gay, with his vanity prompted by Eliot, may have switched just for the chance to have the casting vote, certainly a new and private issue. He got his chance to do so, however, without switching, simply by withdrawing from the coalition for Crawford. Thus rendered apparently decisive, he could vote his true taste, which was, as it turned out, to accept the young men's preference for Jago. So it seems that all the votes were more or less freely cast.

This fact is displayed in figure 1. In this graph, each voter's taste is measured on two dimensions. One dimension is national and international politics, which surely counted much for Getliffe and Pilbrow. The other dimension is private judgments on the abilities and the personae of the two candidates. The combination for each fellow is represented as a point in the plane. Thus Eliot, who believed Jago best and who was politically left, is shown in the upper lefthand corner.

That Crawford won is displayed by the line H, which divides the majority from the minority. Since line H is not parallel to either axis, neither dimension of taste could by itself account for the outcome. On the other hand, two dimensions are sufficient to divide the group neatly. Since both dimensions were present from the beginning, this means that no heresthetician generated still a third dimension in order to confuse matters. Furthermore, since line H is straight, no one is strikingly out of place. This means that no bribery or logrolling took place.

FIGURE 1
Representation in Two-Dimensional Space of Fellows' Preferences at Time of Ballot



Note: Line H divides the space so that, at most, $\frac{n+1}{2}$ Fellows are on each side. Crawford's coalition lies below and left of line H; Jago's above and right. Snow does not specify a political position for either Gay or Nightingale. For both, however, the political dimension is irrelevant, for Gay because he is nearly senile, for Nightingale because his hatred of Jago and near adoration of Crawford blot out everything else.

Suppose there had been a "corrupt bargain." On the day before the election, after Chrystal had announced his switch, Jago, in agony and shame, tried to bribe Chrystal. ("I'm ready," Jago said, "to talk over all the practical arrangements we can conceivably make for the future. . . .") Had Chrystal

accepted, even though now convinced that Crawford was better, then line H would have to go above the point for Despard-Smith, curve back on itself, and drop vertically to take in Chrystal's point. But line H is straight, and this is evidence that here are expressed the true tastes of the fellows on these two dimensions, uncontaminated, as it were, by logrolling or private deals.

Going beyond mere alignments and reading at the deepest political level, this is a story about heresthetical manipulations. They are the engine of retribution within the drama about pride. It is a particularly interesting kind of heresthetic because it is entirely in the hands of one man. Indeed, in almost every action more involved than taking sides, Chrystal is the crucial figure and thus the agent for the outcome.

Eliot, the narrator, tries at the end to explain Chrystal's shift and is torn between two interpretations. According to one, Chrystal was irrational, moved "by vacillations he did not understand" and driven by an inexplicable "impulse to change sides, to resent one's leader and become fascinated by one's chief opponent." So Eliot concludes: "The more certain men are that they are chasing their own concrete and 'realistic' ends, so it often seemed to me, the more nakedly do you see all the strands they could never give a reason for" (p. 338).

Alternatively, Eliot sets forth a second theory: that Chrystal was in fact a rational realist. "He had his own sensible policy for the college: that was safer with Crawford than Jago. . . . He had come to think that, if Jago became Master, his own policy and power would dwindle to nothing within the next five years. . . . He was absolutely right" (pp. 338–39). From this followed, quite reasonably, a vote for Crawford.

Which of Eliot's interpretations are we to accept? They are, I believe, mutually exclusive, because in the former Chrystal understands neither nature nor himself, while in the latter he understands both very well and behaves rationally in light of his understanding. It is only in this passage that Eliot is ambiguous about Chrystal's motives. Earlier in the novel everything Eliot teels us about Chrystal leads to the second interpretation. Why, then, did Eliot attempt an explanation in terms of irrationality only at the very end?

He was guilty, I believe, of exactly the same kind of faulty and self-serving observation as most other theorists of the irrational. Eliot badly wanted Jago to win. Although initially he was rather detached, as the coalition developed, as he himself took a hand in the management of it by trying to persuade Pilbrow, Despard-Smith, and Gay to switch, Eliot came to identify closely with the coalition as a social organization. Its purpose became his purpose and, when it failed, he fell into the fallacy of egomorphism—that is, of structuring one's perception of others like one's perception of one's self. But politics does make strange bedfellows. The people in a coalition share only its official purpose, and sometimes, as with Chrystal, not even that. The shift that appeared irrational given Eliot's goals was realistic given Chrystal's. Of Eliot's two interpretations, therefore, I think we can discard the first as distorted by his momentary pique. All the other information Snow has allowed Eliot to give us confirms the second, rationalistic interpretation of Chrystal's behavior.

Early in the novel Eliot reflected on "three kinds of power." Jago, he said, "longed to be first . . . for the trappings . . . and show of power." Also, "he had dreams," and he told Chrystal, "We can make a great college" (p. 67). Brown, on the other hand, wanted only "to handle, coax, guide, contrive, so that men found themselves in places he had designed; he did not want an office . . . , it was good enough to . . . see it work" (p. 66). Chrystal, as well, wanted no office, indeed believed himself unqualified for high office, but he wanted "to be known as a man of power." "Brown would have been content to get Jago elected and influence him afterwards," but "Chrystal was impelled to have his own part recognized by Jago, by Brown, and the college" (p. 67).

Of the three, only Chrystal got what he wanted because only he was a heresthetician. Brown was good at helping people to express the feelings they already had just beneath the surface and built Jago's coalition in exactly this way. Chrystal, on the other hand, tried to structure situations so that, willy-nilly, something advantageous to him would perhaps occur. He was just as opportunistic as Gouverneur Morris; like Morris, he

was driven by the desire to excel; but, just as Morris was idealistically devoted to the cause of a greater Union, so on a lesser scale Chrystal was devoted to an ideal of a flourishing college. Because he was this combination of the idealist and the heresthetician, in the end he had his way, both forcing the choice *and* getting the credit.

Chrystal's program, which meant far more to him than Jago, was to strengthen the college, and the subplot of the novel is his wooing of a benefactor. Brown had first scented the chance and called in Chrystal, who devoted "countless hours" to nurturing Sir Horace. Ultimately Sir Horace promised six fellowships, thereby increasing the size of the college by nearly half. This was the kind of thing Chrystal regarded as his real duty, and the election of a master was, if anything, a distraction.

At no time was Chrystal an intense partisan of Jago. Brown "drew him in" right away, but he never felt certain of Chrystal's allegiance. At least a half-dozen times throughout the novel, Brown suspected that Chrystal's interest was flagging, that he was slipping away, as indeed he was. Brown recognized, as Eliot perhaps did not, a difference in motivations. For Brown, the election of his friend Jago was an end in itself. For Chrystal it was only a means to a more innovative management of the college. So Brown was right to be constantly concerned with reinforcing Chrystal.

All this is made vividly clear at the receipt of Sir Horace's letter officially proposing his benefactions. Amid the general excitement and congratulations, Winslow, the Bursar, sits silent and shocked. As Bursar he should have been intimately involved in the long negotiations, but Chrystal and Brown have carefully kept him in ignorance because they feared his vicious tongue would put Sir Horace off. Toward the end of the meeting, Winslow resigns his office in shame. Jago comes to Winslow's defense, even though they are old enemies: "This is a wretched exchange . . . a fine Bursar for a rich man's charity" (p. 255). Eliot and Calvert admire Jago's "bravura," but Chrystal is not pleased. It takes the shine off his victory, and the next day he remarks rather petulantly to Brown that he can see the other side's case against Jago. "He's

too much up and down," says Chrystal (p. 259); and perhaps, as Eliot surmises, that was when Chrystal's defection began.

Nevertheless, while Chrystal was in the coalition, he and he alone brought Jago within reach of victory. The college statutes required a clear majority of the fellows to elect, and, failing a majority, the choice reverted to the Visitor, a bishop otherwise unconnected with and uninterested in the college. Most fellows were deeply opposed to allowing the Visitor to appoint; yet the possibility was real. Jago and Crawford could not vote for themselves and would not vote for each other, so there were only eleven free votes from which a candidate needed seven for election. At a meeting Chrystal called to discuss the situation, he summarized the coalitions as they then were:

For Jago: Brown
Chrystal
Eliot
Calvert
Luke
and, possibly, Pilbrow, who, however, was abroad and might even not show up for the election.

For Crawford: Despard-Smith
Winslow
Nightingale
Getliffe
and, possibly, Gay, whose forgetfulness rendered his allegiance doubtful.

Thus, the division was 5–4 among the confirmed adherents of one side or the other or, including doubtfuls, 6–5. Thus, neither side could elect because, as it stood, neither could get seven.

Chrystal then proposed his elegant maneuver. Let the others join him, he urged, in forcing the two candidates to vote for each other. They could, he said, if the candidates refused to comply, bring in an outsider rather than let the decision go to the Visitor. He managed to get three from each side to join in

this threat and so, under duress, the candidates agreed. This maneuver, of course, gave Jago seven votes, at least on paper, and this was the closest he ever came to victory. It was a strong position, fashioned entirely by Chrystal; but Brown, ever suspicious, did not like it. " 'I'd rather,' he said, 'Chrystal was thinking more about getting Jago in than in keeping the Visitor out' " (p. 222). And Brown was right to be upset. It was Chrystal's heresthetic that brought Jago up, but Chrystal's motive was for himself to be in control and to make his control clear. That was what Brown feared.

Chrystal tried to carry off a similar coup after Jago's coalition declined from its high point. Pilbrow switched, then Gay reversed his vote, and the coalitions came to stand 5–5 or, counting Jago and Crawford, 6–6, with Gay's position uncertain. Chrystal called another meeting of which the purpose was clearly again to give Chrystal control. Again, Brown did not like it and was especially upset when Eliot reported that he and Calvert had almost certainly converted Gay, which, if true, would mean Jago still had seven votes. Chrystal refused to believe Eliot's report, perhaps because it eliminated the need for Chrystalization. So the meeting was held, but inconclusively. All night Chrystal tried to form a cave, offering a multitude of names from inside and outside the college to serve as an alternative to which both sides could rally. Chrystal even offered Brown, but not himself: "I'm not fit to be Master. Brown is. I'd serve under him and think myself lucky" (p. 316).

Chrystal couldn't break the apparent deadlock and so he chose the only remaining pathway to control. He spent the day before the election with Crawford and then changed his vote. As he told Brown, "I'm satisfied with Crawford . . . I've been with him all day. I've heard his views on the college. I like them. It's been a satisfactory day" (p. 335).

Thus, Chrystal made the move that brought Jago close to winning and also made the move that won for Crawford. Whatever happened, Chrystal forced the college into a position that, at the time, he wanted. He was not a superman, however. He failed, for example, to form a cave. Eliot wisely

remarked, in just that connection: "in all the moves of politics, dexterity is meaningless, even will itself does not avail, unless there is some spot in one's opponent ready to be convinced" (p. 313). Heresthetic is neither rhetoric nor magic. The heresthetician can neither create preferences nor hypnotize. What he can do is probe until he finds some new alternative, some new dimension, that strikes a spark in the preference of others. Sometimes he fails, as in Chrystal's cave; sometimes he succeeds, as when Chrystal raised the dimension of choice by the Visitor. And when all else fails, he has his own vote to manipulate, just as Chrystal did.

One should remember, I believe, just what skillful heresthetic ians can do. Engage their attention, draw them into the struggle, and no future is certain. Poor Jago. Naively he believed that victory was his and prematurely revealed his ambition and pride. Thus he was rendered vulnerable to the natural forces around him. Chrystal's heresthetic raised him up and then cast him down. That is something to remember.

Novels are complex matters, not quite as complex as life itself, but just as complex as history. Some readers may believe that I have selected just one strand out of the complexity of *The Masters*. Of course, I have selected just one strand, but I believe it is the most important. In his brief preface, Snow commented on what in the novel is fictional and what is real. He said his people were "from many sources" and there was no "actual election" like his imaginary one. Still, he added, "there is a tradition of a last-minute change of fortune early in the century, and a well authenticated one in Mark Pattison's *Memoirs*" (p. vii). All this suggests that Snow himself thought that the switch was the central theme, especially since there is little similarity between Jago's and Pattison's cases except the fact of the switch. (In 1851, going into the election for the Rectorship of Lincoln College, Oxford, Pattison had a five to four majority. There was a defection to the candidate of the other side, one Kay; so Pattison lost, but at least his party found an alternative on Kay's side in one Thompson, whom Pattison's party then elected with their four votes and Thompson's. Not at all the same kind of story, except in the switch itself.)

More to the point, however, two pages from the end of the novel, when the votes are read out, the reader discovers that Chrystal's Christian names are Charles Percy, exactly like C. P. Snow. Is this Chrystal of Snow a facet that reveals himself, reflecting his decision and his concerns?