

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Paul Cantor, professor, University of Virginia

### Table of Contents

I: Literature and Liberty 00:15 – 43:16

II: 20th Century Literature 43:16 – 1:26:03

### I: Literature and Liberty (00:15 – 43:16)

KRISTOL: Hi I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very glad to be joined today by Paul Cantor, Professor of English at the University of Virginia and a previous conversant, whatever the right term is there.

CANTOR: Great to be back. "Interlocutor."

KRISTOL: "Interlocutor," right, right. We've discussed Shakespeare, we've discussed popular culture. People should go watch those CONVERSATIONS in my opinion. They're very good ones.

I thought today – I called you up and asked, tell someone like me who doesn't do nearly enough reading of good books what I should read. And tell everyone out there books they should read, maybe books they wouldn't automatically think, okay? You've changed the assignment a little bit.

CANTOR: I was a little worried with just talking about books in general because there'd be an awfully long list then. I thought I'd talk about works of literature – plays, novels, some short stories – that support liberty. That teach us something important about liberty and freedom.

KRISTOL: That's kind of a contrarian notion since I think people assume that much of literature or the adversary culture are hostile to liberty, at least economic liberty. Old-fashioned political liberty is not a –

CANTOR: There is some truth to that. I have certain ways of accounting for it. One of them is that since the market economy developed, a lot of authors are hostile to it now. They're very mistaken; they don't appreciate how much the market economy has done for literature. In fact, more people have been able to earn livings writing literature since the market economy developed.

But the problem is they are rewarded, but in their view, they're not rewarded enough. The frustration to them is, "Yeah, I'm making a decent living writing novels, but Stephen King is making so much more money than I am." I think there's a problem with authors that they have high opinions of themselves, and they think that the market must be bad because it doesn't sufficiently reward them.

Another interesting theory I came up with in an essay I wrote about H. G. Wells – authors don't give freedom to their characters. They are used to running a little world. Central planning. The act of writing a novel is an act of central planning. It's why many authors are attracted to the notion of, "Well, society should be run that way, people shouldn't be allowed to do whatever they want to do." I wrote this up in an essay on H. G. Wells' *Invisible Man* where there is this strange moment where he admits to losing sight of his main character, and it's pretty frustrating. What happened at that point in *Invisible Man*? Nobody knows to this day. This is frustrating to an author. They are used to their characters following the script.

So it's almost an occupational hazard being an author to be disposed towards central planning. Today we're going to look at several authors who are free of that prejudice.

KRISTOL: This is great works of literature free of the prejudice – free of anti-liberal prejudice. Liberal in the old-fashioned sense.

CANTOR: In the old-fashioned sense, indeed.

I'm going to begin with, maybe, the most extraordinary of the works. It's a play by Ben Jonson. It's called [\*Bartholomew Fair\*](#). It dates from around 1614. Ben Jonson was a contemporary of William Shakespeare, what a sad thing to be. Ben Jonson is a great, great playwright, but he was only the second greatest playwright of his day.

He is famous for his comedies. Plays called *The Alchemist*, and *Volpone*, which are very much still produced today and very funny. This play is less well-known. It's actually a little hard to stage because it has such a large cast of characters. It is fantastic when it's staged. I've been lucky to see it twice. I looked on YouTube; I wish I could recommend something that's available of a production, but I couldn't find one.

Anyway, it's about a fair. It's about Bartholomew Fair. It was a real fair. Just a real fair. Just outside London. I like to call the play the *Seinfeld* of the Renaissance. It's a play about nothing. It's a play about a group of people who go to a fair, mill around, look at various goods, buy things, get into trouble, and then go home.

It's as close to a slice of life as you'll get of any drama before the 19th century. I will confess it's a little hard to read for that reason. These ordinary people going to the fair, and at first it seems anti-market. It's almost the cliché of what's wrong with markets. The market, Bartholomew Fair, is full of cheats. They are adulterating, they're – tobacco mixing it in with some other stuff. They're giving instructions to the barkeeps, "Shake the beer so the foam comes up, and they'll think they're getting more." They tell, again, the waiters, "Get the bottles off while they're still half-full, and we'll serve them more."

We see all the complaints about the market. The businessmen cheat their customers, there are prostitutes at the fair. We constantly see people buying things they don't need. Silly toys and so on. You'd think at first it's all about what's wrong with marketplaces, but what Jonson deals with is the people who want to regulate the marketplace. And what he shows is they're worse than the thieves and the conmen at the market. I actually think of this play as the first defense of a free market in literature and, quite frankly, one of the first defenses of the free market anywhere. It's based on the idea –

KRISTOL: That's pretty early. 1614, it's before the political philosophers we think of as being –

CANTOR: There were the Spanish Scholastics, the School of Salamanca, which were defending the free market. Not too many people have heard of them.

What it deals with is the problem of regulation. There were two main would-be regulators. One is a Puritan, he has the marvelous Puritan name of Zeal-of-the-land Busy. To him the market is the site of iniquity, sinfulness – it must be shut down. And he tries to destroy some of the little shops at the fair. What Jonson exposes is this guy is a hypocrite because he's complaining about all these things at the fair, but he seems to know a lot about it. For example, he's not supposed to be eating pork as a Puritan. Evidently, they went back to the Old Testament prohibitions. But he loves a pork sandwich, and he comes up with some sophistical argument about why he must encounter the evils of the pork-sellers to be able to deal with them. Then he munches down to his delight.

You begin to see that one of the sources of Jonson's sympathy for the market is because the Puritans want to shut down the commercial theaters, so one thing Jonson understood was people who regulate

markets regulate theaters and would put them out of business. Actually, the play builds up to a hilarious scene. There's a puppet show at the theater, and they're doing a play that's almost as bad as "Pyramus and Thisbe" in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. It's about Hero and Leander. One of the main arguments the Puritans raised against the theater was cross-dressing. As you may know women – there were no actresses, boys dressed up as women and staged Shakespeare's plays.

So Zeal-of-the-land Busy gets up and curses these cross-dressing actors, and of course, the puppet show – at the climactic moment, the puppet pulls up its dress, and there's no private parts there and says, "Look, I'm neither male nor female." It's a great embarrassing moment for Zeal-of-the-land Busy. Again, what Johnson is showing is these regulators are no better than the people they're trying to regulate. They have their own self-interest. They're just trying to spoil fun. Jonson wrote to entertain an audience, and in a sense, he concludes markets are there to make people happy, and what's wrong with that?

The even more interesting character is a Justice, a Justice of the Peace named Adam Overdo. That name is a clue that he sees all the illegal acts going on at the fair and he wants to regulate – There's one passage that is so fascinating I've got to read it to you because he's imagining what we need for this fair. He's looking for a guy to regulate, and it says,

Never shall I enough commend a worthy worshipful man, sometime a capital member of this City, for his high wisdom in this point, who would take you now the habit of a porter, now of a carman, now of the dog-killer, in this month of August; and in the winter, of a seller of tinder-boxes.

He wants undercover agents at the fair. They'll dress up as if they're participants of the fair.

And what would he do in all these shapes? marry, go you into every alehouse, and down into every cellar; measure the length of puddings, take the gauge of black pots and cans, aye, and custards with a stick; and their circumference with a thread; weigh the loaves of bread on his middle finger; then would he send for 'em, home.

We're going to check out every dimension of every item at the fair, and he would punish them, and then:

give the puddings to the poor, the bread to the hungry, the custards to the children; break the pots and burn the cans himself; he would not trust his corrupt officers; he would do it himself. Would all men in authority would follow this worthy precedent. For (alas) as we are public persons, what do we know? nay, what can we know?

That should be on every government regulatory agency as a motto.

nay, what can we know? we hear with other men's ears, we see with other men's eyes. A foolish constable, or a sleepy watchman, is all our information

And that, I claim, is Friedrich Hayek. The problem of knowledge. The reason you can't have regulation is it's too detailed. You would have to be every man himself. It would undo the division of labor; you would have a corps of regulators, which would outnumber the actual producers. It's an amazing passage to make it a problem of knowledge. In light of all the controversy about the EU, these Brussels regulations, the curve of the banana gets specified. Here Jonson anticipates that idea as early as 1614.

KRISTOL: It's not just anti-clericalism or anti-puritanism, which would lead you in a liberal direction, presumably. It's a sort of more of a critique of central planning, even –

CANTOR: It's a defense of the marketplace, the dispersal of knowledge, and the other thing that's quite amazing is that the fair – it's corrupt, but it's innocent and nobody gets hurt. But both Overdo and Zeal-of-the-land Busy start hurting people. They tear down businesses, they get into fights. There is a guy named

Humphrey Wasp in it, too. Amazingly, Johnson anticipates the English Civil War of the 1640s. He sees that the market has its problems, but it's not violent. It's a way of bringing people together to satisfy their desires, and there are these other forces – this waspishness, this puritan intolerance – he senses that this is going to break the peace. Thirty years after this play, England is plunged into war by characters like Adam Overdo and Zeal-of-the-land Busy.

KRISTOL: 1614 is amazing. I guess Shakespeare has the critique of puritanism. *Measure for Measure*, I guess. Not so much the appreciation of the market.

CANTOR: There's a bit of it in *The Merchant of Venice*. The objection to converting Jews is that it will raise the piece of pork. It's one of the first formulations of the law of supply and demand in literature. I think Jonson is ahead of Shakespeare on this issue.

Part of the reason is Jonson sees the correspondence between the spirit of the market and the spirit of comedy. Generally, comedy is in defense of human desires. It's all about spoilsports, killjoys, people who stand in the way of people enjoying life. That's the spirit of the market as well. Particularly, the defense of the market against an overzealous religious attitude and an overzealous political attitude. In all honesty, Jonson never wrote anything quite like this – though there were elements of this in the play *The Alchemist* as well – but it really is remarkable.

KRISTOL: Good to have the recommendation of something I've never heard about. I've actually seen one or two Jonson plays put on here in Washington. They are funny, but they seem more conventionally comic, as you say. Making fun of, you know –

CANTOR: This is very unconventional play, and it's absolutely brilliant. There's this great character in it called Ursula the Pig-Woman, who is usually played by a man. My dream would have been to see John Belushi play Ursula the Pig-Woman, but we'll never get to see that, alas.

KRISTOL: Next, once we've read this play?

CANTOR: Next on my list is Daniel Defoe's [\*A Journal of the Plague Year\*](#), which is the first zombie novel. It is a novel about the walking dead. It is presented as a straight-forward nonfictional account of the great London plague of 1665.

KRISTOL: And Defoe writes in?

CANTOR: It's written in 1721.

KRISTOL: He's early 18th – a whole century after Jonson.

CANTOR: He was born in 1660 so he had actually experienced the plague as a child. This is very early in the history of the novel, really. The line between fiction and nonfiction was not clearly drawn. Most people thought *Robinson Crusoe* was a true account when he wrote that. In this case, as well, it looks like a true account, somewhat fictionalized.

It's quite literally about the walking dead. It's about bubonic plague in London (if that's what it is; I guess that's the best guess). What's interesting about Defoe, in the history of the novel, is he really is reacting to the new individualism that comes with Hobbes and Locke and the study of the individual in isolation. That, after all, is what *Robinson Crusoe* is. So in the case of *Robinson Crusoe*, he's dealing with something that's obviously the state of nature. But in *Journal of the Plague Year*, he figured out how to recreate the state of nature in London. That's what the plague did, it made people suddenly islands unto themselves, trying to isolate themselves from the plague. It particularly shows how the division of labor breaks down under the plague, situations where people can't trade as easily with each other.

So it becomes a kind of narrative of survival. We talked about the TV show “The Walking Dead” last time I was here. And in many ways this show explores the same issues as “The Walking Dead” does and, in particular, the issue of how the government responded to the plague. Whether government intervention, here we go again, whether government intervention was the proper response to the plague. Here Defoe, I think, very legitimately airs both sides of the debate without acknowledging the contradiction. Sometimes, he says the government did a great job with the plague, and sometimes, he shows it didn’t do such a great job.

This was based on the curious fact that Daniel Defoe – he was in many ways the first political journalist in the modern sense, but he wrote for both parties. He wrote for the Whigs, he wrote for the Tories. There are evidently crazy situations where he’s writing editorials against himself. He’ll publish something in favor of the Whigs, and then he’ll write a Tory article against it. He was just trying to sell articles to newspapers. There is this fascinating correlation between the rise of newspapers and the development of the novel. Defoe was the Tom Wolfe of his day, a journalist that wrote novels.

So on the one hand, he does say the government did a great job, that they came in, they set up watches, they quarantined the city, they tried to confine people to their quarters, and offers a really positive image of the government supervision of the situation. I should point out that it’s the civic government of London, though, the municipal government. He’s very hard on the royal family and the court. That they deserted the city to protect themselves. You do see something of the Puritan, middle-class background of Daniel Defoe, that what he’s defending is the middle-class authorities and how they handled it.

But counter to that is, again, a kind of Hayekian argument of the unintended consequences of the supervision. For example, because houses were being shut down and people – a lot of people didn’t report the plague. He also makes the point that maybe the best way of dealing with a plague is not to confine hundreds of thousands of people to a limited area and let it spread. Of course, people didn’t understand the cause of the plague, but they suspected it had something to do with being near some of the other people. Then, he points out – again, it’s akin to Ben Jonson – he points out that they didn’t have enough knowledge. It was impossible to supervise the whole city. So in many cases, they were acting on the wrong information.

Then he makes, again, what would be a very contemporary point that this looks great in theory, but many of the guardians were bribed. You set up this watch system, and then people just bought their way out. Also, he makes the argument and presents very positively the people who fled. They were escaping the plague, not spreading it, and there’s an interesting dialectic in the book between the government attempt to keep everybody in place and the human impulse towards freedom and moving on and getting away from the problem. It explores many of the issues that a show like “The Walking Dead” does. Does the government help the situation or actually make it worse? I think it’s a fascinating read for that reason.

KRISTOL: So we have two English authors who are sort of Hayekians centuries ahead of Hayek. You sort of expect that maybe from the Anglo-American, the English tradition, the British tradition that they would have some feel for the case for liberty.

CANTOR: Particularly Defoe who was basically a Whig, although he would write for the Tory press. There was money in it.

KRISTOL: We’ve read Jonson, we’ve read Defoe.

CANTOR: We’re going over to Germany now. There was no Germany at the time I’m talking about, but the German alliance. German playwright named Georg Büchner – that’s “Buckner” to Americans. Georg Büchner. He’s a fascinating case, died at the age of 24. If Shakespeare had died at the age of 24, we never would have heard of him. Shakespeare apparently wrote his first play when he was 25. Büchner was on his way maybe to being the greatest dramatist ever. No one – even Hugo von Hofmannsthal – ever wrote such great dramas at that age.

KRISTOL: When is this?

CANTOR: 1830s, he died in 1837.

KRISTOL: What did he die of?

CANTOR: I think it was some kind of disease although evidently his health wasn't that good. We have three plays; he wrote a fourth play that has been lost. One of the three plays that we have is [Woyzeck](#), which was made into [a movie by Werner Herzog](#) starring Klaus Kinski, I think in the 1990s. The only way I can express this is to say that Georg Büchner wrote a screenplay for a 1990's movie in 1835.

In fact, none of his plays were produced during his lifetime, his plays were not produced until the 20th century. This play *Woyzeck* became Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck* because they couldn't read Büchner's handwriting originally. One of the greatest operas of the 20th century; the libretto was written in the 1830s. It is one of the most amazing cases in literary history. Talk about a man born before his time. He was writing 20th-century literature in the 1830s, and no one knew who he was in the 19th century. His plays were enormously influential on 20th-century drama, people like Brecht, for example.

I want to talk about his play called [Danton's Death](#). Most people think of *Woyzeck* as his greatest play, and there's much to be said for that. I actually think *Danton's Death* is greater and more important. It's a play about the French Revolution. It's largely about the conflict between Danton and Robespierre. I like to see it as the conflict between two sides of Rousseau. Rousseau actually comes up in the play. That is, Büchner is trying to understand why the French Revolution went wrong.

The French Revolution was potentially the greatest subject for 19th-century literature. I always laugh when people sit around and say, "We have no great subjects anymore in the 19th century." Well, the French Revolution was as dramatic an event in world history as any. Büchner is really the one I know of who does full dramatic justice to it. What he shows is the ideological conflict at the heart of the Revolution, and it's the conflict between liberty and equality.

He takes what we'll call the social contract side of Rousseau. There's a side of Rousseau who's arguing for community, return to the model of Sparta, the General Will, the emphasis on participating in the community. Büchner shows that that's what Robespierre stood for in the French Revolution.

Danton stands for the other side of Rousseau, the Rousseau you'd find in his *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, in his *Confessions*, in all his personal writings where he talks about his own life. Where he speaks in favor of a radical freedom, which he sees as the only way of recapturing the state of nature. There's this famous moment when he says – I think it's in the *Confessions* – where he says, "I couldn't make love if I was ordered to do it." Even the most pleasurable experience, I couldn't enjoy if it was under compulsion. That's what Danton represents in the play, the liberty aspect.

It really shapes up as the political conflict, the personal conflict between the two, and it's really interesting because what Büchner understands is liberty, equality, fraternity, those don't go together that easily. In particular, he shows the conflict between liberty and equality. That Robespierre stands for equality. It's quite explicit in the play that we will drag people down to the level where they'll then be equal.

The objection to Danton – Danton's actually a classical liberal. He's in favor of liberty in all aspects of life, and the result is some people will get wealthier than others, and Robespierre's very much the man of the people, the people love him for that reason. Whereas they're very suspicious of Danton, they think he's a new aristocrat so that's how Robespierre is able to defeat Danton. Danton's death ends with Robespierre's triumph, of course. We know Robespierre will fall, too, but it's really a wonderfully perceptive illustration of the way revolutions destroy their own, eat up their own.

This is the 1830s; it's not that long after the event. I think he saw how the French Revolution was going to become the prototype of revolutions later. Büchner himself was a revolutionary. By the way, he was a medical doctor. He had a doctorate in medicine. This is all age 24. He wrote something called, we'd say the *Hessian Courier* – he had a revolutionary newspaper trying to stir up people against the aristocrats. And yet part of him saw how dangerous that was, and there's one sequence, one wonderful sequence in the play where some poor guy, they want to rename his daughter: "Cornelia." As you may know the French Revolution loved to rename things. Notre Dame became the Temple of Reason, and they adopted Roman names.

This guy, it's his daughter and he wants to name her, and the crowd wants this nice Roman name. He refers to her as his daughter, and "Oh no, she's the daughter of the Republic." Really, you know, this gets to the sort of stuff that produced names like Lenin and Stalin. It's an amazing perceptive work. Really raises a fundamental question that we're still dealing with, what is the tradeoff between liberty and equality?

KRISTOL: Sounds great. I got to admit I never heard of him or the play. It's translated in English?

CANTOR: Many translations. I've seen it in London. A production of it by Max Reinhardt in 1912 changed the course of 20th-century theater. It required radically new methods of production. And from that so much of 20th-century stagecraft developed because Max Reinhardt was this very great stager in German theater.

KRISTOL: That sounds great. French Revolution. Well, French Revolution was a huge topic.

CANTOR: But efforts to represent it in literature have not turned out.

KRISTOL: Napoleon was represented in literature, obviously. Sort of.

CANTOR: Even there, there are some questions about how well that was done. It's a remarkable political play. Maybe the best political play for the 19th century. By the way, it has a strong Shakespearean element in it. There is comic relief, for example. Shakespeare was his model for it. Because Shakespeare was very popular in Germany then. In some ways, the most Shakespearian play of the 19th century. Because he's dealing with the same issues.

And one of the great issues in it is whether history makes human beings or human beings make history. The characters fight back and forth on this. They realize that if men make history, that's not very democratic; it's the Great Man theory. Robespierre represents the principle that no man is indispensable to the revolution. Danton insists, "I am, I made this revolution." That turns the crowd against him. It really deals with – It's a great play.

KRISTOL: I'm glad to have learned about the play and of the author. I wasn't aware that that was the origin – obviously, I know a little bit about the opera, but I did not know about the origin. It really is just the play [*Woyzeck*]?

CANTOR: Büchner did not finish it. So there were four versions. Modern authors have the liberty of choosing things so that, for example, the sequence of scenes in the Berg opera is different from the generally accepted version of the play. Similarly, in Herzog's film. The play does work in *Woyzeck* in any order because it's a play about a madman and part of it is about the disintegration of his mind. Scenes follow each other in different order. That works very well.

KRISTOL: You'd recommend the movie?

CANTOR: The movie is stunning. It is perhaps Klaus Kinski's greatest performance, and that's saying a lot. Playing a madman was not much of a stretch for Klaus Kinski.



KRISTOL: You tune in here for literary recommendations, and you get movies thrown in, TV shows, too, “The Walking Dead.” We expect no less from you. Back to Britain now?

CANTOR: We’re going to go back to Britain now to a novel that dates to 1854, Elizabeth Gaskell’s [\*North and South\*](#). Now, Elizabeth Gaskell is at the very top of the second rank of Victorian novelists, or I would even say at the very bottom of the first rank. I don’t know how many Americans have heard of her; she’s very well known in England. The book I’m going to discuss is called *North and South* that was made into a miniseries in England. *Wives and Daughters* was made into a miniseries. Let’s say she’s just below the rank of the Bronte sisters and George Eliot. She was a very successful novelist at the time. Certainly one of the top 10 novelists in the 19th century in Britain.

What’s interesting about this book is it defends the Industrial Revolution, and it defends women working in factories. This is so counter to what we think of. It’s an amazing book. If you like Victorian novels, you’ll like it. It’s a love story, but a different kind of love story.

It’s not autobiographical, but it parallels Elizabeth Gaskell’s experience to this extent. She moved to Manchester from the south of England. Manchester, as you may know, was the ground zero of the Industrial Revolution, was a great center of the cotton mills. Everybody’s example of what was wrong with the Industrial Revolution, the pollution and the noise, and she hated it when she got there. Her first novel, *Mary Barton*, was very successful, and it attacked the cotton business.

This did not sit well with her neighbors in Manchester, and moreover, as she got to know the place, she began to understand it. And to appreciate the energy of it. The industriousness of the industry. She came from, really, the world of Jane Austen, from the rural south of England. Her heroine Margaret Hale comes from there. She’s from an upper-class family, not a wealthy upper-class family, but upper-class, and as a young woman, as she puts it, Margaret doesn’t like “shoppy” people.

Her mother is trying to set her up with someone – “Oh, he’s a shoppy person, he’s in trade.” You get all the, you know, her father is a clergymen, she lives in the world of gentlemen and gentlewomen. She’s a very decent person. Lot of *noblesse oblige*. She’s helping out the poor people back home in the south; then she comes up to the north and the noise, the dirt, the smoke. Her first vision – it’s called Milton-Northern in the novel, but it’s Manchester – first vision of Manchester, she can’t see it.

But she falls in love with a cotton baron, John Thornton, and she begins to appreciate that this guy accomplishes something, that he produces something. She starts to notice that people aren’t lazy in Manchester. Back home in the south, they sat around and did nothing. Especially did nothing for themselves. Up here in the north, the people are working hard, they’re producing things, and it’s particularly interesting she see these women working in the factories and they’re whistling while they work. When they come home they’re happy, they’re jovial. They don’t pay sufficient respect to her. These people seem independent. Back home everybody deferred to her, “Oh, Miss Margaret,” but up there, they don’t care who she is.

The other thing the family notices is they can’t get servants. They’re used to having servants, and no one answers their ads. She finally talks to some women about it, and they like working in the factory. Why? Because they’re paid money. And they can decide what to do with it. The servant jobs were basically room-and-board jobs. You worked as a servant, and then we won’t go into all the problems, because Elizabeth Gaskell wasn’t going to raise the sexual issues that came up when you worked for some master in a household.

It’s clear the women tell Margaret how they like the independence of it. They liked, well, I’m going to say nine-to-five, but maybe it was eight-to-seven. They liked the fact that they can leave the job at the office or in the factory. That they are not 24 hours, 24/7 subject to someone’s will. They liked the fact that they are not paid in kind, but in money that they can spend on their own.



Again, these things that we think of as the nightmare of Victorian England, women worked in factories, turns out that the women made a conscious choice to work in factories. In fact, the laws passed against women working in factories were generated by male labor unions who were trying to keep the work for men. Women were not allowed to testify at the Parliamentary hearings on these new laws, and people like Elizabeth Gaskell who were resented. Why? Because, again, the market had been very good to her. Here was a profession that women were able to compete in equally, and it is the 19th-century commercial British novel that was the first artistic area in which women were able to compete as equals with men and they not only held their own, they blew away the competition.

KRISTOL: Just think of the famous 19th-century British novelist. They were women.

CANTOR: This was not lost on the men who complained about it. If they could have banned women from writing, they would have. Now, *Mary Barton* was published anonymously. But once it was a success, everyone wanted the author of *Mary Barton*. And she could reveal her identity.

Dickens was her patron. That is, *North and South* was published serially in Dickens' magazine, *Household Words*. Dickens didn't like her, and he thought of her as a rival. Suddenly, everybody's talking *Mary Barton* now, and his clever idea is "I'm getting her to work for me, she'll write for my magazine." They had lots of arguments actually. Dickens was actually writing *Hard Times*, his anti-industrial novel, and at the same time, and they were being serialized with *North and South* a little behind. And *North and South* is actually a kind of ongoing critique of *Hard Times*. It's a fascinating dialogue going on there.

Elizabeth Gaskell experienced it's nice to be a working woman. It's quite remarkable how she was able to see that projected onto the situation of these factory women. The other thing that is the great thing about the novel in my view is that it is a critique of agricultural labor. We have these weird fantasies about the 19th century that factory work was so horrible, and it was horrible. But we're comparing it with life today. We don't see that what the practical alternative to factory life was working on farms.

KRISTOL: Or being a servant, I suppose.

CANTOR: Being a servant or working on farms. And the novel is very strong about how horrible it was to work on an English farm in the 19th century. We think of it as gardening. Oh, you're outdoors. Well, be outdoors in an English fall and spring in Northern England.

Several of the characters are farmers. And then several of the laborers in the north want to go south. "You made the south sound so good." And then she finally – she keeps defending the south even as she comes to appreciate the north, and then finally one of the laborers she likes is going to move down south to work on a farm, and she has to confess, "You wouldn't last one week, you'll die in that weather."

We have this myth of English factory life as if it was Mao and the Great Leap Forward. That people were forcing the English people into factories. This was voluntary. Again, today there are many wonderful alternatives to working in factories. The alternatives then were servant or farm laborer. What Gaskell shows us now is farm labor was horrible. By the way, read Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* if you want to see how hard it was.

The other thing she shows is it was soul-destroying. It was brutalizing. You worked 12 hours in the field, you came home and just want to collapse. She goes in the city, in Manchester, people go to pubs and they talk, and I can't – it's a bit of an idealization of it, but we need to undo this pattern of idealizing farm work and demonizing factory work. This novel is very unusual in that it does that. I really recommend that.

## II: 20th Century Literature (43:16 – 1:26:03)

KRISTOL: In the 20th century, one thinks of literary figures, artists, and so forth particularly being enamored of different despotisms, obviously Communism, but fascism, too. Even collaborating with Nazis and so forth. Not being big defenders of liberal democracy on the whole. Is that correct?

CANTOR: It is correct largely. It's actually a shameful record of many authors of the 20th century. They often feel an affinity with dictators as little dictators themselves, and quite frankly, a lot of great artists were seduced by great dictators, Hitler, Stalin, Castro, so on. These people seem to respect them and promote them and so on. It's been a kind of devil's bargain. But –

KRISTOL: But there is art friendly to liberty in the 20th century?

CANTOR: Also hostile to tyranny. Those are the ones I'm going to discuss. Let me begin with Joseph Conrad, who was born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, a Pole. A Pole during a period when Poland was ruled by the Russian Czar, and Conrad's parents actually were freedom fighters for Poland. One reason he ended up fleeing the country, which wasn't a separate country at the time.

Anyway, I want to talk about his novel [\*Secret Agent\*](#), which dates from 1907. One of these remarkable works – you can't believe it was written when it was done. It is a great novel about terrorism. Particularly about the strange double, triple world of espionage, counter-espionage, terrorism, counter-terrorism.

It's based on a true incident that was an attempt to blow up Greenwich Observatory. That's where the prime meridian is, Greenwich Mean Time. This would be a real classic terrorist act. The kind of thing we're living with today. What turned out to be so odd about it is it was planned and financed by a foreign government that wanted to stage a leftwing anarchist terror incident because Britain in the 19th century, this amazingly liberal society in the old sense, was a safe haven for anarchists, communists, various leftwing forces from all over Europe. People like Mikhail Bakunin, Alexander Herzen, we'll be talking about them maybe in a while. Karl Marx, of course, the greatest example.

These people who, for example, participated in the 1848 Revolution and were persona non grata in their homelands. They ended up in Britain, which welcomed them and in many cases lionized them, treated them very well. This was very frustrating to some of these autocratic governments. And so in this real incident, evidently it was being staged by some foreign power that wanted to discredit the political refugees in Britain and get them expelled.

Conrad wrote a novel about that. In the novel, there's a whole kind of cell of leftwing radicals, would-be terrorists in London, but they're not responsible for the act. Some guy named Vladimir at some foreign embassy is behind it, and Conrad absolutely hated Russia as a Pole at a time when there was no Poland. It's not said, but this is presumably Russia staging this.

So you have a story about a rightwing continental autocratic power staging a phony leftwing anarchistic socialist terrorist act. The way many literary critics have interpreted this is Conrad must be negative about all politics. After all, he shows how evil the rightwing is, has these nefarious purposes, but he doesn't present the leftwing sympathetically. In fact, what he tends to show is the anarchists are accomplishing nothing. They're sitting around talking about it, but they never do anything.

The only one who does something is this weird character Mr. Verloc, who's a triple agent. He appears to be working for the anarchists, but he's secretly in the pay of Vladimir and this foreign power, but secretly, secretly he's an informant to the British police. It's actually based on a guy named Azev who evidently was a triple agent and at one point gave orders to assassinate himself. In his capacity heading one organization, he gave orders to assassinate himself in another. Amazing story, but true.

Anyway, so Conrad appears to be: "it's a plague on both your houses." The leftwing revolutionists are no good, the rightwing autocrats are no good. I actually accepted that reading for many years until I sat down to rethink it. I realized it was the fallacy of the excluded middle, that in fact, Conrad is defending the

political middle. In the book, the political middle is liberal England, 19th-century liberal England. That it is, in fact, a defense of a middle-class, law-bound society in England against these two extremes. The socialist anarchists who want to destroy it and the continental autocrats who want to destroy it.

People talk about the ineffectuality of everybody in this novel, and it's true. One of the hilarious things about it is the chief of the radicals, a man named Michaelis – it's actually based on Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian anarchist – he has grown so fat that he can barely move. It becomes emblematic of a leftwing radicalism that now enjoys its celebrity and is not accomplishing anything.

KRISTOL: So contemporary in many ways?

CANTOR: I'll get to that actually in a minute. The hero of the book, and it has a genuine hero, he is simply called the Assistant Commissioner. It's a kind of Sherlock Holmes figure. Conrad was always trying to be successful commercially. It took him awhile, but he imitated people like Kipling and H. G. Wells. He looked at what was selling and said, "I'll try that."

This Assistant Commissioner tracks down what has really happened by a clue I'm not going to reveal. Like *Lord Jim*, this has one of the greatest narrative turns in fiction history, and I won't spoil it. I'll just say that through a Sherlock Holmes-like clue, he's able within a couple of days to unravel the mystery, go to where this guy Vladimir is, and say, "I know you did it; you leave the country, and I won't say any word of this." He doesn't want to punish Vladimir; he just wants to crush the story because he knows the aim was to make a big terrorist incident to get the British to change their policy towards continental refugees.

He senses the political solution is to cover up the story. He has a way to do it, and it's legitimate. Because they don't succeed in blowing up – I can tell you this much. You may have noticed the observatory is still there. In fact, they didn't blow it up, and in the story, they didn't blow it up. Something gets blown up. Read the novel, you'll find out.

In fact, the Assistant Commissioner turns out to be brilliant. He solves the mystery and does it in such a way that other people want to prosecute, they want to make a big deal of it, and he realizes we're playing into their hands if we play up the story. Just disassociate it from the Greenwich Observatory, keep it quiet.

This is the figure who emerges as heroic. He's a very ordinary middle-class English type who solves things by his rationality. Everyone thinks England is so stupid. The leftwing revolutionaries think it's so stupid. The rightwing autocrats think it's so stupid. Why are they admitting these refugees? They're so stupid? They're not stupid, they know what they're doing. They believe in freedom, and in some ways, they are defusing these terrorist by welcoming them.

It's actually based on – Bakunin famously escaped from a prison in Siberia, he wrote a book about it, became famous, lionized on "television" (the equivalent then) – Made a lot of money off it. In the novel, he has an aristocratic patroness. In fact, it helps the Assistant Commissioner that orders have come down – Michaelis must not be involved, and he proved he's not involved: "I can show that."

One of the great things about the novel that's so perceptive is it studies aristocratic socialism in England. There are two figures who are aristocrats who are very sympathetic to these leftwing radicals. One is this aristocratic patroness, the other is Sir Ethelred, the Secretary. Also grossly fat and a mirror image of these radicals.

You have the guy at the top of the English hierarchy, the Home Secretary, and then this radical. Sir Ethelred is fostering through Parliament a bill for the nationalization of fisheries. Perfect Hayekian image of government. He's got this sycophantic sidekick who's called the revolutionary Toodles in the work. "We're revolutionary." And what Conrad understands is the aristocracy actually backs socialism. This is very true in England, also in Sweden, by the way. Particularly shows with the aristocratic patroness – she

can stand people who've made money. She has money, she wants to hold on to it. She can't stand the idea that other people are getting money now so she sides with the revolutionaries who are opposed to capitalism.

Conrad really shows a brilliant understanding of this, that capitalism really is poised there in the middle between the extreme right and the extreme left. It is preferable to either. And so you have this aristocrat in Parliament who wants the government to take over the whole fishery business. It's really very perceptive about what happened in England. Many of the people who supported nationalization of industries in the 19th century in general, who were behind the development of the welfare state, were aristocrats who had contempt for this new power of the middle class and businessmen.

Conrad is a foreigner. Again, we think of him as an English author, but really he was a Pole. English was his third language. He had a perspective, and this novel shows he understood what was happening in England in 1900 better than any Englishman I know of at the time. It is a remarkable novel. I mean, again, the plot is so sensational I just can't even –

KRISTOL: It also shows what mystery novels do. The system doesn't quite defend itself. It does need this person of ability who doesn't simply mechanically enforce the law. And makes a prudential judgment about –

CANTOR: You're so perceptive there because there is a dumb cop in it. Chief Inspector Heat. As soon as he hears about the bomb, he wants to arrest all the radicals, just what Vladimir wanted. He is slowed down, and indeed, it turns out he is in cahoots with the criminals and with the radicals. It's a strange world in which the policemen are basically the mirror images of the people they're defending. Again, a central image is this triple agent Verloc, who by the way runs a soft porn shop, as well.

KRISTOL: Very contemporary.

CANTOR: It's really amazing.

KRISTOL: Soft porn is not contemporary.

CANTOR: I haven't even talked about his wife. What you see in the novel is that the ordinary forces in England can't defend themselves. Conrad makes a point; the Assistant Commissioner looks like a foreigner. Like him. He likes eating at Italian restaurants. It's as if you have to be a little foreign to be able to understand these foreigners and defend your country against them. There's a lot about the English establishment in the work that shows them as not knowing what they're doing. It's like Sherlock Holmes, who is such an odd man out. The outsider has to defend the middle.

KRISTOL: Sounds great. I'm curious. I was in high school and college, Conrad was a big deal, I would say. If you had pretensions to be slightly intellectual, you read some Conrad, and at least, one knew of the different works, and some are really famous like *Heart of Darkness* and *Secret Agent*. Am I wrong – he's less read today, or at least –

CANTOR: He's very, very important in the academy.

KRISTOL: You agree that he's a very great novelist.

CANTOR: He may be the greatest novelist in English in the 20th century. I get a lot flack for that one. But James Joyce, eat your heart out. I think he's really great, and it is funny he didn't succeed commercially until he started writing bad novels late in life.

He was very widely read, and it's actually funny, apropos what you're saying. T. S. Eliot wanted an epigraph from Joseph Conrad in *The Waste Land*. As you may know, Ezra Pound edited it for him, and

he said, “Why the hell do you want an epigraph from this second-rate hack?” He talked Eliot into taking out the epigraph from Conrad.

He’s taken very seriously now. Partially, people discovered his connection with imperialism. So *Heart of Darkness*, everyone reads *Heart of Darkness* and learns to condemn it according to Chinua Achebe’s formula. And *Lord Jim*. He is read an awful lot in college. I’d say *Heart of Darkness* is probably one of the fifth or sixth most read literary texts in college today.

KRISTOL: That’s good even if they don’t understand it.

CANTOR: I had lunch with Chinua Achebe once. He said, “Conrad, great author, read him.” That essay was for public consumption and to stir up controversy.

KRISTOL: So Conrad. Other 20th-century authors who were friendly to liberty?

CANTOR: I’m going to Franz Kafka. And this is a bit strange, though not as I’m going to try to argue. When I was growing up in the 50s, I mean, Kafka was this hot author and everybody read Kafka, and man, was it ever metaphysical and existential.

Kafka – everything was a religious allegory or everything was a psychoanalytic parable. That’s all true. His works are incredibly deep and very complicated, ambiguous, and there are all sorts of ways to approach them. There is so much to find in the novels. But, you know, it’s interesting, people are rethinking him and realizing that he was an anti-state author. That so much of his writing is about the lack of liberty in 20th-century life.

It’s funny just after we talked about doing this conversation I saw this newspaper article on how there’s a new statue of Kafka in Prague. By a man, I think, named David Cerny. The statue is evidently in front of City Hall, and the sculptor said, “I want people to think of Franz Kafka every time they’re totally frustrated by a state employee.” That’s in a way amazing, but it turns out that Central and Eastern Europeans have been thinking of Kafka all along that way.

In some ways, it was an English and American appropriation to create the metaphysical or philosophical Kafka. Again, I’m not denying that’s there. But an awful lot of his writing is about what it is to live in the 20th century in these great bureaucratic states. What is *The Trial* about? By the way, that’s *Der Prozess* in Germany, the process. It’s about this process that you can get sucked into where in that case you don’t know what you’re accused of. Your whole life is destroyed.

KRISTOL: When did he write? Just to orient people.

CANTOR: Basically, the second decade of the 20th century. 1915, ’16, ’17. It’s interesting again. We sometimes get thrown off by authors – what is Kafka? Is he a German author? He wrote in German, but he lived his life in Prague. Is he a Czech author? Well, he’s an Austro-Hungarian author. When he wrote, the political unit he lived in was the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which what became Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic, was part of.

Prague was the second or third city, and then Budapest – Vienna, the first city, then Budapest and Prague. That was a notoriously bureaucratic outfit. As you know, I’m very interested in Austrian economics, and it’s no accident that it really should be Austro-Hungarian economics because it was produced out of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and my favorite economist, Ludwig von Mises, wrote a book called *Bureaucracy*, and as I recall he has one footnote in it about Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy where he said, “Typically people would be charged with murder and with failing to register with the police in the hotel, and these were roughly regarded as equal crimes.”

I'm exaggerating, but Mises had lived with bureaucracy, Kafka lived with bureaucracy. He worked at an insurance company, he was a claims adjuster, basically. Very familiar with the bureaucratic world, what we call the office world, and that world turns us into insects. So we get to *Metamorphosis*, his most famous story. A lot of his stories deal with the dehumanization that comes from living in a modern bureaucratic world. I'd like to recommend two particularly, "[The Great Wall of China](#)" and "[In the Penal Colony](#)."

"The Great Wall of China" is 1915, and it's a parable ostensibly of the Chinese empire, but really is the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It deals with what it was like to live in the southern corner of China when they were building the wall in the north. It deals with – you get a message from the Emperor, and in the story, there are so many layers of bureaucracy the message has to go through before it gets to you. Kafka raises the possibility that the Emperor could be dead by the time you get the message.

It's all about what it's like to live in a world where you're getting these commands at a hundredth removed. You don't even know if the Emperor is still in power, and you're told about building this wall, and it is totally irrational, as is true of the actual Great Wall. Most people think there's one continuous Great Wall. There are seven walls that were built, and it really wasn't continuous. Of course, it was a complete failure. It was meant to keep the Mongols out, and it became the flashpoint at which trade with the Mongols occurred, and they all got in anyway.

It's a story about the irrationality of massive government works projects. Indeed, it emerges in the story they're building the wall to keep the Chinese in and not to keep the Mongols out. They're building it as a project that can engage all these people in the state. That's a marvelous image of how the empire and the nation-state uses these massive projects to control its population. Pretty short story, but amazingly powerful.

And then the other work I'd recommend is "In the Penal Colony." Again, just an astoundingly prophetic work. It's about a nameless penal colony of some European power, most likely Devil's Island – they seem to speak French in the story. It's about a punishment machine, which engraves the lesson you should be learning on your body. That is, if you're guilty of stealing, it engraves, "Thou shalt not steal" on your body, and it's a frightening image of what the state became in so many places in the 20th century.

By the way, it's a very interesting illustration of Hannah Arendt's thesis in her book on *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. That totalitarianism started in, and genocide specifically, in the colonies of Europe and came back home. That's the suggestion here. *In der Strafkolonie*, the punishment colony. You do these awful things, but it's going to come back to haunt you. It's about the guy that runs this thing, and the machine is getting creakier and creakier, and it doesn't work, and finally he puts himself into it to have the punishment inscribed onto him.

It's a nightmare image of the Nazi extermination camps, or the Gulag, of all these horrible things. And in particular, you know, the normal understanding is the state punishes people because they've done things wrong, and this is instrumental, it's supposed to set them right, but Kafka suggests that *is* the state. It's a punishment machine. They're punishing you for the sake of punishing you. That has terrifying resonance with so many things that came later. Two of Kafka's sisters died in extermination camps.

In some ways it's a blessing he died in the 20s before this happened. It's true World War I had started, but you know it's the tail end of that optimistic vision of the future of Europe, and he sees these really horrible things on the horizon. "In the Penal Colony," it's one of the most powerful stories I know of the 20th century. I really do recommend it.

KRISTOL: One of the relatively few authors, I guess, whose name becomes an everyday adjective, *Kafkaesque*.

CANTOR: In "Breaking Bad" – you know, is my favorite TV show – *Kafkaesque* is used.

KRISTOL: An impressive achievement. Of course, it oversimplifies and distorts also.

CANTOR: It's sad that he never lived to have any signs of it [his fame today]. Most of his works were unpublished when he died, and he asked his best friend, Max Brod, to destroy them. Fortunately, Brod broke his pledge to Kafka.

KRISTOL: Good idea. Any other 20th-century works of liberty?

CANTOR: I'm going to go with Tom Stoppard.

KRISTOL: Moving to the present almost.

CANTOR: Our one living author. Arguably, the greatest living playwright. Extraordinary, long and productive career and a very varied career.

What many people don't know is that that man was born Tomáš Straussler. He was born in 1937 in Czech, what was then Czechoslovakia. His father worked as a physician, working for the Bata Shoe Company. They were Jewish. Bata Shoe Company tried to get its Jews out in the late 30s and sent him to be safe to Singapore. Bad move. His father was killed by the Japanese, and his mother ended up in India and married an English military officer named Stoppard. And that's how we got Tom Stoppard.

He seems the quintessential Englishman. You hear him speak – he's the great inheritor of Oscar Wilde and the witty tradition of English drama – he seems so English. But in the late 1970s, he started to go back to his Czech roots. He refers to himself as a "bounced Czech." He got interested in the dissident movement in Eastern Europe and specifically in Czechoslovakia, met Vaclav Havel, championed Havel in the English-speaking world, and you start to see a number –

KRISTOL: Which influenced the other, or is it in both ways? I always had the impression that they were friends and allies.

CANTOR: But they were in some ways fully formed before they met. I'll say, I mean, as I think about it in some ways Havel had more of an influence on Stoppard because he opened up this issue of totalitarianism and Czech dissidence. In the late 70s, he wrote a series of plays, the first one is *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*.

KRISTOL: He, Stoppard.

CANTOR: Stoppard, yes. Which is about the Soviet abuse of psychiatric hospitals. It's a play about a dissident and a genuine madman in the same psychiatric ward. Of course, being Stoppard, we flip flop with who's the madman and so on. It was an attempt to expose this horrific practice and this Soviet system of using the psychiatric wards to imprison dissidents.

Then he wrote a television play called *Professional Foul*, which is a term out of soccer, and the play is a lot about football, English football. It's about an English professor of philosophy who goes to a philosophy conference abroad and gets drawn into the Czech secret police doing surveillance on a philosophy graduate student. It's a really interesting play because this guy is a professor of ethics, and he's never made a real ethical decision in his life. It's all this abstract stuff. He has a theory of ethics, but no ethics. He discovers ethics when he has to lie to save the life of this grad student.

He, Stoppard wrote a really weird thing called *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth*. I just wrote a long essay about it for the *Review of Politics*, and my title was "Reality Czech." It's very interesting because Stoppard uses Shakespeare in it, and it's very difficult to explain, but I'll just say it juxtaposes a



performance of *Hamlet* at an English boarding school with a performance of *Macbeth* in Prague in 1978 as a protest against the crackdown against the '68 generation.

It's very campy, but essentially it shows Shakespeare is meaningless in England. They don't have a clue. *Hamlet*, they're just going through the motions, they don't care. In Prague, it's become a life-and-death matter. It's an amazing play because it's *Macbeth*, you know, knocking at the gate, the famous knocking at the gate. Macbeth has killed Duncan, and someone shows up at the gate, and you hear this knocking. The play proceeds to that point, but it's the secret police knocking at the door. They're there to shut down this dissident production.

It is absolutely brilliant. It was actually produced at the Shakespeare Theater here in DC in February; unfortunately, I couldn't get into it. I saw it in Chicago once. It's a fascinating play about how Shakespeare's taken seriously under tyranny. Where it really counts for something politically. Whereas we've gotten too used to it. It's too easy to produce Shakespeare. It takes place at a boarding school, little kids put on Hamlet, and they don't even understand it anyway.

What I really want to talk about is [The Coast of Utopia](#), which came out in 2002. Actually, Stoppard heavily revised it for the New York Lincoln Center production in 2007. It's his *War and Peace*. It's his play about 19th-century Russia with a cast of thousands. It's a trilogy, it's an enormous sprawling work, but it is an analysis ultimately of what produced the Russian Revolution and Communism and how horrible it was.

Stoppard – he read Isaiah Berlin to write it – and it shows that it's about the problem of theory and practice. That these – it's specifically about Mikhail Bakunin, Alexander Herzen, Vissarion Belinsky. All these proto-revolutionaries. Well, they were revolutionaries, in fact, tried in '48. They wrote these revolutionary newspapers.

The great joke of the play is these guys can't run their own lives and yet they want to run the whole world. They just screw up everywhere, particularly in their sexual relationships. They destroy their own families. "Coast of utopia" – they're always on the way to utopia. They are imagining this perfect world, and Stoppard sees that this is going to become real when it gets to Lenin and Stalin, and people get to try out these things in the real world. By the way, Marx is a character in the play, rather minor one. Very interesting how it shows that there were so many varieties of leftwing thought. The question of how Marx ends up on top in it. But it is a deeply anti-utopian play.

It shows great sympathy for the characters, particularly Alexander Herzen. Stoppard really thinks of them as having good hearts. In fact, Herzen – he was illegitimate – his father gave him the name Herzen because he was the product of heart. He shows it doesn't work, and in particular it's a great attack on the idea of history. The Hegelian and then Marxist idea of history. It shows the tragedy that results when people think that life is governed by history, and it's on march towards progress and nothing can stop it and we just have to enlist in the cause of history.

By the way, there's a bit of that in – Conrad understands that as well because he sees the messianic nature of the theories of people like Michaelis in the novel. It's an interesting connection between the Stoppard play and the Conrad novel – both works show what the Left can't deal with is contingency. It wants an absolute validation of a utopian situation that will come about as an inexorable product of history. It's very symbolic as Conrad develops the idea of blowing up the Greenwich Observatory. Perfect act of terrorism because it would stop time. Stop that temporal element of human life that complicates things.

My colleague Stephen Cox has written a wonderful essay on the *Secret Agent* that appears in a book he and I edited called [Literature and the Economics of Liberty](#), in case you want to explore some other books. He talks about how these characters can't deal with the contingency of human life, which is the great subject of novels themselves when they were written.

There is a wonderful book on the subject called [\*Narrative and Freedom\*](#) by Gary Saul Morson. He celebrates Dostoevsky and Tolstoy precisely for allowing their characters freedom, for allowing the plots to just develop without pre-planning and without trying to pigeonhole a character in certain situations. If you talk to novelists, they will often say, “Well, I didn’t know what the character was going to do until I wrote the scene.” That sounds ridiculous, but it’s true. It’s true to many novelists’ experiences.

Similarly, in the Stoppard play, what these people, they can’t handle contingencies. One of the tricks of the work – it’s a bit like Harold Pinter in *Betrayal* – the scenes do not appear in chronological order so we get the irony of seeing people ahead of time. We know how it’s going to turn out. Then, we see them planning the events, and they don’t turn out according to plan.

It’s actually interesting that if you put – the Marxist view of history is extremely linear and one-directional, and I think Stoppard breaks down the normal linearity of drama to convey a vision of the world that is the opposite of that. That things just don’t work out according to planning. They don’t work out according to plans like who are you going to marry. But the people who experience that, don’t understand that you can’t plan the future of a country any better than you can plan your marriage, or how your children will grow up. The play, *Coast of Utopia* is a lot about how contingency is a fundamental element of human life.

Which in a way takes us all the way back to Ben Jonson, and this notion that central planning ignores the contingency and diversity of life, how strange things are, how unpredictable they are. That’s the odd thing about many authors, that in their desire to produce a story, they turn it into something so predictable and miss the fundamental fact about human life, its unpredictability. A lot of these works I discussed today I think are works that recognize that contingent and unpredictable elements in human life that makes it human and not just a product of abstract forces.

*The Coast of Utopia* is wonderful. Stoppard identifies the intelligentsia, this Russian word that was coined for this new phenomenon, and he shows these people who think they’re better than everybody else because they are smarter. They *are* smarter. These are smart people Stoppard shows, but they think because they’re smarter they should run the life of everybody. He actually shows – they’re journalists a lot of them. They’re writing for magazines; they’re trying to make a living off their wits. It really is that new phenomenon, actually, again, Conrad shows that to some extent in *Secret Agent*.

This new phenomenon, product of the Enlightenment, university-educated people, genuinely smart, in many cases having an attractive vision of the human future, but in one way they’re just trying to make a living off their ideas and that becomes so dangerous. The danger of the intelligentsia is a great theme of *Coast of Utopia*.

KRISTOL: You’ve given us more than enough to read and wonderful commentary. It occurs to me and we didn’t discuss this, but none of the authors you mentioned is American. In the era of Trump, I feel that’s a terrible slight. So off the top of your head is there one American novelist –

CANTOR: *Huckleberry Finn*.

KRISTOL: Twain is a friend of liberty?

CANTOR: Though he also understands the potential dark side. *Huckleberry Finn* is a great celebration of liberty in the great American tradition of lighting out for the frontier.

KRISTOL: We should have a separate discussion about American literature. There really are interesting don’t you think? – trends both ways amongst some of the greatest American authors.

CANTOR: Absolutely, but the great American image of the frontier. By the way, Kafka wrote – his last novel was *Amerika*, and it's a very bizarre vision of America. It does show that America was a beacon of freedom in Europe even a century ago.

KRISTOL: That's a good note to end on. Paul, thanks so much for this extremely instructive and enlightening discussion.

CANTOR: Pleasure discussing it with you.

KRISTOL: Thank you. And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]