

Conrad as a Modernist Writer

The Secret Agent

The fact is you want more scepticism at the very foundation of your work. Scepticism, the tonic of minds, the tonic of life, the agent of truth, — the way of art and salvation.

Conrad, Letter to John Galsworthy, 11 November 1901.

Joseph Conrad's works are usually taken together with 20th-century literature so that we are inclined to forget that more than half his life was spent in the 19th century and that it was in the 19th century that he began his career as a writer. *Almayer's Folly*, his first fictional effort, was published in 1895, and it was followed by *An Outcast of the Islands* in 1896. Both these Malayan novels are prentice work; they reveal faint signs of Conrad's later greatness but are written very much in the vein of the conventional exotic fiction of the late 19th century. When *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* appeared in 1897, Conrad unmistakably showed for the first time that his talent was extraordinary, yet he is still recognisably a 19th-century writer. He is very much a 19th-century realist and he celebrates the traditional values of the Merchant Service such as courage, discipline, loyalty, endurance and collaborative endeavour. It is true that he suggests the limitations of these values: while these values enable the European seamen to deal with grave but straightforward and not unfamiliar problems such as those caused by the storm, these values do not equip the ordinary sailors to cope with serious, unfamiliar, subtle problems such as those posed by Donkin and, above all, by James Wait. Still, Conrad's emphasis is on the strength of these values rather than on their frailties: Old Singleton and the officers are always equal to the problems posed by nature as well as by human beings such as Donkin and Wait. Conrad, however, becomes modernistic as he develops, and this tendency first declares itself in his technique. His objectivity becomes more scrupulous, his use of material more strictly economical and his novelistic structure organic yet independent of plot. These aspects of technique are triumphantly employed in *Lord Jim*, published in 1900, while his novelistic vision is still of a piece with *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus.'* It is in *Nostromo*, issued in 1904, that not only Conrad's technique but his artistic vision becomes modernistic: he becomes sceptical of the strength and validity of all moral values. The values of all his characters, ranging from public prestige esteemed by Nostromo to scepticism itself upheld by Decoud, are tested against the silver and emerge as more or less qualified. Yet a trace of 19th-century faith remains in Conrad's vision even in his greatest work. It is true that Giorgio Viola, "the idealist of the old humanitarian revolutions,"¹ is an old

1. Joseph Conrad, 'Author's Note' (1917): *Nostromo*, London: Penguin, 1963 ed., p. 12.

man and an immigrant who cannot affect or take part in the affairs of Costaguana; Captain Mitchell, who retains the values of the Merchant Service, and Don Pepe, who is the loyal retired military man, are rather dense and actively support the "material interests." But the values of Giorgio Viola, Captain Mitchell and Don Pepe are able to withstand the corruption usually wrought by the silver. When Conrad writes *The Secret Agent* (1907), his talent develops further and is fully modernistic in both technique and artistic vision. It is mainly his vision that I wish to examine here.

In a letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham of 7th October 1907, Conrad wrote of *The Secret Agent*: "It had some importance for me as a new departure in *genre* and is a sustained effort in ironical treatment of a melodramatic subject."² Both Conrad's viewpoint and fictional mode are ironic. It is true that in *Heart of Darkness* (1902) he had employed an ironic method through a narrator, Marlow,³ but the irony of *The Secret Agent* is of a different quality and is deployed without a narrator. The novel is thus, for Conrad, "a new departure in *genre*." Its "subject" is usually the stuff of melodrama — the life of a double agent, embassy plotting a bomb blast, accidental death, suicide and underground revolutionists. But Conrad's controlling interests are not those of a writer of melodrama.

F. R. Leavis suggests that the central theme of the novel is "insulation."⁴ Certainly, "insulation" describes accurately the relationship of Adolf Verloc and Winnie, both before and after marriage. But it seems to me that the central and developing theme is about betrayal. The basic tendencies of Mr. Verloc's character are towards order, opulence, indolence and respectable domestication but, in ironic contrast, his home is lower middle class and squalid, his associates revolutionists, his profession that of a double agent (he is both a spy for the Russian Embassy and a police informer). Thus, Verloc has betrayed his true nature by his chosen way of life. His innate bias towards secretiveness and his profession induce him to keep Winnie in the dark about his way of life, and he thus betrays his wife. Yet Verloc gains by contrast with his associates, the anarchists, Karl Yundt, Comrade Ossipon, Michaelis and the Professor. Verloc is like one of us whereas the anarchists seem a breed apart; Chief Inspector Heat rightly recognises, with a shock of horror, the alienness of the rebels when he accidentally runs into the Professor in the street. Verloc's appearance is untidy and flabby: "he had an air of having wallowed, fully dressed, all day on an unmade bed;"⁵

2. C. T. Watts (ed.), *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham*, Cambridge: The University Press, 1969, p. 169.

3. See D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke, *Developing Countries in British Fiction*, London, Macmillan, 1977, p. 110.

4. F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, London: Penguin, 1962 ed., p. 231.

5. Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, London: Dent, 1961 ed., p. 4; all later quotations from the novel are from this edition and their page numbers are noted in my text.

the first remark made by Mr. Vladimir, the First Secretary of the embassy of Czarist Russia, when he sees Verloc, is "He's fat - the animal" (p. 19). His appearance reflects Conrad's moral disapproval but he is much less repelling than the anarchists. He even has an element of worthiness and an appeal which the anarchists lack. He is a man more sinned against than sinning. He ruins not only his family but himself. He brings about ruin because he is weak in a human way rather than because he is actively evil.

Conrad seems to have thought that Winnie is a more important character than Verloc. He seems to have thought she is the heroine of the novel in the conventional sense, that the story is her story, that she is heroic, that she wins and deserves the wholehearted sympathy of the reader.⁶ Christopher Cooper virtually subscribes to these views.⁷ Can we agree? Winnie's life before she accepted Mr. Verloc's offer of marriage is relevant to our assessment of her. Her mother remembers:

There had been a steady young fellow, only son of a butcher in the next street, helping his father in business, with whom Winnie had been walking out with obvious gusto. He was dependent on his father, it is true; but the business was good, and his prospects excellent. He took her girl to the theatre on several evenings. Then just as she began to dread to hear of their engagement (for what could she have done with that big house alone, with Stevie on her hands), that romance came to an abrupt end, and Winnie went about looking very dull. (p. 40)

The son of the butcher did not have the means to provide for Stevie, Winnie's half-witted younger brother, and her mother, whereas Mr. Verloc had, and this fact alone makes Winnie decide in favour of Verloc, though the butcher's son was closer to her in age, was more attractive and had won her affection. Winnie has the capacity to love and she betrays her own nature when she contracts a marriage of convenience with Verloc of her own free will. After marriage, her love as such was only for Stevie and this is a betrayal of her husband. The intensity of her feelings for the boy had its origins in her childhood - "As a little girl she had often faced with blazing eyes the irascible licensed victualler (their father) in defence of her brother" (p. 38) - and remains undiminished. It is true that her love for Stevie is partly selfless. The boy needed a home and protection; he could not fend for himself. He does not appeal to her for help, but she looks after him of her own accord and gains nothing materially thereby. Yet, emotionally, Winnie does gain from Stevie. He provides her with an object for affection, both before and after marriage. The feelings which he evokes in Winnie,

6. Conrad, 'Author's Preface' (1920): *The Secret Agent*, p. xiii.

7. Christopher Cooper, *Conrad and the Human Dilemma*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1970, p. 19.

are a substitute for her want of love for her husband and the absence of children. These feelings introduce a savour into the otherwise tasteless life of a double agent's wife. Thus Winnie's devotion to Stevie has its self-aggrandizing aspect. It is not heroic self-abnegation. I cannot but disagree with Christopher Cooper: "Winnie Verloc is throughout motivated by a concern for her idiot brother which in its quality amounts to that nobility which stems from a desire to make life easier for others and operates to the complete exclusion of self-interest."¹⁹ I deny that Winnie achieves "nobility." Her "self-interest" is unconscious, but it is there.

Verloc assumes that he is loved by Winnie for his own sake, and the reader sympathises with him in his error. Winnie throughout conceals from him the true state of her heart. Moreover, while betraying Verloc in this important respect, she assumes that Verloc loves her for her own sake and expects this kind of love as a matter of right:

In the early days, made sceptical by the trials of friendless life, she (Winnie's mother) used sometimes to ask anxiously: "You don't think, my dear, that Mr. Verloc is getting tired of seeing Stevie about?" To this Winnie replied habitually by a slight toss of her head. Once, however, she retorted with a rather grim pertness: "He'll have to get tired of me first." (p.40)

Winnie's mind was very limited: a "distant and uninquiring acceptance of facts was her force and safeguard in life." (p. 153) With such a mind, she was extremely fortunate in engaging the affections of the butcher's son and she must indeed be thankful for having secured even Mr. Verloc as her husband. The relationship of Verloc and Winnie is carefully defined by Conrad:

Their accord was perfect, but it was no tprecise. It was a tacit accord, congenial to Mrs. Verloc's incuriosity and to Mr. Verloc's habits of mind, which were indolent and secret. They refrained from going to the bottom of facts and motives. (p. 245)

Both Verloc and Winnie are equally responsible for what their marital relationship is. It is superficial and vague, the husband and wife are insulated from each other. Yet it is precisely because of its superficiality and vagueness and the insulation that the marriage achieves a kind of success. Both have confidence in each other's fidelity and they do not betray each other in this respect, even though Comrade Ossipon directed shamelessly inviting glances towards Winnie. Verloc provides Winnie with a home which is not less than she deserves. He provides for Stevie

8. Christopher Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

and Winnie's mother without a murmur of discontent. Indeed, his generosity seems virtually transcendental to Winnie's mother. She wishes to reduce his burden by entering an almshouse and thereby secure permanent provision for Stevie, though Verloc had not said or done anything to warrant her self-sacrifice and anxiety on account of her son. On the other hand, Winnie is a dutiful wife. She not only runs the household efficiently, lends a hand in the shop, but is solicitous for Verloc's welfare; here is the scene at night in the bedroom of the Verlocs after Verloc had been upset by his encounter with Mr. Vladimir at the Russian embassy:

Mrs. Verloc expressed her surprise at seeing him up yet.

"I don't feel very well," he muttered, passing his hands over his moist brow.

"Giddiness?"

"Yes. Not at all well."

Mrs. Verloc, with all the placidity of an experienced wife, expressed a confident opinion as to the cause, and suggested the usual remedies; but her husband, rooted in the middle of the room, shook his lowered head sadly.

"You'll catch cold standing there," she observed. (p. 57)

Winnie's conscientiousness answers to Verloc's own conscientiousness and is less worthy than his. Hers derives partly from gratitude for Verloc's generosity in providing for Stevie and her mother, where as his is entirely on her own account.

The relationship of Verloc and Winnie is catapulted into a crisis when Stevie dies in the bomb blast: The manner in which this crisis is presented, illustrates Conrad's mastery of a modernist form for his novel. The pivot of the entire plot is only one incident, Verloc's attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory, and Conrad so uses it that it is perfectly adequate for such a complex and rich novel. As early as chapter four, during the conversation between Comrade Ossipon and the Professor, Conrad mentions the explosion at Greenwich Park and Verloc's association with it, but it is only towards the end of chapter nine that a clear picture of the incident emerges. In-between Conrad employs cunning shifts of time and place and the climactic last scene between Verloc and Winnie gains maximum intensity and maximum ironic import.

It is true that Verloc had employed Stevie to carry the bomb with which he accidentally blew himself up, and Verloc had hidden from Stevie the real nature of his assignment. He had betrayed Stevie's trust in him as the soul of wisdom and goodness and also Winnie's belief in him as a

generous, selfless patron, she had even regarded him as Stevie's foster father. But Verloc remains, as Conrad himself states in the novel, "a human being — and not a monster as Mrs. Verloc believed him to be." (p. 257) It was impossible for Verloc to take Stevie into his confidence because the lad was a half-wit. Moreover, Verloc tells Winnie:

"By heavens! You know that I hunted high and low. I ran the risk of giving myself away to find somebody for that accursed job. And I tell you again I couldn't find any one crazy enough or hungry enough. What do you take me for — a murderer, or what? The boy is gone. Do you think I wanted him to blow himself up? He's gone. His troubles are over. Ours are just going to begin, I tell you, precisely because he did blow himself up. I don't blame you. But just try to understand that it was a pure accident, as much an accident as if he had been run over by a 'bus while crossing the street.'" (pp. 256-7)

Of course, Stevie's death is not quite "a pure accident, as much an accident as if he had been run over by a 'bus while crossing the street'" and Verloc is responsible for employing Stevie on a dangerous and unlawful mission, absolutely outside the normal course of Stevie's life. But there is something to be said for the circumstances which Verloc mentions; these are extenuating. Whereas Verloc truthfully says "I didn't mean any harm to come to the boy" (p. 231), Winnie is incapable of judging him properly and proceeds to misjudge him:

Mrs. Verloc's mental condition had the merit of simplicity; but it was not sound. It was governed too much by a fixed idea. Every nook and cranny of her brain was filled with the thought that this man, with whom she had lived without distaste for seven years, had taken the "poor boy" away from her in order to kill him — the man to whom she had grown accustomed in body and mind; the man whom she had trusted, took the boy away to kill him! (p. 249)

Verloc appears fully human in being driven to desperation by Mr. Vladimir's forcefully expressed threat to discontinue his services as a spy of the Russian embassy if he did not commit an outrage that would influence the British government to pass repressive legislation. Verloc felt, quite rightly, that his whole livelihood was being menaced. He attempts to save himself and Winnie by trying to blow up the Greenwich Observatory; his motive is understandably human and not wholly selfish. When he tells his wife, "Do be reasonable, Winnie. What would it have been if you lost me?" (p. 234), he has grounds to feel aggrieved. He genuinely sympathises with Winnie in her bereavement and tries to console her:

"You'll have to pull yourself together, my girl," he said, sympathetically. "What's done can't be undone."

Mrs. Verloc gave a slight start, though not a muscle of her white face moved in the least. Mr. Verloc, who was not looking at her, continued ponderously:

"You go to bed now. What you want is a good cry." (pp. 240-41)

During the crisis, Verloc's feelings and thoughts range from fatalism ("Nothing could be helped now" p. 231), to generous sympathy for Winnie, annoyance at her stupor and even to optimism. He looks forward to life after serving a term of imprisonment and, with characteristic generosity of spirit, he includes Winnie in his plans for the future. He is open about his secret life in a way he had never been. Yet none of Verloc's moods or words elicit a proper response from Winnie or alter her obsession that he had intentionally murdered Stevie. Her reactions to the crisis are independent of Verloc's and have a much narrower range. She moves from a nightmarish paralysis of rage and despair over Stevie's death to a murderous cunning and a macabre sense of irresponsibility and idleness. The vagueness and superficiality of the relationship of the Verlocs and the insulation between them, which were responsible for the success of their marriage, is also responsible for its failure. Understanding and communication are needed during the crisis if the marriage is to survive, and these are precluded by the very nature of their relationship. Verloc was incapable of understanding "either the nature or the whole extent of" Winnie's passion for Stevie (p. 233), while Winnie had been incapable of communicating this passion to Verloc. She is incapable of understanding Verloc or joining him in a search for a solution to their difficult problem. The crisis jolts Verloc into making gestures of understanding and communication, but these are not reciprocated by Winnie. When her obsession compels her to plunge a carving-knife into Verloc, the reader does not feel that justice is being done. It seems to me that Winnie is more to blame than Verloc for the final collapse of their marriage and our sympathies, at this stage in the novel, are with Verloc rather than with Winnie. Still, Winnie never loses our sympathy. Verloc's case is complicated and it is difficult for her to judge him, especially in her emotional state. Indeed, it is difficult even for a person better endowed intellectually than Winnie and without her emotional involvement to judge Verloc's case. Our sympathies for her increase when she flees after murdering Verloc. She entrusts herself and her money to Comrade Ossipon, only to be betrayed. She believes that Ossipon loves her for her own sake, ironically recalling to the reader Verloc's belief that Winnie loved him in his own right, whereas Ossipon is interested only in her money. He gets hold of her money and then deserts her. She commits suicide soon after. Yet Ossipon is not a

monster. His increased disinclination to assist Winnie after he discovers the murder, is human and understandable. He feels guilty when he learns of Winnie's suicide and his own personality disintegrates. His plight adds to the pathos of the novel's conclusion.

The story, then, is as much Verloc's as Winnie's. If she is the "heroine," then she is not the single chief character. In this case, Verloc is the "hero" and an equally important character. Indeed, the terms "hero" and "heroine" are not quite appropriate when applied to Verloc and Winnie. Both are not heroic and do not win our wholehearted sympathy and approval. Rather, Verloc is an anti-hero and Winnie an anti-heroine. Our sympathies and approval for both are divided and well up in much the same degree for both. If there is a difference of degree, it is in Verloc's favour. The value of their relationship is nil and it ends in disaster, in nothing. Winnie precariously holds on to a love of life after murdering Verloc, but this is soon crushed and is not established as a positive value. Conrad's outlook, then, in his presentation of the personal themes is completely sceptical.

In his valuable pages on *The Secret Agent* in *The Great Tradition*, F. R. Leavis is preoccupied with Conrad's moral interest in the novel. But it seems to me that Conrad has a distinctly social interest which Leavis neglects. There is a social theme about order and disorder which is important and bulks large in the novel. In fact, the personal and social themes are interrelated: Verloc's public role as a double agent is partly responsible for his personal isolation at home; the attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory represents an attempt made by Verloc to save both his public profession and private home and, ironically, the attempt results in the destruction of both. The social theme is presented with the same kind of art as the personal theme; see, for instance, the scene at the Russian embassy, early in the book:

Mr. Vladimir bore the look of heavy inquiry with perfect serenity.

"What we want is to administer a tonic to the Conference in Milan," he said, airily. "Its deliberations upon international action for the suppression of political crime don't seem to get anywhere. England lags. This country is absurd with its sentimental regard for individual liberty. It's intolerable to think that all your friends have got only to come over to."

"In that way I have them all under my eye," Mr. Verloc interrupted, huskily.

"It would be much more to the point to have them all under lock and key. England must be brought into line. The imbecile bourgeoisie of this country make themselves the accomplices of the very people whose aim is to drive them out of their houses to starve in ditches. And they have the political power still, if they only had the sense to use it for their preservation. I suppose you agree that the middle classes are stupid?"

"Mr. Verloc agreed hoarsely.

"They are."

"They have no imagination. They are blinded by an idiotic vanity. What they want just now is a jolly good scare. This is the psychological moment to set your friends to work. I have had you called here to develop to you my idea."

"A series of outrages," Mr. Vladimir continued calmly, "executed here in this country; not only planned here - that would not do - they would not mind. Your friends could set half the Continent on fire without influencing the public opinion here in favour of a universal repressive legislation. They will not look outside their backyard here."

Mr. Verloc cleared his throat, but his heart failed him, and he said nothing. (pp,29-30)

Verloc is aware of the ironies of his position: he is conscious of the real difficulties of his job in a way Vladimir is not and does not care about. Above both the characters operates the still wiser irony of Conrad. His irony shows up, by implication, the ineptness of Verloc, the unscrupulousness and brutal repression of autocracy represented by Vladimir, and the perverse destructiveness of anarchism. Conrad's irony also suggests that there is some truth in Vladimir's criticism of English insularity and middle-class denseness, but at the same time it suggests that the present state of order in England with its "individual liberty" is wrongfully menaced and is to be preferred to autocracy and anarchism. The irony thus works at several levels at the same time, and packs a wealth of social and political insight into the comic scene.

Conrad's sceptical insight is so penetrating that the social theme takes the reader to the very core of social and political realities of a capitalist state. These are thoughts evoked in Chief Inspector Heat when he runs into the Professor in a London street:

Chief Inspector Heat was, of course, not insensible to the gravity of moral differences. But neither were the thieves he had been looking after. They submitted to the severe sanctions

of a morality familiar to Chief Inspector Heat with a certain resignation. They were his fellow-citizens gone wrong because of imperfect education, Chief Inspector Heat believed; but allowing for that difference, he could understand the mind of a burglar, because as a matter of fact, the mind and the instincts of a burglar are of the same kind as the mind and the instincts of a police officer. Both recognize the same conventions, and have a working knowledge of each other's methods and of the routine of their respective trades. They understand each other, which is advantageous to both, and establishes a sort of amenity in their relations. Products of the same machine, one classed as useful and the other as noxious, they take the machine for granted in different ways, but with a seriousness essentially the same. The mind of Chief Inspector Heat was inaccessible to ideas of revolt. But his thieves were not rebels. His bodily vigour, his cool, inflexible manner, his courage, and his fairness, had secured for him much respect and some adulation in the sphere of his early successes. He had felt himself revered and admired. And Chief Inspector Heat, arrested within six paces of the anarchist nick-named the Professor, gave a thought of regret to the world of thieves—sane, without morbid ideals, working by routine, respectful of constituted authorities, free from all taint of hate and despair.

After paying this tribute to what is normal in the constitution of society (for the idea of thieving appeared to his instinct as normal as the idea of property), Chief Inspector Heat felt very angry with himself for having stopped, for having spoken, for having taken that way at all on the ground of it being a short cut from the station to the headquarters. (pp. 92-3)

Conrad suggests ironies at the centre of the social situation. He sees law and crime, property and thieving, as two sides of the same coin and anarchism in this system as both peculiar and insanely destructive. Conrad is also indignant at Heat's calm acceptance of the given social state. Conrad's many-faceted irony plays on Heat as a representative of order, on ordinary society and on anarchism. More striking, artistically, is the scene when Winnie and Stevie converse after leaving behind the wretched cabman, the equally wretched horse and the cab in which Winnie's mother had been conveyed to the almshouse:

Hanging back suddenly, Stevie inflicted an arresting jerk upon his sister.

"Poor! Poor!" he ejaculated, appreciatively. "Cabman poor, too. He told me himself."

The contemplation of the infirm and lonely steed overcame him. Jostled, but obitinate, he would remain there, trying to express the view newly opened to his sympathies of the human and equine misery in close association. But it was very difficult. "Poor brute, poor people!" was all he could repeat. It did not seem forcible enough, and he came to a stop with an angry splutter: "Shame!" Stevie was no master of phrases, and perhaps for that very reason his thoughts lacked clearness and precision. But he felt with greater completeness and some profundity. That little word contained all his sense of indignation and horror at one sort of wretchedness having to feed upon the anguish of the other — at the poor cabman beating the poor horse in the name, as it were, of his poor kids at home. And Stevie knew what it was to be beaten. He knew it from experience. It was a bad world. Bad! Bad!

Mrs. Verloc, his only sister, guardian, and protector, could not pretend to such depths of insight. Moreover, she had not experienced the magic of the cabman's eloquence. She was in the dark as to the inwardness of the word "Shame." And she said placidly:

"Come along, Stevie. You cant help that."

The docile Stevie went along; but now he went along without pride, shamblingly, and muttering half words, and even words that would have been whole if they had not been made up of halves that did not belong to each other. It was as though he had been trying to fit all the words he could remember to his sentiments in order to get some sort of corresponding idea. And, as a matter of fact, he got it at last. He hung back to utter it at once.

"Bad world for poor people."

"Don't you know what the police are for, Stevie? They are there so that them as have nothing shouldn't take anything away from them who have."

She avoided using the verb "to steal," because it always made her brother uncomfortable. For Stevie was delicately honest. Certain simple principles had been instilled into him so anxiously (on account of his "queerness") that the mere names of certain transgressions filled him with horror. He had been always easily impressed by speeches. He was impressed and startled now, and his intelligence was very alert.

"What?" he asked at once, anxiously. "Not even if they were hungry? Mustn't they?"

The two had paused in their walk.

"Not if they were ever so," said Mrs. Verloc, with the equanimity of a person untroubled by the problem of the distribution of wealth, and exploring the perspective of the roadway for an omnibus of the right colour. "Certainly not. But what's the use of talking about all that? You aren't ever hungry." (pp.170-74)

The scene is fine ironic comedy. Conrad sees to it that the thoughts and speech of Stevie and Winnie are perfectly in character and at the same time suggests insights beyond their minds. Stevie's sympathy for the poor is, in the main, inarticulate and naively instinctive and Winnie's resignation to the existence of poverty is superficial, yet Conrad also suggests central problems of capitalist society, the inequality of classes and the distribution of wealth.

Irving Howe regards Conrad as a conservative,⁹ but it seems to me that, in *The Secret Agent*, Conrad is not a conservative but a "critical realist," to use a term from Soviet literary criticism. Arnold Kettle notes, "By *Critical Realism* I assume we mean literature written in the era of class society from a point of view which, while not fully socialist, is nevertheless sufficiently critical of class society to reveal important truths about that society and to contribute to the freeing of the human consciousness from the limitations which class society has imposed on it."¹⁰ *The Secret Agent* was written in the era of class society. Conrad was not a socialist; we may recall that the socialist who enters *Nostramo* at the close of the novel, is a gross caricature. Yet Conrad is sufficiently critical of class society to reveal important truths about that society, as regards both personal and social life, and by his unflinching exposure of these truths, he contributes to the freeing of human consciousness from the limitations which class society has imposed on it. While pointing to deficiencies and problems of capitalist society, Conrad at the same time suggests that it is greatly preferable to the autocracy of Czarist Russia and anarchism. And the preference is sound.

In England, anarchism was a movement of minor consequence. As George Woodcock notes,

English anarchism has never been anything else than a chorus of voices crying in the wilderness, though some of the voices have been remarkable. At no time did the anarchists

9. Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel*, Cleveland & N. Y. : World Publishing Company, 1962 ed., p. 79.

10. Arnold Kettle, "Dickens and the Popular Tradition," David Craig (ed.), *Marxists on Literature*, London: Penguin, 1975, p. 214.

have even a remote chance of controlling the British labour movement. They have always been a small sect, hardly existent outside London and Glasgow, and in adapting themselves to their situation without admitting it, they have concentrated more than libertarians in many other countries on the graces of art and intellect.¹¹

If Conrad was principally interested in English anarchism in its own right, a part of the subject of *The Secret Agent* would have been of minor significance. But fortunately Conrad is concerned with anarchism not so much as a movement in its own right, but as a form of social disorder. As such, he does not attempt to evaluate anarchism as a movement; it is irrelevant to criticise Conrad for neglecting "the real and most impressive best" among the 19th-century anarchists as Irving Howe does.¹² It is true that, as George Woodcock notes, "the modest record of the English movement shows an experimental spirit which has embraced every kind of anarchist thought and has produced every type of anarchist individual, with the sole exception of the practising terrorist."¹³ But Conrad does not intend to present or suggest or do justice to the range of English anarchist thought or of English anarchist individuals. He has selected four types of anarchists — Karl Yundt, Comrade Ossipon, the Professor and Michaelis — who, though not representing the best among the anarchists, still seem to me convincingly lifelike rank-and-file social rebels. They are presented as bold caricatures and their repelling physical attributes reflect Conrad's moral disapproval.

Karl Yundt is a preacher of terrorism and his distinguishing feature in this respect was that "he took the part of an insolent and venomous evoker of sinister impulses which lurk in the blind envy and exasperated vanity of ignorance, in the suffering and misery of poverty, in all the hopeful and noble illusions of righteous anger, pity, and revolt." (p. 48) He is disgustingly decrepit. He was "old and bald, with a narrow, snow-white wisp of a goatee hanging limply from his chin;" his mouth was "toothless," his eyes were "extinguished," his "skinny groping hand deformed by gouty swellings," (p. 42) Comrade Ossipon is a pamphleteer and he thinks: "the only thing that matters to us is the emotional state of the masses. Without emotion there is no action." (p. 50) Though he lives off the women he seduces, he is curiously wanting in attractions: "a bush of crinkly yellow hair topped his red, freckled face, with a flattened nose and prominent mouth cast in the rough mould of the negro type." (p. 44) "The negro type" of Ossipon's features is meant by Conrad to denote ugliness. The Professor feels superior to the other revolutionists because

11. George Woodcock, *Anarchism*, London: Penguin, 1972 ed., p. 414.

12. Irving Nowe, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-8.

13. George Woodcock, *op. cit.*, p. 415.

he is more dangerous; he dabbles in explosives and carries with him a bomb that could wipe out every creature in his vicinity. His ideas are more deadly than those of the others:

"To break up the superstition and worship of legality should be our aim. Nothing would please me more than to see Inspector Heat and his likes take to shooting us down in broad daylight with the approval of the public. Half our battle would be won then; the disintegration of the old morality would have set in its very temple. That is what you ought to aim at. But you revolutionists will never understand that. You plan the future, you lose yourselves in reveries of economical systems derived from what is; whereas what's wanted is a clean sweep and a clear start for a new conception of life. That sort of future will take care of itself if you will only make room for it. Therefore I would shovel my stuff in heaps at the corners of the streets if I had enough for that; and as I haven't, I do my best by perfecting a really dependable detonator." (p. 73).

The Professor's appearance is unprepossessing. He is puny, frail and shabby; "his flat large ears departed widely from the sides of his skull. . . . the flat cheeks, of a greasy, unahlethy complexion, were merely smudged by the miserable poverty of a thin dark whisker." (p. 62) Michaelis is presented as the least objectionable of the anarchists. Conrad is capable of seeing to it that Michaelis lucidly, accurately and consistently expresses Marxism:

"...All idealization makes life poorer. To beautify it is to take away its character of complexity—it is to destroy it. Leave that to the moralists, my boy. History is made by men, but they do not make it in their heads. The ideas that are born in their consciousness play an insignificant part in the march of events. History is dominated and determined by the tool and the production—by the force of economic conditions. Capitalism has made socialism, and the laws made by the capitalism for the protection of property are responsible for anarchism. No one can tell what form the social organization may take in the future. Then why indulge in prophetic phantasies? At best they can only interpret the mind of the prophet, and can have no objective value. Leave that pastime to the moralists, my boy." (p. 41).

Conrad's condemnation of Michaelis too is clearly implied in the physical attributes which he gives the ticket-of-leave apostle:

He had come out of a highly hygienic prison round like a tub, with an enormous stomach and distended cheeks of a

pale, semitransparent complexion, as though for fifteen years the servants of an outraged society had made a point of stuffing him with fattening foods in a damp and lightless cellar. (p.41)

The anarchists are not, however, totally revolting. It is customary for critics to overlook the sympathy which Conrad elicits for the anarchists by sketching their past to explain their present state and by other suggestions. The Professor is, as Conrad indicates in a letter, "a megalomaniac of an extreme type,"¹⁴ but even from him I do not wholly recoil. Conrad makes us understand how the frustration of the Professor's ambition and vanity influences him to formulate destruction as his creed;¹⁵ we respect his peculiar integrity; we feel sorry for the way he is lost in crowds and is undersized, miserable and lonely. Our sympathies go out to Michaelis when we learn that his term of imprisonment is not justified, that it has made him obese and, much worse, damaged his mind. Yet far more important than Conrad's sympathy for the anarchists is his criticism. All of them serve to bring out, in common, "the criminal futility of the whole thing, doctrine, action, mentality" and "the contemptible aspect of the half-crazy pose as of a brazen cheat exploiting the poignant miseries and passionate credulities of a mankind always so tragically eager for self-destruction."¹⁶

In *The Secret Agent*, the forces of disorder are opposed by forces of order. Conrad sees ironies in the forces of order too. "Chief Inspector Heat was a kind man, an excellent husband, a devoted father;" he enjoyed "public and departmental confidence." (p. 119) But he could be shockingly dishonest and unjust: he wanted to frame Michaelis for the explosion at Greenwich Park. He uses Verloc as an informer unknown to anyone else in his department and he wanted to hide this fact even when it interferes with the true investigation of the explosion. He conceals the address-tab he found under the lapel of dead Stevie's coat until the Assistant Commissioner forces out the information. There seems to be some truth in the Assistant Commissioner's fleeting thought that the reputation of Chief Inspector Heat might possibly have been made in a great part by the Secret Agent Verloc." (p. 131) Thus, Conrad suggests the existence of dubious methods and incongruities behind the smooth public front of Justice. His moral disapproval of Heat is implicit in his description of Heat's physiognomy as having "too much flesh." (p. 116) When we discuss the Assistant Commissioner, we remember A. J. Guerard's true

14. Joseph Conrad, letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham, 7 October 1907: C. T. Watts (ed.), *Letters to Cunningham Graham*, p. 170.

15. See especially *The Secret Agent*, pp. 80-1.

16. Conrad, 'Author's Preface': *The Secret Agent*, p. ix.

contention that "such slight author-identification as exists in *The Secret Agent* is clearly with Assistant Commissioner."¹⁷ Yet the more important thing is that Conrad is able to portray him with sufficient objectivity so as to place him. He had "considerable gifts for detection" (p. 117) and he is more than a match for Heat. He, not Heat, finds out from Verloc that Vladimir had instigated the bomb outrage. Yet he feels uncomfortable in his present job; he dislikes being "chained to a desk in the thick of four millions of men" (p. 113) whereas, in contrast, "the police-work he had been engaged on in a distant part of the globe had the saving character of an irregular sort of warfare or at least the risk and excitement of open-air sport." (pp. 112-13) He is impelled, in the first place, to save Michaelis from Heat's inclination to frame him, not from a sense of justice, but from self-interest; he does not wish to offend Michaelis' aristocratic patroness because she was a "good friend" of his wife and himself (p. 112) and had an "excellent influence" upon his wife. (pp. 111-12) Still, he is the least objectionable among the representatives of order; naturally, he is lean and his appearance is unoffending. The elder statesman's appearance implies that Conrad disapproves of him more strongly:

Vast in bulk and stature, with a long white face, which, broadened at the base by a big double chin, appeared egg-shaped in the fringe of thin greyish whisker, the great personage seemed an expanding man. Unfortunate from a tailoring point of view, the cross-folds in the middle of a buttoned black coat added to the impression, as if he fastenings of the garment were tried to the utmost. From the head, set upward on a thick neck, the eyes, with puffy lower lids, stared with a haughty droop on each side of a hooked, aggressive nose, nobly salient in the vast pale circumference of the face. (p. 136)

He is self-centred and conducts himself with a sense of self-importance, yet he is not corrupt. His private secretary is silly, bumptious, and has been appointed purely because of his social status, regardless of merit. In sum, the representatives of order in *The Secret Agent* are not as reprehensible as the representatives of disorder, but they are tainted.

One critical issue remains: the question of setting. London is presented with a Dickensian vividness and vitality, also with less caricature and more realism than in Dickens. Probably, it is the effectiveness of Conrad's portrayal of London that prompted Leo Gurko to elaborate an eccentric thesis that "the heart of the book, the dominant idea that determines its movement, is London."¹⁸ Numerous touches—for instance, Conrad writes:

17. A. J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962, p. 223.

18. Leo Gurko, *Joséph Conrad: Giant in Exile*, N. Y.: Macmillan, 1962, p. 169.

“on the pavement of the squalid and wide throughfare, whose poverty in all the amenities of life stood foolishly exposed by a mad profusion of gaslights, . . .” (p. 170) — build up a total composite impression of London as a sprawling murky sordid metropolis. Not only the personal theme and the social theme, Conrad’s presentation of the setting too is disillusioned. His disillusion is unflinching and total. His vision in *The Secret Agent* is fully modernistic.

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