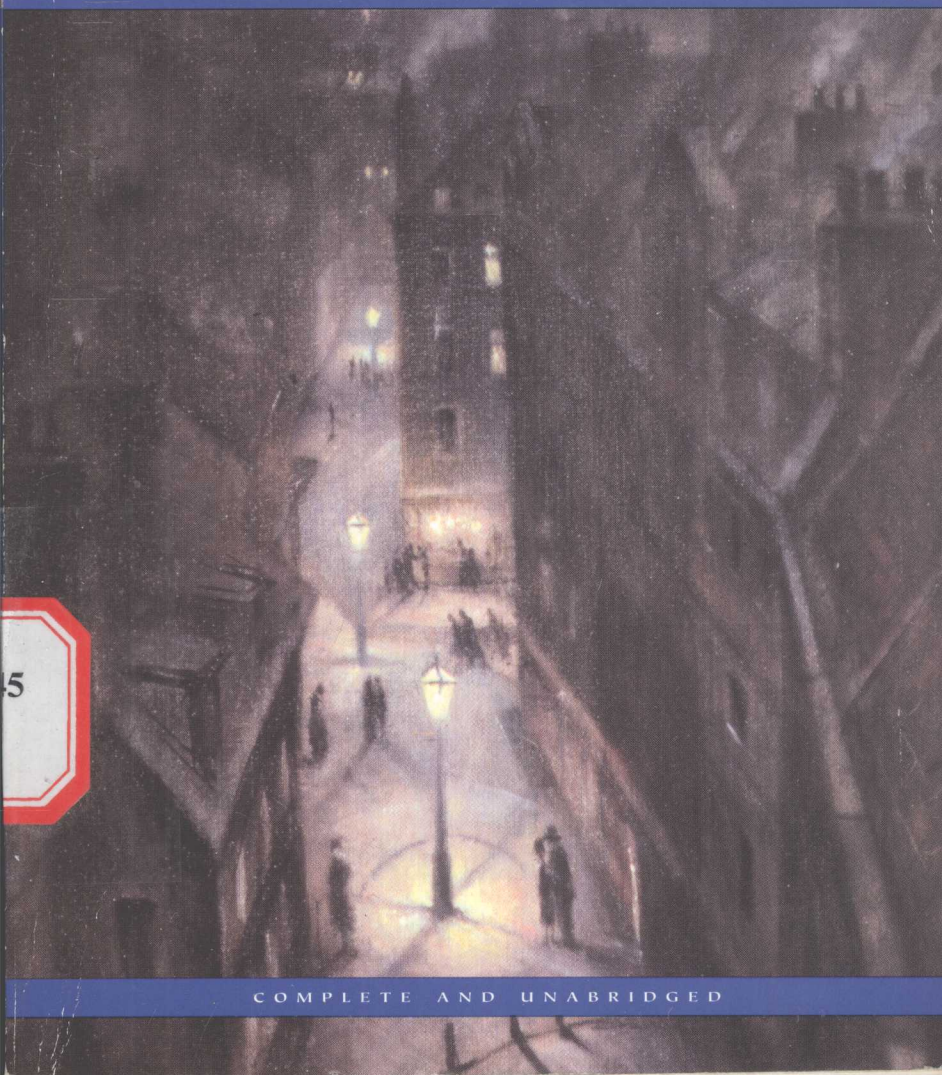


WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

The Secret Agent

JOSEPH CONRAD



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE SECRET AGENT

A Simple Tale

◆

Joseph Conrad

Introduction and Notes by

HUGH EPSTEIN

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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

First published, in 1993, by Wordsworth Editions Limited
8b, Crib Street, Ware, Hertfordshire SG12 9HJ
New introduction and notes added in 2000

ISBN 1 85326 065 7

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2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3

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Typeset by Antony Gray
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of *The Secret Agent* two characters separately walk along crowded London streets, one endeavouring to secure himself in the conviction that 'He was a force' with the power to regenerate the world, the other with his self-conception in ruins, unable to break free of a journalist's sentence that absorbs the entire action of the novel in which he has played a minor part into '*An impenetrable mystery . . .* (p. 220). Both men are utterly disregarded by the multitudes among whom they move. It is a fitting, and fittingly inconclusive, image upon which to relinquish the examination of the separateness of closely contiguous lives that the novel has conducted so searchingly and, many readers have felt, so remorselessly. By taking an apparently meaningless public manifestation – the attempt to throw a bomb at the walls of the

Greenwich Observatory – and locating the particular form of this supposed anarchist outrage in the secresies of a particular set of domestic and marital arrangements, *The Secret Agent* offers itself not only as a detective novel, replete with Chief Inspector Heat of the Special Crimes Department, but also as an enquiry into the collision of the private conception and the public perception of the self that one might take as one of the major preoccupations of the nineteenth-century novel. It is one of the distinctions of *The Secret Agent* to rewrite that concern with such a bleak and terrifying imaginativeness as almost to invent a new form for the twentieth century.

Inaugurating the major postwar re-evaluation of Conrad, F. R. Leavis used the term 'insulation' to describe the condition of the lives depicted in *The Secret Agent*, and no better term has been found to indicate that quality of deadening self-enclosure with which each character is surrounded, be it established by a stream of language or by an 'unfathomable reserve' that borders on silence. Leavis writes of these lives that they are 'insulated, but committed to co-existence and interaction in what they don't question to be a common world and sometimes making disconcerting contacts through the insulation'.¹ In fact, what these 'disconcerting contacts' reveal is the tenacious persistence of private conceptions that seem to take no account of each other, to the extent that the reader is forced to question the conditions that make up 'a common world' in a manner not granted to any of the characters in the novel, unless it be the slow-witted, peculiar, oversensitive and literal-minded 'degenerate', Stevie. Yet, far from making this a subject for lament, the novel seems to find a source of irrepressible laughter in its characters' inability to understand, or even to talk to each other. The whole picture of life seems composed in the spirit that Conrad had recommended to John Galsworthy in a letter discussing Galsworthy's recently published book of short stories, *A Man of Devon*: '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.'²

When, in the exquisitely funny scene in Chapter Two, Mr Vladimir precipitates what will ostensibly be the major action of the novel by suggesting that Verloc has 'a go at astronomy', he feels that 'the

1 F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, Chatto & Windus, London 1948 (Peregrine Books, 1962), p 231

2 11 November 1901, Karl and Davies (eds), *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, Cambridge University Press, 1983–, Vol. 2, p. 359

blowing up of the first meridian is bound to raise a howl of execration' among the middle classes (p. 37). Taken symbolically, to blow up the first meridian would be to destroy the space-time co-ordinates which (since the Washington Conference of 1884, at any rate) underwrite human operations in a conceptually common world. Short of 'throw[ing] a bomb into pure mathematics' (p. 36), the attack on Greenwich, in Mr Vladimir's view, constitutes the most direct and atrocious assault on 'the fitness of things' so held to, in their different ways, by every character in the novel (excepting, perhaps, the Professor), bourgeois and revolutionary, public servant and domesticated paterfamilias alike. Deeper, however, than this fundamental comic irony of the novel is the disclosure made by the 'sudden hole[s] in space and time' (p. 71) blown open by Stevie's failed attempt on the Observatory: namely, that our experience of ourselves is so isolated an event, so ill-understood by anyone else, that blowing up the first meridian would be a redundant confirmation of what, for the Verlocs, had long been accomplished – the impossibility of sharing our conception of ourselves or our perception of the world we inhabit. In practice, in this novel, from Sir Ethelred to the night cabby no one wants to know very much about the world or about what anyone else is thinking or feeling, apart from the Assistant Commissioner and Stevie: Winnie Verloc's notion that life does not stand very much looking into is only the articulation of the operative belief system that governs all of the characters.

The difficulty of communication is represented everywhere in the novel. When, for instance, Mr Verloc is getting into bed with his wife at the end of Chapter Three, 'It was as if her voice were talking on the other side of a very thick wall' (p. 52). Throughout, we see characters trapped by the unwelcome necessity of communicating, struggling to formulate ideas into words, for which we can take Comrade Ossipon's defence of his phrase about the bombing as being 'nothing short of criminal' as paradigmatic: "'How am I to express myself? One must use the current words'" (p. 62). In Conrad's next novel, *Under Western Eyes*, the narrator, an English teacher of languages, says, 'Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality', and although *The Secret Agent* does not offer an equivalently magisterial pronouncement, it is permeated with a sense of the inadequacy of the public systems of language to represent what people are really thinking or feeling. Verloc is 'easily intimidated' by his wife's silence which bears, to him, the mysteriousness of living beings' (p. 134), and at the end of the great chapter of the cab-ride he can only confide, "'I am going on the Continent tomorrow"' (p. 134), in his attempt to explain, or not to explain, his extreme

mental discomposure. The Verlocs, Heat, Ossipon, Yundt, Sir Ethelred, the Assistant Commissioner – all exemplify Talleyrand's dictum, quoted in *Under Western Eyes*, that man was given speech in order to conceal his thoughts. It is little wonder, therefore, that when Verloc finally feels he must talk to his wife, he finds it 'extremely difficult to get into contact with her', and in all the painful comedy of her refusal to talk to him, 'The excellent husband of Winnie Verloc saw no writing on the wall' (p. 175). Had he done so, Verloc would have known that he had been weighed in the balances and found wanting, but, instead, he is displayed in all his complacent self-absorption:

Through her set teeth Mrs Verloc muttered at the wall:

'And I thought he had caught a cold.'

Mr Verloc heard these words and appropriated them.

'It was nothing,' he said moodily. 'I was upset. I was upset on your account.'

[p. 179]

Words are a currency to be cashed for particular returns, not a means of initiating any authentic contact. Repeatedly, in the duplicated interviews and conversations that make up so much of the novel, the reader is comically made aware of the disjunction between the words that pass for communication and the unuttered internal dialogue to which we are given access by the imperturbable, ironic commentary of the narrative voice.

Nowhere is this more humorously achieved than in the cross-examination that Chief Inspector Heat has to endure at the hands of the Assistant Commissioner in Chapters Five and Six, in which Heat feels 'like a tight-rope artist might feel if suddenly, in the middle of the performance, the manager of the Music Hall were to rush out of the proper managerial seclusion and begin to shake the rope' (p. 92). Even as Heat elects to 'jump off the rope' and to come 'to the ground with gloomy frankness', showing the Assistant Commissioner the scrap of cloth with the Brett Street address on it which he has brought back from Greenwich, he thinks to himself, "'you, my boy, don't know your place, and your place won't know you very long either, I bet'" (p. 98). He resents this intrusion upon "'Private friendship, private information, private use of it'" (p. 100), as he sees it, and its conversion into official currency which will rob it of all future value as Verloc will no longer be a usable secret source. Conversely, nowhere is the failure of a private and personal language so completely exposed by this same ironic method as in the portrayal of the domestic intimacy of the Verlocs in those brilliant glimpses offered at the end

of Chapter Three and Chapter Eight, in the second of which:

Mr Verloc went on divesting himself of his clothing with the unnoticing inward concentration of a man undressing in the solitude of a vast and hopeless desert. For thus inhospitably did this fair earth, our common inheritance, present itself to the mental vision of Mr Verloc. All was so still without and within that the lonely ticking of the clock on the landing stole into the room as if for the sake of company. [p. 134]

Here is the true Conradian signature in this novel, with its bizarre conjunction of the intimate close-up and the sudden panorama, the mock-innocent animation of the agent of time itself, and a voice-over employing the tone of a clinical Hamlet, which all combine to project Verloc into a remote region of human distress yet, at the same time, one likely to be uncomfortably familiar to anyone who reads *The Secret Agent* with enjoyment.

This is a novel which records dispassionately, yet with a prompting of great sympathetic inwardness, the 'unresonant voice' of private life (the phrase is used about Winnie) that leaves the reader with a vision of lives separately locked away. A sense of the abandonment of the private world of marriage by all that should connect it to public life is rendered not only with biting dramatic irony, but also with poignancy, in the scene in Chapter 9 in which Verloc returns to the shop after Stevie has been blown to fragments and Winnie, eyeing complacently the signs of her 'domestic propriety' but missing Stevie from the picture, says artfully to Verloc 'in the fullness of her heart: "And you are not tired of me"' This disingenuous insinuation is the verbal formula that hides the truth of her maternal protectiveness of Stevie that has led her to submit herself to the service of Verloc's sexual comfort in return for the security of domestic comfort for her brother and mother. The passage continues:

Mr Verloc made no sound. Winnie leaned on his shoulder from behind, and pressed her lips to his forehead. Thus she lingered. Not a whisper reached them from the outside world. The sound of footsteps on the pavement died out in the discreet dimness of the shop. [p. 144]

The severance between a public manifestation and the private experience of life is complete and there is, it would seem, no available form of words that will sew it together. The sense in this novel of the artful contrivance of all utterance (and it begins, of course, with the narrative

voice itself) is so deep that any hope of transparency seems quite lost in this discreet dimness.

Conrad's exposure of the linguistic dress worn in public life is primarily conducted through the posturing of the anarchists, who are shown to be futile and harmless irrelevancies as far as menacing a complacent and impervious social system is concerned. It is only Stevie – who takes their words as literal references to a common world of shared sensations and can feel in these words the very objects they refer to, who thus naïvely makes a direct connection between the realms of public discussion and personal impression – it is only Stevie who is affected by Yundt's explosive rhetoric (just as he will be the only direct casualty of Vladimir's astonishing and absurd harangue of Verloc):

The venomous spluttering of the old terrorist without teeth was heard.

'Do you know what I would call the nature of the present economic conditions? I would call it cannibalistic. That's what it is! They are nourishing their greed on the quivering flesh and the warm blood of the people – nothing else.'

Stevie swallowed the terrifying statement with an audible gulp, and at once, as though it had been swift poison, sank limply in a sitting posture on the steps of the kitchen door.

Michaelis gave no signs of having heard anything. [p. 47]

Whilst, later, Stevie will be treated to a full inwardness with the word 'shame', he is never to be granted the detachment from the metaphoric qualities of language that seems necessary for survival. Within two chapters he will become, literally, the 'raw material' for Yundt's savage metaphor; and Winnie and Ossipon, too, will be destroyed by 'damp, rubbishy sheets of paper soiled with printers' ink' (p. 67), their minds 'pulsating wrongfully to the rhythm of journalistic phrases' (p. 221).

We must wonder, then, if the reader of *The Secret Agent* is offered any possibility of authentic articulation of the human condition. Any reader's primary experience of this novel must surely be of its relentless irony, of what Conrad himself called, in a letter to his friend Cunninghame Graham, 'a sustained effort in ironical treatment of a melodramatic subject'.³ From the deliciously comical vision of Verloc as having 'an air of having wallowed, fully dressed, all day on an unmade bed' to the final, much more disconcerting, vision of the Professor, 'unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men',

the reader is aware that there is no innocent recounting of a series of events in this mischievously subtitled 'simple tale of the nineteenth century'. The procedure that Conrad has adopted is to maintain a narrative voice that seems almost disdainfully more than adequate in its linguistic endowment, and to set it at odds with what makes up so much of the novel – 'the lament of poor humanity rich in suffering but indigent in words' (p. 213). Whilst Conrad in his Author's Note claims that this treatment is the means for him to say all he would wish to 'in scorn as well as in pity', many readers have felt that it is the scorn that predominates. Martin Price, for instance, deplores the lack of freedom for moral choice that Conrad grants his characters, seeing them as no more than targets for satire, impotent victims of the author's irony.⁴ Yet from a configuration in which all efforts at utterance seem likely to be inscribed with sentimentality or fundamental evasiveness, the novel does retrieve moments in which words are held to express a significance that resists the irony that crowds in upon them. Even though it is 'found in a worn and artificial shape picked up somewhere among the phrases of sham sentiment', Winnie is granted 'the truth – the very cry of truth –' (p. 213). And the information that the night cabby transmits to Stevie in his 'mysterious whisper', that " 'This ain't an easy world' " (p. 126), creates a profound accord with Stevie's hunger for meaning. For more than three pages Stevie works at the idea:

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.'

[p. 129]

Poignancy and irony are finely balanced in the deliberately elementary, explanatory quality of the narrative as well as of Stevie's utterance. But the painfully clumsy struggle into language stands as the index of a moral responsiveness greater than the words themselves and remains active in unresolved opposition to the almost excessive authority of the narration.

At the margins of respectable society, then, but at the heart of the novel there can be found tentative articulations of compassion that survive the deliberately ironic-macabre tones with which they are

4 See Martin Price, 'Conrad: Satire and Fiction', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 14, 1984, pp. 226-42.

menaced. The pages devoted to the cab-ride, and to Stevie's conversations with the night cabby and with Winnie, provide one of literature's starkest pictures of a benighted mankind attempting an enquiry into suffering and unfairness, reminding us, in the lurid lighting provided by its incongruous comedy, of the dramatic-grotesque scenes of Lear, the Fool and Poor Tom on the heath in *King Lear*. Winnie's "Nobody can help that", an illustration of her temperamental defence of not looking into the bottom of things, when taken in context, expresses the weight of the novel's tragic vision, which it is Stevie's burden – alone of all the characters – to bear in his consciousness. And this artful indifference of Winnie conspires with the superciliously unmoved eloquence of the narrative voice virtually to obscure the novel's two acts of compassion, hidden in the darkness of this chapter too. Both, fittingly, are secret in their motivation: Mrs Verloc's mother's misunderstood removal of herself from the Verloc household, and the cabby's sudden decision to lead his horse rather than further to burden 'the motionless partner of his labours'. "Come on," he whispered secretly' (p. 126). Debased humanity, in the true fashion of a grotesque, counters the disdainful voice of the narration to exhibit a 'forlorn dignity' in the abyss.

In one sense, the constituents from which Conrad constructed his macabre novel can be readily retrieved from English history. Conrad has provided us with a precise date for the Verlocs' marriage – 24 June 1879 – and he establishes that the main action of the novel takes place in spring seven full years after the marriage, that is, in the early months of 1887. This was the year of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee and the radical uprising known as Bloody Sunday. The plot and general characterisation follow quite closely what is known of a highly publicised incident in which, on 15 February 1894, a young man, Martial Bourdin, attempted to bomb the Greenwich Observatory, apparently under the influence of his brother-in-law, H.B. Samuels, an anarchist pamphleteer. He only succeeded in mutilating himself and died a few hours later. At least one early reviewer saw that the portrait of Sir Ethelred, the Home Secretary, bore a strong resemblance to Sir William Harcourt, an insight confirmed by Conrad in the Author's Note of 1920, in which he goes on to elaborate the incident between Harcourt and Sir Robert Anderson, the Assistant Commissioner of Police, the minor but historical event that he claims crystallised a 'colourless solution' into the 'bizarre and unexpected shapes' of his fiction.

In another sense, as this last quoted phrase suggests, the production

of *The Secret Agent* has more to do with one of the supreme imaginative encounters, after that of the sea, experienced by this deracine *émigré* – his encounter with the metropolis, with London itself. In the Author's Note, Conrad writes of the 'monstrous town' with 'darkness enough to bury five millions of lives', and of the sensational immediacy of his own experience that demanded this fictional conception: 'I had to fight hard to keep at arm's-length the memories of my solitary and nocturnal walks all over London in my early days, lest they should rush in and overwhelm each page of the story . . . ' (p. 7). The presence of those walks can be felt not only in Ossipon's aimless yet driven criss-crossing of London that closes Chapter Twelve, but also in the descent of the Assistant Commissioner into the 'slimy aquarium' of the London night, 'composed of soot and drops of water', and in the footsteps in Brett Street that 'died away unhurried and firm, as if the passer-by had started to pace out all eternity, from gas lamp to gas lamp in a night without end' (p. 52). Such hauntingly evocative images render the densely packed loneliness of urban life more intensely than anything outside Dickens, and all readers have felt the Dickensian touch in Conrad's London. This is scarcely surprising. *Bleak House*, which he reread repeatedly, was Conrad's favourite novel; and in 'Poland Revisited' (1915) he recalls his first visit to London in September 1878 by writing that he was in search of 'a Dickensian nook of London, that wonder city, the growth of which bears no sign of intelligent design, but many traces of the freakishly sombre phantasy the Great Master knew so well how to bring out by the magic of his understanding love'. Yet for all his extensive debt to Dickens (who, like Flaubert, permeated Conrad's imagination and whose influence is diffused throughout his novels and even his personal letters), Conrad's own 'freakishly sombre phantasy' of London is more apocalyptically exhausted than the exuberantly energetic city that emerges from Dickens's pen. With striking imaginative consistency *The Secret Agent* views London as 'enormous piles of bricks' containing the impervious 'mass of mankind'; as 'a slimy dampness, a muddy maze, an abyss' which is 'dissolving in a watery atmosphere' and contains streets 'like a wet, muddy trench'; and as having, in various forms, 'the majesty of inorganic nature': a jungle and a forest, a 'vast and hopeless desert', and a monster sleeping on a bed of mud. Although we can ascribe these and other visions of London to various characters, what is so characteristic is the manner in which they lack the particularity belonging to individual perception: rather, they coalesce into a single sensational presence that is larger than the apprehension of any consciousness in the novel.

Dickens provided a general literary example for the representation of London in fiction, but if a single precipitating source is sought it will be found in Ford Madox Ford's *The Soul of London*, which Conrad read excitedly while staying in Capri in 1905, the year previous to the writing of *The Secret Agent*.⁵ Although Conrad nowhere acknowledges it, I would claim that his abiding concerns with the fundamental criminality of society, with alienation, and with the meaning of human activity, were concentrated into their particular form in *The Secret Agent* as much by Ford's visually impressionistic sketches of streets, houses and thoroughfares, his glimpses of life from train windows, as by the genesis that Conrad offers us in his Author's Note.⁶ Writing of the provincial visitor to London, Ford immediately strikes upon the feeling that Conrad will make the subject of his novel: 'the dominant note of his first impression will be that of his own alone-ness. It is none the less the dominant note of London' (*SL*, p. 7). Conrad also found Winnie Verloc among these pages in the form of a matchbox-maker who worked so hard that she had no time for ideas beyond keeping her children out of trouble. The necessity of going on the streets was always threateningly close, and she twice spoke of 'taking a carving knife' to others. Ford writes, 'It was like interviewing the bedrock of existence in a cavern deep in the earth' (*SL*, p. 91). For the 'plunging blow' which despatches Verloc, Winnie rediscovers 'the simple ferocity of the age of caverns' (p. 190). But the point is that Conrad does not simply take over Ford's impressions, but uses them as prompts towards his own style of cinematic expressionism, a style of cuts, dissolves and superimpositions that represents the phantasmagoria of a mind in isolation yet constantly assailed, which is the condition of city life. So Conrad renders in Knightsbridge 'a thick police constable, looking a stranger to every emotion' as 'surging apparently out of a lamp-post' (p. 23); or, at the corner of Brett Street, a fruiterer's stall beyond which people 'vanished at one stride beyond the glowing heaps of oranges and lemons. No footstep echoed. They would never be heard of again'

5 Ford Madox Hueffer, *The Soul of London: A Survey of a Modern City*, Haskell House, New York 1972 (Alston Rivers, London 1905), hereafter abbreviated as *SL*.

6 See Conrad to Cunninghame Graham, 8 February 1899: 'Man is a vicious animal. His viciousness must be organised. Crime is a necessary condition of organised existence. Society is fundamentally criminal, - or it would not exist' (translated - Conrad wrote this part of the letter in French), *Collected Letters*. Vol. 2, p. 160).

(p. 114). These are not simply verbal equivalents of impressions striking the senses; inscribed in such representations is the apprehension of an inner vacancy, or a dark inaccessibility, animating the shapes of the visible world: the surrealism of grotesque irony lights a way into a dark condition where simple visual impressionism cannot conduct us.

Above all, as the last quotation suggests, Conrad's London is a muffled world, in which sound is lost and from which no cry escapes. It is an accumulation of impervious material, felt by Verloc to be an 'enormity of cold, black, wet, muddy, inhospitable accumulation of bricks, slates, and stones, things in themselves unlovely and unfriendly to man' (p. 51); and, after his murder, Brett Place becomes for Winnie and Ossipon an enclosure 'in which all sounds of life seemed lost as if in a triangular well of asphalt and bricks, of blind houses and unfeeling stones' (p. 199). And this indifferent absorbency extends to its myriad inhabitants as well, providing the Professor with his only anxiety as even 'The sound of exploding bombs was lost in their immensity of passive grains without an echo' (p. 219). Sheer number, mass, forbids suffering mankind being taken to bed out of compassion or blown up out of revolutionary zeal. The monstrosity of such a city is that the individual consciousness, the meaning of an individual life and the story of that life, is simply an accumulation of raw material to be devoured by a greater accumulation. Yundt is not far from being right. Whereas, in Conrad's earlier fiction, the elements could be contended with 'yell for yell' to wring out of life the sustaining illusion of meaningful activity, the reader may well feel – as do many of the characters in the novel – that in the London of *The Secret Agent* no action has the possibility of raising such a resonance.⁷ As Ford had written, 'to see London and to see it whole . . . [a foreigner] must have an impressionability and an impersonality, a singlemindedness to see, and a power of arranging his illustrations cold-bloodedly, an unemotional mind and a great sympathy' (*SL*, p. 21). Ford's arresting formulation aptly anticipates exactly how the foreigner Conrad would manage the narration in his next novel.

7 We might want to point to the swift and effective intervention of the Assistant Commissioner as a redeeming instance to the contrary; but Vladimir is shaken rather than dislodged, no institution feels the slightest reverberation from the bomb, and his own motives bear the taint of the anarchists' fraudulence – he acts so that his domestic arrangements may remain undisturbed.

The Secret Agent did not prove a great success with the public, selling less than 3,000 copies in five years in Britain and only 2,500 in seven years in the USA, but there were from the outset discerning readers who appreciated its brilliant and coruscating surface. For instance, in America Stuart Edward White applauded 'Mr Conrad's marvellous ability of fixing a scene in suspension as by a flash of lightning', and here the *Star* asserted, 'Since Dickens no novelist has caught the obscure haunting grotesquerie of London. Now Mr Conrad has caught it . . . ' and later, 'The moment of the crime is intolerably visible.'⁸ Not the least ironic aspect of this ironic novel is that its first readers would have read it serialised in the American magazine *Ridgeway's: A Militant Weekly for God and Country*, a fact that raises in an appropriately bizarre manner the question as to what readers made, and have continued to make, of what Conrad himself conceived of as 'a new departure in genre'. Interpretations of the novel's final meaning and effect have varied wildly, but at the end of the century Jacques Berthoud in the *Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad* (1996) can claim that *The Secret Agent* 'is now regarded as his [Conrad's] consummate achievement in the art of fiction', and the editors of the Cambridge edition (Cambridge University Press, 1990) can propose that '*The Secret Agent* may well be the modern novel.' The novel currently seems to have a status amongst Conrad's works similar to that of *Hard Times* in Dickens's oeuvre: concentrated into a tight compass, carried through with conscious control, and somewhat atypical, both books are more frequently read, certainly more often set for study by examination boards, than the larger and more characteristically romantic novels.

It is perhaps scarcely surprising that the estimate of this novel should have risen so sharply in a century which has seen so many people literally ground down for and into their constituent materials by systems impervious to the individual cry of a common humanity. Although it cannot be claimed that *The Secret Agent* addresses the concentration camp, which is the logical and inevitable construction of a society that denies reality to others, it does portray both a social and a mental condition in which the reality of others becomes lost in systematic enclosure. In making so 'intolerably visible' a city of the mind, *The Secret Agent* takes us from Dickens to Kafka, and takes us from the activity of lonely detection, so characteristic as a literary

8 Both reviews quoted in Norman Sherry (ed.), *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1973; Stuart Edward White, *Bookman*, January 1908; the *Star*, 5 October 1907

response to the metropolis, to the contemplation of a systematic secret determinism, so characteristic of the twentieth-century novel of espionage. When, after Stevie's death, Verloc responds to the clatter of the shop bell, 'he obeyed . . . like an automaton . . . And this resemblance to a mechanical figure went so far that he had an automaton's absurd air of being aware of the machinery inside him' (p. 145). Verloc here functions as a fictional animation of Conrad's bleakest feelings about the world we are born into and the societies we construct to live in it, which he expressed in a now-famous letter to Cunninghame Graham in 1897:

There is a, – let us say, – a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold! – it knits And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself made: itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident, – and it has happened. You can't interfere with it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can't even smash it. In virtue of that truth one and immortal which lurks in the force that made it spring into existence, it is what it is, – and it is indestructible!

It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions, – and nothing matters. I'll admit however that to look at the remorseless process is sometimes amusing.⁹

The Secret Agent is the consummate fictional expression of such a feeling. How is it then that the novel can be, as Ian Watt puts it (picking up the note struck in Conrad's letter to Galsworthy quoted earlier), 'tonic rather than depressing in its final effect'?¹⁰ One answer is that the performance played out by the narrative irony is a droll, clear-eyed assertion of life in the face of death. Too fundamentally serious to assume the guise of dandyism, too broad in its vision to be defined as gallows humour, the narrative stance of the novel resembles the incongruously elegant 'tall pier-glass' glimpsed in the second-hand furniture dealer's cavernous shop in the alley in which Heat encounters the Professor, which 'glimmered like a pool of water in a wood' (p. 69). Because of this single source of reflected light amid the 'moribund look of incurable decay – empty shells awaiting demolition', we can be

⁹ 20 December 1897, *Collected Letters*, Vol 1, p. 425

¹⁰ Ian Watt (ed.), *'The Secret Agent': A Selection of Critical Essays*, Casebook Series, Macmillan, London 1973, p. 77

assured 'life had not departed wholly as yet'. Thomas Mann brilliantly expressed the strangely uplifting quality of such a highly polished narrative mirror in his Introduction to the German edition of 1926: 'The gaze turned upon the horrible is clear, lively, dry-eyed, almost gratified . . . [modern art] sees life as a tragi-comedy, with the result that the grotesque is its most genuine style – to the extent, indeed, that today that is the only guise in which the sublime may appear.'¹¹ The sublime in *The Secret Agent* is a gaiety in treading the edge knowing fully the extent of the drop.

A second, related, answer is that in so vividly rendering how its characters are locked in separate worlds, the very action of the novel denies that this is the whole truth and substantiates the communicability of human experience. The usual account of the irony is to speak of it as a mechanism for detachment, for the belittling of the novel's characters and their dilemmas. Reversing that account, I would claim that it is the medium through which an accusation of complacency is made against the complicit reader. Entirely robbed of the clothing that invites sentimental identification, disabled from speaking to us directly, these fictional lives do move in a common world and through the insulation of their incomprehension recoil upon the reader to say like Baudelaire and like T. S. Eliot later – 'You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable – mon frère!'

HUGH EPSTEIN

Secretary The Joseph Conrad Society