Conspiracy, Revolution, and Terrorism from Victorian Fiction to the Modern Novel

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Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory

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Introduction

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a "conspiracy" thus: "A combination of persons for an evil or unlawful purpose; an agreement between two or more persons to do something criminal, illegal, or reprehensible (especially in relation to treason, sedition, or murder); a plot." Although the first citations of the word are from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales,* the phenomenon of conspiracy is as old as (if not older than) recorded history. If we turn to ancient literature, we see that it abounds with examples of conspiracies. II Samuel, for instance, depicts the conspiracy that Absalom and Ahithophel organize to drive King David out of power. Herodotus launches his *History* with the story of Candaules' unnamed wife, her lover Gyges, and their plot to kill Candaules, the ruler of Sardis, and assume his rule. Thucydides, in his account of the Peloponnesian War, devotes ample space to the accusations that Alcibiades and his friends conspired to disfigure the Athenian Hermae statues. Cicero's orations against Cataline detail the conspiracy that Cataline spearheads against the Roman people. And, of course, Suetonius (among many others) explores the most famous ancient conspiracy—that of Gaius Cassius, Marcus, and Decimus Brutus to assassinate Julius Caesar. Each of these examples conforms to the OED's definition of "conspiracy." Similarly, from Chaucer's time to our own such conspiracies have remained a consistent phenomenon. As one critic notes, "[c]ourt dockets are replete with indictments for various sorts of criminal conspiracy such as bribery, racketeering, price fixing, and drug trafficking. Co-conspirators, indicted and unindicted, are commonplace. The political record also contains major conspiracies"—the most famous of which include the assassinations of leaders like Tsar Alexander II and Archduke Ferdinand, and the *coup d'etats* of Napoleon III, Mussolini, and Franco (Pipes 20–21). Similarly, literature abounds with conspiracies. One needs only to point to one example—the conspiracy of the Macbeths to kill King Duncan and seize his

throne—to show how common conspiracy narratives (i.e., narratives that depict a genuine conspiracy) are in literature.

In this study, however, I set out to explore a distinct but related phenomenon—the conspiracy theory narrative. In this instance the OED proves less useful, defining a "conspiracy theory" as "the theory that an event or phenomenon occurs as a result of a conspiracy between interested parties; *spec.* a belief that some covert but influential agency (typically political in motivation and oppressive in intent) is responsible for an unexplained event." There are but a few differences between this definition and that for conspiracy. The "combination of persons" from the definition of conspiracy here becomes a set of "interested parties" or, more menacingly, a "covert but influential agency"; the plot narrows to politics; the conspiratorial act may be an "unexplained event" or, apparently, an ongoing situation, i.e., some current or historical state of affairs. In other words, the OED defines conspiracy theory as a theory that postulates that a conspiracy is responsible for a single event or continuing developments. Under such a guise, however, a conspiracy theory is nothing new. It represents, simply, the perspective outside the conspiracy, the stance an individual (the OED adds the title "conspiracy theorist") will assume either after a conspiracy has successfully yet secretly carried out its plans or before such a conspiracy—if there is one (an individual or group might just have invented such a conspiracy out of fear)—acts. Among the former, a conspiracy theory after the fact, we might count the example already given from Thucydides. It was never proved, after all, that Alcibiades and his friends were guilty (though the suspicion did eventually contribute to the death sentence of Alcibiades' friend and mentor, Socrates). As to the latter, a conspiracy theory before the fact, we need look no further than the perennial and pernicious fear that "the Jews are behind it all." Surprisingly, however, despite the seeming antiquity of this concept, the first use of "conspiracy theory" that the OED cites dates only to 1909 and, as the cluster of later-dated citations suggests, the term did not enter common parlance until the 1950s or early 1960s. Similarly, as anyone who has read, for example, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* or Don DeLillo's *Libra* knows, the phenomenon of conspiracy theory in these novels comes to mean something in excess of the OED's definition. The novels operate in a distinct literary register, one which relies on the "paranoid style" (to borrow a term from Richard Hofstadter). Not merely articulations of single and/or simple conspiracy "theory," conspiracy theory narratives like Pynchon's and DeLillo's instead give extended attention to the complex, conspiracy-centered "paranoia" of their protagonists. What

matters in these narratives, what shapes and sustains the plot, is not the machinations of a genuine conspiracy per se. Rather, the narratives focus on the fear of their protagonist(s) that a conspiracy, often one of immense proportions, *might* exist.

However, before I offer a full definition of a conspiracy theory narrative, I want to look at a few recent critical studies on conspiracy theory, which together suggest the variety of approaches that critics have taken towards the subject. In *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* Daniel Pipes, an otherwise notorious critic because of his much-assailed right-wing views, offers an expanded and modified version of the OED definition. Conspiracy theory, writes Pipes—while it has some "overlap" with the concept of conspiracy which refers to "an act"—is a subjective phenomenon: "the fear of a non-existent conspiracy." Alternately, conspiracies are "real" while conspiracy theories "exist only in the imagination." In addition, states Pipes, both conspiracies and conspiracy theories divide into two kinds, "the *petty* and the *world*": "Petty conspiracies are limited in ambition, however dangerous their consequences," while "world conspiracies aspire to global power and to disrupt the very premises of human life" (20–21). The petty conspiracy theory, thus, is "ageless" and goes back "to the earliest forms of social life, existing in all places." The world conspiracy theory, conversely, arises out of "the distinctive history of Europe," dates back "two and a half centuries, to the Enlightenment," and so, argues Pipes, is "neither an eternal feature of the human mind nor a product of this century" (22). Pipes also lists the three central elements of a world conspiracy theory: "a powerful, evil, and clandestine group that aspires to global hegemony; dupes and agents[; . . .] and a valiant but embattled" counterforce (22).

More important, Pipes indicates that conspiracy theories often mushroom into "conspiracism"—that for the individuals that hold them, conspiracy theories frequently become a life-pursuit. Believing in one usually entails believing in others and living one's life in a correspondingly "paranoid" way. Although such a disposition often remains hidden, occasionally it does "enter the mainstream," as the paranoid careers of Lenin and Hitler demonstrate (22–25). Along the same lines, Pipes also offers a series of lists by which to identify conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories *operate,* for example, via excessively strict logic, by mixing truth and fantasy, and by relying on "paranoid scholarship," i.e., "building huge edifices out of odd and unrelated elements" (30–33). Conspiracy theories have distinct *patterns,* among them inconsistencies, "overabundant learned factoids and pedantic references," and a tendency to dismiss "contradictory evidence as [itself indicating the

signs] of a conspiracy" (39–42). Finally, conspiracy theories also rely on a basic set of *assumptions* such as "power is the goal," "benefit indicates control," and "conspiracies drive history" (42–49). In this way, Pipes attempts a very rigorous definition of conspiracy theory—one, Peter Knight suggests (more below), that begins to resemble the conspiracy theories it describes because of its intense and sustained attempt to pin down the parameters of the term "conspiracy theory."

In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic,* Fredric Jameson offers a radically different perspective on conspiracy theory, what he calls "conspiracy as totality." "The older motif of conspiracy," writes Jameson, "knows a fresh lease on life" in the postmodern age. As a now diffuse phenomenon (the conspiracy that is everywhere), conspiracy provides a way for conceptualizing contemporary life: "a potentially infinite network, along with a plausible explanation of its invisibility; or, in other words: the collective and the epistemological" (9). Conspiracy describes the ways things are and provides an explanation of how they got to be that way. Yet to function as this "cognitive map," conspiracy must also represent an imperfect investment,

> for the most part an unconscious one, for it is only at that deeper level of our collective fantasy that we think about the social system all the time, a deeper level that also allows us to slip our political thoughts past a liberal and anti-political censorship. But this means [. . .] that the cognitive function of the conspiratorial plot must be able to flicker in and out, like some secondary or subliminal after-image. (9)

Conspiracy is something rarely seen directly. Rather it most often appears in the corner of one's intellectual eye. The result is that the everyday world takes on a new and sinister disposition: "object worlds can be allegorically prepared, disposed and rewired in order to become the bearers of conspiracy"—they "can be made to express and to designate the absent, unrepresentable totality." Or, as Jameson also puts it, incidental objects are "transformed into [a] communications technology" which, consequently, reveals that the conspiracy is enormous—that there is an "incommensurability between an individual witness [. . . and] the collective conspiracy which must somehow be exposed and revealed through these individual efforts" (10). The conspiracy which is all around us thus becomes too big for any one person to describe, let alone understand.

To account for this new version of conspiracy, Jameson turns to Marxism. Conspiracy as totality, asserts Jameson, represents a collective cultural attempt to understand the shift in property from the private to

the corporate—how there can still be "private things" in a world where "almost everything [. . .] is functionally inserted into larger institutional schemes and frameworks" (11). Further, because of this insertion, closure has become "a meaningless concept," and in art and in movies the "closure-effect" can only be secured by representations of "space itself and spatiality"—i.e., by depictions of the conspiracy as touching or inhabiting everything in the landscape (31–33). What occurs as a result of these developments, therefore, is the "collectivization of the individual functions": the villain is "an omnipresent network," "everybody" is the victim, and the detective might just as well be "anyone" (34). In such a configuration "paranoia" becomes the realization (as happens in the movie *Videodrome* or in contemporary spy fiction with its dizzying network of agents and double-agents) that individuals might occupy any one of these three positions (villain, victim, detective) and easily move back and forth among them (33–34). Allegiances break down and your friend, you discover, might just be "involved"—might be the enemy.

In *Conspiracy Culture,* Peter Knight provides an account of conspiracy theory that bridges the gap between Pipes's group-centered definition and Jameson's infinitely diffuse concept. Knight also offers an insightful critique of both critics. Although it "opens up the possibility of a materialist analysis," argues Knight, Jameson's account suffers because of its grandeur. "Conspiracy as totality" is too rigid, "too powerful," and ultimately boils down to a "repressed understanding of economies" (Knight 19–20). On the other hand, Knight suggests, Pipes doesn't really account for the contemporary configuration of conspiracy theory. Pipes's argument reiterates the perspective offered in Richard Hofstadter's classic essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." Hofstadter wrote against the backdrop of the 1950s and early 1960s, and his essay (however useful it might be in helping us understand the psychological configuration of the conspiracy theorist—see Chapter Four) presents conspiracy theory as an aberration in American culture. Consequently, he, like Pipes after him, perceives the conspiracy theorist as only a "marginal, paranoid crackpot, usually located on the far right of the political spectrum, and, in the American context, in a decided minority" (Knight 24). This perspective, argues Knight, represents an outdated way of thinking. Knight also takes Daniel Pipes to task, arguing that Pipes's work, given the rigid framework into which it tries to lock the term "conspiracy theory," itself operates like a conspiracy theory. In addition to the detailed enumeration of conspiracy theory traits, observes Knight, Pipes seems driven by a desire to expose and condemn the conspiracy theorists of the world. As a result, he offers no historical analysis as to *why,* since the 1960s and since Hofstadter

wrote his essay, conspiracy theories have proliferated and become so popular (Knight 7–9, 15).

In response to critics like Jameson and Pipes, Knight takes a recuperative approach, one that "considers a broad spectrum of conspiratorial representations, from fully elaborated theories to passing suspicions about hidden forces" (11). In the United States, Knight suggests (his study, incidentally, appeared before September 11), conspiracy has come to be taken for granted as the driving force behind numerous historical, cultural, and political events. Since the 1960s and, in particular, since JFK's assassination, conspiracy theory has moved from the far right to something that permeates daily life. A large portion of the American population, argues Knight, is suspicious to some extent—exhibits some level of "a world-weary paranoia": "It is always in danger of spiraling out of control, but it is also held in check by a paradoxical self-ironizing awareness of the diagnosis of paranoia," or "The rhetoric of conspiracy takes itself seriously, but at the same time casts satiric suspicion on everything, even its own pronouncements" (2). Conspiracy theory inspires a half-ironic response, is (or was before the World Trade Center attacks[1]) simultaneously accepted and dismissed: Of course, there *might* have been a double conspiracy against JFK—first to assassinate him, then to cover it up. *Who knows?* Further, conspiracy theory offers an explanation, one that resolves doubts about "causality, agency, responsibility and identity," but which, notes Knight, also describes an implicit mode of operation in American politics (3–4). To support his case Knight offers a persuasive list of terms that have become associated with conspiracy and conspiracy theory: "JFK, RFK, MLK, Malcolm X, Marilyn Monroe, MK-ULTRA, Operation Paperclip, Phoenix, Mongoose, Majestic-12, COINTELPRO, Lee Harvey Oswald, James Earl Ray," etc. (25). Of course, writes Knight (rather prophetically), not all of these terms point to actual conspiracies, but enough of them do, so that "we can never rest in our interpretive endeavors" (25).

In *Paradigms of Paranoia,* Samuel Coale sees this development, namely the contemporary rise of conspiracy theories, as a product of postmodernism. Postmodernism's "radical skepticism" (4), writes Coale, foregrounds the instability of the modern experience: "[Postmodernism] subverts and questions every form of authority, including that of language itself. [. . .] Everything becomes relational, debatable, elusive, and precarious" (2–3). As a result, postmodernism stirs a deep human yearning for "unity and wholeness," a yearning to which conspiracy theory responds: "everything becomes a sign, a clue, a piece of a larger puzzle" (4). In this manner, conspiracy theory gestures towards becoming the ultimate master-narrative because, in a way that recalls Jameson's "conspiracy as totality," conspiracy theory can reduce

"everything to evidence and predetermined clues": "It denies or undercuts the singularity of particular information and interprets it as part of some larger allegorical structure" (Coale 4). Through its all-encompassing framework, conspiracy theory thus tantalizes us with the possibility of closure and certainty. In Coale's reading, consequently, a text like *Gravity's Rainbow* recreates the postmodern experience. With its suggestive, but disconnected barrage of images and allusions, Pynchon's novel engages the desire of its readers for coherence: "We become conspiracy theorists in search of the overall plan. [. . .] We feel forced to seek an order behind the visible text and tales" (Coale 150–151). The novel, in short, affectively situates its readers in the place of its characters—"loose in a world that has become so mediated, dispersed, intricate, and coded that one cannot possibly fathom it and feels only that bitter sense of absence, loss, and impotence" (Coale 11).

Knight and Coale also discuss an interesting development that has accompanied the rise of conspiracy theory. The term "paranoia," they argue, has been reconceptualized and commodified; it is now "the stuff of entertainment and philosophical reflection, part of everyday American culture" (Knight 44; cf. Coale 5). David Trotter also draws attention to this development. In contemporary use, writes Trotter, "paranoia" makes little or no reference to clinical diagnosis: "When we use the term 'paranoid' in conversation, in biographical inquiry, or in debates about modernity and postmodernity, we understand that we are talking about a mental illness, but we do not usually feel any need to make reference to [. . .] psychiatric description [. . .] as we might, perhaps, if our argument happened to depend on the terms 'schizophrenic' or 'manic-depressive'" (16). The practice, we might argue, even carries over to literary criticism. For example, in an otherwise insightful and provocative essay on paranoia, Eve Sedgwick offers the following five shorthand definitions:

> Paranoia is *anticipatory.*
> Paranoia is *reflexive* and *mimetic.*
> Paranoia is *a strong theory.*
> Paranoia is a theory of *negative affects.*
> Paranoia places its faith in *exposure.* ("Paranoid" 9, emphasis in original)

Although, as I shall argue below, there is much to be learned from Sedgwick's essay, it is clear even here that the closest Sedgwick comes to dealing with paranoia as a psychiatrist might is in her reference (following the lead of psychologist Silvan Tomkins) to *affect*—which, though there is some overlap,[2] really isn't that close at all. At one point, Sedgwick even dismisses

the psychiatric approach: "I myself have no wish to return to the use of 'paranoid' as a pathologizing diagnosis" ("Paranoid" 5–6).

After this initial, suggestive look at a few representative instances in the critical discussion surrounding the concept of conspiracy theory, and the relation of modern conspiracy theory to "paranoia," I now move to the focus and goals of the present study. As the reader will probably have noticed, the title of my study emphasizes at least one topic which I have hitherto ignored: the *relation* of Victorian conspiracy fiction to the novels of authors like Pynchon, DeLillo, and others. The omission has been deliberate. By thus proceeding I have tried to emphasize that most recent critics discuss conspiracy theory as a development of the latter half of the twentieth century and the majority (Trotter's study of paranoia in British modernism is an exception)[3] center this development in the United States. In addition, much of the criticism discussed above emerges out of a cultural studies context and so devotes insufficient space to literary conspiracy theory narratives (Samuel Coale is the exception in this latter case). More important, no literary critic I have been able to find considers the conspiracy-conspiracy theory narrative tradition as a whole (and my assertion here will be that it is a teleological tradition) and so no critic asks the following questions: How, in literature, did conspiracy narratives develop into conspiracy theory narratives? When did this come about? For what reasons and, in particular, as a reflection of what historical, cultural, and political trends or events did this transition happen? And why, as reflective/conscientious readers, should we bother to read the narratives that manifest this conspiracy transition in the first place—or, how does the skillful depiction of conspiracy and conspiracy theory enhance the aesthetic/affective power of a given literary work so as to make it *worth* reading?

The answers to these questions form the substance of the present study. Although my thesis, essentially, can be summarized in eight words—the conspiracy narrative tradition engendered conspiracy theory narratives—I have pursued this thesis using an array of critical approaches, the most important of which are structuralist, historical, psychiatric, and affect theory-based. I have chosen to work within the "long" Victorian period (specifically 1837–1914) because it seems to me, especially in regard to British fiction, to be particularly fertile in terms of the above four questions. In one respect, analysis of the Victorian conspiracy narrative tradition thus becomes a "case study" through which I also hope to demonstrate how the literary transition from conspiracy narratives to conspiracy theory narratives came about (or might have come about) in other literary traditions. That such a transition did happen elsewhere is one of my implicit assumptions and so in discussing