

## ***THE SECRET AGENT: A FAR FROM SIMPLE TALE***

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**Abstract:** This article examines Conrad's novel in the light of the Irish Fenian bombing campaign of 1881-1885. Conrad's avoidance of any mention of their destructive methods and not unreasonable political objectives, allows him to focus on the absurdity of the Russian Nihilists, also resident in London at this time: their idle, parasitic and despairing devotion to indiscriminate destruction. While the first half of the novel is a metaphysical analysis of evil, where *passive* men do nothing, the second half is determined by its heroine, the *active* agent, Winnie, who invites comparison with Tess of the D'Urbervilles, shares with Lena in *Victory* the distinction of dying in a just cause, and satisfies the reader's desire for a justice which neither the police nor the government is willing to offer. Conrad traces the roots of indiscriminate terrorism to Nihilist despair and Russian willingness to use London as a stage for its states-sponsored terrorism. His analysis of 'the rules of the game' agreed by security services, spies and terrorists, is as relevant today as it was in 1907.

**Keywords:** terrorism, Nihilism, Irish Fenians, absurdity, parasites, idleness, 'rules of the game', surrealism, metaphysical, feminism, heroines, *Victory*, madness, despair, Russia

An Englishman coming to talk about Joseph Conrad to the Conrad Society of Krakow must be a superb example of 'glaukas es Athenas' or 'coals to Newcastle,' but, instead of apologising, I am going to ask you to indulge an amateur of Conrad, whose speciality is in manuscripts and the Catholic underground in Elizabethan England. My love of this Polish master of English prose was inspired by two monks, from two different Benedictine monasteries. Dom Paul Ziegler of Quarr Abbey, on the Isle of Wight, first introduced me to the beautiful novel, *Victory*, while Dom Illtyd Trethowan, of Downside Abbey, introduced me to *The Secret Agent*. Since then, both novels I have read, studied and taught as often as I can. Dom Illtyd also introduced me to the compelling mystery of 'The Secret Sharer,' with its investigation of the relations between the human person and possibility. Both of these men were mystics, one a poet, the other a theologian. I have never, for this reason, been able to miss the profound moral and metaphysical dimension in Conrad's portrayal of our world.

I should like you to allow me to bring to *The Secret Agent* this metaphysical perspective and to suggest to you that this novel, obviously not 'A Simple Tale' as Conrad ironically suggests in his subtitle, so transforms the conventions of the novel that it deserves to be treated in a genre of its own. I shall leave to the discussion at the

end how best to describe *The Secret Agent*, and use the talk itself to attempt a brief analysis of its very unusual structure and a more detailed one of its wholly original use of language and imagery to create a world that owes more to the modes and patterns of poetry than of the conventional novel. It is no surprise that T. S. Eliot, wished to place an epigraph from Conrad at the beginning of 'The Waste Land', one of the greatest poems of the twentieth century. In his patterns of language and imagery, Conrad is surely closer to Eliot than to Dickens, Hardy or Tolstoy. In *The Secret Agent* as in *Victory*, the shining exception to this imagistic writing is the idealised tragic heroine, who seems to take control of the 'plot' in the second half of the novel, as Lena does in *Victory*. As she drives a knife into the idle bulk of her recumbent husband, Winnie shares much with Lena, even if her husband has none of Heyst's idealism; indeed, Verloc shares a great deal with that other 'monster', Mister Kurtz, in *The Heart of Darkness*. While Kurtz lies 'in an impenetrable darkness', with a terrifying perception of 'The horror! The horror!' of his life and deeds, Verloc, on his back, is still unable to grasp the moral depths of what he has done. As he calls 'Winnie', to come to him in what Conrad calls his 'note of wooing', still imposing his own 'leisurely' mode of being on the narrative, he has just time to see the shadow of the carving knife as it 'flickered up and down'.

In a novel full of idle, fat, narcissistic and parasitical men, who live off 'the social mechanism' in the darkened shadows of a 'town of marvels and mud', and a secret agent who does nothing and works with the anarchists, the Russian embassy and the police, an economically dependent woman is the only person who *does* anything in this novel. Of course, in several ways she demands comparison with Hardy's wronged heroine in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: Tess also kills an unfeeling man, but Alec's blood, dripping from the ceiling is much closer to Victorian melodrama, and Tess's murder seems to be attacking the whole patriarchal society that condemned her to shame and left Alec untouched. In Conrad's novel, that affects to be a '*roman policier*,' where the reader normally enjoys the satisfaction of seeing the police or the law carry out justice, Conrad chooses a heroine able to drive a knife into the breast not just of a monstrous, inert husband, but into the heart of the 'social mechanism' that is sustained in delicate and hypocritical balance between the Houses of Parliament, British society hostesses, the police, the Russian embassy and absolutely idle and grotesque anarchists. One distinctively Polish element in the novel is that the real villain is a Russian, the oily society favourite, Mr Vladimir.

If Conrad's novel is poetic, indeed surreal, it also reflects the real world of his time. Between 1823 and 1906, no one was refused entry into England, and the result was that by 1880, London was full of terrorists. These fell into three main groups: the Russian *Narodnaya Volya*, usually known as 'nihilists', Irish-American Fenians, and pan-European anarchists. From London they plotted outrages in Continental capitals, and it was the Russian nihilists who first adopted the term 'terrorist' in 1879: their aim, they said, was 'terrorist revolution'. It is significant that with one notable exception they organised no explosions in London; the exception was the explosion in Greenwich Park in 1894, where a bomb appears to have exploded accidentally in the hands of a French tailor well-known in anarchist circles, Martial Bourdin. This is

often cited in introductions to *The Secret Agent*, as if this is enough to explain Conrad's conception, and yet what is more significant is what Conrad does *not* include: the one group that did terrorise London in this period, the Irish Fenians.

Between 1881 and 1885, they carried out thirteen successful plots: bombs exploded 'in the City of London, under London Bridge, in the railway stations' luggage rooms, and the tunnels of the underground."<sup>1</sup> As Michael Frank notes, "The sustained campaign (the first of its kind in the history of terrorism) culminated on January 24, 1885 with near-simultaneous explosions at the Tower of London, Westminster Hall, and the Houses of Parliament."<sup>2</sup> Conrad's omission of the real threat London faced at the time clarifies and makes precise Conrad's philosophical interest. While the Fenians had a political purpose that could be rationally understood, the Russian nihilists did not. Conrad's portrayal of the whole of the social order and those pretending to subvert it—government, police, law, terrorists, anarchists, agents provocateurs—as a vast mechanism collaborating to maintain their own interests in the status quo required that the anarchists and Russian *agents provocateurs* should be portrayed as *absurd*. Even if the Clan na Gael and the Skirmishers (the two Irish groups responsible for these outrages) used dynamite, their targets were not the public at large and their aims made political sense. Only the anarchists deliberately attacked the public at large. In 1892, they blew up a restaurant in Paris, killing two people in the Boulevard de Magenta; in 1893, a Spanish anarchist threw a bomb into the Lyceu Opera House in Barcelona, killing more than twenty. In 1894, Emile Henry threw a bomb into the Café Terminus near Gare Saint Lazare, injuring more than twenty and killing one. Taken together, these attacks marked the arrival of indiscriminate and destructive terrorism as we know it today. Even if, by 1906, it had not reached London, it must have seemed merely a matter of time before it did.

A portrayal of Irish Fenians as nihilists did get into the earliest literary response to the Fenian campaign: *The Dynamiter* by Fanny Stevenson, the wife of Robert Louis Stevenson who tried to keep her husband amused as he started losing his sight by reading him terrorist stories. They were published under the title *More New Arabian Nights*, in 1885.<sup>3</sup> The bomb-builder in this story (who speaks with a foreign accent) is called Zero, his vision is of 'the fall of England, the massacre of thousands, the yell of fear and execration.'<sup>4</sup> Their targets are selected in order to cause the greatest possible public outcry. Zero's companion, Patrick McGuire, on his way to an abortive attempt to blow up a statue of Shakespeare, reflects with shocking callousness:

<sup>1</sup> K. R. M. Short, *The Dynamite War: Irish-American Bombers in Victorian Britain*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1979, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> M. C. Frank, "Plots on London: Terrorism in Turn-of-the-Century British Fiction" [in:] *Literature in Terrorism: Comparative Perspectives*, eds. M. C. Frank and E. Gruber, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> R. L. [and F. Van de Grift] Stevenson, *More New Arabian Nights: The Dynamiter* (1885) [in:] *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Tusitala Edition, III, 2<sup>nd</sup> imp., London: William Heinemann, 1924.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

As M'Guire drew near, his heart was inflamed by the most noble sentiment of triumph. Never had he seen the garden so crowded; children, still stumbling in the impotence of youth, ran to and fro, shouting and playing round the pedestal; an old, sick pensioner sat upon the nearest bench, a medal on his breast, a stick with which he walked (for he was disabled by wounds) reclining on his knee. Guilty England would thus be stabbed in the most delicate quarters; the moment had, indeed, been well selected ...<sup>5</sup>

Zero has so many failures with his bombs (giving his name an ironic meaning) that he decides to retire, but before he can do so, his bag knocks against a bookstall, the bomb goes off, and he is 'expunged'.<sup>6</sup> Even if not technically a nihilist, Zero's name and methods, which are closer to them than to the Fenians, could have provided Conrad with a hint as to how to subject anarchists to a frontal assault by the full force of irony.

One of the most ironic things in *The Secret Agent* is the structure. For the first seven of thirteen chapters, neither anarchists nor police, neither *agents provocateurs* nor Russian embassy officials *do* anything except talk. The only event which reaches the reader, through the newspapers, is the news that a man has been blown to bits in Greenwich Park. As we discover, the only event in the novel until the murder at the end, is an accident whose immediate cause is Verloc and whose ultimate cause is 'the favourite of intelligent society women' (37), Mr Vladimir, at the Russian Embassy. Vladimir sponges off the very society for which he expresses the deepest contempt. He despises the British veneration for liberty, as he explains to Verloc: '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—'. Verloc interrupts him to give exactly the same justification of his 'inaction' as Chief Inspector Heat later, 'In that way I have them all under my eye'.<sup>7</sup> This idle surveillance contrasts with the man nicknamed 'the Professor', the only radical terrorist in the novel, who says that

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 in its very temple. (67)

The Professor's reasoning shows Conrad defending the British respect for legality, and contrasting it with 'the States', where the Professor argues, 'they don't stand on ceremony with their institutions' and 'the collective temperament is lawless' (67); so from a revolutionist's point of view, 'America is all right. It is this country [Britain] that is dangerous, with her idealistic conception of legality. The social spirit of this people is wrapped up in scrupulous prejudices and that is fatal to our work.' (67) What is remarkable about Conrad's portrayal of terrorism and the State is that from the start he portrays it as an elaborate game of point and counterpoint, and it is part of his irony that the Russian Embassy shares exactly the same opinions and desires as the most extreme revolutionary in the book. Mr Vladimir contemptuously expresses

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 121-22.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>7</sup> J. Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, London: Penguin, 1963, p. 33. All subsequent references will be in the text and refer to this edition. The novel was first published in 1907.

the desire for 'England to 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.' (33) This 'favourite in the very highest society' (29), Mr Vladimir, wishes to blow it to pieces in order that it abandon its scrupulous adherence to liberty and law, a view identical with the Professor. In a long conversation with another idle anarchist, Ossipon, the Professor expounds his destructive philosophy and his contempt for 'revolutionists': 'You revolutionists are the slaves of the social convention, which is afraid of you; slaves of it as much as the very police that stands up in the defence of that convention.' (64) By contrast, the Professor argues that he is superior to them: 'They depend on life ... whereas I depend on death, which knows no restraint and cannot be attacked.' (63)

Sounding like Callicles (a thin disguise for Alcibiades) in Plato's *Gorgias*, the Professor is chosen by Conrad to end the novel with a defence of *force*. The word is repeated, as if force were an abstract concept, five times in these last two pages: four times by the Professor, and once in the very last paragraph as Conrad sums up, in a devastating coda, the inner emptiness of the living embodiment of the intellectual vacuum at the heart of terrorism:

And the incorruptible Professor walked, too, averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind. He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable—and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unexpected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men. (249)

If Conrad allows us to see the true human tragedy that is at the heart of the novel, he is as withering in his analysis of the intellectual emptiness of force as is Simone Weil, who, in the essay she wrote in December 1940, when France faced the full horror of four years of Nazi occupation, argues that force reduces men to things: both the victims of force and those who practise it.

Such is the nature of force. Its power of converting a man into a thing is a double one, and in its application double-edged. To the same degree, though in different fashions, those who use it and those who endure it are turned to stone.<sup>8</sup>

Conrad seems to have reached the same conclusion, and it is significant that he uses the word *force*, when describing the police constable who vanishes without trace, even as the Assistant Commissioner, 'as though he were a member of the criminal classes' waits for his return: 'But this constable seemed for ever to be lost to the *force*'. (126) Although it is a common ellipsis for the full title, *police force*, Conrad has chosen the word carefully to emphasize that the Assistant Commissioner and the terrorist are two sides of the same coin of Death, and that the Chief Inspector represents the 'forces of law, property, oppression and injustice'. (75) As the Professor contemptuously argues:

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<sup>8</sup> "The Iliad or the Poem of Force", transl. M. McCarthy, *Chicago Review* 1965, 18(2), p. 23.

The terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality—counter moves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical. (64)

No wonder that Conrad makes the main cast of policemen and anarchists less alive than the objects around them. As the Professor and Comrade Ossipon, who has just led Winnie Verloc to her suicide, leave the beer-hall, 'The mechanical piano near the door played through a valse cheekily, then fell silent all at once, as if gone grumpy.' (248) When Verloc, 'tired' by his 'labours' (allowing his simple-minded brother-in-law to carry the bomb and blow himself to bits), collapses 'heavily' on the sofa, he is described as 'disregarding as usual the fate of his hat, which, as if accustomed to take care of itself, made for a safe shelter under the table.' (209) When the Great Personage, Sir Ethelred interviews the Assistant Commissioner, he looks at the timepiece with the 'sly, feeble tick' and notices that 'The gilt hands had taken the opportunity to steal through no less than five and twenty minutes behind his back.' (121)

Conrad devotes the first seven chapters to an analysis of the absurdity of the 'hate and despair' that characterizes the nihilist and anarchist, and of their symbiotic relationship with the police and government. Even as Chief Inspector Heat reflects on 'the absurdity of all things human' and the fact that police and thieves 'understand each other', are indeed 'products of the same machine' he regrets that 'the anarchist nicknamed the Professor' is not, like them, 'free from all taint of hate and despair.' (82) Nevertheless, Heat and the Professor delicately circle round each other, playing a complex 'game', and Heat will not arrest him, any more than he will arrest Verloc, 'on account of the rules of the game'; instead he will 'get hold of him' later (Conrad repeats this key phrase) 'according to the rules of the game.' (84) So Heat's relationship with the anarchists, even one as dangerous as the Professor, is as symbiotic as his superior's. As the Assistant Commissioner reflects, Heat is keen to protect Verloc, since Verloc works both for the Embassy and for Heat, and is a useful agent for both. But the Assistant Commissioner himself is keen to protect Michaelis because 'the lady patroness' whose 'drawing-room' he frequents, who is not 'an exploiting capitalist', as Conrad explains, but 'above the play of economic conditions', thinks that the 'ticket-of-leave' apostle, has 'the temperament of a saint.' (95) Conrad is devastating in his analysis of the political naivete of some members of the English aristocracy, another view that was to prove prophetic in the late 1930s, with Diana Mitford and the Duke of Windsor, for example.

What Conrad does show in this elaborate 'game' is that those tasked with law and order are very far from pursuing shared goals. Chief Inspector Heat, the unnamed Assistant Commissioner and the Great Personage all have their own interests at the front of their mind. Indeed, when the Assistant Commissioner challenges his subordinate on his use of Verloc, Heat defends his position on the technicality that Verloc is not 'in his pay', but 'in the pay of a foreign government', and keeps Heat informed of the arrival of any new anarchists (113). When Heat maintains his right to preserve his own secrets, 'These things are not fit for everybody to know', the Assistant Commissioner replies, 'Your idea of secrecy seems to consist in keeping the chief of your department in the dark.' (113)

The Assistant Commissioner is compromised even more, since he is not only anxious to preserve his place in the drawing-room of the Lady Patroness by protecting the obese Michaelis from arrest, but he also goes to the same club as Mr Vladimir, the man behind the whole dastardly plot. When the Assistant Commissioner tells the 'apprentice statesman', the unpaid private secretary of the Great Personage, Toodles, that Vladimir is an honorary member of the Explorers Club, Toodles says, 'That's the beastliest thing I've ever heard in my life' (177), a verdict that seems ironically contrasted with Stevie's more passionate and precise use of the word, 'Beastly' (143), to describe the treatment of the poor. Conrad uses the word once more to describe the blood around Verloc: 'a beastly pool of it all round the hat' (231). Conrad's sharpened awareness of the ironic space behind common idiomatic expressions is unrivalled.

His poetic satire of the English system of clubs as the worst society will do to Vladimir reaches its peak when Vladimir and the Assistant Commissioner stand together outside the Explorers Club. When Vladimir hails a hansom cab, the Assistant Commissioner remarks, 'You're not going in here.' (186) It is a statement, not a question, and seems to be the ultimate sentence passed on Vladimir. 'The thought passed through his mind that Mr Vladimir, honorary member, would not be seen very often there in the future'. (186) This is all Vladimir can expect from the English establishment, as always, keen not to make a fuss, to do anything showy. As we have seen, the Russian Embassy and the Russian anarchist both wish the police to use more violent methods. In fact Vladimir uses the same language of destruction as the Professor, 'A bomb outrage to have any influence on public opinion now must go beyond the intention of vengeance or terrorism. It must be purely destructive.' (35) For all his irony at the expense of the English class system, English clubs, Conrad's admiration for the value it puts on law and liberty seems touchingly idealistic.

So if the first half of the book is an almost static analysis of the elaborate game played by the anarchists, the Russian government, the police and Parliament, the real action takes place with all the drama of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* in the second part of the novel, Chapters 8-13. Winnie drives her knife into the recumbent form of the idle agent with a stronger sense of justice than Clytemnestra, whose purity of revenge for her daughter is qualified by her adultery with Aegisthus. Winnie's revenge for the murder of a boy who is almost the embodiment of innocence not only expresses the desire of the reader for justice, but also acts as a contrast to the inadequacies of the English judicial system. Verloc expects only a short prison sentence for his actions, since technically he has been only an accessory to terrorism or to an accident. The fact that Winnie expects to hang for her murder, and that she flings herself on the dreadful Ossipon to avoid that fate, only heightens the reader's identification with Stevie's view of the world: 'Bad: Bad!' (139) The focus of the first half of the book is on the shady, entirely masculine world of idle anarchists, whose parasitic impotence is suggested by their gross weight and the brown paper packages in Verloc's shady shop, and vividly exemplified in Comrade Ossipon's failure to rescue a damsel in distress; instead, he robs her of her money and leaves her to drown. The transition to a world dominated by a feminine sense of justice, occurs when the Assistant Commissioner visits what Conrad ironically calls 'the humble abode of Mr Verloc's

domestic happiness.’ (127) At this point, Conrad defies chronology and takes us back in time to explain how his domestic arrangements have come about, with Winnie marrying him so she could find a good arrangement for her mother and Stevie. The climactic centre of the novel comes in the wonderfully surreal cab journey in Chapter 8, the turning point, when Stevie’s simple view of the police contrasts vividly with all we have learnt in the first part of the novel. As Stevie hears how badly the cabbie is treated he concludes it is a ‘bad world for poor people’ (143), and assumes that the police are there to sort this injustice out. When Winnie tells him that ‘they are not for that’, he replies, amazed: ‘Not for that? ... Not for that? He had formed for himself an ideal conception of the metropolitan police as a sort of benevolent institution for the suppression of evil.’ (143) Conrad is not content to leave this irony there, as Winnie offers a rather Dickensian *ex cathedra* answer to Stevie’s anxieties: ‘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.’ (144) This is entirely in line with Conrad’s portrayal of the ‘game’, an elaborate equilibrium between ‘the force’ and anarchists, between embassy and senior policemen, in which the real threat to society, the Professor, whose evil presence Conrad highlights in the last line of the novel, remains untouched. ‘Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men.’ (249)

Yet, even in this unusual bomb outrage—unusual because Stevie was not ‘known to the police’ like the other anarchists—the police are not as impotent as the anarchists, and apparently crack the case in twelve hours, as the Assistant Commissioner points out to Vladimir (185). The praise of the police force seems mainly directed at Vladimir, whose Russian contempt for the English police he is compelled to revise: ‘But in his heart he was almost awed by the miraculous cleverness of the English police.’ (184) For at the heart of the novel, the point where in an ordinary crime novel, the perceptive detective sees in a blinding flash the significance of some trivial piece of evidence, the roles are reversed. Chief Inspector Heat, anything but hot on the trail of Verloc, shows Winnie Verloc the label Stevie has been wearing. What Aristotle calls the *anagnorisis*, the recognition scene, is Winnie’s not Heat’s, though Heat realizes immediately what the significance of her recognition is. When Verloc invites Heat into the back room and tells him the whole grisly truth—‘Blown to bits: limbs, gravel, clothing, bones, splinters—all mixed up together. I tell you they had to fetch a shovel to gather him up with.’ (172)—Winnie overhears, and ‘her contract with existence’, as Conrad describes it, ‘was at an end’ (204). From now on to the end, where a normal detective novel would show the police closing in on the criminal in some climactic duel, the reader is transfixed by Winnie closing in on the man she now believes to be ‘a monster.’ (208) The novel ends not with a coda describing the sad satisfaction of Inspector Morse or Kurt Wallander, but with the sinister figure of the Professor.

This is anything but ‘a simple tale’, and Conrad’s analysis of the relationship between terror and a society committed to law and liberty (a ‘liberal democracy’ in the current jargon) reveals the hidden dangers exploited by both foreign governments and the most extreme death-driven nihilist in the book. Both desperately (the right

word here) desire the government to abandon the protection of law and order, and resort to 'force'. Then force could meet force on equal terms, and society would no longer enjoy any moral superiority. What I think makes Conrad's novel remarkable is the way he balances this ironic and surreal portrayal of anarchists in London in the late nineteenth century, with a profoundly moving human story. That the protagonist of this is a woman who has been treated like a piece of property, and whose 'simple' brother has been thrown away like 'some splendid treasure of jewels, dropped in a dust-bin' (174) arouses the reader's intense and passionate interest in what might otherwise have remained a rather poetic, detached and ironic (even if accurate) portrayal of society and its enemies. On the contrary, Conrad's description of Winnie's murder of her monstrous husband is more intensely moving than Hardy's account of the after-effects of Tess's murder of Alec. It is so, partly because Conrad makes us share the appalling insensitivity (the word itself seems inadequate) of Verloc's reaction to Stevie's murder, and his complete failure even to contemplate its possible effects on Winnie: these allow the reader to build up almost as much anger as Winnie. His single 'wooing' word, 'Winnie', allows him to misinterpret her movement towards him as part of her 'unbroken contract' (212), and his 'leisurely' (the word repeated three times) idleness makes it plausible that he can see what is coming to him without 'stirring a limb' (213). The reader is able to enjoy a full sense of justice at the end of this story of crime and punishment: Winnie commits suicide before facing the fourteen-foot drop she so vividly imagines, Verloc has got what he deserves, Ossipon's philandering has been ended. Although the Assistant Commissioner argues that 'All that's wanted now is to do away with the *agent provocateur* to make everything safe,' Conrad alerts us to the greater solitary menace of absolute nihilists. At the end of the novel, the Professor still stalks the streets, where 'His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction' (249). The word 'images' alerts us to the prescience of Conrad's analysis, where terrorists trade not just in blood and limbs but in images of horror; their currency is in images able to produce fear, and the arrival of the internet has enabled them to broadcast these world-wide. The primary targets of this 'dreadful trade' remain completely innocent victims, chosen because they attract the largest outcry. The blatant nature of the Salisbury attack on Sergei Skripal, like the Litvinenko attack in 2006, remind us that the Russian government is still more interested in a destabilizing effect than in poison, whether with Polonium or A-234. In the Salisbury attack, as in Conrad's fiction, a completely innocent, and very vulnerable, person died. The poison had been thrown away in a dust-bin and a man believing it to be perfume gave it to his partner: both were living in a drugs hostel.

But I wish to end with what perfectly expresses Conrad's surreal purpose: the two great cab journeys in the streets of London. The first is the Assistant Commissioner's.

His descent into the street was like the descent into a slimy aquarium from which the water had been run off. A murky, gloomy dampness enveloped him. The walls of the houses were wet, the mud of the roadway glistened with an effect of phosphorescence, and when he emerged into the Strand out of a narrow street by the side of Charing Cross Station, the genius of the locality assimilated him. He might have been but one more of the queer foreign fish that can be seen of an evening about there, flitting round the dark corners.' (124)

In this subaqueous inferno, the Assistant Commissioner becomes ‘a fare’ when he boards a hansom cab, and slips away ‘leaving an effect of uncanny, eccentric ghostliness upon the driver’s mind.’ (124)

Conrad’s portrayal of the last journey of Stevie in a cab with his sister, talks of the vehicle as ‘the perfection of grotesque misery and weirdness of macabre detail, as if it were the Cab of Death itself.’ (142) It is in this cab that Stevie enunciates his ideal conception of the police. Conrad’s portrait of an infernal London of ghostly shadows and macabre cabs is the surreal setting for his metaphysical analysis of the relation between society and its enemies (some of whom are officially its friends), an analysis that could seem despairing about human beings if it were not for Winnie and Stevie who redeem nature from the general curse: society and its institutions turn human beings into things, more like automata than the mechanical piano that plays out the pest-Professor and Comrade Ossipon, whose brain is pulsating wrongfully to the rhythm of journalistic phrases ‘...*Will hang for ever over this act ...*’—it was inclining towards the gutter—of *madness or despair*.’ (249) Ossipon’s career is the subject behind ‘it’ and the madness and despair belong to the revolutionists, anarchists and embassies who support them. At the heart of this novel is a theological perception of evil as not being, the absence of good. ‘Why this is hell, nor am I out of it,’ says Mephistopheles in *Doctor Faustus*; Conrad’s image of London as a damp, watery hell is a recognition that hell is no other place, but where we make it, a place of ‘madness and despair.’ By contrast, Winnie’s plunge into the icy waters of the Channel, as Ossipon recognizes, comes from ‘a vigour of vitality, a love of life’ in a woman driven by ‘the fear, the blind, mad fear of the gallows,’ and it enables her to escape the structures of a ‘bestly’ society that has failed her and the helpless Stevie.

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