

# “Where All Things Sacred and Profane Are Turned Into Copy”: Flesh, Fact, and Fiction in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*

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How can you tell the truth from lies? The colour of the ink and the shapes of the letters are the same.

—Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*

“How fine it would be,” Joseph Conrad once wrote Ford Maddox Ford, “. . . if the idea had a substance and words a magic power, if the invisible could be snared into a shape” (qtd. in Baines 223). Snaring the invisible into shape, giving what he called “les valeurs idéales” their fictional form, inscribing truths that were like “une ombre sinistre et fuyante, dont il est impossible de fixer l’image” (Jean-Aubry 1: 270)—these difficulties comprise a familiar version of the Conradian problematic of embodiment, a problematic marked, as Tony Tanner noted some time ago, by Conrad’s painful awareness of “language’s incapacities and obligations—the necessity to tell, the impossibility of telling” (33). But if Conrad’s sense of his medium as at once crucial and in crisis affords one side of that problematic, then another, more historically precise factor—one brought to the fore in *The Secret Agent* (1907)—lay in the historically specific difficulty of trying to embody “les valeurs idéales” in an age where, as Conrad himself put it, “all things sacred and profane are turned into copy,”<sup>1</sup> a time when technologies of mass reproduction and industrial iteration threatened

to displace or discredit those values and the literary artifact alike, depriving both of what Walter Benjamin might call their “aura,” their authenticity and uniqueness. Conrad, as Jim Reilly has argued, was painfully aware of his era as a time when “the writer’s medium of words and books is being superseded as the pre-eminent channel of knowledge by information technologies” such as newspaper accounts, photographs, and scientific discourses, “losing its primacy as the conveyor of historical meanings and drifting into irrelevance” (36)—a loss *The Secret Agent* records through the “impenetrable mystery” of “a human brain pulsating wrongfully to the rhythm of journalistic phrases” (237). Far from being solely an effect of language’s potential autonomy, then, the problematic of embodiment traced in Conrad’s text is also deeply historic, closely bound to the era and technologies of mass reproduction, to the rise of information technologies and the “rhythm of journalistic phrases.”

*The Secret Agent* inscribes this displacement through what by the turn of the century had come to stand as the perversion par excellence in an age of mass reproduction and late capitalist commodification: fetishism. Whether understood in its Marxist sense as a term describing how, in a capitalist social order, representations (specifically, of value) take on a fantastic autonomy apart from the material relations they originally stood for, or in the psychoanalytic sense as the disavowal of lack or absence through the formation of an ersatz surrogate, fetishism captures precisely the loss of primacy, plenitude, and authenticity endemic in an age when “all things sacred and profane are turned into copy,” made simulacra and commodity alike. As I hope to show, fetishism opens a space for *The Secret Agent* to explore not only its own representational bind, caught as it is between the phantasmic circulation of “copy” and its own medium’s penchant for displacing or deferring its referent, but to interrogate as well the perverse effects of journalism’s “ready-made phrases” (42) and a discursive practice this text singles out as “the fetish of to-day” (41)—science, most notably the criminal science of Cesare Lombroso.

*The Secret Agent* opens with an inventory of the shop from which Mr. Verloc, secret agent and “seller of shady wares” (23), conducts his business:

The window contained photographs of more or less undressed dancing girls; nondescript packages in wrappers

like patent medicines; closed yellow paper envelopes, very flimsy, and marked two-and-six in heavy black figures; a few numbers of ancient French comic publications hung across a string as if to dry; a dingy blue china bowl, a casket of black wood, bottles of marking ink, and rubber stamps; a few books, with titles hinting at impropriety; a few apparently old copies of obscure newspapers, badly printed, with titles like *The Torch*, *The Gong*—rousing titles. (22)

Barely clothed bodies and “badly printed” papers, soaked and “soiled” volumes hung across a string as if to dry, customers who enter with “traces of mud on the bottom of their nether garments,” hands “plunged deep” in their side pockets, there to browse among “rousing titles,” “promising” titles, “titles hinting at impropriety” (22–23)—*The Secret Agent* begins by taking stock of a certain slippage between fugitive ink and furtive activities, textuality and titillation, mud, printed matter, and masturbation.<sup>2</sup> This slippage and the failure of form it indicates figures the sort of open-ended, self-perpetuating semiosis that lies at the root of *The Secret Agent*’s problematic of embodiment, a menace it calls up through the specters of onanism, the anarchist text, and the slick, self-sufficient “ready-made” phrase.

Masturbatory imagery permeates this novel, typically but not always in conjunction with texts and the telling of tales. For as it turns out, Verloc’s customers, in search of “rousing” or “promising” titles, are not the only ones who keep their hands plunged deep in their pockets. There is the Professor, a fanatical anarchist who has turned himself into a human bomb with his pocket detonator, and who walks “always,” as he tells Comrade Ossipon, “with my left hand closed round the india-rubber ball which I have in my trouser pocket,” a ball attached to a rubber tube “resembling a slender brown worm” (66). Verloc’s feeble-minded brother-in-law Stevie also habitually keeps “his hands thrust deep into his pockets”: “not wise enough to restrain his passions” (138), Stevie instead relieves them through “the agitation of his limbs” (143), repeatedly exhibiting “the same signs of futile bodily agitation” (138). With his “vacant” look, agitated air, and slack lower lip (25), Stevie is drawn right along the lines of the classic nineteenth century victim of ‘the secret vice’; and indeed, as the following

episode suggests, "he might have been suspected of hiding a fund of reckless naughtiness":

When he had reached the age of fourteen a friend of his late father, an agent for a foreign preserved milk firm, having given him an opening as office-boy, he was discovered one foggy afternoon, in his chief's absence, busy letting off fireworks on the staircase. He touched off in quick succession a set of fierce rockets, angry catherine wheels, loudly exploding squibs. . . . It seems that two other office-boys in the building had worked upon his feelings by tales of injustice and oppression till they had wrought his compassion to the pitch of that frenzy. (26)

Tales of injustice and oppression also help the anarchists who frequent Verloc's parlor work themselves up into a frenzy. Stirred by talk of lengthy prison terms, "the old terrorist" Karl Yundt (himself a "veteran of dynamite wars" [54]) gropes for his stick with one gouty hand and begins mouthing his words with a "worn out passion, resembling in its impotent fierceness the excitement of a senile sensualist" (50); as he speaks, "[t]he knob of his stick and his legs shook together with passion, whilst the trunk . . . preserved his historic attitude of defiance" (53). Michaelis, the "ticket-of-leave apostle" who has nursed his Marxist faith during fifteen years of solitary confinement, lifts his eyes to the ceiling and lets his optimism "flow from his lips" (54), "indifferent to the sympathy or hostility of his hearers, indifferent indeed to their presence, from the habit he had acquired of thinking aloud hopefully in the solitude of the four whitewashed walls of his cell" (51); and it is in the same state of blissful and solitary lubricity that the apostle works away at his autobiography, "writing night and day in a shaky, slanting hand that 'Autobiography of a Prisoner' which was to be like a book of Revelation in the history of mankind": "He could not tell whether the sun still shone on the earth or not. The perspiration of the literary labour dropped from his brow. A delightful enthusiasm urged him on. It was the liberation of his inner life, the letting out of his soul into the wide world" (104).

This characterization of writing as a solitary, self-enclosed and self-stimulating activity extends to the "literary propaganda" churned out by

the anarchists as well (53), a steady stream of tracts, leaflets, broadsides and pamphlets that rise in the window of Verloc's shop, spread across Wurm's writing table, and cover Mr. Vladimir's "vast" mahogany desk, texts written, as this last complains, "in a *charabia* every bit as incomprehensible as Chinese" (38).<sup>3</sup> "What are all these leaflets . . ." Vladimir indignantly asks Verloc. "Isn't your society capable of anything else but printing this prophetic bosh in blunt type on this filthy paper—eh? Why don't you do something?" (38–39). "Here you talk, print, plot, and do nothing" (71), the Professor accuses Ossipon, editor-in-chief of the 'F. P.' (Future of the Proletariat) pamphlets: "The condemned social order has not been built up on paper and ink, and I don't fancy a combination of paper and ink will ever put an end to it, whatever you may think" (70). A combination of paper and ink, and nothing besides, is a good way to describe Verloc's reports "for the last twelve months" to the Embassy, documents that are the epitome of self-referentiality: "That state of affairs you expose there," Wurm says, pushing at the mound of papers, "is assumed to exist as the first condition of your employment" (32).

The autotelic and self-stimulating text, written in fugitive ink and on sodden pages; the solitary anarchist clutching his rubber ball or soaked "with the perspiration of literary labor"; the men who plunge their hands deep in their pockets and who "get a little splashed, a little wet" (158) in the "slimy dampness" of a dissolute London, searching for "rousing titles"—each reinforces the link between writing and masturbation through which *The Secret Agent* evokes the rampant failure to reproduce or to fix form that subsists at the heart of its problematic of embodiment. The novel elaborates this failure through its recurrent imagery of bodies, buildings, and texts dissolving within the "immensity of greasy slime and damp plaster" that is modern London, a "town of marvels and mud" where everything is "enveloped, oppressed, penetrated, choked, and suffocated by the blackness of a wet London night, which is composed of soot and drops of water" (124), always on the verge of sliding back into a sort of primordial slime or watery mist. Texts that circulate within this "slimy dampness" are filthy and well-fingered, "grey sheet[s] of printed matter" set in "blunt type on this filthy paper" (38–39), "damp, rubbishy sheets of paper soiled with printer's ink" (75); within them, as within the space of Verloc's shop, politics and pornography run together, as is the case with Comrade Ossipon's "popular quasi-medical study (in the form of a cheap pamphlet

seized promptly by the police) entitled 'The Corroding Vices of the Middle Classes' " (52–53). Newspapers partake of the same grimy fluidity, evince the same lapsing of figure into ground:

In front of the great doorway a dismal row of newspaper sellers standing clear of the pavement dealt out their wares from the gutter. It was a raw, gloomy day of early spring; and the grimy sky, the mud of the streets, the rags of the dirty men harmonized excellently with the eruption of the damp, rubbishy sheets of paper soiled with printer's ink. (75)

The blurring of textual, topographic, and bodily boundaries traced in such passages indexes what John Rignall has described as *The Secret Agent's* "thematic preoccupation with a problem of form" (151), a problem he finds erupting most spectacularly in all the "explosions, real and imagined" (144), that take place throughout the text: Stevie's violent disintegration, for instance—"smashed branches, torn leaves, gravel, bits of brotherly flesh and bone, all sprouting up together in the manner of a firework" (201)—or Ossipon's hallucinatory vision of the Silenus beer hall turned after a blast from the Professor's pocket detonator "into a dreadful black hole belching horrible fumes choked with ghastly rubbish of smashed brickwork and mutilated corpses" (67). Rignall reads such disintegration as evidence of the loss of the formal and epistemological stability once provided by the figure of the realist *flâneur*, whose controlling perspective begins breaking down in the vast, obscure, and alienating space of the modern metropolis. I would suggest, however, that *The Secret Agent's* thematic of dissolution and the crisis of form it signifies is less the effect of a newly problematized narrative perspective than it is an index of the mounting pressures put on the literary artifact by the rise of information technologies and the all-consuming "rhythm of journalistic phrases" (237), pressures resonating in Conrad's sense of his as an age where "all things sacred and profane are turned into copy." It is a problematic which emerges most forcefully in the opposition between the infinitely disseminated phrase or constantly circulated text and the unique, closed sign, the arrested and arresting "fact" set forth by a purely operational, a transitive and thereby revolutionary language. As Privy Councilor Wurmt tells Ver-

loc in the novel's earliest formulation of this opposition, "What is required at present is not writing, but the bringing to light of a distinct, significant fact—I would almost say of an alarming fact" (32).

It is, at any rate, just this dearth of the "distinct" or "significant" and its roots in the conversion of the authentic into "copy" that menaces Mr. Vladimir's plans to provoke repressive legislation against anarchist refuges by staging a counterfeit anarchist incident.<sup>4</sup> Leaving aside the obvious irony that Vladimir's scheme is itself a copy, a "sham," it is crucial to remark that this scheme takes as its informing principle the need to "defy the ingenuity of journalists" (44). Assassination attempts on "a crowned head or a president," Vladimir informs his secret agent Verloc, are "almost conventional"; nor will "an outrage upon—say a church" do:

No matter how revolutionary and anarchist in inception, there would be fools enough to give such an outrage the character of a religious manifestation. And that would detract from the especial alarming significance we wish to give to the act. A murderous attempt on a restaurant or a theatre would suffer in the same way from the suggestion of a non-political passion; the exasperation of a hungry man, an act of social revenge. All this is used up; it is no longer instructive as an object lesson in revolutionary anarchism. Every newspaper has ready-made phrases to explain such manifestations away. (42)

For this reason, Vladimir directs his flabbergasted secret agent to blow up Greenwich Observatory: "having a go at astronomy," he cheerily informs Verloc, is sure to exceed "the ingenuity of the journalists" (44).

As the novel's repeated references to the power of the press and the peculiar rapacity of "emotional journalists in want of special copy" makes clear (105), Vladimir's estimate of the power and pervasiveness of journalism's "ready made phrases" is not wanting. There is, however, a more startling side to this massive mediation, an effect figured, as suggested earlier, by the constant disappearance of discrete forms into London's "slimy dampness"—and that is, copy's capacity for absorbing or subsuming its material referent. Vladimir's "philosophy" of bomb throwing (46), formulated in response to journalism's uncanny ability to convert every-

thing sacred and profane into copy, and that in every sense of the word, bespeaks *The Secret Agent's* own embattled situation, the same with which we began: namely, how to extricate "les valeurs idéales" and the prose in which they are embodied from this circuit of unchecked recursivity and "ready-made phrases," that industrial iteration which threatens to drain every original production of its value and authenticity.

We might, then, take Vladimir at his word when he says of the typical anarchist incident that "Every newspaper has ready-made phrases to explain such manifestations away": for as *The Secret Agent* shows, such phrases not only neutralize, they in fact usurp their material referents, spiriting away events themselves, coming in the end to take their place. One of the most exemplary stagings of this usurpation arrives late in the novel when Winnie Verloc, having just plunged a carving knife into her husband's breast for what she considers his complicity in her brother Stevie's death, begins trying to imagine her impending execution at the gallows:

There within four high walls, as if into a pit, at the dawn of day, the murderer was brought out to be executed, with a horrible quietness and, as the reports in the newspapers always said, "in the presence of the authorities." . . . And how was it done? The impossibility of imagining the details of such quiet execution added something maddening to her abstract terror. The newspapers never gave any details except one, but that one with some affectation was always there at the end of a meagre report. Mrs. Verloc remembered its nature. It came with a cruel burning pain into her head, as if the words "The drop given was fourteen feet" had been scratched on her brain with a hot needle. "The drop given was fourteen feet." (207)

That phrase continues to dog her steps as she lurches out into the street; and during the length of her flight with Ossipon to the railway station, "Now and then, like a sable streamer blown across a road, the words 'The drop given was fourteen feet' got in the way of her tense stare" (225).

This incident offers one of the novel's most painstaking demonstrations of how the ready-made and reiterated phrase, "always said" and "always there," completely eradicates its referent, becoming, "like a sable streamer blown across a road," a material reality in its own right. Standing

in the place of its absent referent, at once surrogate for and symbol of its loss, the phrase “The drop given was fourteen feet” becomes a sort of verbal fetish, endowed with an uncanny, gripping potency: “These words affected her physically, too. Her throat became convulsed in waves to resist strangulation; and the apprehension of the jerk was so vivid that she seized her head in both hands as if to save it from being torn off her shoulders. ‘The drop given was fourteen feet’ ” (207).

This is neither the first nor the last time a printed phrase or notion will come to acquire what the narrative describes as “an outward existence, an independent power of its own, and even a suggestive voice” (186), exercising an enthralling power over one or another of this novel’s personages. *The Secret Agent* is remarkable for the consistency with which it depicts not only writing, but also the implements of writing (pens, paper, desks, writing tables and inkstands) as alive with the sort of fantastic autonomy Marx found in the commodity fetish. A striking instance of this dominion is afforded in a description of the Assistant Commissioner, “pen in hand, bent over a great table bestrewn with papers, as if worshipping an enormous double inkstand of bronze and crystal” (88). And indeed, enormous desks and “vast” mahogany writing tables, crowned with imposing reams of paper and “official inkstands” (125), are shown time and again to dominate those who sit behind and those who appear before them: the Assistant Commissioner, for instance, is “Chained to a desk in the thick of four millions of men” (99), “stuck in a litter of paper” and mired in “desk work, which was the bane of his existence because of its confined nature and apparent lack of reality” (113); Chief Inspector Heat and Verloc, summoned to appear before their superiors’ desks, are there rebuked by accusing documents, incriminating papers, “the unanswerable retort of a finger-tip laid forcibly on the telegram” (80); and the obese Michaelis, “[f]itted with painful tightness into an old wooden armchair” (104), sits in a “tiny cage in a litter of manuscript” (231), laboring away at his autobiography in “conditions of confined space, seclusion, and solitude” that recall “being in prison” (104).

This span of imagery doubtless owes something to Conrad’s acute awareness of the power of language, its capacity not just to enforce, but to *enable* certain kinds of embodiment. As Edward Said pointed out some time ago, Conrad shared with his contemporary Nietzsche a strong sense of “the connection between the characteristics of language as a form of

human knowledge, perception and behaviour, and those fundamental facts of human reality, namely will, power and desire" (66).<sup>5</sup> Less inclined to celebrate that connection than Nietzsche, Conrad remained instead fearful that all forms of figuration risked being distorted by "méchanceté"—literally and, according to Eloise Knapp Hay, properly translated as "perversity" (25–26, 241–242).<sup>6</sup> "The things 'as they are,'" Conrad cautioned one correspondent, "exist in words; therefore words should be handled with care lest the picture, the image of truth abiding in facts, should become distorted—or blurred" (qtd. in Ingram 49). And as Conrad's famous distrust of "les ombres d'une éloquence qui est morte justement parce qu'elle n'a pas de corps" might lead us to suspect, it is the material body and its figuration that stands at the center of this nuanced and potentially volatile connection between power, perversity, and language.

J. Hillis Miller has written eloquently on the thematic importance the corpulent body attains in *The Secret Agent*, on how, by flagrantly apotheosizing the (phenomenologically speaking) obscene incongruity between spirit and matter, consciousness and corporeality, the fat body broadcasts what he calls "the scandal of our incarnation." That scandal, Miller argues, spreads to social institutions as well, to the moribund conventions or outmoded belief systems that fetter humanity's aspirations, or to what the Professor denounces as "the great edifice of legal conceptions sheltering the atrocious injustice of society" (76). "Incarnation," Miller writes, "means more than the imprisonment of spirit in body. It also means the imprisonment of spirit within the narrow bounds of a set of imperfect assumptions about law and morality. For this reason the Professor's bombs must destroy more than the buildings of modern civilization. They must destroy people, too, for in them history is embodied as much as in stones and inscriptions" (52). Miller's "scandal of incarnation" thus seems to involve, at least tacitly, as much the idea of incarceration as it does incarnation, the switch-point between these two being "a set of imperfect assumptions about law and morality." I would like to explore this link between incarnation and incarceration under the heading of what might in turn be called "the scandal of inscription," keeping the material body well at its center; at the same time, I want to argue that this scandal is less the result of flawed precepts regarding law and morality than it is a function of language itself, an effect *The Secret Agent* traces through a particular, and as we shall see highly fetishistic, practice of representation, a technology that manages to

combine—indeed, to make mutually enabling—incarnation and incarceration under the twin rubrics of ‘degeneration’ and ‘criminality.’

This scandal erupts most spectacularly in the discourse of Lombrosian criminal science.<sup>7</sup> Its hottest denunciation belongs to Karl Yundt, who has this to say about Lombroso:

And what is crime? Does he know that, this imbecile who has made his way in this world of gorged fools by looking at the ears and teeth of a lot of poor, luckless devils? Teeth and ears mark the criminal? Do they? And what about the law that marks him still better—the pretty branding instrument invented by the overfed to protect themselves against the hungry? Red-hot applications on their vile skins—hey? Can’t you smell and hear from here the thick hide of the people burn and sizzle? That’s how criminals are made for your Lombrosos to write their silly stuff about. (53)

Yundt’s account of “how criminals are made” for and in the Lombrosian text rehearses the same usurpation of the real by the “ready-made,” the same dissolution of integral, originary forms, as that occasioned by “copy” and “the ingenuity of journalists.” Dismembered, objectified, and reconstituted within a new, wholly discursive order, the bodies of these “luckless devils” have been, in effect, converted into “copy,” giving way to the deviant fragment and the criminal synecdoche, the “teeth and ears” cut loose from their original totality and set circulating within pages of “silly stuff.” The patently fetishistic character of such a technology is made apparent when Comrade Ossipon, himself wholly under the sway of the “sacrosanct fetish” of science (43), begins to gaze at Mrs. Verloc’s face “as no lover ever gazed at his mistress’s face”:

He was scientific, and he gazed scientifically at that woman, the sister of a degenerate, a degenerate herself—of a murdering type. He gazed at her, and invoked Lombroso, as an Italian peasant recommends himself to his favourite saint. He gazed scientifically. He gazed at her cheeks, at her nose, at her eyes, at her ears. . . . Bad! . . . Fatal! Mrs. Verloc’s pale lips parting, slightly relaxed under his passionately attentive gaze, he gazed also at her teeth. . . . Not

a doubt remained . . . a murdering type. . . (227; Conrad's ellipses)

At stake here is what might be termed the written body, a body which, precisely because it is no longer the referent but rather the effect of a certain kind of representational practice, now begins posing as vexed a question of reference as does language itself. For while Conrad may, as Tony Tanner has argued, have sought in earlier works to overcome language's insubstantiality by focusing on how characters mouth, chew, or mumble their words—this representing, in Tanner's words, “an attempt to rephysicalise language, as it were, to get it off the page and back into the mouth, and make us aware of how intimately related it is to the body” (34)—then any purchase gained by a focus on the body's production of language is a purchase *The Secret Agent* undermines through its relentless attention to the body's production *in* language, particularly as that body is constituted through such information technologies as Lombrosian discourse and journalistic copy. For as Conrad's text makes clear, in an age governed by the technologies of mass reproduction and industrial iteration not even the material body can escape a printed fate.

Signs of that destiny appear early on in *The Secret Agent*, chiefly in the form of this text's repeated references to the body as a “mortal envelop” (46, 204), to the fact of Stevie's scattered remains being collected without “miss[ing] a single piece as big as a postage stamp” (83), and to the address sewn on the underside of the boy's lapel (“‘Can't understand why he should have gone about labeled like this,’” the Assistant Commissioner muses—whereupon Heat immediately recounts the story of an old gentleman who did the same [108]). The point of all this talk about “labeled” or letter-like bodies, it seems to me, is to underscore the body's status as written, to show how the material body is always already caught up, indeed dispersed within, the greater, larger social text here called “copy.” It is a status the narrative voice confirms by presenting its characters as themselves the sum of so much print or so many titles, mimicking, as Daniel Schwartz has observed, “the popular journalistic style (used for short obituaries and feature stories) of summarizing a man's significance in a sequence of appositions” (160)—as when, for instance, the narrative delivers this eulogy over Verloc's body: “Night, the inevitable reward of men's faithful labors on this earth, night had fallen on Mr. Verloc, the tired

revolutionist—‘one of the old lot’—the humble guardian of society; the invaluable Secret Agent Δ of Baron Stott-Wartenheim’s dispatches; a servant of law and order, faithful, trusted, accurate, admirable . . .” (221); or again, when it takes note of “Alexander Ossipon, anarchist, nicknamed the Doctor, author of a medical (and improper) pamphlet, late lecturer on the social aspects of hygiene to working men’s clubs” (227). But nowhere is the body’s printed destiny and dispersal made more apparent than when Mrs. Verloc’s suicide and Comrade Ossipon’s sanity are alike consumed by the maddening reiteration of a ready-made phrase.

Having first finagled Mrs. Verloc out of the family savings and then (under the impetus of his “scientific” fear of her as a “degenerate” of the murdering type) abandoned the woman to her fate, Ossipon learns of Mrs. Verloc’s presumed death from a newspaper account entitled “Suicide of Lady Passenger from a cross-Channel Boat.” Its closing lines run thus: “‘*An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair*’”: “Comrade Ossipon was familiar with the beauties of its journalistic style. ‘*An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever. . . .*’ He knew every word by heart. ‘*An impenetrable mystery . . .*’” (234; Conrad’s ellipses). Like the phrase that haunted Winnie Verloc, these words will acquire a free-floating, spell-binding power, menacing the anarchist “in the very sources of his existence”: “He could not issue forth to meet his various conquests [. . .] without the dread of beginning to talk to them on an impenetrable mystery destined. . . . He was becoming scientifically afraid of insanity lying in wait for him amongst these lines. ‘*To hang for ever over.*’ It was an obsession, a torture” (234). Or, more to the point for our purposes, it is a verbal fetish, a surrogate that supplants and yet constantly evokes the absence that is its referent. Here is the closing description of Ossipon, slumped over his beer at the Silenus beer-hall:

He was alone. “*An impenetrable mystery. . . .*” It seemed to him that suspended in the air before him he saw his own brain pulsating to the rhythm of an impenetrable mystery. It was diseased clearly. . . . “*This act of madness or despair.*” [. . .]

Comrade Ossipon, nicknamed the Doctor, went out of the Silenus beer-hall. At the door he hesitated, blinking at a

not too splendid sunlight—and the paper with the report of the suicide of a lady was in his pocket. His heart was beating against it. The suicide of a lady—*this act of madness or despair*. [. . .]

He could face no woman. It was ruin. He could neither think, work, sleep, nor eat. But he was beginning to drink with pleasure, with anticipation, with hope. It was ruin. His revolutionary career, sustained by the sentiment and trustfulness of many women, was menaced by an impenetrable mystery—the mystery of a human brain 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*. . . .” (236–37)

It would seem that what Vladimir says of the anarchist incident holds true for suicides as well: “Every newspaper has ready-made phrases to explain such manifestations away.” But if the conversion of Mrs. Verloc’s suicide into a ready-made phrase provides bitter proof that this is indeed an age “where all things sacred and profane are turned into copy,” then it is “the mystery of a human brain pulsating wrongfully to the rhythm of journalistic phrases” that reveals what is surely that conversion’s most perverse effect—namely, the fetishization of copy, the pathological throbbing of human brains and bodies to the all-consuming rhythms of the “ready made” phrase.

Through the usurpation of the real by the “ready-made phrases of journalism” and across the fractured, fetishized body of Lombrosian criminal science, Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* traces the pressures put on the narrative medium by the continuous conversion of the authentic into the “ready-made” and the mystery of brains, bodies, and texts “pulsating wrongfully to the rhythm of journalistic phrases.” It is by way of such fetishism that Conrad draws his most ironic and bitter picture of the ascendancy of information technologies and the threat such technologies pose to the primacy of literature. But if fetishism provided him with a timely trope for dramatizing the historical pressures confronting the literary artifact in an age of mass reproduction and late capitalist commodification, it proved amenable as well for staging the rather more esoteric difficulties posed by language’s potential autonomy, an autonomy every bit

as fetishistic in its literary guise as it is in phrases like “The drop given was fourteen feet” or Ossipon’s interminably varied “madness and despair.” And once again, it is the material body and its relation to language that affords the most spectacular locus for this problematic.

*The Secret Agent* might be read as a sustained demonstration of how, as Roland Barthes has written in another context, “language undoes the body, returns it to the fetish” (113). Barthes is speaking here about the overlap between realist discourse—specifically, that of Balzac’s *Sarrasine*—and the *blazon*, the Petrarchan convention of dismembering the beloved’s body with the intention, as he puts it, “of predicating a single subject, beauty, upon a certain number of anatomical attributes.” Like the sentence whose structure and destiny it shares, the *blazon*, Barthes writes,

can never constitute a *total*; meanings can be listed, not ad-mixed: the total, the sum are for language the promised lands, glimpsed *at the end* of enumeration, but once this enumeration has been completed, no feature can reassemble it—or, if this feature is produced, it too can only be *added* to the others. . . . As a genre, the blazon expresses the belief that a *complete* inventory can reproduce a *total* body, as if the extremity of enumeration could devise a new category, that of totality: description is then subject to a new kind of enumerative erethism: it accumulates in order to totalize, multiplies fetishes in order to obtain a total, de-fetishized body; thereby, description *represents* no beauty at all: no one can *see* La Zambinella, infinitely projected as a totality impossible because linguistic, *written*. (113–114)

*The Secret Agent* also shows the body subjected to “the spitefulness of language,” parodying the multiplication of fetishes in the name of achieving a total and defetishized body: it does this in order, precisely, to show how such a “totality [is] impossible because linguistic, *written*,” how in the last instant “language undoes the body, returns it to the fetish”—a return and an impossibility this text figures through the fragment.

*The Secret Agent* is a remarkably fetishistic text, full of fragments, splinters, bits and pieces of bodies, clothes, and texts: discarded boots and hats “[b]lack, and rim upward” (219), torn velvet collars, “rags, scorched and bloodstained” (80); scraps of phrases, shredded papers, “words that

would have been whole if they had not been made up of halves that did not belong to each other" (139–40); "swollen legs" and "menaced eyes" (24, 71), "luminous and mutilated vision[s]" of decapitated heads or "a rainlike fall of mangled limbs" (60, 201), those "bits of brotherly flesh and bone" whose disintegration marks this novel's central, structuring absence (201), "limbs, gravel, clothing, bones, splinters—all mixed up together" (166). The fragment, the scrap, and the splinter: each marks the loss or dissolution of a discrete whole, the vanishing of a totality. The central explosion itself might be read, as James Hansford has suggested, as "an explosion of reference," one which, along with Verloc's mysterious triangle, highlights "the disfigurement, dismemberment and obscurity of reference between word and world" that lies at the center of what he calls *The Secret Agent's* "critique of the sign" (116). The novel's fragments stand, in true fetishistic fashion, as both symbols of and surrogates for an irrecoverable loss, a totality impossible to experience except negatively, through the evidence they themselves provide of its absence; hence, rather than the recovery, they mark the loss of plenitude, a loss derived not only from the contemporary proliferation of the ready-made, the reiterated, and the simulacra, but from the autonomy of the linguistic medium itself.

Beyond marking the disparity between, say, "copy" and its referent, or the written and the material body, *The Secret Agent's* thematic of dismemberment and fragmentation signals as well the inevitable gap between signifier and signified, between "les valeurs idéales" and the narrative seeking to incarnate them—precisely the gap Conrad was acknowledging when he wished that "the idea had a substance and words a magic power," that "the invisible could be snared into a shape." We can get a sense of this hiatus and the trope through which he would eventually inscribe it in Conrad's reaction to the actual "Greenwich Bomb Outrage," the incident that gave him the germ of his novel and the historical referent for Stevie's immolation.<sup>8</sup> Martial Bourdin's death after the bomb he was carrying in Greenwich Park accidentally exploded seemed, Conrad wrote in the "Author's Note" to his novel,

a blood-stained inanity of so fatuous a kind that it was impossible to fathom its origin by any reasonable or even unreasonable process of thought. For perverse unreason has its own logical processes. But that outrage could not be laid

hold of mentally in any sort of way, so that one remained faced by the fact of a man blown to bits for nothing even the most remotely resembling an idea, anarchistic or other.

In the astounding gap between the real and the idea fantastically instanced in a body “blown to bits for nothing even the most remotely resembling an idea,” Conrad found, I think, not only *The Secret Agent*’s impetus but its informing trope as well, the fetishistic fragmentation through which he could inscribe both the problems of writing in an age given to turning all things into “copy” and the difficulties of writing in a medium perversely inclined to displace its referent. *The Secret Agent*’s depiction of another body “blown to bits for nothing even the most remotely resembling an idea,” of a suicide written out by the banality of a “ready-made phrase” and a mind left “pulsating wrongfully to the rhythm of journalistic phrases”—each bespeaks the vacuity or violence that can ensue when “copy” rushes in to fill the gap between word and world, when forms of figuration set themselves to snare the invisible into shape. Like Bourdin’s bomb, language—whether in the form of the “ready-made” phrase, the formulaic pronouncements of Lombrosian criminology, or literary figuration itself—threatens always to disperse, to disintegrate, and dismember the material forms with which it comes into contact, leaving bits and pieces—“teeth and ears,” for instance, or “The drop given was fourteen feet”—in the place of an ineffable plenitude.

## Notes

1. In this letter to Edward Garnett, dated 20 Oct. 1911, Conrad is reproving Garnett for the latter’s suggestion that Conrad’s hatred of Russia and things Russian is patent in *Under Western Eyes*. “And anyhow,” Conrad writes, “if hatred there were it would be too big a thing to be put into a 6 /—novel. This too might have occurred to you, if you had condescended to look beyond the literary horizon where all things sacred and profane are turned into copy” (Ingram 82).
2. In *Coercion to Speak: Conrad’s Poetics of Dialogue*, Aaron Fogel makes the point in his chapter on *The Secret Agent* that Conrad exposes anarchism, masturbation, and sympathetic affect as “similar forms of solitary, secret activity,” thereby debunking the “ideology of sympathy as free exchange” in both its popular and aesthetic (Aristotelian) guises (161–162). For an extended treatment of the novel’s masturbatory im-

- agery as well as its blending of the political and the pornographic, see Brian W. Shaffer, "'The Commerce of Shady Wares': Politics and Pornography in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*."
3. For a discussion of Conrad's views on the anarchist text, see Paul Hollywood, "Conrad and Anarchist Theories of Language."
  4. In "Aliens, Anarchists and Detectives: Legislating the Immigrant Body," David Glover places Vladimir's plans and the novel itself "within a wider debate about the limits of English liberalism and the continuing viability of the legal entitlements it had traditionally upheld" (23).
  5. "The way of even the most justifiable revolutions," Conrad writes in *The Secret Agent*, "is prepared by personal impulses disguised into creeds" (76). For more recent work on Conrad's affinities with Nietzsche, see Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper*.
  6. Conrad speaks most incisively of this perversity in the famous and oft-quoted letter he wrote to Cunninghame Graham, dated 8 February 1899: "L'homme est un animal méchant. Sa méchanceté doit être organisée. La société est essentiellement criminelle—ou elle n'existerait pas. C'est l'égoïsme qui sauve tout,—absolument tout,—tout ce que nous abhorrons, tout ce que nous aimons. Et tout se tient. Voilà pourquoi je respecte les extrêmes anarchistes. —'Je souhaite l'extermination générale.' Très bien. C'est juste et ce qui est plus, c'est clair. On fait des compromis avec des paroles. Ça n'en finit plus. C'est comme une forêt ou personne ne connaît la route" (Jean-Aubry 1: 268–70).
  7. For more on Conrad's views of Lombroso, see Martin Ray, "Conrad, Nordau, and Other Degenerates: The Psychology of *The Secret Agent*"; John E. Saveson, "Conrad, Blackwood's, and Lombroso"; Robert G. Jacobs, "Comrade Ossipon's Favourite Saint: Lombroso and Conrad"; and Allan Hunter, *Joseph Conrad and the Ethics of Darwinism*.
  8. For an extensive discussion of this and other sources of Conrad's novel, see Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Western World*.

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