

was the most lonely of murderers that ever struck a mortal blow" (203) and that she is incapable of residing in liminal space without association to another liminal being.

The Secret Agent shows the high personal and social price that culture must pay for disrupting the dialectic between structure and anti-structure. In a functional social environment, a dialectic relationship between the structure and the *communitas* suggests that "men are released from structure into *communitas* only to return to structure revitalized by their experience of *communitas*." The exaggeration of structure "may well lead to pathological manifestation of *communitas* outside or against 'the law.'" In turn, exaggerating *communitas* "may be speedily followed by despotism, over-bureaucratization, or other modes of structural rigidification" (Turner 1969: 129).

Conrad's analysis of British society reads like a criticism of his adoptive culture's failure to maintain a functional balance between structure and the anti-structure. Today, the novel reads as a warning against maximizing *communitas* as this "provokes maximization of structure, which in turn produces revolutionary strivings for renewed *communitas*" (129). Conrad's first-hand experience of the repercussions of existing "betwixt and between" states and cultures drives him to issue a fictional reminder of the dangers inherent in institutionalizing liminality, when several individuals, armed with ideology and discontent with the "limbo of statuslessness" (97) refuse to accept it as their existential condition.

Acknowledgement

A version of this essay was presented at the 32nd Annual International Conference of the Joseph Conrad Society (UK), London, July 2006.

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published in *The Secret Agent: Centennial Essays*. Eds. Allan H. Simmons and J. H. Stape. *The Conradian*. Editions Rodopi, 2007.

The Materialist-Scientific World View in *The Secret Agent*

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FROM THE BEGINNING of *The Secret Agent* we are made aware of the importance of science in Edwardian society. First Secretary Vladimir of the presumably Russian Embassy tells Verloc that he will lose his job if he does not commit a bomb outrage in order to frighten Britain into passing repressive legislation against foreign anarchists. Vladimir's suggested target is "the sacro-sanct fetish of to-day": science (29). For him this fetishistic belief's symbolic embodiment is the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, and he therefore directs Verloc to "Go for the first meridian" (33). His target is well-chosen. In 1884, Greenwich had been made the keeper of Standard World Time and thereby acquired immense national and international prestige. The bomb outrage, however, gets nowhere near "raising the howl of execration" (32) he desires. The Assistant Commissioner dismisses the affair as "without gravity" and refers to it as "Barefaced audacity amounting to childishness of a peculiar sort" (107). Ten days after it happens, the outrage is already forgotten. If we read this miserable failure metaphorically, we could argue that it supports Vladimir's analysis of the status of science. It and the concomitant materialist-scientific world view have become unassailable and no longer vulnerable to attack. This essay will examine how far the novel as a whole supports such a reading, and to what uses it puts science and the materialist-scientific world view.

Two of the novel's characters can be classified as scientists. An anarchist and "ex-medical student without a degree" (40), Ossipon is a fanatic adherent of the theories of Lombroso, who believed that so-called "criminal degenerates," epileptics, and "idiots" could be recognized and categorized by such physical features as the shape of their ears or lips" (Knowles and Moore 2000: 206).¹ Ossipon appears to have lost the

¹ For a discussion of Conrad's use of Lombrosian theories in the novel, see the essays by Harrington and Watts in the present collection.

ability to view his fellow humans as individuals and regards them in terms of Lombrosian typologies. He identifies Winnie, on the run from the police after killing her husband, as a criminal degenerate: "He gazed at her cheeks, at her nose, at her eyes, at her ears. . . . Bad! . . . Fatal! . . . a murdering type" (222). By reducing Winnie to an object of study, he distances himself emotionally from her and renounces responsibility for abandoning her with all her money in his pocket. He is criticized for the way he fetishizes a specific scientific theory and in invoking Lombroso "as an Italian peasant recommends himself to his favourite saint" (222) has exchanged one set of superstitions for another. His scientific fanaticism is ironically undermined by his vulnerability to his own diagnosis; his physical traits identify him as a Lombrosian degenerate and a congenital criminal: "A bush of crinkly yellow hair topped his red, freckled face, with a flattened nose and prominent mouth cast in the rough mould of the negro type. His almond-shaped eyes leered languidly over the high cheek bones" (39).

The Professor likewise has a scientific background. The "once assistant demonstrator in chemistry at some technical institute," who also worked in a "laboratory of a manufactory of dyes" (62), holds a world view that can be interpreted as an extremist version of Social Darwinism: "Exterminate! . . . First the blind, then the deaf and the dumb, then the halt and the lame" (226). When Ossipon anxiously asks him, "And what remains?", his answer is: "I remain – if I am strong enough" (226). The irony undermining this declaration is that physically The Professor is the exact opposite of the Nietzschean superman he believes himself to be: his "physique" is of "lamentable inferiority" (52); he is "frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable" (231) and "unwholesome looking" (68); and he speaks with a weak, rasping voice. The insistence on his large ears, "thin like membranes . . . standing far out from the sides of his frail skull" (226), suggests that he is a Lombrosian degenerate. If his programme of extermination were implemented, he would be among the first to go. Heat's thoughts take this direction when he contemplates The Professor's appearance: "the physical wretchedness of that being, so obviously not fit to live, was ominous" (76).

These characters can be read as a warning against scientific fanaticism and its dehumanizing tendency; however, their pseudo-science is not an attack upon science as such. It cannot even be claimed that the novel distances itself from the dubious theories of degeneration – after all, the ironic point being made about both is that their physical traits

identify them as degenerate and reveal them as potential victims of theories they espouse.

The perspective on the world in *The Secret Agent* is materialist-scientific and informed by concepts associated with Darwin and Darwinism. The novel portrays a social system that seems to reflect the laws of Natural Selection, such as the struggle for survival and the survival of the fittest. These tendencies are reinforced by the values and the workings of capitalism. As Jeremy Hawthorn puts it, in this society "people . . . treat other people as means to ends, as objects to be manipulated, rather than as fully human individuals" (1979: 74). Vladimir uses Verloc to implement his bombing plan; Verloc, in turn, uses Stevie to carry it out; Karl Yundt and Ossipon exploit their female companions to survive; the Assistant Commissioner uses his wife to gain access to society's highest levels; Winnie has married Verloc to protect her mother and Stevie; Inspector Heat wants to use Michaelis as a scapegoat to bring the investigation into the Greenwich bombing to a quick conclusion; Michaelis himself uses the Lady Patroness to enable him to write his autobiography.

Only the innocent Stevie seems granted insight into this system of mutual exploitation. When he realizes that the cabman whips his decrepit horse *not* because "his soul was cruel and his heart evil" (122) but because he needs to feed himself and his family, he feels "indignation and horror at one sort of wretchedness having to feed upon the anguish of the other" (132). According to Jacques Berthoud, the conclusion Stevie laboriously arrives at – "Bad world for poor people" (132) – shows how he "manages to conceive of the poor as part of a veritable system of suffering, in which the relief of misery requires the infliction of misery" (1978: 140). Berthoud, however, also emphasizes that this "vision of society as some kind of pain generator is clearly not one in terms of which a normal life can be led" (140). This might explain why all the other characters close their eyes to this society's nature and follow Winnie's maxim that "things do not stand much looking into" (136).

The Secret Agent, however, not only suggests that Darwinian forces determine our lives externally but also internally. Darwin insisted that humans are emphatically part of nature and emphasized the close relationship between humanity and our animal ancestors. As Avrom Fleishman summarizes: "The entire society in *The Secret Agent* comes to be seen as a jungle of animal forms obeying the laws of predatory survival. Alien to this world, forced to live in it yet inevitably devoured, men acquire the characters of beasts" (1965: 209).

These creatures are presented as largely controlled by animal instincts barely hidden beneath an ordinary or even elegant exterior, almost in the manner of the creatures in H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896). Verloc, for instance, appears to strangers as if he were a respectable "well to do mechanic," "picture-frame maker" or "locksmith" (16). He seems "thoroughly domesticated," and his mother-in-law believes him to possess a "heavy good nature" and a "kind and generous disposition" (11, 12). His ordinariness is, however, undermined by the fact that he sells his wares "With a firm, steady eyed impudence, which seemed to hold back the threat of some abominable menace" (10). Verloc, we are thus reminded, is not an ordinary shopkeeper but a purveyor of pornography whose own sexual instincts are pronounced. His hardly repressed violence manifests itself in his dreams of revenge on Vladimir and the "Embassy people" (152). He wishes to be let "loose in there with a cudgel for half an hour" and to "keep on hitting till there wasn't a single unbroken bone left amongst the whole lot" (185) and then would "cut their hearts out one after another" (152).

Vladimir, too, veers between the civilized and the instinctual-animalistic. His sensitive and cultivated looks and his "drawing room reputation as an agreeable and entertaining man" (20) contrast starkly with his talk of murder, butchery, destruction, and bombing campaigns. He is able to switch with perfect ease between a refined and a savage mode of speaking and behaving, at one moment speaking French or "idiomatic English without the slightest trace of a foreign accent" (21), at another availing himself of "an amazingly guttural intonation not only utterly un-English, but absolutely un-European" (24). During part of the interview he is "Lying far back in the deep armchair, with squarely spread elbows ... throwing one leg over a thick knee" (21); later he "advanced into the room with such determination that the very ends of his quaintly old-fashioned bow-necktie seemed to bristle with unspeakable menaces" (24).

Winnie most powerfully illustrates how closely the ordinary and the savage may be intertwined. In the novel's first half she is a taciturn housewife who cares for her weak-minded brother and fulfils her wifely duties. What could, however, make us suspect early on that her "unfathomable indifference" (10) and "stony reserve" (50) are a mere façade is that her "temperament" is described as "maternal and *violent*" (182; emphasis added) and that her "militant love" (186) for Stevie is said to have "the unerring nature and the force of an instinct" (137). When her brother is killed, she regards her marital contract with Verloc ended and momentarily feels like "a free woman" (189). Shortly afterwards, however,

her instincts take control of her and she kills, becoming what Ossipon calls a "savage woman" (216). Into her "plunging blow" (197), she puts "the simple ferocity of the age of caverns, and the unbalanced nervous fury of the age of barrooms" (197).

Although Winnie's atavistic transformation is an extreme example of the way the bestial may at any time break through the surface of the ordinary – in the way that in Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) the brute and the savage overpower the normative – the novel in general insists that *all* characters are to some extent controlled by animal instincts. Particularly pernicious and pervasive is egoism, which can be seen as a variant of the survival instinct. The investigation into the bombing, for instance, reveals how professional decisions can be based upon private self-interest. Among the reasons why Chief Inspector Heat wants to turn Michaelis into a scapegoat are his desire to protect his informer Verloc, his aversion to "meddle with the desperate ferocity of The Professor" (96), and his vindictive desire to get even with him for having been released on ticket-of-leave due to journalists who exploited "the sentimental aspect of his imprisonment either for purposes of their own or for no intelligible purpose" (85). In general, the anarchist's arrest would be the most convenient way of proceeding as it would bring the investigation to a rapid and satisfactory conclusion. As Heat knows, "the rules of the game did not so much protect Michaelis" as other individuals whose arrest would be "a more complicated matter" (95).

Although the Assistant Commissioner is superior in more than a hierarchical sense to his Chief Inspector, his intercession in Michaelis's favour has not much to do with ideas of legality, the fear of a possible miscarriage of justice, or saving an innocent man from imprisonment. It is mainly due to his "instinct of self preservation" (89) – he wants to safeguard his domestic peace. Michaelis, after all, enjoys the favour of an aristocratic society hostess who has an excellent influence on his petulant wife. He knows that the Lady Patroness's "arbitrary kindness would not brook patiently any interference with Michaelis' freedom" (87) which, in turn, would make his married life more difficult. He therefore comes to a conclusion "extremely unbecoming his official position without being really creditable to his humanity. 'If the fellow is laid hold of again ... she will never forgive me'" (89). From this moment on he proceeds to turn the Chief Inspector "inside out like an old glove" (93) and – due to the unexpected information he divulges – succumbs "to a fascinating temptation" (103) to take on the case himself. Once again this resolution, grounded in egoism, smacks of self-indulgence. After all, he is not only

unhappy in his marriage but also in his job. Annoyed with his dependence “on too many subordinates and too many masters” (80), he finds the “desk work” he is forced to do “the bane of his existence because of its confined nature and apparent lack of reality” (104). “A born detective” (92) possessing “an adventurous disposition” (89), he cannot resist the chance to escape the “futility of office work” (80) and “do some real work for his salary” (93) for the first time since taking up his appointment.

The Darwinian perspective is so consistently deployed in *The Secret Agent* that even concepts of morality and altruism are ambiguous. For instance, when Heat contemplates Stevie’s mangled remains, he is so affected by what he sees that he rises “by the force of sympathy, which is a form of fear, above the vulgar conceptions of time” (71). This would mean that altruistic feelings or actions arise from anxiety for one’s own well-being and are therefore informed by egoism. Similar scepticism pervades the portrayal of Stevie’s compassion. Although critics have seen him as the novel’s moral centre, a variant of the “holy idiot,”² he is not exempt from the narrator’s Darwinian perspective, and the animal imagery so frequent in the novel is also used for him.

His moral qualities are not informed by “turning the other cheek” but are part of a chain of instinctive, uncontrollable reflexes: “The anguish of immoderate compassion was succeeded by the pain of an innocent but pitiless rage” (130). Pushed to extremes, this blind rage might even drive him to homicide.³ John Lyon adds that Stevie’s compassion is “not straightforwardly altruistic since it is so intensely and narrowly bound up with his own ‘morbid horror and dread of physical pain’” (2004: xii). It is also suggested that Stevie’s moral notions are merely the result of conditioning. Thus his belief that Mr Verloc is “good” (135) is an “ethical fact” “established, erected, consecrated ... behind Mr Verloc’s back, for reasons that had nothing to do with abstract morality” (135). The narrator also tells us that the “main sanctions of Stevie’s self restraint” have been his “father’s anger, the irritability of gentlemen lodgers, and Mr Verloc’s predisposition to immoderate grief” (135). The narrative’s relentless Darwinism not only undermines the moral value of Stevie’s compassion but also that of Winnie’s and her mother’s sacrifices for him. As Allan Hunter argues: “It seems they are inherently – genetically –

predisposed towards acts of abnegation that Conrad saw as typical of women. ... If natural selection has made sure that the two women are likely to act that way, then their altruism is instinctive, not really conscious. Can it therefore *be* altruism?” (1983: 176). Although Winnie and her mother are forced into “acts of abnegation” at least as much by economic necessity as by predisposition, it is true that Winnie’s and her mother’s devotion to Stevie is frequently described in instinctual terms.

Even more troubling than the idea that their love for Stevie might be “mere” instinct is that their sacrifices initiate a tragic chain of cause and effect that inexorably leads to the destruction of the very person they mean to save. The first link in this chain is Winnie’s mother’s decision to retire to an almshouse in order to strengthen Stevie’s “moral claim” (125) on her daughter and son-in-law. This “move of deep policy” (125) is tragically successful. Even though Stevie has been “the unconscious presiding genius” (183) over Winnie’s life, too, now that their mother is gone, her “quasi-maternal affection” (13) for her brother is intensified. She redoubles her efforts to recommend his usefulness and devotion to her husband and even tells him that “*You* could do anything with that boy” (140).

Verloc, who has hitherto “extended as much recognition to Stevie as a man not particularly fond of animals may give to his wife’s beloved cat” (35), starts to feel flattered by “the extraordinary character of the influence he apparently has over Stevie” (178) and even agrees to let him come along on his walks. While Winnie believes that “the supreme illusion of her life” (184) is about to be realized – namely, that Verloc should behave like the loving father Stevie never had – the reader already knows that Verloc’s kindness is irresponsible selfishness. Made desperate by Vladimir, he has decided to use Stevie as an unwitting accomplice in the bomb plot. When he later tries to justify his action he puts his finger upon a painful truth: “Strike me dead if I ever would have thought of the lad for that purpose. It was you who kept on shoving him in my way” (193). According to Aaron Fogel, altruism is at the root of the tragic course of events that leads to Stevie’s destruction: “the Euripidean plot ... [sharpens] the sense of causality, to realize the idea that sympathy itself causes the tragedy: it is the effective cause and not only the permeating affect. As maenads of pity and charity, Winnie and her mother involuntarily help to kill Stevie, driven not by intoxication but by pity” (1996: 188).

This subversion of traditional morality raises the question whether the novel implies that in a materialist-scientific world ethical principles

² For instance, Berthoud (1978: 141) and Fleishman (1965: 204).

³ Hearing of cruelty in the German army, Stevie flies into such a rage that Winnie takes the carving knife from him. According to her, “he would have stuck that officer like a pig if he had seen him then” (51).

are obsolete. If the answer is “Yes,” then *The Secret Agent* aligns itself with Nietzsche’s radical materialism as expressed in *The Twilight of the Gods* (1889):

Christianity is a system, a consistently thought out and *complete* view of things. If one breaks out of it a fundamental idea, the belief in God, one thereby breaks the whole thing to pieces: one has nothing of any consequence left in one’s hands... Christian morality is a command: its origin is transcendental ... it possesses truth only if God is truth – it stands or falls with the belief in God.

(translated by Hollingdale 2003: 80-81)

The Secret Agent, however, does not go so far. Showing that altruism is to some extent informed by egoism or that well-meant moral actions *may* have disastrous consequences does not invalidate morality. Nowhere is it implied that Winnie and her mother should not have sacrificed themselves for Stevie, or that the latter’s compassion is worthless.

Some critics have argued that even though the novel does not have characters such as Emilia Gould, Monygham, or Marlow who vindicate moral principles against all odds by deliberately basing their actions upon them, we can attribute a moral quality to the narrator despite his lofty position and his relentless irony. J. Hillis Miller explains the function of these characteristics as follows:

To describe this town London from the point of view of someone blindly enclosed in it would be no way out of the darkness. The nature of the collective dream is invisible to the dreamers because it determines what is seen and how it is judged. If society is to be exposed there must be a withdrawal to some vantage point outside it. (1966: 44)

This is why a detached point of view becomes necessary. Although he does not explicitly say so, the terms Miller uses imply a comparison between Conrad’s narrator and aspects of Schopenhauer’s philosophy.⁴ According to the latter, we are relentlessly subject to the will, which manifests itself in the world and in our bodies; however, Schopenhauer recognizes special moments of contemplation during which the

⁴ In philosophical terms Schopenhauer, of course, is not a materialist. Nevertheless, his emphasis on the power of the instincts and his critique of Christian morality anticipate Darwinian and Nietzschean ideas.

“miserable pressure of the will” is lifted and we are free to view and gain insight into “the universal spectacle of the will” (Safranski 1989: 216).

In *The Secret Agent*, the narrator’s disillusioned but clear-sighted perspective might be regarded as the extended realization of such a moment. What is more, Schopenhauer’s moments of contemplation are characterized by “non-participatory viewing, without being involved in blinding seriousness” (Safranski 1989: 339). Again, this seems an apt description of the narrator whose irony frequently makes for grim comedy. Arguably, the novel’s effect upon the reader is similar to that of Schopenhauer’s “will-less” moments and can thus be described as cathartic.⁵ Schopenhauer apart, the narrator’s commitment to reveal the truth about the human condition in a materialist-scientific universe also reminds us of Conrad’s view of the writer’s task in the “Preface” to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*: “By the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel ... before all, to make you *see*” (x). To achieve this moral duty Conrad needed to create a narrator who “would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say *in scorn as well as in pity*” (7; emphasis added). The complex ways in which pity originates in the novel, whether despite or because of this scorn, have been the subject of debate. John Lyon argues that

moments of local intensity, fully dramatized, overcome the structural ironies in the course of the experience of reading, while such moments are further overlaid by a narrative commentary which ... can at once distance and entangle the reader. The security of ironic withdrawal is itself ironically unmasked for the reader: it dissolves in the face of the absorbing, if melodramatic, immediacy of the “scenic present.”

(2004: xxxvi)

Hugh Epstein similarly claims that “the novel does retrieve moments in which words are held to express a significance that resists the irony that crowds upon them” (1993: xiii). Such instants occur during the scenes featuring Winnie, her mother, and Stevie. The achronological structure informs the reader in advance that the two women’s attempts to secure Stevie’s future are doomed; however, because of the “immediacy and cinematic precision” (Lyon 2004: xxxvi) with which the characters’ suffering is rendered we are made to experience a pity that “constitutes a

⁵ Such an interpretation is also suggested by Fogel’s analysis quoted above in which he compares the plot to a Euripidean tragedy.

rebuttal of the sentimentalism and patronage that characterizes well-bred sympathy" (Berthoud 1996: 114).

Out of context, Stevie's remark about the nature of society – "Bad world for poor people" (132) – appears banal and trivial; however, the effort it costs him to reach this conclusion and to verbalize it "stands as the index of a moral responsiveness greater than the words themselves and remains active in unresolved opposition to the almost excessive authority of the narration" (Epstein 1993: xiii). This analysis also holds true for Winnie's reply to his insight that "Nobody can help that" or the cabman's "This ain't an easy world" (132, 129). These utterances all express "the lament of poor humanity, rich in suffering and indigent in words" and contain "the very cry of truth" that is "found in a worn and artificial shape picked up somewhere among the phrases of sham sentiment" (223).

As we have seen, *The Secret Agent* consistently employs a materialist-scientific world view and, in contrast to its Victorian forebears, rejects any compromise with the remnants of the theological one. The novel therefore asks its readers to readjust their view of themselves, of the species, and of human institutions and thus of their conceptions of morality and altruism. Nevertheless, this is not a novel without morality; indeed, the narrator's commitment "to make us see" may be interpreted as a subtle moral affirmation. As a consequence, the narrator may be said to speak, implicitly at least, "to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation – and to the subtle but invincible, conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts" ("Preface": viii).

Acknowledgement

A version of this essay was presented at the 32nd Annual International Conference of the Joseph Conrad Society (UK), London, July 2006.

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