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The Still Uproar of Conrad's Press: A Breakdown of "High" Literature in the Modern Metropolis

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The *Still Up roar* of Conrad's Press: A Breakdown of "High" Literature in
The Modern Metropolis

In Joseph Conrad's *Notes on Life and Letters*, he writes that "The printed page of the Press makes a sort of still uproar, taking from men both the power to reflect and the faculty of genuine feeling; leaving them only the artificially created need of having something to talk about" (121). This observation indicts the simple-mindedness of the press, its power, and its pandering to sensation and anxiety as the ultimate form of "hack writing," which his friend and fellow novelist George Gissing documents in his 1891 novel, *New Grub Street*. It also features in Conrad's fiction in interesting ways. *The Secret Agent* (1907) plays out first in the press, in London, the most populous city in the world, and then examines an anarchist atrocity that shocked England. The result is a fascinating duel between the novelist's skeptical engagement with empathy and nuance and his identification of the press as a commodity, which in its muffled bluster, as he described in a letter to the *New York Times*, is devoid of the "irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life so enigmatic" (Mulry 9).

The fact that Conrad's novel is his first venture into the Edwardian cityscape is significant. In his 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life," Georg Simmel wrote that the metropolis "reduces all quality and individuality to the question: How much?" (176). This reduction is what transforms the press into the "still uproar" that Conrad describes, and makes it an opportunistic trade which sacrifices artistic nuance for profit. Ultimately, the press does not have to be right—it only needs to be titillating, absolute, and without skepticism. Art, on the other hand, must surely do more. It is this changed relationship between high art and mass culture, and their increasing proximity to one another in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which Conrad and other novelists such as Gissing attempt to expose in their own work.

In *The Secret Agent*, this exposure occurs as the press seeks, but ultimately fails, to explain the mysteries of the 1894 Greenwich Bombing, and the resulting domestic tragedy. In framing the novel

this way, Conrad ultimately is writing a reply to Gissing's own depiction of literature emerging within the highly urban and industrial metropolitan centers. Mindful of his own need to court the press in search of popularity, and mindful too, of its relative power to spread simplistic narratives as a kind of virus, Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is a very modern text in which the battle between high culture and mass culture is joined with the ideological conflicts of anarchism and public order to compete for the power of the word. The examination of this "battle," as well as Conrad and Gissing's dialogue, reveals the ongoing tensions between high art and mass culture. It also reveals *The Secret Agent* as both a self-aware analysis of high modernism and the ultimate exemplar of it.

This flawed simplicity of the press organism is first seen surrounding the event which operates as the novel's epicenter. The information released by the press following the 1894 Greenwich Bombing exposes its failings. Newspaper reports released about the bombing were concerned with the brutality of the atrocity, and broader threats of global espionage, rather than with the human drama or reality of what occurred. The horror of an anarchist blowing himself up as an act of conspiracy sells more copies and proves a more useful narrative in the provocation of public outrage by cementing the "Anarchist" as a monstrous figure of popular nightmare.

The papers did not concern themselves with the underlying political motivation of the event or the social inequities driving anarchist protest. There is no mention of what Conrad describes in his "Author's Note" as "the criminal futility" of the act (*The Secret Agent* 249). It accomplished nothing, aside from the death of the bomber, Martial Bourdin: no one else was hurt, no great symbolic structure was destroyed (though Conrad makes much of the Greenwich setting). This sensationalizing of the event reveals the press as the voice of capital, seeking to benefit from the resulting clamor of its consumers. This can be observed in an excerpt from *The Pall Mall Gazette* following the bombing, which announced that "The London police have discovered an Anarchist conspiracy, which [...] will prove to be the most desperate and dangerous of any revolutionary plot that has ever had its headquarters in London" (1894:7). The announcement is filled with sensational language such as "anarchist" and "conspiracy," and conveys the press's ferocious agenda to titillate the public by exploiting social fears and anxieties.

The press's first reports of the bombing appeared in the late edition papers that same evening. Subsequent reports in *The Pall Mall Gazette* and *The Times* continued the general tone and sensational intent of the aforementioned excerpt, going so far as to describe the mutilated body of the bomber. The *Gazette* reports that "The first to arrive [on scene] found a man half crouching on the ground, alternately moaning and screaming. His legs were shattered, one arm was blown away, and the stomach and abdomen were ripped up, slashed and torn in a dreadful fashion" (1894:7). The press celebrates the physical wreckage in bold type, and uses it to sell more copies and further stoke public anxiety to keep the story current. Their only concern was to sell the story as widely, and for as great a profit, as possible with a shocking narrative that shaped itself more quickly than the facts presented themselves.

After an immense amount of embellishment and sensationalized reports had been fixed into the public consciousness, the press retracted most of their initial accounts. Only a couple of days after the bombing and initial reports, *The Times* conceded that "The miserable man was not blown to pieces, as at first alleged, nor was he covered with the remains of the explosive in the form of a sticky black substance like printer's ink" (1894:9). This report demonstrates the corrupt tendency of the press to report first and ask questions later. Unfortunately, fallacious and titillating reports with ensuing retractions are still commonplace in today's media landscape.

Gissing mocks this very type of fallacious pandering in *New Grub Street* when hack-writer Jasper Milvain tells of a London newspaper that published two opposing reviews of the same novel, an example of a contemporary marketplace which panders to the public's fleeting interests (16). It is no wonder then why these novelists struggle to reconcile the devaluing of the written word when it was, and often still is, treated as nothing more than a commodity meant to satiate the restless appetite of the public. It endeavors to indulge rather than inform, no matter how vulgar popular taste becomes. Stories are pumped out on an assembly-line of dramatic embellishment, and while they are loud and exciting, they're empty. When this taste for vulgarity dictates what literature is produced, the result is a breakdown in high culture and the loss of artistic nuance. Gissing exposes the greed and dishonesty of hack writing by placing it next to the higher form of the skilled novelist, but ultimately allows the former to triumph. Conrad, however, going a step further as if in response to Gissing's own resentment,

cleverly chooses to expose this form of hack writing by outdoing it.

The accounts published by *The Pall Mall Gazette* were sensational enough, and they used graphic language to horrify and thrill their readers; however, Conrad magnifies this in *The Secret Agent* tenfold with Chief Inspector Heat's description of Stevie's body, the blown-up man in Greenwich Park. Heat exclaims "Of course. Blown to small bits: limbs, gravel, clothing, bones, splinters-all mixed up together. I tell you they had to fetch a shovel to gather him up with" (166). The embellishment has an immediate and visceral effect on its "consumer," because, as readers, we do not arrive at this description with firsthand knowledge of Stevie's death. The narrator does not allow us to experience the bombing in real-time. Instead, the death of Stevie, a character who represents purity and innocence, and for whom the reader has cultivated a sense of empathy throughout the novel, is reduced to a sensational headline in a newspaper, a bloody name-tag in a coat, and a horrific description by the Chief Inspector. The preceding newspaper description of the event was summarized by Ossipon to the Professor in the Silenus Restaurant. Ossipon looked at the paper and explained that "All round [there were] fragments of a man's body blown to pieces. That's all. The rest's mere newspaper gup" (57).

This same device of allowing the press to inform the reader of crucial events in the narrative is used to great effect in the paper's announcement of Winnie Verloc's suicide, and even her fear of capture and conviction in the build up to it. The press's resounding and absolute view of her death is that there is "An impenetrable mystery [which] seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair.' Such were the end words of an item of news headed 'Suicide of Lady Passenger from a cross-Channel Boat'" (242). "Madness or despair" is repeated again and again as a kind of white noise, and yet says nothing of substance in regards to her death, who she really was, or the complex narrative that had led her to commit this violent act against herself. Conrad's implicit criticism of the press's common dismissal of the "real" story is contrasted by the development, in his narrative, of the "domestic drama" between a husband and wife.

This is not to say that the press wouldn't delight and clamber to publish something as sensational as a domestic murder, but they are only interested in the sensation of the What, and not the potentially unexceptional reason behind the Why. Mass culture wants a headline, but Conrad wants

the story. He understands the higher calling of the artist to fulfill a greater aesthetic; as Fredric Jameson notes in *The Political Unconscious*, the novelist strives to “arrest the living raw material of life, and by wrenching it from the historical situation [...] preserve it, beyond time, in the imaginary” (238). This is what Conrad does in *The Secret Agent*: he “preserves” the story and the “living raw material of life” rather than exploiting it with a few sensational phrases that briefly entertain the public.

Just as with the death of Stevie, Conrad denies the reader the ability to experience Winnie’s death as it occurs. Instead, Conrad skillfully fractures the chronological framework of the narrative and juxtaposes the limits of the newspaper against the potential of the novel. This is achieved through Ossipon’s character, who, like his creator, struggles to account for the paper’s helplessness to get at the heart of the thing, the “criminal futility,” the domestic drama, and life of the woman, Winnie. Ossipon’s character depicts this limitation as a disparity between what the papers provide their consumers and what the dismissed truth—no less compelling—actually is. As the narrator describes this situation, it was “An impenetrable mystery’ [...] as far as all mankind was concerned. But what of that if he alone [...] could never get rid of the cursed knowledge” (243). The narrator continues, and clarifies, that the information and “knowledge [of Winnie’s suicide] was [only] as precise as the newspaper man could make it” and that being informed is not the same thing as “knowing” (243).

The newspaper informs the reader that “by what [the crew and passengers] could see of [Winnie’s] face she seemed to them to be dying” (244). Conrad responds to this with Ossipon’s insight, for “Comrade Ossipon knew that behind that white mask of despair there was, struggling against terror and despair, a vigour of vitality, a love of life that could resist the furious anguish which drives to murder and the fear, the blind, mad fear of the gallows” (244). Ossipon notes the more complex truth of the moment; Winnie was not a woman on the verge of death, but a woman struggling to live. The subtle beauty of Conrad’s insight here makes this nuanced shift. The press, focusing on “madness and despair,” misses the complex domestic narrative that Conrad provides.

Jameson describes this ability as “Conrad’s [...] narrative hermeneutic—what really did happen? Who knows it all? What impressions do people have who possess only this piece of the puzzle [?]” (222). In support of this narrative ideology, it seems that in reading *The Secret Agent* we are not

meant to discover the truth of the event; in fact, few of Conrad's characters actually want to uncover the truth. Many of them insist of remaining on the surface of things. What we are meant to discover is the wisdom of skepticism, of asking "what really did happen?" and of demanding more from the "still uproar" of modern-day life. This was an ideology Conrad held onto even throughout his own necessary engagement with the press during the late 19th and early 20th century (he was a skilled exploiter of the literary marketplace), as publishers, newspapers, and writers conformed to the mass-market and the metropolitan appetite for sensationalism.

The three-volume drama of the Victorian era was a dying relic and the age of newspapers, short volumes, and magazines had arrived, an era where the hack-writer prospered and the novelist struggled to succeed. In *New Grub Street*, Jasper Milvain exclaims that "Literature nowadays is a trade. Putting aside men of genius [...] your successful man of letters is your skillful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the markets; when one kind of goods begins to go off slackly, he is ready with something new and appetizing" (5). Like Milvain, Conrad also recognized the changed nature of the literary market, as well as the potentially profitable result of engaging with it.

The changed nature of modern life in the metropolis, with its increased commodification and advertisement, forces the modern artist to court the press. Jameson marks this change by observing that "the printed text is wrenched from its concrete position within a functioning social and communicational situation, and becomes a free-floating object, which [...] 'has the attitude of life, and yet if you ask it a question it [...] gives one unvarying answer'" (220). *The Secret Agent* is a novel which manipulates the marketplace, while discoursing on it, without ever losing the human element or *soul* in its pages.

Conrad's first submission for publication was a short story entitled "The Black Mate" to a magazine (called *Tit-Bits*) writing contest for sailors in 1886. He did not win. This magazine represented everything that was both shallow and successful in the contemporary marketplace, especially human interest stories and sensational melodramas. Even the name of the magazine, suggesting the fragmentary and ephemeral, titillates the tongue and is reduced to two syllables, as if appealing to the short attention span of the metropolis.

In *New Grub Street*, Gissing both anticipates and ridicules this kind of publication through his character Whelpdale, who desires to acquire a similar kind of publication called “Chat” and transform it into something even more sensational and successful. He exclaims that “Instead of Chat I should call it Chit-Chat [...] Chat doesn’t attract anyone, but Chit-Chat would sell like hot cakes [...] No article in the paper is to measure more than two inches in length [...] what [people] want is the lightest and frothiest of chit-chatty information-bits of stories” (422-423). In many ways, both authors are holding the consumers more responsible for the literary damage and changed market than the producers of these vulgar “bits” of stories, since it is mass-culture and the bustling metropolis which seems to dictate literary production.

Conrad’s first published novel was *Almayer’s Folly* in 1895, and only one year after its publication in book form he published the novel in a Dutch newspaper, *Nieuwe Rotterdamsch Courant*. Publishing in the newspaper, or in serialized form, often proved more lucrative for Conrad than having his novels published in book form, especially through his serialization in America and the publicity which surrounded it. His stories and works appeared in American magazines and newspapers (where they were often syndicated) and were fragmented by advertisements so that readers had to engage with the commercial-market as they consumed higher literature. In this relationship, the market benefits the novelist, but perpetuates the fragmentation and breakdown of the novel’s higher values.

However, despite the benefits, Conrad’s distrust of the press remained. In *Notes on Life and Letters*, he writes “There must be something subtly noxious to the human brain in the composition of newspaper ink” (121). His distrust of this “noxious” property, “this prophetic bosh in blunt type on [...] filthy paper,” as it’s described by Mr. Vladimir when he dismisses Ossipon’s anarchist leaflets, is evident throughout *The Secret Agent*. One example of this distrust occurs when Mr. Vladimir attempts to explain the course an anarchist attack must take to elicit the desired level of outrage from a public which has been overexposed to sensation by media and mass culture. He exclaims that “An attempt upon a crowned head [...] is sensational enough in a way, but not so much as it used to be. [...] It’s almost conventional” (25). He concedes that “Every newspaper has ready-made phrases to explain such manifestations away. [...] You can’t count upon [the public’s] emotions either of pity or fear for very

long” (26). This goes back to Conrad’s remark that the press removes the “faculty of genuine feeling.” For a bomb to elicit the true noxious and titillating means of the press, and “to have any influence on public opinion [...it] must be purely destructive” and visceral (26). This relationship between the public and the press degrades the nuanced complexity of literature and the novel. It promotes the sensational novel while degrading the art of storytelling, as Gissing predicts, and Conrad demonstrates, in that fertile landscape which Jameson discusses as the “culture industry” (207).

Conrad and Gissing are not alone in struggling with this changed relationship between print and culture. In *Group Portrait*, Nicholas Delbanco cites a confession of H.G. Wells, another contemporary of Conrad’s (and dedicatee of *The Secret Agent*), and author of such works as *The Invisible Man*, that he would “rather be called a journalist than an artist, that is the essence of it, and there was no other antagonist possible” (142). The beauty of Wells’s statement, that he’d “rather be called a journalist than an artist,” is that he essentially states that the task of the journalist, to report life’s drama with a simple and marketable vision, is so much less agonizing than the “organic quality” demanded of the artist and novelist. It is ironic that a writer of such opinions would be made the dedicatee of Conrad’s novel. In a 1911 talk based on his essay “The Contemporary Novel,” Wells goes on to say that “he has been thinking about novels for twenty years—since his first review of [Conrad’s] *Almayer’s Folly* [and] the novel is, he proposes, an instrument for the amelioration of the people’s lot” (Delbanco 156). Wells essentially declares that the novel’s higher purpose is to improve the “people’s lot,” and while he begins this statement with a reference to Conrad’s work, *Almayer’s Folly*, the difference between the two novelists’ agendas could not be more distinct.

Conrad told Wells that “The difference between us is fundamental. You don’t care for humanity but think they are to be improved. I love humanity but know they are not” (Delbanco 158). This embrace of skepticism within Conrad’s work illustrates the higher values possible through the novel form. The higher value will not be found in novels that act as “instruments for the amelioration of the people’s lot,” nor will it be found in the press’s “still uproar,” which acts “according to the instrumental dialectic of means and ends” (Jameson 220). For Conrad, the value of high literature and culture “lies in the courageous recognition of all the irreconcilable antagonisms” (Mulry 9). It does not lie in mass

culture, nor does it lie in the capitalistic form of the press which depends on “only the artificially created need of having something to talk about” (Conrad, *Notes* 121).

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