

5-1-2017

The Romance of Terror: Stevenson's Dynamiter and Verne's Submariner

David Robb
University of Dundee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Robb, David (2017) "The Romance of Terror: Stevenson's Dynamiter and Verne's Submariner," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 43: Iss. 1, 103–114.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol43/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

THE ROMANCE OF TERROR: STEVENSON'S DYNAMITER AND VERNE'S SUBMARINER

David Robb

Stevenson's *The Dynamiter* (1885), the follow-up to his *New Arabian Nights* (1882), was, like the earlier work, characteristic of its author, yet, again like the earlier work, ignored by the general reader. Both seem little regarded by many modern Stevenson critics; whereas the earlier of the two collections, slight and immature as it can seem, rates at best a passing mention, *The Dynamiter* (or *More New Arabian Nights*) is additionally handicapped by its bafflingly light-hearted treatment of serious subject-matter and also by being partly the work of Stevenson's wife Fanny, a figure of some controversy and dislike from that day to this.

Yet anyone who begins to grapple with *The Dynamiter* is liable to find it both intriguing and entertaining. Furthermore, unlike the "escapist" romances of adventure with which Stevenson is usually associated and however fanciful its manner may be, it takes up an important and urgent contemporary issue. The view that he matured only late in his short life—"matured" both as a person and as a writer—is frequently ascribed, in part, to his encounters with the reality of colonialism and empire when he moved to the South Seas. Here, however, is an earlier instance of his fiction being sparked by a major contemporary challenge with international ramifications, namely the Fenian bombing campaign which afflicted the British mainland while Stevenson was making his name.

Irish republican violence in England and Scotland had grown from small beginnings in the 1860s to become a major fact of life by the 1880s.¹ Gunpowder had been used in 1867 to breach the wall of Clerkenwell prison, injuring and killing innocent local people and doing much damage to surrounding houses. In the later 1870s, however, dynamite became available as the essential ingredient of bombs of increasing sophistication:

¹ For background, see, e.g., Michael Burleigh, *Blood and Rage: A Cultural History of Terrorism* (London: HarperCollins, 2008), 1-18, or more specifically, Niall Whelehan, *The Dynamiters: Irish Nationalism and Political Violence in the Wider World, 1867-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

where the Clerkenwell explosion had involved a barrel of gunpowder transported on a barrow and ignited by a lit fuse, dynamite could be hidden in a small case, easily transported and detonated by a timing-device. Alarm-clock timers were developed, and the so-called “infernal machine” was born. One prominent American-based Fenian, Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, advertised courses in bomb-making in his Irish republican newspaper. Fenian agents struck in England at Salford Barracks in January 1881, and a campaign against public targets got under way in the following months. A further major burst of terrorist activity—funded from America—occurred in 1883. A secret British chemical factory enabled bombers to strike in both Glasgow and London, targeting among other things the London Underground. Attacks, some successful, others not, happened in 1884 and continued well into 1885, including the attempt to hurl a bomb into the chamber of the House of Commons itself. Five days after the Commons attack of 24 January 1885, an outraged Stevenson wrote to his father, “now, to have a dynamiter lynched, and all would be for the best in the best of possible worlds.”²

The Dynamiter, however, lacks the obvious vehemence of Stevenson’s comment. Instead, it is a mysteriously light-hearted treatment of Fenian terrorist activity which seemingly allows itself to be side-tracked by the unexpectedness, the comedy and colourfulness of the adventures of its three hapless male heroes. In addition, the wild inventions of its heroine spin fictions which conceal, rather than express, the reality of her terrorist involvement. It could be argued that Stevenson, in coating the terrorist reality with the cheerful zest of his fictional invention, is doing the same thing. Despite his comment to his father, Stevenson’s imagination had been sparked by the Fenian violence, not into a political or moral diatribe, but into a celebration of the essential playfulness of the art of fiction as he saw it. The question which then arises is obvious: why does Stevenson treat the topic of indiscriminate terrorist violence in any way other than in a spirit of serious condemnation? The book can easily seem a misconceived puzzle.

This view may be strengthened when one remembers a more famous novel of terrorism, Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907), which is sometimes seen as influenced by *The Dynamiter* but which gained the wide recognition, high reputation and central status that eluded the earlier work. Conrad’s novel is now regarded as one of Modernism’s great classic works, not least because it expresses so powerfully a vision of bleakness and irony. *The Secret Agent* seems the touchstone for fictional treatments of terrorism, with its bitterly ironic realism and its atmospheric intensity of

² Letter of 29 January 1885, in *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew, 8 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994-95), 5: 73.

effect. It expresses a near-definitive judgement upon the extremist political violence to which the world was being subjected by Fenians and Anarchists. Yet it is as well to remind oneself that Conrad's masterpiece was only one of a notable number of literary responses to the late nineteenth-century upsurge in terrorism, both in Europe and America. Conrad himself followed *The Secret Agent* with the equally fine, if more elusive, *Under Western Eyes* (1911). Equally respected but less frequently read, novels such as Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) and G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) stand out from the work of largely forgotten authors such as George C Griffith, and also from easily overlooked tales such as H. G. Wells's "The Stolen Bacillus" (1894). Twentieth-century terrorism continues to prompt fictional responses from writers as diverse as Doris Lessing and Frederick Forsyth.

The Dynamiter, then, appeared to herald a new strand of modern fiction, yet its claim to priority in the genre has to give place to at least one other novel not so frequently grouped with terrorist fiction, namely Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869-70). This is now seen by most of its young readers as a piece of colourful and exciting early science fiction. Yet Nemo shares the aggressive anonymity of his name with Stevenson's master bomb-maker Zero, and is driven to terrorist murder on the high seas by a political agenda and a nationalism-fuelled hatred which overcomes, at least occasionally, his general desire simply to have nothing to do with the rest of humanity. These two early examples of terrorist fiction, Verne's and Stevenson's, are seldom grouped with later, better-known or more obvious examples such as those mentioned above. Yet it seems worthwhile to consider Stevenson's neglected and puzzling portmanteau of stories in the larger context of those greatly various later examples and also with a memory of its unexpected predecessor.

At first glance, Stevenson's compilation of tales could hardly seem more different from Verne's fictional traversal of the globe: it is set almost completely in London, though with one excursion to Glasgow. Admittedly, we are also taken, imaginatively and mendaciously, to Utah in the American West and to Cuba, thanks to the inventiveness of the Scheherazade-like Clara Luxmore. She turns out to be the young and beautiful helpmate of the bomb-maker Zero: in her youthful zeal she is committed to the Irish cause and to its violent methods which she renounces only at the end. She is encountered, each in turn, by the three young men, Challoner, Somerset and Desborough, whose fanciful decision to follow up whatever adventure first presents itself provides the structure of the tale in all its confused intertwining. Further narratives provided by Clara's mother and by the bomb-maker Zero himself appear to be "true" within the frame story but are marked by the same Stevensonian improbability as Clara's fibs. The whole entertaining farrago ends with the

implosion (thanks to a couple of explosions) of the terrorist plot, and with order restored by the metamorphosed Prince Florizel from the earlier collection *New Arabian Nights*: Clara is married to one of the three young men and spurned by another, while the third is content with a lowly post in T. Godall's cigar divan (i.e. Prince Florizel's tobacco shop and male bolt-hole in Soho). Her terrorist colleagues are both dead: Zero has been blown up by his own dynamite and the Irish-American M'Guire has faded away in a deep depression.

Their terrorist motivations are largely taken for granted: Stevenson makes no attempt to explore, or to judge, the rationale for the Irish extremism they embody. He probably felt no need. That there was an arguable case for the Irish nationalist position was an established strand in the public discourse. In Stevenson's dedication of the work to the two police officers injured during the attack on the Commons, he is able to make detailed reference to Parnell's tactics and behaviour in parliamentary debates without explanation, and with all the air of an ongoing conversation. So in the cases of two of his terrorist characters, Clara and M'Guire, he creates essentially simple, stock figures as familiar types which would have been instantly accepted by his readers. Clara is the beautiful, passionate daughter of privilege whose youthful idealism has involved her, temporarily as it turns out, in extremist politics: for us, she is perhaps a prefiguring of Maud Gonne whose beauty and nationalist commitment would so beglamour Yeats. Her type was becoming known across Europe: Michael Burleigh has discussed the apparently curious phenomenon of the considerable number of young upper-class women who involved themselves in terrorism at this time, either as active agents or as "radical-chic" sympathisers indulging a foolish tolerance of revolutionary posturing (Burleigh, 30, 36-7). M'Guire's visual distinctiveness is also typical: his beard is a characteristic American fashion, a reminder of the trans-Atlantic character of the Fenian insurgency. An aping of American style was apparently a favourite anti-British gesture among Fenians (Burleigh, 33). As regards his personality, M'Guire's sole feature is his extreme nervousness, understandable in the light of the ever-present dangers of capture by the police and annihilation by his leader's highly unstable explosive devices. In neither case is there any psychological exploration, any recounting of inner journeys to political violence or any account of their perceptions of the issues at stake. Their commitment is simply part of who they are. (It is notable that when Stevenson places a naturally apolitical hero in a position of having to choose between opposed factions, as he does with Richard Shelton in *The Black Arrow*, serialized in 1883, there is a similar ignoring of the merits or otherwise of the rival claims of the parties who are causing so much devastation in the Wars of the Roses.)

The third member of the terrorist cell, however, is more interesting: his portrayal is the nearest we come to a Stevensonian exploration of the psychology of terrorist destructiveness. Zero, master bomb-maker as he aspires to be, is scarcely the sinister, vicious, cold-blooded zealot we might expect. Indeed, he seems a far less politicised character than Clara. Rather, he is a self-obsessed comic figure entirely lacking in empathy or moral conscience. The Irish cause which he serves is less important to him than his reputation among his fellow terrorists (both Fenian and those in the wider European world of Anarchism) as a creator of explosive devices with all their unreliability in chemical composition and clockwork mechanism. (Stevenson, we might recall, was about to write another story with the uncontrollable impurities of commercially available chemicals at its heart: *Jekyll and Hyde*). Zero sees himself as an artist, a solo performer, for whom reputation is everything. His reputation, however, is as fragile as the devices he builds. He is like an actor or a film star who is only as good as his last performance, and unfortunately most of the bombs he builds fail to go off, or go off with a splutter rather than a bang, or at the wrong time. He is a martyr to the complexities and uncontrollable accidents of his calling, a virtuoso whose pyrotechnical performances take him to the limits of creativity, ingenuity and executive perfection. Or so he sees himself. His thinking appears to be all about the means, and scarcely at all about the ends. He says little about the Irish issue. Zero's goal is simple: to have his bombs detonate properly in the right place at the right time. In this, however, he is constantly frustrated. The only one of his bombs which appears to work as planned fails to be placed at its target (the statue of Shakespeare in Leicester Square) when the hapless M'Guire is foiled first by the possible presence of several policemen, and then by his failure to pass on the ticking bomb to an innocent child or to a kindly lady passer-by. After this, he struggles to get down to the Embankment in time to toss the bomb in the river: he fails to leave the bag in a cab he has just taken then finds himself further delayed by an argument with the cab-driver, because he lacks the money for the fare. In the end, he succeeds in throwing the ticking bag into the Thames, but with scarcely a second to spare.

Zero, however, complements this slapstick incompetence with his own preposterous self-perception: in him at least we are offered some psychological illumination, though of a hilariously unexpected kind. Stevenson organises his daisy-chain of tall tales so that the reader only gradually pieces together the terrorist network and its arrangements, glimpsed by each of the three young men in turn. And of the three it is Somerset who fully encounters Zero, his lodger in the "superfluous mansion" in Golden Square in central London. As Somerset gradually realises his lodger's true business and struggles to come to terms with his own predicament, "Mr Jones" takes pride in revealing himself as "the

redoubted Zero.”³ Clearly revelling in his own reputation and instinctively needing to counteract the extreme isolation imposed by his activities, he claims his landlord as a friend despite Somerset’s increasingly open condemnation. And the manner of this non-meeting of minds is comic:

‘At least,’ cried Somerset, ‘I can, and do, order you to leave this house.’

‘Ah!’ cried the plotter, ‘but there I fail to follow you. You may, if you choose, enact the part of Judas; but if, as I suppose, you recoil from that extremity of meanness, I am, on my side, far too intelligent to leave these lodgings, in which I please myself exceedingly, and from which you lack the power to drive me. No, no, dear sir; here I am, and here I propose to stay.’

‘I repeat,’ cried Somerset, beside himself with a sense of his own weakness, ‘I repeat that I give you warning. I am master of this house; and I emphatically give you warning.’

‘A week’s warning?’ said the imperturbable conspirator. ‘Very well; we will talk of it a week from now. That is arranged; and in the meanwhile I observe my breakfast growing cold.’ (*Dynamiter*, 131-132)

Zero’s crazy refusal, or blindness, in accepting that Somerset is not his friend is one of the ways in which Stevenson acknowledges the astonishing, alien mind-set of the terrorist. Whereas a normal reaction to the terrorist mentality is a baffled and horrified ‘how can they do such things?’, Stevenson’s comic vision leads him to endow Zero with an alternative but equally astonishing outlook to the bloodthirstiness and political desperation we might expect: he is a preening, self-lauding prima donna on the stage of terrorist opinion, a creator rather than a destroyer — in his own eyes at least, an artist in dynamite and clockwork. His outlook, expressed in words and behaviour, startles the reader as much as if it had been that of the most cold, determined and ruthless assassin, alienated from all like the Professor in *The Secret Agent*. He is an irrepressible comic turn, trapped in his preposterous perceptions of his own abilities and grandiose visions, never to be achieved thanks to the habitual failure of his devices. Against one’s better judgement, the reader grows fond of him, as does (in a way) Somerset who fails to betray him to the authorities and tries to help him to escape to America.

Stevenson’s conception here is not so perverse as at first appears. Zero’s boundless vanity amplifies a strain in terrorism which had been recognised by an exiled Russian terrorist who had found refuge in London after her acquittal for murder in 1877:

³ Robert Louis Stevenson, *More New Arabian Nights: The Dynamiter* [Tusitala Edition, vol. III] (London: William Heinemann, 1923), 117. There are no chapter numbers.

[Vera Zasulich] had developed major reservations about [terrorist violence], except when, as in her own case, terrorists acted for purely selfless reasons. Terrorism was divisive and exhausting, and it provided the government with too easy a pretext for massive repression. More importantly, it led to pathological behaviour: 'in order to carry out terrorist acts all one's energies must be expended, and a particular frame of mind always results: either one of great vanity or one in which life has lost all its attractiveness'. (Burleigh, 46-7)

Nor is Stevenson's comic treatment of the terrorist enterprise necessarily a miscalculation on his part. If anything, it prefigures a number of responses to terrorism which acknowledge its potential ludicrousness and the possibility of comedy, however black. Even *The Secret Agent* is gently coloured by comedy, in the failures of self-perception in its leading characters and in their inadequacy of response to horrific events. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* is comic in its strange way. And so, even, is Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist*, thanks once more to the amateurishness of its terrorist cell and to their blinkered self-confidence while caught in a web of murderous professional ruthlessness. It is easy, in fact, to portray terrorists as pathetic misfits and loners, unable to perceive how risible are their own pretensions: this is Conrad's tactic. And it is Wells's, too, in "The Stolen Bacillus," in which a pale-faced crank with an overpowering sense of how the world has underestimated him steals what he thinks is a glass tube of cholera bacillus, not knowing that his scientific contact, having decided he dislikes him, has duped him. The little villain, in fact, thinking himself satisfactorily infected, is only likely to turn blue: English normality has the last laugh. And yet, of course, Wells's short tale, deriding the would-be terrorist as it does, simultaneously communicates the terrorist danger to full effect. It is only in the final lines that we are told how harmless the bacillus really is, and the ease with which cholera could be let loose with malign intent is starkly clear. Neither Conrad's irony, nor Lessing's pitying amusement, mutes the horror of the damage done to innocents by terrorist explosives: terrorism remains hateful. And so it does in Stevenson's treatment of it, despite the comedy of the hapless villains: potential innocent victims lurk in its pages and the dedication to the real-life policemen is a clear enough acknowledgement of the dreadfulness of the current bombing campaign. Somerset, afflicted as he may be with the moral tolerance of an ill-thought-out liberalism (and, particularly comically, by a misplaced English gentlemanliness), discovers that the indiscriminate destructiveness of the dynamite bomb marks the moral line he cannot cross.

The mix of comedy, pathetic self-aggrandisement, horrible destructiveness and downright evil in the terrorist enterprise, therefore, is periodically attractive to novelists. Not that comedy must always be a

constituent of the mix, as *The Princess Casamassima* and Frederick Forsyth's *The Afghan* (2006) remind us. It may be that the extreme destructive potential of present-day terrorism now largely precludes the inclusion of comedy in the fictions which it generates. Yet perhaps the terrorist world of Stevenson's time allowed writers, then and now, to despise it from a situation of apparent security—until in Sarajevo its consequences would prove simply too disastrous. It is noticeable, for example, how Burleigh's account of Nihilism and Anarchism in the last decades of Czarist Russia takes on a constant tone of amusement and mockery at the pretensions, contradictions, blindness and personal inadequacies of their revolutionary adherents. Stevenson's unexpected way of approaching the issue should be seen as an early attempt to find an artistic way of handling its various contradictions.

The comedies of Zero and M'Guire, despite their goals, are all the less jarring thanks to the larger context in which they are placed. The framing tale is of how three rather empty-headed young men, leading aimless lives and not merely down on their luck but apparently incapable of mending their own fortunes, nevertheless make the wise Stevensonian choice of opening themselves to the surprises of romance which lurk in the blandness of the everyday. Fundamental to their world—which, of course, is Stevenson's fictional world, here and in the previous volume of "Arabian" tales—is the irruption of the unexpected into the predictability of normality, the chance encounter with "the countless mysteries by which we live surrounded" (*Dynamiter*, 7). Stevenson's instinctive preference for fiction as romance, for stories which offer the reader imaginative discoveries rather than repetitive renderings of the familiar, periodically leads him to set his works in the immediacy of London (or of Edinburgh, or Glasgow) in order to delight the reader with the transmogrification of the familiar. It should perhaps be no surprise that the transformative experiences of the three young men involve an attractive young woman, nor that the young woman runs rings round each of them—it is the stuff of romantic comedy. But the screw is tightened by making her a Fenian terrorist, thereby picking up on the most pressing and alien contemporary mystery "by which we live surrounded." The terrorist threat of the 1880s constituted as great an irruption of the mysterious and unfamiliar into the world of normality as could be imagined: as such, it might seem a natural Stevenson subject after all.

What is unexpected, of course, is Stevenson's use of the alien mentality of the terrorists, with their constant need for deception, concealment and disguise, to open up glimpses of possibilities, of wonders and worlds of the imagination apparently at odds with the everyday streets of London upon which the novel opens—until one of the most solid-seeming mansions in those streets is blown sky-high by their machinations. If Clara is an easy

candidate for forgiveness (and marriage) despite her threat, it is because she is a surrogate of the author: not only does she weave, apparently spontaneously, two lengthy and utterly unexpected tales which transport their hearers (and readers) to exotic parts of the world, but she embodies Stevenson's own role as ring-master of the bewilderingly complex series of tales and events which so enmesh and (hopefully) intrigue the reader. Along with the three swains, we confront a puzzle of labyrinthine complexity: she it is who emerges as the key to its solving. And if Clara the terrorist opens to us worlds of entertaining wonder, so in his way does Zero, transforming the streets of London (so distant from any treasure islands) into a dangerous battleground and revealing in his own confessions a strangely poetic state of mind un-guessable by anyone to whom a dynamiter was simply hateful. Clara is an artist like her creator, and so is Zero in his constant search for perfection in his chosen creative field. The Stevenson whose eventual complete success as a popular writer was yet to come (with *Jekyll and Hyde*) could surely empathise, in part at least, with Zero's perpetually frustrating closeness to making an undeniable and epoch-making mark.

Terrorist fiction, by its very nature, reveals to us perceptions of the world, and excitements within the world, which can be intriguingly at odds with the mundane. The perpetual question, "how can they be so cruel and wrong-headed?," which forms the groundwork of our characteristic response to terrorism nevertheless opens the door to alternative worlds and perceptions, to visions of reality at odds with our own. Stevenson in *The Dynamiter* takes this much further, of course: from that open door there cascades a wealth of unpredictable entertainment. (We might note, in passing, that in the original *Arabian Nights* the abundance of Scheherazade's entertainment is also prompted by a frame-situation of grim cruelty.) That terrorism, in Stevenson's fiction, can be the means of revealing a world of marvel and delight seems strange, yet it was not without precedent. As mentioned above, Verne's Nemo is also a terrorist, though his means are very different from Zero's. Yet the similar blankness of their names suggests concealment and determined anonymity, and while Nemo's weapon, the *Nautilus*, is a far cry from Zero's infernal machines they can both be hugely destructive on the rare occasions when they attack successfully. Zero's political context is clear and immediate while Nemo's is a matter of mystery and conjecture, only to be clarified in a subsequent Verne novel, *The Mysterious Island*. Indeed, it seems that Nemo sees himself, in part, as no threat to anyone but simply as someone who, with his crew, wishes to cut himself off entirely from the rest of mankind. Yet one or two episodes in Verne's book suggest that Nemo does feel himself to be at violent odds with at least one (unspecified) nation, and the final attack on the ship of that un-named nation reveals the *Nautilus's* master

and crew as being essentially at war. As the stricken vessel sinks, the *Nautilus* is taken, underwater, to within ten metres so as to view the death-throes of the ship and its crew. Whether some of the encounters in the opening chapter should also be seen as attacks by Nemo is not entirely clear. Yet the danger to innocent shipping and seafarers posed by the *Nautilus* is obvious from the outset, and the stealth of its attacks, using means which seem fiendishly clever, make it a terrorist vessel.⁴

In Verne's novel, however, terrorism seems a subsidiary strand. The wonders of the submarine itself and the variety of peaceful incidents encountered during its voyage take imaginative precedence in the experience of readers. Above all, it is a book which offers its protagonist, Dr Aronnax (and with him, its readers) entry into a wonderful and unfamiliar vision of the natural world, with all its hitherto un-glimpsed immensity, variety and surprises. Page after page is devoted to accounts of the magical undersea scenes and creatures visible from the *Nautilus*. This transforms our sense of the globe we inhabit, filling it with new and unexpected wonders and beauties. In many of its pages, the novelties of the seas appeal to Aronnax and reader alike on both scientific and aesthetic—indeed poetic—grounds. At other times, an even more mythical sense of wonder is conjured up, as when Nemo and Aronnax visit the lost undersea city of Atlantis. The reader acquiesces in the spectacle of this magical parade, just as Aronnax does—both allow the sense of threat in the fascinating and mysterious Nemo to lie dormant for many pages. Terrorism's refusal to be confined by the norms and expectations of mundane society allows Nemo to break through to a realm where new wonder and beauty comes within reach, even though we may not wish to follow him into his new moral domain. A distant parallel, Zero may be a comic fool and incompetent inventor beside Nemo, but he certainly livens up the London streets being trod by Challoner, Somerset and Desborough. As Andrew Martin has written,

Twenty Thousand Leagues is less concerned with defamiliarization ... than with *refamiliarization*, the domestication of the strange. The entire *Voyages extraordinaires* can be seen as an attempt to restore the extraordinary to ordinariness, to take what is *extra* (Aronnax describes his existence on board the *Nautilus* as 'extra-naturelle'), outside the ordinary, and bring it inside.⁵

Stevenson, too, is playing games with the ordinary and the extraordinary: ordinary Victorian London, so carefully and specifically delineated in the book, is given a new strangeness by his narrative inventions, just as it had

⁴ Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, trans. William Butcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁵ Andrew Martin, *The Mask of the Prophet: The Extraordinary Fictions of Jules Verne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 99.

been by the real-life terrorist threat. And on the other hand, the apparently inconceivable otherness of the terrorist mentality is given a startlingly ordinary familiarity when it turns out to consist of the foolish youthful passion and idealism of a beautiful headstrong girl and the vain ambitions of a preening, self-regarding, lonely would-be artist. It is in the nature of terrorism that it sets out to transform normality: it is the irruption of the extraordinary into the perfectly ordinary existences of us all. In a moment, a familiar social activity can be turned into an experience of horror, or an ordinary road vehicle, or an aeroplane, can be turned into a lethal weapon.

Both books, therefore, find fictional romance to be a mode congenial to the theme of terrorism. The genre's natural interplay between familiarity and unfamiliarity—its habitual amplification, or transformation, of the mundane—proves surprisingly compatible with situations and behaviours which seem extraordinary (verging on the unthinkable) to most people. Another of the oppositions endemic to terrorism results from the concealment which is necessary for a terrorist enterprise: until the terrorist act itself, its perpetrators and their means are completely indistinguishable from the wider environment. Concealment and openness, inside and outside, the continuity of ordinary life versus the suddenness of the extraordinary moment—these are the natural patterns of terrorist fiction. In Verne's novel, there are two "insides": the inside of the *Nautilus*, lovingly and extensively imagined, and the "inside" of the concealing ocean where the submarine hides until its occasional landfalls and encounters with other vessels. In *The Dynamiter*, the streets of London are a constant felt presence, both in the experiences of the three young men and also in many of the narratives embedded in the book. But subtly opposed to those streets is the interior of the house which figures in several of the tales and episodes, which comes unexpectedly into the *de facto* possession of Somerset, then becomes the lair of Zero and his bomb-making factory, and is finally blown up by one of his infernal machines. The house is the focus of much of the book's mystery and adventure, a presence in the London townscape with its own insistence to match the omnipresence of the London streets, so it seems fitting that it too, like the other characters, should come to a decisive end rather than just fading from our consciousness as mere unimportant fictional furniture. It becomes, as we read, the domain of terrorist interiority, its façade hiding unexpected secrets. (Once more, one reminds oneself that Henry Jekyll will very soon create a similar disjunction between a house's respectable public façade and the darkest, and most unexpected, of interior secrets. One also recalls that Verloc's house interior contributes much to the atmosphere of *The Secret Agent*.)

The stress on the house's interiority may also help make further sense of the puzzle which is Zero. Writing about *Twenty Thousand Leagues*

Under the Sea, Roland Barthes has discussed how Verne constantly explores “the ceaseless action of secluding oneself”:

Imagination about travel corresponds in Verne to an exploration of closure, and the compatibility between Verne and childhood does not stem from a banal mystique of adventure, but on the contrary from a common delight in the finite, which one also finds in children’s passion for huts and tents: to enclose oneself and to settle, such is the existential dream of childhood and of Verne.... All the ships in Jules Verne are perfect cubby-holes, and the vastness of their circumnavigation further increases the bliss of their closure, the perfection of their inner humanity. The *Nautilus*, in this regard, is the most desirable of all caves: the enjoyment of being enclosed reaches its paroxysm when, from the bosom of this unbroken inwardness, it is possible to watch, through a large window-pane, the outside vagueness of the waters, and thus define, in a single act, the inside by means of its opposite.⁶

Stevenson’s “superfluous mansion” scarcely attains such a high degree of definition in counterpointing its interior with its London surroundings, yet that sense of opposition is still strong. And its walls come to house not only the immature Somerset, idling away his time at painting for which he has no talent, until he comes to a measure of lowly usefulness behind the counter of the cigar divan, but also Zero who finds the mansion to be the ideal environment for his needs. Barthes’s hint seems apposite: the reclusive Zero is indeed child-like, despite his inventiveness and his dangerousness. He strives to master a skill in bomb-making which is beyond him (Somerset also strives to master arts which are far beyond his capabilities), and his motivation, above all, is his desire for the praise of others. He cannot believe that he is not liked: he just wants to be friends. The “superfluous mansion” is a haven for the child-like: the other distinctive location in the work on the other hand, the cigar divan, is the domain of the father-figure of the piece, Goodall, or Florizel: from it, the lads sally forth, and to it they return again, a little wiser.

Despite these echoes and similarities, Verne’s novel and Stevenson’s are clearly very different works: the links between them hardly clasp them close. Yet they have their obvious over-riding similarity: neither is normally thought of as being a major contribution to the fiction of terrorism—Stevenson’s because it lurks amongst the now scarcely read items in Stevenson’s output, Verne’s because it hardly strikes most readers as a terrorist novel at all. Yet there remains one further linkage between them, once their idiosyncratic engagement with the theme of terrorism is

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2000), 65-67.

recognised. They are both imagination-widening works, inducting their readers into worlds of wonder and surprise.

And their kinship in this regard can be further pinpointed. In *The Secret Agent*, we meet a cast of characters who seem to be variously embodiments of the darkness of its vision. When, however, we meet one who is not, we find that he alone retains an opposite outlook—and is seen as naïve as a result. The Assistant Commissioner visits, late in the evening, the powerful politician variously referred to, with heavy irony, as “the great man,” “the Great Presence,” “the great personage.” etc. His junior, Toodles, however, is less impressive but viewed just as ironically:

Toodles was revolutionary only in politics; his social beliefs and personal feelings he wished to preserve unchanged through all the years allotted to him on this earth which, upon the whole, he believed to be a nice place to live on.⁷

Toodles’s naivety as regards the nature of the world he lives in seems laughable in the context of Conrad’s novel. It would be hard, also, to find among later works of terrorist fiction a “nice” world which would bear him out. However, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and *The Dynamiter* both seem to regard the world as a nice place, despite the destructiveness which some humans bring to it. One turns to Verne’s book to experience, above all, a sense of the wonders of the deep: its world is one of teeming colour and life, whatever dangers and sadness it also contains. Stevenson’s book is buoyant both in its content and in the manner of its telling: the optimism which sets the three young men on their search for adventure amongst everyday wonders proves amply justified, even though they too discover danger. Both novels entertain the reader with surprise and variety. Both their worlds invite optimistic engagement, by characters and readers alike. Twentieth-century bleakness seems still a little way off.

University of Dundee

⁷ Joseph Conrad. *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 171.