

# Terrorist Vision in *The Secret Agent*

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Long live death!

-- Spanish Anarchist rallying (qtd.  
in Wilkinson, p. 313)

Violence is a purifying force. It frees the native from the inferiority complex and from despair and inaction. It makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.

-- Fanon (qtd. in Wilkinson, p. 313)

Conrad's *The Secret Agent* centers on a terrorist act -- a supposed demonstrative bomb attack on the Greenwich Observatory. In this "failed attempt" on the world-known institution, an unlucky bomber was blasted to pieces by the dynamite he carried. Until now, whether or not the bomb attack was aimed at the Greenwich is an unsolved mystery. The difficulty of knowing the intention of the bomber lies in the fact the bomb carried by the terrorist was disguised as a vanish can. As the bomb was ingeniously installed in a vanish can, it was highly mobile -- it could be carried by anyone to any place without being suspected by anyone of the police forces in charge of anti-terrorist movement. Therefore, the Greenwich Observatory might or might not be the target of the plotted bomb attempt. The absurd cruelty, in which the terrorist was blasted, was due to the fact that at that time dynamite was a rather recent means of destruction. The terrorist was victimized by the dynamite he carried for some higher course. According to Spittles, dynamite had just taken the place of gunpowder as the means of terrorist intimidation before the turn of century (Spittles, 130). Though the new explosive material was eagerly adopted by the revolutionaries as means of intimidation, the dynamite at that time was as highly volatile as it was mobile. Because of its high volatility there were several cases in which bombers were blown up by their own bombs - the Greenwich outrage being one of them. Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is an imaginative construction or reconstruction based on this "absurd cruelty" happened in February 1894.

In *The Secret Agent*, our knowledge of the fin-de-siecle English society comes a great deal from the a group of anarchists, especially from the terrorist nicknamed Professor. His is the perspective of the oppressed, the unprivileged and most of all the alienated: "there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist". (11) Conrad had been sympathetic to revolutionists ever since he was young, especially when he was an angry young man wandering desperately in street of London looking for a job in the 1880s. {1} Now an established writer in the English society, he tried to detach himself from the way he saw the London of 1880s in which he strolled like a flaneur: "I had to fight hard to keep at arm's length the memories of my solitary and nocturnal walks all over London in my early days, lest they should rush in an overwhelm each page of he story ..." (11) Despite his deliberate detachment to the revolutionist vision, terrorist vision looms large in the story. In this report I want to focus on the revolutionist or terrorist vision through which Conrad portrayed the turn-of-the-century

desolate London. Still he tried hard to keep the vision at arm's length. To me it is the terrorist vision against which we can define Conrad's way of seeing. His way of seeing is vacillating between the resistance and acceptance of the terrorist vision. The repeated and conscious resistance of that terrorist vision is what made possible the ironic tone of the story which he stated in the preface of the book: "to scorn and to pity".

In his essay "Raid on the Conscious" which deals with DeLillo's *Mao II*, Glen Scott Allen detects a symmetry between terrorist and novelist: both of them being "solitary plotters," "seeking to reconnect with a society from which they feel alienated, and so they must 'write' themselves back into the world" (Allen, 1). Just as terrorist tries to raid the conscious of the public by terrorist acts in order to publicize their ideal, so a novelist writes to make known his ideal. What Allen finds in DeLillo's works is that terrorists have taken the place used to be occupied by the novelists who could move the public and to influence them to do the things they otherwise won't do. The appalling symmetry between the terrorist and the novelist for me is a little bit exaggerated. Terrorists are stereotypically depicted as blood-thirsty psychopaths who are fanatically reasonable. Yet the analogy makes it clear that terrorists, not unlike novelists, are trying to reason with us, to talk us into doing something, though with different means of communication. Theirs are deadly.

In Allen's essay, articles on terrorism done by Dowling and Faren are discussed and compared. For Allen the two agree that a terrorist act is a "communicative act consisting of the manipulating of symbol" (Allen, 3). For Dowling the terrorist communicative act is the process for terrorist to identify himself and his group as distinct from other terrorist and terrorist group. For Faren, "terrorism is a form of expression, a text which all the parties involved seek to control" (Allen,3). However, understanding the terrorist communicative act is "one thing the 'authorities' must claim to be incapable of doing". (Allen, 3) Yes, the terrorist act is communicative, yet message is always rejected and neglected because their message which is bloody violence is unreadable. For Allen, violence as means of communication falls outside of the Western logocentric sensibility. Therefore it is impossible to read the terrorist text, because understanding the senseless communicative act requires the acquisition the same language, the language of bloodshed.

From Allen's essay we know that terrorists communicate through violence and the terrifying communicative act is generally denied by its audience. Even though there are novelists whose messages are destructive and apocalyptic, their messages are symbolic. They are violent, destructive and terrorist in theory, not in practice. What I want to emphasize here is that if there is a symmetry between terrorist and novelist, the symmetry lies in the similar ways of conception of the world, not in their ways to "write back" to the world. To better understand the way the terrorist conceives the world I here want to discuss more about terrorism.

There are an array of terrorist movements, ranging from the liberals seeking only to initiate a change, to anarchists and nihilists who seek destruction, to communist and other millennial movement. (Amon, 69) What are the means of the terrorist movement? Bombings in public places, kidnapping, murder, injury, or threats of the above terrorist acts -- these are the means

systematically used by terrorist movements. To what ends are the terrorist means? They are meant to create "an atmosphere of fear" (Wilkinson, 310). To create the atmosphere of fear, to create a general sense of terror, a terrorist act has to be indiscriminate and arbitrary. Therefore, in a terrorist society, every individual is the object of terror. (Gregor, 159) To spread a general terror, terrorists "deliberate terrorist attacks on the civilian population and public facilities." Whether or not you sympathize with the movement, you are equally liable to be victimized by a terrorist act. That is why a terrorist society is paranoiac. {2} People living in it feel insecure because they could not look ahead or plan ahead. Under the reign of terror, everything becomes unpredictable. People gradually lose the sense of direction, not knowing where to go.

Theoretically, terrorism is a battle of winning "credibility and legitimacy." {3} By using terror as means of intimidation, the terrorists want to make everyone in a society feel insecure. People in the terrorist society will be forced to question the government's ability to guarantee security, to govern. As the sense of insecurity in a society prevails, the legitimacy of the government will be sabotaged.

The shattering of the legitimacy requires something important: the transfer of guilt. (Tugwell, 285) Terrorist warfare is the attempt to win credibility of the people, to make people believe that it is the terrorist faction not the government that knows the destiny. They want people to believe that only when they are in power can people be relieved of terror. The government, not the terrorist movement, is to blame for the terror and insecurity caused by the terrorist movement. If successful, the guilt transfer will lead to terrorists' accession to the power.

The terrorists are always those who claim to have vision, those who claim that they are enlightened, that is, those who claim that they can see while others are blind to the truth. According to Amon, terrorist ideologies are "messianic, gnostic and apocalyptic" (Amon, 69). Terrorists can foresee "the attributes of the world to come, to know the nature of this ideal world, and quite often even who its 'messiah' is" (Amon, 69). In *The Secret Agent*, there are two "enlightened" terrorists who can see better than others - the Professor and the First Secretary Vladimir. The irony of the story is that their prophetic visions fall on the two extreme ends of the ideological spectrum: while Vladimir is strictly counter-revolutionary, Professor is nihilist and revolutionary.

Perhaps it may seem too farfetched to name Vladimir as a terrorist since he does not want to win the right to govern. As an agent of foreign government, what he intends is to influence the policy of the British government to take stricter measures to combat the terrorist activities in England, to influence English government to curb the influx of political refugees from Europe. To achieve this object, he provokes Verloc to carry out a "demonstration" on the Greenwich -- to set off a bomb on the world-known institution. We know that the outrage is not directed against the public building itself. It means to cause impact which is out of proportion to the destruction of the building. {4} It is directed against "the sacrosanct fetish of today" - science. (34) For Vladimir, science is at the source of the public's material prosperity, the maniac outrage on the Greenwich will symbolize a pure destruction -- the determination "to make a clean sweep of whole social creation." Even though what he wants is just a change in policy, the tone of

Vladimir's statement is nevertheless apocalyptic.

For Vladimir terrorist act is a communicative act: "bombs are your means of expression, it would be really telling if one could throw a bomb into pure mathematics"(36). The terrorist act for him is a means to cause general mistrust of the legality of the government, to force the government to take measures in favor of the foreign regime which Vladimir represents. For Vladimir the "imbecile bourgeoisie" had turned themselves the accomplices of the political criminals: "The country is absurd with its sentimental regard of individual liberty". (33). The legality of England is questioned by Vladimir. But he wants to share his vision with the British subjects. A terrorist act is needed to cause a general incredibility of the government by the public, which is, for Vladimir, the "imbecile" bourgeoisie.

Vladimir is very confident about his vision and intelligence. For him, the bourgeoisie are not only imbecile but also "blinded by an idiotic vanity". What he means is that the liberal policy of England which grants political asylum to political refugees from European countries like Tsarist Russia had caused damages not only to reactionary European regimes but to England herself. As a man much more enlightened, he believes that a bomb attack will cause "a jolly scare" to make them see better.

The Professor is no less enlightened: "My superiority is evident" (64). He can see through the mask of legality: "It is this country that is dangerous, with her idealistic conception of legality. The social spirit of this people is wrapped up in scrupulous prejudices, and that is fatal to our work" (67). For him, the legality is the fetish that masks and blinds the bourgeoisie. "To break up the superstition and worship of legality", to tear off the mask which "wrapped" up the public, "a telling stroke would be delivered - something really startling - a blow fit open the first crack in the imposing front of the great edifice of legal conception sheltering the atrocious injustice of society" (72-3). While Vladimir's attack on the legality is via the attack on science, Professor constantly dreams of a bloody confrontation between him and the law itself.

For Professor a terrorist act is a genuine piece of propaganda: "It is I who am the true propagandist." His terrorist communicative act is much much more bloody than Vladimir's. {5} Always carrying a bomb with him, he is ready to ignite the detonator and blows himself up if ever any one of counter-terrorist police force makes an attempt to arrest him. He even envisions a bloody scenario in which Inspect Heat and his colleagues kill him "in broad daylight with the approval of the public." "Half our battle would be won then; the disintegration of this old morality would be set in its very temple" (67).

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Unlike Vladimir who believes in terror, Professor doubts about the effect of the bomber attack in enlightening the mass. He is sure about his vision, he knows the evil of the society: "My superiority is evident." Nevertheless, he is not sure whether people will actually be regenerated by a "telling stroke". He is terrified by the blindness of the multitude: "He felt the mass of mankind in its number. They swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like ants, thoughtless

like a natural force, pushing on blind and orderly and absorbed, imperious to sentiment, to logic, to terror, too, perhaps" (emphasis mine,74).

Though he doubts about the power of terror to regenerate the society, he still anticipates a total destruction. The society for him is controlled by "the weak, the flabby, the silly, the cowardly, the faint of heart and the slavish of mind." For Professor the society needs to start all over again. That means the society has to be defunct: "They are the multitude. Theirs is the kingdom of death. Exterminate, exterminate!" (243) Those degenerated shall be purged of in order for the society to renew itself.

At times Professor is like Nietzsche's superman who is acrobatic in facing conventions and institutions. Death is the foundation on which his vision is built. His belief in death causes him to indulge himself in the improvement of the explosive material: "But I was thinking of my perfect detonator only." He seems too much occupied by the technique of destruction so that he is blind to what will come after the wholesale destruction: "He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the image of ruin and destruction" (248). Professor at this particular moment is totally obsessed with death, with destruction. He appears so nihilistic, so insane that Conrad keeps him at arm's length. Obviously he is a figure that is both atrocious and repulsive. The distance between Conrad and Professor signifies his "scorn" of this nihilistic vision, even though we can detect Conrad's sympathy to the cause of the terrorist movement when Professor attacks verbally the legality of English society. When he is despised, he doesn't appear superior: "He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable - and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men" (248).

The distrust of the mass, the expectation of the total destruction and the apocalyptic vision are shared by many modernist writers who are sympathetic to Fascism. In Frank Kermode's *The Sense of An Ending*, Modernist poets such as Yeats, Pound are singled out as the writers with apocalyptic elements. Take Yeats for example. Terror and destruction, which signify transition to a new era, are frequently seen in his poems. "When I was writing *A Vision*, I had constantly the word 'terror' impressed upon me, and once the old Stoic prophecy of earthquake, fire and flood at the end of an age, but this I did not take literally" (cited in Kermode, 98). He praised war because war brings forth destruction as well as terror. For him war means more than destruction; it is the means of renewal: "The danger is that there will be no war... Love war because of its horror, that belief may be changed, civilization renewed" (cited in Kermode, 98). Unlike Conrad who is ironic about visions whether terrorist or revolutionary, Yeats does not keep what he writes at arm's length. His apocalyptic vision is similar to that of the Professor and Vladimir who believe in the renewal of society through violence. For them a universal bloodshed is the price to pay for the coming of a new millennium.

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Though Conrad does not share the fascist vision of the modernists such as Yeats and Pound, his writing is modernist. In his discussion about the characteristic of modernist writings, Perloff lists a conglomeration of concepts which for him are the characteristics of modernism. Among the characteristics are verbal ambiguity and complexity, the emphasis on the divided self, the

malaise of the individual in the "lonely crowd," the alienated self in the urban world. (Perloff, 158) It is obvious that Conrad's writing falls into the category of modernist because his practice of writing clearly exemplifies what Perloff sees as the modernist. Modernist characteristics like verbal ambiguity and the focus on the alienated self in the urban world are especially relevant in our discussion of the terrorist vision. Characters in *The Secret Agent* are mostly alienated from the society. In the novel those terrorists and anarchists want to "write back" to the society from which they are alienated, either by propaganda or by the terrorist "propaganda" which is a bomb. Though Conrad is not ambiguous and complex verbally in *The Secret Agent*, the story is by no means without ambiguity. Conrad is ambiguous in positioning himself politically: he keeps an ironic distance from the terrorist vision to show "scorn and pity". His attitude towards politics is antithetical to that of Yeats and Pound. He belongs to the modernists who are against "militant modernization, and hence to the dominant imperial rhetoric of patriotism, progress, development, and global mission" (McClure, 50).

In his discussion about Conrad's attitude towards politics, Spittles detects in Conrad's praise of the French novelist Anatole France the ambiguous attitude toward politics. In a 1904 essay on Anatole France, Conrad "perceives that political institutions, whether contrived by the wisdom of the few or the ignorance of the many, are incapable of securing the happiness of mankind" (cited in Spittles, 128). The essay shows Conrad's distrust of political systems whether Fascist or democratic. For him, "socialism" is "too materialistic" for him and he feels repulsive about its "the stupidity of the dogma and the unlovely form of the ideal" (cited in Spittles, 128). But his distrust of political systems old or new does not prevent him from admiring someone who is strongly committed to a political cause. Anatole France is praised by Conrad for his "profound and unalterable compassion" as a socialist (cited in Spittles, 128). He adores a socialist but detests socialism. While he admires the person's commitment to a political system, he does not believe in the system. For Spittle Conrad is skeptic about politics. His skepticism stems "not entirely from his innate conservatism, but from a distrust of language" (Spittles, 128). Language is abused by "demagogue" and "provocateur" for some selfish end rather than for collective good. For me Conrad's skepticism does not stop there. He is skeptical epistemologically: about our ability to see and foresee. For him, the claim to see clearly partakes of terrorism -- fascist or nihilist.

## Notes

1. In Batchelor's *Life of Conrad*, Conrad is described as a "displaced and (often) socially humiliated foreigner." (Batchelor, 161)
2. Paranoia in society under state-terrorism is discussed in Allen's essay. A fascist state is haunted by a general terror which is as horrifying.
3. Glover discusses "the shattering of the nation's legal illusion in *The Secret Agent*. His focus is on the the study of Anti-alien movement.
4. Aron has said, "an action of violence is labeled 'terrorist' when its psychological effects are out of proportion to its purely physical result. ... the lack of discrimination helps to spread fear, for if no one in particular is a target, on one can be safe" (cited, in Wilkinson, 310). Vladimir's aim to destroy the fetish of English society which to him is science through the destruction of Observatory is terrorist in that he plans an attack which hopefully will lead

to an incident "out of proportional to its purely physical result."

5. In fact Vladimir idea is close to that of a performance artist. All he wants is a harmless demonstration: "Moreover, I am a civilized man. I would never dream of directing you to organize a mere butchery, even if I expected from a butchery the best result I want" (36).

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