Introduction

Ich bin kein Mensch, ich bin Dynamit! Nietzsche

Almost every day I received letters, evidently written by spies of the international police, mentioning some dynamite plot, or mysteriously announcing that consignments of dynamite had been shipped to me.

Peter Kropotkin

In 1864 Emil Nobel and four other people were killed while working with nitroglycerine in the explosives factory of Emil's older brother Alfred. The Swedish government closed down the factory, and Alfred resumed his experiments on a barge. Three years after his brother's death, he invented dynamite: a mixture of nitroglycerine and kieselguhr, a porous siliceous earth, safer to handle than pure nitroglycerine, set off with a blasting cap or detonator that Nobel perfected. The invention of dynamite made Alfred Nobel a rich man. He patented it in Sweden, Britain, and the United States and improved on his recipe, substituting wood pulp for kieselguhr,

adding sodium nitrate, and later inventing a more powerful gelatinous version. A recluse, bachelor, and pacifist, Nobel would leave much of his fortune for annual, international prizes to be awarded, as he specified, in chemistry, medicine, physics, literature, and peace to those who had contributed to the betterment of mankind. [1]

Dynamite was widely used in Nobel's lifetime in mining, railroad construction, quarries, and other destructively constructive projects. Chemically, it is a "high" or "detonating" explosive, as opposed to a "low" or "deflagrating" explosive. Nitroglycerine is its "sensitizer." High explosives expand rapidly, producing heat and gases; the chemical reaction spreads in a detonation wave, a particular kind of shock wave possessing constant amplitude and velocity. Shock waves in turn are a kind of acoustic wave, which is why dynamite explosions make a loud noise.[2]

As a metaphor of sudden expansion and violent destruction, dynamite would capture the fin-de-siècle imagination much as computer jargon does today. In *Ecce Homo,* Nietzsche, whom Emma Goldman and other anarchists admired, proclaimed: "*Ich bin kein Mensch, ich bin Dynamit*" ("I `m not a human being, I`m dynamite"). In one of her essays on the drama, Goldman wrote of Ibsen, "*Ghosts* has acted like a bomb explosion, shaking the social structure to its very foundations." [3] And in a stanza contrasting elite patronage with popular accessibility, August Strindberg praised Alfred Nobel:

> You, Swarz, had a small edition published
>
> For the nobles and the princely houses!
>
> Nobel! you published a huge popular edition
>
> Constantly renewed in a hundred thousand copies.[4]

While it retained the association with intellectual illumination and power, the metaphor of dynamite began to acquire a new connotation. As a result of a number of striking *attentats*, particularly in Paris in the 1890s, Nobel's invention became linked with political radicals, especially anarchists.

Anarchism and Violence

The stereotype of the anarchist is, and has been, that of the fanatical bomber, whose indifference to the lives of his victims makes him seem inhuman, even monstrous. One celebrated anarchist bomber was Francois-Claudius Ravachol, whose very name became a synonym for "to bomb," *ravacholiser*, and about whom was written a song, *La Ravachole,* with the refrain, *Vive le son de l`explosion*! Octave Mirbeau described Ravachol` s anarchist bombs as "the roll of thunder preceding the joy of sun and peaceful skies."

Other anarchists followed Ravachol's example. Explaining his own hostility to capitalism and his consequent bomb assaults on Paris cafés,

Émile Henry said, "It was then that I decided to intrude among that concert of happy tones a voice the bourgeois had already heard but which they thought had died with Ravachol: the voice of dynamite." [5] Explaining his choice of targets—ordinary people rather than heads of state—Henry added, "there are no innocent bourgeois." In Chicago in 1886 working men gathered at the Haymarket for a rally; when the police showed up, someone in the crowd hurled a bomb at them. Eight anarchists were held responsible and hanged. In 1893 Auguste Vaillant threw a bomb from the gallery into the French chamber of deputies; no one was killed, but Vaillant was executed, crying " *Vive l'anarchie*! "

In his history of the period, *The Age of Empire*, Eric Hobsbawm refers to "the anarchist epidemic of assassinations in the 1890s, to which two monarchs, two presidents, and one prime minister fell victim." [6] These assaults were a result, according to the historian of anarchism James Joll, "of the anarchist belief in immediate, apocalyptic value of an act of self-immolation which would also remove the symbol of the existing social order." [7] In his book on French anarchism, Richard Sonn agrees, writing "the bomb was a sort of magical device that would explode the myth of bourgeois invincibility... they [the anarchists] did not really expect their bombs to start a chain of events that would lead to the revolution. Rather, they collapsed the revolutionary process into one act that stood for the whole." [8] Paul Avrich, the most prolific historian of anarchism, observes,

"Dynamite, in the eyes of the anarchists, had become a panacea for the ills of society,"[9]

Like other oppositional movements, fin-de-siècle anarchism tried to come to grips with its lack of political power and influence. How was it supposed to combat the seemingly overwhelming force of the State, with its courts, prisons, army and police force, and Capital, with its endless funds and private armies? A typical anarchist response to denunciations of violent activists was that all authority—law, government, labor—was based on violence or the fear of violence; that the state, with its army and police force, had arrogated to itself a monopoly on violence; that capitalism perpetrated daily violence upon the workers and the poor; and that anarchy in fact stood for order, not for chaos and confusion. As even the most casual student of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century labor history knows, workers, both rural and industrial, suffered dramatically from low wages, long working days, lack of safety standards, the exploitation of children. Outraged by specific injustices — workers dying from industrial diseases, maimed and killed in industrial accidents, children killed in mines and factories, families evicted from company shacks, striking workers fired upon by the state militia—some anarchists felt that the revolution couldn`t wait. Resistance to oppression, they felt, had to be immediate and unmistakable.

Other anarchists disliked the reduction of their politics to simple acts of violence against the established order. A contributor to the June 1894 issue of

the London anarchist journal *Liberty* wrote: "To let the workers gain their first idea of Anarchy from a series of bomb explosions, having for their object the destruction of life, is not, to my mind, the way to impress them most favorably towards its principles or its advocates." [10] In a *Liberty* editorial several months later, Henry Seymour, after some circumlocution, disagreed:

> It is scarcely necessary to disclaim a too close sympathy with that startling phenomenon of civilization, the bomb-thrower; but we are blind indeed if we do not observe and take into account the immense revolution of ideas he is effecting ... The bomb-thrower is essentially a *brave* man, a man of quick sympathies, and vigorous in action. He is the agent of a new terror mainly on account of the moral justification that stimulates him. We are all of us convinced, in our innermost hearts, that society is responsible for his actual existence ... Gunpowder changed the old methods of war, and shifted the balance of power ...The individual Nihilist is more feared by the Czar than a whole army of serfs... And so, when Science shall provide individuals with still more potent, still more terrible engines of destruction it may come to pass that we shall pay some respect, if indeed we do not lift our hats, to the bomb-thrower [italics original].[11]

The bomb-thrower does not merely take revenge; he also enacts a "revolution of ideas." The purpose of his deed is not just to wreak vengeance or inspire fear, but to change consciousness.

Violence is not, however, intrinsic to anarchist theory, and "propaganda by the deed" did not necessarily refer to an *attentat*. In the founding modern anarchist text, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), William Godwin explicitly opposed revolutionary violence, arguing that it spreads vengefulness and distrust, dissolves social ties, and brings into existence a climate hostile to "the cultivation of justice and the diffusion of benevolence."[12] Any revolution that sheds blood, he continued, is both "crude and premature," since it disrupts the natural progress of reason and public understanding.

In his book on anarchism, political scientist David Miller tries to put anarchist violence into historical perspective. "Only a small proportion of anarchists have advocated terrorist methods, " he writes, "and moreover anarchist terrorism has been very largely confined to two decades, the 1890s and the 1970s. Acts of terror have been performed by republicans, by nationalists, by revolutionary socialists and by fascists, and if one tried to quantify the anarchist contribution to this catalogue of horror, it would turn out to be relatively small."[13] Similarly, writing about the Haymarket anarchists, Paul Avrich asserts that "the gap between the advocacy of terrorism and its actual practice was very wide" and that most of them "shrank from the methods that in theory they justified and professed" and were only guilty of making "rash and provocative statements." [14] Nonetheless, anarchism has been saddled with the reputation of being the most violent of radical movements.

Anarcho-syndicalist Georges Sorel, author of the notorious *Reflections on Violence* (1906), regarded opposition to violence as a middle-class prejudice. "In the eyes of the contemporary middle class everything is admirable which dispels the idea of violence," he argued. "Our middle class desires to die in peace—after them the deluge."[15] Sorel proposed the following distinction between "violence" and "force":

> Sometimes the terms *force* and *violence* are used in speaking of acts of authority, sometimes in speaking of acts of revolt. It is obvious that the two cases give rise to very different consequences. I think it would be better to adopt a terminology which would give rise to no ambiguity, and that the term *violence* should be employed only for acts of revolt; we should say, therefore, that the object of force is to impose a certain social order in which the minority governs, while violence tends to the destruction of that order. The middle class have used force since the beginning of modern times, while the proletariat now reacts against the middle class and against the State by violence. [16]

When asked about her personal attitude toward violence during her trial for opposition to American participation in World War I, Emma Goldman attempted to turn the tables on her interrogator:

> An act of political violence at the bottom is the culminating result of organized violence on top. It is the result of violence which expresses itself in war, which expresses itself in capital punishment, which expresses itself in courts, which expresses itself in prison, which expresses itself in kicking and hounding people for the only crime they are guilty of: of having been born poor.[17]

Despite such arguments, the acts of the violent few contaminated anarchism`s reputation and brought down upon it the full power of the State.

All violence, even that motivated by understandable outrage, is irreconcilable with any notion of beauty. No matter how vile the target, he inevitably becomes an object of sympathy once he too is reduced to the state of suffering, frightened humanity. As a political tactic, violence seems to be self-defeating, and the more anarchists were identified with violence in the public mind, the more repellent and irrational they appeared. Alexander Berkman attacked coal magnate Henry Clay Frick because of his solidarity with the Homestead workers, whose sufferings Frick had caused. Berkman's motivation is understandable; the whole country seemed appalled by the Homestead lock-out. But once Frick lay bleeding on his office floor, it was Berkman who became the monster. By the same token, during their trials and executions, the Haymarket anarchists and Sacco and Vanzetti aroused the sympathy of many Americans who suddenly saw them as individuals, as human beings.

The Anarchist Sublime

As the guillotine had been for the French Revolution, the bomb became the signature or signifier of anarchism. Its signified was social revolution, cosmic chaos. The anarchist infatuation with the bomb during the turn of the century was indicative of a tendency to represent material events in a metaphoric, even aestheticized, way. The discourse of the bomb belongs to the dynamical or revolutionary sublime, which the anarchists imagined as ushering in the stateless utopia, implicitly ruled by the aesthetic category of the beautiful.

Gerhard Lizius published his praise of the bomb—Paul Avrich speaks of his "almost mystical intensity" — in the anarchist journal The Alarm. "Dynamite!" Lizius exclaimed. "Of all the good stuff, that is the stuff. Stuff several pounds of this sublime stuff into an inch pipe ... place this in the vicinity of a lot of rich loafers who live by the sweat of other peoples` brows, and light the fuse. A most cheerful and gratifying result will follow" [italics added][18] In a chapter entitled "The Cult of Dynamite" in his *The Haymarket Tragedy*, Paul Avrich quotes many laudatory descriptions of dynamite in American anarchist journals of the 1880s. Johann Most, publisher of *Freiheit*, whose masthead proclaimed "Against Tyrants All Means Are Justified!" published recipes for explosive devices, eventually compiling them in a 74-page booklet.

The sublime, as philosophers and historians have noted, is theoretically linked with anarchy, chaos, and rebellion via an immunity to regulation and law. "The sublime became a rule for evading rules," writes Peter Gay. "It gave good

reasons for unreasonable preferences, objective sanction to subjective sentiments, legitimate justification for breaking the law" [italics added]. [19] Ernst Cassirer understands the sublime as related to the notion of genius. In the past artists had to obey rules laid down by classical academies; the genius is the person who defies existing aesthetic standards in order to produce. Thus the genius is like the ideal anarchist, dynamically in sync with nature and natural law, spontaneous, generating an internal authority rather than genuflecting to an external one. This in turn is why the artist and the anarchist are akin to one another, sharing an antinomian outlook. Much as the artist resists rules, the anarchist resists rulers.

The link between anarchy and the sublime can be tentatively historicized in two ways. The first shared historical context is that of the Enlightenment, during which both bourgeois aesthetics and the modern anarchism of William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* were conceived. Godwin read the French philosophes and the writings of Edmund Burke, author of *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. The character Falkland in Godwin's novel *Caleb Williams* is reportedly modeled upon Burke, and Caleb's most salient trait, curiosity, is discussed at length on the first page of section I of Burke's treatise. Burke's sublime is, according to Ernst Cassirer, "that which is not subject to rules ... that which is incommensurable by any standards whatsoever ... this phenomenon, which shatters the conceptual framework of previous aesthetic systems." [20] Burke associates the Sublime with such traits as infinity, obscurity, pain, privation, vastness, and roughness. But his account also has a political dimension, invoking as it does both terror and power:

" power," he writes, "derives all its sublimity from the terror with which it is generally accompanied." [21] Therefore, terror *governs* the sublime: "Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime."[22]

The sublime, therefore, belongs to both anarchy and the State, rulership and revolution, Milton's God and Milton's Satan, violence in the service of despotism and violence in opposition to it, the deliberate obscurity of "despotic governments" and religions, the freedom of wild nature and genius, the unrepresentable concepts of eternity and infinity, the darkness of moonless midnights and the whiteness of the whale, the majesty of the Crown and the terror of the guillotine.

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This book is organized around the metaphor of dynamite, so ubiquitous in the modernist era, arguing that modernists appropriated from revolutionary anarchism the aesthetic Walter Benjamin called "shock." My title and the quotations I take as epigraphs are suggestive of the connections I want to explore between modernity and anarchy. The book attempts to unpack a trope that G.K. Chesterton defines and Joseph Conrad illustrates, the bomb-throwing artist who delights in disorder and opposes authority, hierarchy, and conventions.

The following chapters examine the intersections between modernist aesthetics and anarchist theory by reading fictional representations of anarchism with and against political writings by

declared anarchists. Because both modernism and anarchism were international in scope, *Dynamite* includes discussions of, and references to, modernist texts by American, English, Russian, French, and German writers. Some of these texts and writers are predictable, given the topic; other selections may seem surprising. Following the rule incumbent on students of comparative literature, which was my undergraduate major, I include only texts I could read in the original. After some research into American and English support for the antifascists in the Spanish Civil War, I decided to omit the very important Spanish connection to anarchism. Every intellectual project needs limits and confronts limitations, and this one is sufficiently broad-ranging.

Because conservative writers were most likely to trope on anarchism's stereotypical relationship to the bomb, and because they also needed to inflect or exceed the stereotype in an imaginative way, my choice of texts included works by Joseph Conrad, G.K. Chesterton, Andrei Bely, and Henry Adams. In articulating their own anxieties about the social and political transformations of the period, conservative writers were able to explain why anarchy and anarchism are such resonant concepts in modernist art. It was conservatives who saw the connection between anarchy, or a cosmos with neither a center nor a divinity—neither a god nor a master—and modernity. But conservative assessments of anarchism were not homogeneous. While Conrad and Chesterton condemned the association between anarchy and modernity as

symptomatic of a steep cultural decline, Adams and Bely recognized the inevitability of "chaos" in light of modern scientific discoveries.

Chapter 1 is a wide-ranging introduction to the intersecting concerns of various anarchisms and modernisms. In particular it argues that the political activists and artistic figures of the modernist era shared an anxiety about the increasing consolidation of social and economic power and devised aesthetic strategies that subverted or challenged that power.

Chapter 2 concerns the reputation, politics, and aesthetics of Richard Wagner, a forerunner of the modernist project in music and a crucial influence on such major modernist novelists as Joyce and Proust. When we think of Wagner's politics today, we think of his overtures being played as Nazi anthems, of the anti-Semitism in his prose, and of his racialized German nationalism. Yet as I researched this project, I kept coming across associations between Wagner and anarchism. References to Wagner's "anarchism" appear in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German, French, English, Russian, and American writers and texts. Because he is the earliest example of a link between the aesthetics of modernism and the politics of anarchism, Wagner is a crucial figure for the argument in this book.

Joseph Conrad`s *The Secret Agent*—one of two canonical novels about anarchists—is the subject of Chapter 3, as are two noncanonical Conrad short stories explicitly about anarchism. Conrad's account of the

bomb and its target, the Greenwich Observatory, is exemplary of the concerns of this book—explosion, science, centralized power. Conrad is also interesting because he both articulates and undermines a common conservative assumption about leftist revolutionaries—that their rebellion against authority is merely the acting-out of personal resentments and psychological conflicts.

Chapter 4 pairs Henry Adams and Andrei Bely, who possess certain interesting affinities. Like Conrad, Bely and Adams understand revolutionary commitments as inspired by personal conflicts, specifically those between father and son. Both Bely and Adams also have a lot to say about authority, centrality, and the metaphor of explosion, and both ultimately reveal an imaginative grasp of the universe as chaotic system. My decision to include Bely's novel *Petersburg* stemmed initially from a hunch that the bomb in that 1913 novel must have anarchist associations; research confirmed the hunch, leading me to the Russian "mystical anarchists," admirers of Wagner and Nietzsche.

Anarchism as a politics cannot be discussed solely in terms of its metaphors and their philosophical weight, however. Therefore Chapter 5 examines the written reactions of four American sympathizers of the 1926-27 Sacco-Vanzetti case. John Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair, Katherine Ann Porter and Edna St. Vincent Millay recognized, in more worldly terms than Adams, Conrad, Bely, and Chesterton, the historical and social effects of consolidated authority and calcified tradition, forces that

condemned two poor Italian immigrants to an unfair trial and an unjust execution. These writers attempted to represent and even to intervene in these social forces, instead of focusing on, as conservatives tend to do, psychological maladaptions to a world of inevitable inequities. Chapter 5 also argues that politically engaged texts like *Boston* and *The Big Money* have been excluded from canonical modernism because they presented anarchists and their arguments sympathetically. Exclusions like these have contributed to the low profile of anarchism in modernist literature and literary criticism.

The Dadaists and Surrealists have often been described as "anarchistic." The epilogue returns to Europe to look at the avant-garde`s attraction to and appropriation of anarchist ideas. It also considers scientific ideas like self-organization and positive feedback in relation to the anarchist slogan "anarchy is order! " and to a new, related metaphor that arises from the atomic bomb, that of "critical mass."

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[1] This information was culled from various editions of the Encyclopedia Brittanica.

[2] From various editions of the Encyclopedia Brittanica and Colliers' Encyclopedia.

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[3] Emma Goldman, "The Drama" in Anarchism and Other Essays (New York: Dover, 1969) 256. According to Elaine Showalter, this is not such an exaggeration: "Produced in London in March 1891, Ghosts provoked an outburst of horror, outrage, and disgust unprecedented in the history of English criticism." Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle (New York: Penguin, 1990) 200.

[4]quoted in Williams, The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists (London: Verso, 1989) 49.

[5]Emile Henry, "A Terrorist's Defence" in The Anarchist Reader, 192.

[6] Eric Hobsbawm, The Age of Empire 1875-1914 (New York: Vintage, 1989) 100.

[7] James Joll, The Anarchists (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1966) 129.

[8] Richard D. Sonn, Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin-de-Siècle France (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) 240.

[9] Paul Avrich, The Haymarket Tragedy (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984) 166.

[10] Liberty, London, June 1894

[11] Liberty, August 1894

[12] William Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (New York: Penguin, 1994) 272.

[13] Miller, Anarchism, 109.

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[14] Avrich, The Haymarket, 174-75.

[15] Georges Sorel, Reflections on Violence (New York: Collier, 1961) 104.

[16] Sorel, Violence, 171.

[17] quoted in Alice Wexler, Emma Goldman in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) 234.

[18] quoted in Paul Avrich, The Haymarket, 170.

[19] Peter Gay, The Enlightenment: The Science of Freedom (New York: Norton, 1966) 304.

[20] Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 1968) 329.

[21] Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, ed. by James T. Boulton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 65.

[22] quoted in Gay, The Enlightenment, 305.