

## CHAPTER 3

### TEMPERAMENTAL DEFECTS: CONRAD'S PSYCHOLOGY OF ANARCHISM

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*Since bombs are your means of expression, it would be really telling if one could throw a bomb into pure mathematics.* Joseph Conrad

Like other modernists, Joseph Conrad was fascinated by the idea of the dynamite bomb. For Conrad the bomb seems to function as a trope that implicates larger, related issues: anarchy and order, authority and centrality, individual temperament and social limitations on the expression of that temperament. Avrom Fleishman has found an instance of this fascination in a letter Conrad wrote in 1897, in which, using the extended metaphor of a bomb explosion, he thanks a friend for an idea. "Where do you think the illumination—the short and vivid flash of what I have been boasting to you came from?" Conrad demanded:

Why? From your words, words, words. They exploded like stored powder barrels—while another man's words would have fizzled out in speaking and left darkness unrelieved by a forgotten spurt of futile sparks. An explosion is the most lasting thing in the universe. It leaves disorder, remembrance, room to move, a clear space. Ask your Nihilist friends. But I am afraid you haven't blown me to pieces. I am afraid I am like the Russian governmental system. It will take a good many bursting charges to make me change my ways.<sup>1</sup>

This curiously celebratory description fuses propaganda by the word—"words, words, words" [Conrad is presumably quoting Hamlet]—with the explosive materiality of propaganda by the deed. Conrad's comparison of himself to the Russian state is both strange and suggestive.

Fleishman writes of The Secret Agent that it is "a vision of the modern world in a state of fragmentation—as if by explosion."<sup>2</sup> It is the Russian minister, Mr. Vladimir, who chooses for Verloc, the agent provocateur of Conrad's title, the Greenwich Observatory as the target of the bomb assault. Planned to discredit anarchists and drive them out of England where they had found refuge, the plan necessitates the perfect target, one that will provoke public

shock and outrage. It is important for readers to remember that Verloc is not a real anarchist, only a spy on a small, seedy, and inactive group of anarchists in exile, and that Mr. Vladimir is the representative of a State, acting on its behalf, when he demands that Verloc earn his keep by perpetrating an anarchist assault.

Mr. Vladimir's "philosophy of bomb-throwing" is more abstract than that of such famous anarchist bombers as Ravachol and Vaillant, who wished to avenge their comrades, provide a catalyst for revolution, or intimidate a complacent and complicit bourgeoisie. Nonetheless, his rationale for the bombing has some genuinely anarchist implications:

I am about to give you the philosophy of bomb throwing from my point of view...The sensibilities of the class you are attacking are soon blunted. Property seems to them an indestructible thing. You can't count on their emotions either of pity or of fear for very long. A bomb outrage to have any influence on public opinion now must go beyond the intention of vengeance or terrorism. It must be purely destructive. It must be that, and only that, beyond the faintest suspicion of any other object. You anarchists should make it clear that you are perfectly determined to make a clean sweep of the whole social creation. But how

to get that appallingly absurd notion into the heads of the middle classes so that there should be no mistake? That's the question. By directing your blows at something outside the ordinary passions of humanity is the answer. Of course, there is art. A bomb in the National Gallery would make some noise. But it would not be serious enough. Art has never been their fetish. There would be some screaming, of course, but from whom? Artists—art critics and such like—people of no account. Nobody minds what they say. But there is learning — science. Any imbecile that has got an income believes in that ... The attack must have all the shocking senselessness of gratuitous blasphemy. Since bombs are your means of expression, it would be really telling if one could throw a bomb into pure mathematics (SA, 66).

The Greenwich bombing is described as an assault on centralization, assumed truths, and the hegemonic source of intellectual authority, science.<sup>3</sup> As the highest achievements of civilization and products of the greatest minds yet supposedly neutral politically, art and science seem to Mr. Vladimir appropriate targets. Science is preferable because of the greater reverence people have for it. Greenwich was established by an

international conference in 1884 as the prime meridian.<sup>4</sup> Avrom Fleishman observes that "the effort to destroy time is symbolically an effort to end history—thereby theoretically achieving the revolutionary goal of a world beyond history and without time."<sup>5</sup> But Stephen Kern's interpretation is yet more persuasive: "the assignment of the anarchist hero in The Secret Agent—to blow up the Greenwich Observatory—was a repudiation of the public world and the public time that made the coordination of public life possible."<sup>6</sup>

The time represented by the Greenwich prime meridian is the time of regulation and external authority, a product of instrumental reason, allied with Taylorism, divided into discrete units, digital rather than analog. It is, in other words, the version of time which modernists so famously repudiate—in favor of the subjective temporality, the time of involuntary memory and unpredictable flux so compellingly described by Bergson, Proust, Joyce, and Woolf. The disparity between public and private time appears elsewhere in The Secret Agent. Studying the remains of Stevie's body, Chief Inspector Heat "rose by the force of sympathy, which is a form of fear, above the vulgar conception of time. Instantaneous! ... he evolved a horrible notion that ages of atrocious pain and mental torture could be contained between two winks of an eye" (SA, 71). Conrad's account of the Greenwich

bombing inscribes yet another link between anarchism and modernism.

For Conrad and other conservatives, anarchism is falsely synonymous with destruction for its own sake. But Mr. Vladimir's long and seemingly fanciful speech also demonstrates that Conrad is not as ignorant of anarchist theory as some of his critics have assumed. The hypothetical target, "throw[ing] a bomb into pure mathematics," strikingly combines the material and the abstract; it suggests that the bomb is always already an abstraction. It exposes the dangerous interdependence of irrationality and reason. A bomb thrown into pure mathematics would be a manifestation of Kant's "mathematical sublime." The ultimate codification of order, mathematics also threatens to become pure chaos, as in Stevie's endless drawing of circles. The circle, zero, or bomb, an abstraction suggesting both nothingness and a primary stage of order, explodes, spreading disorder — a state of things that Henry Adams considers fundamental: "chaos was the law of nature; order was the dream of man." For Conrad, as for other writers of this period, the bomb is metonymic of violent social transformation. Mr. Vladimir's characterization of the bomb as a form of expression ("bombs are your means of expression"), or propaganda by the deed, echoes the rationale of the anarchist Vaillant, who had attempted to bomb the French Chamber of Deputies: "It takes a

loud voice to make the deaf hear ... Make no mistake; the explosion of my bomb is not only the cry of the rebel Vaillant, but the cry of an entire class." <sup>7</sup>

While the bomb is abstract and sublime in Mr. Vladimir's discourse, it is purely material in its gruesome effects, that is, the destruction of the innocent bomber's body, the pieces of which must be scooped up with a shovel—as Conrad often reminds us. This is the aspect of the bomb that is omitted from the anarchist and fellow-traveler discourse. Conrad reveals that the bomb has its own aesthetic dialectic, that of attraction and repulsion, the sublime and the ugly, and that these two are inseparable, even when one of them is repressed. On the one hand, there is a certain morbid fascination with the physical results of the bomb, on the other, an admiration for technical wizardry.

### Political Subjectivity

"Who is responsible for their [the anarchists'] existence?" asked an 1892 article entitled "European Explosions" in The Nation, "or are they simply an embodiment of natural depravity?" [italics added].<sup>8</sup> One of the fundamental debates about political loyalties concerns the origin of those loyalties. Are opponents of the dominant social order, anarchists and other revolutionaries, merely acting out an

Oedipal rebellion against their fathers, now extended to society at large, or are they awakened to injustice by education and events?

Leftists have tended to emphasize the shaping power of the social context, of conversion experiences in the face of specific injustices, the first experience of which may or may not have occurred in the nuclear family. In his autobiography, for example, Peter Kropotkin, born into the Russian nobility, describes how his parents' appalling treatment of their serfs roused his conscience against serfdom and the social order that had maintained it. Emma Goldman's first experience with unjust authority stemmed from conflicts with her father over the autonomy, sexuality, and education of women. She might therefore be cited as an example of the psychological rebellion giving rise to the political, but other women of her generation rebelled against patriarchy without becoming anarchists. William Godwin's novel Caleb Williams understands the political as preceding and underpinning the psychological because power, wealth, and status corrupt those who possess them.

Conservatives, however, in explaining the radical or rebellious subject, have generally appealed to psychological explanations, understanding them as primary. In Fin-de-Siècle Vienna, Carl Schorske describes "the turn from Marx to Freud," in which "the search for and understanding of the ills that plague



mankind tended to be translated from the public and sociological domain to the private and psychological one." <sup>9</sup> Authors sympathetic to anarchism — Zola in Paris, John Henry Mackay in Die Anarchisten, Frank Harris in The Bomb—attempt to represent both the hardships of the poor and the variety of political and strategic positions within anarchism, while those writers who oppose anarchism — Conrad, Henry James, Max Nordau—tend to elide these topics in favor of a psychological account of the anarchist subject.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, the turn-of-the-century opposition between "anarchy" and "order" is thematized in literary critics' accounts of the psychology of Conrad, a conservative who was sufficiently interested in anarchism to write two short stories and a novel about it. Of Conrad's ambivalence about anarchy and order his biographer Frederick Karl writes:

It appears evident from Conrad's letters that [his friend, Cunninghame] Graham proved an educational experience for him; and that his own well-hidden anarchistic tendencies, his own sense of rage and chaos carefully buried beneath the skin, were allowed freer play because of Graham's presence. Put another way, Graham's insistence on forms of anarchy as part of the normal political scene

struck a sympathetic note in Conrad, even as he consciously pursued order and shape.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, Irving Howe insists that Conrad's hostility to anarchism stemmed from "a projection of an unrevealed self, of the desolation a modern ego fears to find beneath its domesticated surface," in response to which Conrad felt "an exorbitant need for personal order."<sup>12</sup> Because Conrad emphasizes the psychological over the social, his work lacks, according to Howe, "access to the radical mind";<sup>13</sup> that is, he fails to consider either the anarchist critique of capitalism and the state or the existence of nonviolent, intelligent anarchists like Conrad's contemporary Peter Kropotkin.

### Consumers and Collectors

Both anarchists and conservatives imagined social order in aesthetic terms, but their visions of the aesthetic differed.

Anarchists advocated egalitarian, flexible, and decentralized arrangements, while conservatives insisted on the necessity of hierarchical institutions and hereditary distinctions. The prominence of the figure of the collector—one a lepidopterist, the other a connoisseur of Chinese ceramics and brasses—in the stories "An Anarchist" and "The Informer" is in part explicable in

terms of the conservative correlation between social order and traditional aesthetic form. Both of Conrad's collectors have an encounter with an anarchist who unsettles their complacent views of themselves. Conrad's own "exorbitant need for personal order" can be read in light of the collector's dialectic of order and disorder, which in turn is a version of the dialectic that Michael Bakunin postulates as anarchist: order and chaos, creation and destruction.

Collecting and consuming were, and are, contemporaneous yet seemingly antithetical activities. The serious collecting of artworks, rare books, or butterflies is a socially privileged practice, a sign of actual and cultural capital. Prince Albert was a famous collector. The two Victorian institutions that exemplified consumption and collecting were the Crystal Palace exhibition of 1851 and the British Museum. They in turn represent the opposition between low art, aligned with the commodity, and high art, aligned with the rarity—an opposition that so many critics have taken as endemic to the modernist era. "Where high art itself is sucked into the maelstrom of commodification," writes Andreas Huyssen, "modernism is born as a reaction and a defense."<sup>14</sup> Canonical modernism and collecting are metaphorically linked in the "discourse of order" of T. S. Eliot and the New Critics. Many Victorian collectors specialized in Chinese antiquities. Modernist

Orientalism is not so much material as intellectual, as in Pound's translations from the Chinese.

The British Museum greatly increased its collection during the high period of Britain's imperial reign. One of the most remarkable museum collectors of the period was Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826-1897), Keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum, who acquired a sizeable collection of Chinese porcelain and wrote a catalogue on the subject.<sup>15</sup> Another museum collector and resident, British Museum Keeper of Printed Books, Richard Garnett, had a daughter, Olive, who belonged to the social circle of Ford Madox Ford, the Rossettis, and Kropotkin. Her diary, which has been published under the title Tea and Anarchy: The Bloomsbury Diary of Olive Garnett 1890-1893 (and is sold in the British Museum bookshop) describes meetings with Kropotkin in the museum "refreshment room," her visits to art and museum exhibits, and her publications in The Torch, an anarchist magazine published by the younger Rossettis, one of whom is the model for a character for Conrad's "The Informer."

Anarchism and collecting are both associated with aristocracy. Collecting was originally an aristocratic practice; no one else had both the requisite means and sophistication. Among the leading anarchists were actual aristocrats—Kropotkin,

Bakunin, Tolstoy—and the association is also apparent in novels like The Princess Casamassima, The Bomb, and The Man Who Was Thursday. In The Princess Casamassima, the title character, an anarchist sympathizer, collects both artworks and "little democrats" like Hyacinth Robinson. Aristocratic collectors appear in Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories of this period, and like Conrad's characters they specialize in Chinese ceramics and rare butterflies; their villainy, however, is overt. The evil Stapleton, alias Vandeleur, an unrecognized heir who schemes and kills to acquire the Baskerville estate (The Hound of the Baskervilles, 1901), is a lepidopterist with a connection to the British Museum.

<sup>16</sup> Another Holmes story, "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client," has as its villain a Baron Gruner whose hobbies are the seduction of women and the collection of Chinese pottery. "This man collects women, and takes a pride in his collection," says one of his female victims, "as some men collect moths or butterflies." <sup>17</sup> "He has the collection mania in its most acute form," remarks Holmes, and Watson observes Gruner's "murderous mouth."

The sinister implications of the "collecting mania" are further specified by Asa Briggs in Victorian Things: "Collectors of things were particularly concerned about theft. Indeed, some of their critics suggested that they and criminals had certain features in common, notably the desire to possess something not yet your

own and the will to realize it." <sup>18</sup> Briggs's observation is reminiscent of Proudhon's aphorism, "Property is theft." If he collects for himself rather than for a museum, the collector transforms "public property"—butterflies, for example, by belonging to no one in particular, belong to all who see them—into private property. The collector who desires to acquire what he does not yet possess and is sometimes willing to acquire it illegally—hence the famous black market in art objects—is contaminated by anarchism and criminality. His own private means may well have been acquired at the expense of others; Thomas Jefferson mortgaged his sophisticated collections on the backs of his slaves. <sup>19</sup>

Some consumers think of themselves as collectors—in Class Paul Fussell describes some bizarre assemblages of kitsch—but collectors distinguish themselves from consumers by what and how they collect: not mass-produced items but rarities, not because of advertising and gullibility but because of knowledge and mastery. But like all binary oppositions, this one involves a repression or denial of similarities between the two activities. The collector of rarities takes them out of circulation, and yet ensures their continued, although latent, exchange value. The lepidopterist of "An Anarchist" objectifies nature, fashions it, and puts it in a new, "unnatural" order. Walter Benjamin writes,

"The decisive thing in collecting is that the object is freed from all original functions in order to join its fellows in the closest conceivable relationship." <sup>20</sup> Collecting figures as a prominent activity in the work of both James and Conrad as an ironized and failed defense against the market, the commodity, and the consumer.

"Anarchists in general were simply inconceivable to me mentally, morally, logically, sentimentally, and even physically," announces the narrator at the beginning of "The Informer." <sup>21</sup> Like The Secret Agent, "An Anarchist" and "The Informer," written in the winter of 1905-06, are attempts to discover the "nature" of the anarchist," and in each case the anarchist character is contrasted with, or compared to, a collector. In "The Informer," Mr. X., who has a large income, represents himself as an anarchist, whereas in "An Anarchist," the mechanic, who is poor, is an anarchist because others recognize him to be one. The two stories in effect split the anarchist into bourgeois and worker, propagandist and gullible victim. In both stories the identity of the anarchist is curiously undefined; neither anarchist has a proper name. Just as there are two versions of the anarchist in these stories, so are there two versions of the collector. In each case, the collector is ostensibly aligned with order. Both collector and anarchist are marginal figures in bourgeois society and both posit a critique, implicit in

one case, explicit in the other, of that society. In keeping with the historical affinity between anarchists and aesthetes, one of these anarchist characters has a refined sensibility, directed toward fine food and the collection of rare antiques. In these stories and in The Secret Agent Conrad tries to find a position outside of anarchism from which to mount a critique, but he fails to find a stable place uncontaminated by similarities to, or sympathies with, anarchist politics.

"An Anarchist" figures anarchism in or against discourses of advertising and collecting. Its major characters are the narrator, a butterfly collector, Harry Gee, manager of a cattle estate, and a French mechanic an ex-convict. The narrator is not anti-capitalist: "Of course the capital of a country must be productively employed. I have nothing to say against the company" (SS, 166). But he deplores "the modern system of advertising" which he understands as evidence of "that form of mental degradation which is called gullibility" (SS, 166). He has had to swallow the company's meat-extract product on occasion, the narrator says wryly, but that he has never been able to swallow its advertisements, because "whatever form of mental degradation I may (being but human) be suffering from, it is not the popular form." (SS, 166). He thus asserts his superiority to the mass of consumers who are susceptible to the manipulative discourse of advertising ; his



privileged position (leisure time, ability to travel) implies a high/low opposition that will be dismantled in the course of the story.

Advertising leaped into prominence in England with the Crystal Palace exhibition and quickly became a part of everyday life.<sup>22</sup> "From 1851 to 1914 the advertising industry was transformed beyond recognition," writes Thomas Richards, "as fully modern agencies replaced the early Victorian space brokerages."<sup>23</sup> One Conrad critic, Lawrence Graver, has dismissed the references to advertising and butterfly-collecting in "An Anarchist" as "jokes,"<sup>24</sup> but advertising, gullibility, and collecting are actually crucial to Conrad's representation of anarchism in both stories. While advertising is the mode of representation that capitalism employs to promote consumption, anarchism, which opposes capitalism, also "advertises" by pamphlets and oratory, "propaganda by the word," and by its interventions, "propaganda by the deed." Assassinations would theoretically cause the proletariat to realize its own potential power. Proponents of the tactic believed that "ideas result from deeds, not the latter from the former, and the people will not be free when they are educated, but will be educated when they are free."<sup>25</sup>

It is the estate manager, Harry Gee, who dubs the mechanic an anarchist ("un citoyen anarchiste de Barcelone" [SS, 170]) and

describes the collector as "a desperate butterfly-slayer" (SS, 168). Gee himself is like a commercial with his "wearisome repetition of descriptive phrases," and as the sole representative of the meat extract company, he seems to possess its power to categorize and manipulate. Because of contemporary fears of anarchist violence, the truth value of the statement "he is an anarchist" is less significant than its illocutionary force. But while the mechanic is actually French, not Spanish, his politics are more ambiguous. Gee assumes that the man is an escaped convict because of his apparent flight from a boat; he assumes that he is an anarchist because he is a worker ("That`s the class they mostly come from, isn`t it? I hate the cowardly bomb-throwing brutes "[SS, 174]). In order to keep him on the estate—his skills are useful—Gee spreads the word that the man is an anarchist so that no one else will hire him. The position of the narrator might seem to be in contrast with that of the mechanic, in that the narrator has the power to identify himself; yet in keeping with the doubling of narrator and anarchist, the narrator also identifies himself via Gee`s tag. When the narrator spends an evening with the mechanic, he hears his story, and in a surprising twist, it turns out that Gee`s assessment has some truth to it.

The story the mechanic tells reveals that he is implicated in anarchist activity, but in an unusual way. On his twenty-fifth

birthday he is invited out to dinner by friends; afterwards, they invite two strangers to join them for drinks. They are, it is implied, anarchists in search of converts, and under their influence, as well as that of the alcohol, the mechanic finds himself standing on the table, proclaiming, "Vive l'anarchie! Death to the capitalists!" (SS, 180). The incident leads to his arrest, imprisonment, unemployment, and further implication in anarchism. The initial "conversion" to anarchism is peculiar. The thought of social injustice leads directly to the espousal of a particular political position, although such thoughts are apparently quite new to the mechanic. Anarchism is here represented in a way reminiscent of political or sexual "deviance," similar to McCarthy-era attitudes toward communism or Christian Coalition fears of homosexuality : spread by depraved strangers, it quickly becomes a way of life. Alcohol and sympathy encourage the mechanic`s true "nature," his anarchic impulses, to surface.

Because the narrator, like an anarchist, is attempting to get outside of capitalism and the realm of the commodity, he is sympathetic to the mechanic. After hearing his story, however, he tries explicitly to distance himself from him by invoking his different "nature":

On the whole, my idea is that he was much more of an anarchist than he confessed to me or to himself ; and that, the special features of his case apart, he was very much like other anarchists. Warm heart and weak head—that is the word of the riddle; and it is a fact that the bitterest contradictions and the deadliest conflicts of the world are carried on in every individual breast capable of feeling and passion (SS, 197).

"Warm heart and weak head" is a verbal formula, a cliché, reminiscent of a commercial jingle; the narrator pulls it out of his sleeve to reduce a complex politics to pop psychology, and the unacknowledged reductiveness suggests that the narrator participates in the gullibility that he criticizes. The dominance of heart over head is put forward to explain those "gullible" people who are always already anarchists. Conrad implicitly aligns anarchists with consumers, who are susceptible to advertising; by contrast, the narrator of this story is a collector of butterflies, and thus a connoisseur, a specialist, someone who opposes capitalism not on political grounds, but because of its vulgarity. As a lepidopterist, he attempts to align himself with nature, against the commodity.

Much as he might wish to distinguish himself from the gullible masses and from violent anarchists, the butterfly collector's activity is not categorically different. Gee's joke that the collector is "a desperate butterfly slayer" suggests an affinity between the supposed violence of stereotypical anarchist activity and the violence of the butterfly collector, who can preserve ephemeral beauty only by killing it, reifying it, taking it out of circulation, perhaps even contributing to its extinction. Despite his presumed interest in the preservation of nature, the collector thus participates in the larger violence of European civilization against nature (clearing forests, fur trading, etc.). Even so, he remarks that the B.O.S. company's "statistics of slaughter and bloodshed [are] enough to make a Turk turn faint" (SS, 165), displacing the violence of his own culture onto that of another. Anarchism is set against these twin backgrounds of violence against nature; stereotypically associated with, and criticized for, its violence, it seems in this context less a deviation from European civilization than another expression of its destructive tendencies.

In "The Informer," Conrad again sets the collector, as a proponent of order, against both anarchy and the commodity, but again the distinction breaks down. "The Informer" foregrounds both collecting and a peculiar, modern, well-publicized product, Stone's Dried Soup, "a comestible article rather prominently

advertised in the dailies" (SS,100); the anarchists use it to conceal blasting powder and "inflammatory" literature. Here one of the characters is both a collector and a famous anarchist, an author of incendiary revolutionary pamphlets, "the greatest destructive publicist that ever lived"; as a "publicist," Mr. X. is also a kind of advertising agent. He in turn is "collected" by a friend of the narrator whose interest is in "distinguished personal acquaintances." Mr. X is distinguished-looking and well-dressed, a connoisseur of Chinese bronzes and porcelain, and, in yet another instance of the association of anarchism with aristocracy, the narrator conjectures he belongs to a noble family. Mr. X's explicit hostility to the bourgeoisie suggests that he is an aesthete, a spiritual kinsman of Félix Fénéon, the prominent anarchist, art critic, and collector of Impressionist paintings.<sup>26</sup>

The narrator reflects upon the uncanny similarities between himself and this "terrible man," whom he compares to his own Chinese porcelains and bronzes, exquisite and unusual like them, "a kind of rare monster." But the narrator also recognizes his own resemblance to the anarchist-collector:

But then he was not of bronze. He was not even Chinese, which would have enabled one to contemplate him calmly across the gulf of racial difference. He was alive and

European; he had the manner of good society, wore a coat and hat like mine, and had pretty near the same taste in cooking. It was too frightful to think of (SS, 93).

Here the anarchist is not the Other of European high society, a worker, or a racial Other, but an alter ego, even a double, of the seemingly apolitical bourgeois. A "gulf of racial difference" would serve to naturalize their different attitudes toward politics and society; its absence makes the similarity in their cultural practices "frightful." Both the anarchist collector and the bourgeois also share an interest in the "exotic"; that they collect not butterflies but Chinese bronzes and porcelains suggests a mutual involvement in Orientalism, further indicative of their common European identity. If, in "An Anarchist," Conrad seems to distinguish the anarchist and the bourgeois by occupation and class, linking them indirectly through their common proclivity to violence, here he explicitly insists on their similarities, even while the narrator insists on the frightfulness, terribleness, monstrosity of the anarchist, who has written pamphlets that call for social revolution.

The anarchist eventually reveals his "true nature," remarking at dinner one evening, "There`s no amendment to be got out of mankind except by terror and violence" (SS, 94). The facade

of his cultivated exterior lifts to reveal the stereotypical bloodthirsty anarchist. The two layers of his "identity" seem antithetical to the narrator, who points to the apparent contradiction between his expensive tastes and his political views. In response, Mr. X. explains that he derives his income from the bourgeoisie's purchase of his pamphlets. When the narrator professes himself puzzled by this, Mr. X. responds with a characterization of the bourgeoisie that becomes a leitmotif of the story : "Its own life being all a matter of pose and gesture, it is unable to realize the power and danger of a real movement and of words that have no sham meaning" (italics added, SS ,95). Mr. X. appeals to a Real or Truth that lies outside bourgeois artifice, the Real of anarchism and of revolutionary language.

The story that Mr. X. proceeds to tell probably originates, like information for The Secret Agent, from Ford Madox Ford, Conrad's source of information on London anarchism.<sup>27</sup> Ford's cousin, Olive Rossetti, joined the anarchists while still in her teens and published an anarchist journal called The Torch (mentioned by name at the very beginning of The Secret Agent); she worked with Max Nettlau, the prominent historian of anarchism, and she knew Kropotkin.<sup>28</sup> Her book, A Girl Among the Anarchists, published under a pseudonym in 1903, recounts her original enthusiasm for, and gradual disillusionment with, the movement



and her comrades. In Conrad's story Mr. X. dubs her "our young Lady Amateur of anarchism" (SS, 103) a description reminiscent of his earlier distinction between serious collectors (of brass, porcelain, etc.) and amateurs: "Amateurism in this, that, and the other thing is a delightfully easy way of killing time, and of feeding one's own vanity—the silly vanity of being abreast with the ideas of the day after tomorrow" (SS, 96). His young woman is an "amateur" because she is still a member of her class, with its propensity for "pose and gesture." But perhaps she is also an amateur, in Conrad's view as well as Mr. X.'s, because she is a woman. Mr. X. says:

I suppose she put on these appearances [of enthusiasm, of independence, of courageous thought] as she put on her picturesque dresses and for the same reason : to assert her individuality at any cost. You know, women would go to any length almost for such a purpose. She had acquired all the appropriate gestures of revolutionary convictions—the gestures of pity, of anger, of indignation against the anti-humanitarian vices of the social class to which she belonged herself. All this sat on her striking personality as well as her slightly original costumes (SS, 99).

Thus, in a slippage from class to gender, the propensity for "pose and gestures" that is initially attributed to the bourgeoisie as a whole is now specifically attributed to bourgeois women. The bourgeois inability to inhabit a Real becomes a naturalized attraction of women to costumes and acting.

But the young woman in the story is not the only character with theatrical attributes; there is also the title character, a police informer named Sevrin, fanatically anti-anarchist, whom Mr. X. frequently speaks of as wearing a "mask." Sevrin "had fallen in love with the accomplished and innocent gestures of that girl. An actor in desperate earnest himself, he must have believed in the absolute value of conventional signs" (SS, 114). The theatrical metaphor goes oddly out of control in this description. The girl's gestures, previously part of her "costume," become "innocent," virtually natural. Sevrin becomes, on the other hand, "an actor in desperate earnest," whose own acting prevents him from recognizing the gap between signifier and signified, gesture and feeling. Not a member of the bourgeoisie himself, presumably, he does not recognize her theatricality as convention, yet an actor would surely be the first to suspect an accomplished gesture.

These references to acting imply by opposition a Real, just as Mr. X. does earlier when he speaks of "a real movement and words...that have no sham meaning." In his story, therefore, both

anarchist fellow-travelers (women, bourgeois) and police informers are outside of that Real, yet the doubling of actor and actress causes Sevrin to "unmask" himself : "He was accustomed to arrange the last scene of his betrayals with a deep, subtle art which left his revolutionist reputation untouched" (SS, 115).

The collector who hears this story attempts to differentiate his temperament from that of an actor or an anarchist: "I am a quiet and peaceable product of civilization, and know no other passion than the passion of collecting things which are rare, and must remain exquisite even if approaching to the monstrous" (SS, 93). While this collector, like the lepidopterist in "An Anarchist," may wish to dissociate himself from the vulgarity of commodity fetishism and commercialism, his chief purpose is ultimately less aesthetic than financial, as the following description suggests:

My treasures are disposed in three large rooms without carpets and curtains. There is no other furniture than the étagères and the glass cases whose contents shall be worth a fortune to my heirs. I allow no fires to be lighted, for fear of accidents, and a fireproof door separates them from the rest of the house [italics added] (SS,91).

Inheritance was a social practice that anarchism explicitly opposed. According to Bakunin, equality of wealth and condition was impossible without the abolition of inheritance.<sup>29</sup> Walter Benjamin also thinks of collecting in association with inheritance, describing it as "the soundest way to acquire a collection" and observing, "the most distinguished trait of a collection will always be its transmissibility."<sup>30</sup> In Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Benjamin elaborates:

The interior is the retreat of art. The collector is a true inmate of the interior. He makes the transformation of things his business. To him falls the Sisyphean task of obliterating the commodity-like character of things through his ownership of them. But he merely confers connoisseur value on them, instead of intrinsic value. The collector dreams that he is not only in a distant or past world but also, at the same time, in a better one, in which, although men are unprovided with what they need as in the everyday world, things are free of the drudgery of being useful.<sup>31</sup>

Benjamin clarifies here the affinity between Conrad's bourgeois collector and the anarchist collector : both are nostalgic, dreaming of a "distant or past world," before modernity, mass production,

and alienation. Both are also "utopian," dreaming also of a "better" world, in which value is freed from both use and exchange and in which things are "transformed" from mere "collectibles" into pure and autonomous works of art. As the anarchist values the individual and the artisan, so does the collector value and fetishize craft, the trace of the individual artist on the object in which history as well as labor is congealed. Like Benjamin and Conrad, Henry James recognizes the association between art and investment in the preface to The Spoils of Poynton , a novel whose subject is the inheritance of a great collection, writing : "Life ... is capable, luckily for us, of nothing but splendid waste. Hence the opportunity for the sublime economy of art, which rescues, which saves and hoards and `banks,` investing and reinvesting these fruits of toil ."

### Natural Anarchists

In "The Informer" Conrad also begins to show an interest, developed more fully in The Secret Agent, in the psychology or "nature" of another kind of anarchist: the fanatical bomber.<sup>32</sup> In a whimsical touch, Mr. X. has a bombe glacée for dessert; more seriously, the prototype for the Professor of The Secret Agent appears in this story, another professor obsessed with bombs : "His

was the true spirit of a revolutionist. Explosives were his faith, his hope, his weapon, and his shield." (SS,108). Unlike the anarchist-collector, who is a writer of propaganda pamphlets ("propaganda by the word"), the Professor of The Secret Agent, whom Conrad calls "the perfect anarchist," endorses "propaganda by the deed": "It is I who am the true propagandist."<sup>33</sup> The Professor always carries explosives on his person, ready to blow up himself and any policemen who attempt to arrest him. Conrad compares him, in his "moments of dreadful and sane mistrust of mankind," to "all men whose ambition aims at a direct grasp upon humanity—to artists, politicians, thinkers, reformers, or saints" [italics added] (SA, 67). He again, in a list Max Nordau might have made, inscribes an identity between the artist and the anarchist. But are these the only people who aim at "a direct grasp upon humanity"? What about Conrad's earlier example—advertisers, corporations? In a curious circular logic, Conrad's attribution of "sanity" to such "mistrust" provides an alibi for his own distrust of humanity and thus for the anarchists he represents in this novel, even while he displaces this same mistrust onto one of those anarchists.

In The Secret Agent there are other "natural" anarchists. One is, as Eileen Sypher persuasively argues in "Anarchism and Gender," Winnie Verloc, repeatedly referred to after the death of her brother as "a free woman."<sup>34</sup> A number of anarchist figures in

The Secret Agent are based on historical figures like Johann Most and Bakunin<sup>35</sup> but as several critics have claimed, the ultimate anarchist of the novel is the would-be bomber Stevie, a "delicate" retarded boy.<sup>36</sup>

Stevie's "politics" are further indicative of Conrad's own political attitudes. The boy's spontaneous sympathy for suffering humans and animals is represented as a kind of pathology, a by-product of his intellectual and emotional simplicity. "Bad world for poor people," Stevie observes. (SA, 132). Afflicted with "a morbid dread of pain," Stevie "turns vicious" at tales or sights of suffering; his compassion is the flip side of his rage at injustice (SA, 130). Because Stevie is constitutionally unable to grasp the social forces that give rise to and perpetuate the poverty and suffering he witnesses, the novel implicitly dismisses oppressive social practices as evidence of the "darkness" of human nature and the tragedy of life.

Ironically, Conrad's representation of Stevie bears a striking resemblance to Emma Goldman's defense of the violent anarchist. In her essay, "The Psychology of Political Violence," she describes the perpetrators of such acts in terms of "their supersensitiveness to the wrong and injustice surrounding them which compels them to pay the toll of our social crimes."<sup>37</sup> She cites the traits ascribed to such figures, including "a rare love of

animals" and "surpassing sweetness in all the ordinary relations of life,"<sup>38</sup> both applicable to Stevie. Two anarchist assassins, Santa Caserio and Angiolillo, were, according to Goldman, "childlike"<sup>39</sup>—Stevie's principal characteristic. Goldman sums up her essay with a rather confusing extended musical metaphor :

High strung, like a violin string, they weep and moan for life, so relentless, so cruel, so terribly inhuman. In a desperate moment the string breaks. Untuned ears hear nothing but discord. But those who feel the agonized cry understand its harmony ; they hear in it the fulfillment of the most compelling moment of human nature.<sup>40</sup>

Goldman's metaphor is typical of the anarchist reliance on an aesthetic discourse, but she remakes the usual terms. "Harmony" here refers not to a state of utopia but to an act of violence. The violin is strung too tightly and hence will snap under the strain. But the sound it makes as it snaps is discordant to those listeners who, like people who don't appreciate Schönberg, can't decode the sound properly. The political avant-garde, like the musical avant-garde, comprehends the true "nature" of that sound, that privileged moment.



Of course, for Conrad the trait of ready empathy is childish in the most negative sense, while Goldman valorizes childlike sensitivity. Still, her reliance on psychology makes her assessment merely the inverse of Conrad's, with both concurring that a "warm heart" (and by implication "weak head") characterize those anarchists roused to violence by injustice. There was clearly some value for Goldman in making this defense, in arguing that, contrary to their reputation, anarchists were gentle and empathic, not psychopathically violent, and that their acts were in response to the far greater violence of the state.<sup>41</sup> But it was perhaps a strategic error for Goldman to resort to a psychological discourse. Goldman and Conrad are among those implicated in Carl Schorske's "turn from Marx to Freud," but while it is in the interest of a pessimistic, conservative politics to insist on a "heart of darkness," Goldman's position would be better served by sociology than psychology. Conrad sums up his own position—an insistence on the explanatory power of the personal and psychological—aphoristically: "The way of even the most justifiable revolutions is prepared by personal impulses disguised into creeds" (SA, 66).

Stevie's identity as anarchist is further inscribed by his peculiar habit, mentioned more than once, of "drawing circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating

whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable" (SA, 40). His affinity with chaos and confusion makes him a "natural" anarchist. As circles are, like zeros, icons of the bomb, Stevie is implicated in his own demise. Stevie is also a "natural" anarchist in that he is, the character Ossipon remarks, a "degenerate" of the sort described by Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau, who believed that anarchists had criminal tendencies similar to those of thieves and murderers. Martin Ray conjectures that Conrad drew Stevie's specific traits—drawing circles, stammering, tender-heartedness—from Degeneration.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Chief Inspector Heat is "a born detective" whose "considerable gifts for the detection of incriminating truth" are "natural" (SA, 92). A detective, according to this description, is the inverse of an anarchist, one who finds order and meaning in a welter of details.

The Secret Agent puts forth more than one psychology of the anarchist, however. Speaking of Mr. Verloc's "dislike of all kinds of recognized labour—a temperamental defect which he shared with a large proportion of revolutionary reformers" (SA, 45) (Conrad is inclined to slippages that suggest he forgets Verloc

is only posing as a revolutionary ) the omniscient narrator characterizes "social rebels" as follows:

For obviously one does not revolt against the advantages and opportunities of that [social] state, but against the price which must be paid for the same in the coin of accepted morality, selfrestraint, and toil. The majority of revolutionists are the enemies of discipline and fatigue mostly. There are natures, too, to whose sense of justice the price exacted looms up monstrously enormous, odious, oppressive, worrying, humiliating, extortionate, intolerable. Those are the fanatics. The remaining portion of social rebels is accounted for by vanity, the mother of all noble and vile illusions, the companion of poets, reformers, charlatans, prophets, and incendiaries (SA,45-46) [italics added]

As in "An Anarchist," Conrad here theorizes that social revolt arises from personal psychology and is an aspect of human nature, timeless rather than historical; thus, specific social conditions are largely irrelevant. Presumably injustice and cruelty are as much a constant as laziness and vanity, making any agitation for social reform pointless. The value that Conrad endorses, in opposition to

political activism, is that of work; he once said of himself, "I have been a sober worker all my life."<sup>43</sup> The adjective "sober" invokes by contrast the drunken French worker of "An Anarchist," who suddenly shouts, "Vive l'anarchie!" The work ethic is usually associated with the bourgeoisie and Protestantism, but here it is again not social but psychological: "the majority of revolutionaries are the enemies of discipline and fatigue, mostly." In his memoirs, Ford Madox Ford recalls his first conversation with Conrad: "Poor fellow! Work was at once his passion and his agony."<sup>44</sup> "Work" was of course a Victorian watchword, not just a personal trait.<sup>45</sup> But even work does not finally distinguish Conrad from the violent anarchist. Just as both he and the propagandist Mr. X are writers, Conrad shares his dedication to work with the anarchist Professor, the solitary bomb-maker, who dismisses police and revolutionary activity as "play" and "forms of idleness at bottom identical," and explains scornfully: "But I don't play. I work fourteen hours a day, and go hungry sometimes" (SA, 58).

Conrad does, of course, represent some social institutions in the novel—the police, the Secretary of State, the embassy personnel—but he does not, in the way that Lukács thought Balzac did, expose corruption and hypocrisy as constitutive of bourgeois society. It is Winnie, the "free woman," who explains the social purpose of the police when she asks, "Don't you know what the

police are for, Stevie? They are there so that them as have nothing shouldn't take anything away from them who have" (SA,133).

The detective and the collector, like the novelist himself, attempt to align themselves with "law and order" and to assign anarchists to chaos and nature. The Professor's perception of a kinship between police and revolutionaries implies a critique, but it is a psychological critique : "The terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket" (SA, 58). Psychological explanations ultimately fail to differentiate the good guys from bad guys; seeming opposites always contaminate each other. The terrorist and the policeman "come from the same basket," the poet and revolutionary are both ruled by "vanity," the artist and the anarchist bomber share a dedication to work and the desire for "a direct grasp upon humanity," and the collector, like the criminal and the anarchist, is implicated in the idea that property is theft. The collector's obsession with order involves him, as Walter Benjamin explains, in chaos: "Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories." <sup>46</sup> In the final analysis, even the anti-anarchist characters in these texts are secret sharers, tainted by anarchy, defending their fragile, elaborate order against the violence that anarchist and capitalist share.

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Conrad shared the conservative ambivalence toward anarchy, capitalism, and democracy with other modernist writers, among them Henry Adams and Andrei Bely. In Adams and Bely, the representation of anarchy is not so much bound up with an aestheticization of politics, as in Wagner, or with psychological conflicts and resemblances, as in Conrad, but with the philosophical constructs and epistemic ruptures of modernity. In The Education and Petersburg, the dynamite bomb is not just a signifier of sublime and senseless destruction and the sickening decimation of human flesh; it is ultimately an emblem for spontaneous intellectual revelation.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Edward Garnett, March 8, 1897, quoted by Avrom Fleishman, Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1967) 188. Notice that Conrad here compares himself to the State, the target of the bomb, and his friend to the bomber.

<sup>2</sup>Fleishman, 188.

<sup>4</sup>Stephen Kern, The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1983) 12.

<sup>5</sup>Avrom Fleishman, Conrad's Politics, 205.

<sup>6</sup>Kern 191.

<sup>7</sup>quoted in Goldman 96.

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<sup>8</sup>Unsigned article, The Nation, volume 54, number 1400, April 28, 1892, 317.

<sup>9</sup>Carl Schorske, Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture, (Vintage: New York 1981 ), xxiv.

<sup>10</sup>Taking issue with such accounts, Emma Goldman wrote: "Poor human nature, what horrible crimes have been committed in thy name! Every fool, from king to policeman, from the flatheaded parson to the visionless dabbler in science, presumes to speak authoritatively of human nature. " "Anarchism" in Anarchism and Other Essays, 61-62.

<sup>11</sup>Frederick Karl, Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979).

<sup>12</sup>Irving Howe, Politics and the Novel (New York: Meridian Books, 1957) 146.

<sup>13</sup>Howe, Politics and the Novel , 146.

<sup>14</sup>Andreas Huyssen, After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986 ) 41.

<sup>15</sup>David M. Wilson, The Forgotten Collector: Augustus Wollaston Franks of the British Museum (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984) 38-39.

<sup>16</sup>Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories, v. 2 (New York: Bantam Books, 1986) Watson writes of Stapleton: "I learned at the British Museum that he was a recognized authority upon the subject, and that the name of Vandeleur had been

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permanently attached to a certain moth which he had, in his Yorkshire days, been the first to describe," 138.

<sup>17</sup>Doyle, 472.

<sup>18</sup>Asa Briggs, Victorian Things (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 43.

<sup>19</sup>Garry Wills, "Jefferson the Aesthete" in The New York Review of Books, August 12, 1993, v. XL, n. 14, 6-10.

<sup>20</sup>Walter Benjamin, Das Passagenwerk (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982) 271. My translation.

<sup>21</sup>Joseph Conrad, A Set of Six (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1915) 119.

<sup>22</sup>In Idylls of the Marketplace, Regenia Gagnier mentions that "the Royal Academy continued to be ransacked by meat extract firms for portraits of healthy cows." Idylls of the Marketplace (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986) 55.

<sup>23</sup>Thomas Richards, The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990) 12.

<sup>24</sup>Lawrence Graver, Conrad's Short Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 134.

<sup>25</sup>quoted in George Woodcock, Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1962) 329.



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<sup>26</sup> See Joan Unsgerma Halperin, Félix Fénéon: Aesthete and Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

<sup>27</sup> Ford, Return to Yesterday (New York: Liveright Press, 1972), 114.

<sup>28</sup> Ford, 83-84, 111-12.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Thomas, Karl Marx and the Anarchists (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985) 310. "Bakunin argued that the right of inheritance underlay private property and the state, and that its abolition would lead to the downfall of each."

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin, Illuminations (New York: Schocken, 1969) 66.

<sup>31</sup> Walter Benjamin, Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings. Peter Demetz, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1986)155.

<sup>32</sup> There is also a brief reference to a failed bombing in "An Anarchist."

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Conrad, The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale (ed. by Bruce Harkness and S.W. Reid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 94.

<sup>34</sup> Eileen Sypher, "Anarchism and Gender," The Henry James Review, Winter 1988: 9 (1):1-16.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Seymour-Smith's introduction to The Secret Agent, (London: Penguin, 1971) 17.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Ray, "Conrad, Nordau, and Other Degenerates: The Psychology of the Secret Agent," Conradiana, v.16, 1984, 129. The mechanic in "An Anarchist" also has "delicate features."

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<sup>37</sup> Emma Goldman, "The Psychology of Political Violence," Anarchism and Other Essays (New York: Dover, 1969) 80.

<sup>38</sup> Goldman 82.

<sup>39</sup> Goldman 98, 103.

<sup>40</sup> Goldman 107-08.

<sup>41</sup> In Return to Yesterday, Ford Madox Ford agrees, writing, "The passion that inspired these paralyzers of a whole society [Paris in the 1890s] was probably nothing else but pity." (New York: Liveright, 1972)108.

<sup>42</sup> Ray, "Conrad," 130.

<sup>43</sup> Karl, Conrad, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Ford Madox Ford, Return to Yesterday 58.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957) 242.

<sup>46</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," Illuminations , 60.