Popular Accounts of the Greenwich Bombing and Conrad's *The Secret Agent*

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In a late letter to Richard Curle, Conrad describes his resolve to allow his work to remain in the shadow line of "the penumbra of initial inspiration." He goes on to insist that "explicitness my dear fellow, is fatal to the glamour of all artistic work."[1] Such protest, however, serves only to provoke investigation into his work — perhaps nowhere more so than in the pages of *The Secret Agent*.

While the novel has, perhaps inevitably, assumed some of the mystery of its written world, an examination of the social and political climate that led to its shaping allows the modern reader to penetrate the historical penumbra of Conrad's initial inspirations and to access some of the different accounts of the event which became *The Secret Agent*.[2] Whether or not these are accounts Conrad read or knew, though there were likely points of access to them, they reveal the climate of ideas in which Conrad embraced his subject and created his characters. While Conrad is often rightly applauded for his subtle treatment of a wide range of sometimes unlikely sympathies and concerns, the prevailing and competing patterns of explanations for the atrocity, the different voices that form the *milieux* out of which the novel emerges are all traceable to the various mediations of the event which predate Conrad's own novelistic treatment. Those early accounts ranging from the initial reports in the press to anarchist responses and an alternative fictional account of the anarchist background to the bombing, constitute a fascinating skein of perspectives, as mysterious and provocative in their juxtaposition as the different perspectives of Conrad's own tale.

On the afternoon of 15 February 1894, an anarchist named Martial Bourdin died when the bomb he was carrying exploded prematurely. To say that it was a bizarre incident is to understate the case. The bloody scene was enacted swiftly, no doubt as Heat's vision of the moment in the novel suggests, within "two successive winks of an eye" (*TSA* 88). But the chain reaction from that obscure detonation resulted in one of the seminal texts of this century.

Despite Conrad's later denials of having known anything of what "was called, if I remember rightly, the Greenwich Bomb Outrage,"[3] correspondence concern-

ing his uncle Bobrowski's death places him in London, directly within range of the shock and after-shock of this particular atrocity (Najder, *Joseph Conrad* 164). He clearly had immediate access to the breaking story of an injured anarchist, who apparently carried a bomb towards the source of maritime navigation and was then taken to the Seaman's hospital in Greenwich to die.

The first account likely to have reached Conrad would have been a burst of melodramatic headlines from someone touting newspapers in the streets, much as Ossipon was apprised of the event in the novel, by a boy who

> had yelled the thing under his very nose, and not being prepared for anything of that sort, he was very much startled and upset. (*TSA* 63)

Had Conrad chanced to miss the news being shouted in the streets that evening, he could not have failed to catch some of the coverage the next day.[4] The press reacted hysterically. Dynamite outrages on the Continent had become commonplace, but to find them occurring in London was another matter entirely, and one can only assume that the public reacted accordingly, stimulated more, ironically, by the daily bulletins than by the act of terror itself. By comparison, the anarchist response to the bombing was curious. From much of the anarchist community (which was both fairly extensive and diverse in London) there was silence.[5] The Rossettis' journal *The Torch*, for example, says nothing of the bombing in its retrospect of 1894, except to remark that the year "opened stormy and threatening" (Prieg 3). The remainder of the anarchist community, with one or two notable exceptions, simply denied involvement. The bombing, or "Bourdin's Folly" as it was known in some circles, was universally condemned, giving it a special place in the annals of anarchist outrages. It was a bombing that even those close to it found difficult to comprehend (perhaps it was just this that drew Conrad's attention to an event tragically misconceived and criminally executed).

Much unresolved speculation ensued about Bourdin's purpose, but with the exception of a few largely irrelevant concerns, the details of the incident remained vague. Even in Conrad's fictional account we are urged to believe that the rationale behind the atrocity is perverse and implicitly flawed. The immediate press accounts, however, were expansive, reflecting none of that obscurity which shrouds the event even today.

Conrad, in "The Planter of Malata," has the editor of the island newspaper remark "the only really honest writing is to be found in newspapers and nowhere else — and don't you forget it" (15). That comment, like the cheerless life of Winnie Verloc, does not bear much looking into. Certainly in the coverage of the Greenwich incident the press aimed at the most sensational or vulgar sentiments

and fears of the public. It is a treatment that Conrad is scathing about elsewhere. He observes of some popular contemporary authors:

> There are no lasting qualities in their work. The thought is commonplace and the style (?) without any distinction. They are popular because they express the common thought, and the common man is delighted to find himself in accord with people he supposes distinguished. This is the secret of many popularities.[6]

And one wonders whether the same criticisms might be leveled at a popular press that tended to treat anarchism, and indeed radicalism generally, as little more than bloody obscurantism. The coverage of the Greenwich bombing was certainly a case in point.

The Pall Mall Gazette, a popular daily newspaper, opened its initial reports with the news that "the London police have discovered an Anarchist conspiracy, which it is believed will prove to be the most desperate and dangerous of any revolutionary plot that has ever had its headquarters in London."[7] *The Times* had similar startling claims suggesting that both newspapers were leaning heavily on wire sources for their initial reports. Indeed both newspapers carry (almost word for word) an alarmist feature threatening international conspiracy and claiming, erroneously, that

> These facts among others are beyond dispute, that the enquiries of the detectives, although cautiously made, frightened the plotters, that the gang hurriedly scattered, and that its chief met with his death last evening while endeavoring in a panic to carry away to some place the deadly explosives which were to have been used against society, either in this country or in France.[8]

Subsequent discussion of the event seems to suggest that the sensational early accounts have little basis in truth; they are merely couched so as to titillate the public while assuring that the police had the situation under control. There are early speculations about a "black substance" covering Bourdin's hands "which cannot be gotten off" that is presented cryptically as evidence of anarchists as diabolic scientists.[9] Days later, *The Times* begins to concede that little that was initially reported was accurate.[10] It retracts much of the vivid detail of its initial reports, admitting, "the miserable man was not blown to pieces, as at first alleged, nor was he covered with the remains of the explosive in the form of a sticky black substance like printer's ink."[11]

Such graphic and writerly accounts are, however, telling. Throughout the early accounts the emphasis is on spectacle. Bourdin is "a respectably dressed man, in a kneeling posture, terribly mutilated. One hand was blown off and the body was open. The injured man was only able to say 'Take me home,' and was unable to

say where his home was…."[12] *The Pall Mall Gazette* resists the temptation to sentimentalize its anarchist subject and instead its takes delight in the visceral:

> The first [person] to arrive found a man half-crouching on the ground, alternately moaning and screaming. His legs were shattered, one arm was blown away, and the stomach and abdomen were ripped up, slashed and torn in a dreadful fashion.[13]

Such accounts are based upon the need to exacerbate and then exorcize a popular fear.[14] Indeed, both *The Times* and *The Pall Mall Gazette* rather gleefully observe that Bourdin is "hoist by his own petard."

We learn a good deal of the press perspective from this kind of treatment of the anarchist protagonist. The violence of the *Gazette*'s account is cathartic in nature, but an element of that catharsis is sustained by shifting the atrocity into a human rather than political dimension — hence the visceral and violent denouement which distracts the reader and depoliticizes the event itself.[15]

From the very beginning of the reporting on this affair Bourdin was not a political figure, but a sociopath. He and his colleagues were properly vilified, as *The Times* was quick to affirm:

> It may be well to add that everywhere, even in the streets near the Autonomie Club, the unpopularity of the Anarchists is striking. To issue from the door is to encounter a storm of abuse, which, albeit coarse, is distinctly animated by a proper spirit.[16]

The Autonomie Club was an anarchist meeting place, an institution which was perfectly legal under the liberal British laws that in Conrad's novel provoke Vladimir, a representative of a foreign power, into initiating this act of terror to cause a tightening of British domestic policy.

The press, however, quickly takes the initiative and attempts to foment anger against the anarchist presence amidst "proper" thinking people. The popular newspapers argue that even among the lower classes, whose sufferings might make them susceptible to the myth of revolution and therefore to support broad anarchist objectives, a tide of honest feeling is running against the Anarchists. The image the press continually fosters is of the *enemy within*, a notion that Conrad flirts with powerfully in his depiction of the Professor. The tone of the *Times* article attempts to reassure the reading public that the lower classes are not a hot-bed of radicalism — after all, their abuse "albeit coarse, [was] distinctly animated by a proper spirit."

In fact, great pains are taken to insist that the atrocity is foreign in conception and design. The press accounts of Bourdin's funeral arrangements, for example, are charged with a sub-text of international conspiracy. We learn in *The Times*:

> with much regret, that the plans for the funeral of the wretch Bourdin have been changed, and instead of a very quiet and private funeral at Shooter's-hill there is to be a public funeral in the North of London. An elaborate scheme appears to have been drawn up, showing the hand of persons seen in Paris or in Dublin, or in both, what an effect on the lowest of the people is produced by the long funeral procession of a revolutionist.[17]

The recurring fear of the newspaper accounts is of an organized movement of social revolution that crosses borders — or the kind of central intelligence James toys with in *The Princess Casamassima* and Chesterton toys with, much more lightheartedly, in *The Man Who Was Thursday*. The reporter in *The Times* speculates that whichever hand organized Bourdin's funeral has been "seen in Paris or in Dublin, or in both." The implicit connection, Fenian and Anarchist, conflates two common fears into one international intrigue.[18] The implication is of an orchestrated movement, however blurred the connections, setting out to infiltrate and subvert.

The kind of posture that the press adopts in relation to groups and ideas that are radically and irreconcilably different, as Melchiori suggests in her study *Terrorism in the Victorian Novel*, attempts to "canalise … fear so as to build up resistance to the whole socialist movement" (9). One need look no further than Bakunin's failed attempts to ally with Marx's International and the repeated efforts from within the International to purge itself of anarchists, for evidence of fundamentally incompatible agendas among these groups that the press saw as one bloody body politic.

Where there was division and strife, the press reported only the bonds of community and conspiracy. This fundamental flaw in the press accounts renders them fascinating but unreliable for anyone who is seeking the underlying truths of the Greenwich bombing. Conrad, in his essay "Autocracy and War" strikes at the heart of the matter when he writes:

> The printed page of the press makes a sort of still uproar, taking from men both the power to reflect and the faculty of genuine feeling; leaving them only the artificially created need of having something exciting to talk about. (121)

Conrad's choice of the curiously ambivalent, but expressive, oxymoron "still uproar" is highly appropriate, calling to mind the Shakespearean adage "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." It seems to encapsulate the essential nature of the Greenwich incident.[19] However, the accounts in *The Times* or *The Pall Mall Gazette* (or indeed, those propagated generally by the press) are not the only transcriptions of the Greenwich incident available to us, or indeed, as circumstances might suggest, to Conrad. The newspaper accounts draw blank when they attempt to deal with what Conrad called "the criminal futility of

the whole thing" (*TSA* ix), and what other commentators have noted as a disturbing lack of purpose. The press was loath to pursue the enigma. The puzzle in the newspaper accounts is the atrocity itself, though the political dimensions of the act are ignored beyond the most basic scaremongering.

In marked contrast, the anarchist accounts have no interest in the frisson of the explosion; rather, they deal with the background and probable causes, as well as the psychology of the characters involved. Pursuing matters into areas where the newspaper accounts are noticeably reluctant to go, the alternative accounts, as they unfold, have some notable parallels with Conrad's fictional version. While Conrad denied having had access to the most comprehensive anarchist source (the pamphlet by David Nicoll), just as he denied being in London at the time, some commentators, like Sherry, seem to accept nonetheless the significance of its influence on Conrad's text. We are also faced with Conrad's own conflicting claims to his publisher of having some kind of "insider information." Like much about the Greenwich incident, we are unlikely ever to resolve these ambiguities.

Ford, in a later book of reminiscences, offers a concise summary of the anarchist version of events. It is likely that if Conrad had possessed the kind of "inside knowledge of a certain event in the history of active anarchism" that he had originally claimed,[20] Ford would most probably have been its source, or at least he would have provided access. That is what Conrad seems to be suggesting in his author's note (*TSA* x). Still, if the conservative accounts of the press were the first that Conrad had come across, Ford's probably imperfect recollection is likely to have been the second:

> This was, of course, an attempt fomented by the police agents of a foreign state with a view to forcing the hand of the British Government. The unfortunate idiot was talked by these *agents provocateurs* into taking a bomb to Greenwich Park, where the bomb exploded in his pocket and blew him into many small fragments. The idea of the Government in question was that this would force the hand of the British Government, so that they would arrest wholesale every anarchist in Great Britain. Of course the British Government did nothing of the sort. (122)

Ford's account is characteristically ebullient and assured, but his take on the Greenwich bombing is a dramatic departure from the newspaper accounts.[21] His tone assumes complete familiarity with the inside working of the incident, though his recollection seems incomplete. Where Ford's succinct account falls short, others, like that by the anarchist commentator Nicoll, fill in the gaps.

Nicoll's account focuses on H.B. Samuels (who, like Conrad's Verloc, was the brother-in-law of the deceased bomb-thrower), whom he held responsible for the Greenwich bombing. Nicoll had previously been ousted from the editorship of

Commonweal (following a conviction for incitement to murder in one of his *Commonweal* editorials). Samuels had since taken over the position which was jealously disputed by Nicoll. Hence, an already acrimonious relationship flared suddenly into accusations and threats of personal violence some time after the Greenwich bombing. Nicoll's principal claim was that Samuels was the police spy (like Verloc) behind the mystery of the bombing.

Such cloak and dagger was not uncommon. During the period the police used informants as a matter of course. One such documented incident was the affair of the Walsall anarchists who were arrested for running a bomb factory. A notorious police spy and *provocateur* named Coulon was implicated in the case. Matters were further complicated by the admission of Inspector Melville that monies were indeed paid to "lots of anarchists" as informants and *agents provocateurs*, and even further by the fact that when specifically asked if he had paid Coulon,[22] the judge ruled that Melville need not answer the question (Oliver 77). In the later reminiscences of Sir Robert Anderson, his assurances of proper behavior in anarchist proceedings are still less than complete:

> No agent of the British Government would become *intentionally* an agent provocateur; but in those days it needed both vigilance and shrewdness to avoid blundering into a false position which would have involved that reproach. (117; my emphasis)

His tone suggests that such blunders were not as rare as they should have been. He also admits that spies from the anarchist community were a complicated fact of his professional life, describing "a hellish plot to bring about a dynamite explosion in Westminster Abbey … and one of the principal agents in that plot was taken into pay on behalf of our Government" (Anderson 117). All in all, the admissions confirm that Nicoll's concerns were not without foundation.

While cataloging the events of the Walsall case (just as he would later do in the Greenwich bombing), Nicoll was bested by his own anger. He published an editorial condemning the figures presiding over the case, including the judge, whom he maligned, and "the spy Melville, who sets his agents to concoct the plans which he discovers." Nicoll went on indignantly to ask, "Are these men fit to live?" (qtd. in Oliver 80). His editorial, naming specific targets for reprisals, was judged incendiary. Nicoll was arrested and sentenced to sixteen months' imprisonment (in late 1892). In his absence, Samuels eventually succeeded him as editor of *Commonweal*. Samuels, of course, was, as Sherry notes, married to the sister of Martial Bourdin, the unwitting bomb carrier who blew himself to pieces.

Samuels is a peculiar figure, generally disliked and mistrusted to such a degree by most prominent anarchists that it seems odd, to say the least, that he should

have migrated to such a potentially sensitive post as editor of *Commonweal*. One contemporary anarchist, Louise Sarah Bevington, remarked that he was "about the most rubbishy character possible…. The keynotes of his character are vanity and vindictiveness," qualities that Conrad places as foundation stones of his own anarchist figures (Quail 162). Elsewhere he is described as a "verbal terrorist," while another contemporary, an anarchist named Cores, described him as "simply an advocate of violence — by others" (qtd. in Oliver 59).

It is Samuels, however, that Nicoll accuses in his pamphlet, just as it is Verloc whom Conrad makes his *agent provocateur*, and he is described disparagingly, much as Verloc is described, as a "voice and nothing else" (*TSA* 24).[23] Nicoll sets the key note when he relates his first meeting with Samuels:

> I was attracted by a group evidently in hot discussion. Samuels was in the midst of it, quarrelling with a Social Democrat, and he wound up by taking off his coat and offering to fight his opponent. We have often seen that coat taken off since, but we have never seen a fight yet. (Nicoll 8)

How much of Nicoll's account is character assassination is difficult to tell, but that option must not be dismissed and it raises an inevitable question mark over his general reliability. Certainly there are irregularities in Nicoll's account. Nicoll, for example, criticizes Samuels' editorship of *Commonweal*, suggesting that his belligerent attitude would only damage anarchist interests. Nicoll cites the occasion of the Barcelona opera outrage and records Samuels' response of joy in *Commonweal* "because of the death of thirty rich people and the injury of eighty others" (Nicoll 11).

In the expression of such convictions, Nicoll finds not so much the utterings of an anarchist idealogue, as provocation from an agent in the pay of the Government. In a lucid assessment of their probable effect, he describes how Samuels' words are

> calculated to impress the public with the impression that Anarchists are simply a gang of thieves and cut throats, which was exactly the impression that Mr. Robert Anderson, Inspector Melville of Scotland Yard and the lying Scribes of the Capitalist press were endeavouring to produce. And lo they found an "Anarchist" editor ready to second their laudable exertions. To prove their case they had only to point to the pages of the *Commonweal*. (Nicoll 11)

One of the shortcomings of Nicoll's approach, however, is that he is accusing Samuels of the very things that he was himself responsible for as editor (his imprisonment was, after all, for incitement to murder).

When, in Nicoll's pamphlet, Samuels is accused of defending theft and degrading "a bold act of revolt" (Nicoll 10), it must be remembered that "no English-

language London paper seems to have justified robbery as such until Nicoll, as editor of *Commonweal,* included a leader entitled 'Robbery and Theft' in his first issue" (Oliver 88).

Similarly, when Nicoll criticizes Samuels' tendency toward incitement and denounces it as police provocation with the comment, "it was this sort of language that had a good deal to do with driving William Morris out of the movement," we should bear in mind that it was Nicoll's own approach that had done just that some years before Samuels had taken up editorship of *Commonweal* (Nicoll 9). In fact, according to one commentator, Morris finally left because of Nicoll's inclusion and defense of an inflammatory article submitted by none other than Samuels (Quail 95).

Having expressed doubts about Nicoll's motives, we can proceed to the principal points of his accusations with due caution. His first complaint is the tardiness with which the police followed up on the Greenwich incident (a factor that the press also commented upon). Nicoll suggested however, that the police reaction seemed to be that the investigation died along with Bourdin. Conrad repeats the pattern when he shows how the police investigation is stifled and sidetracked because Heat knows that a full investigation would compromise his informant. Samuels boasted amongst his anarchist colleagues and even through the press (immediately after the bombing) and *Commonweal* (!) of his intimacy with Bourdin. He even stressed that he met and walked with him on that fateful morning. Yet it is curious that Samuels seems to have been largely ignored by the subsequent police investigation (though he might have had a better chance than most of knowing which of the anarchists supplied Bourdin with the explosives). He, along with other key figures, was ignored, while the Autonomie Club was raided and a number of innocent anarchists held. Conrad again gives us an example of much the same thing when Heat wishes to implicate Michaelis in the affair to protect his man. Nicoll rightly exposes the incongruity of the police action and asks, "was it because, as in the recent case … they were all in the pay of the police, with the exception of the victim?" (4). He seems to discover in the turn of events a reiteration of the Walsall affair, with Samuels being implicated rather than Coulon.

Nicoll's rhetoric is persuasive, but often compromised by the irrationality that his later years testify to. Still, his account of events is disturbing and his irony caustic. Given Samuels' position, his bombastic nature, and his self-confessed proximity to Bourdin on that last day, it is indeed remarkable that he was left alone. Nicoll writes with a singular irony that anticipates Conrad's strategy in *The Secret Agent*:

> the police did not arrest Mr. Samuels. Because [*sic*] he was a person of such a quiet harmless disposition that he was incapable of conspiracy. (8)

Nicoll goes on to examine Samuels' apparent complicity in a police plot. He tells of several instances in which Samuels provided chemical substances for the production of explosives (implying that he might have done the same for Bourdin's bomb). These substances were procured from a figure Nicoll describes as a recent convert to the movement, "a middle-class gentleman … liberal with money and not unpopular. He was naturally an authority on scientific subjects and understood chemistry" (Nicoll 14). This figure, called "D—" by Nicoll, was in fact Dr. Fauset Macdonald, a member of the Freedom group and a widely respected anarchist.[24]

Samuels' generosity with materials he was supposed to have stolen from Macdonald's laboratory resulted in police raids upon those anarchists who had received incriminating substances from him. Neither Samuels nor Dr. Macdonald was subject to police action. Moreover, though Samuels had reportedly stolen the materials from the laboratory, Dr. Macdonald remained on good terms with him. Nicoll can only account for this behavior as proof of complicity in Samuels' plot. There were few who were willing to condone Samuels' actions in the Bourdin affair (especially for the fact that he earned three guineas for a newspaper interview in which he recounted his close connection with Bourdin). Dr. Macdonald, however, unlike Samuels, was believed to be above suspicion by many of his colleagues; and because he was caught in the wide net cast by Nicoll, the latter's conspiracy theory was largely discredited.

Perhaps more important than the truthfulness of Nicoll's theories is their common currency among anarchists and anarchist sympathizers. Nicoll's account is, arguably, not the most significant anarchist source where Conrad is concerned. If Conrad had, as he claimed, no knowledge of the actual pamphlet, he may nonetheless have been made familiar with its more substantial claims via the precocious Rossetti sisters, cousins of his friend and writing partner, Ford Madox Ford.

For all of Nicoll's apparent unreliability, there were still, curiously, those who gave his theories some credence, notably the Rossettis, who give a similar, though fictionalized, account in their own novel about the bombing. The Rossetti version, which for our purposes is the final (before Conrad's) and most significant account, closely paralleled Nicoll's take on events. It was published in a semi-autobiographical novel called *A Girl Among the Anarchists* (1903), under the pseudonym of Isabel Meredith, and it includes suspicions of conspiratorial behavior between some anarchists and police. Their version has Samuels, thinly disguised as the anarchist Jacob Myers, brother of the deceased bomb-thrower Augustin

Myers.[25] The Rossettis partially changed their account by making Samuels and Bourdin brothers rather than brothers-in-law; but notably, they retained the national characteristics of the original figures and made them into fore-names that would make their identification easy.[26] The Rossetti sisters wrote of Jacob Myers:

> It was this brother whose conduct had given rise to suspicion among his companions, and "spies" and "police plots" were in every one's mouth. (Meredith 41)

The narrator of the Meredith account endorses key elements that also occur in Nicoll's. She suggests that the Samuels figure was responsible for crying up the affair in the press and arousing a storm of public condemnation. She sums up his involvement with a pronouncement of his guilt: "Myers' conduct proves him to be no better than a spy; we of the *Bomb* can have no further relations with him" (Meredith 52). Hence, it is in fulfillment of Samuels' police role that he suggests the existence of an extensive anarchist conspiracy of terror. Verloc's mission from Vladimir is much the same.

In the Rossettis' novel, the narrator's induction into the anarchist movement is at a group meeting coincidentally arranged to discuss Jacob Myers' involvement and behavior in the bombing. In a curious narrative slippage (similar to Conrad's treatment four years later), the bombing itself is largely absent from her account. She relates her interest in the anarchist movement, but does not mention the event. We find out about the bombing simply because it relates to the meeting she plans to attend.

Like other elements of Meredith's account, minor details are altered, but the description correlates closely to the press and anarchist accounts we have already seen. She writes:

> On the 17th of December 189– the posters of the evening papers had announced in striking characters
>
> "DEATH OF AN ANARCHIST
> ATTEMPTED OUTRAGE IN A LONDON PARK"
>
> That same afternoon a loud explosion had aroused the inhabitants of a quiet suburban district, and on reaching the corner of —— Park whence the report emanated, the police had found, amid a motley debris of trees, bushes, and railings, the charred and shattered remains of a man. (Meredith 39)

In Conrad's novel, as we have already seen, Ossipon is the first with the news of the outrage: he hears it from a newspaper boy and then reads the press account just as Conrad may have done. It alarms him to such an extent that he feels the need to enter the Café Silenus "with a dry mouth" (63). There he meets the professor who knows that an atrocity is planned but does not realize it has already occurred and failed. An event that is seemingly unplanned and unsolicited, that

is, in addition, a shock and embarrassment to the peaceable English anarchists, the explosion remains a vague, shadowy enigma to most of the protagonists in both the Meredith and Conrad accounts (just as it did in Nicoll's and the newspapers' coverage, despite their volubility). Moreover, it is something that is first seen via headlines, from the outside, and then viewed from the interior psychology of the act. It is never narrated directly, so that the reader is as ignorant of events as the players themselves.

It is fitting too, that such an enigma should occupy so strange a position in the narrative of both novels. The reader is hardly prepared for it at all (particularly in the Meredith account); there it is introduced as an incident that is completed long before the reader is even informed of its likelihood or possibility. Having discovered that it has happened, one is drawn to discover why and how (and, in Conrad's version, to whom) it came about. From Meredith we never learn exactly what happened. Nicoll's account is so deeply suspect because of his personal antagonism towards Samuels that we cannot trust it, and the newspapers do not pry too deeply into the affair in case they discover something. But in each of the accounts the narrative patterns are revealing, even strangely evocative of one another, certainly reflective of the subsequent narrative pattern that Conrad shapes.

Meredith describes the beginning of the meeting at which Jacob Myers is to be indicted. An anarchist named Banter rises and accuses him of peculiar conduct which, in conjunction with the "undue influence and power" he exercised over his brother Augustin, had led to a number of suspicions, and

> that, moreover Jacob had been seen by a third party drinking a glass of rum in the "Nag and Beetle" in company with a well-known detective, and that, in final and conclusive proof of some very fishy transactions on his part three undeniable half-crowns had been distinctly observed in his overcoat pocket the previous week. (Meredith 49)

Nicoll also stresses the strange relationship of trust that Bourdin had with Samuels. In a detail with sentimental purpose, Nicoll remembers "little Bourdin" in Christmas 1893,

> sitting at the feet of Samuels, and looking up into his eyes with loving trust. To the little man he was evidently a hero to be loved and revered. (Nicoll 12)

In both accounts we find described the kind of relationship that Winnie actually sets out to foster between Verloc and Stevie, that of a "great and awed regard" (*TSA* 175). She even explains to her husband (at the critical point when Verloc is looking for someone to carry the bomb), "you don't know him. That boy just worships you" (*TSA* 186). That relationship leaving Bourdin/Augustin/Stevie both

trusting and completely vulnerable to betrayal is of equal importance in all three accounts.

Jacob Myers' tribunal revolved around his influence over his brother, his implication in a police plot, and his casual disregard in dealing with the press afterwards:

> Jacob was in fact accused of having egged on his unfortunate brother to his doom in order that he might turn a little money out of the transaction between newspaper reports and police fees. It apparently mattered little to this modern Shylock whence came his pound of flesh or what blood ran or congealed in its veins. (Meredith 50)

There is also the manner in which the alleged perpetrator of the crime is left untroubled by the police. Meredith notes with some irony, "the papers hinted at accomplices and talked about the usual 'widespread conspiracy,' the police opened wide their eyes, but saw very little" (40). He is denounced by his anarchist colleagues on all counts. The meeting, according to both Meredith and Nicoll, threatens to turn into a trial but is interrupted in a dramatic fashion. Meredith's account of this episode is particularly vivid (it does not feature as part of Conrad's plot, though it has a close parallel with Razumov's tribunal in the later novel *Under Western Eyes*). Both Nicoll and Meredith describe the accused's responses as arrogant and obdurate. But before a cross-examination is able to get to the facts of the case, Samuels' wife, according to Nicoll, seems to have been introduced as a kind of weapon just as the interrogation becomes too intense:

> "My wife is down stairs," he said, "I'll bring her up." He brought her up, and she immediately begain [*sic*] to assail the group with violent abuse, and threw the whole meeting in turmoil. "I suppose I must go," said Samuels, and he 'went' taking his wife with him. (Nicolls 14)

Meredith's version of events is much more colorful and ironic. She describes how tempers begin to flare against Jacob Myers (one of the anarchists even suggests that he should be shot) when, luckily for him, his wife suddenly appears:

> Jacob opened his mouth to speak, but he was saved from any further need of self-defence or explanation, for at this moment the door of the office was broken rudely open and there entered like a hurricane a veritable fury in female form – – a whirlwind, a tornado, a ravening wolf into a fold of lambs. This formidable apparition, which proved to be none other than the wife of the suspected Myers, amid a volley of abuse and oaths delivered in the choicest Billingsgate, pounced down on her ill-used husband, denounced Anarchy and the Anarchists — their morals, their creeds, their hellish machinations; she called on Jehovah to chastise, nay, utterly to destroy them, and soundly rated her consort for ever having associated with such scoundrels. And thus this formidable preacher of dynamite

> and disaster was borne off in mingled triumph and disgrace by his indignant spouse. (Meredith 53)

Although Conrad's account differs substantially at this point from both anarchist versions, there is a significant point of similarity. Note the sardonic authorial summary of the anarchist's response to the matriarchal ferocity of Mrs. Samuels. She is the wolf and the anarchist press is a fold of lambs. It is these "lambs," after all, who, at least ostensibly, are seeking to terrify society with their bloodthirsty threats of vengeance. Mrs. Samuels, out of mere familial duty, is a "whirlwind, a tornado, a ravening wolf"; she exhibits characteristics that we might expect the anarchist desperados to manifest. But there is clearly a link with Winnie, whom Ossipon begins to fear upon discovering the death of Verloc: "He was terrified at this savage woman" (*TSA* 289). Winnie's actions, even her final act of madness and despair, stem from her love of, and duty toward, Stevie. Like Mrs. Samuels, she finds the anarchists incomprehensible and contemptible and, what is more, she displays a passion that unnerves the delicate anarchist sensibility. Once again, voices, perspectives, the very textures of the actual event are woven with familiar threads and patterns from Conrad's own account.

Despite their later description of the bombing, the Rossettis were not actually in London during the Greenwich incident, but in Italy with their invalid mother, who died shortly after in March 1894 (Oliver 122). Meanwhile, the production of their magazine, *The Torch*, was suspended until their return to London. However, despite their absence, they had access to a good many anarchist sources (including both the Commonweal and Freedom groups that figured in the dispute over Samuels' part in the Greenwich case). Their press had been a popular rallying point within the movement. Such was the Rossetti involvement at the time that at one stage the brother Arthur was even suspected of involvement in the Greenwich case. Arthur was a keen student of chemistry, and Sherry suggests he may have been the model for the father of the Rossettis' "girl among the anarchists." Significantly, he is a man who spends most of his time in his laboratory musing over some problem, and hence he may also figure as a forerunner of Conrad's own Professor. Moser suggests a more tangible link with the information that Arthur was indeed observed by police for some time after the explosion, as they seemed to be under the impression that, because of his background in chemistry, he may well have been a possible source for the explosive used in the affair (17).

Not having been party to the Greenwich event, the Rossetti sisters would have had to rely on rumor and the prevailing theories amongst their anarchist colleagues. Their account favors Nicoll. But, as indicated earlier, Nicoll's voice was

not the only one to be raised over the Greenwich bomb. His disclosures and accusations split the already diffuse and splintered anarchist community. The Freedom Group (an anarchist group linked to the journal *Freedom*, and among whom numbered prominent figures such as Kropotkin and Nettlau) was outraged by Nicoll's accusations and made every effort to silence him. Nicoll was even told to sign a retraction with a covering letter to Nettlau saying, "Nicoll must be *compelled* to *sign* a retraction and beaten if he does not" (qtd. in Oliver 108).

Alhough no such retraction was forthcoming, the threats were apparently not carried out. Instead, the Freedom Group declared that it had dissociated itself from Nicoll until such time as he withdrew his accusations. It appears that the Freedom Group was mainly concerned about the insinuations of Dr. MacDonald's part in the affair (and also the implication of Dr. Nettlau in some way). Its anger was not, apparently, over the accusation leveled at Samuels. In Nettlau's words, recalling the night recorded in both Nicoll's and Meredith's account, when Samuels' complicity was discussed in his presence at an anarchist meeting, "I was there that evening and did not take these grounds for suspicion seriously, just because I knew how little Samuels was worth" (qtd. in Oliver 108).

The Rossettis must have been well acquainted with both Nicoll's accusations and the subsequent furor of the Freedom group. Still, their version compliments the story proposed by Nicoll, although in their account the doctor is cleared of association with Jacobs/Samuels.

Hermia Oliver, in documenting the London anarchist scene, states at the beginning that she regards Meredith's novel as inadmissable evidence, since the line between fiction and fact is purposely unclear, and hence she does not make use of it in her study. Nicoll, she argues, was also unreliable as a source, since he showed signs of psychological imbalance, his mental state collapsing gradually into a persecution complex stemming "from his 'police plot' mania" (Oliver 107). She goes on to relate how he increasingly sought refuge from his frustrations (his career failing after his imprisonment) in the conviction that he was the subject of general conspiracies.[27] Similarly, the Meredith novel, while it remains true to the notable incidents of Nicoll's account, dramatizes diverse incidents as if they were instigated by, or intimately connected with, the familiars of the journal *Tocsin* (known as the *Bomb* prior to Meredith's involvement).

Our concerns, however (unlike Oliver's), are not so much dependent on discovering the actual workings of what most commentators, regardless of their interests, insist is an enigma: "The whole matter, in short, remained, and must always remain, a mystery to the public" (Meredith 40). Such an attitude was fostered by the *Times* report, though it offered a few variations on the anarchist theme.

In the context of this analysis, what actually happened is largely irrelevant, and if we could determine it, it would serve as little more than a diverting footnote. Significantly, however, Conrad reconfigures and even juxtaposes many of the voices that formed the milieux of the Greenwich incident and its major players.

Yet, to go one step further and make a bolder case for Conrad's access to the anarchist versions, we may readily suppose that he had some access to the newspaper accounts as the event itself unfolded; in the case of the Rossetti account it is likely that Conrad either heard it first hand or perhaps was invited to peruse their literary production. Here, probably, is the true link through Ford which Conrad acknowledges in his preface to *The Secret Agent*. Ford insisted that he and Conrad were familiar with anarchists and both certainly had a history of association with radical political figures. Ford (and Cunninghame Graham) was also a source of anarchist and socialist literature. Most importantly, Ford had some intimacy with the *Torch* office, and as George Woodcock notes, he was an early contributor to his cousins' journal:

> The Rossetti sisters specialized in introducing the writings of Continental anarchists, and Louise Michel, Malato, Malatesta, Zhukovsky, and Faure all contributed to *The Torch* … while one of the younger contributors was the youth who became Ford Madox Ford. (Woodcock 423)

Ford was, of course, familiar with the Rossetti circle and found his cousins "horrible monsters of precocity" to whom, as a youth, he played a subservient role (and their formidable achievements). But, even in later years, he remained on terms of some intimacy (Ford 102).

In 1903, the publication of *A Girl Among the Anarchists* coincided with the most intense period of collaboration between Ford and Conrad on the novel *Romance*. It was the culmination of the period during which they have been described as "intimate in the sense of both love and constant communication" (Moser 41). They were living close to each other in London and nearby the Rossetti household. At the same time as Conrad's collaboration with Ford, he was beginning independent work on the novel *Nostromo*, and there are indications that he visited the Rossetti household to discuss that work between 1903 and 1904. Sherry verifies that connection in *Conrad's Western World*; yet, although he refers to the Rossettis' novel elsewhere in his study, he makes no link to its treatment of the Greenwich bombing. Instead, Sherry suggests that the visit is significant as far as sources are concerned to establish Conrad's knowledge of a factual background for the anarchist background for the anarchist story, "The Informer," based as it is, apparently, upon the Rossettis and their *Torch* Press. The Rossetti source for the anarchist story seems irrefutable, but a family visit seems a little futile (the

press had been long removed from the Rossetti home in 1903) and incidental information and anecdotal material should have been easily available to Conrad.

However, the Rossetti visit might, more plausibly and significantly, link Conrad with his anarchist sources for *The Secret Agent* than any attempt to locate him, as some have tried, with the Nicoll version. The influence of that visit extends further; Sherry, relating an account from the notorious anarchist Emma Goldman, points to an interesting characteristic of the Rossetti household:

> *The Torch* office, formerly the nursery of the girls, became a gathering-place for foreign anarchists, particularly those from Italy, where severe persecution was taking place. The refugees naturally flocked to the Rossettis, who were themselves of Italian origin. (qtd. in Sherry 212)

That fact is allied with Conrad's original conception of *Nostromo*, as it is phrased in a letter to Cunninghame Graham; the novel was conceived as set:

> In Sth America, in a Republic I call Costaguana. It is however concerned mostly with Italians. (Jean-Aubry, *I* 315)

Perhaps the Italian connection explains his initial interest in the Rossettis; so much is confirmed in a letter to Ford from March 1903:

> Pray, can you procure me a life of Garibaldi — a picturesque one? … Perhaps your uncle Rossetti may have the book or any book of that sort either in French or in English … Oh! for some book that would give me picturesque locations, idioms, swear words — suggestive phrases on Italy. (Karl and Davies 28)

The Rossetti connection with the Italian background of *Nostromo* is clearly implied in Conrad's correspondence with Ford, and in Sherry's interview with Helen Rossetti. But did it go no further? We should note that a group of Italian refugees feature in the Rossetti novel. It is curious indeed that Conrad's thoughts should turn so dramatically toward the noxious effects of capital and labor problems in a scenario peopled mainly (in his original conception) by Italians, when the Rossetti family had such strong connections with Italian Revolutionary cadres.

Even in the finished *Nostromo*, Viola (ex-revolutionary follower of Garibaldi) and Nostromo, his spiritual son who is seduced by the lure of silver (the pervasive emblem of capital), are striking figures in the novel's design. The closing pages preclude the notion that progress has been achieved through the policing of material interests, and the novel closes cynically with a new, but familiar, turn of revolt promised by Marxist evangelicals.

If the arena of the novel was suggested by Cunninghame Graham's experiences in South America (his travel writing was much admired by Conrad), the turn of events seem to be heavily influenced by the world inhabited by indigenous populations, and old and new colonizers are caught up in the turmoil of revolution

and counter-revolution. The close of the novel points to the influence of propagandists, like Malatesta (a contributor to *The Torch*), who actually traveled to South America to escape European repression and proselytize in the New World.

The Rossetti novel itself may have given Conrad, in the first place, some of the flavor he needed (and had asked Ford to help him find) for his characters in *Nostromo.* The *Torch* office is described in *A Girl Among the Anarchists* as a haven for Italian revolutionaries. The narrator writes:

> When the influx of starving Italians necessitated it, a kind of soup kitchen was inaugurated over which Beppe presided…. In short, the headquarters of the *Tocsin*, besides being a printing and publishing office, rapidly became a factory, a debating club, a school, a hospital, a mad-house, a soup-kitchen and a sort of Rowton House all in one. (Meredith 133)

The characters who moved in the circles of the young Rossettis might have promised the kind of powerful and provocative figures that Conrad was seeking after finishing the *Typhoon* volume of stories (1903), when "it seemed somehow that there was nothing more in the world to write about."[28]

There are indications that Conrad's growing concerns firstly with the tale of dispossessed Italian workers in a land newly discovered by the West began to evolve into problems of labor and the demands of capital. Whatever the manner of development, those issues are aired more specifically in the following novels. The vision of the grip of material interests in the New Americas might have come initially from Cunninghame Graham's experiences; but it seems likely that the connection with Italian exiles and revolutionists might have been formed by Conrad's joint relations with Ford and the Rossettis. And there we discover the seed-germ of his anarchist tales. We can be confident that Conrad had access to the press accounts and Ford's perspective (for what it is worth). The Nicoll account has been something of an enigma, but the link with the Rossettis solves that problem of familiarity with an authentic anarchist version of events. *A Girl among the Anarchists* reproduces, after all, the most significant elements of the Nicoll account with its own distinctly ironic perspective. It is not only a credible source, but a likely one offering access to the details of the Nicoll story, which Conrad insisted he had never read, via the Rossetti novel, which it is very likely that he did.

However, it does not finally matter whether Conrad had access to this text or that, since it is his shaping of the narratives and merging of the voices that renders the event memorable and, as far as it ever will be, meaningful. Seen holistically, the various accounts of the bombing represent a sequence of powerful agents in the formulation of a definitive historical text. The often conflicting narratives of the event coalesce finally into a "world-view [which] did not reject the socialist or

revolutionary position so much as embrace or frame it within the wider context of an ironic and tragic outlook" (Hollywood 244). Those various mediations of the event certainly lend themselves to the recognition, which is one of the particular strengths of *The Secret Agent*, of polyphony and multiple perspectives. These are the characteristics which stamp it as a distinctly modern text and they arise, in part, from the juxtaposed perspectives of the historical event. From the very beginning, the contemporary accounts of the event complemented Conrad's aesthetic sensibility. One has a clear sense of maturity in the expression in this novel, a feeling of Conrad savoring the disparate voices of his simple tale, recognizing, in a way that some of his contemporaries failed to do, the blind compulsions operating in the Greenwich incident which are merely outlined or suggested in the accounts examined hitherto. They are certainly elements of the various separate accounts, but they are never examined as they might be until Conrad gathers them together in a single, simple, ironic tale, which he describes, as if in answer to those who seek to demean the splendid wholeness of his vision, a "perfectly genuine piece of work" (*TSA* xiii). ❋

Notes

[1] Curle, *Conrad to a Friend*. 24 April 1922: 142.

[2] Subsequent quotation from the novel will be taken from the Dent Uniform Edition of 1923, referred to hereafter as *TSA*. Quotation from, or reference to, the introduction, textual essay or apparatus of the Cambridge Edition of *The Secret Agent* will be referred to parenthetically as Harkness and Reid.

[3] Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters Vol. II*. 1 September 1923: 322.

[4] Hitchock's *Sabotage*, the film version of the novel, has a tense dramatic sequence with a young boy running through the crowded streets of London shouting, "Bomb Sensation!"

[5] By the time of the bombing, the ideological or philosophical shift from propaganda by word to propaganda by deed had already happened. Bakunin sanctioned the original notion when he said "le temps n'est plus aux idées; il est aux faits" (qtd. in Oliver 12). What is surprising perhaps is that the anarchists seemed embarrassed by the Greenwich deed, or suspicious of it.

[6] Karl and Davies, eds. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad Vol. II*. To Mme. Angela Zagorska, Christmas 1898: 137.

[7] *The Pall Mall Gazette*. London. 16 February 1894: 7.

[8] *The Times*. London. 16 February 1894: 5.

[9] *Ibid*.

[10] A few days after the event, *The Times* began to retract its more fabulous claims. In a rare admission that the early reports were an over-reaction, we read: "further and calmer enquiry into the explosion in Greenwich Park has robbed the story of some of the picturesque details given by those first on the spot" (17 February 1894: 9). And while Harkness and Reid report that "the police's response was swift by the day's standards" (xxv), and go on to quote the *Morning Leader* report from 16th February, a source offered by Sherry, "One of the chiefs … proceeded at once to Greenwich" (xxv), more reliable reports after the event suggest that the police response was in fact so lax that disciplinary measures were taken against one officer: "the death of Bourdin took place on Thursday afternoon of last week. It appears now that official intelligence of the fact that an explosion had taken place in Greenwich Park reached New Scotland-yard, not by telegram, but by letter on Friday (for which an inspector was fined £4)" (*The Times*, Thursday 22 February 1894: 5).

[11] 17 February 1894: 9.

[12] *The Times*. 16 February 1894: 5.

[13] *Gazette*. 16 February 1894: 7.

[14] Much of the phraseology is redolent of the kind of reporting that went on during the Ripper murders of the previous decade.

[15] Conrad attempts the same shift when he insists that the story is "a simple tale," domestic in nature (according to the Assistant Commissioner) rather than, as he noted in a letter to Pinker, "having any sort of social or polemical intention" (qtd. in Karl and Davies 446).

[16] *The Times*. 20 February 1894: 5.

[17] *The Times*. 21 February 1894: 9. An ironic analogue is possible with Conrad's own experiences in the burial cortege of a revolutionist: Conrad's experience of his own father's burial "while several thousand people followed the coffin in silence" (Najder, *Conrad* 129).

[18] A perspective not entirely divorced from that of Vladimir in the novel, who "confounded causes with effects more than was excusable; the most distinguished propagandists with impulsive bomb throwers; assumed organization where in the nature of things it could not exist; spoke of the social revolutionary party one moment as of a perfectly disciplined army, where the word of chiefs was supreme, and at another as if it had been the loosest association of desperate brigands that ever camped in a mountain gorge" (*TSA* 30).

[19] There seems to be an interesting analogue between the "still uproar" of the newspaper article and that of the anarchist bomb. Both attract violent interest, but are

so transitory in nature that they encourage less lasting reflection than might at first appear possible.

[20] Jean-Aubry, *II*. To Algernon Methuen: 7 November 1906: 38.

[21] Ford's perspective of the bombing is most likely to have been informed by his relationship with the Rossetti children, his precocious cousins who ran an anarchist press, *The Torch*, during the 1890s.

[22] Curiously, Coulon, or Coulin, was later implicated in the Greenwich affair itself, according to accusations in *The Anarchist* (18 March 1894).

[23] The Rossetti account, published under the pseudonym Isabel Meredith, and of which we will hear more later, rests on much the same impression, and talks about the Samuels figure as having made "blood-and-thunder speeches which he had in no wise carried out in action" (Meredith 50).

[24] This figure is also present in Meredith's account, where he is called Dr. Armitage; he is transformed into the figure of the Professor in Conrad's novel.

[25] Nicoll reveals in his pamphlet that Samuels was known to the Rossettis and was published by the *Torch* magazine (Nicoll 10).

[26] Samuels is identified as Jacob (there is implicit in the change of names an allusion to the biblical sibling betrayal). The Frenchman, Bourdin, on the other hand, is identified as the brother, Augustin in whom perhaps we recognize a saintly or redemptive figure (anarchism is full of such paradoxical images) reminiscent of the Lady Patroness' view of Michaelis in Conrad's novel.

[27] In this respect his psychology is rather like the Professor's in *The Secret Agent*, whose conception of his own social failure is based upon his belief in a bourgeois conspiracy.

[28] Conrad, "Author's Note" in *Nostromo*, vii.

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