Dynamite Violence

From Melodrama to Menace

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter inaugurates the book’s historical methodology, delving into the literary and cultural history of dynamite violence as it was cultivated in the nineteenth century and into the modernist period. It argues that dynamite violence, with its connection to radicalism, its melodramatic and sensationalist appeal, and its ultimate mutation into the threat of terrorism, becomes a consummate embodiment of modernist approaches to the problem of political violence. This extensive history features discussion of historical anarchists and the public reaction to anarchism in England, of popular dynamite novels, and of works by Wilde, Zola, Chesterton, and James. The chapter culminates in an extended reading of Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, a novel whose approach to the material realities of dynamite violence, flirtation with melodrama, attraction to sensational events and styles, and final insinuation of a genuinely modern form of violence in the threat of the lone terrorist, make it exceptionally resonant as a reflection on violence in the modern world.

*Keywords*: dynamite, dynamite novel, political violence, anarchism, terrorism, melodrama, sensationalism, Oscar Wilde, Henry James, Jospeh Conrad, The Secret Agent

There are sell out magistrates,
There are big-bellied financiers,
There are cops,
But for all these scoundrels
There’s dynamite...
Long live the sound
Of the explosion!
—Attributed to Ravachol, French anarchist

The explosion of bombs is an inescapable feature of the contemporary world. Marked by suicide attacks around the globe, and in the aftermath of a century that turned the bombing of civilians into the norm for warfare, our era seems unthinkable without such destruction. In the nineteenth century, by contrast, dynamite explosion represented an entirely new form of violence, as Alfred Nobel’s invention of 1866 helped to sweep the world into its modern shape. From the moment of its inception, dynamite violence became an immediate and ever-escalating sensation, with its stunning ability not only to kill and maim, but within seconds to level an entire landscape. The violence of dynamite reverberated across the sensory spectrum as something novel (hence sensational in that way, too), from its chemical smell, to its shattering sound, to its extreme tactile effects, and it held pronounced political associations, quickly becoming associated with terrorism. It shattered, exploded, ripped, and tore; it created its own palpable and recognizable form of wreckage; and its employment for radical causes suggested a future with unknowable and potentially frightful contours. In sum, dynamite violence added a potent new element to the modern imaginary.
Dynamite’s violence might be wide and indiscriminate, but its users were very particular: revolutionaries, and in particular anarchists, who were figured incessantly and in near-caricature as bomb-wielding maniacs.\(^4\) “In late-nineteenth-century America,” as the historian Margaret Marsh explains, “the mention of the word ‘anarchist’ brought to the minds of most people a particular image: an unkempt, bushy-bearded man, swarthy and dirty, lurking in a dark alley with a bomb hidden under his coat.”\(^5\) The bomb and the anarchist were partners; to understand the significance of one is to penetrate the world of the other. The story of the anarchist—his development as type, his association with explosive violence, his place in the literary imagination—holds rich critical potential. To resurrect the cultural and literary history of anarchism in England in this period is to draw a variety of conclusions about how the imagining of political violence and literary form did and did not cooperate. Moreover, one of the critical trajectories we will follow in this chapter is from the particular phenomenon of the anarchist to the more general one of the terrorist, a movement that is both historical (anarchist violence faded as a world phenomenon; terrorist violence did not) and theoretical (at any given moment, the prospect of a given political actor shifting into a generalized destroyer is always live and pressing). In addition to conjuring a typology of violent actors with lasting resonance, the presence of dynamite next to anarchism made for complex, often flamboyant, plots and styles, and its effects on the body created exceptional challenges that literary works both met and dodged, engaged and elided. For modernists, it is precisely the gaps and imbalances in the story of dynamite violence—the excesses of harm in relation to the imagined payoff; the combination of cynicism with idealism in the person of the bomber; the tremendously awful effects of dynamite on bodies and buildings; the powerful attachment to an idea often presented as without substance—that make the topic intriguing. In this sense of incongruity and imbalance, the content of the dynamite narrative overlaps almost entirely with the formal proclivities of the modernist tale about it.

For anarchists themselves, dynamite held highly idealized associations; it offered new vistas of power, not solely for its potential to wreak destruction, but also for its ability to terrify a wide public. The connotations of dynamite for radical politics are hard to overstate, for it brought together, with fearsome efficacy, the capacity to destroy with ease of procurement and deployment. It was the ultimate (p.85) weapon of the one against the many, of any individual with only a smattering of training, or connection to other revolutionists, and a will to kill. (Nietzsche: “I am no man. I am dynamite.”\(^6\)) The dynamite bomb seemed tiny in proportion to its capacity to do harm; it could fit easily into a small bag, or even a pocket. Above all, as the historian Paul Avrich argues, dynamite had virulent class connotations, and this is why its association with anarchism and with other kinds of radical threat was so profound:
Dynamite, in the eyes of the anarchists, had become a panacea for the ills of society. They saw it as a great equalizing force, enabling ordinary workmen to stand up against armies, militias, and police, to say nothing of the hired gunmen of the employers. Cheap in price, easy to carry, not hard to obtain, it was the poor man’s natural weapon, a power provided by science against tyranny and oppression…. Just as gunpowder had broken the back of feudalism and made way for the rule of the bourgeoisie, so dynamite would bring down capitalism and usher in the reign of the proletariat.  

If anarchists hailed dynamite for its equalizing properties, the broader culture was similarly infatuated. The figure of the anarchist bomber (the “dynamitard,” in contemporary parlance), his violent acts (referred to as “outrages” or “attentats”), his favored technology (especially dynamite), and his uncertain aims (total destruction, according to popular accounts) together presented the British public with a nexus of enthralling ideas and images to be explored for three decades in journalism and in fiction. Not surprisingly, popular novels that invoked the specter of anarchist violence flourished in this period, in a subgenre—the dynamite novel—that freely employed elements common to such nineteenth-century conventions as the detective novel, the industrial novel, (proto)science fiction, fantasy novels of invasion or world war, and melodrama. These texts—with such titles as *A Modern Dedalus* (1885), *Dynamiter* (1885), *for Maimie’s Sake: A Tale of Love and Dynamite* (1886), *Hartmann the Anarchist* (1893), and *The Angel of the Revolution* (1895)—helped to configure the anarchist as type, and also focused on the idea of dynamite, with villains inevitably designated as chemists, the residue of dynamite often coloring their hands and clothing, and the smoke of detonated bombs a feature of the threatened landscape. More lavish dynamite novels, in which imagery of revolutionary violence reaches feverish proportions, might feature hyperbolic uses of the substance, such as anarchists raining fire on London by dropping dynamite bombs out of fantastical airships. The power to destroy, in these works, offered the guiding principle in figuring political and social change. Indeed, the most salient and consistent characteristic of dynamite, as it was imagined and represented in fiction and elsewhere, was the hyperbole and excess it generated. The fact of excess, as we have already begun to see in this study, gives violence a particular representational charge in modernism, forcing the literary text into a pointedly self-conscious position, and generating elaborate formal gymnastics. In the case of dynamite violence, this constellation of effects is, in a sense, already in place by virtue of the subject matter alone, which affiliates throughout the century with two related phenomena, the emergence of sensationalism as a bold new feature of Victorian media culture, and the presence, across many genres, of melodrama.
In particular, dynamite violence and melodrama continually overlap and express one another. A remarkably pliant construct throughout this period, melodrama began as a style of stage play in England and France in the middle of the nineteenth century, but more widely expressed a sensibility that could be fitted to many types of writing and performance, so long as these were geared to emotional extremes, ethical absolutes, and exaggerated situations. Peter Brooks has dubbed this emotional and gestural framework “the melodramatic imagination” and Elaine Hadley “the melodramatic mode,” and though there are particulars that denote and ground the term “melodrama” in the period, these critics demarcate a swath of literary and popular culture whose conventions are as recognizable today as they were in the Victorian period. Brooke terms these “the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward for virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety” (Brooks, 11–12), and Hadley: “familial narratives of dispersal and reunion … emphatically visual renderings of bodily torture and criminal conduct … atmospheric menace and providential plotting … expressions of highly charged emotion, and [a] tendency to personify absolutes like good and evil” (Hadley, 3). As these lists indicate, the elements that comprise melodrama are neither fixed nor static; it is a moving field, and one whose malleability has always been mined by an exceptionally diverse array of writers. Melodrama can, for instance, be highly political in purpose—an enormously influential case being *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852)—with a politics that necessarily conforms to its own language conventions, sustaining and perpetuating its logic of good/virtue versus evil/vice. It can, too, rehearse in secular, consumable form many Christian themes. Once derided as middlebrow and feminine, melodrama has emerged as a significant category in cultural studies, and for good reasons: first, because a great variety of texts can be (re)considered according to its tenets; second, because persistent structures of thought and action like the melodramatic frequently produce generic mixtures and shifts; and because there are certain topics that are invariably figured in melodramatic terms. Dynamite violence is melodramatic in this last sense. The moral polarities, affective excess, invitation to delve into secret zones, and literal explosiveness generated by radicals with their bombs were enthralling in ways perfectly suited to melodrama. By the end of the nineteenth century, in other words, melodrama and anarchist violence had both become bywords for sensational events, overwrought emotion, and schematic plots, and thus their yoking has about it an inescapable logic. At the same time, in modernism, any such conjunction is subject to deconstruction; the mutuality of dynamite and melodrama occasions literary representation in mimetic terms, to be sure, but also generates powerful examples of conflict between these two partners, as instability and uncertainty replace the fixity that melodrama generally seeks to encode.
The most canonical rendering of anarchist violence in English modernism comes in Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907), and a reading of that novel forms the crux of my discussion. But Conrad’s work points outward toward a variety of intimately related issues, including the popularization of the dynamite theme in varying literary media, the intractable question of sensationalism in relation to violent radicalism, and the thicket of contradictions surrounding the figure of the anarchist himself. All of these topics embed *The Secret Agent* in its late-Victorian context, but the novel also generates the conditions for an entirely new kind of danger, which will come to dominate the violent imaginary of the later twentieth century, the terrorist. At the pivot is the bomb-making Professor, who slips out of the melodramatic frame altogether to incorporate and instantiate this new phenomenon of terrorist as urban threat. Terrorism and anarchism were not synonymous in this period, though they were often closely allied in the public imagination, with the idea of terrorist, especially, abhorrent to the vast majority, but for a very few, a great honor. Anarchism is engaging as a topic in part for its historicity, but terrorism emerges from this welter as an exportable abstraction, that which can (and of course does) move from place to place, era to era, cause to cause. And if anarchism operates within an active field of Victorian imaginative constructs, of which the terrorist forms an emerging part, his presence in *The Secret Agent* has a catapulting and transformative effect. For Conrad, as for many others, dynamite became a marker for a threat of violence that was virtually defined by its ability to disappear, and *The Secret Agent*, which delves deeply into the nature of secrecy, propounds a logic of increasing invisibility with respect to violence. The novel registers a triple move: from reckoning with the attacked flesh as enacted violence, into a melodramatic rendering of violence as theatricality, and ultimately toward an image of modern violence as pure, endlessly suspended potential. Violence, we might say, goes underground in *The Secret Agent*, much as anarchists themselves were forced to do by the beginning of the twentieth century; or, better, Conrad traces a wider phenomenon of the period that spans from the events of the novel (1894) to its composition and publication thirteen years later, whereby the spectacle of theatrical violence mutates into the threatening yet obscure possibility of attack. That this latter condition tracks both Foucault’s definition of modern cultures (as discipline internalized) and the general condition of a terrorist threat up to the present time (recognizing the possibility of explosion at any moment) suggests that for all its satire and excess—and despite its generally conservative politics—the novel has something exceptionally astute to say about the intertwining of violence and modernity.

**Imagining Revolutionaries and their Acts**
The last two decades of the nineteenth century might well be called the era of anarchism. The period was marked by a string of sensational acts of violence against individual leaders and representative targets, which riveted the public and were heavily reported by the press in England, America, and across Europe. To give just a few of the most notable examples: in 1883, the German anarchist Friedrich Reinsdorf, along with several accomplices, attempted to kill the German emperor by blowing up his carriage; in Chicago in 1886, a bomb was thrown at the police as they broke up a labor gathering—the infamous Haymarket case—for which five anarchists were wrongly executed (the actual bomb-thrower was never identified); the anarchist Alexander Berkman shot the steel magnate Henry Clay Frick at close range in 1892, injuring but not killing Frick; in 1894, the anarchist Émile Henry threw a bomb into the Café Terminus in Paris, wounding twenty people, killing one, and generating a frenzy of press attention; in the late 1890s, major public figures in France, Spain, and Austria were all killed by revolutionaries with anarchist affiliations; and in 1901, President McKinley of the United States was shot and killed by a Polish man with loose anarchist ties. In England, no lethal bombing of a public place or prominent leader was ever carried out, the only person to be killed by an anarchist attack in England being Martial Bourdin, the bomber whose accidental self-immolation at the Greenwich Observatory forms the basis of *The Secret Agent*. Yet a slew of attacks and attempted attacks received intensive coverage in the press, including attempts to blow up London Bridge (1884), Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament (1885), and Greenwich Observatory (1894); multiple plots to assassinate Queen Victoria; the arrest and sentencing of a group of anarchists in the city of Walsall for bomb manufacture (1892); as well as international anarchist incidents and trials, such as those listed above.12
Indeed, in the public eye, anarchism has always spelled violence, “a bloody and smoking chaos, a heap of ruins of all existing things, a complete loosening and severance of all ties that have hitherto bound men together: marriage, the family, the Church, the State, unbridled men and women no longer held in order by any authority, and mutually devouring each other,” in the words of one fictional commentator of the period. In keeping with the hyperbole of such terms, the sense that the political movement of anarchism signaled the unleashing of anarchy became a persistent misconception in the period, one that has never fully abated. In fact, when anarchism embraced violence, it was as a means to an end that was supposed to be peaceful and orderly: a utopian future in which the state and its oppressive mechanisms would have melted away, replaced by a harmonious world order. Nevertheless, the anarchist ideal of the destruction of the state, when yoked in the public mind with high-profile assassinations and bombings, invited a fervent, dystopic response. “To destroy everything” is the avowed aim of the movement, according to an anarchist character in Émile Zola’s *Germinal* (1885): “Set fire to the four corners of the town, mow down the people, level everything, and when there is nothing more of this rotten world left standing, perhaps a better one will grow up in its place.” The idea of leveling is especially noteworthy, conjoining an image of social equalization with physical devastation. Or, in the words of one revolutionary from the forgotten novel *Hartmann the Anarchist*, “Violent diseases often demand violent remedies ... Regard us anarchists as excising the foul ulcers of Humanity and as forced to perform that duty with no anaesthetics to aid us.”
What was anarchism? The word “anarchy” means “no authority,” and it is the opposition to all forms by which one person can hold power over another that most succinctly characterizes the philosophy. Anarchism comprises different branches and emphases, but in every case it opposes the defining institutions of formal power and authority: the government, the church, and the legal system. It stands absolutely against the state—any kind of state, worker or bourgeois, postrevolutionary or capitalist—which it believes inevitably institutes inequality and injustice. From its beginnings in the political theory of William Godwin at the end of the eighteenth century, anarchism developed in the early 1860s, largely out of the writings of the French philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the activities of the Russian Mikhail Bakunin, whose life in exile involved the creation of several notorious secret societies. It entered what we might call its heyday from the early 1880s until the end of the century, when anarchist movements flourished across England, America, and the Continent, and when public fascination was at its apogee. In the twentieth century, anarchism had sporadic life in many parts of the world, significantly in Spain, where anarchist groups were central actors in the Civil War, fighting against Franco’s fascist army (1936–39), and in the United States, where public fear of the phenomenon was reawakened by a series of sensational bombings in 1919. In England, however, the anarchist movement began its decline around the turn of the century, as aggressive tactics of police suppression, including the shuttering of anarchist journals and the tightening of immigration and deportation laws, eventually mitigated any serious presence. Up to then, England’s relatively lenient laws had provided refuge for anarchists exiled from more repressive parts of the world. Historically, anarchism emerged side by side with other radical political movements of the mid-nineteenth century, a response to the egregious injustices of the industrial revolution. Proudhon famously claimed that “property is theft,” yet anarchism was not, for all its attack on private property, specifically a workers’ movement. It took its membership from all classes, and it had high-profile embodiment in the persons of Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin, both Russian aristocrats.

The principle of cooperation, writ small and large, functions for anarchists as the driver of their desired social apparatus, including quite complex functions, such as the creation of central banks and the organization of agriculture and industry. As Kropotkin, the most respected anarchist of the late nineteenth century, wrote in his 1905 Encyclopædia Britannica entry:

Anarchism ... [is] the name given to a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government—harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being.
Kropotkin believed in mutualism as the essential principle not only of anarchism, but of any thriving form of human community. In his most famous book, *Mutual Aid* (1902), he makes the argument that the pseudo-Darwinian emphasis on survival of the fittest as a description of biological and social development is dead wrong, with cooperation and mutualism in fact marking and determining the success of a given species. “Sociability,” he writes, “is as much a law of nature as mutual struggle.”

Kropotkin has been called “the ethical anarchist,” but other brands of anarchism tended to place more emphasis on the individual; sometimes calling themselves “egoists,” these theorists believed in the ascendant individual as the only meaningful social entity. Rejecting any form of external constraint, many drew inspiration from Max Stirner’s fearsome, proto-Nietzschean *The Ego and His Own* (1844, sometimes translated as *The Ego and Its Own*), which propounded an individualism that elevated the sovereign self to a position of near impunity. Kropotkin’s cooperative ideal seems entirely at odds with the egoistic philosophy of Stirner, and, in fact, there was always a tension in anarchist thought between the stress on cooperation and the sanctioning of isolated, individual action. Nevertheless, the various camps did hold in common some basic precepts. Most broadly, they were distinguished from other radicals of the nineteenth century by their firm attachment to the principle of a future without government, and hence, almost by default, the demand for a massive leveling had to be part of the program.
Perhaps the best moniker for depicting how anarchists and their bombs were imagined in their own time comes in the term anarchists coined to rationalize and explain their mode of violence: propaganda by deed.\textsuperscript{22} Propaganda by deed became canonized as allowable violence, and, as such, it partially underwrote the movement. Moreover, its effective transposition into terrorist ideology makes it one of the critical links between this late-Victorian chapter in history and the long era of terrorism that has not yet ended. Clearly, there is something seductive for revolutionaries in the act of violence, and anarchists often invoked a rhetoric of purity and fertility in destruction. Bakunin wrote, “Revolution requires extensive and widespread destruction, a fecund and renovating destruction, since in this way and only in this way are new worlds born,”\textsuperscript{23} or, in the words of the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta, “the insurrectional act which is intended to affirm socialist principles by deeds, is the most effective means of propaganda and the only one which, without deceiving and corrupting the masses, can penetrate down to the deepest levels of society.”\textsuperscript{24} Thus anarchists might call for “a clean sweep” of the social order as a necessary preface for a revived, better world.\textsuperscript{25} As Zola’s anarchist in \textit{Germinal} has it, this desired new world can only be brought about “By fire, by poison, by the dagger. The brigand is the true hero, the popular avenger, the revolutionary in action, with no phrases drawn out of books. We need a series of tremendous outrages to frighten the powerful and to arouse the people” (Zola, 254). As early as 1881, when an international anarchist conference was held in London, the advocacy of propaganda by deed had become manifest among anarchists, and the conference welcomed it as such, with speeches celebrating individual acts of destruction.\textsuperscript{26} The delegates took special note that anarchists needed to pay attention to scientific and technological developments that could aid them in perpetuating offensive tactics—to wit, training in explosives. The science of bomb making would remain a central feature in anarchist literature, the most notorious instance being Johann Most’s \textit{Revolutionary War Science} (1885) a bomb-making tract that \textsuperscript{(p.92)} circulated widely and clandestinely throughout Europe and America for decades, and made the German-born Most one of the most feared and famous anarchists in the world.

\textit{A Girl Among the Anarchists} (1903), a semiautobiographical novel by Helen and Olivia Rossetti (nieces of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and cousins of Ford Madox Ford, writing under the pseudonym Isabel Meredith), offers a canny rendering of propaganda by deed from the perspective of an English, middle-class woman, taking a quietly rational approach to the inflammatory subject.\textsuperscript{27} The novel traces the involvement and eventual disillusionment of its first-person narrator, whose commitment to the amelioration of social injustices has led her to a group of anarchists. Like the Rossettis, who edited an anarchist journal (\textit{The Torch}) in the basement of their family home, the fictional Isabel becomes the editor of \textit{The Tocsin}, and hence is situated at the center of anarchist activity in London. From such a vantage point, she explains the place of violence within the movement:
Very diverse in nature were the motives which prompted the committal of these acts of violence—these assassinations and dynamite explosions—in different men. With some it was an act of personal revolt, the outcome of personal sufferings and wrongs endured by the rebel himself, by his family or his class. In others violence was rather the offspring of ideas, the logical result of speculation upon the social evil and the causes thereof. These Anarchists referred to their actions as Propaganda by Deed.\(^{28}\)

The narrator’s tone is always moderate and explanatory, and the anarchists are sympathetically imagined as motivated by the drive for social equality and justice. Indeed, in the only case where one of the novel’s characters commits an outrage, the bomb-thrower has been deteriorating into paranoia and mental breakdown; his crime represents the final movement of his descent into insanity. The Rossettis’ novel posits a certain marginality in the idea of propaganda by deed, and hence stands against the conception of the general public, for whom it was the defining (and perhaps the only interesting) feature of anarchism.

It is not only the theory of propaganda by deed that caught people’s attention but the term itself, which was used ubiquitously. At the literal level, the term stresses the revolutionary message (“propaganda,” a word whose negative connotations postdate this period) over the violent “deed.” Despite the quaintness of the term to contemporary ears, the stress on violent action as message links historical anarchists with terrorist practices over a longer historical span. Theorists of terrorism in our contemporary context have argued that terrorism is best understood as a form of communication, however distorted and monomaniacal such an idea (p.93) of communication might be. Without minimizing the often horrendous facts of terrorist violence, this approach emphasizes that terrorist violence is meant to encode meaning into action, to utilize highly spectacular and news-garnering violence as a form of language—what Émile Henry, the Café Terminus bomber, called “the voice of dynamite.”\(^{29}\) Or, as Vladimir declares of anarchists in The Secret Agent, “bombs are your means of expression.”\(^{30}\) Or again, in the words of an “anarchic poet” in Chesterton’s novel The Man Who was Thursday (1908), “the man who throws a bomb is an artist.”\(^{31}\) As suggested in the introduction, it is this notion of terrorist violence as language that Karlheinz Stockhausen seemed to have been reflecting upon when he praised the 9/11 attacks as a tremendous work of art, yet in the present, as in the previous two centuries, such thinking always conjures its antithetical idea, that there can never be an alignment of violence and legitimate meaning. Propaganda by deed is a principle of action that assumes interpretation, under the premise that those reacting from the outside will see a clear and causal relationship between the destruction at hand and a political intention. It is, in this sense, a theory that demands an unlikely cohesion between perpetrators and public.
The idea that violence might act (or be imagined to act) as a form of language is a startling claim, though one that has become so familiar in its contemporary terrorist context as perhaps to pass without notice (or, again, to become shockingly noticed when articulated in terms that seem laudatory). I have already described in the introduction, and critical discourse since the publication of Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* has often assumed, a deep and abiding silence surrounding the felt experience of violence. At the same time, in the pandying episode from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce offered an image of violence bringing forth language, in a sequence that had the force of an origin story. Indeed, one of this study’s central objectives is to see how violence and at least one large swath of language—literary form—intersect and produce one another, and so to find in the notion of propaganda by deed a formulation that insists on a ready interchange between explosive violence and the realm of language and interpretation is to confront a significant conceptual moment in the modern history of violence. In the assumptions behind propaganda by deed is embedded a powerful understanding about the nature of violence—that it transpires in dense and crowded significatory settings. In the particular case of “the voice of dynamite,” violence speaks in tones that are meant to be loud and clear, the message blunt, even if the political theory itself is complex, at times incoherent. The concept of propaganda by deed figures violence acting upon the world in the form of hyperbolic and wrenching drama, one that seems simultaneously to expand a political meaning and to nullify its value.

(p.94) This theatricality is also captured in the word “deed,” which has a formal cadence, suggesting something elevated and serious, even a bit archaic. The image—and this was typically highlighted by anarchists in their own self-representations—was of a lone actor, motivated by rage and passion, taking the message of the revolution into his own hands, in an act of violence that was also self-sacrifice. Such an image differs in important ways from another central formula for radical violence in the period, the general strike (“direct action”), in which the individual actor is submerged by the group, and the power of sheer numbers replaces the individual bomb-thrower as instigator of change. Or perhaps it is best to see these two distinct modes as contributing together to a broad conceptualization of radical violence in the period, where direct action conjures the vast organized (or perhaps dangerously disorganized) masses, while propaganda by deed suggests the supremely motivated individual. With the theatricality of propaganda by deed, the central actor is figured in grand, gestural terms, as one who understands himself to be engaged in performance, and the whole enterprise radiates with an exuberantly aesthetic quality.
A hybrid of revolutionary self-representation and equally vivid reactionary portrayal, the person of the anarchist bomber was typically figured in stylized terms—a repository, we might say, for a certain literary zeal. For instance, the question of what kind of person would or could become an anarchist and how to amalgamate such people into an understandable frame of reference came wreathed in intriguing contradiction. As the narrator of Conrad’s “The Informer” remarks, “anarchists in general were simply inconceivable to me mentally, morally, logically, sentimentally, and even physically.” On the one hand, it was unsurprisingly the case, as Haia Shpayer-Makov argues, that the anarchist “was greeted [in the press] with the stock rhetoric and imagery commonly applied to the Irish, the socialists, and other ‘deviant’ groups…. The anarchist was associated with revolutionism and violence, and as such stood in opposition to the self-image of British society as an orderly and law-abiding community.” Yet, for all the invective and anxiety directed toward anarchists and other “degenerates,” there was an appealing mystery about this figure. In popular dynamite novels, anarchists were often surprisingly likable, their motives laudable, even as they tapped into (and helped to refill) a reservoir of anxiety about revolutionary madness.

An amalgam of historical personae and fictional characters, the anarchist as rendered across the culture embodied a number of often clashing traits. The very question of how anarchists operated at all opened up a plethora of issues surrounding their identity and individuation. In some cases, the anarchist was understood to be so embroiled in layers of secrecy, and in organizations beneath organizations, as to have virtually no individual reality. Historically, it was probably Bakunin who did most to foster a sense of obsessive secrecy as a signal trait among anarchists, as a founder of several secret organizations. In the fiction of the period, writers imagined elaborate plots involving secret societies with Masonic-styled initiations and codes. Perhaps most revealing are those works—the most elaborate case, but not the only one, being Dostoevsky’s *The Devils* (1871)—that imagine a single actor, ruthless and clever, convincing others of the breadth and power of a movement that, in reality, does not exist at all. Secrecy, in other words, was imagined as enabling vast networks of subversives to be joined together in an expansive network, and it was also seen as a chimera allowing a single fanatic wildly to extend his reach.
The idea that anarchism is more of a phantasm than a reality, the unfurling of a single individual’s radical will-to-destroy rather than a real movement, reaches its fullest exemplification in Chesterton’s *The Man Who was Thursday*, a strange fable that is simultaneously a story about worldwide anarchist plotters and about the complete unreality of that threat. The principal conceit of the novel is of a group of powerful anarchists—the leaders of the European anarchist movement—who have been infiltrated by the novel’s protagonist, the policeman Gabriel Syme. What transpires, however, is not a tale of violence unmasked, but rather of the identifying of the anarchist leaders as, to a man, agents of the police, leading to the infamous, terrifying Sunday. Despite an initial scene in which Syme witnesses a room full of sinister modern weapons, the giant, international anarchist threat—like the novel itself, subtitled “A Nightmare”—is a fantasy. In this Foucauldian world, there are no powerful violent anarchists plotting assassinations; there are only policemen performing the role of anarchists, creating the characters they fear and imagine, keeping up the chase (quite literally, with the novel staging a whole series of outlandish chases). Critics have noted that Chesterton, like Conrad in *The Secret Agent*, is attending to anarchism at a moment, in England, of its relative belatedness, and suggest that the extravagantly allegorical nature of his conception of anarchism depends upon this condition of muted threat. This seems accurate to a degree, yet the novel’s extreme denuding of political content from anarchism, alongside a paranoid exaggeration of its importance among police and government functionaries, was not uncommon, even in anarchism’s prime. Chesterton’s parable sees anarchism as a form of political violence that prolifically generates fantasy, defined by the gulf separating political content (anarchist theory) and method (terrorist violence). This breach is represented in the novel, or so it seems at first blush, by a strange riddle, with the anarchists named for the days of the week, and the mysterious Sunday seeming to stand for some exceptional concept (an eccentric version of God himself, indeed). And yet, when the political narrative falls away, the whole rationale for the allegory also disappears. In this case, the allegorical structure collapses not because the violent content is too real to be governable by its form of discrete categories (as in “Leda and the Swan”), but because there is no violent content calling for the allegory in the first place. All these names and guises are simply tricks. What is at stake for Chesterton, in developing and undermining his strange formal apparatus, is the way anarchism is imagined to conjoin terror with political vacuity. That which hinges propaganda to deed evaporates, and the result, in *The Man Who was Thursday*, is a wild literary exercise that has puzzled readers since its publication.
In most cases, however, the anarchist was imagined not as hallucination, but as real and thriving. First and foremost, he was a destroyer, unconstrained by ordinary ethical norms, single-mindedly driving the revolution via the commission of “outrages.” The historical names attached to this image are full of flair: Sergei Nechaev (sometimes spelled “Nechayev”) set the tone, authoring a chilling tract entitled “Catechism of the Revolution,” which spelled out the image of the terrorist in cool, calculated detail. Johann Most, the maker of bombs, offered an image of science gone horribly wrong, as he willingly dispersed the technology of killing, seemingly indifferent to human life. The exuberantly self-righteous and famous Ravachol was a French anarchist who became something of a folk legend, after being guillotined in 1892 for a series of dynamite attacks; his song, “La Ravachole” (a revamping of the Revolutionary anthem “La Carmagnole” and the epigraph for this chapter) remained as an echo of his fiery views, with lines like “Let’s blow up all the bourgeois/We’ll blow them up!,” and its refrain, “Long live the sound/Of the explosion!” Then there was Émile Henry, who declared to the judges at his trial for the Café Terminus bombing, in which he was sentenced to death, that “those who have suffered are tired at last of their sufferings,” and that anarchism “will end by killing you.” Alexander Berkman, as unapologetic at his trial for shooting Frick as Henry was at his, depicted the attempted assassination, in a widely read prison memoir (1912), in riveting, moment-by-moment narration. The list goes on, but what seems most notable in each case is the sense of drama, sensation, and narrative possibility around each of these (in)famous figures. Even in the nonfictional language surrounding anarchists—and central to their self-presentation—the characteristics are exhibited that motivated dynamite novelists, and that writers like Conrad would present in terms of thick, modernist conundrums.

Nechaev’s landmark “Catechism,” written in 1869 as a statement of revolutionary methods and creeds, and garnering long-lasting status as underground doctrine, provided an image of the terrorist that was in every sense literary: it both derived from and inspired fictional characters, it very self-consciously imagined the terrorist as a persona, and it carried a strong sense of aura or mood. The excess that always surrounds dynamite violence is here personified. The first line, “The revolutionary is a doomed man,” establishes its ethics of insurrectionary violence primarily as a matter of the commitment, courage, and ultimate selflessness of the terrorist himself:

For him there exists only one contentment, one consolation, one reward and one satisfaction—the success of the revolution. Day and night he must have only one thought, one goal—ruthless destruction. Striving coolly and tirelessly toward this goal, he must be ready to perish himself and to destroy with his own hands everything that hinders the realization of his goal....
The rebel of the “Catechism” feels an intimacy with death: he not only kills, but does so with his bare body, his “own hands.” A complete loner, the anarchist-as-terrorist is enjoined to foreswear all ties of personal affiliation, indeed to relinquish his very humanity in the name of the cause: “All tender softening sentiments of kinship, friendship, love, gratitude and even honor itself must be suppressed in him by a single cold passion for the revolutionary cause.” This ideal of a revolutionary with an absolute and dominating purpose reached far and wide within radical circles. John Henry Mackay, in a semiautobiographical novel about London anarchism in the 1880s, sums up the influence in creating one of his characters as a disciple of Nechaev: “At the age of twenty-four he is a terrorist. He has learned them by heart, those mad eleven principles ‘concerning the duties of the revolutionist to himself and to his fellow-revolutionists’ ... He journeys from city to city. Everywhere he tries to undermine the existing order of things ... He trusts only in the revolution henceforth.”

Restless and itinerant (another hallmark of historical anarchists), the anarchist of the “Catechism” seems to be everywhere and nowhere, a subversive agent of the modern world, relentlessly working to carry out his mission of destruction.

In constructing an image of the revolutionary as ascetic, devoted body and soul to the cause, Nechaev calls to mind a fictional character who, beginning in the early 1860s, became something of a celebrity on the revolutionary circuit, Rakhmetov, from a novel by the Russian N. G. Chernyshevsky, What Is to Be Done? (1863). Chernyshevsky’s novel, which was famous in its own day even before Lenin’s pamphlet adopted its title, deals primarily with questions of how the “new generation” of progressive young Russians approach such matters as sexuality, gender, social interactions, family ties, and the proper economic relations among the classes. Rakhmetov, a shadowy figure whose terrorist activities are alluded to only vaguely, is brought into the novel, according to the author’s own claims, to show what an extraordinary person looks like, someone above and beyond even the novel’s very admirable protagonists. An aristocrat who renounces his wealth, Rakhmetov leads a life of self-denial, swearing off such luxuries as alcohol and sex (“He said to himself, ‘I shall not drink one drop of wine. I shall not touch any women’”), eating only in such a way as to strengthen his already considerable physique—but never for enjoyment—and, in times of “trial” for an unspecified upcoming hardship, sleeping on a bed of nails. What Is to Be Done? was translated and serialized in anarchist journals, and the character of Rakhmetov (or “Rakhmetoff,” in its nineteenth-century transliteration) became shorthand for the idealized terrorist; the name was used as an alias by Berkman, for example, in the lead-up to his attempted assassination of Frick.
For all the asceticism and grim determination in these portrayals, we also find in many works a streak of joy and pleasure in the act of destruction, viewed as revenge-taking against deserving exploiters—the **jouissance** of the deed. Berkman, for one, saw in reprisal killing the germination of his own manhood: “Could anything be nobler than to die for a grand, a sublime Cause? ... And what could be higher in life than to be a true revolutionist? It is to be a man, a complete MAN. A being who has neither personal interests nor desires above the necessities of the Cause; one who has emancipated himself from being merely human...” (emphasis in original).43 One notes, here, the conjunction between Nechaev’s ascetic ideal and a Fanonian model of generative violence, which, as we have seen, imagines a virile masculinity emerging from the fight against European oppressors. Both of these radical positions, in turn, gain momentum from a conventional Christian rhetoric of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, as the revolutionary investment in the body aligns itself with other mystical and masculinist traditions. In Berkman’s language, two different sacrificial bodies are suggested: that of Frick, who stands in for all exploiters, and that of the incarcerated or executed revolutionary, whose expendable body is subsumed by the cause.44 The dualist underpinnings of Western sacrificial logic, the apotheosis accorded to the person who gives his body in the name of some larger commitment, the Christian promise of a glory that disdains bodily pleasure and rewards privation—such conventions are perpetuated in radical conceptions of the revolutionary hero.45

Indeed, a central component in many representations was an almost religious fervor defining the anarchist. Zola’s Souvarine, in *Germinal*, is one such figure. The novel details a mining strike whose ultimate effect is the near-complete decimation of both company and workers. Though the novel’s leading figures (including the protagonist Étienne) hope to avoid violence, the miseries attending the conditions in the mine, along with the strike’s escalation, beget an ever-widening circle (p.99) of horrific violence, which culminates in Souvarine’s destruction of the mine by sabotage. Though Souvarine’s affect in general is one of ironized detachment in relation to the strike (nothing more than “foolery,” as he repeatedly terms it), he becomes powerfully animated when he describes his vision of the destruction of the world: “As he talked, Souvarine grew terrible. An ecstasy raised him on his chair; a mystic flame darted from his pale eyes, and his delicate hands gripped the edge of the table almost to breaking” (Zola, 254). Such mystic transformation is as powerful as it looks, moreover, for Souvarine’s ultimate act of terrorism overshadows the many local, grisly, often frightful scenes of violence the novel catalogues. The anarchist’s form of destruction, mirroring his feverish power, is on an entirely different order from even the most feared forms of revolutionary rampaging. “He had vitality enough in him to bring the dead to life, passion enough for a hundred men,” is how one sympathetic novelist depicted the leader of the Haymarket anarchists.46
Insofar as anarchists were imbued with mystical zeal and power, they begin to metamorphose into one of their avatars, the terrorist. Thus, in another dramatic rendering of the mystic revolutionary, in his *Underground Russia: Revolutionary Profiles and Sketches from Life* (1883), the anarchist Stepniak paints a vibrant portrait of his own version of “The Terrorist.” (Stepniak, pseudonym for Sergei Stepniak-Kravchinsky, was a Russian residing in England, garnering a following among well-to-do English leftists; in that sense, he was like Kropotkin after him, though Stepniak, unlike Kropotkin, had credentials for violence, having himself assassinated the chief of the Russian secret police in 1878.) Of the terrorist, he writes: “He is noble, terrible, irresistibly fascinating, for he combines in himself the two sublimities of human grandeur: the martyr and the hero.” The terrorist, moreover,

... is the type of individual force, intolerant of every yoke.... He bends his haughty head before no idol. He has devoted his sturdy arms to the cause of the people. But he no longer deifies them. And if the people, ill-counselling, say to him, ‘Be a slave,’ he will exclaim, ‘No;’ and he will march onward, defying their imprecations and their fury, certain that justice will be rendered to him in his tomb. ... Such is the Terrorist.47

In Stepniak’s rendering, the revolutionary is a person powerfully motivated to change the world. It is on the future, and perhaps on the past, that he fixes his dreamy gaze; the present will always be the object of destruction, and contemporaries will be the least likely to embrace the terrorist himself. And, in fact, the terrorist’s relationship to the future is one of his hallmarks; he is always pressing (or thrusting, rushing) the present into the future, the temporal realm of his vivid (p.100) imaginary. There is something intensely compelling about this willed and contorted relation to temporality, which dispenses with time as it is actually lived, in the present, a feature of terrorist rhetoric and belief that continues to hold sway in the present period. Yet figures like Stepniak’s fighter, with his dreamy qualities and exaggerated characteristics, also lends himself to parody, or to a charge of inefficacy and fantasizing. The icon of the lone terrorist out to change the world with his bombs was always ripe to become a ludicrous image of narcissistic self-delusion.
Even such an ironist as Oscar Wilde took an interest in the figure of the feverishly devoted, revolutionary assassin. It may come as a surprise to find Wilde creating this kind of protagonist, but *Vera, or the Nihilists*, his first play, takes up the topic of political assassination with all the relish of a dynamite novel and offers an idiosyncratic generic response to terrorism’s appeal. The play presents a roster of idealized Russian insurrectionists, who are motivated to become assassins by a combination of ardent social vision and personal grievance against the czarist regime. Composed in 1880 and originally slated for production in London the following year, the play was withdrawn because of the sensitivity of the political topic—the czar, a target of revolutionaries for years, was assassinated in 1881. The play combines what will become the Wildean hallmarks of arch, decadent, urbane dialogue with a focus on the heated doings of a group of radicals, committed to harassing and, if possible, killing off Russia’s rulers. The eponymous Vera, along with her brother, enters the secret comradeship to avenge their other brother, who had been imprisoned and killed by the regime. As the effective leader of the organization, Vera meets and falls passionately in love with one Alexis, who turns out to be an infiltrator, and none other than the czar’s son, whom Vera is required to kill. Unwilling to do so, she kills herself with a poisoned dagger, and, despite his wish to die by her side, she saves him, in a hyperbolic gesture, by throwing the dagger out of the window. As a protagonist, Vera is not a character we might ordinarily associate with Wilde; she is strong, passionate, humorless, devoted, and ultimately tragic. And the play as a whole is an uncomfortable arrangement. It consists of two divergent groups of characters, the revolutionaries, who are quite free from irony (they are earnestness embodied) and the members of the czar’s ruling council, especially the witty Prince Paul Maraloffski, who belong fully to the world of Wildean reversal and urbanity. Though the dialogue among the council can be amusing, there remains something incompatible in the play’s two worlds, epitomized less by their differences in class than by a stark tonal discrepancy. It juxtaposes, rather than melds, two generic tendencies: the melodrama characterizing the revolutionaries and the canny, wry commentary that provides a disjunctive surround for this central narrative. The play offers a glimpse of Wilde’s developing style, emerging disharmoniously from the welter of the period’s generic indices for political violence. For Wilde, typical of his time, political violence finds expression in melodramatic gestures, well suited to portray its excesses; yet such extravagance cannot be squared with his more pervasive idea, to be pursued throughout his career, that social violence is a much more dispersed, buried, and fragmented construction.
From Vera to Souvarine, from Rakhmetov to the generalized terrorist, where
does all this enthusiasm originate? What is the source of the passion? One
persistent idea is that the terrorist might be personally motivated, his outrage
against the government deriving from some specific injustice against himself or
his family. Wilde’s Vera fits this mold, as do the central figures in George
Griffith’s *The Angel of the Revolution: A Tale of the Coming Terror* (1895), who
nurture extreme personal grievances against the Russian government. Griffith’s
popular dynamite novel imagines a small band of self-described “terrorists” who
make war on Europe and America, overthrowing all existing governments and
replacing them with a socialist paradise where war has been eradicated. To say
that the revolutionaries hold grudges against the czar does not capture the
novel’s flair for establishing deep political conviction: their wounds are literal,
marked onto their bodies. In the case of Natas, the founder of the terrorist
Brotherhood and leader of the revolution, his crippled legs bear witness to his
treatment years ago in the Russian mines, though his even greater bitterness
involves the fate of his wife, who had been captured, raped, and kept by a
Russian soldier, before she died in misery. Natas’s familial tale is highly
sensational, and the novel’s Victorian values, when it comes to gender, are not
particularly revolutionary; this history of female violation is enough to justify
nothing less than world war. Equally spectacularly, two other key members of
the terrorist organization bear witness, on their permanently scarred backs, to
imperial Russia’s viciousness against political dissidents. With Radna Michaelis,
we only “see” her torture in facsimile: a painting of a half-stripped woman, being
whipped by Russian soldiers, adorns the walls of the Brotherhood’s
headquarters, a reminder of her horrifying ordeal and a motivation for action.
But for Alexis Mazanoff, who suffered a similar fate, we readers are privy to his
scarred flesh:

As he said these last words, [Mazanoff/Colston] let go Arnold’s [the
protagonist’s] shoulders, flung off his coat and waistcoat, slipped his
braces off his shoulders, and pulled his shirt up to his neck. Then he turned
his bare back to his guest, and said—

“That is the sign-manual of Russian tyranny—the mark of the knout!”

*(p.102)* Arnold shrank back with a cry of horror at the sight. From waist
to neck, Colston’s back was a mass of hideous scars and wheals, crossing
each other and rising up in to purple lumps, with livid blue and grey spaces
between them. As he stood, there was not an inch of naturally-coloured
skin to be seen. It was like the back of a man who had been flayed alive,
and then flogged with a cat-o’-nine tails.52
The baring of flogged flesh is an always intriguing narrative formula, one that continues to serve, into the twenty-first century, as the sign of torture in war. We might recall Bataille’s obsessive attraction to the torture photograph, which for him expresses the culmination and full embodiment of the eros/death continuum. Here, the wounded flesh returns us, ineluctably, to the scene of the attack itself, another staging of the sudden blow, or violent origin, that spins forth narrative and also continually recalls the reader or viewer back to itself. More generally, the dramatic unveiling of the scarred body ratchets up the pitch: both dramatically (a striptease, a sudden transformation in our estimation and understanding of the character) and thematically (introducing the decimated flesh as both cause and consequence of revolutionary activity), the passage serves to sensationalize the saga, but also in a sense to humanize it. With these wounds marking their bodies, the revolutionaries seem bound to turn the war against flesh in another direction. As they enact their revenge, they hope to shift the narrative written on their bodies from one of victimization to one of ultimate victory.

These never-quite-healed wounds, in other words, call forth the dynamic of reprisal: flesh calls for flesh, blood for blood. I will discuss this motif in some detail in the next chapter, since it provided the underlying logic for much Irish writing in the aftermath of the Rising. Here I want to note, just briefly, the prevalence of such imagery across the spectrum of radical literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The same assertion can be heard over and over: the body is the ground that nourishes modern civilizations, and it will also be the ground for revolution. In accounts of exploited labor, exhortations for systemic change, or panegyrics to heroic self-sacrifice, radical writers offered the spectacle of the body as the force—unacknowledged, yet justifying glorification—beneath all forms of cultural growth. The violated and exploited body was, in this sense, enchanted, holding generative potential. We find this formulation at the opening of Mackay’s *The Anarchists*:

... how many human lives might lie crushed beneath these white granite quarries [of the Embankment], piled one upon the other so solid and unconquerable? And he thought again of that silent, unrewarded, forgotten toil that had created all the magnificence round about him.

(p.103) Sweat and blood are washed away, and the individual man, on the corpses of millions of unnamed, forgotten ones, rises living and admired ... (Mackay, 5, ellipsis in original)
For his part, Kropotkin writes, in his tract *The Conquest of Bread* (1892; first English translation 1906), “Every rood of soil we cultivate in Europe has been watered by the sweat of several races of men. Every acre has its story of enforced labour, of intolerable toil, of the people’s sufferings. Every mile of railway, every yard of tunnel, has received its share of human blood.” And Berkman declares: “The steel-workers were not the aggressors. Resignedly they had toiled and suffered. Out of their flesh and bone grew the great steel industry; on their blood fattened the powerful Carnegie Company.” In all of these cases, and indeed very broadly, what is perhaps most notable is the intermingling of enchantment with disenchantment; the body’s unique power to cultivate vibrant growth is cut across by a desire to expose the real suffering and misery of starved, ruined, exploited bodies, whose situation should never, in the eyes of the reformers, be sanctified or justified. A sense of ruination is inevitably attached to disenchantment, yet for all the effort to focus on that decimation, radical writers also sought a vista of enchantment to redirect their narrative toward enrichment and change. In this sense, they mirror the war writers discussed in the last chapter, who freely deployed enchanted language within their generally disenchanting frameworks.
In *The Secret Agent*, the “old terrorist” Karl Yundt employs a heated version of the metaphor of exploited flesh: “Do you know what I would call the nature of the present economic conditions?” he asks, “I would call it cannibalistic. That’s what it is! They are nourishing their greed on the quivering flesh and the warm blood of the people—nothing else” (*SA*, 44).

And he is even more grotesquely explicit in characterizing the legal system: “And what about the law ... the pretty branding instrument invented by the overfed to protect themselves against the hungry? Red-hot applications on their vile skins—hey? Can’t you smell and hear from here the thick hide of the people burn and sizzle?” (*SA*, 41). Conrad may have been thinking here of a notorious essay with the suggestive title “An Anarchist Feast at the Opera,” which was found in the belongings of several anarchists arrested in 1892 for bomb making (the Walsall Anarchists). The essay ghoulishly and gleefully imagines the probable effects of a bomb being exploded in the London opera house, scene, of course, of materialist self-indulgence, including reflections on the smell of bourgeois flesh burning (“Would not a single one among us feel his heart beat with an immense joy in hearing the shriveling of the grease of the rich and the howlings of that mass of flesh swarming in the midst of that immense vessel all in a blaze?” and so on).

The essay was read aloud at the trial of David Nicoll, the editor of the primary English radical newspaper *Commonweal*, who was sentenced to two years in jail for inciting violence. The “Feast,” summarized in news accounts during the trial, offered a grisly version of the more familiar rhetoric of reprisal against the powerful for abusing the bodies of the workers, and seemed to suggest that anarchists had taken the metaphor of flesh demanding flesh with a shocking literality. The truth is that the essay’s authorship and intent are dubious, but the public sensation of its rhetoric was unchecked by such scruples.
Flesh-consuming or messianic, anarchists in the British imagination were always understood as foreign. There is some legitimacy to this stereotype, for anarchism was fundamentally international in spirit. Its roots ran deepest in Russia, though foundational thinkers came from all over the continent, including England; there was a great deal of itinerancy among anarchists, so that a typical anarchist meeting in London might include Russian, French, German, American, and other Eastern European participants; and Jews made up a robust complement of the movement, especially in London and in large American cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, where Yiddish-language journals flourished alongside those in English, French, German, Italian, and Russian.\(^6\) The anarchist’s canonical foreignness cut in a variety of directions. The question, for instance, of what might attract an English person to the cause became the subject for speculation. Dynamite novels often figured an English protagonist who finds himself immersed, for one reason or another, in an anarchist organization created and dominated by foreigners. In The Angel of the Revolution, discussed above in relation to the scarring of several of its Russian characters, the protagonist is something of a regular English type—a public-schoolboy bachelor, an unlikely candidate for anarchism—who eventually becomes a leader in the movement. Robert Louis and Fanny Stevenson, coauthors of a strange little pastiche of a novel, Dynamiter, portray a series of English male dupes seduced by beautiful revolutionary women. And for its part, the Rossettis’ A Girl Among the Anarchists gives us a detailed genealogy of its protagonist’s attraction to and eventual break from the movement, in an attempt, perhaps, to address the question they know will be on everyone’s mind: “Why would an English girl...?” Indeed, the scandal of the young narrator spending late nights editing her radical journal as Italian anarchist refugees (men, of course) sleep on the floor around her was not likely to pass without notice among the novel’s middle-class readers.
Conrad, too, took up the thread, considering in some detail the national, class, and gender affiliations of anarchist violence. "The Informer," a story composed just before *The Secret Agent*, offers a variety of familiar anarchist types, including its (p.105) internal narrator, Mr. X, a French aristocrat who is "the greatest rebel (révolté) of modern times" and who repeatedly jolts the primary narrator with statements like "There’s no amendment to be got out of mankind except by terror and violence." A variety of other recognizable figures also populate the scene, ranging from the inevitable chemist who spends his days concocting bombs in the attic of the anarchists’ meeting house to the police informer who gives the story its title. And though the narrator professes himself speechless at the conundrum of Mr. X—"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" (CS, 312)—it is primarily a young, middle-class woman, who is largely bankrolling the story’s anarchists and who looks suspiciously like the Rossettis, that most flusters both narrators. Quite simply, they cannot fathom a British, middle-class, woman anarchist, their responses to her betraying a residual sexism: "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," says Mr. X.; "All this sat on her striking personality as well as her slightly original costumes," and so on (CS, 315). For the male narrators of the story, whose radicalism quite notably steers clear of gender, the conundrum of "why" is never really raised; a middle-class English girl could never be an anarchist, she can only acquire his gestures.62

More complexly and subtly than perhaps any other writer on this subject, Henry James considered the appeal and repulsion of anarchist violence in national and gender terms. *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) concerns a young, impressionable English protagonist, Hyacinth Robinson, who commits himself by oath to a shadowy anarchist organization, promising to carry out unspecified acts of violence at the will of the group’s leader. Though Hyacinth comes to anarchism through his English friend Paul Muniment, the anarchist society in *The Princess Casamassima* is resolutely international, as one would expect—its leader Hoffendahl is a notorious German terrorist, and its members are drawn from all over Europe. Yet what interests James, above all, is Hyacinth: his attraction to the movement, his slow disengagement with it, and his stance with respect to what he has contracted to do. James described the novel originating out of his own history of London street-walking, and it is out of this biographical narrative that he conjures his protagonist, a creature of refined, aesthetic sensibility and low social status, following his author’s path:
I arrived so at the history of little Hyacinth Robinson—he sprang up for me out of the London pavement. To find his possible adventure interesting I had only to conceive his watching the same public show, the same innumerable (p.106) appearances, I had watched myself, and of his watching very much as I had watched; save indeed for one little difference. This difference would be that so far as all the swarming facts should speak of freedom and ease, knowledge and power, money, opportunity, and satiety, he should be able to revolve round them but at the most respectful of distances and with every door of approach shut in his face.63

The image of Hyacinth springing from the London pavement suggests a form of radical national affiliation—“a product of the London streets and the London air,” as he puts it in the novel (James, 104–5)—an idea of citizenship that is more local than ethnic, more physical than metaphysical, and, in this sense, more like the French ideal of citoyen than the English one of national character. At the same time, Hyacinth, who is half French, is no more a prototype of Englishness than his creator James. Moreover, as we are told here, his poverty shuts off many outlets for him, while his aesthetic sensibility distances him from the radicals of his circle, leaving him in a strangely empty zone of class, a nonidentity for which his anarchist connections do not compensate.

Instead, in James’s portrait of Hyacinth, we see the image of someone who is drawn toward anarchist violence magnetically more than culturally, if we might put it that way. The language of watching in the above passage suggests magnetism, and, more generally, Hyacinth is consistently figured as a spectator. A number of crucial scenes in the novel take place at the theater, and Hyacinth takes spectatorial pleasure watching the parade of Parisian life from the perch of an outdoor café or meandering endlessly through London, his habitual and favored occupation. He even describes his most profound experience, the oath-taking itself, in ocular terms: “I was hanging about outside, on the steps of the temple, among the loafers and gossips,” he says of his time before meeting Hoffendahl, “but now I have been in the innermost sanctuary—I have seen the holy of holies” (James, 330). Hyacinth is drawn toward anarchism, he looks into its “depths” (to use James’s repeated term), but he does not and cannot become a terrorist of the sort British culture typically envisioned. Hyacinth perhaps marks a limit, an outer edge of that persona. He reacts to, rather than instantiating, the violent threat and appeal of radical politics. Or we might say that Hyacinth is distanced from the explosive side of anarchism, its destructive hunger, only taking up its violence when he turns it onto his own person in a final act of suicide.
The Princess Casamassima is dense with reflections on the dilemma into which Hyacinth falls, and these touch on a variety of familiar motifs surrounding the portrayal of anarchist violence in the period. James hews quite closely, for instance, (p.107) to conventions that characterized the dynamite novel, including the inevitable chemist among the characters (Paul), the stress on secrecy and shadowy worlds-beneath-worlds, the crediting of a genuine social vision to the revolutionaries, and the emphasis on the oath as the signal act-that-generates-acts. This last is especially important for James, as it was for other dynamite novelists, who often imagined a thicket of Masonic rites and elaborate oath-taking protocols, proclivities shared by Wilde’s nihilists. In all these cases, the speech act of dedication to a revolutionary cause became as riveting (psychologically and personally) as the sensational acts of violence that might follow. For James, especially, the apparatus of loyalty entirely supersedes the political content in whose name it is supposed to function, and it is in this gap—between the evacuated meaning and the exaggerated performance, or, if one prefers, between the disappearing signified and the flamboyant signifier—that the drama of the novel is generated. So Hyacinth, after experiencing an initial burst of fervor for the revolutionists and for Hoffendahl, soon becomes disillusioned both with the anarchists’ precept of destroying the existing social order and with the anarchists themselves. It is really his love for the Princess Casamassima—a dyed-in-the-wool radical—that keeps him at all focused on the movement. With little enthusiasm for the cause, he yet remains fixed in and by the oath he has sworn, to be ready at any moment to take up any act, as specified by Hoffendahl. In the end, when the summons comes, Hyacinth is unwilling either to betray his oath or to fulfill it. Suicide being the natural finale of tragedy (and often, too, of melodrama), Hyacinth’s choice to kill himself marks the culmination of his dilemma, as well as a generic endpoint for the text. Hyacinth’s political bind within the novel thus takes its course at the level of form: there is no outlet for him that will not partake of emotional heightening and tragic formulae.
When Hyacinth turns his gun on himself, he thus completes a process that the novel had been evolving all along: the occlusion of political violence by melodrama. James’s narrative operates on the line between an introspective cultural commentary, in which the forces of history work in complex fashion to mold the characters and plots, and the sentimental mode, in which high-pitched emotion and symbolic gesture drive the narrative. Hyacinth himself comes to anarchism (and stays with it) largely because of his infatuation with the beautiful princess, flirting more with the fairy tale than with the grim destructive realities that Hoffendahl represents. More generally, Hyacinth’s story, beginning with his mother, carries all the hallmarks of Victorian melodrama, from his lowly origins as the son of a wronged woman who dies in prison (sentenced for the murder of her lover) to his idealistic and futile love for the Princess. Other characters—the saintly Lady Aurora; the indigent, disabled, ever-cheerful, and aptly named Rosy Muniment (p.108) (younger sister of Paul); Miss Pynsent, who selflessly raises Hyacinth amidst her pinched and cramped quarters, dreaming of the aristocracy—are even more permeated by pathos. James may have pictured Hyacinth as a facsimile of himself, wandering the streets as a new arrival in London, but he places him in a setting with quite different literary attachments. What this means is that the representation of political violence finds itself lodged within a sentimental plot structure that has its own prerogatives. Indeed, The Princess Casamassima ultimately shows just how inexorably anarchist violence merges into the melodramatic, and this is not surprising, given the prominent role of sentiment in the reform novels of the period, James’s literary context for the novel. The hyperbolic understanding of anarchist violence, as it developed throughout the late nineteenth century, makes powerful generic demands, which are not easily brushed aside. Dynamite might give the subgenre its name, but in James’s rendition, the shattering violence of explosion, like the politics that engender it, fades away, the theatricality of explosion rewritten as the psychological combustion of melodrama.

Explosion and Melodrama: The Secret Agent
James suggests, in the end, that his English-born protagonist has no real affinity with anarchist destruction, but in *The Secret Agent*, Conrad proposes that we press the question in a different way, as it was also urgently posed by the historical bombings on English soil: what does it mean for dynamite violence to lodge right here, at home? Though its darkly comic tone and hyperbolic parody debunk the anarchist movement and its personae—leading some commentators to see it primarily as a reactionary fable—*The Secret Agent* offers a rich and deeply considered reflection on political violence. Like *The Princess Casamassima* and other works of the three preceding decades, Conrad’s novel enters the world of revolutionaries and their bombs, and does so both with comic zeal and with pointed introspection. Indeed, what makes *The Secret Agent* especially rewarding as a reflection on the culture of political violence at the turn of the century is that it plunges headlong into the material realities of dynamite violence, even as it capaciously incorporates nearly all the tropes and strategies for representing terrorism that circulated in the contemporary culture. Along the way, Conrad considers the nature of dynamite’s sensation: how dynamite violence registers ethically as a subject for fiction, what its shock value means for characters and plots. In *The Secret Agent*, we find all the key terms brought vividly together—dynamite, anarchism, terrorism, sensation, melodrama—and out of this jostling group of historical and literary phenomena emerges (p.109) a new and eerie image of the future. The literary flamboyance of sensationalism and the popular consolations of melodrama are given moments of triumph in *The Secret Agent*, before they are eroded by an insinuation of ongoing and infectious dread. Ultimately, *The Secret Agent* charts an evolution from the anarchist moment, in all its Victorian detail (which the novel relishes), toward the full-fledged terrorist mode, a more generalized condition of existence extending into the future. It is not a straightforward journey, finding accommodating generic structures for its violent content along the way—only to abandon each. In fact, it is the creed of the novel to refute the possibility that literature can manage the excesses of political violence, for the novel is built around the idea that such acts are the epitome of senselessness.

Indeed, the distinguishing features of Conrad’s tone with respect to his subject matter are his insistence on the meaningfulness surrounding the Greenwich bombing and his stress on the contrast between motive (obscure and cynical) and outcome (gruesome and extreme). In an author’s note appended to the 1920 edition of *The Secret Agent*, Conrad describes the Greenwich explosion in terms of its unfathomability. The Greenwich affair was, he declares,

... a blood-stained inanity of so fatuous a kind that it was impossible to fathom its origin by any reasonable or even unreasonable process of thought. For perverse unreason has its own logical processes. But that outrage could not be laid hold of mentally in any sort of way, so that one remained faced by the fact of a man blown to bits for nothing even most remotely resembling an idea, anarchistic or other. (SA, 5)
If the underlying precept of propaganda by deed is interpretive—that there is, in fact, an idea at the basis of every terrorist act—Conrad dismisses this premise, substituting his own ethical and literary standards for the anarchist theory of political violence. The expression of violence and the expression of motive are thoroughly disengaged, and it is in this gap that he finds the literary challenge. Dynamite explosion thus brings to the fore such Conradian features as ambiguity and unknowability—a disjunction between horrendous realities in the world and obscure signifying practices—or, as he repeatedly figures it in *The Secret Agent*, the specter of insanity. "Madness alone is truly terrifying," says Vladimir; Heat insists to Verloc, "you must have been crazy"; Winnie’s suicide becomes inscribed as a question of “madness or despair”; and the novel ends with a vision of the professor sowing his own insanity in unknowable new directions (SA, 31, 160). These evasive and yet figuratively rich possibilities—the gulf of meaning surrounding extraordinary violence, its madness—makes dynamite explosion particularly resonant for Conrad, drawing him to consider its cultural and bodily expressions.

(p.110) It should not surprise us to find Conrad intrigued by dynamite outrages, since a broad inquiry into the shapes and consequences of violence forms an essential part of his literary legacy. In addition to his career-long exploration into the endemic violence of imperialism, Conrad turned with special interest to nineteenth-century revolutionaries, and to anarchists in particular. In a cluster of works of the first decade of the century (*Nostromo*, 1904; "An Informer" and "An Anarchist," 1906, later in *A Set of Six; The Secret Agent*, 1907; *Under Western Eyes*, 1911), he probed the question of what political violence is, how it works, what it accomplishes, what its protagonists look like, and what the fiction writer’s role might be in addressing this complex equation. In all of these works, and especially in *The Secret Agent*, Conrad goes well beyond simply representing revolutionary violence: he considers its metaphysical, historical, material, and personal ramifications; he creates characters (such as Chief Inspector Heat in *The Secret Agent*) who want to understand violence in its essential forms; and he returns over and over to the moment of violent action and to the nature of bodily catastrophe. These texts, like the bulk of Conrad’s work, are marked by relentless irony, and he heaps contempt on revolutionaries of all sorts. But such tonal issues ought not to blind us to the seriousness with which Conrad took on the problem of political violence, or to the complexity of outcomes that his works on the subject develop. The novel thus recalls the pandying passage from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where the central depiction of violence as originary and transformative was left intact even by Joyce’s habitual ironizing.
Certainly, Conrad knew a great deal about anarchism, notwithstanding his protestations to the contrary. In both personal letters and in his author’s note to The Secret Agent, he declared himself to be uninformed about the workings of anarchists in general, which he brushed off as only of vague interest, and about the Greenwich bombing of February 1894 in particular, which he claimed not to have followed in the papers at the time or to have researched in any detail when composing the novel. But critics have refuted these statements and shown quite conclusively that Conrad was highly educated on the topic of anarchist violence. He had access, through Ford, to the London anarchist scene (such as that portrayed in A Girl Among the Anarchists) and to insider accounts of what may have actually transpired in the Greenwich case; there is every reason to believe he had, in fact, followed the reportage of the Greenwich explosion at the time and read further about it in later years; and his personal and familial history gave him a special interest in the workings of European revolutionaries.
In fact, even without scholars chasing him down, Conrad gives himself away. In the author’s note, written over a decade after the novel, Conrad’s prose is still inundated by the journalistic language of anarchism (he uses terms like “outrage” in double and triple senses, repeatedly employs “anarchism” as both a philosophy and a form of meaningless destruction, and is still consumed with the sensationalism of dynamite explosion). The novel itself, composed, it should be stressed, well after the period it depicts, is so replete with characters and plots out of that earlier period as to read like a handbook of late-Victorian conventions for construing the anarchist scene. So, for instance, the idea that anarchism and violence are inescapable partners is writ into the saga as a premise; the presence of dynamite is the linchpin of the text; the anarchists in *The Secret Agent* fall into typologies as they so often did in the literature of the period, each portraying some aspect of the terrorist; semifictionalized events like the Rome conference to which Vladimir refers have historical counterparts; and the novel returns incessantly to a number of themes that dominated the late-Victorian rendition of anarchism, such as the emphasis on bombs as the inevitable tool of anarchists, the freighted relation between words and deeds, and the international quality of the movement. Moreover, Conrad mirrored in his novel the coverage of the Greenwich bombing in many particulars. That reportage was elaborate and detailed. Over many weeks, it followed the progress of the investigation; analyzed the bomber Bourdin’s personal and political history, as well as anarchist activity more generally; drew comparisons and connections to the Café Terminus bombing in Paris (which had only just occurred); and reported on Bourdin’s funeral, a large event whose public and celebratory nature outraged many in the general public. The newspaper coverage was also gruesome, as, for instance, in *The Times*’ initial report of the scene: “The first [park keeper] to arrive found a man half crouching on the ground. His legs were shattered, one arm was blown away, and the stomach and abdomen were torn open. [new paragraph] As the keeper came up to him the man faintly besought help and then fell forward on his face, unconscious, in a great pool of his own blood.” Such reportage would have been hard to miss, even for someone without Conrad’s particular interests and connections. The sensational newsworthiness of anarchism provided its essential, guiding principle, yet this was a quality that also made Conrad want to distance his novel from the historical setting.

Conrad’s ambivalent position about writing what we might call “historical fiction” suggests a central orientation of his novel: an oscillation between an attention to the materiality of both history and the body and a recourse to generic forms like caricature and melodrama that reduce the pointedness of such effects. We might look, for instance, to the novel’s first page, to see how this dynamic gets established:
The window contained photographs of more or less undressed dancing girls; nondescript packages in wrappers like patent medicines; closed yellow paper envelopes, very flimsy, and marked two and six in heavy black figures; a few numbers of ancient French comic publications hung across a string as if to dry; a dingy blue china bowl, a casket of black wood, bottles of marking ink, and rubber stamps; a few books, with titles hinting at impropriety; a few apparently old copies of obscure newspapers, badly printed, with titles like *The Torch, The Gong*—rousing titles. And the two gas-jets inside the panes were always turned low, either for economy’s sake or for the sake of the customers. (SA, 9)

Conrad’s realism here is oblique, since it gives a detailed and evocative sense of setting precisely through a language of evasion (“more or less,” “nondescript,” “like,” “as if,” “hinting at,” “apparently,” “obscure,” “either … or”). When we do get a concrete detail, in the names of the two anarchist journals, Conrad’s method shows its elusive qualities even more pointedly: one of these, the *Torch*, was an actual journal (edited by the Rossetti children), while the other *The Gong*, is fictional, a takeoff on such real “rousing” periodicals as *The Alarm*. Why mix the historical detail with the parodic? The answer, I think, is that the novel wants to have it both ways with respect to history. It wants simultaneously to offer a harrowing account of violence and to evade that materiality via the ruses of literary conventions like melodrama geared to such excesses and predicated on some distance from factual history. Conrad thus develops an accordion-like movement in and out of history, which in turn also implies a movement closer to and further from the body. In this novel, the body, in a certain sense, is history; to come close to one is also to approach the other. Conrad makes these counterpointing moves—in the direction toward and away from an embodied sense of history—from the novel’s first paragraphs through to the author’s note of the next decade, but it is in the text’s crisis event that this structure takes most powerful form.

I have said that dynamite explosion in this period signified ungovernable excess. Nowhere is such an explosion more vividly imagined than in the destruction of Stevie in *The Secret Agent*:

Another waterproof sheet was spread over that table in the manner of a table cloth with the corners turned up over a sort of mound—a heap of rags, scorched and blood stained, half concealing what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast. It required considerable firmness of mind not to recoil before that sight…

(p.113) ... The Chief Inspector’s eyes searched the gruesome detail of that heap of mixed things, which seemed to have been collected in shambles and rag shops.
'You used a shovel,' he remarked, observing a sprinkling of small gravel, tiny brown bits of bark, and particles of splintered wood as fine as needles.

‘Had to in one place,’ said the stolid constable. ‘I sent a keeper to fetch a spade. When he heard me scraping the ground with it he leaned his forehead against a tree, and was as sick as a dog.’ (SA, 70–71)

Weil’s “thing” produced by force comes to mind here, along with its inexorable conjuring of the humanity lost to its power. And Stevie’s story embodies real pathos, from his beginnings as the victim of paternal brutality, to a life marked by scant affection and by frustrated attempts to imagine and promote social justice, to his hideously violent demise. Chief Inspector Heat perhaps speaks for all of us when he surmises about the effect of the bomb’s “ruthless cruelty” at the moment of Stevie’s death: “The man, whoever he was, had died instantaneously; and yet it seemed impossible to believe that a human body could have reached that state of disintegration without passing through the pangs of inconceivable agony” (SA, 71). It is crucially important for the novel’s reflection on violence, as well as its meditation on time, that Conrad jumps over the bombing itself, giving us only its remnants, yet insisting that to contemplate these remains is to step imaginatively back in time to the moment of their horrific creation. It may simply be impossible, in The Secret Agent, to bracket the moment of explosive violence, hence the Professor’s feverish labor to create the perfect detonator—one that will, however, never be able to eliminate the fateful twenty seconds between detonation and explosion.71 As we shall see, the issue of what kind of imaginative acts evolve to account for the gap in time that mark Stevie’s death—and for those unforgettable remains—is a highly potent question for the direction the novel will take.
Stevie’s empathy for suffering brings him closer than anyone else in the novel to the social vision of the period’s revolutionaries. If the novel’s four anarchists—Yundt, Michaelis, Ossipon, and the Professor—are eviscerated of any real humanity and represent something like an amalgamated and distorted portrait of actual and imagined terrorists, Stevie-as-representative lurches in the opposite direction, embodying a generalized empathy for suffering of the sort that animated historical anarchists to an important degree. Or we might put it this way: Conrad very self-consciously sets out to caricature the anarchists at the same time that he gives us a version of anarchism’s message in the person of Stevie, who functions as a whirling vortex of impressions stamped by the sadistic world around him. Stevie’s sense that life is marked by pain and cruelty, and his status as the whipping boy for the world’s brutality, make him especially responsive and susceptible—literally, as he is destroyed by violence, and figuratively, as he reacts to the suffering he envisages around him. Dogged by a “morbid horror and dread of physical pain,” Stevie visualizes physical suffering in others, as, for instance, when he responds to Yundt’s vivid depiction of the ruling classes as cannibalistic torturers: “Stevie knew very well that hot iron applied to one’s skin hurt very much … it would hurt terribly” (SA, 42). Where Yundt’s language dwells with evident relish on the misery of exploited flesh (“Can’t you smell and hear from here the thick hide of the people burn and sizzle?”), Stevie’s response is visceral, personal, and direct—in a word, humane (SA, 41). We are told, moreover, that the fourteen-year-old Stevie, riled to fury at the mistreatment of fellow workers, had set off fireworks in the office where he was employed as an errand boy, in the hopes, apparently, of destroying the place. Such an event quite clearly refers to a type of anarchist “outrage,” in marked contrast to the novel’s Greenwich bombing, whose social and political meaning is entirely contrived by cynical operatives, working in the interest of their own power.
Stevie the anarchist even has a slogan of his own, developed in his sputtering way, in response to his interaction with a one-armed cabman and his decrepit horse: “bad world for poor people” (SA, 132). “Bad world for poor people” is certainly an accurate description of the state of poverty in urban London, and it also mirrors the kinds of messages about social injustice that anarchists and other revolutionaries worked to disseminate. The scene in which this lesson is learned, however, is a tour de force of comic writing (a simultaneous satire and enactment of the classic industrial novel, and a blistering riff on Raskolnikov’s dream in Crime and Punishment [1866]), and it would be very difficult to take Stevie’s moral encapsulation of the social drama witnessed there as the novel’s own unironic credo. As a spokesman for social justice, the well-meaning Stevie is nevertheless a caricature, just as the image of him as modern artist is equally parodic: “the innocent Stevie, sitting very good and quiet at a deal table, drawing circles, 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).

If Stevie’s status as artist and anarchist is at once constructed and denied, his physical being remains shockingly visible. More generally in The Secret Agent, the flesh of humanity has an inescapable and ubiquitous presence. Conrad seems unusually repulsed in this novel by the body, which appears outsized, a stifling physical cage to match the claustrophobia of the urban scene. And these are not incidental (p.115) suggestions of disgust; James English, for one, has located the crux of Conrad’s political intervention in his creation of such figures as the fat anarchist, an irony that encapsulates a variety of contradictions in the political imaginary of the period. For the anarchist to be fat is to represent precisely that which he is supposed to destroy (the fattened bourgeoisie being a stock image for the hated status quo, as in my epigraph from Ravachol) and to embody a whole series of ironies about their (in)efficacy and belatedness. All of this attention to the flesh reaches its apex in the person of Stevie, whose quivering body reacts to the felt reality and to the mere prospect of pain. When Stevie is blown up, his dripping, shattered remains seem like a confrontation to any form of conceptual or literary accommodation. Stevie is now all flesh; his anarchism reduced to the anarchy of cells and bones and organs and muscles, his chaotic artistry the abstraction of a body whose contours have been entirely fragmented and erased. In this scenario, his body’s radical fleshiness loses its status as satire and becomes, instead, an unbearable burden.
This notion of burden is literalized in the object that comes to symbolize Stevie’s decimated state: the shovel. The shovel that they use to scrape up his scattered body parts—the shovel that is a part of every reference to his death—becomes the metonymical trace of a physical situation almost too gruesome to contemplate. The novel pulls back from Stevie’s death—the thought of what kind of agony he might have suffered in the instant of explosion left as a haunting question—but it repeatedly returns to the shovel. A rustic and primitive implement, a distinctly humble object, the shovel is associated not so much with the cityscape of London as with the ground in general, the site of agriculture and also of burial. It is strikingly an object; with its simple form and universal recognizability, it is completely visually available. When pain becomes unimaginable, it seems, the imagination turns to what it knows, the world of objects. In the passage where Stevie’s remains are initially described, this crystallizing of affect into the shovel takes two forms: first, it is the sound of the shovel (rather than the sight of Stevie’s exploded body) that induces the keeper’s vomiting, and second, the invocation of the shovel immediately follows two metaphors (“what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast” and “which seemed to have been collected in shambles and rag shops”), both of which are jarringly incongruous, and which, in a sense, are replaced by this much more vivid image. The shovel works metonymically; more than any metaphoric solution (cannibal feasts, rag shops), by holding and touching the body’s remains, it stands imaginatively for their terrible reality. Metonymy nudges out metaphor, bringing us closer to the body, but that metonymy immediately works too well, generating a vivid return to the body (in the form of the keeper’s reaction).

The fragmented body of Stevie creates a powerful challenge, which will call up a variety of responses. But the first is to linger on the shovel. Winnie, for one, returns instinctively to it:

That’s where the boy was killed. A park—smashed branches, torn leaves, gravel, bits of brotherly flesh and bone, all spouting up together in the manner of a firework. She remembered now what she had heard, and she remembered it pictorially. They had to gather him up with the shovel. Trembling all over with irrepressible shudders, she saw before her the very implement with its ghastly load scraped up from the ground. (SA, 195–96)

Though Winnie’s structures of thought may not be exactly normative—her susceptibility to journalistic phraseology, for instance, approaches the pathological—her response to Stevie’s body in ruins does function paradigmatically. An excess of violence, here, pushes the imagination not toward any given political meaning—as the principle of propaganda by deed would suggest—but toward an imagism that exists at the opposite end of the intelligible spectrum. There is no “idea” to associate with the shovel; its work seems to belie the very notion of interpretability.
Such spare imagism, a reaction to the exploded body, must nevertheless confront dynamite’s other central attribute, its sensationalism. Dynamite violence was sensational almost by definition, incorporating its key components of graphic violence, the threat of escalation, social transgression, and mystery. Sensationalism, one of modernity’s favorite self-fulfilling vices, represented a pivot point in late-Victorian conceptions of modern crime. Over and over, the culture asked itself whether and how the media (newspapers, penny dreadfuls, novels) influenced criminal behavior, thus indicting its own most basic impulses, such as the dissemination of information and the abhorring of violence. The never-solved Ripper murders in London’s East End (1888), to take the most notorious case, spawned their own textual industry, in a lavish display of interest, fascination, anxiety, and seemingly endless hand-wringing with respect to responsibility. The mutuality linking horrific crime with the ever-broadening news media thus represents a rich topic in Victorian cultural history; the history of anarchism and the theatricality of dynamite violence in particular were always thoroughly intertwined with sensationalism. The notion of propaganda by deed, for one, depended on a sensationalist-minded press, which would spread word of anarchist outrages far and wide and help to stir public fear and interest. More generally, what makes a crime “terrorist” in structure is its determination to send a message, and for this journalism was the central form of communication.

(p.117) The Secret Agent, which makes the proximity between the novel and the newspaper visible at every turn, indirectly confronts its own relation to news in general and to sensationalism in particular. As with the shovel and the body, Conrad presents the language of the press in a relation of adjacency to the reader’s consciousness (rather than as lodging within the mind, encased by it). So, for instance:

It was a raw, gloomy day of the early spring; and the grimy sky, the mud of the street, the rags of the dirty men harmonised excellently with the eruption of the damp, rubbishy sheets of paper soiled with printers’ ink. The posters, maculated with filth, garnished like tapestry the sweep of the kerbstone. The trade in afternoon papers was brisk, yet, in comparison with the swift, constant march of foot traffic, the effect was of indifference, of a disregarded distribution. (SA, 65)

Layers upon layers of proximity: the ink rubs against the papers (an interesting form of writing), the city’s grime against people and advertisements, the papers against the passing multitudes. Every element in the city soils every other element, but the printers’ ink seems the most transferable, leaving its traces on a population that is all the more receptive for its obliviousness and indifference.
“Rubbing off” seems the appropriate figure for the uneasy relation of the news media to political violence, both within *The Secret Agent* and in the contemporary understanding more broadly. The question of what effect journalism had on the escalation of anarchist attacks was always a thorny one. If journals of all sorts made much of the specter of anarchist violence, there was also an uneasiness as to whether their coverage might contribute to the celebrity, and hence, in a certain way, the success, of the revolutionaries. The anarchist Stepinak, to take a surprising example, lays heavy blame on journalism for fomenting high-profile anarchist violence, which he felt hurt the broader cause. In addressing “The Dynamite Scare and Anarchy,” he writes:

... it is the sensational journalism which deserves the palm for its efforts in spreading and protracting the dynamite epidemics. It is the noise made about these outrages, the shocking rush after every personal detail of the lives of their authors when detected, interviewing them, hunting up their genealogy, recording their words, which gives them the proud sensation of having shaken with one blow the foundations of society, and which may turn the heads of outsiders as well. Against this influence of journalism we are powerless.77

Not surprisingly, Conrad offers a variety of viewpoints on the question of sensational journalism.78 On one hand, in *The Secret Agent*, he suggests that the grimy (p.118) printers’ ink has rubbed off on the populace to such a degree that they can only think in terms of journalistic formulations. So Winnie is driven mad by the phrase “the drop given was fourteen feet”; her mantra-like repetition of these words, whose precise meaning is as vague to her as her children’s book vision of the gallows, transforms her from an independent, “free” woman (as she conceives herself in the moments after her mental break from Verloc) into a cringing mess, clinging desperately to her rescuer Tom Ossipon. And Ossipon, in turn, for all his self-serving callousness, is also haunted by the language of the newspapers, in this case the melodramatic account he reads of Winnie’s death: “An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair” (SA, 228, italics in original). The suggestion here is twofold: that people learn how to read their own interior lives by what they read in the papers (a familiar postmodern insight), and that the nature of this particular “simple tale,” as Conrad subtitled the novel, is so entwined with the kinds of events covered in newspapers and journals as to make it almost emanate from the press. It is highly appropriate, then, that when Winnie learns about her brother’s death, her first response is to rip a newspaper down the middle. In a sense, her shredding of the paper functions as her first act of revenge (the second being Verloc’s murder), a lashing out against the textual matter that Winnie, at some level, understands to be partially responsible for her brother’s death.
Yet if the novel critiques the insidious power of the press to construct human interiority, it also succumbs to the general infatuation with anarchist violence, as understood and imagined by journalists at the time of the Greenwich bombing. Though the shovel appears to have been Conrad’s innovation, and though Bourdin was actually alive when first discovered (quite unlike Stevie), the novel remains true to contemporary newspaper accounts, which returned ineluctably to the bomber’s exploded body. The degree to which Bourdin was mangled, the image of his torn body in what appeared to be a kneeling position, the speculation about where and how the explosion occurred and what the effects must have been on his person—all of this formed part of the news coverage.

Conrad insisted that Bourdin’s death was meaningless, but the tendency within the press was to attempt to make the Greenwich bombing comprehensible in human and political terms, and something like this, too, is a major endeavor of The Secret Agent. Conrad’s decision to write a novel about the Greenwich bombing at all testifies to his attraction to sensational news, since no “outrage” generated more coverage in England than this one. As Vladimir—Conrad’s alter ego in the novel, who plots its course and explicates its mysteries even before they exist—muses, “Every newspaper has ready-made phrases to explain such manifestations [as political assassination] away,” (p.119) but an outrage like the Greenwich bombing would be sure to “raise a howl of execration” (SA, 30, 32).

More generally, Conrad was concerned both with how the press reports violent events and with the way such reportage correlates to the imaginative capacities of the citizenry. In “Autocracy and War” (1905), an essay he wrote as he was composing The Secret Agent, he makes a strong case against the way violence is and can be reported.79 The essay focuses on the Russo-Japanese War, then underway, which Conrad believed forecast the ultimate demise of the Russian empire. Conrad lodges a heavy critique of the coverage of the war—odd, in some senses, given that, as Frederic Sharf writes, “No war in prior history had ever been observed as closely, or recorded in so many formats,” with foreign journalists stationed in Russia and Japan, and as “written and pictorial accounts of the war were brought together and distributed on an unprecedented scale and speed” all over the world.80 Nevertheless (or perhaps in response to this relative onslaught), in Conrad’s view, such reportage cannot approach the real suffering that war entails:
... the war in the Far East has been made known to us, so far, in a grey reflection of its terrible and monotonous phases of pain, death, sickness; a reflection seen in the perspective of thousands of miles, in the dim atmosphere of official reticence, through the veil of inadequate words. Inadequate, I say, because what had to be reproduced is beyond the common experience of war, and our imagination, luckily for our peace of mind, has remained a slumbering faculty, notwithstanding the din of humanitarian talk and the real progress of humanitarian ideas. Direct vision of the fact, or the stimulus of a great art, can alone make it turn and open its eyes heavy with blessed sleep...

The first part of this passage, with its language about the dim veil through which we view war and its condemnation of inadequate language, seems to promise an attack on the press for its insufficient reporting of a severe human catastrophe. And the self-serving last line seems to point to a happy solution, great art. Yet what is striking is that Conrad does not, in fact, single out the newspaper for its failures; instead, he suggests that the problem lies in the ordinary human faculties for apprehending and imagining violence in its full, embodied reality.

As for statistics and numbers, these are even less effective in stimulating the empathetic mind:

An over-worked horse falling in front of our windows, a man writhing under a cart-wheel in the street, awaken more genuine emotion, more horror, pity, (p.120) and indignation than the stream of reports, appalling in their monotony, of tens of thousands of decaying bodies tainting the air of the Manchurian plains, of other tens of thousands of maimed bodies groaning in ditches, crawling on the frozen ground, filling the field hospitals; of the hundreds of thousands of survivors no less pathetic and even more tragic in being left alive by fate to the wretched exhaustion of their pitiful toil. (NLL, 112–13)

Conrad is troubled by the fact that a person in England might react with apathy to the horrendous suffering of victims in a distant war, but with sympathy to a dying horse and an injured man in the street. Such a comparison suggests ignorance, surely, but, more pointedly, it raises the possibility that there is something inauthentic and suspect in one’s feeling “horror” and “pity” at the spectacles of London. Most centrally, by contrasting sympathy for the suffering of the poor at home with the indifference to those out of reach, Conrad establishes and attacks a particular structure of feeling. The problem may not derive from bad faith (suggested in the phrase “official reticence” or in the general condemnation of the press) so much as from a narrowness in the imaginative range of the reading public.
What differentiates the horrendous situation of the victims of a modern war from the sad state of the overworked horse and man—to Conrad’s late-Victorian imagination—is that the former is infused with politics and the latter with melodrama. Conrad’s own descriptions of soldiers’ suffering certainly stress the human, physical, one might say universal, elements of the war’s devastating effects, and hence, as Elaine Scarry reminds us, those elements that are external to politics, but his larger insistence in “Autocracy and War” is that this war represents a major turning point in world politics (“the ghost of Russia’s might is laid” [NLL, 120]). In a certain sense, the suffering of those injured, writhing bodies on the Manchurian plains is attached to the long history of imperial Russia, and thus is infused with political significance. But journalism can do justice neither to the richness of history nor to the magnitude of a human crisis: “there must be something subtly noxious to the human brain in the composition of newspaper ink,” Conrad reflects, “or else it is that the large page, the columns of words, the leaded headings, exalt the mind into a state of feverish credulity. 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” (NLL, 121). As in The Secret Agent, where the newspaper is figured in terms of its materiality, here, too, the physical paper—its ink, style, format—determines its effects. That format, in Conrad’s view, transforms a story of both physical and historical magnitude into a catalyst for inauthentic feeling. The desire for “something exciting to talk about” replaces any serious engagement with the significance of the war; heightened emotion of a comfortably familiar variety elbows out the more difficult reckoning with political violence on the large scale of war.
And this is exactly what happens in *The Secret Agent*: it turns from the unendurable reality of Stevie’s body and the shovel to the melodramatic story of Winnie’s revenge and suicide. In doing so, it moves from a form of violence whose contours are unfixable, as the body itself becomes fragmented beyond recognition, and whose connections to political violence carry over all the incommensurabilities inherent in dynamite violence, to a kind of violence that can be understood because it can be attached to familiar literary traditions (familiar and also adaptable). Or, we might say that it shifts from political violence to domestic violence, and in this shift, it taps into available narrative conventions. When the Assistant Commissioner notes that “from a certain point of view, we are here in the presence of a domestic drama” (*SA*, 168), he articulates a truth about the novel in several senses. At one level, the distinction is between what is English and what is foreign, a divide that interests Conrad precisely for its instability. If the conventional representation of anarchists as a foreign infection had become canonical by the time Conrad wrote *The Secret Agent*, and if Conrad gives his anarchists the requisite international credentials, he nevertheless deconstructs these conventions. The sequence in which the Assistant Commissioner wanders through Soho, dining at an Italian restaurant, is particularly rich for its evocation of a new hybridity that casts suspicion on the idea of authentic national markings or characteristics. The Assistant Commissioner is himself identified as “foreign-looking,” while the actual foreigners in this scene are as much a simulacrum, a product of the new commercial phenomenon called the restaurant, as they are representatives of anything “foreign” in the usual sense. (This sequence perhaps also recalls Conrad himself, the Polish-born British citizen, who always spoke English with a heavy accent, and who, following James in the preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, refers in the author’s note to a vivid memory of “solitary and nocturnal walks all over London in my early days” [*SA*, 7].)

But the characterization of the tale as a “domestic drama” also applies more specifically to the novel’s propulsion as it turns its focus to Winnie, and refers to the domesticity of the home—a home that, in this case, is anything but protective. For Winnie’s story, like her brother’s, is a story of spiraling and shifting violence. Winnie’s childhood in a brutal home, where, cowering herself, she had attempted to shelter Stevie from the attacks of their father, comes back in the form of memories of those half-successful attempts to nurture and protect:

*She remembered brushing the boy’s hair and tying his pinafores—herself in a pinafore still; the consolations administered to a small and badly scared creature by another creature nearly as small but not quite so badly scared; she had the vision of the blows intercepted (often with her own head), of a door held desperately shut against a man’s rage (not for very long); of a poker flung once (not very far), which stilled that particular storm into the dumb and awful silence which follows a thunder-clap. (SA, 183)*
All of this has been internalized by the adult Winnie, whose placid exterior belies a reckoning of the world as defined by violence. Hers is the interiority of “the potential violence of tragic passions”; she feels her brother’s death as “a white-hot iron drawn across her eyes.” Like Stevie, she has a visceral empathy for victimization, born of her own terrified childhood (SA, 160, 182). Conrad treats Winnie’s family background allusively, by suggestion more than detailed narration, but his representation of the traces of domestic violence in the persons of Winnie and Stevie nevertheless suggests something important about how violence operates. Conrad, like the nineteenth-century industrial novelists who preceded him in considering an endemic social violence, presents this brutal background as a matter of exposing the violence that attends the lives of the working classes (“bad world for poor people,” to recall Stevie’s formulation), but also as a kind of metaphor or originating point for the ensuing violence that sweeps through the novel.

In this sense, he demonstrates the doubled nature of intensive (subjective, private, originary) and extensive (outward, public, allegorical) modes for representing violence, as initially encountered in the passage from A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Winnie’s powerfully interiorized, if half-remembered, experiences of victimization, like Stevie’s reactive body and psyche, bring to the fore the most intimate reckoning with violence, while their stories sweep outward in the direction of a broader social critique. In this sense, her story tracks with a common literary tendency in the period, as the concerted effort to express a sense of primacy in the instant of experienced violence meets an equally motivated social drama. The moment of internality and the impulse to widen the narrative are melded in such reckonings, suggesting continuities and parallels, and illuminating the very thorough permeation of violence into both private and public spheres. In The Secret Agent, the shift from political violence to domestic violence suggests that violence never abates or disappears. Stevie’s death is a culmination of his life, just as Winnie’s revenge against Verloc culminates her own story of frustrated, ineffective efforts at protection.

And yet, the domesticating of violence in The Secret Agent also makes it conceivable; with Winnie’s murder of her husband, violence can find its conventions. The first killing in the novel—the destruction of Stevie—was one that, as we have seen, Conrad claimed “could not be laid hold of mentally in any sort of way.” The second murder, by contrast, bears the hallmarks of a kind of sensationalism that can be considered amenable to a reading public, indeed to those very readers of grimy newspapers with bold headlines of whom Conrad had despaired in “Autocracy and War.” Though both bodies inspire their discoverer to vomit (the keeper in the case of Stevie, Ossipon for Verloc), the spectacle of Verloc’s body is quite different from the “sort of mound” that marked Stevie’s lumped remains:
It was the handle of the domestic carving knife with nothing strange about it but its position at right angles to Mr Verloc’s waistcoat and the fact that something dripped from it. Dark drops fell on the floor-cloth one after another, with a sound of ticking growing fast and furious like the pulse of an insane clock. At its highest speed this ticking changed into a continuous sound of trickling. Mrs Verloc watched that transformation with shadows of anxiety coming and going on her face. It was a trickle, dark, swift, thin... Blood! (SA, 199)

What a striking contrast divides the defining object that touches Verloc’s body—the carving knife—from the shovel that bore Stevie’s remains. If the latter suggested a challenge to metaphor, along with an imaginative return to rusticity and the fundamental mortality of the body, the carving knife brings us back to the realm of fiction, and particularly to sensational crime fiction. As a talisman, the carving knife promotes itself as the signifier for a popular literature that stands in the same relation to Conrad’s ironized tales of political intrigue as the “sea life of light literature” read by a young Lord Jim stands to Conrad’s fractured imperial tales. Lord Jim may at first promise to give us that popular literature of empire only by way of nostalgia, but in the Patusan sequence, Conrad unfurls his own florid, romantic tapestry, an interlude seeped in orientalism and exuberant as a generic getaway. Likewise, The Secret Agent eventually presents the dripping blood of a thriller; it becomes, at least for a while, a suspense story. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that both implements, the knife and the shovel, signal the promise and the problem of sensationalism in their own forms: the shovel by way of self-critique, pointing to the novel’s concern with its own adjacency to journalism and to the illegibility of the brutal, modern city, the knife by way of inaugurating a style within a style. Conrad himself described The Secret Agent as “a sustained effort in ironical treatment of a melodramatic subject,” but it might be more accurate to say that irony gives way to melodrama in the novel, as the language depicting the novel’s later crimes, with its attachment to popular (p.124) forms, overtakes the murky nonconventions that obstruct the approach to Stevie’s obliterated body, the user and victim of dynamite.

If we return to Winnie’s “pictorial” response to her brother’s death, we will find the movement from inconceivable explosion to literary accommodation encoded in her structure of thought. I have quoted this passage in my discussion of the first reaction to Stevie’s body, the turn toward the shovel (“Trembling all over with irrepressible shudders, she saw before her the very implement with its ghastly load scraped up from the ground”). What follows is a departure from that implement into a more frenzied pictorial panorama:
Mrs Verloc closed her eyes desperately, throwing upon that vision the night of her eyelids, where after a rainlike fall of mangled limbs the decapitated head of Stevie lingered suspended alone, and fading out slowly like the last star of a pyrotechnic display. Mrs Verloc opened her eyes. (SA, 196)

The garishness of Winnie’s vision of her brother’s head floating in the sky suggests an entirely different imaginative system from the grounded realism of the shovel. In fact, that realist moment fell in the middle of this sequence, momentarily freezing the working of her fervent vision, making her shudder (like Stevie himself), but she circles back, as her eyes close, to the fireworks where she began, which recall Stevie in a double sense, since his exploding of fireworks was the early sign of his anarchist tendencies.

As Winnie’s imagination indicates, explosive violence ultimately calls for figurative hyperbole, not imagism but imagistic overload—indeed the supplanting of the unimaginable body by the concrete object makes the first move in that direction. At one level, the simple shovel with its material load would seem to offer the kind of image that literature especially rewards, in comparison with the bizarre fireworks that surround it. But, in fact, when the night of Winnie’s eyelids descends, what emerges is the flamboyant image, the extreme metaphor, the flaunting of figuration. The horribly mangled body, with its telltale implement, stops the imaginative process short; it returns Winnie to her own body, as she shudders irrepresibly; it functions as an impasse. When her vision of fireworks resumes, the exuberance of the figurative capacity reasserts itself. This showcasing of an extreme literary flair, I am suggesting, mirrors, encodes and propels the novel’s wider transformation from ironized political drama, where the reality of dynamite violence ferociously cuts through the text, to a melodrama which continues the thematics of violence—and sharing the sense of an originary field of violent, determining events—but within a more theatrical, derealized mode. It is a mode that makes room for open-endedness (“an impenetrable mystery seems to hang for ever over this (p.125) act of madness or despair ...”), and where the sensation of an invisible suicide has all the pathos missing from the awful remains of an unknown—and, for Conrad, ontologically unknowable—anarchist. The unfathomable nature of exploded bodies and political crime thus gives way to another kind of mystery, one kind of madness to another.

Dynamite and the Future
When dynamite explodes, it can leave behind total fragmentation; but it also can create gashes and tears in the landscape, and these imprinted patterns lead us on a brief side tour, to the novel Conrad wrote immediately before The Secret Agent, Nostromo, which has more in common with the later work than might immediately be evident:
Charles Gould was not present at the anxious and patriotic send-off. It was not his part to see the soldiers embark. It was neither his part, nor his inclination, nor his policy. His part, his inclination, and his policy were united in one endeavour to keep unchecked the flow of treasure he had started single-handed from the re-opened scar in the flank of the mountain.88

In this passage, and in Nostromo more broadly, Conrad gives an elaborate and quite precise view of one kind of gash in the landscape: the San Tomé mine. Overdetermined and foundational, the mine is inescapably envisioned as both a wound on the landscape and a site of unending consequentiality. If for Zola the coal mine continually demanded more and more blood in an endless cycle of destructive revenge, Conrad’s depiction of the reopened scar in the mountain’s flank deflects both politics and violence—yet not exactly. The novel, that is, offers much by way of analysis of more properly political violence (civil war; the grisly hanging of a political prisoner), but what the mine-as-rip adds is a form of productivity that simultaneously avoids and emanates from those eruptions. The gash of the mine, site for the endless production of silver and engendering point for the buried treasure that is such an overdetermined motif in the novel, functions implicitly alongside the many explicit forms of violence in the text. The mine never technically incites political violence; on the contrary, it is repeatedly imagined as the source for political stability and peace, and yet, of course, its telltale gash calls up the explosiveness that stood in the late nineteenth century for dynamite violence, and its hidden wealth drives the political economy of the region.89 It is simultaneously a zone cordoned off from war, just as Charles Gould recuses himself from overt (p.126) political and patriotic activities, and the ultimate image of how the colonized landscape, penetrated by force, yields its wealth, in both material and cultural terms. The mine, with its magnetism and power, is able to exude what the act of political violence never can: success. Its gash, unlike the ripped flesh and exploded sites that became the familiar marks of a highly questionable political violence in the period, lies at the very center of cultural development.
But there is more: ever canny, and perhaps echoing his author’s sense of the ironic structures of power, Charles Gould ensures continued ownership of the mine (and thus, in his view, the mine’s protection) by threatening its complete destruction: “I have enough dynamite stored up at the mountain to send it down crashing into the valley,” he explains, “to send half Sulaco into the air if I liked” (*Nostromo*, 170). Or again, “He was prepared, if need be, to blow up the whole San Tomé mountain sky-high out of the territory of the republic” (294). Charles Gould’s use of dynamite as prophylactic against political upheaval represents a brilliant reimagining of the contemporary infatuation with dynamite as the material par excellence of anarchism and revolution. By surrounding the mine, dynamite creates a safety wall around it; by promising to explode the mountain completely, it leaves the partial explosion (the gash) intact, thus continuing to yield its many treasures, material and cultural—the creation, in fact, of an entirely new republic—in the interest of the English and their allies.
Gould’s trick is spectacularly successful. It also spawns a surprising imitator, the Professor in *The Secret Agent*, who safeguards himself from arrest by carrying a bomb on his person at all times, ready to explode himself (and his potential arresting officer) at a moment’s provocation. As he explains it, “‘they [the police] know very well I take care never to part with the last handful of my wares. I’ve it always by me.’” He touched the breast of his coat lightly. ‘In a thick glass flask’” (SA, 55). In *Nostromo*, the dynamite is kept at a slight remove from the mountain, just as the gash remains only analogous to the body. But in *The Secret Agent*, the bomb is nestled on the body, and the hand remains vigilantly on the India rubber ball. The masturbatory image of the Professor grasping the ball in his pocket is no doubt comic (incongruously recalling Pip at the opening of *Great Expectations*), but it is also menacing, crude, and precise. By lodging the device on his body, the Professor indissolubly links protection with annihilation, the prophylactic of *Nostromo* combined with the immense destructive (and self-destructive) force of popular accounts of anarchism, the ultimate mechanism of survival with an extreme vision of destruction—“a dreadful black hole belching horrible fumes choked with ghastly rubbish of smashed brickwork and mutilated corpses” is how Ossipon expresses his disenchanting vision of the likely effects (p.127) of the Professor exploding (SA, 56). It is as if, in the figure of the Professor, Conrad has distilled the dispersed political imaginary surrounding anarchist violence into the tightest of spaces, the “frail” little being of this destructive agent (one of only a few characters in the novel who is not fleshy and obese), folding into itself a generalized image of violence that, in the case of the mine, was instead exfoliated—political violence as culturally productive because always held at bay. In closing the gap between weapon and the object of destruction, the Professor enacts what we will see elsewhere in this study at the linguistic level, a drop from allegory into incarnation, or from metaphor into literalness. When that distance is eliminated, moreover, one is left in the profoundly claustrophobic space of an urban sphere that, like the aquarium to which Conrad repeatedly compares London in *The Secret Agent*, seems confined in and by its own vulnerability.
The Professor is, of course, a suicide bomber, or at least he holds out that possibility as his final card to play; in this role, he assumes a new kind of power in the text, what he calls “force.” It is the power of the weapon become the person, a complete intertwining of the man himself with an explosive device. In an early discussion with Ossipon, the Professor credits his effectiveness (“I am deadly”) to what he calls “force of personality,” a sheer will to destruction, which matches his desire for “a clean sweep and a clear start for a new conception of life,” language that echoes actual and fictional anarchists from the period (SA, 57, 56, 61). Monomaniacal in his search for a perfect detonator, indifferent to any form of human attachment, ascetic in his habits, the Professor has much in common with Nechaev’s terrorist from the “Catechism of the Revolution,” and, as in Nechaev’s treatise, this combination suggests an image of disproportionate power. The Professor is no man of the people—indeed his detestation and horror of the masses represent his most notable weakness—a preacher less of revolution than of simple destruction. In his opening colloquy with Verloc, Vladimir had fantasized about the perfect dynamite attack as one lodged into “pure mathematics,” but we can also see such a logic extended to the person of the Professor, who represents something like the potential for an attack of pure mathematics (SA, 31). Conrad seems to agree with the Professor’s own arrogant sense of his destructive reach, yielding the novel’s final paragraph to him and, perhaps surprisingly, given what many critics take to be an attitude of contempt for all the anarchists in the text, partially echoing his self-assessment:

And the incorruptible Professor walked too, averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind. He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked (p.128) frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable—and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men. (SA, 231)

For all Conrad’s diminishment of the Professor here (“a pest”), the bomb on his body nevertheless transforms London’s citizens into his potential victims, a condition that virtually defines the state of terrorism. “He was a force”: the repeated term recalls what we have already learned about the idea of “force,” what distinguishes it from other forms of violence—its overpowering and sweeping qualities. Here force, in a reversal of Weil’s later usage in relation to war, is invisible, and it is that quality which gives it its charge, its “terrible ... simplicity.” Indeed, The Secret Agent is a “simple tale” not only for its focus on the bare dynamics of familial revenge, but because it culminates in the “simplicity” of a violence that is pure in its propulsion of a politics-free lust to destroy.
The Professor may himself have “no future,” but he offers, quite precisely, an image of the future for the rest of modernity’s citizens. It is a future defined by the bomb’s hidden presence, by the invisible threat of a single individual, a mere speck amidst “the multitude of mankind,” with an excess of violent will. “He was going over there, to the unknown. He was going tranquilly to extermination, wherever there might be dynamite to blow up towns and men. He will be there, without doubt, when the middle class in agony shall hear the pavement of the streets bursting up beneath their feet”: not the Professor this time, but Zola’s Souvarine; these agents of future destruction were imagined, in a sense, as survivors of their own era, hurtling forth into a dystopian futurity (Zola, 504–5). If the general melting of anarchism into melodrama seems to suggest an eclipsing of its threat into a literary-historical comfort zone, the preserving of the terrorist bespeaks quite a different reckoning with violence in the future. In the end, the structure of dynamite violence seems to come down to two poles: the exploded body (Stevie’s physical obliteration) and the menace of the Professor (endlessly seeking a form of extreme destruction). What differentiates them, of course, is agency: the body whose destruction represents an insane crash of force from nowhere and for no purpose, and the body whose self-construction as bomb represents the potential blast of force from a single point and in a surfeit of pure purpose. Once again, it is a structure of everything and nothing, excessive consequence confronting denuded value.
In the end, the afterlife of anarchist violence turns out, tautologically, to be the idea of afterlife. In conceptualizing the body-as-weapon as sheer potentiality, Conrad figures dynamite as an insistent and ineradicable possibility. It would be a technology whose users might change, but whose link with a radical desire to destroy the social structure—or just to destroy human bodies and their landscapes—would remain a constant. There has been no “end of history,” as was projected in the late 1980s, but there are points of no return; the violent prospect associated with an individual bomb-thrower, or a man with a bomb in his pocket in the crowded city, is one such point. A bomb explodes in a meeting hall in Australia, killing and injuring. All we really know—all the author feels we need to know—is that “the bomb thrower was an unknown anarchist, probably a new immigrant from Europe.” This is D. H. Lawrence’s 1923 novel Kangaroo, where the anarchist and his bomb make only a cameo appearance in the novel, to serve as deus ex machina and to provide a culminating image for the violence that has been gathering force. But for Lawrence, the bomb also has the effect of releasing the text from its agonistic structure. In the midst, that is, of competing political factions whose rival visions have reached the point of out-and-out clash, Lawrence inserts the anarchist, a figure whose very epithet seems to connote random killing. By the nineteen-twenties, anarchist violence in England could be evacuated of any real meaning—any significance beyond its destructive capacities—but its imaginative utility had broadened and elasticized. Whether in London or Canberra, Lawrence reminds us, our modernity is defined, in part, by its forms of violence. One of these, now and forever, is the explosion—it will be detonated by an unknown actor, “probably a new immigrant from…”

Notes:

(1) A number of the most inflammatory anarchist works, which have always circulated in clandestine form, are only readily available online. For these, I use web addresses in my citations. For “La Ravachole,” see http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/ravachol/la-ravachole.htm
(2) The OED defines “sensational” as follows: “Of works of literature or art, hence of writers: Dealing in ‘sensation’ [...], aiming at violently exciting effects. Also of incidents in fiction or real life: Calculated to produce a startling impression.” As these terms (“violently exciting effects,” “startling impression”) indicate, it appears to be endemic to the “sensational” to consider the personal, social, and ethical consequences of its effects. The term entered usage in the early 1860s, alongside the literary phenomenon of the sensation novel. For discussion of some of these issues, see Patrick Brantlinger, “What Is ‘Sensational’ about the ‘Sensation Novel’?,” Nineteenth-Century Fiction 37:1 (June 1982): 1–28; Ann Cvetkovich, Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); and D. A. Miller, The Novel and the Police (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).


(4) Dynamite was also associated with Fenians, who preceded anarchists in their usage of it. I will discuss some overlaps between Fenians and anarchism in the next chapter. Here my focus is more specifically on anarchists.


(8) I have chosen, throughout this chapter, to use the masculine pronoun in my reference to anarchists. For ease of reading, I find it preferable, and a majority of the works I will be discussing take the masculine gender of the anarchist for granted. However, women were present in the anarchist movement to no small degree—Emma Goldman being the most famous—and the dynamite fiction of the period often had a marked gender theme, with beautiful women anarchists, for example, featured as seductresses. For discussion of women and radical movements of the period, see Marsh, Anarchist Women; Avrich, Anarchist Portraits (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 214–28; Alex Houen, Terrorism and Modern Literature: From Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 34–93; and on Goldman in particular, Candace Serena Salk, Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990) and Bonnie Haaland, Emma Goldman: Sexuality and the Impurity of the State (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1993).


(12) All the major news media, dailies as well as weekly/monthly periodicals, covered anarchist events. Papers such as *The Times* treated anarchist attacks as a staple topic. A perusal of *The Times* from the mid-1880s to the mid-1890s, in particular, betrays an exceptionally consistent interest in the subject, with "outrages" reported and discussed almost daily.


(16) E. Douglas Fawcett, *Hartmann the Anarchist; or, the Doom of the Great City* (London: Edward Arnold, 1893), 109
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(18). Thus we note a theoretical difference between Bakunin, the most important exponent of anarchism in the 1860s and ’70s, and Karl Marx, which led to a famous break at the founding of the First International (1864).

(19) Peter Kropotkin, Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets, ed. Rojer N. Baldwin (New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1968), 284

(20) Peter Kropotkin, Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1989), 5

(21) Avrich, Portraits, “Kropotkin’s Ethical Anarchism,” 53–78


(23) Mikail Bakunin, Bakunin on Anarchism, ed. and trans. Sam Dolgoff (Montreal: Black Rose, 1980), 334

(24). Quoted in Cahm, 78.

(25). Avrich uses the phrase “clean sweep” in reference to the words of the militant Italian anarchist Luigi Galleani, and Norman Sherry finds a number of resonant usages that might have contributed to the employment of such language in The Secret Agent. See Avrich, Portraits, 169, and Sherry, Conrad’s Western World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 279.

(26) H. Oliver, The International Anarchist Movement in Late Victorian London (London: Croom, 1983), 10–17

(28) Isabel Meredith, *A Girl Among the Anarchists* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 188


(32) In French, the term was “propagande par fait,” the word “fait” meaning both “act” and “fact,” and this conjunction of action with accomplished fact has added connotations. The suggestion is that violent action immediately changes the structure of opposition between the insurrectionists and the world they seek to effect, because facts represent an already altered world.


(35) We might note, too, that even into the twentieth century, when the novel was written, anarchism was still very much alive in the press, a fact sure to be available to Chesterton, who, in addition to his enormous volume of books, also wrote weekly columns in several newspapers, and even published his own journal, the *G. K.’s Weekly*.


(37) Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature*, 34–54

(38) For English anarchists, Ravachol became a lightning rod, almost a metaphor for the extreme edge of anarchist commitment to propaganda by deed. See Quail, *Slow Burning Fire*, 140–43.


(40) http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/history/franks/classes/131b/perm/radicalsdocuments.html For another translation, see http://www.nbp-info.org/library/SergeiNechaevKat.htm

(41) Mackay, *The Anarchists*, 48–49


(45) The fact that Berkman is of Jewish origin does not seem to lessen the power of the Christian thematics.


(49) Wilde’s title character might have been modeled on several historical Veras who received the attention of the English press, perhaps Vera Zasulich, who shot the governor of Saint Petersburg in 1878, or Vera Figner, a member of the group who eventually succeeded in assassinating the czar; or perhaps Wilde’s choice of a quintessentially Russian female name is meant to suggest something generic about her, an emblem of female revolutionary energy. For discussion of some of these issues, see Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 27–54. See also H. Montgomery Hyde, introduction to *The Complete Plays of Oscar Wilde*, 21–23.

(50) For all Wilde’s fame as an ironist, he held on to some of melodrama’s trappings and character types, as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and throughout his life continued to admire revolutionaries, as indicated in “The Soul of Man under Socialism.” As late as *De Profundis*, he praises Kropotkin:

> Two of the most perfect lives I have come across in my own experience are the lives of Verlaine and of Prince Kropotkin: both of them men who passed years in prison: the first, the one Christian poet since Dante, the other a man with the soul of that beautiful white Christ that seems coming out of Russia.


(51) My claim that Wilde’s play accords with popular representations of anarchists is based on my reading of the anarchist/terrorist as a figure of some complexity on the cultural scene. Eltis, by contrast, argues that in terms of contemporary drama, Wilde’s play is unique in portraying nihilists in a positive light. See Eltis, 34–44.

For an historical example, Emma Goldman describes a scene at a public gathering in which several Spanish anarchists “opened their shirts and showed the horrible scars of burned flesh” (quoted in Oliver, 115).

In the film *Metropolis* this theme is given wide expression, as the workers’ underground bodies literally feed the machines, and the radical leaders make good use of the rhetoric of bodily flesh providing the building material for the undeserving wealthy.


Berkman, *Prison Memoirs*, 3

Anarchists had a particularly strong animus against the legal system.

W. C. Hart, *Confessions of an Anarchist* (London: G. Richards, 1911), 139

For discussion of the essay, the trial of Niccol, and the full historical context, see Quail.

*Arbeter Fraynd* Avrich, *Portraits*, “Sacco and Vanzetti: The Italian Anarchist Background,” 162–75

Conrad, *Collected Stories*, 309, 312

We should perhaps note that the story ends in an enigmatic fashion, with the suggestion that perhaps Mr. X was no anarchist at all, more like a practical joker.


In this sense, *The Princess Casamassima* is less of an outlier in James’s canon than is sometimes thought, insofar as his signature style involves the circling around of gaps and aporias (in speech, meaning, understanding).
(65) . In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, to which I earlier made reference, Peter Brooks makes a convincing argument that James’s works operate according to what he calls “the melodrama of consciousness.” “The reasons for outward and inward melodrama in James are the same,” he writes, “his desire to make ethical conflict, imperative, and choice the substance of the novel, to make it the nexus of ‘character’ and the motivation of plot” (Brooks, 159). A brilliant reading of James’s full oeuvre, Brooks’s analysis of James as creating a melodramatic substratum to his seemingly ironized, complex surface is not focused on a given text or topic but, conversely, demonstrates a nearly ubiquitous stylistics and structure of meaning-making (a “moral occult”) in James’s works.


(69) . In Milan, in 1898.

(70) . *The Times*, February 16, 1894

(71) . For a brilliant discussion of this motif, see Fleischman, 185–214.

(72) *The Secret Agent* Sherry, *Conrad’s Western World*

(73) . It seems likely that Conrad came upon the narrative of the Greenwich bombing as the brainchild of the Russian embassy, frustrated with Britain’s lax laws and hoping to goad public opinion, from Ford Madox Ford, who appears to have heard such rumors from his anarchist connections.

(75). See English, “Anarchy in the Flesh.” The flesh motif is pervasive in the novel. Many of the novel's characters are extremely fat, often to the point of disability (Verloc, Michaelis, Sir Ethelred, Winnie’s mother), the theme of corporeality spreads in various directions, as with the repeated invocations of Cesare Lombroso’s theory of degeneracy, which was framed in terms of the phrenological capacity to read the face and body, and the novel closes with the twin images of the Professor as a corrosive threat to the bodies of all Londoners and Michaelis’s utopia of the future as a giant hospital.


A number of critics have observed the split quality of *The Secret Agent*, and have considered the move to Winnie and domestic violence. In a well-known commentary, Irving Howe argues that the second half of the novel marks an increasingly caricatured portrait of humanity. For Howe, Conrad’s irony is too encompassing in this novel, and the shift to Winnie’s drama in the second part of the text catalyzes a form of parody that turns the whole panorama into a kind of grim urban puppet show (Howe, *Politics and the Novel*). More recently, two excellent feminist critiques have worked from the observation of a fundamental shift in the novel, in both style and thematics, in which the detective novel (with its particular preoccupations and cultural markers) cedes to the domestic novel (with its own forms of violence). See Wendy Moffat, “Domestic Violence: The Simple Tale within *The Secret Agent*,” *ELT* 37:4 (1994): 465–89, and Rishona Zimring, “Conrad’s Pornography Shop,” *MFS* 43:2 (1997): 319–48. For discussion of the domestic drama as, in effect, a way to work out broader anxieties surrounding anarchism, see Eileen Sypher, “Anarchism and Gender: James’s *The Princess Casamassima* and Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*,” *Conradiana* 9:1 (Winter 1988): 1–16.


Zdzislaw Najder makes an interesting case for reading the novel in terms of a subverted—what we might call a deconstructed—melodrama. He writes, for instance: “The narrative ... goes against the melodramatic grain of the subject matter. The course of action does not resolve the conflicts but makes them more complex and ambiguous; instead of simple contrasts we are faced with manifold deceptions, misunderstandings and ambiguities.” See Zdzislaw Najder, “Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, or the Melodrama of Reality,” *New York Literary Forum* 7 (1980): 161.

Dynamite Violence


(91) Sherry, Conrad’s Western World, 283–85


(93) D. H. Lawrence, Kangaroo (New York: Penguin, 1980), 353

(94) D. H. Lawrence, Selected Literary Criticism (New York: Viking, 1956), 117

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