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JOSEPH CONRAD': 'THE SECRET AGENT'

CEDRIC WATTS

*'There had been
moments ...
when I was
an extreme
revolutionist.'*

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Joseph Conrad: 'The Secret Agent'

Cedric Watts

Bibliographical Entry:

Watts, Cedric. *Joseph Conrad: 'The Secret Agent'*. Literature Insights. Tirril: Humanities-Ebooks, 2007

A Note on the Author

After service in the Royal Navy, Cedric Watts entered Cambridge University and took his BA (Class I, English), MA and PhD there. He has written or edited forty-eight critical and scholarly books (among them *A Preface to Conrad* and *The Deceptive Text*), and is known internationally as an expert on William Shakespeare, R. B. Cunninghame Graham and Joseph Conrad. He is currently Research Professor of English at Sussex University.

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1. Editorial Note, Acknowledgements and Abbreviations

Unless otherwise specified, quotations from the book version of *The Secret Agent* are taken from my Everyman paperback edition. This represents the text of the first British edition of the novel. From time to time, my ensuing commentary draws on the introduction to that Everyman edition and to parts of my book *The Deceptive Text*. Works which proved very useful during the preparation of this Ebook were Norman Sherry's *Conrad's Western World* and the Cambridge edition of *The Secret Agent*.

The following abbreviations are used:

- CL*: *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. Frederick R. Karl, Laurence Davies *et al.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Vol. 1, 1983; Vol. 2, 1986; Vol. 3, 1988; Vol. 4, 1990; Vol. 5, 1996; Vol. 6, 2002; Vol. 7, 2005.
- CSA*: Joseph Conrad: *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale*, ed. Bruce Harkness and S. W. Reid. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- CWW*: Norman Sherry: *Conrad's Western World*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- SA*: Joseph Conrad: *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale*, ed. Cedric Watts. London: Orion Dent Everyman, 1997.

In quotations, a row of three points (or of four points to include a full stop) indicates an ellipsis already present in the quoted matter, whereas a row enclosed in square brackets indicates an omission that I have made. Square brackets also enclose editorial insertions.

2. Biographical

Conrad's Progress

Joseph Conrad, originally Józef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski, was born on 3 December 1857 into a Poland which had virtually disappeared from the map of Europe. In a series of 'partitions' at the end of the eighteenth century, the country had been annexed by Russia from the east, Prussia from the west, and Austria-Hungary from the south-west. Conrad was raised in the eastern part of Poland, the Ukraine, which was controlled by the Russians. His parents, patriotic members of the land-owning gentry-cum-nobility, conspired against the Russian overlords, were arrested, found guilty of subversive activities, and exiled to the remote province of Vologda. Their four-year-old son accompanied them on the dreary journey into exile. Partly as a consequence of their privations, both parents died young, leaving Conrad an orphan at the age of eleven. (An uncle became his guardian.) Thus, even as a child, Conrad had gained experience of the power of imperialism, of the fact that loyalty to one cause may resemble treachery to another, and of the ironic interconnection of solidarity with isolation. It is not entirely surprising, then, that he eventually became the most intelligent political novelist of his generation.

When he was sixteen, he left Poland for Marseille in the south of France. He lived a bohemian life but also worked among seamen and voyaged to the West Indies in French ships. On one occasion when ashore, he gambled and lost some borrowed money (his uncle reported) at Monte Carlo. He returned to his lodgings and attempted suicide: the bullet from his pistol narrowly missed his heart. In 1878 he entered the British Merchant Navy, and during the next sixteen years made many voyages in sailing-ships and steam-ships, qualifying as second mate, first mate and eventually as captain. He became a British citizen in 1886, and made London his base between voyages which took him to Bombay, Bangkok, the East Indies, Australia and the Congo. These voyages and the exotic landfalls, the romance and the disillusionments of distant journeys, were to provide the material for much of his eventual literary output. So, too, would the contrast between the shipboard community and the urban masses.

In Poland he had known the bitter life of a nation subjected to imperialism; but in England he knew the life of a nation at the height of her imperial power, proudly ruling the greatest empire the world had ever known. He could respond to the glamour, the Titanism and the hubris of the imperial endeavour, even while his shrewd scepticism and his patrician distaste for commercialism alerted him to its hypocrisies and its acquisitive rivalries. Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* would declare:

‘The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.’

Conrad’s friends would include such radical critics of imperialism and capitalism as Cunninghame Graham (an associate of Friedrich Engels) and Edward Garnett (friend to anarchists). In any case, his encounters abroad with a diversity of indigenous peoples provoked a questioning of European assumptions. What were the bases of civilisation and what was the true nature of ‘progress’? Were there any essential differences between the Europeans and the people they sought to colonise? Stein, the wise observer in Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, would even argue that human beings were unwanted colonisers of the very planet:

‘Sometimes it seems to me that man is come where he is not wanted, where there is no place for him; for if not, why should he want all the place? Why should he run about here and there making a great noise about himself, talking about the stars, disturbing the blades of grass?’

As he travelled the world, Conrad had gained exceptional linguistic experience. While his native language was Polish, he had lived in a region where the overlords spoke Russian and the peasants Ukrainian. His father, Apollo Korzeniowski, was not only a patriotic poet and playwright but also a translator of English and French texts (by Shakespeare, de Vigny and Victor Hugo). Conrad’s own second language was widely-ranging French: the courtly French of civilised address, the literary French of Flaubert, Maupassant and Anatole France, and the vernacular of Mediterranean seamen and stevedores. His English was acquired partly from tutors, largely from his voracious reading (of Shakespeare, Byron, Carlyle, Dickens and many others), and partly from fellow seamen. When exploring the Congo in 1890, Conrad kept his journal in English.

If he had gambled and lost at Monte Carlo, it might have seemed to Conrad in the eighteen-nineties that he had also gambled and lost as a seaman. As steam gradually superseded sail, and as ships became larger and more efficient, it became harder

for him to find appointments which matched his qualifications. In relinquishing the merchant marine for the career of a writer based in England, he was gambling again. His first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, was published in 1895; the second, *An Outcast of the Islands*, in 1896. Both were widely reviewed, occasionally negatively, often with respect, and sometimes with high praise. Between 1897 and 1907, in an exuberantly creative decade, appeared *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *Nostramo* and *The Secret Agent*. Nevertheless, though his reputation grew, sales were disappointing, and he was frequently burdened by debt and depression. He also bore the responsibilities of a married man with two sons; his diligent wife, Jessie, became an invalid who needed a series of surgical operations on her legs. Conrad was helped by loans from friends, by a grant from the Royal Literary Fund, by a generous pension (a 'Civil List Pension') from the British taxpayer, and by huge advances from his loyal literary agent, J. B. Pinker. Around 1914, however, as *Chance* sold well, his gamble paid handsomely. Publishers reprinted his earlier texts, Hollywood bought the film rights to numerous works, and Conrad, in the final decade of his life, was at last prosperous: a popular as well as an acclaimed author. He was lionised on a visit to the USA, and was offered a knighthood (which he courteously declined) by Ramsay MacDonald, Britain's first Labour Prime Minister. After a heart attack, he died on 3 August 1924 and was buried at Canterbury with Roman Catholic rites. His gravestone quotes the following couplet from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*:

Sleepe after toyle, port after stormie seas,
Ease after warre, death after life, does greatly please.

These words were probably chosen for their maritime allusion. In the poem, ironically, they are uttered by a spirit called Despair. Like Conrad's last work, *Suspense*, Spenser's epic is incomplete.

Sometimes, in retrospect, it may seem that Conrad's best works were written under the auspices of the Roman god Janus. Janus is the two-faced god: he looks in opposite directions at the same time. He is the patron of thresholds and of paradox. Joseph Conrad himself was Janiform: Polish and English, seaman and novelist, moralist and sceptic, Augustan and Romantic, Victorian and Modernist. His literary character is intensely descriptive, astutely philosophical, and distinctively noble. While commenting acutely on his own times, he also wrote prophetically for posterity. As terrorism burgeons in the twenty-first century, *The Secret Agent* retains topicality.

3. The Composition of *The Secret Agent* and its Modes of Publication

3.1. Composition

The Secret Agent was published in two distinct forms. First, there was the American serial version which appeared in *Ridgway's: A Militant Weekly for God and Country* between 6 October 1906 and 15 December 1906. Next, there was the book version, published in 1907 by Methuen in London, by Harper and Brothers in New York, and by Tauchnitz in Leipzig.

The work commenced as a tale. In February 1906, Conrad began a story entitled *Verloc*, and proceeded to work on it intermittently but with eventual acceleration. As late as August 4, he referred to it (in a letter to H. G. Wells's wife Jane) as 'an Anarchist story, rather long, which with two others (short) is to form a special volume' (CL 3, 346). The narrative continued to grow. Other novels by Conrad, notably *Lord Jim* and *Nostramo*, had similarly begun as tales but had lengthened as Conrad realised their potentialities. As it expanded into a short novel, to be entitled *The Secret Agent*, the author sent the material, piece by piece, to his agent, J. B. Pinker, who sought an outlet. Eventually, the work was accepted for serialisation in *Ridgway's*. When serialisation began, the novel was still unfinished, and Conrad came under great pressure to complete it on time. On 2 November, he sent the following hasty telegram from Stanford in Kent to Pinker in London:

38 pages leave by 10 train begin typing at once another 1500 words to end shall leave at noon by rail with you about 2.40 in time to be typed and catch Southampton mailboat please wire me at five o'clock Conrad

The redoubtably efficient Pinker received the material and rapidly had it typed, so that it did indeed catch the mailboat from Southampton to New York in time to meet the *Ridgway's* schedule. The manuscript of *The Secret Agent* which currently survives at the Rosenbach Museum resembles the serial rather than the book. The typed copies have apparently not survived.

During May, June and July 1907, Conrad revised and expanded the novel, tell-

ing H. G. Wells on 30 July that it was finished. In London, Methuen and Company published the book on 12 September. In New York, it was published a few days later by Harper and Brothers. The Tauchnitz version derived from the first British edition and contained no separate Conradian revisions. The American version was set from Methuen proofs, but not all of Conrad's corrections were in time for it. In 1920, Conrad wrote an 'Author's Note' to accompany the novel when, in the following year, it appeared in the collected editions of his works published by William Heinemann in London and F. N. Doubleday in New York. (The note was also published in the *London Mercury*.) Otherwise, Conrad seems to have contributed very little to the preparation of the novel in those collected editions.

In 1920 Conrad adapted *The Secret Agent* as a play. It was privately printed in a four-act version in 1921; in the next year, it was unsuccessfully staged in London as a three-act drama; and in 1923 the three-act script was published in London by Laurie. Later (in four acts again), it was included with Conrad's other two works for the theatre in *Three Plays: 'Laughing Anne', 'One Day More', 'The Secret Agent'* (London: Methuen, 1934). A translation was performed in Poland in 1923.

3.2. The Serial and the First Book Edition

Ridgway's: A Militant Weekly for God and Country (retailing at five cents a copy) was a down-market magazine which liked to expose scandals in high places. The initial, relatively short version of *The Secret Agent* produced by Conrad was further shortened by the *Ridgway's* editorial office. In October 1906 Conrad remarked to Pinker: 'Ridgways are sending me their rag. It's awful – and it don't matter in the least. I see they are "editing" the stuff pretty severely.' (CL 3, 369.) The *Militant Weekly for God and Country* was publishing a work from which God was conspicuously absent and in which the Professor declares the USA 'essentially anarchistic' and 'lawless', 'fertile ground' for terrorism. The serial had to wind its way through the allotted areas between the numerous advertisements. Via Pinker, Conrad had sought to inform the magazine that 'not story but quality' was what mattered. Subsequently, in the tones of a school-teacher, the magazine introduced the serial with the following explanation which (as many reviewers had) postulated Conrad's kinship with two very popular – and very different – writers of the day, Kipling and Stevenson:

Joseph Conrad, the author of 'Youth,' 'Romance,' 'Typhoon,' etc., is a story-teller who writes literature. Like Stevenson and Kipling, his tales last because there is more of them than the bare bones of the plot; there is the knowledge of men, the

feeling for life. In his new novel, 'The Secret Agent,' there is a deal of plot and life. It is a story of diplomatic intrigue and anarchist treachery.

Inevitably, however, in this abbreviated serial text of *The Secret Agent*, 'the bare bones of the plot' became very conspicuous. After the first episode, each instalment was preceded by a synopsis of 'the story so far'. Many of the passages cut by *Ridgway's* concerned the history and circumstances of the characters; others were philosophical or 'essayistic' reflections by characters or the narrator. One fine passage in the manuscript which failed to emerge in the serial (or the book) was this, an appropriately ironic and classically-attuned commentary on the sudden death of the recumbent Verloc:

If it is true that the spirit carries the reflection of the earthly shape into the other world and seeks there the old associates of its earthly life[,] the spiritual part of Mr Verloc appearing suddenly in the Elysian Fields must have astonished the shade of the late Baron Stott-Wartenheim, its appreciative patron[,] by its air of vexation and fatigue. (*CSA*, 404)

My inserted commas clarify a structure which was slightly blurred, probably by Conrad's haste in composition; but the eruditely mordant comedy of the slain Verloc and his post-mortal 'air of vexation and fatigue' remains radiantly clear.

In addition to making many cuts, the editors at *Ridgway's* interpolated some linkage-material and made some stylistic alterations which were intended to clarify the narrative. The numerous illustrations by Henry Raleigh (line-drawings in a style verging on caricature) solicited the magazine-reader by isolating dramatic incidents, such as the revelation of the mangled remains of the bomb-victim or the stabbing of Verloc by his wife. In *Ridgway's*, in contrast to the book version, Conrad's novel resembles a graphic thriller for rapid reading, a work markedly less resonant and subtle. The serial was accompanied by a variety of advertisements: e.g. for Johnson's revolvers, ten-cent cigars, washing machines and the unexpurgated works of Balzac. *Ridgway's* failed in mid-February 1907, and that it published Conrad's novel is now its main claim to fame.

The first book edition of *The Secret Agent* offered a text which was almost half as long again as the serial. A new episode (now Chapter 10) was added, and the ending (now Chapters 11–13) was greatly expanded. The relationship between Stevie, his mother and his sister was given much fuller treatment. The ironic commentary was greatly extended. Descriptions were elaborated and refined, and co-ordination improved.

The first British edition was superior to the first American edition. Two rounds

of revision of the Methuen proofs enabled Conrad to achieve numerous late and minute improvements, some of them too late to be transmitted to New York for the Harper text. Of course, typists of his manuscripts sometimes introduced small errors and ‘improvements’, and both the Methuen and the Harper editors introduced minor changes of their own. (Such matters are fully analysed and illustrated in the textual apparatus of the 1990 Cambridge volume.) The American first edition, though inferior to the British, has some unique readings. For instance, where the Professor’s ears were ‘large’ in the MS and the serial, they were ‘thin, large’ ears in Harper and finally ‘flat, large’ ears in Methuen. Such diversity is cautionary for critics but delectable for collectors.

3.3. The Stage Version

Conrad’s adaptation of *The Secret Agent* for the stage was performed at the Ambassadors’ Theatre in London in 1922. The acting was evidently variable in quality, so that after the first performance Conrad abbreviated two of the parts, and the response from reviewers was generally hostile. The play was not well attended, and the run ended after just ten performances. As Conrad acknowledged, when the novel is reduced to its ‘bare bones’ for the stage, ‘it makes a grisly skeleton’ (*SA*, 236). Removal of the narratorial voice is indeed a stripping of the flesh. To fit the chronological and spatial requirements of stage action, the plot is drastically compressed and locations are kept indoors. The *finale* of the last act verges on parody of the conventional endings of theatrical thrillers: Ossipon, Inspector Heat, two constables, a detective and the Professor arrive at Verloc’s shop within minutes of the domestic murder, while Winnie relapses into lunacy.

In *Heart of Darkness* we are told that, in Marlow’s view, ‘the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze’. Comparison of the play-text with the novel text of *The Secret Agent* makes the same point forcefully. The significant ‘envelope’ is absent from the play. The plot-elements of most Conradian fiction can be found in a wide range of second- and third-rate works. It is the quality of their authorial scrutiny, descriptive embodiment and ironic arrangement which generates, in Conrad’s narratives, their durable significance.

4. The Opening, the Plot and the Narration

4.1. The Title, Sub-Title and Dedication

The novel's title, *The Secret Agent*, may seem to refer only to the 'double agent', Adolf Verloc. We learn that he was jailed in France for stealing military secrets and supplying them to the Russians. Since then he has been employed by the Russian Embassy for eleven years not only to spy on subversive groups but also to act as an *agent provocateur*, for he is a talented speaker at 'workmen's assemblies' and has a fund of scorn for the rulers of the state. The novel itself repeatedly refers to him as a secret agent, sometimes with mockingly emphatic capitalisation, as in 'Mr Verloc, the Secret Agent' (171, 194).

On 1 October 1907, however, Conrad replied thus to a letter from Edward Garnett:

I am no end proud to see you've spotted my poor old woman. You've got a fiendishly penetrating eye for one's most secret intentions. She *is* the heroine. (CL 3, 487)

The 'poor old woman' is Winnie's mother, a 'secret agent' in her private plan to help Stevie. But then, we may reflect, Winnie herself has concealed from Verloc her own motivation in marrying him. She is 'capable of a bargain the mere suspicion of which would have been infinitely shocking to Mr Verloc's idea of love' (192). Conrad's 'Author's Note' says: 'At last the story of Winnie Verloc stood out complete [...]. *This* book is *that* story.' Yet another 'secret agent' is the Professor, who, at the end of the novel, walks through the streets 'unsuspected and deadly'. In addition, Inspector Heat operates too secretly – or so the Assistant Commissioner complains. Characters repeatedly fail to understand the inner motives of others. Meanwhile, even time itself becomes a peculiarly potent agent. In short, though the title points obviously towards Verloc, it invokes a wide terrain of deception, concealment, misunderstanding, incommunication and covert action.

The sub-title of the novel, '*A Simple Tale*', also solicits explanation. After all, it is followed by a work which has the customary length of a novel rather than of a tale;

furthermore, the novel is complex rather than ‘simple’, and holds dense ironies. On 12 September 1906, Conrad responded thus to comments by his fellow-novelist John Galsworthy:

In such a tale one is likely to be misunderstood. After all you must not take it too seriously. The whole thing is superficial and it is but a *tale*. I had no idea to consider Anarchism politically – or to treat it seriously in its philosophical aspect: as a manifestation of human nature in its discontent and imbecility. (CL 3, 354)

A letter from Conrad to Pinker strikes a similar note. There Conrad provides the following explanation of the sub-title: ‘I don[’]t want the story to be misunderstood as having any sort of social or polemical intention.’ (CL 3, 446.) Nevertheless, the reader of *The Secret Agent* encounters an abundance of social comments and polemical observations; indeed, the satiric scorn directed against anarchists and revolutionaries is both implicit and explicit. In the ‘Author’s Note’, Conrad is keen to stress that he does not claim personal familiarity with the revolutionary underworld; but he reports his gratification on hearing that he had been credited with ‘inside knowledge’ by ‘an experienced man of the world’ and by ‘revolutionary refugees in New York’. That sub-title, ‘*A Simple Tale*’, can therefore be construed in various ways, and it may even be regarded as ironic, a piece of mock-modesty.

The Secret Agent is dedicated thus:

TO
H. G. WELLS

THE CHRONICLER OF MR LEWISHAM’S LOVE
THE BIOGRAPHER OF KIPPS AND THE
HISTORIAN OF THE AGES TO COME

THIS SIMPLE TALE OF THE XIX CENTURY
IS AFFECTIONATELY OFFERED

In 1896, Wells had reviewed Conrad’s *An Outcast of the Islands*, praising it highly. Conrad wrote to thank him. Thus began a warm and co-operative friendship. Conrad particularly enjoyed *The Time Machine* (which influenced *Heart of Darkness*) and *The Invisible Man*. Those two works and *The War of the Worlds* seem to have contributed to *The Inheritors* (1901), a novel of science fiction and topical politics by Conrad and F. M. Hueffer. Griffin, the protagonist of *The Invisible Man*, anticipates the ruthless dedication of Conrad’s Professor; and Conrad echoes details of that novella. When