



PROJECT MUSE®

---

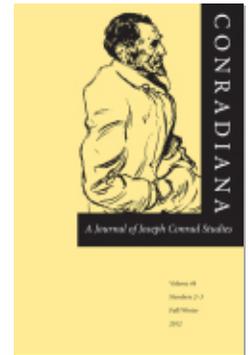
*The Secret Agent* by Joseph Conrad (review)

Ellen Burton Harrington

Conradiana, Volume 44, Numbers 2-3, Fall/Winter 2012, pp. 254-255 (Review)

Published by Texas Tech University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cnd.2014.0008>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/554525>

Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*. Ed. Tanya Agathocleous. Buffalo, NY: Broadview, 2009. 320 pp. ISBN 9781551117843.

Recent terrorist attacks—from the Unabomber to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the spate of political bombings around the world that has followed 9/11—have stirred interest in *The Secret Agent* in the decade of its centennial, though as Tanya Agathocleous argues, “With its conspirational plot and cynical outlook, *The Secret Agent* arguably sheds more light on the logic of those who believe that the American government staged the World Trade Center attacks in order to further its own agenda than it does on the psychology of the 9/11 terrorists.” Agathocleous’s recent edition of *The Secret Agent* from Broadview Press offers a varied selection of historical and contextual materials, eminently suitable for the classroom or to provide an introduction to the novel. (In keeping with the Broadview Editions series, the volume includes no criticism other than contemporary reviews.) In addition to a brief introduction and chronology, the volume features appendices organized by topics that represent some of the major areas of historical consideration of the novel, providing a basis for approaching the novel in the classroom and inviting further historical and critical research.

Agathocleous’s concise introduction to *The Secret Agent* situates the novel in terms of its publication history, its relation to Conrad’s interests and oeuvre, its critique of Victorian mores and genres, contemporary concerns about anarchism and violence, its connection to literary naturalism and the themes of degeneration and heat death, and its afterlife in contemporary culture. Starting with sources for and influences on the novel, Agathocleous considers the novel’s perspective on history in “its insistence on the fundamental inseparability of private and public life.” Agathocleous examines the influence of anarchism as well as anarchist and Fenian violence on Conrad in this period, describing the novel’s connections to the “dynamite novel” and other popular spy fiction of the day, including Isabel Meredith’s *A Girl Among the Anarchists*, which, Agathocleous argues, influenced *The Secret Agent* and which is excerpted in this volume’s appendices. She discusses Conrad’s discomfort with the subject of anarchism, possibly because of British xenophobia and concern about immigration in this time period, as well as the legacy of radical politics in his own family. Yet, as Agathocleous notes, the novel’s social critique is intertwined with anarchism: “Though the novel suggests that Conrad could see no way out of the machine-like world that he depicts, it also testifies to his fascination with the idea of ‘smashing’ the system.” Reading the novel as a dismantling of the nineteenth-century realist novel by comparing it to *Bleak House*, Agathocleous examines the naturalistic bent of *The Secret Agent*, both in its outlook and in its treatment of

the discredited discourses on degeneration and heat death. In telling “Winnie Verloc’s story” (as Conrad famously characterizes it in his Author’s Note), *The Secret Agent* casts a satirical eye on marital and domestic relations, which links it to the New Woman novel, even as it experiments with what will become modernist techniques. As Agathocleous notes, “In its anarchistic refusal to take sides or rely on universal humanist values—and its undisguised horror at the void that it uncovers as a result—*The Secret Agent* is modern to the core.” This introduction is dense and engaging in its historical coverage and contextualization, a useful opening to the study of the novel.

Historical materials in the appendices are grouped according to major themes in the novel, and, while the selections are quite brief (frequently only a page or two each), they allow an instructor to frame certain important historical, cultural, and literary aspects of the novel and are preceded by introductory comments contextualizing the excerpts. Appendix A on London contains two very short excerpts on the city from *Bleak House* and from *The Soul of London* by Ford Madox Ford (as Ford Madox Hueffer). Appendix B on “Anarchism and Terrorism” offers a fuller selection of sources, including *The Times*’s account of the 1894 Greenwich explosion, excerpts from Conrad’s letters to R. B. Cunningham-Grahe and Peter Kropotkin’s essays, and the Meredith excerpt, which allows for a more complex consideration of the role of anarchism in the novel (the selection of “Evils Attributed to Alien Immigration” from the Report of the Royal Commission on Alien Immigration of 1903 is a striking document, one that will seem relevant to contemporary readers). Likewise, Appendix C, the section on degeneration, which includes excerpts from Darwin, Lankester, Lombroso, and Nordau, dramatizes degeneration theory and the reach of criminal anthropology effectively in relation to the novel. Using excerpts from Thompson, Swinburne, and Stewart and Lockyer, Appendix D on “Heat Death, Entropy, and Time” connects the form of the novel and Conrad’s own “attack on time” to contemporary concerns about entropy and heat death, which themselves evoke the discourse on the decline of Victorian ideals and degeneration. Appendix E contextualizes “Marriage and Feminism” by going back to Patmore and Ruskin before turning to New Women authors Mona Caird and Sarah Grand and Hugh E.M. Stutfield’s critique of feminism and the New Woman as degenerate. The final appendix of seven contemporary reviews offers a range of the responses to the novel on its initial publication, including reviews by Garnett and Galsworthy. Despite the overall brevity of these selections, the range of perspectives offered in each topic area gives the reader a complex view of the historical context of the novel and promising leads for in-depth reading and research.

ELLEN BURTON HARRINGTON

*University of South Alabama*