

# “A Mad Art Attempting the Inconceivable”: Rethinking Irony in *The Secret Agent*

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## 1.

As the composition of *The Secret Agent* neared its end, Joseph Conrad became increasingly defensive about his work. In his correspondence of 1906 and 1907, he repeatedly disclaims any philosophical, moral, or political significance of the novel, insisting that anarchism was a wholly incidental element in his work. As a response to the contemporary attack on the “moral squalor of the tale” (7), Conrad in the “Author’s Note” (1920) again attempts to “justify” his choice of anarchism and use of an “ironic method” (11). Asserting that “there was no perverse intention, no secret scorn for the natural sensibilities of mankind at the bottom of my impulses,” he proceeds to state that “applying an ironic method to a subject of that kind was formulated with deliberation and in the earnest belief that ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as in pity” (11).

Despite Conrad’s contention that he “ha[d] not intended to commit a gratuitous outrage on the feelings of mankind” (12), the narrator’s scathing mockery of human beings — from anarchists, idiots, helpless women to civil authorities — has left critics conflicted about Conrad’s pedagogical intention and the ethics of the novel. Irving Howe, for instance, deplored the novel’s withholding of “a moral positive to serve literary ends” (96). Regarding the novel as “an inhuman game with human needs” (90-91), Anthony Winner states that it hardly offers any “moral education” (14). Although Mark A. Wollaeger acknowledges some complexities in the novel’s use of irony, he still sees the narrator’s view of the characters too harsh and inhuman (149, 154). For Wollaeger, the “overbearing presence of the narrator” reflects Conrad’s desire for

"order" and "authorship" and the narrator's "monologic indifference to the fate of the characters" reveals the writer's intention to "take possession of them" (145, 155). By contrast, J. Hillis Miller holds that the ultimate purpose of *The Secret Agent* is to teach the reader not to fall into "fatuous complacency" by encouraging the reader to be critical about the narrator's attitude toward the characters (44).

In some sense, these criticisms are united in their view of irony as basically a series of techniques or strategies for "conveying the opposite of what one says," namely, what Ernst Behler and other scholars term "classical irony" (Behler 76). To borrow Behler's phrase, one of the fundamental characteristics of classical irony is the assumption of "perfect understanding between speaker and listener" and an "absolute notion of truth"(2). Obviously, this kind of irony abounds in *The Secret Agent*, ranging from verbal to dramatic or structural irony. For example, much of the irony in the novel turns on a "truth" about the anarchists that both the narrator and the reader are supposed to know, namely, their ineptitude or inability to revolt. In addition, a great deal of the narrative develops through the characters' ignorance or miscalculation of others' minds, motivations, or the entire situation. For example, Winnie Verloc's attempt to instill Verloc's absolute goodness in the mind of her half-witted, all-too-trusting brother Stevie turns out to be a fatal blunder, for it is Stevie's loyalty to Verloc that leads to his death by the bomb explosion.

Does irony in *The Secret Agent*, however, function simply on the basis of the "absolute notion of truth?" Or, to put it differently, does irony in the novel operate in a fixed epistemological, moral, and/or political horizon? Our thinking on this question can be illuminated by recent studies of irony. For Alan Wilde, the "fundamental habit of defining irony essentially as a contrast between reality and appearance" and by implication, the tendency to assume the existence of an absolute truth underlying this discrepancy, is problematic in that it "rationaliz[es]" the "protean and elusive nature of irony" (4). With similar objections in mind, many theorists of irony have attempted to redefine or broaden the concept of irony by aligning it with "a mode of consciousness" (Wilde), a modernist nihilistic worldview (Glicksberg), or an anti-foundational literary mode that registers the "necessity and the impossibility of

communication" (Behler). And yet, curiously, critical responses to Conrad's irony have largely remained tied to the classical notion of irony.

Wilde's study suggests that these so-far conventional approaches to irony in *The Secret Agent* have offered rather a limited understanding of both irony and the novel. In *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination*, Wilde states that there has been a growing sense of difficulty in defining irony. Many scholars would generally agree that since Friedrich Schlegel characterized Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* in terms of irony at the end of the eighteenth century, the concept of irony began to embrace something more than a figure of speech. A number of theorists, however, have proposed different perspectives on the conceptual, philosophical, ethical, or political features of irony as well as the relation between irony and literary romanticism, modernism and postmodernism. For example, Charles Glicksberg contends that the concept of irony has "evolve[d]" or been "transformed" throughout history from "a rhetorical device" through "romantic irony" to "metaphysical irony" (11). In his view, the metaphysical irony of twentieth century literature goes beyond both classical and romantic irony in that it expresses the nihilistic conviction that there is "no final explanation of the mystery of existence" (32). Like Glicksberg, Ernst Behler also distinguishes the romantic irony (initiated by Schlegel) from "isolated ironic passages" (75). But unlike Glicksberg, who assumes semantic breaks between the ironies of different ages, Behler's emphasis on the dynamic, process-oriented character of irony leads to an association of irony with "the modern style of self-reflection and self-consciousness," namely, "literary modernity" (82). Taking a cue from Schlegel's definition of irony as an "involuntary and yet completely deliberate dissimulation" that "contains and arouses a feeling of the indissoluble antagonism between . . . the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication" (75), Behler views Schlegel's irony as an attempt to "rescue" Socratic-Platonic irony — a form of irony that until the end of the eighteenth century had been obscured by the prevalence of another view of classical irony, a view that presumed a "complete agreement" and "perfect understanding between speaker and listener and an absolute notion of truth" (81).<sup>1</sup> Characterizing Schlegel's irony as an "indeterminable . . . process of thinking and writing" through which "thought and counter-thought moves forth

in lively fashion," Behler proceeds to question the association of irony and rationalism that he detects in postmodern discourses (with the exception of Paul de Man)(83). Borrowing de Man's view of irony as one of the "innermost essence of literature," Behler defines irony as a "rupture," "a disruption of language which makes it impossible for the author to master his text and for the reader to register unambiguous reading protocols" (103). From this perspective, Jacques Derrida's "différance" can be seen as "a continuation and reformulation of one of the central features of Schlegel's irony — "the impossibility and necessity of complete communication" (Behler 109).

As Behler's study suggests, de Man's observations concerning irony have helped to reshape our understanding of irony. In his 1977 lecture titled "The Concept of Irony," de Man states that "it seems to be uncannily difficult to give a definition of irony" (164), for irony is "not a concept" in the first place (167); rather, irony is "a performative system" bound up with "the impossibility of understanding" (167). For de Man, it is Schlegel's texts where the problem of irony — that of the "impossibility of understanding"— "really gets worked out." Schlegel's writing "Über dies Unverständlichkeit" (which de Man translates as "On the Impossibility of Understanding," "On Incomprehensibility," or "On the Problem of the Impossibility of Understanding" 166-67) is an exemplary text that simultaneously deals with and enacts irony in its rigorous refusal to be fixed to any single meaning (181). Taking another example from "Eine Reflexion" (A Reflection), a chapter in Schlegel's anecdotal roman à clef *Lucinde* that has notoriously irritated many readers including Kierkegaard and Hegel, de Man argues that what was really upsetting about this text was the "threat" that its philosophical "reflection on the very physical questions involved in sexual intercourse"(168) poses to "all assumptions one has about what a text should be" through the mutual interruption and disruption of sexual and philosophical discourses (169). In this respect, de Man suggests, "Eine Reflexion" enacts the deconstructive performance of irony in its "dangerous" circles that

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1) Thus, while Glicksberg differentiates Socratic irony that, he believes, is based on the ironist's knowledge of the absolute truth from modernist irony based on nihilism and skepticism, Behler approaches Socratic irony in light of process and indeterminacy, thus regarding it as a predecessor of modern irony.

disrupt the desire “to stabilize, to control the trope” (167). “What is at stake in irony,” therefore, “is the possibility of understanding, the possibility of reading, the readability of texts, the possibility of deciding on a meaning or on a multiple set of meanings or on a controlled polysemy of meanings” (167). In sum, for de Man, irony is “a free play of the signifier” that goes beyond the intention of the speaker/writer in its “sheer circulation” (181).

This is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of the possibilities and problems that each of these approaches to irony opens up, or of their differing assumptions about language, truth, meaning, and modernist aesthetics. Rather, I want to show that some recent theories of irony help us understand *The Secret Agent* from a new angle. This does not mean, of course, to confine the novel's irony to specific theoretical frame. On the contrary, while acknowledging the usefulness of these theoretical insights, I seek to refine them as well, by illuminating where they fail in explaining the complex epistemological and political significance of irony in the novel. As we shall see, my reading of irony in *The Secret Agent* complicates Wilde's rather schematic distinction between a modernist irony — that he believes achieves “aesthetic closure” as a substitute for a lost paradise — and a postmodern irony — that he assumes takes the absurd and contingent world as it is. Although the world in the novel is contingent and absurd, this does not mean that the novel conforms neatly to Wilde's formulation of postmodern irony. While irony in the novel is primarily propelled by a profound anguish about the absurdity of the world, it does not simply register a nostalgia for a lost paradise (as Wilde assumes) or a sense of sheer randomness and circulation. Borrowing de Man's words, irony in *The Secret Agent* resists the desire to “stabilize” by continuously interrogating the power embedded in the illusion of objective truth and meaning. But Conrad's irony pushes de Man's view of irony a step further by locating what de Man calls the “danger” of irony in a more concrete socio-political terrain, constantly interrogating the contingency and the desire for domination embedded in the illusory beliefs in truth, disinterested political commitment and moral decisions.

2.

Many of Conrad's works portray a world devoid of any absolute, objective meaning or truth. For example, at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, we read:

Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him 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, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (20)

The image of meaning as an envelope that surrounds an episode reveals a sense of hollowness and the absence of any fixed, transparent meaning, a sense that runs through the entire novel. This is not to say that the narrator here totally negates the existence of meaning. Rather, the image of "a haze" or "misty halos" suggests that meaning is obscure and without solidity. In *The Secret Agent*, the world is filled with a sense of uncertainty. Most characters in the novel have murky origins. Verloc's Soho shop is full of "nondescript packages" (13), "box without apparently nothing inside" (14) and "the shadows of nondescript things" (54). The recurrent images of empty or nondescript boxes and shadows intimate incomprehensibility and obscurity. Although the overt plot — a story about a failed bomb-attack on Greenwich Observatory — unravels the "truth," namely, the man behind this crime, the entire narrative constantly debunks the "notion of absolute truth" by exposing the will to domination implicated in any truth claim, while disrupting the "complete agreement" between the narrator and the reader as well.

At this point, de Man's reading of Schlegel's observations concerning wit and mythology in light of "authentic language" (*reelle Sprache*) is noteworthy as it makes possible for us to view Conrad's irony as a resistance to absolute truth. To begin with, Schlegel draws upon the image of a "glow" as something that allows the meaning of "the original nature and the original force" (which de Man translates into *Kraft*) "to shine through." Interestingly, Conrad also uses the image of a "glow" or "moonshine" that makes visible the meaning (however

misty it may be) of an "episode" or a "tale." More importantly, both Schlegel and Conrad's texts associate this "glow" with madness or absurdity instead of with reason. According to de Man, the "glow" here is a version of Schlegel's authentic language which Schlegel describes as "the strangely, even the absurd. . . childlike yet sophisticated naivety" or "error, madness, and simpleminded stupidity" (180-81). In Conrad's passage the glow also connotes madness, as it turns to "moonshine."<sup>2)</sup> In de Man's view, this language of madness for Schlegel is what Schlegel calls "the origin of all poetry" that "suspend[s] the notions and the laws of rational thought" (181); it is a language, in de Man's words, "open to the radical arbitrariness of any sign system and as such capable of circulation, but which as such is profoundly unreliable" (181). It is at this point where de Man's view of irony emerges most clearly: irony is "a free play of the signifier," a kind of authentic language, or "words" that have their own ways of "saying" and "doing" things, while challenging the audience to face "a sheer circulation"; it enacts the "impossibility of understanding" (181).

From this perspective, the scene that portrays Verloc's half-witted brother-in-law, Stevie, drawing circles seems to epitomize the kind of irony that the novel employs:

Stevie, seated very good and quiet at a deal table, drawing circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable. (76)

The significance of Stevie's "concentric" and "eccentric" circles is multiple; they are a signifier of "cosmic chaos," an indicator of the absence of any reliable truth or meaning. At the same time, these numerous circles can be read as a metaphor for the endless hermeneutic circles that the text engenders. Following de Man's lead and the invitation of this highly self-reflexive passage, we may argue that irony in the novel is a most apt mode for a "mad art" that wrestles

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2) What I have in mind here is the age-old association of moonlight with madness, as evident in the words like "moonstruck" or "lunatic."

with the problem of irony — the impossibility of understanding. To borrow de Man's words again, irony in the novel poses a "threat" in its rigorous refusal to be contained by any hermeneutic or epistemological closure. However, the irony in the novel goes beyond "a free play of the signifier" or "sheer circulation" or randomness, complicating the terrain where de Manian irony operates. As we shall see, Conrad's irony is deeply engaged with a socio-political context that seems to be neglected in de Man's discussion of irony. The disruption of the illusion of truth and fixed meaning through irony in the novel is inseparable from the concern with the possibility of resisting and reformulating the seemingly "unattackable" society — a society which is oblivious to other people's suffering in its indifference and conventionality. Embodying the novel's struggle with "the inconceivable," irony pursues the impossible horizon of resistance and change in a world insensible to its own ubiquitous injustice, absurdity, and misery.

### 3.

The excessive and mostly unjust disdain of the novel's narrator toward its characters have provoked many critics to attack the ethics of irony in the novel. Indeed, in many instances, the narrator's sarcastic mockery — which spares nobody in the novel, from the inapt anarchists and self-interested civil authorities to the compassionate idiot and sacrificial mother and sister — sounds too gratuitous and inhumane. A close reading, however, suggests that the narrative voice is much less consistent or firmly established than usually assumed. Belying some critics' assumptions about the ironic narrator armed with superior knowledge, the narrator directly or indirectly reveals his own contradictions and ignorance. For example, after his derisive depiction of Verloc's "fat-pig" style, the narrator suddenly concedes his lack of omniscience and confesses that he is "not sure" since he has not carried his "investigations so far in the depths" (21).

As the novel proceeds, we come to see that, far from being simply a deceiving trap or an expression of chilling indifference, the narrator's denial of omniscience reflects the entire narrative mode that constantly destabilizes its own narrative



ground. Note for example the scene where Vladimir, First Secretary of the (probably Russian) Embassy, pressures Verloc into the bombing of Greenwich Observatory. The passage reveals a curious affinity between Vladimir and the narrator in their meanness and “epistemological will-to-power” of an ironist (Armstrong 91). Like Vladimir who immediately starts “formulat[ing] in his mind a series of disparaging remarks” at the sight of “Mr. Verloc’s face and figure” (31), the narrator sets forth “disparaging remarks” that mock the ineptitude of the anarchists: the terrorist Yundt’s “toothless gums” and the Professor’s frail skull, which looked frail enough for Ossipon to crush between thumb and forefinger”(38). The recurrent image of Vladimir’s huge “eyeglasses” evokes the drive for power/knowledge embedded in his ironic I/eye. As a man of “joke and witticism” (37), we are told, Vladimir “develops his idea from on high, with scorn and condescension” (35). And yet, the narrator is unaware of the similarity between Vladimir and himself, demonstrating that he shares the limited self-knowledge and sense of self-righteousness with the other characters. The text further goes on to disclose the psychological state of Vladimir, the ironist. In a free indirect discourse, we hear Vladimir’s contemptuous view of Verloc: “this was then the famous and trusty secret agent, so secret that he was never designated otherwise but by the symbol Δ. . . . The celebrated agent Δ whose warnings had the power to change the scheme and the dates of royal, imperial, grand-ducal journeys. . . . ! This fellow!” (31). At this moment, the narrator intervenes and speaks: “Mr. Vladimir indulged mentally in an enormous and derisive fit of merriment” (31). To some extent, such a “fit of merriment” can be associated with “a mood of joyfulness” or “exultation” — a psychological state which D.C. Mueck sees induced by the ironist’s awareness of himself as the unobserved observer.” Vladimir’s confidence in his superior knowledge, however, turns out to be groundless, as the Assistant commissioner all too easily discovers that Vladimir, is the instigator of the bombing affair. Neither does the text give the narrator narrative authority. Verlock’s surprise at Vladimir’s “amount of ignorance as to the real aims, thoughts, and methods of the revolutionary world” (64) betrays both the narrator/ironist’s impulse to deride Vladimir’s sense of superiority and self-confidence(via Verlocks’s eyes) and his own limited knowlege — i.e., his failure to recognize the similarity

between Vladimir and himself. The self-defeating circle of irony — that constantly makes the ironist a target of mockery — does not end here. At the very moment when the reader identifies how this kind of irony operates, the text challenges them to face their own "tempting pleasures of ascendancy," thus simultaneously reproducing and dismantling the very ground of irony (Armstrong 93). As shall be seen in the following, however, the politics of irony in *The Secret Agent* is not limited to the text's attack on what Armstrong calls the "epistemological will-to-power"(91). Contradictions and the lack of self-knowledge in the novel go beyond the endless circle of irony. They refer to one of the central questions that the novel agonizes over: is it possible or desirable indeed to have morally and politically correct beliefs to make a better world in the face of ubiquitous social injustice?

#### 4.

Contradicting some critics' assumptions of the inhuman joke about the wretched, the narrator at one moment makes clear that "mocking an abject mankind in the most pressing of its miserable necessities" is "immoral" (103). From Armstrong's view, such a statement might be no better than another instance of contradictions that the novel exposes. According to Armstrong, sympathy in the novel is a case in point. Taking Stevie — whose compassion does not lead to anywhere but to his absurd death — as an example, Armstrong suggests that much of the irresolvable contradictions in the novel derives from the idea that neither derision nor sympathy works in the given world. That is to say, what the novel tells us is that while derision is immoral, sympathy is undesirable.

The issue of sympathy is crucial to understanding irony in *The Secret Agent*. The issue is important, however, not in the sense that it helps us see irony as an expression of helpless despair at the ineffectiveness of sympathy. Rather, it is central to the text's rigorous attack on oppressive authority and domination, as it is deeply tied up with ethical, political, as well as epistemological questions that the novel grapples with. To put it differently, the question is not so much whether sympathy is desirable or not as what kind of sympathy is problematic,

or why sympathy fails. At this point, the sympathetic gesture of a wealthy patroness toward Michaelis is notable. In a party scene the lady is fascinated by the anarchist's "infant eyes" and "angelic smile" (96), whereas others regard him as "monstrous" (95). Irony here operates on a very complex horizon. It mocks both Michaelis' naive idealist belief in the future and the patroness' blind affection. As Michaelis' past unfolds, the guests' contempt at the anarchist becomes problematic as well. Because of his trivial role in the attempt to rescue some prisoners, he got a heavy sentence. He is after all a victim of unjust society. The seemingly opposite attitudes toward the anarchist become similar in that both of them represent the prevailing conventional mind that cannot accept any potential for social change. Indeed, as the narrative proceeds, the patroness' sympathy, which at first seems to be as futile as Stevie's blind compassion, takes on a more sinister significance. It becomes clear that behind the patroness' sympathetic fascination lies the horrifying placidity of her impregnable privilege, privilege that is not to be disturbed by any 'thought' of social change or revolt. Her "great capacity of pity," we are told, is possible precisely because she was "such a complete stranger" to any human misery. Her "lofty position" is so firmly secured that Michaelis' vision of the "disappearance of the last piece of money" does not disturb her at all; "she could not conceive how it[the eradication of capital system] could affect her position" (95). To some extent, the patroness' psyche mirrors those who protested against the court's unjust decision on behalf of Michaelis, people who in fact simply "wish[ed] to exploit the sentimental aspect of his imprisonment for purposes of their own or for no intelligible purpose"(93). As the text points to contingency and self-interest embedded even in seemingly admirable causes and activities the wall between those who laugh at and those who sympathize with the "harmless" anarchist collapses. All of them turn out to be inhabitants of an "unattackable" wasteland where the seed of revolt can't even be planted (85).

Reading the patroness' sympathy in light of the paralyzing conventionality of the privileged enables us to look at an unexpected similarity between the Chief Inspector Heat and the patroness as well. At first glance, Heat is the opposite of the patroness; the former criminalizes Michaelis while the latter believes in this man's innocence. As a matter of fact, however, both Heat and the patroness try

to tame the ex-convict; the former by criminalizing so as to incarcerate him again, and the latter by infantilizing, romanticizing, and thus disarming this man. As in the case of the patroness, "the mind of Chief Inspector Heat was inaccessible to ideas of revolt" (82).

This does not mean, of course, to negate Michaelis' ineptitude as a revolutionary activist. Among other things, his failure to maintain any sound relationship with people undercuts his socialist dream of reforming the world. While he constantly seeks to communicate with people, he is totally estranged from them in his "indifference" and "mental solitude" that preclude the possibility for communication. Part of his disconnection with people, we need to remember derives from his 20 years of incarceration. And yet, it also indicates the ubiquitous indifference in the entire society, indifference that withers the seed of revolution.

The long narrative about a man called Professor X further demonstrates that irony in the novel is rooted in a profound anguish about the psychological and social conditions that paralyze the human agency for resistance and change. Irony here points to the vulnerability of the human psyche — the psyche that easily falls prey to the very vice that it seeks to attack — as well as the predominant "conventional morality" and "indifference." Carrying explosives fastened to his body, Professor X works hard to invent a perfect detonator to blow up the entire human being for a fresh start for the future. As in the cases of the other anarchists, what seems most obviously ironic about this "perfect anarchist" — whether we laugh at him with the narrator or not — comes from the discrepancy between his deformed, tiny little body that incarnates his fear of mankind and his grandiose desire for revolution. To some extent, he seems to be distinguished from the other anarchists in his subversive language and insight. For example, his contention that both the anarchists and the police are trapped within conventional norms epitomizes one of the novel's central social criticisms, tempting us to view him as a truly rebellious spirit. Indeed, Professor X asserts his independence from all other people whose enslavement to "conventional morality" sustains the dominant "social order"(63). He says to Comrade Ossipon, one of Verloc's anarchist associates: "You revolutionists . . . are the slaves of the social convention. . . slaves of it as much as the very police that stands up in the

defence of that convention. . . . You are not a bit better than the forces arrayed against you . . . than the police, for instance. . . . The terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality . . . forms of idleness at bottom identical. . . . I've the grit to work alone, quite alone, absolutely alone. . . . It is I who am the true propagandist" (93-94). "He quarrelled with the authorities upon a question of unfair treatment" (98) and he always dreams of "a blow fit to open the first crack in the imposing front of the great edifice of legal conceptions sheltering the atrocious injustice of society" (101-2).

And yet, the following passage once again mars Professor X's political potential.

Of humble origin, and with an appearance really so mean as to stand in the way of his considerable natural abilities, his imagination had been fired early by the tales of men rising from the depths of poverty to positions of authority and affluence. The extreme, almost ascetic purity of his thought, combined with an astounding ignorance of worldly conditions, had set before him a goal of power and prestige to be attained without the medium of arts, graces, tack, wealth — by sheer weight of merit alone. On that view he considered himself entitled to undisputed success. . . . He nursed it [his ambition] as something secularly holy. To see it thwarted opened his eyes to the true nature of the world, whose morality was artificial, corrupt and blasphemous. The way of even the most justifiable revolutions is prepared by personal impulses disguised into creeds. The Professor's indignation found in itself a final cause that absolved him from the sin of turning to destruction as the agent of his ambition. To destroy public faith in legality was the imperfect formula of his pedantic fanaticism. . . . He was a moral agent — that was settled in his mind. By exercising his agency with ruthless defiance he procured for himself the appearances of power and personal prestige. That was undeniable to his vengeful bitterness. It pacified its unrest; and in their own way the most ardent of revolutionaries are perhaps doing no more but seeking for peace in common with the rest of mankind — the peace of soothed vanity, of satisfied appetites, or perhaps of appeased conscience. Lost in the crowd, miserable and undersized, he meditated confidently on his power. . . . (102)

My suggestion is that the instability of the narrative perspective on Professor X is inseparable from the issues of the possibility of resistance and commitment.

The passage starts with a subtle but balanced criticism of both the social injustice that victimizes the Professor and the naivety of the latter. The narrative then goes on to expose the hidden affinity between the Professor and the corrupt world, as exemplified by his penchant for power. Furthermore, despite Professor X's indignation at the "true nature of the world" — the world where every socio-political activity is motivated by individual interests and desire for power — he himself yields to such fault, thus pointing to his lack of self-knowledge. Along with this, the seemingly righteous urge of Professor X to rebel turns out to be no better than "vengeful bitterness," inviting us to look at his anger in terms of Nietzschean "ressentiment." His fuming anger remains within the boundary of the dominant social order as far as it is tied up with the secret yearning for power. The Professor's anger loses its subversive edge as it partakes the very vice of the society. The image of him "lost in the crowd" casts a dubious light on his potential to revolutionize the world, intimating the affinity between him and other people as well.

As typical of the entire text, the irony does not stop here. It always urges the reader to confront their own problems and limits. The image of the crowd wherein Professor X is lost once again evokes the horrible stasis of the psyche that fails to conceive the very idea of change and revolt. The Chief inspector Heat's musings on thieves and anarchists after the bombing affair are worth noting at this point. In contrast with the work of thieves, Heat sees the anarchist's plot as totally unreadable and incomprehensible:

The complexion of that case had somehow forced upon him the general idea of the absurdity of things human, which in the abstract is sufficiently annoying to an unphilosophical temperament. . . . At the beginning of his career Chief Inspector Heat had been concerned with the more energetic forms of thieving. . . . Thieving was not a sheer absurdity. It was a form of human industry, perverse indeed, but still an industry exercised in an industrious world. . . . They [thieves] submitted to the severe sanctions of a morality familiar to Chief Inspector Heat with a certain resignation. They were his fellow-citizens gone wrong because of imperfect education, Chief Inspector Heat believed; but allowing for that difference, he could understand the mind of a burglar, because, as a matter of fact, the mind and the instincts of a burglar are of the same kind as the mind and the instincts of a police officer. Both recognize the

same conventions, and have a working knowledge of each other's methods and of the routine of their respective trades. . . . Products of the same machine, one classed as useful and the other as noxious, they take the machine for granted in different ways, but with a seriousness essentially the same. The mind of Chief Inspector Heat was inaccessible to ideas of revolt. But his thieves were not rebels. . . . He had felt himself revered and admired. And Chief Inspector Heat, arrested within six paces of the anarchist nicknamed the Professor, gave a thought of regret to the world of thieves — sane, without morbid ideals, working by routine, respectful of constituted authorities, free from all taint of hate and despair. (110-11)

In a sense, the effect of the bombing affair on Heat is what exactly Vladimir aimed at; Vladimir insisted to Verloc that their activity should be sheer absurdity that operates in a realm beyond any conventional philosophical, ethical, or political norms. Unlike thieves, whose existence serves only to secure Heat's authority through their confinement within the bounds of conventionality and comprehensibility, anarchists are to be "rebel[s]" who challenge the power of this civil authority. But then the text immediately takes another direction, disrupting this interpretation. Heat's inability to gain access to "ideas of revolt" and his preoccupation with his own power games with his immediate superior, the Assistance Commissioner, transform this potentially subversive incomprehensible affair into a joke. What happens at this moment is the triumph of the conventional psyche, which regulates even this absurd activity by filing it under the simple name of madness.

The problem immediately before the Chief Inspector was that of managing the Assistant Commissioner of his department, his immediate superior. This is the perennial problem of trusty and loyal servants; anarchism gave it its particular complexion, but nothing more. Truth to say, *Chief Inspector Heat thought but little of anarchism*. He did not attach undue importance to it, and could never bring himself to consider it seriously. . . . And recalling the Professor, Chief Inspector Heat, without checking his swinging pace, muttered through his teeth: "Lunatic."(113-14)

The dramatic irony that arises from Heat's failure to consider Professor X even

as a possible suspect mockingly points to the failure of the "urattackable" mind, the mind that cannot conceive the idea of revolt. It is this kind of conceptual, epistemological, and political condition of the society that engenders and is challenged by irony.

Indeed, one of the most fearful questions that haunts the novel is how to resist the repressive, unjust society in the face of the incredible stasis that threatens to tame even most absurd activity. From the first the story is set against the backdrop of a London that is depicted as "hav[ing] the majesty of inorganic nature, of matter that never dies" (21), hinting at the unchangeable world. In this respect, for all his limitations and ignorance, Vladimir's justification of an attack on the Greenwich Observatory is notable to the extent that it touches on the question of how to make a difference in this world which seems to be immune to change. Vladimir's contention that only an "incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable" act of "madness" can make a slightest influence on the indifferent, stolid middle-class reflects the novel's underlying wish and despair. Conrad's seemingly passing remark that "there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist" (11) becomes illuminating at this point. As Professor X succinctly puts it, the novel is driven by a question, "what if nothing could move them [mankind]?", a question posed by his confrontation with a society where people have become too indifferent to feel anything about agony of their fellow human beings and too conventionalized to conceive the idea of resistance or revolt (74).

## 5.

In sum, much of the multifaceted and abundant irony in *The Secret Agent* is generated by the novel's confrontation with a difficult question: is it possible to change, or at least, communicate human despair and suffering in the contemporary society that is incapable of conceiving, imagining, or naming the very word revolution in its freezing indifference bred by affluence, conformity, and self-deception? Throughout the novel irony constantly dismantles the illusion of absolute truth by producing endless dynamics of meaning, thus shattering and interrogating the very ground on which irony operates. This does



not mean, however, to confine irony to sheer randomness. Through the persistent combat with fixation and rationalization, irony challenges the "unattackable stolidity" of the world, while desperately distancing itself from a position of superior knowledge or self-defeating and self-deceiving sympathy. In its mad art, irony in *The Secret Agent* reaches out for "the inconceivable" horizon of resistance and change in its unending fight with epistemological, moral, and political illusions of closure and stasis.

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