(Neo-)Victorian Fatigue: Getting Tired of the Victorians in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*

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Abstract:
In this paper, I propose looking backward, rather than forward, from the 1907 publication of *The Secret Agent* to consider the novel's engagement with Victorianism – used in the broadest sense to encompass the mainstream culture of the nineteenth century that was embodied in the Protestant work ethic and idealised middle-class values of the British royal family. Both the events of the novel (which opens in 1887, the year of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee) and the 'Greenwich Bomb Outrage' (1894) that inspired its writing, are located firmly within the Victorian period. Moreover, two of the key figures, the 'ticket-of-leave' apostle Michaelis and the unnamed 'Lady Patroness' who is his benefactor, are closely linked to the 'golden days' of Victoria and her reign. Theirs is not a culture of anarchy, New Women, and aestheticism; instead, both belong to the 'high Victorian' 1850s and 1860s and have been distanced from the age in which they live. Moving forward from a discussion of Michaelis and the lady patroness, I examine the novel's 'Victorian fatigue', that is, its acknowledgement of society's increasing aggravation with and inability to change its condition. Publishing *The Secret Agent* in 1907, Conrad uses his post-Victorian position to suggest that there was some negativity underlying the celebration of Victoria's Jubilee – the public frustration with its staid monarch and entrenched system of values and beliefs – a mood that would last for another fourteen years.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Neo-Victorian Studies, nostalgia, Queen Victoria, *The Secret Agent*, terrorism.

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A "simple tale of the XIX century" (Conrad 2004; dedication) that has garnered much popular and critical attention since September 11, 2001, Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) has become one of the most frequently-quoted works of literature, mentioned repeatedly in print and online periodicals. The novel has been reintroduced in myriad venues, as a model of spy fiction, a prophetic text, and a handbook to understanding terrorists. This renewed interest in Conrad's novel is clearly rooted in contemporary desires to understand and come to terms with acts of terrorism, yet the novel's treatment of the nineteenth century also links it to another cultural trend: the appetite for Victoriana.

In *The New York Times*, Joseph Finder calls Conrad the "true progenitor" of the spy thriller and notes how the genre, which had been all

but dormant since the fall of Communism, was revived in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11: "Once again America has real enemies and a great, ambient sense of anxiety that seems certain to produce a new age of espionage fiction" (Finder 2001: WK1). Other articles focus on the political, rather than literary, significance of *The Secret Agent*. In the London *Daily Telegraph*, Robert Harris advises:

> If you want to understand Osama bin Laden and his al-Qa'eda organisation, my advice is to put the newspapers aside for a while and get hold of a novel published in 1907. *The Secret Agent* by Joseph Conrad describes the activities of a small group of state-sponsored terrorists, plotting an atrocity against a world-famous building – in this case, the Greenwich Observatory. (Harris 2001: 26)

And, more directly, A. N. Wilson notes, "It is extraordinary to read Conrad's *Secret Agent* in the light of what has happened since September 11" (Wilson 2001: 21). The Wilson and Harris articles appeared in the months directly following 9/11, yet writers have continued to draw connections between *The Secret Agent* and terrorist activity. Regarding Britain's entry into the conflict in Iraq, the *Ottawa Citizen* reported:

> Yesterday's protests in Britain against Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to go to war in Iraq reminded us of one of the main characters in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* – the 'incorruptible Professor,' the anarchist who wants to improve the world by destroying it because 'mankind does not know what it wants'. (Anon. 2005: A18)

The novel's portrayal of terrorism and terrorists has made it compulsory reading for those dealing with and writing about global politics in the twenty-first century.

Such readings of Conrad's novel position it as an anomaly – an early-twentieth-century text suddenly transplanted into a contemporary, postmodern consciousness with a fresh relevance. However, the post-9/11 attention to *The Secret Agent* also dovetails with the neo-Victorianism that

has become popular as both a form of nostalgia and cultural critique. As Cora Kaplan explains:

> The variety and appeal of Victoriana over the years might better be seen as one sign of a sense of the historical imagination on the move, an indication that what we thought we knew as 'history' has become … a kind of conceptual nomad, not so much lost as permanently restless and unsettled. (C. Kaplan 2007: 3)

Considering *The Secret Agent* in this context expands the scope of neo-Victorianism – generally viewed as a mid- to late- twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century phenomenon – to encompass the first half of the twentieth century. While definitely a product of its time, *The Secret Agent* also shares features with other neo-Victorian texts in its negotiation of the relationship between history and fiction, self-conscious use of time, and attention to the ways in which the Victorians constructed class and gender. Victorianism is a dominant force in Conrad's text, and the novel's negotiation of Victorianism both aligns it with contemporary neo-Victorian texts and emphasises the transitional nature of the period in which it was written. Moreover, considering the relationship between Conrad's novel and the Victorians in the context of neo-Victorian studies also invites a reconsideration of the relationship between Victorianism and the Modernism that succeeded it.

Based loosely on the 1894 'Greenwich Bomb Outrage' – a failed attempt to destroy the Greenwich Observatory, in which the terrorist succeeded in destroying only himself – *The Secret Agent* depicts an increasingly-agitated society, chafing against the physical and ideological limits of its own culture. More recently, it has become the task of neo-Victorian novelists, including John Fowles, A. S. Byatt, and Sarah Waters, to locate and open up these same sources of friction and agitation in their own fictional re-creations of the nineteenth century. In *The Secret Agent*, one such source is the relationship between the political system and the people it is set up to serve. The sense of futility surrounding anarchist movements and the ineffectiveness of the state structures in place to impede them has been the subject of fruitful critical inquiry, particularly some recent work that looks at the use of media and surveillance to attest to the

contemporaneity of Conrad's text. William W. Moseley, Jr., reads Conrad's novel through Michel Foucault's concept of the panopticon, noting:

> The author's concern with the notion that the individual must be restrained within society is particularly evident in *The Secret Agent*. The novel provides a glimpse of the workings of the system which restricts British society, keeping it 'civilized' by subjecting the ego to the community. (Moseley 1997: 59)

Mark Hama also takes a Foucauldian approach to the novel, extending critical discussions of the role of time in the novel to consider time as a function of power: "Thus, Conrad, in developing *The Secret Agent*'s narrative around the Greenwich Observatory and all it symbolises, brilliantly exposes the complex nexus of temporal structures at the macro-level of social and cultural time" (Hama 2000: 125). And Peter Lancelot Mallios calls *The Secret Agent* "Conrad's imaginative attempt to throw a bomb into a newspaper to determine what the terms and dimensions of its authority are", reading the novel in the context of both the nineteenth- and twenty-first-century periodical press (Mallios 2005: 170).

Looking backward, rather than forward, from the 1907 publication of *The Secret Agent*, however, reveals the novel's engagement with Victorianism – used in the broadest sense to encompass the idealised middle-class domestic values that were perpetuated by the British royal family and flourished during the 1850s – and its permeation with a sense of "Victorian Fatigue".[1] In relation to *The Secret Agent*, I use the term 'Victorian Fatigue' to characterise Conrad's depiction of a society that is defined by, yet frustrated with Victorian ideals. Of course, the basis for defining 'Victorian' in contemporary literary and historical studies is a vexed issue, but for the purpose of discussing *The Secret Agent* within this context, I focus on the middle-class domestic ideals associated with Victorian England, which are presented as sites of tension in Conrad's novel and are consistently re-made by other neo-Victorian novelists as well.[2] Such ideals, which shaped nineteenth-century class and gender hierarchies, were influenced by industrial advances, economic prosperity, and increasing colonial power. Despite its forward-looking, and some would say prophetic, consciousness, *The Secret Agent* is permeated by Victorianism and dogged

by its Victorian heritage, which provides a counterpoint to the novel's more progressive social and political elements. Conrad's depiction of Victorian culture, moreover, aligns his novel with postmodern neo-Victorian works, thereby extending the scope of neo-Victorianism and situating his text in an early-twenty-first century context that both includes, and moves beyond, the events of 9/11.

Published six years after Victoria's reign had come to an end, *The Secret Agent* exerts a dual vision. Although nominally Victorian in its subject matter, with both the events of the novel, which opens in 1887, the year of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, and the 1894 'Greenwich Bomb Outrage' that inspired its writing located firmly within the Victorian period, the text is self-conscious in its temporal distance from the events it depicts. Conrad's decision to have his already complex and multi-layered novel engage with Victoria's Golden Jubilee is significant because many artists and writers used the occasion of the Jubilee to reflect on 'becoming Victorian'; that is, they undertook retrospective views of the nation's social, artistic, and political development in an attempt to better understand the influence of the monarch and to see how Britain had developed to reach its current state. *The Secret Agent*, too, undertakes this retrospective view, but the backward glance is counterbalanced by the activity of the terrorists, and these two narrative strains unfold under the shadow of the Greenwich Observatory, moving – sometimes unwillingly – to the beat of Greenwich Mean Time.[3]

In addition to the setting, Conrad also uses three key characters to investigate Victorianism from a post-Victorian perspective: the 'ticket-of-leave' apostle Michaelis, the unnamed 'Lady Patroness' who is his benefactor, and the Home Secretary Sir Ethelred, all of whom are closely linked to mid-century culture and to Queen Victoria herself. Theirs is not a world of anarchy, New Women, and aestheticism; instead, they belong to the 'high Victorian' 1850s and 1860s and have been distanced from the age in which they live. Similarly, the anarchists, with their political visions and theories, are distanced from the period in which the novel is set as they try to re-plot the seemingly fixed course that society is poised to follow into the twentieth century. Michaelis, the Lady Patroness, and Sir Ethelred are competing and complementary forces in relation to the anarchist Verloc and his compatriots because both the idealised Victorianism and the ambitious anarchism offer alternatives to the cultural climate depicted in Conrad's

novel, in which the realities of the *fin de siècle*, fifty years of a staid monarch and an entrenched system of values and beliefs, were beginning to wear thin for a society increasingly aggravated by, but not yet able to change, its condition.

The relationship between Conrad's depiction of this society and the media, specifically newspapers, in *The Secret Agent* has been characterised as "a vital ground and *terra mirabila* from which the novel extends – a set of generative conditions both inside and outside the novel that occasions its unusual interest in the ideological and genetic power of signs" (Mallios 2005: 158). The importance of the periodical press has been further highlighted by the novel's re-appropriation in twenty-first century writings on terrorism. The function of the Victorian press and the intertextuality between periodical articles and novels is a subject of interest for neo-Victorian writers interested in both reproducing and interrogating the means through which information was disseminated in the nineteenth century. For example, in Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999), Margaret Prior attempts to reconstruct spiritualist Selina Dawes's trial and subsequent arrest for fraud by reading spiritualist newspapers:

> The report told of Selina leading a séance at Holborn, where there were bells brought in the darkness and shaken by spirits, and a voice that whispered through a paper tube…. a different paper, I forget the title of it, it described a private meeting at Clerkenwell. (Waters 1999: 135)

Margaret becomes completely absorbed in these newspaper accounts, which serve to strengthen the net in which Selena is binding her. The reliability of the newspapers, like everything else in the novel, however, is hazy, as the lines between flesh and spirit, reality and fiction, blur in Margaret's opium-saturated consciousness. By incorporating these spiritualist newspapers into the text, Waters questions the nineteenth-century culture of periodicals, imbuing her Victorian tale with a postmodern consciousness concerning the debatable reliability of the news media and equity of the judicial system.

The presence of newspapers within the pages of *The Secret Agent* also stands as a reminder of the disjunction between the past and the present, revealing the text's self-consciousness about its own place in history. In describing a typical day, Conrad's narrator notes, "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" (Conrad 2004: 66). The newspapers, the source of circulation for topical information, are outdated and quaint in relation to the immediacy of life in the streets of London. They are, Conrad suggests, doomed to become historical documents as soon as they are printed, never quite able to keep up with the flow of time, which is represented by the "swift, constant march of foot traffic" on the street. The present constantly fades into the past. In such a context, Conrad asks, what kind of 'agency' can an individual exercise? The anarchists see themselves as agents of social change, and the government sees their agents as political tools, yet nothing is accomplished. For example, the fanatical anarchist known as the Professor is confident in his role as "a moral agent": "By exercising his agency with ruthless defiance he procured for himself the appearances of power and personal prestige" (Conrad 2004: 68). Yet the London crowds, embodying the mood of the novel, quell even the Professor's sense of power:

> Lost in the crowd, miserable and undersized, he meditated confidently on his power … but after a while he became disagreeably affected by the sight of the roadway thronged with vehicles and of the pavement crowded with men and women. He was in a long, straight street, peopled by a mere fraction of an immense multitude; but all around him, on and on, even to the limits of the horizon hidden by the enormous piles of bricks, he felt the mass of mankind mighty in its numbers. They swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like ants, thoughtless like a natural force, pushing on blind and orderly and absorbed, impervious to sentiment, to logic, to terror too perhaps. (Conrad 2004: 68)

By juxtaposing a cast of 'agents' against the swarming multitudes, Conrad establishes a conflict between individual ideals and the movement of a society that, in 1887, is marking the fiftieth anniversary of its increasing momentum. The result is a world in which the gas-jets are always turned low and it is always about to rain.

As previously noted, the present of the novel, although technically Victorian in setting, is separate from the idealised high Victorianism of the 1850s and 1860s, a separation emphasised through the characters of Michaelis, the Lady Patroness, and Sir Ethelred, who represent the novel's engagement with mid-Victorian ideals and the power of the past. Michaelis's position within society provides one link to the Victorians – imprisoned for fifteen years, he has lost time and only recently rejoined the world. Thus, he has not evolved into the world of the 1880s but rather has been transplanted from the England of fifteen years earlier. The reader first encounters Michaelis, as he lectures on history:

> History is made by men, but they do not make it in their heads. The ideas that are born in their consciousness play an insignificant part in the march of events. History is dominated and determined by the tool and the production – by the force of economic conditions…. No one can tell what form the social organisation may take in the future. Then why indulge in prophetic phantasies? At best they can only interpret the mind of the prophet, and can have no objective value. (Conrad 2004: 34)

Here, Michaelis juxtaposes events and ideas in the making of history. Events, he claims, particularly those driven by economic conditions, are concrete and will endure as "History", while ideas and prophecies are, by comparison, "insignificant". Ironically, Michaelis himself makes little direct contribution to the events of the novel, as Norman Sherry notes: "Michaelis can become a further demonstration of the theme of the futility of such revolutionary activity and of the fickle and hysterical attitude of society to it" (Sherry 1971: 273). Michaelis is initially a suspect in the bombing, but he is cleared by Verloc's confession, much to the relief of the Assistant Commissioner who fears offending the Lady Patroness by incriminating Michaelis: "'If the fellow is laid hold of again,' he thought, 'she will never forgive me'" (Conrad 2004: 93). This commitment to history and understanding how the events of the past determine the conditions of the present forms one link between Michaelis and the mid-Victorian ideals that have shaped the present of the novel. The self-conscious way in which Conrad engages time and history is also a feature of neo-Victorian novels,

such as Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), which opens with an unidentified narrator warning the reader to "Watch your step" as the narrator leads the way through the streets and alleyways of London with a reminder that "[t]he truth is that you are an alien from another time and place altogether" (Faber 2002: 3). Such interruptions punctuate the novel at various points, constantly jerking the reader back to a recognition of her/his own contemporary consciousness: "Is there any good fortune in this story? None!… Otherwise this novel, conceived as a cry of unappeasable anger, risks becoming one of those 'Reader, I married him' romances she so detests" (Faber 2002: 246). For Conrad's reader, a similar double consciousness is produced by Michaelis's discourse on history, which is supplemented by a plethora of ticking clocks and day-old newspapers.

It is only natural, then, that Michaelis be taken up by another transplant, the unnamed Lady Patroness, whose wealth – she is "above the play of economic conditions" – separates her from the society in which she lives (Conrad 2004: 89). Indeed, Conrad's narrator emphasises this separation in his description of the Lady Patroness who seems resistant to the social changes wrought by time: "Married young and splendidly at some remote epoch of the past…. three generations had admired her infinitely…. In her own words, she liked to watch what the world was coming to" (Conrad 2004: 86-87). She is not a participant in the world; instead, she situates herself as an observer. Like Michaelis, the Lady Patroness has little direct effect on the events of the novel, although she does create a space where characters come together. Because she is distanced from social mores, the Lady Patroness can blur class and caste lines in her evenings at home. These salon-like gatherings are described as

> the only place in the wide world where an Assistant Commissioner of Police could meet a convict liberated on a ticket-of-leave on other than professional and official ground…. You never could guess whom you were likely to come upon being received in semi-privacy within the faded blue silk and gilt frame screen. (Conrad 2004: 87)

Thus, the Lady Patroness does not engage in actions that directly impact the anarchist plots, Greenwich bombing, or resulting investigation, but she does

indirectly participate by hosting these salons, which provide a place – a context – for the major players to come into contact with one another. Using the Lady Patroness, the embodiment of Victorianism in the novel, to attest to the power of context allows Conrad to illustrate how the political and cultural institutions that the anarchists are working to undermine are deeply entrenched within society.

The significance of the unnamed Lady Patroness as a Victorian icon is further emphasised through her association with the Victorian philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts, who is perhaps best-known for her charitable work with Charles Dickens, her friendship with the Duke of Wellington, and her figurative associations with Queen Victoria herself. Various critics, including Norman Sherry and Peter Mallios, have cited Burdett-Coutts as the model for Conrad's Lady Patroness, acknowledging similarities in their wealth, status, and position as social hostesses, yet the implications of such an association have remained largely unexplored. Burdett-Coutts shared the class privilege of Conrad's Lady Patroness. She espoused "a belief in the immutability of the existing social order" and enjoyed considerable cachet: "It was not unusual for several hundred of the *haut ton* to attend Miss Coutts's functions, and invitation were eagerly sought after" (Orton 1980: 160; 56). Termed "a complete Victorian" by her biographer Clara Burdett Patterson (Patterson 1954: 44), Burdett-Coutts, like Conrad's Lady Patroness, was also a timeless feature of Victorianism, a period that was encompassed within her long life (1814-1906). Her association with Victorianism and connection to Queen Victoria is further underscored by her status as the first woman to be raised to a peerage on her own merits (1871), an event that prompted Benjamin Disraeli to write to Queen Victoria on 22 September 1880 that Burdett-Coutts would be "an inspiring feature in your Majesty's illustrious reign" (cited in Healey 1978: 203). Burdett-Coutts's position as a bastion of Victorian culture was also linked to her family business, Coutts's Bank. An 1871 *Appleton's Journal* article on 'Baronness Burdett-Coutts', celebrating the newly-made peeress, notes that Coutts's Bank functions as

> one of the landmarks without which London would be bewildered. No catastrophes, panics, 'black seasons' of financial distresses, have shaken the sturdy old house; so the money has steadily accumulated, and its credit is only

> inferior to that of the bank of England itself. (Anon. 1871: 282)

The solidity of the bank is matched by that of Burdett-Coutts herself, who is described as "public-spirited", "noble-minded", and "patriotic" – the embodiment of Victorian respectability (Anon. 1871: 282).

In addition to her associations with Victorianism through Angela Burdett-Coutts, as a society hostess and charitable patroness, Conrad's Lady Patroness is also akin to Queen Victoria, who often bore the label "patroness" in her own charitable acts and who came to embody the feminine domestic ideal. This "domestic, maternal, and seemingly middle-class queen," as Adrienne Munich and Margaret Homans explain, "reflected back to her subjects their own values to reassure them about the comprehensibility of their lived reality; they in turn created her in their image to serve their social and economic needs" (Homans and Munich 1997: 7; 2).[4] Likewise, the Lady Patroness rules over the society of Conrad's London, using her wealth and status to create a cross-class space that can accommodate a variety of individuals.

The parallels between Conrad's Lady Patroness and Angela Burdett-Coutts raise questions concerning the relationship between fiction and history, which necessarily informs the work of neo-Victorian novelists, some of whom negotiate this through the incorporation of historical figures – either as themselves or in slight adaptations. In *Arthur & George* (2005), Julian Barnes blends history and fiction in retelling the story of Arthur Conan Doyle and his involvement in the life of George Edalji, an Anglo-Indian who was convicted of mutilating livestock. The themes of national identity and racial profiling and persecution in Barnes's novel strongly link the late-nineteenth- and early-twenty-first centuries. Moreover, the novel itself interrogates the link between fiction and history within its pages as Arthur works to untangle truth from fabrication in constructing George's case:

> As he set to work, Arthur felt back on familiar ground. It was like starting a book: you had the story but not all of it, most of the characters but not all of them, some but not all of the causal links. You had your beginning, and you had your ending. There would be a great number of topics to be kept in

> the head at the same time. Some would be in motion, some static; some racing away, others resisting all the mental energy you could throw at them. Well, he was used to that. And so, as with a novel, he tabulated the key matters and annotated them briefly. (Barnes 2005: 256)

Here, Arthur's effort mirrors Barnes' in teasing out the relationship between history and fiction in a situation where they are tightly entwined. Similarly, Conrad's endeavour in writing *The Secret Agent*, as articulated in his 'Author's Note' to the text, involved a similar process: "Presently, passing to particular instances, we recalled the already old story of the attempt to blow up Greenwich Observatory; 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" (Conrad 2004: xxxv). However, Conrad did "fathom its origin" in bringing his literary and imaginative consciousness to bear on the historical events. Thus, the blending of history and fiction – and, more importantly, authorial attention to that blending – evidences a shared endeavour between the self-consciously neo-Victorian *Arthur & George* and the socially and literarily prophetic *The Secret Agent*.

Sir Ethelred, the Home Secretary, is another of the novel's representatives of Victorianism, one that brings the world of civil service into the novel in an echo of works by Trollope and Dickens. Sir Ethelred represents a government, at the state level, unable to understand the methods or ideologies of the anarchists. Sir Ethelred's name, of course, is taken from the tenth-century Anglo-Saxon monarch Ethelred, and this connection positions Sir Ethelred as the embodiment of Englishness, monarchy, tradition, and the status quo. Thus, Sir Ethelred becomes not only a Victorian influence but is connected to two thousand years of England's history. Referred to as the "great personage" or "Presence", Sir Ethelred possesses an indefinable essence that fills the room, just as Victorianism permeates the novel. His office includes one of the most notable of the novel's many clocks: "a heavy, glistening affair of massive scrolls in the same dark marble as the mantelpiece, and with a ghostly, evanescent tick" (Conrad 2004: 113). Standing in front of this clock, "[t]he great Personage might have been the statue of one of his own princely ancestors stripped of a crusader's war harness, and put into an ill-fitting frock coat" (Conrad 2004: 113). In this description, Sir Ethelred is associated with the weight of time.

The clock is described as "heavy", and the Assistant Commissioner notes that it has advanced a ponderous seven minutes since Sir Ethelred began talking. Likewise, the comparison to the statue of his ancestors, like Sir Ethelred's name, links him to an England of the past and casts Sir Ethelred as a living emblem of nationalism and tradition. Just as the Lady Patroness is separate from the world because of her class status and Michaelis is distanced by his time spent in prison, so Sir Ethelred is distanced by his privileged political position. He has what Robert Kaplan terms a "schematic view of the world, which is wilfully unencumbered by messy details that someone like Heat encounters by patrolling the streets" (R. Kaplan 2004: xvii).

Indeed, Sir Ethelred's need for the physical (and, Conrad suggests, moral) support of his Under Secretary Toodles when walking in the street further emphasises his distance from the everyday lives of the people whose well-being he supposedly oversees. The clear delineation of hierarchy within Sir Ethelred's office, with its myriad moving parts in the form of undersecretaries and lackeys, marks an additional connection to mid-Victorian culture in its similarity to the world Dickens parodies in *Bleak House* (1853), where the legal system from Mr. Tulkinghorn to Mr. Guppy to Inspector Bucket is populated with a host of characters, each doing their part to ensure the almost-mechanical perpetuation of "Jarndyce and Jarndyce". In *The Secret Agent*, these hierarchies are reinforced by setting. It is a far cry from Sir Ethelred's plush office, raised above the London streets, to the streets themselves, into which the Assistant Commissioner descends upon leaving the office:

> His descent into the street was like the descent into a slimy aquarium from which the water had been run off. A murky, gloomy dampness enveloped him. The walls of the houses were wet, the mud of the roadway glistened with an effect of phosphorescence, and when he emerged into the Strand out of a narrow street by the side of Charing Cross Station the genius of the locality assimilated him. (Conrad 2004: 121)

Such streets, with their limitless potential for dark and hidden dramas, provided inspiration for the novel, as Conrad explains in the 'Author's Note':

> Then the vision of an enormous town presented itself, of a monstrous town more populous than some continents and in its man-made might as if indifferent to heaven's frowns and smiles; a cruel devourer of the world's light. There was room enough there to place any story, depth enough there for any passion, variety enough there for any setting, darkness enough to bury five millions of lives. (Conrad 2004: xxxvii)

This is the part of the world most in need of governance, yet it is that which is most distanced from those doing the governing. In contrast, Sir Ethelred's office is safe and secluded: "Shades of green silk fitted low over all the lights imparted to the room something of a forest's deep gloom" (Conrad 2004: 178).

Within the world of *The Secret Agent*, the anarchists work to overthrow the Victorian social contexts and cultural influences embodied by Michaelis, the Lady Patroness, and Sir Ethelred, which can be blamed for the current state of affairs. The anarchists attempt to arrest the unceasing movement of society, which moves in sync with the status quo, by stopping time, quite literally, with the destruction of the Greenwich Observatory. It has become a critical commonplace to note the significance of the site of the intended bombing for both the historical and fictional anarchists:

> the book deals with an attempt to actually blow up Time, specifically Greenwich Mean Time, an attempt whose very failure in the course of the story succeeds in the matter of that story's presentation, which is chronologically fragmented from the point of the explosion. (Surgal 1997: 127)

Yet, the Observatory is only one of many timekeepers that tick throughout the pages of the novel, reminding the reader that even if the attempt to destroy the Observatory had been successful, 'time' itself would continue. By attempting to explode time, the anarchists threaten the Victorian influence, which has shaped the present and is determining the future of this world and which derives its power, in part, from the uninterrupted flow of time.

Similarly, in an anarchist moment, when she steps outside the constraints of society, Winnie Verloc throws off the Victorian domestic ideals that have been pressed on her throughout the novel: "At that precise moment Mrs. Verloc began to look upon herself as released from all earthly ties. She had her freedom. Her contract with existence, as represented by that man standing over there, was at an end. She was a free woman" (Conrad 2004: 206). The reinvestigation of the Victorian domestic space adds yet another dimension to Conrad's neo-Victorian agenda, and, appropriately, this moment, too, is punctuated by the ticking of the clock:

> She had become aware of a ticking sound in the room. It grew upon her ear, while she remembered clearly that the clock on the wall was silent, had no audible tick. What did it mean by beginning to tick so loudly all of a sudden? Its face indicated ten minutes to nine. Mrs. Verloc cared nothing for time, and the ticking went on. She concluded it could not be the clock, and her sullen gaze moved along the walls, wavered, and became vague, while she strained her hearing to locate the sound. Tic, tic, tic. (Conrad 2004: 216)

The sound of the clock at this moment, suggests the movement of time as opposed to the stasis of Mrs. Verloc's life up until this point. Winnie's breaking point, Brian W. Shaffer contends, is an example of the ways in which "the novel explores the unbridgeable gap between the period's domestic ideals and domestic realities, especially for homemakers" (Shaffer 1995: 314). Attention to Victorian domestic realities, particularly with regard to gender, is also a subject of inquiry for neo-Victorian novelists, who often work to give voice to characters who exist outside the delineations of the Victorian norm. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1965), John Fowles's Sarah Woodruff refuses to conform to gender norms, consciously locating herself as an outsider by allowing herself to be perceived as a fallen woman, and Fowles explores the implications of this for both Sarah and the society in which she lives. Novelist Sarah Waters extends the idea of normative gender roles to include sexuality as well, as the lesbian heroines of her postmodern Victorian works *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2003) negotiate spaces such as the music hall and Victorian country house, which Waters opens up to

accommodate their sexuality. For Conrad's Winnie, neither the Victorian status quo, nor the anarchist alternative, can effectively attend to individual needs, yet these are her only options, and Conrad's portrayal of Winnie's situation allows him to comment on Victorian constructions of gender and domesticity. Winnie does not have the class status or social cachet of the Lady Patroness, which separate her from society and enable her to survive; instead, Winnie is firmly lodged within the society of the novel and cannot transcend its boundaries.

Anarchism and Victorianism are the controlling ideas of *The Secret Agent*; they represent two different approaches to the world, both equally separate from it – one through its obsession with the past and the other through its obsession with the future. "The true genius of Conrad's treatment of time in *The Secret Agent*," according to Mark Hama, "becomes apparent in his symbolic use of the Observatory, for he reveals that, as a form of free-flowing Foucauldian power, modern time can be neither destroyed nor controlled indefinitely by any given individual or group" (Hama 2000: 124). *The Secret Agent* ends with a picture of the Professor that echoes an earlier description and is in keeping with the mood of society that the novel represents:

> 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 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. (Conrad 2004: 253-254)

Is the Professor "incorruptible" because he adheres to his ideals? Or, is Conrad's treatment ironic, juxtaposing the Professor's declaration of purpose with the "multitude of mankind" that, throughout the novel, represents the onward march of time, unable to be stopped?

If, as most critics claim, *The Secret Agent* ultimately argues, through the failed plot and inefficient anarchists, for the inability to effect change, then this theme is both heightened and complicated by its engagement with

Victorian figures and ideals. The fin-de-siècle world of *The Secret Agent* is in a state of fatigue that cannot be remedied by the forces of idealised mid-nineteenth-century Victorianism or ambitious forward-looking anarchy. However, whereas the anarchists and their plots self-destruct, both literally and metaphorically, the Victorians endure. The timelessness of the Lady Patroness and Sir Ethelred and the innocence of Michaelis, secluded in the country writing his book, both suggest an ability to persevere. Thus, the real revolutionary power of Michaelis is not in his connection to any anarchist plots but in his ability to perpetuate Victorianism through the end of the century and beyond.

Conrad's novel itself, then, becomes an example of this influence, an early work in the emerging field of Modern and Postmodern Victorianism, a field characterised by Christine Kreuger in the introduction to *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*: "No matter how vociferously we protest our postmodern condition, we are in many respects post-Victorians, with a complex relationship to the ethics, politics, psychology, and art of our eminent – and obscure – Victorian precursors" (Krueger 2002: xi). The continued influence of Victorianism and its impact on the literature and culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has recently become the subject of critical analyses, many of which take up the questions of time, media relations, and the dissemination of information that are the subject of Conrad's novel.[5] Indeed, the title of Kreuger's collection, *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*, reminds readers that "culture" is flexible, actively functioning within an undefined "present time" – itself a self-reflexive designation. Welcome or not, Victorian culture is at work in the lives of readers in 2008 (and no doubt in the decades to come), just as it is for the denizens of Conrad's London.

What inclusion of Conrad's *The Secret Agent* within this framework brings to an understanding of neo-Victorianism, however, is twofold. It encourages a reconsideration of the relationship between Victorianism and Modernism and also extends the scope of neo-Victorianism, positing an immediacy to the relationship between the neo-Victorian text and the historical moment it represents. The relationship between Victorianism and Modernism has been characterised by works such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), which vilify the Victorians as oppressive and narrow minded. Perhaps the best

illustration of this comes in Woolf's description of the transition from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries:

> This great cloud which hung, not only over London, but over the whole of the British Isles on the first day of the nineteenth century stayed…. A change seemed to have come over the climate of England…. Thus, stealthily, and imperceptibly, none marking the exact day or hour of the change, the constitution of England was altered and nobody knew it…. Love, birth, and death were all swaddled in a variety of fine phrases… Thus the British Empire came into existence. (Woolf 1956: 227-229)

Accounts such as this have produced critical commentary on the strained relationship between Victorian and Modern culture, which Cora Kaplan characterises as separate from neo-Victorianism:

> For while the high literary modernism and the popular culture in the first half of the twentieth century defined itself through an explicit if tacit rejection of the cultural preferences and social mores of the Victorian world, distance from the period has not only produced detailed – and controversial – historical analyses of its customs, practices, and influence, but has gradually lent it over time the charm of antiquity and the exotic, so that increasingly, in the new millennium, even its worst abuses seem to fascinate rather than appal. (C. Kaplan 2007: 6)

Similarly, Nancy Armstrong writes:

> to consider postmodernism as an extension of Victorian culture – or more accurately, an extension of Victorian culturalism – is to expose modernism as an attempt at arresting the process of cultural modernization that shifts political action from government onto culture. (Armstrong 2002: 313)

Was Modernism necessarily a 'break' in the development of a cultural consciousness, or can (and should) it be re-appropriated? Early and late twentieth-century revisions of Victorian literature and culture certainly reflect the distinct moments of their production, but as Conrad's text itself and the similarities among *The Secret Agent* and other neo-Victorian works demonstrates, these works do exist in a continuum – a continuum undoubtedly marked by breaks, but one for which the theoretical frameworks of neo-Victorianism work to highlight points of contact and continuity. If one of the functions of neo-Victorian texts is to attest to the lasting power and influence of the Victorians, then reading the first half of the twentieth century in this context shows dual forces at work. The Modernist rejection of Victorian ideals is complicated by a, perhaps unconscious, attention to and attempt to come to terms with the legacy of the Victorians in works that stand as precursors to the postmodern neo-Victorianism of writers such as Fowles, Byatt, and Barnes.

While the ethos of Woolf and Strachey is also present in *The Secret Agent*, the more subtle engagement with Victorianism, accomplished primarily through setting, tone, and use of minor characters rather than direct critique of the period, allows Conrad to rewrite the events of 1894 from an historical, and also oddly prophetic, perspective, demonstrating the weight of the culture and highlighting its stifling implications. The question remains, however, whether Conrad is quite 'neo' enough to be neo-Victorian? While his historical distance from the period he represents in *The Secret Agent* is not as great or marked by cultural and social change as that of contemporary writers, his novel does function in much the same way, blending history and fiction, calling attention to the plights of those who did not have voice, and demonstrating a self-conscious awareness of time and its place in both literature and history. Just as the historical moment and political consciousness of the mid-twentieth or early-twenty-first centuries have influenced the way in which writers such as Fowles, Barnes, and Waters depict the Victorians, so Conrad's position, in a moment of transition between Victorianism and Modernism, informs his recreation of events, a shared neo-Victorian endeavour played out in a different cultural moment.

As an artist whose career spanned the Victorian, Edwardian, and Modern periods, Conrad recognises the Victorian influence that cast its shadow over the early decades of the twentieth century and, arguably,

continues to influence art and culture more than one hundred years after the publication of *The Secret Agent*. Thus, it is Victorianism that emerges as the more powerful of the two social forces – Victorianism and anarchism – because of its continued legacy and pervasive haunting of the social, political, and literary movements of the early twentieth century, and perhaps those of the twenty-first century as well.

Notes

1. The topic 'Victorian Fatigue' was the theme of the 2006 Northeast Victorian Studies Association Conference at which an earlier version of this essay was presented.
2. 'Defining Victorian' has recently (May 2008) been the subject of an extended discussion on the VICTORIA list (https://listserv.indiana.edu/cgi-bin/wa-iub.exe?A0=VICTORIA) concerning how to frame the period with regard to teaching and scholarship.
3. Although the Observatory stands as the signifier of time in the novel, centralised time did not yet exist in Britain and across the empire, a situation that further underscores the futility of the anarchists' plan.
4. In 'Queen Victoria and Me,' Laurie Langbauer offers a perceptive feminist analysis of Queen Victoria's role in historical re-creations: "If Victoria, the very figure who gave her name to a historical period, remains in effect invisible within it up till now, especially as these scholars argue because she *is* a woman, then the cultural resistance to recognizing women's history, and literary history, is still very powerful indeed." (Langbauer 2000: 212)
5. For critical writings on postmodern Victorianism, see Kucich and Sadoff's *Victorian Afterlife*: *Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (2000); Krueger's *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time* (2002), Taylor and Wolff's *The Victorians Since 1901* (2004), and C. Kaplan's *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (2007).

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