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“Parliament is Burning”: Dynamite, Terrorism and the English Novel.” (6,750 words)

On August 2nd, 1881, eight months into the Fenian bombing campaign that opened with a fatal explosion at Salford Barracks in Lancashire, a furious Robert Louis Stevenson complained of its organizer and chief propagandist, Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa: “He and his tyrannicide! I am in a mad fury about these explosions. If that is the new world! Damn O’Donovan Rossa; damn him behind and before, above, below, and roundabout; damn, deracinate, and destroy him, root and branch, self and company, world without end. Amen. I write that for sport if you like, but I will pray in earnest, O Lord, if you cannot convert, kindly delete him!”¹ Four years later, the Almighty had not yet erased Rossa from the human record and his dynamiters were still antagonizing Stevenson. When they detonated two bombs inside the Palace of Westminster on January 24th, 1885, the self-confessed unionist, who would later call for the deployment of Gatling guns in Ireland “until the whole apparatus of terrorism is destroyed,”² retired to Bournemouth to write. Within weeks, his most political novel, *The Dynamiter*, was published as a literary counter-move to the Fenians’ political efforts to achieve Irish decolonization.

Having already bombed the Mansion House in London, along with the underground railway, Victoria Station, the Carlton Club and the offices of *The Times*, their

¹ Robert Louis Stevenson to Sidney Colvin, Monday, 2nd August, 1881 in Robert Louis Stevenson, *Letters to his Family and Friends* (London: Methuen, 1900), Vol. 1, pp.214-5.

² Robert Louis Stevenson, “Confessions of a Unionist: An Unpublished ‘Talk on Things Current’” (Cambridge, Mass.: privately printed, 1921), pp.9, 17.

spectacular coup at Westminster outmatched even their demolition of the headquarters of the Special Branch in Scotland Yard the previous summer. Opening his novel by invoking the plucky spirit of Gordon of Khartoum in his indignant dedication to policemen injured by one of the Westminster bombs, Stevenson retaliated with a tale designed to ridicule Irish nationalism. To undermine public sympathy for Charles Stewart Parnell and the Home Rule movement, he portrayed Fenianism as a thoroughly evil, even satanic phenomenon and an indiscriminate foe determined to “paralyze” the British state and halt the working of its imperial Parliament. According to O’Donovan Rossa’s journal, *United Ireland*, his men were undetectable: “With all their spies and detective agencies in every part of the world, the English government must be unable to get any really valuable information as to the movements of... Irish Republicans. Thousands upon thousands a year are spent upon secret police; and what is the result of it all? Explosions every other week”.³

The popular and sensational late-Victorian fictions that were inspired (or, depending on the author’s political perspective, shocked into existence) by these elusive bombers were known as ‘dynamite novels’, tales that exploited what Grant Allen described in his 1894 story, “The Dynamiter’s Sweetheart”, as the seemingly-mystifying practice of “indiscriminate revolution”.⁴ Determined to discredit Fenianism, Stevenson regarded the composition of his own novel as a contribution to the great contemporary debates over British colonialism and coercion in Ireland. Engaging with what O’Donovan Rossa’s supporters among the diasporic Irish communities in the United States regarded as their “new struggle”,⁵ he criticized the kind of political violence that had been made

³ *United Ireland*, 31 January, 1885, quoted *ibid*, p.86.

⁴ Grant Allen, “The Dynamiter’s Sweetheart”, *Strand Magazine*, Vol. 8 (July, 1894), pp.137-147, p.144.

⁵ “Irish Republicanism”, *United Ireland*, 29 March, 1884, reprinted in *A Verbatim Copy of the Parnell Commission Report* (London: The Liberal Unionist Association, 1890), p.118.

possible by Fenianism's deployment of recently-invented high explosives. Stevenson was aware of the symbolic purchase of what one Fenian sympathizer termed "the dynamite ticket".⁶ So, too, were his literary nemeses: the Irish separatist authors who wielded fiction as a weapon against the British imperial state and published their own tales about the dynamite campaign that explained and sympathized with Fenianism, as much as Stevenson celebrated the empire they resisted.⁷ As Sarah Cole has recently shown, these tales spoke to a public infatuation with the specter of political violence that began in the 1880s and continued into the modernist era.⁸

Detection and *The Dynamiter*

Originally surtitled *More New Arabian Nights*, *The Dynamiter* was marketed as the sequel to Stevenson's popular 1882 collection, *New Arabian Nights*. Designed to isolate Irish republicanism by portraying it as the insane, devilish other to the civilising ideology of British imperialism, the novel reduced Irish anti-colonialism to the level of a personally-motivated conflict, or "private and barbarous war", (p.189) rinsed of any ideological motivation. Resuscitated a year later in the "insurgent horror" and "ape-like spite" that drives the murderous Henry Hyde on his London rampages,⁹ the designs of the aptly-named Zero are portrayed as the work of a maniac rather than a revolutionary. The tale centres on the efforts of three flâneurs to thwart the villain's campaign, positing the British metropolis as an orientalised and unreadable environment, a "hieroglyph" encoding the mysteries of an urban sphere that is "lost in terrors" (p.10). The city is

⁶ Ibid, p.86.

⁷ Recent studies of the dynamite novel have

⁸ See Sarah Cole, *At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), especially Chapter 2, "Dynamite Violence: From Melodrama to Menace".

⁹ Robert Louis Stevenson, "The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde", *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1979, pp.95, 97).

populated by a subaltern and suspicious underground of nightwalkers, tramps and lodging house-dwellers, among whom circulate Irish nationalists “of unsound intellect”. (187) Stevenson’s view of the Fenians as mentally defective was not shared by his fellow-Tory, Standish O’Grady, who, while sharing the Scot’s opinion of them as “the devil’s brood”, insisted that these revolutionaries were all the more diabolical because they were driven by “intelligent, ambitious, and desperate minds”.¹⁰

Believing that detection is “the only profession for a gentleman”, (4) Stevenson’s amateur Fenian-hunters discover that they cannot interpret the unreadable and ultimately unknowable “mysteries” of this Irish insurgency.¹¹ Their efforts do not reveal the motives of their strange prey, as they are exposed to increasingly mysterious layers of secrecy in this “confused war of politics”. (Preface, vii) Instead, their experience intensifies their alienation from the reality of imperial violence in Ireland, an effect that Stevenson also intended for his readers by exposing them to the subject matter of the “ugly devil” of “political crime”. (vii) The barbarism of Stevenson’s dynamiters is matched by their strangeness, which is conveyed through the perspectives of his confused and decentred flâneurs, who find themselves moving through London and Glasgow, uncertainly, “like parts in some obscure and mischeivous imbroglio”. Their experience of Fenianism’s “evil” fusion of “secrecy, terror, and falsehood” (p.55) underlines Stevenson’s principal ideological objective, which was the mystification of Irish nationalism. This denial of the political motivations of Irish antagonists characterised the conservative dynamite novel and was noticed by contemporary reviewers, who

¹⁰ Standish O’Grady, *The Crisis in Ireland* (Dublin: E. Ponsonby, 1882, pp.24-5, pp.51, 25.

¹¹ See *Mysteries of Ireland* (London: Milner & Co., 1884), iii.

remarked that such fiction portrayed bombers being devoted to their work “as much for the love of the thing as from hatred of tyrants”.¹²

Revealingly, *Mysteries of Ireland* was the title of a book published in London in 1884 that promised to expose the truth behind the enigma of Irish resistance. Consisting almost entirely largely of newspaper reports about Fenianism and the ongoing Land War, the events that it narrated were not at all mysterious in Ireland. However, when conveyed to an English readership as evidence of the “vile”, “cruel and dastardly” efforts of dynamiters and Land Leaguers who were driven by “blind zeal”, these events became distorted. Documenting the propensity of the Irish towards mindless violence during a decades-long history of wanton “acts of cruelty, bloodshed and violence”, the editors insisted that this fanaticism was now rousing “the spirit of hatred and deep feelings of revenge in the breasts... of the people of England”. A work of more explicitly avowed propaganda, *Mysteries of Ireland* reveals how Stevenson’s novel served as a fictional parallel to the more direct work of the imperialist press, which shared his opinion that Irish insurgency should be represented to the British public as the bloody work of unhinged zealots.

Rather than exploring the circumstances that drove Fenian insurgency, the imperialist dynamite novel provides crescendos of senseless violence that often conclude with the auto-destruction of the bomber. This occurs in *The Dynamiter* and in John Coulson Kernahan’s later novel of Irish political villainy, *Captain Shannon*, both of which close with the reassuring spectacle of the complete physical destruction of the Irish rebel, of whom no physical traces are to be found, having either been. In both cases, the Fenian

¹² “Recent Novels”, *The Times*, Wednesday, June 9th, 1897, p.11.

is vaporised by accidental detonation of his own bomb. Henry James opted for a similar closure to his 1886 novel *The Princess Casamassima*, in which a reluctant anarchist, Hyacinth Robinson, takes his own life rather than that of his intended victim. In *The Dynamiter*, Stevenson's desire to make nothing out of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa is realised with the destruction of the Fenian, Zero, when his bomb explodes prematurely beside the symbolically significant site of a railway station newspaper stand.

The Aesthetics of Dynamite

Zero, the leader of Stevenson's chaotic Fenian cell (his anti-identity being a pun on Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa's supposed operational *nom de plume*, "Number One"), explains his reliance upon anonymity:

'If you love romance (as artists do), few lives are more romantic than that of the obscure individual now addressing you. Obscure yet famous. Mine is an anonymous, infernal glory. By infamous means, I work towards my bright purpose. I found the liberty and peace of a poor country desperately abused; the future smiles upon that land; yet, in the meantime, I lead the existence of a hunted brute, work towards appalling ends, and practice hell's dexterities.' (p.106)

Zero's diabolical campaign is a consciously modern affair that occurs in an age of advertising, when the cabbalistic "poetry" of his dynamite outrages constitutes a novel, if rather volatile, addition to the panoply of images circulating throughout the late Victorian society of the spectacle. He goes on to explain the popular aesthetic and

symbolic qualities of his insidious “star of dynamite”: the highly explosive material that has emerged from industrial modernity. Now, having “risen for the oppressed”, (106-107) it has democratized warfare and simplified political struggle by making it alarmingly immediate. Through its shock value, mediated, in turn, by the press, it connects the bomber directly with his target population, the British public. An aesthete at heart, and having “something of the poet in my nature”, Zero reveals that he is committed not so much to achieving political change as he is to terror for terror’s sake, and his campaign is “devoted to that more emphatic, more striking, and (if you please) more popular method of the explosive bomb.” (pp.107-108)

As his “chosen medium”, dynamite conveys a wickedly artistic sensibility that, with its destructive fusion of anarchy and aestheticism, is more shocking than the political motivations of any actual Fenian bomber. Along with his awareness of the destructive power of these bombs, Zero’s appreciation of dynamite’s power to frighten inadvertently politicizes the model of artistic consciousness outlined by Walter Pater in his 1873 study of aesthetics, *The Renaissance*. Describing all art, including “music, poetry, artistic and accomplished forms of human life”, as “receptacles of so many powers or forces”, he represented the artistically-minded subject as a receiver of intense experiences, or “impressions” locked into a state of supreme sensitivity to the “powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations”. This theory of art-as-force is echoed in Zero’s insistence on the beauty, or “bright purpose”, of his cause as its purely destructive medium carries its ultimate meaning. Stevenson ridicules the notion that the critical temperament is deeply affected by both the power and the presence of the beautiful but, by equating Pater’s theory with the romantic appeal of revolutionary politics, he also suggests that terrorism has a uniquely aesthetic purchase, insisting that the pure energy

of Zero's explosions can be compared to the "heat of... genius" celebrated by aesthetes like Pater.¹³

Zero's campaign ends with his death at a newspaper stand on a crowded railway platform where, desperate to read a report about one of his explosions, he accidentally detonates the bomb that he has prepared for his next attack:

the train for Liverpool was just about to start, another had but recently arrived; and the double tide made movement difficult. As the pair reached the neighbourhood of the bookstall, however, they came into an open space; and here the attention of the plotter was attracted by a *Standard* broadside bearing the words: "Second Edition: Explosion in Golden Square." His eye lighted; groping in his pocket for the necessary coin, he sprang forward – his bag knocked sharply on the corner of the stall – and instantly, with a formidable report, the dynamite exploded. When the smoke cleared away the stall was seen much shattered, and the stall keeper running forth in terror from the ruins; but of the Irish patriot or the Gladstone bag no adequate remains were to be found.
(p.182)

Zero's symbolic and self-reflexive end occurs amid a crowd of onlookers. Addicted to media coverage of his explosions, he dies while reaching for a newspaper report on his latest attack, undone, ironically, by the publicization of his bombing campaign. His death

¹³ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Preface, xxix-xxxi.

takes place within the circulation of modernity and its media, with his final detonation – itself marked by the “report” of the blast - marking terrorism’s assimilation within the *schema* of urban modernity. Instead of disrupting the modern imperial metropolis he becomes part of its very matter: exploding upon the platform and amid the moving crowd, his atomised remains are fused with the disintegrated texts of daily papers, detective novels and other popular reads sold at the news stand. While the reputations of ratiocinative protagonists of such popular narratives, like Arthur Conan Doyle’s iconic detective, Sherlock Holmes, depends on their ability to solve mysteries by making something out of nothing, *The Dynamiter* ends with not with the satisfying resolution of the successful detection and exposure of a villain, but with Stevenson’s complete obliteration of the Irish revolutionary. Unable to erase O’Donovan Rossa in 1881, he instead composed *The Dynamiter* in an effort to redact the political meaning of Fenianism from the cultural and historical record. While it was impossible for him to ignore the events that so fascinated contemporary readers Stevenson, with this closure, sought to limit and contain Irish politics by such means of narration. With *The Dynamiter*, he attempted to desubliminate terrorism by suggesting that its political shocks could be absorbed by Britain’s resilient, modern imperial culture: while dynamiting was itself a consciously modern revolutionary tactic, Stevenson suggested that its terrors had become part of the wider cycle of urban modernity. These, he hinted, could be halted by the very processes that it was designed to disrupt.

Other dynamite novels proposed that Fenianism’s capacity to alert the public consciousness to the Irish crisis could be constrained in similar ways. In J.D. Maginn’s 1889 potboiler, *Fitzgerald the Fenian*, the Fenians’ “London work” includes a series of bomb attacks against both the British government and the conservative press include,

beginning with the offices of that “filthy and most-offensively conducted organ” the *Times*¹⁴ (the Fenians claimed that, by bombing the *Times* office in 1883, they were repaying the “genteel dastards” of “the anti-Irish press”¹⁵ for circulating imperialist propaganda). Bombs are also planted at Westminster, the Home Office, Scotland Yard and Windsor Castle, along with cultural sites like the Crystal Palace and the British Museum are also targeted. Their plan to “push on the war with vigour in the metropolis”, to “terrify John Bull out of his senses”, “sack and burn every city and town in England” and “have nothing but blood” will, they declare, capture “the attention of the city”.¹⁶

Coulson Kernahan’s 1897 potboiler, *Captain Shannon*, also presents a frantic vision of Fenian violence. Loaded with graphic scenes of mass death and urban destruction, this strangely prescient tale revisited Stevenson’s theme of the railway platform explosion but in a far more spectacular fashion. Serialized in the *Windsor Magazine* from July-November, 1896, it was hurriedly issued in book form just weeks after an unclaimed bomb exploded on the Inner Circle line of the London underground railway in April 1897 (one reviewer of *Captain Shannon* thought that by rekindling memories of the Fenian campaign of the 1880s the explosion would “cause people to read the book”¹⁷). The explosion at Aldersgate Station killed one passenger, injured nine, damaged a passing train, and the blast wave travelled to several of the surrounding stations.¹⁸ It also fueled rumours that the Fenians had returned to London to disrupt the approaching

¹⁴ J.D. Maginn, *Fitzgerald the Fenian*, 2 Vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1889), p.189.

¹⁵ “The Genteel Dastards”, *United Ireland*, 20 December, 1883, reprinted in *A Verbatim Copy of the Parnell Commission Report*, pp.84-5, p.84.

¹⁶ Maginn, *ibid*, pp.182, 222, 224.

¹⁷ “Recent Novels”, *The Times*, *ibid*.

¹⁸ “Explosion on the Metropolitan Railway”, *The Times*, Tuesday, April 27th, 1897, p.9.

celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.¹⁹ Kernahan's novel opens with its titular terrorist, Captain Shannon, a Fenian-turned anarchist and cross-dressing "devil", retaliating against the passing of coercive legislation by attacking newspaper offices, train stations post offices and newspapers. He also assassinates the Chief Secretary for Ireland and hostile newspaper editors, along with any civilians unfortunate enough to get in his way. Like Stevenson, Kernahan also depoliticizes the Fenian, who is driven by his adherence to "criminal code" and not by any ideological motivation.²⁰ His dislike for dynamiters was also explored in his subsequent novels, *The Red Peril* (1901), which features anarchists who deploy gas-bombs as well as explosives, and *Scoundrels & Co.* in which a syndicate of left-wing dynamiters, "surging like devils from the mouth of hell", is infiltrated and destroyed by a police spy before it can launch a bombing campaign designed to stimulate strike action across Britain.²¹

Pro-Fenian Fiction

Imperialism was challenged by Irish nationalist authors who portrayed bombing in a sympathetic light by showing how its destructive power, now converted into dynamite's "more compact form", could also concentrate the political force of militant republicanism.²² Supporting the Fenians' campaign to become "undisputed masters of the whole of Irish soil",²³ they proposed that dynamiting was one example of many justifiable acts of resistance against British conquest, colonisation and occupation. There are no premature explosions or defused bombs in these political fantasies, nor do they

¹⁹ "The Explosion on the Metropolitan Railway", *The Times*, Wednesday April 28th, 1897, p. 12; "The Explosion at Aldersgate-Street Station", *The Times*, Tuesday, May 25th, 1897, p.15.

²⁰ Coulson Kernahan, *Captain Shannon* (London: Ward, Lock & Co., 1897), pp.195, 167.

²¹ Coulson Kernahan, *Scoundrels & Co.* (London: Ward, Lock and Company, 1901, p.226.

²² Edward Moran (as Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa), *Edward O'Donnell: A Story of Ireland of Our Day* (New York: S.W. Green, 1884), p.238

²³ Tom Greer, *A Modern Dædalus* (London: Griffith, Farran, Okeden & Welsh, 1885), p.245

close with any guarantee of imperial security, as they centre on what O'Donovan Rossa's journal, *The United Irishman*, described as "the satisfaction of seeing London laid in ashes".²⁴ In one case, the author Edward Moran even attributed his own novel of Fenianism, *Edward O'Donnell: A Tale of Ireland of To-Day*, to O'Donovan Rossa, who did not object to having his own name associated with propaganda fiction.²⁵

Published two months before the Westminster attack that outraged Robert Louis Stevenson, this comprehensively anti-colonial novel opposed British colonialism in its direct form but also criticised what Moran regarded as the "will-o'-the-wisp bugaboo" of constitutional nationalism. The dynamite campaign is portrayed as a response to the occupation of Ireland and its long history of coercion and counterinsurgency: "the good work which the men have now in hands in London" (233) is contextualised here as a legitimate militant response to far greater levels of British violence. O'Donovan Rossa's "new American teaching", (174) has, Moran explains, modernized Fenianism: drawing on the politically levelling potential of terrorism, he predicted that the political gravity in Ireland would now very suddenly shift because "science has put in our hands a great equalizer"²⁶:

"The best advertisement we ever get is an odd explosion with dynamite in London; and when this is telegraphed abroad and finds its way into the foreign press, inquiries are made of the cause, and they are beginning to know what a blood-stained hypocrite England is."²⁷

²⁴ "London Bridge", *The United Irishman*, January 10th, 1885, p.2.

²⁵ The Brooklyn-based author was the brother of D.P. Moran, the champion of exclusive cultural nationalism. See Stephen Brown, *Ireland in Literature: A Guide to Irish Novels, Tales, Romances and Folklore* (Dublin: Maunsel and Company, 1919), pp.216-7.

²⁶ Moran, *ibid*, p.32.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.145.

The Fenians' attempts to "blow up all London" in revenge "for all our poor people have suffered" is driven by political desperation and their "undying yearning for total separation from England", a desire that "maddens them and drives them on to dynamite when all peaceful means have failed."²⁸

Donald MacKay's novel *The Dynamite Ship* and Tom Greer's techno-fantasy, *A Modern Dædalus*, while sharing Moran's political sympathies, both abandon Moran's recognisably contemporary context of the Land War for more slightly futuristic settings. Published in 1885, these novels transplanted Fenianism into fantastic yet recognisable settings – Greer's novel features aerial warfare and MacKay's centres on the invention of long-range dynamite gun. Featuring the deployment of more conventional weapons and battle tactics than used by the Fenians during the 1880s, they replace urban terrorism with more clearly-drawn battle lines and conclude with Irish victories over the British empire. Inspired by the experimental dynamite shells that were tested by the US military during the 1880s, MacKay's novel stresses the legitimacy of his protagonists' political goals. The deployment of such weapons was, according to the *Times*, a truly appalling prospect,²⁹ but for Greer and MacKay, such technology would place Ireland on an equal military footing with the British and could only do good for the nationalist cause. In *The Dynamite Ship*, Fenians attack London with a pneumatic cannon, loaded with high explosive shells and mounted on a petrol-powered boat. Capable of razing entire islands, this fictional weapon was a fusion of contemporary military technology with the Irish Republican Brotherhood's unsuccessful 1881 project to construct a submersible named

²⁸ Ibid, 144, 240.

²⁹ "The Dynamite Gun and Shell", *The Times*, Tuesday, August 18th, 1885, p.13.

the “Fenian Ram”.³⁰ In contrast with O’Donovan Rossa’s calls for clandestine operations in England, they are dedicated to engaging conventionally with the British because, when used “secretly, dynamite, or even gunpowder, is not a legitimate article of warfare.” If applied “openly, and in sight of all men,” however, it becomes legitimate and “is as fair as the sling of David.” (p.95) In a clearly-drawn conflict, MacKay insists, dynamite will perform “honestly, and fairly in the sight of all men”, like any other military weapon. (pp.95-96) The cleaner practices of “open and legitimate warfare” (p.154) are portrayed as being morally superior to the “skulking” tactics of the skirmishers, and the novel closes with the instant destruction of Westminster, a hasty British surrender and the establishment of an Irish republic. Greer also drew attention to the possibility of defeating the British with superior weapons in *A Modern Dædalus*, in which Fenians subject British forces to aerial bombardment.³¹ Greer also asked his readers to consider the hypocrisy of preferring the “unprecedentedly destructive” levels of violence being employed during wars of colonial subjugation to the far more selective tactics of the dynamiters. Comparing the destruction caused by infernal machines to the “infernal rain” of military shelling, Greer highlights the “species of cant born of the idea that war is a magnificent game for kings and nobles, and must be carried out under rules that disguise its essentially revolting nature, and prevent it from being too dangerous or disagreeable to them.”³²

Anarchists and Dynamite Fiction

³⁰ “The United States”, *The Times*, Wednesday April 18th, 1883, p.7. For discussions of the Fenian movement’s scientific experiments in the United States, see Gillian O’Brien, *Blood Runs Green: The Murder that Transfixed Gilded Age Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), K.R.M. Short, *The Dynamite War* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979) and Niall Whelehan, *The Dynamiters: Irish Nationalism and Political Violence in the Wider World, 1867-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³¹ Donald MacKay, *The Dynamite Ship* (New York: Manhattan Publishing, 1888), pp.95-6, 154, 178.

³² Tom Greer, *A Modern Dædalus* (London: Griffith, Farran, Okeden & Welsh, 1885), pp.233, 247.

As if conscious of Stevenson's claim that the Fenians stood "all upon the side of anarchy" (Confessions, p.9), other authors used anarchism as a kind of political cypher for Fenianism, and in doing so represented Irish anticolonialism at a remove. Joseph Conrad's 1907 novel, *The Secret Agent*, is the most enduring of these coded fictions, while the popularity of others such as Grant Allen's 1886 novel, *For Maimie's Sake: A Tale of Love and Dynamite* and E. Douglas Fawcett's 1893 tale of the destruction of London, *Hartmann the Anarchist*, did not endure beyond the decades of their publications. For Henry James, however, anarchism provided an opportunity to suggest that culture, if properly policed and preserved, could protect capitalist society from political meltdown. His 1886 novel, *The Princess Casamassima*, revolves around the claim that, in the end, only culture could protect society from the Jacobinical demands of contemporary democrats. Culture, James insisted, should be mediated and defended by an elite of educated and "finely aware" custodians who, applying the "maximum of sense" and detachment, would preserve British values against the inferior political and aesthetic sensibilities of poor people. Fusing his literary ideas with profoundly reactionary political thought, James's novel portrays socialists as being incapable of comprehending the responsibilities that mark the cultured. An "aggressive, vindictive, destructive social faith", socialism had, in his view, no positive role to play in society, neither within the broader cultural sphere, nor in relation to literature. (44) Like Stevenson, who regarded terrorism as a product of "the burned atmosphere of cities", (9) James also treated the London streets, where the rich might collide with the poor, as fascinating but truly pathological territory where anything might happen. Terrorism appears in *The Princess Casamassima* as a by-product of the city's compression of the

classes into its dangerous “atmospheric mixture”,³³ but the subject is treated in a more mundane manner than in *The Dynamiter*, which James admired nonetheless for its provision of excitement, “dangers and thrills”. Celebrating Stevenson’s faith in “personal gallantry”, James praised him for doing so through the application of “extreme psychological truth” and admired his political handling of his subject matter in *The Dynamiter*, as much as he did his style. Recognizing him as a master of the urban mystery whose imagined city was “so full of history and poetry... of associations springing from strong passions and strange characters”,³⁴ James nonetheless regarded radicalism as a threat to established culture and as something that could, in the end, only be thoroughly policed by superior novelists.

Joseph Conrad shared James’s fascination with the urban origins of terrorism but differed in his appreciation of its value as a source of literary capital. This he identified in his 1906 short story, “The Informer”, in its stress on the need to achieve the “the *chambardement general*”, or “general blow-up,” of society in. (“The Informer”, p.92)

James explored anarchism during the immediate aftermath of the Fenian attacks; written with more considerable hindsight, Conrad’s novel was set during the same period, subtly displacing the very immediate crisis of Irish insurgency. This is alluded to by Conrad in hints that appear throughout his 1907 novel, *The Secret Agent*: these include the substitution of the former Fenian prisoner, Michael Davitt, who was only released by the British on license, with Michaelis, “the ticket of leave apostle of anarchism” (Michaelis’s conviction for taking part in a jail break modelled on the Fenians’ Manchester escape of 1867). The professional background of the Assistant Commissioner of Police, whose

³³ Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima* (Macmillan & Co, 1886, reprinted London: Penguin, 1987), pp.44, 9, 443.

³⁴ Henry James, “Robert Louis Stevenson”, pp.120-121, 124.

experience of counterinsurgency in more exotic colonial settings enables him to successfully pursue the agent provocateur, Adolf Verloc, into Soho, is also transplants colonial practice into the metropolis. Instead of British imperial violence, however, the reader is confronted with the problem of state-sponsored terrorism, unleashed, in this instance, by the presumably-Russian embassy for which Verloc works. The plan hatched by the ambassador, Mr Vladimir, is to shock both the British public and the European governments about to meet at an upcoming anti-anarchism conference with a “startling” idea: a conceptually flawless and “purely destructive” attack not on any politician or head of state, but on the very concept of science.³⁵ The objective of Vladimir’s pseudo-plot is to influence and the domestic policies of rival governments through the manipulation of conspiracy and the simulation of insurgency.

Whereas Stevenson emphasized the seemingly-illegible motives of Irish revolutionaries, Conrad’s modernist revision of the dynamite novel associates what Vladimir terms the “shocking senselessness” and “gratuitous blasphemy” of terrorism directly with the policies and practices of the state. (p.67) As Michael Parkes argues, this connection aligns modernist aesthetics very closely with the political shocks and “modern cultural logics of terrorism.”³⁶ Centered on the complicity of governments in the “close-woven stuff” of violent and deadly conspiracies and the “unexpected solutions of continuity, sudden holes in space and time” that they cause, *The Secret Agent* reveals how, both in the policing and staging of political violence (or, as Baudrillard would later have it, its simulation),³⁷ the deep state manufactures and manages crises in order to conceal its

³⁵ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp.73, 61, 67.

³⁶ Michael Parkes, *A Sense of Shock: The Impact of Impressionism on the Modern British and Irish Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.134. See also my *Blasted Literature: Victorian Political Fiction and the Shock of Modernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

³⁷ In 2004, Baudrillard updated his model of simulation to include the state’s then-increasing (and now undeniably permanent) reliance on virtual plots and false conspiracies. Achieved by means of

duplicity in these most “incomprehensible, inexplicable... (and) unthinkable” events.³⁸ Sharing James’s fascination with the “exposed and tangled state” of late Victorian politics,³⁹ Conrad went further by highlighting the hidden contacts that threaded together the networks and circuits along which imperial power flowed in its domestic settings, as well as in its farther-flung colonial sites.

The Anarchist Scare

The relationship between art, continental anarchism and press distortion of political events was the subject of Grant Allen’s dynamite fictions, which represented anarchism as a fusion of nihilism and Polish nationalism, both of which are reactive to Russian state terror. His story, “The Dynamiter’s Sweetheart”, published in *Strand Magazine*, centers on a series of bomb attacks in Paris, beginning with an explosion at a café and concluding with an attempt to kill visitors to the Louvre. In this story, Allen continues with the subject matter of his earlier novel, *For Maimie’s Sake: A Tale of Love and Dynamite*, by satirizing contemporary refusals to consider the reasons behind political violence. Allen worked within the conventions of conservative dynamite fiction and its decontextualization of violence in order to parody the genre but in this story, he also indulges a subtle swipe at Henry James. Presenting terrorism as the counterproductive work of “detestable anarchists”, whose determination to “maim and destroy innocent women and children” along with “poor, helpless souls, sitting by chance at a café”, he

“preventive terror”, designed to function under “the banner of security” and relentlessly “ground into the tiniest interstices of social and political life”, these pseudo-threats, he warned, were being produced to generate saturation-levels of fear, justify omniscient surveillance and normalize state repression. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, originally published as *Le Pacte de lucidité ou l’intelligence du Mal* (Galilée, 2004), translated from the French by Chris Turner (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p.119.

³⁸ Conrad, p.105.

³⁹ James, p.37.

portrays dynamiting as a form of violence that harms the cause of its practitioners by killing and injuring “good folks who may hate the tyrants just as much as they do.” His anarchists form a collective of artists, sexual predators and degenerates who, living on “nothing but cigarettes and absinthe”, inhabit “that strange, unconventional Bohemian Paris”. Here, revolutionaries attend painting classes where they boast about their latest sexual conquests and assess the impact of the most recent explosions on the French popular opinion. The villain of the piece, Stanislas Laminski, seduces a naïve American art student, Essie Lothrop, who has emigrated to France because “I mean to study art, if I have to die for it”. She quickly falls in love with the artist, bomber and womanizer, despite a proliferation of “dark hints” about his political leanings, including Laminski’s own casual admission that the Friends of Freedom, a secret society of “advanced politicians”, of which he is a member, is responsible for a recent attack on a café. Undeterred by this statement, or by his friends’ alarming proposals that the rich should be butchered to feed the poor after being tortured and killed “for purposes of artistic study”, Essie remains ignorant of their politics and is shielded from the reality of class struggle in Europe by the willful ignorance that has instilled in her an “astounding want of information and culture”. Resembling James in her belief that an artist should “never pretend to understand politics”, her failure to comprehend the unfolding crisis prevents her from heeding these warning signals until it is too late, when she finally realizes that her boyfriend is preparing to plant another bomb.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Allen, “The Dynamiter’s Sweetheart”, pp. 143-4, 138, 140-1. The story mirrors the dynamite novel’s appropriation of the terrorist’s basic strategy: the next attack, or shock, should outdo the previous one by far. For a discussion of the very reflexive manifestation of this phenomenon within contemporary political fiction, see Peter C. Herman’s recent essay, “Dynamite Bombs of New York Manufacture: The Terrorist Perspective in the Stevensons, Greer and James”, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 10.1, June 2016, pp.1-21.

Allen parodies the dismissal of radicalism by conservative authors like Stevenson and James, along with their denial of the political contexts and histories that were intended to dilute the public's political consciousness, leaving it in a condition resembling that of the innocent and misguided Essie, who is uninformed and left with "no glimpse of the truth." Ignoring the circumstances that motivated radical violence at the fin de siècle and unable to comprehend these with her "simple little New England mind" (this is an indirect but no less stinging criticism of James's consciousness of radical politics, as much as it is of the New Woman), Essie is unable to "grasp the full awesomeness of Continental Anarchy." Instead, she falls in love with Laminski's projection of politics through "fiery eloquence", "poetical feeling" and his "aggressive and demonstrative" art, being drawn to his angry fusion of artistic and revolutionary sensibility (his painting is characterized by "force and Slavonic vigour"). Finally realizing that he is a terrorist as well as an artist, Essie prevents her now "transformed and unbeautified" lover from carrying out a second bomb attack on visitors at the Louvre. She ironically fulfils her promise to "die for art" when, after throwing Laminski's device away from the crowd, she bears the full force of its explosion, and the story ends with a final distortion of events by the press: "'She meant to set fire to the Louvre,' said the papers; 'but, owing to a fortunate scuffle with her accomplice, the bomb exploded prematurely'." ⁴¹

Understanding the Incomprehensible

Whereas Stevenson demanded an increase of the already-absolute powers of coercion in Ireland, Allen emphasized that terrorism, including even the apparently meaningless attacks on sites of culture and consumption that took place in Paris during the mid-1890s, was part of a broader spectrum that included state violence, the mediation of terror, and

⁴¹ Allen, 142, 145-7.

the erosion of truth, all of which contributed towards the prolongation of unpredictable and desperate acts revolutionary violence. Addressing the willingness of artists and the press to exclude the bombers' political motivations from their fiction, thereby ensuring that it remains "unknown, unnoticed",⁴² Allen suggested that the redaction of facts desensitized the public to the obvious warning signals of alienation and desperation that were manifesting themselves across "this terrible Europe".⁴³ Stevenson had already confronted Allen's sympathetic portrayals of revolutionaries and dynamiters and condemned his expressions of sympathy for "Irish lawlessness" and "the Irish appeal to violence", asking "et tu brute?"⁴⁴ Arguing in his unpublished essay, "Confessions of a Unionist", that the only way to deal with Irish insurgents was to "put them down" and violently eradicate them, Stevenson demanded the establishment of a "vigilance committee", accompanied by a much-needed "appearance of Judge Lynch", (p.18). Echoing the views of contemporary coercionists, his insistence on the pacification of Ireland by means of official and unofficial force reveals how contemporary political fiction responded so closely to these crises.

In contrast, dynamiting was intended, in the words of one Irish separatist journal, "to pay off England". It added: "We know what instruments England has employed in repressing us. We know how she never scrupled to murder and assassinate that she might rob, despoil and conquer. Against such a foe any weapons are lawful."⁴⁵ As a political tactic, the Fenian bombing campaign of the 1880s served as a form of violent counter-shock designed to draw attention to imperialist violence in Ireland and

⁴² Allen, *For Maimie's Sake: A Tale of Love and Dynamite* (New York: International Book Company, n.d.; originally published London: Chatto & Windus, 1886), p.252.

⁴³ Allen, "The Dynamiter's Sweetheart", p.145.

⁴⁴ Stevenson, "Confessions of a Unionist", pp.17-18.

⁴⁵ "Vengeance by Dynamite", *United Ireland*, 15 March 1884, reprinted in *A Verbatim Copy of the Parnell Commission Report*, p.73.

highlight the hypocrisy of Britain's claim to moral monopoly on the use of armed force. When compared to the saturation levels of state violence and coercion that the Irish and other colonized peoples were being subjected to it would, its advocates believed, reveal "the inconsistency of English pressmen who ranked the comparatively harmless explosion at Victoria Station amongst the most heinous crimes, while almost at the same time they chuckled with wild delight at the massacre of thousands of Arabs by their own countrymen."⁴⁶ As a form of political discourse, the dynamite novel, whether written in support of British imperialism or against it, was also a politically-charged form of writing. While their organization was described as consisting of "murderous clubs of maniacs" by the unionist pamphleteers who echoed Stevenson's views of Irish nationalism,⁴⁷ Irish republicans themselves expressed solidarity with other anti-colonial forces, such as "the brave Arabs of the Soudan", who had successfully driven British "invaders back in disgrace."⁴⁸ Greer was inspired to write by *A Modern Dædalus* by the Boer struggle, and concluded his novel by asking how planting bombs in London was could be any less objectionable than the high-tech munitions of mass destruction that had been put to use against anti-colonial insurgents in Africa. The reflexive role of nineteenth-century political fiction is underlined by the dynamite novel and the short fiction spin-offs that it inspired.⁴⁹ Whether they were Irish republicans or British imperialists, the authors of these works understood the political and cultural novelty of the dynamiters. Appearing well into the first decade of the twentieth century, these novels and stories drew on the atmosphere of "nervous terror"⁵⁰ that the dynamiters sought to instill. In them, we find competing narratives about the polarizing politics of

⁴⁶ "Irish Republicanism", *United Ireland*, 29 March, 1884, reprinted *ibid*, pp.85-6, p.85.

⁴⁷ *A Verbatim Copy of the Parnell Commission Report*, p.81

⁴⁸ William O'Brien, quoted *ibid*, p.119.

⁴⁹ See Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, p.119.

⁵⁰ "Intense Excitement in England", *The United Irishman*, January 3rd, 1885, p.1.

Victorian imperialism, the Fenians' revolutionary theories of Irish resistance and the class antagonisms that underlined bourgeois opposition to socialism.