The Secret Agent (Everymans Library) by Joseph Conrad

This Act Of Madness Or Despair.

(Book Jacket Status: Not Jacketed)

The Secret Agent is the unsurpassed ancestor of a long series of twentieth-century novels and films which explore the confused motives that lie at the heart of political terrorism. In its use of powerful psychological insight to intensify narrative suspense, it set the terms by which subsequent works in its genre were created. Conrad was the first novelist to discover the strange in-between territory of the political exile, and his genius was such that we still have no truer map of that regions moral terrain than his story of a terrorist plot and its tragic consequences for the guilty and innocent alike.

Introduction by Paul Theroux

Joseph Conrads 1907 novel, The Secret Agent, is a difficult little book. Its story is difficult and its characters are largely unpleasant. By difficult and unpleasant, I dont mean to say the novel isnt any good. Far from it. These terms I mean to denote the impenetrability of motive, of sense. The story of a group of anarchists, police, and a family caught in the middle in late Victorian England, The Secret Agent is far from Conrads subtitle, A Simple Tale. The novel, for me, is about hatred, mistrust, and breakdowns in communication.

The Secret Agent begins early one morning in 1886. Mr. Verloc, a secret agent for a foreign embassy, who lives in a small apartment with his wife Winnie, her mentally ill brother, Stevie, and their mother. Keeping an eye on a particularly ineffectual anarchist community in London, Verloc pretends to be an anarchist revolutionary himself. As the novel opens, Verloc is called in by his new employer Mr. Vladimir. Vladimir, discontented
with the apparent lack of production out of his secret agent, and even further with the lackadaisical English police, wants Verloc to act as an agent provocateur, and arrange for a bomb to spur the English government to crack down on the legal system. As religion and royalty are, according to Vladimir, no longer strong enough emotional ties to the people, an attack must be made upon Science, and he selects the Greenwich Observatory as the appropriate site for action.

The novel introduces us to a range of wholly unsympathetic characters. The anarchist collective roughly consists of Doctor Ossipan, who lives off his romantic attachments to women barely able to take care of themselves; The Professor, explosives expert, who is so insecure, he is perpetually wired with a detonator in case he is threatened by police capture; and Michaelis, the corpulent writer, engaged upon his autobiography after a mitigated sentence in prison. Conrads portrayal of this cabal is wholly ludicrous - a band of anarchists that are better at talking than doing anything to achieve their undeveloped goals. No better than these are their nemeses, the London police, here represented by Inspector Heat, who identifies so much with the common criminal element, youd think he was one himself; and the Assistant Commissioner, who is so dissatisfied with his desk job, that he would do anything to get out on the streets - but not so ambitious as to upset his nagging wife and her social circle.

At the diffuse center, if it has one, of Conrads novel, is the Verloc family, held together by ties no less tenuous and flimsy than any other community in the work. Verloc and his wife communicate and interact by monosyllables and the broken bell of their front door. Winnie Verloc knows nothing of her husbands secret life, and tries desperately to prevent him from taking offence at having to support her infirmed mother and practically useless brother by forming a society of admiration amongst them for her good husband. Lack of real communication and sympathy amongst the Verloc household is at the heart of Conrads satire against late Victorian England.

As the Greenwich Bomb Outrage is an early, but central moment in the novel, it would not be spoiling anything to tell you that this is where Conrad really earns his paycheck. His mode of bringing all the disparate characters and subplots of the novel together throughout the rest of the book is both reminiscent of and radically undercutting the influence of Charles Dickens in Conrads social critique. The Secret Agent is a clever novel, but exceptionally bleak. Thinking about other early 1900s British novels like Samuel Butlers The Way of All Flesh or Virginia Woolfs To the Lighthouse, Conrads The Secret Agent is another of these works where a British writer tries to assess the state of the Empire in the aftermath of Victorias demise - examining past follies to be overcome, and peering without optimism at what lies ahead.

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