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Plots on London: terrorism in turn-of-the-century British fiction

Frank, Michael C

Abstract: This book chapter provides a contextual analysis of the first wave of terrorist fiction in British literature, focusing in particular on Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Dynamiter" (1885) and E. Douglass Fawcett's "Hartmann the Anarchist" (1893). Considering both books against the background of contemporary forms of terrorism, the chapter argues that the so-called "dynamite novels" of the late nineteenth century adapted the conventions of Gothic terror to the new phenomenon of "terrorist terror" by complementing or substituting them with new motifs: the late-Victorian metropolis of London, anarchist conspiracies, dynamite explosions, and the contradictory images of inept would-be-terrorists who accidentally blow themselves to pieces and futuristic scenarios of a London laid waste by modern weaponry. My main hypothesis is that such novels give insight into the "cultural imaginary" of terrorism, which may be defined as the period-specific repertoire of images and stories pertaining to terrorism in both its actual and its potential forms. Intermingling the available historical knowledge with fantastic speculation, this imaginary is shaped not only by the respective period's public discourse on terrorism (the often hyperbolic pronouncements of politicians, the media, as well as the terrorist groups themselves) but also by the literary traditions that lend themselves to the narrativization of terror.

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PLOTS ON LONDON: TERRORISM IN TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY BRITISH FICTION

MICHAEL C. FRANK

From Gothic “terror” to terrorist “terror”

In a 1797 journal essay written in the form of a letter to the editor, an anonymous reviewer deplored the vogue of “terrorist novel writing” that dominated the literary scene at the close of the eighteenth century. For the unknown author, a “terrorist novel” was a text in the tradition of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, a tradition now better known under Walpole’s own term, “Gothic”. The critique specifically aimed at the “great quantity of novels” produced in the wake of Ann Radcliffe’s successes of the early 1790s, “in which it has been the fashion to make *terror* the *order of the day*, by confining the heroes and heroines in old gloomy castles; full of spectres, apparitions, ghosts, and dead men’s bones”.¹ This fashion is closely related to a reevaluation of affect in the latter part of the eighteenth century. One of the most influential aesthetic writings of the period, Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), famously argued that sublimity appeals to the passions relating to self-preservation and that it therefore causes stronger

¹ Anonymous, “Terrorist Novel Writing” (1797), in *The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1797: Being an Impartial Selection of the Most Exquisite Essays and Jeux d’Esprits, Principally Prose, That Appear in the Newspapers and Other Publications. With Explanatory Notes and Anecdotes of Many of the Persons Alluded to*, London: R. Philipps, 1798, I, 223 (emphases in original). In the same year, another anonymous letter drew a direct connection between the Gothic tradition in Britain and recent events in France, arguing that British novelists had developed their own “system of terror” in response to the Jacobin atrocities; see Anonymous, “The Terrorist System of Novel-Writing” (1797), in *Gothic Readings: The First Wave, 1764-1840*, ed. Rictor Norton, London and New York: Leicester University Press, 2000, 299-303.

emotions than beauty. Against this background, Burke identified terror as “the ruling principle of the sublime”,² which he in turn described as “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling”.³ For Burke, the “delight” in terror was restricted to those frightful and potentially dangerous objects or situations that cannot actually harm us, because we perceive them from a safe distance⁴ – for instance, as viewers of art or as readers of poetry. The literary tradition of Gothic romance inaugurated by Walpole in 1764/65 gives expression to precisely this positive understanding of terror as a prime source of aesthetic enjoyment.

The noun “terror” and its derivative adjective “terrorist” were soon to undergo a dramatic semantic shift, however – a shift that had already begun when the essay “Terrorist Novel Writing” was first published. In the context of the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution, the term “*la terreur*” acquired a markedly different meaning, used by the protagonists themselves to describe the Jacobin policy of intimidation.⁵ The earliest appearance of the neologism “*terrorisme*” in French occurred in 1794.⁶ After Maximilien Robespierre was deposed and executed, the Thermidorians used the term with unambiguously pejorative intent, in order to differentiate themselves from the Jacobin “terror”. As early as 1795, the English lexicon had adopted this new meaning of “terrorism”. “Thousands of those Hellhounds called Terrorists ... are let loose on the people”,⁷ Edmund

² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful: And Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. David Womersley, London: Penguin, 2004, II, ii, 102.

³ *Ibid.*, I, vii, 86.

⁴ See *ibid.*, I, xv, 94, and I, xviii, 97.

⁵ On the history of the concepts of “terror” and “terrorism” before and after the “Reign of Terror”, see the meticulous reconstructions by Gerd van den Heuvel, “Terreur, Terroriste, Terrorisme”, in *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680-1820*, vol 3: *Philosophe, Philosophie; Terreur, Terroriste, Terrorisme*, eds Rolf Reichardt and Eberhard Schmitt, Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1985, 89-132; Rudolf Walther, “Terror, Terrorismus”, in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, eds Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1990, VI, 323-444.

⁶ See Heuvel, “Terreur, Terroriste, Terrorisme”, 120, 124; Walther, “Terror, Terrorismus”, 348.

⁷ Edmund Burke, “Fourth Letter on the Proposals for Peace with the Regicide Directory of France: Addressed to the Earl Fitzwilliam. 1795-7”, in *The Works of the*

Burke wrote in a letter of that year. The same Burke who had so greatly contributed to the prestige of “terror” as an aesthetic category in the middle of the eighteenth century was among the first to condemn revolutionary “terror”.

Gothic fiction writers quickly responded to the events in France. In the climactic riot scene towards the end of Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk* (1796), an incensed populace lynches the prioress of St. Clare, before invading and burning down the convent⁸ – in a scenario that, regardless of its medieval Spanish setting, is clearly meant to evoke the storming of the Bastille.⁹ Patrick Brantlinger comments that from 1789 onward “Gothic terror often reflects revolutionary terror”.¹⁰ Despite such metaphorical references, however, the concept of terrorism itself had not yet entered the literary stage. Outside of literature, the term “terrorism” remained inextricably linked with Robespierre and his followers. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, all instances of the word from the first half of the nineteenth century refer to the Jacobins.¹¹ What the *OED* does not say is when exactly this usage of “terrorism” was superseded by the more general one that we still primarily associate with the word today – and that encompasses state or top-down terrorism as well as the bottom-up terrorism of sub-state groups.

It is exclusively in this latter sense that twenty-first century critics apply the term “terrorism” to literature. While today the description of Gothic fiction as “terrorist novel writing” seems curiously obsolete, the phrase “terrorist novel” itself has gained new currency.¹² Two

Right Honorable Edmund Burke, rev. edn, Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1866, VI, 70.

⁸ Matthew Lewis, *The Monk* (1796), ed. Howard Anderson, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 355-58.

⁹ See Ronald Paulson, “Gothic Fiction and the French Revolution”, *English Literary History*, XLVIII/3 (Spring 1981), 534-35.

¹⁰ Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998, 51.

¹¹ See the entries on “Terror”, “Terrorism”, and “Terrorist” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, prepared by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, XVII, 820-21.

¹² Margaret Scanlan, *Plotting Terror: Novelists and Terrorists in Contemporary Fiction*, Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2001; Anthony Kubiak, “Spelling It Out: Narrative Typologies of Terror”, *Studies in the Novel*, XXXVI/3 (Fall 2004), 294-301; Benjamin Kunkel, “Dangerous Characters”, *The New*

hundred years after the rise of Gothic fiction, the term is now applied to a novelistic sub-genre that only emerged in the late nineteenth century, that was temporarily discontinued in the context of the two world wars, and that has increasingly gained in importance since the 1970s,¹³ with notable booms in the 1990s and the years following the 9/11 attacks. When Margaret Scanlan re-introduced the phrase “terrorist novel” in 2001, she traced the history of the genre to Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Devils*, Henry James’ *Princess Casamassima*, and Joseph Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes*.¹⁴ These works, she argued, set the pattern for late twentieth-century terrorist fiction. Other diachronically oriented approaches to terrorism in literature have followed Scanlan’s example.¹⁵

What these various studies have in common is that they consider turn-of-the-century terrorism fiction as the starting point of a new literary form. As the example of post-revolutionary Gothic indicates, however, the “terrorist novel” has a much longer (pre)history. It is perhaps helpful in this context to think of the narrative of terror not in terms of a “fixed genre” but as a transgeneric “mode”.¹⁶ As such, it has repeatedly changed with the concept of “terror” itself. Each new, historically determined understanding of “terror” produced new types of terror narrative. Thus the present article will demonstrate that the anarchist and dynamite novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries adapted the conventions of Gothic terror to the new phenomenon of “terrorist terror” by complementing or substituting the

York Times, 11 September 2005: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/11/books/review/11kunkel.html> (accessed 28 July 2009); Francis Blessington, “Politics and the Terrorist Novel”, *Sewanee Review*, CXVI/1 (Winter 2007), 116-24; Robert Appelbaum and Alexis Paknadel, “Terrorism and the Novel, 1970-2001”, *Poetics Today*, XXIX/3 (Fall 2008), 387-436.

¹³ See Appelbaum and Paknadel, “Terrorism and the Novel”, 395-96.

¹⁴ See Scanlan, *Plotting Terror*, 7-11.

¹⁵ In what was then only the second monograph entirely devoted to the topic, Alex Houen similarly juxtaposed Victorian and Edwardian fiction with later twentieth-century literature, and the same holds for a more recent essay by Francis Blessington, which expands the focus to also cover post-9/11 fiction. See Alex Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature, from Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; Blessington, “Politics and the Terrorist Novel”.

¹⁶ I am thinking here of Fredric Jameson’s definition of “mode” as “a formal possibility which can be revived and renewed”. Fredric Jameson, “Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre”, *New Literary History*, VII/1 (Autumn 1975), 142.

genre staples of “old gloomy castles, ... spectres, apparitions, ghosts, and dead men’s bones” with new settings and motifs: the late-Victorian metropolis of London, anarchist conspiracies, dynamite explosions, and the contradictory images of inept would-be-terrorists who accidentally blow themselves to pieces and futuristic scenarios of a London laid waste by modern weaponry. This is not to say that turn-of-the-century terrorism novels merely updated the Gothic tradition. As will become apparent, they rather combined Gothic elements with various other modes, incorporating the phenomenon of “terrorist terror” into a host of narrative genres – with very different effects.

This multiple narrativization of terror cannot be investigated independently of what the social anthropologists Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass term “terrorism discourse”.¹⁷ Even if the late twentieth-century situation examined in their study is radically different from the ones in earlier decades, many of the tendencies described by Zulaika and Douglass may be traced to the very beginnings of public interest in terrorism. This is particularly true for the observation that, “regarding terrorism, the brandishing of stark facts goes hand in hand with great leaps into discursive fantasy”.¹⁸ To achieve its defining effect – collective fear of (more) violence to come – terrorism has always relied on the belief that the next attack is impending, and that it could happen anywhere, anytime. As the recent example of 9/11 has shown, this belief is, seemingly paradoxically, underpinned by counterterrorist rhetoric, which insists that the “question is not if, but when”.¹⁹ In this sense, the phenomenon of terror is located in the interstice between the real (actual attacks and their tangible aftermath) and the imaginary (speculations about possible future assaults), a fact reinforced by the perception of the perpetrators as being both invisible and in our very midst, omnipresent in public discourse but still elusive in person.

¹⁷ See Joseba Zulaika and William A. Douglass, *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism*, New York and London: Routledge, 1996, “Part One: Fashioning Terrorism Discourse”, 1-119. See also the Introduction to the present volume.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹ See Frank Furedi, *Invitation to Terror: The Expanding Empire of the Unknown*, London and New York: Continuum, 2007; Joseba Zulaika, *Terrorism: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009.

The fantastic dimension of terror may be one of the reasons why writers of fiction were quick to respond when insurgent terrorism first emerged – in various guises – on the stage of history. From its beginnings in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, novels dealing with terrorism have predominantly depicted imaginary attacks, perpetrators, and conspiracies, answering real plots with invented ones. Accordingly, I will put forward the thesis that such novels give insight into the “cultural imaginary” of terrorism, which may be defined as the period-specific repertoire of images and stories pertaining to terrorism in both its actual and its potential forms. Combining the available historical knowledge with the counterfactual, this imaginary is shaped not only by the respective period’s public discourse on terrorism (the often hyperbolic pronouncements of politicians, the media, as well as the terrorist groups themselves) but also by the literary traditions that lend themselves to the narrativization of terror. By focusing on the emergence of the theme of terrorism in late-Victorian fiction, the following analysis will be concerned with the earliest manifestations of the cultural imaginary of terrorism in British literature.

Three forms of insurgent terrorism at the close of the nineteenth century

The first comprehensive account of terrorism in *fin-de-siècle* fiction has been provided by Barbara Melchiori. Apart from outlining the variations of the dynamite theme in British novels of the period, Melchiori offers a helpful historical contextualization. Two general observations from her introductory chapter are particularly relevant for what follows. The first concerns the diversity of terrorist groups and causes at the close of the nineteenth century. Melchiori distinguishes three “subversive movements”, which were active in different countries and had specific aims: the Russian Narodnaya Volya, or “People’s Will” (better known in the West as “Nihilists”), the Irish and Irish-American Fenians, as well as the pan-European anarchists. According to Melchiori, each of these movements directed its violence at a specific type of target: public figures, public buildings, or the public at large.²⁰ While this distinction is too clear-cut – since neither group can be reduced to just one type of target – it is nevertheless helpful: the ques-

²⁰ See Barbara Arnett Melchiori, *Terrorism in the Late Victorian Novel*, London, Sydney, and Dover, NH: Croomhelm, 1985, 6-8.

tion as to whom or what terrorists aimed their bombs at played a significant role in the public perception of the phenomenon. For this reason, I want to begin by elaborating on Melchiori's point.

In 1879, ninety years after the outbreak of the French Revolution, the Russian Nihilists adopted the term "terrorism" to characterize their own revolutionary practice in the struggle against the autocratic regime in Russia.²¹ A "terrorist revolution" carried out by a small group was lauded in pamphlets as a preferable alternative to a broadly based popular uprising, as it would entail fewer victims, and the victims it claimed would be almost exclusively just. Henceforth, despots were to be in a state of constant fear for their lives.²² Consequently, the efforts of Narodnaya Volya were almost exclusively focused on assassinating Czar Alexander II.²³ Yet the type of terrorism pioneered by the Nihilists was not limited to the removal of despots; it could also be applied to members of the police, the military, or other officials. Martin Miller points out that what differentiates the political assassinations of the nineteenth century from earlier regicides is the fact that "the objects of attack expanded": violence was now also directed against "individuals *associated* with the unjust authority".²⁴

Although members of a Fenian splinter group, the Irish National Invincibles, stabbed the Chief Secretary for Ireland and his Under-Secretary in Phoenix Park, Dublin, in 1882, the Fenians' chief strategy in the 1880s was to plant bombs in public buildings. This strategy was advanced by the American branch of the movement. Between 1881 and 1885, Clan na Gael and its breakaway faction, the Skirmishers, ran parallel operations in Britain, sending small groups of American-Irish men equipped with explosives to the country. Several attempts

²¹ See Walther, "Terror, Terrorismus", 389.

²² See Nikolai Morozov, "The Terrorist Struggle" (1880), and G. Tarnovski, "Terrorism and Routine" (1880), in *The Terrorism Reader: A Historical Anthology*, eds Walter Laqueur and Yonah Alexander, rev. edn, New York and Scarborough, ON: Meridian, 1987, 72-78 and 79-84.

²³ See Yves Ternon, "Russian Terrorism, 1878-1908", in *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to Al Qaeda*, eds Gérard Chaliand and Arnaud Blin, trans. Edward Schneider, Kathryn Pulver, and Jesse Browner, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2007, 147-50.

²⁴ Martin A. Miller, "The Intellectual Origins of Modern Terrorism in Europe", in *Terrorism in Context*, ed. Martha Crenshaw, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, 30-31.

failed because the bombs were discovered when their fuses were still burning or because they did not detonate, but despite these setbacks thirteen attacks were successfully executed in London alone.²⁵ As the historian Kenneth Short notes at the beginning of his study *The Dynamite War*, the British capital “for almost five years daily faced the threat of gunpowder and dynamite explosions occurring in the City of London, the street of Westminster, the Tower of London, the House of Commons, under London Bridge, in the railway stations’ left luggage rooms, and the tunnels of the underground”.²⁶ The sustained campaign (the first of its kind in the history of terrorism) culminated on January 24, 1885 with near-simultaneous explosions at the Tower of London, Westminster Hall, and the House of Parliament.

The Fenian bombs were not primarily directed at civilians, even if they caused severe injuries among bystanders (especially when they were detonated on underground trains). While it is notable that the whole campaign of the 1880s did not cause as many fatalities as the December 1867 attack on Clerkenwell prison – a failed attempt to free a Fenian prisoner by blasting the wall of the prison yard during which six people were instantly killed and more than a hundred injured²⁷ – this fact alone does not indicate that the American-Irish terrorists deliberately avoided civilian deaths. As Lindsay Clutterbuck notes, the use of dynamite in the public space rather suggests that “At best, the perpetrators were reckless or careless to the potential loss of innocent life or at worst, they considered it of little or no consequence to their objective.”²⁸

Despite this qualification concerning the supposedly discriminate character of Fenian operations, Clutterbuck would probably agree that

²⁵ For a concise account of the operations run by Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa (1881-83) and Clan na Gael (1883-85), see the section “The Dynamite Campaign” in Séan McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848-1922: Theatres of War*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003, 330-56.

²⁶ K.R.M. Short, *The Dynamite War: Irish-American Bombers in Victorian Britain*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979, 1.

²⁷ For a brief account of the Clerkenwell prison attack, see *ibid.*, 7-12.

²⁸ Clutterbuck continues: “To infer from the low level of actual casualties that *Clan na Gael* ... actually attempted to minimise them is to confuse their failure to kill anyone with a desire not to do so [O]nly good fortune prevented casualties occurring as an inevitable consequence of their actions.” Lindsay Clutterbuck, “The Progenitors of Terrorism: Russian Revolutionaries or Extreme Irish Republicans?”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, XVI/1 (Spring 2004), 166, 169.

of all dynamite terrorists of the late nineteenth century, only anarchists purposefully attacked the public at large. In 1892, two people died after the Véry restaurant in the Boulevard de Magenta, Paris, had been blown up. The attack was supposed to avenge the incarceration of notorious dynamiter Ravachol, who had spoken too freely about anarchism to a waiter of the restaurant and subsequently been arrested there.²⁹ The following year, a Spanish anarchist threw two bombs into the audience at the Liceu Opera House in Barcelona, causing the death of more than twenty. This deed was committed to retaliate the execution of an anarchist assassin, but neither the targeted people nor the place of the attack were in any way related to that event.³⁰ Another year later, Émile Henry bombed the Café Terminus near the Saint-Lazare railway station in Paris, injuring more than twenty and killing one. He acted in response to severe government measures against anarchists. However, Henry was less interested in the possible secondary effects of his attack – the pressure that it might put on the government to reconsider its measures – than in its immediate consequences: the punishment of the “bourgeoisie”, which Henry held collectively responsible.³¹ Taken together, these three bombings signal the rise of indiscriminate terrorism – terrorist violence aimed at whole social groups and populations.³²

The second important observation made by Barbara Melchiori in her study on late-Victorian terrorism fiction concerns the choice of villains. Historian Bernard Porter notes that “between 1823 and 1906

²⁹ See Olivier Hubac-Occhipinti, “Anarchist Terrorists of the Nineteenth Century”, in *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to Al Qaeda*, eds Gérard Chaliand and Arnaud Blin, trans. Edward Schneider, Kathryn Pulver, and Jesse Browner, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2007, 127.

³⁰ See *ibid.*, 120.

³¹ See *ibid.*, 129.

³² In his recent study of Henry and the anarchist circles in Paris, John Merriman describes the Café Terminus bombing as “a defining moment in modern history”: “It was the day that ordinary people became the targets of terrorists.” John Merriman, *The Dynamite Club: How a Bombing in Fin-de-Siècle Paris Ignited the Age of Modern Terror*, London: JR Books, 2009, 5. It would be gravely misleading, however, to simply identify anarchism with indiscriminate terrorism. Not all anarchists endorsed violence and even fewer participated in it. And even among the latter, the targeting of civilians was the exception rather than the rule. At the turn of the century, the greatest number of political assassinations was committed by alleged anarchists.

no refugee who came to Britain was ever denied entry, or expelled”.³³ As a consequence of this policy, Victorian Britain and especially its capital became an asylum for both Russian dissidents and anarchists from all over Europe, including some of the Paris *dynamitards*. There were various political refugee clubs in the city, with the “Autonomy Club” serving as the “unofficial headquarters of the informal network of foreign anarchists”.³⁴ As a hub of international anarchism, London played a pivotal role in the dissemination of radical journals and pamphlets, many of which were printed there. Because in 1880 the country “did not have a secret political police force of any kind, and had not had one for more than twenty years”, as Porter adds in another study, “revolutionaries of all political and national complexions enjoyed more liberty of action in Britain than they had anywhere else”.³⁵ Some extremists used this liberty to continue plotting against their home governments. Britain itself, however, was spared.

While the campaigns of the People’s Will were naturally concentrated on Russia, only one anarchist bomb detonated on British soil: in 1894 Martial Bourdin, a French tailor who was well-known in London’s anarchist circles, accidentally blew himself up while carrying explosives through Greenwich Park – in what was apparently a failed attack on the Royal Observatory. As Melchiori emphasizes, all terrorist attempts that were successfully executed within the British Isles were organized by the Fenians. The Fenian “outrages”, as they were then called, were Britain’s only direct encounter with terrorist violence. All the more surprising is the fact that “the dynamite novelists of the 1880s and 1890s for the most part were inclined to attribute their fictional attempts to rather vaguely defined anarchists or, occasionally, Nihilists or socialists”. Notably absent from the majority of turn-of-the-century terrorism novels is the figure of the American-Irish dynamiter. “The reason”, Melchiori believes, “can only be the wish, conscious or otherwise, to keep the condition of Ireland question

³³ Bernard Porter, *The Refugee Question in Mid-Victorian Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, 8.

³⁴ Merriman, *The Dynamite Club*, 123.

³⁵ Bernard Porter, *The Origins of the Vigilant State: The London Metropolitan Police Special Branch before the First World War*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987, 1, 9.

out of the novel *qua media*".³⁶ Did English novelists or their publishers not wish to provide a platform for radical Irish nationalism and its agenda? Or were the London circles of anarchists from Russia, France, and other continental European countries simply considered a more exotic and therefore literarily more attractive subject? What is certain, in any case, is that the Victorian cultural imaginary of terrorism was dominated by the image of the foreign anarchist.³⁷

Robert Louis and Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson's *The Dynamiter* (1885)

Despite the dominance of the alien anarchist in late-Victorian fiction about terrorism, the "condition of Ireland question" did appear in at least one novel by a well-known non-Irish author: *The Dynamiter*, co-authored by the Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson and his American-born wife Fanny Van de Grift, is the earliest literary response to the Fenian campaigns of the 1880s. The majority of the stories in the collaborative novel date back to the winter of 1883, when the couple resided in Hyères in southern France. According to a 1923 "Prefatory Note", they were first conceived as bedside stories for Robert Louis Stevenson, who, among other ailments, had caught an eye disease that threatened him with blindness. To entertain her husband, Fanny Stevenson took on the role of "Scheherazade"³⁸ and invented one new story every day. The news from England about the Fenian attacks provided her the material for a frame narrative. As she recalls, "There had been several dynamite outrages in London about this time, the most of them turning out fiascos. It occurred to me to take an impotent dynamite intrigue as the thread to string my stories on" (xi-xii). Only a year

³⁶ Melchiori, *Terrorism in the Late Victorian Novel*, 8.

³⁷ In an essay on newspaper representations of anarchism in late-Victorian Britain, Hana Shpayer-Makov demonstrates that the various forms of terrorism distinguished above were often conflated, "anarchism" becoming the umbrella term for all disruptive activities, including those of the Fenians. See Haia Shpayer-Makov, "Anarchism in British Public Opinion 1880-1914", *Victorian Studies*, XXXI/4 (Summer 1988), 487-516.

³⁸ Robert Louis [and Fanny Van de Grift] Stevenson, *More New Arabian Nights: The Dynamiter* (1885) (The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson: Tusitala Edition, III), 2nd imp., London: William Heinemann, 1924, xi. Unless specified otherwise, all subsequent references are to this edition.

later did the couple begin to write down these stories. Finding themselves short of money, they decided to publish the collection as a sequel to the 1882 volume of *New Arabian Nights*.

Bearing the main title *More New Arabian Nights*, the stories are modern fairy tales, set in a London that is presented, in the very first sentence, as “the city of encounters, the Bagdad of the West” (1). The tales are loosely tied together by a frame narrative that relates the adventures of three impecunious young gentlemen: Challoner, Desborough, and Somerset, “three futiles” (4) lacking the training for any useful occupation. When the men accidentally meet in a cigar divan at the beginning of the narrative, Somerset persuades his friends that they should “hunt down [a] miscreant” (6) sought by the police. The role of amateur detective, he is convinced, is the only one suitable for men in their position. Accordingly, Somerset prompts his friends to unhesitatingly embrace “the next adventure that offers itself” (7).

What follows is a surreal sequence of chance encounters. During their adventures, Challoner and Desborough unwittingly meet members of the conspiratorial group associated with the man wanted by the police. In the meantime, Somerset shares a house with the wanted man himself, who turns out to be the bomb-builder “Zero”. Apart from Zero, only two terrorists play a significant role in the story. One is the Irish-American Patrick M’Guire; the other is Clara Luxmore, a young English lady who ran away from home (so her mother tells Somerset) because “Some whim about oppressed nationalities – Ireland, Poland, and the like – ha[d] turned her brain” (81). In the course of the novel, Clara appears in various exotic guises. Her imaginary life-stories are the subject of two of the inset narratives. Located in the Mormon community of Utah and in a Cuban slave plantation, respectively, they are romantic tales of escape involving Destroying Angels, voodoo witches, slave traders, and pirates. Apart from a brief reference to a Mormon scientist’s experiments with a life-elixir that causes accidental explosions, the stories’ only connection to the overall theme of dynamite terrorism is the motif of camouflage: as they suggest, to be a terrorist means to play a perpetual game of false appearances and to erase one’s true identity.

This is confirmed by the chief terrorist of the group, who lives a life of constant dissimulation – to the extent that he has almost become a non-entity, as his preferred alias “Zero” indicates. He has as

many pseudonyms as he keeps wigs, artificial beards, suits, and overcoats in his bedroom closet (see 114, 116). The alias “Zero” alludes to a documented Fenian practice: that of assigning members letters of the alphabet or numbers. During the trial following the Phoenix Park murders of 1882, James Carey, who had played a crucial part in the Irish National Invincibles’ conspiracy, surprisingly turned Queen’s witness. Among other things, he provided a description of the current commandant of the society, known only by his pseudonym, “Number One”. Following Carey’s testimony, there was wild speculation in the press as to who that mysterious person might be. This case provides a striking example of the imaginary appeal of terrorism, as one contemporary account illustrates:

[T]he newspapers increased the number of individuals who in their estimation might have been the owner of this peculiar *nom de guerre*, some mythical and some in the flesh It eventually became such a mystery that the general public began to pronounce “Number One” a myth and the creature of Carey’s brain.

According to the same source, ““Number One’ would have remained ... the greatest mystery of the nineteenth century” had he not been identified through a photograph and forced to escape to the United States.³⁹

In *The Dynamiter*, the masquerading of Clara Luxmore, the woman terrorist, has an additional function apart from shielding her from police identification: it also helps her to win the sympathy of the self-declared detectives and to trick them into inadvertently assisting her. Both Challoner and Desborough readily take on the role of “knight-errant” (52, 57, 183), helping the case of radical Irish republicanism in the naïve belief that they are serving a lady in distress. To Clara’s great amusement, Challoner agrees to travel all the way to Glasgow, where he delivers a warning note and money at M’Guire’s hideaway

³⁹ The quotations are from Chapter XXXIII of the book written by Number One (alias Robert Tynan) himself. This particular chapter allegedly has a different author, however; it is signed Patrick Kinsella, who is identified as the man in charge of the Dublin faction of the Invincibles during Number One’s absence: P.J.P. Tynan, *The Irish National Invincibles and Their Times: Three Decades of Struggle against the Foreign Conspiracy in Dublin Castle*, New York: The National Invincible Publishing Co., 1894, 469.

in a derelict part of town. The younger Desborough – who falls in love with Clara, believing her to be a “fair Cuban” – is even more gullible. This time, Clara feels remorse, however. When Desborough carries a box containing a bomb to Holyhead (in a plot to blow up a steamer to Dublin), she follows him and reveals the truth – eventually abjuring terrorism and becoming his wife.

At first sight, terrorism as such seems to play a marginal role in the Stevensons’ novel. Once the scattered passages dealing with the political uses of dynamite are considered together, however, two recurring themes emerge from them: that of the indiscriminate character of dynamite terrorism; and that of the unreliable bomb. Both are closely connected with Zero, whose origins remain obscure. All we know for sure is that he is a foreigner (see 137), probably from a non-English speaking country (since he mispronounces the word “bomb” as “boom” [121] and uses stilted language), who is ready to risk his life for the sake of “green Erin, green Erin” (197). This deliberately ludicrous phrase suggests that Zero is driven by a vague romantic attachment to Ireland rather than a genuine political agenda. Here as elsewhere in the novel, the Stevensons have little to say about the causes and goals of Irish republicanism. Zero himself merely states that his motivation for becoming a terrorist was his outrage at seeing the “liberty and peace of a poor country desperately abused” (116).

Other passages suggest less altruistic reasons. After his utterly pointless destruction of the – empty – mansion in which he had rented a room, Zero, the “author of the outrage of Red Lion Court” (119), prides himself on also being “the author of the Golden Square Atrocity” (198). As with “report”, the Stevensons’ preferred designation for explosions,⁴⁰ the word “author” is carefully chosen: terrorists were indeed “authors” of outrages to the degree that journalists turned the “reports” of their bombs into newspaper reports, immortalizing them under such names such as “the Outrage at Salford Barracks”. Zero makes it clear that the aspiration to this kind of “anonymous, infernal glory” (116) is one of the main driving forces behind his terrorism. By suggesting that the attention-seeking of terrorists is related to an egotistical desire for fame, the Stevensons call into question the political basis of terrorist violence.

⁴⁰ On this pun, see also Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature*, 29.

But Zero is nevertheless given space to develop his threatening vision of “the fall of England, the massacre of thousands, the yell of fear and execration” (118) – a vision that is much closer to the mass-casualty terrorism of our own times than it is to the Fenian attacks of the late nineteenth century. *The Dynamiter* seems well informed about the functioning of terrorist tactics: “Whatever may strike fear, whatever may confound or paralyse the activities of the guilty nation, ... imperial Parliament or excursion steamer, is welcome to my simple plans” (119), Zero explains, admitting that he endorses an “indiscriminate” type of terrorism (118-19). This terrorism is illustrated in a tale about an abortive plot to blow up a statue of Shakespeare – a satirical response to a real incident in May 1884, when an unexploded device was found at the foot of Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square.⁴¹

Our objective was the effigy of Shakespeare in Leicester Square: a spot, I think, admirably chosen; not only for the sake of the dramatist, still very foolishly claimed as a glory by the English race, in spite of his disgusting political opinions; but from the fact that the seats in the immediate neighbourhood are often thronged by children, errand-boys, unfortunate young ladies of the poorer class, and infirm old men – all classes making a direct appeal to public pity, and therefore suitable with our designs. As M’Guire drew near, his heart was inflamed by the most noble sentiment of triumph. Never had he seen the garden so crowded; children, still stumbling in the impotence of youth, ran to and fro, shouting and playing round the pedestal; an old, sick pensioner sat upon the nearest bench, a medal on his breast, a stick with which he walked (for he was disabled by wounds) reclining on his knee. Guilty England would thus be stabbed in the most delicate quarters; the moment had, indeed, been well selected ... (121-22)

In accordance with current definitions of terrorism, this passage neatly distinguishes between the immediate targets (the effigy of Shakespeare and innocent civilians), their symbolic values (Shakespeare as a supposed supporter of Elizabeth I and her Irish policies; the old, the poor, the sick, and the young as objects of public pity), as well as the intended message (the punishment of England, the great imperial nation). Significantly, the wounding of civilians is an essential part of

⁴¹ See Melchiori, *Terrorism in the Late Victorian Novel*, 18.

the scheme. Victims are selected not so much because they are held responsible for the oppression of Ireland (as citizens of a “guilty” nation) but because their deaths are likely to stir a public outcry – and thereby to increase attention to the terrorists’ cause. The Stevensons are more than explicit about the callousness of this strategy, which purposely targets the weak and the helpless to achieve its aims and, in doing so, far exceeds even the most ruthless Fenian and anarchist bombings.

On 14 January 1881, the first explosion of the Fenian “dynamite war” occurred at Salford Barracks near Manchester. During a densely foggy afternoon, two men removed a ventilation grid from the outer wall and lowered explosives into what they presumably thought to be the armory. Instead, the dynamite exploded in “the building set apart for butcher’s meat”. The partial destruction of the butcher’s shed would almost have been comical had it not killed a seven-year old “workman’s son” who happened to be passing by in the street when the explosion took place.⁴² It is quite obvious that the Stevensons had in mind this particular attack when they devised “the outrage of Red Lion Court”, an incident with a similar outcome: Somerset remembers that the bombing merely destroyed “[a] scavenger’s barrow and some copies of the *Weekly Budget*” (119), to which Zero proudly adds that it also injured a child.

Although considered a “*fiasco*” by Somerset, the outrage of Red Lion Court is the only “success” of Zero’s entire career (119). For once, the bomb did not misfire; and it even went off at the desired place and time, which is not the case with Zero’s other contrivances. When the first explosive device that is mentioned in the novel detonates “thirty hours too soon”, producing a thud, a hiss, and ill-smelling vapors but no major explosion, the reader learns that this was just the last in a series of failures (10, 61). As the failures continue, Zero grows increasingly despondent. After another of his bombs has burned “like tobacco” (195), he decides to resign. Now that he has “fallen to be a laughing-stock and mockery”, he feels that he can no longer pursue his occupation, that he is “extinct” as a terrorist (193, 194). Zero’s many failures give his alias an unintended new meaning. And so does the conclusion of the Zero subplot: when the terrorist’s bag full of

⁴² “The Outrage at Salford Barracks”, *The Times*, 27 January 1881, 11.

explosives knocks against a bookstall at a train station, he is literally “expunged” (201).

Even though accidental explosions such as this one demonstrate the great destructive power of dynamite in the hands of terrorists, they nevertheless suggest that dynamite primarily endangers those who carry it around London. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the Stevensons’ terrorists are themselves more terrified than their potential victims. With the exception of Clara Luxmore, who performs her role in a light-hearted and playful manner, all terrorists in *The Dynamiter* are described as conspicuously nervous and pale. M’Guire is the very personification of the terrified terrorist. His pathological susceptibility to “terror” manifests itself in various scenes, and he himself is fully aware of it (see 59, 110-11). In the end, it comes as no surprise that M’Guire – who is revealed to have undergone treatment “for sleeplessness, loss of appetite, and nervous depression” – dies without any apparent cause. His doctor concludes that he must have “died of fear” (204). Unlike Zero, then, M’Guire is not killed by explosives. Yet he, too, falls victim to his own terrorism: the permanent fear of being caught by the police and, worse still, of being destroyed by dynamite proves too much for him to bear.

Terrorist invasions: *Hartmann, the Anarchist* (1893)

One year after the publication of *The Dynamiter*, John Most, the infamous German socialist dissident and founding editor of the journal *Die Freiheit*, reminded revolutionaries that the effective employment of weapons required intense training. “[The] actual possession of arms is only half the story”, he wrote, adding that “one must also know how to use them.” More often than not, bombs either failed to detonate or were planted in such a way that they did not cause the desired amount of damage: “Numerous incidents – notably in England – have shown just what a fool one can make of oneself if one does not know how to handle these substances properly.”⁴³ Most understood that the primary

⁴³ John Most, “Advice for Terrorists” (1884-86), in *The Terrorism Reader: A Historical Anthology*, eds Walter Laqueur and Yonah Alexander, rev. edn, New York and Scarborough, ON: Meridian, 1987, 108.

purpose of terrorist violence was to create terror and that, accordingly, terrorists who failed to produce this effect did not deserve that name.⁴⁴

It is certainly significant in this context that *The Dynamiter* chose to describe terrorist failures rather than successes, refusing to be intimidated by terrorists and even to take them seriously. The impotence and mishaps of the Stevensons' would-be-bombers stand in stark contrast to the omnipotence and technological prowess of later fictional dynamiters. Writing in a utopian (or, depending on the perspective adopted, dystopian) mode, several contemporary novelists used real-life terrorist plots to imagine spectacular attacks. Some of these are reminiscent of the notion of "Skirmishers" developed by Fenian leader Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa in the mid-1870s. In 1875, New York newspaper publisher Patrick Ford asked his readers to donate to a "Skirmishing Fund" which would be used to purchase explosives and to recruit fighters:

The Irish cause requires Skirmishers. It requires a little band of heroes who will initiate and keep up, without intermission, a guerrilla warfare – men who will fly over land and sea like invisible beings – now striking the enemy in Ireland, now in India, now in England itself, as occasion may present.⁴⁵

Literary responses to the dynamite war were frequently closer to Ford's projected image of heroic Skirmishers than to the actual bombers, who committed all kinds of blunders. Note that Ford's vision of "men who will fly over land and sea like invisible beings" is strongly indebted to the Burkean sublime: these imaginary fighters possess superhuman powers, they remain shrouded in obscurity, and they produce the emotion of terror.

The same applies to several of the period's fictional terrorists, men who literally "fly over land and sea". *A Modern Dædalus* by the Irish doctor Tom Greer describes how the first-person narrator invents

⁴⁴ To assist terrorists in the construction of explosives and other weapons, Most had published a how-to manual in 1885. See Johann [aka John] Most, *Science of Revolutionary Warfare: A Handbook of Instruction Regarding the Use and Manufacture of Nitroglycerine, Dynamite, Gun-Cotton, Fulminating Mercury, Bombs, Arsons, Poisons, etc.*, no translator cited, El Dorado, AR: Desert Publications, 1978.

⁴⁵ *The Irish World*, 4 December 1875; quoted in Short, *The Dynamite War*, 38.

mechanical wings that enable him to fly.⁴⁶ In an air strike *avant la lettre*, he and his squadron, a “flying brigade” of fifty men, drop dynamite on the British forces in Ireland and free the country from foreign rule.⁴⁷ In another utopian narrative, *The Dynamite Ship* by Irish-American writer Donald MacKay (1888), three men – one Irish, one American, one English – reach the same aim with the help of a steam-yacht that has been transformed into a military vessel, propelled by petroleum and equipped with compressed-air guns able to shoot dynamite projectiles as far as eight miles.⁴⁸ Having anchored below London Bridge, the three assailants and their Irish-American crew send an ultimatum to the British Parliament, before reducing several landmark buildings to rubble and setting fire to the city.

Their method is identified as open warfare, in explicit contrast to the clandestine terrorism of the Fenians. In a similar vein, the flying Irishman in Greer’s novel distances himself from the tactics of radical Irish republicans, eventually starting his own campaign. Even though the attack is in each case conducted by a non-state group that uses dynamite in an asymmetric conflict, both novels describe acts of war rather than the kind of bombing that the British public witnessed in the 1880s. They belong to a genre inaugurated by George Chesney’s “The Battle of Dorking”, an 1871 short story describing how, in the near future, a technologically and strategically superior German army successfully invades and subjugates Britain.⁴⁹ Between 1871 and 1914 several dozen similar future-war stories emulated the “Chesney formula”,⁵⁰ constituting a distinct genre that I.F. Clarke, the leading expert in the field, has named the “tale of the war-to-come”.

The destruction of London, the Victorian metropolis, is frequently at the center of these tales. In 1893, the English writer and adventurer

⁴⁶ Tom Greer, *A Modern Dædalus*, London: Griffith, Farran, Okeden and Welsh, 1887 (rep. New York: Arno Press, 1974).

⁴⁷ Greer, who lived in London, began his novel by emphasizing his own sympathies for England and his support of the Union, presenting his book as an admonitory tale.

⁴⁸ Donald MacKay, *The Dynamite Ship*, New York: Manhattan Publishing House, 1888. I would like to thank Hendrik Blumentrath for sharing his microfiche copy of this extremely rare book with me.

⁴⁹ George Tomkyns Chesney, *The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer*, Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood, 1871.

⁵⁰ I.F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War, 1763-1984*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1966, 38.

Edward Douglas Fawcett presented his own version of the future-war story in response to the recent wave of anarchist violence in Europe. Fawcett's *Hartmann, the Anarchist; or, The Doom of the Great City* is set in an imaginary future, "after the late Continental wars",⁵¹ in 1920. The first-person narrator, Stanley, is himself a moderate socialist subscribing to the watchword "Not revolution, but evolution" (5). He is friendly with a radical anarchist, however, who openly endorses terrorism and who is in contact with the anarchist leader Hartmann. Ten years before the events of the novel, Hartmann tried to blow up the German Crown Prince and his suite during their visit to London by placing a bomb on Westminster Bridge. After the failure of the assassination attempt, which killed fifty to sixty bystanders, Hartmann escaped and was generally believed to have drowned on his way to Holland. As Stanley soon learns, Hartmann really fled to Switzerland. Not only is he still alive, but he has also made plans for a major anarchist revolution – together with his "tutor in vice" (43), the "obnoxious German" Michael Schwartz (38) – that is to take place in several European capitals and to begin in London. For this purpose, Hartmann, an engineer of genius, has developed the prototype of a flying-machine, the "aëronef". Constructed out of a new ultra-light material, the aëronef (also referred to as "aëroplane") is electrically powered, driven by propellers, and buoyed up by surrounding envelopes filled with hydrogen.

The narrator is on board the aëroplane when Hartmann and his crew of international anarchists begin their devastating attack. Hovering above London, the terrorists drop dynamite, the new, more powerful explosive forcite, and incendiary oil, seeking to destroy buildings – the Houses of Parliament, the entire City, St. Paul's Cathedral, and many other edifices – as well as civilians (the illustration reproduced on the cover of the present volume shows the collapse of the Big Ben clock tower). In the meantime, bands of anarchists and rioters continue the work of destruction on the ground. The novel's climactic scene contains one of the rare instances in which the aims and strategies of the terrorists are described in more detail. From our own present-day

⁵¹ E. Douglas Fawcett, *Hartmann, the Anarchist; or, The Doom of the Great City*, London: Edward Arnold (rep. New York: Arno Press, 1974), 5. Unless specified otherwise, all subsequent references are to this edition.

perspective, its vision of a strike against the network of global capitalism seems strikingly prescient, as does the terrorists' choice of targets:

[Hartmann's] aim was to pierce the ventricle of the heart of civilization, that heart which pumps the blood of capital everywhere, through the arteries of Russia, of Australia, of India, just as through the capillaries of fur companies in North America, planting enterprises in Ecuador, and trading steamers on African rivers. "Paralyze this heart", he has said, "and you paralyze credit and the mechanism of finance almost universally." (148)

After the first raid, the appalled (though fascinated) narrator is allowed to leave the *aéronef*. He parachutes into the city and searches for Hartmann's mother, only to discover that she is among the numerous victims of the attack. Stanley finds her last letter, in which she condemns her son's actions, and conveys it to Hartmann, who steers his ship away from the city and blows it up with himself in it.

Throughout the novel, Fawcett's narrator is more interested in Hartmann's invention than in his plans for an anarchist revolution. Large parts of the book are dedicated to either Stanley's exhilaration at flying or to descriptions of the *aéroplane* in all its technical details. These sections combine Jules Verne-type science fiction with elements of the late-Victorian adventure story. The ideology behind the terrorist attacks remains vague. Hartmann merely tells Stanley that his object in launching attacks on London and other major cities is "to wreck civilization", and that he and his men are "Rousseaus who advocate a return to a simpler life" (84). The novel is therefore not a book about anarchism; rather, it is a book that uses anarchism in accordance with certain generic conventions: it casts terrorists in the role that would later be played by other invaders (for example, H.G. Wells' Martians).

Coda: Turn-of-the-century novelists and their terrorist plots

For Barbara Melchiori, the various literary engagements with the theme of dynamite terrorism at the close of the nineteenth century constitute a "new genre", the dynamite novel.⁵² Apart from the dynamite theme, however, the novels in question often have little in com-

⁵² Melchiori, *Terrorism in the Late Victorian Novel*, viii.

mon. The examples of *The Dynamiter* and *Hartmann, the Anarchist* are a good case in point. Melchiori herself has demonstrated that in the 1880s and 1890s, the dynamite theme was taken up – and adapted – by various pre-existing literary forms, from the social novel through popular romance to science fiction. Each of these forms, I would add, influenced the respective representation of terrorism in specific ways. In this sense, the emergence of the terrorist in fiction did not produce a new literary genre, characterized by unique structural features, but was rather itself shaped by the specific narrative patterns of the genres involved. These genres produced a wide range of – often conflicting – images of terrorism, its causes, its perpetrators, its motivations, and its dangers to British society.

Margaret Scanlan’s observation that “terrorist novels” often hint at the tacit “affinities ... between literary and terrorist plots”⁵³ is suggestive in this context. The novels investigated by Scanlan feature writer-protagonists, which is not the case in the examples discussed here. However, the figure of the writer may also be located elsewhere: in the implied author, who is responsible for the terrorist plots conceived and sometimes executed in the novel and who frequently marks his presence behind the story in the form of a paratext. From this angle, the pun in Scanlan’s felicitous title – *Plotting Terror* – seems even more appropriate, for the plotting of the fictional conspirators is merely a structural ingredient of the author’s plot, which sets the terrorist tale in motion.

To illustrate this point, I would like to briefly turn to the best known and most widely discussed English-language novels about late nineteenth-century terrorism, Henry James’ *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) and Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907). In both works we may recover traces of actual events (as mediated by contemporary newspaper reports). Whereas in the case of Conrad’s novel, the link to the Greenwich Bomb Outrage of 1894 is well established,⁵⁴ James did not model his story on one particular incident. Yet he, too, wrote his novel against the backdrop of intense media interest in international terrorism, and he made extensive use of contemporary

⁵³ Scanlan, *Plotting Terror*, 2.

⁵⁴ See in particular Norman Sherry, “The Greenwich Bomb Outrage and *The Secret Agent*”, *The Review of English Studies*, XVIII/72 (November 1967), 412-28.

accounts.⁵⁵ The parallel does not end here. Both James and Conrad later wrote autobiographical accounts of the origins of their respective novels (James in a lengthy Preface to the 1909 New York Edition, Conrad in his “Author’s Note” of 1920), offering strikingly similar narratives.

James begins his Preface by asserting that “this fiction proceeded quite directly, during the first year of a long residence in London, from the habit and the interest of walking the streets”. During his late-evening perambulations through the Victorian metropolis, James continues, his imagination was “assault[ed] directly by the great city”, and this is how the idea for his story and its characters came to him:

... to a mind curious, before the human scene, of meanings and revelations the great grey Babylon easily becomes, on its face, a garden bristling with an immense illustrative flora. Possible stories, presentable figures, rise from the thick jungle as the observer moves, fluttering up like startled game, and before he knows it indeed he has fairly to guard himself against the brush of importunate wings. He goes on as with his head in a cloud of humming presences ...⁵⁶

At first sight, James seems to picture himself here as a mere receptacle of stories. The basic elements of his novel, he writes, only had to be collected from the streets of London, where the main protagonist and would-be-terrorist Hyacinth Robinson virtually “sprang up for me out of the ... pavement”.⁵⁷

In *The Princess Casamassima*, James appears to suggest, London wrote itself through him. Yet the novel itself tells a different story. The vast terrorist conspiracy at the core of the text is unmistakably the author’s free invention, as is his protagonist’s vision of a London that is literally undermined by secret revolutionary activities. “Nothing of it appears above the surface”, Hyacinth tells the Princess, “but there’s an immense underworld, peopled with a thousand forms of revolutionary passion and devotion In silence, in darkness, but under the

⁵⁵ See Wesley H. Tilley, *The Background of The Princess Casamassima*, Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1961.

⁵⁶ Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima* (1887), ed. Derek Brewer, London: Penguin, 1987, 33.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

feet of each one of us, the revolution lives and works.”⁵⁸ This topographical motif is conspicuously inconsistent with the image of the *flâneur* evoked in James’ belated Preface, since neither a secret conspiracy nor an underground revolution would be visible to even the most perceptive of city strollers. As a closer examination of the cited passage reveals, James does not deny his use of poetic license. In the author’s careful phrasing, his London walks provided him with “possible stories”: what was there in the streets of London was not an actual but a potential plot – and it was up to James to realize this potentiality. Significantly, the London depicted in the Preface is clearly marked as being already literary, shaped by the classical topos of Babylon as well as by the more recent discourse of late-Victorian London as an “urban jungle”.⁵⁹ The London that inspired James, then, was not a geographical and historical given that preceded his fiction, but a city belonging to the cultural imagination. It is in the context of this imaginary that James’ plotting of a terrorist conspiracy has to be read.

The London of Conrad’s “Author’s Note” is even more obviously a projection. Like James, Conrad evokes “the memories of my solitary and nocturnal walks all over London in my early days”.⁶⁰ But he also portrays the city as a “Dark Continent”, echoing the frame narrative of his earlier novel *Heart of Darkness* as well as the Assistant Commissioner’s experience of Soho as a “jungle”,⁶¹ in Chapter Seven of *The Secret Agent*:

... 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

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 330.

⁵⁹ For a detailed reconstruction of this discourse, see Joseph McLaughlin, *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot*, Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000.

⁶⁰ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (1907), ed. John Lyon, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 231. The quotation is from the “Author’s Note”, which was first published in 1920 and which is reprinted in *ibid.*, 228-33.

⁶¹ Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, 110.

enough for any passion, variety enough there for any setting, darkness enough to bury five millions of lives.⁶²

Everything is possible in the Victorian metropolis, and this fact allows the author of a London fiction to “place any story” in “any setting”. Conrad himself made ample use of this freedom by concocting a complex conspiracy narrative centering on an informer who works for both the Russian embassy and the London police. Verloc, the half-French “secret agent” of the novel’s title, runs a pornography shop in Soho, where he attempts to infiltrate London’s revolutionary community by organizing clandestine meetings for an anarchist group in the apartment above his shop. These anarchists are portrayed as ineffectual shams who are parasitically dependent on the social system they set out to eradicate. Their actions are limited to talking and pamphleteering, and even the “Professor” – the only truly threatening character in the book – never makes use of the bomb that he is constantly carrying in his coat. It is one of the narrative ironies of Conrad’s novel that the only instance of terrorist violence that occurs in the book is really a perverse act of counterterrorism. The odious Ambassador Vladimir uses Verloc as an *agent provocateur*, hoping that the explosion at the Greenwich Observatory will prompt the British government to reconsider its policy of granting political asylum to foreigners.

In James and Conrad, London – the “grey Babylon” and “cruel devourer of light” – is alluring to political subversives as well as to novelists, in whom it inspires ominous visions of revolutionary undergrounds and terrorist plotting. As in the examples discussed above, the plots that the novels ascribe to terrorists are really products of the imagination. Because both terrorism and counterterrorism involve clandestine operations, only spectacular occurrences such as attacks or arrests become visible to the general public. The rest remains in the dark, offering a world of possibilities to the imagination. Drawing on and combining various literary traditions, late-Victorian terror narratives exploited the peculiar status of terrorism as real (past) and imagined (future) violence for their own purposes, neglecting for the most part the political and social issues at stake. Thus decontextualized, “terror” became a fantastic element in the novels’ plots.

⁶² Conrad, “Author’s Note”, 231.