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The background is a grayscale photograph of a London street scene. In the foreground, there is a paved walkway with a metal railing. Several ornate, black street lamps with glass globes are spaced along the railing. In the background, the London skyline is visible, including the Houses of Parliament and the prominent clock tower, Big Ben. The sky is overcast and hazy.

Joseph Conrad

THE SECRET AGENT

Read by **David Horovitch**

CD 1

1	Chapter 1	8:13
2	His prominent, heavy-lidded eyes rolled sideways...	8:14
3	Chapter 2	7:09
4	The polished knockers of the doors gleamed...	6:05
5	'We are not very satisfied with the attitude of the police here,'...	6:23
6	Mr Vladimir, First Secretary, had a drawing-room reputation...	6:47
7	This flight of fancy provoked something like a faint smile...	6:36
8	'You give yourself for an "agent provocateur".'	7:26
9	Mr Vladimir shrugged his shoulders.	7:43
10	A murderous attempt on a restaurant or a theatre...	8:44

Total time on CD 1: 73:22

CD 2

1	This perfectly gratuitous suggestion caused Mr Verloc...	5:41
2	The theory was that Mr Verloc would have been inexpressibly...	5:21
3	Chapter 3	8:10
4	Michaelis pursued his idea – the idea of his solitary reclusion...	8:02
5	The famous terrorist had never in his life raised...	7:11
6	Michaelis gave no sign of having heard anything.	8:35
7	Positively he did not know how to speak to the lad.	6:01
8	Mr Verloc, in the same position, cleared his throat...	6:33
9	Chapter 4	8:40
10	'Proof of what? Dealing in explosives...'	8:51

Total time on CD 2: 73:07

CD 3

1	Ossipon could not restrain a start of indignation.	8:04
2	The little man seemed already to have considered that point...	7:44
3	'He told me it was going to be a demonstration...'	8:38
4	Chapter 5	7:28
5	In the dark patches of the orbits the eyeballs glimmered...	7:24
6	Chief Inspector Heat, an efficient officer of his department...	7:54
7	A convenient train whirled him up to town...	7:01
8	But the reception they got departed from tradition...	7:44
9	Catching thieves was another matter altogether.	5:50
10	The near presence of that strange emotional phenomenon...	5:56

Total time on CD 3: 73:47

CD 4

1	He entered his club to play from five to seven...	1:27
2	Chapter 6	7:38
3	If he could not give the great and curious lady...	8:29
4	The disappearance of the last piece of money...	7:21
5	He caught on the latter's face not only the complacency...	7:25
6	His Chief Inspector, if not an absolutely worthy foeman...	8:03
7	Moreover, besides being legal and expedient...	7:50
8	But it was immediately followed by the reflection...	8:41
9	No later than next afternoon my man turned up...	8:04
10	Chapter 7	9:07

Total time on CD 4: 74:05

CD 5

1	'However, this is an imperfect world...'	7:48
2	I want your authority to give him such assurances...	6:59
3	'He's ready to go now,' he exclaimed in a whisper...	5:07
4	He was satisfied by the subtle modification...	5:57
5	Chapter 8	7:17
6	A division, on the other hand...	7:12
7	The cabby turned at him...	6:50
8	As regards Winnie's sisterly devotion...	6:40
9	Before the door of one of these tiny houses...	6:15
10	Stevie, though apt to forget mere facts...	7:40
11	It was a bad world. Bad! Bad!	5:43

Total time on CD 5: 73:31

CD 6

1	She cast a swift glance at the boy...	8:17
2	This speech, becoming the solicitude of the wife...	7:56
3	Chapter 9	7:41
4	But, in truth, Stevie moped in the striking fashion...	7:07
5	'You too seem to have grown quite fond of him of late,'...	7:10
6	'I don't know what you mean,' remarked his wife...	7:03
7	But talking round that vital point...	7:18
8	Mr Verloc had done no more than put on his overcoat.	6:45
9	Private Citizen Heat entered the street...	7:19
10	'Michaelis,' confessed Mrs Verloc...	7:39

Total time on CD 6: 74:17

CD 7

1	Mrs Verloc pressed her ear to the keyhole...	7:38
2	Chapter 10	7:30
3	The great man manifested no surprise...	7:15
4	'Pardon me. I don't think so.'	9:05
5	He left the drawing-room hurriedly...	8:18
6	Chapter 11	6:13
7	He noticed all these things now for the first time...	8:23
8	In all the eventualities he had foreseen...	6:49
9	He perceived that his wife had sat up.	6:10
10	Mrs Verloc, in common with other human beings...	7:19

Total time on CD 7: 74:41

CD 8

1	'Might have been father and son.'	8:21
2	'You must reckon on me being two years away from you,'...	8:02
3	This shaking piece of forgetfulness stimulated Mrs Verloc's intelligence.	8:04
4	This man, hurt cruelly in his vanity...	8:07
5	They were spoken because Mr Verloc...	8:57
6	Mrs Verloc was coming.	8:03
7	Chapter 12	7:41
8	She floundered over the doorstep head forward...	6:50
9	In comparison with his usual amatory speculations...	5:16
10	Ossipon let that pass, and took up his running.	5:55

Total time on CD 8: 75:17

CD 9

1	There were suggestions of triumph, relief...	8:42
2	Suddenly she clutched at her breast...	7:27
3	A yell coming from the innermost depths of his chest...	8:15
4	Ossipon groped his way back through the stuffy atmosphere...	6:53
5	Mrs Verloc, as if relieved by the outburst...	7:35
6	In the other case I mean if he had his account...	6:02
7	He spoke scientifically in his secret fear.	8:05
8	Chapter 13	7:01
9	But rolling to the feast on the top of the omnibus...	8:05
10	The stewardess fetched the chief steward...	7:59

Total time on CD 9: 76:06

Total time on CDs 1–9: 11:08:13

Joseph Conrad

(1857–1924)

THE SECRET AGENT

When we think of the leading novelists of Edwardian England – Henry James, H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett, E.M. Forster – one man stands out as being fundamentally different from the rest. The works of Joseph Conrad inhabit a very different world from the rich, pictorial social realism of the mainstream novels of the time. In Conrad there is something alien, disturbing and threatening, some psychological tension that is unfamiliar and new in the English novel.

None of this should really surprise us, because Conrad's life and personality were both utterly different from that of any other English writer – in fact he was not English at all, by birth or by temperament. Conrad came of a family of Polish patriots, and was born in 1857 in what is now the Ukraine. His parents took part in the 1863 Polish insurrection against Russia and were arrested and exiled, both dying

before the future author was twelve years old. Conrad's formal education was scanty, for at the age of seventeen he left Poland and travelled to Marseilles, in search of a seafaring career. He spent almost twenty years as a merchant seaman, sailing over all the oceans of the world, living through experiences of a kind few writers would ever equal. By the age of forty he had settled in England and begun his literary career, never writing in Polish but always in English. His language was from the first curious: complex and subtle, grammatically faultless, but with a movement that could often be strangely elusive, despite its carefully crafted structure.

His novels and short stories almost always had a maritime setting, but they were never merely seafaring adventures. Instead he used the sea and the foreign or savage locations to show men, and

sometimes women, *in extremis*, wrenched out of conventional or civilised life, and forced to grapple in isolation with fear, conflict, self-doubt or disillusionment. It is for this quality that his work is recognised as an early and influential manifestation of modernism in the novel. He took the English novel out of its accepted confines of romance, marriage, money and social manoeuvring, and exposed it to the elemental forces of the sea and of spiritual crisis. His story *Heart of Darkness* has become a crucial text on the dehumanising force of imperialism, while the much longer *Nostromo* explores at greater length the corruption that attends the quest for power and wealth. In these and in his other works, Conrad counterpoints civilisation and savagery, as his characters move to and fro between these two spheres, their identities dissolving and re-forming in crisis, in fear or in resistance, and in the discovery of some inner truth. The difference between Conrad's characters and those in more conventional novels, is that they do not merely think and feel, they must act, they discover themselves through action,

through the good and evil in which they themselves participate. Conrad's narratives may therefore be called existential, rather than merely dramatic or reflective. His style reinforces this sense of embattled being, for his great aim as a writer is to show both character and plot emerging tentatively, without rational control or choice, out of the unforeseen conflict between chance and necessity.

The Secret Agent, published in 1907, is very much the odd man out among Conrad's novels, in that it has a London setting and it contains an element of absurdist black humour – in both respects it is perhaps indebted to Dickens. Instead of the sea and exotic Pacific or oriental locations, Conrad makes use here of his personal knowledge of the extremist politics of central and Eastern Europe. The characters of the book inhabit the strange, mysterious world of anarchists and revolutionaries, who at that time were to be found in many European cities pursuing their campaign to bring destruction to the old political and social order, or liberation to oppressed groups of people. Their favourite tactic was the

bomb attack against symbolic individuals or places. In 1881 Tsar Alexander II was blown up in St Petersburg, while twenty years later in America, President McKinley was shot. Between these two dates, King Umberto of Italy, President Sadi-Carnot of France, the Spanish Prime Minister del Castillo, and Elizabeth, Empress of Austria, were all assassinated. These events could scarcely be dismissed as random acts of meaningless violence, for a few years later all Europe would be plunged into a terrible war by the shooting of an Austrian Prince.

The British experience of this kind of political violence was strictly limited, and its one significant occurrence was mysterious rather than terrifying. In 1894 a young Frenchman named Bourdin accidentally blew himself up in Greenwich Park. Who he was, why he was carrying a bomb, and what if any his political connections were: none of this was ever discovered. It was assumed that his target had been the Royal Observatory, for a bomb placed there could have been seen as the symbolic act of destroying conventional, historic time, and inaugurating a new

age. It was this incident which provided the germ of Conrad's plot in *The Secret Agent*. But what attracted Conrad to this subject, and how did it relate to the themes of his other novels?

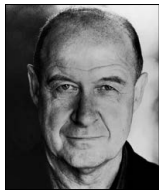
The clear point of contact is that the small group of anarchists whom Conrad portrays are, like his other central characters, loners, outsiders, caught up in a crisis, groping their way through unknown territory. Yet the difference is that Conrad clearly has no empathy with them as human beings. Instead he presents them as objects of scorn and disgust. They are all, in their various ways, creatures who are psychologically maimed and physically rather grotesque. Verloc – the Secret Agent himself – has given himself to this extremist cause, but he is the reverse of heroic and the reverse of idealistic. His official trade is that of pornographer – the proprietor of a disreputable shop in Soho – thus showing pretty clearly what Conrad thinks of him. He seems to have become a political agent purely for money. Normal human feelings have become extinguished in him, as they have also in the foreign embassy staff –

presumably Russian – who employ him. Taken as a whole, the novel is in fact a devastating attack on the poisonous game of undercover politics, comparable to the much later picture drawn by Le Carré. Here there is no honour, no dignity, no self-discovery; these people are wandering blindly through a void. The novel really comes to life when Conrad grimly presents the effects of Verloc's terrible actions on his family. It is at this point that his wife, Winnie, formerly reserved and emotionless, is transformed first into a Greek fury, and then into a tragic victim. The novel, which had previously had moments of ironic humour, now becomes intensely dramatic, as all the implications of Verloc's blind, selfish, inhuman character, are suddenly exposed, and vengeance takes its course.

Conrad once wrote that during the long creative process of writing, he was living in 'a cave without echoes', as he explored conflicting states of being within himself. The later sections of *The Secret Agent* provide vivid evidence of what he meant by that chilling phrase. This is a strange and memorable novel,

which begins like a whimsical Dickensian character-sketch, but ends more like a novel by Zola, a grim parable of lost, dehumanised beings confronting the darkness they have made for themselves. Its relevance to today's world, just over a century after it was written, is clear and powerful.

Notes by Peter Whitfield



David Horovitch has had a long and distinguished career. His appearances in the theatre include many in the West End, the National Theatre and the RSC. On television he is best known for his performance as Inspector Slack in *Miss Marple*. Among his many readings for Naxos AudioBooks are Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Credits

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