JOSEPH CONRAD'S THE SECRET AGENT AND THE GROTESQUE

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to examine Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* in the context of the grotesque mode. Part I discusses narrative and narrative style as a function of the dynamic relationship between text and reader, and emphasizes the degree to which the interplay between text and reader may be determined and manipulated by the author's esthetic exploitation of the conventions and expectations that comprise this relationship. The discrepancy between narrative and reader expectation as a potential source of the grotesque, the nature of the grotesque as a critical concept and as a mode possessing specific forms, images, and effects, and the historical development of the grotesque, are examined in Part II. Particular attention is paid to the modern development of the grotesque mode, to the use of the grotesque in the novel, to the specifically literary features of the grotesque, and to the creative aspects of the mode. Part III investigates the narrative structures of *The Secret Agent*, and reveals the various characteristic grotesque motifs, images, and characters that perform important esthetic functions in the narrative. The extensive presence of the grotesque at this level suggests an examination of the narrative structure, perspective, and style within the context of the grotesque. This leads to an explanation for the apparent discrepancies.
between perspective and content in *The Secret Agent*, and provides a unified description of those aspects of perspective, style, and language which determine the narrative function and effect. At a more speculative level, the grotesque mode also suggests certain creative attitudes and psychological motives which might be associated with the novel.

Supervisor
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INTRODUCTION

Certain characteristic, and therefore important, aspects of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* have not been satisfactorily explained by the critical writing on the novel; the problem is, I believe, one of approach rather than of critical perceptiveness.

I feel the criticism of *The Secret Agent* to be especially inadequate in two principal ways. First, it has not sufficiently accounted for certain "discrepancies" and "discontinuities" which are present at all levels of the narrative, from content through structure to perspective. These dissonances may range from large structural "gaps," such as exist between chapters three and four or in the chronology of the novel, to the suppression, delay, ambiguity, or even gratuitous presence of certain details within the context of single scenes, sentences, or images.

Secondly, one of the most evident of these discrepancies is the relationship between form and content, and it is largely the failure to describe this relationship satisfactorily, and therefore the failure to account for what is perhaps the central discrepancy, that has prevented a comprehensive and meaningful description and interpretation of the narrative as a whole and of the interrelationship of its components. The form/content relationship is commonly described in terms of irony and detachment: such a description
in fact prevents recognition of the vital, dynamic, and continual interplay between perspective and content, a recognition important to an understanding of the unique effect of the novel.

It is my contention that this relationship, its apparent discrepant nature, and the other discontinuities, dissonances, and incongruities which are characteristic of the narrative, can be accounted for and described in a manner consonant with the thematic concerns of the novel, by means of the grotesque mode.

Although writers on the grotesque commonly assume, and rightly so, I believe, that the grotesque exists as a complete and independent esthetic category, there exists no satisfactory definition and description of the mode which is truly comprehensive in the generic sense. This is especially true of the grotesque as a literary mode. It is first of all necessary, therefore, to define and describe the grotesque in as comprehensive a manner as possible, so that its characteristic motives, attitudes, contents, structures, stylistic devices, and effects are related to each other within a single concept.

The foundation of any such concept will be Wolfgang Kayser's The Grotesque in Art and Literature, originally published under the title Das Groteske: seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung (1957). This study is primarily useful
in its provision of a catalogue of the principal motifs and images which characterize grotesque art and literature, and in tracing the development of the grotesque as a mode and as a critical concept from the Renaissance to the modern era. It is limited in three important ways, however: first, although it outlines the nature of the grotesque as an independent esthetic category, and suggests certain motives, perspectives, and effects associated with the mode, its main emphasis is upon the content of the grotesque; second, its trans-generic scope tends to prevent or obscure any clear sense of a distinctly literary grotesque; and third, whenever the focus does become purely literary, the definite bias toward the German Romantic literary tradition essentially invalidates the observation insofar as most post-Romantic English and American grotesque literature is concerned.

These limitations apply generally to most writing on the grotesque, although a few studies of individual works, and a recent emphasis upon the psychological implications of the grotesque, have extended the concept in important ways. I have employed such studies where relevant, and have attempted to compensate for the Romantic or "gothic" bias of the standard definitions by referring to the writings of such modern exponents of the grotesque as Charles Dickens, G. K. Chesterton, James Joyce, William Faulkner, Flann O'Brien, Nathanael West, Flannery O'Connor, and Samuel Beckett.
assessing the ways in which the grotesque in their writings is a function of specific literary perspectives, structures, and devices, I have tried to provide a more modern context for the grotesque in *The Secret Agent*.

Generally speaking, the problem of defining the genre of the grotesque is one which attaches itself to the attempt to define any genre. This problem is clearly stated by Wellek and Warren in *Theory of Literature*:

> The dilemma of genre history is the dilemma of all history: i.e., in order to discover the scheme of reference (in this case, the genre) we must study the history; but we cannot study the history without having in mind some scheme of selection.²

That some scheme of selection is necessary in attempting to reach a definition of the grotesque is indicated in George Gibian’s remark that:

> The danger in using the term GROTESQUE is of attributing to it too broad rather than too narrow a meaning. The grotesque borders on or even participates of numerous other qualities: the fantastic, distorted, exaggerated, bizarre, absurd, ludicrously eccentric, extravagant, monstrous, or macabre. Yet these adjectives are not a list of its synonyms. The grotesque must moreover be distinguished from simple caricature and the tragicomic.³

The need for, and difficulty of, such comparative definition is further indicated by the fact that Philip Thomson’s *The Grotesque*, the best short introduction to the subject, devotes over one-third of its discussion to making precisely the types of distinction mentioned by Gibian. Thomson relates the grotesque respectively to the absurd, the
bizarre, the macabre, caricature, parody, satire, irony, and the comic. He points out that even "the conflict of incom-patibles," which is the most fundamental element of the grotesque, "is not exclusively a criterion of the grotesque"; that, for instance,

Irony and paradox depend on this sort of conflict or confrontation, and all theories of the comic are based on some notion of incongruity, conflict, juxtaposition of opposites, etc.⁴

Such distinctions are therefore especially pertinent when it comes to examining The Secret Agent within the context of the grotesque, for the elements of disharmony which characterize The Secret Agent are usually explained in terms of the ironic, and sometimes the comic, mode. While such explanations are valid up to a point, they are unable to deal with some of the basic facts and relationships of the narrative.

The description of the grotesque as a literary mode is facilitated by stressing a certain concept of style—namely, one which takes account of the ongoing relationship between reader and text, and between reader and author. For it is the exploitation of the conventions and expectations of this ongoing relationship which is a primary source of the grotesque mode. This is suggested in the following observation regarding Dickens, an observation which could well be applied to any grotesque narrative, including The Secret Agent:
... some of the most memorable of the grotesquerie of Bleak House depends upon our remembering that the book is a present transaction with its readers, and not simply the relic of prior events, hoarded up for our more leisured inspection or edification.5

The three parts of the thesis, therefore, deal respectively with narrative and narrative style, the grotesque mode, and the grotesque mode of The Secret Agent. Although the first two parts are designed to be more than mere preliminaries to the final part, it is nevertheless true that the main ideas and observations of my discussion are fully realized only in terms of the concrete narrative of The Secret Agent, and are often, of necessity, only suggested or stated as generalizations in the earlier, more abstract sections on style and the grotesque.

Part I, which deals with narrative and narrative style, is the briefest and most derivative of the three. It represents a synthesis of ideas and observations put forth by certain critics, principally Frank Kermode and E. H. Gombrich. This synthesis is largely an attempt to illuminate certain aspects of narrative that are often ignored in criticism, and which I feel are especially significant in understanding and appreciating both the grotesque mode and the narrative peculiarities of The Secret Agent.

Part II discusses the grotesque, beginning with an examination of the development of the traditional grotesque, and moving toward a concept of the grotesque as a specifically
literary mode which is definable in terms of motive, conception, execution, and effect, and identifiable as a concrete set of structures, forms, motifs, images, and stylistic devices.

Part III focuses upon The Secret Agent. The narrative is considered in terms of subject, content, structure, perspective, and style, with each of these narrative aspects being related to the grotesque features characteristic of each. I have particularly emphasized the significance of the grotesque point of view, or perspective, as it is here that the primary source of the grotesque, and of the unique effect of the narrative is, I believe, to be found. Accordingly, I have attempted to illustrate those stylistic devices and strategies which seem to characterize and determine the grotesque perspective, and to relate these devices to other aspects of the narrative as well.

The development of the ideas and observations, from the abstractions of "style" through the grotesque to the text of The Secret Agent, might suggest that the first two parts are no more than preliminary steps toward the analysis of the latter. This is not entirely the case; my interest, and consequently part of my emphasis, is also upon style, and upon the grotesque, irrespective of their roles within The Secret Agent. As well as examining style and the grotesque as subordinate steps in the attempt to understand and describe
The Secret Agent, I have also attempted, therefore, to explore what I feel is a very significant generic approach to a great deal of modern literature, and to outline certain of my basic assumptions regarding style.

Because of the divided emphasis, I have hopefully reduced the degree to which the sections form a self-validating system, and trust that the concept of style I have outlined is valid not only for the genre of the grotesque, and that the definition of the grotesque I have offered is not restricted in application to The Secret Agent alone. On the other hand, I trust that a sense of development and continuity does exist among the sections, and that the divided emphasis hasn't filtered out into three unrelated essays. Each part is meant to provide at least a meaningful context for the others.

My primary purpose, however, is to analyze and describe, by way of the grotesque mode, the narrative structures of The Secret Agent. By so doing, I hope to provide a description of the novel which goes beyond the limitations of those descriptions which approach The Secret Agent according to a strictly ironic or comic framework, and thereby indicate the dynamic nature of the narrative as a whole.

My analysis of The Secret Agent tends to be descriptive in nature, and attempts to suggest the structural and stylistic purposes and effects of the narrative; as such,
however, it is offered as a supplement to, rather than a substitute for, those analyses which are interpretive in nature, and which give priority to the thematic purposes and concerns.
PART I

In his essay entitled "Myth, Fiction, and Displacement," Northrop Frye observes that

When a critic deals with a work of literature, the most natural thing for him to do is to freeze it, to ignore its movement in time and look at it as a completed pattern of words, with all its parts existing simultaneously.

This approach, as Frye points out, is common to practically every critical technique. It is, however, incomplete, and leads to what might be called a "static" concept of narrative, which is in turn unable to account fully for the experience of a work of literature.

The insufficiency of the static concept of narrative is primarily a function of its inability to deal with the temporal structures of the novel, and to its inadequacy in accounting for the relationship between author and reader. In short, such a concept of narrative tends to obscure recognition of the subtleties of the ongoing transaction between reader and text.

Frye refers to this transaction in terms of "the persuasion of continuity," stating that

. . . in the direct experience of literature, which is something distinct from criticism, we are aware of what we may call the persuasion of continuity, the power that keeps us turning the pages of a novel and that holds us in our seats at the theatre [Frye, 21].

It is interesting to note Frye's assertion that "the direct
experience of literature" is "distinct from criticism." This is true, of course, insofar as it is impossible to read and reflect upon a story simultaneously. Nevertheless, I feel that the methods of critical analysis and explication could well be expanded to take better account of certain aspects of narrative which are more closely connected to the direct experience of a novel than to the "static" patterns and relationships which are present when the work is viewed from a "spatial" or synchronic perspective and seen "as a completed pattern of words, with all its parts existing simultaneously."

The concept of narrative as a "static" relationship between the components of a text leads in turn to an emphasis upon theme. According to Frye,

... in the direct experience of fiction, continuity is the center of our attention; our later memory, or what I call the possession of it, tends to become discontinuous. Our attention shifts from the sequence of incidents to another focus: a sense of what the work of fiction was all about, or what criticism usually calls its theme [Frye, 23].

The thematic concerns of narrative certainly deserve attention, and must be taken into consideration by any critical approach which claims to be comprehensive; so too, I would argue, should any such approach take into consideration the narrative as a set of temporal relationships between the words, images, ideas, and structures, and conjointly, as a dynamic, ongoing relationship between reader and text. This
in turn leads to a concept of narrative as a dynamic process—a concept which would complement the concept of narrative as a static and spatial set of relationships.

The definition of style which seems to me to deal best with the subtleties of temporal continuity in narrative is, paradoxically, a definition offered in a study of spatial form. I am referring to E. H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, the subject of which is stated in the subtitle: *A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation.* According to Gombrich,

A style, like a culture or climate of opinion, sets up a horizon of expectations, a mental set, which registers deviations or modifications with exaggerated sensitivity. In noticing relationships the mind registers tendencies [Gombrich, 60].

Gombrich's definition is related to certain psycho-stylistic concepts which have a direct bearing on the subject at hand, and which I will therefore outline briefly.

In its simplest terms, the fundamental premise underlying Gombrich's definition is that "the familiar will always remain the starting point for the rendering of the unfamiliar" (Gombrich, 82). This premise holds for the recognition as well as the rendering of the unfamiliar. The unique or original is first approached by means of an initial "schema" or category, within which the flux of experience or impressions is loosely grasped or categorized. The schema, Gombrich notes,
... is not the product of a process of "abstraction," of a tendency to "simplify"; it represents the first approximate, loose category which is gradually tightened to fit the form it is to reproduce [Gombrich, 74];

further, it is important to note that "Paradoxically, it matters relatively little what these first categories are. We can always adjust them according to need" (Gombrich, 88).

We confront new experiences at least in part, therefore, by projecting familiar schemata onto them; this initial starting-point is followed by a process of adjustment, and the movement toward specification is carried out. This process is particularly significant in that it leads not to an accurate transcription or "faithful record" of external reality, but rather to the "faithful construction of a relational model" (Gombrich, 90). It therefore becomes easier to recognize the primary goal of art as being that of creating an equivalence of reactions, not of representing life.

The stylistic significance of such a process is evident with regard to both artist and audience, or writer and reader. The emphasis is returned to the relationship between the artist and his art, or the audience and the work of art, rather than to the mimetic relationship between art and the external (or for that matter, the internal) "realities" it ostensibly transcribes. With regard to the artist, it becomes apparent that
Nature cannot be imitated or "transcribed" without first being taken apart and put together again. This is not the work of observation alone but rather of ceaseless experimentation [Gombrich, 141-142].

It is a process in which "making precedes matching," in which the unfamiliar and the particular are rendered only through a process of adjusting and experimenting with familiar schemata. Equally important is the recognition that the final "matching" represents a discovery not of likeness but of equivalence, which enables us, says Gombrich, "to see reality in terms of an image and an image in terms of reality" (Gombrich, 345).

The psychological factors which govern the rendering of an experience are equally important with respect to the reception of this artistic rendering; thus Gombrich notes that

... the very process of perception is based on the same rhythm that we found governing the process of representation: the rhythm of schema and correction. It is a rhythm which presupposes constant activity on our part in making guesses and modifying them in the light of our experience [Gombrich, 271-272].

The tendency of the reader to register and classify experience in terms of the familiar and known, in conjunction with the fact that the responses of the reader are directed less by conceptual knowledge than by the power of expectation, may present a problem to the artist in his attempt to render the particular, or to create a freshness of perspective and response. Thus the need exists for a special awareness
(particularly on the part of the writer) of the relationship between writer and reader—a relationship that Martin Price has called the "fictional contract." 8

With such an awareness, however, the writer may use these very "obstacles" to communication as means of augmenting his stylistic capabilities. He may exploit the expectations of the "fictional contract" to his own advantage—not only by playing upon those conventional expectations which are independent of the individual work, or are attached to the larger, generic schema of the narrative, but also those more subtle expectations, assumptions, and anticipations which the writer first sets up and then manipulates in more or less unexpected ways within the work itself. It is in understanding the stylistic techniques and possibilities that allow such manipulation that a sense of narrative as a dynamic and temporal construct can be formulated.

Musical stylistics is naturally concerned with temporal and teleological (goal-oriented) rather than spatial and representational patterns and modes, and accordingly offers a concept of style which is relevant here. In his Music, the Arts, and Ideas, Leonard B. Meyer asserts that:

. . . styles exist not as unchanging physical processes in the world of nature, but as psychological processes ingrained as habits in the perceptions, dispositions, and responses of those who have learned through practice and experience to understand a particular style. What remains constant from style to style are not scales, modes,
harmonies, or manners of performance, but the psychology of human mental processes—the ways in which the mind, operating within the context of culturally established norms, selects and organizes the stimuli that are presented to it. For instance, the human mind, striving for stability and completeness, "expects" structural gaps to be filled in.⁹

From the perspective offered by Gombrich and Meyer it becomes possible to conceive of style in reference to its ability to mobilize and then manipulate the projections of the reader. This forces us to become aware of the techniques and conventional structures which are capable of triggering certain expectations and assumptions, and of the ways in which a particular narrative fulfills, fails to fulfill, or fulfills in unexpected ways, the expectations and anticipations which it has itself mobilized.

In his essay entitled "The Irrelevant Detail and the Emergence of Form," Martin Price discusses the experience of literature within a framework of perceptual psychology similar to that employed by Gombrich and Meyer in their respective studies of pictorial representation and musical structure. Price, like Gombrich, refers to our tendency "to create patterns, to relate elements, to simplify, to classify."¹⁰ He goes on to say that
Our first impressions are often based upon stereotypes, upon conventional categories by which we assimilate the unfamiliar or bewildering. It is only with closer knowledge and extended interest that we begin to differentiate, to specify distinctive patterns or telling peculiarities, to construct an individual [Price, ID, 70-71].

The process associated with a dynamic and temporal style therefore entails a movement from stereotype toward specification, carried out by what Gombrich calls "the rhythm of schema and correction." This process of making and matching, to repeat, is also a movement in the direction of equivalence rather than likeness; in Price's terms: "the elaborate forms of realism are generated less by the desire to represent the actual than by the pressure of conventions reaching outward for more complex differentiation" (Price, ID, 74).

The beginning of a narrative will therefore trigger certain conventional expectations and assumptions; exactly which conventions and assumptions are set up, and the degree of control that the writer has over the development and fulfillment of these anticipations, depends upon the awareness and stylistic dexterity of the author in question. In his essay entitled "The Fictional Contract," Price contends that

To read a novel is to discover the order latent in its materials rather than simply to impose one by a set of rules. In some sense each novel discloses to the reader the order he may expect to find, in its use of conventions and by its opening
movement: we could not speak of suspense unless there were a limited range of expectations, within which there remains crucial unpredictability. In that sense, the novel both sets the rules and provides the challenge [Price, FC, 152].

In both of his essays Price compares the process of reading to that of engaging in a game. The "rules of the game" which the reader is to play, says Price, are set by the openings of novels:

The degree of specifications in setting, the presence or absence of a person behind the narrative voice, the verbal density of the style—its metaphorical elaboration or cultivated innocence—all these are ways of indicating the nature of the game, of educating the responses and guiding the collaboration of the reader [Price, ID, 82].

Accordingly, the reader may give himself over to the conventions or rules of the game once they have been established and learned; however, whereas the rules of a game are inflexible, the "rules," or conventions, of a narrative may in fact be altered or manipulated: such changes often determine the meaning and effect of a narrative.

The significance of the process whereby conventional "sets" or schemata are stylistically mobilized and manipulated to new ends is one of the subjects of Frank Kermode's study of teleological patterns in fiction, The Sense of An Ending. Kermode focuses upon the patterns and processes as sources of our sense of reality and relevance in narrative.

Broadly speaking [writes Kermode] it is the popular story that sticks most closely to established conventions; novels the clerisy calls
"major" tend to vary them, and to vary them more and more as time goes by [Ending, 17].

The process of reading fiction becomes what Kermode would call the re-enactment of "the familiar dialogue between credulity and scepticism," or, in terms of the text rather than the reader, the adjustment of pattern, or paradigm (convention, archetype, or stereotype), by and to the contingencies of the actual.

It might be supposed that narratives which confirm our expectations would be those we value most highly; paradoxically, it is those narratives that falsify our expectations of their development and endings that meet with our strongest approval. This generalization requires a degree of qualification. What is sought is something between the two extremes: a narrative which ends in a manner consonant with its beginnings, but which reaches this consonance in unexpected ways—usually through a series of disconfirmations, best described in terms of what Kermode refers to as "peripeteia":

Peripeteia, which has been called the equivalent, in narrative, of irony in rhetoric, is present in every story of the least structural sophistication. Peripeteia depends on our confidence of the end; it is a disconfirmation followed by a consonance; the interest of having our expectations falsified is obviously related to our wish to reach the discovery or recognition by an unexpected and instructive route [Ending, 18].

This interplay between paradigm and contingency, pattern and detail, and the assimilation of the peripeteia, through which
we enact an adjustment of our expectations—and thereby move toward specification—is more a function of the process of reading than of the overall structural patterns and thematic concerns which we are able to perceive in retrospect.

The creative satisfaction and the sense of relevance associated with such a process are related to the presence of the peripeteia, for, as Kermode points out:

The more daring the peripeteia, the more we may feel that the work respects our sense of reality; and the more certainly we shall feel that the fiction under consideration is one of those which, by upsetting the ordinary balance of our naive expectations, is finding something out for us, something real [Ending, 18].

This aspect of our reading is similarly described by Price, who once again employs the analogy of the game:

Passive participation in games of mere chance involves little more than hopeful waiting; but most games involve some skill, and therefore an active effort to bring form into being. The success of a game depends, in large measure, on its providing sufficient resistance to call forth exertion and yet not so much as to make the effort futile [Price, FC, 154].

What is required, says Kermode, is "a challenge to creative co-operation," not "easy satisfactions" (Ending, 19).

This concept of significance is also supported by Meyer's remarks on value and musical style. He states that

... value has something to do with the activation of a musical impulse having tendencies toward a more or less definite goal and with the temporary resistance or inhibition of these tendencies [Meyer, 26].

This process may also be understood in terms of the listener,
in that

... musical meaning ... arises when our expectant habit responses are delayed or blocked—when the normal course of stylistic-mental events is disturbed by some form of deviation [Meyer, 10].12

"Meaning," therefore, refers not only to the thematic concerns and formal structures of a work, but is also a function of the dynamic and teleological, or what Meyer terms the "kinetic," process involving schema, peripeteia, and consonance in a movement toward specification and equivalence. As Meyer states it: "Meaning, then, is not a static, invariant attribute of a stimulus, but an evolving discovery of attributes" (Meyer, 12).

Taken to either extreme, the process breaks down. Those narratives which parallel or meet our expectations without any degree of disconfirmation or specification fail to create a sense of reality (although they may well confirm our wishes and satisfy the stereotyped and conventional ideas and beliefs of an unsophisticated audience). Such schematic narratives are described by Price:

... a pattern is so firmly established that, once it is mastered, its application presents no new problem and becomes only passive execution. Things do not simply fall into place; they jostle one, as it were, in their readiness to get there, and one feels oneself more the instrument of a design than the discoverer, much less the creator, of one [Price, FC, 154-155].

Just as total fulfillment of expectation and assumption amounts to no more than a cliché in which information is nil, so too is a complete defeat or departure from the
paradigm likely to lead to a breakdown of communication and loss of credulity in which suspension of disbelief becomes impossible. This is true whether the narrative establishes itself as fantasy or realism: the particular convention is irrelevant. It is the degree of adherence to and manipulation of the convention that is significant here. What seems to be necessary is a certain continuity and logic of dissonance rather than complete satisfaction of expectation or complete surprise.

Although a teleological and kinetic concept of narrative is valid for all literature, its relevance is especially apparent with regard to modern and contemporary literature with its characteristic penchant for experimentation and its acute awareness and consequential exploration of its own conventions and paradigms, both in respect to its traditions and to the "fictional contract" between author and reader. As Price observes, to

... discover such canons of relevance may require little effort in a conventional work; it may be a major source of interest in the experimental novel, where the experiment is performed upon the reader as well as upon the material [Price, ID, 70].

A similar observation is made by Kermode:

As an extreme case you will find some novel, probably contemporary with yourself, in which the departure from a basic paradigm, the peripeteia in the sense I am now giving it, seems to begin with the first sentence. The schematic expectations of the reader are discouraged immediately [Ending, 19].

Conrad's The Secret Agent is not as radical in its
exploitation of expectation and convention as certain more recent novels; it is, however, no less aware of these conventions and their implications than such novels—particularly where the subtleties of relationship between text and reader are concerned. What Kermode observes with regard to Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommes* may not be true to the same degree of *The Secret Agent*, but it is true in kind: "It is always not doing things which we unreasonably assume novels ought to do: connect, diversify, explain, make concords, facilitate extrapolations" (Ending, 21). In a recent lecture, published as *Novel and Narrative*, Kermode links these two writers in precisely these terms:

As I've noted, novelists long ago exploited their knowledge that their medium was inherently pluralistic; to the name of James one need add only that of Conrad, who invented the hermeneutic gap long before Robbe-Grillet expanded it to engulf the whole text.13

Referring to *The Secret Agent*, U. C. Knoepflmacher writes that:

Conrad's narrative method presupposes an absolute alertness from the reader. Although the narrator's ironic voice sets the tone for the story, this voice is disembodied; despite his omniscience, the narrator effaces himself and forces us to hear and see only those details he has carefully screened and selected. These "suppressions" of detail and fact, Knoepflmacher
declares, "offend our yearning for order, continuity, and explanation." 14

The narrative discrepancies in *The Secret Agent* range from major structural gaps to discrepancies at the level of the sentence and image. Whereas earlier criticism of the novel tended to ignore, rearrange, or condemn these discrepancies, more recent criticism has begun to recognize their significance. Elliott Gose, for instance, noting the insistence upon and frequency of various narrative discontinuities and oddities in *The Secret Agent*, remarks that "all these 'failures' of narrative should convince us that he is aiming at another kind of rhythm . . ." 15 Similarly, Albert Guérard recognizes the stylistic transition as being "an astonishing leap into an entirely different kind of art." 16

The transition is not such that subject and theme are no longer important, but it is certainly such that the meaning of the narrative at any given point cannot be considered apart from the manner of presentation; moreover, the presence of various "peripeteia" at all levels of the narrative suggests the need for a means of narrative description which will reveal the kinetic as well as the static aspects of the stylistic devices and strategies.

The emphasis I have given to the apparently radical nature of the stylistic transition represented by *The Secret Agent* would seem to imply that a correspondingly radical
change took place in Conrad's thinking or esthetic. This is suggested, for example, in the following remarks:

Conrad was not finally satisfied with this retreat into style. In *Under Western Eyes* and subsequent novels he returns to the problem of social relationships, and examines once again how action can be meaningful.¹⁷

Although this same critic allows that *The Secret Agent* is "a great masterpiece of the modern imagination," I question his statement that it represents a "retreat into style"; nor can it be said that Conrad ignores "the problem of social relationships" in *The Secret Agent*—in fact many of Conrad's most perceptive critics have focused their interpretations upon the comprehensive social vision offered by the novel.

My own sense is that Conrad's concern with style in his other novels is equal to that in *The Secret Agent*. Certainly the latter represents a change of direction, but it does not signify a departure from Conrad's overall purpose; rather, it represents an extension along one of the lines of Conrad's continual development of, and experimentation with, technique and stylistic potential, and stands as an intensification rather than temporary abandonment of his esthetic purpose as stated in his "Preface" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*: "My task which I am trying to achieve is by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see" (x).

The style of *The Secret Agent* may be related to the
subject, content, and themes of the novel; it might also be seen as the means of exploring and exploiting the esthetic possibilities of the ongoing and dynamic transaction between narrative and reader. With regard to the significance of such stylistic concerns, Leonard Meyer points out that

... our habits of perception and apprehension—the accumulation of traditional preconceptions which we bring to aesthetic experience—prevent us from seeing and hearing what is really there to be perceived [Meyer, 74].

The Secret Agent is therefore of central, not peripheral, importance to an understanding of Conrad's art and the techniques which that art comprises. It is directed not only at what we see, but also at the way in which we see—it concerns the breaking down and restructuring of our perspective. As George Santayana puts it in The Sense of Beauty: "The disintegration of mental forms and their reintegration is the life of the imagination." 18

The creating artist, however, has little use for theories of style—he works with a medium, not with ideas, and it is with this in mind that I will now turn from the concept of narrative and style as means of breaking down and restructuring familiar schemata to a description of narrative and style as a concrete set of techniques which constitute this means. The stylistic techniques I refer to are those of the grotesque.
PART II

1.

The Traditional and Modern Grotesque

Excavations in Rome and other parts of Italy during the late-fifteenth century brought to light an ancient type of ornamental painting which came to be known as the grotesque ('la grottesca') or grotesque ('grottesco')—derived from 'grotta' (cave). This art form was subsequently traced back to the beginning of the Christian era when, according to Kayser, it "had reached Italy as a new fashion relatively late" (Kayser, 20).

It is perhaps appropriate, therefore, to begin an analysis of the grotesque, from both an historical and a critical point of view, with the following comments of the Roman contemporary of Augustus, Marcus Vitruvius Pollio:

... our contemporary artists decorate the walls with monstrous forms rather than reproducing clear images of the familiar world. Instead of columns they paint fluted stems with oddly shaped leaves and volutes, and instead of pediments arabesques; the same with candelabra and painted edicules, on the pediments of which grow dainty flowers unrolling out of roots and topped, without rhyme or reason, by figurines. The little stems, finally, support half-figures crowned by human or animal heads. Such things, however, never existed, do not now exist, and shall never come into being [quoted in Kayser, p. 20].

Vitruvius's comments will serve as a useful introduction both to the nature of the grotesque and to a characteristic
critical perspective on the grotesque. He refers to the "monstrous forms" of this art, and at another point in his attack he calls them "bastard forms." Vitruvius may have chosen his adjectives with their pejorative connotations in mind, but they are nonetheless apt from a strictly objective or descriptive point of view as well: the grotesque implies an incongruous or discrepant fusion, confusion, fragmentation, or juxtaposition of normally separate realms or objects—often accompanied by a sense of radical disproportion and discontinuity—the effect of which is usually to create an ambivalent response. The ambivalence and ambiguity are heightened by the frequently abnormal nature of the material, and by the fact that it is the trusted and familiar aspects of the everyday world which are undergoing a process of estrangement. The "clear images of the familiar world" are subverted.

In the example which Vitruvius describes, a confusion of realms in which the human, the plant, and the animal are fused "without rhyme or reason" is apparent: "The little stems . . . support half-figures crowned by human or animal heads." This motif of a confusion or fusion of normally separate or distinct realms is also central to more recent grotesque forms. One of the anarchists (appropriately named Gogol) in G. K. Chesterton's The Man Who Was Thursday (1908) is described as wearing:
. . . the high white collar and satin tie that were the uniform of the occasion; but out of this collar there sprang a head quite unmanageable and quite unmistakable, a bewildering bush of brown hair and beard that almost obscured the eyes like those of a Skye terrier. . . . The effect of this figure was not terrible like that of the President, but it had every diablerie that can come from the utterly grotesque. If out of that stiff tie and collar there had come abruptly the head of a cat or a dog, it could not have been a more idiotic contrast.19

Where Chesterton's character appears to take on the features of various domestic animals, Dickens' Silas Wegg, in Our Mutual Friend, threatens to sprout wooden appendages:

Wegg was a knotty man, and a close-grained, with a face carved out of very hard material, that had just as much play of expression as a watchman's rattle. When he laughed, certain jerks occurred in it, and the rattle sprung. Sooth to say, he was so wooden a man that he seemed to have taken his wooden leg naturally, and rather suggested to the fanciful observer, that he might be expected—if his development received no untimely check—to be completely set up with a pair of wooden legs in about six months.20

Just as Vitruvius's analysis of the grotesque is applicable to these excerpts from Chesterton and Dickens, so too can the following general definition of the grotesque by a modern critic be applied to the example given by Vitruvius:

In the broadest sense, the grotesque shows us a world in which the natural order of things has been subverted. The animal and vegetable worlds are confused and swarm in to each other: the world of inanimate things is no longer separate from the realms of plants, animals, and human beings. The laws of statics, symmetry and proportion are no longer valid. Men can become animals which can become plants: again, we are in a primitive dream world where fantasy and nightmare have full play.21
Perhaps the simplest assessment of the grotesque in these general terms is offered in Kayser's statement that "The grotesque world is—and is not—our own world" (Kayser, 37). It is this suspension between our own familiar, trusted world and an alien, perhaps hostile realm that is partially responsible for the ambivalence and ambiguity of the grotesque.

From a psychological point of view, the grotesque "presupposes that the categories which apply to our world view become inapplicable" (Kayser, 185). The grotesque refuses to order experience according to conventional patterns, and a disorder similar to that of dream or hallucination is substituted (The Man Who Was Thursday is subtitled A Nightmare, and frequently refers to the experiences it relates as being dream-like). The laws of cause and effect, perception and concept, and temporal and spatial continuity appear to break down, and this serves to actively challenge our basic assumptions about the order and significance of life: "The integrity of the individual and the harmony of the universe cease to be matters of fact and become instead no more than a matter of perceiving." 22

The grotesque is far more than simply an intellectual structure, and the response to the grotesque goes beyond a purely intellectual reaction. As well as confronting us with a vision, or a perspective, which may seem to be "without
rhyme or reason," and which undermines our rational assumptions, the discrepancy also challenges the structure of our conventional emotional responses to experience. The incongruity is frequently emotional in nature, comprising a conflict between, for instance, the comic and something which is non-comic or anti-comic, such as the tragic, pathetic, disgusting, horrible, or frightening. The ambiguity of effect serves as an important means of distinction between the grotesque and the purely comic or ironic. I offer the following excerpt from the murder scene in Flann O'Brien's The Third Policeman in an attempt to elicit the ambivalent response associated with the grotesque:

There is little to tell about the murder. The lowering skies seemed to conspire with us, coming down in a shroud of dreary mist to within a few yards of the wet road where we were waiting. Everything was very still with no sound in our ears except the dripping of the trees. Our bicycles were hidden. I was leaning miserably on my spade and Divney, his iron pump under his arm, was smoking his pipe contentedly. The old man was upon us almost before we realized there was anybody near. I could not see him well in the dim light but I could glimpse a spent bloodless face peering from the top of the great black coat which covered him from ear to ankle. Divney went forward at once and pointing back along the road said:

"Would that be your parcel on the road?"

The old man turned his head to look and received a blow in the back of the neck from Divney's pump which knocked him clean off his feet and probably smashed his neck-bone. As he collapsed full-length in the mud he did not cry out. Instead I heard him say something softly in a conversational tone—something like "I do not care for celery" or "I left my glasses in the scullery." Then he lay very still.
It is interesting to note that the casual, almost matter-of-fact tone of this passage and the utterly ridiculous comments of the victim, which together serve to infuse the scene with its comic component, paradoxically serve also to heighten and provoke the extremely anti-comic aspects of the actual event being described.

The dissonant effect of the grotesque may be caused by the material itself, by a tension between the material or subject and the form, or by the form itself. In such terms, the historical evolution of the grotesque might be seen as a movement away from a dependence upon substance and toward establishment as a function of form and style. The development of the grotesque as a way of seeing, as a perspective, allows the writer to present all of his material in a grotesque light if he so wishes—he is no longer dependent upon an abnormality inherent in the material itself. Secondly, and of equal importance, this in no way diminishes the grotesque effect, but in fact gives it even greater intensity and depth—now even the most ordinary, familiar, and trusted material can be transmuted into the "substance" of the grotesque.

Another important development which corresponds to the transition toward a mature and modern grotesque perspective and style (and which in fact enhances this transition) is the adaptation of the grotesque to the generic demands of
the novel. Kayser, it might be noted, would oppose this observation, and states that

... the grotesque appears preferably in the form of episodes and individual scenes, while being unable to furnish the structural basis for an entire work. ... The matter is quite different, however, in the shorter form, the novella [Kayser, 68].

In the context of the Romantic period, Kayser's observation is indisputable; the grotesque—especially the gothic and fantastic grotesque—flourished in the tales and märchen of Poe and E. T. A. Hoffmann, not in the novel. The novel itself was perhaps the least important of the Romantic genres. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, having been employed by such novelists as Balzac, Dickens, and Dostoevsky, the grotesque had become fused with the longer prose narrative forms of the romance and the novel.

Donald Fanger, in Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism, refers to the writers most responsible for this adaptation as "romantic realists," whom he also sees as being responsible for first realizing "the potentialities of the metropolis as a subject of fiction." In his assessment of the contributions made by these writers, Fanger states that:

The extravagant, the bizarre, the grotesque, which others could use to produce a crude or factitious sense of novelty, became for these writers the basis of their claims to realism, the outward sign of the newness of the social patterns they were describing. Each emphasized the solidity of his physical city, to set off the unreality of the life lived in it. And by so doing each was
admonishing his readers, in effect: "The old assumptions, the old categories, are no longer valid; we must try to see afresh." [Fanger, 260-262].

Although Fanger emphasizes its sociological significance in this passage, his final statement points beyond to the fact that the grotesque, by the beginning of this century, had been found to be compatible with the contexts of the novel and its associated conventions, and had begun to be recognized as an important way of "seeing afresh"—as a perspective—and was available as a concrete set of stylistic devices and strategies.

The implications of Fanger's final sentence are particularly important: they illuminate the potential of the grotesque not merely as a means of estranging, or "breaking down" familiar reality, but also as a means of "restructuring" or "recreating" a new reality. It is this possibility that signifies the presence of an independent mode.

Before the grotesque was able to attain recognized status as an independent genre, it had to be freed from an external definition based upon the premises of its relationship to classical ideals of art, as well as from definitions aimed at subordinating it as a branch of one of its components—usually either the gothic or the comic. An analysis
of this transition toward generic independence will also suggest the corresponding process of adaptation to the principal modes of modern literature. The shift away from an emphasis on substance toward an emphasis on perspective and style as the sources of the grotesque will be seen to be intimately connected with the transition away from the gothic and fantastic toward the comic and realistic as the prime instruments and techniques of the grotesque.

The critical precedent established by Vitruvius has proven to be as tenacious as the grotesque mode itself; this is indicated by the following remarks of Arieh Sachs, editor of *The English Grotesque: An Anthology from Langland to Joyce*, published in 1969:

> Given all I have said, we might attempt a definition of the grotesque as an aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic) category. The grotesque, then, is the inverse of the ideal. It is evil or baseness or abnormality, portrayed in incongruously compounded human and non-human images, that are in various degrees both disturbing and absurd.\(^5\)

The distinction, according to Sachs, is unequivocal:

> The ideal, whatever it is, tends to be characterized by proportion, harmony, cleanliness, serenity and beauty. In the notion of the grotesque are combined the inverse qualities: the deformed, the monstrous, the repulsively ill-proportioned or frighteningly protean in shape and spirit. One may, therefore, conclude that the grotesque is diametrically opposed to the ideal [Sachs, xx].

The classical assumption of an "ideal" both as a basis for definition and as a norm of value is responsible for the subordinate position of the grotesque in Sachs' hierarchy of
value. The assumption that the grotesque is all that "the ideal" is not tends to reduce the grotesque to a back-door route through which the ideal shines as the ultimate goal. This notion of the "implied ideal" is typified in the following remarks by Walter Bagehot:

This art works by contrast. It enables you to see, it makes you see, the perfect type by painting the opposite deviation. It shows you what ought to be by what ought not to be; when complete, it reminds you of the perfect image by showing you the distorted and imperfect image.26

Needless to say, Bagehot's concept of "it makes you see" is the exact opposite of what this same statement refers to in Conrad's "Preface" to The Nigger of the "Narcissus". The hierarchy of classical value which underpins such assessments is explicit in Bagehot's assertion that

An exceptional monstrosity of horrid ugliness cannot be made pleasing, except it be made to suggest—to recall—the perfection, the beauty, from which it is a deviation [Bagehot, 360].

Another danger inherent in such an approach is that the recognition of an implied ideal may lead to the tempting but not necessarily logical assumption that the novelist is proposing the possibility of obtaining or instituting such an ideal.27

Victor Hugo, and the Romantic era in general, elevated the grotesque to a higher, and on occasion equal, status in relation to the classical ideal, seeing one as a necessary complement to the other. As Arthur Clayborough puts it:
"Hugo regards the grotesque not merely as a useful source of contrast but as a necessary complement without which the sublime and the beautiful must remain imperfect." Nevertheless, whether the grotesque is viewed as a polar opposite to the classical, as a deliberate contrast implying the ideal, or as a necessary complement, the very assumptions on which all such views are formulated are fundamentally classical in origin. And it usually follows that, as Tony Tanner warns,

If you posit and set up one ideal of reasonable beauty, or reasonable conduct, then in fact everything you see will look unreasonable because, of course, nothing material ever incarnates the ideal perfectly. The recalcitrant imperfections of matter always prevent this [Tanner, 149].

The grotesque-classical distinction is therefore largely a product of the basic credos of the classical esthetic itself: the separation of styles, and the positing of norms and standards. Accordingly, the grotesque is defined negatively, and often pejoratively, within the context of such an esthetic, a tendency which has persisted throughout the history of grotesque art. However, although it is necessary to keep in mind the limitations and dangers of such definitions of the grotesque, there is no need to abandon the distinction. What is necessary is a careful qualification, for the actual situation is far more complex and significant than the simple opposition or contrast delineated by the classical esthetic would suggest.
Perhaps the point at which the grotesque moved from a situation of peripheral importance to a central, or at least independent position, occurred in conjunction with the recognition that the classical idea of art as "an imitation of nature" was brought into question, and with the corresponding recognition that the "truth" of art is less a function of mimesis than of artifice—a recognition which shifts the "authority" for the work of art from an unimpeachable external standard, approachable only by abstraction and implication, to the very conventions and structures within the work of art. This shift rendered vulnerable the previously unassailable assumptions and standards. Sachs points out that

The classical idea of art as "an imitation of nature" and the classical separation between the "high" and "low" styles are therefore inimical to the grotesque, which will be found to flourish in ages like the Gothic, the Mannerist, the late Romantic or the Modern, when the classical ideals for various reasons lose their hold [Sachs, xxv].

While some might look upon such periods as "lapses" in the history of art, I would argue that they represent times of regeneration for art, and that the shift away from the classical to the grotesque corresponds to a shift away from "nature" toward the work of art itself as the locus of creativity, and that such self-consciousness is not only potentially healthy, but even necessary to the regeneration of artistic conventions. It is in this sense that the grotesque exists not merely as a mode of breaking down or
confusing familiar reality or standards, norms, and conventions of art, but also as a means of reconstructing, restructuring, and renewing these aspects of the artistic experience in a more vital and relevant manner. This relationship is suggested by Thomson's observation that "highly inventive and imaginative, as well as strongly experimental, literature seems to gravitate toward the grotesque" (Thomson, 64).

We have now moved from a concept in which the grotesque is defined as one half of a conflict between the classical and anti-classical, to a position in which this "conflict" is internalized within the structure of the grotesque itself, and the distinction between classical and grotesque is no longer necessary to a description of either. This modern concept of the grotesque might be represented by Thomas Mann's remarks in his 1925 Introduction to the German translation of *The Secret Agent*:

... I feel that, broadly and essentially, the striking feature of modern art is that it has ceased to recognise the categories of tragic or comic, or the dramatic classifications, tragedy and comedy. It sees life as tragicomedy, with the result that the grotesque is its most genuine style—to the extent, indeed, that today that is the only guise in which the sublime may appear.29

The situation has now reversed completely, and the "sublime," once the central pivot of the classical esthetic, has now been adopted by the grotesque. The grotesque has not taken over from the classical, but it has come to be seen as a mode
distinct from the classical, and as a genre which no longer depends solely upon the "implication" of the ideal for its own definition. With independence comes recognition, and in her "Introduction" to Thomas Wright's A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art, Frances K. Barasch contends that "In fiction and drama, in the theater and in art, the grotesque has appeared as the single most characteristic expression of our time."^30

The modern conception of the grotesque has not only had to evolve amid attempts to define it according to classical standards, but also against the tendency to view it in terms of one of its components at the expense of others. As Thomson notes:

Writers on the grotesque have always tended to associate the grotesque with either the comic or the terrifying. Those who see it as a sub-form of the comic class the grotesque, broadly, with the burlesque and the vulgarly funny. Those who emphasize the terrifying quality of the grotesque often shift it towards the realm of the uncanny, the mysterious, even the supernatural [Thomson, 20].

Most of the writers on the grotesque have pointed to this duality: Kayser distinguished the "fantastic" and the "comically" grotesque; Axton refers to the "darker" strain as opposed to the "lighter, gayer" strain of the grotesque; Fanger observes that:
In the works of high romanticism (in Germany especially and, through the influence of Hoffmann, in France), the grotesque meant the fantastic, the supernatural, the diabolic, the causes of the effects of alienation and madness. . . . Or the grotesque may be considered . . . as residing in the play with proportion, an essentially comic manipulation of reality to construct a new and unreal world where any trifle can grow to colossal proportions [Fanger, 124].

Both Kayser and Axton associate the "darker" or "fantastic" current of the grotesque with such artists as Breughel, Grünewald, Bosch, and Kafka, and the "lighter" or "comic" grotesque with such sources as "commedia dell'arte," harlequinade, and the drawings of Callot. Kayser emphasizes the more gothic aspects of the grotesque tradition; Axton, who is more conscious of the English development of the grotesque, asserts that

. . . it seems clear that the development of grotesque style is firmly linked to important precursors of English pantomime, burlesque, and melodrama, and that the later forms retain many of its features.31

Thus the antithesis which arose between the concepts of the grotesque and the classical is also apparent in terms of the two principal currents underlying the grotesque: both the comic and the gothic are considered deviant modes within the context of classical esthetics—or at least were until the beginning of the twentieth century. But just as the attempt to define the grotesque as a whole on the basis of classical assumptions is bound to result in a negative conception, so too is the attempt to confine and subordinate the
grotesque to one of its two main elements likely to limit and distort the conception which emerges.

Therefore most attempts at definition which begin by separating the strands of the grotesque have found it necessary to reweave them in order to offer a viable explanation of the mode. Such is the case, for instance, in John Ruskin's analysis of the grotesque in *Grotesque Renaissance*:

First, then, it seems to me that the grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful; that, as one or other of these elements prevails, the grotesque falls into two branches, sportive grotesque and terrible grotesque; but that we cannot legitimately consider it under these two aspects, because there are hardly any examples which do not in some degree combine both elements; there are few grotesques so utterly playful as to be overcast with no shade of fearfulness, and few so fearful as absolutely to exclude all ideas of jest.

Ruskin's view is actually closer than that of many more recent critics to the modern conception of the grotesque as a composite of both currents in which one or the other may prevail, or dominate, but in which one is inseparable from the other. The spirit of the grotesque may range from geniality to ferocity, but the effect requires a certain balance of the grotesque components, not the absence of one or the other. This would concur with Thomson's position that ... apart from a few exceptions in earlier periods, the tendency to view the grotesque as essentially a mixture in some way or other of both the comic and the terrifying (or the disgusting, repulsive, etc.) in a problematical (i.e., not readily resolvable) way is a comparatively recent one [Thomson, 20-21].
This concept is far more capable of accounting for the unique effect of the grotesque, and enables a clearer distinction to be made between such a response and the response to the purely comic or purely gothic.

Kayser's own perspective on the grotesque, as mentioned above, is oriented toward the more romantic, fantastic, and gothic features of the mode. His emphasis of these features leads to a corresponding de-emphasis of the comic and realistic elements associated with the grotesque. This particular bias emerges most strongly in his somewhat cursory assessment and subsequent dismissal of English literature's contribution to the grotesque tradition:

Our brief glance at English literature furnishes additional proof that the grotesque has also its place in realism, even though its scope is considerably narrowed by the increasingly strong rejection of the supernatural and the greater emphasis which is placed on its humorous side.

Kayser here chooses to ignore the significance of the English contribution to the grotesque tradition for the very reasons I would stress it: the exploitation of the comic aspect of the grotesque, and, equally important, the adaptation of the grotesque mode as a whole to the realistic mode and to a realistic framework.

This adaptation also occurs, although with less emphasis on the comic, in literature other than English, particularly in Russian and French literature. The French
and Russian novelists, as Fanger convincingly demonstrates in *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism*, were turning the comic and realistic to grotesque ends in their exploration of the possibilities offered by the genre of the novel, and by the city as a possible subject and setting within the context of the novel.

First of all, according to Fanger, writers such as Gogol, Balzac, Dostoevsky, and Dickens participated in the rediscovery and further exploitation of the grotesque "as an instrument for yoking literary values that had hitherto been considered antithetical, to produce something in the nature of a 'frisson nouveau'" (Fanger, 20). Fanger suggests that just as

... realism, largely through the use of irony, continues to bear the marks of a comic inheritance adapted to new ends, so it might be hypothesized ... that romantic realism reveals a parallel adaptation of comic techniques, largely through the use of the grotesque [Fanger, 20].

Secondly, Fanger asserts that the "romantic realists" were the first to realize the possibilities inherent in the city as setting and subject. Fanger notes that

Already in the second decade, the grotesque had been made to invade the real, the seriously real, in Hoffmann's tales; but it is only with Gogol that we see a major attempt to identify it with the real, symbolically, in the Petersburg tales [Fanger, 229-230].

Whereas the "reality" of an urban or metropolitan setting might seem to be alien to the spirit and effect of estrange-
ment essential to the grotesque, the opposite is in fact the case. With regard to Gogol and Dostoevsky, Fanger observes that

Petersburg is established as the most real of real places in order that we may wonder at what strange things happen in it: it is, in fact, the condition of our perceiving the full force of the strangeness, the lever that forces the suspension of our disbelief [Fanger, 134].

This observation could be applied with equal validity to Balzac's Paris or Dickens' (or Conrad's) London.

It is interesting to note that in the London of Dickens, Chesterton, and Conrad, it is frequently the detective-figures who serves as the guide into the darker corners of the metropolis. What they discover is often as fantastic in one sense as it is realistic in another. The following scene involving Inspector Bucket in Bleak House looks ahead to similar scenes involving Inspector Heat and the Assistant Commissioner in The Secret Agent:

When they come at last to Tom-all-Alone's, Mr. Bucket stops for a moment at the corner, and takes a lighted bull's eye from the constable on duty there, who then accompanies him with his own particular bull's eye at his waist. Between his two conductors, Mr. Snagsby passes along the middle of a villainous street, undrained, unventilated, deep in black mud and corrupt water—though the roads are dry elsewhere—and reeking with such smells and sights that he, who has lived in London all his life, can scarce believe his senses. Branching from this street and its heaps of ruins, are other streets and courts so infamous that Mr. Snagsby sickens in body and mind, and feels as if he were going, every moment deeper down, into the infernal gulf.
"Draw off a bit here, Mr. Snagsby," says Bucket, as a kind of shabby palanquin is borne towards them, surrounded by a noisy crowd. "Here's the fever coming up the street!"

As the unseen wretch goes by, the crowd, leaving that object of attraction, hovers round the three visitors like a dream of horrible faces, and fades away up alleys and into ruins, and behind walls; and with occasional cries and shrill whistles of warning, thenceforth flits about them until they leave the place.34

Similar observations are to be found in The Man Who Was Thursday, in which London is referred to variously as a labyrinth, hell, a "subterranean country," and as "the landscape of a new planet" (Thursday, 49).

Thomson also examines the relation of the grotesque to the "realistic," and takes a position opposite to that of Kayser's dictum that the movement away from the "fantastic" toward the realistic presentation leads to a narrowing of scope and power. Thomson maintains that

... far from possessing a necessary affinity with the fantastic, the grotesque derives at least some of its effect from being presented within a realistic framework, in a realistic way [Thomson, 8].

He goes on to point out that:

If "fantastic" means simply a pronounced divergence from the normal and natural then the grotesque is undoubtedly fantastic. But if, as we surely must, we insist that the criterion be whether the material is presented in a fantastic, or realistic way, then we are more likely to conclude that, far from possessing an affinity with the fantastic, it is precisely the conviction that the grotesque world, however strange, is yet our world, real and immediate, which makes the grotesque so powerful [Thomson, 22-23].
Other writers on the grotesque have made parallel observations. Alfred Appel, Jr., for instance states that

The impact of the grotesque depends on a sense of the familiar, for what Nathanael West called the "truly monstrous" resides not in the supernatural and the bizarre, but in our ordinary, everyday lives.35

The intensity and unique effect of the grotesque is at least partly derived, therefore, from its ability to estrange reality without dispensing with it.

The implications of this characteristic of the grotesque insofar as its development as a style and perspective is concerned are suggested in the following passage (quoted by Thomson) from Gerhard Mensching's dissertation entitled Das Groteske im modernen Drama:

No matter how inventive the author of the fantastic is, he will mostly keep to the perspective of the unreal (or anti-real). The fantastic world remains closed. It may be only through the inclusion, or omission, of a single piece of information at the beginning of the text, but there will be between author and reader a certain mutual understanding about the level at which everything is to be taken. The assumption, for example, that there are certain people who have the ability to hover in the air, could be the starting-point for a fantastic story of a humorous, uncanny or fairy-tale nature. But as long as the narrative perspective is retained unbroken it will be pure fantasy. Such a story might become grotesque not because of some extraordinary bizarreness of invention, but because of the alternation or confusion of different perspectives. The hallmark of the grotesque in the realm of the fantastic is the conscious confusion between fantasy and reality [Thomson, 22-23].

Thomson observes that

Mensching pinpoints here a very interesting
source of the grotesque: the disorienting and even frightening, but also potentially comic, confusion of the real with the unreal [Thomson, 24].

What seems even more significant, however, is Mensching's recognition that this confusion and disorientation is a function less of content or subject than of the conventional assumptions and expectations triggered by a particular work—that the grotesque is a "conscious confusion" which is born in the awareness and exploitation of the fact that "there will be between author and reader a certain mutual understanding about the level at which everything is to be taken."

It is this recognition that I am attempting to prepare for in terms of the grotesque, as I did in terms of style—the recognition that the grotesque mode, in Conrad as well as in certain other modern writers, is largely a function of perspective and style, where perspective and style are in turn informed by and developed according to those subtle bonds of anticipation, expectation, and assumption, and the subsequent manipulation of those bonds, which link author, narrative, and reader. The modern exploration of literary technique, style, and perspective, in which Conrad participated and to which he contributed significantly, made this discovery of "style as process" possible.
2.

The Nature of the Grotesque

The most characteristic feature of the grotesque is that of disharmony, and it is important, according to Thomson, that this disharmony be traced to its sources not only in the work of art itself, "but also in the reaction it produces and (speculatively) in the creative temperament and psychological make-up of the artist" (Thomson, 20). Kayser also makes it clear that "the word 'grotesque' applies to three different realms—the creative process, the work of art itself, and its reception," stating that this multiplicity of location and approach "is significant and appropriate as an indication that it has the making of a basic esthetic category" (Kayser, 180).

Studies of the grotesque have been carried out in terms of each of these realms, some restricting their focus to the creative process assumed to lie behind the work, some to the work of art, or to some aspect of the work of art, and some to the response elicited by the grotesque. There has as yet been no comprehensive study which has taken all of these aspects into account; even Kayser, who recognizes that the grotesque must be charted in each and all of these realms if it is in fact to stand as an independent genre, offers no more than an outline of the overall relationship. His tri-
partite definition gives special emphasis to the creative process (1. "the grotesque is the estranged world"; 2. "the grotesque is a play with the absurd"; 3. "the grotesque is an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" [Kayser, 184, 186, 187]), but his actual analysis is limited to the content or substance of the grotesque. Within this limitation, however, Kayser's account of the grotesque is thorough, and traces the principal motifs, forms, images, and features of the grotesque from the Renaissance to modern times.

The recognition that the grotesque is less a direct transcription of distorted reality than an aesthetic distortion of normal or familiar reality has led other writers on the grotesque to consider the creative processes and motives underlying the grotesque, or the psychological response to the grotesque. The psychological approach has in fact been responsible for providing various insights into the grotesque which have been extremely important in understanding both its significance as an aesthetic mode, and the particular complexities of its mechanism and effect. Although psychological criticism tends to subordinate literary analysis to human psychology, and depends ultimately upon theoretical and often mythical models of mind, it often serves to complement literary analyses, or offers theoretical structures which can be transposed into aesthetic structures, and thereby
be given objective verification in stylistic terms.

Of those studies which have attempted to account for and describe the grotesque principally in terms of the work of art itself, the majority have sought to establish their findings on the basis of content or subject-matter, and have pointed to the grotesqueness of the substance or content as the primary source of the grotesque. Attempts to establish a stylistic basis for the grotesque are practically non-existent, although certain studies of individual works and authors have provided observations and insights which are applicable in the larger context. There are also studies such as Kayser's which point to those larger structures and forms which are characteristic of the grotesque, but these structures are in effect motifs rather than elements of style. With regard to the work of art itself, therefore, it may be said that the grotesque has frequently been described in terms of content, less frequently in terms of a specific relationship between content and style, and only rarely in terms of style alone.

Kayser has assembled a catalogue of the most characteristic features, motifs, and images of the grotesque. Naturally all "monsters" belong to the animal realm of
the grotesque, one major source of which is the Biblical apocalypse with its "animals rising from the abyss." Real animals are not excluded, for, according to Kayser, "Even in animals that are familiar to him, modern man may experience the strangeness of something totally different from himself and suggestive of abysmal ominousness." The animals which Kayser cites as being "especially suitable to the grotesque" are "snakes, owls, toads, spiders—the nocturnal and creeping animals which inhabit realms apart from and inaccessible to man" (Kayser, 182). It is to such a realm that Dickens relegates Fagin in Oliver Twist:

The mud lay thick upon the stones, and a black mist hung over the streets; the rain fell sluggishly down, and everything felt cold and clammy to the touch. It seemed just the night when it befitted such a being as the Jew to be abroad. As he glided stealthily along, creeping beneath the shelter of the walls and doorways, the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved: crawling forth, by night, in search of some rich offal for a meal.36

As might also be expected, "vermin" and "insects" occupy an important position on the list, and the catalogue of animals is capped with the

... grotesque animal incarnate ... the bat ("Fledermaus"), the very name of which points to an unnatural fusion of organic realms concretized in this ghostly creature. ... It is strange even in the state of repose when its wings cover it like a coat and it hangs, head down, from a rafter, more like a piece of dead matter than a living thing [Kayser, 183].

One has to allow for Kayser's gothic and demonic bias,
but it is nevertheless true that, together with similar forms from the plant world, such creatures are standard grotesque types. It is interesting to note that these have been replaced by more familiar and "domestic" creatures in modern grotesque literature—and that the effect is equally "monstrous," which is a sure indication of the shift from substance to perspective as the source of the grotesque. The following excerpt from William Faulkner's *The Hamlet* will illustrate this point:

The smoke lay like a wall before him; beyond it he could hear the steady terrified bellowing of the cow. He ran into the smoke and toward the voice. The earth was now hot to his feet. He began to snatch them quickly up; he cried once himself, hoarse and amazed, whereupon, as though in answer, the smoke, the circumambience itself, screamed back at him. The sound was everywhere, above and beneath, funnelling downward at him; he heard the hooves and as he paused, his breath indrawn, the horse appeared, materialized furiously out of the smoke, monstrous and distorted, wild-eyed and with tossing mane, bearing down upon him. He screamed too. For an instant they yelled face to face, the wild eyes, the yellow teeth, the long gullet red with ravening gleeeful triumph, stooping at him and then on as the horse swerved without breaking, the wind, the fierce dragon-reek of its passage, blasting at his hair and garments; it was gone.

It did not even swerve. It took off almost without gathering, at full stride. The teeth, the wild eyes, the long red gullet, stooped at him, framed him out of a swirled rigidity of forelock and mane, the entire animal floating overhead in monstrous deliberation. The air was filled with furious wings and the four crescent-glints of shod hooves as, still screaming, the horse vanished beyond the ravine's lip, sucking first the cow and then himself after it as though by the violent vacuum of its passing.
As is evident from the above examples, one of the main features of the grotesque content (aside from its frequent physical abnormality) is the apparent fusion, juxtaposition, and confusion of normally separate realms. This breakdown of barriers between realms, or intrusion into a realm by an alien substance or object, is by no means restricted to the organic realms of plants and animals. In fact, perhaps one of the most characteristic motifs of the modern grotesque is the fusion of the animate, or human, with the inanimate, which Kayser terms the "technical" grotesque: the fusion of organic and mechanical elements, as well as "all the tools which unfold a dangerous life of their own" (Kayser, 183). An example of this may be seen in Bloom's Nighttown encounter with the streetsweeper in *Ulysses*:

> He looks around, darts forward suddenly. Through rising fog a dragon sandstrewer, travelling at caution, slews heavily down upon him, its huge red headlight winking, its trolley hissing in the wire.38

The fusion of the human with the nonhuman underlies a great deal of grotesque estrangement. In the case of the mechanical and human, for example, "The mechanical object is alienated by being brought to life, the human being by being deprived of it" (Kayser, 183). Accordingly, "Among the most persistent motifs of the grotesque we find human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks" (Kayser, 183). One other characteristic motif which Kayser relates to the dehumanizing tendency
of the grotesque is that of insanity:

In the insane person, human nature itself seems to have taken on ominous overtones. Once more it is as if an impersonal force, an alien and inhuman spirit, had entered the soul. The encounter with madness is one of the basic experiences of the grotesque which life forces upon us [Kayser, 184].

Various of these features are evident in the maddened figure of Armstid in The Hamlet, who is reduced to an inhuman puppet by his obsessive quest for treasure:

Then the last of the watchers would depart, leaving Armstid in the middle of his fading slope, spading himself into the waxing twilight with the regularity of a mechanical toy and with something monstrous in his unflagging effort, as if the toy were too light for what it had been set to do, or too tightly wound [Hamlet, 372].

In terms of substance or content, then, many of the images and motifs are intrinsically incongruous, particularly when the underlying structural principle is the fusion or confusion of normally separate realms. Frequently, the separate components of a grotesque image are grotesque in themselves. This is true of such basic grotesque forms as bats, snakes, vermin, and insects, where a disharmony and incongruity, related to a sense of abnormality associated with such creatures, is present even before such forms are combined with images from alien realms to produce grotesque fusions. Abnormality is of course another form of disharmony, and the grotesque therefore owes its effect not only to a basic disregard of boundaries and categories, but also to a basic disregard of "norms" and "standards" (norms of the
familiar and ordinary rather than classical norms). Thomson relates the grotesque to the "physically abnormal," and he incorporates this into his definition of the grotesque:

The abnormal is a secondary factor, of great importance but subsidiary to what I have outlined as the basic definition of the grotesque: the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response. It is significant that this clash is paralleled by the ambivalent nature of the abnormal as present in the grotesque: we might consider a secondary definition of the grotesque to be 'the ambivalently abnormal' [Thomson, 27].

Thus far it is possible to describe the grotesque in terms of content or substance, where the element of disharmony may arise out of the intrinsically abnormal, or out of the clash between realms—and in most cases, out of both simultaneously. Needless to say, it would be difficult to establish the grotesque as an independent genre on the basis of subject-matter and substance alone. Similarly, an individual work of art may contain instances of the grotesque without being grotesque in concept or execution—particularly if such instances are restricted to the content of the work in question. It is only when the grotesque permeates the work that the work as a whole can be termed grotesque, and it is only when the grotesque inheres in the very form of the work that such permeation is possible. Thus, as important, if not more important, than the radical nature of the grotesque content is the way in which the material is presented. Thomson points out that the "radicality exists
in both subject and presentation: in the subject-matter presented and in the means employed in the presentation" (Thomson, 28). We can now begin to examine the grotesque as it is manifested in structure and style.

The grotesqueness of what is presented is matched by the grotesqueness of the presentation. So pursuit of the object leads us to pursuit of the vision, and pursuit of the vision leads us to the style [Fanger, 121].

The significance of the grotesque as a self-sufficient genre, and its potential as style, does not fully reveal itself until we move from the "grotesqueness of what is presented" to the "grotesqueness of the presentation." Grotesque subject-matter, motifs, and forms may occur in a literary work without significantly altering the tenor of the work as a whole, but, as mentioned, it is only when the grotesque begins to permeate the structure, style, and point of view of a work that a grotesque mode or genre must be taken into consideration. When the entire "vision" is grotesque, we look less to the substance and more to the light cast upon it, and the grotesque must be examined as the conceptual basis underlying the vision. If the effect of estrangement so characteristic of the grotesque is largely a function of the "sudden placing of familiar elements of
reality in a peculiar and disturbing light" (Thomson, 59), then the most potent source of the grotesque becomes the perspective or point of view itself, and its ability to cast "a peculiar and disturbing light" over all that is placed under its estranging glow.

With such a grotesque perspective, there would be little need to rely upon the traditional "furniture" of the grotesque—the rats, bats, and monsters—which, like the unicorn, soon lose the disharmonious impact so necessary to the grotesque; instead, with such a perspective, the most familiar and trusted aspects and articles of our world can be turned against us in sudden, aggressively sudden, ways. What, then, constitutes a "grotesque perspective" or "grotesque vision"? And what are the techniques by which such a perspective is achieved?

As the development of such a perspective largely coincides with the recognition of the stylistic possibilities of certain comic devices and strategies, it will be useful to begin with an examination of such techniques, and to relate them in turn to the other components of the grotesque perspective.

The significance of the comic component in the art of the grotesque, especially the modern grotesque, is often misunderstood. Thomson, as noted earlier, views the grotesque as being "a clash between incompatible reactions—laughter on
the one hand and horror or disgust on the other" (Thomson, 2), and many similar definitions could be cited. This basic discrepancy or discord between the comic and the non- or anti-comic, which serves to disorient the reader, is certainly one of the most apparent features of the grotesque. But in order to understand the grotesque in all of its potential, range, and subtlety, it becomes necessary to pursue the mechanics of the comic component even further.

Comedy, and the "comic," are concepts which lend themselves to definition almost as reluctantly as the grotesque. This is particularly true of modern literature in which, as Wylie Sypher points out, "comedy goes a great deal farther—as it did for the ancients with their cruel sense of the comic." In contrast to the classical separation of genres, "The comic and the tragic views of life no longer exclude each other" (Comedy, 193). Sypher goes on to suggest that

Perhaps the most important discovery in modern criticism is the perception that comedy and tragedy are somehow akin, or that comedy can tell us many things about our situation even tragedy cannot (Comedy, 193).

The absurd, the irrational, the inexplicable, the ludicrous, and the nonsensical are inherent in the modern sense of existence to a greater extent than ever before—we exist "amid the irrational, the ludicrous, the disgusting, or the perilous" (Comedy, 197)—and our existence amid such irreconcilables turns toward the comic for its mode of
expression and in an attempt to discover meaning and value.

The comic artist

... has less resistance than the tragic artist to representing what seem incoherent and inexplicable, and thus lowers the threshold of artistic perception. After all [continues Sypher] comedy, not tragedy, admits the disorderly into the realm of art; the grotesque depends upon an irrational focus. Ours is a century of disorder and irrationalism [Comedy, 199-201].

The blurring of distinctions between the realms of tragedy and comedy in modern literature is often described in terms of tragicomedy. Kayser notes that

Beginning with the dramaturgic practice of the "Sturm und Drang" and the dramatic theory of Romanticism, tragicomedy and grotesque are conceptually related, and the history of the grotesque in the field of drama is largely one with that of tragicomedy [Kayser, 54].

Whereas the "tragicomic mixture," to borrow Ruby Cohn's phrase, provides another clue as to the nature of the basic incongruities at the heart of the grotesque, it is nevertheless true that an important distinction between the two exists. Thomson makes this distinction in observing that "Tragi-comedy points only to the fact that life is alternately tragic and comic, the world is now a vale of tears, now a circus." He sees the possibility of the fusion of the two as well as their co-presence, or "mixture," and asserts that such a fusion "has a harder message. It is that the vale of tears and the circus are one, that tragedy is in some ways comic and all comedy in some ways tragic and
pathetic." This fusion, according to Thomson, is a characteristic not of tragi-comedy in the traditional sense of the term, but rather of the grotesque, and

... is perhaps the most profound meaning of the grotesque, at least of that type of the grotesque exemplified by Lear but characteristic also of such dissimilar writers as Kafka and Beckett [Thomson, 63].

It is therefore to be expected that the proximity of the grotesque mode to the modes of the comic and tragicomic will be reflected in the techniques which are characteristic of each. As noted earlier, various critics have approached the grotesque as a branch, or sub-category, of the comic. In certain instances, of course, this is precisely the case. A fundamentally comic, or tragicomic, or for that matter, ironic, parodic, or satiric work may, for one reason or another, take a grotesque turn, without becoming grotesque as a whole. Various combinations of comedy, tragicomedy, irony, parody, satire, and the grotesque often co-exist in a single narrative, and enhance one another. The attempt to locate the point at which comedy or irony ends and the grotesque begins, or vice versa, is always difficult in such works. But just as each of the traditional modes mentioned here is perfectly capable of becoming the unifying and determining mode of discourse for a particular narrative, so too is the grotesque capable of the same.

One mode which is related to both the comic and the
The grotesque, and which is often adapted to the visions of both comedy and the grotesque, is that of caricature. Its most characteristic techniques are also important to the grotesque. According to Thomson, "Caricature may be briefly defined as the ludicrous exaggeration of characteristic or peculiar features" (Thomson, 38). Although the grotesque can be distinguished from caricature on the basis of both substance and effect, it is also true that the line that separates the two is often a thin one. The fusion of incompatible or alien elements and the ambivalent, problematic response usually associated with the grotesque are not ordinarily associated with caricature; however, caricature is based upon distortion and exaggeration in the direction of the ludicrous and abnormal, and there comes a point at which one merges with the other. At this point, the straightforward response associated with caricature becomes more complicated and ambivalent; as Thomson observes: "There is norm for caricaturistic exaggeration—a norm of abnormality" (Thomson, 38-39).

The tendency for caricature to move in the direction of the grotesque is a function of its inherently reductive quality. Tony Tanner describes caricature as "reduction by means of simplification and abbreviation." Such reduction is frequently aimed at eliciting the "latent animal in the human features," or, for that matter, the latent plant,
object, or machine (Tanner, 148). Dickens' novels represent a virtual compendium of reductive techniques, and his caricatures frequently exceed the "norm of abnormality" to become grotesque hybrids which exist in a conglomerate realm of the human and non-human. Grandmother and Grandfather Smallweed in Bleak House exemplify such caricatural excess.

Their repetitious, one-dimensional, predictable, and automatic reactions to one or two specific stimuli are typical of caricature, but the reduction carries them well over the borderline separating the world of man from the world of objects. Grandmother Smallweed is triggered by any mention of a number, which she unfailingly associates with money. Her subsequent reaction elicits an inevitable response from Grandfather Smallweed, who throws his cushion at her. The entire process is a mechanistic chain reaction:

"Ho!" says Grandfather Smallweed. "Ten minutes." Grandmother Smallweed, who has been mumbling and shaking her head at the trivets, hearing figures mentioned, connects them with money, and screeches, like a horrible old parrot without any plumage, "Ten ten-pound notes!"

Grandfather Smallweed immediately throws the cushion at her.

"Drat you, be quiet!" says the good old man.

The effect of this act of jaculation is twofold. It not only doubles up Mrs. Smallweed's head against the side of her porter's chair, and causes her to present, when extricated by her granddaughter, a highly unbecoming state of cap, but the necessary exertion recoils on Mr. Smallweed himself, whom it throws back into his porter's chair, like a broken puppet. The excellent old gentleman being, at these times, a mere clothes-bag with a black skull-cap on
the top of it, does not present a very animated appearance until he has undergone the two operations at the hands of his granddaughter, of being shaken up like a great bottle, and poked and punched like a great bolster [Bleak, 343].

A source of grotesque techniques and motifs which are related to those of caricature is the theatre. Kayser emphasizes the importance of the "commedia dell'arte" and the "Sturm und Drang" drama in the evolution of grotesque forms, and William Axton focuses upon the nineteenth-century popular theatre as a storehouse of similar techniques, many of which, according to Axton, Dickens adapted to his literary style. Such theatrical modes as farce, pantomime, and burlesque

... shared a fondness for improbability, extravagance, and comic anachronism, together with a preference for action and business to dialogue. Structurally these forms were episodic, exploiting all the possibilities of machinery, sudden changes of scene, incongruous transformations, and surprise reversals; what unity they achieved lay in their common delight with stock patterns of action: intrigue, disguise, the chase, accidental unmasking, and comic repetition with variation in motif, episode, gesture, and action [Axton, 22].

The entire action of Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* achieves its grotesque effects precisely by these means: the overall sense is one of bustling but absurd activity, in which plump policemen are transformed into bicycles in a strange and consistently irrational underworld just close enough to the surface of our world to be uncomfortably familiar. The same is true, although to a lesser degree, of
the action in Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, as well as in *The Secret Agent*.

Axton connects burlesquerie and caricature as sharing certain traits which relate them to the "involvement" of the grotesque as opposed to the "detachment" of comedy. The latter maintains a certain detachment "which is not proper to the grotesque," and in which "we find ourselves becoming more involved than we had anticipated . . ." (Axton, 31-32). Like caricature and burlesquerie, the grotesque subverts familiar footholds of convention, tradition, and reality, and the effect is one of displacement rather than of security or detachment on the part of the reader. Detachment may be effected through the grotesque, but it must emerge within a new framework, and follows upon or at least is simultaneous with the dissolution of prior frameworks and traditions.

The "reductive" quality which is present in caricature is also characteristic of theatrical burlesquerie. In the latter, the world is

... simplified to its gestic essentials, heightened by repetition, and estranged by a spectatorial point of view that refuses to provide conventional links between things or that perceives likenesses between incongruous things [Axton, 59].

Simplification and heightening are the techniques which the worlds of caricature, burlesque, farce, and pantomime share in common, and which are carried over into the mode of the grotesque.
The affinity of the grotesque for the theatrical mode is discernible in other ways as well. Many of the important motifs and forms of the grotesque are the stock-in-trade of the popular theatre, as is apparent in the following brief description of this theatre by Axton:

There were inventions of unlikely beings and objects tumbling about amid incompatible juxtapositions of everyday things. There, too, eccentric figures gamboled in the caricatural, gestic modes of pantomime and burlesque or pursued their humors and crotchets with the mad consistency of "farceurs."

It is a mode involving

... the sprightly transpositions of animate and inanimate worlds; where pantomime clowns became animals, vegetables, and objects, and where machinery, inanimate things, and vegetable life turned into people or took on some extraordinary activity of their own [Axton, 28-29].

The affinity between the grotesque and these theatrical techniques is apparent in Kayser's comments on the dramatic elements of "suddenness and surprise" and the "gestic style" which characterize the grotesque. He defines "gestic" in terms of visual art: "A completely frozen attitude in one part of the drawing may suddenly give way to the most eccentric movements in another" (Kayser, 39). Transposed into literary, or at least dramatic terms, "gestic" refers to rapid, sudden, and eccentric movements which are out of proportion to their context, and which suddenly and unexpectedly intrude or explode within a previously static scene. One of Faulkner's Southern "golems," Eck Snopes of
The *Hamlet*, provides an excellent example of "gestic" movement, bringing to his new position of blacksmith an uncontrolled and unceasing energy of both physical and verbal action which completely unsettles the scene:

"Morning, morning," he said, his little bright eyes darting. "Want that horse shod, hey? Good, good: save the hoof and save all. Good-looking animal. Seen a considerable better one in a field a piece back. But no matter; love me, love my horse, beggars can't be choosers, if wishes was horseflesh we'd all own thoroughbreds. What's the matter?" he said to the man in the apron. He paused, though still he seemed to be in violent motion, as though the attitude and position of his garments gave no indication whatever of what the body within them might be doing—indeed, if it were still inside them at all.

... the shoe shaped and cooled in the tub, the newcomer darted in again. It was as if he took not only Houston but himself too by complete surprise—that weasel-like quality of existing independent of his clothing so that although you could grasp and hold that you could not restrain the body itself from doing what it was doing until the damage had been done—a furious already dissipating concentration of energy vanishing the instant after the intention took shape, the newcomer darting between Houston and the raised hoof and clapping the shoe onto it and touching the animal's quick with the second blow of the hammer on the nail and being hurled, hammer and all, into the shrinking-tub by the plunging horse which Houston and the man in the apron finally backed into a corner and held while Houston jerked nail and shoe free and flung them into the corner and backed the horse savagely out of the shop, the hound rising and resuming its position quietly at proper heeling distance behind the man [Hamlet, 64-65].

The theatrical or dramatic texture of the grotesque vision might also be explained in part by the close relation-
ship of the grotesque imagination to the visual and physical. The term "grotesque" is usually associated with the visual arts, and was coined to describe a form of visual art. As Thomson remarks, "There is nothing abstract about the grotesque" (Thomson, 57).

These grotesque techniques which resemble and often begin with the techniques of caricature or the theatre are principally important to the art of the grotesque at the levels of characterization, action, and setting, and to a certain extent as a basis for the larger structures of a grotesque narrative. The underlying "reductive" qualities of heightening and simplification are important in terms of a grotesque perspective or point of view as well, however, and will therefore play a part in the consideration of a grotesque style.

Those qualities which provide the basis for a grotesque form or perspective which is not necessarily dependent upon the subject-matter or content, or even upon a certain relationship between content and form, are difficult to isolate, particularly in the abstract. However, a comparison with the techniques associated with the cinema is useful in this respect, and certain of the techniques central to the film are also important to the perspective and style of the grotesque mode. Referring to modern and experimental literature, Thomson asks
The potential of cinematic techniques for the grotesque is almost boundless. The most obvious affinity exists between the visual emphasis of each. And in a mode which often stresses the "object-ive" tendencies of humans, what more suitable technique than the detached objectivity of the "camera eye"? The detachment proper to the grotesque, however, is that "detachment" which in fact gains its most potent effects through a sudden and unexpected involvement in a scene or action, and which is achieved through an objectivity which estranges and provokes: a gratuitous and irrelevant detail suddenly comes into focus, becoming the centre of attention; it may be "zoomed-in" on, or "blown-up" out of all proportion to its context or value. If the detail is normally a part of a larger whole, it may suddenly appear by this method to take on an independent, and therefore ludicrous, or menacing, or ludicrous and menacing, existence. Events may be put into "slow-motion," or "fast-motion" (resembling the theatrical "gestic" style); flashbacks, time-lapses, time-shifts, discontinuous or disjointed chronology, and a confusion between time as "temps" and time as "durée" become possible.
Thus far the main emphasis has been placed on the grotesque as a mode of alienation and estrangement, and upon the substance and techniques of the grotesque as means of breaking down, estranging, fusing, confusing, and fragmenting familiar reality and its conventions, thereby rendering the known as unknown in an aggressive and often hostile manner. This aspect of the grotesque is certainly present, but the picture is still incomplete. This is especially true when we consider the gradual movement away from the "gothic" or "demonic" grotesque and toward the comic-grotesque during the past century.

On the one hand, then, the grotesque effect is one of alienation: "Something which is familiar and trusted is suddenly made strange and disturbing" (Thomson, 58). The sudden shock and impact of the grotesque amplifies its aggressiveness, and as well as being thus suited as a weapon used in the contexts of satire, irony, parody, and burlesque, the grotesque

... may also be used to bewilder and disorient, to bring the reader up short, jolt him out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective [Thomson, 58].

On the other hand, this sudden recasting of familiar reality, or reorientation of perspective, which underlies the effect of estrangement or alienation, is not necessarily seen as a movement ending with the breakdown of perspective
and reality. Various critics, particularly in the light of the comic component in the grotesque, and of the psychological functions performed by the comic-grotesque, have seen the "breaking-down" of experience as but a preliminary step in a process rather than the end-result of a unilateral shift. The term "step" is in fact misleading—in the grotesque, the breaking down and restructuring of familiar reality actually occur simultaneously.

Commenting on G. K. Chesterton's assessment of the grotesque, Arthur Clayborough states that

Apart from being a reflection of reality, the grotesque is thus in the second place an artistic device which does not so much serve to draw our attention from the natural world as to make us see the world with new eyes in a way which is not less but more truthful than the usual attitude of casual acceptance.

Clayborough goes on to note that the

... chief point of interest in Chesterton's remarks on the grotesque is the idea that the grotesque may be employed as a means of presenting the world in a new light without falsifying it [Clayborough, 59-60].

Various critics have more or less supported this concept of the grotesque as a way of seeing the world anew, and of "restructuring" reality, although few have been willing to examine the means by which this process occurs.

One means has already been suggested: the association of value and significance to the presence of peripeteia, and the corresponding association of peripeteia with a "coercive"
style such as is exemplified by the grotesque. Another means is suggested by the comic component which often characterizes the grotesque. It is interesting to note Ian Watt's statement that

\[ \ldots \text{it is surely this consistently comic style that characterizes } \text{The Secret Agent, from the brilliant description of Verloc's walk to the Embassy in chap. 2, to that of the murder itself. To define the varying elements of this style is one task which the critics do not yet seem to have attempted.} \ldots \]

I agree with Watt's contention that a closer analysis of the style is a principal key to a fuller understanding of \textit{The Secret Agent}; but I disagree that this style is essentially comic in nature, and offer the grotesque as the proper schema with which, in Watt's words, "To define the varying elements of this style."

The distinction between the comic and the grotesque is not always clear, and the concept of the former has been expanded in the hands of certain critics to include much of what certain other critics would assign to the latter. It is perhaps here that the psychologically oriented approaches to the comic and the grotesque serve as the most useful means of discrimination, providing certain insights that other approaches are incapable of discerning.

Thomson isolates what seems to be a principal distinction in terms of

\[ \ldots \text{the presence of one cause of laughter which} \]
one might not admit to be connected with the comic. This is the purely defensive laughter with which a person seeks to ward off emotional shock or distress. In its extreme form, this sort of laughter takes on overtones of hysteria; but even in a milder form, the nervous laugh, it cannot be properly seen as a reaction to the comic. Laughter purely in defense means that the person concerned does not find anything comic in whatever causes it [Thomson, 53-54].

According to Thomson, then, laughter in the face of the grotesque is not "free" or "undisturbed"—the reaction is confused by a simultaneous recognition of that aspect of the grotesque which is incompatible with the comic, "its horrifying, disgusting or frightening aspect" (Thomson, 53-54).

In terms of the psychological effect associated with the grotesque, the process involving the "breaking down and restructuring of familiar reality" is equivalent to a dynamic process of interaction between author and material, and material and reader, involving the liberation from fears and inhibitions. As implied in the above discussion of laughter, however, the response is not straightforward or unilateral, and neither is the effect. This raises the question "of whether the grotesque has a liberating or an inhibiting, tension-producing effect" (Thomson, 59). Is the non-comic elements—the gothic, or disgusting, or horrible—undercut and thereby controlled by the comic element, or does the opposite occur, and the horrifying or disgusting cut across a basically comic vision that "the guffaw becomes a grimace" (Thomson, 59)?
The most plausible analysis of the grotesque paradox in terms of its psychological function and significance is put forth by Michael Steig in his article "Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis." Steig begins by examining the concept developed by L. B. Jennings (in _The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose_) that a "disarming mechanism" is at work in the grotesque, by means of which, according to Jennings, "The formation of fear images is intercepted, at its very onset, by the comic tendency, and the resulting object reflects this interaction of opposing forces" (quoted in Steig, 255). Whereas such an explanation seems logical, Steig pursues his definition yet further, and moves on to the principle enunciated by Thomas Cramer in his study of the grotesque in the works of E. T. A. Hoffmann (_Das Groteske bei E. T. A. Hoffmann_): "the grotesque is the feeling of anxiety aroused by means of the comic pushed to an extreme," but conversely, "the grotesque is the defeat, by means of the comic, of anxiety in the face of the inexplicable" (quoted in Steig, 256). As Steig points out,

This formulation of the complementarity of the fearsome and the comic allows us to move beyond the rather mechanical notion of the comic as solely a defensive measure against anxiety: in the grotesque they are more complexly related, in that the extravagant use of the comic can create anxiety, as well as relieve it [Steig, 256].

This simultaneity (or what Steig designates as "complementarity") and ambivalence of response was intimated
earlier in the discussion of caricature, when Thomson pointed out that "a norm of abnormality" existed, and that what seemed at one moment to promote detachment, the next moment involved the perceiver in an uncomfortable and perhaps threatening manner. Or rather than speak in terms of a succession of responses, it is more accurate to say that a multileveled response occurs simultaneously:

... on one level, we will respond to the distorted, unhuman qualities of the character with anxiety, because they are strange and alien and yet seem to resemble human qualities; but at the same time, the fact that these qualities are recognizably a denial of humanity to the character allows us to treat him as though he were separate from our own reality, and thus unthreatening [Steig, 256].

Steig points to this paradoxical nature of the grotesque as the feature which distinguishes the grotesque from the comic —in pure comedy the defense is complete, and detachment is achieved, whereas the grotesque is "double-edged," and both "allays and intensifies" the fears, anxieties, and inhibitions which are associated with the response.

Although Dickens' characters—Fagin, Krook, Heep, for instance—are usually cited as examples of grotesque characterization prompted by psychological motives, one of the best examples may be found in Conrad's Under Western Eyes, in the person (or rather form) of the double-agent Nikita: a "creature, so grotesque as to set town dogs barking at its mere sight . . ." (267). The comical but frightening
grotesqueness of "Necator," as he is nicknamed, is registered by Razumov in his first encounter with him:

    The abrupt squeaks of the fat man seemed to proceed from that thing like a balloon he carried under his overcoat. The stolidity of his attitude, the big feet, the lifeless, hanging hands, the enormous bloodless cheek, the thin wisps of hair straggling down the fat nape of the neck, fascinated Razumov into a stare on the verge of horror and laughter [266].

Although rendered flabby and absurd, and "reduced to the proportions of a squeaking toy" (225), the vicious monstrosity of Nikita remains barely endurable, and his attack on Razumov after the latter's confession is brutal and horrible.

    The concept of the grotesque which emerges within a psychological framework is therefore that of a mode which provokes and brings to the surface our fears and anxieties, where they are rendered less harmful or inoperative through comic management. The management is incomplete, however, and the effect is therefore ambiguous and ambivalent—this, in conjunction with the fact that it is often the comic pushed to an extreme which elicits these fears and anxieties in the first place, serves to distinguish the grotesque from other modes.

    The psychological concept of the grotesque can be related to the third part of the definition put forth by Kayser:

        In spite of all the helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces which lurk in and
behind our world and have power to estrange it, the truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation. The darkness has been sighted, the ominous powers discovered, the incomprehensible forces challenged. And thus we arrive at a final interpretation of the grotesque: an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world [Kayser, 188].

Although Kayser couches his definition in characteristically gothic terminology, he nevertheless makes explicit the link between the creative motive and the psychological response of the reader.

The psychological approach provides the most detailed exploration of "the processes involved in our response to the grotesque" (Steig, 260), and serves to complement the concept of the grotesque as a mode which operates dynamically as well as reflectively and statically. It is particularly useful, according to Thomson, in that "it accounts in psychological terms for the essential paradox of the grotesque: that it is both liberating and tension-producing at the same time" (Thomson, 61).

The psychological concept of the grotesque would therefore seem to support the overall concept of the grotesque as the simultaneous breaking down and restructuring of familiar reality, accomplished through the radical presentation of a subject-matter which is in itself frequently, but not necessarily, abnormal, and which aims neither at complete alienation nor complete detachment, but rather plays one against the other in order to effect a readjustment of perspective.
toward the familiar, commonplace world. In short, the grotesque is a means of transforming the existing world.

Although the grotesque mode flourishes in many art forms, and although many of its most characteristic features and motifs are equally apparent and effective in each of these, it is also true that certain unique aspects of each form are especially predisposed towards the grotesque. By examining some of the aspects of language and literary discourse that seem to have a particular affinity for the grotesque, the extent to which the grotesque is a verbal phenomenon in any given text will become more apparent.

Language and literary discourse in general are as subject to the distortions and discrepancies of the grotesque as any other human creation or structure; and insofar as language or discourse is dependent upon conventions, prone to clichés and stereotype expressions, subject to hyperbole, multiple meaning, ambiguity, figurative distortion, and capable of being proliferated along a tangential course of development, it is particularly suitable as a grotesque medium.

As Thomson points out, the grotesque may actually originate in the "play" with language, as is frequently the
case in the works of such writers as Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, Christian Morgenstern, and James Joyce. Such "play" also goes beyond mere whim and caprice, often being motivated by the belief that language inhibits expression, imprisons creativity, and, because of its conventional and arbitrary nature, falsifies experience. Thomson notes that from this point of view,

Morgenstern's brilliantly witty games with words are . . . devious devices of alienation, and at their most radical succeed in producing in the reader a strange sensation—making one suddenly doubt one's comfortable relationship with the language—not unlike the sense of disorientation and confusion associated with the grotesque [Thomson, 65].

Although it is unlikely that the pure play with language, irrespective of content, stands behind more than a small fraction of grotesque literature, it is probable that this aspect plays some part at least in most literary grotesquerie; even more significant is the clarity with which the extreme cases demonstrate that specific elements of language facilitate and encourage the development of the grotesque.

Accordingly, the grotesqueness of a given work may be described in part on a verbal basis, particularly in terms of those elements which are exploited by the writer for grotesque ends, or which, because of their natural affinity for the grotesque, reflect the concerns of the grotesque vision and perspective. In either case, the elements are the same, and
may be traced from certain figurative devices through to an overall narrative "voice."

The figure of speech best suited to the grotesque is the simile, which serves to indicate the strangeness of the familiar in its ability to link one commonplace thing or feature with another quite incongruous thing or feature. Equally important is the fact that the simile is able to hold the two things being compared in parity or suspension. A particularly unsettling example of such figurative ambivalence is the following description from Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*:

He got out of bed in sections, like a poorly made automaton, and carried his hands into the bathroom. He turned on the cold water. When the basin was full, he plunged his hands in up to the wrists. They lay quietly on the bottom like a pair of strange aquatic animals. When they were thoroughly chilled and began to crawl about, he lifted them out and hid them in a towel.

He was cold. He ran hot water into the tub and began to undress, fumbling with the buttons of his clothing as though he were undressing a stranger. He was naked before the tub was full enough to get in and he sat down on a stool to wait. He kept his enormous hands folded quietly on his belly. Although absolutely still, they seemed curbed rather than resting.

Here the reductive quality of the figurative equation is especially apparent in the vision of the hands taking on a grotesque life of their own, which, together with the animal and mechanical imagery, effect the estrangement of the human realm.
The examples could be multiplied; both Dickens and Conrad make frequent use of the transfiguring potential of the simile, metaphor, and "as if" formula. Whereas the simile has the virtue of parity, suspension, and ambivalence, the metaphor is especially suited to the sudden and unexpected transformation of the commonplace. All of these figurative means are particularly devastating when applied reductively to man. The apparent fragmentation and independence of normally coherent aspects or parts, the sense of automation or mechanization, and the mingling of the human and non-human, all of which are present in the above example from West's *The Day of the Locust*, are also evident in similar descriptions in Dickens and Conrad. Dickens' Mr. Chadband, for example, is described as being:

. . . a large yellow man, with a fat smile, and a general appearance of having a good deal of train oil in his system. . . . Mr. Chadband moves softly and cumbrously, not unlike a bear who has been taught to walk upright. He is very much embarrassed about the arms, as if they were inconvenient to him, and he wanted to grovel [Bleak, 316-317].

Faulkner uses similar means of description in characterizing many of the grotesques in *The Hamlet*, especially the ominous and deadly Flem Snopes:

. . . a thick squat soft man of no establishable age between twenty and thirty, with a broad still face containing a tight seam of mouth stained slightly at the corners with tobacco, and eyes the color of stagnant water, and projecting from among the other features in startling and sudden paradox, a tiny predatory nose like the beak of a small hawk.
It was as though the original nose had been left off by the original designer or draftsman and the unfinished job taken over by someone of a radically different school or perhaps by some viciously maniacal humorist or perhaps by one who had had only time to clap into the center of the face a frantic and desperate warning [Hamlet, 52].

In his analysis of Faulkner's Snopes Trilogy, Lewis A. Lawson employs the term "meiosis" to describe the process of verbal reduction illustrated by the above example. Mei­osis, according to Lawson, is a form of diminution, which in turn is "any kind of speech which tends, either by the force of low or vulgar imagery, or by other suggestion, to depress an object below its usually accepted status." Such descriptions result in the primary object absorbing the contemptibility of the secondary object with which it is being compared. (In light of the frequent references to obesity, and the association of obesity with certain types of animals and with the inanimate, in The Secret Agent, it is interesting to note that "meiosis" is the Greek rhetorical term for "the technique of rendering devils flabby" [Lawson, 45-46].) At the same time, as the figurative attacks upon such characters as Dickens' Fagin, Conrad's Necator, and Faulkner's Snopes make clear, the technique of meiosis, and of grotesque characterization in general, serves also to intensify the ominous nature of certain figures, and to increase as well as allay the anxiety or fear effected by their presence.

As well as exploiting the conventional norms of
language, such as the cliché and the relationship between literal and figurative dimensions of meaning, the writer may also employ other aspects of language as vehicles for the grotesque. The propensity toward a certain type of imagery may be accompanied by the tendency toward extravagant proliferation of such imagery, in which the grotesque is effected through the use of excessive and gratuitous detail.

A technique closely associated with language, being itself defined as a "play on words," is the pun. Both the pun and the double-entendre represent potent means of fusing conflicting elements, especially the comic and anti-comic. The grotesque possibilities of these verbal turns are best illustrated by the puns directed against Stevie in The Secret Agent, as, for example, when the narrator remarks in chapter one that "he was difficult to dispose of, that boy" (8); or when Winnie warns Stevie "not to dirty his clothes unduly in the country," followed by the remonstrance: "'You know you do get yourself very untidy when you get a chance, Stevie!'" (189).

As well as turning language and discourse to grotesque ends by means of such devices as figurative language, meiosis, proliferation, puns and double-entendres, it is also possible to achieve a grotesque effect through incongruities between character and dialogue, and between dialogue and situation. Just as the grotesque actions and features of a
character are reached through an extreme caricature, so too is the dialogue of such characters rendered grotesque through extreme parody. Chapter three of *The Secret Agent* offers a good example of this type of grotesque discourse; the narrative oscillates between grotesque dialogue (reduced to a disembodied monologue in Conrad's world of non-communication) and grotesque description:

"I have always dreamed," he [Yundt] mouthed, fiercely, "of a band of men absolute in their resolve to discard all scruples in the choice of means, strong enough to give themselves frankly the name of destroyers, and free from the taint of that resigned pessimism which rots the world. No pity for anything on earth, including themselves, and death enlisted for good and all in the service of humanity—that's what I would have liked to see."

His little bald head quivered, imparting a comical vibration to the wisp of white goatee. His enunciation would have been almost totally unintelligible to a stranger. His worn-out passion, resembling in its impotent fierceness the excitement of a senile sensualist, was badly served by a dried throat and toothless gums which seemed to catch the tip of his tongue.[42-43].

The utterances of the characters are subjected to the same grotesque distortions that characterize their features and actions. The syntax fragments their bodies, actions, and utterances into series of discrete, essentially unrelated phenomena, dissociating spirit and flesh, severing intention from act and motive from speech, stylizing gesture and expression until the characters take on the mindless formality of automata.

These various aspects of language and discourse might
be considered together in terms of what Axton calls the "grotesque voice." According to Axton, the grotesque voice is "ordinarily a descriptive mode, which is marked by a discrepant use of language to render strange the familiar object-world by discordance and incongruity" (Axton, 155). Axton goes on to define this "voice" on the basis of its imagistic and descriptive qualities, pointing out that:

... the grotesque voice ... is mainly deployed in scenic description, where it may be identified by the presence of incongruous imagery to depict commonplace objects. In particular, grotesquerie takes the form of figurative transposition or juxtaposition of incompatible or discrepant realms, much in the manner of theatrical pantomime: the inanimate and animate, the bestial and the human, the familiar and the exotic. Or it may equally involve the intermixture of commonplace items drawn from two or more widely separated contexts, [or] the fantastic proliferation of concrete realistic details far in excess of any descriptive necessity. [Axton, 155-156].

Peter Steele has remarked of Dickens that "grotesquerie is something in Dickens's voice as well as something in his eye" (Steele, 21); this same observation could well be applied to The Secret Agent, and various critics, among them Albert Guérard, J. Hillis Miller, Norman Holland, and U. C. Knoepflmacher, have referred to the particular "voice" which characterizes the novel. It is toward an understanding of this "voice," and its contribution to the grotesque vision and perspective in The Secret Agent, that the rest of the thesis is devoted.
PART III

1.

THE SECRET AGENT: GROTESQUE CONTENT

The plot of The Secret Agent centres upon the attempted bombing of Greenwich Observatory, and begins with Mr. Vladimir's demand that Verloc create an anarchist-type incident. Mr. Verloc in turn sends his half-wit brother-in-law Stevie, bomb in hand, on a mission to blow up the Observatory; Stevie accidentally trips over the root of a tree in the park adjacent to his target and blows himself to bits. The failure to complete the attack against the Observatory presents no obstacle to the sequence of events which has been initiated. Even the strictly "political" plot is continued by the explosion: the target is missed, but an irrational explosion nevertheless occurs, thereby fulfilling the principal demand of Mr. Vladimir. More important, however, at least with regard to the principal characters in the novel, is the death of Stevie. This fact serves to intertwine the domestic affairs of the Verloc household with the political plot, both of which are further knit by the singular focus of the subsequent police investigation.

The political implications of the story which emerge early in the novel are gradually subordinated to the "domestic" implications which Stevie's death introduces; although
anarchists, revolutionaries, embassy officials, political figures, and policemen responsible for anarchist activities crowd the scene, the sequence of events culminates in two main incidents primarily connected to the domestic rather than the political plot: Winnie's murder of Verloc, and her subsequent suicide. The political plot continues along its ironic curve, coming full circle to destroy Verloc and render Mr. Vladimir ineffective as a political force. Our attention has long since shifted almost fully to the Verloc household and its bizarre goings on, however, and there is a great deal of truth to the Assistant Commissioner's observation that "'From a certain point of view we are here in the presence of a domestic drama'" (222).

From yet another point of view, The Secret Agent might appear at first to have been composed with an eye to the popular market. The bomb-explosion, murder, and suicide; the presence of revolutionaries, anarchists, policemen, and secret agents; and the criminal investigation, political intrigue, and air of mystery—all of these elements would seem to indicate the melodramatic plot of the crime novel or "thriller." In fact, Albert Guérard affirms that with The Secret Agent Conrad "virtually created the genre of the serious psycho-political mystery novel" (Guérard, 220). It soon becomes apparent, however, that none of these elements are being employed merely for their own sake (Guérard is
careful to use the adjective "serious"), although early reception of the novel tended to question this, and Conrad even felt compelled to formally defend the "seriousness" of his purpose in the "Preface" to The Secret Agent:

I confess that it makes a grisly skeleton. But still I will submit that telling Winnie Verloc's story to its anarchistic end of utter desolation, madness and despaér, and telling it as I have told it here, I have not intended to commit a gratuitous outrage on the feelings of mankind [xv].

At the other extreme, it is possible to relate the narrative to historical fact: specifically, to an actual bombing attempt which occurred on February 14, 1894, and has since come to be known as the "Greenwich Bomb Outrage of 1894." An anarchist, or rather a man supposed by the police to be an anarchist, named Martial Bourdin, died shortly after the bomb he was carrying exploded prematurely in Greenwich—it is speculated that his target was the Greenwich Observatory. The connection between the historical event and the fictional account in The Secret Agent is supported by various similarities and facts, not the least of which is Conrad's explicit reference in his "Preface" to "the already old story of the attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory," followed by his declaration that "This book is that story, reduced to manageable proportions, its whole course suggested and centred around the absurd cruelty of the Greenwich Park explosion" (x, xii). Further support for the historical reference and framework of the novel is offered by Ian Watt,
who points out that "The years between the Greenwich explo-
sion and the writing of The Secret Agent were certainly the
golden age of political 'agents provocateurs'" [Casebook, 238].

The historical and topical aspects of the narrative
are certainly worth considering, but to conclude with Norman
Sherry that "the novel derives undoubtedly from Conrad's
knowledge of the Bomb Outrage and of anarchist activity in
London at that time" accentuates these aspects in a way that
is as untenable as the view that the vision is purely gratui-
tous in purpose; both views ignore the narrative complexities
of the novel as a whole.

A true sense of the narrative lies somewhere between
these extremes, although the reconciliation of perspective,
style, subject, and content is not, as it turns out, simply
a matter of compromise. Ian Watt's qualification of the his-
torical reference in which he states that "although Joseph
Conrad's fiction nearly always started from some germ of
reality—an anecdote, an historical event, an incident seen
or a conversation overheard—by the time the work was fin-
ished it usually disclaimed any relation to actual persons,
places or events" (Casebook 229), may serve to put the
factual connection in a proper perspective, but certainly
doesn't diminish the literal concerns of the narrative. It
is apparent that even without the "Bomb Outrage of 1894" the
narrative is "realistic" in the sense that its urban setting
is distinctly modern and familiar, its characters represent possibilities within the broad social vision that the novel presents, and its subject is topical.

In the light of the above, a strong critical gravitation toward thematic interpretation based upon the literal concerns of The Secret Agent has persisted from the beginning, although recent criticism has been increasingly turned toward other dimensions of the narrative. I believe that both approaches have a place in a comprehensive reading of The Secret Agent; just as the thoroughness and imaginative continuity of the literal vision cannot be ignored, so too is there strong and consistent evidence throughout the novel for interpretations which ultimately transcend the literal concerns. I will first of all examine the possibilities and limitations of those interpretations which focus upon the explicit subjects and themes of The Secret Agent, and then move toward a conception of the novel which will also take account of those aspects of the narrative which seem to elude such interpretations.

These narrative "difficulties," particularly those concerning style and point of view, are apparent in an analysis of The Secret Agent by Irving Howe (included in his Politics and the Novel) which is relevant to various aspects of the discussion to this point. Howe's study provides an example of an approach which focuses upon the literal
concerns of the novel, which sees Conrad's treatment of his material as being gratuitous in purpose, and which inadvertently demonstrates the necessity for an approach which, unlike his own, does not view style as an adjunct to content and subject.

In brief, Howe takes the narrative literally, and approaches *The Secret Agent* as a story which has political anarchy and political anarchists as its main concern. Howe asks of a narrative that it be "true to life"—and in this particular case, that it be "true to the moral complexities of political behaviour." The vision of *The Secret Agent* which emerges through this perspective is interesting and informative:

What one misses in *The Secret Agent* is some dramatic principle of contradiction, some force of resistance; in a word, a moral positive to serve literary ends. Conrad's ironic tone suffuses every sentence, nagging at our attention to the point where one yearns for the relief of direct statement almost as if it were an ethical good.

And this is true even for Conrad's development of the theme that the most deviant political figures are driven to destruction by their desire, shared with the vast sluggish mass of men, for normal and domestic convenience. That the very motives which lead one man to a suburb can entangle another in a conspiracy, that the extremists of politics can be as mediocre in their personal standards as those who find safety in the cant of political moderation—this is a brilliant insight. And yet in its very brilliance, it disfigures the novel. *The Secret Agent* is surrounded by a thick fog of irony which steadily eats away at the features, the energies, the very vitals of its major characters. What the English narrator does in *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad's style overdoses in *The Secret Agent*. It
is one thing for a novelist gradually to deprive his characters of their pretensions or illusions, another thing to deny them the mildest claims to dignity and redemption. The novel forces one to conclude either that Conrad's fable is not worth troubling about, which I take to be manifestly untrue, or that his irony has turned in upon itself, becoming facile through its pervasiveness and lack of grading. . . . So peevish an irony must have its source less in zeal or anger than in some deep distemper [Howe, 96].

What is particularly interesting about Howe's evaluation is the underlying assumption that the content, or substance of the story takes priority, and that the style, or way in which the content is treated and presented, should correspond to the subject in question, but in a supporting role. In other words, style is seen as secondary to subject and content. Howe is not objecting to the ironic point of view per se—irony represents a valid correspondence between form and content—what he objects to is the dominance of style in the narrative, or at least to the extent to which style and perspective determine the vision. What I see as a justifiable emphasis, Howe views as excess: "What the English narrator does in Under Western Eyes, Conrad's style overdoes in The Secret Agent." This stylistic pressure, from Howe's perspective, can be accounted for in only one of two ways: either "Conrad's fable is not worth troubling about," or else Conrad has failed to control his own excess, and "his irony has turned in upon itself."

What is implicit in Howe's analysis is another choice:
either Howe is correct in his belief that the narrative suffers from an imbalance of subject and style, or else The Secret Agent as a whole cannot be accounted for at the level of subject and content alone.

There are fairly obvious indicators even at the most literal levels of the story which suggest that all is not what it might appear to be insofar as the "political" plot is concerned. The main plot and its central events, as I have already suggested, possess only peripheral connections with political anarchism. The sequence of events is initiated by an ambassador of a reactionary foreign government, who is anything but an anarchist; the sequence is continued by Mr. Verloc, whose "mission in life" is "the protection of the social mechanism, not its perfectionment or even its criticism" (15); and the step leading to the explosion is executed by a halfwit.

Most readers would in all likelihood emerge from a reading of the novel not with a sense of moral concern regarding political anarchism, but rather with images of a grisly and absurd explosion-death, a highly charged and partly ludicrous murder scene, and a pathetic suicide, all outlined against the background of a dark, dank, and foggy metropolis in which the bonds of everyday normality and reality have been loosened. One of the more memorable scenes in the novel is the journey of Winnie's mother to the alms-
house in the grotesque cab, a scene which is totally separate from the political concerns of the novel, and in fact is basically irrelevant to the plot as a whole.

The political concerns must be seen in the context of larger concerns. It is not that political anarchy and the political anarchists are not really a part of the theme; rather, it is that "anarchy" is not restricted to the political realm, and the "anarchists" are not limited to the self-proclaimed anarchists. What emerges, therefore, is less a political than a social vision. As Elliott Gose points out, "The Secret Agent is less about the shortcomings of a group of conscious anarchists than about the failure of a whole society disintegrating into a state of unconscious anarchy" (Gose, 40). This view is also held by J. Hillis Miller, who states that

> The vision of society which informs The Secret Agent is not that of a stable civilization threatened by the absurd criminality of a lot of "half-crazy" anarchists. Conrad sees all society as rotten at the core, as a vast half-deliberate conspiracy of police, thieves, anarchists, tradesmen, aristocratic blue-stockings, ministers of state, and ambassadors of foreign powers. 47

The anarchistic views of the novel's self-proclaimed revolutionaries are therefore only the political manifestations of a larger situation, in which anarchy goes beyond a political philosophy to become a moral condition affecting
all of society; it is a situation in which

The entire universe of moral values is falling apart; the world of The Secret Agent, from top to bottom, from the official spheres to the domestic to the underground ranks of conspirators, is one of profound moral dislocation and anarchy. The isolation of the characters, the pursuit of self-centred interests (although frequently carried out "under the banner of faithful public service" [Hagan, 160]), and the breakdown or lack of communication between characters, are a few of the more obvious manifestations of the themes of moral and social anarchy which run throughout the novel. Each character in the story attempts to keep intact a separate little world that he or she has created.

The pursuit of individual interests is no less true of the police than of the revolutionaries. The Assistant Commissioner's motive for solving the mystery of the explosion and capturing those responsible for it has little if anything to do with a sense of duty toward social justice. In fact, he is not really concerned that he capture those responsible—what he is really concerned about is that Michaelis, whether guilty or innocent, does not get arrested. For if he is, the friendship of Michaelis' lady-patroness which is enjoyed by the Assistant Commissioner's wife would dissolve, and the Assistant Commissioner would in turn find himself further harassed by his already nagging wife: "If the fellow is laid hold of again," he thought, 'she will
never forgive me'" (112). This leads to the ludicrous duel of wits between the Assistant Commissioner and Chief Inspector Heat (whose very title of "Chief Inspector" seems to usurp the rank of his superior). Heat's motives in the pursuit of justice are as self-centred as those of the Assistant Commissioner; but while the Assistant Commissioner wants Michaelis left alone, Heat seeks immediately to have the fat ex-convict arrested, for "besides being legal and expedient, the arrest of Michaelis solved a little personal difficulty which worried Chief Inspector Heat somewhat" (121). According to "the rules of the game," Heat reasons, when a crime is committed, someone (it doesn't really matter who) must go to jail, and what better person than a natural suspect such as Michaelis:

This being the strong feeling of Inspector Heat, it appeared to him just and proper that this affair should be shunted off its obscure and inconvenient track, leading goodness knows where, into a quiet (and lawful) siding called Michaelis [123].

That the case is finally solved, and the right people apprehended or discovered, is a matter more of pure chance (Stevie's coat-label) than of justice being carried out rationally and consciously. The actions of the police, although mitigated somewhat by their comic appearance and behaviour, are in fact no less if not more morally reprehensible than the anarchists' attitudes. Distinctions are soon levelled in this particular solution of individual atoms
seeking self-equilibrium.

It soon becomes apparent, therefore, that the concept of anarchy must be expanded beyond the narrow bounds of its political connotations to include the entire spectrum of the social vision and its components in the novel, an expansion which is recognized by Avrom Fleishman in his statement that

The Secret Agent is, then, not as much a novel about political anarchism as it is a novel about social anarchy. It is a dramatic portrayal of the sociological concept of "anomie"—radical disorder in the social structure and consequent personal dislocation.49

As was implied in the analysis of the motives behind the actions of the Assistant Commissioner and Heat, the situation of social disintegration, and of individual self-interest and isolation, is made more ironic by the emphasis on the apparent social orders and connections which link the various characters one to the other in a series of social "circles." Each character in the novel is a member of at least one, and often more than one circle, ranging from the domestic or family circle of the Verlocs through the revolutionary circle, the police circle, the political circle, to the social group gathered beneath the roof of Michaelis' lady-patroness. Michaelis belongs both to the latter and to the circle of revolutionaries; the Assistant Commissioner moves through various circles in the course of the story; and of course Verloc, who is shopkeeper, police-spy, embassy secret agent, revolutionary, husband and step-father—each
"ostensibly" and "nominally," to borrow two terms from the opening paragraph of the novel—while at the same time remaining totally self-interested, is the perfect representative of the "social" situation: he is the ironic "Everyman" at the heart of the vision.

According to J. Hillis Miller, the vision of society and its "web of secret connections" presented in The Secret Agent is symbolized by London itself. That Conrad's London is appropriate to the conception of society displayed within its boundaries is evident in several ways. As Conrad himself states in his "Author's Preface" to the novel:

There was room enough there to place any story, depth enough there for any passion, variety enough there for any setting; darkness enough to bury five millions of lives [xii].

It is also true, however, and perhaps even more significant in the final analysis, that it is in terms of the setting (at the level of content rather than style) that the narrative exerts its most noticeable tendency away from the literal, and begins to take on a significance over and above the themes of either political or social anarchy. Again, this is not to say that these themes are dispensable; in fact, the theme of anarchy is not dispensed with at all—it is actually raised to a new power, extended to incorporate not only the
sense of political and social, moral and psychological anarchy, but of natural and metaphysical anarchy as well. In addition, the urban setting also becomes the principal locus for the emergence of the grotesque in *The Secret Agent*.

The London of *The Secret Agent* is imaged as a city composed of decaying ruins, enveloped in a darkness "as vast as the sea," and permeated with a "raw, unwholesome fog" (102, 86). Its "squalid" and "sordid" streets wind through a "wilderness of poor houses," and between buildings which are viewed as "enormous piles of bricks" (82, 82); the characteristic vision is that of

... an immensity of greasy slime and damp plaster interspersed with lamps, and enveloped, oppressed, penetrated, choked, and suffocated by the blackness of a wet London night, which is composed of soot and water [150].

As the precincts of this dank and dark metropolis are exposed in the course of the story, images of the jungle, the underworld, the labyrinth, and the prison are superimposed on the urban setting; the Assistant Commissioner's journey to Verloc's abode ("nestling in a shady street behind a shop where the sun never shone" [258]) is seen as a "descent into a slimy aquarium from which the water had been run off. A murky, gloomy darkness enveloped him" (147). This city is a closed system, and Winnie, her protective illusions shattered after the death of her brother and her murder of her husband, sees it in its most confining and abysmal form:
She was alone in London: and the whole town of marvels and mud, with its maze of streets and its mass of lights, was sunk in a hopeless night, rested at the bottom of a black abyss from which no unaided woman could hope to scramble out [270-271].

The city, with its dark, cold, inhuman prospect, stands as a threat not only to Winnie, but to every character within the story, and a feeling that this man-made environment is about to close in and crush its inhabitants, or fall in ruins, charges the novel with a latent tension.

To begin with, then, the London of The Secret Agent may be viewed as the objective correlative to the psychological and moral chaos of its inhabitants. The inner isolation and breakdown is reflected in the vision of the city that offers itself to the characters. The structures of the city both amplify the tension that mounts within the characters, and provide an added tension by their very presence. As Norman Holland declares, "London becomes inner madness rendered as outer setting, and the city threatens throughout the novel to stifle, suffocate, submerge, overwhelm . . ."\(^5\) We find Verloc, for instance, with the growing burden of Vladimir's assignment on his mind, leaning

\[\ldots\] his head against the cold window-pane—a fragile film of glass stretched between him and the enormity of cold, black, wet, muddy, inhospitable accumulation of brick, slates, and stone, things in themselves unlovely and unfriendly to man [56].

Such a fragmented and inhuman environment is highly appropriate to the inner state of Mr. Verloc, who "felt the latent
unfriendliness of all out of doors with a force approaching to positive bodily anguish" (56). He is left with "the sensation of an incipient fall" (57), a "sensation" which affects character and setting alike. During the cab-ride to the alms-house, for example,

. . . the progress of the journey was made sensible to those within by the near fronts of the houses gliding past slowly and shakily, with a great rattle and jingle of glass, as if about to collapse behind the cab . . . [156].

The city is an alien environment, yet bizarrely human, threatening to engulf man in his own precarious structures and forms, before disintegrating into the primal mud and darkness where man and his materials first originated.

The city is, as J. Hillis Miller points out, "'man-made', a monstrous human construction which surrounds man with his own image, and hides from the light and truth of nature" (Miller, 41). The image provided is social as well as psychological, for the London of The Secret Agent serves to symbolize the social organization as well as the individual tensions. The irrational maze of streets, the darkness, the crumbling facades, the buildings which threaten to return to a pile of bricks and stones and finally to a layer of dust, the lifeless expanses of concrete, the mud, fog, and soot all serve as the decaying and precariously balanced superstructure of a society which is, as Miller states, "rotten at the core" and composed of "a vast half-deliberate
conspiracy" of self-seeking individuals. As we spiral down through the political, social, legal, revolutionary, and domestic "circles," the apparent order dissolves before our eyes into a vast atomistic swarm of independent beings, each seeking self-equilibrium under the illusory guise of the various orders or departments that they ostensibly serve.

Some of these features of the urban setting become evident during Mr. Verloc's journey to the embassy (chapter 2), a scene which will also serve as an introduction to other aspects of the narrative in which the city plays a significant role:

Mr. Verloc, steady like a rock—a soft kind of rock—marched now along a street which could with every propriety be described as private. In its breadth, emptiness, and extent it had the majesty of inorganic nature, of matter that never dies. The only reminder of mortality was a doctor's brougham arrested in august solitude close to the curbstone. . . . A guilty-looking cat issuing from under the stones ran for a while in front of Mr. Verloc, then dived into another basement; and a thick police constable, looking a stranger to every emotion, as if he too were a part of inorganic nature, surging apparently out of a lamp-post, took not the slightest notice of Mr. Verloc. With a turn to the left Mr. Verloc pursued his way along a narrow street by the side of a yellow wall which, for some inscrutable reason, had No. 1 Chesham Square written on it in black letters. Chesham Square was at least sixty yards away, and Mr. Verloc, cosmopolitan enough not to be deceived by London's topographical mysteries, held on steadily, without a sign of surprise or indignation. At last, with business-like persistency, he reached the Square, and made diagonally for the number 10. This belonged to an imposing carriage gate in a high, clean wall between two houses, of which one rationally enough bore the number 9 and the other was number 37 . . . [13-14].
The irrational and labyrinthine nature of London's topography is imaged throughout the story, as we proceed through its dark streets, into back alleys, and into the vicinity of "Maze Hill." This sense of disorder in the human realm is even more radically indicated by another image which occurs in the above passage, and which recurs throughout the novel: the movement of life through lower forms toward a state of inanimacy, and of ordered forms in general toward even lower forms of order and energy. Mr. Verloc appears as "a soft kind of rock"; the cat appears to be merely a momentary incarnation, born of stone and quickly returning to its original state; similarly, the "thick police constable . . . as if he, too, were part of inorganic nature," emerges "out of a lamp-post." It is within this context of "matter that never dies" that the concept of anarchy takes on yet further dimensions, as the theme of order versus disorder, and the images of form tending toward deformity, move beyond the social levels of the narrative into the very structures of the world of The Secret Agent.

This tendency of life to move downward to the inorganic, and of matter itself to seek lower and lower forms of organization, is imaged in various ways throughout The Secret Agent, and underlies many of the novel's most important themes. This tendency is also one of the principal motifs of the grotesque, with its characteristic inversion
and subversion of the natural world, and the consequent fusion of the human realm with the non-human realms of the animal, vegetable, inorganic, and mechanical realms. This fusion of the human and non-human is a latent threat and frequent actuality in *The Secret Agent*, in which London, the "cruel devourer of the world's light" (xii), seems to absorb everything into its fog and murky darkness—"darkness enough to bury five millions of lives" (xii).

This grotesque distortion, fusion and fragmentation affects everything in the story. Part of this outer breakdown can be attributed to the "psychological" aspects of the landscape, to the fact that we frequently see the world according to the perspective of its inhabitants; part can be attributed to the fact that the urban environment is a human construct, and therefore reflects the vision of its inhabitants. But there is no hierarchy of focus in the novel: where setting reflects character, character reflects setting. There is no hero, no central character—the characters are a part of their environment as surely as their environment is a part of them. In fact, some critics, notably Leo Gurko, go so far as to proclaim London itself the "hero" of the novel. Gurko contends that although "the anarchist theme supplies the novel with its physical scaffolding," it does no more:

Underneath lies the heart of the book, the dominant idea which determines its movement and is responsible in the first place for the selection of
anarchism as the sheath of the plot. That heart is London, and the idea stemming from it is the life of man in the great city.\textsuperscript{51}

Gurko's emphasis on the significance of the city, independent of its characters, is a useful counter to the view that the city's prime function is that of symbolizing the psychological, moral, political, and social aspects of the characters. These relationships are certainly integral to the narrative as a whole, but I would argue that they each reflect a condition of anarchy that transcends all of the manifestations so far examined. I disagree with Gurko's assertion that the anarchist theme only provides the "physical scaffolding"; rather, I join Stahton de Voren Hoffman in his statement that "The problem is—how far reaching is this theme of anarchy, is it everywhere, in every possibility, and how are we to take it, once we see it?"\textsuperscript{52} The sense of anarchy which begins to emerge in the physical descriptions of the city and its life not only supports the literal aspects of the narrative plot and situation, but introduces an additional dimension to the vision. The sense of disorder, of anarchy, is not restricted to the human realm, but expands to permeate the entire world of \textit{The Secret Agent}. 
The concept that suggests the natural and metaphysical manifestations of anarchy as well as the social, political, and psychological manifestations, is that of entropy. A short but comprehensive definition of this concept is provided by Wylie Sypher in *Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art*:

In effect entropy is the tendency of an ordered universe to go over into a state of disorder. This is another way of saying that the behaviour of things tends to become increasingly random; and in any system tending toward the random there is a loss of direction. The universe as we have thought of it from Aristotle to Einstein was a system controlled by laws that produced a cosmos instead of a chaos—that is, the universe was highly structured; but entropy is a drift toward an unstructured state of equilibrium that is total. With the passage of time, therefore, there is a gradual movement in nature from the ordered to the random, from a situation of high energy potential to a situation of uniformity, equilibrium, and inertia. According to Sypher, "Every isolated system increases in entropy until it reaches a condition of rest" (Sypher, Loss, 74). Ultimately the entropic process represents a wearing down and halting of all life: the reversion to the eternal torpor of the inanimate.

The world of *The Secret Agent* could easily be described as an "isolated system," within which the inhabitants seek equilibrium like so many atoms or particles in solution. The tendency toward ever lower forms of order, and toward a greater dispersion of energy, with the ultimate
goal of inertia and equilibrium, is analogous to the process in *The Secret Agent*. The chromatic movement is one of light to darkness. The novel begins by focusing upon the tension and excess energy of Stevie, which is portrayed as a strain upon the system in the early chapters of the story—a strain which, through the successive tampering of Vladimir and Verloc, is released suddenly in the form of an explosion, which in turn sets off the "chain reaction" through which the system attempts to seek equilibrium by dispersing this excess energy. This may be said to lead to Winnie's murder of Verloc, and finally, with Winnie's leap into the sea outside of this isolated system, the energy is released, and the system as a whole settles to a lower level of homogeneity and inertia. This shift is negative, with an increase in entropy, because Stevie's explosion-death represents a perversion of the potential energy, and what is potentially creative becomes destructive in actuality. "The point is," says Tony Tanner in a reference to Pope's *The Dunciad* which is equally applicable to *The Secret Agent*, "that all this misdirected energy is not productive of anything positive or fully formed, and energy which does not form something must, perforce, deform something" (Tanner, 154).

It is not necessary to look at the novel from such a scientifically objective and naturalistic perspective to perceive the above process in operation. Images of inertia,
decay, fragmentation, and reduction abound. The process of dehumanization which affects the human realm is made even more ominous by what seems to be the opposite process in the non-human or inanimate realm, where "things," or subhuman creatures ordinarily relegated to levels of nature lower than man, begin to assert themselves:

... Mr. Verloc heard against the window-pane the faint buzzing of a fly... The useless fussing of that tiny, energetic organism affected unpleasantly this big man threatened in his indolence [27].

He even feels threatened by something as normally insignificant as Mr. Vladimir's bow necktie, which "seemed to bristle with unspeakable menaces" (24). A similar situation, explicitly connected with entropy, occurs in West's Miss Lonelyhearts:

On that day all the inanimate things over which he had tried to obtain control took the field against him. When he touched something, it spilled or rolled to the floor. The collar buttons disappeared under the bed, the point of the pencil broke, the handle of the razor fell off, the window shade refused to stay down. He fought back, but with too much violence, and was decisively defeated by the spring of the alarm clock.54

It is possible to trace this process of dehumanization and the corresponding process of the assertion of the inanimate or non-human in The Secret Agent until the two seem to merge at the moment of Mr. Verloc's murder. After Winnie has stabbed him, there is no apparent difference in his appearance: "Mr. Verloc was taking his habitual ease. He
looked comfortable" (264). Similarly, Ossipon's scrutiny of Verloc's corpse reveals no visible change: "He looked in, and discovered Mr. Verloc reposing quietly on the sofa" (284); as far as he (Ossipon) is concerned, Mr. Verloc is "simulating sleep for reasons of his own" (285). Finally, and significantly, Ossipon is "told" the truth of the situation by an inanimate object—Mr. Verloc's hat: "But the true sense of the scene he was beholding came to Ossipon through the contemplation of the hat. It seemed an extraordinary thing ..." (285). It is an extraordinary thing, for just as we have watched the indolent and fat Verloc progress toward his own private state of inertia—"he longed for a more perfect rest" (259)—we have also seen his constant companion, his hat, achieve an almost lively independence in comparison. As Verloc settles into his favorite sofa, unaware that he shall never rise again, "his hat, as if accustomed to take care of itself, made for a safe shelter under the table" (259).

Verloc himself is constantly described in terms of his obesity, indolence, and drowsiness, often being imaginatively reduced and fragmented as in the following description: "His thick arms rested abandoned on the outside of the counterpane like dropped weapons, like discarded tools" (179), in which the reference to his obesity ("thick arms") is followed by a series of images of separation ("abandoned," "dropped," "discarded") and of reduction to inanimate
"weapons" and "tools." These same images and techniques of perspective are associated with all of the characters in The Secret Agent, most of whom share Verloc's fatness and indolence, and are distorted in grotesque ways.

With regard to the setting, the processes outlined above are evident at every turn. The steady onset of darkness and dampness, in which everything seems to dissolve, prompts Hillis Miller's observation that "Everything seems to have come out of this fluidity, and to be in danger of returning to it on any dark, rainy night" (Miller, 61). Buildings are reduced by being described as "accumulations of bricks, slates, and stones" (56), or as "enormous piles of bricks" (81), and even the remaining fragments threaten to merge with the darkness and sink into oblivion. The vision is one of nature anarchically inverted—"Entropy is evolution in reverse," remarks Sypher (Sypher, Loss, 75)—in which natural forces "may actually be on the side of those things which go downwards, back to earth, headlong to mud" (Tanner, 155). The implications of such a vision, as Tanner points out, "are formidable: that Nature's drift works against man's intelligent effort" (Tanner, 157), and that

Nature is no longer a synonym for light and order, but a ceaseless corrosive levelling mutability which indifferently destroys monstrous aberrations and all that makes life dignified [Tanner, 158].

This sense of entropic disintegration is also present in other authors of the grotesque. In Bleak House, we see
Mr. Tulkinghorn sitting

... In his lowering magazine of dust, the universal article into which his papers and himself, and all his clients, and all things on earth, animate and inanimate, are resolving ... [Bleak, 359].

This theme is made explicit by Nathanael West in Miss Lonelyhearts:

The physical world has a tropism for disorder, entropy. Man against Nature ... the battle of the centuries. Keys yearn to mix with change. Mandolins strive to get out of tune. Every order has within it the germ of destruction. [Lonelyhearts, 31].

The theme of entropy in The Secret Agent is the subject of Joseph I. Fradin's query:

Do we not come to feel in The Secret Agent some obscure knowledge, some stirring in the mind which creates it, that the law at work in human affairs, the movements of men, is the reflection of larger physical laws, that anarchy imitates entropy? Do we not feel, in other words, that the drift of the human community toward the anonymity and moral sameness which is a form of death imitates the universal drift toward thermodynamic sameness, the death which is total inertia?55

Although Fradin's description of the "larger physical laws" is an accurate indication of the overall state of affairs in the novel, it is necessary to note that the vision does not represent a total acquiescence in the drift toward "sameness." Even though what resistance there is in the novel is in fact levelled before the story reaches its inexorable conclusion, it is important to explore the islands of resistance that do emerge, for it is only in terms of such resistance that Fradin's conclusion that the novel presents a "nihilistic
vision" and demonstrates "the void which lies at the heart of life" can be countered.  

Nevertheless, the London of The Secret Agent is inseparable from its image as an "enormous town slumbering monstrously on a carpet of mud under a veil of raw mist" (300). If such a London symbolizes the nature of the human community within, it is also true that "Such a London symbolizes the universe as absurd, irrational, purposeless, unfriendly to man through its vast indifference to all."  

It is a world in which anarchy is the norm rather than the exception; a world in which anarchy as a political attitude and as a social situation is a reflection of anarchy as the prevailing natural and metaphysical condition; a situation in which, paradoxically and ironically, anarchy represents an alignment with the governing forces rather than an attack upon them.

The affinity between the city-setting and the mode of the grotesque is one of the subjects of Fanger's Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism; Fanger also assesses the degree to which the genesis of the modern grotesque is a function of its adaptation to the genre of the novel. A further relationship among these subjects is contained in Fanger's
observation that "Between the very form of a novel and that of a great city, an affinity exists" (Fanger, 27). Fanger integrates these various subjects by analyzing their role in the evolution of romantic realism in nineteenth-century European literature.

The parallel between the function of the grotesque and Fanger's definition of romantic realism will be immediately apparent: romantic realism, according to Fanger, involves "a principled deformation of reality: its familiar contours are presented to us, but in a new, manipulated light" (Fanger, 15). The ability to fuse the familiar and the strange, the known and the unknown, the real and the ideal, the material and the spiritual, and the natural and the supernatural represents for Fanger the principal endeavour of romanticism. He notes that such an endeavour characteristically sought its forms in the context of "Nature," and looked upon the city as "inherently unsuited" in its rationally organized and rigidly restraining forms, structures, and institutions. The development of romantic realism as a viable mode arose in conjunction with the recognition that the city did in fact offer a potential realm for romantic exploration—that the city was "'terra incognita', and that, to the properly armed investigator, it could offer all the wonder of the strange in the familiar which might be desired" (Fanger, 22).

According to Fanger, the "properly armed investigator"
is that artist who, like Balzac, Dickens, Gogol, and Dostoevsky, adapted and developed the techniques of the grotesque, or, more specifically: "... romantic realism reveals a parallel adaptation of comic techniques, largely through the use of the grotesque" (Fanger, 20). It was the romantic realists, especially those mentioned above, who were able to fuse these techniques with the concerns associated with the realistic urban environment; in short, it was the romantic realists who "were the first fully to realize the potentialities of the metropolis as a subject of fiction" (Fanger, 21).

Much of what Fanger observes about the city-settings of his subjects could be applied to Conrad's London in The Secret Agent—some of the parallels are, in fact, quite striking. Fanger refers to a passage from Sketches by Boz ("Shabby-Genteel People") in which

... Dickens notes the existence of "certain descriptions of people who, oddly enough, appear to appertain exclusively to the metropolis. You meet them, every day, in the streets of London, but no one ever encounters them elsewhere; they seem indigenous to the soil, and to belong as exclusively to London as its own smoke, or the dingy bricks and mortar" [Fanger, 76].

This recalls an observation made by the Assistant Commissioner regarding the patrons of the little Italian restaurant that he visits:

They seemed created for the Italian restaurant, unless the Italian restaurant had been perchance created for them. But that last hypothesis was unthinkable, since one could not place them anywhere outside those special establishments. One
never met these enigmatical persons elsewhere. It was impossible to form a precise idea what occupations they followed by day and where they went to bed at night [149].

In both descriptions the inseparability of character and environment is emphasized—a merging which, as noted earlier, is a common feature of the urban world of *The Secret Agent*, and which serves as a principal motif of the grotesque. It might also be noted here that a great deal of what is grotesque in *The Secret Agent* is anticipated in the characters and settings of Dickens' urban worlds, where the muddy streets immersed in darkness, fog, and decay are prowled by detectives, policemen and criminals who have their counterparts in *The Secret Agent*.

The world of *The Secret Agent* might also be compared to Dostoevsky's Petersburg. In his "Petersburg Chronicle," Dostoevsky remarks that

> It is well known that all Petersburg is nothing but a collection of an enormous number of little circles, each of which has its regulations, its decorum, its law, its logic, and its oracle [Fanger, 138].

*The Secret Agent* has been described as "a collection of an enormous number of little circles," and it is no less true here than in Dostoevsky that each of these "circles" represents a realm which is isolated in many ways from the others; on the other hand, as in the case of Stevie's circles, each one is linked to another. The connections, however, are usually clandestine, and it is this fact that
lends importance to those characters who have access to this multitude of realms. It is in such a milieu that the "detective" figure and "secret agent" emerge as the natural heroes. Sherlock Holmes represents the romantic conception of such a hero, the explorer of the urban jungle.

None of the characters in The Secret Agent are granted the privileges, insight, and detachment of Sherlock Holmes, but the type is certainly recognizable in the figure of the Assistant Commissioner. It is through such a figure that the circles of society are revealed, penetrated, and explored, and the clandestine links between them demonstrated. That characters other than the police are able to move with equal facility among many of these circles in The Secret Agent is an indication of the social anarchy which prevails, in which the continual juxtaposition of characters from supposedly separate realms is related to the continual overlapping, interchanging and fragmenting of social roles—"It is a world of double-dealing and masks beneath masks" (Fanger, 25-26).

The illusion of social differentiation and separate orders is recognized by the Professor, who remarks that "The terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality—counter moves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical" (69). The situation as a whole is best suggested by Fanger's description of a similar situation in Balzac's Ferragus:
The bewildering changes of identity between outlaws and respectable citizens, like those between police agents and their quarry; the fantastic powers translated from the realm of the supernatural to that of the everyday; all these suggest the romantic concerns that were to be legitimated anew in the urban setting [Fanger, 27].

This is also the state of affairs in Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, where the confusion and interchangeability of roles among the anarchists and policemen is carried to such extremes that it becomes impossible to know who is an anarchist and who is a policeman, not to mention who is pursuing whom. The assuming of masks and disguises, along with metamorphoses, multiple identities, and reversals, are characteristic of the burlesque and grotesque modes, and are present, although to a lesser extent than in *The Man Who Was Thursday*, in *The Secret Agent*.

The city-setting, then, was developed by certain nineteenth-century writers as a suitable context, subject, and setting for the continuation of romantic concerns. Equally important, as is suggested by the term "romantic realism," is the corresponding development of the urban setting as a "realistic" environment. Paradoxically, this does not temper or dilute the power of the grotesque, but in fact enhances it. This is true whether "realism" is considered in terms of plausibility and ordinariness, or in terms of certain stylistic techniques. Dostoevsky, for example, referred to his mode of rendering setting as being "fantastic
realism," in which he established Petersburg "as the most real of real places in order that we may wonder at what strange things happen in it" (Fanger, 134).

In a similar fashion, the grotesqueness of the Professor in *The Man Who Was Thursday* is attributed in part to the "sense of unbearable reality" about his figure:

Under the increasing sunlight the colours of the Doctor's complexion, the pattern of his tweeds, grew and expanded outrageously, as such things grow too important in a realistic novel [Thursday, 99].

This coincides with Thomson's observation that the grotesque effect is partly dependent on the realistic framework and manner of presentation, which in turn lends to the disturbing sense that it is our own familiar and trusted world which is capable of grotesque transmutation.

To what extent Conrad was directly influenced by those novelists designated as "romantic realists" by Fanger is less important than the recognition that, like those artists, Conrad transformed the urban setting into a medium and framework capable of accommodating his deepest concerns—a transformation which led to the discovery that such concerns or themes could not only be adapted to such a setting, but actually be enhanced and given additional power and depth within just such a framework. Fanger states that:

All such investigations of evil, crime, and death, treated sensationally by the popular novelists of the same period, in the hands of these same writers become part of a more serious search for
meaning and possibilities of meaning in the chaos of the city. The same may be said of the terms they used to set forth these investigations. The extravagant, the bizarre, the grotesque, which others could use to produce a crude or factitious sense of novelty, became for these writers the basis of their claims to realism, the outward sign of the newness of the social patterns they were describing. Each emphasized the solidity of his physical city, to set off the unreality of the life lived in it. And by so doing each was admonishing his readers, in effect: "The old assumptions, the old categories, are no longer valid; we must try to see afresh." [Panger, 260-262].

Conrad certainly recognized the narrative potential of the metropolis as setting and subject, and was able to perceive the stylistic and structural means by which such a setting and its concerns would best be rendered. It is evident that the city-setting of London serves Conrad's vision and purpose in various ways, from the literal superstructure of a social situation to the physical index of the metaphysical condition. Patricia Morley declares that "The London of The Secret Agent is not the London found in most Edwardian novels of social realism" (Morley, 60). Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it is—and is not.

Conrad's thorough exploitation of the possibilities existing in the metropolitan setting is matched only by the aptness of an equally potent and suggestive image—the bomb explosion. The correspondence between setting and central
event is perfect.

The situation revealed in *The Secret Agent* is "explosive" from the beginning. This sense of instability, in the opening scenes of the novel, is centred in the character of Stevie, who, in one sense, may be seen as the pivot upon which the entire social edifice is constructed. He is, as it were, the main point of contact for the irrational forces gathered beneath this particular world; he is the "crack in the imposing front of the great edifice of legal conceptions sheltering the atrocious injustice of society," and "the really intelligent detonator," both of which the Professor seeks and, inadvertently, finds (80, 67). Stevie is described as "a perpetual residue of anxiety"; for those around him "there was always the anxiety of his mere existence to face" (38, 39). The forces concentrated in Stevie are suggested by his "mad art," "those coruscations of innumerable circles suggesting chaos and eternity" (237). The potentially disruptive effect of these forces is suggested in the description of Stevie's letting off of fireworks in the office where he was once employed—his hypersensitivity having been tampered with results in a comical adumbration of later events: "Wild-eyed, choking clerks stampeded through the passages full of smoke; silk hats and elderly businessmen could be seen rolling independently down the stairs" (9). The key word here is "independently": already there are
indications of the liberation of inanimate objects—in this case, significantly, the objects are "hats."

Stevie's brother-in-law "stepfather," Mr. Verloc, is the figure in whom is invested the power of control over this irrational and volatile occupant of an otherwise lethargic household and society. His control is established by Winnie and her mother, who have rigorously indoctrinated Stevie with the belief and faith that Mr. Verloc is infallibly "good." Mr. Verloc is an apt figurehead, for in him is embodied the entire social and political structure of the society in which he lives.

If the opening situation is looked at in terms of Stevie's volatility and the quality of control represented by Mr. Verloc, the balance is seen to be precarious at best, and the slightest pressure injected into this already strained "system" will suffice to bring about an explosion. There is, as it turns out, one opening which is susceptible to additional pressure from outside: the embassy. As J. Hillis Miller aptly describes it,

The plot of The Secret Agent is a chain reaction, a sequence of disenchantments started by Mr. Vladimir's demand that Verloc create a sensationalist anarchist demonstration [Miller, 45].

Even at the most literal level of interpretation, this "chain of events" represents a grotesque comedy of errors. As mentioned previously, the action is originated not by an anarchist—on the contrary, it is conceived by Mr. Vladimir,
the foreign ambassador of a reactionary government. Verloc represents the next link in the chain, which further guarantees the perversion of the original conception, and adds another level of irony to the "political" aspect of the plot. The violent explosion-death of Stevie represents the next, and most important step in this string of absurdities, from which point the sequence is picked up by the police, who inform Winnie of Stevie's death. This transposes the plot primarily to the "domestic" plane for the balance of the novel, culminating in the murder of Verloc and Winnie's subsequent suicide. As well as having only the most tenuous connection with actual political anarchists, the plot leads up to and away from an event which is based upon pure chance: Stevie's death occurs when he trips over the root of a tree.

The place of the explosion within the context of the events which occur on the political, social, and domestic levels of the novel is evident, particularly in the consequences which befall Adolf Verloc and his wife Winnie. Again however, as in the case of the setting, the explosion points toward correspondences beyond the moral, social, and political levels, although, as stressed earlier, these levels are not dispensed with, but are incorporated into a broader and more profound vision encompassing all. As stated by Joseph Fradin and Jean Creighton, "Stevie's disintegration assumes increasing force in the novel as an analogue of the universal
disintegration which is taking place" (Fradin and Creighton, 26).

The city-setting of London and the explosion-death of Stevie together constitute a powerful symbolic force which dominates the narrative. The narrative movement itself is analogous to an explosion, or perhaps to an explosion in slow-motion, as the waves of force move relentlessly outward from the violent centre, distorting, fragmenting, mixing, fusing and disorienting everything in their path. The force of the explosion is felt in the very descriptions of the objects and characters in the novel; the explosion is not directly narrated, but its effects are, paradoxically, directly recorded in the grotesque dissonances present in both form and content.

Kayser refers to the German Romantic novelist Jean Paul as being the first writer to make

... use of a motif which frequently occurs in the subsequent history of the grotesque: the disintegration of order in a spatially unified social group, the estrangement inflicted upon an entire city [Kayser, 67].

It is interesting to note that "in order to motivate the estrangement" Jean Paul introduces into his urban setting "a dense fog, the most terrible fog of the entire eighteenth century. This fog, however, only increases the confusion that already inheres in the situation" (Kayser, 67). Although fog and darkness reinforce the estrangement of
Conrad's London in *The Secret Agent*, it is actually the bomb explosion which, like Jean Paul's fog, functions to motivate the estrangement of the characters. It is also true however, again like Jean Paul's fog, that the explosion in *The Secret Agent* "only increases the confusion that already inheres in the situation." As far as the characters who are affected by it are concerned it is certainly the major event of the novel, serving to demolish their flimsy defenses and bring them face to face with an alien and hostile world. To the reader, however, the alienation of the characters is apparent from the beginning. As Frank Kermode observes, the explosion

\[\ldots\text{ takes place, though little is made of this, at the dead center of the human world, at meridian zero. But we are clear that it belongs not to a world marked off by meridians— are they reduced to Stevie's pointless, endless circles?— but to a world entirely without coherence, a world which already echoes the hopes of the anarchists.}58\]

The explosion and its consequences thrust the characters into contact with the "reality" of their world, an encounter which in fact exposes its basic unreality: "One by one these characters are wrested from their complacency and put in a situation which is, one might say, out of this world" (Miller, 45). The previously latent tension and sense of danger is made manifest, as the fragile, because illusory, barriers enclosing and protecting each character are swept away. This, once again, is the condition and situation of the grotesque: it
is—and is not—our own world. The ambiguous way in which we are affected by it results from our awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence [Kayser, 37].

A sense of unreality is continually felt as a latent pressure, and intrudes with greater frequency as the story progresses, particularly following the explosion, until it becomes all-pervading as reflected by and through the deranged consciousness of Winnie Verloc. It is a world viewed on the brink of and in the process of dissolution, a situation which is made even more apparent by the sense of instability and menace which gathers about the characters, and ultimately by the madness which possesses Winnie and constitutes her "legacy" to Ossipon at the conclusion of the novel. The explosion, to repeat, is not the abysmal force, but rather its most profound manifestation, the instantaneous irruption of violent disintegration which occurs at the centre of the human cosmos, and that requires the expanse of the entire novel to fully register.

In terms of the grotesque, it would be difficult to imagine a more characteristic, even prototypical, manifestation of the nature and effect of the grotesque than the explosion-death of Stevie. The grotesque is indicated by a fusion or juxtaposition of incompatibles, which usually takes the form of a confusion of the human realm with that of the
animal, vegetable, inorganic or mechanical realms. It is also indicated by the fragmentation of wholes into independent parts which may take on a separate existence. The radical nature of the grotesque is often heightened by the abnormality or deformity of its subject-matter, as well as by the sudden and frequently violent manner in which it intrudes upon the familiar and normal to estrange and alienate the environment.

The result of Stevie's death is, literally, fragmentation and abnormal fusion, effected violently and suddenly:

The shattering violence of destruction which made of that body a heap of nameless fragments affected his [the Chief Inspector's] feelings with a sense of ruthless cruelty, though his reason told him the effect must have been as swift as a flash of lightning [87].

What remains of Stevie is intermixed with the elements of his surroundings at the time of the explosion, and is referred to as "that heap of mixed things, which seemed to have been collected in shambles and rag shops," complete with "a sprinkling of small gravel, tiny brown bits of bark, and particles of splintered wood as fine as needles" (87). The dehumanization of Stevie is literally complete: he has been transformed first of all into "A really intelligent detonator" (67), and is finally reduced to fragments of matter inextricably mixed with fragments of surrounding matter. Avrom Fleishman describes this process of dehumanization in The Secret Agent in more general terms:
Physical disintegration begins in the tendency to reduce the human being to its component parts. Men are seen first as animals, then simply as fat, flesh, or meat. . . . With the ultimate reduction of the human being to fragments of matter . . . man is imaginatively—and literally—annihilated [Fleishman, 198].

Fleishman is referring less to the actual reduction of Stevie than to the imaginative reduction of the characters as a whole, but Stevie's death represents an ironic symbol of this process.

Moving from the substance to the actual structuring of the narrative, the "blank space" at the centre becomes even more apparent. The actual explosion occurs "offstage," and we are informed of it indirectly through the newspaper report which Ossipon reads to the Professor in chapter four. Not only is the explosion narrated indirectly, but the identity of its victim is not revealed (although many hints are given) until much later. This information is "delayed," as is the narrative effect of the explosion as a whole:

In hearing about the bomb outrage as a piece of secondhand information, we are as yet unaware that another gaping "hole" has been punched by the novelist himself. Misled by the seeming continuity of chapters three and four, we do not yet know that chapter eight—with its exposition of the triangular relationship binding Stevie, Winnie, and their mother—should have chronologically followed the action depicted in chapter three [Knoepflmacher, 246-247].

Knoepflmacher goes on to point out that it is not until chapter eight and the first part of chapter nine that the events omitted between chapters three and four are filled in:
Winnie's mother's sacrifice and relinquishment of her maternal role to Winnie, Stevie's encounter with the cabman, the increasing rapport between Stevie and Verloc, their joint walks, Verloc's assurance to his wife that Stevie would profit by being sent to Michaelis' cottage in the country, their trip to the country, and Verloc's resumption of his walks [Knoepflmacher, 247].

We are forced, as Andrzej Busza aptly stated it, to backfill the hole which has been blown in the middle of the novel; says Knoepflmacher,

To understand even its plot we must supply some facts and carefully piece together those that are doled out to us; like Inspector Heat or the Assistant Commissioner we must go by hints, loose fragments, surmises, and keep away from misleading pieces of evidence [Knoepflmacher, 241-242].

The geographical location of the explosion at Greenwich has various metaphysical implications, which have been closely analyzed and discussed at length by R. W. Stallman in his essay "Time and The Secret Agent." Stallman observes that "all time—legal time, civil time, astronomical time, and Universal Time—emanates from Greenwich Observatory," which leads him to conclude that

The theme of The Secret Agent has to do with time, the destruction and confusion of time itself, and the confused chronology of narrated events by their disarrangement from time effects a structure which is at one with the theme. Stallman's conclusion finds ample evidence to support it, and I agree with the view that a close relationship exists between structure and theme; I would also argue, however, that this relationship is much more complex than
Stallman's analysis suggests—in terms of both theme and structure. Knoepflmacher moves beyond Stallman in this respect, recognizing that

Conrad's disruption of the time scheme of a novel centered around Vladimir's attempts to have Verloc blow up Greenwich Observatory, the first meridian which lends order to the notions of a civilization ruled by time, serves his purposes in more ways than one. Vladimir wants to unsettle this impassive, orderly world and shake its optimism through an "act of destructive ferocity" so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable" (chap. 2). The novelist, however, is less nihilistic in his aims. Although he too wants to jar the reader's complacency, he explodes time so that he can order his fictional universe by controlling and gradually widening our understanding of its nature [Knoepflmacher, 247].

The apparent structural "confusion" is therefore motivated by far more than a somewhat superficial attempt to structurally imitate the theme. What in fact occurs is much more complex, namely, that as order and continuity break down on one level, they are simultaneously reinstated at another level. This, from a structural or formal point of view, is the situation of the grotesque, and it can be seen therefore that the explosion is analogous to the grotesque as structure and style as well as to the grotesque as content or substance.

The grotesque content of The Secret Agent has many facets which have not yet been touched upon, and it will be helpful to illuminate certain of these aspects in order to facilitate the transition to the conception of the grotesque as a function of perspective and style, and as an independent
mode. Once the grotesque is established as a pervasive element in the subject matter and substance of the story, and its function, effect, and significance made clear at this fundamental narrative level, this transition should occur naturally and logically.

An examination of chapter four will serve to establish the nature of the grotesque content in narrative context; it will also serve to introduce the sense of a grotesque dissonance operative at the levels of form and style, which will be discussed later.

Chapter four opens upon the figures of the Professor and Comrade Ossipon sitting at a table in the "underground hall" of the Silenus Restaurant. Although we are not as yet informed of the fact, the explosion has already occurred. The first hint that something has happened is contained in Ossipon's remark to the Professor: "'Unless I am very much mistaken you are the man who would know the inside of this confounded affair!'" (61), a remark which triggers the following response:

An upright semi-grand piano near the door, flanked by two palms in pots, executed suddenly all by itself a valse tune with aggressive virtuosity. The din it raised was deafening. Then it ceased, as abruptly as it had started [61].
The irruption of this absurd piano is "sudden," "aggressive," and apparently meaningless in terms of the narrative. The walls of the café present a background of equally irrelevant frescoes, with "Varlets in green jerkins [who] brandished hunting-knives and raised on high tankards of foaming beer" (SA, 61). As Frank Kermode observes, "The relation between these properties and the thematic design of the book is an occult one" (Kermode, History, 235). However irrelevant and meaningless such intrusions might appear at the literal level, they nevertheless take on a cumulative significance at another level of the narrative. The "brandished hunting-knives," for example, herald a sequence of similar instances in which our attention is drawn to a knife—particularly to the carving knife in the Verloc kitchen, which ends up being stuck murderously into Verloc.

This scene is set in "the basement of the renowned Silenus Restaurant" (67), Silenus making his appearance again in the form of the grotesque cab-driver who conveys Winnie's mother to her final abode. Wylie Sypher's statement concerning Nietzsche and Silenus is appropriate in this context:

> The substratum of the world of art, Nietzsche says, is "the terrible wisdom of Silenus," and Silenus is the satyr-god of comedy leading the ecstatic "chorus of natural beings who as it were lived ineradicably behind every civilization" [Comedy, 200].

This particular "underworld" is the favourite haunt of the Professor, the dedicated agent of the subversive anarchist
forces who, unlike the rest of mankind with its dependence on life, depends "on death, which knows no restraint and cannot be attacked" (68). Like Stevie, whom he resembles in size and bat-like features, the Professor is a threat to the "ordered" forces of the social world—"They stood perplexed before him as if before a dreadful portent" (83-84). The Professor's companion in this scene, Comrade Ossipon, is committed to the orders of science and medicine, and is accordingly given an "Apollo-like ambrosial head," although his particular illusions fail in the end to sustain him.

Even at this moment in the novel Ossipon's daylight, sane, pseudo-Apollonian existence is threatened by the ominous surroundings of the Professor's realm. As well as being subjected to the irrational outbursts of the piano, he begins to suffer menacing visions, and the sense of impending chaos is heightened. Ossipon imagines the Professor's

... round black-rimmed spectacles progressing along the streets on the top of an omnibus, their self-confident glitter falling here and there upon the heads of the unconscious stream of people on the pavements. The ghost of a sickly smile altered the set of Ossipon's thick lips at the thought of walls nodding, of people running for life at the sight of those spectacles [63].

The tension is further amplified when Ossipon sights the Professor's body-bomb: "a glimpse of an india-rubber tube, resembling a slender brown worm, issuing from the armhole of his waistcoat and plunging into the inner breast of his jacket" (66), which in turn serves to provoke an even
more terrifying vision, complete with appropriate musical accompaniment:

The piano at the foot of the staircase clanged through a mazurka with brazen impetuosity, as though a vulgar and impudent ghost were showing off. The keys sank and rose mysteriously. Then all became still. For a moment Ossipon imagined the overlighted place changed into a dreadful black hole belching horrible fumes choked with ghastly rubbish of smashed brickwork and mutilated corpses. He had such a distinct perception of ruin and death that he shuddered again [67].

His vision is prophetic indeed—and the final scene of the novel returns to the basement of the "renowned Silenus," where once again the Professor and Ossipon are seated, thus closing the circle which begins with the first mention of the explosion and culminates in the final scene with the announcement of Winnie's death by suicide. Another parallel is provided by both the explosion and the suicide being mentioned initially in the newspaper.

The piano, which returns at the end of the first of these scenes to play the Professor out of the Silenus to the tune of "The Blue Bells of Scotland," also adds its strident notes to the final Silenus scene: "The mechanical piano near the door played through a valse cheekily, then fell silent all at once, as if gone grumpy" (310). This irrational piano frames each of the two scenes in the Silenus, and the scenes themselves frame the entire sequence of events which occur between the explosion-death of Stevie and the suicide of Winnie—the framework suggesting the tenor of the events that
lie between. The explosion has taken place "offstage," just prior to the lifting of the curtain onto the Silenus scene in chapter four, and is therefore never directly narrated. In another sense, however, it is transmitted directly, with an impact and significance far greater than an actual transcription of the event would be capable of conveying. For from this point onward, structure and substance are grotesquely disarranged, rearranged, distorted, and fragmented, and we are left to contend with the gaping "hole" left in the narrative, followed by a series of other such "unexpected solutions of continuity, sudden holes in space and time" (85).

In chapter four it seems as though the major themes in the novel are visibly transformed or translated into the forms and images of the grotesque. The connection between the novel's thematic design and these forms or images may indeed be "an occult one," but it is a relationship that serves to clarify the issues and movements of the narrative rather than obscure them—"after all," writes Kermode, "it is an extremely informative scene, and in its way a plausible one. It makes us see. It explains" (Kermode, History, 235).

The "brazen" piano and the Professor's ominous spectacles are characteristic grotesque forms—two of countless similar grotesque images and motifs which occur throughout the novel, all of which serve to render the familiar unfamiliar and to elicit from the well-known the shape of the
unknown in a concrete and direct way. Kayser states that "The mechanical object is alienated by being brought to life, the human by being deprived of it" (Kayser, 183). Various objects are brought to life in The Secret Agent, as in the above-mentioned instances of the piano, spectacles, and nod­ding walls; these incarnations may range from the ludicrous, such as during Verloc's interview with Vladimir when the latter's "quaintly old-fashioned bow necktie seemed to bristle with unspeakable menaces" (24), to the monstrous apparition of the van and horses in Brett Street which,

 . . . merged into one mass, seemed something alive—a square-backed black monster blocking half the street, with sudden iron-shod stomplings, fierce jingles, and heavy, blowing sighs [151].

There are "trotting vans," "drowsy" and "lonely" clocks; an "unhappy, homeless couch, accompanied by two unrelated chairs" standing in an alleyway; "Speaking bubes resembling snakes ... tied by the heads to the back of the Assistant Commissioner's wooden armchair," whose "gaping mouths seemed ready to bite his elbows" (97); a "long frock coat" which has the "character of elastic soundness, as if it were living tissue" (110); gas-jets which whistle "as if astonished" or purr "comfortably like a cat" (191); and a cracked doorbell which clatters "with impudent virulence" at various times in the course of the story. These images belong to a world in which the conventional relations between man and objects have broken down and no longer pertain.
Such grotesque images may range in impact from the slightly bizarre or ludicrous to the repulsive and frightening; they may occur in isolation or, as in chapter four, they may dominate an entire scene or chapter. Chapter eight, for example, is not only thoroughly grotesque in terms of its imagery, but the chapter as a whole might be termed "occult" in its relationship to the balance of the narrative. Once again, it is informative in a direct and concrete way, and the cab-ride to the alms-house involving Winnie, Stevie, and their mother stands as one of the more memorable episodes in the novel. The instruments of this journey—the cab, cabman, and horse—are characteristic forms of the grotesque imagination, as is the journey itself. The mode of description is worth analyzing briefly on this account.

The cabman has "a hooked iron contrivance protruding from the left sleeve" of his coat, and his "enormous and unwashed countenance flamed red in the muddy stretch of the street"; this same countenance is also described as a "bloated and sodden face of many colours bristling with white hairs" (156, 157). The "infârm horse" is even more grotesque in appearance than its master:

The little stiff tail seemed to have been fitted in for a heartless joke; and at the other end the thin, flat neck, like a plank covered with old horse-hide, drooped to the ground under the weight of an enormous bony head. The ears hung at different angles, negligently . . . [166].

And finally the cab itself is related to "a medieval device
for the punishment of crime," to a coffin ("the dark, low box on wheels"), and appears to Winnie as "profoundly lamentable, with such a perfection of grotesque misery and weirdness of macabre detail, as if it were the Cab of Death itself . . ." (163, 168, 170).

The grotesqueness of these images is manifested in a variety of ways: the cabman with his hook is a literal grotesque, maimed physically in a manner characteristic of many grotesque figures; the grotesqueness of the horse and cab, on the other hand, is established through the reductive description. The horse appears to be a fusion of animate and inanimate parts which have been "fitted" together—the tail is stuck on and the neck is a piece of "plank covered with old horse-hide." This mode of description occurs throughout The Secret Agent, as was suggested in the earlier section dealing with Verloc's dehumanization, and as will be further discussed in relation to the grotesqueness of the characterization in general.

Certain images may become grotesque through association, rather than through an inherent disproportion, distortion, or incongruity. This is true, for example, in regard to many of the references to food and eating, which become grotesque according to the degree of association of such images with other more overtly grotesque images, particularly those of human fleshiness and obesity, Stevie's
violent disintegration into scraps of flesh and matter, and the references to cannibalism. Such images work metonymically, interacting and enhancing each other until reference to one automatically brings to mind another.

The joint of roast on the Verloc table, for instance, becomes thoroughly repulsive to the reader for various reasons. As a chunk of animal flesh it is related to various characters whose obesity and passivity is described in similar terms. This similarity is made grotesquely explicit in the following scene, which occurs in the context of Verloc's reflections about the death of Stevie:

The sensation of unappeasable hunger, not unknown after the strain of a hazardous enterprise to adventurers of a tougher fibre than Mr. Verloc, overcame him again. The piece of roast beef, laid out in the likeness of funereal baked meats for Stevie's obsequies, offered itself largely to his notice. And Mr. Verloc again partook. He partook ravenously, without restraint and decency, cutting thick slices with the sharp carving knife, and swallowing them without bread [253].

Here the roast is associated not only with the spiritless fleshiness of the characters in general, but specifically with the corpse of Stevie. Mr. Verloc is correspondingly reduced to a ravenous beast or cannibal, and the earlier description of Stevie's remains as "an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast" (86) also comes to mind. The reference to the carving knife, on a second reading of the novel at least, would conjure the image of Verloc's corpse as well.
Other instances of similar grotesque juxtapositions could be cited, and it is interesting to observe the subtle preparations for such associations that are made throughout *The Secret Agent*. The description of Heat's examination of the dead Stevie is comparable to and helps prepare for the above description of Verloc feeding:

> And meantime the Chief Inspector went on peering at the table with a calm face and the slightly anxious attention of an indigent customer bending over what may be called the by-products of a butcher's shop with a view to an inexpensive Sunday dinner [88].

The comic aspects of most of these descriptions should not be overlooked either, and it is frequently the comic component which elevates an image or scene into the true grotesque. It is interesting to note that the most humorous scenes and incidents are those which are also the most intense and disturbing, and potentially the most non-comic: the Inspector's befuddled examination of Stevie's blasted remains, particularly when combined with the comments of the ludicrous policeman ("'He's all there. Every bit of him. It was a job'" [87]); the scene surrounding Winnie's murder of Verloc; the references to Stevie, who is constantly being undermined through puns and double-entendres; and particularly the final scenes involving Winnie and Ossipon, in which humour and tension push one another to ever greater heights of intensity. By the time these final scenes are reached,
Conrad's mastery of the finely honed ambivalence necessary to the grotesque response is complete.

The grotesque world of *The Secret Agent* is inhabited by grotesque characters. The fact that these characters are all initially unaware of the true nature of their situations, and in most cases remain so, serves to amplify the effect of the grotesque. This amplification occurs through the growing sense of menace surrounding each of the characters as their defenses threaten to collapse, through their visions of an estranged world which are provoked by this apprehension, and through the actual estrangement of those characters who come to recognize the truth of this situation.

The characterization is grotesque in an even more direct sense, achieved largely by means of "satiric, caricatural, and cynical distortions, that is, by way of the comically grotesque" (Kayser, 173). The characters are almost all distorted or deformed in the direction of the inhuman, or may appear in more overtly grotesque forms through the use of such characteristic grotesque motifs as eccentricity of feature or gesture, masks, or the fusion with the animal, inanimate, or mechanical.

The most common type of distortion in the novel is
that of size and shape. As J. Hillis Miller remarks:

With something of a shock the reader realizes how many of the characters in *The Secret Agent* are fat. Conrad seems to be insisting on their gross bodies, as if their fatness were connected with the central themes of the novel [Miller, 50].

Of the twelve main characters in the story, eight are portrayed in varying stages of obesity, from the plump Winnie Verloc with her "full, rounded form" (6) to Winnie's mother, "a stout, wheezy woman" whose "swollen legs rendered her inactive" (6), or Michaelis, whose "voice wheezed as if deadened and oppressed by the layer of fat on his chest" and who is "round like a tub, with an enormous stomach and distended cheeks of a pale, semi-transparent complexion" (41).

Almost every reference to Michaelis pays tribute to his grossness, and he is specifically referred to as being "grotesque" in appearance, both as a "grotesque incarnation of humanitarian passion," and as being "pathetic in his grotesque and incurable obesity" (108, 107).

This characteristic obesity often leans toward the animal or inanimate, as in the case of Mr. Verloc, who is described as "Undemonstrable and burly in a fat-pig style," as "a soft kind of rock," and as "slow beast with a sleek head, gloomier than a seal, and with a husky voice" (13, 13, 257), to mention only a few of many such references. That such descriptions are motivated by more than a satirical purpose, and reflect a larger vision of humanity as a whole,
is suggested in Hillis Miller's observation that "A fat man seems in danger of ceasing to have a soul and becoming simply a body, and this recalls the grotesque absurdity of our own incarnation" (Miller, 50). The grotesque discrepancy between an idea and its material incarnation, or a spirit and its mortal embodiment, forms a major theme of The Secret Agent. It is a novel which "predicates the retrogression of what ceases to go forward" (Kermode, History, 236).

Other distortions of body size also occur. The Professor is described as "a dingy little man" of "stunted stature," as a "short, owlish, shabby figure," and as "a pest in the street full of men" (62, 77, 311). He is in fact given even more characteristic grotesque features, appearing not only as a "miserable organism" and "owl," but also with the physiognomy of what Kayser calls the "grotesque animal incarnate"—the bat: the Professor's

... flat, large, earstdepartedpwideiywfromytheom tersides of his skull, which looked frail enough for Ossipon to crush between thumb and forefinger... the flat cheeks, of a greasy unhealthy complexion, were smudged by the miserable poverty of a thin dark whisker [62]

—and as a final touch he is extremely shortsighted.

Distortions like these may in turn be amplified by physical deformities, such as Yundt's "skinny groping hand deformed by gouty swellings," his "faint black grimace of a toothless mouth," and his "extinguished eyes" (42, 42, 47). A figure like the "maimed" cabman and his "infirm" horse
together illustrate, according to the narrator, "the proverb that 'truth can be more cruel than caricature,' if such a proverb existed" (155). Such truths are rendered by the grotesque.

"Among the most persistent motifs of the grotesque," writes Kayser, "we find human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automatons, and their faces frozen into masks" (Kayser, 183). Characters in The Secret Agent often seem to move in a mechanical, eccentric, or automatic manner, or seem to require an external force in order to move at all. At the conclusion of the meeting of the revolutionary "circle" at Verloc's abode, for example, the scene is partly described in the following manner:

With troubled eyes he [Michaelis] looked for his round, hard hat, and put it on his round head. His round and obese body seemed to float low between the chairs under the sharp elbow of Karl Yundt. The old terrorist, raising an uncertain and claw-like hand, gave a swaggering tilt to a black felt sombrero shading the hollows and ridges of his wasted face. He got into motion slowly, striking the floor with his stick at every step. It was rather an effort to get him out of the house, because, now and then, he would stop, as if to think, and did not offer to move again till impelled forward by Michaelis [51].

Michaelis's round body "floating" toward Yundt's "sharp elbow" is perhaps closest to an explosion in the particular anarchist's everpresent The picture is thoroughly grotesque in detail, gestic movement, and sense of outer compulsion. The physical automatism which marks various of the characters is
matched by the "mental" automatism or unidimensionality of thought which they also possess, Michaelis's "idée fixe" being an example of the latter.

The final scenes surrounding Winnie's discovery of Stevie's death, her murder of Verloc, and her subsequent encounter with Ossipon are charged with grotesque explosiveness and humour, and are correspondingly replete with grotesque motifs, forms, and images. In response to Winnie's telling him to see who has entered the shop (it is the Assistant Commissioner, come to deliver the first blow to the Verloc household),

Mr. Verloc obeyed woodenly, stony-eyed, and like an automaton whose face had been painted red. And this resemblance to a mechanical figure went so far that he had an automaton's absurd air of being aware of the machinery inside of him [197].

Winnie's appearance, once she has gazed upon the truth of the situation, goes through a sequence of grotesque metamorphoses: she is seen as a "statue," a "dummy," a "corpse," a "masked and mysterious visitor of impenetrable intentions," as having "no face, almost no discernable form," and as being totally estranged and excluded from the "human" world around her. The extent of this alienation is indicated by the description of Verloc's speech to her in terms of

The waves of air of the proper length, propagated in accordance with correct mathematical formulas, flowed around all the inanimate things in the room, lapped against Mrs. Verloc's head as if it had been a head of stone [260].
Here the embodiment of idea and spirit in human speech is tantamount to entombment.

It soon becomes evident, therefore, that the refusal to narrate the explosion directly in no way lessens its impact. It is forcibly manifested in every aspect of the story, including, as I shall try to show in the following chapters, form and style as well as content. In many ways it provides the link between form and content, as suggested by Avrom Fleishman's observation that

... the imaginative perspective of The Secret Agent is consistent with the subject matter, both personal and social. This perspective is a vision of the modern world in a state of fragmentation— as if by explosion [Fleishman, 188].

The setting, imagery, and characters in The Secret Agent are fundamentally grotesque. The inhabitants of this dark city are constantly threatened by their environment, and the two merge in various ways—the city and its materials take on a grotesque existence, and the characters undergo a process of dehumanization which in certain cases culminates in the reduction to inorganic matter, and in others: the consequence is madness. It is a vision of physical and mental disintegration. The process of disintegration in the story as a whole is a slow-motion version of the explosion, and the effects of this blast on Stevie and his immediate surroundings are a forewarning of the final state of balance between all of the characters and their metropolitan
environment: "'Blown to small bits: limbs, gravel, clothing, bones, splinters—all mixed up together'" (210).
THE SECRET AGENT: THE GROTESQUE PERSPECTIVE

So far I have analyzed the grotesque vision in The Secret Agent largely in terms of subject-matter and content. This content, of which the city-setting and the explosion are so appropriately emblematic, is largely that of a world in the process of dissolution and estrangement, moving toward darkness, decay, madness, despair, and death. The mode of the grotesque on this basis appears to be one of distortion, alienation, and disharmony, with total estrangement of the human realm being the ultimate end.

With such a content, it is tempting to view the form and style of The Secret Agent in one of two ways: either as corresponding to the content, or as redeeming it. Stanton de Voren Hoffman, for example, sees the theme of anarchy, which I have attempted to trace through to its metaphysical manifestations and implications, as extending into the form itself:

... the anarchy extends even to the level of artistic consciousness. One peels off layer after layer and finds more and more disorder and at the very core is the symbol for order used as a parody of disorder, and thus becoming, itself, disorder, through this parodying. But this also happens to what seems to be the only real order in the novel—artistic ordering—the novel's only counter-value [Hoffman, 124, n. 52].

The opposite approach, viewing the content as being
qualified in some significant way by the form, is certainly more tenable than the approach offered by Hoffman. This approach sees the form as balancing, controlling, detaching, redeeming or in some such way offering a positive value as a counter to a negative psychological, moral, social, and metaphysical vision. Such views may range from the belief that the esthetic order offers a straightforward triumph of form over content, seeing art as the only means of transforming the chaos of experience into a valuable and meaningful order, to more subtle versions of the form/content relationship. Of these latter relationships, irony and comedy are most frequently offered as the modes governing The Secret Agent.

The majority of the critical interpretations of The Secret Agent support the view that the relationship between form and content is one of pure ironic disjunction, controlled by what J. Hillis Miller, among others, refers to as Conrad's "stance . . . of ironic detachment" and his perspective of "clearheaded pity and contempt" (Miller, 44, 46). According to this commonly held view, the situation is one in which clarity, objectivity, detachment, and a classically controlled form and structure are held against a world of mud, darkness, confusion, disorder, "madness and despair." This does not, however, account for those instances in the narrative when this "distancing" and "detachment" between perspective and
material simply collapses, such that the perspective actually provokes or enhances the grotesque effect of the scene, character, or image that is being focused upon. Irony and the grotesque are not incompatible, and the former is frequently the base or context of the latter; in the presence of the grotesque, however, the ironic stability afforded the reader tends to dissolve, and the perspective suddenly becomes capable of cutting both ways simultaneously.

The distinction between the grotesqueness inherent in the subject-matter of the story is difficult to distinguish from the grotesqueness resulting from the way in which the subject-matter is presented. In The Secret Agent, the grotesque may be established as a function of either, but it is only when we move from the substance to the vision, and from the vision to the style itself, that the extent and depth of the grotesque in the novel can be measured and assessed. In short, the grotesque is no less a function of the manner of presentation than of the matter being presented.

The Secret Agent comprises thirteen chapters. Anyone reflecting upon the structure of the novel is bound to be struck by the complex and intricate design which permeates the entire novel. Even more significant, however, is that
at first the narrative seems to lack any consistent structuring principle. Indeed, for some critics, the novel simply does not possess a consistent structure; others take the opposite view. This opposition is reflected in the responses of critics such as F. R. Leavis and Jocelyn Baines. Whereas Leavis praises the "complex organic structure" by which "the theme develops itself," and notes "the rich economy of the pattern," "the cunning organization of the whole book," and "the economy of form and pattern that gives every detail its significance":61 Baines states that

... it is very hard to decide what the central interest is, for, although the ironical treatment provides a unity of mood, the book lacks, unlike most of Conrad's work, a unifying theme, and when it is carefully examined falls apart into a succession of only superficially related scenes; in fact the "crystallization" of which Conrad speaks in the Author's Note never occurs.62

Such a divergence of opinion is indicative of the ambiguity of response which is possible when confronted with this novel—a sense of ambivalent structure which is captured by R. W. Stallman's declaration that "All's chaos and confusion; all's incongruous and irrational, but nevertheless logic designs the structure of The Secret Agent" (Stallman, 236).

The significance here lies in the fact that the disunities, or dissonances, present in the narrative structure are not a result of lapses on the part of the author, but are obviously deliberate. The sources of these dissonances on the larger structural plane are relatively easy to
identify: the plot is subject to time-shifts, thereby "confusing" the chronological sequence and creating inconsequent juxtapositions of scenes; relevant information is suppressed and delayed; and the main incidents of the plot are often rendered indirectly. In fact, of the three main events of the story—the explosion-death of Stevie, the murder of Adolf Verloc, and the suicide of Winnie—the first and third occur "offstage" as it were, and we receive the news as second-hand information (literally, as both incidents are first revealed through newspaper reports). On the other hand, the murder of Verloc is presented in as direct a manner as possible—so direct that Leavis pronounced it as "disturbing in its reality," and declared the scene to be "one of the most astonishing triumphs of genius in fiction" (Leavis, 245, 244). Why, it might be asked, is there such a glaring contrast and apparent incongruity in narrative techniques?

Not only does Conrad choose to "omit" direct narration or description in certain key instances which would seem to demand "onstage" treatment, but he also includes an entire chapter (chapter eight) which more than one critic has singled out as being irrelevant to the principal concerns and movements of the plot. Another apparent narrative peculiarity is the absence not only of a hero, but of a central character, which in most narratives provides the focal point and principal means of achieving unity. Critical support for this
observation is indirect rather than direct, for almost every character in *The Secret Agent* has been singled out by some critic or other as the principal character—especially Winnie, Stevie, Mr. Verloc, and the Assistant Commissioner. However, although each of these characters becomes the focal point temporarily during the course of the story, none remains in this position long enough to warrant the label of "hero" or central character. Leo Gurko notes that *The Secret Agent* is "a novel without a hero," pointing out that

> It is the only such novel ever written by Conrad, and one of the few of its kind in the whole history of fiction. There is no dearth of characters; no fewer than eight sit to full-length portraits. But there is no "central" figure, around whom either the action or the meaning of the story revolves. Instead, it revolves around them all. Moreover, there is no main character in terms of sympathy, liking, or identification [Gurko, 308].

John Hagan, Jr. makes a similar point, although he would disagree with Gurko that *The Secret Agent* is the only one of Conrad's novels without a hero. Hagan remarks that

> Beginning with *Nostromo* . . . a dispersion of the atoms of the story took place on a hitherto unprecedented scale. The focal point fluctuated so radically that some critics denied that the book had any center of interest at all. To a lesser extent the same thing is going on in *The Secret Agent* [Hagan, 149].

This, once again, leads to the larger question: "the extent to which Conrad succeeds in fusing into an organic whole a great number of apparently detached scenes and characters" (Hagan, 148). Gurko and Hagan, like Stallman, offer their
own versions of the unity underlying the apparent chaos, but at the moment I am primarily interested in emphasizing the more obvious departures from, or modifications of, the normal structures of narrative. As U. C. Knoepflmacher observes, a reading of \textit{The Secret Agent} entails an "accumulation of fragments which at first do not seem to cohere at all," and that in order to

... understand even its plot we must supply some facts and carefully piece together those that are doled out to us; like Inspector Heat or the Assistant Commissioner we must go by hints, loose fragments, surmises, and keep away from misleading pieces of evidence. We must rearrange the thirteen fragments—one hesitates to call them chapters—into which the novel is divided. Although we must experience them in the order in which they are presented, we must at the same time be aware of their true chronological sequence [Knoepflmacher, 241-242].

That Conrad is aiming at a different structure, style, and effect in the \textit{The Secret Agent} is further suggested by the absence of certain narrative techniques which, if not in this case associated with the novel in general, are certainly associated with much of his own writing. Albert Guérard goes on to observe that "The Secret Agent...\textit{Asymniser...}

ways an astonishing leap into an entirely different kind of art" (Guérard, 226). For Guérard, this "leap" is principally indicated by what he refers to as the "ironic" or "detached"
style of the novel, which contrasts markedly with Conrad's characteristic and highly successful use of character-narrators, of whom Marlow is the best-known example: "We have instead a 'voice' which is an attitude, and which controls to an unusual degree its distance from the material." The result, according to Guérard's judgement, is equally successful, and

... this controlled and relatively bare style did function for Conrad as a congenial point of view or narrating consciousness; style became, as it were, an interposed narrator! It satisfied the needs provided for in earlier novels by literal removal in time and space or by the screening Marlovian voice [Guérard, 228].

Where I would agree completely with the frequent observation that Conrad maintains complete and close stylistic control over his material in *The Secret Agent*, I believe that the observation that this style is fundamentally "ironic," and thereby "detached" from the substance or subject which it presents, needs to be qualified. The style is in part ironic, and does allow a form of detachment, but to leave it at this partially obscures the stylistic function as a whole. Irony implies a degree of emotional disengagement and dependence upon intellectual response which cannot be satisfactorily reconciled with the experience of *The Secret Agent*.

The presence of irony and detachment are important to the style of *The Secret Agent*, but only in part, and for a
more complete conception of the style it is necessary to take account of what seems to be an opposite effect: a frequently disturbing and certainly ambivalent emotional engagement with the material, often accompanied by a loss of the intellectual and rational framework. The style, no less than the structure, is permeated with deliberate gaps and discrepancies, and we are faced with a narrative or set of techniques designed to simultaneously control and disorient the material, and the reader's perception of and response to the material. While the style allows for a sense of irony and distance on the one hand, it is also true that this apparent "detachment" frequently turns against itself, or dissolves, promoting a sense of incongruity and disorientation. This paradoxical capability of acting toward opposite ends simultaneously is the essence of the grotesque style.

Norman Holland, like Albert Guérard, focuses on the shift from narrator to style or "voice," but goes beyond Guérard in suggesting the dual potential of this style:

> In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad put aside the margin of safety the narrator represented. . . . He created a comic, ironic style that swings between an involved periphrasis, almost neo-classic in manner, and sudden, grimy, realistic details [Holland, 229].

Were these "sudden, grimy, realistic details" solely a function of the material, then there would be no need to look further than the technique of irony and comedy as the stylistic bases of presentation. This is not, however, the
case. The material is, in many instances, inherently disturbing in various ways, and the style does serve as a means of distancing and detachment. But on the other hand, it soon becomes apparent that in many cases the style actually serves to aggravate normally "harmless" material, or to further provoke inherently disturbing or potentially disturbing material, thereby presenting it in an uncomfortably "realistic" light.

The Secret Agent may differ in various significant ways both from Conrad's characteristic set of narrative techniques, and from the narrative expectations surrounding the novel in general, but these differences are, I believe, evidence of his attempt to reach the objective toward which all of his writing is aimed, namely "the profound readjustment of his readers' perspective toward the familiar, commonplace world around them, whether by serious or comic means" (Axton, 153). As Knoepflmacher points out in his analysis of The Secret Agent:

... there are no overt guidelines to sort out the experiences we observe at first hand. The juxtapositions of scenes, symbols, phrases, words, force the reader into assessing the significance of each of the details to which he is exposed.

Knoepflmacher goes on to quote Conrad's famous credo: "My task which I am trying to achieve is by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see," pointing out that this
statement "places the burden on the perceptiveness of his readers" (Knoepflmacher, 243).

Knoepflmacher, like Guérard and Holland, is led to a consideration of the subtlety of "voice" which distinguishes the style, and to a further consideration of this voice, or style, as the mediator between the author and his material, between material and reader, and between author and reader. This stylistic mediator serves not only to set up the sense of order and the expectations associated with this order, but also to jar those same expectations and, consequently, to challenge the sense of order and the assumptions upon which they are based. This is suggested in Knoepflmacher's remarks that

Conrad's narrative method presupposes an absolute alertness from the reader. Although the narrator's ironic voice sets the tone for the story, this voice is disembodied; despite his omniscience, the narrator effaces himself and forces us to hear and see only those details he has carefully screened and selected. His suppressions offend our yearning for order, continuity, and explanation. The reader, irritated by the narrator's elusive voice, almost feels like apostrophizing him much in the way that Mr. Vladimir apostrophizes Verloc: "Voice won't do. We have no use for your voice. We don't want a voice. We want facts—startling facts—damn you!" [Knoepflmacher, 242-243].
The discontinuities, incongruities, and narrative "gaps" which are present at the larger structural level, and which characterize the narrative content, are also apparent as features of the perspective and style of The Secret Agent. The techniques underlying these various narrative levels are grotesque in function and effect. The same design governs all.

The significance of certain comic techniques (especially those related to caricature and adapted to the dramatic mode) and certain "cinematographic" techniques to the perspective and style of the grotesque was discussed earlier; this significance becomes even clearer upon examination of the techniques of style and perspective in a work such as The Secret Agent.

The Secret Agent has been adapted to both stage and screen. Conrad himself was responsible for the stage adaptation, and although the film version had to wait for Alfred Hitchcock, Ian Watt notes that "Conrad was also interested in the cinema, and indeed collaborated with Pinker on a film scenario of 'Gasper Ruiz'; which is in the Yale University Library" (Casebook, 83). It is interesting to compare the adaptations of The Secret Agent with each other and with the novel itself.

With regard to the stage-play, Watt writes that Conrad's
... dramatisation of *The Secret Agent* exists in two forms, that in four acts privately printed in 1921, and that in three acts which was produced at the Ambassadors' Theatre on 2 November 1922 [Casebook, 82].

The apparent "dramatic" qualities of the novel evidently failed to maintain their vigour once transposed to the stage, however: Watt states that "The play was not successful, and ran only to 11 November. It failed with most of the critics, as well as with the public" (Casebook, 82). The extent to which the failure was due to the production rather than to the material is difficult to determine, but apparently the "play followed the novel closely, and used much of the dialogue" (Casebook, 83). Because of staging difficulties, certain changes became necessary, among these being the removal of the outdoor scenes involving Verloc's walk to the Embassy and home again. The ending is even more radically re-written; on the whole, however, the failure can probably be attributed to the fact that the strength of the narrative is dependent upon the point of view, the one element that is consistently lacking in the play: "The essential difference between the novel and the play," states Watt, "... is the absence of the writer's ironic commentary" (Casebook, 83). Once extracted from the control of Conrad's narrative style, the materials of the story were left in an unredeemable state of melodrama. Watt refers to Conrad's own recognition of this loss, registered in the "Author's Note" to the novel:
lately, circumstances have compelled me to strip this tale of the literary robe of indignant scorn it has cost me so much to fit on it decently, years ago. I have been forced, so to speak, to look upon its bare bones. I confess that it makes a grisly skeleton [xiv-xv].

It is interesting to note that the element of style or perspective conspicuously absent in the stage adaptation of *The Secret Agent* becomes perhaps too conspicuous in the screen version of the story. The film version was directed by Alfred Hitchcock and released in 1936 as *Sabotage* in England and *A Woman Alone* in the United States (the film titles were changed from the novel's title due to the fact that Hitchcock had already made a film called *The Secret Agent*, based on Somerset Maugham's Ashenden stories). The adaptation to the screen proved more successful than the dramatization of the story, but encountered certain problems of its own.

Direct comparisons between the novel and film are made somewhat difficult because, as Watt points out, "The scenario and setting were very different from Conrad's." This, if Watt's brief summary of the film is a fair indication, is a drastic understatement:

Verloc (Oscar Homolka) manages a small cinema, and Heat employs a handsome detective (John Loden) who courts Winnie (Sylvia Sidney) so that he can keep an eye on Verloc. There is a somewhat improbable happy ending: a timely explosion after the murder destroys the evidence against Winnie, who then finds happiness in the detective's arms.

Even with all of these changes of plot to suit the more
wishful expectations of the audience, a certain tension between medium and subject-matter was still apparent:

As a film Sabotage is, as Hitchcock remarked, "a little messy." One of the reasons is certainly that the squalor of the original story would be much too strong when presented through the realism of the camera. Thus the film, like the play, draws attention to how utterly dependent Conrad's tale is on the mode of telling. For instance, the blowing-up of Stevie in the film was much "resented" by the audience; as François Truffaut puts it: "Making a child die in a picture is a rather ticklish matter; it comes close to an abuse of cinematic power" [Casebook, 84].

The dramatic and cinematic adaptations of the novel are therefore interesting for various reasons. First of all, they point to an affinity between the techniques of The Secret Agent and the techniques of drama and cinema—or at least to a predisposition toward similar techniques. Of course a novel need not make use of any cinematographic techniques itself in order to become suitable material for a screenplay—novels written long before the cinema and its techniques were first conceived have been made into highly successful films (many of them more successful, from both a critical and popular point of view, than Sabotage). Similarly, it might well be argued that the real affinity between The Secret Agent and the stage, on one hand, and the screen on the other, is less an affinity of structure and technique than of subject and content. The melodramatic and sensational is specifically what Hitchcock would be looking for in a potentially filmable narrative. However, I don't offer
The events of *The Secret Agent* occur within the context of a carefully delineated realistic environment. The events themselves are rendered in a wealth and precision of detail; like Winnie's own visions, they occur in "such plastic relief, such nearness of form, [and] such a fidelity of suggested detail" (244), that there would appear to be a complete resistance to distortion. Yet this objectivity and attention to realistic detail frequently serves as a prime vehicle of the grotesque in the novel. As the narrator of *The Secret Agent* himself remarks: "to exaggerate with judgement one must begin by measuring with nicety" (249-250).

The techniques here used to combine the realism of objectivity and detail with the perspective of grotesque distortion and discrepancy bear a close resemblance to certain techniques and perspectives characteristic of the cinema. Insignificant details suddenly intrude upon the narrative, and are given a disproportionate significance by their mere presence, a presence unjustified by their content: "Mr. Vladimir's hand clasped the ankle reposing on his knee. The sock was of dark blue silk" (21); or, at a moment of dramatic intensity, it is observed that "Mrs. Verloc touched the back of her hair. It was in perfect order" (203). This
the adaptations as proofs of similar techniques inherent in
the novel itself, but rather as indications.

The differences are even more significant. Whereas
the dramatization of the novel lost the sharp impact of the
narrative's grotesque voice and perspective (what Watt refers
to as "the absence of the writer's ironic commentary"), the
film version acted in precisely the opposite manner, empha-
sizing the objective power of the perspective ("it comes
close to an abuse of cinematic power") and consequently
losing the necessary human, or subjective, contact with the
material. Watt's remark that "the film, like the play,
draws attention to how utterly dependent Conrad's tale is on
the mode of telling" points to the significance of the dual
role which the "mode of telling" performs—not only does it
serve to objectify and detach the reader from the characters
and material of the story, but it also involves the reader
with the characters and material, often in a discomfiting
and ambivalent manner. Further, and paradoxically, the
duality is frequently simultaneous, a source of additional
ambivalence. This mode of telling, or style, is maintained
throughout The Secret Agent; while it gains its peculiar
power and effect through its adaptation of dramatic and
cinematographic techniques, this mode is essentially narra-
tive, and any attempt to isolate one aspect of the style
destroys the effect of the whole.
sense of disproportion is also achieved through the "close-up": "On repeating this last word Mr. Vladimir laid a long white forefinger on the desk"; or similarly, "the raising of a shapely, large white hand arrested him" (22, 30). Such isolated shots serve also to "blow-up" the object in a disturbing manner, and where the detail or object in question is normally a part of a larger whole, it may appear to take on an independent existence. The grotesque effect of such distortions is whimsically (less so from Verloc's point of view) suggested by the remark that "To be crushed, as it were, under the tip of a forefinger was an unpleasant experience" (85).

Thick knees, fleshy fists, and "large, white, plump hands" frequently intrude or pass across the scene, as do various other objects, animate and inanimate alike. Joseph I. Fradin refers to The Secret Agent as a "natural scenario" which is filled with "images whose content yields itself more readily to a sensibility shaped by the moving-picture than by the printed page." Fradin continues:

The juxtaposed image in the scene between the Professor and Ossipon, for example—the unknown couple going up the stairs, the piano playing by itself, the over-lighted restaurant, the ghastly rubbish, the mutilated corpses—which capture the whole irrational violence of the world, are like a sequence out of a film by Jean-Luc Godard. In general Conrad is very cinematographic in The Secret Agent, often working like the camera in the "nouvelle vague" film. The camera picks up a face or a form as it moves into range, watches it for a
moment without identifying it or the point of view, and lets it drift away—another nameless atom in the flux. Or it moves from the identified—but no more really known—man to the unidentified, commits them to a common fate as anonymous fragments accidentally associated for a moment, and coolly drops them [Fradin, Everyman, 1032].

Such a perspective serves to level distinctions between the human and non-human realms, or between what is humanly significant and insignificant. Normally unimportant "things" or aspects normally relegated to the background are invested with momentary importance or raised to the foreground, and the human is reduced to a fragmented or peripheral existence.

The grotesque emerges through a disruption of the temporal as well as the spatial dimension of the narrative. The explosion takes place at Greenwich, the temporal and spatial centre of the earth, and it manifests itself throughout the narrative as "sudden holes in space and time" (85). The discrepancy between time as "temps" and time as "durée" is one of the main themes in The Secret Agent, and forms the basis of various other discrepancies in the novel. These temporal discrepancies and dissonances are even more adaptable to cinematographic techniques than the spatial incongruities.

The "slow-motion" scene of Verloc's death is the most obvious example in which an incongruity between chronological and subjective time, as well as between thought and action, is manifested. Knoepflmacher offers a succinct description
of this scene and its unique effect:

As in a slow-motion film, Conrad forces us to behold details that could not have been perceived through a more rapid presentation. He devotes an entire paragraph to the thoughts flashing through Verloc's mind during the brief moment that elapses while the arm moves back and down. Verloc's body cannot carry out the elaborate "plan of defense" concocted by his brain. The inertia which has characterized him in life also characterizes him in this last moment before death. The grotesque, sensual man pays for his lifelong inability to be moved [Knoepflmacher, 258].

As well as registering the discrepancy between thought and action, this particular adaptation of narrative prose to the temporal contingencies of the event being narrated is one of the better examples of the process I outlined earlier: the attempt to literally register the effects of the explosion that occurs in the centre of the narrative. The Secret Agent not only records or transcribes events, it embodies them.

This attempt to fuse narrative and event at the level of language, style, and structure in The Secret Agent is perceptively related by R. W. Stallman to a statement made by Marlow in Lord Jim; says Stallman:

Where Marlow in Lord Jim explains—"All this happened in much less time than it takes to tell, since I am trying to interpret for you into slow speech the instantaneous effect of visual impressions"—describes precisely what Conrad creates in the slow prose of the murder scene—a sense of time suspended [Stallman, 247].

It is interesting that the more rapid the flow of perceptual impressions, the "slower" the pace of the prose (or in Marlow's terms, the "speech") that is required to capture
the full effect of such impressions. At a certain point in such a process time appears to become suspended, and even the most rapid succession of instantaneous events can be recorded.

Perhaps this inverse relationship between narrative pace and the flow of events is what Ford Madox Ford, in Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance refers to as "progression d'effet." Ford states that:

In writing a novel we [Ford and Conrad] agreed that every word set on paper—every word set on paper—must carry the story forward and, that as the story progressed, the story must be carried forward faster and faster and with more and more intensity. That is called "progression d'effet," words for which there is no English equivalent.63

Although the scene of Verloc's murder is the most memorable example of "slow prose" and the phenomenon of "progression d'effet," there are other scenes and descriptions which provide interesting variations on this process. The cab-ride in chapter eight, which "obliterated every sensation of onward movement" (163), is a noteworthy instance. So also is the following description of a single moment in the interview between Heat and the Assistant Commissioner:

At the little laugh of Chief Inspector Heat's he [the Assistant Commissioner] spun swiftly on his heels, as if whisked away from the window-pane by an electric shock. He caught on the latter's face not only the complacency proper to the occasion lurking under the moustache, but the vestiges of experimental watchfulness in the round eyes, which had been, undoubtedly, fastened on his back, and now met his glance for a second before the intent
character of their stare had the time to change to a merely startled appearance [114-115].

A sense of "frozen time" is created by the discrepancy between sudden action and delayed reaction, enhancing the equally grotesque effect of the sudden action occurring against a static background (the essence of the "gestic" style important to the dramatic quality of the narrative to which I will refer below). This suspended or "frozen" shot or "hold" creates a sense of the "pregnant moment," charging the scene with a latent tension, and "with a weight of profound menace" (Hagan, 153).

This sense of menace and tension is achieved in other ways as well. Extended gaps frequently occur between perception and conceptualization, as in the following description of Sir Ethelred:

A slight jerky movement of the big body half lost in the gloom of the green silk shades, of the big head leaning on the big hand, accompanied an intermittent stifled but powerful sound. The great man had laughed [220].

Often these gaps are quite prolonged, and the atmosphere is further charged by the timely introduction of other grotesque images, the tension seeming to invoke the grotesque and the grotesque serving to amplify the tension. Following Mr. Verloc's return home on the day of the explosion, for example, Mrs. Verloc is sitting in the parlour when, just as she is about to rise and enter the kitchen,

... a slight, very slight, and rapid rattling
sound grew upon her hearing. Bizarre and incomprehensible, it arrested Mrs. Verloc's attention. [That something is askew is here being announced in a manner identical to the "announcement" of the explosion by the piano in chapter four.] Then as its character became plain to the ear she stopped short, amazed and concerned. Striking a match on the box she held in her hand, she turned on and lighted, above the parlour table, one of the two gas burners, which, being defective, first whistled as if astonished, and then went on purring comfortably like a cat [emphasis mine].

The focus then shifts to Mr. Verloc, and another entire paragraph is taken up in a somewhat irrelevant and gratuitous description of his position, detailing the location of his hat, feet, head, hands, body, and overcoat ("It was lying on the sofa"), before the cause of the "rapid rattling sound" is finally revealed: "His teeth rattled with an ungovernable violence . . ." (l91). The event is hardly momentous in itself, yet by revealing the effect prior to the cause, and by delaying the revelation for the duration of two paragraphs, the common scene and detail is charged with tension, and given an oblique twist which allows it to come alive in the form of whistling and purring gas burners, which in turn further intensify the scene.

We find this technique used in an even more disturbing manner in the scenes involving Verloc's murder and Winnie's encounter with Comrade Ossipon. For example, in the sequence relating Winnie's stabbing of Verloc, a strange sound is described but the explanation of its origin is temporarily withheld:
Nothing moved in the parlour till Mrs. Verloc raised her head slowly and looked at the clock with inquiring mistrust. She had become aware of a ticking sound in the room. It grew upon her ear, while she remembered clearly that the clock on the wall was silent, had no audible tick. What did it mean by beginning to tick so loudly all of a sudden? Itsfface indicated ten minutes to nine. Mrs. Verloc cared nothing for time, and the ticking went on. She concluded it could not be the clock, and her sullen gaze moved along the walls, wavered, and became vague, while she strained her hearing to locate the sound. Tic, tic, tic [264].

As in the earlier example, an inexplicable noise is introduced, and then the screw is turned, as it were, first by prolonging the revelation of the source of the noise, and secondly by taking advantage of the heightened tension to introduce further grotesque images and impressions:

After listening for some time Mrs. Verloc lowered her gaze deliberately on her husband's body. Its attitude of repose was so homelike and familiar that she could do so without feeling embarrassed by any prolonged novelty in the phenomena of her home life. Mr. Verloc was taking his habitual ease. He looked comfortable [264].

The narrator then continues, and his deliberate refusal to anticipate the discovery awaiting Winnie is made even more apparent in the following lines:

By the position of the body the face of Mr. Verloc was not visible to Mrs. Verloc, his widow. Her fine, sleepy eyes, travelling downward on the track of the sound, became contemplative on meeting a flat object of bone which protruded a little beyond the edge of the sofa. It was the handle of the domestic carving knife with nothing strange about it but its position at right angles to Mr. Verloc's waistcoat and the fact that something dripped from it [264-265].

By this point, suspension has practically become an infinite
series of regression, a distance matched by the almost inhumanly detached objectivity of perspective. However, instead of breaking perception down into yet smaller and more objectively transcribed components, the cause is finally revealed, and the concept of the entire situation allowed to form:

Dark drops fell on the floor-cloth one after another, with a sound of ticking growing fast and furious like the pulse of an insane clock. At its highest speed this ticking changed into a continuous sound of trickling. Mrs. Verloc watched that transformation with shadows of anxiety coming and going on her face. It was a trickle, dark, swift, thin . . . Blood! [265].

Here the acute temporal and perceptual discrepancies rendered by the style are the subject of the scene as well. Various other incongruities and dissonances are achieved by similar means: discrepancy between appearance and reality, cause and effect (which are often reversed as well), perception and concept, and foreground and background.

Like a film maker [writes Knoepflmacher] this novelist achieves his effects through abrupt changes in pace, placement, and focus; he enlarges one subject, foreshortens another, and blurs a third. Time is frozen, cut up, and broken [Knoepflmacher, 246].

Thus the same temporal and perceptual discontinuities which operate at the larger structural levels of *The Secret Agent* are equally prevalent within single scenes, paragraphs, and even sentences, and are instituted by specific stylistic devices. Information is narrated indirectly, or suppressed
temporarily, or omitted altogether, or released in fragments, and events are juxtaposed, or jolted out of chronological sequence. The duration of a flashback might be momentary, or it might comprise an entire chapter. These stylistic and structural "gaps" might be related to what Wolfgang Iser terms "gaps of indeterminacy." At the larger structural level of the chapter, for example, Iser contends that

Each chapter prepares the "horizon" for the next, and it is the process of reading that provides the continual overlapping and interweaving of the views presented by each of the chapters. The reader is stimulated into filling the "empty spaces" between the chapters in order to group them into a coherent whole.64

A similar process occurs at the level of the scene, paragraph, and sentence, and the effect in each case is ultimately the same: to disorient and simultaneously reorient the perceptions and assumptions of the reader by means of a consonance which is achieved through modification, delay, suppression, or disconfirmation of expectation and anticipation.

The obvious eccentricity of perspective is further intensified by the dramatic quality of The Secret Agent. F. R. Leavis focuses upon this aspect of the novel's style, observing that "the whole is so dramatically realized that we are hardly aware of shifts to description, stage direction; stage directions or reported thoughts: it all seems to be enacted before us" (Leavis, 241). It is interesting that Albert Guérard credits the dramatic quality of the narrative
to the shift from "the screening Marlovian voice" to a situation in which "style became . . . an interposed narrator." Because of this transition, maintains Guérard,

Conrad was able to carry through for almost the first time long dramatic scenes occurring in a fictional present; to achieve, even, excellent scenes of violent action, violent emotion, and violent comic discovery [Guérard, 228].

The dramatic immediacy of the narrative is a primary source of certain grotesque elements and effects. Kayser refers to the characteristically "gestic style" of the grotesque, whereby a static or frozen scene suddenly gives way to movement or gesture. There is in The Secret Agent a constant focus upon gesture, facial expression, sudden and eccentric movement. As in the encounter between the Assistant Commissioner and Chief Inspector Heat cited above, sudden movement within an otherwise "static" context serves to disorient and create tension; the frequent incongruity of such movement (which is normally associated with such comic dramatic forms as the "commedia dell'arte," the mime, the farce, and burlesque) also adds a note of ludicrousness to the scene. Almost every encounter between the characters in The Secret Agent involves instances of gestic movement or expression. The interview between Verloc and Vladimir early in the novel provides abundant instances of this, as when Mr. Vladimir "turned, and advanced into the room with such determination that the very ends of his quaintly old-fashioned
bow necktie seemed to bristle with unspeakable menaces" (24); in the following description of the Assistant Commissioner, the gestic contrast is made explicit: "The Assistant Commissioner uncrossed his legs suddenly. The briskness of that movement contrasted with the casual way in which he threw out a suggestion" (121).

Related to the dramatic quality of the narrative is the structural importance of the "interview" which seems to provide the core situation for many of the scenes. This is discussed by John Hagan, Jr. in his essay, "The Design of Conrad's The Secret Agent." Hagan points out that

The most remarkable feature of the structure of The Secret Agent is that it is made up of a series of interviews—not merely "scenes" in James's general sense of the term, but of more or less official interviews between two persons which are confined in space and run to no greater length than the actual time it takes to read them. There are, to be exact, seventeen such interviews of varying length of importance . . . [Hagan, 149].

It might be added that these interviews are for the most part played out within the context of carefully delineated closed "sets," ranging from the Verloc household, through the offices of the Assistant Commissioner, Mr. Vladimir, and Sir Ethelred, to the Silenus Restaurant, the drawing room of Michaelis's "lady patroness," and the Professor's "barren room. Although an intricate and elaborate web of relationships interconnects these various scenes, the apparently independent nature of each is maintained by frequent shifts in time
and focus, particularly when such shifts radically dislocate the chronological relationship of one to the other. This explains in part the apparent structural "disunity" of what is in fact a tightly integrated sequence of scenes.

These closed sets contribute to the overall sense of dramatic immediacy and "realistic" perspective which together provide an ideal context for the grotesque. The transformation and estrangement of the everyday world is best conducted within such an environment. This is suggested by Kayser's remark that "In literature the grotesque appears in a scene or an animated tableau," impressing itself "upon the observer as a scene or a latently dynamic image" (Kayser, 184, 163); in short, according to Kayser: "As soon as one focuses upon specific settings, frequent occasion for the grotesque arises" (Kayser, 111-112).

The sense of a "verbal" grotesque, as discussed in the final section of Part II, is also relevant to The Secret Agent. The language, dialogue, and rhetoric of the narrative are frequently exploited at precisely those points which are particularly susceptible to the exaggerations, distortions, and disharmonies of the grotesque. The grotesque effect is frequently based upon figurative language and meiosis, puns
and double entendres, incongruities between speaker, dialogue, and situation, and often upon a playful manipulation of the language itself.

Conrad explores the disquieting possibilities of the simile and the "as if" formula on various occasions, with results ranging from the ludicrously to the ominously grotesque. The reductive, or meiotic, quality of these figurative equations is especially apparent when the "victim" of the equation is one of the characters in the story. Many of the examples of grotesque characterization in *The Secret Agent* that were cited earlier have their sources in figurative distortion: Michaelis's elbow, for instance, appears "like a bend in a dummy's limb" (42); Ossipon's "thick legs" are "similar to bolsters" (43); Verloc's "thick arms rested abandoned on the outside of the counterpane like dropped weapons, like discarded tools" (179). Such examples could easily be multiplied, for the process of disfigurement and distortion is widespread, and carried out in a variety of ways.

The frequent use of the "as if" formula lends an eccentricity of perspective to a great deal of the action in *The Secret Agent*. Once again, this eccentricity is most evident in those parts of the story charged with the greatest tension, as in the scenes immediately prior to and following Winnie's discovery of Stevie's untimely and violent death.
Moments after Heat has confronted Winnie with Stevie's coat-label, Verloc returns and ushers the Chief Inspector into the parlour:

The door was hardly shut when Mrs. Verloc, jumping up from the chair, ran to it as if to fling it open, but instead of doing so she fell on her knees, with her ear to the keyhole [208, emphasis mine].

For a moment it is as though we ourselves are unable to comprehend the meaning or predict the outcome of the action we are witnessing, a sensation which is also closely associated with the sudden gestic movement which is the subject of the description. It is also similar to the effect of the gap between perception and conceptualization which results from the cinematographic objectivity of certain actions, such as the description of Ethelred's laugh.

The same sense of gestic movement, given an additional twist toward oddity by the eccentricity of perspective, is present in the following description (here the "as if" is replaced by "It all had the appearance of . . .," but the technique is identical—that of naive spectator—and the effect is brilliant):

Mr. Verloc caught hold of his wife's wrists. But her hands seemed glued fast. She swayed forward bodily to his tug, and nearly went off the chair. Startled to feel her so helplessly limp, he was trying to put her back on the chair when she stiffened suddenly all over, tore herself out of his hands, ran out of the shop, across the parlour, and into the kitchen. This was very swift. He had just a glimpse of her face and that much of her eyes that he knew she had not looked at him.
It all had the appearance of a struggle for the possession of a chair, because Mr. Verloc instantly took his wife's place in it [234-235].

The grotesque disjuncture between appearance and reality instituted by this final observation is extremely powerful, serving both to increase the absurdity of the situation, and thereby the tension, and to release tension in the form of laughter—or at least through the apprehension of the comic. The overall effect is one of ambivalence. The gap between perspective and action is made practically analogous to the gap between Winnie and Verloc. And it is a gap which goes beyond that of ironic detachment: it is directed at the reader as much as the character. It is our perspective which is being radically disoriented.

Such radical fissures between dialogue and character or dialogue, action, situation, and perspective underly the grotesque effect of other scenes in the novel as well; this is true of the conversation between Winnie and Ossipon in the final scenes, and is also apparent in the parodic speeches of Michaelis and Yundt in chapter three which I cited earlier as examples of grotesque discourse.

The grotesque exploitation of puns and double entendres is also present in The Secret Agent, examples of which were given earlier. The pervasiveness of such devices reflects a frequent playfulness and frivolity executed within the language itself. Fradin and Creighton, in "The
Language of *The Secret Agent: The Art of Non-Life,* go so far as to assert that language is in fact "the ultimate secret agent in the novel" (Fradin and Creighton, 23). They point out that "the play of language" manifests itself in other ways as well; such "play" might take the form of an over-extended metaphor, such as, for example, the metaphor of "the world as drained aquarium," which "involves a whole complex of water and fish references found throughout the novel both on and under the surface" (Fradin and Creighton, 24). The proliferation of terms along such a tangent quickly becomes grotesque in effect, particularly if the image or metaphor being extended is inherently grotesque to begin with, therefore adding to the overall levelling effect of the language. Fradin and Creighton declare that:

> The very frolicking of the language contributes to the process by which man's affairs are made insignificant, just as the element of gratuitousness makes the characters' lives even more hopeless, diminished beyond any reduction of men to animals [Fradin and Creighton, 26].

It is not always possible to distinguish between the degree to which the grotesque is purely a function of language, as distinct from the subject, content, or perspective, and in most instances the grotesque is reflected in all of these aspects of the narrative. Nevertheless, it is apparent that certain types of discourse, images, figurative turns, and extensions or exaggerations of language are
especially suited to the mode of the grotesque, and that in
The Secret Agent they both produce and reflect the grotesque
vision.
I have tried to demonstrate that the discontinuities and incongruities which are present in the larger structural patterns of *The Secret Agent* also govern the various inner hierarchies of perspective and style, and that these formal elements correspond to the subject-matter and content—the characters, setting, events, and images—so that a single vision or conception may be said to permeate the novel. I have also attempted to demonstrate that this particular vision is essentially grotesque in function and effect, and that each of the component layers of this vision, from the structural to the substantial, is also grotesque in function and effect.

My emphasis so far has been upon the formal implications of the grotesque—an emphasis which is attributable to the fact that the grotesque in *The Secret Agent* is a function less of subject and content than of the radical manner in which this subject-matter is presented. Nevertheless, although the vision, or process, of estrangement is primarily effected through the grotesque perspective, the substance of
the narrative cannot be dismissed as incidental to this vision and process. In fact, a problem of reconciliation between style and content arises in this connection.

Whereas the estranging or alienating properties of the grotesque style are readily discerned in the subject and content, the "restructuring" properties of the style do not seem to find their analogues in the substance of the story. In fact, the movement of the story would seem to resolutely oppose any possibility of restructuring, or liberation, in the narrative. We follow Winnie Verloc's story, says Conrad in the Preface to *The Secret Agent*, "to its anarchistic end of utter desolation, madness and despair . . ." (xv). And madness, observes Kayser, is "the climactic phase of estrangement from the world" (Kayser, 74). If, it might be asked, Conrad's aim was actually to readjust our perspective to the familiar world around us, to make us see afresh, why then did he choose a subject and substance which would appear to deny such a purpose? The story has its redeeming features, but these are relentlessly undercut by the end of the novel; the estrangement is provoked as well as allayed by the form and perspective of the narrative, which tends to rule out the possibility of comic and ironic detachment; how, then, are we to avoid the conclusion reached by certain critics that *The Secret Agent* presents a nihilistic vision, that "What Conrad wants 'to hold up before the mental vision' of the readers
of The Secret Agent is the void which lies at the heart of life" (Fradin and Creighton, 23)? These questions require an answer if the "restructuring" capabilities of the grotesque style are to be recognized and justified. They may be combined with a similar question put forward by Ian Watt:

There is one other important question which, as it seems to me, is not satisfactorily answered in the body of critical writing about The Secret Agent. How is it that a tale so deeply depressing on the face of it, a tale in which every possible card is stacked against human freedom and happiness, should be, for some readers at least, tonic rather than depressive in its final effect [Casebook, 77]?

J. Hillis Miller sees the purpose of The Secret Agent as being "to bring about . . . a liberation for the reader by effecting it for the chief characters of the novel," for, according to Miller,

. . . the objects of Conrad's "inspiring indignation and underlying pity and contempt" are not only the revolutionists of the story, but all men, his readers too, trapped, like the characters of the story, in a blind belief in what is a human fabrication and a lie [Miller, 44].

I agree with Miller's contention that The Secret Agent is ultimately liberating in its effect upon the reader; I do not agree, however, with his view as to how this liberation is achieved. Liberation is only effected for the main characters of the story in a very negative sense, for although their "human fabrications" are exploded, nothing is offered them in the way of replacement, and "liberation" is therefore tantamount to destruction. True liberation requires not only
the breakdown, but also the reformation of the relationships between man and the world. The problem remains: how are we liberated by a process that sends the characters in the narrative to an ending of madness, despair, and death?

I would argue that the liberation of the reader is, as Miller suggests, effected through the characters—but only in part, for it is a liberation attained through their sacrifice, not their corresponding liberation. The grotesque characterization, possessing the same simultaneous duality and ambivalence as the grotesque image, serves to create the tension which surrounds the characters, and is reflected in their visions of and reactions to their world, while at the same time it serves to detach the reader from the inevitable consequences of this grotesque provocation. As Michael Steig maintains in his article on the psychological dynamics of the grotesque, it serves both to create and liberate or allay anxiety simultaneously. This basic paradox of the grotesque is also emphasized by Thomson, who recognizes both its "liberating" and "inhibiting," tension-producing effect, and points out that whereas the "horrifying or disgusting aspect cuts across our amusement," it might also be said that "our response to the horrifying is undercut by the comic side of the grotesque," acting therefore as a "disarming mechanism."

Therefore the sense of malice, dissolution, and absurdity which permeates the novel is allayed by being
directed at characters from whom we are able to detach ourselves by means of the more ironic, satiric, and caricatural aspects of the grotesque characterization; on the other hand, it is the tendency of these aspects to shift over into the grotesque, and thereby to involve us in the incongruities of the vision in unexpected and inexplicable ways, that is largely responsible for the felt sense of menace, dissolution, and absurdity in the first place.

This paradoxical quality of the grotesque is exemplified throughout *The Secret Agent*. The scenes which focus on the death of Stevie and on the consequent madness of Winnie are the most intense not only in terms of repulsiveness and a heightened sense of fear, suspense, absurdity, and menace, but also in terms of the comic. The essential incongruity and paradox of the grotesque may often be traced to this "co-presence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable" (Thomson, 3). The image of Stevie's "mangled remains" is placed in a sequence of incompatible contexts, each of which serves to provoke and accentuate the more inhuman and aggressive aspects of the image, but which also serves to release this tension through comic channels. The blasted body is seen both in the repulsive terms of "an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast" (86), and in terms of the police constable's ludicrous remark: "'He's all there. Every bit of him'" (87). The presence of this
ridiculous policemen ("He ran between the trees toward the Observatory. 'As fast as my legs would carry me,' he repeated twice") and the intellectual bafflement of Heat during these proceedings combine with the image of the "mangled remains" to produce an effect which is neither purely repulsive nor purely comic, but an ambivalent fusion of both, each component enhancing yet allaying the effect of the other.

This same effect could be illustrated in various other scenes in the novel, particularly those scenes in which Ossipon and Winnie are together at the Verloc abode following the murder of Verloc. Ian Watt points to these scenes as evidence for his view that it is the comic humour of The Secret Agent which provides the primary control of the vision:

Only that I think can begin to explain why a tale which in every possible card is stacked against human freedom and happiness should be tonic rather than depressive in its final effect.

Again, however, the effect is not pure comedy; as Claire Rosenfield notes: "No matter how comic the final meeting with Ossipon may appear, their complete inability to comprehend each other turns what might be sheer farce into a grotesque vision of truth." The effect is one of ambiguity and ambivalence, and this essential ambivalence reflects the dual nature of the grotesque.

This ambivalence may even be ascribed to the central symbol of the grotesque in The Secret Agent: the explosion. The explosion so far has been seen primarily as a literal,
metaphorical, and symbolical centre of disorder, distortion, and destruction; it might also be seen as a means, and metaphor, of order—or at least of a re-ordering and re-structuring. This paradox is supported by Avrom Fleishman's assertion that "The novel's vision of the modern world as fragmented is an attempt to radically reorder its substance, to turn it in the opposite direction, toward an ideal, organic community" (Fleishman, 189). Knoepflmacher makes a similar assertion, stating that

Conrad's disruption of the time scheme of a novel centered around Vladimir's attempts to have Verloc blow up Greenwich Observatory, the first meridian which lends order to the motions of a civilization ruled by time, serves his purpose in more ways than one. Vladimir wants to unsettle this impassive, orderly world and shake its optimisms through "an act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable (chap. 2). The novelist, however, is less nihilistic in his aims. Although he too wants to jar the reader's complacency, he explodes time so that he can order his fictional universe by controlling and gradually widening our understanding of its nature [Knoepflmacher, 247].

Thus it is possible to harness the creative potential implicit in the subversive nature of the grotesque, so that, as G. K. Chesterton has suggested, the grotesque may be employed as a means of presenting the world in a new light without falsifying it; or, as Thomson puts it:

... it may be a function of the grotesque to make us see the (real) world anew, from a fresh perspective which, though it be a strange and disturbing one, is nevertheless valid and realistic [Thomson, 17].
The grotesque may be approached in terms of its forms and contents within the work of art itself, in the reaction it produces, and "speculatively," adds Thomson, "in the creative temperament and psychological make-up of the artist" (Thomson, 20). As Thomson suggests, one can only speculate on the creative motives of the artist, and any attempt to isolate one specific motive, whether psychological, political, social, or esthetic, runs the risk of being extremely reductive as well. However, based on a thorough analysis of the substantial evidence within the work of art itself, and in the context of other works similar in mode and effect, such speculation is far from idle, and will serve at least to supplement the description of the grotesque in *The Secret Agent*.

Of Kayser's tripartite definition of the grotesque, two of the three parts refer to the creative impulse, or motive, underlying the work: "The grotesque is a play with the absurd," and "an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (Kayser, 187, 188). Such motives are much more easily discerned, and form a much more valid part of the analysis, when the central figure of the story is an artist. The "artist-hero" played an important role in
Romantic literature; in the tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann, for example,

... it is the artist who provides the point of contact between the real world and the ominous forces, and who loses hold of the world because he is able to penetrate the surface of reality [Kayser, 74-75].

The presence of such heroes obviously accounts in large part for the emphasis on the two aspects of Kayser's definition mentioned above. Such a definition can hardly be assumed with the same confidence in the case of The Secret Agent, which not only lacks an "artist-hero," but lacks a hero of any type.

On the other hand, although The Secret Agent does not have a central character, it does have certain principal characters; similarly, although the main incident (the explosion) is not narrated directly, we can piece it together and reconstruct it from its fragmentary manifestations throughout; and while no "artist-hero" (in the usual sense of the concept) exists, there are explicit references to artists made in connection with certain of the characters—and however fragmentary, incomplete, oblique, or parodic these references and allusions are, I believe it is possible to construct a composite sense of the artistic motives underlying the narrative as a whole.

The two characters most frequently pointed to as being representatives in any way of the author's own attitudes are
Stevie and the Assistant Commissioner. Stevie is explicitly referred to as an artist, and his circular creations are referred to as art. The description of Stevie engaged in his usual occupation could well serve as an obliquely metaphorical description of Conrad himself at work on *The Secret Agent*, in which "circles" abound:

Stevie, seated very good and quiet at a deal table, drawing circles, circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable. The artist never turned his head . . . [45].

Stevie, like the Romantic artist-hero in one sense at least, is in direct contact with forces which have, in Fleishman's words, "moral possibilities of both the most destructive and the most exalted sort" (Fleishman, 196). What Stevie lacks is control—or rather, inner control, for the attempts to impose external controls upon him eventually hasten his destruction instead of preventing it. Paradoxically, Stevie embodies not only the potential for destruction and disorder, but also, insofar as his role is seen to parallel that of the artist, of creation and order. This paradox is implicit in the view of Stanton de Voren Hoffman, who says at one point that *The Secret Agent*

... deals with the elemental, the passions underlying a superficial order and existence, and basically destructive to that order. Stevie—who
differs from all the other characters of the novel —is the symbol for this;
and at another point, that "... Stevie is the symbol for the form and artistry of the novel" (Hoffman, 112, n. 24; 118, n. 41). This paradox should not trouble the reader who views the narrative in the context of the grotesque; that Hoffman himself does not allow for this possibility or paradox is evident in his conclusion that "Stevie, by being a half-wit, undercuts the form," and therefore that "Conrad, in other words, allows nothing to remain, even form and technique as a value is destroyed" (Hoffman, 118, n. 41). On the contrary: through the grotesque, form and technique are given even greater depth and value. Certainly Stevie is not Conrad, but the difference does not undercut form and technique; rather, it implies the need for something in addition to what Stevie represents in order that the forces in question be turned to creative instead of destructive ends.

The figure of the Assistant Commissioner might serve to provide an additional aspect, in that he has been compared to both Stevie and Conrad. He is connected to Stevie, for instance, by Avrom Fleishman, who points out that of all the figures in *The Secret Agent*, "Stevie and the Assistant Commissioner stand out as the only lean ones" (Fleishman, 196). This shared leanness suggests the more important basis of comparison to Fleishman: the "quixotic" quality of "moral idealism." It is on this basis that Fleishman goes on to
make the further comparison with Conrad himself. Conrad, as Fleishman notes, had been referred to as "an incorrigible, hopeless Don Quixote" when young; the Assistant Commissioner, whose description befits that of Quixote, is explicitly referred to as "looking like the vision of a cool reflective Don Quixote" (147); Stevie, according to Fleishman, . . . is in the tradition of the comic jester who is free to reveal the madness and corruption of a society with impunity. Further, his idealism renders him a fool of a special sort—the Quixote who is out of touch with the practical realities of the world but who reaches the heart of its moral condition by his awareness of its divergence from a lost ideal state [Fleishman, 196].

Fleishman refers to these three quixotic figures as "the author, the fool, and the hero." Of course the Assistant Commissioner is a hero only in a very limited sense. He is more aware of, and better able to cope with, the realities of his situation than any other character in the story. He is of "an adventurous disposition," and is a "born detective," and although the "rules of the game" dictate that he remain tied to his desk, he nevertheless assumes a disguise and is able to "become unplaced" in the darkness of the city, where he relives the adventures of his earlier jungle assignment: "He felt light-hearted, as though he had been ambushed all alone in a jungle many thousands of miles away from departmental desks and official inkstands" (150).

In addition to his "adventures," the Assistant Commissioner has an even greater love (and means of escape)—"his
daily whist party." To the Assistant Commissioner, this daily diversion represents "the most comforting habit of his life, as though the game were a beneficent drug for allaying the pangs of moral discontent" (102). By inventing roles for himself, by being able to relive the sense of adventure, and by engaging in games and play, the Assistant Commissioner is able to transform and transcend—however illusory and temporary the transformation may be—his otherwise entrapped and harassed existence.

As in the case of Stevie, the similarities between the motives and actions of the Assistant Commissioner and those of the author neither reduce the author to the limitations of the character nor raise the character to the stature of "hero," since along with the similarities some fundamental differences exist—particularly the self-seeking attitude which lies behind most of the Assistant Commissioner's actions.

The "play-urge" has frequently been cited as a component of artistic creation, particularly where grotesque art is concerned. Kayser defines the grotesque in part as "a play with the absurd" (Kayser, 187), and Thomson makes reference to "the playful or capricious grotesque" and to the possibility that

... the play-urge, the desire to invent and experiment for its own sake, is a factor in all artistic creation, but we can expect this factor
to be more than usually strong in grotesque art and literature, where the breaking down and restructuring of familiar reality plays such a large part [Thomson, 64].

The entire sequence of events in *The Secret Agent* takes on the appearance of an elaborate game, with the city divided into "Squares, Places, Ovals, Commons," and a limited number of characters (of various ranks and powers) moving through a specified number of "circles" in a variety of combinations. And as in most games, chance plays its part—Stevie's death is accidental, while standing at the same time as the central link in the chain of events commencing with Vladimir's demand for an anarchist incident and ending with Winnie's suicide and Ossipon's pending madness and despair. From this point of view, the action of *The Secret Agent* is best described in the Professor's terms as a series of "counter moves in the same game" (69).

The Professor himself, although radically different from the author in most ways, bears a certain resemblance in terms of motives which have been assigned to each. The Professor has detached himself from the institutions and laws of society, and believes that a "clean sweep and a clear start for a new conception of life" is necessary (73). This attitude might be compared to that of Conrad as revealed in one of his letters to Edward Garnett:

*Where do you think the illumination—the short and vivid flash of what I have been boasting to you*
came from? Why! From your words, words, words. They exploded like stored powder barrels—while another man's words would have fizzled out in speaking and left darkness unrelieved by a forgotten spurt of futile sparks. An explosion is the most lasting thing in the universe. It leaves disorder, remembrance, room to move, a clear space.\textsuperscript{67}

Fleishman makes explicit the connection between Conrad and the Professor suggested here, noting that

The letter's description of the liberating results of an explosion is quite close to the images of liberating negation put forth by the Professor; it indicates an imaginative identification by the author with his most bizarre character. Conrad's need for a "clear space" in the artistic realm is the counterpart of the nihilist's desire for "the destruction of what is," as the Professor puts it [Fleishman, 188].

The "imaginative identification" is, of course, one of oblique analogy, and opposing sets of values are involved, although the patterns run parallel. The difference between the Professor's aims and those of the author is not one of pure destruction versus pure creation; there is a similarity as well. Where the Professor's aims are destructive, and end in destruction, Conrad's art "destroys" or breaks down in order to restructure. The diametrically opposite consequences are due to the different "means of expression" employed by each. The Professor depends upon real bombs; Conrad's clear space is created by "words, words, words," the explosive power of which is ultimately much more effective. The limitation of real explosives and the possibilities open to the artist are suggested in Mr. Vladimir's wishful
speculation: "'Since bombs are your means of expression, it would be really telling if one could throw a bomb into pure mathematics'" (33).

Mr. Vladimir's speculations are worth considering in further detail. So too are his motives in connection with his assigning Verloc the task of creating an anarchist incident. For the entire sequence of events, as mentioned earlier, originates with Mr. Vladimir. Vladimir's motive for demanding "a sensationalist anarchist demonstration" are especially interesting in that he is anything but an anarchist himself. By causing an apparent anarchist outbreak, Vladimir hopes to prompt the police to increase their "vigilance," and to clamp down upon anarchist and revolutionary groups in the area, thereby rendering his own reactionary existence even safer than before. I would suggest that this same motive may be seen as an analogue of one important motive informing the conception of The Secret Agent as a whole, namely, the "attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (Kayser, 188), which Kayser offers as the final part of his definition of the grotesque.

We are told that Mr. Vladimir's "wit consisted in discovering droll connections between incongruous ideas" (19), certainly a principal trait of the grotesque imagination. It might be mentioned in this respect that Dickens referred to his own tendency "to fancy or perceive relations
in things . . . not apparent generally" (quoted in Axton, 28-29). This element of incongruity characteristic of the grotesque is partly responsible for the ambivalence of response it creates, a feature which is further enhanced by the radical manner in which the subject-matter is presented. As Mr. Vladimir so aptly phrases it: "'the attack must have all the shocking senselessness of gratuitous blasphemy'" (33). Kayser's assertion that the intrusion of the grotesque "must remain incomprehensible, inexplicable, and impersonal" (Kayser, 185) is echoed by Vladimir's remark:

"But what is one to say to an act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable; in fact, mad? Madness alone is truly terrifying, inasmuch as you cannot placate it either by threats, persuasions, or bribes" [33].

Mr. Vladimir's abstractions do eventually elicit their concrete correlatives in the shape of madness (also symbolized by Stevie's circles): the madness of Winnie Verloc. As mentioned earlier, madness represents "the climactic phase of estrangement from the world" (Kayser, 74).

Knoepflmacher's reference to the parallels of motive between the author and Vladimir is qualified by the statement that

The novelist . . . is less nihilistic in his aims. Although he too wants to jar the reader's complacency, he explodes time so that he can order his fictional universe by controlling and gradually widening our understanding of its nature [Knoepflmacher, 247].
The actions of Conrad and Vladimir are analogous, but as in the case of the Professor, the difference in "means" results in totally opposite results. Conrad too is a revolutionary, but in a creative rather than destructive sense:

I have no doubt, however, that there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist, I won't say more convinced than they but certainly cherishing a more concentrated purpose than any of them had ever done in the whole course of his life [xiv].

Each of these characters—Stevie, the Assistant Commissioner, the Professor, and Mr. Vladimir—therefore shares, in fragmented, oblique, reduced, and often parodic ways, certain motives, attributes, and actions that either belong or appear to belong to the author of *The Secret Agent* himself. The sum total of the features of the characters in question does not add up to, or explain in full, the motives and methods of the author, but the composite certainly suggests interesting parallels to them. These same motives and methods are perhaps equally apparent without the support of such speculations, but the support offered helps at least to confirm the more "legitimate" observations made on the basis of content, style, and effect.

With or without these relationships between the characters and the author however, *The Secret Agent* possesses extensive grotesque features at all levels. from subject and content through to structure, perspective, and tone;
accordingly, I believe it is valid to refer to the narrative as being grotesque in style, and to *The Secret Agent* as being grotesque in mode.
CONCLUSION

It is possible to describe and define the grotesque as a mode which is predisposed toward specific subjects, motifs, forms, images, actions, and types of characterization; as characterized by specific techniques of perspective, structure, and style; as having a unique effect upon and therefore eliciting unique responses from the reader; and speculatively, as being rooted in certain creative motives and temperaments. In short, it is valid to speak of the grotesque as a distinct literary genre or mode embodying specific and characteristic stylistic techniques.

The development of a mature and complete grotesque mode depends upon the prior development of a related set of techniques capable of providing a narrative with a consistent grotesque point of view. The provision of such a point of view, or perspective, frees the mode from a dependence upon a limited number of specific and special images and motifs, and enables the grotesque transformation of even the most ordinary and realistic situations. This shift in the source of the grotesque—from what is presented to the way in which it is presented—is the most significant step in the development of the modern grotesque style. This development is inseparable from the adaptation of the grotesque to the genre of the novel with its conventions of realism and perspective. By the end of the nineteenth century, the
The grotesque was fully capable of serving as the dominant style in a given novel.

The Secret Agent can be related to and meaningfully described in terms of the grotesque at all levels of the narrative. The content of the novel is characterized by the grotesqueness of its subject, imagery, actions, setting, and characters. Both the city-setting and the main incident (the explosion) could well be termed "meta-images" of the grotesque, and are related to traditional grotesque motifs.

The grotesque vision presented by The Secret Agent is less a function of the grotesque subject and content, however, than of the way in which the material is described and presented. A distinct but complex perspective is consistently maintained throughout. The distinctness and consistency are suggested by the sense of a "voice" which various critics have noted in reference to the tone and point of view. The complexity is a function of the multiplicity of technique which constitutes, and the multiplicity of effect which is enacted by, this "grotesque" perspective: a frequently unpredictable, distorting, provoking, bizarre, playful, and essentially ambiguous light is cast over everything, and the stance is as prone to sudden estrangement as it is to casual detachment.

There is little to indicate that Conrad was consciously aware of or consciously applied the mode of the grotesque;
nor do I wish to suggest such a conscious application. The adjective "grotesque" is employed (and accurately applied from an esthetic standpoint) on at least four occasions in *The Secret Agent*, but this can be attributed to normal usage, as the term is by no means restricted to esthetic terminology. The fact that *The Secret Agent* can be related to the grotesque at all levels of narrative does suggest, however, the affinity of the grotesque mode to the particular motives underlying the work, the affinity of the grotesque material to the particular vision embodied in the narrative, and the affinity of the grotesque perspective to the particular manner in which this vision is presented. Further, the affinity for the grotesque at the various narrative levels suggests the interrelatedness, consistency, and unity of the novel as a whole.

As well as suggesting the essential consistency or decorum of motive and method in *The Secret Agent*, the pervasiveness of the grotesque allows a meaningful description of each narrative level or aspect in terms of the others. This is especially fruitful with respect to this particular narrative in describing the interplay between perspective and content. I have tried to bring into question the frequent critical contention that the principal mode governing the relationship between perspective and content, and ultimately between style and substance, is that of irony. The techniques,
stances, effects, and motives usually associated with the ironic mode are often inapplicable—and, in fact, are frequently subverted; the intellectual detachment and rational framework of response intrinsic to irony is frequently removed, leading to an ambiguous and disorienting emotional engagement with the material; and the perspective actually serves at times to further provoke rather than detach from the discomforting aspects of the material or situation, and therefore increases rather than curbs the eccentricity and discrepancy of the narrative. By illustrating these aspects of the narrative, I have attempted to show the need for a more feasible description of both method and motive in The Secret Agent, and to demonstrate that the grotesque mode provides the basis for such a description.

Various of the techniques and motifs Conrad employs in the creation of his grotesque perspective and style are characteristic of grotesque art and literature prior to The Secret Agent; at the same time, however, certain of the techniques and strategies used by Conrad are turned to grotesque ends for perhaps the first time. This is especially true of the many "cinematographic" techniques of perspective and temporal manipulation which are used to create discrepancies and discontinuities in the dimensions of time, thought and action, perception and conceptualization, and proportion. Conrad's moulding of these techniques into powerful instruments
of the grotesque might account in part for their proliferation in a great deal of modern grotesque literature, with the narratives of Joyce, Faulkner, and O'Connor providing abundant instances (the latter two explicitly acknowledge their stylistic debt to Conrad).

The Secret Agent is distinct from Conrad's other novels and tales in certain of its thematic and stylistic pursuits; these distinctions, however, represent extensions of, rather than departures from, the overriding concern for style and the principal thematic concerns which characterize Conrad's writing as a whole. The Secret Agent is not a "retreat into style"; on the other hand, neither is style subordinated to subject, content, or theme: subject, content, theme, structure, perspective, and style generate and inform each other.

Conrad strove to create a literary style flexible enough to convey the immediate reality of sense experience while simultaneously registering the subtle nuances of emotion and feeling which accompany such experience; he sought a style which would not merely represent, but would re-enact experience, and which would therefore allow the reader to experience afresh—to see as if for the first time—and to participate in the process of giving form to a specific vision. The singular focus and metaphorical richness of the choice of subject, setting, and plot in The Secret Agent
provided Conrad with an ideal context and content with which to embody this purpose, and the fact that the novel, in terms of both its thematic concerns and its manner of presentation, is as relevant today as in 1907, testifies to Conrad's successful combination of motive, material, and method.
NOTES


Meyer distinguishes three principal types of such "deviation," or, to borrow the Aristotelian term used by Kermode, "peripeteia":

(1) The normal, or probable, consequent event may be delayed. Such a delay may be purely temporal or it may also involve reaching the consequent through a less direct route, provided that the deviation is understandable as a means to the end in view. (2) The antecedent situation may be ambiguous. That is, several equally probable consequents may be envisaged. When this takes place, our automatic habit responses are inadequate, for they are attuned only to a clear decision about probabilities. And (3) there may be neither delay nor ambiguity, but the consequent event may be unexpected—improbably in the particular context [Meyer, 10].


27 It is interesting to note that the "implied ideal" is met with in certain interpretations of The Secret Agent. Avrom Fleishman, for example, states that

Despite its ironic skepticism, the novel carries with it certain implications for conduct. It does not amount to a political program, to be sure, any more than it suggests an ideal of social order by its very representation of a world without order [Avrom Fleishman, Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 212].

Fleishman, recognizes, however, that although the world of The Secret Agent is morally corrupt, and implies an ideal form of moral conduct, there is nevertheless no possibility for redemption offered.


33 Kayser's fundamental orientation toward German Romanticism underlies and informs his assumption regarding the nature of the grotesque, and this bias is responsible for his refusal to re-orient himself toward the definite shift in perspective offered by English literature. This is implicit in Kayser's assessment of Russian literature which follows his statement on English literature:

Surprisingly enough, a superficial glance at Russian literature seems to indicate that here the evolution from the Romantic to the "realistic" grotesque was closely patterned after the German development. This is less surprising if one considers how strongly dependent Russian literature was upon German Romanticism as late as the eighteen thirties [Kayser, 123].


Statement by Andrzej Busza as recalled from a seminar discussion of *The Secret Agent* in 1972 at the University of British Columbia.


LIST OF WORKS CITED


