The Flâneur/Flâneuse and the Benjaminian Law of "Dialectic at a Standstill" in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*

PEI-WEN CLIO KAO

NATIONAL CHENGCHI UNIVERSITY, TAIWAN

INTRODUCTION

Most of the critical studies of the theme of the city in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* are focused on the despair and the squalor of the urban scenario symbolic of the moral darkness of its inhabitants, which is phrased by critics as the myth of the "monstrous town." In this essay I aim to shed new light on the relationship between the cityscape and the human life inhabiting it as represented in *The Secret Agent*. My analysis works from the framework of Walter Benjamin's study in *The Arcades Project* of the nineteenth-century metropolitan type of the "flâneur," which illuminates the Benjaminian conception of an anti-linear and anti-bourgeois temporality of "dialectic at a standstill."

Given the context of a specifically male definition of the flânerie by Benjamin and the feminist critique of his male-dominated definition, I attach equal weight to the lifestyles of the flâneur and the flâneuse in *The Secret Agent*. From a feminist perspective, I shall demonstrate that in this novel it is ironically the un-Benjaminian flâneuse rather than the typical flâneur who fulfills the Benjaminian "backward-looking" vision of resistance and revolt against the bourgeois temporality based on established institutions; it is the female figure of the flâneuse from whom we might identify the possibility of messianic redemption in the making of history. Winnie Verloc plays an important role as the flâneuse who defies the bourgeois patriarchal ideology of the separate spheres in her crossing from the domestic sphere—as a heroic, maternal protector of her innocent brother Stevie—to the public sphere—as an avenger killing her husband, engaged in streetwalking, and finally committing suicide. Winnie's acts of violence and streetwalking transgress the boundary of the private/public

spheres of femininity/masculinity. We can best discern the Benjaminian law of "dialectic at a standstill" at work in Winnie's straddling the two spheres. Her actions represent the people of the private sphere in their protest and rebellion against the hegemony, exploitation, and oppression of the public sphere, which can be deemed as a backward-looking gesture towards the prehistory and towards the oppressed in the lower social stratum that prefigures the messianic rupture of the progressive movement of time in a manner of anti-bourgeois revolution.

The topic of this paper is centered on the metropolitan figure of the flâneur emerging in the nineteenth-century Paris as studied by Benjamin; therefore, the theme of the city is a major concern here. Conrad in his "Author's Note" to *The Secret Agent* connects the theme of the "monstrous town" to the moral atrocity of its inhabitants, who are depicted as "indifferent to heaven's frowns and smiles" like "a cruel devourer of the world's light" (vii). Contemporary critics studying Conrad's unreal cityscape of London often follow the writer's formulation of *The Secret Agent* as a tale of "utter desolation, madness and despair" (xv) so that they tend to fixate on the pessimistic sense of the story as an expression of moral failure. Cedric Watts establishes the paradigm of reading Conrad's tale of the myth of the monstrous town, associating the physically "murky and oppressive" cityspace with the theme of a "morally murky" universe (29). Similarly, Robert Hampson argues that the "topographical exactitude" of Conrad's text only produces an "alienated experience" of London as an urban landscape that is "anonymous and unknown" (174, 169), and Hugh Epstein suggests Conrad's metaphorical conception of London is founded on an "inert terrain of hopelessness" (195), while Martin Ray attempts to compare Conrad's constitution of a "threatened and apocalyptic city" to the writings of other nineteenth-century authors like Dickens and Wells (199). In J. Hillis Miller's nihilistic reading of *The Secret Agent,* the motifs of "walking and insomnia" connote the value of walking as an act that "does not express the freedom of spirit" but only "signifies man's inability to escape from himself" in the form of aimlessness and malfunction of an insomniac (64). Despite the fact that most of the critical research insists on the gloomy and dark side of the cityscape and the impossibility of "walking" as a way out of the moral dilemma in *The Secret Agent,* my study aims—through the Benjaminian conception as well as through the feminist critique of his limitation—to tease out the possibility of resistance in the text, as realized in the figure of Winnie Verloc the "flâneuse," whose story of murdering, streetwalking, and suicide may transcend the "*act of madness or despair*" (*SA* 310) to reach a higher sense of rebellion. As Jacques Berthoud has put it, "Winnie's defeat is also, paradoxically, a victory" (119)—only through her suffering and victimization is the violence of

oppression and exploitation brought about by the political struggle in the public sphere exposed and condemned.

Benjamin, in *The Arcades Project,* invokes various literary as well as cultural sources of the type-figure called the flâneur emerging in the modern metropolis. In general, based on Baudelaire's prose and poetry, Benjamin defines this type-character as a male idler who wanders the metropolitan streets of nineteenth-century Paris and engages in the "activity of strolling and looking" (Tester 1). In particular, the formula of "dialectical at a standstill" makes the flâneur stand out from the mass of the crowd by virtue of his unusual gesture of seeing and being seen, as opposed to the definite power-relation of knowing subject/dead object characteristic of the Baudelairean artist-flâneur or Poe's "man of the crowd" through his overlooking and voyeuristic male gaze observing the crowd with a sense of superiority. In "The Painter of Modern Life" Baudelaire identifies the illustrator Constantin Guys as the embodiment of the modern-day artist-flâneur—a dandy who in free use of his leisure time in globe-trotting is also the man of the world as well as the man of the crowd. In a nutshell, he is a "perfect idler" and a "passionate observer" who merges with the crowd as he is wandering the metropolitan city (399). In Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" the narrator assumes the "inquisitive" gaze of the flâneur to observe the passengers in London streets from the window of a coffee house (232). Shortly after his sedentary observation, he determines to stalk and examine an eccentric old man—the "man of the crowd"—through the maze of London streets under the guise of a "private eye." He is reading and studying the target but "does not permit [himself] to be read" (232). Similar to Baudelaire's artist-flâneur, Poe's detective-flâneur is engaging in a one-way activity of observing and seeing without being seen in contrast to Benjamin's dialectical model of the flânerie based on seeing/being seen as aforementioned.

There have been a number of dissenting voices from feminist critics to challenge the male-centered definition of the flâneur articulated by male literary critics since Janet Wolff's article "The Invisible Flâneuse," the founding monument of feminist study of the exclusively male experience of modernization. The feminist critique questions the legitimacy of the flâneur as a patriarchal paradigm of modernity through the "more complex spatial experiences of women," and points out the inherent masculine anxiety of its subjectivity as embodied in the figure of the flâneur (D'Souza and McDonough 1). In their endeavor to trace out the visibility of the flâneuse, feminist critics have re-examined the dominant patriarchal ideology of separate spheres that determines gender order in modernity, and revealed the male mastery of the public space as only a fantasy or an ideological construction (1–4). The feminist voices have contributed to my analysis of the potential role of the flâneuse,

which stands in stark contrast to her notable male counterpart situated in the urban context of Conrad's work. Janet Wolff criticizes the limitation of literature of modernity as the exclusive "experience of men," based on the ideology of "separate spheres" that confines women to the private domain, and thereby renders their role as "flâneuse" invisible and impossible ("The Invisible Flâneuse" 141). Her major concern is the "oversocialization of the public sphere" that devalues the importance of private domain in the constitution of modernization; on the other hand, the alternate experience of women which was indeed "visible and active" in the public arena was ignored in the literature of modernity (152, 153). In tracing out the nineteenth-century art history of modernity and modernism, which is characterized by the relation of "masculine sexuality" and "bodies of women" based on the rule of "commercial exchange," Griselda Pollock contends the Baudelairean artist-flâneur "embodies the gaze of modernity which is both covetous and erotic" (54, 67). The flâneur as a male type represents the bourgeois ideology of the hierarchical order of the masculine self and its gender as well as class Other based on the division of public and private spheres as spaces of masculinity and femininity, respectively (67). Corresponding to Wolff's argument, Pollock laments the impossibility of the female equivalent of the flâneur because women during that historical time "did not have the right to look, to stare, scrutinize or watch," that they are reduced to the "*object* of the flâneur's gaze" (71). By contrast, Elizabeth Wilson in a radical feminist stance drastically challenges the adequacy of the nineteenth-century ideological construction of separate spheres, arguing public and private spaces are blurred so that "private sphere was—and is—also a masculine domain" and "the private sphere is the *workplace* of the woman" as well (5). She also points out the transgression of the nineteenth-century women entering into activities of the male-dominated public space, such as the consuming act in the department store, so that "a woman, too, could become a *flâneuse*" (7). Accordingly, Wilson highlights the flaw of feminist theory that "overemphasizes the passivity and victimization of women," ignoring their potentiality for resistant force represented by the "flâneuse," who occupies the public realm through the roles of journalists or writers (8). Unlike Wolff, instead of succumbing to the "invisibility" of the flâneuse in literature of modernity, Wilson insists that it is the "flâneur" who is invisible so that he becomes the embodiment of male anxiety to "dissemble the perversity and impossibility of his split desires" out of his narcissistic fantasy of an all-powerful male gaze in control of women as his erotic object (16).

In the ninth of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin contemplates Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* to formulate his concept of "angel of history" as a divine messenger looking backward to the past while being

driven forward to the future by the storm blowing from the paradise called "progress" (257–8). Benjamin thus conceives his philosophy of temporality as a "dialectic at a standstill" derived from this tug-of-war between the backward and forward movements. When applied to the context of the flânerie in the metropolis, this phenomenon is likewise driven by two opposite forces. On the one hand, the backward-looking move is anti-evolutionary and anti-Taylorist by virtue of the flâneur's unproductive and indolent activity of promenading along the city streets. On the other hand, with a forward-looking drive the flâneur sometimes leans towards the mechanism of the capitalist marketplace and forms a complicity with the state power. In Benjamin's unusual sense of temporality, it is the anti-bourgeois backward-looking gesture that is redeeming and resistant in propelling history to move toward utopia as opposed to the concept of bourgeois linear progress. As Rolf Tiedemann puts it, "Benjamin's interpretation of the present refers to the recent past: action in the present means awakening from the dream of history, an 'explosion' of what has been, a revolutionary turn," that he "invented the term 'dialectical images' for such configurations of the Now and the Then; he defined their content as a 'dialectic at a standstill'" ("Dialectic at a Standstill" 936, 942).

THE FLÂNEUR/FLÂNEUSE WANDERING THE LONDON STREETS

This section addresses the dominant theme of "walks" in *The Secret Agent,* in which we can identify several passages of walking along London streets—ranging from the promenades of the double agent Mr. Verloc, of the anarchist terrorist the Professor, of the Assistant Commissioner, to that of the female protagonist Winnie Verloc and of her would-be seducer Comrade Ossipon, the womanizer and anarchist nicknamed "Doctor." Based on Benjamin's study of the late-nineteenth-century male type of the flâneur derived from the poetry of Baudelaire, my examination of the male characters as "flâneur" in Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is focused on the characteristics of the flânerie as the "activity of strolling and looking" endowed with the anti-bourgeois ethos of idleness and indolence, which is the gesture of "the protest of flânerie against the local clock of hours and the universal clock of progress" (Tester 1, 15). The Benjaminian flâneur is specifically gendered as the male figure due to socio-historical facts and contemporary patriarchal ideology as a whole. However, in my study of the phenomenon of the flânerie in *The Secret Agent,* I include the female character Winnie Verloc as an example of a flâneuse—a female flâneur—as a challenge to the male-dominated theory and a critique of the nineteenth-century European patriarchal society.

At the opening of the novel, we encounter Mr. Verloc, the double agent who works for the foreign embassy as an agent provocateur, for the state institution as a police spy, and as a sham revolutionary anarchist. He is conducting his routine walks from his home in the Soho district westward to Hyde Park:

> Through the park railings these glances [of Mr. Verloc] beheld men and women riding in the Row, couples cantering past harmoniously, others advancing sedately at a walk, loitering groups of three or four, solitary horsemen looking unsociable, and solitary women followed at a long distance by a groom with a cockade to his hat and a leather belt over his tight-fitting coat. [. . .]. Mr. Verloc was going westward through a town without shadows in an atmosphere of powdered old gold. [. . .]. He surveyed through the park railings the evidences of the town's opulence and luxury with an approving eye. All these people had to be protected. Protection is the first necessity of opulence and luxury. (*SA* 11–2)

In this passage Mr. Verloc is reading and observing the crowd of the city with glances of his "approving eyes." As a spy working for Chief Inspector Heat, he feels an obligation to "protect" the people of London through his prudent reading and studying of their faces and behaviors. For Benjamin, the flâneur can serve as a spy of the police, decoding the traces of the physiognomy of the people in the city: "the flâneur has made a study of the physiognomic appearance of people in order to discover their nationality and social station, character and destiny, from a perusal of their gait, build, and play of features" (*The Arcades Project* M6a, 4). David elaborates this activity of "looking" and "observing" of the flâneur as a "form of *reading the city* and its populations (its spatial images, its architecture, its human configurations), and a form of *reading written texts*" (82–3). However, apart from Mr. Verloc's position as an observer reading the city and its inhabitants in a gesture of male surveillance, he himself is observed by a narrating "I"/ seeing "eye." From the perspective of this narrating "I,"

> there was also about him [Mr. Verloc] an indescribable air which no mechanic could have acquired in the practice of his handicraft however dishonestly exercised: the air common to men who live on the vices, the follies, or the baser fears of mankind; the air of moral nihilism common to keepers of gambling hells and disorderly houses; to private detectives and inquiry agents; to drink sellers and, *I* should say, to the sellers of invigorating electric belts and to the inventors of patent medicines. (*SA* 13; my emphasis)

According to Benjamin, this is the "dialectic of flânerie": the circuit of seeing/ being seen engaged in the acts of wandering. "On one side, the man who feels

himself viewed by all and sundry as true suspect and, on the other side, the man who is utterly undiscoverable, the hidden man" (*AP* M2, 8). Mr. Verloc's attached involvement with the city crowd as an avid reader of their faces and his detached air of moral imprudence or even "moral nihilism" observed by a voyeuristic I/eye also shows the double significance of flânerie as both active "involvement" in the cityscape and passive "detachment" from its people (Parsons 35).

A second example of the flâneur is the anarchist Professor, who wanders the street outside the gathering restaurant haunted by the revolutionary anarchists:

> Lost in the crowd, miserable and undersized, he meditated confidently on his power, keeping his hand in the left pocket of his trousers, grasping lightly the india-rubber ball, the supreme guarantee of his sinister freedom; but after a while he became disagreeably affected by the sight of the roadway thronged with vehicles and of the pavement crowded with men and women. [. . .], he felt the mass of mankind mighty in its numbers. They swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like ants, thoughtless like a natural force, pushing on blind and orderly and absorbed, impervious to sentiment, to logic, to terror, too, perhaps. (*SA* 81–2)

On the one hand, the Professor feels the "sinister freedom" of his loitering guaranteed by his detonator as if he were ensconced in the private space of the "refuge of his room," the "hermitage of the perfect anarchist" (*SA* 82). On the other hand, the Professor also feels exposed to the outdoor landscape as he "became disagreeably affected by the sight of the roadway thronged with vehicles" and imagined the crowd as insects and vermin occupying their natural habitat. This doubled experience of being situated in both the interior and the exterior spaces accords with Benjamin's definition of the interpenetration of private/public spaces in the cityscape the flâneur experiences in the city of Paris: "For if flânerie can transform Paris into one great interior—a house whose rooms are *quartiers,* no less clearly demarcated by thresholds than are real rooms—then, on the other hand, the city can appear to someone walking through it to be without thresholds: a landscape in the round" (*AP* M3, 2). John Rignall designates this experience of the "intoxicated interpenetration of street and residence" (*AP* M3a, 5) as a form of the phantasmagoria of the city-space, "now as open, now as enclosing, now familiar, now phantasmagoric" (114). Accordingly, we can detect the Professor's paradoxical sense of simultaneous security and insecurity as being a terrorist / anarchist, feeling confident in his mission and cause but alienated from the people surrounding this world.

A third example comes from the walking scene of the Assistant Commissioner, who wanders from his office to the little Italian restaurant and finally to

the shop of the Verlocs in Brett Street. The passage of the Assistant Commissioner's loitering is depicted in a mesmerizing and fantastic manner as the man is likened to a "foreign fish" navigating in an "aquarium"-like surroundings:

> He left the scene of his daily labours quickly like an unobtrusive shadow. His descent into the street was like the descent into a slimy aquarium from which the water had been run off. A murky, gloomy dampness enveloped him. The walls of the houses were wet, the mud of the roadway glistened with an effect of phosphorescence, and when he emerged into the Strand out of a narrow street by the side of Charing Cross Station the genius of the locality assimilated him. He might have been but one more of the queer foreign fish that can be seen of an evening about there flitting round the dark corners. (*SA* 147)

According to Rob Shields, the "defamiliarized" rendering of the urban environment has transformed the latter into a "foreign and then visually consumed . . . 'exotic' spectacle" (74). This dream-like and hallucinatory atmosphere enveloping the activity of flânerie is called by Benjamin a kind of "anamnestic intoxication" in which "the flâneur goes about the city and not only feeds on the sensory data taking shape before his eyes but often possesses itself of abstract knowledge . . . as something experienced and lived through" (*AP* M1, 5). In the Assistant Commissioner's walking memory, he is not only bombarded by the "sensory data" of the cityscape as the street turns to an "immensity of greasy slime and damp plaster interspersed with lamps," but is also overwhelmed by the "abstract knowledge" which is "experienced and lived through" in the activity of flânerie, as he feels "enveloped, oppressed, penetrated, choked, and suffocated by the blackness of a wet London night" (*SA* 150). The dampness of the urban environment as the sensory experience, combined with the morally felt damp uneasiness as an "abstract knowledge," together create a sloppy and untidy world of city life in the mind of the Assistant Commissioner, who is like a caretaker of the city and responsible for making it a morally clean place for people to live in.

Last is the walking experience of Winnie Verloc accompanied by the sham anarchist Comrade Ossipon. Before launching into a study of Winnie's street-walking, it is necessary to briefly inquire into the critical debates on the practicality and possibility of the female flâneur, the "flâneuse." By virtue of the predominance of the patriarchal ideology of separate gender spheres in a nineteenth-century Europe that confines women to the domestic domain, Wolff refutes the existence of the category of flâneuse as a female version of the flâneur in her "The Invisible Flâneuse." Although later, in her "Gender and the Haunting of Cities," she admits to the actual participation of women in public

arena through activities such as shopping at department store and cinema-going, Wolff maintains her former argument that the role of flâneuse remains impossible (21–2). Nevertheless, in both articles Wolff's agenda is not the insistence of the invisibility of the flâneuse entailed by the ideological construction of separate spheres, but the revelation of the "intersections of public and private and of the particular experiences of women" (23). In other words, Wolff attempts to highlight the "concomitant socialization of the private realm" where the "domestic arena of home might be seen as fully embedded in the same processes of modernization that were affecting the 'public' world beyond" (D'Souza and McDonough 5). Wolff denies the concept of the "public" as "already given" and thus opens up the possibility of rethinking the urban experience of modernization to which women's particular experience has great contribution hitherto eclipsed by the importance of the practice of flânerie ("Gender and the Haunting of Cities" 28). Accordingly, despite the fact that she suggests the invisibility and impossibility of the flâneuse as a nineteenth-century type, Wolff confirms the importance of the domestic experience of the private sphere occupied mainly by women as part of the constituent element of urban life. In this particular regard the reader is encouraged to recognize the significance and positivity of Winnie's domestic roles as a housewife, a protective sister, and an obedient daughter, prior to her subsequent role as a flâneuse wandering the cityspace. By contrast, Wilson in "The Invisible Flâneur" argues for the visibility of the flâneuse by virtue of the actual participation of women in public activities. On the other hand, Wilson maintains the masculine authority of the flâneur not as an exclusively male type but as an embodiment of "the undecided, the uncertain, in bourgeois experience of the city" (D'Souza and McDonough 9). This "ambivalent" nature of the flâneur, and the indeterminacy of his habitat as a kind of "liminal space" striding between public and private arenas, also supports my reading of Winnie's transition from a domestic woman to a flâneuse who transgresses the fixed ideological construction of separate spheres. Susan Buck-Morss contends that the issue of "sexual difference" makes the male-dominated definition of flâneur problematic and thereafter suggests "prostitution was indeed the female version of flânerie" (167, 168). She points out Benjamin's recognition of the revolutionary acts of women as exemplified by the 1848 revolution, which lends a kind of "subversive reading" of the practice of loitering on the part of its female practitioners (171, 180). Winnie's role as a flâneuse wandering the city unattended is indeed reminiscent of the audacious gesture of a "revolutionary woman," if not a "prostitute" engaged in commercial exchange. Deborah L. Parsons also affirms the existence of flâneuses as female observers and walkers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There exists a tension between the urban

experience of the male flâneur as "ordered, planned, and mapped" and the female flâneuse as "marginal, forgotten, and past" (Parsons 10). Parsons calls for a reassessment of the gendered concept of flâneur and proposes the figure of "androgyny" to resist the male-dominated experience of gaze and observing (42).

Winnie Verloc's status as a flâneuse is best illustrated by her transgression of the nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres. Her acts of streetwalking, murdering, and suicide demonstrate her crossing of the boundaries between private/public spheres of femininity/masculinity. The turning point before her audacious unattended streetwalking is her violent murder of her husband out of revenge for her innocent brother Stevie. The text more than once says "she was a free woman" (*SA* 251, 254) who was "released from all earthly ties" and "free to enjoy the profound calm of idleness and irresponsibility" (*SA* 251, 266). Like the protagonist of the "New Woman fiction" who desires to "escape the confines of the domestic environment" (Parsons 27), Winnie escapes from both the familial ties and the legal regulation as a murderess on the run: "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" (*SA* 270–1). As an unchaperoned woman wandering the street at night, Winnie blurs the "divide between respectable and unrespectable" in bourgeois ideology, and thus in a sense displays her defiance against the bourgeois male value (Wolff, "Gender and the Haunting of Cities" 23). Indeed, such social discourse of respectability derives from a defense mechanism of "male anxieties," while woman artists and critics attempt to break down the discourse of the mother/whore binarism by offering an alternative view to "fallen women" such as the prostitutes (23). From this feminist perspective, Winnie can be viewed not so much a "fallen woman" as a "free woman" as already designated by the narrator. Winnie's "unrespectable" acts of unattended promenading and suicide have appalled her seducer Comrade Ossipon at the end of the story, whose male self-identity is thus threatened and undermined. This again corresponds to Wilson's argument of the crisis of male authority taking place in the public zone of the urban space, where his anxiety to subordinate women in order to maintain his incomplete subjectivity is exposed rather than placated (11). If the flânerie allows a "subversive reading" and a "form of resistance," as Susan Buck-Morss contends (180), then Winnie's aimless streetwalking assumes this subversive gesture. In her attempt to escape from the institutional punishment by "gallows" through her free choice of suicide by drowning, Winnie has attained her individuality and subjectivity as a New Woman in defiance against established institutions and in pursuit of a form of liberation. Although Winnie temporarily turns to Mr. Ossipon for help

and support, and is thereby judged by the narrator as "no longer a free woman" (*SA* 292), after she has been abandoned, she bravely and determinedly chooses her ending by suicide as a form of self-willed liberation. Winnie is able to display her own subjectivity and autonomy as a protective sister, a loyal daughter, and a strong free woman choosing her own destiny at the end. Parsons points out that there are two possible perspectives of "woman of the crowd" as either "a possessable object" or an "autonomous and observing presence" (43). Winnie's case shows her transition from the former to the latter status, as she transgresses the boundary between private/public spheres and is transformed from a submissive wife to a violent avenger and independent flâneuse.

Alexander Ossipon–who wheedles Winnie into giving away all her money—wanders the street alone with his pockets filled with the stolen money. He is like the manipulative capitalist who exploits the working class and extracts money from their sweat and blood. He is represented as an accomplice of capitalism in the image of a sandwich-man: "Already his robust form, with an Embassy's secret-service money (inherited from Mr. Verloc) in his pockets, was marching in the gutter as if in training for the task of an inevitable future. Already he bowed his broad shoulders, his head of ambrosial locks, as if ready to receive the leather yoke of the sandwich board" (*SA* 311). Benjamin's unique attitude toward commercialism signals the flâneur's ambivalent relation to the marketplace—he is both resistant to capitalism and in complicity with it. Here the covetous Comrade Ossipon represents the pro-capitalist sandwich-man in service to the marketplace and its commodity culture: "Empathy with the commodity is fundamentally empathy with exchange value itself. The flâneur is the virtuoso of this empathy. He takes the concept of marketability itself for a stroll. Just as his final ambit is the department store, his last incarnation is the sandwich-man" (*AP* 17a, 2).

THE BENJAMINIAN LAW OF "DIALECTIC AT A STANDSTILL" EMBODIED IN THE FLÂNEUSE WINNIE VERLOC

In Benjamin's denunciation of the capitalist conception of linear progress, he proposes his alternative temporality as a desire of the "dialectical images" to deflect the imagination backward upon the "primal past" and to search for the hope of utopia among the debris and rubble excluded by capitalist progress. In the "Exposé of 1935" titled "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," Benjamin expounds the concept of history as dialectic of the past and the future:

> These tendencies [of the dialectical images] deflect the imagination (which is given impetus by the new) back upon the primal past. In the dream in which each epoch

> entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of *primal history* . . . that is to elements of a *classless society.* And the experiences of such a society . . . engender, through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life. (*AP* 4–5; emphasis added)

In this interpenetration of the old (in the classless society of prehistory) and the new (in the modern capitalist society), Benjamin's expectation of the utopian and messianic moment is put in the *past:*

> [Benjamin's] understanding of utopia is anchored in the past. This was the precondition for his projected prehistory of the modern age. . . . The way to the origin is . . . a way backwards, but backwards into a future, which, although it has gone by in the meantime and its idea has been perverted, still holds more promise than the current image of the future. (Szondi 147)

According to Tiedemann, this "mimesis of the dead and the smashed" is "a sign of solidarity with the oppressed, in spite of being . . . just as helpless as they have been in history thus far and just as unable to control the future" ("Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?" 139). In other words, this "solidarity with the oppressed" denotes Benjamin's emphasis on the past vector rather than the future vector in the "dialectic at a standstill." The past-oriented drive represents the backward-looking gesture of the subversive and resistant force, while the future-oriented drive is in complicity with the institutional power of modernity. Benjamin's dialectical model of flânerie sets him apart from his sources of, say, Baudelaire.[1] Benjamin's philosophical formation of "dialectic at a standstill" makes the flâneur a tension-ridden figure who is torn between the forces of bourgeois modernity and anti-evolutionary prehistory. Benjamin's elaboration of the ambivalent nature of flâneur lends us a critical eye to examine the pro-bourgeois and pro-institutional tendency of Conrad's male characters beneath their apparent roles as subversive flâneurs. On the other hand, Benjamin's definition is also pertinent to my analysis of Winnie's "transgressive" role as a flâneuse straddling the "liminal space" between public and private spheres to claim her individuality and self-identity.

In "Convolute N" Benjamin images the process of historical materialism as a form of "constellation," an "encounter between the historical 'now' and the historical 'then' of recognizability" (Hanssen 11). Benjamin defines the methodological procedure of "cultural-historical dialectic" as the opposition of two forces—the " 'productive,' 'forward-looking,' 'lively,' 'positive,' " force on the one hand and the "abortive, retrograde, and obsolescent" force on the other hand

(*AP* N1a, 3). Consequently, in light of a "displacement of the angle of vision," a new "positive element" will emerge from the latter—or the "negative," the past-oriented, force—in this struggle of "dialectical contrasts": "It is therefore of decisive importance that a new partition be applied to this initially excluded, negative component so that, by a displacement of the angle of vision (but not of the criteria!), a positive element emerges anew in it too—something different from that previously signified" (Benjamin, *AP* N1a, 3). To put it in terms of temporality, with the tension of the two forces of the (present) "now" and the (past) "then," the new moment of awakening or reconciliation "meant the revolutionary completion of the past, the explosion of past possibility in the actuality of the present" (Hanssen 11). What is emphasized here again is the retrograde movement toward the past where the hope of revolutionary transformation will be realized. Benjamin's historical materialism is opposed to the bourgeois temporality of linear progress toward the future, for it "aspires to neither a homogenous now nor a continuous exposition of history" (*AP* N7a, 2). By making use of the "rags" and the "refuse" of the historical past excluded or discarded by the progressive temporality of modernity (*AP* N1a, 8), Benjamin envisions the revolutionary moment falling at the backward point of time.

In *The Secret Agent,* there are two opposite forces driving the movement of the flânerie. On the one hand is the forward-looking movement toward the public sphere of modernity, patriarchy, and commodity; on the other hand is the backward-looking movement toward the private sphere of tradition and family. The male characters as flâneurs represent the former gesture leaning toward the power of established institutions. By contrast, Winnie the flâneuse represents the oppressed and suggests the possibility of subversion and resistance against the institution of modernity. Winnie's acts denote a backward move towards the private domain made up of an unhierarchical interpersonal relation that is associated with the "classless society" of "primal history" in Benjamin's dialectical image, which might prefigure the moment of redemption that takes place at the end of the novel.

Mr. Verloc, the Assistant Commissioner, and Comrade Ossipon all lean towards the forward-looking force of established institutions in the public sphere. Mr. Verloc, as a secret agent working for the unidentified Russian Embassy and as a police spy, is involved in the political intrigues of the nation. The Assistant Commissioner obviously represents the state power, an example of the "patriotic flâneur" in complicity with the establishment. Comrade Ossipon, "nicknamed the Doctor" and "[submitting] to the rule of science," is in the service of scientific rationality and commodity culture in the image of a sandwich-man as mentioned earlier. Elizabeth Wilson points out that there is a critical tendency to romanticize the flâneur as a "tragic figure" who is "refractory"

and rebellious (9). In *The Secret Agent,* the flâneurs are the veritable pseudo-rebels, who in the name of radical revolution or liberal reform only consolidate the patriarchal ideology and male hegemony in the public sphere.

As a traditional housewife once confined in the domestic sphere, Winnie Verloc bravely takes revenge on her husband for her brother's destruction and engages in streetwalking as a flâneuse before committing suicide. As a once oppressed and confined domestic woman, Winnie's violent acts carry a subversive and resistant force that challenges the dominance of patriarchal hegemony and the Edwardian ideology based on "English moderation" that is "guilty of . . . stupidity and complacence" (Howe 95). Winnie's tragedy of a destroyed family life in the private sphere is caused by the political struggle between the anarchists, the anti-revolutionary regime, and the liberal police force of England. Winnie's protest is on behalf of the victims in the private sphere against the political struggle in the public sphere, and she becomes the mouthpiece of Conrad who "seeks to challenge—in the name of concord and justice—not so much anarchism as such as the shallow or unimaginative liberal-progressive response to anarchism" (Berthoud 105). Being representative of the Conradian heroines who challenge the dominant power of male institution, Winnie's action echoes "a recurring theme in the fiction in which women play an important role in the critique of imperialism (both in colonialist and European settings)" (Jones 11). Winnie's violent action bespeaks the resistant force coming from the backward-looking gesture toward the past of the "primal history" and prefigures the messianic rupture of linear time in the frozen moment of the "dialectic at a standstill."

THE POSSIBILITY OF REDEMPTION IN *THE SECRET AGENT*

Conrad himself in "Author's Note" admits his pessimistic rendering of Winnie Verloc's story with an "anarchistic end of utter desolation, madness and despair" (xv). Conrad's pessimism in *The Secret Agent* becomes the centerpiece of a number of critical studies focused on the moral nihilism of the urban scene of London and its denizens. Avrom Fleishman observes that this novel is a representation of the concept of social "anomie," whose political as well as moral anarchy results in "radical disorder in the social structure and consequent personal dislocation" (212). There seems to be no vision of hope and no way out of the moral dilemma of the unscrupulous political intrigues in the public sphere and the concomitant domestic tragedy in the private sphere. Accordingly, John Lyon laments that the novel "pre-empts any imaginative engagement with radical politics" (xv), while Irving Howe bewails "what one misses in *The Secret Agent* is . . . some force of resistance; in a word, a moral positive to serve literary ends" (96). Despite the preponderance of the

critical works that negate the possibility of moral redemption, Daniel R. Schwarz as a critic of steadfast moral humanism affirms that the narrative voice in *The Secret Agent* adopts a moral distance from the "cynicism, amorality, and hypocrisy" surrounding London and that Conrad is interested in the "individual emotional and moral lives of its inhabitants," such as the maternal love of Winnie and Winnie's mother and Stevie's innocent sense of morality and compassion (157, 159).

Based on Benjamin's philosophy of temporality and redemption, my intention is to posit the possibility of redemption in *The Secret Agent* through Winnie's violence and vengeance as a form of revolution against the hierarchical male institution of modernity and a point of rupture of linear progress that prefigures the coming of messianic time at a standstill. Benjamin argues in the "Second Thesis" that "our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption" ("Theses on the Philosophy of History" 254). Benjamin highlights the philosophical principle of *The Arcades Project* as a kind of "backward looking archeology" (Leslie 110) in the struggle of two forces that expect the "revolutionary explosion" in the past:

> We can speak of two directions in this work: one which goes from the past into the present and shows the arcades, and all the rest, as precursors, and one which goes from the present into the past so as to have the revolutionary potential of these 'precursors' exploded in the present. And this direction comprehends as well the spellbound elegiac consideration of the recent past, in the form of its revolutionary explosion. (Benjamin, *AP* 862)

Benjamin's attempt in a nostalgic gesture to "recapture images of the past" conveys in fact his anti-institutional, anti-bourgeois, and anti-evolutionary concept of history (Hanssen 2). In *The Arcades Project* Benjamin takes the nineteenth-century Parisian arcades as the prime example of the "ruins" excluded by the progress of history, which is represented by the Haussmann boulevards. Haussmannization is a "modernization project" which aims to "flush out the hidden haunts of low-life where bohemia" gathered (Leslie 92, 93). By contrast, the Parisian arcades represent everything that is opposed to the modernizing as well as progressive spirit of modernity—a retrograde force that is "antinomies of capitalism" as embodied in the indolent figures of the flâneur who weaves in and out of the arcades (94). Benjamin thus entertains a kind of "ruined hopes of the past" that will be realized in the "historical construction" of the outmoded arcades (93). Benjamin's perspective of bourgeois

progress is modeled on the idea of "catastrophe" as embodied in the stagnant immutability of the "status quo": "The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are 'status quo' *is* catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given" (*AP* N9a, 1). In other words, it is the revolutionary force that propels the veritable progress of history taking place at the moment of redemption in Benjamin's philosophical system: "Definitions of basic historical concepts: Catastrophe—to have missed the opportunity. Critical moment—the status quo threatens to be preserved. Progress—the first revolutionary measure taken" (*AP* N10, 2). In light of Elissa Marder's interpretation, Benjamin associates the meaning of "redemption" and "messiah" with the moment of "happiness" as demonstrated by the epiphany of "profane illumination" experienced by Proust in his immersion in the sensory "involuntary memory" (196).[2] However, this definition of "redemption" and "happiness" is confined to the aesthetic realm, as opposed to Winnie's revolutionary act, which might be viewed in socio-psychological terms. In one fragment from "Convolute N," Benjamin reconceptualizes the possibility of "happiness" and "redemption" on the basis of the mental status of "despair and desolation," which is reminiscent of Winnie's situation as an oppressed domestic woman seeking to break through her private confinement in her new guise as an audacious flâneuse: "there vibrates the idea of happiness . . . the idea of salvation. This happiness is founded on the very despair and desolation which were ours. Our life, it can be said, is a muscle strong enough to contract the whole of historical time. Or, to put it differently, the genuine conception of historical time rests entirely upon the image of redemption" (*AP* N13a, 1). This messianic moment of redemption in the past in Winnie's case can be interpreted as her fierce striving for an "unhierarchical" state of interpersonal communication based on equality and justice on behalf of the weak and the oppressed, which corresponds to the Benjaminian sense of a "classless society" of "primal history" apart from the patriarchal as well as capitalist domination of modernity (*AP* 4–5).

Benjamin's association of "moral barbarism" with "civil order" and "cultured refinement of life" in a sense justifies Winnie's violence against the hypocritical respectability of patriarchal institution and civilization in her illegitimate acts of murder and suicide as a moment of revolution: "All degrees and shades of moral barbarism, of mental obtuseness, and of physical wretchedness have always been found in juxtaposition with cultured refinement of life . . . and free participation in the benefits of civil order" (*AP* N14a,1). In "Critique of Violence" Benjamin justifies the destructive force of "divine violence" to judge the injustice of "legal violence," calling for the force of revolution to confront the latter that consolidates the state power:

> The dissolution of legal violence stems . . . from the guilt of more natural life, which consigns the living, innocent and unhappy, to a retribution that "expiates" the guilt of mere life—and doubtless also purifies the guilty, not of guilt, however, but of law. . . . Mythic violence [legal violence] is bloody power over mere life for its own sake; divine violence is pure power over life for the sake of the living. (250)

When frustrated with the injustice and unreliability of institutional law complicit with state power, the oppressed people—"the living, innocent and unhappy"—have no choice but to resort to a higher form of destructive force to thwart the atrocities afflicted by this "law-making" and "law-preserving" legal violence. In Winnie's insight, the justice enforced by the police is also a kind of legal violence to protect the interests of those complicit with the state power: "They [the police] are there so that them as have nothing shouldn't take anything away from them who have" (*SA* 173). Her act of violence on behalf of the oppressed and the powerless is thus colored with the tone of "divine violence" with an expiatory vision to disrupt the injustice of "legal violence" and state power embodied in the male political conspirators. According to Rebecca Stott, Conrad's marginalized female characters can serve as the threatening force of the "Other" to disrupt the "Manichean oppositions" in which the male gaze as the seeing I/eye try to possess, objectify, and classify the female body. Looking back to the male gaze in a posture of resistance, the "eyes of the Other swallow or engulf the self (the seeing-eye) in the returned gaze" (Stott 54). Winnie's violent action at the end of the novel represents this resistant force of the Other as a flâneuse who looks back into the eyes of the observing flâneur in their encounter and challenges his overlooking power of surveillance.

Winnie and Ossipon's encounter at the end of the novel suggests the confrontation of "autonomous reason and dependent suffering" (Berthoud 119)—the tug-of-war of the opposite forces of the new and the old in Benjamin's temporality. Comrade Ossipon's disturbed conscience over Winnie's suicide and his threatened sense of self-identity by the news of Winnie's death is an epitome of the tension of two principles at work in the novel: "His revolutionary career, sustained by the sentiment and truthfulness of many women, was menaced by an impenetrable mystery—the mystery of a human brain pulsating wrongfully to the rhythm of journalistic phrases" (*SA* 310–11). Ossipon's male-dominated world of science, rationality, and progress is defeated by Winnie's domestic world fraught with suffering and victimization. A moment of messianic redemption arises from Winnie's "*act of madness or despair*" (*SA* 307, 310) through the violent action that disrupts the linear progress of time characteristic of patriarchal hegemony and male modernity, which is a gesture of vengeance from the "Unhappy, brave woman" (*SA* 277), the flâneuse.

NOTES

1. In Benjamin's case, the practice is two-dimensional with positive (forward-looking) and negative (backward-looking) forces. However, in Baudelaire's formulation of his artist-flâneur, he is always in the guise of a modern "hero," assuming the rebellious and subversive air of a romantic outsider (Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" 39). This is why the feminist critic Wilson complains that many writers have "romanticized the *flâneur* as a tragic figure" and thus endows this figure with a sense of male glamour and superiority (9). Benjamin's flâneur is involved in the dialectic of seeing/being seen—he is not only in a position of a seer observing the crowd, but also reduced to a status of passive object viewed by other passers-by as a public spectacle. By contrast, Baudelaire's flâneur is totally engaged in the activity of "botanizing on the asphalt," whose "joy of watching prevails over all" (Benjamin, "The Paris of Second Empire in Baudelaire" 19, 41). This Baudelairean artist figure is "away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very center of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world" with "independent, intense, and impartial spirits" (Baudelaire 400). Besides, Baudelaire's artist-flâneur is imbued with an atmosphere of dandyism in a gesture of "opposition" and "revolt," as an aristocratic rebel who "[conceives] the idea of establishing a new kind of aristocracy" against the flourishing capitalism of modernity (421). In its totally rebellious relation to capitalist modernity, it once again demonstrates the insufficiency of Baudelaire's one-dimensional concept of flâneur in striking contrast to Benjamin's two-dimensional one which is both anti-bourgeois and complicit with capitalism.

2. See Benjamin's "Surrealism," in which he identifies "the reader, the thinker, the loiter, the *flâneur*" as "types of illuminati" who practices the "profane illumination of reading" as well as the "profane illumination of thinking" in a status of "ecstatic" "hashish trance" (216). See also Benjamin's "On the Image of Proust" where a definition of the "dialectics of happiness" is given: "There is a dual will to happiness, a dialectics of happiness: a hymnic form as well as an elegiac form. The one is the unheard-of, unprecedented, the height of bliss; the other, the eternal repetition, the eternal restoration of the original, first happiness. It is this elegiac idea of happiness—it could also be called Eleatic—which for Proust transforms existence into a preserve of memory" (239).

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