

**“SOOT AND DROPS OF WATER”: PARTICULATE
ATMOSPHERICS AND REDUNDANCY IN
*THE SECRET AGENT***

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Abstract: This paper examines the saturation of redundant particulates (such as fog, soot, dust and mist) and redundant sign systems in the atmospherics of *The Secret Agent*, while taking into account late Victorian responses to London’s air pollution. Through applying the information theory concepts of redundancy and information carrying capacity, it extends J. Hillis Miller’s analysis of repetition in Conrad’s work and thereby examines how the text’s minimal redundancy of specific words serves to encode higher levels of significance. The paper demonstrates that *The Secret Agent* represents the particulate atmosphere of London as a media system, in that its patterned use of minimal redundancy serves to trace the stabilization of collective conditions of immersion in air and sign systems.

Keywords: atmospherics, climatology, redundancy, information theory, media theory, *The Secret Agent*

In an oft-quoted passage of his 1920 “Author’s Note” to *The Secret Agent* (1907), Joseph Conrad describes the “crystallization” of the “sort of atmosphere” of the novel in terms of a specific envisioning of solar physics and climatology:

One fell to musing before the phenomenon – even of the past – of South America, a continent of crude sunshine and brutal revolutions; and of the sea, the vast expanse of salt waters, the mirror of heaven’s frowns and smiles, the reflector of the world’s light. Then the vision of an enormous town presented itself, of a monstrous town more populous than some continents and in its man-made might as if indifferent to heaven’s frowns and smiles, the devourer of the world’s light. There was room enough there for any story, depth enough there for any passion, variety enough there for any setting, darkness enough to bury five millions of lives.¹

Regarding this passage of the “Author’s Note”, Alex Houen argues: “The catalyst for the story is thus explicitly imagined in terms of thermodynamics, for it was the sun, seemingly the central energy source of the world, that was placed at the centre

¹ J. Conrad. *The Secret Agent* [1907]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 6; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text and abbreviated *SA*.

of much of the scientific debate.”² Yet the sun is conspicuously absent from this passage (as is the name of the “monstrous town”); Conrad’s account dramatically effaces the movement by which the sun’s light becomes the *world’s* light, where the light of the sun is either reflected or absorbed by various places or entities on the surface of the globe. This effacement enables Allen MacDuffie to read this passage as suggestive of an “exploitative, directional, global economy” of energy forms; for MacDuffie, Conrad’s allusion to the “devourer” evokes a “metabolic vision” of the “city as a consumer within – indeed, a parasite upon – the greater natural economic world system”³. In MacDuffie’s argument, the dynamic relationship between the sun’s light and different parts or entities of the globe (whether South America, the sea or London) flattens into a relation between places on the map of the “world system”, between the capitol of a “core” nation and its imperial “periphery”. These critical analyses seem to miss the subtlety of the passage’s description of climatology. If London is such a “devourer” of light, why is there “darkness enough” there to “bury five millions of lives?” Moreover, what is it that makes London “devour” the light rather than reflect it? To answer these questions, we must recognize that the description dramatizes the existence of a certain parallel relationship – one between social climate and meteorological climate. The first half of the passage suggests that the “brutal revolutions” of South America “reflect” its raw climate, in which the sunshine is “crude”, rather than refined; moreover, this parallel between the social and the meteorological further reflects the mirroring of the sea, whose movements “mirror” the capriciousness of “heaven’s frowns and smiles”.⁴ In contrast, the densely populated, “monstrous” London of *The Secret Agent* is embedded within the “insular nature of Great Britain” (*SA*, 212); the “monstrous town” therefore is “indifferent to heaven’s frowns and smiles”, as its “man-made might” insulates itself from the rhythms of such cosmic phenomena. In the London milieu of *The Secret Agent*, where the “blended noises of the enormous town” sink down “to an inarticulate low murmur” (*SA*, 68), the disturbance of the Greenwich Park explosion dissipates as a slight tremor. What is it that reinforces this insulation and thereby allows it to accomplish its dissipative effect (through muffling or veiling the noise)?

Peter Sloterdijk’s thought regarding social stress dynamics provides a useful context for considering this question. Sloterdijk argues that groups of individuals form

² A. Houen. *Terrorism and Modern Literature, from Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 41.

³ A. MacDuffie. “Joseph Conrad’s Geographies of Energy”. *ELH* 2009, Vol. 76 (Spring), p. 76.

⁴ As Katharine Anderson points out, certain nineteenth meteorologists (such as the physicist Balfour Stewart and the economist William Stanley Jevons) sought to prove that there was a correlation between solar physics (specifically sunspot cycles) and periodic meteorological disturbances. As occurrences of Indian famines (and the social upheavals associated with them) were closely tied to rainfall cycles, certain strains of Victorian meteorology did postulate connections between solar physics, meteorological disturbances and social climate in the imperial periphery. See K. Anderson. *Predicting the Weather: Victorians and the Science of Meteorology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 235-284. See also P. Mukherjee. *Natural Disasters and Victorian Empire: Famines, Fevers, and the Literary Cultures of South Asia*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 29-60.

insulated, self-stressing communities that integrate their own “operative unity” through generating “stress-creating themes”:

What warm-bloodedness does for animals, stress-creating themes (*stressierende Themen*) do for social entities. Because groups always have projects – be they work or festivals, wars or elections – and because they are always ‘worked up’ or agitated about something or other – be it catastrophes, enemy states, crimes or scandals – they constantly keep revolving the thematic material that they use to communicate internally about their situation, or rather about their immune status or stress-status. By means of its current themes, a group takes its own fever temperature; and through its fever, it generates its own operative unity as an endogenously closed context of agitation.

Groups vibrate with a constant, internally generated agitation that transforms normative stress into their normal pitch.⁵

Conradian texts such as *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* (1897), *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900) all contain significant references to this sort of resonant vibration, which manifests social cohesion and solidarity.⁶ Moreover, resonant vibration in these texts serves to act as a sort of strain gauge for manifesting the internal agitation and stress-status of social groups. For example, in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, the explosive vibration induced by Wait’s “metallic” cough resounds through the ship’s structural integrity and through the “dome of the sky”; it registers the agitation of the very cosmos surrounding the ship’s community:

He put his hand to his side and coughed twice, a cough metallic, hollow, and tremendously loud; it resounded like two explosions in a vault; the dome of the sky rang to it, and the iron plates of the ship’s bulwarks seemed to vibrate in unison, then he marched off forward with the others.⁷

This metallic vibration of the “dome of the sky” manifests the heightened stress-status of the solidarity of the crew as it symbolically mobilizes to fight the infection of the contagions of Wait’s idleness and Donkin’s anarchist ideology, while preparing for the coming storm:⁸

Extra lashings were put on the spare spars. Hatches were looked to. The steward in his leisure moments and with a worried air tried to fit washboards to the cabin doors. Stout canvas was bent with care. Anxious eyes looked to the westward, towards the cape of storms. The ship began to dip into a southwest swell, and the softly luminous sky of low latitudes took on a harder

⁵ Sloterdijk 2006b, p. 6.

⁶ For a discussion of vibration and solidarity in *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, see J.B. Napolin. “A Sinister Resonance”: Vibration, Sound, and the Birth of Conrad’s Marlow”. In: *Vibratory Modernism*. Eds. A. Enns, S. Trower. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 53-79.

⁷ J. Conrad. *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*. London: J.M. Dent, 1897, p. 18.

⁸ For a reading of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* in the context of late nineteenth-century germ theory, degeneration theory and the notion of physiological and social contagion, see M. Bock. “Joseph Conrad and Germ Theory: Why Captain Allistoun Smiles Thoughtfully”. *The Conradian* 31.2 (Autumn 2006), pp. 1-13.

sheen from day to day above our heads: it arched high above the ship vibrating and pale, like an immense dome of steel, resonant with the deep voice of freshening gales.⁹

While such vibration is prevalent in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, it is conspicuously absent from *The Secret Agent*. The text contains only two references to vibration, neither of which provide any social cohesion: first, in the "comical vibration" of the "wisp" (SA, 38) of Karl Yundt's goatee; and second, in Winnie's voice calling out to Ossipon, which "vibrate[s] after him in that blackness with a desperate protest" (SA, 215). Voices are "unresonant", as in the "unresonant voice" of Verloc's "private life" (SA, 149) and in Winnie's likewise "unresonant voice" (SA, 182). The narrative ultimately depicts the failure of the Greenwich Park explosion to become what Sloterdijk refers to as a "stress-creating theme", at least for anyone other than the members of the Verloc household and a very small fraction of London's police and bureaucracy. The explosion itself is contained within a small vicinity of the Park: "Foggy Morning. Effects of explosion felt as far as Romney Road and Park Place" (SA, 59). Moreover, the vibration of the explosion dissipates as a slight tremor, through the "diseased" pulsation of Ossipon's brain: "It seemed to him that suspended in the air before him he saw his own brain pulsating to the rhythm of an impenetrable mystery. It was diseased clearly..." (SA, 230-231). This "diseased" brain can be pathologically diagnosed and discarded through the city's drainage system: "It was inclining towards the gutter" (SA, 231). The "impenetrable mystery" of the newspaper line ultimately seems to become part of the "murky, gloomy dampness" (SA, 114) that hangs over the city: "*An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang forever over this act of madness or despair*" (SA, 228; Conrad's italics). The explosion certainly is botched, but why is it that the news of the explosion registers only a marginal fluctuation of agitation within the greater London milieu?

As Sloterdijk emphasizes, the vibrational agitation of a group's stress-status is mostly imperceptible: "Groups vibrate with a constant, internally generated agitation that transforms normative stress into their normal pitch. It is part of the 'hiddenness of health' of groups that most of the time they do not have a sense of their own basic nomotopic tension and hardly thematise it."¹⁰ For Sloterdijk, this "nomotopic tension" refers to a form of "tensional integrity" or "tensegrity"; it is the "atmospheric tension" which holds together and patterns the "field of efficacy" in which a group's routines, rules and codes operate.¹¹ Groups form "self-stressing ensembles" that integrate and stabilize themselves through the "tensional integrity" of "normative architecture", upon which "differently tinged customs, cultures, rights, laws, rules, relations of production, language games, forms of life, institutions, and habituses rely."¹² For Sloterdijk, cultures are "collective conditions of immersion in air and sign sys-

⁹ J. Conrad. *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, p. 32.

¹⁰ P. Sloterdijk. "The Nomotop: On the Emergence of Law in the Island of Humanity". Transl. F. Koch. *Law and Literature* 2006, Vol. 18.1 (Spring), p. 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

tems,” whose “primary product is the founding of a domestic climate.”¹³ This “immersion” in social atmospheres and communicative sign systems develops into a “culturally controlled process”, where cultural climate is maintained through the internal generation and regulation of “tensional integrity”.¹⁴ This “tensional integrity” works immunologically, as “immune *dispositifs* are what enable systems to become systems, life forms to become life forms, and cultures to become cultures.”¹⁵ In this atmospheric “immersion”, redundant and repetitive language games function like “spatial immune systems” in that they serve to make such “culturally controlled” climates inhabitable by stabilizing them from within:

In the ontological sense, [people] are ‘outside’ in the world, but they can only be outside to the degree that they are stabilized from within something that gives them firm support [...] It is spatial immune systems that enable us to give being-outside a tolerable form [...] it is indeed language in its habitual form that is a perfect agenda to compensate for an undesired ecstasy. Since most people always say the same things all their lives – and their language games are, as a rule, completely repetitive – we live in a world of symbolic redundancy that functions just as well as a house with very thick walls.¹⁶

As this discussion will show, redundancy is what structures and stabilizes collective conditions of immersion in the air and sign systems of *The Secret Agent*. In other words, redundancy becomes the particular language game that patterns the field of efficacy in which codes operate – the field in which “collective conditions of immersion” are stabilized.

In a climatological sense, Victorian London really was a “cruel devourer” of light, with an “insular”, stabilized climate, saturated with particulate pollution. B.W. Clapp estimates that Victorian London enjoyed only one quarter of the sunshine absorbed by British country towns.¹⁷ Moreover, as Dale Porter points out, Victorian Londoners’ use of coal for hearth fires served to raise London’s ambient temperature to about two or three degrees Fahrenheit above that of the surrounding countryside, while the introduction of gaslights in the 1830s increased that ambient temperature by an additional four or five degrees.¹⁸ These cumulative temperature increases generated an insular “heat island” effect, as Thomas Glick puts it.¹⁹ Furthermore, the smoke produced by coal fires and gaslights combined with caustic exhausts from coal gas works

¹³ P. Sloterdijk. *Terror from the Air*. Transl. A. Patton, S. Corcoran, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009, p. 84.

¹⁴ P. Sloterdijk. “Architecture as an Art of Immersion”. Transl. T. Engels-Schwarzpaul. *Interstices* 2011, Vol. 12, p. 105.

¹⁵ P. Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. Transl. W. Hoban. Cambridge: Polity, 2013, p. 8.

¹⁶ P. Sloterdijk. “Spheres Theory: Talking to Myself about the Poetics of Space”. *Harvard Design Magazine* 2009, Vol. 30 (February), p. 8.

¹⁷ B.W. Clapp. *An Environmental History of Britain*. London: Longman, 1994, p. 14.

¹⁸ D.H. Porter. *The Thames Embankment: Environment, Technology, and Society in Victorian London*. Akron, OH: The University of Akron Press, 1998, p. 12.

¹⁹ T.F. Glick. “Science, Technology and the Urban Environment: the Great Stink of 1858”. In: *Historical Ecology: Essays on Environment and Social Change*. Ed. L.J. Bilsky. New York: Kennikat Press, 1980, p. 124.

and the miasmas emanating from polluted waterways.²⁰ As Stephen Mosley acknowledges, the humid climate and cloudy skies of Victorian Britain allowed fogs to form easily in smoky cities, especially in Manchester and London, as smoke and soot “provided in abundance the necessary nuclei for condensation and the formation of water droplets, especially at low temperatures.”²¹ References to air pollution condensed into popular speech itself; “the big smoke” became a popular name for Victorian London, while “being fogged” referred to being confused.²²

As Mosley emphasizes, the ever-present fog and soot of Victorian Britain’s cityscapes was not universally viewed as noxious pollution; it could also be taken as a sign of human warmth and abundant economic production.²³ As scientist and air pollution expert (and first British Alkali Inspector) Robert Angus Smith wrote in 1876, “coal smoke [...] is associated in our minds with pleasant ideas of comfort rather than of nuisance.”²⁴ This view is aptly expressed by Josiah Bounderby of Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854): “First of all, you see our smoke. That’s meat and drink to us. It’s the healthiest thing in the world in all respects, and particularly for the lungs.”²⁵ These perceptions of smoke persisted into late Victorian times, even after the advent of smoke abatement legislation, which was part of the Public Health Acts of 1848 and 1875 and the Sanitary Act of 1866.²⁶ As Sheffield Chief Smoke Inspector William Nicholson’s 1905 *Smoke Abatement* manual states:

[...] a smokeless country, even with its purer air, clear skies and more sunshine would be a country of universal poverty, but a country with its furnaces and fires making only the necessary smoke for the carrying on of industries, though a little smoky, would be a country of universal prosperity [...] what cannot be cured must be endured, for it is a lesser evil than putting out the furnaces and fires.²⁷

As Brimblecombe notes, the inorganic compounds found within smoke (especially sulphur dioxide) were not necessarily viewed as pollutants; they were often portrayed as disinfectants that cleansed the air of disease-carrying miasmas.²⁸ An 1892 editorial in *The Lancet* evokes the two-sidedness of late Victorian representations of London smoke, as both disinfectant and pollutant:

²⁰ D.H. Porter. *The Thames Embankment*, p. 12.

²¹ S. Mosley. *The Chimney of the World: a History of Smoke Pollution in Victorian and Edwardian Manchester*. Cambridge: White Horse, 2001, p. 28.

²² P. Brimblecombe. “Perceptions and Effects of Late Victorian Air Pollution”. In: *Smoke and Mirrors: The Politics and Culture of Air Pollution*. Ed. E.M. DuPuis. New York: NYU Press, 2004, p. 22.

²³ S. Mosley. *The Chimney of the World*, p. 70.

²⁴ Qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁵ Ch. Dickens. *Hard Times* [1854]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 166.

²⁶ P. Brimblecombe. “Perceptions and Effects”, p. 17. For a concise history of Smoke Abatement, see C. Flick. “The Movement for Smoke Abatement in 19th-Century Britain”. *Technology and Culture* 21.1 (1980), pp. 29-50.

²⁷ Qtd. in S. Mosley. *The Chimney of the World*, p. 74.

²⁸ P. Brimblecombe. “Perceptions and Effects”, p. 17.

As many as 350 tons of sulphur are thrown into the air in one winter's day, and the enormous quality of sulphurous acid generated from it deodorises and disinfects the air, destroying disagreeable smells emanating from refuse heaps and sewers and killing the disease germs which find their way into the atmosphere. There may be a good deal of truth to this view, but there is undoubtedly another side to the question [...] sulphurous acid in London fogs, for although it may be beneficial to the London householders by destroying microbes [...] frequently does them harm by attacking their lungs and bringing on bronchitis and asthma [...].²⁹

As Mosley argues, the “‘story lines’ of ‘wealth and well being’ and ‘waste and inefficiency’ are two sides of the same coin” in late Victorian responses to smoke pollution.³⁰ Eminent scientist Oliver Lodge aptly illustrates the reformist “waste and inefficiency” argument of a mostly middle-class, educated and professional elite: “To shovel a heap of coal together is a simple plan of making a fire [...] it is a disgraceful barbarism... It is a troublesome process, a wasteful process, a dirty process, and is, really and truly, an expensive process.”³¹ This view of coal smoke as noxious and wasteful manifested itself in some strains of late Victorian “degeneration” theory. For example, following the Boer War, the 1904 report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration (the same report which brought about increased support for the eugenics movement in Britain³²) addressed the “careless” pollution of coal smoke and portrayed it as “the cause of much disease and physical deterioration.”³³

Conrad's image of London as the “cruel devourer of the world's light” aptly depicts a “heat island” city which metabolizes the sun's light to the point of extinguishing it; the milieu of *The Secret Agent* is consistently “enveloped, oppressed, penetrated, choked, and suffocated by the blackness of a wet London night, which is composed of soot and drops of water” (*SA*, 116). This portrayal of soot and fog thus would seem to align itself with a reformist view of the noxiousness of air pollution in late Victorian London and thereby would support MacDuffie's argument that *The Secret Agent* suggests the workings of an “exploitative, directional, global economy” of energy forms, in which the city of London acts as a “parasite” upon the “greater natural economic world system.”³⁴ MacDuffie is quite right to attribute an entropic vision to *The Secret Agent's* representation of the polluted London milieu. However, before hastily suggesting that *The Secret Agent* is an environmentalist novel, I would like to suggest that we might interpret the text's polluted atmospherics in another way – as a depiction of redundancy. Well through the eighteenth century, the word “redundant” did not imply the unnecessary or the wasteful, but rather was “part of a family of words

²⁹ *The Lancet* (London), 25 June 1892, p. 1433. Qtd. in S. Mosley. *The Chimney of the World*, p. 82.

³⁰ S. Mosley. *The Chimney of the World*, p. 115.

³¹ O. Lodge. “Electricity and Gas v. Smoke”. *Exhibition Review* 6 (1882), p. 2. Qtd. in S. Mosley. *The Chimney of the World*, p. 93.

³² See D. Pick. *Faces of Degeneration: a European Disorder*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 185-187; and W. Greenslade. *Degeneration, Culture, and the Novel: 1880-1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 191-192.

³³ Qtd. in S. Mosley. *The Chimney of the World*, p. 107.

³⁴ A. MacDuffie. “Joseph Conrad's Geographies of Energy”, p. 76.

that signalled overflow, or superfluity, often of a desirable or opulent kind.”³⁵ As the *OED* indicates, “redundant” could still bear this connotation even in the late nineteenth century, as in Henry James’s *Roderick Hudson* (1876): “a handsome, blonde young woman, of redundant contour, speaking a foreign tongue.”³⁶ In a sense, what Mosley describes as the “two-sided” story of Victorian air pollution depends on which way redundant emissions are viewed, whether they point to production or to unnecessary waste. In smoke abatement discourse (such as that of Nicholson above), some smoke is necessary and points to the regulation of efficient production, but excessive smoke suggests wastefulness and inefficiency. As we will see, the polluted London milieu of *The Secret Agent* – “enveloped, penetrated, choked, and suffocated” (*SA*, 116) – provides the text with a means of representing an atmosphere which is over-saturated with redundant communication, but where minimal redundancy is capable of encoding complexity into communication. Some textual “pollution” becomes a means of writing reflexive complexity into the text; through the use of redundant discourse, the text indicates that it is self-conscious both of its encoding strategies and its status as a textual medium.³⁷

As Steven Connor acknowledges, redundancy in information theory (such as that of Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver) is defined as “the total amount of information sent in a message minus the total amount necessary for its transmission employing the most efficient code.”³⁸ William Paulson points out that “redundancy is a ratio denoting, in effect, the portion of a message given over to the repetition of what is already found somewhere else.”³⁹ Every encoded message must repeat itself, to some degree, so that it can convey information amidst noise; as Connor notes, “repetition of certain portions of the message maybe be essential to its successful transmission.”⁴⁰ Where there is maximal noise in a message signal there is no redundancy and no information is conveyed. However, with too much redundancy, information is lost; as Connor recognizes:

[...] noise and redundancy can be thought of as symmetrical but opposite pressures on information. Where there is maximal noise, no information gets through: there is nothing to distinguish any one frequency or frequencies from what is known as “white noise,” a sound containing every frequency within the range of human hearing. Where there is maximal redundancy, there

³⁵ S. Connor. “The Poorest Things Superfluous: On Redundancy” (2011), p. 1. Available online at <http://stevenconnor.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/redundancy.pdf>, accessed: 3/06/2015.

³⁶ H. James. *Roderick Hudson* [1876]. London: Houghton and Mifflin, 1891, p. 11.

³⁷ My argument somewhat relates to Michael Greaney’s discussion of “linguistic dystopia” in *The Secret Agent*; Greaney argues that the text represents mass media (such as newspapers and pornography) as “sordid excrescences of urban life” which “nevertheless ooze their way into the substance of Conrad’s novel, contaminating its linguistic texture and generic strategies.” Greaney focuses his analysis primarily on “linguistic” (as opposed to atmospheric or environmental) pollution and does not address dynamics of redundancy. See M. Greaney. *Conrad, Language, and Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 151.

³⁸ S. Connor. “The Poorest Things Superfluous”, p. 6. Also see C. Shannon, W. Weaver. *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949.

³⁹ W. Paulson. *The Noise of Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 58.

⁴⁰ S. Connor. “The Poorest Things Superfluous”, p. 7.

is equally no possibility of any message being imparted, since once again, there is nothing that disturbs or departs from the absolute self-identity of the redundant elements.⁴¹

In *The Secret Agent*, excessive word redundancy disperses meaning, as in the text’s great many references to “force”, which include: “force of economic conditions” (SA, 37), “force of suggestion” (SA, 42), “force of personality” (SA, 56), “force of law” (SA, 68), “force of sympathy” (SA, 71), “force of her protecting passion” (SA, 148), “force of habit” (SA, 169), “force of the blow” (SA, 197) and so on. References to repetition itself also multiply throughout the text; variations of the word “repeat” occur twenty-nine times. These numerous instances of “repeat” point to the “repeated curves” of Stevie’s circle 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. (SA, 40)

In *The Secret Agent*, excessive redundancy thus points to a loss of meaning, suggested by the “cosmic chaos” of the circles. However, more minimal redundancy serves to encode intricate patterns of significance. For example, variations of the word “cook” occur just four times, despite the omnipresence of eating and cannibalism motifs in the text.⁴² Through depicting the “fraudulent cookery” (SA, 115) of the Italian restaurant, the text evokes a sense of immersion in artificial space – in “one of those traps [...] without air but with an atmosphere of their own” (SA, 114-115). This allusion to “fraudulent cookery” modulates into the text’s reference to the “shamelessly cooked statistics” with which the “inferior henchman of ‘that brute Cheeseman’” “mercilessly” bores “a very thin House” (SA, 162). This minimal redundancy thus sets up a subtle parallel between the statistical manipulation of raw data and the “fraudulent cookery” of an inauthentic atmosphere – in which the Italian restaurant patrons are not “stamped in any way, professionally, socially, or racially,” and are “as denationalised as the dishes set before them with every circumstance of unstamped respectability” (SA, 115). Because words which repeat less have a lower probability of occurring within the text’s sign system, the minimal redundancy of a more improbable element (or word) holds the capacity to carry or convey more information (as the certainty of its meaning is less dispersed) and to encode higher levels of significance. This dynamic function of minimal redundancy thereby anticipates the information theory concept of information carrying capacity, which is defined as the improbability of receiving a given message element or sign (out of all the other possible elements or signs which the receiver could have received). As Paulson acknowledges, Shannon’s information theory holds that “[t]he more improbable the

⁴¹ S. Connor. “The Poorest Things Superfluous”, p. 7.

⁴² For a discussion of cannibalism motifs in *The Secret Agent*, see J. Zuckerman. “The Motif of Cannibalism in *The Secret Agent*”. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 1968, Vol. 10, pp. 295-299.

arrival of a given message element, the more uncertainty its actual arrival resolves in its receiver, the more information it conveys."⁴³

J. Hillis Miller emphasizes that Conrad's repetition is Nietzschean rather than Platonic, in that its use is based on difference and is not "grounded" in relation to an "archetypal model".⁴⁴ Each instance of Nietzschean or anti-Platonic repetition is only "opaquely similar" to another, as "one thing is experienced as repeating something which is quite different from it and which it strangely resembles."⁴⁵ For Miller, Conrad's use of repetition multiplies indeterminacy, but also limits it, through constraining the various meanings of a specific word to a limited set of possibilities:

No one of [the repetitions] is the original ground, the basis on which the others may be interpreted. *Lord Jim* is like a dictionary in which the entry under one word refers the reader back to another word which refers him to another and then back to the first word again, in endless circling [...] The various meanings are not the free imposition of subjective interpretations by the reader, but are controlled by the text. In that sense they are determinate [...] The indeterminacy lies in the multiplicity of possible incompatible explanations given by the novel and in the lack of evidence justifying a choice of one over the others. The reader cannot logically have them all, and yet nothing he is given determines a choice among them. The possibilities, moreover, are not just given side by side as entirely separate hypotheses. They are related to one another in a system of mutual implication and contradiction.⁴⁶

Miller's account needs to be taken further, as Miller's concept of "indeterminacy" activates itself in a field of probability. What limits the "endless circling" of meaning of a certain word is the (im)probability of encountering that word in the text. If a word has a high probability of occurring in the text, the repetition of that word multiplies the possibilities of what Miller refers to as "mutual implication and contradiction"; excessive redundancy thereby disperses meaning. In contrast, minimal redundancy constrains Miller's "endless circling", yet uses "opaquely similar" modulations (of word repetition) to generate complexities of meaning and thereby encodes higher levels of significance. The text of *The Secret Agent* thereby stages the generation of an operationally closed sign system in which excessively repeated words disperse patterns of meaning. The "ready-made phrases" (*SA*, 30) of newspapers in *The Secret Agent* reinforce the workings of the text's redundancy in that their function is to carry out this dispersal. As Mr. Vladimir's rant in the embassy suggests, the "ready-made phrases" of newspapers in *The Secret Agent* work to de-contextualize events and to re-contextualize them in redundant contexts: "A murderous attempt on a restaurant or a theatre would suffer in the same way from the suggestion of non-political passion: the exasperation of a hungry man, an act of social revenge [...] Every newspaper has ready-made phrases to explain such manifestations away" (*SA*, 29-30).⁴⁷ What Mr.

⁴³ W. Paulson. *The Noise of Culture*, p. 46.

⁴⁴ J. Hillis Miller. *Fiction and Repetition*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982, p. 8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

⁴⁷ Peter Mallios uses Jean Baudrillard's theory of the "simulacral" to argue that in "the context of the press", *The Secret Agent* demonstrates "a written relationship to events" in which "the elements of representation and of a differentiated, autonomous reality drop out entirely." The world of *The Secret*

Vladimir’s “rapid incisive utterance” (*SA*, 30) seeks to evoke is the suggestion of a non-redundant event – one that will “defy the ingenuity of journalists” (*SA*, 30). The newspaper line of “*An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair*” (*SA*, 228) indeed functions to explain away; it de-contextualizes the meaning of the explosion by describing it with the “ready-made phrase” of “this act of madness or despair”. However, within the text’s closed sign system, the redundancy of the actual newspaper line does not completely disperse meaning, but rather points to the text’s patterning of the flow of information. The allusion to hanging recalls the “narrow strip of velvet with a larger triangular piece of dark blue cloth hanging from it” (*SA*, 72-73) – the piece of Stevie’s coat, inscribed with 32 Brett Street, which leads Inspector Heat to the Verlocs’ household and thereby threads the passage of information in the narrative. Minimally or moderately repeated words thus serve to trace complexities of significance; they format the workings of de-contextualization so that meaning is re-activated within the text’s operationally closed sign system.

In this fashion, the text’s minimal repetition of the word “damp” serves to format the text’s depiction of collective immersion in particulate pollution. Variations of “damp” or “dampness” occur eight times, for example in the description of the Assistant Commissioner’s walk through the “murky, gloomy dampness” of the “slimy aquarium” (*SA*, 114) around Charing Cross Station. Within the nonlinear formatting of the sequence of the narrative this allusion to dampness occurs almost exactly halfway through the text, in the text’s seventh out of thirteen chapters; the nonlinear format thereby encapsulates the depiction of this “slimy aquarium”:

His descent into the street was like the descent into a slimy aquarium from which the water had 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 flitting round the dark corners. (*SA*, 114)

The passage’s suggestion of drainage (in which water is “run off”) serves to saturate this backwater milieu with an air of “murky, gloomy dampness”, where residues condense, envelop, and suffocate: “He advanced at once into 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 drops of water” (*SA*, 116). The description of Winnie leaving the house (after she murders Verloc) recalls this immersion in dampness: “This entrance

Agent thereby becomes “scripted, constituted, [and] supplanted by the media and models that are brought to bear on it.” See P. Mallios. “Reading *The Secret Agent* Now: The Press, the Police, the Premonition of Simulation”. In: *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century*. Eds. C. Kaplan, P. Mallios, A. White. London: Routledge, 2005, p. 170. The Baudrillardian reading provides valuable insight. Moreover, as I will point out below, in the atmospherics evoked by the text, explosion itself has already been exploded – into a ‘muggy’ dampness saturated with particulate pollution. *The Secret Agent* therefore seems to suggest that explosion itself has already been made redundant, within London’s very atmospherics, even before the newspaper reports script or ‘simulate’ the individual explosion in Greenwich Park.

into the open air had a foretaste of drowning; a slimy dampness enveloped her, entered her nostrils, clung to her hair. It was not actually raining, but each gas lamp had a rusty little halo of mist" (SA, 202). Within the greater London of the text – "the enormous town slumbering monstrosly on a carpet of mud under a veil of raw mist" (SA, 224) – atmospheric immersion becomes immersion in a patchwork of milieus of saturated airs, most of which are flooded with various particulates, residues and excrescences, including mists, powders, dusts, soot and slime. Near the Professor's "hermitage of a perfect anarchist" (SA, 67), dust saturates the medium of perception: "On one side the low brick houses had in their dusty windows the sightless, moribund look of incurable decay – empty shells awaiting demolition" (SA, 67). Differences in air quality are trans-coded into particulate or powder quality. In the more affluent milieu near Hyde Park Corner, the dispersion of "diffused light" recasts itself into the opulence of powdered gold: "The very pavement under Mr Verloc's feet had a gold tinge in that diffused light [...] Mr Verloc was going westward through a town without shadows in an atmosphere of powdered old gold. There were red coppery gleams on the roofs of houses" (SA, 15). Moreover, this allusion to the "powdered gold" sheen connects this description to the Professor's reference to his "X2 green powder", contained in the "old one gallon copal varnish can" (SA, 62). This immersion in polluted atmospherics is further saturated with an explosive "eruption" of "rubbishy" and filthy print matter, which "harmonise[s] excellently" with the "grimy sky":

In front of the great doorway a dismal row of newspaper sellers standing clear of the pavement dealt out their wares from the gutter. It was a raw, gloomy day of the early spring; and the grimy sky, the mud of the streets, the rags of the dirty men, harmonised excellently with the eruption of the damp, rubbishy sheets of paper soiled with printers' ink. The posters, maculated with filth, garnished like tapestry the sweep of the curbstone. (SA, 65)

These "damp, rubbishy sheets" of newspaper further "harmonise" with the "murky, gloomy dampness" of the "slimy aquarium" (SA, 114) near Charing Cross Station. The "grimy" cityscape of the "enormous town" seems to have already become that which Ossipon imagines as the "dreadful black hole belching horrible fumes choked with ghastly rubbish" (SA, 56).

In *Lord Jim*, according to Stein's dictum of "In the destructive element immerse", immersion must take place in the "destructive element", beyond the margins of what Marlow refers to as the "sheltering conception of light and order which is our refuge", to which "words belong".⁴⁸ However, the mode of immersion in *The Secret Agent* is always one of immersion in a media system of particulate atmospherics in which the "refuge" has become the "slimy aquarium" – flooded with pollutants, residues and redundant communication. In this "slimy aquarium", distinction is lost. As Steven Connor argues, "emergence" in *The Secret Agent* is rather a "merging" together; the "muggy stillness" (SA, 138) of *The Secret Agent* is "full of obstructive inertia" and "weight as mass clogging the possibility of movement and the emergence of distinction."⁴⁹ Regarding the novel's atmospherics, Connor suggests:

⁴⁸ J. Conrad. *Lord Jim* [1900]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 154, 228.

⁴⁹ S. Connor. *The Matter of Air: Science and Art of the Ethereal*. London: Reaktion Books, 2010, p. 303.

Explosion itself has been exploded, until it becomes the opposite of itself, an inert solidarity of dissipation. It is imaged perfectly by the London night into which the Assistant Commissioner ventures [...] The oppressive atmosphere is formed from the clustering of atomized matter.⁵⁰

Connor’s argument should be taken further. What Connor identifies as the seeming explosion of explosion generates itself through a form of atmospheric tension between saturation and dispersion – where a certain degree of saturation serves as pneumatic “tensional integrity” in that it clusters the particulate (of soot, dust, fog and mist). This depiction of particulate, atmospheric saturation provides the text with a means of self-consciously representing its own textual saturation – its pollution with redundant text in its own composition as a collection of “rubbishy sheets of paper soiled with printers’ ink” (*SA*, 65). The text therefore represents itself as part of the polluted milieu which it evokes. Moreover, a moderate degree of textual repetition – accomplished through the text’s eight references to dampness – proves capable of tracing relations between the atmospheric and the communicational and thereby gives “tensional integrity” to the text’s patterning of parallels between particulate pollution and redundant communication.

Moreover, the saturation of particulates densifies and damps air-space, so that it envelops, oppresses, penetrates, chokes and suffocates – and deadens explosion, as in the Professor’s thoughts of the crowd: “The thought of a mankind as numerous as the sands of the sea-shore, as indestructible, as difficult to handle, oppressed him. The sound of exploding bombs was lost in their immensity of passive grains without an echo” (*SA*, 228). The Professor’s thoughts here recall the de-toning effect of “the falling mist in the darkness and solitude of Brett Place, in which all sounds of life seemed lost as if in a triangular well of asphalt and bricks, of blind houses and unfeeling stones” (*SA*, 207).⁵¹ The text’s redundant descriptions of damp air-space, mist and fog thus depict a damping effect that deadens reverberation and echo. This damping envelops “the enormous town slumbering monstrously on a carpet of mud under a veil of raw mist” (*SA*, 224), and thereby blankets the town in its somnambulistic state, with its “unconscious stream of people on the pavements” (*SA*, 53). Within the media system of the atmospherics of *The Secret Agent*, this depiction of damp air thus traces out a threshold of collectively damped perception – below which the “blended noises of the enormous town [sink] down to an inarticulate low murmur” (*SA*, 68). In parallel, the workings of repetitive language games (within the text’s sign system) serve to flood a densified medial space with redundancy and thereby ensure that the meaning of improbable events can be damped – or de-contextualized, re-contextualized and dispersed. The Greenwich Park explosion thereby points to a redundant scenario which is brought into the “current of domestic events” (*SA*, 140); as the Assistant Commissioner states: “From a certain point of view we are here in the presence of a domestic drama” (*SA*, 168). On the one hand, *The Secret Agent*’s portrayal of collective

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

⁵¹ As Aaron Fogel suggests, “detonation” for Conrad is a rather a “de-toning”, which “explodes the dialectic of sound and silence” and thereby resolves itself “atonally”. See A. Fogel. *Coercion to Speak: Conrad’s Poetics of Dialogue*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 27, 58.

damping dramatizes the anaesthetizing effect of information and the “the mist of print”⁵² which Conrad considers in “Autocracy and War” (1905):

[...] our imagination, luckily for our peace of mind, has remained a slumbering faculty [...] Direct vision of the fact, or the stimulus of a great art, can alone make it turn and open its eyes heavy with sleep [...] In this age of knowledge our sympathetic imagination, to which alone we can look for the ultimate triumph of concord and justice, remains strangely impervious to information, however correctly and even picturesquely conveyed.⁵³

However, on the other hand, to “damp” is not only to deaden or to anaesthetize, but also to moisten and thereby to saturate the atmospherics as a medium of perception – to manifest the surrounding air and to enhance perception of the very milieu in which perception (and its damping) takes place. Within the text’s closed sign system, reading the minimal repetition of “damp” thus serves to unfold the redundancy that formats collective conditions of immersion in the particulate – where the saturation of the particulate points to the damping and anaesthetizing effect of redundant sign systems. *The Secret Agent* effectively demonstrates that through operationally closing a certain sign system (so that patterns of textual redundancy are activated within the field of probability of their occurrence), minimal redundancy becomes capable of tracing such formatting and thereby depicts the stabilization of media climate. It is this formatting that effectively damps vibration, reinforces the “insular nature” (*SA*, 212) of the atmospherics evoked by the text and absorbs the Greenwich Park explosion as a mere ripple in stress-status.

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⁵² J. Conrad. “Autocracy and War”. In: *Notes on Life and Letters*. New York: Doubleday, 1921, p. 87.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

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