

## ARTIFICIAL ENHANCEMENT AND THE POSTHUMAN CONDITION IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *THE SECRET AGENT*

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**Abstract:** This essay examines the ‘posthuman condition’ and its critical relevance to Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907). It will be shown that oppressive examples of constitution-altering technologies find complex and recurrent depiction throughout the novel, often dismantling and redefining the physiques of their respective hosts. Most centrally however, it will be argued that Conrad criticises this notion of the posthuman condition through menacing depictions of ‘the Professor’, crucially emphasising the instability and endangerment potentially associated with the technologically-enhanced constitution. To this end, brief descriptions of *The Secret Agent* and contemporary conceptions of the posthuman condition will be provided. Thereafter, I shall explore the novel’s disquieting depictions of prosthetic technology and their detrimental effects upon the organic constitution, before then interrogating Conrad’s treatment of the posthuman condition and the devastation apparently inherent to this state of mechanical alteration. Finally, the novel’s ultimate denunciation of the posthuman condition will be considered, with particular reference to the death of Stevie and the numerous depictions of his fragmented body.

**Keywords:** post-human, technology, Modernism, constitution, prosthesis, fractured, body, machine, Stevie, Professor, transhumanism, enhancement

The term ‘posthuman’ has been used in a variety of capacities; in some philosophical domains it refers to an ideology intended to replace Renaissance Humanism, whilst in contemporary critical theory it denotes certain new ways of perceiving the human condition. In the dominant sense, however, the phrase refers to a technologically-enhanced individual who possesses one or more abilities that have been altered to far outstrip that of the conventional human being. Indeed, Nick Bostrom describes the term and its current usage:

It is sometimes useful to talk about possible future beings whose basic capacities so radically exceed those of present humans as to be no longer unambiguously human by our current standards. The standard word for such beings is “posthuman”. [...] Posthumans could be completely synthetic artificial intelligences [...] or they could be the result of making many smaller but cumulatively profound augmentations to a biological human. [...] Some authors write as though simply by changing our self-conception, we have become or could become posthuman. This is a confusion or corruption of the original meaning of the term. The changes required to make us posthuman are too profound to be achievable by merely altering some aspect of psychological

theory or the way we think about ourselves. Radical technological modifications to our [...] bodies are needed. (“FAQ” 346)

Bostrom therefore explains that despite certain conflicting uses of the term by post-modern and post-structuralist theorists, the term ‘posthuman’ most centrally denotes an individual who has gained one or more superhuman abilities by close and permanent integration with constitution-altering technologies. Indeed, in this context, commentators such as Max More have argued that the individual could be allowed greater physical, mental and emotional capacities by the discovery of new ways to assimilate man and machine (39, 40). Moreover, such a concept has continued to be a topic of much recent debate, particularly given that theorists such as Ray Kurzweil have actively promoted this notional state as “the next inevitable step” for human physiology owing to the various pronounced advantages apparently associated with the condition (255).

This commentary on the artificial enhancement of the human body resonates meaningfully with *The Secret Agent*, a novel often preoccupied with technology’s potentially devastating effect upon the organic constitution. Indeed, it is noteworthy that Conrad’s contemporaneous memoirs reveal a certain interest in the assimilation of man and machine, often depicting the sea-faring vessel as a corporeal extension of the body.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, in an 1897 letter to R.B. Cunningham Graham the author muses about the human constitution being itself an ontological projection of an “evolved” but fundamentally machine-like universe:

There is a – let us say – machine. It evolved itself [...] out of a chaos of scraps and iron and behold! – it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider – but it goes on knitting. [...] The infamous thing has made itself: made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. [...] It knits us in and knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions – and nothing matters. (Letters, 56, 57)

Furthermore, it appears that a new interest in the mechanised body emerges more generally in the literature of the early twentieth century. With the mechanically enhanced body apparently being “bound up with the dynamics of modernity”, Tim Armstrong crucially observes that a “reciprocal relationship between man and machine emerges in Modernism”, and that “technology offers a reformed body, more powerful and capable, producing in a range of modernist writers a fascination with organ extension, organ replacement, sensory extension” (78). Indeed, allusions to the body as a mechanical construct occur continuously throughout *The Secret Agent*: Michaelis’ arm is once described as having an “elbow presenting no appearance of a joint, but more like a bend in a dummy’s limb” (37), while Mr Verloc becomes “like an automaton [...] his resemblance to a mechanical figure went so far that he had an automaton’s absurd air of being aware of the machinery inside of him” (176). In these

<sup>1</sup> In *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906), Conrad writes: “Such is the intimacy with which a seaman had to live with his ship of yesterday that his senses were like her senses, that the stress upon his body made him judge of the strain upon the ship’s masts. [...] No seaman can feel comfortable in body or mind when he has made his ship uneasy.” (31, 43).

instances, the body is rendered inert and strange by Conrad's descriptions of these characters as machine-like entities. Indeed, "a dummy's limb" portrays Michaelis as more mannequin than man, whilst "the machinery inside of him" evokes the impression of artificial, supplementary vital organs.

Perhaps more crucially, however, prosthetic enhancement is also depicted continuously throughout the novel: Wurmt requires a pince-nez, Verloc continuously carries a walking stick and an unnamed cab driver is shown to rely heavily on a hook prosthesis and whip. This last figure certainly creates an especially menacing vision of the technologically altered constitution:

Crawling behind an infirm horse, a metropolitan hackney carriage drew up on wobbly wheels and with a maimed driver on the box. This last peculiarity caused some embarrassment. Catching sight of a hooked iron contrivance protruding from the left sleeve of the man's coat, Mrs Verloc's mother lost suddenly the heroic courage of these days. [...] With the dirty back of his whip-hand he rubbed the stubble sprouting on his enormous chin [...] the iron hook protruding from a ragged, greasy sleeve. (139, 140, 141, 149)

In these moments, Conrad depicts the potential horrors associated with the mechanically altered body. Being a "maimed driver on the box", this anonymous coachman appears as an appendage to a mechanical contraption, which would also appear to incorporate a similarly incapacitated "infirm horse". The driver's iron hook particularly reinforces the author's technophobic vision of man-machine assimilation, "protruding" from his dirty sleeve in a threatening and distinctly unnatural manner. Stevie's reaction to this malignant vision also reflects the horror of such technological interventions upon the body, with the device apparently petrifying the character and "[robbing] him of the power of connected speech" (141). In the above instances, Conrad's depictions of prosthetic technology frighteningly appear to alter the human constitution and render it grotesque, redefining the body as something tainted by an artificial, sinister force.

It is the figure of 'the Professor' who is truly the locus of mechanical bodily interventions within the novel, however. Indeed, Conrad goes to great lengths to emphasise the intimate way in which ability-augmenting technologies have come to integrate with, and even dominate his once human frame:

The stalwart man was buttoned up in a dark overcoat, and carried an umbrella. [...] His thin, large ears departed widely from the sides of his skull, which looked frail enough for Ossipon to crush between thumb and forefinger; the dome of the forehead seemed to rest on the rim of the spectacles; [...] All his movements – the way he grasped the mug, the act of drinking, the way he set the heavy glass down and folded his arms – had a firmness, an assured precision [...] the be-spectacled, dingy little man who faced Ossipon behind a heavy glass mug full of beer emitted calmly what had the sound of a general proposition. (54, 55, 56, 74)

This individual is so closely assimilated with a range of ability-augmenting technologies that the character's body actually appears warped, forming itself around such devices ("the dome of his forehead seemed to rest upon his spectacles"). Moreover, the Professor is continuously depicted in a distinctly mechanical register, apparently possessing a dome-like constitution, grasping his glass with a machine-

like “precision” and finally “emitting” an utterance in a distinctly inorganic manner. J.M. Kertzer enigmatically writes that given the character’s unusual appearance and “his blasphemous religion”, the Professor “moves beyond the crocodile’s tears and the hyena’s laugh, and reaches that grotesque stage beyond humanity” (126). Indeed, the Professor’s menacing portrayal suggests that he has in some way become more than human, uncanny, and in many ways now more reminiscent of machine than man.

The possibility that such an individual has achieved the posthuman condition becomes truly plausible once he reveals the concealed bomb that has come to be integrated with his constitution, however:

“I walk always with my right hand closed round the india-rubber ball which I have in my trouser pocket. [...] The pressing of this ball actuates a detonator inside the flask I carry in my pocket. It’s the principle of the pneumatic instantaneous shutter for a camera lens. The tube leads up –” [...] With a swift disclosing gesture he gave Ossipon a glimpse of an india-rubber tube, resembling a slender brown worm, issuing from the armhole of his waistcoat and plunging into the inner breast pocket of his jacket. (59)

Crucially, the bomb appears as a projection of the Professor’s organic body, with the rubber ball and tube forming an extension from his hand, apparently running parallel to the figure’s torso before “plunging” directly back into his chest area, effectively forming an integrated exoskeleton with his frame. Indeed, the complexity and intimacy of the contraption is vaguely reminiscent of the circulatory system, whilst the device’s comparison to a “slender brown worm” renders the mechanism distinctly anatomical in its own right. Moreover, this augmentation is apparently near-permanent, with the Professor describing how his hand is constantly closed over the mechanism, as well as boasting more generally that “I take care never to part with [...] my wares. I’ve it always by me” (58). To recapitulate, Bostrom has described the ‘posthuman’ as “a being that has at least one posthuman capacity. By a posthuman capacity, I mean a general central capacity greatly exceeding the maximum attainable by any current human being without recourse to new technological means” (“Posthuman” 108). In the Professor’s case, it is clear that the character has attained a posthuman state by the close and long-term technological augmentation of his constitution by this suicide bomb, particularly given the hyperbolic extent to which this system is able to extrapolate his body’s destructive power.

Much like the depictions of prosthetic technology throughout the novel, Conrad’s vision of the posthuman state is also intensely pessimistic, however. Indeed, despite the Professor’s pronounced artificial enhancement, it seems that the character’s organic constitution is wasting away beneath this powerful exoskeleton: “His clothes were all but falling off him [...] He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable” (278, 280). Moreover, this figure has apparently become obsessed by his own state of posthumanity, boasting that “I have the means to make myself deadly”, whilst maniacally describing his obsession for the refinement of his bomb and the further improvement of his body’s destructive abilities (60, 62). In these instances, Conrad provides a troubling depiction of the technologically enhanced individual who, ow-

ing to such bodily interventions, has become seriously compromised both physically and mentally. Ultimately, however, it is the resonant image of Stevie's "fragmented" body following the attempted bombing of Greenwich Observatory that most directly critiques the Professor's mechanical pursuits and, more generally, the notion of the technologically enhanced constitution:

The man, whoever he was, had died instantaneously; and yet it seemed impossible to believe that a human body could have reached that state of disintegration without passing through the pangs of inconceivable agony [...] after a rainlike fall of mangled limbs the decapitated head of Stevie [fell] like the last star of a pyrotechnic display. [...] The shattering violence of destruction which had made of that body a heap of nameless fragments. (77, 78, 234)

While Stevie does not necessarily attain a state of posthumanity during the novel, never truly integrating with these destructive technologies in an intimate or permanent way, his fragmented body is nonetheless emblematic of the potential dangers associated with such an excessive state of technological enhancement. In this moment, the instability and danger of the posthuman condition is realised, with Conrad graphically detailing the way in which such technological interventions can dismantle and annihilate the human constitution. A particular emphasis is placed upon the fracturing or "disintegration" of the body, as well as the severance of limbs from it ("after a rainlike fall of mangled limbs the decapitated head of Stevie [...]"), further underscoring the vulnerability of the organic form in the face of such assimilated technology. Leonard Orr observes that "[Stevie's] dismembered body is horrific because, among other things, it forces us to confront the ontological question of what constitutes a human" (181). Indeed, these devastating effects upon the constitutions of both the Professor and Stevie appear to condemn the technologically enhanced posthuman condition, as well as emphasising the underlying instability and danger associated with such drastic bodily interventions.

In conclusion, Conrad's vision of the technologically enhanced individual appears to be largely pessimistic and ultimately reveals itself to be condemnatory. Indeed, prosthetic, supplementary devices are continuously depicted throughout the course of *The Secret Agent*, often dominating the human body and rendering it grotesque. It is the Professor, however, who appears to attain the posthuman condition, closely integrating his physical constitution with technologies that effectively extrapolate his body's destructive power. This notion of the mechanically enhanced individual is treated oppositionally by Conrad; the intrinsic instability and danger of this state is shown both by the Professor's compromised health and by Stevie's annihilated body, with the latter ultimately becoming nothing more than "a heap of nameless fragments" as a result of such technologies. *The Secret Agent's* depiction of the posthuman condition is therefore fairly remarkable, engaging intimately with the notion of mechanical body augmentation whilst also lending itself to a domain of discussion that would not become critically established until many decades later.

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