In chapter 10 of Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, at the end of his final report to Sir Ethelred on the Greenwich Park Observatory bombing, the Assistant Commissioner offers the following summary of his findings: “Yes, a genuine wife. And the victim was a genuine brother-in-law. From a certain point of view we are here in the presence of a domestic drama” (222). In thus echoing Conrad’s own hint in his Author’s Note that the whole novel can be productively reduced to “the story of Winnie Verloc,” wife of the titular Secret Agent \( \Delta \), the Assistant Commissioner also shows just how much the changes to England’s rhetoric of conspiracy suggested in *Lothair* had progressed by the early twentieth century. Although *The Secret Agent* features a catalog of conspirators rivaling that in *Lothair*—socialists, anarchists, terrorists, Continental spies, agents-provocateurs, and undercover police—Conrad’s novel eschews Disraeli’s concern for politics and uses these many conspirators as mere points of entry in the marriage of Adolf and Winnie Verloc. Further subordinating all possible connotations of secrecy to the domestic realm, Conrad’s narrator describes this marriage as “kept up on the wages of a secret industry eked out by the sale of more or less secret wares: the poor expedients devised by a mediocre mankind for preserving an imperfect society from the dangers of moral and physical corruption, both secret, too, of their kind” (258). The family, it seems, is the ultimate secret society.

By making a Russian plot designed to compel the British police to more aggressively monitor political dissidents into the final act of Verloc’s “domestic drama,” Conrad displays the full potential for parody latent in England’s rhetoric of conspiracy. The Assistant Commissioner’s choice of the word “drama” transforms the novel’s web of conspiracy into a pleasurable spectacle, one designed to tantalize the viewer even as it satirizes the ease with which political opportunists can invoke the figure of the secret society to accuse someone of conspiracy. Such opportunists, the novel suggests in one of its most vivid images, are like the hapless Stevie, who draws “circles, circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of curves, uniformity of form, and confusions of intersecting lines suggesting a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable”
In this rendition of England’s fungible rhetoric of conspiracy, there is no beginning or endpoint, only a constant interconnected revolution that, like Carlyle’s rhetorical revolution in *Sartor Resartus*, circles an empty center.

As Conrad’s novel suggests, however, the irony of responding to all accusations of conspiracy with parody is that such a response may, itself, ensure that some conspiracies remain a secret. Verloc, “the far-famed Secret Agent Δ of the late Baron Stott-Wartenheim’s alarmist despatches” (180), does know many actual secrets. Moreover, as Chief Inspector Heat reflects, the revelation of these secrets could have far-reaching consequences: “The turn this affair was taking meant the disclosure of many things—the laying waste of fields of knowledge, which, cultivated by a capable man, had a distinct value for the individual and for the society. It was sorry, sorry meddling. It would leave Michaelis unscathed; it would drag to light the Professor’s home industry; disorganize the whole system of supervision, make no end of a row in the papers . . .” (210–11). And yet, Heat tells Verloc, “You won’t be believed as much as you fancy you will” (210). The accuracy of this observation is confirmed by Sir Ethelred himself, who, in the interview alluded to earlier, and despite the information to which his Cabinet position undoubtedly makes him privy, stops the Assistant Commissioner at one point to remark, “All this seems very fantastic” (219). The potential for parody—a potential writ large in what Peter Knight has termed our contemporary “conspiracy culture,” with its “presumption toward conspiracy as both a mode of explanation and a mode of political operation” (3)—makes a straightforward account of a conspiracy seem unbelievable, even unreal. This aura of unreality remains an enduring, if unwitting, legacy of the Victorians’ myriad plots of opportunity. Originally deployed to construct immediate belief for the purposes of propaganda, they have helped to foster a more long-term fascination with secrets and a profound skepticism of the possibility of revelation.