

The Fictions of Ted Kaczynski

Literary scholar Don Foster inevitably sees more in the Unabom documents than was relevant to his testimony as a government witness.

Donald Wayne Foster

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As an assistant professor at U.C. Berkeley in 1968–69, Theodore J. Kaczynski was a rising star in the field of mathematics theory. But despite the brilliant originality of his published work, students found him ill suited to the classroom. In their course-evaluation questionnaires, undergraduates complained that Professor Kaczynski was a poor lecturer, unresponsive to their questions, unwilling to provide extra help with difficult material. Kaczynski was himself miserable in his chosen profession—and not so much unwilling as unable to communicate. When spoken to, he looked away. Painfully shy, he would cross the street just to avoid the discomfort of saying hello. In June 1969, after just two years of teaching, Professor Kaczynski abruptly resigned his position, announcing to his family that he was through with mathematics and with the academic life.

Accompanied by David (a long-suffering younger brother and his only friend), Ted Kaczynski set out to find some undeveloped land on which he could live like a pioneer, without depending on other human beings or on modern technology. While traveling together in the summer of '69, the Kaczynski brothers fell in love with the solitude and natural beauty of the northern Rockies. They promised themselves that they would return someday to live in Montana, or perhaps in Canada, far from the madding crowd. When the summer ended, David returned to school at Columbia and Ted retreated to Lombard, Illinois, to live with his parents. It was a painful homecoming. As a child, Ted had felt obliged to excel at science and math in order to please his working-class father, Theodore R. Kaczynski, who dreamed of his son's future success. His mother Wanda was a reader of Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, Conrad—but to Ted she read such fare as *The Scientific American* magazine. By David's account, Mr. and Mrs. Kaczynski were always loving and generous parents—to Ted no less than to himself—but they were clearly disappointed, bewildered by their son's inexplicable resignation from the university. Ted flatly refused to seek other employment. There were arguments.

Ted kept mostly to his room, alone with his books. He thought that he might be able to make it as a writer, if not as a novelist then as a social theorist, or both. Ted's early efforts included a satiric novella called *The Memoirs of H. Bascomb Thurgood*, a (comic) short story entitled "How I Blew Up Harold Snilly," and a series of increasingly angry essays in which he inveighed against the "oversocialization" of modern life. Drawing ideas from Jacques Ellul's *Technological Society* and recollecting his own unhappy childhood, Kaczynski warned of a grim future in which science would be exploited to invade privacy, control people's minds, and virtually eliminate personal autonomy. But the particular rigors of writing for mathematics journals had not prepared Ted Kaczynski to write for the popular press. Most of his submissions were met with perfunctory rejection slips. Unable to endure his parents' disapproval, and frustrated in his writing, Kaczynski fled to Montana. David had taken up residence in Great Falls after his 1970 graduation. Near the small town of Lincoln the brothers bought a plot of land on which Ted built the 10 x 12 foot cabin that was to become his home and laboratory for a quarter-century. This, at last, was freedom—and a bed from which to nurse his growing resentment, his anger at society.

In September 1995, hinting that his next device would be bigger than Timothy McVeigh's blast in Oklahoma City, the Unabomber threatened to strike again unless his 35,000-word manifesto, "Industrial Society and Its Future," by "FC," was published in a national newspaper. Some academics jested that "this Unabom fellow has given new meaning to the phrase 'Publish or perish.'" But when David Kaczynski read the published manifesto in the New York Times, he felt a sickening shock of recognition. Not many of his brother Ted's writings had ever reached print—just a few brief op ed pieces back in 1970–71, in the Chicago Tribune and the Saturday Review magazine—but David had read much of his brother's work in manuscript. He knew Ted's manner—the ponderous and repetitive arguments, the mathematically precise phrasing, the familiar metaphors, the allusions to Jacques Ellul. It was a chilling moment. David recognized with horror that the Unabomber—who by this time had maimed or injured twenty-three persons and killed three—could be his own brother.

As a scholar with some expertise in text analysis and methods for authorial attribution, I was subsequently invited to compare the writings of the Unabom subject with the writings of Theodore Kaczynski. It was not my task to determine whether or not Kaczynski ever built or mailed a bomb. Nor was it my prerogative to comment on the defendant's mental health. Nor did the FBI share with me any forensic evidence. My commission was strictly limited to the question of whether or not Theodore J. Kaczynski, author of certain mathematical treatises, short stories, letters, and other documents, was the "FC" who wrote "Industrial Society and Its Future" and related correspondence.

A learned, shy, almost penniless recluse, Ted Kaczynski seemed like an unlikely terrorist—but further study of his writings indicated that he was indeed the sole author of the 35,000-word Unabom manifesto and related writings. In two declarations for the prosecution, I set forth the evidence of Kaczynski's authorship. The first—a summary report rebutting a defense motion to suppress evidence—was filed by prosecutors in May 1997 and cited by Judge Garland Burrell in the court's denial of the motion to suppress. A second declaration laid out the textual and linguistic evidence in meticulous detail. Kaczynski's habits of punctuation and spelling, his diction, grammar, syntax, and phraseology formed an inimitable match with the Unabom documents. Kaczynski and the Unabom subject expressed similar beliefs, complained of the same grievances, borrowed material from many of the same sources. In fact, one of Kaczynski's unpublished essays from 1971 reappeared, substantially unchanged, within the Unabom manifesto. There could be no reasonable doubt concerning who wrote "Industrial Society and Its Future" by "FC."

Criminal profiling is largely a figure of the popular imagination. In unresolved criminal cases, investigators routinely construct a hypothetical suspect, revising their profile as new evidence emerges; but investigative "profiles" rarely enter into courtroom proceedings. Nor may the courts consider a literary interpretation of the defendant's prose. A psychoanalytic reading of the Unabom documents may have had some value at the investigative phase; but once the suspect was arrested and facing trial, my considera-

tion of the defendant's writing was necessarily limited to such matters as the physical documents, handwriting and typefaces, postmarks, spelling, vocabulary, sentence construction, and source material. In my study of the Kaczynski and Unabom documents, I was nevertheless struck by Ted Kaczynski's literary pursuits and by his evident use of fiction to help him make sense of his unhappy life. Writing now as a professor of English and not as an expert witness, I am at liberty to share a few millings about Kaczynski's reading and creative writing from 1967 to 1996.

Certain literary texts had an arguably pernicious effect on the Unabomber's imagination during his seventeen-year campaign of terror. An avid reader, Kaczynski's study included a wide variety of English, American, and Spanish fiction—and he often commented afterward on those stories and novels that especially moved or amused him. One such is Horacio Quiroga's "Juan Darien," a story that Ted subsequently translated into English. Juan Darien is a studious boy, cruelly ridiculed at school for his rough hair and shyness—but he is actually a tiger bearing a human shape. Taunted once too often, the tiger-boy renounces his sympathy for humanity. Taking his revenge on a cat-tamer, Juan catches the man in his teeth, carries him to a cane-brake, and sets him on fire. The cat-tamer begs pardon for his offenses, but it is too late. As the canes burn, the tiger that was Juan Darien stands by with other tigers, gazing at the colorful flames until the man is reduced to a blackened corpse.

Theodore J. Kaczynski's favorite author is Teodore J. K. Korzeniowski—better known to English and American readers as Joseph Conrad. *The Secret Agent*—possibly Ted's favorite novel (he professes to have read it at least a dozen times) is of special interest, for it features a bomb-making terrorist known only as "the Professor." Resentful to the bone, the Professor is a man whose only belief is that people have treated him "with revolting injustice." A nihilist, he is the most dangerous member of a terrorist group that calls itself "FP" (for "Future of the Proletariat"). He dwells alone in a "cramped hermitage" suited to "the perfect anarchist," devoting his solitary study to the construction of bombs. *The Secret Agent* closes with "the incorruptible Professor" standing alone, "averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind," still "training for the task of an inevitable future... His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction."

In his activities as the Unabomber, as also in his writings from 1976 to 1996, Ted Kaczynski cultivated a likeness between himself and Conrad's bomb-making Professor—as in a shared preoccupation with finding the perfect detonator (a theme of the Unabom documents) and even in such personal details as taking a smug pride in an unkempt appearance. (Writing to his brother, Kaczynski brags of wearing the same clothes "until they rot off my body," like Conrad's Professor, and with similar phrasing.) Ted endorses the Professor's view that most people have been too thoroughly "brainwashed" to use violent force against a system that restricts their personal freedom. Ted Kaczynski wrote many times about this "problem"—the reluctance of "oversocialized" individuals to steal or kill—as if nonviolent compliance with the system were a personal failing to be overcome. "Anarchists" and "adequate

terrorists,” in the parlance employed by Ted Kaczynski and Conrad’s Professor, are those individuals with the conscious resolve to make society pay, with pain or death, for its assault on personal autonomy.

With his characteristic irony, Conrad in *The Secret Agent* has a diplomat remark that science and mathematics must be bombed to shake modern society from its complacency:

The sacrosanct fetish of today is science... Is it not part of these institutions which must be swept away before the FP comes along? ... Artists—art critics and such like—people of no account. Nobody minds what they say... Since bombs are your means of expression, it would be really telling if one could throw a bomb into pure mathematics. (*Secret Agent*, Doubleday, 1951, pp. 38–41)

The Unabomber calls his fictional organization “FC” for “Freedom (dub)”, not “FP” (for “Future of t he Proletariat”), but he seems otherwise to take his targeting cues from Conrad’s novel:

[T]he system needs scientists, mathematicians and engineers. It can’t function without them. (Kaczynski, case doc. U-14, 1995)

We would not want anyone to think that we have any desire to hurt professors who study archaeology, history, literature or harmless stuff like that. The people we are out to get are the scientists and engineers ... (U-7)

A writer as well as a reader of fiction, Kaczynski sometimes reshapes his favorite fictional narratives into stories of his own, most often as a domestic allegory. Long before his arrest as the Unabomber, Ted advised his mother and brother to read *The Secret Agent*. He seems to have felt that his family could not understand him without reading Conrad. And he may be right. But there is more to Ted’s interest in *The Secret Agent* than his apparent identification with a bomb-making professor. Kaczynski also associates his parents and his brother David with fictional characters. The pathos in Conrad’s novel centers on a “loving, innocent, harmless” boy named Stevie, and on Winnie, his maternal elder sister. In his notes on *The Secret Agent* Kaczynski compares his mother Wanda to Winnie and his brother David to Stevie. But Stevie in Conrad’s novel is killed when Winnie’s husband, Mr. Verloc (Stevie’s surrogate father), botches a bombing attack on the “idol of science.” Science survives. Stevie is exploded instead—reduced to bloody fragments. Ted in his scattered remarks on *The Secret Agent* seems a little unsettled by this lack of symmetry, unsure whether he can save the innocent brother whom Conrad explodes—but he takes the position that his brother David is a lost cause if he remains tolerant of science and technology or retains his faith in the fundamental goodness of human society.

In *The Secret Agent* there is also a fellow named Lombroso, a phrenologist who figures in the novel as a representative of pseudo-science. Kaczynski seems to borrow

this figure for one of his own stories, calling him “Lord Daddy Lombrosis.” Basing his story on a dream he had one night, Ted writes of a strange battle between himself and the “cult” of “Lord Daddy Lombrosis”: three henchmen, “substitutes” for Lombrosis, visit the Kaczynski house in order to tighten their intellectual and emotional hold on David: “As each one came in, I confronted him, defied him, and killed him. The last and most sinister of the three I tore to pieces with my bare hands.” David cries out, who will come next—Satan? But when Lombrosis appears, he bears a “kindly, paternal, dignified expression on his face; and he looked like a man whom one would respect.” After killing the three substitutes, Ted finds himself unable to kill the Lord Daddy: “I felt awed by him and thought, ‘This is God!’ Yet in my heart I defied him.” Ted acknowledges that Lombrosis really wishes to be kind, both to him and to his brother—“but the price that he demanded was submission.” Ted stands defiantly between Lombrosis and his younger brother, protecting him from the intruder’s influence—for there can be no freedom of thought, no personal autonomy, either for himself or for his brother David, until Lombrosis is overthrown.

When Lombrosis perceives himself rejected by the two boys, he turns away sadly, walks out of the house, and off into the snow. For David’s sake, not his own, Ted relents, and calls for Lombrosis to return:

I ran after him, begging him not to leave like this, not to leave my little brother without hope... I threw myself at his feet and cried, “No, don’t leave my brother without hope, give him another chance!” and I started to say, “and me too,” but I caught myself and said, “No! Not me! I will never give in!”... But the footprints just kept going off through the snow. And then I woke up with a terrible sense of fear and foreboding. It was a remarkable and very frightening dream...

Ted’s “Lord Daddy Lombrosis” story was written at about the time that his father died of lung cancer back in Lombard. Ted denies that Lombrosis is a symbolic stand-in for his dad. Instead, writes Ted, Lombrosis is “Technological Society,” the representatives of which must be vanquished. (Kaczynski, case doc. T-120, n.d. 1991?) But Ted was never entirely sure, even as a child, who his real enemies were. He knew only that he was very unhappy, and that someone ought to suffer for it.

Ted Kaczynski hurt many innocent people. He has deserved his punishment. And he deserves pity. The Unabom killings were the work of a desperately unhappy man, one whose vast learning brought him no interconnectedness with other human beings. In his desultory correspondence with an elderly Mexican ranch hand, Kaczynski wrote that he wished he had been able to have a wife and children like other men—but he acknowledged that he lacked a capacity to love. The picture that emerges from Ted’s writings is that of a disturbed and lonely soul who never had a successful, mutually supportive relationship with anyone—a person so deeply introverted that he could barely endure to communicate with his own family—and finally, not even with them, not even with David, not even by mail.

Ted Kaczynski's imprisonment did not begin with his 1997 guilty plea, nor with his 1996 arrest, nor with his 1971 exile to a one-room cabin in Montana. Nor did it begin with that bitterly remembered incident when fellow students playfully shut him in a school locker. Troubled since childhood, unable to connect with other people, often taking offense and unwilling to forgive, Ted Kaczynski's entire life has been spent in solitary confinement, a lost soul having nothing but his books, and words, to go on.

Don Foster (above) has taught Shakespeare and Renaissance English literature at Vassar since 1986. In addition to his attribution work in the Unabomber case, he gained widespread attention when he identified Shakespeare as the previously unattributed author of an obscure eulogy and, in a more contemporary case, identified the anonymous author of the novel *Primary Colors* as journalist Joe Klein.

The Ted K Archive

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