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Modernism and Modern Identity

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Response Paper 10

In one of the pivotal passages of *The Secret Agent* Verloc's handler, the First Secretary states "A bomb outrage... must be purely destructive. It must be that, and only that, beyond the faintest suspicion of any other object... The attack must have all the shocking senselessness of gratuitous blasphemy" (61-62). This passage connects, if somewhat ironically, to hands down my favorite educational experience which was the Tate Modern. The day that we explored the Tate Modern and I saw *Fountain* in person in all of its obnoxiously unassuming "un-artistic" and obscene glory, I couldn't help but think of that line from *The Secret Agent* which is by far and away one of my favorites precisely because of how closely it connects, and almost predicts the Dadaists and their credo of wielding "the clash of parallel lines as weapons for the fight". There's an incredibly irony, and I think an irony that Conrad was almost presciently aware of in the fact that almost the exact ethos that motivates the First Secretary to have the target for the bombing be set as the Greenwich Observatory is the same ethos that is present in *Fountain*, and not only *Fountain* but probably dozens of other pieces in the Tate Modern. The objects and acts which represent exactly the "shocking senselessness of gratuitous blasphemy" that the First Secretary hopes will motivate the British middle-classes into reaction, fear, and repression, have now become objects of contemplation.

Of course they weren't first received that way, but if the Tate Modern and the portraits of the Modernists in the National Gallery tell us anything it's that the British state, and perhaps the British population in general are desperate to depict their place in the history of modernism not as the hyper-traditionalist, almost reactionary element that they actually were, but instead as the torchbearers of a brave new cultural world. In fact, though I can't remember the exact quote outside of the Modernist room in the National Portrait Gallery there is a plaque that explicitly states that Britain was almost *exactly* that of torchbearer. However, right beside that room are pictures of the War Cabinet and Generals of the British Empire in WWI who, according to Modris Ekstiens *Rites of Spring* at least, viewed themselves as *exactly* the opposite. Not at torchbearers for a new age of modernism, but instead as the protectors of a conservative, traditional sort of English utilitarianism that they had to defend from the civilization collapsing barbarity of the German "Huns". For me the combination of not only the sheer amount of art in the Tate Modern, but what it represents: essentially a concerted effort to solidify Britain as a cultural center outside of the country's complicated histories with traditionalism, monarchy, and colonialism are all basically bound into that ugly urinal that Duchamp scrawled R. Mutt onto ninety-nine years ago inside of the reconfigured Bankside Power Station. And the fact that all of that history and aesthetics and ideology can be found inside of a page of text and a repurposed urinal is something that I don't think I would have ever grasped if I hadn't had the opportunity to

actually stand in the Tate Modern and stare at *Fountain*. That's my favorite educational moment of the entire trip, and I think really the entire point of study abroad.