

“The Consumption of Absence in *The Secret Agent*”*

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In his essay on *The Secret Agent*, Terry Eagleton observes on the relations of language, history, and ideology as follows:

Just as for the *Tractatus* language is coterminous with the world, so for the text ideology is coterminous with history, permeating its own sign-systems; and it is for this reason that the text cannot cast a direct glance ‘behind’ that ideology to the history it signifies. What it can do instead is indicate the presence of that reality by the very sign of contradiction it produces within it.¹

The novel is unable to speak anything but contradictions; it just indicates the presence of certain reality, or in other words a significant absence, through the contradictions. This seems the most important logic of the process of signification in the text. The text always expresses what is not in its place, or displacement itself.² Once we are concerned with this logic of the text, our study of literature becomes pragmatic, investigating what illocutionary purpose a given sentence or discourse serves.³ This pragmatic study of literature does not mean distorted readings of a literary work by means of theoretical speculations: for literary works are always speaking of their own way of signification (perhaps nothing other than it), just as myths, according to Lévi-Strauss, are comprised of metalanguages.⁴ The text can, however, never be a metalanguage since it consists of the same substance as the object it tries to describe: language. Therefore, our attempt to describe the logic of the text is to describe, whether the text is writerly or not, the working of “a difference which does not stop and which is articulated upon the infinity of texts, of languages, of systems”⁵

Signifying through absence is quite characteristic of Conrad’s novels. Most of his important works lack a definite resolution of contradictions. We have only to think of *Nostramo*: the novel makes us see disgusting inhuman aspects of both capitalistic colonialism and adventurous individualism, without any redeeming visions of the future. To put it another way, the novel derives its discursive structure from the very absence of

resolution. This pattern is not limited to *Nostramo*, but makes a key structural pattern among Conrad novels.

The Secret Agent Can be regarded as another manifestation of the structure.⁶ Moreover, its negative construction, in which values qualify one another and nothing stands intact, leads Eagleton to remark that the novel presents an example of textual signification. As he points out, the crucial figure of the mutually cancelling pattern of the novel is Stevie, whose pragmatic connotations far surpass his importance as a character in a conventional sense.⁷ In this essay, we shall argue that he is a manifestation of the absence which lies at the center of the novel's signification

The Secret Agent, as most of Conrad novels, lacks an anagogical framework. Let us examine how this fact manifests itself in the novel, before considering Stevie's structural function. First of all, in terms of its thematics, the novel exposes various forms of hypocrisy and stupidity inherent in the social system of London and in the plans of social revolution by anarchists, without presenting any substituting social model of its own. Those who believe themselves to be the protectors of the peace of London are all depicted as quite selfish and complacent. For instance, Vladimir intends to protect the world from anarchists' destructive activity; in order to achieve his aim, however, he parodies terrorism. Vladimir advises Verloc as follows:

"I suppose you agree that the middle classes are stupid? . . .

"They have no imagination. They are blinded by an idiotic vanity. What they want just now is a jolly good scare. . . .

"A series of outrages," Mr Vladimir continued, calmly, "executed here in this country; not only *planned* here—that would not do—they would not mind . . .
(28)

"Yes," he continued, with a contemptuous smile, "the blowing up of the first meridian is bound to raise a howl of execration." (32)

Vladimir's biased class-consciousness and hypocritical justification of terrorism makes him indistinguishable from anarchists. At least, he is more disgustingly depicted than the anarchists in the novel.

Almost the same thing can be said of Mr Verloc. Indeed, he believes that he is devoting himself to maintain the peace of the city and his family; but his means to the end is the cruel exploitation of his brother-in-law. Although he "was shaken morally to pieces"

(174), he said to himself that:

It had been so near success that he could have positively terrified Mr Vladimir out of his ferocious scoffing with this proof of occult efficiency. . . . His prestige with the Embassy would have been immense if—if his wife had not had the unlucky notion of sewing on the address inside Stevie's overcoat . . . it was rather advantageous. Nothing can equal the everlasting discretion of death. (178)

His moral passion of protection turns out to be a quite egoistic instinct of self-preservation.

Furthermore, the Assistant Commissioner and Chief Inspector Heat are not free of the same kind of charge. They are, like Vladimir and Verloc, tinged with deception, that is, a form of secrecy. The Assistant Commissioner happens to be the first man who gets to the truth of the explosion and consequently to prove that his intelligence is superior to Heat's.⁸ Yet his intelligence is by no means blameless. He wants to investigate the Verloc affair by himself, on the one hand, because he is the type of person who walks around seeking for criminals rather than orders someone else to do that. On the other hand, however, his rather rushing investigation is motivated by a selfish desire: the Chief Inspector's suspicion of Michaelis is not convenient to the Assistant Commissioner. Michaelis is a protégé of a great lady, to whose circle the Assistant Commissioner and his wife belong. If Michaelis is arrested by Heat, the Assistant Commissioner fears, she would wield an unhappy influence over him directly, and indirectly through his wife. Equally, Heat is too biased to make an impartial search for the truth of the Verloc affair: he blindly believes that Michaelis is the instigator of the explosion since he simply hates anarchists. The Assistant Commissioner is an obedient servant to the upper-class; Heat is a faithful agent of the anti-anarchist camp. Both characters act according to the dogmatic doctrines of the parties they belong to, without any doubt about their hypocrisy.

As for anarchists, the novel gives us a vividly ironical scene in Chapter 3. Michaelis, Karl Yundt, Ossipon all blindly and stupidly commit to one idea, and they are all rather impotent. Indeed, they have something to insist, but cannot do anything by themselves in order to realize it. Karl Yundt's figure is representative of thier impotence:

His enunciation would have been almost totally unintelligible to a stranger. His worn out passion, resembling in its impotent fierceness the excitement of a senile

sensualist, was badly served by a dried throat and toothless gums which seemed to catch the tip of his tongue. (38)

The shadow of his evil gift clung to him yet like the smell of a deadly drug in an old vial of poison, emptied now, useless, ready to be thrown away upon the rubbish heap of things that had served their time. (42)

Yundt cannot even walk without a stick. Equally, Michaelis and Ossipon cannot live without totally depending on someone else. Michaelis, a Marxist idealist heavily criticizing idealism, is a parasite on a great lady; whom Michaelis's "view and beliefs had nothing in them to shock or startle," "since she judged them from the standpoint of her lofty position" (85). Ossipon, an enthusiastic supporter of science and Lombroso, is also nothing but a leech, living off his lovers. At best these anarchists are simply stupid.

The status quo which Verloc tries to maintain is, so to speak, a hierarchy of secrecy.⁹ As we have seen, secrecy leads to deception; another aspect of secrecy is separation. Secrecy divides the possessor of knowledge from those who are kept out of the secret. We find in the case of the Verlocs a domestic tragedy caused by secrecy. Mr Verloc and his wife have never fully confided their thoughts to each other. The former has been a secret agent without letting the latter know the fact, whereas Mrs Verloc has been deceiving her husband, pretending that she loves him. They are quite alienated from each other.

The social stability of the city is also preserved by secrecy, that is, manipulating or hiding knowledge. In vertical social relationships, secrecy generates power; excluding someone from information, the possessor of the information acquires a socially superior position to the alienated person. The Assistant Commissioner is a character who practices the theory in a typical way. Just as Vladimir does for a different reason, he intends to make use of his knowledge of the Verloc affair for the purpose of expelling secret agents: "What pleased me most in this affair . . . is that it makes such an excellent starting-point for a piece of work . . . that is, the clearing out of this country of all the foreign political spies, police, and that sort of—of—dogs" (171). This is almost the same policy as Vladimir's. Moreover, the struggle between Heat and him is the struggle in which one tries to hide some knowledge from the other and to obtain an important piece of information earlier; hence, when Heat discloses to the Assistant Commissioner that he has obtained an address from the fragments of Stevie's body, he feels as if he "had made up his mind to jump off the rope, came to the ground with gloomy frankness" (98). In other

words, it is a battle which is motivated by, in the Assistant Commissioner's words, a "desire to know something at first hand" (112). In order to win the battle, one has to be armed with secrecy; the Assistant Commissioner explains to Sir Ethelred why he has come to see the Secretary of State in person: "Yes, Sir Ethelred—An imperfect world. Therefore directly the character of this affair suggested itself to me, I thought it should be dealt with special secrecy" (108). Getting the information about Verloc from the Chief Inspector, the Assistant Commissioner occupies an advantageous position over him in the interview with Sir Ethelred, implying that Heat's way of investigation is out of fashion. Secrecy is opposed to knowledge, which heals isolation. But the redeeming function of knowledge does not work in *The Secret Agent* since it is never shared; knowledge is always monopolized and just gives rise to another secrecy. In this way, the social order of the city is maintained by the means of deceptive and fragmenting secrecy, and the novel depicts the state through quite severe scepticism.

The city contains darkness "as vast as a sea" (81). This encompassing darkness can be regarded as the spatial representation of the secrecy prevailing the society. The darkness separates the inhabitants of the city into isolation and indifference. The unchangeability of the society is the final implication of the Verloc affair. The Professor thinks to himself:

The thought of a manking as numerous as the sands of the seashore, as indestructible, as difficult to handle, oppressed him. The sound of exploding bombs was lost in their immensity of passive grains without an echo. For instance, this Verloc affair. Who thought of it now? (228)

What the vast darkness or seashore of the city contains is the masses which obstinately refuse to change or remain to be indifferent. The city does not care at all about the shock of Stevie's explosion, while deception and meanness can be found wherever you like to look for. The Professor's desperate mood is quite close to the novel's sceptical tone, which is visually represented by the darkness.

Subjecting all characters (we shall discuss the cases of Stevie and the Professor soon later) to irony or ridicule, then what kind of ethics or social system does the novel indicate as a resolution? Nothing. The implication of the all-embracing irony is that nothing should be changed; or, more desperately, nothing cannot be changed. Not that the society in question is without problems; far from that, it has too many forms of evil and meanness

to be improved at all. The novel's irony, which is generally sceptical, and often comical, originates in this awareness that it cannot offer any resolving future vision. Thus the fact that the novel has no angaogial framework is quite significant in its interpretation.¹⁰

The connotation of *The Secret Agent* concerning social development is that essentially there is nothing to change. To put it another way, the realization of a social ideal is always deferred; it only exists in the midst of revolution or, for anarchists, in destruction. Since this unchangeability does not satisfy the novel, it does not depict anarchists as totally disgusting, if so comical: for anarchism is a possibility of change, even though it may be hardly anything more than that.

A social ideal can be found only in its plan, and its realization is not attainable. This idea of social developments corresponds to the notion of meaning as absence. Meaning exists only in transition from one level of language to another;¹¹ by presupposing the temporary working of a metalanguage, or by reducing one thing to another, we can get a meaning of the object or word examined. That meaning is never present in itself; it exists precisely in its transition from one state to another. The pragmatic connotation of the novel's skeptical relativism is this absence of meaning.

Meaning is always absent. Just as a social revolution is found only in its plan, meaning only exists in the act of interpretation: meaning is not defined after interpretation but it does not exist until interpreted. This proposition prevails the novel, and such characters as Vladimir and the Assistant Commissioner implicitly subscribe to it. When Vladimir says to Verloc, "What we want now is activity" (23), the interpretation of the activity has already been determined before Verloc take on the activity. Or as the Assistant Commissioner complains, "the spy will fabricate his information is a mere commonplace. But ... the professional spy has every facility to fabricate the very facts themselves" (108). Again, this is true of Verloc's morality: to Stevie, Mr Verloc was good "because Mr Verloc was *good*. His mother and his sister had established that ethical fact on an unshakable foundation. They had established, erected, consecrated it behind Mr Verloc's back, for reasons that had nothing to do with abstract morality" (135). Vladimir, the Assistant Commissioner, Mrs Verloc and her mother are all aware of the arbitrary nature of the relation between an event and its meaning, and try to fix their favorite interpretations. But their attempts all turns out to be unsuccessful. Vladimir is quite afraid that the planned explosion may be interpreted in wrong ways; the target of the explosion must be deliberately chosen. He explains to Verloc:

"The sacro-sanct fetish of to-day is science. . . .

This is what you should try for . . . say, a church. Horrible enough at first sight, no doubt, and yet not so effective as a person of an ordinary mind might think. No matter how revolutionary and anarchist in inception, there would be fools enough to give such an outrage the character of a religious manifestation.

(29)

Accordingly, Vladimir orders Verloc to blow up Greenwich Observatory, whose destruction the former believes yields his intended effect. Nevertheless, Vladimir fails to shake the indifferent public, as we have seen. Equally, the two women's plan of sheltering the boy brings about the opposite effect. The Assistant Commissioner's ambition of expelling all foreign spies cannot begin without the confession of Verloc. All failed, and their failure proves that the arbitrariness of interpretation works at the center of the novel.

The novel's scepticism implies that any resolution of social problems are not available. Equally, no final meaning or interpretation can exist in the novel's relativism. In other words, meaning and social ideal are given a transcendental place as a significant absence in *The Secret Agent*. The novel's irony does not support any existing social systems, social plans, or interpretations its characters express in the story. Rather, the continuous cancellation of values in *The Secret Agent* is a negative manifestation of the wish for transcendence.

Stevie, who we shall find the key actor concerning the structuration of the novel, is the hero of the novel, if we define a hero as morally the most innocent character. Although this proposition surely raises several problems, his innocence no doubt distinguishes him from other characters; Stevie is the least despicable character of the novel. We have examined how both policemen and revolutionists are rejected by the novel as hypocritical or simply stupid. This is also true of domestic characters such as Mrs Verloc and her mother. Mrs Verloc is possessed by the passion of protection; but just like her husband, Mrs Verloc does not mind sacrificing other people. She married Verloc without any love of him in order to give her brother material security. In doing so, she shows her disgustingly materialistic notion of marriage. Her mother's obsessive love is the less intensified version of Winnie's

In contrast to these deceptive characters, Stevie, though foolish, or because of the foolishness, can be considered as the only innocent figure of the novel. His heart is full of

sympathetic sensations:

Stevie, though apt to forget mere facts, such as his name and address for instance, had a faithful memory of sensations. To be taken into a bed of compassion was the supreme remedy, with only the one disadvantage of being difficult of application on a large scale. And looking at the cabman, Stevie perceived this clearly, because he was reasonable. (129)

Stevie wishes that he could save all people from their suffering, which is obviously impossible. In spite of his reasonableness, he is not so wise as to give up his hope of universal salvation easily:

Supremely wise in knowing his own powerlessness, Stevie was not wise enough to restrain his passions. The tenderness of his universal charity had two phases as indissolubly joined and connected as the reverse and obverse sides of a medal. The anguish of immoderate compassion was succeeded by the pain of an innocent but pitiless rage. (130)

Living solely on his sensations, Stevie freely and inevitably oscillates between two conflicting feelings: charity and rage. It is precisely this oscillation which is latently connected with the novel's unresolvable dilemma between the ideal meaning and the sceptical irony: the novel dreams of an ideal solution to the unresolvable problems it posits, self-consciously enough to be aware of its impossibility. Unable to restrain its passions, however, the novel fills itself with sceptical ironies. All characters except Stevie avoid facing this relentless oscillation, which plays a quite important role in the novel's structuration; hence they are thematically given a name of hypocrites. In this point, there is a clear distinction between Stevie and other characters of the novel. In the novel, whose widespread irony makes it quite difficult to choose a figure of redeeming ethical beliefs, his mere existence even suggests a 'mythical' intimation of values critical of bourgeois society because of this distinction.¹²

Stevie as the hero of *The Secret Agent* cannot effect any positive resolution of the problems raised by the Verloc affair. It is no doubt his being an idiot which keeps the novel from having any definite solution. Stevie's foolishness influences the novel's signification in two ways. First, we must notice that all Stevie can do as a novelistic character is to die.

As Umberto Eco observes, development is the essence of major characters in a novel.¹³ Like Superman, however, Stevie is destined not to make any development concerning his character; one difference between Stevie and Superman is that the former is allowed to die. A narrative needs changes in order to exist and to survive: the only change Stevie can bring about on himself is to stop living. In terms of time, this means that Stevie lived in a mythical time and only at his death he existed in the same kind of time as ours. In this context, we may understand why Eagleton uses the word "mythical" for him and chooses him as the key figure of the novel. The meaning Stevie conveys belongs to myth, and as a consequence it is universal. If the hero is the character who speaks words which assume to have universal values, equally we can say that the hero is the character whose structural connotations are burdened with universal values. No character but Stevie cannot help being entangled with often selfish values of contemporary society or anarchist vision. Thus, Stevie is structured as the hero.

The other structural connotation of the fact that Stevie is an idiot is about the narrative manifestation of a significant absence of the novel. As mentioned above, the novel has no final ethics replacing the hierarchy of secrecy. Consequently, the novel is to have no place for its hero; in fact, *The Secret Agent* is a novel which cannot have any developing hero, just as *Nostromo*. Therefore, Stevie is not so much as a hero as the trace of a hero. To put it another way, he is a shadow of the significant absence of the novel; paradoxically, his innocence is closely related to the self-canceling irony of the novel. Stevie's thematic association of absence is indirectly connected with the structural absence of the novel.¹⁴

Stevie's view of the world is no doubt more sympathetic than any other's presented in the novel. Yet he cannot change the world a bit. He is simply impotent. This combination of an ideal of humanity and a caricature of human sympathy is quite contradictory. And this contradiction is, on the one hand, characteristic of the signification of the text which can speak only in a distorted way or through contradictions, and on the other hand, of the absence embedded in Conrad's novels.

Stevie offers us a perspective from which we can reconstruct the structural pattern of various elements in the novel. Especially, the relation of the Professor to Stevie is important. Stevie blows up himself by the explosive Verloc got from the Professor. This draws our attention to the fact that Stevie and the Professor have some parallel with each other: in a sense, Stevie performs an ideal form of self-disintegration for whose realization the Professor has been endeavoring. The Professor distinguishes himself from anarchists

like Yundt and Ossipon; he says to the latter:

“But what you say means nothing. You are the worthy delegates for revolutionary propaganda, but the trouble is not only that you are as unable to think independently as any respectable grocer or journalist of them all, but that you have no character whatever.”

Ossipon could not restrain a start of indignation. “But what do you want from us?” he explained in a deadened voice. “What is you are after yourself?”

“A perfect detonator,” was the peremptory answer. (57)

The Professor always carries an explosive with him, which he intends to use to explode himself when the police tries to arrest him. The explosive makes him almost invincible; nevertheless, his device is not perfect.

“It is instantaneous, of course?” murmured Ossipon, with a slight shudder.

“Far from it,” confessed the other, with a reluctance which seemed to twist his mouth dolorously. “A full twenty seconds must elapse from the moment I press the ball till the explosion takes place.” (56)

There is, at least in the Professor's mind, the possibility that the delay of twenty seconds might allow the police to arrest him without being involved in the explosion. Therefore, in order to invent a perfect detonator and to enable his instantaneous death, the Professor works alone everyday in his room. In other words, what the Professor longs for is precisely Stevie's way of dying:

The Chief Inspector, stooping guardedly over the table, fought down the unpleasant sensation in his throat. The shattering violence of destruction which had made of that body a heap of nameless fragments affected his feelings with a sense of ruthless cruelty, though his reason told him the effect must have been as swift as a flash of lightning. The man, whoever he was, had died instantaneously... Instantaneous! (71)

In performing what he can only do, namely, die, Stevie is quite swift; there is almost no distance between the intention of death woven in the novel's structure (not Stevie's

intention) and its realization. Whereas the Professor, who is not given a means and an opportunity to die an instantaneous death, remains to be a representation of the mere theoretical possibility of death.

Wishing for the instantaneous effacement of himself, the Professor lives on, with a bitter sense of defeat. The Professor's anarchistic ideal rests on the extermination of the weak:

"Conceive you this folly, Ossipon? The weak! The source of all evil on this earth! . . . I dreamt of a world like shambles, where the weak would be taken in hand for utter extermination.

"Do you understand, Ossipon? The source of all evil! They are our sinister masters—the weak, the flabby, the silly, the cowardly, the faint of heart, and the slavish of mind. They have power. They are the multitude. Theirs is the kingdom of the earth. Exterminate, exterminate! That is the only way of progress. (226).

Although this declaration by the Professor is quite determined, the sense of despair has already casts its shadow over his tone. Soon after this eloquent assertion, he says, "Ah! that multitude, too stupid to feel either pity or fear. Sometimes I think they have everything on their side. Everything—even death—my own weapon" (226). The Professor is painfully aware that he, the strong, is powerless before the weak. As he fears, the novel does not allow him to die freely, while Stevie, Verloc and Winnie die their swift and sudden deaths.

If skeptical irony is the basic tone of the novel, it is because the novel has no anagogical vision. The novel's proposition about social development is that there can be no fundamental change on human nature and hence society. This is the dominating determinism or, in Mieke Bal's term, "power" of *The Secret Agent*.¹⁵ As we have seen, this unchangeability, which denies any possibilities of revolution, is represented by the indifference of the masses. Therefore, there should be no surprise that the Professor is inimical to the masses and that he is destined to be defeated. When the unchangeability and despair is the novel's power, we can understand why Stevie is given an opportunity of perfect self-effacement which the Professor, perhaps, will never get. Stevie is the embodiment of unchangeability, while the Professor is the figure who represents the complete destruction of the present social and moral systems; in a word, change.

Verloc is in contrast with Stevie in that he is forbidden to speak. Stevie's explosion eloquently speaks out his novelistic function, the only one, namely, death. When Stevie explodes himself, he consumes himself, and in so doing implies the absence behind every narrative signification. Ironically, after the death, he, or one of his fragments, even tells his address to the police, which he could not do when alive. On the other hand, Verloc is forced to die and to shut up his mouth. When he realizes that he cannot escape, Verloc determines to confess all secrets he knows:

Chief Inspector Heat was saying to Mr Verloc, the secret agent:

"So your defence will be practically a full confession?"

"It will. I am going to tell the whole story."

"You won't be believed as much as you fancy you will"

And the Chief Inspector remained thoughtful. 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. (159)

Verloc's confession might shake the social hierarchy of secrecy and monopolized knowledge; but the novel does not give him the opportunity. Verloc, like the Professor, is not favored by the novel's determinism.

Actually, it can be said that Verloc is murdered by the novel's determinism itself. When Winnie kills her husband, she is possessed by Stevie:

Mrs Verloc was coming. As if the homeless soul of Stevie had flown for shelter straight to the breast of his sister, guardian and protector, the resemblance of her face with that of her brother grew at every step, even to the droop of the lower lip, even to the slight divergence of the eyes. (197)

Mrs Verloc's face suddenly shows a striking resemblance with his dead brother. And the existence of Lombroso, Italian criminologist who thought that certain physical characteristics should necessarily be connected with degenerates, makes that resemblance a marked relation. Ossipon, a faithful disciple of Lombroso, observes about her features:

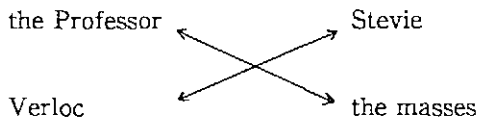
He was scientific, and he gazed scientifically at that woman, the sister of a

degenerate, a degenerate herself—of a murdering type . . . He gazed scientifically. He gazed at her cheeks, at her nose, at her eyes, at her ears . . . Bad! . . . Fatal! . . . Not a doubt remained . . . a murdering type. . . .

"It's almost incredible the resemblance there was between you two." (222)

Lombroso in this novel is a symbol of vulgarized form of science, which is the religion of the masses. Destroying this science itself is proposed by Vladimir as the only means of disturbing the peace of the masses (29-31), and it is Verloc who did the outrage to science. Since this displacement of Stevie by Winnie is supported by Lombroso's criminological systems, this murder is, as it were, the revenge of Lombroso, the religious symbol of the indifferent mass. Verloc is murdered, and the indifference and unchangeability is preserved.

These considerations of the novel in terms of Stevie's structural role give us the following diagram.



The combination of the Professor and Stevie is characterized by explosion; while the opposite combination of Mr Verloc and the masses by the hierarchy of secrecy. *The Secret Agent* is a novel about the tension between explosion and secrecy; the latter represents the corrupt society and its inhabitants, and the former is an imperfect and desperate resistance to the society. Stevie and the masses are aided by the novel's thematical determinism, while the other two are oppressed by it.

Toward the end of the novel, after Stevie's death, Stevie's fixed idea of charity is replaced by another obsession: Winnie's hysterical, and thwarted, love of her brother. Throughout the novel, Mrs Verloc is described as a woman who tries to seeks for only 'facts,' and denies the multiplicity of meaning:

That night she was 'not quite herself', as the saying is, and it was borne upon her with some force that a simple sentence may hold several diverse meanings—mostly disagreeable . . . But she did not allow herself to fall into the idleness of barren speculation. She was rather confirmed in her belief that things did not

stand being looked into. (137)

The difference between the death of Stevie and the death Stevie's ventriloquist, Winnie, inflicts on her husband is that the former implies as its cause the absence and cancellation of meaning in the text and, the description of the death itself is omitted from the novel, while the latter is filled with ironical and psychological meanings: for example, we are suddenly offered a quite long passage which tells about Mrs Verloc's repressed feelings (183-84). Replacing Stevie's role of the key character of the plot, Mrs Verloc also brings forth the fixation of meaning. By centering on her psychology, the novel ends as a story of the destruction of a self-deceiving woman.¹⁶

Stevie's time as a novelistic character is only the time toward death; Equally, after the murder, Winnie's time consists of death; her husband's blood:

Nothing moved in the parlour till Mrs Verloc raised her head slowly and looked at the clock with inquiring mistrust. She had become aware of a ticking sound in the room. It grew upon her ear, while she remembered clearly that the clock on the wall was silent, had no audible tick . . . It was the handle of the domestic carving knife . . . Dark drops fell on the floorcloth one after another, with a sound of ticking growing fast and furious like the pulse of an insane clock. (189-99).

Once a novelistic character or actor begins to be the drive behind the progress of the plot, it sets out toward its disintegration. The narrative survives, consuming its own characters one after another.

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Notes

- 1 Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Essays 1975-1985* (London: Verso, 1986) 27.
- 2 See Roland Barthes, *Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) 286.

- 3 See Tzvetan Todorov, *Symbolism and Interpretation*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982) 52-59.
- 4 See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) 141-42, 2 vols. 1968-1978.
- 5 Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 3.
- 6 For the novel, page references are given in the text to the following edition: Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale*, ed. Bruce Harkness and S.W. Reid (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990).
- 7 See Jakob Lothe, *Conrad's Narrative Method* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 258.
- 8 See Lothe 254.
- 9 See Avrom Fleishman, *Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1967) 191. Also in other respects this essay owes much to Fleishman's perceptive analysis; see 187-214.
- 10 See Eagleton 31, and Lothe 255-56.
- 11 See Fredric Jameson, Forward, *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, by Algirdas Julien Greimas (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987) x.
- 12 Eagleton 26; see also Avrom Fleishman, "The Landscape of Hysteria in *The Secret Agent*," *Conrad Revisited: Essays for the Eighties*, ed. Ross C. Murfin (N.p.: U of Alabama P, 1985). 104.
- 13 Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) 107-24.
- 14 See H.M. Daleski, *Joseph Conrad: The Way of Dispossession* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977) 149.
- 15 Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, trans. Christine van Boheemen (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1985) 28-31.
- 16 See Daleski 146-157.