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## The Voice and the Facts

### Ideological transactions in Conrad's *Secret Agent*

Father, can't you see I am burning –  
(Freud: Interpretation of Dreams)

#### I

Derivatives may explain origins, the after-reading effect may illuminate the recently completed text, and even the non-literary after-life of a literary narrative can shed light on the original material. Such is the case with Alfred Hitchcock and Joseph Conrad. In 1936, the former turned the latter's novel from 1907 into one of his several films to feature espionage. The script of *Sabotage* differs significantly from its literary source: among other alterations, it confines much of the plot to a movie-theatre run by the central married couple. Film-watching and its supporting technical apparatus are thus assigned a pivotal role: the proprietors of the cinema actually live behind a huge screen, a time-bomb is delivered along with film-canisters, and the tragic events are ironically played against the laughter of an audience that enjoys Disney's murderous bird cartoon, *Who Killed Cock Robin?* Undercover as he is, the detective-character is caught eavesdropping behind the projection screen, and will soon be forced to give up his disguise. Hitchcock's adaptation explicitly focuses on matters of representation inside his fictional world: on the differences between illusion and reality, on the way illusions (of cinematic identification) can be produced on a massive scale, and, as the detective's story shows, on changes in one's identity effected by the apparatus that

disseminates such illusions. The use of the sabotage motif and the foreign agents raises issues of political manipulation.

Paradoxically, it is by means of these diversions that the master director remained loyal to the spirit of the source text. His vision of a home that is like a movie-theatre is only seemingly a roundabout way to the truth Conrad expressed, which can, in fact, be better grasped if the Hitchcockian version is considered. Let this concern with the world of images mark the course of the present literary investigation and explain its concentration on issues of identification.

Mechanisms of doubling, seducing and, most importantly, promising affect more than the mere imagery or symbolism of the novel. They become formative elements of what is equally fundamental to both Conrad and Hitchcock's spy thriller: the plot. In *The Secret Agent*, the very opening of the story-line hinges on the main character's need to assume the radically new role of becoming an active terrorist, and planting a bomb at the Greenwich Observatory. Yet, the translation of Verloc's professed anarchistic views into action is not without difficulties. Subsequent to Vladimir's threat to dismiss him unless he carries out this "act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable" (67),<sup>1</sup> he leaves the embassy perplexed and devastated, and most of the further complications derive from his incompetent handling of this strange commission. Unease and crisis soon shatter Verloc's fragile family. It is suggested in the very first chapter that the marital tie between Winnie and her husband is a purely economic arrangement, yet the narrator takes his time to make this point clear. Whereas the cleavage between man and wife is obvious from the beginning, the full balance-sheet is only revealed in Chapter Eleven, when, facing the crisis in its entirety, Winnie is forced to re-consider what she calls a "bargain" (233) between her and her husband. Counting Winnie's losses, the narrator uses a boat metaphor to outline the woman's original options of prospective husbands as well as economic means:

[There was] a young man wearing his Sunday best, with a straw hat on his dark head and a wooden pipe in his mouth. Affectionate and jolly, he was a fascinating companion for a voyage down the sparkling stream of life; only his boat was very small. There was room in it for a girl-partner at the oar, but no accommodation for passengers. He was allowed to drift away from the threshold of the Belgravian mansion while Winnie

<sup>1</sup> All parenthesised references are to this edition: Joseph Conrad. *The Secret Agent*. London: Penguin Books, 1984. All italics in quotations from Conrad are mine.

averted her tearful eyes. He was not a lodger. The lodger was Mr Verloc, indolent and keeping late hours, sleepily jocular of a morning from under his bed-clothes, but with gleams of infatuation in his heavy-lidded eyes, and always with some money in his pockets. There was no sparkle of any kind on the lazy stream of his life. It flowed through secret places. But his barque seemed a roomy craft, and his taciturn magnanimity accepted as a matter of course the presence of passengers.

(220)

In other words, it is for her family's, and mainly for Stevie's sake – from Verloc's point of view, for that "encumbrance" (48) of a brother-in-law's sake – that she married Verloc. What she receives in exchange for this sacrifice is equally businesslike: "Mr Verloc loved his wife as a wife should be loved – that is, maritally, with the regard one has for one's chief *possession*" (174). This, of course, is something unpleasant to face or talk about, therefore the insincerity that characterises their lack of interest and communication is a consequence of the dishonesty of the original deal. Winnie's conviction that "things do not bear looking into very much" (175) and her "philosophical, almost disdainful incuriosity" (216) are expressed so often in the novel that they deserve the name of "the foundation of their accord in domestic life" (216). On the woman's part, a self-created, self-imposed and self-deceiving conviction substitutes for love: "[...] Mr Verloc was *good*. [Stevie's] mother and his sister had established that ethical fact on an unshakeable foundation. They had established, erected, consecrated it behind Mr Verloc's back, for reasons that had nothing to do with abstract morality" (171).

Except for the profound affection between Winnie and Stevie, the spirit of dependence over and above understanding pervades all interpersonal relationships in the household. Though willing to "provide for this fellow, too" (83), Verloc "extended as much recognition to Stevie as a man not particularly fond of animals may give to his wife's beloved cat; and this recognition, benevolent and perfunctory, was essentially of the same quality" (72). The reference to his spouse's person is an appropriate analogy, for the disastrous speechlessness between Winnie and her husband remains equally unbroken between provider and his male dependent: "Mr Verloc perceived with some surprise that he did not know really what to say to Stevie" (83). The lack of confidence penetrates even the mother-daughter relationship. As "a move of deep," yet completely hushed up "policy," the "heroic old woman" (161) decides to remove herself from her

family and gains admission to an almshouse for widows. The act, inexplicable and never confided to anyone as it is, has its clandestine motivation: a "directly dependent position" for the boy is to be achieved, one that will settle him "permanently for life" (162).

The characters are then in quite complicated positions. Winnie is a deprived woman in several senses of the word: with her youth, "full bust, in a tight bodice" and "broad hips" (46), she is a person of erotic attraction, yet she finds no proper outlet either sexually or socially. In Chapter Twelve, she refers with horror to the seven years while she was "a good wife to him, the kind, the good, the generous - And he loved [her]" (244). Her loneliness, though clear from the beginning, becomes particularly painful after her mother's departure. Once separated from her blood relatives, she became "a very friendless woman" (239) who, in a mental search for a friendly face, can only come up with her charwoman.

Verloc's position is complicated in different ways. He maintains simultaneous ties with the Russian Embassy, the British police, France, British anarchists and the secretive customers of his sex shop. Political ideas seem to play no role for him, the prospect of relatively easy living is more tempting: "He had been guided in the selection of this peculiar line of business by an instinctive leaning towards shady transactions, where money is picked up easily" (82). Yet the notorious incompatibility of (double) espionage-related duties imposes a distressing burden on him "with a force approaching to positive bodily anguish," for "[t]here is no occupation that fails a man more completely than that of a secret agent of police" (84). Ironically enough, it is his secretiveness that he genuinely shares with his wife: as Winnie remains silent about the true mechanism of their marriage, so does he conceal his sources of income. She is not the only person to be kept ignorant: the various political factions know, understandably, nothing about Verloc's simultaneous commitments - the only exception is police officer Heat, but even he, for the most part, is informed in his private, rather than his official capacity.

The actions of Winnie's mother are in line with the ways her daughter and son-in-law try to establish themselves in society. Like the couple, she too chooses perversely roundabout, clandestine and yet somewhat logical means to improve her son's future chances. Her departure is a symbolic removal of the coherence that a mother provides for a family. It delegates a more distinct motherly role to the childless Winnie, which, in turn, will contribute to the

unfortunate pairing off of Stevie with his poor father surrogate of a brother-in-law (see p. 221). Her unwarranted decision to abandon her family exemplifies something that governs the acts of the major characters as well: her confusion about her status and choices, in other words, reality and illusions. This is no abstract moral judgement: even her own daughter fails to understand her, for in reality, there is no pressing need for her to leave the family behind – much the same way there was no real need for Winnie to marry Verloc, and, as confirmed by the police officers themselves, for Verloc to become the sole executor of the commissioned bomb attack.

The congeniality of these strategies encourages the reader to understand the story as reflecting the efforts of its characters to establish their *subject positions*. Located between conflicting needs and demands, these persons' positions call for the supplement "subject-" in various senses of the term. As indicated above, the troubles arising are a matter of both *subjection* and *subjectivity*: the main characters are *subjects* in an intricate cobweb of dependencies and exchanges where their subjugation is further intensified by the way their subjectivity perceives and responds to their actual conditions. It is the desire for the consolidation of these positions that governs the illegal, deceptive and in the long run (self-)destructive steps that the characters take. Quite literally, the novel is then about the creation of subject positions in modern capitalist society, and, as it will be argued later on, it is not only true in thematic, but also in linguistic as well as structural terms.

## II

Many may read the narrative as a conservative success story: as the Assistant Commissioner boasts, the police are so quick and efficient that they find the culprits "in less than twelve hours" (209). He is also quite right in saying that they have been dealing with a "domestic drama" (204) because Vladimir, the non-domestic evil angel behind the attack, never meant to implicate the Verlocs as a family, in fact, he is astonished to learn that the renowned secret agent is married. Moreover, the instigator represents a foreign power (just how foreign is discussed by Vladimir and the Assistant Commissioner on page 209, where the cornered diplomat drops hints at the legal exemption granted to embassy territories in host countries).

A battle can only be won if the enemy's whereabouts are known: the above arguments tend to locate, and thereby restrict the sphere, causes, and even

dangers of (political) crime. The text, however, resists such reductions. It is rich in analogies between those attributes of legality, half-legality and outright illegality which, at first sight, may appear to be disparate entities. These parallelisms intensify the tightness and unity of this remarkably coherent novel, and, by virtue of their all-embracing nature, encourage the reader to move beyond the success story theory, and seek out intriguing social implications with a claim larger than mere domesticity.

In the first place, there are structural analogies of which the characters themselves are usually not aware, which are only available for the reader. The least tangible, yet most conspicuous, is the portrayal of politics with its legal as well as illegal manifestations and of its location the city, as impersonal, even hostile. For Conrad's London, with its alcoholic charwomen, maimed cab drivers, various forms of "irremediable decay" (167) and "odious multitudes of mankind" (269), is a place where people are faceless and labour is alienated. Although the "rags of the dirty men harmonized excellently with the eruption of the damp, rubbishy sheets of paper soiled with printers' ink," the machineries of commerce and information - "with their wares from the gutter" (101) - effect a deep rift between the individual and the capitalist establishment around him. Jacques Berthoud perceives this link mainly between anarchism and the modern metropolis:

The almost dehumanised preoccupation of the anarchists with principles, systems, and abstractions is the analogue of the impersonal, dehumanised city - that immense abstraction - where the anarchists feel their social targets to be most heavily concentrated. By sheathing the novel in the anarchist apparatus, Conrad creates at once the air of conspiracy and desperation, of individual men and women struggling vainly to assert their identity, to make themselves felt, their presence known, amid the overwhelming anonymity of city life.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, various episodes call for the inclusion of legal, though not desirable, politics into this analogy. Heat's attempt to charge the paroled convict Michaelis with the explosion he knows he is innocent of is only one example of the little regard the establishment has for individual lives. Placed in this context, it is no wonder that the Professor, with his particular blend of intelligence and madness, comes to recognise that the "terrorist and the policeman both come from the

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Berthoud. *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 171.

same basket" (94), that "revolutionists" are equally "slaves of the social convention" (93). These statements will find their echo in the words of yet another character: although Heat's intention is to sharpen the difference between anarchists and policemen, in doing so, he underlines the congeniality between the police and more regular criminals: "he could understand the mind of a burglar, because, as a matter of fact, the mind and the instincts of a burglar are of the same kind as the mind and the instincts of a police officer" (110). The opposition between policeman and anarchist is further loosened up by the equally ironic application of a flattening epithet to both of them: whereas Heat is proclaimed to have "moral support" (113) behind him, the Professor also deserves the label "moral agent" (104). Words, motifs and situations initially associated with the underworld reappear in those segments of society which the criminals aspire to antagonise. The poor vision of Privy Councillor Wurmt, Chancelier d'Ambassade (54) will find its counterpart in Secretary of State Sir Etherald's weak eyes (201), who, incidentally, is twice described as "revolutionary" (149, 201) as those conspirators whose suppression is his job. Verloc's confrontation with his new superior Vladimir is echoed by Heat's unsettling dialogue with the new Assistant Commissioner. As Cedric Watts points out, physical unease combines with hostile feelings against upper-class newcomers with a foreign background at both meetings.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the seemingly disparate social entities share surprisingly similar character traits. The Professor (radically illegal), Verloc (a *petit bourgeois* hovering between legality and illegality), Heat (firmly legal middle-class) and Sir Etherald (legality and the establishment incarnate) offer a representative sample from the social scale to demonstrate this point.

Most conspicuously, all the four characters share vanity as a motivating force. The Professor, who "fearlessly confronted [...] all his enemies [...] in a supreme satisfaction of his *vanity*" (104), is a representative of "the most ardent of revolutionaries [who] are perhaps doing no more but seeking for peace in common with the rest of mankind – the peace of soothed *vanity*, of satisfied appetites, or perhaps of appeased conscience" (102). Verloc seems to have taken his wife's undeserved love for granted, for when their final and only showdown breaks out, he feels "hurt cruelly in his *vanity*" (229), "hurt in the tender spot of his secret weakness" (231). A couple of steps up the social hierarchy, detective Heat is shown to be one of those police officers who derive a "satisfactory sense

<sup>3</sup> Cedric Watts. *The Deceptive Text*. Brighton: Harvester, 1984, p. 115.

of superiority [...] from the unofficial but intimate side of their intercourse with the criminal classes, by which *the vanity of power* is soothed [sic], and the vulgar love of domination over our fellow creatures is flattered as worthily as it deserves" (132). Even the very representative of the conservative establishment is not quite exempt from that kind of self-love that disconnects rather than connects: when meeting subordinates, it is with "*haughty eyes*" (201) that he receives them.

Vanity requires a selective way of seeing things: the way egotistic people cling to their self-image makes them less prone to adjustment and more liable to abstractions. The examples are again all-embracing. Anarchism as well as terrorism is based on disregard for differences of any kind between randomly targeted human beings, moreover, it is often accompanied by a suicidal extension to the assassin's own self: "What happens to us as individuals is not of the least consequence" (95), claims the Professor, the most abstract-minded of all the characters. As Geoffrey Galt Harpham formulates it, the man's chilling and paradoxical boasting about his invulnerability – a "dream [...] of dynamite" – is ultimately "the dream of logocentrism."<sup>4</sup> Verloc, who "lacked profundity" (213), is incapable of such ideological convictions, yet his alliance with anarchism, the complete exchange of his political identity for pay-checks, and the reduction of his marriage to a sexual and economic arrangement reveal him to be prone to a less conscious type of abstraction. Heat's moral indifference when the identity of the real perpetrator is in question has already been mentioned: "he is an old departmental hand [...] [for whom] the plain duty is to fasten the guilt upon as many prominent anarchists as he can on some slight indications" (146–7). Finally, Sir Etherald's weak vision is in symbolic harmony with his repeated desire to avoid emotional particulars ("Spare me the details" [143]): he only wishes to confront a carefully censured version of political reality.

### III

Disaster then clearly exceeds the sphere of mere domesticity. Since its real and potential contributors have been shown to encompass several social strata, the very underlying workings of society may be connected to the catastrophic outcome. The real subject matter of the novel is then politics in its broadest

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham. "Abroad Only by a Fiction: Creation, Irony and Necessity in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*." *Representations* 37 (1992) 79–103, p. 92.

possible sense. It explains why Eloise Knapp Hay claims that *The Secret Agent* “expresses Conrad’s fundamental political convictions with greater clarity and simplicity than any novel he wrote.”<sup>5</sup> But what are the responsible social mechanisms exactly? Just preceding Winnie’s killing of her husband, a scene in Chapter Eleven sheds light not only on the impending murder, but also on the causes of this, as well as other instances of victimisation. In it, Winnie reflects on the end of the businesslike agreement which made her provide Verloc with wifely care in exchange for the provisions Verloc made for her brother, her mother and herself.

Her face was no longer stony. Anybody could have noted the subtle change on her features, in the stare of her eyes, giving her a new and startling expression; an expression seldom observed by competent persons under the conditions of leisure and security demanded for thorough analysis, but whose meaning could not be mistaken at a glance. Mrs Verloc’s doubts as to the end of the bargain no longer existed; her wits no longer disconnected, were working under the control of her will. But Mr Verloc observed nothing. He was reposing in that pathetic condition of optimism induced by excess of fatigue. He did not want any more trouble – with his wife, too – of all people in the world. He had been unanswerable in his vindication. He was loved for himself. The present phase of her silence he interpreted favourably. This was the time to make it up with her. The silence had lasted long enough. He broke it by calling to her in an undertone:

‘Winnie.’

‘Yes,’ answered obediently Mrs Verloc, the free woman. She commanded her wits now, her vocal organs; she felt herself to be in an almost preternaturally perfect control of every fibre of her body. It was all her own, because the bargain was at an end. She was clear sighted.

(233)

The passage encapsulates several of the images that pervade the whole novel. In it, four motifs appear with weight and frequency: seeing (im)properly, bargain, personal autonomy, and addressing the other. A brief survey of their interrelation here and elsewhere in the novel can help us better to understand the way in which domestic and social realms are organised in the narrative.

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<sup>5</sup> Eloise Knapp Hay. *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 241.

The most often repeated image of seeing and blindness is described as a hallmark of truth and error. It is claimed that an experienced eye can recognise the truth carried in physical reality – the change on Winnie’s face – and that a less acute vision – like Verloc’s – can mistake it. The reason for this *misrecognition* lies in perception that centres on the perceiver’s own self: the husband, in his “unanswerable vindication,” is convinced that he is loved for himself. Verloc then fails to see his own self properly. As a consequence, his similarly imaginary relationship with his surroundings prevents him from seeing – that is, understanding – his wife.

The bargain idea has been partly formed by the motif of seeing (im)properly. Besides interest, it is the characters’ distorted self-image that made the two parties strike a deal which could not have gone worse. Vain Adolph and blindly trustful Winnie mutually misrecognise the efficiency of their unspoken agreement: it is the quasi substitute father-figure Verloc who, of all people, has failed to provide for Stevie; in turn, Winnie declares herself to be “free” of contractual obligations.

The resulting sensation of autonomy is couched in similarly bodily terms: Winnie’s new existential freedom is experienced through her control of her brains, vocal cords and muscles. But because her “perfect control” is described as “preternatural,” and because it paves the way for a murderous act to deprive the woman of whatever freedom she had left, Winnie’s clear-sightedness turns out to be as ill advised and illusory as Verloc’s complacency. Her misrecognition of her body and her situation is but a variant on her husband’s mistaken idea of his own importance.

Finally, Verloc’s lamely authoritative address of Winnie will recapitulate the symbolic charge of the previous motifs. By using a firm yet tender tone, as becomes a husband, he tries – belatedly – to *interpellate* the woman into a subject position reserved for understanding, i.e., the obedient wife. His resort to this strategy is a logical consequence of their marital history: by signing her copy of the contract, it was Winnie herself who has placed him into the typical husband position of Western patriarchal societies. The narrative significance of the verbal act lies in its falsity. As if through some borrowed magic power, the husband tries to render her wife someone or something that he suspects – with a vague sense of guilt – she is not any longer.

It is here then that the word *interpellation* needs elaboration. First used by theoreticians who were interested in the creation and dissemination of ideology in

terms of psychology and linguistics, such as Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser and Michael Pêcheux, it became a term to designate the manipulative force inherent in the inevitably social use of language. For them, interpellation is a matter of transmission of certain beliefs, “whereby” individuals are “called upon to identify with certain subject positions,”<sup>6</sup> a process which Lacan described as “that by which I make pass into the other the faith that is mine.”<sup>7</sup> Who is the “I” and who is the “other”? The transmitters are those who represent a given social formation, e.g. democracy, or that which justifies this formation, e.g. God’s will, the interest of mankind, or universal moral sense. Their calls and imperatives will be decoded as personal messages by (one of) the millions of people whose work is needed for the preservation of this particular formation. In capitalism, for example, people “freely” and “voluntarily” exchange their labour, and although their complete insignificance as individuals in the huge social machinery – no one cares who gets the work done as long as the work is done – might depress and demoralise them, they continue, as Althusser put it, to “work by themselves.”<sup>8</sup> Contribution without being driven mad is possible, because society not only pays its “employees” money, but it also pretends to recognise the fact that they are autonomous, unique and irreplaceable. The deception is not to be conceived of as a conspiracy-type of thing: it is a matter of people’s use of language, rather than of ill will. For subject-positions come to one, inevitably, in the form of language: it starts with a child’s acceptance of the word “I,” can range, through several instances, from the pleasing sensation associated with one’s being called by name to pride in job title.

This perspective on the never-ceasing, speech-related flux of deals between individuals and their social context is in many ways congenial with Conrad’s vision in *The Secret Agent*. Althusser, who redefined ideology as “the representation of the subject’s *Imaginary* relationship to his or her *Real* conditions of existence,”<sup>9</sup> was preoccupied with the necessarily illusory nature of the deal,

<sup>6</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner. *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*. London: Macmillan, 1991, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lacan. *Le Séminaire, Livre III: Le psychoses*. Paris: Seuil, 1981, p. 343. This seminar of Lacan’s has not been translated into English; the above translation was created by Mark Bracher in his book (*Lacan, Discourse, and Social Change: A Psychoanalytic Cultural Criticism*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 29).

<sup>8</sup> Louis Althusser. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: New Left Books, 1971, p. 169.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Althusser, p. 167.

and it is precisely this type of deception that underlines Verloc's creation of clear ideological roles for his spouse and himself. Moreover, the all-embracing claim of the definition(s) help the reader understand what happens in the non-domestic sphere – the scene above with Winnie and her husband has only been selected because it offers a domestic cross-section of what happens on a much larger social scene. As Verloc has mistaken his economic usefulness for his being “loved for himself,” so are several other characters lured into believing in the importance, or outright indispensability of their positions which are in fact governed by financial or political interest. The tools of misrecognition and deception remain the same: seeing and interpellation. Through a number of tailor-made addresses, these characters are called upon to identify with certain subject positions, and if they do, society recognises them as persons. A brief survey may demonstrate how several such positions have been produced in this very dialogic novel.

When the topics of spying and policing are introduced, the whole of English society is characterised by an imaginary view of its real conditions. Anarchists and the secret police function in a strange symbiosis to alternately impose a sense of threat and protection on the “menaced social order” (52). Whoever contributes to this show does so with a belief in his mission. The Professor's role as a “moral agent” has been mentioned, and his prosecutor Heat, “in his pride of a trusted servant,” is conscious of “having an authorized mission” (113). Even the double agent Verloc falls back on his excellence in espionage at the peak of his marital crisis: “A man like me! [...] Some of the highest in the world got to thank me for walking on their two legs to this day. That's the man you have got married to, my girl! [...] The old Baron knew what I was worth to his country” (217). The most innocent of all, Stevie dies in “the conviction of being engaged in a humanitarian enterprise” (236).

The text, which has above been called “dialogic,” deserves this epithet in yet another sense: its sequence of addresses and responses has a particular retrospective direction, and, as a consequence, is determined by a past situation. The reader learns how variants on deceptive interpellations had been directed on the characters in a more or less distant past. Brief references reveal that the now so harsh and demanding foreign embassy used to hold Verloc in high esteem (58, 59), in other words, it satisfied his narcissistic desire for recognition to compensate him for his services. As the Embassy repeatedly addresses Verloc, his response is governed by a desire to comply with the narcissistic self-image Vladimir's predecessors lured him into establishing. The first interpellation then created a

fundamentally deceptive, yet temporarily pleasing situation whose inner conflicts – as in dramatic works – were nevertheless bound to be revealed upon repetition. It is to be emphasised that Verloc, though acting under pressure, is by no means forced into executing the attack himself. In his defence lawyer's speech to Winnie, he dwells on the deadly danger his non-compliance would have incurred, yet his connections with the police, his feasible plan of fleeing abroad, and, most informatively, the outsider Heat's diagnosis of his foolishness render such risks less, and Verloc's will to involvement more significant.

In Winnie's case, the bearings of the past on the present become manifest in a late episode. Long exposed to Ossipon's seductive glances, the woman finally turns to the man for love, assistance and protection. Her "saviour," a former medical student, gets her on an outbound train and stops, right before they part ways, to examine her face "scientifically." The "earnestness" of the gaze is a product of Ossipon's curiosity about what he calls a "murdering type," yet the desperate Winnie reads it as "devotion" (259). Like her dead husband did, she responds to the Other's interest with a self-centred and eventually self-destructive zeal, only possible because these advances had an unwelcome, yet clearly recognised prehistory.

One can then add to the earlier proposed thesis that the novel not only discusses or describes the difficult establishment of subject positions, but it offers a highly dramatised version of the process. It stages, on the level of fictional present time, such instances of interpellations to which the characters fail to respond adequately, and it is dramatic, because their failure stems precisely from the same narcissistic zeal with which they answered such addresses in the past.

#### IV

When propounding his concept of social exchanges, Althusser put Lacan's observations on the primordial experience in ego formation (the so-called mirror-phase<sup>10</sup>) to dense metaphoric use, and suggested that the elaborate system of

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<sup>10</sup> Lacan originates and shifts the phenomenon of misrecognition beyond private life from the so-called mirror phase. The respective psychoanalytic narrative attributes one's perception/sensation of oneself as a unified and autonomous body to this stage. According to this, approximately one-year-old children with quite rudimentary bodily co-ordination confront their mirror images and come to be fascinated by the image's perfect compliance with their movements. The pleasurable experience is fundamentally deceptive, because it offers a sense of mastery and coherence that are in fact not there.

takings and givings, recognitions and promises in social life is analogous to the fundamentally deceptive relationship to emerge between the individual and his or her mirror image. What the two have in common is the pleasing sensation of a type of autonomy that exists, if viewed objectively, neither socially nor physically.

As for the novel, the earlier quoted example of a marital-existential crisis has been claimed to suggest a similar constellation. The passage, which brought the motifs of seeing, achieving freedom, bargaining and addressing the other into a focal point, suggests that the transmissions of beliefs – more politically put, interpellations in ideology – have their roots in an ostensibly less social sphere, that of the body. For it is its own reflected image to give the earliest confirmation to the self: the subsequent favourable social feedbacks will, in a less direct way, only re-enact these original impressions. Then it is no wonder that Conrad, in his concern with the lures and traps of social address, chose to intimate his characters' narcissism, their aspirations to establish themselves at and outside home, in conspicuously visual terms.

The first example of this strategy is the establishment of Verloc as a pornographer and an anarchist in one person. His combined flat and store caters to two, only seemingly different clientele, and the link between the two is subtly suggested by the use of identical or similar words. Adolph Verloc is called the "seller of shady," i.e. pornographic "wares" (47), and the same noun will designate the Professor's lethal detonator, the anarchist "ware" (91). For a full catalogue of these correspondences, one should read Brian W. Shaffer's informative essay.<sup>11</sup> The implication of this metaphorical unity of pornography and politics goes beyond the mere suggestion of decline and disintegration, because it sheds light on the main political theme of the book, which is man's responsiveness to such promises of power and recognition that have been formulated in bodily terms. Pornography is, one might say, the quintessential imaginary order inasmuch as its very marketability hinges on that – in reality non-existent – element of mirroring which has been shown to characterise ideological interpellations and their receptions:

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This will leave a lasting imprint in the individual's memories, and evoke the insatiable narcissistic desire to elicit similarly unconditional love and recognition in whoever's mirror-like glance she or he reciprocates.

<sup>11</sup> Brian W. Shaffer. "Politics and Pornography in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*." *Journal of English Literary History* 62 (1995) 443–466.

[...] all women, men are assured, ultimately desire to have done to them exactly what men desire to do to them. By reinforcing the masculine conviction that such complementarity is the natural order of things, pornography encourages men to seek and demand women whose desire is simply a mirror image of their own...<sup>12</sup>

This explains, then, why both pornographic and revolutionary literature in the shady store are characterised as “arousing” (45) and “promising” (46) – they promise power and autonomy. But this sense of control is erroneous. When men buy erotic pictures in Verloc’s store, they commit the well-known sexual fallacy of mistaking the representation of a person for the person herself: “Now and then it happened that one of the faded, yellow dancing girls would get sold to an amateur, *as though she had been alive and young*” (46).

Promises of a visual kind continue to saturate the texture of the novel. It begins in the household where Winnie finds an “easy way” to her husband’s heart through a seductive glance and encompasses, as all other domestic examples do, the political realm. The strategic value of a good visual position becomes particularly apparent in the crucial interview between Verloc and Vladimir. The latter abuses the spy through disparaging his rhetorical abilities (“We don’t want a voice. We want facts...” [p. 61]). As tension grows, the narrator indeed shifts focus in his description from comments on how the adversaries speak to something more fundamental in their struggle to assert themselves: how they look. The bullying Vladimir decides not to view his victim face to face but “in the glass over the mantelpiece.” When the employee stumbles on an unwitting impudence, a hush falls, in which

[f]or some thirty seconds longer Mr Vladimir studied in the mirror the fleshy profile, the gross bulk, of the man behind him. And at the same time he had the advantage of seeing his own face, clean-shaved and round, rosy about the gills, and with the thin, sensitive lips, formed exactly for the utterance of those delicate witticisms which made him such a favourite in the very highest society. Then he turned, and advanced into the room with such determination that the very ends of his quaintly old-fashioned bow necktie seemed to bristle with unspeakable menaces.

It is no accident that the politician’s merits are listed, of all places, here. Seeing one-self as reflected by the non-self provides an extension of the limits of the “I,”

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Bracher, p. 97.

therefore Vladimir will corner his opponent right after summoning strength from a glance of his ideal self. Conrad's juxtaposition of a quasi dual scene with visual ornamentation is then emblematic of the interrelation between narcissism, power and political manipulation that the novel as a whole proposes.

Another scene reveals the least hot-headed character of all, the Assistant Commissioner to be captive to a visually evoked interest in his own identity.

Meanwhile, the Assistant Commissioner was already giving his order to a waiter in a little Italian restaurant round the corner – one of those traps for the hungry, long and narrow, baited with a perspective of mirrors and white napery [...] In this immortal atmosphere the Assistant Commissioner, reflecting upon his enterprise, seemed to lose some more of his identity. He had a sense of loneliness, of evil freedom. It was rather pleasant. When, after paying for his short meal, he stood up and waited for his change, he saw himself in the sheet of glass, and was struck by his foreign appearance. He contemplated his own image with a melancholy and inquisite gaze, then by sudden inspiration raised the collar of his jacket [...] He was satisfied by the subtle modification of his personal aspect caused by these small changes.

(151-2)

The passage focuses on the wonder, astonishment and imperative that emerges from an encounter with one's mirror image: the officer, confounded by the gap between his reflected and supposed self, derives satisfaction not only from the act of viewing, but from his ability to live up to the ideal his own projected self imposes on him. He changes his appearance, gets "a little wet, a little splashed" (152), and places himself into what Lacan called an "erotic relationship:" "it is in [this experience where] the human individual fixes himself upon an image that alienates him from himself, that are to be found the energy and the form in which this organization of the passions that he will call his ego has its origin."<sup>13</sup> For misrecognition, the will to see oneself as a form which the self is not, is necessary for survival. Man can only act as an autonomous subject if he perceives himself to be one, man can only tolerate his insignificance in capitalist society if he postulates his singularity, and man can only be truly successful – as top detective Heat and top politician Etherald are – if they fail to take cognisance of elements

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<sup>13</sup> Jacques Lacan. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Routledge, 1977, p. 19.

that might stain their vision and therefore hinder their work: justice, in the first instance, the details and emotional corollaries of a case, in the second.

The satisfaction of being reflected derives not only from direct self-duplicates. The other's gaze is another scene for the individual to recognise itself, and the vital function of this experience is revealed in the novel by episodes where the sought-for acknowledgement is denied. Paradoxically, Winnie uses a visual metaphor – "Things do not bear much *looking* into" – to explain the efficiency of their business arrangement of a marriage. Her statement proves to be applicable in the short run only. The bedtime scenes, where the couple resorts to the candle motif with its familiarly fatal connotations from *Othello*, provide the comment's refutation. In bed, Verloc and Winnie's minimum dialogues repeatedly end on the call "Put out the light." When both the light and the chance to see each other disappears, Verloc irrevocably renounces his rising intention to talk, for the first time in his life, confidentially to his wife. The suffocating memory of this element of the marriage will be uncannily acted out after Winnie's revenge, when she sends Ossipon back to the house: "Go in and put that light out, Tom. It will drive me crazy" (252).

The couple's inability to see, address and recognise each other in their respective gazes is given dramatic intensity at their final confrontation: whereas Verloc was "*looking* fixedly at his wife," Winnie was "*looking* fixedly at a blank wall." Symbolically as well as literally, not being looked at means the end of any individual, particularly of self-centred Adolph Verloc. Narcissism, long known to be associated with aggression, has its destructive supplement this time too: the shop-keeper's fanatically murderous partner, the Professor is also shown to be – again in an emphatically visual way – simultaneously greedy for recognition and deprived of it. The last sentence in the narrative describes him in a condition where "Nobody *looked* at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly..." (267).

Yet another character, Ossipon's story offers an interesting inversion of the visual-economic dealings between Winnie and Adolph. Whereas the couple's marriage hinged on not *looking* deep into anything, and ended in the husband's not receiving any looks at all, Ossipon has set "shamelessly inviting eyes" (220) on her from the beginning, and deserved Winnie's desperate outburst: "Who would *look* at me if you don't?" The seeming opposition between not looking (Verloc) and looking deceptively (Ossipon) collapses into the cruel irony which assigns Winnie the same fate in both cases: to be used sexually. Ossipon's brisk transition from the will to flirtation to the desire to get rid of her is emblematic of the

novel's concern with gazing, identification and the ego formation related to it. He discovers the dead body because he, partly encouraged by Winnie, has peeped inside the Verlocs' drawing room, "looked in without a thought, without intention, without curiosity of any sort [...] looked in because he could not help looking in" (250). The sentence and what follows exemplify the inevitability of one's involvement in visual lures, their relation to the love that is expected of the other, and the trap and the frustration these have in store for the gazer. Although the con man Ossipon's fate is by no means typical of the rest of the characters, his accidental act of viewing is – power and self-definition are inextricably bound up in the novel everywhere. The womaniser's curiosity is governed by his will to mastery: in trying to make love to another man's wife, he peeps inside a house he wants to own – in making out Verloc's body, he makes out the man whose stead he wants to be in, and recognises, symbolically, the morbid reflection of his own (dead) self.

V

In the middle of Chapter Ten, the Assistant Commissioner reports the new developments of the case to the Secretary of State in words more insightful than he means them to be: "[Verloc] felt himself to be threatened. Formerly, you know, he was in direct communication with old Stott-Wartenheim himself, and had come to regard his services as indispensable. It was an extremely rude awakening. I imagine that he *lost his head*" (203). With this last colloquialism to correspond, among other things, to Stevie's decapitation, he has indeed hit the nail on the head. For this story of vain and masterful egos discusses not only how narcissistic feelings come to be generated in modern Western societies, but it also takes a dramatic interest in the consequences of the over-inflation of these feelings inasmuch as the plot and imagery derive the metaphorical and literal losing of the head from the way individuals come to regard their services as "indispensable." What kind of vision is there in the background?

Distinct as they are, narcissistic pride in one's coherence and physical disintegration can be seen as "alternative states" within the same process of ego "construction."<sup>14</sup> As mentioned in a note earlier, images and reminiscences of earliest life with no bodily co-ordination haunt human imagination in Lacanian

<sup>14</sup> Malcolm Bowie. *Lacan*. London: Fontana Press, 1991, p. 26.

theory. The experience, which the theoretician described as the “fragmented body” (*le corps morcelé*) underlies the individual’s desire for a unified self and survives as memory. At critical times, when the long attained ideal of the self’s coherence comes under threat, the memory is reactivated and the fantasy of the “body-in-pieces” emerges. In other words, the mirror phase is “responsible” for these tormenting images “retroactively,” for “anxiety about fragmentation” arises as a “consequence of loss of narcissistic identification.”<sup>15</sup>

In its “combination of time and shock” (99) manner, the novel envisages the struggle of its characters to establish their positions in strikingly similar terms. Conrad carries the discord between their self-image and respective versions of social reality to the point where it translates into discord within the body itself. Motifs of physical disintegration saturate the text as persistently as the earlier cited examples of narcissism.

The majority of them centre on Verloc. His bodily discomfort during the crucial interview with Vladimir is amply detailed. Having been called “very corpulent” (56), his “physiognomy” underwent a “doleful change” (58) with a hand that “hung lifelessly” (57), a nape that “became crimson,” and lips that “quivered before they came wide open” (59). Now he cannot but “los[e] his head” (203). When, at the end of a long and disastrous day, the exhausted man chooses to still his hunger and face his wife’s inarticulate sorrow at the same time, the motif of eating invites renewed attention to the bodily aspect. Taking food in a situation like this is callous: it can be seen as a symbolic effort to fill a kind of vacancy that is more closely related to moral integrity than to nutrition.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, the same carving knife that served his physical confirmation will bring about his ultimate disintegration.

It is not Verloc alone whose troubled self-identity is couched in bodily terms. The by no means narcissistic Stevie has one problem in common with his victimising brother-in-law: he too finds it difficult to relate himself to the external world, and when he makes an attempt, his try assumes a fantastic, grotesque form, not necessarily ill-intentioned, but certainly ill-advised. Winnie’s brother, who fails to understand why cabmen cannot but whip their horses and why the police are not supposed to do anything about it, is ignorant, on a very concrete level, of

<sup>15</sup> Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. London: Karnac Books, 1988, p. 252.

<sup>16</sup> Herman M. Daleski. *Joseph Conrad: The Way of Dispossession*. London: Faber and Faber, 1977, p. 163.

causal relations in the world around him. So has Verloc been shown to be: his deed, which Sir Etherald and the Assistant Commissioner call "fantastic" and compare to a "ferocious joke" (203), is determined by his inability to identify the true cause – his usefulness, rather than his person – of the high regard he enjoyed politically as well as domestically. In both cases, the mistakes will come home to roost and destroy their bodies.

Such a lot awaits Stevie from the very beginning: accounts of his past prefigure his death by explosion. The reader is told how the former office boy "was discovered one foggy afternoon, in his chief's absence, busy letting off fireworks on the staircase," how he "touched off in quick succession a set of fierce rockets, angry catherine wheels, loudly exploding squibs" (49). The closer the narrator moves to the climactic moments, the more unmistakable these images of bodily disintegration become. "[I]nnumerable circles" depict "cosmic chaos" in Stevie's "mad art" (76), his outrage at the story of a brutal German military officer "tearing half-off the ear of a recruit" (87) make the "boy" pick, informatively, the carving knife that will eventually kill Verloc, as early as at the end of Chapter Three. It is also here that the proximity of accounts on his sense of justice to the first appearance of the candle motif equates him symbolically with "light" in the dark world of social injustice. Though with difficulty, Verloc decides to have the light put out and then to lie, with no sleep to come, in the darkness he himself fears (87). The situation is not only Othelloesque, but also Macbethian: the torture of sleepless nights is momentarily revealed by a wrongly interpreted, self-fulfilling prophesy. For it will be Winnie who provides the fatal clue in encouraging her husband to take Stevie along his walks. When she remarks that her brother "would go through fire for" Verloc (177), she unwittingly voices the terrible truth that has been lurking behind their domestic cobweb of lies and deceptions. Stevie will indeed go through fire for the man who "might" as well be his "father" (179), only to end up being "what may be called the by-products of a butcher's shop with a view to an inexpensive Sunday dinner" (107).

Though less emphatically, the breaking up of Winnie's ideal world too has its bodily manifestations. To underline the fragility of her position, she swings, as it were, back and forth between states of coherence and incoherence. She experiences a new sense of freedom before she strikes, feels a regained "control of every fibre of her body," yet when the deed is done, "[h]er personality seemed to have been torn into two pieces, whose mental operations did not adjust themselves very well to each other" (228). The subsequent fragmentation indicates

a symbolic return to her former captivity in marriage. For it was then that her curiously silent, non-communicative personality was given some minimum substantiality with references to her hair, hip, face and eyes – parts of her body that never combine into a whole and remain, for spectators such as Verloc and Ossipon, raw material for the imaginary construction of an ideal woman. Later again the unified self version comes. Once a person that she can cling to appears, Winnie perceives herself – repeatedly and obviously erroneously – to be autonomy incarnate: she describes her predicament to Ossipon in “disjointed phrases” and imagines “her incoherence to be clearness itself” (248).

As was the case with narcissistic misrecognition, the fantasy of *le corps moraclé* also embraces several levels of society. Karl Yundt, an old “toothless” terrorist (74) makes the following comments on the social body: “Do you know what I would call the nature of the present economic conditions? I would call it cannibalistic [...] They are nourishing their greed on the quivering flesh and the warm blood of the people – nothing else” (80). The remark will gain a prophetic value when the shreds of Stevie’s body are compared to “an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast.” The cruel vision of bodily disintegration finds an articulation at several points of the text: in the spirit of necessity in which the cabdriver – himself maimed – beats his horse, in references to how Stevie was misused by his own father, and in the way Etherald and Heat, quasi-conspiring to investigate the case behind the Assistant Commissioner’s back, weaken the police and thereby, indirectly, the *body politic*.

## VI

The Lacanian vision of split personalities torn by narcissistic desires affects more than the plot structure and the imagery of the text. It has bearings – among other segments of the text – on the perspective from which the story is told. Except for the pervading sense of irony, this stance is difficult to attach either to a character or to an (implied) storyteller’s position, whereby the author created a particular kind of narrative consciousness. This fact has elicited various critical responses, mostly in relation to the artistic value of the book. Though it is generally acknowledged that *The Secret Agent* is Conrad’s best-written novel in terms of narrative craftsmanship, it is also a fact that this tale of great suspense, precision and surprise has proved to be less popular than the author’s other major

achievements. Leo Gurko<sup>17</sup> attributes this to the very limited space the reader has for identification with the numerous, yet generally unattractive or indifferent characters. The insight is quite true: the tragic Winnie and Stevie are characters for whom one feels pity, but no motivation arises for empathy. The Assistant Commissioner is the fictional person who comes closest to the role of a model: his sobriety, professionalism and, most importantly, his sense of justice can well evoke feelings of respect. Yet, all this is insufficient for a depository of the reader's sympathetic feelings. The officer's merits are related to his excellence as a public servant, and do not go beyond that: the narrator reveals very little about him as a person and chooses to repress, quite significantly, even his name. Honest as he is, he too is inextricably bound up with the system as all the characters irremediably are.

With no person to identify with, with the almost equal length of description given to the high number of characters outside the Verloc family, it is easier to understand Joyce Baines' often-quoted complaint<sup>18</sup> about the novel's lack of a "unifying theme," as well as his implicitly stated dissatisfaction with the lack of a central narrative consciousness. Indeed, there is no dominant psychological perspective to mediate and filter events in the narrative. But is this a flaw? No, it is not. For in a text which dramatises the difficulties of the self in relating to its social surroundings, such a narrative construction merely re-enacts those obstacles that hinder the individual in his or her endeavour. In other words, the reader is prevented from identification the same way, as the narcissistic self-projections of the characters are shown to be problematic.

Conrad has used further narrative devices to address, implicitly, issues of identification. So obvious and so consistent from the beginning, his biting irony serves this purpose. He persistently applies certain standard phrases to introduce the mention of a name, and in repeatedly calling, for example, Verloc "the celebrated secret agent" and Michael's "the ticket-of-leave apostle," he creates a miniature linguistic cross section of the ongoing transactions of desire and acknowledgement between individuals and their social context. These terms of address do what the social interpolations mentioned earlier do: they address the individual in a way that is inconsistent with their actual positions. They lie, because Verloc is not celebrated, and there is nothing apostolic about Michael's either. The two men are in fact deplorable cogwheels in a large capitalistic

<sup>17</sup> Leo Gurko. *Joseph Conrad: Giant In Exile*. New York: Macmillan, 1979, p. 167.

<sup>18</sup> Joyce Baines. *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1960, p. 340.

machinery with an exclusively political (alternatively, economic) use, but to be able to live with that, they need the “great and saving illusion”<sup>19</sup> that they are more than that. Obviously absurd, these verbal tags expose the discrepancy between the characters’ real and imagined subject positions, thereby contributing to the sense of alienation already established by the setting and the rest of the imagery.

The choice of London also contributes to the elaboration on the establishment of subject positions as the main subject matter of the novel. To dwell on the dialogic exchange of economic-political use on the one hand, and personal recognition on the other, Conrad could not resort to his exotic settings, but he had to choose the Western city he was the most familiar with by 1907, London. As again Gurko argued, it was only this “great, teeming, grimy city” which proved to be the appropriate format for the “incohesiveness” and “split that exist within the lives of the individual characters.”<sup>20</sup>

The city is significant not only because such deals mark a more integral part of life there than elsewhere, but also because the need to find one’s way around there, literally as well as socially, is more pressing and more challenging than in smaller places. Conrad’s characters spend much time roaming in the metropolis, which underlies, in narrative terms, their mental efforts to find their way on the larger socio-geographical chart. The main example is again Adolph Verloc: his morning walk marks the beginning of the story line proper. Though moving towards the this time specific destination of the embassy building, this trip foreshadows the agent’s subsequent, aimless walks in despair. Facing a severe identity crisis and a hostile political apparatus, the man’s roaming can be seen as fictional versions of what Fredrick Jameson called “cognitive mapping.”<sup>21</sup> The phrase, which designates a psychological process by which individuals place themselves on a mental map and find their way around in large cities, has its applicability for other characters as well. The Professor’s ominous walks, Stevie’s risk of getting lost and Winnie’s confusion about the best route to escape from Brett Street symbolically mark the characters’ desire for an extension of their selves as well as their efforts to position themselves as subjects on a chart which is not geographical.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness*. London: Penguin Books, 1983, p. 119.

<sup>20</sup> Leo Gurko, p. 173.

<sup>21</sup> Fredrick Jameson. *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 51.

But Conrad goes beyond the mere symbolism of walking. To enhance the text's coherence as well as ironic impact, he imposes the catalogue of imaginary social and emotional recognitions on the suffocatingly real, almost claustrophobic social configuration. The two charts overlap and render the characters' roaming and flights emblematic, not only of their efforts to establish themselves in general, but also of their specific moves to meet circulating ideological messages, i.e. recognise themselves as addressees of concrete interpellations. In other words, the spatial moves of the characters can be seen as the physical version of their efforts to position themselves at a point where they become the targets of an otherwise impersonal call.

Thus, space becomes heavily charged with an ideological impact. It is also clear from the way Conrad structured what he appropriately described as "the story of Winnie Verloc" (41), the narrative, which centres emotionally on the illusions and sufferings of a woman, is squeezed into an irremediably male world where the first and the last words are "Mr" and "men." It is this masculine frame that holds – like a cupboard a dead body – the woman who herself became an accomplice to many deceptions. She cannot achieve freedom, because her imprisonment is a matter of ideology encoded into language, and its paralysing effects no speaking human can escape.<sup>22</sup> Wasted between the cogwheels that the repetitions of the word "mister" mark as subject positions, she finds it impossible – in her very limited space for movement – even to rid herself of her wedding ring that is lost, in a puzzling and unrealistic way, *twice* (198, 267).

Finally, a few words should be said about the technical side of the detection. That the clue for the detectives is literally a *written address*, which is then returned to the *sender*, highlights important aspects of the Conradian vision of social existence. Though motivated by the noble intention of securing a better future for her brother, Winnie's mistaken marriage to Verloc comes home to roost in "less than twelve hours," and provides a symbolic shortcut to truth from which the couple have been deviating so long. With all its crime detection connotations, the case looks like that of a secret text reaching its decipherer. At this point, the reader is likely to recognise a liberalised version of Lacan's famous

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<sup>22</sup> Confirming Winnie's innocence, Hitchcock commented on the climactic scene between her and her husband: "I wanted to make the murder inevitable without any blame attached to the woman. I wanted to preserve sympathy for her, so that it was essential that she fought against something stronger than herself" (Alfred Hitchcock. "Director's Problems." *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*. Ed. Sidney Gottlieb. London: Faber and Faber, 1955, p. 241.

slogan according to which “The letter will always arrive at its destination.” But what does the enigmatic closing sentence of Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” mean exactly? What does it imply for Winnie’s doomed act of writing?

It is in this statement that the readers of Poe and Lacan discover a concise summing up of the kind of reasoning which identifies man as the pre-determined recipient of a distantly launched communication. The folk-tale-like, almost miraculous logic whereby somebody recognises himself, of all people, as the lucky or damned addressee of a prophecy, scheme or plan, “lays bare the very mechanism of a teleological illusion.”<sup>23</sup> The illusion is one of being selected: whereas the individual believes to be reached by a tailor-made message, it is in fact his belief that renders him the recipient. As Barbara Johnson puts it: “A letter always arrives at its destination *since its destination is wherever it arrives.*”<sup>24</sup> The case is then that of the above-discussed matter of misrecognition, with two major implications for Stevie’s address sewn in his coat so that does not get lost.

Firstly, it may be claimed that the Verlocs’ reception of the surviving address is a metaphor of their liability to become addressees of ideological interpellations. The way they both launch Stevie on a disastrous route where they end up becoming senders and addressees at the same time is but one particular instance of how they initiate other processes to identify themselves as recipients of social messages that they themselves have – at least partially – issued. The point is – and this is what creates the very Conradian mixture of pathos and irony – that they do not know about their authorship or *agency*: the characters’ need to assert themselves will be presented in a particularly ironic light when, facing his wife, Verloc repeatedly mentions “conspiracies of fatal destiny” (216). Morally, by far the greater responsibility lies on him; artistically, however, it is Winnie’s suggestion about her husband and brother’s walks together that dramatises the inevitably domestic origin of all foreign-looking mail. She receives what she herself has posted. In Slavoj Žižek’s words, “the letter that the subject put into circulation ‘arrives at its destination,’ which was from the very beginning the sender himself: the letter arrives at its destination when the subject is finally forced to assume the true consequences of his activity.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Slavoj Žižek. *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Johnson. “The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida.” *The Purloined Poe*. Eds. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, p. 248.

<sup>25</sup> Slavoj Žižek, p. 13.

Secondly, it is an integral, by no means accidental feature of the novel's design that the terrible discovery reaches Winnie on a tactlessly revealed newspaper sheet. Such sheets have been described earlier: they are "damp, rubbishy and soiled" (101). Their sinister return in connection with randomly circulating messages direct attention to those modern social mechanisms that are capable of addressing (interpellating) large masses of a given population. Winnie's deeply personal encounter with the impersonal media bears a strange analogy with the way Verloc recognises himself as the sole executor of a mad political necessity. Both cases capture the moment when a general message finds its particular receiver, when one cannot but become the reader, and therefore the shaper of his or her life-story. There is, of course, a major difference, and it is a matter of gradation and personal responsibility: whereas Winnie is smitten by all the chillingly final consequences of her husband's gullibility, Verloc, at the beginning of the crisis, has failed to use his prudence in a blameworthy enough fashion.

Yet, the novel is not a story of homicide. Emphasising Verloc's ignorance, Conrad is more interested in the extenuating circumstances than in blaming the culprit. It is again the newspapers that symbolise these evil, yet extenuating circumstances. The man, himself a secret agent, is powerless against the machinery of which papers are the fine emblems: the more potent agency and secrecy that derive from the implacability of these institutions overwhelm the individual. No wonder then that Verloc is repeatedly and emphatically described as "hopelessly inert" (87). Why, of all paralysing effects, is inertia proposed? The motif of newspapers, these sources of immense information, may make one remember Baudrillard. "Information," reads the relevant passage, "dissolves meaning and the social into a sort of nebulous state leading not at all to a surfeit of innovation but to the very contrary, to total *entropy*."<sup>26</sup>

To be granted, the social formation outlined in the novel is not yet a part of the French sociologist's wild world of radically proliferating signs. The world is not a deceptive sign-labyrinth, yet the main male character comes close to getting lost in as such: his duties as a double-agent place him at the intersection of several, often incompatible messages and interpellations, and explain Conrad's emphasis on that spirit of inertia, or entropy. His insistence becomes explicable in terms of his concern with the supposed autonomy of the characters, for that is what inertia eventually affects. In this respect, Verloc's designation as a secret agent is clearly

<sup>26</sup> Jean Baudrillard. *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983, p. 100.

ironic, since he manages to act neither secretly nor in harmony with his supposed integrity. Behind his accidental-looking personal fate, loom the incalculable interventions of a threatening ideological apparatus, with more potency, that is, more efficient *agency* than what might be attributed to any individual, “celebrated” as he is. Thus the title of the novel simultaneously designates Verloc’s position as a spy as well as the agency (that is, potency) of political ideology which, so inseparably bound up with language, social law and the tools of its own large-scale dissemination, cannot but remain secretive.

Baudrillard locates the origin of entropy not only in information flow itself, but also in the result of this flux: the happy erasing of the distinction between the real and the imaginary discussed earlier. But the distinction is nevertheless there, and the tension between what is real and what we would like to see as real is sometimes bound to reach an explosive point – this time literally. Since our interest is in how it happens, Baudrillard’s concept of “*implosion*” appears to be serviceable: his description of the process of social entropy finds its strangely appropriate echo in Conrad’s narrative on the Greenwich Park explosion. In Best and Kellner’s particular paraphrase, the phenomenon reads as if it had been meant to describe the novel itself:

the masses become bored and resentful of their constant bombardment with messages and the constant attempts to solicit them to buy, consume, work, vote, register an opinion, or participate in social life. The apathetic masses thus become a sullen silent majority in which all meanings, messages, and solicitations implode as if sucked into a black hole.<sup>27</sup>

This hole is the outcome of a disastrous exchange between the implacably secret agency of interpellating promises, and their addressee. Verloc, so proud of his voice, fell prey to voices quieter yet much more potent than his own. His story confirms Edward Said’s view, which claims that the “Conradian encounter is not simply between a man and his destiny,” but between “speaker and hearer.”<sup>28</sup> One can add that the two alternatives are perhaps not all that different: *The Secret Agent* is a novel where destiny assumes the form of a blindly circulating message.

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<sup>27</sup> Best and Kellner, p. 121.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Said. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, p. 44.