

The Description of Characters in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*

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Introduction

The author of outstanding landmarks of first-person narrative in English literature, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900), Joseph Conrad chooses a totally different approach in *The Secret Agent* (1907). The most remarkable characteristic of the text is, as Stephen K. Land says, “a number of protracted interviews or conversations” whose purpose is to show “the irony of a world in which characters constantly talk and work at cross-purposes or with the object of concealing rather than revealing their thoughts.”¹⁾

The way Conrad presents the world in *The Secret Agent* is thus largely based upon descriptions of verbal exchanges. His new objective requires the new style. Our chief concern in this paper is to see how Conrad utilises the descriptions in presenting different domains of society occupied by different kinds of individuals. We are to consider it especially by focusing on the change of Winnie Verloc, the heroine.

Of all the characters in *The Secret Agent*, only Winnie Verloc undergoes a fundamental change of personality. Conrad emphasises

in "Author's Note" that "telling Winnie Verloc's story" (236)²⁾ is of great importance. Obviously Conrad draws upon various modes of description to present Winnie's transformation through recognition. Comparing her with other characters, we can see how the change of descriptions of her has to do with her character transition.

Concerning the above point, it is interesting that the characters' conversations are fairly frequently accompanied with the depiction of bodies. Generally speaking, in literature body traits are often employed symbolically to imply the character's nature, as in Shakespeare's *Richard III*. However, Conrad's aim appears to be somewhat different from that traditional (and somewhat discriminatory) characterisation. Instead it seems that he tries to express how ideology is, expressed in the form of clear-cut propositions, actually conditioned and controlled by amorphous complexity associated with physicality and materiality.

Among all body parts, much emphasis is put on characters' eyes in *The Secret Agent*. The workings of their eyes indicate what complexity is at work in human interactions beneath such clearly verbalised notions as anarchist propaganda. In the case of Winnie as well, it is her eyes that symbolically demonstrate her character transition. Focusing on the descriptions of eyes will help us comprehend more profoundly the way Winnie realises what has really happened to her beloved brother and avenges his death on her husband Verloc.

It might reveal to some degree the essence of Conrad's art to see the interrelationship of description and characterisation in the course of this event.

1. Various Characters

Winnie Verloc plays a very important role in the thematic aspect of *The Secret Agent* because only she “goes from the most complete innocence to the most shattering knowledge of what lies beyond the world.”³⁾ She is the only character in *The Secret Agent* who acquires a new understanding of the universe, transgressing the bounds of her original domain. Our concern is how her change of personality is accompanied with that of the narratological style. To begin with, we are to see what kinds of domains — social, not necessarily geographical, areas where human interactions take place — are occupied by different characters in the text, and what kind of descriptive method is employed to present each of them.

At first, Winnie lives in the domain restricted within the family. She fails to see the dynamic complexity of things, due to “her belief that things did not stand being looked into” (133). At first, in accordance with her simplistic worldview, the narrator gives little body description of her except her “round” figure, whereas much more emphasis is given on body expressions in many other parts of the text. See for instance the conversation between her husband Verloc and Winnie in an early part of the novel:

“I don’t feel very well,” he muttered, passing his hands over his moist brow.

“Giddiness?”

“Yes. Not at all well.”

Mrs Verloc, with all the placidity of an experienced wife,

expressed a confident opinion as to the cause, and suggested the usual remedies; but her husband, rooted in the middle of the room, shook his lowered head sadly.

“You’ll catch cold standing there,” she observed. (44)

The speeches and thoughts of Winnie are presented very economically. This probably means that at this stage she is not an important active participant in the dynamism of the London of *The Secret Agent*. For, as we see later, the various modes of speech presentment represent various character domains in *The Secret Agent*.

We can therefore say that Winnie exists, in spite of the difference of their social statuses, in an inert insignificant domain similar to that of the lady patroness of Michaelis. When the lady appears in Chapter 6, the narrator presents almost no body traits, as in Winnie’s case; instead she is abstractly described as “kindness personified” or “the specially choice incarnation of the feminine” (84). The narrator’s inclination to economical description here is conspicuously shown in the following summary statement: “A certain simplicity is common to serene souls at both ends of the social scale” (81). This remark is interesting as it tells us, in style and in content, that like Winnie, who is near the other “end” of the “scale,” the lady patroness has little in her speech or around it that deserves to be communicated in much detail. The following passage containing many voices commenting on Michaelis’ ugliness clearly shows this attitude of the narrator:

Other voices, as if glad of the opening, murmured hasty compassion. “Quite startling,” “Monstrous,” “Most painful to see.” The lank man, with the eyeglass on a broad ribbon, pronounced mincingly the word “Grotesque,” whose justness was appreciated

by those standing near him. (83)

The narrator describes this scene so concisely because he does not feel it necessary to communicate other information than the sporadic fragments of utterances do. It is also unnecessary for the narrator to counterbalance the contents of the classy society's speeches with minute descriptions. This is also the case with those between the double agent Verloc and his ignorant wife.

In contrast, the narrator does not spare body descriptions in the scenes where anarchists appear. The anarchists in *The Secret Agent* certainly exist in a domain different from Winnie. As we shall see, however, they are not the most significant characters in the text, either; instead they seem to play the role of introducing more important ones.

Conrad is "a man who looks upon the political spectacle ... from a great and chilling distance."⁴⁾ This "distance" is recognised between the narrator's coolly objective description and the anarchists' eloquence. This narratorial distance, casting doubt on their ideologies, results in the abundance of the anarchists' bodily traits, which are usually unattractive and sometimes grotesque. The narrator tells us, for example, that the anarchist of the highest repute in *The Secret Agent*, Michaelis, has an extraordinary fat body with "an enormous stomach and distended cheeks ... his elbow presenting no appearance of a joint" (33). This concrete depiction is contrastive to his grand abstract recitation of historical materialism of a kind. Other anarchists, such as toothless and bald Karl Yundt and Comrade Ossipon with a red, freckled face, are abundantly endowed with detailed body descriptions.

Critics generally agree that the narrator's elaborate description of those bodily traits has the effect of creating a sense of irony. For instance, Ossipon with features "of the Negro type" (35) believes in the theories of Cesare Lombroso, who emphasises that criminals often have noses of the "negroid character".⁵⁾ The primary aim of these descriptions is perhaps to counterbalance the fantastically ideological and abstract speeches. The concrete corrupt physicality of the anarchists keeps us from swallowing their abstract ideological words too readily.

Conrad writes to Galsworthy concerning *The Secret Agent*:

After all, you must not take it too seriously. The whole thing is superficial and it is but a tale. I had no idea to consider Anarchism politically, or to treat it seriously in its philosophical aspect; as a manifestation of human nature in its discontent and imbecility.⁶⁾

Thus Conrad does not want the reader to take the ideological remarks in the novel "too seriously." We are, instead, made to turn to a more "superficial" aspect of the world, by Conrad's presentation of physicality much more vivid than the anarchists' insipid notions. Insipid as they are, however, they are still heavily loaded with meaning, so Conrad offsets them by the detailed, grotesque but literarily attractive, body images. We are therefore made to focus on the "superficial" level, paying more attention to the body.

In this light the anarchists are found fairly ineffective in the active power structure of society. Awareness of the real state of things does matter here. They are not so different from Winnie and the nonchalant nobility as they appear at first, because they

themselves are not aware that the body can have the better of the idea. Instead they make a fool of themselves by being devoted merely to words. The anarchists contribute mostly to demonstrating this. It is not that their notions are themselves significant. It seems that the domains of characters in *The Secret Agent* could be classified into a hierarchical order according to the members' effectuality in society based upon their awareness and recognition. The anarchists certainly never occupy the highest one.

The domain of the characters that play really significant roles in the complex society, soberly aware of the actual state of things, is introduced in the calm but tense confrontation between the Assistant Commissioner and Chief Inspector Heat. They are accordingly introduced in a more attentive, close-up style of narrative than before. Although they might appear similar to the anarchists in that their physical traits are often mentioned, yet the descriptions of them are in a very different way than those of the anarchists. The most remarkable are their eyes :

He [the Assistant Commissioner] caught on the latter's [Chief Inspector Heat's] face ... the vestiges of experimental watchfulness in the round eyes, which had been, no doubt, fastened on his back, and now met his glance for a second before the intent character of their stare had the time to change to a merely startled appearance. (86)

This body description obviously serves a purpose different from that of the anarchists' scene, since here is no ideological speech that the narrator must feel it necessary to put qualifications on. What is emphasised in this passage is, instead, the power of looking piercingly

at things to detect any hidden information. This implies far more active power to work at the fundamental level of society than the anarchists' stale propagandas. To add to that, it is obvious that the tense intersection of glances presented here tells us much about the two person's characters, statuses and social relationship. While no speech is given, a communication far more substantial than the anarchists' ideological humbug is present here. And, most importantly, they are fully conscious of the workings of this power relationship. This consciousness definitely distinguishes them from other characters.

It seems to be implied that the real politics in the London of *The Secret Agent* exists in the domain where physicality is integral, not in that of abstract ideology alone. What is really important in the workings of society is conducted not in endless discussions in loud voices but in transactions between those who can function effectually without ostentatious words.

The descriptions of the characters' physicality thus represent the domains that they are to be distributed into in the world of *The Secret Agent*. As the workings of the characters' eyes are especially important as the above extract shows, we focus on them in the next chapter.

2. Description of Eyes

In other scenes than the above, the eye appears to operate as an active agent representing human relationships that really matter in the world of *The Secret Agent*. As a matter of course, it plays an important role in the presentment of Winnie's transformation. So it

seems worthwhile to examine how the eye functions in the presentment of human relationships in the text.

In Chapter 2 Verloc the double agent, though taking the position of a superior guardian at first, is soon reduced to an inferior by being exposed to the “bloodshot” sun’s glance hanging in the sky “with an air of punctual and benign vigilance” (11). Evidently the sun has the symbolical status of the omniscient eye that never misses anything.

The description of Verloc and Vladimir shortly afterwards contains a number of eye workings which represent power relationship. Having been disconcerted by “the sense of being blinked at watchfully” (15), Verloc has his dignity still more dwarfed unawares :

For 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 (20)

Vladimir acquires a double glance at both Verloc and himself by means of the mirror, while allowing Verloc no glimpse of him. This monopoly of eyesight, as if he were watching from the central tower of Bentham’s Panopticon, implies the advantage of Vladimir’s power over Verloc.

Then in a striking way the sun, the omniscient and absolute power, is again introduced into the scene, to define the symbolism of the eye :

“... Why don’t you do something? ... No work, no pay.”

Mr Verloc felt a queer sensation of faintness in his stout legs. . . . He was, in truth, startled and alarmed. The rusty London sunshine struggling clear of the London mist shed a lukewarm brightness into the First Secretary's private room (22)

After this reappearance of the all-watching omniscient London sun piercing through mist, Vladimir declares his total control over Verloc's actions. This suggests that Verloc is trapped under the inescapable network of the authoritative glances presiding all over London. From our point of view it confirms the symbolism of the eye that represents power politics at the level of individuals, together with the declaration repeated again and again by characters that all anarchists are under observation.

Other authoritative figures in *The Secret Agent* also like to cast a one-way glance: the Assistant Commissioner in Chapter 5 is seated in his chair "with one hand shading his eyes," and asks Chief Inspector Heat a question "without uncovering his eyes." In Chapter 7, when the Assistant Commissioner is in an inferior position in turn, Sir Ethelred, "the great man," behaves as the superior. His "haughty drooping" eyes do not look straight at the other, but look down. His spared glance implies spared unfathomable power. His glance is not at rest, though; like that of the sun, it secretly searches for any information available:

"Of course," repeated the great man He turned his big head slowly, and over his shoulder gave a haughty oblique stare to the ponderous marble timepiece with the sly, feeble tick. The gilt hands had taken the opportunity to steal through no less than five and twenty minutes behind his back. (107)

His carefulness never to miss anything, never to be deceived by anything “sly” and “feeble” (inconspicuous), is emphasised here.

Interestingly, after meeting Sir Ethelred, the Assistant Commissioner’s eyes regain their power. He has a “calm, speculative gaze” and his “sunken eyes of a dark enthusiast” are so “exercised” that they can easily distinguish “in the confused movements of lights and shadows thronging the roadway the crawling approach of a hansom” (109 – 10). The restoration of his activeness, resulting from coming off from the superior and being able to act freely, is thus accompanied with that of the activeness of his eyes.

The same pattern is repeated later. Sir Ethelred keeps covering his eyes in front of the Assistant Commissioner. We are told that Sir Ethelred is in fact suffering from his “menaced eyes,” which are “physically the great man’s weak point. This point was wrapped up in secrecy. When an opportunity offered, he rested them conscientiously” (160). It seems that this meeting with the Assistant Commissioner is indeed an “opportunity” for rest; he sits still, “resting his eyes under the screen of his hand” (162). The information that the Assistant Commissioner has found out the truth of the bomb outrage at the Greenwich Observatory is not important enough to open his weak eyes. He knows that everything is virtually over now. There remain no uncertain factors; nothing significant that might affect the real politics is likely to happen any longer. So he shades his eyes both to conceal his weakness and to protect the current power structure, which is more important for him than the truth about the Greenwich bomb outrage. As a result, in spite of the “secret” physical weakness, his obscure greatness is emphasised all the more in the dark room: “The great personage rose heavily, an imposing shadowy

form in the greenish gloom of the room" (163). The gloom to protect his eyesight also serves to make his power overwhelming.

Following the previous pattern again, having left Sir Ethelred, the Assistant Commissioner restores his power together with the shrewd workings of his eyes. They show obvious superiority when he confronts the real mastermind of the bomb outrage, Vladimir. By this confrontation Vladimir has virtually lost his game, as his attempt of terrorism to perturb the nation's sense of security has miserably failed. In the confrontation, the eyes of both characters operate in contrastive ways. Vladimir's lack of composure is shown as "his eyes remained serious, like the eyes of convinced man" (165)⁷⁾, while the Assistant Commissioner appears to imitate Sir Ethelred's behaviour claiming superiority: "When Mr Vladimir ceased speaking the Assistant Commissioner lowered his glance, and the conversation dropped" (166). Vladimir is driven into a position inferior to the Assistant Commissioner. His eyes, while he is worrying about the Assistant Commissioner's movement, are merely "seeing" and "looking up and down" (166-67), much less powerful than the fierce "glance" of the Assistant Commissioner. Vladimir, who once seemed to assume ultimate power in front of Verloc, is now overwhelmed by the glance of a man who has far more understanding of how things work in the world, backed by "the great man."

The differences between the characters are accordingly represented by those of descriptions assigned to them, especially of their eyes. They show as a whole that while the police officers can deliberately control their physicality participating in human interaction, anarchists are totally unaware that physicality is at play when they are making grand speeches. As E.M.W. Tillyard argues,

Conrad “suspends his ironic method in dealing with the Assistant Commissioner” and “creates in the Assistant Commissioner a man pretty close to himself.”⁸⁾ Conrad might believe that it is such individuals as the police officers, not the anarchists brandishing grand but impractical ideas, who can behave really efficiently.

Winnie Verloc is, in the earlier part of the novel, almost totally outside the actually significant workings of the world, just like the ignorant nobility. We then see how her transition from this innocence to a new recognition of the world, like that of the police officers, is presented.

3. Winnie's Transition

Winnie Verloc is the only one in the novel who moves from one domain to another, deepening her awareness and recognition. It seems that in the light of the consideration above, we can understand her character transition by considering how the narrator presents it.

We have already seen what the early Winnie is like. Still in Chapter 8, in which she takes her mother to an institution for old people, there are few remarkable physical characteristics described of her. She seems just a simplistic woman who deserves little particular attention; accordingly a summary account of how Winnie's mother decides to go occupies much of the chapter. Conspicuous by its absence is the description of the circumstances in the presentment of the following dialogue:

“I know, my dear, you'll come to see me as often as you can spare the time. Won't you?”

“Of course,” answered Winnie shortly, staring straight before her.

And the cab jolted in front of a steamy, greasy shop in a blaze of gas and in the smell of fried fish.

The old woman raised a wail again.

“And, my dear, I must see that poor boy every Sunday. He won’t mind spending the day with his old mother —”

Winnie screamed out stolidly :

“Mind! I should think not. That poor boy will miss you something cruel. I wish you had thought a little of that, mother.”

(121)

This probably means that the narrator finds in Winnie little worth telling us besides what she actually says. The narrator stays away from her and observes the ongoing family affair fairly objectively. In Chapter 9 Winnie’s simplicity is still emphasised with the conciseness of her dialogue. See how the narrator presents her responses after her husband says, “I’ve been to the bank” :

Mrs Verloc became attentive.

“You have!” she said dispassionately. “What for?”

Mr Verloc mumbled, with his nose over the grate, and with marked unwillingness.

“Draw the money out!”

“What do you mean? All of it?”

“Yes. All of it.” (142)

Winnie’s stupidity is ironically confirmed when this dialogue is concluded with her complacent assertion, “Oh yes. I can trust you.”

She does not doubt her husband's sincerity, who is in fact the murderer of her beloved brother. The scarcity of her physicality in the description is in accordance with her characteristic simplicity.

However, she does not remain the same for ever. In preparation for presenting her later change, the narrator begins to mention Winnie's eyes occasionally. At first they are, in line with her philosophy of indifference to anything, covered with a hat, "immovable" (117), turned "to the roof of the cab" (118), or "staring straight before her" (121). These remarks on her dormant eyes are like seeds planted in the text waiting to sprout later. At this stage it is emphasised that she refuses anything that brings information alien to her, and so fails to recognise important things around her; for instance, she cannot see that her mother's decision is based upon a wrong notion that Verloc can be the real guardian of Stevie. Then gradually, at times, she begins to show incertitude of her belief in the course of the deepening of her recognition; and interestingly they are accompanied with the description of her eye movements. In Chapter 8, when Winnie recognises that her mother's absence has irrevocably altered her family, her eyes show "a subtle change" (130). This foreshadows the later transformation of her character. The seeds are awakening from dormancy.

Only her brother, Stevie, matters to Winnie. It is not until his welfare is at stake in Chapter 9 that she really activates her eyes. When Verloc, for instance, suggests without consideration about Stevie that the family go abroad, she gives "a glance, half arch, half cruel, out of her large eyes — a glance of which the Winnie of the Belgravian mansion days would have been incapable" (145). As the truth about Stevie's death is revealed, her eyes take various actions

and show new appearances, in sharp contrast to the former inertness : they seem to “grow bigger” (153) ; then they open so wide that they look “like two black holes” ; and they even notice “the sporting sheet left by the Chief Inspector” (155), which the early Winnie would certainly overlook.

These descriptions mean that she has begun to get out of the former immobility and to act as an active agent participating in the really dynamic domain of the world. When she covers her face when she is with her husband (171 – 72) and “gets out of his line of sight in the kitchen” (175), it is not the previous attitude representing her indifference ; this time it is the same sign of attaining superiority as we have seen above. For when her eyes appear again, they have acquired some extraordinary power :

It was not a wild stare, and it was not inattentive, but its attention was peculiar and not satisfactory, inasmuch that it seemed concentrated upon some point beyond Mr Verloc’s person.

The impression was so strong that Mr Verloc glanced over his shoulder. (177)

Here she appears, like Sir Ethelred, as someone who is unfathomably powerful. This change of description apparently shows her gaining competence at the level of really substantial human relationship in *The Secret Agent*, where people’s intentions and exertions of power directly meet, collide, or shrewdly evade each other, represented in their various glances. Winnie has already thrown away her shallowness, her former “philosophy” of avoiding looking into things. She has acquired some profundity, which is symbolised by her eye’s “unfathomable depths” (184).

It is interesting that the earlier pattern of the husband and wife's relationship reappears here, only with the participants inverted. In an earlier chapter it is Verloc who secretly looks at his wife's body "out of the corners of his eyes" (133) before she knows about her brother's death. Here in Chapter 11, in contrast, when her stare is transferred "from the wall to her husband's person," he is "looking on the ground" (183). This means that Verloc is in the position of disadvantageous blindness and his eyesight cannot grasp the approaching danger. This looking downward of his is, despite the superficial similarity, very unlike the authoritative people's posture of defence, as he is vulnerably indifferent to what his wife does or thinks. On the other hand Winnie, as if imitating Vladimir in the early part of the novel, cunningly casts a look on Verloc, who is again degraded to a person that is seen. Winnie's "black glance" now keeps following Verloc (185) and even when his body is largely concealed, she "kept her eyes on his feet" (193). Moreover she imitates another previously shown attitude of authority: she conceals her eyes from Verloc with "a black veil over her face" (188), adopting the strategy of the Assistant Commissioner and Sir Ethelred.

The formerly settled symbolic patterns of eye movement in the political realm are thus repeated in the family realm, convincing us that Winnie has completely come onto a more complex and dynamic phase of existence than she formerly stayed on inactively. The family here, as it were, has come to form the stage of real politics. As Avrom Fleishman puts it, the political and the domestic plots and their sectors are "welded together not as much by their point of contact in Verloc as by the imagery, which is once maintained throughout the novel in both plots."⁹ Although here Fleishman ascribes the function

of “welding together” to the imagery of fragmentation, the same seems to hold true of that of eyes. Eyes can represent the relationships between characters and their attempts to take part in the activities that really matter in their world.

Towards the moment of murdering her husband, Winnie’s eyes “grow still larger,” close, and then open (192). Compared with the previous chapters, the description of her eyes is almost overabundant. It seems relevant that J. Hillis Miller says that “Winnie’s depersonalization goes on through the sequence of events”¹⁰⁾ that centre on the murder. Her “depersonalization” is obviously needed because to take the critical action, Winnie, who used to impose too simple ideas on the reality, must shed her former personality and assume a new one that the earlier Winnie would regard as inhuman: driven by an obsession — the devotion to Stevie — she becomes dehumanised in a way, as being human here means remaining a meek simplistic creature with inertness whose action is always predictable. If she kept such simplicity she could not allow herself to execute the murder that definitely exceeded her husband’s — and her own — horizons of expectation. It shows this character transition of hers that her eyes are for the first time given the status of an active agent.

After the murder, the blood from Verloc’s body at first regularly drips down, sounding like clockwork ticks, and then turns into an inarticulately continuous flow. It might symbolise her (and of course his) transition from the previous orderly state of commonplace humanity to an inarticulate, unfathomable one which is close to the usually hidden materiality, the deep structure of the world.

Naturally, this grotesque kind of revelation is not bearable for long. She cannot help shrieking at it, which marks the end of her

depersonalisation. The tragicomical affair of her and Ossipon that precedes her suicide seems to show that people cannot permanently stay close to the essential materiality unless he or she becomes “nothing” like the dead Verloc. This recognition of the abyss of materiality scares her. After the murder she probably feels trapped in the incomprehensible world, having looked “into the very bottom of this thing” (197). She now feels “free,” but this is just a freedom from her former simplicity, and lasts only a little while. Her situation somehow looks like Verloc’s in Chapter 2, who is bound tightly by the cobweb of power relationship. The window making “a square patch of soiled blood-red light” (199) seems to play the same role as the sun, London’s eye that does not stop watching anyone in the Verloc scene. Just as Verloc’s bombing leads to the inescapable death, Winnie cannot but choose suicide, entrapped in it after the critical deed.

We have seen how various ways of descriptions are employed in presenting Winnie’s transition. “Bad world for poor people” (128) is all too correct an expression given by Stevie to the world of *The Secret Agent*. The police officers have probably adapted themselves to such a world by recognising the “bad” and the “poor” to the bottom, and behaving at once entangled in it and standing aloof from it. Winnie is, on the other hand, too “good” to return safely from the deadly sight of the reality, like Lot’s wife — or like most of us. Her eyes show that *The Secret Agent* is a tragedy about a woman whose recognition of the truth ruins her.

Conclusion

Miller says, “The theme of *The Secret Agent* seems to be the

disjunction between matter and spirit. . . . Man lives in both realms.”¹¹⁾ For us these “realms” represent those Winnie traverses; and through her transition we are made to glimpse their coexistence in the world. Throughout the text, as we have seen, Conrad deftly handles the narrative so that the descriptions of speeches and bodies represent the domains that the characters occupy in the textual universe of *The Secret Agent*.

At the basis of this is probably Conrad’s doubt about the representational power of abstract language cut off from concrete reality. According to Ian Watt, Conrad was “an arch-reactionary in his early days.”¹²⁾ His cynicism on the revolutionists might have to do with it. He has some disbelief in rigid conceptions: no definite conceptual framework ought to be imposed upon things, since it may repress the world’s dynamism that could not be captured in language. Miller says, “Repeatedly in *The Secret Agent* Conrad reminds the reader that the forms which man imposes on matter effect only a precarious transformation.”¹³⁾ It is always precarious in a way. Here it seems plausible what Terry Eagleton says as to what kind of “answer” *The Secret Agent* can provide about the world: “The world goes on: and this is at once the question, and the answer, of the text.”¹⁴⁾ It is the belief in and the seeking of “the answer” expressible in definite words that is wrong in the first place. What dismays Ossipon in the last chapter of *The Secret Agent*, “an impenetrable mystery — the mystery of a human brain pulsating wrongfully to the rhythm of journalistic phrases” (228), implies the inconsistency between language and the reality it apparently represents.

Vladimir’s failure in terrorism seems to suggest that a plan to manipulate the world in a purely theoretical way has to fail.

Although Vladimir is the most competent kind of person in terms of commanding language and logic, “discovering droll connections between incongruous ideas” (16) and easily switching languages in speaking (17), he at the same time shows “an amount of ignorance as to the real aims, thoughts, and methods of the revolutionary world” that makes him mistaken about many facts (24). He is purely a man of notion, who is unfit to manage things properly in the world of *The Secret Agent*. Later Conrad cynically makes Vladimir convinced that his bombing plot is indifferent altogether to such people as he wants to shock: he hears Michaelis’s patroness responds to his account of the bomb affair: “I had no idea this was such a grave affair” (165). The character contrastive to Vladimir is Sir Ethelred, who does not speak too much but seems to completely grasp the workings of the world where he lives. He is probably of the same opinion as the narrator of *Under Western Eyes*, who says, “Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality.”¹⁵⁾

Through the varying descriptions assigned to characters differing in importance in the society, we are given a glimpse of how what really matters is conducted in the world of *The Secret Agent*: it takes place in the domain where language gives way to the reality that actually controls it from beneath. This is the way the universe of *The Secret Agent* goes, and it is reflected in the narratorial way things are presented. Winnie Verloc’s awakening to the world’s aspect new to her is thus effectively presented in association with those previous political scenes.

The novel’s apparently ironical subtitle, “A Simple Tale,” invites us to delve behind the superficial simplicity. Conrad makes the speeches of characters, especially those of the anarchists, the

representative of ineffective ideas. It is against this backdrop that the social effectuality of the police officers and Sir Ethelred is outstanding, and that Winnie Verloc's adventure from innocence to deadly recognition is made so impressive: their really substantial actions and interactions are not expounded by the narratorial voice but only shown in descriptive details. This considerably complex narratological method is at work behind the "simple tale."

Notes

- 1) Stephen K. Land, *Conrad and the Paradox of Plot* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 148.
- 2) Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (1907. London: Everyman, 1997). All the references to the novel are to this edition, and the page numbers are shown in parentheses.
- 3) J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 45.
- 4) Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), p. 95.
- 5) Quoted in Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Western World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 276.
- 6) G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters* (London: William Heinemann, 1927), vol. II, p. 37.
- 7) Cedric Watts, the editor of Everyman Paperbacks edition of *The Secret Agent*, says in "Notes" that this is a Gallicism and "convicted man" means "guilty or convicted man" (*The Secret Agent*, p. 252).
- 8) W. L. M. Tillyard, "Irony in *The Secret Agent*," *Readings on Joseph Conrad*, Ed. Clarice Swisher (San Diego: Greenhaven P, 1998), pp. 170 - 71.
- 9) Avrom Fleishman, *Conrad's Politics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 189.
- 10) Miller, *Poets of Reality*, p. 63.
- 11) Miller, *Poets of Reality*, p. 57.
- 12) Ian Watt, *Essays on Conrad* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), p. 122.
- 13) Miller, *Poets of Reality*, p. 49.
- 14) Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain*, (London: Verso, 1986), p. 31.
- 15) Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* (1911. London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 5