

A THOUGHTFUL READING GUIDE TO *THE SECRET AGENT*: A SEMIOTIC TEXT

Maggie Holland

The University of British Columbia in Vancouver

Abstract: Written by an armchair detective/semiotician, this truncated version of a longer reading guide demonstrates Terence Hawkes' *Structuralism and Semiotics* dictum that any semiotic "way of thinking about the world which is predominantly concerned with the perception and description of structures" is not static (6). Such dynamism, Hawkes points out, owes its momentum to the early twentieth-century revised understanding of the nature of perception. This understanding contains an inherent bias which affects what is perceived: "[t]he true nature of things [lies] not in things themselves, but in the relationship which we construct, and then perceive, *between them*" (7). In constructing one reading of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent: a Simple Tale* this guide relies on Michel Foucault's elaboration in *Les Mots et les choses (The Order of Things)* of the relationship between signifiers such as "correspondence", "lie", "mirror" as well as other encoded, cryptic, allegorical, verb / nouns and things. By example more than by explanation or interpretation, the guide foregrounds Conrad's amusement at the "droll connections between incongruous ideas" (16) which the mind makes. The guide's strategy of employing examples of mental semiotic processes borrows Conrad's strategy of employing a pseudo detective story as a structuring method. As a detective text, *The Secret Agent* draws attention to its own self-reflexive *modus operandi*: it drops clues to Charles Sanders Peirce's secret agent: semiotics. The guide invites its readers to likewise discern word's hidden "matter."

Keywords: allegory, correspondence, clue, detection, irony, process

...throughout the nineteenth century, and right up to our own day...literature achieved autonomous existence, and separated itself from all other language with a deep scission, only by forming a sort of 'counter-discourse', and by finding its way back from the representative or signifying function of language to this raw being that had been forgotten since the sixteenth century (43-44). ...from the nineteenth century, literature began to bring literature back to light once more in its own being: though not as it had appeared at the end of the Renaissance. For now we no longer have the primary, that absolute initial word upon which the infinite movement of discourse was founded and by which it was limited; henceforth, language was to grow with no point of departure, no end, and no promise. It is the traversal of this futile yet fundamental space that the text of literature traces from day to day. (44)

Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*

Logic, in its general sense, is...only another name for 'semiotics', the quasi-necessary, or formal doctrine of signs. By describing the doctrine as 'quasi-necessary', or formal, I mean that we observe the characters of such signs as we know, and from such an observation, by a process which I will not object to naming Abstraction¹, we are led to statements, eminently fallible, and therefore in one sense by no means necessary, as to what must be the character of all signs used by a 'scientific' intelligence, that is to say by an intelligence capable of learning by experience.

(C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, Vol. 2, Para. 227). (100)

Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*

This reading guide proposes to treat Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent: a Simple Tale* as a case study in semiotics. The semiotic theories of Michel Foucault's "Representing" in *Les Mots et les choses* and, to a lesser extent, those of Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of the sign as interpreted by Terence Hawkes in *Structuralism and Semiotics* will inform this reading. Both these theories emphasize the part played by the mind's idiosyncratic thought processes in its interpretation of the signifier's relationship to the signified, its interpretation of the sign. In accordance with theories of the sign, this guide does not claim that any of its own interpretations of *The Secret Agent's* signifiers that it identifies is the "correct" or only such indication of the signified, referent or sign; it offers only its own speculative reading of such signifiers.

The activity of the mind...will therefore no longer consist in drawing things together, in setting out on a quest for everything that might reveal some sort of kinship, attraction, or secretly share nature within them, but, on the contrary, in discriminating, that is, in establishing their identities, then the inevitability of the connections with all the successive degrees of a series. In this sense, discrimination imposes upon comparison the primary and fundamental investigation of difference: providing oneself by intuition with a distinct representation of things, and apprehending clearly the inevitable connection between one element in a series and that which immediately follows it.

Michel Foucault: *Les Mots et les choses* (55)

Starting with the title of Conrad's text *The Secret Agent: A Secret Tale* as a palindrome, (TSA:AST) and then quoting two passages from the body of the text will serve as an introduction to a further, more comprehensive, semiotic reading of Conrad. The significance of a palindrome in this case study is its function as a mirror, or self-reflection, a function also borne out by the text's pseudo detective story narcissistic and semiotic devices. In this regard, the observations of Terence Hawkes and of Linda Hutcheon are worth noting. "The writer of, say, a detective novel, is normally concerned primarily with content and would find any iconic message beyond that of 'this is a detective novel' to be merely an interference" (Hawkes 112). And for Hutcheon a narcissistic, or metafictional (1), text draws attention to its own method of narration, it "includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" and it both describes and suggests an allegorical reading of the Narcissus

¹ "...a form of inference (alongside *deduction* and *induction*) by which we treat a signifier as an instance of a rule from a familiar code" (*Semiotics for Beginners* by Daniel Chandler).

myth (1). Although narcissistic, some texts, in that they hide their self-awareness, are covertly so. Hutcheon offers four diegetic models of covert narcissistic fiction, but the one which pertains to this reading is the first model: “The Detective Story (the written plot and the plot to kill)” (31).

Self-reflexivity and semiotics are related in this reading of *The Secret Agent* in that they both draw attention to the signifier and to the clues, codes and thought processes which are triggered by that signifier. Both theories are self-conscious of process rather than insisting on product. Later on, this guide will offer further readings of self-reflexivity in Conrad’s treatment of mirrors as well as of his paying attention to the signifier’s indeterminate detection of a signified or referent. For now, this introduction will quote Conrad’s foregrounding of “train of thought” processes as well as his reference to Peirce in support of a claim of a semiotics theory itself as being the secret agent to reading Conrad’s text meaningfully.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century...thought ceases to move in the element of resemblance. Similitude is no longer the form of knowledge but rather the occasion of error....The age of semblance is drawing to a close. It is leaving nothing behind it but games. Games whose power of enchantment grow out of the new kinship between semblance and illusion; the chimeras of similitude loom up on all sides, but they are recognized as chimeras; it is the privileged age of... the play that duplicates itself by representing another play...; it is the age of the deceiving senses; it is the age in which the poetic dimension of language is defined by metaphor, simile, and allegory. Foucault (51)

According to Peirce, the framework for the existence of knowledge derives from the assertion of propositions through the second² ‘triad’ of signs: icon, index and symbol.... In the icon, the relationship between sign and object, or signifier and signified, manifests, to use Peirce’s phrase, a ‘community in some quality’: a similarity or ‘fitness’ of resemblance proposed by the sign, to be acknowledged by the receiver. Thus a diagram or a painting has an iconic relationship to its subject in so far as it resembles it: it is the signifier to its subject’s signified in the iconic mode. ...In the index, the relationship is concrete, actual and usually of a sequential, causal kind. The pointing finger is a signifier whose relationship to its signified is indexical in mode....In the symbolic the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary; it requires the active presence of the interpretant to make the signifying connection. (Hawkes 105)

Drawing specific attention to the notion of sign, Conrad muses on its semiotic mode. He ponders the thought processes that the mind undertakes in making allegorical connections; it winks sceptically at a thought (Conrad 11-12). To address this question of process he employs allegory itself. That allegorical sign is “train” and does double duty: it is a means of physical conveyance and an idiomatic train-of-thought conveyance. “A convenience train whirled him up to town, alone and pondering deeply” (75); “Chief Inspector Heat got out of the train in a state of thoughtfulness” (76); “the Chief Inspector thought that the other man might have been actually ... ready to catch the next train up” (82); “the Assistant Commissioner mused aloud, wondering. He was told that such was the name on *two tickets out of three* given up out of that train” (84) (my emphasis). Here, train of thought mirror-images the correspondence with the Verloc home address: 32 Brett Street. Conrad continues to play

²The first triad is “*representamen* or sign, *object* and *ground*” (Hawkes 103).

with the idiom and concept of train of thought: “A fool and his job are soon parted, went on the train of prophetic thought in Chief Inspector Heat’s head” (103); “there was no train till the morning, and [Ossipon] stood looking thoughtfully at her face” (228); “his brain [had] just thought of the Southampton – St. Malo service ... There was a train at 10.30” (231); and instead of “we will miss the train” Ossipon exclaims, “Let’s get out, or we will lose the train” [of thought] (238).³ Whether Ossipon and Heat realize it or not thought trains make “droll (train) connections between incongruous ideas” (16). The Assistant Commissioner, on the contrary, who ponders the two tickets out of three signifier expression, puts two and two together. He has a clue. It is he, not Heat, who solves the mystery. But I give the game away.

That Conrad had Peirce’s semiotic theory in mind is evidenced by the date inscribed on the inside of Winnie’s wedding ring: “24th June, 1879” (252). It was on this date that philosopher Peirce, having turned detective, recovered his stolen overcoat and watch from their thief. This incident and Peirce’s connection to the detective story is related in the Sebeoks’ *“You Know My Method”: a Juxtaposition of Charles S. Peirce and Sherlock Holmes*. Moreover, the Sebeoks note the importance of guessing⁴ to Peirce and cite as an example “Holmes’ reading of Watson’s mind in *The Cardboard Box*” (42). Conrad plays this guessing game in the interview between Mr. Verloc and Mr. Vladimir, an interview which takes place in a room at some distance from where Verloc (Sherlock) awaits that meeting. To get to that room “[h]e walked along a passage lighted by a lonely gas jet, then up a flight of winding stairs, and through a glazed and cheerful corridor on the first floor. The footman threw open a door and stood aside” (Conrad 16). Prior to that walk, while waiting in the distant lower room, State Councillor Wurmt had unexpectedly remarked to Mr. Verloc, “You are very corpulent” (16), but when Verloc is admitted to Mr. Vladimir’s room Mr. Vladimir says “in French⁵ to the Chancelier d’Ambassade, ‘You are quite right, mon cher. He’s fat – the animal’” (16). Allegory makes droll connections (16) with distant trains of thought. At this early stage in the text Conrad had warned the reader that s/he will be engaging in a Peircian detective story “guessing” game.⁶

³ Addressing the question “where are we when we think?” Hannah Arendt points out that we are not only in space but also in time: “... representations – by which we make present what is phenomenally absent – are, of course, thought-things Time ... forces [representations into a sequence] ... called thought-trains” (201). Previously Arendt had noted that these trains have not to do with logic but with the imagination (154).

⁴ “Guessing” for Peirce is neither deduction nor induction, but a third kind of logic, and its purpose was, according to Max Fisch’s “Foreward”, “to distinguish the possible kinds of semioses or sign-functions” (Sebeok 11).

⁵ De Man’s response to Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” is that “translation is a form of allegory” (Tambling 129).

⁶ Other evidence in the text points to Conrad’s interest in Peirce. That Kant’s theory of “appearance” and “thing-in-itself” influenced Peirce has been much documented, J.M.C. Chevalier notes. Chevalier also points out that Peirce was a supporter of transcendentalism, and Conrad gives us a clue to this connection. In a discussion between Ossipon and the Professor, Ossipon comments that ““This is a transcendental way of putting it”” (Conrad 57). Later, Ossipon growls “with *moody* concern ... ‘You are too transcendental for me’” (60) (my italics), and the Professor replies that ““This is the enlightened kind.

Having introduced some basic semiotic theories, this reading will now engage in a more comprehensive examination of thought processes in *The Secret Agent*.

'The human Intellect...easily supposes a greater order and equality in things than it actually finds; ... it feigns parallels, correspondents, and relations that have no existence... Hence the fiction, 'that among the heavenly bodies all motion takes place by perfect circles' (Bacon).

Such are the ...spontaneous fictions of the mind: ... one and the same name being applied indifferently to things that are not of the same nature....Only prudence on the part of the mind can dissipate them...

...it is Classical thought excluding resemblance as the fundamental experience and primary form of knowledge, denouncing it as a confused mixture that must be analysed in terms of identity, difference, measurement, and order. Foucault (52)

A key term and idea in both detecting and then applying the detected clue to a signified is “correspondence.” This guide notes two meanings of this term: writing and allegory – writing as correspondence; allegory as non-correspondence. Another key term is “lie”, again used semiotically as noun or verb: tell a lie; lie down. This “correspondence” will play a vital role in demonstrating the indeterminacy of the overcoat wearer who is responsible for the Greenwich Park bomb. Using these and other key words this guide applies them to instances of allegory found in Conrad’s text: in the Bible, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Hamlet’s mise-en-abyme* play, as well as in other literary works. These texts correspond intertextually and, in that they are allegorically not true, they lie. They are fallible.

That this guide disregards both the story and the plot of *The Secret Agent* is, in fact, sanctioned by the text itself. The failure of the Greenwich Park explosion plot demonstrates what role this central aspect of the story serves in Conrad’s coded writing about language: following his story’s plot leads nowhere; it fails. Furthermore, that this central aspect of Conrad’s story – considering Winnie’s devotion to Stevie – does not include any mention of Stevie’s burial plot (whether or not one existed), seems to be a motivated device. This omission directs the (inter) text semiotic reader away from the work’s plot – its trajectory and target – and toward method or process, directs the interpretant to attend to “the language used [or not used] and to ignore or play down the context in which it is used” (Hawthorn 2004, 360). Story, plot, character and setting function as “the literary robe of indignant scorn [Conrad had] fit on his tale, decently, years ago” but which he now feels compelled to strip and “to look upon its bare bones”, its “grisly skeleton” (Conrad xxxix). As we shall see, in disguising the overcoat worn by the perpetrator of the Greenwich Park explosion, the work’s robe is camouflaged dressing, imposture. In the meantime, the bare bones matter.

Polonius. ... – What do you read, my lord?
Hamlet. Words, words, words.
Polonius. What is the matter, my lord?

America is alright” (60). Undoubtedly, these passages refer to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s transcendentalism and to his correspondence with his Aunt Mary *Moody* Emerson.

Hamlet. Between who?
Polonius. I mean the matter that you read, my lord.
Hamlet. Slanders, sir; for the satirical rogue says here that old men have gray beards...
 ...
Polonius. [Aside] Though this be madness, yet there is method in't....

Hamlet II.ii.190-208

Because one of his allegorical functions is that of reader, the Assistant Commissioner of Police expresses the reader's suspicions: the text "is up to something" allegorically, but we readers, being "stuck in a litter of paper" puzzle how we are "supposed to hold all the threads, [whose ends are fastened "where they please"], in [our] hands." "Yet [we] can but hold what is put in [our] hand, and nothing else" (Conrad 95). Since what is put in this guide's hands are allegorical threads, this reading proposes to simply follow those threads littered haphazardly throughout the text. It will not endeavor to presume to determine where their ends are fastened or where their referents, if any, are inscribed on that strewn litter. It will, nonetheless, attempt to show the semiotic process or method by which they are strewn. The overall theme that this reading detects is that this pseudo detective story – like its deceitful double agent protagonist – is an allegorical text of the idea of allegory; it is meta-allegory or "postallegory."

While this reading of *The Secret Agent* does not address the political⁷ it does read Conrad's text as a revolutionary outwitting of resemblance, representation and correspondence. As do accomplices Mr. Verloc (Conrad 11, 11, 11) and Inspector Heat (73, 95), the text winks. And it also lies. Like Mrs. Verloc reclining on the ship's deck (251, 251), the text "lies" on a hooded seat. It hoodwinks. But more on this later.

CORRESPONDENCE

... just as interpretation in the sixteenth century, with its superimposition of a semiology upon a hermeneutics, was essentially a knowledge based upon similitude, so the ordering of things by means of signs constitutes all empirical forms of knowledge as knowledge based upon identity and difference. The simultaneously endless and closed, full and tautological world of resemblance now finds itself dissociated and, as it were, split down the middle: on the one side, we shall find the signs that have become tools of analysis, marks of identity and difference, principles whereby things can be reduced to order, keys for a taxonomy; and, on the other, the empirical and murmuring resemblance of things, that reacting similitude that lies beneath thought and furnishes the infinite raw material for divisions and distributions. On the one hand, the general theory of signs, divisions, and classifications; on the other, the problem of immediate resemblances, of the spontaneous movement of the imagination, or nature's repetitions. And between the two, the new forms of knowledge that occupy the areas opened up by this new split.

(Foucault 57-58)

⁷ No more does Jeremy Hawthorn, who believes that "discontinuities [exist] between overt political opinions and underlying meanings in the fiction" (Hawthorn 1979, xi).

In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad's detective, Chief Inspector Heat, hears of the root-caused explosion only through after-the-fact reports mediated by others. He does not, as it were, correspond with the event. Evidence of the event is found and fabricated by others and examined by the detective, but that evidence falsifies fact. It lies. It is allegory. That the plot misfires – Greenwich Observatory is not blown up; an unintended “messenger” is accidentally killed – re-emphasizes the claim that plot is not a reliable guide to interpretation. Plot breaks with convention; it falsifies the detective story genre; it does not correspond with the rules of the game; it lies. Cause and effect are not related.

Here, Conrad foregrounds the question of semiotics, that is of the mind's workings, of what sparks thought and of what connects thought to a concept, object or person – to a signified and a referent. In the narrative, Detective Heat (who, as it turns out, is not hot on the trail), whose constable had once stumbled on a root (Conrad 74), hears “[t]he echo of the words ‘Person unknown’ repeating itself in his inner consciousness” (74) and contemplates the “sprinkling of small gravel, tiny brown bits of bark, and particles of splintered wood as fine as needles” (73). Fragments of language (words) remain as evidence to be sifted through for clues about the unknown root nature of their material and shape of their appearance – their relevance to be investigated by detectives, armchair- and professional. Ultimately mystery is not solved, meaning not determinable. Unfathomable, the correspondence between word-sign and its possible referent is not found in that word's etymological roots. Originating arbitrary correspondence remains a semiotic mystery, it leaves us stumped.

The connection of ideas does not imply the relation of cause and effect, but only a mark or sign with the thing signified. The fire which I see is not the cause of the pain I suffer upon my approaching it, but the mark that forewarns me of it [13]. [Malebranche and Berkeley] (Foucault 60).

The cause of the “crime” is found to be a dynamite explosion sparked by the ignition of a coruscating chemical substance detonated accidentally by the victim stumbling against an ill-placed tree root (74) in a park. Root as cause is lethal and relationship between cause and effect accidental and unpredictable. The victim draws concentric, eccentric, coruscating (38) circles, signs which act with Bakhtinian centrifugal force and with Derridian free play, their relevance to be investigated by detective-readers interpretants. Within a given language word-signs play with eccentric meaning. Their context, their syntactical location does not always guarantee meaning. Meaning is contingent, not inherent. Park location – the word name of which Winnie forgets (205) – does not delimit the possibility of word's explosion. It cannot trip up word's uses.

Though the detective-reader searches for a key to unlock the anarchic word's secret capacity to initiate unknown referents, s/he finds that it mysteriously turns up in another's possession.⁸ It is portable. The former owner of the key – in this case

⁸ While Mr. Verloc “turned the key, shot the *bolt*” (43), later on a *latch* key is found reposing in deceased “Mr. Verloc's waistcoat pocket” (234). But very soon after we are given this information Mrs.

Mr. Verloc – “glance[s] over his shoulder [but sees] nothing behind him ... [sees] no writing on the wall” (197).⁹ He sees no permanent marking ink, such as that which Winnie sells in the Verloc shop, or meaning. Like the perambulating secret double agent, who kept the key in his waistcoat pocket (234), the word is ambulatory. But, unlike him it is not pedestrian; it is adaptable.

Mr. Vladimir, on the other hand, “confound[s] causes with effects” (25); roots effect meaning. Being an armchair detective he “chime[s] in with his idea of the fitness of things”, does not reflect on “unexpected solutions of continuity” and is “carried away by his sense of the fitness of things” (71). Word and thing fit. He discerns a direct iconic correspondence between them. Mr. Verloc and Inspector Heat, however, do not. Explaining to the Assistant Commissioner his relationship to Mr. Verloc, Inspector Heat says that he hadn’t “seen him to speak to three times in the last two years” (Mr. Verloc lives at number thirty two Brett Street) but that he drops Mr. Verloc “a line, unsigned, and [that] he answers [him] in the same way at [Heat’s] private address” (108). They correspond. Neither of these men of letters signs; they disregard sign and read only signifieds. Anarchist Verloc corresponds privately but not with law enforcement.

Winnie, however, had once had “it [disagreeably] borne upon her with some force that a simple sentence may hold several diverse meanings” (146). And much later Winnie, asking herself “what were words to her now? What could words do to her for good or evil in the face of her fixed idea?” (205), acknowledges that a fixed idea, such as that held by Mr. Vladimir, and confirmed by its being “in the roots of her hair” (202) – which hair she had previously arranged and found to be “in perfect order” (166) – does not allow the word any free play. Perhaps, though, her eventual illogical madness frees her from the force of her origins. Adopting Conrad’s “delayed decoding”¹⁰ method we will later on consider the implications of Winnie’s madness.

For now, however, one key to this reading of *The Secret Agent* as meta-allegory is not held in Winnie’s possession, nor is it secreted in Mr. Verloc’s pocket (234) or in his unrealized potential as locksmith (12); nor is it held in Ossipon’s hand who “turned the key on Mr. Verloc’s repose” (235). This allegorical key is found in Michaelis’ trade as locksmith¹¹ (88) and his use of skeleton keys. After his release from (Jameson’s) prison house of language, Michaelis (Dostoevsky), we shall see,

Verloc hears Ossipon “move about and [hears] the snapping of a lock in the parlour door. Comrade Ossipon had turned the key on Mr. Verloc’s repose” (235). Since he had not been in contact with Mr. Verloc, how Ossipon came to possess any key is unknown. Furthermore, while “shot the bolt” and “turned the key on...repose” are idiomatic expressions, they exemplify the very possibility of the word’s far-flung versatile utility.

⁹ Peter Mallios’ footnote 2 suggests that this passage which emphasizes “language and communication” may be, like the passage he refers to in footnote 1, an “instance of signs [being] detached from their expected referents, old names being used to create new things” (304).

¹⁰ “A narrative device which “combines the forward temporal progression of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside world, with a much slower reflexive process of making out their meaning” (175). I. Watt. *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*.

¹¹ Interestingly, both Verloc (17) and Michaelis (34) had spent time in prison but it was Michaelis’ use of “skeleton keys” (88) that caused his incarceration.

becomes a starving writer who lives on a skeletal starvation “diet of raw carrots and a little milk” (247). Playing on language as an allegorical prison, the gates of which can be unlocked by the possessor of a key that fits the lock, Conrad, in his “Author’s Note”, justifies the use of allegory, as one key to reading his text: “ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as in pity” (xxxviii). While irony is not allegory, Conrad uses both concepts as well as correspondence and pun to say what he has to say about the fixed word. In Conrad’s text, allegory, however, is sometimes more of a challenge to detect than is irony, correspondence or pun. It is a more secret agent. A significant number of scholars¹² have written on allegory as well as on its (dis)similarity to irony.

The claims some literature makes to originality, to realism, to physical accuracy of description have ultimately to be seen in this depleting light. To the semiotician, most works of literature, in emitting messages that refer to themselves, also make constant reference to other works of literature. As Julia Kristeva has pointed out, no ‘text’ can ever be completely ‘free’ of other texts. It will be involved in what she has termed the intertextuality of all writing.

This leads to one of the most important insights into the nature of literature that semiotics afford. For books finally appear to portray or reflect, not the real physical world, but a world reduced to other dimensions; to the shape and structure of the activity of writing: the world as a text. (Hawkes 119)

In *The Secret Agent* a non-mimetic notion of allegory occurs most obviously in its “quotation” of the Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress* and perhaps less so in quotations of *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Hamlet*. The following somewhat detailed examination of allegory in these texts will illustrate some of Conrad’s application of this semiotic device. Other canonical texts, too, illustrate an intertextual reading of allegory. Let us briefly look at these other texts before returning to the more well-known ones.

References to some lesser known canonical texts than the above correspond more indexically than allegorically. For example, Stevie as an idiot immediately calls to mind Dostoevsky’s nihilistic¹³ *The Idiot* and the character Chief Inspector Heat suggests Gogol’s multiple addressee play “The Inspector General.”¹⁴ Further, the “protagonist” of Gogol’s detective story “The Overcoat” is worn by Verloc throughout Conrad’s story and sometimes by Stevie. Also, Winnie’s “a simple sentence may hold several diverse meanings” (Conrad 146) suggests Lewis Carroll’s [“‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things... adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs’”]. Additionally, Conrad’s mentions of card-

¹² See Jeremy Tambling *Allegory*; Paul De Man *Allegories of Reading*; Angus Fletcher *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*.

¹³ In this novel Dostoevsky “links Myskin...to the ‘nihilism detected in Mr. Turgenev’” (Moser 380) and portrays the character Burdovskij as verbally inadequate (378). Conrad indexes directly the notion of nihilism only once: “moral nihilism...” (12).

¹⁴ See Inna Galperina’s “Gogol’s Play with Multiple Addressees: Society Vaudeville and Satirical Comedy in ‘The Inspector General.’” Also, Ronald Wilks comments on the question of the non-comprehending addressee, or interpretant, in his note 53: “‘What are you laughing at...?’” [is] usually directed at the audience”(329). *Nikolay Gogol: Diary of a Madman, The Government Inspector, and Selected Stories*.

board boxes (4, 124, 154, 155) implies Sherlock (Verloc) Holmes' "The Adventures of the Cardboard Box" as well as his "It was elementary" (84) [my dear Watson]; and Alexander Ossipon, later called "Tom" by Winnie, corresponds to Thomas Alexandre Dumas, author of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, whose protagonist, the allegorical Dantes, was imprisoned for some years. Moreover, Winnie's thinking that Mr. Verloc and Stevie "[m]ight be father and son" (153) references not only Turgenev's *Father and Sons* but also Dickens' father and son novel *Dombey and Son*. Likewise, Toodles is a character not only in Dickens but in Conrad also as Private Secretary to Sir Ethelred (118). Intertextual allegory can be covert.

But let us return to the other canon, to the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Hamlet*.

The Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*

Two of the most obvious allegorical works that Conrad secretes in his text are the New Testament and *Pilgrim's Progress*. Locksmith Michaelis, an "apostle" and "ticket-of-leave" (Conrad 29) ex-convict on *parole*, has turned wordsmith. He spends time at a cottage writing an unfinished biography,¹⁵ looks "Angelic", (247) and has divided his writing "into three parts, entitled – 'Faith, Hope, Charity'" (247). As an angelic apostle writing about faith, hope and charity Michaelis is an allegorical figure of New Testament teaching. But, as well, he is an allegorical *Pilgrim's Progress* figure. Faith, Hope and Charity are also characters in Bunyan as well as are Christian and Vainglory (Mr. Verloc thinks he is loved for himself (213)). He is conceited, or in metaphysical poetry terms, is a "conceit."¹⁶ He is a double agent. By its very nature, however, allegory signposts no one fixed referent, no mere double, no one intertext.

The three characters Faith, Hope and Charity occur repeatedly in *The Secret Agent*: Michaelis' thought was "growing like a faith revealed in visions;" his time had been spent in "sepulchral silence" and no "amount of argument could shake his faith;" "he made again the confession of his faith" (37); "He was like those saintly men whose personality is lost in the contemplation of their faith" (88); and "had managed without effort to impress her by his unembittered faith" (89); his "habit . . . of thinking aloud hopefully in the solitude of the four whitewashed walls of his cell" (37); his being an "apostle of humanitarian hopes" (86) and being a model for those who espoused "[t]he humanitarian hopes of the mild Michaelis" (91-2). In contrast with Michaelis as "faith" and "hope", a few others characters allegorize "charity". One is "Chairman of the Governors of the Charity" (127), others "[throw themselves] like

¹⁵ An indeterminate correspondence exists between this biography and Michaelis' autobiography, a work which he was "writing night and day in a shaky, slanting hand that 'Autobiography of a Prisoner'" (Conrad 99). Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan's "The Heterobiography of Joseph K. Conrad" (11-29) offers a possible interpretation of this hybrid genre: "the hidden presence of the [absent] author in his work" (13).

¹⁶ In the traditional fourteen-line sonnet the term "conceit" is "a figure of speech which establishes a striking parallel, usually ingeniously elaborate, between two very dissimilar things or situations" (Abrams 42). Distinct from the Petrarchan conceit, the metaphysical conceit, Samuel Johnson explains, is "a kind of *discordia concors*: a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike . . . The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together" (43).

this on a charity” (131) and limp “[b]etween the lamps of the charitable gate” (138). Neither Michaelis nor the charitable mother of Mrs. Verloc, however, limp or walk about the city. They do not progress. Only Mr. Verloc and Stevie go on a pilgrimage: “Mr. Verloc retraced the path of his morning’s pilgrimage” (31), and there is “the risk of Stevie losing himself for very long on his pilgrimage of filial piety” (139). Winnie, though, is “a wayfarer” (212). Neither the New Testament’s nor *Pilgrim’s Progress*’s moral lessons, however, concern Conrad. In fact, he talks about “moral nihilism” (12) and uses allegory for semiotic purposes only.

Before we turn to *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Hamlet*, a word is in order here regarding the apparent influence Peirce and Nietzsche had on Conrad. De Man’s “Semiology and Rhetoric” chapter in *Allegories of Reading* explains that Peirce and Nietzsche¹⁷ had laid the philosophical foundation for modern semiology (8), a tribute that, in the following quoted passages, Conrad acknowledges. Writing about Nietzsche’s notes to *The Birth of Tragedy*, de Man remarks that “these fragments [valorize] the Dionysian” (117). Conrad’s Professor, quoting Nietzsche’s Dionysus, cheers, “Let us drink and be merry” (Conrad 248), and Ossipon sports an “Apollo-like” (252, 253) head of hair. Zarathustra, too, is heard from: “Thus he spoke” (99) and “Thus spoke Mr. Verloc” (203). In contrast with Nietzsche, Peirce expands the concept of allegory by introducing a third element to the notion of “sign” and “referent”: the notion of “‘interpretant’ within any relationship that the sign entertains with its object” (de Man 8). For Peirce, de Man explains, “The interpretation of the sign is not ... a meaning but another sign; it is a reading, not a decodage, and this reading has, in its turn, to be interpreted into another sign, and so on *ad infinitum*” (9). Its root system is rhizomatous. Thus, Peirce’s sign, though it introduces a third element, is not triangular and is not more stable than Nietzsche’s binary Apollonian / Dionysian. It is less so in that it implies uncertainty.

Gulliver’s Travels and *Hamlet*

Perhaps a more obscure clue to allegory than are those of the New Testament, *Pilgrims Progress*, Nietzsche and Pierce occurs in Conrad’s hint at Jonathan Swiftian allegory. Quoting a “satirical hodgepodge” passage from Book Three of *Gulliver’s Travels*,¹⁸ Peter Schwenger, in “Words and the Murder of the Thing” remarks that

¹⁷ In “What Silenus Knew: Conrad’s Uneasy Debt to Nietzsche” George Butte holds that “echoes of Nietzschean themes [occur] in Conrad’s fiction” (155). (“Silenus” is the name of the pub where, at the end of the novel Ossipon and the Professor meet (248)). Another link between Conrad and Nietzsche might be Stevie’s fear that the cabbie would whip his horse: “‘Don’t whip’” (Conrad 129); toward the end of his life Nietzsche suffered a mental breakdown following his witnessing of a horse being whipped by its driver. Apart from Nietzsche, Butte also mentions a connection with Havelock Ellis as well as with Conrad’s own story, “The Idiots” (161). The woman protagonist in Conrad’s “The Idiots” bears a plot as well as an intertextual relationship to Winnie: in it a woman kills her husband and runs into the sea to be drowned (504). M. Chaikin. “Zola and Conrad’s ‘The Idiots’”, pp. 502-507. See also Erdinast-Vulcan 84-87.

¹⁸ *Since words are only Names for Things, it would be more convenient for all Men to carry about them, such Things as were necessary to express the particular Business they are to discourse on ...* (Swift).

“Swift is satirizing the notion of a perfect correspondence between words and the physical things they denominate” (99). He adds a footnote to this remark, pointing out that Swift critics identify a particular target of this satire: Thomas Sprat’s¹⁹ desire for an Edenic time ““when men deliver’d so many things, almost in an equal number of words”” (99). One instance of Conrad’s playing a word game with Swiftian satire occurs in his delayed decoded “This was very swift” (Conrad 192), a comment which belatedly responds to the apparently insignificant, ““And your sprat?”” (176). Another Swiftian instance occurs earlier on in the text when Stevie, who had thought that “the old terrorist” (Karl Yundt) had used the term “cannibalistic” literally, not allegorically, swallows “the terrifying statement with an audible gulp...as though it had been swift poison ...” (42). He is gullible.

Conrad’s “paraphrasing” of *Hamlet* references its source more readily, perhaps, than does his allusions to Swift. A number of critics have commented on Conrad’s revisionist quotations. For example, Peter Mallios’ note 5 to Chapter Eleven of *The Secret Agent* identifies several such revisions (305). In addition to these, variation of *Hamletian* “smile and smile” occur not infrequently throughout the text and Conrad’s “Author’s Note” reminds us that “Man may smile and smile but he is not an investigating animal” (xxxiv). In the text itself, we read that “the banal society smiles hardened on the worldly faces turned towards her with conventional deference” (91), and that a customer “smiled the smile of an old distant acquaintance” (165): [*That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain. Hamlet I.v.108*]. Other revisions include ““What is the matter?”” (Conrad 29) [“*What is the matter, my lord?*”” *Hamlet* 11.ii.195]; ““Fasten yourself upon the woman for all she’s worth”” (65) [*Those friends thou has’t, and their adoption tried / Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel. Hamlet I.iii.62-63*]; and “laid out in the likeness of funereal baked meats” (207) [*The funeral bak’d meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage table. Hamlet I.ii.180-81*]. *Hamlet*, however, need not be a man. S/he can be (wo)man. She can be, as we shall soon see, a semiotically motivated²⁰ sign, not a fixed one. She can become destabilized, become mad.

Winnie has method and is mad [*Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t. Hamlet II.ii.195*]. Winnie’s method, as we have already seen, is to not look into things, her “... principle to ignore bore merely on the methods” (126). Later she “suddenly stop[s] in her methodical proceedings” and then goes “on with her me-

¹⁹ Swift’s target must have been the poet and prose writer Thomas Spratt (1635-1713), <http://www.westminster-abbey.org/our-history/people/thomas-sprat>. Schwenger’s footnote 2 cites “Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society*, ed. Jackson I. Cope and Harold Jones [St. Louis, 1958], p. 113.” (99-100). See also Chandler 125.

²⁰ Distinct from an arbitrary sign, “a motivated or natural sign is one which is linked to that which it represents by a resemblance or connection existing independently of the conventions of the sign system to which the sign belongs” (Hawthorn 2004, 17). Explaining that ““motivation of the sign’... refers to the relationship between the signifier and the signified”, O’Sullivan *et al.* provide the example of the highly motivated photograph signifier. In the photograph “the form (the appearance) of the sign (the photograph) is largely determined by the nature of the signified. It has to look like a cat. The signifier is not totally determined by the signified, because the photographer can choose the camera angle, distance, focus and so on. So a photograph is highly motivated but never totally motivated ... (188-189). In narrative, the sign can be motivated by point of view or focalization.

thodical proceedings” (157). No longer methodically stable, Winnie, as sign, now changes angle of vision, changes from non-motivated (arbitrary) to motivated. The madness of her method is seen in “... her crazed eyes ...” (172); in her “whole being [being] racked by that ... maddening thought” (202); in telling “... some crazy tale or other about [Mr. Verloc]” (211); in having “gone raving mad” (214); in her fear that she will ““go mad”” (231); and in that the gas light ““will drive [her] crazy”” (234). In portraying Winnie as having *Hamletian* characteristics, Conrad draws attention to the notion of difference, not sameness, of the word: woman, not man. Notable is the difference between Winnie’s and Ossipon’s thought processes. He, although he has “the insane notion of strangling [Winnie]” (237) and thinks “of everything with extraordinary method” (238) – because of “*madness or despair*” (253) – is “scientifically afraid of insanity lying in wait for him among these lines” (250).²¹ Different from Winnie, he “saw himself living in abject terror in some obscure hamlet in Spain or Italy” (238). Unlike hers, Ossipon’s thought processes transport him to sunnier climes. Not all signs are of equal value, not all motivated; many are arbitrary. Moreover, some texts can be schizoid. Yet Winnie’s and Ossipon’s connection to each other is detectable in Winnie’s form being shaped as that of “a young woman with a full bust” (4-5) and of Ossipon’s form being “robust” (43). The connection between these two characters can also be found in Winnie’s insisting that she will not be hanged. That is, she will not be depended by rope from a gallows; similarly, as it turns out, Ossipon is also not dependable. He is hardly Winnie’s “saviour” (238). For Mallios the name “Ossipon” is a scrambling of the word of “poison” (41) (297). This poison or venom, however, does not apply to snakes which, because of “the venomous spluttering of the old terrorist without teeth” (42), do not bite. These snakes are of the constricting kind. Having become entangled with his financial benefactor Winnie, Ossipon “positively [sees] snakes now” and sees “the woman twined round him like a snake” (237). He dreads being twinned with Winnie, being constricted.

But Ossipon’s name can also suggest that he is an animal of a different kind. The name “Ossipon” is more likely an anagram of the French word for “fish”, *poisson*, than a scrambling of the word “poison.” Mr. Vladimir is “...rosy about the gills” (21); Sardines, sprats (176); whales and dog fish (177); and other fish-related terms swim around in Conrad’s text and certainly the story is allegorically fishy. Mr. Verloc fishes “for his hat” (163) and the Assistant Commissioner tells Toodles that he is about to catch ““a witty fish”” (177). Conrad hauls in his catch by releasing “a catch in order to speak” (239), by using a “hooked iron contrivance” (128) which “hearten[ed] him to grapple” (80) with the use of semiotics. He draws the reader’s attention to these red herrings and other intratextual referencing by highlighting the droll connection (16) between incongruous ideas: “an unhappy homeless couch [is] accompanied by two unrelated chairs” (69). Conrad’s being a polyglot and an adept user of foreign tongues has surely heightened his awareness of language as allegory.

For the native speaker, allegory may not always be so obvious. Contemplating the cabbie’s wretched horse, Stevie, “trying to express the view newly opened to his

²¹ “...you discover your *clairvoyance* to be a liar. You knew from the first she was in an abnormal condition of nerves; and everybody whose nerves are not in perfect adjustment does lie” (Peirce 185).

sympathies of the human [Yahoo] and equine [Houyhnhnm] misery in close association”, finds it “very difficult” to make the connection (140). Soon, though, Stevie begins to articulate this disconnection: “The docile Stevie... [mutters] half-words, and even words that would have been whole if they had not been made up of halves that did not belong to each other” (141). He couches his words in unrelated non-correspondence. He begins to understand Sherlock Holmes’ challenge that “the [semiotic] game’s afoot” and testifies to his discovery by the fragment of legs and foot (74) which survive his annihilation. He takes the game of language seriously²² and forfeits his life for his native word-thought method, a word-thought connection which ESL Mr. Vladimir finds amusing. The allegorical word may not always be culturally translatable.

Signs other than words function semiotically. The triangle shape Δ associated with Verloc’s name (23, 23, 147, 234)²³ has attracted much critical interest. Most critics identify the shape as the Greek letter “delta” and speculate on its significance as such. But the word “delta” also has a fish-related meaning: “a nearly flat plain of alluvial deposit between diverging branches of the mouth of a river, often triangular” (Random House Dictionary). As such, the shape acts as metonymy for words having diverging branches.

Word’s refracting, explosive,²⁴ nature is performed most obviously in the central action of *The Secret Agent*: the explosion in Greenwich Park. This semiotic and allegorical event epitomizes the concept of a thing being lied about by the word. That word is “overcoat”, cover up. As cover the word secretes (hides) its lie. The police investigation finds that this “piece of material evidence” (121) includes “a narrow strip of velvet with a larger triangular piece of dark blue cloth hanging from it” (75). The constable who had gathered up the corpse’s fragmented remains corroborates this detailing evidence: “Velvet collar. Funny the old woman should have noticed the velvet collar. Dark blue overcoat with a velvet collar, she has told us. He was the chap she saw, and no mistake. And here he is all complete, velvet collar and all. I don’t think I missed a single piece as big as a postage stamp” (75). Third-hand witness report and fragmented material evidence correspond. The old woman who had identified the wearer of the coat had told the sergeant (who had told the constable) that “he was a fair-haired fellow. She [had] noticed two men coming out of the station... [but had not been able to] tell if they were together [and had taken] no particular notice of the big one, but [had noticed that] the other was a fair, slight chap, carrying a tin varnished can in one hand” (74). The old woman was not the only witness to the departure of these two men from the railway station. To a Maze Hill Station porter –

²² In his “Author’s Note”, Conrad remarks that he wrote the story in “a mood as serious in feeling and thought as any in which [he] had ever [written] a line” (xxxviii). He also quotes a comment made by another about his writing: “that Conrad must... [have] an excellent intuition of things.”

²³ Interestingly, the two instances of this shape on p. 23 are followed by a tittle, while the other two are not. Also, see Peirce (203) for his use of the triangle sign.

²⁴ In a letter to Edward Garnett, Conrad points out that his inspiration came from Garnett’s “words, words, words...explode like stored powder barrels....An explosion is the most lasting thing in the universe. It leaves disorder, remembrance, room to move, a clear space. Ask your Nihilistic friends” (Hawthorn 1979, 84).

Inspector Heat (who had been told by the constable, who had been told by the sergeant) tells the Assistant Commissioner – the men seemed to be “two respectable working men of a superior sort – sign painters The big man [had] got out of a third class compartment backward, with a bright tin can in his hand. On the platform he [had given] it to carry to the fair young fellow who followed him. All this [had agreed] exactly with what the old woman [had] told the police sergeant in Greenwich” (84). In fact it does not. Heat does not tell the Assistant Commissioner that the old woman is said to have described the coat as having a velvet collar, nor does he mention that he had previously flung the collar back on the table (75). Something is lost, or gained, in translation.²⁵

As the police investigation continues, this thing – the mystery of the overcoat detail – will turn out “likely to remain forever unknown” (74). Contemplating this unknowable, Inspector Heat hears “[t]he echo of the words ‘Person unknown’ repeating itself in his inner consciousness He would have liked to trace this affair back to its mysterious origin for his own information” (74). The relationship of word to thing is unknown to him. The Peircian “sign proper” correspondence between sign and referent has become detached by the explosive contents of “an old one gallon copal²⁶ varnish can” (63). The relationship has been glossed over.

Because “the first term of the problem [is] unreadable” (74-5), Inspector Heat, after stuffing “the triangular piece of broadcloth” into his pocket, flings “the velvet collar back on the table” (75). He detects a “cover up” (75) of thing over word. Later, when reporting on the case to the Assistant Commissioner, Heat pulls out of his pocket “a singed rag of dark blue cloth” (103) on which is written an address and which is a remnant of “the overcoat the fellow who got himself blown to pieces was wearing” (103). While it identifies an address, the singed rag does not name a person, does not name, as it were, a signature: it is un’sign’ed. Recognizing the address as that of the Verloc’s, Chief Inspector Heat comments that “the overcoat may not have been [the wearer’s], and may have been stolen [but says that] that’s not at all probable if you look at the “square piece of calico with an address written on it in marking ink” (103). Mysteriously a triangular piece of broadcloth has been reshaped as a square piece of calico. Triangulated Chesham Square (13) has been returned to its original shape. The concept of delta does not appeal to Heat; he does not approve of Verloc being a double agent, a Verloc Δ .

While the cloth is unsinged – it is, in a verbal sense, not signed – the address marked on it contains sign and referent. What subsequently is identified as “32 Brett Street” (104) is now “the number 32 and the name of Brett Street ... written in marking ink on a piece of calico slightly larger than an ordinary cigarette paper” (104). The specific “32” thing is detached from the general words “Brett Street” in the same way as the number 37 on a gate in Chesham Square is detached from its house. Word and thing do not add up; they non-plus (231). Detection needs to shape up.

²⁵ See footnote 5 re allegory and translation.

²⁶ “A lustrous resin obtained from various tropical trees and used in making varnishes” (Random House Webster’s College Dictionary).

The overcoat itself, however, similar in function to “the old woman’s cloak” (128)²⁷ – but unlike it in being detached from its collar – has been blown up, yet is not immaterial evidence of a crime. Though it no longer functions as a cover, its velvet collar – lying on the table where Inspector Heat had flung it – remains. Before that, though, the collar had been attached to an overcoat – Mr. Verloc’s, not Stevie’s. Early in the text, Mr. Verloc, confronted by Mr. Vladimir, had felt “[t]he nape of his neck [become] crimson above the velvet collar of his overcoat” (19). That Conrad does not supply this velvet collar detail to a description of Stevie’s overcoat – “[t]he material of [the two men’s] overcoats was the same” (153) – is unlikely to be an omission on his part. Nor is it likely that the two men, being of dissimilar shape and size, exchange overcoats. To whose overcoat, then, does the velvet collar which survives the explosion adhere? Whodunit? To whom does the explosive word belong? The overcoat?

More ambiguous than this unidentified cause/effect is Mr. Verloc’s behavior after returning home from Greenwich Park: “Mr. Verloc, against his usual practice, had thrown off his overcoat. It was lying on the sofa” (156). Later when an unnamed visitor (Mr. Vladimir) calls to see him at the shop he “stood looking down at his overcoat lying [on the sofa], as though he were afraid to touch it” (161). Who belies? The overcoat, the collar, the sofa²⁸? Preparing to accompany this person outdoors, Mr. Verloc “had done no more than put on his overcoat” (163). He covers up; is not overheard by the narrator. Though Conrad reports no audible words between these two men, Mr. Verloc’s words or unspoken thoughts act equally as a disguising overcoat. It is an under-lying word.

The subsequent secret conversation between Heat and Verloc, however, being partly audible, acts as a partial cover up, a camouflage. Having been “chucked out” (165) of his responsibilities as chief investigating officer in the Greenwich Park explosion case, Inspector Heat visits the Verloc shop for a chat with Mr. Verloc. Finding him at home, they leave the shop where Winnie sits behind the counter, enter the parlour and close the door behind them. The previously uncurious, “things don’t bear looking into” Winnie, having just been told by Heat that Stevie has been killed, eavesdrops on the parlour conversation. Putting “her ear to the keyhole... [she hears] plainly the Chief Inspector’s voice, though she [can] not see his finger pressed against her husband’s breast emphatically” (170). At first she hears “the voice of Mr. Verloc;” then hears “only muttering” and after, she hears “her husband a little louder.” Then again she hears “nothing but murmurs ... less nightmarish ... than the horrible suggestions of shaped words” (170). Soon, “there [is] silence” followed by “the voice of Mr. Verloc” which sank and rose and “was heard to laugh a little” (171). After Winnie overhears the details of the accident that killed Stevie, she jumps up “from her crouching position and [stops] her ears” (172). She does not hear the remainder of the conversation that the reader hears. She hears not. And when Heat leaves the

²⁷ Gogol’s self-reflexive “The Overcoat” is sometimes translated as “The Cloak”. In this short story, Akaky’s overcoat is stolen and the police do not find the thief. But after his death Akaky returns and sees people as overcoats.

²⁸ The sofa is not the only allegorical “thing” which lies; throughout the work Mr. Verloc, only, lies on the sofa.

premises, Winnie, “behind the counter, might have heard but [does] not see his departure” (173). Hearing and understanding do not necessarily correspond; hearsay can be mendacious. Word’s referent is not always apparent; it sometimes escapes detection.

Like the glossy copal varnish can which does not survive the explosion, Winnie’s gold circlet wedding ring which “glitter[s] exceedingly with the untarnished glory of a piece of some splendid treasure of jewels, dropped in a dust bin” (174), becomes ineffective. A circumscribing wedding ring changes in semiotic capacity, loses potency. Having been escorted to the lower deck of the steamer which is to take her to St. Malo, Winnie disappears; but her wedding ring is found “lying on the seat” where she had reclined on the upper deck (252). The ring lies; Winnie hides. “She [is] nowhere. She [is] gone” (251). Referent remains while the sign does not. The relationship between signifier and referent, like the velvet collar, has become detached. The notion of absence as presence recurs here and suggests that the unconscious remains below deck.

Earlier on, when she had first tried to convey her mind’s state to Ossipon, Winnie “had imagined her incoherence to be clearness itself. She had no conscience of how little she had audibly said in the disjointed phrases completed only in her thought” (230). Perhaps – I am just guessing – she had believed in the then popular medium of telepathy.²⁹ Perhaps for this reason too she had come to know Ossipon’s familiar name, “Tom”: “... he was called Tom by arrangement with the most familiar of his intimates” (224). Having come to realize that she can know the circumstances of Stevie’s death through presence of absence³⁰ in the Heat/Verloc parlour conversation, Winnie imagines that Ossipon too can know in this way. Although Ossipon has no firsthand knowledge of the circumstances of Mr. Verloc’s death he believes both a lying Inspector Heat, “a fellow whom you may have seen once or twice at the shop perhaps” (223) and the lying “evening paper” (223), believes that Verloc was killed in the explosion. Not present at the Greenwich Park accident, Ossipon believes hearsay.

Despite her twice mentioned “‘Haven’t you guessed what I was driven to do!’” exclamation (230, 230) Winnie takes for granted that Ossipon “‘needn’t be long in guessing then what [she is] afraid of’” (230). She, however, does not know *his* mind; this reading guessed wrongly that Winnie believes in mental therapy. While Ossipon himself does not second guess events or people, he realizes that others may do so. Fearing that she “‘may be guessed at as [being] Mrs. Verloc running away’” with

²⁹ Not long before this Ossipon had asked Winnie whether Mr. Verloc’s bank account had been in the name of “Smith”: “‘The bank has no means of knowing that Mr. Verloc and, say, Smith are one and the same person’” (Conrad 240). This reference may be one of Conrad’s “delayed decoding” clues to George Albert Smith of the Society for Psychical Research. See Peirces’ *Reasoning and the Logic of Things*, 272 n7. Elsewhere, the account is in the name of “Prozor”, which is reminiscent of the Ukrainian word for “transparent / limpid” or the Russian and Ukrainian words for “perspicacious / insightful / clairvoyant”.

³⁰ In *The World, the Text and the Critic* Edward Said comments on Conrad’s treatment of absence as presence (95, 97) and on his “negation of writing” (107-110) as well as on Jonathan Swift’s irony (87). And in “Negation, Privation, Absence” Senn provides a detailed analysis of Conrad’s use of “negative adjectives” and other “nothing” words.

Ossipon (238) – “which was no guess at all” (227) – he advises her to enter the railway platform unaccompanied. Some ten days (250) after Winnie is “gone” and when Mr. Verloc’s corpse has not yet been discovered, or at least not publicized, Ossipon re-reads the end sentence of a paragraph: “*An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness and despair*” (250).

In the ten-day interval between Winnie’s disappearance and Ossipon’s re-reading of the end sentence of a paragraph, Ossipon does participate in mental telepathy. Though he had not left London after he had abandoned her (in fact he walks all night before returning home in the morning (244-245)) he is “well informed [and knows] what the [Southampton] gangway man had seen: “A lady in a black dress and a black veil, wandering at midnight alongside, on the quay. ‘Are you going by the boat, ma’am,’ he had asked her encouragingly. ‘This way.’ She seemed not to know what to do. He helped her on board. She seemed weak”” (251). Ossipon also knows “what the stewardess [who had attended the now unveiled Winnie on board the boat] had seen: a lady in black with a white face [who] ... seemed to them to be dying” (251). Although the stewardess’s reported speech is metaleptically at further remove than is the gangway man’s voice, “Ossipon [is] informed that the good woman found the unhappy lady lying down in one of the hooded seats” (251). In touch with absence he knows that, despite the gangway man’s and the stewardess’s assessment of Winnie’s condition, Winnie is not dying; she is nowhere. If we remember that Stevie was, after all, the author of his own misfortune, then Culler might claim that she is foretelling the death of the author and the birth of the reader (38).

The likelihood that Ossipon knows, not by guessing, but by telepathy seems to be a more persuasive argument. “Comrade Ossipon knew that behind that white mask of despair there was struggling against terror and despair a vigour of vitality, a love of life that could resist ... mad fear of the gallows. He knew. But the stewardess and the chief steward knew nothing ...” (251). In fact, they know something and that something is “nothing.” Ossipon, too, has come to know, but he comes to know differently than the steward and stewardess do. Leaving the Silenus,³¹ he starts to walk “without looking where he put his feet, feeling no fatigue, feeling nothing, seeing nothing, hearing not a sound” (253). Just as when he first sees Mr. Verloc’s body lying on the sofa (232), Ossipon’s “body, left thus without intellectual guidance, [holds on] with the unthinkable force of instinct” (232).³² He knows by neither guessing nor telepathy, but by instinct. Here, Conrad considers to what extent post-allegory semiotic epistemology is instinctual rather than intellectual truth; to what extent knowledge is mind over matter.

The importance of mind in *The Secret Agent* as well as in language usage attracted the attention of contemporary book reviewers. Shortly after the novel’s publication in 1907 a number of reviewers remarked on their reading of the work’s epistemologically related thematics. *The Athenaeum*’s writer remarks on “the remarkable character of [Mr. Conrad’s] mind ... [and] his mental attributes” (Mallios 256). The *New*

³¹ In “The Birth of Tragedy” Nietzsche tells the story in which King Midas says that “...best of all [is] to be *nothing*.”

³² Peirce holds that knowledge is instinctual, not intuitive (Cooke 42-44 and 7-12 respectively).

York Daily Tribune's writer notes that Mr. Conrad's "first object, and his last, is to create an atmosphere ... in which we watch the movements of men's minds, hardly caring what happens to their bodies [t]he absorbing thing in his work is his subtle analysis of mental states Queer lightning flashes in the fog of words ... expose the last secrets of their hearts and brain" (256). And in *The Academy* S. Squire Sprigge comments that "the simplicity lies neither in the events nor the planning, but in the author's method ... Mr. Conrad does the telling, and you do the thinking, with very little indication from him as to what direction the thinking should take" (257). Alternatively *Country Life* claims that "... the reader knows absolutely that Mr. Conrad is guessing, and guessing very badly, at the intricate movements of a woman's mind. There is no way by means of which he could get within it" (257). Schwenger's more recent criticism of prose poetry, however, compares thematically with these earlier reviews.

Critiquing the work of prose poem³³ writer Gertrude Stein, Schwenger remarks that her work "invites us into a process of making sense, without any intention of arriving at a definitive sense" (105). In quoting a passage from Stein's *Tender Buttons*, Schwenger notes the work's inclusion of both difference and likeness and interprets this inclusion as indicating that it is "the mind that is being shown, rather than the thing. And, as well, language is being shown." Schwenger notes Sherwood Anderson's brother's reaction to Stein: "'It gives words an oddly new intimate flavor and at the same time makes familiar words seem almost like strangers.' What is defamiliarized, then, is not common objects, but common words" (105). The same remarks, undoubtedly, could be made of Conrad's text.

Asking how a reader can know what a text's referents are, Conrad enumerates at length, as we have seen, epistemology's thought methods and concludes that attempting to know is not something that language can predict. Indeed, Mr. Verloc's final word is a contraction of "do not": "'don't'" (215). And like her mother who "was gone – gone for good" (146) Winnie is "nowhere," she is "gone" (251). She is not discernible, is absent. If, then, the word is not the thing and the sign is not the referent, how can we know what's what? – is a question Conrad asks. How can we know what *The Secret Agent*'s referents are? Like the Assistant Commissioner, who observes "that this is a very improper remark to make," Conrad, in Heat's voice, replies, "'I'll tell you that this is not my meaning'" (97).

....Conrad himself guardedly admitted the fact that the reader's response to his work is necessarily subjective and conditioned to a certain extent by the inbuilt 'indeterminacy' of the literary text. In the 'Author's Note' to *Typhoon and Other Stories*, for example, he observes two critics' different readings of the title story: 'neither was exclusively my intention;' and of the entire volume: 'each of those stories, to mean something, must justify itself in its own way to the conscience of each successive reader' (vii).

(Senn 127-28)

³³ As well as "Smith", one of Verloc's pseudonyms is "Prozor" (prose or poem), a name which may reference the prose poet Baudelaire. Conrad hints at this suggestion in "the cracked bell" (4) and in his attention to correspondence (both titles of prose poems by Baudelaire).

The interpretant plays an important role in reading Conrad.

Distinguishing among the three kinds of Peircian interpretants, David A. Pharies explains the third kind: this “interpretant is of the nature of a SIGN when the effect of the original sign is to make the interpreter THINK. (5.475)” These interpretants Peirce calls ‘logical’ interpretants. (5.476)” (18). The logical interpretant may be a word, a simple proposition or even an entire book, as in the case when a book attempts to serve as the interpretant of *Hamlet*” (18). *The Secret Agent* serves as an interpretant of several allegorical books.

...from the seventeenth century, one began to ask how a sign could be linked to what it signified. A question to which the Classical period was to reply by the analysis of representation; and to which modern thought was to reply by the analysis of meaning and signification.The profound kinship of language with the world was thus dissolved... Things and words were to be separated from each other... Discourse was still to have the task of speaking that which is, but it was no longer to be anything more than what it said.

....

There is nothing now, either in our knowledge or in our reflection, that still recalls even the memory of that being [the primitive being of the Like]. Nothing, except perhaps literature – and even then in a fashion more allusive and diagonal than direct. It may be said in a sense that ‘literature’, as it was constituted and so designated on the threshold of the modern age, manifests...the reappearance of the living being of language....The art of language was a way of ‘making a sign’ – of simultaneously signifying something and arranging signs around that thing; an art of naming, therefore, and then, by means of a reduplication both demonstrative and decorative, of capturing that name, of enclosing and concealing it, of designating it in turn by other names that were the deferred presence of the first name, its secondary sign, its figuration, its rhetorical panoply. And yet, throughout the nineteenth century, and right up to our own day... literature achieved autonomous existence, and separated itself from all other language with a deep scission, only by forming a sort of ‘counter-discourse’, and by finding its way back from the representative of signifying function of language to this raw being that had been forgotten since the sixteenth century. (Foucault 43-44)

Whereas a simple story may remain inscrutable to the sophisticated reader, and a myth inscrutable to any reader at all, the correspondences of allegory are open to any who have a decoder’s skill. In this way, oddly enough, allegorical intention is in general a simple matter (Fletcher 325).

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