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SELF-ADAPTATION:

THE STAGE DRAMATISATION OF FICTION BY NOVELISTS



Caricature of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* in *The Stage* 9 November 1922

RICHARD JAMES HAND

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

1996

SELF-ADAPTATION:
THE STAGE DRAMATISATION OF FICTION BY NOVELISTS

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ABSTRACT

The stage dramatisation of fiction is a common and increasingly popular practice. Normally, a dramatist will take a novelist's work and adapt it, but there are cases dating back to at least the sixteenth century where novelists themselves have attempted to dramatise their own fiction. In the context of British theatre, it was not until the 1911 Copyright Act that novelists had copyright over the dramatisation of their original work. For this reason, novelists were obliged to adapt their own fiction to protect it against unauthorised dramatisation. Several authors, however, adapted their novels for more than reasons of copyright. The glamour of the West End and the potential for financial reward lured the novelists into adaptation. There was also substantial encouragement by leading figures in the theatre to get the assistance of "men of letters" in the creation of a "literary theatre". For Henry James the appeal lay in the technical challenge of dramatic form, and for others too adaptation represented a creative experiment.

In the numerous adaptations of Henry James the language of the fictional narrator invades his scripts, in the form of stage directions or forced into the mouths of the characters. James is fascinated by the technical aspect of drama and he did make a substantial effort to rewrite *Daisy Miller* to make it suitable for the dramatic genre, but this includes a disappointing use of stage cliché as part of the mechanics of stagecraft (such as melodramatic techniques and the "happy ending"). Over all, despite his concerted efforts it appears that James underestimates the intelligence of the audience and the dynamics of the stage.

Thomas Hardy was enthusiastic about the stage in his youth and had some innovative ideas for the stage but never fully realised his concepts. The adaptation of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* has some evocative imagery but is more like a

medley of dramatic highlights separated by major ellipses than the panoramic and inexorable vision of the novel. This has an effect on language inasmuch as the stage dialogue is more melodramatic and overloaded with information than the equivalent passages in the novel.

Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is a key novel of early twentieth-century English literature. It is a devastating satire on late Victorian society on all levels: law and order; parliamentary and anarchistic politics; the class system; the domestic world. Most impressively, the novel constructs a powerful sense of London as a forum of experience, and Conrad's refusal to adhere to a strictly chronological exposition creates a remarkable, ironic complexity. In the adaptation of *The Secret Agent*, Conrad sustains a loyalty to the novel which mars the play with too many characters and an excess of exposition. Conrad's decision to be chronological in the adaptation strips the story of its sophistication and creates an uncompromising, even shocking, play. This could be seen as a merit as are Conrad's expressionistic touches and his treatment of heroism and insanity. Indeed, the play is a compulsive experience and claims that it is ahead of its time are perhaps justified.

The process of self-adaptation is illuminating because it reveals much about the way these novelists saw their fiction as well as the broader perception of their culture. Most interesting is Conrad because the adaptation of *The Secret Agent* was an ambitious project and the various discoveries Conrad makes in dramatising his own novel — including horror — reveals much about various aspects of culture, genre, and text in the early modern period.

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September 1996

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SELF-ADAPTATION:
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PREFACE

The study of adaptation is frequently marred by subjective evaluation. It is an area of research and debate that is fought over by critics of literature and of drama. My research in the field of self-adaptation has been carried out within the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies and the Department of English Literature at the University of Glasgow.

In this thesis I will focus on three self-adapters: Henry James, Thomas Hardy, and Joseph Conrad. Their experiences of, and attitudes towards, adaptation were diverse with one uniting factor: all of their plays were unsuccessful. I will strive to elucidate the context and experience of these three novelists whose plays have, to some extent unfairly, disappeared into the backwaters of literary and theatrical history. It is hoped that this study will illuminate the context in which they produced their plays; how they wrote them; and why their dramatic enterprises failed. In my research I have used the fiction and drama of the chosen novelists as well as their letters, notebooks and other writings. I have also made use of relevant works by literary and dramatic critics. Particularly useful have been Leon Edel and R. R. Kossmann in relation to James, Margerite Roberts on Hardy, and Jacques Berthoud and Frederick Karl on Conrad. There is a wealth of material on the fictional works of my chosen authors but very little on their plays. It is hoped that this is a contribution to the study of their drama as well as to this specific field of adaptation.

James was active in drama from the 1880s into the twentieth century. Hardy wrote his *Tess* adaptation in the 1890s but it was not given a full London production until the 1920s. Conrad first attempted adaptation in the 1890s, but his most ambitious attempt was his 1919 adaptation of *The Secret Agent*. Although a fairly broad period will be covered, it is the perspective, practice and experiences of the three central writers which will unite the study. The focal figure in my study will be

Joseph Conrad, whose fiction and drama proved to be the most rewarding and challenging in my research. I have provided substantial studies of *The Secret Agent* as a novel and as a play in isolation before interrelating the two.

A version of Chapter 3 was presented as a conference paper entitled “Self-Adaptation and the Literature of Region and Nation with special reference to Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*” at the Fourth International Conference on the Literature of Region and Nation at the University of Wales, Swansea (1992); and a version of Chapter 5 was presented as a conference paper entitled “Self-Adaptation, the stage dramatisations of novels by the authors themselves” at the 1992 Postgraduate Conference at the University of Glasgow.

I would like to express my thanks to Mr Claude Schumacher and Dr Donald Mackenzie who gave me excellent guidance during my two full-time years at the University of Glasgow. They continued to be extremely understanding and tolerant of a difficult research situation when I took up my full-time lectureship at the University of Humberside. They will remain, as Conrad would have said, “worthy of my undying regard”.

Richard James Hand

Chapter One

ADAPTATION AND SELF-ADAPTATION: AN INTRODUCTION

Adaptation — the conversion of fictional narrative into drama — has been common practice for centuries. Before the rise of the novel, other varieties of adaptation were at the centre of cultural practice: the use of traditional stories in the formation of Greek dramatic texts; the dramatisation of Scripture in the medieval miracle plays; and so on. Adaptation has a central place in our culture with a profound resonance across our civilisation. The broad concept of adaptation is of central interest to a cultural theorist such as George Steiner whose *Antigones*¹ investigates the prevalence, and adaptability, of Greek myth in the art and thought of western civilisation. Steiner's *After Babel*² explores adaptation in the specific form of translation. Similarly, Michael Edwards investigates aspects of adaptation in the form of translation and myth in *Towards a Christian Poetics*³ and *On Making Many Books*.⁴ If we turn our attention to individual writers in our culture, perhaps the English adapter *par excellence* is Shakespeare. In constructing his plays he makes use of a wide range of sources whether this is drama (from Plautus to the *Ur-Hamlet*) or non-fictional prose (from Holinshed to North's Plutarch). With regards to fiction, Shakespeare uses Bandello, Giovanni Fiorentino, Boccaccio, Cinthio and others. This process of adaptation is central to Shakespeare's art: he uses materials and models in creating "new" plays. Just as Shakespeare was an adapter, so his plays have in turn been adapted. Of course we should mention that this reflects the process of drama itself, the shift from text to performance. Each level of interpretation — director, designer, actor, and so on — is modified by ideological, material and physical influences.

¹ See Steiner, George, *Antigones*, Oxford University Press: 1984.

² See Steiner, George, *After Babel* (Second Edition), Oxford University Press: 1992.

³ See Edwards, Michael, *Towards a Christian Poetics*, Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1984.

⁴ See Edwards, Michael, *Of Making Many Books*, Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1990.

In our own time adaptations proliferate: between 1980 and 1985 adaptations of fiction amounted to five per cent of theatre performances in Britain; in 1992 the figure was around seventeen to twenty per cent.⁵ I think it partly reflects a cautious theatrical industry where chances are not taken on original drama. The title of a successful work of fiction may be enough to secure the interest of an audience; or if a story “worked” as a fictional narrative this may be seen as evidence of its strength to form the basis of a play. Adaptations of fiction have been ambitious (David Edgar’s *Nicholas Nickleby*); fortune-making (Royal Shakespeare Company’s *Les Misérables*); and avant-garde (Berkoff’s Kafka plays). Despite the diversity and increasing quantity of adaptations, let alone the fact that it is at the heart of our culture, it is a process that still has its critical enemies. Joyce McMillan, for instance, states:

There are 101 good arguments against the wave of miniature novel adaptations now sweeping British theatres. Far too often, they reduce theatre from full-blooded drama to a kind of illustrated narrative, with the audience held at a comfortable arm’s length; far too often, they distract the audience with self-consciously ingenious tricks of staging, which have nothing to do with the content of the piece, and everything to do with theatre’s depressing status as an old-fashioned curio among art forms. Then again, with their small casts and their famous, easy-to-market titles, they are too much of a temptation to hard-pressed companies; people do them dutifully and often without flair.⁶

Without neglecting the important financial aspect of adaptation, McMillan draws our attention to the problems in adaptation which can be detrimental to both drama and fiction. Similarly we find Michael Billington asserting that usually in adaptations “you get just about every quality except the ones that made the original a masterpiece in the first place”.⁷ This issue — essentially the question “the work was written as a fictional narrative for a reason, so why attempt to convert it into another genre?” — is central to the whole adaptation debate.

⁵ See Reynolds, Peter (ed.), *Novel Images: Literature in Performance*, Routledge: London, 1993, pp. 4-5.

⁶ *The Guardian* “Review”, 2 February 1993, p. 6.

⁷ *The Guardian*, 11 December 1991, p. 34.

This topic becomes particularly interesting when we consider self-adaptation, the attempt of novelists to adapt their own fiction, because it is no longer simply a question of a playwright looking over the generic fence, as it were, and seeing dramatic potential in a novel. A self-adapter indelibly connects the two versions because he is the originator of the primary text and subsequently, by adapting it, its interpreter. One effect of this close link is in terms of critical reception: reviewers sometimes patronise writers working in an alien genre. Moreover, I have found that an analysis of the motives of novelists who tried to adapt their own fiction, and the problems they experienced in the attempt, is interesting in terms of literary history and as an artistic practice. An analysis of these novelists reveals much about the process of adaptation and, I believe, modern culture itself.

In our own time writers such as Harold Pinter have attempted self-adaptation: the television play, and latterly stage work, *Tea Party* (1965) is a dramatisation of his short story "Tea Party" (1963). Pinter is, of course, primarily a dramatist, so in this instance we find a writer transforming a work into a more familiar genre. Nevertheless, Pinter comments on the adaptation, "In my view, the story was the more successful".⁸ Earlier in the twentieth century there have been significant self-adaptations: Mikhail Bulgakov, for instance, turned his novel *The White Guard* (1925) into a play for the Moscow Art Theatre in the same year as the novel was published. Other novelists who dramatised their own fiction include D. H. Lawrence, Graham Greene, P. G. Wodehouse and John Steinbeck. A particularly prolific self-adapter is Agatha Christie: even *The Mousetrap* (1954) is an adaptation of the short story "Three Blind Mice" (1950). The earliest instance of self-adaptation I have been able to locate is German: in 1554 Jörg Wickram wrote *Der Jungen Knabenspiegel*, an educational *Büchlein*, which he turned into a play later in the same year. [Appendix 1 provides a selected list of self-adapters.] In this thesis, however, I have decided to narrow my study down to look at one of the most interesting periods of self-adaptation: the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; in other words, the era that sees the burgeoning of Modernism. In 1891 Guy de Maupassant wrote, "I

⁸ Pinter, Harold, *Plays: Three*, Methuen: London, 1978, p. 242.

believe the art of dramatising the novel is a dead art”;⁹ yet in many ways that is when adaptation becomes most interesting because of the experiences of the self-adapters and the challenge presented by their fiction. I will look at figures who have been called “transitional” writers or pioneers of Modernist fiction but also attempted to become playwrights. For example, *Daisy Miller*, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, and *The Secret Agent* are all the titles of *plays* by Henry James, Thomas Hardy, and Joseph Conrad respectively as well as the more famous novels. However, before looking at the adaptations of these novelists and the contexts they were writing in, I want to take a brief look at the nineteenth-century culture from which they emerged.

The broad concept of adaptation was central in the English theatre of the nineteenth century. This thesis will concentrate on the generic adaptation of novel into drama, but adaptation in the form of translation was also important in this period. In the 1870s there was a fervour for adapting successes from the French stage as demonstrated by Brander Mathews’s *Ballade of Adaptation*:

The native drama’s sick and dying,
So say the cynical crew!
The native dramatist is crying —
Bring me the paste! Bring me the glue!
Bring me the pen and scissors too!
Bring the works of E. Augier!
Bring me the works of V. Sardou!
I am the man to write a play!¹⁰

This skit reflects the situation where any successful French play was adapted into English. One reason for this was that it was cheaper to pay for an adaptation than

⁹ Quoted in Jack, R. D. S., *The Road to the Never Land: A Reassessment of J. M. Barrie’s Dramatic Art*, Aberdeen University Press: 1991, p. 26.

¹⁰ Quoted in Allan Wade’s “Introduction” to James, Henry, *The Scenic Art*, Rupert Hart-Davis: London, 1949, p. xvi.

commission a dramatist for an original play.¹¹ One of the central figures in this study, Henry James, is an avowed Gallophile when it comes to drama. Nevertheless, he condemns unequivocally the “coarse” adaptations from French not because they are bad plays but because in the process of adaptation into English “their literary savor (is) completely evaporated, and their form and proportions quite sacrificed”.¹² This gives an indication of the difficulties of adaptation and what he saw as the problematic nature of English stage conditions.

Dramatised fiction was a great money-spinner in the nineteenth century. We need only consider the numerous adaptations of Walter Scott’s novels or C. H. Hazlewood’s celebrated stage version (1863) of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s novel *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862). Many novelists attempted the adaptation of their own fiction. In 1838 we find Charles Dickens declaring:

I propose to dramatize *Oliver* for the first night of the next season... I am quite satisfied that nobody can have heard what I mean to do with the different characters in the end, inasmuch as at present I don’t quite know myself.¹³

It is interesting that Dickens confesses that he is not aware what will be done with the characters in the end as this implies that a change in genre must change the plot. We shall never know what Dickens intended because he did not, after all, adapt *Oliver Twist*. Nevertheless, this did not mean that theatre audiences were deprived of stage versions of the novel: there were five dramatisations in 1838 alone. On other occasions Dickens took his attempts further, and some of his contemporaries — such as Wilkie Collins — enjoyed great success in turning their fiction into melodramatic plays. The ease with which they seem to have dramatised their novels reflects the perception of the two genres in the nineteenth century. Thus we find William Ainsworth declaring that the novel “is a drama, with descriptions to supply the place

¹¹ See Woodfield, James, *English Theatre in Transition 1881-1914*, Croom Helm: London, 1984, p. 9.

¹² James, Henry, “The London Theatres” (1879) in *The Scenic Art*, p. 123.

¹³ Letter (March 1838) quoted in Churchill, R. C. (ed), *A Bibliography of Dickensian Criticism 1836-1975*, Macmillan: London, 1975, p. 189.

of scenery”.¹⁴ Similarly, Charles Dickens asserts that “every good author, and every writer of fiction, though he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage”.¹⁵ Despite some Victorians’ view of the unproblematic link between the genres, there was a less than harmonious relationship in practical terms. Due to the shortcomings of the copyright laws of the period, a novelist’s legal control over his or her work did not extend to dramatisations of it. Hence we find a furious Charles Reade complaining about the phenomenal success of “piratical versions” of *It is Never too Late to Mend*:

Saloons rose into theatres by my brains, stolen. Managers made at least seventy thousand pounds out of my brains, stolen: but not one would pay the inventor a shilling.¹⁶

The issue of copyright with regards to the stage adaptation of fiction is a particularly curious issue in the period we are looking at. It was not until 1911 that an Act was passed through Parliament which amended the Law relating to Copyright and protected writers with regards to, amongst other things, the dramatisation of narrative works. The Act states:

For the purposes of this Act, “copyright” means the sole right to produce or reproduce the work or any substantial part thereof in any material form whatsoever, to perform the work or any substantial part thereof in public; if the work is unpublished, to publish the work or any substantial part thereof; and shall include the sole right,

(a) to produce, reproduce, perform, or publish any translation of the work;

(b) in the case of a dramatic work, to convert it into a novel or other non-dramatic work;

¹⁴ Quoted in Meisel, Martin, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England*, Princeton University Press: 1983, pp. 65-6.

¹⁵ Speech to Royal General Theatre Fund, 1858 quoted in *A Bibliography of Dickensian Criticism 1836-1975*, p. 187.

¹⁶ Quoted in Reade, C. L. and Reade, Rev. C. (eds), *Charles Reade: A Memoir Volumes I and II*, Chapman and Hall: London, 1887, pp. 164-5.

(c) in the case of a novel or other non-dramatic work, or of an artistic work, to convert it into a dramatic work, by way of performance in public or otherwise;

(d) in the case of a literary, dramatic, or musical work, to make any record, perforated roll, cinematograph film, or other contrivance by means of which the work may be mechanically performed or delivered, and to authorise any such acts as aforesaid.¹⁷

As can be seen, the Act protects writers against adaptation “in any material form whatsoever”, whether translation (a), or adaptation into film (d), or — most importantly for us — the stage adaptation of fiction (c) and vice versa, the adaptation of drama (c). Before the 1911 Copyright Act, the somewhat absurd situation reigned where novelists could only protect their works against adaptation if they dramatised it themselves. George Bernard Shaw gives an account of the state of affairs in his 1899 essay on “The Censorship of the Stage in England”:

Not long ago a popular novelist announced for performance a stage version of one of his books. He was promptly warned that his version was an infringement of a version already made by a sharp country solicitor, and duly licensed by the Examiner of Plays and performed. The author had actually to buy back the stage right of his own story from the pirate who had stolen a march on him. In such a state of affairs, every prudent novelist whose book contains valuable dramatic material takes the precaution to put together some sort of stage version, no matter how brief or inept, and to have it furtively performed at a suburban hall with a theatrical license, the actors being a few friends who read their parts anyhow, and the audience a single confederate who complies with the law by paying for his seat. (...) Further, the English stage right in a play is forfeited if the play is performed first in America. Consequently, the first thing a dramatic author has to do, when his play is not written for immediate production in England, is to give a copyrighting performance of the kind described above. The dramatic authors and the novelists between them... keep up a series of theatrical performances of which the public knows nothing, but upon every one of which the Examiner of Plays levies his ten dollars and a half.¹⁸

¹⁷ Isaacs, Sidney C., *The Law Relating to Theatres, Music-Halls, and other Public Entertainments*, Stevens & Sons: London, 1927, pp. 387-416.

¹⁸ Shaw, G. B., “The Censorship of the Stage in England” in West, E. J. (ed.), *Shaw on Theatre* MacGibbon and Kee: London, 1958, p. 68.

Laws of copyright notwithstanding there was a marked attempt to lure novelists into stage drama. The sentiment that theatre needed rescuing is evident across the European context. In the France of the 1860s and 1870s Émile Zola believed in the necessity of naturalism to rescue the stage as it had rescued the novel. In Britain, some believed the solution to lie in creating a “literary theatre”. Henry Arthur Jones helps to define this when he claims that a play needs more quality than simply being performable: “the true test of a play is, will it act and read?”¹⁹ There was a view that the English stage was dying and that it could only be saved by becoming “literary”: developing a repertoire of plays that would *read* as well as they would *perform*: well-written, thought-provoking drama. The actor and producer Elizabeth Robins describes the mood of optimism that came into being in the late nineteenth century:

In time, new first-rate English plays would come our way. Those people who ought to be in the service of the theatre and still remained outside it, must be brought in. If French and German men of letters wrote for the stage, why shouldn't the English? [...] Oh, the novelists would help, the publishers would help.²⁰

Another key player, along with Henry Arthur Jones, in the attempt to secure men of letters for the theatre was William Archer. For them, as Marguerite Roberts informs us, “the hope of the theatre lay in luring other men of letters into writing for the stage”.²¹ They were concerned that the English theatre seemed so poor and ailing in contrast to the vivacity of the English novel: Jones described Victorian theatre up to the 1890s as “A Slough of Despond in the wide well-tilled field of English Literature”.²² He did, like Henry James, level the blame at the practical world of drama: “the worst and deadliest enemy of the English drama (is) the English theatre”.²³ Archer and Jones were encouraged by Henry James’s adaptation of *The*

¹⁹ Quoted in Turner, Paul, *English Literature 1832-1890 Excluding the Novel*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1989, p. 387.

²⁰ Robins, Elizabeth, *Theatre and Friendship*, Jonathon Cape: London, 1932, p. 35.

²¹ Roberts, Marguerite, *Tess in the Theatre*, University of Toronto Press: 1950, p. xviii.

²² Quoted in Turner, Paul, p. 387.

²³ *ibid.*

American (1882) and Stevenson and Henley's original play *Beau Austin* (1884) and were delighted when another man of letters such as Thomas Hardy attempted to write plays. We find them only too keen to give practical advice to this type of budding dramatist. Archer wrote an article entitled "The Stage and Literature" (1892) in which he praised Ibsen and argued:

So soon as we have an English playwright who possesses the literary vigour and technical skill of Dumas, Meilhac, or Becque, we shall cease to dispute as to the possibility of a literary drama.²⁴

It is worth noting that Alexandre Dumas *fils* was a novelist whose stupendously acclaimed foray into the dramatisation of his own fiction with *La Dame aux camélias* (novel 1848; play 1852) makes him quite possibly the most successful example of self-adaptation.

The desire to improve the state of the English stage was manifested in an active way in June 1893 when Terry's Theatre produced an evening of short plays by non-dramatists who had been invited to try their hand at writing for the theatre including Hardy, J. M. Barrie (who was not at this time an established playwright), and Arthur Conan Doyle. The producer of this event was another interesting figure in this mission to inaugurate a "literary theatre", Charles Charrington. George Bernard Shaw describes Charrington's efforts thus:

His view that the only live English fiction is to be found today not in plays but in novels, and his attempt to drag it on to the stage... cost him several years' income, and would have cost him his reputation for common sense had he possessed one.²⁵

Ford Madox Ford claims that the novelists themselves were equally enthusiastic when he informs us that they were "obsessed by the idea that if they could only get a play

²⁴ *Fortnightly Review*, February 1892, pp. 231-2, quoted *ibid*.

²⁵ Shaw, G. B., "The New Century Theatre" (10 April 1897), *Our Theatre in the Nineties Volume 3*, pp. 101-2.

produced, fame, fortune and eternal tranquillity”²⁶ would be forever theirs. This may be true to an extent (at least when the self-adapters were at their most idealistic), but the situation is not quite so clear-cut. This study will illuminate the reasons for the failure of the self-adapters, but a couple are worth earmarking already. Certainly the nature of English drama of the period was one reason they avoided the stage. As Shaw writes:

[Artists are] banished from the theatre (to the theatre’s great loss) by the monotony and vulgarity of drama in which passion is everything, intellect nothing, and art only brought in by the incidental outrages upon it.²⁷

In short, it was a *Catch 22* situation of sorts: the reason the men of letters were needed was precisely the same reason that they were deterred from the theatre. This anti-theatre prejudice may also account for the “aloofness” that the self-adapters seem to exude at times. Moreover, it was not simply because the contemporary drama was perceived as being inherently monotonous or vulgar, there were some outside influences that determined its condition. Just as the inadequate copyright laws forced the novelists to protect their original work through dramatisation, the existence of censorship had an impact on the integrity of the artist.

Curiously, a renowned novelist has a key role in the history of stage censorship in Britain: the Theatrical Licensing Act of 1737 was introduced in reaction to Henry Fielding’s scathing satire *The Historical Register for 1736*. This implementation of censorship under the Lord Chamberlain effectively ended Fielding’s career as a playwright and led to another form of self-adaptation inasmuch as it made him become a novelist. It could be argued that the existence of stage censorship kept writers away from the theatre for over two hundred years. The shadow of censorship put enormous pressure on the artistic freedom of dramatists and put limitations on the kind of play they were able to produce.

²⁶ Ford, Ford Madox, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*, Duckworth: London, 1924, p. 126.

²⁷ Shaw, G. B., “Two New Plays” (12 January 1895) in *Our Theatre in the Nineties Volume 1*, Constable: London, 1931, p. 6.

Giving evidence at the 1909 Joint Select Committee on Censorship, Harley Granville Barker reveals the options open to a writer:

he must either write purely conventional plays, which he practically knows the Lord Chamberlain will not object to, or he must take to some other form of literary work, such as book-writing — the writing of fiction — where he is not hampered by any such dictation.²⁸

So speaks a “man of the theatre”. As for the writers of fiction called forward to testify in 1909, they assault stage censorship in no uncertain terms. Arnold Bennett regards it as “monstrous and grotesque and profoundly insulting”;²⁹ and Henry James, by now an experienced but unsuccessful self-adaptor, is just as uncompromising when he describes “the depth of dismay and disgust” of potential dramatists when they discover they have to deal with the Lord Chamberlain: “an obscure and irresponsible Mr So-and-So”.³⁰ The implication of this is that there is greater freedom in other genres and James goes on to stress that the repression of the stage has deterred writers who have “any intellectual independence and self-respect”.³¹

In time a literary theatre did come into existence. James Woodfield asserts that despite the claims that there was a renaissance in English drama in the late nineteenth century, it actually came to pass in the early twentieth century with George Bernard Shaw’s rise as a playwright.³² Nevertheless, the period immediately before this laid an essential groundwork. We can cite the works and efforts of numerous figures who were important in this, especially Arthur Wing Pinero, William Archer, Henry Arthur Jones, Harley Granville Barker, Elizabeth Robins, J. B. Grein and Charles Charrington. The self-adaptors we will look at were caught up in this endeavour, but none of them made an impact. The exception is perhaps Henry James, whose plays were disasters but whose critical writings made an important

²⁸ Quoted in Findlater, Richard, *Banned! A Review of Theatrical Censorship in Britain*, MacGibbon and Kee: London, 1967, p. 107.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 106.

³⁰ *Henry James Letters IV: 1895-1916* (ed. Edel, L.), Harvard University Press: 1984, p. 532.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² See Woodfield, James, pp. 171-3.

contribution: as Allan Wade states, James's pleas for "a native English drama [give his writings] an honourable place in the role of theatre's criticism".³³

I will now proceed to look at three specific case studies of self-adaptation: Henry James's *Daisy Miller*, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. James and Hardy wrote their novels and subsequent adaptations in the context I have outlined above. Although it was performed before *Tess*, Conrad's adaptation of *The Secret Agent* is the latest play we will look at. He adapted the novel in 1919 and the history of writing it, and its style, betray a sophistication beyond James's and Hardy's attempts. A substantial study of the novel and the play will be undertaken to do both of Conrad's works the justice they deserve. Conrad is evidently working in a more modern context, and, in addition, his play has been held to be ahead of its time. However, all three self-adapters are transitional writers or founders of Modernism and a close analysis of their experiences and practices of self-adaptation reveal interesting aspects, to lesser or greater extents, of the period that sees the shift away from Victorian culture into Modernism. Let us now look at our three case studies which will illuminate various aspects of the theatrical scene of the period and approaches to the practice of self-adaptation. The point of view will be that of the novelists, who wanted, or were persuaded, to test the water of practical drama even though they would always remain more celebrated, and more comfortable, writing fiction. Hopefully, in the following study, an illuminating picture will be gained of the personalities of the era and the mood of the context, from the perspective of three very different, but equally brilliant, writers.

³³ Wade, Allan, "Introduction" to James, Henry, *The Scenic Art*, p. xvi.

Chapter Two

HENRY JAMES

(1843-1916)

1. Henry James, Drama, and Adaptation

Henry James's interest in the theatre was not a passing fancy. *The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting and the Drama 1872-1901* is a collection of his dramatic criticism and *The Complete Plays* is a substantial volume comprising original works and several adaptations of his own fiction. Moreover, the theatre occurs with significance in his novels, most notably *The Tragic Muse* (1890) which he wrote at the beginning of his career as a dramatist and which is as much a treatise on theatre as a story. Two critical figures loom large over a study of James's dramatic work: Leon Edel whose annotations in *The Complete Plays* and biographical work such as "Henry James: The Dramatic Years"³⁴ are as thorough as any other aspect of his work on James; and R. R. Kossmann whose *Henry James: Dramatist* is an account of the writing and reception of all the plays.

In *A Small Boy and Others* (1910) — James's autobiography of his first fourteen years of life — we read that as a child James saw adaptations of one of his favourite novelist's works:

It was the age of the arrangements of Dickens for the stage, vamped-up promptly on every scene and which must have been the roughest theatrical tinker's work.³⁵

James also saw adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) while a child: one version by George L. Aiken, and another by H. J. Conway. This was particularly significant to James, not merely bearing in mind that he was later to

³⁴ Contained in the single volume edition of James, Henry, *Guy Domville*, Rupert Hart-Davis: London, 1961.

³⁵ James, Henry, *A Small Boy and Others*, Macmillan and Company: London, 1913, p. 118.

dramatise some of his own fiction, but because his observation from that early age is of interest to a study of the art of adaptation as a whole. Comparing the two different stage versions of the same story, James received his “first glimpse of that possibility of a ‘free play of mind’”.³⁶ The potential of adaptation, the opportunity to produce different versions of the same source was a key experience. James also remarks on the experience of the audience which was not beguiled by theatrical “reality” but rather sustained an ironic distance from it. James describes this as “a great initiation”,³⁷ seeing where the “absurd” ended and “the real fun, which was the gravity, the tragedy, the drollery, the beauty”³⁸ began.

In the essays that make up *The Scenic Art*, we can detect what could be seen as a celebration of French theatre. The London theatre is compared most unfavourably with its equivalent in Paris both socially and aesthetically. The theatres hidden in the gloomy back streets of London’s dingy theatre land are a startling contrast to Paris where “the various temples of the drama are scattered along the clean, bright Boulevard”.³⁹ In “The London Theatres” (1877) James describes the process of going to the theatre as a somewhat uncomfortable and Dickensian experience which serves as a “reminder that the arts of the stage are not really in the temperament and the manners of the people”.⁴⁰ Most profoundly James argues that in England the theatre “is a social luxury and not an artistic necessity”.⁴¹ In contrast to the Bohemian, intellectual and demanding French spectator, the English audience member is more genteel, more naive and more respectful. We can detect a class attitude here and this is compounded in “The London Theatres” (1879) where he bewails the fact that the “world is being steadily democratized and vulgarized, and literature and art give their testimony to the fact”.⁴² This reflects a problem with audience that will haunt James’s theatrical endeavours.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 171.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ James, Henry, *The Scenic Art*, Rupert Hart-Davis: London, 1949, p. xvii.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 100.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 120.

As well as a problem with the condition and situation of theatre in English society and its audience, James is dismayed by the nature of the drama performed. In “The London Theatres” (1877) he sees it as inauthentic and unrepresentative:

The English stage of to-day... certainly holds the mirror as little as possible up to nature — to any nature, at least, usually recognized in the British Islands.⁴³

Some years later in *The Tragic Muse* we find complaints on the lack of good English actors and the paucity of original English plays.⁴⁴ Some of these points are brought together by Elizabeth Robins who, in her memoir *Theatre and Friendship*, describes the experience of going to the theatre with James:

Going with Mr. James to English plays sometimes demanded what our Florida cook would call “de bol’ courage.” (...) Mr. James’s all too audible remarks, conveyed in terms always “chosen” often singularly picturesque, sometimes diabolic, as though he revelled in mercilessness — would send cold shivers down his companion’s spine.⁴⁵

James may not have been a gracious spectator but plenty of audiences would exact their revenge on James’s own plays.

Paris is where James’s experience of European drama was inaugurated and in “The London Theatres” (1877) he reveals that a “spectator with his senses attuned to all those easy Parisian harmonies feels himself, in London, to be in a place in which the drama... cannot have a vigorous life”.⁴⁶ He goes so far as to describe himself as “very much like a Francisque Sarcey”.⁴⁷ The American émigré feels more French than English. R. R. Kossmann agrees that James’s dramatic criticism allies him with the influential French theatre critic of the late nineteenth century. Certainly James would concur with Sarcey that technical perfection is paramount, and that Eugène Scribe and Victorien Sardou stand amongst the greatest of playwrights (whereas Kossmann

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴⁴ See Chapter 7 of James, Henry, *The Tragic Muse*, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1978.

⁴⁵ Robins, Elizabeth, *Theatre and Friendship*, Jonathon Cape: London, 1932, pp. 128-9.

⁴⁶ James, Henry, *The Scenic Art*, p. 96.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

describes them as a pair of “hacks”!).⁴⁸ These French influences not only mould the way James assesses drama in his critical capacity, but they affect the style he will employ as a dramatist. As Max Beerbohm astutely observes in his review of *The Other House* (1909): James “was not in Paris in the early ‘seventies for nothing”.⁴⁹

James’s “technical” view of drama can be well illustrated in his article “Tennyson’s Drama: I. Queen Mary” where he likens the writing of drama to packing a box:

The five-act drama — serious or humorous, poetic or prosaic — is like a box of fixed dimensions and inelastic material, into which a mass of precious things are to be packed away. It is a problem in ingenuity and a problem of the most interesting kind. The precious things in question seem out of all proportion to the compass of the receptacle; but the artist has an assurance that with patience and skill a place may be made for each, and that nothing need be clipped or crumpled, squeezed or damaged. The false dramatist either knocks out the sides of the box, or plays the deuce with the contents; the real one gets down on his knees, disposes of his goods tentatively, this, that, and the other way, loses his temper but keeps his ideal, and at last rises in triumph, having packed his coffer in the one way that is mathematically right.⁵⁰

We can see here that James, the great formalist, was fascinated by the technical demands and problems faced by the “real” dramatist. In his own later attempts at play writing it was really this technical challenge that interested him, much more than just the mercenary reasons of cash. Indeed, in many ways James reveals himself to be quite unsuited to the *realities* of theatre such as audiences, reviewers, and the alterations demanded, and liberties taken, by those directly involved in production — as his experiences make clear.

In the 1882 *Notebooks*, after his troubled *Daisy Miller* adaptation, James writes that the “unhappy English stage” is “almost fatally disgusting and discouraging. I have learned, very vividly, that if one attempts to work for it one must

⁴⁸ Kossmann, R. R., *Henry James: Dramatist*, Wolters-Noordhoff: Groningen, 1969, p. 40.

⁴⁹ “Mr. Henry James’ Play”, in Beerbohm, Max, *Around Theatres*, Rupert Hart-Davis: London, 1953, p. 542.

⁵⁰ Quoted in *The Complete Plays of Henry James* (ed. Edel, L.), Rupert Hart-Davis: London, 1949, p. 35.

be prepared for disgust, deep and unspeakable disgust.”⁵¹ The fact that James had not forgotten this in 1889, but was nevertheless tempted back into drama — this time for money, ostensibly — with the prospect of adapting *The American*, is demonstrated by another remark in *The Notebooks*, (dated 12 May 1889) where he bewails “the vulgarity, the brutality, the baseness” of “English-speaking theatre today”.⁵² But he goes on to say that he must brave the conditions and produce a number of plays as any monetary success will allow him “time, leisure, independence for ‘real literature’”.⁵³ The emphasis on “English-speaking theatre” reminds us of James’s admiration of the French dramatic scene, and the contempt he has for the theatre of his own tongue was, in the words of Kossmann, “not a happy omen for success”.⁵⁴ Furthermore, we should note James’s dismissal of dramatic writing as “false literature”: at least that is the implication of his reference to drama giving him money for the purposes of “real literature”. However, once in the thick of production, James’s letters reveal an astonishing transformation:

I feel at last as if I had found my *real* form, which I am capable of carrying far, and for which the pale little art of fiction, as I have practised it, has been, for me, but a limited and restricted substitute. The strange thing is that I always knew *this* was my more characteristic form — but was kept away from it by a half-modest, half-exaggerated sense of the difficulty (that is, I mean the practical odiousness) of the conditions.⁵⁵

James goes on to claim that he is “*master*” of the conditions and will be able to “use them, command them, lift them up and better them. As for the form *itself*, its honour and inspiration are... in its difficulty.”⁵⁶ This statement was made not long after the publication of *The Tragic Muse* in which we discover a similar fascination with drama and its potential. Through Peter Sherringham’s “intense vision” of a “superior,

⁵¹ Kossmann, p. 22.

⁵² James, Henry, *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* (eds Edel, L. and Powers, L. H.), Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 52-3.

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Kossmann, p. 40.

⁵⁵ Letter to William James, 6 February 1891, *Letters of Henry James Volume III*, Macmillan: London, 1980, p. 329.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

glorious stage”⁵⁷ we can glean a great deal about James’s own vision and ideal for the English dramatic scene:

a great academic, artistic theatre, subsidized and unburdened with money-getting, rich in its repertory, rich in the high quality and the wide array of its servants, and above all in the authority of an impossible administrator — a manager personally disinterested...⁵⁸

This gives a good impression of James’s analysis of the problems inherent in the English theatre. The thoroughness of his account gives a clue that he was soon to become actively involved in drama. The whole novel indicates that James was optimistic about his enterprise. Having said that, in the above quotation the word “impossible” stands out, and one does get the sense of James walking a fine line between what is an attainable vision and what is the unrealisable dream.

The American adaptation was ultimately a failure, and at the worst point of this James returns to his cynical and hostile attitude towards the theatre (even if he does later attempt, once again, to write plays). In another letter to his brother William, James pinpoints his objections:

The whole odiousness of the thing lies in the connection between the drama and the theatre. The one is admirable in its interest and difficulty, the other loathsome in its conditions. If the drama could only be theoretically or hypothetically acted the fascination resident in its all but unconquerable... form would be unimpaired, and one would be able to have the exquisite exercise without the horrid sacrifice.⁵⁹

Leon Edel provides a more succinct James quotation: “I may have been meant for the Drama — God Knows! — but I certainly wasn’t meant for the Theatre.”⁶⁰ James was a practitioner of literature, and thus found the decentralised nature of theatre (where the comparatively omnipotent novelist is bound to lose much power and control)

⁵⁷ James, Henry, *The Tragic Muse*, p. 325.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 325-6.

⁵⁹ 29 December 1893, quoted in Kossmann, p. 50.

⁶⁰ Quoted in *The Complete Plays*, p. 53.

insupportable. The demands for cuts that were often made to James were agony: “Oh, the mutilated, brutally simplified, massacred little play!”⁶¹ He did, however, always try to please the producers to the best of his ability, and provide alterations, and so on (this included such tasks as writing an entirely new fourth act for *The American*). James seemed to mock this in his own verbose manner when work was begun on *Disengaged*: the producer was not happy with the original title, so James provided a list of sixty-four alternatives!

James was also frustrated by the liberties taken in production. A London production of *The Saloon* by Gertrude Kingston in 1911 aroused James’s dismay because of her additions to the work. The play is a kind of “ghost story”, but James ensures that nothing supernatural is blatantly shown. In Kingston’s version a ghostly figure appears on stage at the end of the play. James wrote to her pointing out that there is “absolutely no warrant or indication for this in my text”⁶² and requested that the apparition be removed.

Guy Domville — not an adaptation, but a completely original play — was a catastrophe for James. Although half the audience seemed appreciative on the first night, the gallery was bellicose. Hence, when one character announced “I’m the last, my lord, of the Domvilles”, a voice exclaimed, “It’s a bloody good thing y’are”;⁶³ and when James was invited onto the stage for the curtain-call he was hissed. What is interesting about this episode is the insight it gives us into James’s attitude towards the audience. Describing the humiliation James writes to his brother William:

All the forces of civilization in the house waged a battle of the most gallant, prolonged and sustained applause with the hoots and jeers and catcalls of the roughs, whose *roars* (like those of a cage of beasts at some infernal “zoo”) were only exacerbated... by the conflict. (...) The “papers” have, into the bargain, been mainly ill-natured and densely stupid and vulgar; but the only two dramatic critics who count, W. Archer and Clement Scott, have done me more justice. (...) Obviously the little play, which I strove to make as broad, as simple, as clear, as British, in a word, as possible, is over the heads of the *usual*

⁶¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 52.

⁶² Quoted in Kossmann, p. 89.

⁶³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 74.

vulgar theatre-going London public (...) The thing fills me with horror for the abysmal vulgarity and brutality of the theatre and its regular public.⁶⁴

James therefore regards the failure of his play amongst the “regular” public as due to their stupidity, rather than conceding the possibility of his play lacking “real” dramatic essence (in other words, that James’s account of a would-be Catholic priest forced to marry in order to perpetuate the family name might possibly have been a somewhat tedious play). George Bernard Shaw does, however, spring to James’s defence in his essay on “Gallery Rowdyism” (6 March 1897) when he explains that

the gallery will trample furiously on delicate work like Mr Henry James’s, and keep refined and sensitive artists who attempt original and thoughtful work in dread all through the first night lest some untheatrical line should provoke a jeer or some stroke of genuine pathos a coarse laugh.⁶⁵

James always thought it was necessary to be comparatively unsubtle in writing plays, and that the audience’s hostility had more to do with their confusion with the plot than anything else. He also felt that the audience only wanted

*one kind of play — the play of the same kind as the unutterable kind they already know. With anything a little more delicate they are like a set of savages with a gold watch. Yet God knows I had tried to be simple, straightforward and British, and to dot my i’s as big as targets... But the theatre is verily a black abyss — and one feels stained with vulgarity rien que d’y avoir passé. Thank heaven there is another art.*⁶⁶

Edel quotes James on assessing the playwright’s conception of the audience thus: “Your maximum of refinement must meet the minimum of intelligence of the audience — the intelligence, in other words, of the biggest ass it may conceivably contain.” (p. 52). Such an attitude towards your audience is not particularly helpful or endearing. It implies a patronising approach towards the spectators before pen has even been put

⁶⁴ 9 January 1895, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 74-5.

⁶⁵ Shaw, G. B., *Our Theatre in the Nineties Volume III*, Constable and Company: London, 1931, p. 68.

⁶⁶ Letter to Henrietta Reubell, 10 January 1895, quoted in Kossmann, p. 76.

to paper. A word of advice from William Archer to James in a review in the *Daily Chronicle* (8 January 1895) is particularly illuminating:

Mr James has never taken up a natural and unconstrained attitude towards the stage... If he will only clear his mind of critical cant... and write solely for the ideal audience within his own breast, he will certainly produce works of art, and not improbably successful plays.⁶⁷

James's remarks about theatre audiences reveal that he did not construct an "ideal audience within his own breast". He saw the audience on "real" terms, thus expecting them to be stupid and undiscerning. A great deal of what fascinated James with drama was the interior games involved in its construction: the challenge of the theatre's limitations and also those of plot and structure, and so on. But the clash of this, as it were, drawing-room activity with the public world of the theatre was inevitable: James's sheer contempt for the audience would be irreconcilably destructive. In his attitude he was not a playwright presenting the audience with drama, but rather a writer in no doubt as to his own genius sermonising to what he saw as "odious" masses.

Thus James held the audience in contempt and yet (perhaps because) he did not attempt to set his own dramatic standards, and was concerned with what he thought — bitterly, it would seem — were the requirements of the audience. Kossmann cites James's new fourth act for *The American* as an example where James displays his "inability (or unwillingness) to set his own standards in the drama and let the audience come up to those, rather than the other way around".⁶⁸ The new act for this play in effect destroys the entire piece. Thus James hindered his dramatic potential by expecting so little of the audience and by revising his work to meet its "level" (we could compare this with Zola's inability to make his *Thérèse Raquin* adaptation as bold and as controversial as the novel, and thus his failure to bring about the stage revolution he advocated). Perhaps the nineteenth-century audiences

⁶⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 68.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 78.

were not ready for the challenge that the style of James and “realism” of Zola gave the nineteenth-century reader.

Having mentioned Zola, I would like to make another brief digression on the subject of James and the French. Kossmann argues that James was always an outsider in his Paris days in the company of Flaubert’s set because of the “dreariness and brutality”⁶⁹ to be found in the works of Zola and Flaubert himself. Kossmann cites an article by James entitled “The Parisian Stage” (published in the *Nation* in January 1873) as proof of James’s belief that some “French novels and plays not only lack moral perception but the use of adultery as a theme is due to a desire to give ‘a mere pigment, a source of dramatic color’”.⁷⁰ James does not offer any specific examples: he merely remarks that “some are too detestable”.⁷¹ The evolution that was to come about in drama — generally associated with Ibsen and his followers — was not simply on the grounds of morality. If Zola’s adaptation of *Thérèse Raquin* had been more loyal to the original novel and less caught up in the standards of the theatre of the time, such as techniques used in melodrama, Zola himself might have brought about that particular dramatic revolution. Perhaps we can argue that even if James would not have changed theatre in terms of the subject matter it dealt with, he might have been able to make a lasting impact on the grounds of style, as he did in the English novel. But James believed that there were golden rules of dramatic writing. These infallible laws included the use of dramatic clichés, not least some from melodrama, which the nineteenth-century theatre was ready, by now, to abandon. It is in relation to this that Elizabeth Robins accounts for James’s failure: “My own feeling is that, had Mr. James given himself to it twenty-five years earlier, the theatre would have rewarded him.”⁷² To say that James failed as a playwright because his plays were rather old-fashioned seems to me to be the kindest criticism that could be levelled at him.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 109.

⁷⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 109.

⁷¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 110.

⁷² Robins, Elizabeth, *Theatre and Friendship*, Jonathon Cape: London, 1932, p. 165.

We saw earlier how James was intrigued by the technical challenges of writing plays, but in the same article where he exalted the technicalities of drama he reveals that he was also conscious of another aspect of drama:

In a play, certainly, the subject is of more importance than in any other work of art. Infelicity, triviality, vagueness of subject, may be outweighed in a poem, a novel, or a picture, by charm of manner, by ingenuity of execution; but in a drama the subject is of the essence of the work — it is the work. If it is feeble, the work can have no force; if it is shapeless, the work must be amorphous.⁷³

It would thus appear that James's efforts to be "simple" and "straightforward" represent an attempt to avoid the infelicity, triviality and vagueness of subject that are the kiss of death in dramatic writing. James had clear ideas as to what is the essence of drama and these are clearly Hegelian.⁷⁴ In giving advice to Mrs W. K. Clifford about the play she had sent him, James comments that a "play appears to me of necessity to involve a struggle"⁷⁵ and he goes on to express the need for "the suspense, the curiosity, the anxiety, the *tension*... of seeing".⁷⁶ Yet even though James was aware of the paramount importance of "subject" and dramatic tension, his fascination with the *mechanics* of writing plays — in fact, precisely the "ingenuity of execution" — succeeds in denying any *life* to the subject. Ironically, James complains in "The Blight of the Drama" (1897) that, "The drama verily is blighted when the drama is dropped."⁷⁷ There is a case to argue that James's plays "dropped" their drama, and the next business was, indeed, "merely to bury"⁷⁸ them.

I would now like to progress systematically through James's adaptations, with reference to their contemporary critical reception in an attempt to gain insights into the art, and problems, of self-adaptation. James's *Daisy Miller: A Comedy in Three*

⁷³ From "Tennyson's Drama: I. Queen Mary", quoted in Kossmann, pp. 112-3.

⁷⁴ O'Toole, John, *The Process of Drama: Negotiating Art and Meaning*, Routledge: London, 1992, p. 162: Hegel sees "conflict, an inevitable feature of the interaction of characters and their situation in most plays, as *the* central element" of drama.

⁷⁵ Letter to Mrs. W. K. Clifford, 19 July 1909, *The Letters of Henry James Volume II* (ed. Lubbock, P.), Octagon Books: New York, 1970, p. 130.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ James, Henry, *The Scenic Art*, p. 297.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

Acts (1882) was his first adaptation, but I shall address this play in the next section which is dedicated to a close reading of this work.

The adaptation of *The American* (1891) follows the plot of the original novel (1877), except that there is a happy ending to the play (Christopher Newman — the eponymous hero — marries Claire de Cintre), and there is considerable difference in characterisation. While in the novel James satirises Newman's nationality with a gentle irony, in the play Newman is more like a caricature of the American in Europe, with his loud clothes and exaggerated accent and catch-phrases.

The American was the most successful of James's plays, but on unsubtle grounds as we have seen. The reviewer of *The New York Times* said the play was "a mass of bold melodrama", and that Newman was "the advance agent of a circus".⁷⁹ The stark contrast to the novel is illustrated in *The Atlantic Monthly* review:

American vulgarity is always a tolerably welcome spectacle on the London stage and even Mr Compton's American... is made quite vulgar enough to atone for many of his virtues.⁸⁰

Disengaged (1893) was adapted from the short story "The Solution" (1892); more exactly, James simply used two ideas from the fiction: a man is tricked into engagement, having been convinced that it is entirely his own initiative, but is rescued — and married — by an attractive young widow. The play was not successful, for reasons the review in *Forum* reveals:

All of the characters are super-civilized beyond all reminiscence of simple natural humanity; as people they are exceedingly adroit in subtle, intellectual details. (...) But the play makes its appeal merely to the intellect; it is unemotional, unsympathetic, heartless, and therefore empty.⁸¹

The High Bid (1907) was adapted from the short story "Covering End" (1898) which was the companion piece to *The Turn of the Screw* in a volume entitled *The Two*

⁷⁹ Quoted in Kossmann, pp. 44-5.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 45.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 58.

Magics. “Covering End” was in fact based on an earlier play by James, *Summersoft* (1895). *The High Bid* was an improvement on the confusing *Summersoft*, and achieved mild success. The critics praised it as having a “pleasant literary flavour”,⁸² regarding it as a “mild and amiable satire” although it “never becomes a play”.⁸³ The latter comment is quite telling, implying as it does that although the play may have possessed a “literary flavour” it lacked the verve of drama. However, there is one element of praise in the *Illustrated London News* review that is worth quoting. The review states that James’s play had displayed

the trick of modern conversation, which deals in hints and evasions, using words as a sort of shorthand, and answers the underlying thought rather than the remark actually made.⁸⁴

This is indeed a dramatic achievement, and may remind us of the sub-text or “reading the silences” in, say, a Chekhov play. However, a good deal of the credit on this ground must go to the actors in the reviewed performance. Johnston Forbes-Robertson and Gertrude Elliot played the lead roles, and were highly praised by the reviewers: they had a greater presence than James, by which I mean the performers dominated *The High Bid*. Indeed, they were praised whilst the actual *play* (as opposed to performance) was criticised for its triviality, its “great paucity of happenings”⁸⁵ as the *New York Tribune* expressed it. The achievement of the actors can be further emphasised by the review in *The Times* which perhaps also qualifies the praise of James’s dialogue. The actors are commended for talking “Henry James”: “They all achieve the feat with dexterity and gusto; to listen to them you would almost believe that people do really talk like that.”⁸⁶ James’s dialogue at this stage of his dramatic career may not be naturalistic, but nevertheless had the quality of “modern conversation”.

⁸² *Illustrated London News*, quoted in Kossmann, p. 82.

⁸³ *Daily News* quoted in *ibid.*

⁸⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 82.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p. 83.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 82.

Whilst the performers in *The High Bid* may have mastered Jamesian language, the dialogue of *The Saloon*, written in the same year (1907), would cause problems in performance. *The Saloon* is an adaptation of the short story "Owen Wingrave" (1892). The plot of *The High Bid* was perhaps slightly banal, but at least the performers of the première made the dialogue work. *The Saloon* causes difficulty because there is a fundamental dichotomy between plot and language. In *The Times* review of the 1911 performance the actors were described as knitting "their brows in the effort to remember the unusual collocations"⁷⁷ while the ending of the play could be described simply as melodramatic and "lurid".

Kossmann attacks *The Saloon* thus:

On the one hand James has his characters speak and act in a rather civilised manner, yet at the same time he asks us to swallow wholesale the crude machinery of the worst kind of melodrama. Like all Jamesian characters, those in *The Saloon* have quite complex emotions and thoughts leading to their respective utterances, but... James shows himself more of a novelist than a dramatist because the only way in which he can try to convey this complexity is through his instructions to the actors: his stage directions. As a result these are hopelessly novelistic, and quite impossible for actors to follow successfully."⁷⁸

The stage directions in *The Saloon* are certainly quite extraordinary, some being long, rambling prose passages confined only by their parentheses. Here is a supreme example:

TONY. (*All embarrassed and beautifully gaping, the unexpected having sprung upon him.*) Bless my soul, my dear child — you don't mean to say that there are difficulties? (*Across the interval, as he speaks she suddenly faces round, and his view of her hereupon making him smite his head in his expressive penitent way. Something comes over him.*) What a brute I am not to have seen you're not quite happy, and not to have noticed that he—! (*He catches himself up: the face offered him is the convulsed face ROSE has managed though only comparatively to keep from her lover. She literally*

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 90.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 90-1.

glares at him; standing there with her two hands pressing down her agitated breasts and something in all her aspect like the first shock of a great accident. What he sees, without at first understanding it, is the final snap of tremendous tension, the end of her wonderful false calm; which makes him instantly begin, dismayed and disappointed, to guess and spell out, as it were, quite misunderstandingly, the real truth of her situation. He thus springs at the idea that she has received a blow — a blow which her self-control up to within a moment only presents now as more touchingly borne. Her desire to get rid of VIDAL becomes instantly a part of it for him: what has somehow happened flashes into vividness. Thus — giving her all the benefit of it — he pieces her case together.)⁸⁹

The strongest characters in the whole play would seem to be the italicised stage directions, which are poised to launch into a full narrative. Looking at these stage directions, it would not surprise most readers that this playwright is primarily a novelist. There may be drama here but it is theatrically unfeasible. Indeed, it strikes the reader as more like a clumsy version of James's later novel style than beneficial stage directions.

The Other House (1909) was adapted from the novel of the same title (1896) which was based on a play scenario called *The Promise* that James sketched around 1893. Leon Edel regards this play as the most Ibsenesque of James's dramas. Kossmann, however, dismisses the play as being much too long, with excessively drawn-out passages of arguably pointless dialogue, and melodramatic on the grounds of plot and characterisation. Kossmann contends that

The Other House is a melodrama because the characters remain at all times subordinate to the playwright's manipulation of plot for purposes of suspense and horror. In tragedy the protagonist looms large, in melodrama the playwright as juggler does; in *The Other House* James himself is dramatically the most visible character on stage.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ *The Complete Plays*, p. 696.

⁹⁰ Kossmann, p. 99.

It could be argued that James put himself into a structural and stylistic straitjacket when he wrote his plays. James believed that there were laws of dramatic composition, which he learned from French drama, and he attempted to import these into what he saw as the impoverished English theatre. Kossmann states that James's "very failure was due to this hollowness, to his belief that one must master one's dramatic grammar rules in order to write good drama".⁹¹

It is true to say that in the realm of fiction James did go some way in creating his own laws. It could be said that the rules James admired in the plays of Scribe and Sardou were not as flawless, or at least not as "eternal", as he may have thought. There was space in the drama for James to be as innovative as he was in fiction, and this means more than just attempting to introduce plays influenced by certain French dramatists. There was also a serious problem in attitude, most obviously in relation to theatre audiences. Additionally, James — ever the novelist — is biased against the theatre, despite the occasional moment of enthusiasm. In *The Tragic Muse* he evaluates the two forms:

What can you do with a character, with an idea, with a feeling, between dinner and the suburban trains? You can give a gross, rough sketch of them, but how little you touch them, how bald you leave them! What crudity compared with what the novelist does!⁹²

In James's own plays, there is a crisis with regards to point of view. A master of narrative, James often mediates experience and perception through a focaliser in the text of his fiction. As Kossmann writes:

In the novels and stories, James can achieve his effects very well by strictly adhering to the point of view chosen, the focal point of the action, which is usually the mind of one of his characters. To James action was essentially a mental and emotional process and not a physical one.⁹³

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p. 67.

⁹² James, Henry, *The Tragic Muse*, p. 51.

⁹³ *ibid.*, p. 103.

This is surely what prompted Max Beerbohm to contend that “of all that I love in Mr. James’ mind so very little can be translated into the sphere of drama”.⁹⁴ We saw earlier that James had a clear idea of the Hegelian dynamic of drama, and it is obvious that much of James’s fiction does contain conflict. However, the nature of this conflict may not be *theatrical* even if it is *dramatic*. In an essay on the novella of *Daisy Miller*, Kenneth Graham argues that “so often in Henry James, the central presence of indecision provides the decisiveness and energy of the narrative”.⁹⁵ This is a good way to define the dramatic tension in James’s fiction, but this indecisiveness is very different to the conflict that a stage play might require. Moreover, we lose the narrative in the stage play which, if we accept Graham’s terms, implies that we lose the decisiveness and energy that may have been inherent.

Drama is in essence a “physical” art. It certainly is a physical art if one is hoping for a play to be successful as an actual performance; but even if it is presented just as a text there must be an element of this. James, of course, aspired to real theatrical success. Another facet of James’s problems when transferring works from fiction to drama is that of psychological reality. This is obviously linked to the notion of Jamesian action being first and foremost psychological. This causes problems when the theatrical characters are required to speak. As Kossmann writes:

In his novels psychological reality is what counts, not actual audible reality. But on stage psychological reality cannot be achieved unless the dialogue is convincing. The thoughts may be brilliant but unless the speaker is given identity and individuality in the dialogue, the ideas he utters are unconvincing because they are sounded by a mouthpiece, not spoken by a credible human being.⁹⁶

Although verisimilitude would seem an obvious requirement, much more important is that the language in the speeches should at least be convincing: in other words, that there is an individuality manifested in the various voices and not purely a clearly

⁹⁴ Beerbohm, p. 544.

⁹⁵ Graham, Kenneth, “*Daisy Miller: Dynamics of an Enigma*” in *New Essays on Daisy Miller and The Turn of the Screw* (ed. Pollak, V. R.), Cambridge University Press: 1993, p. 35.

⁹⁶ Kossmann, p. 131.

discernible individuality of author which is revealed throughout all the dialogue. As I argued earlier, James's dramatic characters often speak alike despite the fact that the diffusiveness of drama is all-important. Despite the psychological reality which may be behind the characters, their limitation of voice — its unreality — jeopardises James's drama.

2. Henry James's *Daisy Miller*: a comparison of the novella and the play

Daisy Miller: A Study (1878) is probably James's most famous novella besides *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). In the preface to the work, James informs us that in 1877 a friend in Rome told him an anecdote concerning a "simple and uninformed American lady".⁹⁷ He felt that the case "had merely served to point a familiar moral",⁹⁸ but nevertheless he had placed a small pencil mark in the margin of his notebook to signify "Dramatise, dramatise!"⁹⁹ With a note like that perhaps it is little wonder that he would not just write a novella but eventually adapt the work for the stage. The novella had a mixed reception with some critics seeing the work as "an outrage on American girlhood"¹⁰⁰ and others celebrating it. In the words of W. D. Howells in 1879, "The thing went so far that society divided itself into Daisy Millerites and anti-Daisy Millerites."¹⁰¹ Since then *Daisy Miller* has been regarded as one of James's key works and a paradigm of his treatment of the "international situation". As Michael Swan writes, "James was the first novelist to see the possibilities of drama in the Europe-America relationship."¹⁰² More specifically in *Daisy Miller*, "Europe stands for the outward propriety which its wisdom would demand; America for a naturalness which does not take into account the possibility of immorality."¹⁰³

⁹⁷ *Tales of Henry James* (ed. Wegelin, Christof), Norton: New York, 1984, p. 368.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 369.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Henry James: The Critical Heritage* (ed. Gard, Roger), Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1968, p. 74.

¹⁰² James, Henry, *Selected Short Stories* (ed. Swan, Michael), Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1963, p. 10.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

Interestingly, there are two versions of the novella: the 1878 original and the revised 1909 New York edition. The differences between the two versions are themselves fascinating as instances of another type of adaptation and are thoroughly examined by Philip Horne in *Henry James and Revision*.¹⁰⁴ In this study I will refer to the 1878 edition as this is the one James used when adapting the novella into a stage play.

With *Daisy Miller: A Comedy in Three Acts* (1882), James hoped to replicate in the theatre the success of his four-chapter novella. According to Leon Edel, James thoroughly enjoyed writing the play and looked back on that period with a kind of religious veneration.¹⁰⁵ James presented it to various theatres and its constant rejection served to fan the flames of his bitterness towards the theatre. Eventually James published the play privately in 1882 and in 1883 it appeared in *Atlantic Monthly*. The *New York Tribune* reviewed the script with the declaration that

we cannot repress some surprise — and regret — that such an accomplished writer should not have perceived the full extent of the failure which he has now put permanently on record.¹⁰⁶

As with so much of James's fiction, there is an inherent dramatic potential in *Daisy Miller* although it is not comfortable in the context of nineteenth-century theatre. James was obviously aware that the adaptation would need to be radical. Indeed, one has to admire his pains in adapting *Daisy Miller*: in no way does he fall prey to Thomas Hardy's fear that one can read a dramatisation as a short cut to wading through the fictional narrative. James does not merely re-order and re-adjust aspects of the plot, he embarks on a complete rewriting of the story.

The locations remain more or less consistent. However, there is a narrower range of settings in the play which focuses the work but also pares down the ambience of the European landscape and urban experience. Act I is set in the "Garden

¹⁰⁴ See Chapter 7 "Revised Judgements of *Daisy Miller*" in Horne, Philip *Henry James and Revision*, Clarendon Press: London, 1990, pp. 228-65.

¹⁰⁵ *The Complete Plays*, p. 118.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in *The Complete Plays*, p. 119.

and terrace of an hotel on the Lake of Geneva” (121),¹⁰⁷ more specifically named as Vevey in the novella. In the distance the “Château de Chillon” can be seen, which is visited in Chapter II. Act II is in “the gardens of the Pincian Hill in Rome” (141), Chapter III is set in Rome and includes the movement from “the Via Gregoriana to the beautiful garden at the other end of the Pincian Hill” (29).¹⁰⁸ Act III is set in the Hôtel de Paris, Rome (160) while Chapter IV opens in Mrs Miller’s hotel (36), but also takes us to St. Peter’s (40), the Corso and “the cynical streets of Rome” (42). Moreover, in the novella James also takes us to the Palace of the Cæsars (43); a villa on the Cælian Hill; the Arch of Constantine; the Forum and the fateful Colosseum by moonlight (45). Towards the end of the novella there is a scene in the Protestant cemetery (49) and the tale is completed with Winterbourne returning to Vevey and then Geneva.

There are more differences when we come to the *dramatis personae*. Eugenio the courier in the novella may look at Winterbourne “offensively” (12) at the end of Chapter I, but that does not prepare the reader for his metamorphosis in the play. In the adaptation he “is more than impertinent — he is dangerous” (121). Eugenio is the villain of the piece involved in blackmail, intrigue and bribery. Madame de Katkoff is very important in the play but in the novella she is unnamed and alluded to as “a foreign lady — a person older than himself” to whom Winterbourne is “devoted” (4) and less specifically as one of the “Russian princesses sitting in the garden” (3) of the hotel.

As well as making characters who are marginal, or alluded to, central, James decides to keep Mrs Miller offstage throughout. Two significant characters, Charles Reverdy and Alice Durant, are completely new additions, another pair of lovers for this comedy about bourgeois American tourists in Europe.

¹⁰⁷ All page references to the *Daisy Miller* play are to the version contained in *The Complete Plays of Henry James* (ed. Edel, L.), Rupert Hart-Davis: London, 1949.

¹⁰⁸ All page references to the *Daisy Miller* novella are to the version contained in *Tales of Henry James* (ed Wegelin, Christof), Norton: New York, 1984.

As well as these adjustments and additions, James makes some substantial alterations. Let us compare two versions of the dialogue involving Giovanelli towards the end of the story. In the novella he is conversing with Winterbourne and we read:

“Ah,” said the handsome native (Giovanelli), “for myself, I am not afraid.”
“Neither am I — for you! I am speaking for this young lady.” (47)

The play gives us:

GIOVANELLI. I was afraid for myself, Heaven knows!
EUGENIO. “Afraid for yourself” is good — with an American heiress beside you! (161)

Apart from such curious shifts in character, there are some alterations to the story which could not be more radical. For instance, not only does he allow Winterbourne to propose to Daisy Miller, he also allows the eponymous character to recover from malaria thus transforming his tragic short novel into a comedy.

Nevertheless, James’s dramatisation of *Daisy Miller* is a self-conscious adaptation by which I mean that James foregrounds some quotations from his novel. In two descriptions — the physical appearance of Daisy and Randolph — he puts the text in quotation marks and footnotes them as being “From the story” (126, 128). Therefore the physical appearance of the characters is ideally unchanged even if he has changed what happens to them. The implication of this is that for James the stage can allow a realisation of the visual and physical even if it demands profound changes in the story.

The description in the novella and play informs us that Daisy is “strikingly, admirably pretty” (play 126, novella 6), but in the play James makes Reverdy declare “It’s true she’s very dazzling!” (126) in case the audience did not notice. This is the moment — Act I, sc. ii — where Daisy Miller is introduced to the audience, entering stage right and exiting stage left without uttering a word. In the novella we first meet her through our focalising central character Winterbourne. The silent introductory walk in the play allows Daisy Miller to be initially presented as a visual form and the

audience will recognise her and anticipate the voice of the eponymous heroine. Daisy's first appearance in the play attempts to render her a distant object of desire like Helen of Troy in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* or is perhaps reminiscent of Romeo's first sight of Juliet.

The scene where Daisy first speaks is part of the encounter between Winterbourne and Randolph and latterly Daisy. This is one of the most loyal sections of the adaptation. The dialogue between Randolph and Winterbourne is very close to the novella with some subtle but interesting differences:

RANDOLPH. (...) Will you give me a lump of sugar?

WINTERBOURNE. Yes, you may take one; but I don't think sugar is good for little boys.

RANDOLPH. (*He steps forward and carefully possesses himself of the whole contents of the plate. From these he still more carefully selects the largest lump, depositing the others in his pocket. Biting, with a grimace.*) Oh, blazes! it's hard!

WINTERBOURNE. Take care, young man. You'll hurt your teeth. (128)

"Will you give me a lump of sugar?" he asked, in a sharp, hard little voice — a voice immature, and yet, somehow, not young.

Winterbourne glanced at the small table near him... and saw that several morsels of sugar remained. "Yes, you may take one," he answered; "but I don't think sugar is good for little boys."

This little boy stepped forward and carefully selected three of the coveted fragments, two of which he buried in the pocket of his knickerbockers, depositing the other as promptly in another place. He poked his alpenstock, lance-fashion, into Winterbourne's bench, and tried to crack the lump of sugar with his teeth.

"Oh, blazes; it's har-r-d!" he exclaimed, pronouncing the adjective in a peculiar manner.

Winterbourne had immediately perceived that he might have the honour of claiming him as a fellow-countryman. "Take care you don't hurt your teeth," he said, paternally. (4-5)

We should note the emphasis James puts on the intonation of "har-r-d" in the novella to emphasise (especially if read aloud!) Winterbourne's subsequent observation that Randolph is a "fellow-countryman": American. The novella allows Winterbourne to

be “paternal” with his “Take care you don’t hurt your teeth”. “Take care, young man” does seem a little more distant.

With regards to the stage direction, Randolph takes all the sugar and not merely the three lumps described in the novella. This may seem a very slight change, but in terms of performance this action is much more humorous and does reveal James’s awareness — at times — of stagecraft.

When Daisy appears, the dialogue is similarly accurate:

WINTERBOURNE. I imagine that’s your fault, not hers. (*DAISY comes in... and on reaching the middle of the stage stops and looks at WINTERBOURNE and at RANDOLPH, who has converted his alpenstock into a vaulting-pole, and is springing about violently. WINTERBOURNE continues, getting up.*) By Jove, how pretty!

DAISY. Well, Randolph, what *are* you doing?

RANDOLPH. I’m going up the Alps. This is the way!

WINTERBOURNE. That’s the way they come down.

RANDOLPH. He’s all right; he’s an American man!

WINTERBOURNE. (*Aside.*) It seems to me that I have been in a manner presented.

“I imagine that’s your fault, not hers,” said Winterbourne. The young lady meanwhile had drawn near... she was strikingly, admirably pretty. “How pretty they are!” thought Winterbourne, straightening himself in his seat, as if he were prepared to rise.

The young lady paused in front of his bench... The little boy had now converted his alpenstock into a vaulting-pole, by the aid of which he was springing about in the gravel, and kicking it up not a little.

“Randolph,” said the young lady, “what *are* you doing?”

“I’m going up the Alps,” replied Randolph. “This is the way!” And he gave another little jump, scattering the pebbles about Winterbourne’s ears.

“That’s the way they come down,” said Winterbourne.

“He’s an American man!” cried Randolph, in his little hard voice.

The young lady gave no heed to this announcement, but looked straight at her brother. “Well, I guess you had better be quiet,” she simply observed.

It seemed to Winterbourne that he had been in a manner presented. (5-6)

The scene in both versions is not quite love at first sight but it is one of burgeoning attraction and of immense significance to the story. Having a child “springing about violently” throughout this can only be a fatal distraction. In the narrative, James can

tell us Randolph is there but can move onto other issues and foci. In the play, James can direct that Randolph is “still jumping about” (129), twenty-one exchanges of dialogue after the first reference to Randolph’s behaviour. This is an instance where James reveals that he is a novelist: he is taking up an image again which on stage would have been constant and quite probably overpowering. Likewise, Daisy’s exclamation to her brother in the play “Well, you needn’t stick your pole into my eye!” (130) would need very careful choreographing or might just seem to be exaggeration.

In terms of the dialogue, James replaces Winterbourne’s interior “How pretty they are!” with his utterance of “By Jove, how pretty!”. James solves the problem to interior observation by rendering it into speech rather than relying on the synthesis of the actor’s voice, facial expression, body language, and so on. More seriously in the above passages, James seems determined to get his witty line, “It seemed to Winterbourne that he had been in a manner presented”, into the script at any cost and does so by giving Winterbourne the rather awkward if not jarring aside “It seems to me that I have been in a manner presented”. These asides — more often than not indicative of James’s reluctance to lose his narratorial observations — are all too frequent in the play. Kossmann pinpoints this as the key stylistic problem in James’s adaptation:

The inclinations and techniques of the fiction writer are still clearly visible... In fact, he overused the “aside” in an attempt to compensate for the loss of the point of view technique.¹⁰⁹

In this scene, the overuse of the aside critically mars the subsequent emotional development between Daisy and Winterbourne. In the novella James presents us with a dialogic encounter and then leads us into a sensitive and crucial section of narrative which presents some indirect dialogue and reveals Winterbourne’s personality, not least his “relish for feminine beauty”. One of the joys of reading James is his ability to move from pared dialogue into narrative which gives a moment of clear, specific

¹⁰⁹ Kossmann, p. 31.

focus in terms of character and motivation. Moreover, in this particular case James can also highlight some features connected with his quintessential theme of the “international situation”: America in relationship to Europe.

To return to Winterbourne’s first encounter with Daisy:

DAISY.... (*Looks down at her dress, and continues to smooth her ribbons.*)

WINTERBOURNE. (*Aside.*) Does she accept my acquaintance or not? It’s rather sudden, and it wouldn’t do at Geneva. But why else did she come and plant herself in front of me? She is the prettiest of the pretty, and, I declare, I’ll risk it! (*After a moment, aloud.*) We are very fortunate in our weather, are we not? (129)

The young lady inspected her flounces and smoothed her ribbons again; and Winterbourne presently risked an observation upon the beauty of the view. He was ceasing to be embarrassed, for he had begun to perceive that she was not in the least embarrassed herself. (7)

In the play Winterbourne seems rather opportunistic — much more of a “lady-killer” — through his expressed intention to “risk it!” in contrast to the much more passive “(he) risked an observation”. Similarly, it is hard to see the dramatic Winterbourne being in the least self-conscious or “embarrassed”. This transformation in Winterbourne’s personality is further emphasised by his monologue when Daisy has exited:

She’s simply amazing! I have never seen them like that! I have seen them worse — oh, yes! — and I have seen them better; but I’ve never encountered that particular shade — that familiarity, that facility, that fragility! She’s too audacious to be innocent, and too candid to be — the other thing. But her candor itself is a queer affair. Coming up to me and proposing acquaintance, and letting her eyes rest on mine! planting herself there like a flower to be gathered! Introducing me to her courtier, and offering me a rendezvous at the end of twenty minutes! Are they all like that, the little American girls? (131)

The “other thing” is presumably a “flirt” or “coquette” and yet we should note that Winterbourne uses the latter in Act II, sc. viii: “What they say is true — you are a thorough-going coquette” (155). The monologue I have quoted above is not far from the moustache-twisting of a melodramatic villain (“the little American girls” indeed)

with lusty expediency instead of the blossoming romance which never comes to fruition in the novella. As we can see in this example, the characteristic Jamesian prose destroys dramatic language, and it does so throughout the play. An example of this can be illustrated with reference to Act II, sc. i. Here is Winterbourne's dialogue with Mme de Katkoff:

WINTERBOURNE. When, at your hotel just now, they told me you had gone out, I was pretty sure you had come here.

MME DE KATKOFF. I always come here as soon as I arrive in Rome for the sake of that view. It's an old friend of mine.

WINTERBOURNE. Have you no old friends but that, and wasn't it also — a little — for the sake of meeting one or two of them? We all come here, you know.

MME DE KATKOFF. One or two of them? You don't mean two — you mean one! (142)

The typical James subclause, qualification and imagery (a view as "friend") serves only to confuse what is really a very banal exchange. This is rather disappointing considering that elsewhere James is able to make some lines clearer in adaptation: for example, in the discussion about the Château de Chillon Winterbourne's question, "You too, I suppose, have seen it?" (11) becomes "I suppose you have been there, too?" (139). Later in Act II, sc. i Mme de Katkoff describes Winterbourne in terms of the following metaphor:

You are like one of those tall German stoves, which present to the eye a surface of smooth white porcelain, without the slightest symptom of fuel or of flame. Nothing at first could seem less glowing; but after you have been in the room with it for half an hour you feel that the temperature is rising — and you want to open a window! (143)

This original addition to the play might work in a novel, but for drama it is too long, too elaborate and probably rather absurd. Similarly, Daisy's monologue in Act II, sc. v has great potential — Daisy addresses her current situation but also relates to the experience of Americans in Europe complete with national stereotypes — but it is too long and convoluted. To quote an extract:

Well, I don't much care about the Americans: I can make it all right with the Americans when I get home. Mr. Winterbourne isn't an American; I never saw any one like *him* over there. If I had, perhaps I shouldn't have come away; for over there it would all be different. Well, it isn't different here, and I suppose it never will be. Everything is strange over here; and what is strangest of all is one's liking people that are so peculiar. (150)

One loses sight of what she is actually talking about, especially if we subject it to what we could call the GBS test and recite it (see Chapter Five, page 204).

All the characters in the play seem to share the same voice. Indeed, this failing was highlighted by a contemporary reviewer in the *New York Times*:

These people do not act; they talk, talk, talk. And while they have some smartness of repartee, it is a dead level of smartness: they all talk alike.¹¹⁰

This problem exists not least because, as I said earlier, James is determined to use whatever means necessary to get as many of his narrative observations into the script as possible. One stylistic repercussion of this reliance on the original narrative voice is that all the characters seem to speak with the same voice. Indeed, when reading the play one has to keep a close eye on the speaker because there is a lack of vocal individuality. James also betrays a propensity for tying up any loose ends in dialogue. For example, compare the two accounts of Mr Miller:

DAISY. (*Indicating WINTERBOURNE.*) Ask him *his* name.

RANDOLPH. Ask him yourself! My father's name is Ezra B. Miller. My father ain't in Europe. My father's in a better place than Europe.

WINTERBOURNE. (*Uncertain.*) Ah, you had the misfortune...

RANDOLPH. My father's in Schenectady. He does a big business. He's rich, you can bet your head!

WINTERBOURNE. (*Aside.*) Oh, in Schenectady? I thought he meant in Paradise! (130)

"Ask him *his* name," said his sister, indicating Winterbourne.

But on this point Randolph seemed perfectly indifferent; he continued to supply information with regard to his own family. "My father's name is Ezra B. Miller," he announced. "My father ain't in Europe; my father's in a better place than Europe."

¹¹⁰ 9 September 1883, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 25.

Winterbourne imagined for a moment that this was the manner in which the child had been taught to intimate that Mr Miller had been removed to the sphere of celestial rewards. But Randolph immediately added, "My father's in Schenectady. He's got a big business. My father's rich, you bet." (8)

Rather than let the Randolph ignore his sister, "Ask him yourself" is added. Winterbourne's "uncertain" comment about "misfortune" indicates that he presumes Mr Miller to be deceased. It is questionable whether his remark is actually necessary — the thought could be indicated through gesture or expression — but clearly the final aside is superfluous and may even patronise the audience. James does not want any doubt as to what his characters' thoughts or attitudes are.

Perhaps most critically, James's adaptation is extremely melodramatic. Part of the problem of this is that the novella is about unfulfilled passion and gently tragic anticlimax. By substituting a serious illness and recovery on stage James creates a much more melodramatic version. In the novella Daisy passes quietly, her last utterance being the poignant message conveyed via Mrs Miller. The message is poignant not least because it is so indirect and uncomprehending and because her mother had refused to deliver it:

Anyway, she says she's not engaged. I don't know why she wanted you to know; but she said to me three times — "Mind you tell Mr. Winterbourne." And then she told me to ask if you remembered the time you went to that castle, in Switzerland. But I said I wouldn't give any such messages as that. (48-9)

The remembrance of the trip to Chillon has a direct and "living" importance for Daisy and Winterbourne in the play:

DAISY. You are just as you were at that castle!

WINTERBOURNE. So are you — at this moment. We can dream we are in that happy place! (156)

In contrast to Daisy's quiet demise in the novella, here is Mme de Katkoff in Act III, sc. vi reflecting on Daisy's condition:

When I met that poor girl just now, and looked into her face, I was filled with compassion and shame. She is dying, I say, and between us we are killing her! Dying because she loves you, and because she thinks you despise her! Dying because you have turned away from her, and she has tried to stifle the pang! Dying because I have held you here — under compulsion of a scoundrel! — and she thinks she has lost you forever! I read it all in her eyes — the purest I ever saw. I am sick of the ghastly comedy, and I must tell the miserable truth.
(170)

Not only is Daisy in the depths of malaria at this point, but Mme de Katkoff additionally levels blame and confesses the intrigue she has compounded, while at the same time extolling the purity of the American girl.

Later in the same act, Daisy feels sufficiently recovered to join the carnival but is overcome in the crowd:

(Enter rapidly WINTERBOURNE, carrying DAISY, in a swoon, in his arms, and followed by GIOVANELLI, who looks extremely alarmed and extremely indignant. At the same moment MME DE KATKOFF enters from the opposite side.)

MME DE KATKOFF. *(With a cry.)* Ah, it's all over! She is gone!

WINTERBOURNE. A chair! A chair! Heaven forgive us, she is dying! (174)

Katkoff's line has a resonance and poignancy but it is undercut by the action which follows. Daisy continues to slip in and out of consciousness and prompts a desperate Winterbourne to declare his love:

WINTERBOURNE. We shall be happy together when you have told me you forgive me. Let me hear you say it — only three words! *(He waits. She remains silent.)* Ah, she sinks away again! Daisy, won't you live — won't you live for me?

DAISY. *(Murmuring.)* It was all for you — it was all for you!

WINTERBOURNE. *(Burying his head in her lap.)* Vile idiot! Impenetrable fool!
(175)

Soon afterwards Daisy recovers and accepts Winterbourne's proposal and the play ends with her staggering to her feet. The denouement is extreme and histrionic —

confessions of blame, guilt, and love while Katkoff stands up to Eugenio and Daisy accepts Winterbourne's proposal. As Oscar Wilde might say, "The good end happily, and the bad unhappily."¹¹¹

However, it is important to observe that the cloying aspect of the final act is tempered with irony. For instance, Mrs Costello declares in the midst of one of Daisy's swoons that "She'll come to life again: they don't die like that" (174). Indeed, I cannot resist observing that if Daisy did die in the play this remark would not be far from the final words of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*! Mrs Costello may not be a Lady Bracknell (or a Judge Brack), but her ironic presence does save the final scene to an extent.

There are some other redeeming features in the adaptation which I feel we have a duty to highlight. I have just mentioned Mrs Costello's irony and earlier I quoted a reviewer who for all his criticism did acknowledge the "smartness of repartee" in *Daisy Miller: A Comedy in Three Acts*. There are a number of witty exchanges and jokes that are not in the novella:

DAISY. Do you live here — in the mountains?

WINTERBOURNE. (*Aside.*) Does she think I'm a goatherd? (130)

MISS DURANT. (...) you never give him time.

MRS. COSTELLO. Does he want three hours?

MISS DURANT. No, but he wants three minutes! (152)

However, it is surprising what James resists. For instance, in the novella there is the amusing account of the Miller's family's dyspepsia:

"I hope you have been well since we parted at Vevey," he said.

Mrs. Miller now certainly looked at him — at his chin. "Not very well, sir," she answered.

"She's got dyspepsia," said Randolph. "I've got it too. Father's got it. I've got it worst!"

This announcement, instead of embarrassing Mrs. Miller, seemed to relieve her. "I suffer from the liver," she said. (26)

¹¹¹ Wilde, Oscar, *The Importance of Being Earnest* Act II, Methuen: London, 1981, p. 28.

Again this allows James to raise issues of embarrassment in relation to the interjections of children and to satirise the informality of “unrefined” Americans in Europe. In the play Daisy explains why she has been to the Château de Chillon:

DAISY. Well, we were going last week, but mother gave out. She suffers terribly from dyspepsia. She said she couldn't go. (139)

Thus James is determined to keep Mrs Miller's condition in the play, but it is merely a banal fact. At most it is a device to allow Winterbourne to escort Daisy to Chillon personally. It loses the comic and satirical aspect it has in the novella.

To return to some strengths of the dramatisation, James does exploit the aural and visual potential of the stage. Act III is dominated by the Carnival with the distant “flare of torches, the sound of voices and of music” (160). The Carnival — which does not occur in the novella — affects all the characters, one way or another, and precipitates the denouement. I have complained about the long, moribund monologues in the play. Act III, sc. iii opens with Daisy, recovering from Roman fever, reflecting on and reacting to the distant Carnival. It is a refreshing and tender speech, not overstated or melodramatic because the carnival gives it a focus:

DAISY. (...) Perhaps I'm too fond; that's one of the things I thought of as I lay there. I thought of so many — and some of them so sad — as I listened to the far-away Carnival. I think it was this that helped me to get better. I was afraid I had been bad, and I wanted to live to be good again. I was afraid I should die, and I didn't want to die. (162-3)

In sc. i, James employs an interesting use of mask:

REVERDY. (*To Miss Durant, remaining behind.*) Will you give her the slip, and come out with me?

MISS DURANT. (*Looking at him and listening to the music.*) In a fancy dress?

REVERDY. Oh, no; simply in a mask. I've got one in my pocket. (*Takes out a grotesque mask and holds it to his face a moment, shaking his head at her.*) How d'ye do, lovely woman?

MISS DURANT. Dear me, how very hideous!

REVERDY. If *you* put it on, I shall be as handsome as ever. (160)

The use of the mask here would be visually effective in production. The introduction of the Carnival into the play is an appropriate and refreshing exploitation of another performance tradition. Moreover, the idea of dialogue and deceit is central to the play, and this masking would emphasise this in a striking way.

The play also makes some interesting points about nationality: European values in contrast to American ones, and the notion of tourist culture. Of course, the novella is a masterpiece on this front, but the play does contribute to James's literature of the international situation in its own way. The invention of Mme de Katkoff is excellent for this purpose, a mature Russian princess residing in Rome with snobbish attitudes:

WINTERBOURNE. (...) Do you dine at the table d'hôte?

MME DE KATKOFF. At the table d'hôte, with that rabble of tourists? I dine in my own apartments. (157)

Her involvement with Winterbourne is intriguing and she serves as an effective opposite to the young American woman.

To conclude, James's adaptation, with a couple of exceptional points, is a seriously marred play. At some moments it is overblown and melodramatic, at other times it is dull and verbose. The long monologues and the all too frequent asides demonstrate that James is forcing text into the play at any cost and ignores the potential of performance: the presence of actors and the use of silence, pauses and subtext. In short, James fails to create meaning through exploiting the numerous languages of drama other than written text. Analysing *Daisy Miller*, Bernd Lenz writes:

Was in der Erzählung gelingt — die Abstimmung von Dialog- und Erzählpassagen, der Handlungsablauf mit dem notwendig tragischen Ende, die sprachliche Darstellung, Charakterisierungs- und Erzähltechnik — , funktioniert im Drama nicht mehr. Simple Dialoge, ein melodramatisches

happy ending, Auslassen von dramatisch wirksamen Szenen aus der Vorlage, die bis zum Überdruß praktizierte Technik des >aside< und flache Charaktere lassen Erzählung und Drama trotz der bisweilen wörtlichen Übereinstimmungen wie zwei völlig unterschiedliche Texte wirken.¹¹²

[What works in fiction — the harmonisation of dialogue and narrative passages, the plot with the necessarily tragic ending, the language, techniques of characterisation and narrative — does not work any longer in drama. Simple dialogues, a melodramatic happy ending, omission of dramatic scenes, the over-use of the aside and one-dimensional characters make narrative and drama appear as two entirely different texts, despite frequent identical passages.]

¹¹² Lenz, Bernd, "Intertextualität und Gattungswechsel" in *Intertextualität: Formen, Funktionen, anglistische Fallstudie* (eds Broich, U. and Pfister, M.), Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1985, p. 170.

Chapter Three

THOMAS HARDY

(1840-1928)

1. Thomas Hardy, Drama, and Adaptation

In *Hardy and the Sister Arts*, Joan Grundy refers to Hardy's enthusiasm for drama in his youth. One of his earliest ambitions was to write plays in blank verse and, in the 1860s, he even sought experience as an actor on the London stage, believing that this would "teach him the techniques of drama".¹¹³ Harold Orel provides more information about Hardy's acting when he tells us that Hardy had a walk-on part in *Ali-Baba and the Forty Thieves; or, Harlequin and the Genii of the Arabian Nights!* by Gilbert à Beckett in 1866.¹¹⁴ Aside from biography, Joan Grundy sees "drama" throughout the Hardy oeuvre and argues that it dominates the novels. Several critics have drawn parallels between the novels and classics of dramatic literature (in particular Shakespeare).¹¹⁵ Hardy himself defines good fiction "as that kind of imaginative writing which lies nearest to the epic, dramatic, or narrative masterpieces of the past".¹¹⁶ Joan Grundy goes so far as to say:

He thinks of both life and literature in terms of the dramatic categories, "tragedy, comedy, farce" [a quotation from *Jude the Obscure*]. The metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* is scarcely a metaphor for him: it is a fact.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Grundy, Joan, *Hardy and The Sister Arts*, Macmillan: London, 1979, p. 70.

¹¹⁴ Orel, Harold, *The Unknown Thomas Hardy*, Harvester Press: Brighton, 1987, p. 39.

¹¹⁵ See Hand, Richard J., "'Character is Fate': Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*", *Literature of Region and Nation Newsletter* Volume 2, Number 4: Aberdeen, September 1991, p. 3.

¹¹⁶ Orel, Harold, *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, Macmillan: London, 1967, p. 114.

¹¹⁷ Grundy, p. 70.

The latent importance of the dramatic in Hardy's work is something the novelist himself recognised. In 1908 he writes to the actor-manager Charles Cartwright, who had asked Hardy if he had ever considered dramatising *The Mayor of Casterbridge*:

I quite remember your excellent acting as Sergeant Troy in the adaptation of "Far from the Madding Crowd."

I have often seen the possibility of a play in "The Mayor of Casterbridge", & knowing how my novels are ransacked for situations by dramatists I have sometimes thought of trying my hand at one. But as most novels become mere melodramas in adaptation, & as, moreover, everything connected with the stage is so shifty and uncertain, I have not been tempted to set about it. I will, however, consider the matter, & let you know if I regard it as practicable.¹¹⁸

Joan Grundy explains the dramatic parameters of Hardy's fiction when she contends that "the dramatic talents which had to wait so long to burst out into sudden blaze found an outlet in the despised prose itself".¹¹⁹ The "sudden blaze" Grundy rather hyperbolically refers to is, of course, *The Dynasts*. This Napoleonic epic, with its three parts, nineteen acts and one hundred and thirty scenes, was never intended for practical performance. A couple of examples from the stage directions can highlight this:

The unnatural light... usurps that of the sun, bringing into view, like breezes made visible, the films or brain-tissues of the Immanent Will, that pervade all things, ramifying through the whole army, Napoleon included, and moving them to Its inexplicable artistries.¹²⁰

There immediately is shown visually the electric state of mind that animates Wellington... [lists other British and French figures]. This vision, resembling as a whole the interior of a beating brain lit by phosphorescence, in an instant fades again back to the normal.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ 20 February 1908, *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy Volume Three: 1902-1908* (eds Purdy, R. Little and Millgate, M.), Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1982, pp. 297-8.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰ Hardy, Thomas, *The Dynasts: An Epic-Drama* III, I, i, Macmillan: London, 1925, p. 330.

¹²¹ *ibid.* III, II, ii, p. 368.

These examples adequately demonstrate the impossibility of staging this epic drama strictly using the instructions of the playwright. While other stage directions in *The Dynasts* are curiously cinematic (aerial views and so on), the two examples above rely entirely on the figurings of the reader's mind. Nevertheless, in November 1914 Harley Granville Barker produced selected scenes from *The Dynasts* at the Kingsway Theatre. These were, Hardy informs us, "staged mainly for patriotic and practical objects (sic)".¹²²

When it comes to Hardy's interest in theatre, however, by the time we are in the twentieth century he appears to be rather contemptuous. In May 1908 he was invited to join a committee to create the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. Hardy refused in unequivocal terms, and his letter to Robert Donald explains why:

I do not think that Shakespeare appertains particularly to the theatrical world nowadays, if he ever did. His distinction as minister of the theatre is infinitesimal beside his distinction as a poet, man of letters, & seer of life, & that his expression of himself was cast in the form of words for actors, & not in the form of books to be read, was an accident of his social circumstances that he himself despised. I would, besides, hazard the guess that he, & all poets of high rank whose works have taken a stage direction, will cease altogether to be acted some day, & be simply studied.¹²³

This statement was perhaps no less startling to the Shakespeare theatre committee in 1908 than it is to us. The bold assertion that Shakespeare "will cease altogether to be acted some day" pales into insignificance next to the astonishing notion that Shakespeare wrote plays to be acted rather than books to be read due to "an accident of his social circumstances that he himself despised". Grundy explains Hardy's attitude thus:

This rather disdainful repudiation of the actual theatre may owe something to Hardy's disappointment of his own ventures into it (with adaptations of *Tess* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*); more to his distaste for the over-elaborate productions and misguided "realism" of the contemporary theatre;

¹²² Hardy, Thomas, *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy Volume Five: 1914-1919*, (eds Purdy, R. Little and Millgate, M.), Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1985, p. 65.

¹²³ 10 May 1908, *Letters Three*, p. 313.

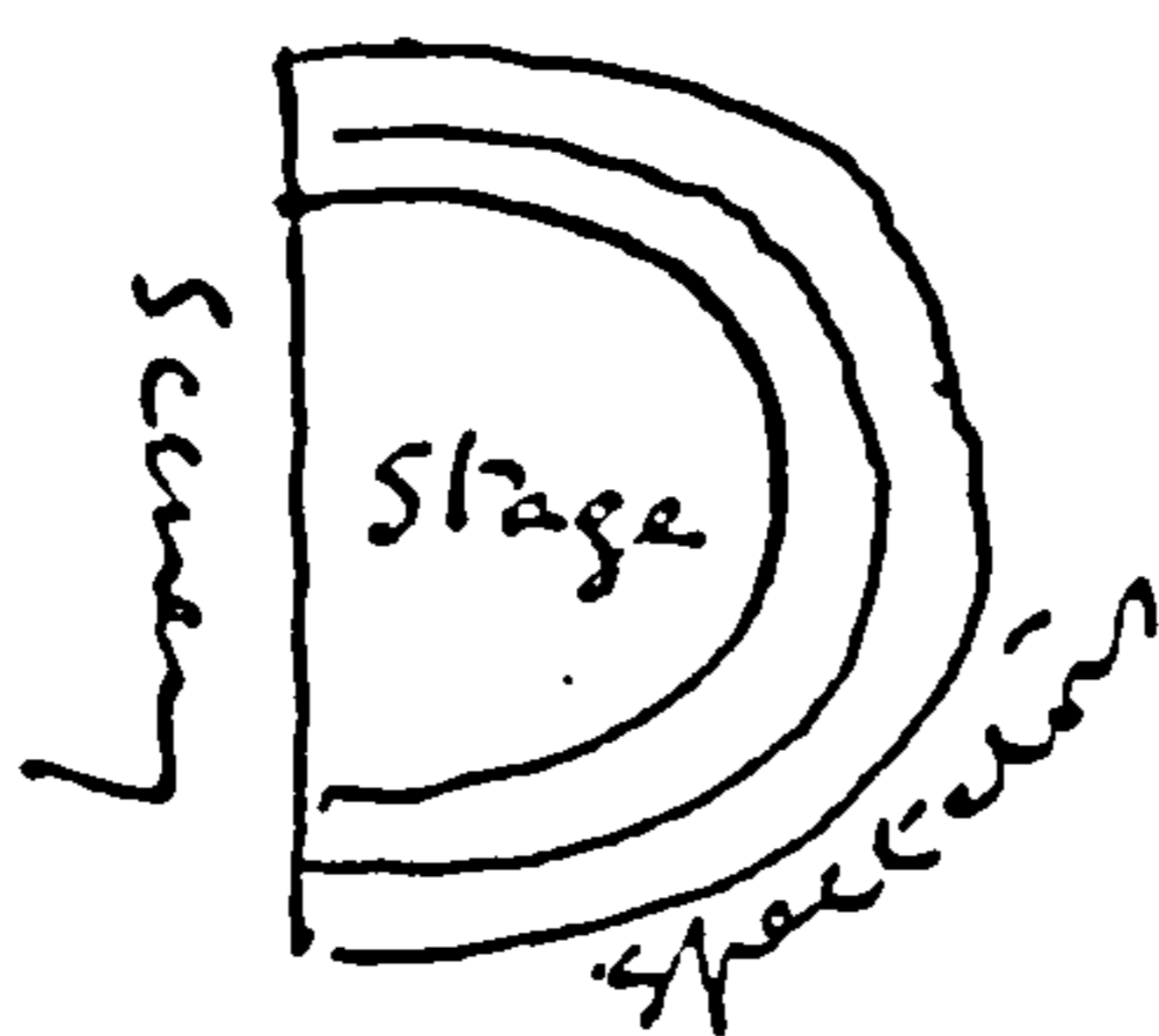
but most of all to a partisan preference for the alternative type of drama which the nature of his material had driven him to create.¹²⁴

I believe that the fact Hardy failed in his theatrical ventures is very important — perhaps no less important than the other reasons which Grundy highlights — and it is something he tended to gloss over in later accounts of his career. In 1922, for example, Harley Granville Barker asked Hardy if he had ever been interested in the theatre. Hardy replied, with false modesty if not dishonesty,

I have only had one idea about the theatre, and I wrote a letter to the papers thereon nearly 40 years ago:... that I should like the pit to be level with the stage, and the actors to walk out upon it, so that we could see all round them. But as nobody took any notice of my letter my interest ended.¹²⁵

Hardy's involvement with the world of practical theatre was more than this letter implies. With regards to Hardy's "one idea about the theatre", in July 1890 he wrote to J. T. Grein (advocator for the establishment of an English *Théâtre Libre* and founder of the Independent Theatre in London in 1891) with the suggestion that a Greek-style arena would be an "attractive" idea, and he also provides a diagram of what he suggests:

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¹²⁴ Grundy, p. 71.

¹²⁵ 19 March 1922, *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy Volume Six: 1920-25* (eds Purdy, R. Little and Millgate, M.), Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1987, p. 124.

¹²⁶ 24 July 1890, *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy Volume One: 1840-92* (eds Purdy, R. Little and Millgate, M.), Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1987, p. 213.

In this respect Hardy was many decades ahead of his time: the modern theatre-in-the-round principle that he is essentially advocating here is generally said to have come into prominence in the Soviet Union in the 1930s with Nikolai Okhlopkov's anti-proscenium productions at the Realistic Theatre. Neither Robert Edmond Jones's support of the theatre-in-the-round concept in America in 1920, nor Robert Atkins's Shakespeare productions at the Blackfriars Ring in the 1930s had such an immediate impact as the Moscow experiments. Moreover, whilst being a revolutionary idea, Hardy's anti-proscenium stance links him, once again, to the Greek and Renaissance dramatists. When J. I. M. Stewart states that, "There is no doubt that Shakespeare ranked with the Greek dramatists amongst Hardy's yardsticks",¹²⁷ we can extend this influence beyond theme and content into the sphere of practical dramaturgy. Another aspect of classical drama which interested Hardy was the "dramatic unities" of action, time and place.¹²⁸ Hardy was particularly impressed by the use Ibsen made of the unity of time. In his autobiography he writes:

He witnessed the performance of *Hedda Gabler* at the Vaudeville, on which he remarks that it seems to him that the rule for staging nowadays should be to have no scene which would not be physically possible in the time of acting. (An idea carried out years after in *The Queen of Cornwall*.)¹²⁹

Hardy's parenthetical reference to his late play, *The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall* (begun in 1916 and published in November 1923), once again emphasises Hardy's simultaneously progressive and yet traditional vision for the English theatre.

F. B. Pinion, commenting on *The Queen of Cornwall*, explains:

Hardy's stage recommendations show that his theatrically progressive ideas are founded on the practice of the Greeks and Romans. One alternative he suggests recalls the seating in their amphitheatres. His main criticism of the English stage resembles that of Addison at the beginning of the eighteenth century: the presentation of the human passions was regarded as less

¹²⁷ Stewart, J. I. M., *Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography*, Longham: London, 1971, p. 111.

¹²⁸ See Brockett, Oscar G., *History of the Theatre*, Fifth Edition, Allyn and Bacon: Boston, 1987, p. 556.

¹²⁹ Hardy, Thomas, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* (ed. Millgate, Michael), Macmillan: London, 1984, p. 245.

important than magnificent settings, robes, and other “real and sham-real appurtenances”.¹³⁰

If *Hedda Gabler* influenced Hardy’s approach towards dramatic time in the late play, Pinion reminds us how *The Queen of Cornwall*, despite its many shortcomings, represents an attempt to be radically classical in terms of practical dramaturgy and staging.

In December 1893 Florence Henniker asked Hardy if he had ever considered writing for the stage, and the novelist explains why he did not attempt to become a dramatist in economic, aesthetic and even, we could argue, social terms:

Plays are very uncertain ventures — & would — taking a merely commercial view of them — most likely bring less than novels in the long run. Moreover they are distinctly a lower form of art: what is called a good play, receiving a column’s notice in the morning’s papers, being distinctly in point of artistic feeling & exhibition of human nature no higher than a third rate novel. Consider what a poor novel “Mrs Tanqueray” wd make — I mean, how little originality it wd possess — that sort of thing having been done scores of years ago in fiction.¹³¹

The “social” terms we can interpret here are that the issues raised — as well as the “artistic feeling” — in *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* were minor next to the questions being addressed by the contemporary novel. Interestingly, George Bernard Shaw would seem to concur about Pinero’s play when he describes it as being “noticeably old-fashioned... in its sentiment and stage mechanism”.¹³² Hardy’s assertion about drama being a “lower” form of art is thought-provoking, but one cannot help asking “What about the impact of Ibsen?” Ibsen had certainly emerged on the British scene by now, thanks largely to the influence of William Archer whose ceaseless defence and translations of the Norwegian playwright, which he had started before 1880, had

¹³⁰ Hardy, Thomas, *The New Wessex Edition of the Stories of Thomas Hardy Volume 3: Old Mrs Chundle and Other Stories with The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall* (ed. Pinion, F. B.), Macmillan: London, 1977, p. 237.

¹³¹ 1 December 1893, *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy Volume Two: 1893-1901* (eds Purdy, R. Little and Millgate, M.), Clarendon Press: Oxford, p. 43.

¹³² Shaw, G. B., “Archer’s Annual” (19 March 1898) in *Our Theatre in the Nineties Volume 3*, Consatle: London, 1932, p. 339.

ensured that all the plays Ibsen had written were available in English by 1890.¹³³ Surely Ibsen could not be as easily rejected as Pinero for being “third rate” (in terms of “story”) or for not tackling current social issues. Moreover, could Ibsen’s plays be dismissed as a “lower form of art” or for lacking “artistic feeling”? Hardy admired Ibsen, and in *The Life* we read of the productions he saw in London in 1893:

During the week he saw *Hedda Gabler* and *Rosmersholm*, in which Miss Elizabeth Robins played. The former he had already seen, but was again impressed by it, as well as by the latter. Hardy could not at all understand the attitude of the English press towards these tragic productions — the culminating evidence of our blinkered insular taste afforded by the nickname of “the Ibscene drama” which they received.¹³⁴

In the same week Hardy also went to see *The Master Builder* accompanied by several people, including Mrs Henniker. She was, of course, the woman who asked Hardy if he had considered writing for the stage.

A degree of artistic affinity can be traced between Ibsen and Hardy. Certainly there is a parallel to be drawn between critical reception and *potential* reception. When Granville Barker was producing excerpts from *The Dynasts* at the Kingsway in 1914, Hardy remarks in *The Life* that

One trembles to think what would have occurred had the whole philosophy of the play been put in; but Mr Barker, remembering what had happened to Ibsen in this country, was too wise to represent the thought of the age in an English theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century and during a war.¹³⁵

But before we go too far in likening Hardy to Ibsen, we should note Hardy’s reservations about the work of the Norwegian dramatist. Hardy did not join in the denunciation of the plays as specimens of “Ibscenity”, his critique is more discreetly aesthetic:

¹³³ See Brockett, p. 556.

¹³⁴ *Life*, p. 272.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 397.

In an article on Ibsen in the *Fortnightly* the writer says that his manner is wrong. That the drama, like the novel, should not be for edification. In this I think the writer errs. It should be so, but the edified should not perceive the edification. Ibsen's edifying is too obvious.¹³⁶

The issue that Henniker raised when she asked Hardy if he had considered writing plays became a question of public cultural interest. In 1892 the *Pall Mall Gazette* asked a number of leading non-dramatists why they did not write for the stage. The *Gazette's* three questions were phrased thus:

(1) Whether you regard the present divorce of fiction from the drama as beneficial or inimical to the best interests of literature and of the stage; (2) Whether you, yourself, have at any time had, or now have, any desire to exercise your gifts in the production of plays as well as of novels; and, if not, (3) Why you consider the novel the better or more convenient means for bringing your ideas before the public whom you address.¹³⁷

The issue of 31 August provides Hardy's response:

"Why I Don't Write Plays"

1. Inimical to the best interests of the stage: no injury to literature.
2. Have occasionally had a desire to produce a play, and have, in fact, written the skeletons of several. Have no such desire in any special sense just now.
3. Because, in general, the novel affords scope for getting nearer to the heart and meaning of things than does the play: in particular, the play as nowadays conditioned, when parts have to be moulded to actors, not actors to parts; when managers will not risk a truly original play; when scenes have to be arranged in a constrained and arbitrary fashion to suit the exigencies of scene-building, although spectators are absolutely indifferent to order and succession provided they can have set before them a developing thread of interest. The reason of this arbitrary arrangement would seem to be that the presentation of human passions is subordinated to the presentation of mountains, cities, clothes, furniture, plate, jewels, and other real and sham-real appurtenances, to the neglect of the principle that the material stage should be a conventional or figurative arena, in which accessories are kept

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 235.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Orel, Harold, *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings* Macmillan: London, 1967. p. 139.

down to the plane of mere suggestions of place and time, so as not to interfere with the required high-relief of the action and emotions.¹³⁸

Hardy's third answer serves to re-emphasise his opposition to theatrical "realism" and the proscenium stage design. Hardy had in fact written more than mere "skeletons", and within a year of this explanation his short play *The Three Wayfarers* (an adaptation of the Wessex tale "The Three Strangers") was produced in London. In June 1893 Terry's Theatre produced an evening of short plays by non-dramatists who had been invited to try their hand at writing for the theatre: Hardy's *The Three Wayfarers*; a Thackeray adaptation — *Becky Sharp* — by J. M. Barrie (who was not yet an established playwright); Arthur Conan Doyle's *Foreign Policy* (an adaptation of his short story "A Question of Diplomacy"); and other pieces. Hardy had not had much faith in his play, and had predicted that the entire evening would be extremely unsuccessful in a letter to Florence Henniker:

My little scrap of a play has taken up so much of my time this week — more than it is worth. It is to be produced tonight with 4 others — and I prophesy a *fiasco* for such a heterogeneous collection.¹³⁹

Nevertheless, Hardy's one-act play was celebrated by *The Times* as "unquestionably the best piece of the evening".¹⁴⁰

In 1894 Hardy embarked on his most ambitious adaptation — indeed, his most ambitious play for the theatre — *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Before we remark glibly that by now Hardy was a well-established and successful novelist who would obviously have no interest or need for the theatre, we should realise that 1892 was not an easy year for Hardy. His diary for Easter of that year reveals his disgust with the state of the novel — with regards to critical reception — in the light of the bad treatment of *Tess* on its appearance in novel form:

¹³⁸ *ibid.*

¹³⁹ 3 June 1893, *Letters Two*, p. 10.

¹⁴⁰ See Purdy, Richard Little, *Thomas Hardy: A Bibliographical Study*, Oxford University Press: 1954, p. 79.

If this sort of thing continues no more novel-writing for me. A man must be a fool to deliberately stand up to be shot at.¹⁴¹

This remark makes us realise that the world of a successful novelist does not necessarily make fiction a comfortable or easy option.

Certainly Hardy would become disgruntled with regards to the status of the theatre in cultural life: the celebration in drama of what he held as third-rate, if not *passé*, themes in fiction. In 1909 Hardy asks William Archer why he has never written

an article on the unfair & disproportionate difference of standard applied to works of the theatre & those of us poor scribblers — I mean imaginative writers — who depend upon the press for making our ideas known. A situation, for instance, which is a stale thing in a novel or dramatic poem, is hailed as one of dazzling originality when, after some years, it has been imitated from that novel or poem & appears behind the footlights. Surely a re-adjustment of terms is wanted here, so that the two arts might be reduced to common measure.¹⁴²

Hardy is, we should remember, much less polite in the letter to Charles Cartwright I quoted at the beginning where he remarks that “my novels are ransacked for situations by dramatists”.

One of the dramatic “skeletons” Hardy had created was in fact the complete play adaptation of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which I referred to, fleetingly, earlier. Hardy gives a succinct history of this dramatisation in an 1881 letter to W. Moy Thomas:

Some time ago I was enduced to dramatize the story, which I did alone & unassisted, under the title of “*The Mistress of the Farm — A pastoral drama.*” Some time after this Mr Comyns Carr asked if I had ever thought of dramatizing the story, when I sent him the play as I had written it. He modified it in places, to suit stage carpentry & c, & offered it to the St James’s...¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Roberts, M., *Tess in the Theatre*, University of Toronto Press: 1950, p. xx.

¹⁴² 9 January 1909, *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy Volume Four: 1909-13* (eds Purdy, R. Little and Millgate, M.), Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1984, p. 2.

¹⁴³ 30 December 1881, *Letters One*, p. 99.

The St James's Theatre accepted Hardy's play, rehearsed it but eventually decided against full production and rejected the work. There was some controversy in 1881 over a play by the young dramatist Arthur Wing Pinero which was performed at the same theatre. Pinero's play — *The Squire* — is very similar in plot to *Far from the Madding Crowd* and Hardy was encouraged to take legal action on the grounds of the copyright of his *own* play. Although some considered there was reasonable case, Hardy was prudent enough, arguably, not to pursue a court action. Eventually, in March 1882, Comyns Carr's adaptation of the 1874 novel was premièred in Liverpool in the presence of Hardy:

The play... was not sufficiently near the novel to be to Hardy's liking, but it was well received, and was staged in London at the Globe Theatre in April, where it ran for many nights, but brought Hardy no profit, nor the adapter, as he was informed.¹⁴⁴

Hardy, like any of the "prudent novelists" that Shaw referred to in the Introductory chapter, was involved in writing short dramatic versions of his novels to protect his copyright. It was, he writes to Florence Henniker, "a business I hate".¹⁴⁵ In 1897, for example, a discreet copyright production of *Tess* was performed at the St James's Theatre. After the copyright production, the novelist writes to Emma Hardy:

Mr & Mrs McIlvaine & a friend were "the audience" & duly paid 2 guineas each for their seats. It is a farce which will cost me more than twenty pounds.¹⁴⁶

However, we should not be fooled into thinking that Hardy's adaptation of *Tess* was a modest and insignificant enterprise: the *play* itself was certainly not a farce (even if the law was an ass). Many great names of the theatre followed Hardy's writing of the play with interest. This is reflected when Hardy writes to Mrs Patrick Campbell in

¹⁴⁴ *Life*, p. 158.

¹⁴⁵ 19 February 1897, *Letters Two*, p. 148.

¹⁴⁶ 2 March 1897, *ibid.*, p. 149.

1895, “You must be the Tess now we have got so far. It would be a thousand pities if you were not.”¹⁴⁷ Hardy was still writing the adaptation at the time of this letter. Indeed, it was not until the very beginning of the subsequent year that Hardy can write the following:

I have finished the *Tess* play. But heavens knows what I shall do with it. I have received a large offer for its performance in America; but in my total inexperience I imagine it ought to appear here first.¹⁴⁸

This bemused and self-effacing letter is addressed to no less a man of the theatre than William Archer. We find Hardy asking for *practical* advice (he writes, for example, to Henry Arthur Jones in 1896 because he is “in a hopeless fog”¹⁴⁹ about the theatre’s financial terms), but regarding the actual artistic integrity of his work, Hardy was very protective of the *Tess* adaptation from the start. He writes to the agents Harper and Brothers:

I hope to send a copy of the play in a few days. I shd prefer that my version be adhered to, but I wd consent to a reasonable modification, if indispensable to its production by a first class company.

You will not, of course, allow anybody to see the play who is unlikely to produce it.¹⁵⁰

The reluctance which this letter seems to imply, as well as the element — in the last paragraph — of secretiveness may make us wonder why Hardy wrote it at all. Many years later, in 1925, Hardy sums up his experience with self-adaptation and motives for dramatising *Tess* for the stage in a letter to Harley Granville Barker:

to attempt to put a novel on stage is hopeless, and altogether a mistake in art. I should never have thought of trying my hand on it nowadays; but having been tempted by many “leading ladies” of the nineties I could not resist.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ 10 July 1895, *ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁴⁸ 2 January 1896, *ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁴⁹ 15 March 1896, *ibid.*, p. 113 .

¹⁵⁰ 9 February 1896, *ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁵¹ 20 October 1925, *Letters Six*, p. 362.

The first “leading lady” to approach Hardy would seem to be Olga Nethersole who wrote to Hardy from New York in November 1894:

I have dreamed and dreamed of *Tess*... The character appeals to me beyond my power of expression. It is so human, so pathetic, and so true. Oh, please, give me the chance of doing something really great. (...) Please answer this letter and tell me my dreams shall be realized.¹⁵²

Such positive interest in his story must have been very gratifying to Hardy after the pejorative remarks from the critics that the novel received. In the autobiography, we can read that

Hardy received letters or oral messages from almost every actress of note... asking for an opportunity of appearing in the part of “Tess” — among them being Mrs Patrick Campbell, Ellen Terry, Sarah Bernhardt, and Eleanora Duse.¹⁵³

However, there is a distortion of the facts in this which can be proved if we peruse the collected letters. In the letters we discover that Hardy himself approached Sarah Bernhardt, and not vice versa. Hardy sent Bernhardt a copy of the novel of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in French with the remark that:

It has been dramatized and played for hundreds of nights in America (in English); and though I have no great wish to see it played on this side of the Atlantic, I would consent to your dramatizing and producing it in French, because I feel that the chief character could be so finely rendered by yourself.¹⁵⁴

In addition to Sarah Bernhardt and the actresses mentioned previously, other leading female performers of the time who approached him directly, or were put forward by

¹⁵² 19 November 1894, quoted in Roberts, M., p. xxiv.

¹⁵³ Hardy, Thomas, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* (ed. Millgate, Michael), Macmillan: London, 1984, p. 282.

¹⁵⁴ 25 June 1901, *Letters Three*, p. 291.

managers, included: Elizabeth Robins (whom Hardy saw performing as Hedda Gabler in 1893); Julia Neilson; Helen Blythe; and Mrs H. B. Irving.¹⁵⁵ Eventually, the American Minnie Maddern Fiske got the role with Hardy's blessing although, as we shall see, not in Hardy's own adaptation.

Nevertheless, Hardy's bold experiment in self-adaptation was rejected, and not put into production. Hardy was not depressed by this, in fact he was rather relieved: his being in a "hopeless fog" about the financial terms; not to mention what would seem to be his scorn for the theatre as a whole. In August 1896 he writes to Mrs Patrick Campbell that there were "other reasons than dramatic ones"¹⁵⁶ for *not* producing it, which implies that Hardy had personal reasons.

Hardy, however, did give full American and Canadian rights for the adaptation of *Tess* to Minnie Maddern Fiske. Fiske had to find a dramatist capable of adapting the novel and subsequently chose Lorimer Stoddard. Hardy's copyright performance of his own adaptation at the St James's Theatre secured his British rights and so Fiske could not — and did not — bring her production of Stoddard's *Tess* to Britain.¹⁵⁷

Hardy did not go to America to see Fiske's performance at the Fifth Avenue Theater in New York in 1897, but he followed reports of the play with keen interest. Rebekah Owen wrote to Hardy describing the opening night. Hardy replied that he had never "taken very kindly" to the dramatisation idea at all but was "much entertained" by Owen's account. He also asks one crucial question about Fiske's performance:

Did you notice whether her intonation was sufficiently near the English to pass on the stage here as that of an English girl without seeming discordant to London ears...?¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ See Roberts, M., p. xxv.

¹⁵⁶ 7 August 1896, *Letters Three*, p. 128.

¹⁵⁷ See Roberts, M., p. xxxiv.

¹⁵⁸ 16 March 1897, *Letters Three*, p. 152.

This surely reflects that Hardy was considering allowing for a performance in Britain. I think it is fair to add that the accent would doubtlessly sound discordant to *Wessex* ears!

In June 1897 Richard Watson Gilder wrote to Hardy about the production in New York, commenting that,

Mrs Fiske does not look like Tess, does not act like her, does not think like her; but nevertheless she presents an individuality, based upon your work, which is one of the most moving pieces of acting that I have ever seen.¹⁵⁹

This fascinating judgement, which touches at the core of the challenge and issues that adaptation raises, made Hardy reply that, "I did not much care to have the novel dramatized at all, but cannot now complain of the result."¹⁶⁰ Indeed, the proven success of the play provoked ambivalent feelings for Hardy. On the one hand there was the glamour of the theatrical success that his original work of fiction had evidently initiated, but at the same time there was the terror of losing control over the work in numerous ways. As the success of the play gathered momentum, Hardy wrote to Henry Arthur Jones with the remark that it "fills me with consternation, for I had secretly hoped Tess was going to fall through altogether..."¹⁶¹

Nevertheless, Hardy resisted the temptation to invite or encourage the American production to come to Britain. A version of *Tess*, however, was seen in London in February 1900 in the form of Hugh Arthur Kennedy's unauthorised dramatisation, starring Mrs Lewis Waller. Fiske claimed that the adaptation was a plagiarism of Stoddard's version and, supported by Hardy, she took legal action and a court injunction closed the production after a few weeks.¹⁶²

A few years later, Hardy was approached by the composer Frederic d'Erlanger, who desired to make an opera out of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Hardy readily gave his permission, and the work was prepared with libretto by no less a

¹⁵⁹ See footnote to 26 June 1897, *Letters Three*, p. 167.

¹⁶⁰ 26 June 1897, *Letters Three*, p. 167.

¹⁶¹ 16 February 1897, *Letters Three*, p. 147.

¹⁶² See Roberts, M., p. liii.

figure than Luigi Illica (who had written the libretti for Puccini's *La Bohème* and *Tosca*, and would later go on to write the libretto for *Madama Butterfly*). The opera received its première in Naples in April 1906, but the event was completely ruined by nothing less than the eruption of Mount Vesuvius! The *Manchester Guardian* describes the fiasco thus:

Both performers and the audience were half choked with lava dust, and the noise of falling masonry all round the theatre was an unrehearsed accompaniment to the music.¹⁶³

Hardy sent a letter of commiseration to d'Erlanger with the wry comment that: "The volcano was all one of a piece with Tess's catastrophic career."¹⁶⁴

Hardy's own adaptation of *Tess* did not remain hidden away forever, and it made a return to life in the 1920s. In 1924 the Hardy Players requested a play by the novelist, and Hardy turned once again to his thirty year old adaptation of *Tess*. In *The Life* we read:

After much hesitation Hardy handed over his own dramatization, although, as he notes in his diary, he had come to the conclusion that to dramatize a novel was a mistake in art; moreover, that the play ruined the novel and the novel the play.¹⁶⁵

Nevertheless, Hardy was determined to lose no control over the work and he set out his strict terms to the company's producer thus:

1. That performance in Dorchester only is conceded at present...
2. Every announcement of the play is to include the statement that it was dramatised from the novel in 1894-5, (without stating by whom.)
3. The cast decided on is to have Mr Hardy's contention, who is entitled to reject any actor that in his opinion is unfitted for the part...
4. Nothing is to be mentioned publicly or allowed to get into the press of its intended production till (...) say the end of September.

¹⁶³ 15 July 1909, see *ibid.*, p. lxii.

¹⁶⁴ 28 April 1906, see *ibid.*, p. lxii.

¹⁶⁵ *Life*, p. 460.

5. No more dialect or local accent than is written in the play is to be introduced by the performers, each part being spoken exactly as set down.¹⁶⁶

As can be seen here, Hardy was more than keen — in this case he is insistent — to be involved in the production of his adaptations. This was reflected in 1893 with the first production of *The Three Wayfarers* where Hardy, despite his severe misgivings about the whole enterprise, sends the script to the producer Charles Charrington (who also played the Hangman in the performance) commenting that

I have inserted tunes & figures as they used to dance them — but they need not be strictly followed — although I know the dances myself, & would give any directions.¹⁶⁷

By the 1920s this willingness to be involved has evolved into, or perhaps revealed itself as, a form of blatant protectionism.

The danger of adaptation is that it can shatter illusions: the reader's conception of a fictional character can be irreconcilable with the dramatised figure played by an actor. This is illustrated when Hardy writes to Harold Child, reviewer for *The Times* who was coming to Dorchester to review *Tess*, with a warning about the personal view the critic may have developed of Angel Clare: "a slightly bald Angel Clare will perhaps change your estimate of him".¹⁶⁸

In September 1924 Hardy's publisher wrote to him with the suggestion of putting the adaptation of *Tess* into print. Hardy rejected the proposal outright and in so doing reveals where his artistic priorities lie:

Owing to the fact that the play is made up more largely from the novel than in many adaptations for the stage — containing pages of the story almost word for word — I feel its publication might injure the novel, by being read as a short cut to the gist of the tale, saving the trouble of wading through the much longer narration of it.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ 24 August 1924, *Letters Six*, p. 269.

¹⁶⁷ 15 May 1893, *Letters Two*, p. 9.

¹⁶⁸ 13 November 1924, *Letters Six*, p. 286.

¹⁶⁹ 29 November 1924, p. 289.

Hardy reveals how important narrative is to his work: the omniscient narrator will dominate much more than the characters in the actual story. In strict literary terms, “plot” is more important than “story”. Hardy is adamant that the reader should “wade” through the narrative of the novel, rather than read the story in play form: a “short cut”. This is specifically about texts in the form of books (novel against script), but perhaps Hardy’s diffidence towards the production of his *Tess* adaptation, as revealed earlier, reveals the superiority he gives to the unadapted original (novel against play). On a basic level, Hardy merely shows us that he is loyal to his fiction which was, after all, the key to his success; but it does, moreover, illustrate Hardy’s attitude to the theatrical scene and the — in his opinion — highly dubious process of adaptation. The restrictions on Victorian novelists included those of censorship, reader-demands, serialisation and so on. But compared to the pressures imposed on Victorian dramatists, these appear less stringent. Most specifically there was a greater artistic control in fiction — an independence and free-reign — which a playwright could never hope to attain. A novelist approaching the world of theatre would find it necessary to sacrifice much of the power to which he or she was accustomed.

In the letter to Macmillan, Hardy interestingly implies — when he writes that his play “is made up more largely from the novel than in many adaptations for the stage” — that many adaptations are *not* particularly loyal to the original. Loyalty to the source material is an essential criteria for adaptation from Hardy’s point of view. We may remember that he was disgruntled with the Liverpool production of Comyns Carr’s *Far from the Madding Crowd* because it did not adhere closely enough to the original novel. Hardy is virtually hostile in a letter to another adapter — Samuel Karrakis — in February 1925. Karrakis had sent Hardy a copy of his adaptation of *The Hand of Ethelberta* for Hardy’s opinion. Hardy’s reply attacks the dramatisation for its additions to the story: “irrelevant... trifling episodes... confusing & long-winded”.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Mid-February 1925, *Letters Six*, p. 310.

We can also look at Hardy's regionalism as a powerful element in his work. Hardy is perhaps at his most outspoken in his defence of regionalism — above all, that of his own region — in essays such as his Preface to the 1908 Oxford collection of William Barnes's verse and "The Dorsetshire Labourer",¹⁷¹ written in 1883. In July 1924 A. H. Evans asked if Hardy would give his son permission to produce the adaptation of *The Woodlanders* originally performed by the Dorchester Players in 1913. Hardy refused, the reply stressing that the original production was performed only before the Dorset Society in London and nowhere else. He adds a regional argument:

The dialect would be a great difficulty except for Wessex players, & a drawback to a London performance, & Mr Hardy thinks your son might exercise his skill on a less local play by some London writer.¹⁷²

As we saw, Hardy was strict in expressing his insistence that, "No more dialect or local accent than is written in the play is to be introduced by the performers." We should also remember Hardy's question about whether Minnie Maddern Fiske's performance as Tess had a sufficiently English intonation for a London audience. Henry Arthur Jones, after attending the London production of *Tess* in 1925, wrote to Hardy:

The peasants were credible and veritable rustics. The Dorset dialect was well sustained. Our stage peasants are generally accomplished linguists, and speak a polyglot blend of Yorkshire, Norfolk and Somerset, with a marked preference for 'Zummerzet'.¹⁷³

The use of dialect was a matter of grave concern for Hardy, and it is fair to question whether this letter from Jones comforted him in any way. In September of the following year, when John Drinkwater's adaptation of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

¹⁷¹ See *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, pp. 168-191.

¹⁷² Mid-July 1924, *Letters Six*, p. 265.

¹⁷³ Quoted in *Life and Letters of Henry Arthur Jones* (ed Jones, Doris Arthur), Victor Gollancz Limited: London, 1930, p. 357.

was brought from the Barnes Theatre in London to Weymouth, the dramatist received a message that Hardy would attend the matinée, but also with the warning that the actors should be prevented from “indulging in dialect: it is not really necessary to do more than just hint it. T. H. says he is afraid they overdo it.”¹⁷⁴

Hardy’s definition of the art of adaptation is fascinating. In a 1924 letter to John Masefield regarding the Hardy Players’ request for a play, Hardy writes, “I hunted up an old play I carpentered out of a novel 30 years ago.”¹⁷⁵ This is not the only instance where Hardy likens adaptation to carpentry. In 1925, when *Tess*’s success led it towards a London production, the necessity of revising the play was aired, especially if Sybil Thorndike was to take the eponymous role (Hardy takes care to stress that “she has not said this”¹⁷⁶ in a letter to Granville Barker). St John Ervine was suggested as the writer to assist Hardy in the revision. Hardy rejected his help, stating:

My consolation in giving up your assistance is that, according to my experience of the theatre, provided a play has a good story at the back of it, the details of construction are not important. (...) The dramatization of a novel is really only an ingenious piece of carpentry.¹⁷⁷

Despite Hardy’s claim that adaptation is merely a craft — “carpentry” (albeit “ingenious”) — a few months earlier we find Hardy declaring to Granville Barker his fears about getting someone to revise the *Tess* play for London performance: “Knowing the difficulties of dramatization I think it may be made worse (if) tinkered.”¹⁷⁸ Perhaps Hardy was worried that the chosen dramatist might not be a sufficiently skilled “craftsman” or “ingenious” enough to perform the task satisfactorily, but it is more likely a reflection of Hardy’s protectionism: he wants to safeguard his “*Tess*” by losing none of his autonomy. The novelist strove to maintain

¹⁷⁴ 11 September 1926, *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy Volume Seven: 1926-27* (eds Purdy, R. Little and Millgate, M.), Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1988, p. 42.

¹⁷⁵ 18 November 1924, *Letters Six*, p. 187.

¹⁷⁶ 3 December 1924, *Letters Six*, p. 291.

¹⁷⁷ 19 February 1925, *Letters Six*, p. 312.

¹⁷⁸ 3 December 1924, *Letters Six*, p. 291.

his creative control over his work, as strictly as possible, no matter how the story might evolve.

As we saw, Hardy's writing of the *Tess* adaptation in the 1890s caused excitement for a generation of "leading ladies", because of the enormous challenge and dramatic potential the eponymous role could offer them. Similarly, several of the leading actresses of the 1920s — including Sybil Thorndike and Lady Forbes-Robertson — coveted the role when Hardy gave his permission for the London production. In the end, the role of Tess went to Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies. By the time the play was performed in 1925, Hardy seems totally irritated by the world of theatre, although he was not involved in the London production and did not even go to see the performance (the company did, however, come to Dorchester in December 1925 to give a private performance of the play at Max Gate).

2. Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*: a comparison of the novel and the play

Hardy's novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman* (1891) was given a controversial reception. Hardy provides an enlightening account of this in his preface (July 1892) to the novel where he sums up the different types of critic from the "half-an-hour" Christian to the "modern 'Hammers of Heretics'".¹⁷⁹ But the novel has come to be seen as one of Hardy's central works and a key text in the context of nineteenth-century English literature. One of the most absorbing aspects in the history of the *Tess* novel are the editorial changes. The novel was first serialised in *The Graphic* in 1891. There are many differences and variants — in fact, "thousands"¹⁸⁰ David Skilton claims — between the 1891 serialisation and the 1912 Macmillan *Wessex Novels* edition. Space does not permit an in-depth analysis of these, but a striking example is Chapter XXIII where Angel rescues the four maids by carrying them over the waterlogged lane. In *The Graphic* Hardy was forced to rewrite this in the name of public decency so that Angel finds a wheelbarrow and can transport them

¹⁷⁹ Hardy, Thomas, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (introduced by A. Alvarez, ed David Skilton), Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1978, pp. 38-9.

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 499.

to safety without placing a finger on them. One reason I found the different versions interesting is because there are similarly two versions of the play — the unperformed Dorchester text of 1894 and the 1925 London version — which have a number of differences. For the sake of this study I will keep observations on this front to a minimum and will concentrate on analysing the 1912 edition of the novel and the 1925 script of the performed play.

Hardy was worried that the publication of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Tragedy in Five Acts In the Old English Manner* might injure his original novel, because, as we have already seen, it might be read as “a short cut to the gist of the tale, saving the trouble of wading through the much longer narration of it”.¹⁸¹ Indeed, Hardy's fears seem to be justified when we look at the adaptation. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is a substantial novel spanning a few years and several locations with a number of significant themes such as regionalism, industrialisation, superstition and Fate. What we discover in the play is a work that strictly follows the chronology of the novel, cramming in the significant details of the *Tess* story. In short, we are presented with the action of the novel stripped of reflection or digression: a dramatic précis. There are nevertheless some interesting deviations in the play. For instance, the play's first stage direction describes the sliding flats:

*A highway near Marlott Village. In the background stretches the beautiful Vale of Blackmoor. TIME: evening. SEASON: summer. (133)*¹⁸²

This is Hardy's summary of Chapter II which begins with the “village of Marlott” lying amid “the beautiful Vale of Blakemore or Blackmoor” (48).¹⁸³ This chapter, like Chapter I of *The Return of the Native* (1878), is an intricate piece of “picture painting” which tells us what the landscape looks like, its history but also constructs the psychological and even the philosophical backdrop against which the characters will come into existence.

¹⁸¹ *Letters Six*, 29 November 1924, p. 289.

¹⁸² All page references to the play relate to the version in Roberts, M., *Tess in the Theatre*.

¹⁸³ All page references to the novel relate to the Penguin edition.

In contrast to this inauguration of location, the play does indeed seem to start very quickly and intensely: the “Foreshow” condenses information from Chapters I, IV and VII into three short scenes. We lose the extensive contextualisation, above all the sense of life in the rural community. We do, however, get a great deal of exposition. This is an early indication that *Tess* will be blighted with what is so often the self-adaptor’s curse: trying to squeeze in too much because of an unwillingness to cut out key elements of the novel’s plot. But what Hardy does cut out at the beginning of the play is rather surprising. In the ellipsis between the “Foreshow” and Act I Tess moves from being, as the novel puts it, “The Maiden” to “Maiden No More”. The inherent drama in Tess’s departure for Trantridge and her meeting with Alec is left to our imagination or, some might say, shied away from. Tess’s “trump card” (136) — her face — is mentioned but the first time we actually see Tess she is the tortured “maiden no more” who returns home in Chapter XII. Another significant ellipsis is between Acts I and II where there is a gap of “*Two years*” (148). Act II, sc. i crams in an excessive amount of information to make up for the hiatus: the birth and death of Tess’s baby are recounted; Angel Clare is introduced and Joan bewails Tess’s rejection of his proposal of marriage even though it is the first time she has met Angel.

Despite including much of the plot, the play condenses the range of locations so we progress from “A highway near Marlott Village” (133), to the village itself (136), Talbothays Dairy (148), Wellbridge (167), Sandbourne (188) and Stonehenge (199). Hardy thus omits locations such as Trantridge and Wintoncester. Similarly, Hardy reduces the number of *dramatis personae*. The Durbeyfield children are described thus in the novel:

her nine-year-old brother Abraham, and her sister Eliza-Louisa of twelve and a half, called “Liza-Lu”... Next in juvenility to Abraham came two more girls, Hope and Modesty; then a boy of three, and then the baby, who had just completed his first year. (61)

These six children are condensed into the form of Liza-Lu in the play. In the novel, Liza-Lu is twelve and a half, whereas in the play Hardy simplifies this to “aged 12” (132). This may seem a trite observation, but I do think it reveals something of Hardy’s attitude to the process of adaptation: he feels he is making things easier by describing her as being “12” when he might have described her as being an older child or adolescent girl, just as he changes the novel’s May-time into a more general “*Summer*”.

To return to Hardy’s expediency with characters, Angel’s elder brother Felix is given a stage presence while his father is not. If we look at Act II, sc. ii, for instance, we find that some sections are directly lifted from the novel. Let us compare the opening dialogue:

FELIX: And you seem to have changed a good deal. I suppose it is farming or nothing for you now, my dear fellow. And therefore we must make the best of it. But I do entreat you to endeavour to keep as much as possible in touch with moral ideals. Farming, of course, means roughing, literally; but high thinking may go with plain living, nevertheless.

ANGEL: Of course it may. Was it not proved nineteen hundred years ago — if I may trespass on your domain a little? Why should you think, Felix, that I am likely to drop my high thinking and my moral ideals? (151)

The equivalent section in the novel is in Chapter XXV:

“I suppose it is farming or nothing for you now, my dear fellow,” Felix was saying, among other things, to his youngest brother, as he looked through his spectacles at the distant fields with sad austerity. “And, therefore, we must make the best of it. But I do entreat you to endeavour to keep as much as possible in touch with moral ideals. Farming, of course, means roughing it externally; but high thinking may go with plain living, nevertheless.”

“Of course it may,” said Angel. “Was it not proved nineteen hundred years ago — if I may trespass on your domain a little? Why should you think, Felix, that I am likely to drop my high thinking and my moral ideals?” (220)

First of all, it is worth noting that Hardy does not develop on the “among other things” that the novel attributes to Felix. On the contrary, he gives Angel’s brother the same statements. Indeed, the only difference between the novel and the play here

is that the novel's "Farming, of course, means roughing it externally" is modified into "Farming, of course, means roughing, literally". The dichotomy of external "roughing" and intellectual thought becomes refined into literal "roughing" and intellectual thought. If the novel is sustaining that balance between outer and inner life, the play's focus on the literal is far more physical: the idea of *really doing something*. This modification is more appropriate as a stage metaphor but the resulting phrase is also more forceful: it sounds better.

As the scene proceeds the adaptation is more adventurous. In the novel Angel states to his brother:

"Now, Felix" said Angel drily, "we are very good friends, you know; each of us treading our allotted circles; but if it comes to intellectual grasp, I think you, as a contented dogmatist, had better leave mine alone, and inquire what has become of yours." (221)

In the play, the equivalent speech begins similarly but leads off in another direction:

ANGEL: Now, Felix, we are very good friends so far; and if we are to keep so, please don't lecture me on my mental state. You've the old conventional notion of Hodge as an animal merely — the pitiable, caricatured, unvarying Hodge. These people here are thinkers and feelers as much as you are — beings of many minds — full of infinite differences. Some of them are bright, some stupid; some happy, and some unhappy; some refined, some boorish — just as people are in society, so-called. They are not the dummy uniform figures you fancy them, I can assure you. They and their lives have been an education for me — a finer education than I derived from Greek and Latin... How is father? (152)

Hence, instead of demanding to be left alone, Angel launches into a lecture himself, on the subject of Hodge. This material is not to be found in chapter XXV, but rather back in chapter XVIII where the narrator mediates Angel's discoveries on arriving at Talbothays:

...some happy, many serene, a few depressed, one here and there bright even to genius, some stupid, others wanton, others austere; some mutely Miltonic, some potentially Cromwellian... (173)

The play puts these ideas into Angel's own words and makes them sound like actual speech. Significantly the dramatised version trims away the hyperbole of the Commonwealth allusion, and reference to the "wanton" type of Hodge.

The other technique of adaptation in this short extract — just over one page — is change of source. To explain what is meant by this, in the play Angel and Felix proceed to discuss their father, the vicar of Emminster. After Felix describes the altercation between Alec D'Urberville (described by the narrator in the novel), Angel and Felix exchange dialogue thus:

ANGEL: I wish father would not expose himself to such gratuitous pain from scoundrels!

FELIX: Oh, he took it calmly enough. The only pain to him was pain on the young man's account. We know he has had lots of such experiences, and his scorners have lived to thank him and praise God.

ANGEL: May this young man do the same! Though I'm afraid he won't, from what I hear. (152)

In the novel the equivalent passage reads like this:

"Dear father," he (Angel) said sadly, "I wish you would not expose yourself to such gratuitous pain from scoundrels!"

"Pain?" said his father... "The only pain to me was pain on his account, poor, foolish young man. Do you suppose his incensed words could give me any pain, or even his blows? (...) Though I have borne blows from men in a mad state of intoxication."

"No!"

"A dozen times, my boy. What then? I have saved them from the guilt of murdering their own flesh and blood thereby; and they have lived to thank me, and praise God."

"May this young man do the same!" said Angel fervently. "But I fear otherwise, from what you say." (228)

Felix provides a summary of his father's account, omitting the visceral aspect of murder, flesh, blood and intoxication that we receive in the novel. This may be a surprising omission as all references to murder establish an ironic context for Tess's

ultimate act of despair. However, perhaps this danger of overplaying the melodrama and fate is the very reason Hardy resisted mentioning murder at this point.

As we have seen, Angel's father is absent from the play although it must be noted that with the indirect references outlined above "Mr Clare the elder" (227) is more of a presence than the other great omission: Alec's mother, Mrs D'Urberville.

Earlier I mentioned that we first see Tess on her return to Marlott village: the event of Chapter XII. This means that Tess is the "Maiden No More". Perhaps it is interesting to speculate if it was felt to be indecorous to show Tess as a woman with, and then without, her virginity. It is less contentious to see that Tess is already well into her tragic decline when she enters the stage. The consequences of this has an significant effect on the plot. For instance, we see Alec D'Urberville *before* Angel Clare in the play.

Alec is definitely a stage villain in the play. Tess's argument with Alec (138-40) is very loyal to the equivalent in the novel in Chapter XII. Or so it might seem on first reading. A closer look reveals some very slight adjustments: the novel's "Then good morning, my four months' cousin — goodbye!" (127) becomes "Then good-bye, my three months' cousin. Goodbye!" (140) to which is added the dramatically resonant: "Perhaps some day you'll be glad to come back to me." (140).

All the same this serves as a startling introduction to Alec: something we are left to infer about him in the novel. Consider that first description of him, in Chapter V of the novel:

He had an almost swarthy complexion, with full lips, badly moulded, though red and smooth, above which was a well-groomed black moustache with curled points, though his age could not be more than three- or four-and-twenty. Despite the touches of barbarism in his contours, there was a singular force in the gentlemen's face, and in his bold rolling eye. (79)

This seems a cliché of the melodramatic villain, but in the novel he does have time to build up to his dastardly deeds. In a play the first encounter with a character who declares, Richard III style, "I was born bad, and I have lived bad, and I shall die bad, in all probability" (139) — which is taken verbatim from later in the novel — is

particularly damning. In this instance it is the context which escalates the melodramatic villainy. We should never forget the excision of the narrator's mediation, albeit particularly minimal in this extract of the novel. A more intriguing example for our purposes is Hardy's dramatisation of the Sandbourne episode.

In the ellipsis between Acts III and IV is a gap of "More than a year" (188). We are presented with the drawing room of a "well-furnished seaside lodgings" (188), more specifically called "The Herons" (464) in the novel. In the play, Hardy presents us with Angel travelling to Sandbourne and gives him a companion in the form of Joan Durbeyfield, Tess's mother. This seems odd and certainly diminishes the romantic edge of the lone lover in pursuit of his wife a-lost. But attention to the dialogue soon offers an explanation for this curious pairing. The device allows Hardy to account for the hiatus between the third and fourth acts: Act IV, sc. ii contains nine exchanges of dialogue which inform us of seven crucial pieces of information:

1. How much time has passed since Angel left Tess.
2. Tess does not use her surname "Clare".
3. Angel spent "months and months in Brazil" (188).
4. Sir John has died.
5. Tess's family have lost the house in Marlott village.
6. Tess had to take employment as a swede-hacker and virtually starved.
7. Angel left Tess some money and told her to approach his parents if she needed more, which Tess refused to do.

As amply demonstrated here, Angel and Joan's exchange allows a particularly intense amount of plot exposition. It also allows Angel a long monologue — delivered, ostensibly, to Mrs Durbeyfield — about how he has admitted his "faults" (190) and the shock of his revelation about Tess's lost virginity and her child which turned his "light into darkness as black as hell" (190).

Hardy redeems the presence of Joan by making her persuade Angel to leave so that she can "prepare her for your visit" (191). Then Tess appears. It is interesting to see how our introduction to Sandbourne-Tess is mediated through Angel in the novel and Joan in the play. In the novel we read:

Tess appeared on the threshold — not at all as he had expected to see her — bewilderingly otherwise, indeed. Her great natural beauty was, if not heightened, rendered more obvious by her attire. She was loosely wrapped in a cashmere dressing-gown of gray-white, embroidered in half-mourning tints, and she wore slippers of the same hue. Her neck rose out of a frill of down, and her well-remembered cable of dark-brown hair was partially coiled up in a mass at the back of her head and partly hanging on her shoulder — the evident result of haste.

He had held out his arms, but they had fallen again to his side... (465)

In the play we see the following:

TESS enters from the bedroom. She is in a dressing-gown and slippers, her hair being tied back, so that it falls in a mass behind. She starts at sight of her mother, and her mother stands embarrassed at her appearance. (191)

The novel conveys Tess's beauty and sexuality, which is innate and made more "obvious" by her undress and "haste", but is also personal for Angel: "well-remembered". Her clothing symbolises her sexuality but also indicates that she is in a state of "half-mourning": half of her — Angel's true love half — has died while the sexual half has been fulfilled. Angel's arms fall to his sides not because of his shock that she is just out of bed and hence, post-coital. He is stunned by her beauty. This reunion with Tess is powerful for Angel *and* the reader. The spectator's first encounter with Sandbourne-Tess in the play is poignant in its own right, due to the embarrassment of the mother beholding her daughter in a state of undress. It is interesting to consider that the exposition at the beginning of the act notwithstanding, Hardy may have felt it more acceptable on the stage to have Tess's first encounter after adultery with her mother rather than her husband.

Tess and Joan talk, the former explaining that she is with Alec. Tess offers her mother breakfast which she refuses. Joan seems almost paralysed: "I can't tell her, and I can't tell Mr. Clare. I wish I was well out o'this!" (192) The shock of seeing Tess in a post-coital state and her recognition of the critical situation fast developing leads her to depart in an "agitated" (192) manner. Her role at this point in the tragedy

has become redundant, but more importantly she proves herself to be about as beneficent to her daughter as the day she sent her to Trantridge.

After Joan's departure we see Alec look out from the bedroom in his dressing-gown and they engage in dialogue. The purpose of the exchange is to establish further the dastardliness of Alec. He begins by remarking on the earliness — ten o'clock in the morning — of Joan's visit for, as the novel informs us, Alec "was not an early riser" (470).

TESS: Early! Formerly it would have seemed to me that half the day was gone.

ALEC (*from bed*): But now you've gone up in the world your day is hardly begun!

TESS: I don't think I have gone up. I've gone the other way — down — down!

ALEC: Pooh! That's like you, to be such a prude! Though you only sham it! You know better.

TESS: I don't sham it! You know as well as I how I hate to be here. I'd rather be pulling swedes at Flintcomb-Ash Farm!

ALEC: Well, all I can say is that you're infernally ungrateful. See what pretty things you wear! See what I've given you to spend on your people! A miserable broken-down lot — why, if it hadn't been for me they'd have had to go to the workhouse.

TESS: Don't say that! *I won't have it!* (*With emphasis.*) I hate my pretty things. As for the help to my poor mother and the children that you brag of, if you had given help to them freely that would have been generosity. But you didn't — your selfishness wouldn't let you. Everything you've given them I've had to *buy* of you, at a dear price enough! (...)

ALEC: What the devil are you doing? I won't stand these airs.

(193)

Alec's language continues to have an edge of melodramatic villainy: he uses words like "infernally" and "devil" and is taken by the idea of the "sham" and "airs" which reflects more on him than the "pure" heroine. In terms of content, the above exchange raises some issues connected with class. Alec is part of the leisured bourgeoisie and the image of him in his dressing-gown slipping back into bed forms an effective antithesis to Tess's desire to be pulling swedes. But this goes even further when Alec discusses Tess's "people": a "miserable broken-down lot" whose existence is haunted by the workhouse. There is clearly a subtextual defence of

Hodge to be detected in contrast to the elitism of the repellent Alec. This is underlined when Tess asserts that she has been prostituted — “Everything you’ve given them I’ve had to *buy* of you, at a dear price enough” — which casts a cynical light on the idea of “betterment” and upward mobility. This latter point fits in with the Hardy agenda of regionalism — which is as significant in Hardy’s work as the international situation is in James’s — and is in keeping with the novel of *Tess* and others such as *The Return of the Native* and *Jude the Obscure* (1896). Indeed, the play is a self-contained work which it is difficult to fit into Hardy’s Wessex universe. Although not obvious, the novels interconnect and in *Tess*, for instance, we find “Wide-O” from *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). Hardy asserts regionalism in the play through the use of the folk dancing in Act I. The opening to the Dorchester version includes more of this: “*Several village girls in white, members of the Girls’ Benefit Club, cross singing: ‘May Colvine & False Sir John.’*” (132) Hardy also uses Wessex dialect. Tess’s mother utters dialect expressions like “Don’t it make your buzzum plim?” (152) and in Act III we witness the Labourer:

LABOURER: Well — if you go round by the old road it may be a matter o’ ten mile; but if so be you come along straight, and don’t mind hopping down zeventeen times to open zeventeen gates — well, you may do it in nine mile. (167)

There was even more dialect in the Dorchester version:

LABOURER: Well — if you da goo round by the wold road it mid be a matter o’ ten mile; but if so be you da come along straight, and don’t mind hopping down zeventeen times to open zeventeen gates — well, you mid do it in nine mile. (167)

To return to Alec’s confrontation with Tess, after this new addition to the *Tess* story, Hardy returns to the novel to adapt the encounter between Tess and Angel. The reunion is loyal to the novel with many lines being reproduced verbatim. Some additions are made to account for Joan, so that when Tess asks how Angel has tracked her down in the novel he says, “I inquired here and there, and I found the

way” (466), whereas in the play he states, “I called at your mother’s and got your address” (195). Another difference is that Angel is given a long opening speech in contrast to the staccato dialogue in the novel. We do lose the narrative description which is particularly effective in this scene:

Clare looked at her keenly, then, gathering her meaning, flagged like one plague-stricken, and his glance sank; it fell on her hands, which, once rosy, were now white and more delicate. (466)

In one sentence Hardy successfully conveys Angel’s emotional desolation, alludes to his poor physical health and draws attention to Tess’s shift in social and class status. Of course such detail could come alive in an effective performance.

The most significant difference comes at the end of their dialogue. Let us compare the two versions:

“He is upstairs. I hate him now, because he told me a lie — that you would not come again; and you *have* come! These clothes are what he’s put upon me: I didn’t care what he did wi’ me! But — will you go away, Angel, please, and never come any more?”

They stood fixed, their baffled hearts looking out of their eyes with a joylessness pitiful to see. Both seemed to implore something to shelter them from reality.

“Ah — it is my fault!” said Clare.

But he could not get on. Speech was inexpressive as silence. But he had a vague consciousness of one thing, though it was not clear to him till later; that his original Tess had spiritually ceased to recognize the body before him as hers — allowing it to drift, like a corpse upon the current, in a direction dissociated from its living will.

A few instants passed, and he found that Tess was gone. (466-7)

TESS: (...) He’s in there. I *hate* him now because he told me lies — that you were not coming again anymore; and you *have* come! These clothes are what he has put upon me; I didn’t care what he did wi’ me! But hate him or not, here I am! But will you go away, Angel, *please*, and never come any more! Oh *never* think of me, or pray for me, or pity me. Only forgive me!

ANGEL (*after a stillness in which he turns aside*): Ah... it is my fault — mine only — and his!

TESS (*in a whisper*): Will you — go?

ANGEL (*continuing to look away from her*): There is nothing else for me to do — nothing — nothing! While that man lives I am an outcast and accursed. She has no kiss left for me.

HE *goes out*. (196)

In the novel Alec is “upstairs” while the play presents a much more intimate “in there”. Although I have resisted as much as possible drawing attention to the two different versions of the play it is worth noting that the earlier version gives the line as a blatant “He’s in bed in there.”

Both the novel and the play emphasise the sham nature of Alec: the “lie” in the novel and the “lies” in the play. In addition, Tess stresses that the clothes she is wearing “are what he has put upon me” which highlights that everything around Alec is made false and disingenuous. The line — with slight variation — is used in both genres but has an interesting resonance on stage as it draws attention to costume and appearances.

In the novel Angel’s desperate “It is my fault” is followed by an overwhelming silence. Moreover, Hardy exploits the omniscience of the narrator by telling us what Angel can *vaguely* sense: Tess’s dissociated will, a profound and ultimately fatal alienation. The play is far less complex: Angel’s self-accusation evolves into what is almost an expression of rivalry “my fault — mine only — and his!” It draws attention to the two men in Tess’s life — the true love and the scoundrel — rather than the personal revelation in the novel where Alec is irrelevant for Angel. This is exacerbated by the extra lines Hardy grants Angel: “While that man lives I am an outcast and accursed.” The fault is levelled at Alec and although, as in the novel, Angel does depart, one would not be surprised if it were to be pistols at dawn, especially as it is apparently Alec’s existence that curses Angel’s life. Even more startling is Angel’s final line — “She has no kiss left for me” — which invokes the concept of the forsaken lover more than the profound desolation in the novel where even language fails. The shallow treatment of this episode in the play compounds the melodramatic thrust of the adaptation.

The melodramatic aspect continues with the murder of Alec. However, it could be argued that this is the most melodramatic part in the original novel itself. What makes the account in the novel so interesting is that it is mediated through the landlady, Mrs Brooks, who is spying through the keyhole. In the play, Hardy's concession is to have Alec off-stage in the bedroom during the dialogue.

“What's the matter?”

She did not answer, but went on, in a tone which was a soliloquy rather than an exclamation, and a dirge rather than a soliloquy. Mrs Brooks could only catch a portion:

“And then my dear, dear husband came home to me... and I did not know it!... And you had used your cruel persuasion upon me... you did not stop using it — no — you did not stop! My little sisters and brothers and my mother's needs — they were the things you moved me by... and you said my husband would never come back — never; and you taunted me, and said what a simpleton I was to expect him!... And at last I believed you and gave way!... And then he came back! Now he is gone. Gone a second time, and I have lost him now for ever... and he will not love me the littlest bit ever any more — only hate me! ... O yes, I have lost him now — again because of — you!” (...Mrs Brooks could see) her lips were bleeding from the clench of her teeth upon them... She continued: “And he is dying — he looks as if he is dying!... And my sin will kill him and not kill me!... O you have torn my life all to pieces... made me be what I prayed you in pity not to make me be again!... My own true husband will never, never — O God — I can't bear this! I cannot!”

There were more and sharper words from the man; then a sudden rustle; she had sprung to her feet. (469-470)

ALEC (*from bedroom*): What's the matter?... (*Pause.*) What are you doing? Who has been talking to you?

TESS: My husband.

ALEC: Who? What?

TESS (*sobbing upon a chair*): How can I bear it?... My dear, dear husband has come home to me... And I did not know it!... And you had used your cruel persuasion upon me... you did not stop! My little sister and brothers, and my mother's troubles — they were the things you moved me by — and you said my husband would *never* come back — *never*; and you taunted me, and said what a simpleton I was to expect him. And at last I believed you, and gave way!... And then he came back! Now he is gone — gone a second time, and I have lost him for ever... and he will not love me the littlest bit ever any more — only hate me... O yes — I have lost him, — lost him — again because of you!

ALEC: What are you whining about? *I* am your husband, young woman, for the present.

TESS: And he is dying — he looks as if he were dying! And my sin will kill him, and not kill me! Oh, you have torn my life all to pieces — made me be what I prayed you in pity not to make me be again. My own true husband will never—

ALEC: Damn it, I tell you I am your husband, at any rate just now. Don't you be so infernally virtuous! If you hadn't been willing to sell yourself, you wouldn't have been here, you little humbug!

TESS: O God — I can't bear this — I cannot!

ALEC: Then get back to him! Or perhaps he came to make a quiet arrangement, for a consideration? A virtuous pair you two. (TESS sobs.)

TESS: O God! O God!

ALEC: Oh, stop that infernal noise!

TESS: I can't bear it, I can't.

TESS *springs up from the chair-seat...* (197)

By only hearing Tess's words in the novel, Hardy continues the theme of Angel's revelation of Tess's extreme alienation. It is as though she is talking to herself and, with her bleeding lips, torturing herself in body and mind. Perhaps the most significant line from this perspective is "my sin will kill him and not kill me". Despite accusing Alec, Tess ultimately levels blame at herself. In the play we still have the spectacle of the isolated, self-despising Tess, with Alec's voice audible. Alec continues to fulfil the role of cad, emphasising that he is her husband only "for the present" or "just now": this is no permanent arrangement. Similarly, Alec adds insult to injury by drawing attention to Tess's willingness to "sell" herself and by ironically describing the romantic leads as a "virtuous pair". It is worth noting that this sarcasm is what does for Alec and not, as Tess claims later, "He called you by a foul name" (200). The "sharper words" referred to in the novel are perhaps the "damn" he uses in the play, and it is fitting that Alec's last words should be "that infernal noise": once again he alludes to evil.

In the novel, Hardy follows Mrs Brooks downstairs and hence leads us away from the murder until the heart-shaped bloodstain spreads on the ceiling and begins to drip. In the play the murder is off-stage but is signified by the "*cry within*" (198). In the subsequent moment of silence, the pallid Tess dresses herself and calls out "I am coming, my love!" and exits "*as in a dream*" leaving the room "*empty for half a*

minute” (198). The play does reintroduce the Landlady by having her knock on the door:

LANDLADY (*without*): Mrs. D’Urberville. (*Pause.*) (*She half opens the door.*) Mrs. D’Urberville! There’s a red stain in the ceiling below your bedroom; something soaking through. Drip, drip, drip, as the red of blood! (198-9)

This does seem to overstate the incident and is another demonstration of Hardy’s attempt to include as much of the novel as possible. The account in the novel is effective and well-paced, and in the play the silence of Tess getting dressed and then the empty room has a dramatic potential of its own: the Landlady is perhaps a semiotic and narrative overload.

After the Landlady has brought Act IV to its conclusion, there is an “After-Scene” set in Stonehenge at daybreak. The ellipsis between curtains covers the information appertaining to the reunion of Tess with Angel and their journey (Chapters LVII and LVIII in the novel). Some of their conversation in these chapters is recounted in the play retrospectively. But it is an interesting dramatic shift from the comforts of the “*well-furnished*” (188) Sandbourne lodgings to the “*gradually lightening*” (199) view of the Stonehenge ruin with Tess lying on an altar stone. The Stonehenge scene follows the equivalent in the novel faithfully with a convincing dramatic potential, as it would be effective visually and on a symbolic level. This is evident not least when Tess “*falls asleep. Sun rises. CONSTABLE’S shadow appears. ANGEL starts as if for defence.*” (202) This is a loyal summary of the novel’s action, but is refreshing in its use of levels of dramatic communication other than the linguistic. The After-Scene has the potential to look good but is probably flawed by too much dialogue. Hardy ends the play with Tess’s final words in the novel “I am ready.” (203) This is a wise decision as it has a resonance which any attempt to end the play with the novel’s finale of Liza-Lu and Angel in Wintonchester would have diminished.

There are some redeeming features in Hardy’s adaptation of *Tess*. Some of the dialogue is sharp and effective, with interesting additions to the writing in the

novel. Stonehenge works on a visual and symbolic level, and so do other similar indications from Hardy: the paintings of the “*two ill-featured dames of the eighteenth century*” (167) ominously oversee the Wellbridge manor house in Act III.

The faults, however, are more evident. There are speeches which explain too much and overload the spectator with information. This has the effect of making some monologues — in particular Angel’s in Act IV, sc. iv — not particularly dramatic but more like a *précis* of plot and motivation. What is also quite striking are the elements that are not in the novel but Hardy feels obliged to include. For instance, in the novel Tess’s confession to Angel takes place in the ellipsis between Phase the Fourth and Phase the Fifth: she begins her account at the end of Chapter XXXIV (“murmuring the words without flinching... (293)) and the next chapter begins “Her narrative ended...” (297) In the play Hardy is obliged to write the confession in full so we get the curious situation where the playwright is including even more than the novelist. Incidents like this and the final confrontation between Tess and Alec are interesting because they reveal much about the way Hardy sees and understands his characters.

Other weaknesses reflect the fact that Hardy is more comfortable with the novel form than theatre. Some details might — if produced literally — be rather excessive. For example, Act III opens in the old manor house in Wellbridge. The house is being prepared for the newly wed Tess and Angel by an “*aged FARM LABOURER and his WIFE, both toothless, are moving about the room.*” (167) Although not on a par with Conrad’s “man with no hands” in his play *Laughing Anne*, this is still a rather grotesque image which is probably safer in fictional narrative.

Other details loyally adapted from the novel come across as excessively contrived on stage. Particularly striking is Act III, sc. iii which deals with the letter under the carpet incident of Chapter XXXIII. As it cannot be shown on stage, Tess recounts how she wrote the letter, put it under Angel’s door and later discovered it under the carpet. Tess explains all this to Angel in the space of one short speech.

Hardy endeavoured to boil down a full novel into a stage play and was worried that it might be used as a short cut. The solution was probably to produce another story, as Henry James at least attempted with his adaptation of *Daisy Miller*. After being most obviously an adaptation, Hardy's play is more of a Victorian melodrama than the *Tragedy in Five Acts In the Old English Manner* he claims it to be. The notion of the "Old English Manner" probably needs some explanation. When Hardy sent his adaptation of *Tess* to the agents Harper and Brothers in February 1896 he explained the style of the piece thus:

[The] departure from the modern mode of presentation in a few set scenes (a mode more or less borrowed from the French) has been deliberately made, there being an incipient tendency in England to revert to the form of the older English drama, particularly in a play exhibiting old English country life, & not dealing with intrigue.¹⁸⁴

The title therefore emphasises Hardy's attempt to shift radically away from the modern mode — the "French" style — of presentation. In an article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* Hardy asserted that the dominant "modern mode" of theatre was, in fact, reason enough not to write for the contemporary stage.¹⁸⁵ Moreover, the claim to Old Englishness also asserts the idea of the traditional folk drama, not far from the Mummers play in Book II, Chapter IV of *The Return of the Native*, but more precisely like what he attempted to recreate with his *Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall* (1923). The dancing in Act I is an element of folk performance especially when we read in the *Letters* in connection with *The Three Wayfarers* (1893) that Hardy was willing to teach the performers the correct dances.¹⁸⁶

The novel of *Tess* is structured by an episodic technique which has a cumulative effect. But it requires *time* to achieve credibility. In the play the action remains but the reflection (of the narrator and the characters) is lost. It is as if Hardy picked the best dramatic moments and then struggles to link them. The effect of his

¹⁸⁴ 14 February 1896, *Letters Three*, pp. 111-2.

¹⁸⁵ See "Why I Don't Write Plays" in *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, p. 139.

¹⁸⁶ 15 May 1893, *Letters Two*, p. 9.

struggle with transposing a novel's plot into a dramatic medium is that the psychological depth of the characters is destroyed. Or at least a great challenge is put on the performers to bring the characters to life through a sea of exposition. This is why some critics felt that Tess was lost from sight. In Chapter XVIII Tess describes how to make one's soul leave one's body while still alive:

“A very easy way to feel ‘em go,” continued Tess, “is to lie on the grass at night and look straight up at some big bright star: and, by fixing your mind upon it, you will soon find that you are hundreds and hundreds o’ miles away from your body, which you don’t seem to want at all.” (175)

This seems to me a fitting emblem of what has happened to Tess Durbeyfield in Hardy's adaptation.

Regarding the critical reception of the *Tess* play, Hardy was, as ever, bitter about critics, as shown in a letter to Sydney Cockerell:

All the people who went to see the play testify to one experience: how much they were moved by it. The critics in the papers seem to have been like little children — expecting the whole novel: though the tone of the supercilious ones seems to be exasperation that an intruder should splash in among the regular dramatists, in whose interest some of them appear to write. (...) My wife... says the audience was in tears: so the remark of the critic who says “everybody went to be moved, but nobody was” — is rather brazen.¹⁸⁷

Elsewhere, Hardy condemns dramatic critics for always putting “technique first and emotional power last, instead of the reverse”.¹⁸⁸

The most interesting reviews of the 1925 *Tess* production draw attention to the problems of dramatisation. St John Ervine emphasises the personal crisis involved in transposing Tess Durbeyfield from being a construction in the pages of fiction into a flesh and blood person on the stage:

No one comes between us and Tess in the novel, but several persons, all of them in a different mood, come between us and her on the stage... An actress

¹⁸⁷ 12 September 1925, *Letters Six*, p. 349.

¹⁸⁸ 29 September 1925, *Letters Six*, p. 359.

attempts to adapt herself to the imagined woman. A producer adapts her adaptation to his, or she adapts his adaptation to hers. A dozen different obstacles are raised between us and our Tess, and so, no matter how finely the actress does her work, there must be some disappointment.¹⁸⁹

The personal crisis affects several people: self-adapter; actress; producer; and reader-spectator. St John Ervine was himself a well-established adapter whose assistance in revising *Tess*, it is definitely worth remembering, Hardy declined. Ervine gently criticises Hardy for losing the creative “fervour”, and thus implies that there is a damaging lapse between the original creation and the secondary, generic revision. Ervine assumes that we — the “us” in his first line — have read the novel before we have seen the play. Therefore the spectator is thus a “reader-spectator” who has experienced — he implies in the first line — the intimacy of the novel where no one (not even, by implication, the narrator) “comes between us and Tess”. While the reader is “close” to Tess, the spectator has to sit — literally, even — at a distance. It would seem to be this loss of intimacy, this distancing, that causes the greatest disappointment for Ervine.

Another reviewer finds fault in the structure and form of the adaptation:

The greatness of the book consists in the grandeur of the scale to which it is constructed, the slow but inevitable march of its events, the minuteness of its character-drawing and dissection of motives, the utter simplicity and truth of its atmosphere. Every one of these qualities demands elbow-room and leisurely writing, such as the three hours’ traffic of the stage will only allow to those who understand by instinct or long experience how to work easily within the limits imposed by the economy of the theatre... and in the telescoping process which has taken place many of the motives and much of the atmosphere of the original disappear. It is impossible to doubt that *Tess* would have been a great play if its author had conceived it first in dramatic form and had simplified its structure accordingly.¹⁹⁰

In essence this reviewer criticises Hardy for not being a dramatist. The adaptation obliterates the “atmosphere” and detail of the original novel and Hardy lacks the

¹⁸⁹ *The Observer*, 13 September 25, quoted in Roberts, M., p. xc.

¹⁹⁰ Anonymous review quoted in Roberts, M., p. xcvi.

instinct and experience of the professional dramatist. The reviewer certainly does not doubt the “great” dramatic potential of the “story”, but only if Hardy had “conceived it first in dramatic form”. The implication of this latter point is that the “telescoping” and simplification of a novel into the dramatic genre becomes increasingly difficult as the fictional work becomes longer and more complex. It is most difficult to reduce the *structure* of the fictional creation into the “economy of the theatre”.

Chapter Four

JOSEPH CONRAD

(1857-1924)

1. Joseph Conrad, Drama and Adaptation

In the 1920 Dent edition of *Youth and Gaspar Ruiz* there is “A Conrad Catechism” included at the end of the volume. The publication is a children’s edition and the “Catechism” is a series of “Questions and Exercises”.¹⁹¹ The questions are generally along the lines of “how far do you assent to the truth of the first paragraph?”¹⁹² The final question on “Gaspar Ruiz” reads as follows:

24. Consider the story from the point of view of a drama, selecting the most dramatic incidents.¹⁹³

But what is particularly interesting for us is that the children are informed that the questions and exercises were “approved by the author in the spring of 1920”.¹⁹⁴

The reason Conrad approved of readers — young readers, even — analysing his fiction from a “dramatic” point of view was because he himself had a practical interest in adaptation. At this time he was about to adapt “Gaspar Ruiz” into a screenplay. Conrad had first considered producing a screenplay of this short story — from *A Set of Six* (1908) — as early as March 1915¹⁹⁵ but shelved the idea for five years. In August 1920 he and J. B. Pinker went to see a film version of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* at the Stoll, Kingsway, in order to research the techniques of cinematic adaptation. Conrad subsequently collaborated with Pinker on a film scenario of “Gaspar Ruiz”, beginning in September 1920 and completing it — with

¹⁹¹ *Youth and Gaspar Ruiz*, J. M. Dent and Sons: London, 1920, p. 171.

¹⁹² *ibid.*

¹⁹³ *ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 171.

¹⁹⁵ This, and subsequent, information on the dates of Conrad’s adaptations comes from Knowles, Owen, *A Conrad Chronology*, Macmillan: London, 1989, pp. 53-119.

the title *Gaspar the Strong Man* — at the end of October. Conrad and Pinker met representatives of the Laski Film Company and, in October 1921, American film producers, but the screenplay was never filmed.

However, Conrad had been interested in the dramatic media before 1920, for as Jeffrey Meyers informs us :

During the Cracow years [i.e. the late 1860s and early 1870s], the solitary, hypersensitive and well-read young Conrad impressed friends by memorising and reciting long passages from Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* and by writing patriotic plays, like *The Eyes of Jan Sobieski*, in which Polish nationalists defeated the Muscovite enemy.¹⁹⁶

Nevertheless, 1920 was clearly the pivotal year of the “dramatic” Conrad, because in addition to *Gaspar the Strong Man* he had also been working on adaptations of *The Secret Agent* and “Because of the Dollars” for the stage.

However, we must not be misled by Conrad's apparent enthusiasm towards the dramatic media. In a letter to Richard Curle from 1920 we discover Conrad's forthright attitude towards the related arts of cinema and theatre:

I prefer Cinema to Stage. The Movie is just a silly stunt for silly people — but the theatre is more compromising, since it is capable of falsifying the very soul of one's work both on the imaginative and on the intellectual side — because having some sort of inferior poetics of its own which is bound to play havoc with that imponderable quality of creative literary expression which depends on one's individuality.¹⁹⁷

The crucial element to notice in this statement is the notion of “individuality” and “the very soul of one's work”. It is reminiscent of the Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897) where Conrad informs us that the “artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife... he finds the terms of his appeal”.¹⁹⁸ The artistic writer is a focused individual who presents a unique vision. Theatre,

¹⁹⁶ Meyers, Jeffrey, *Joseph Conrad*, John Murray: London, 1991, p. 27.

¹⁹⁷ Quoted in Curle, Richard, *The Last Twelve Years of Joseph Conrad*, Sampson Low, Marston and Co.: London, 1928, pp. 125-6.

¹⁹⁸ Conrad, Joseph, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, J. M. Dent and Sons Limited: London, 1945, p. 3.

however, is a diffusing art. Although it is important for us to acknowledge that there is a difference between the style and audience of Dickens and James or Conrad, in broad terms there is in the writing of fiction a “concentration” in the creative process (in terms of comparative individual freedom of the novelist) and even in the field of reception (we could after all argue that a novelist is writing for one reader: an “ideal” reader). By stark contrast, the theatre is immediately a diffused art not necessarily on the grounds of the playwright’s initial “creation” but in the production and reception of the staged play. Conrad clearly shares the same grievance and resentment as Henry James due to problems with producers and actors, and that is before the theatre audience is confronted. Indeed, Conrad provides a general rule about actors in his letters, writing to Edward Garnett that “actors... have no imagination”¹⁹⁹. In an impressive letter to Cunninghame Graham he does not mince his words:

The actors appear to me like a lot of *wrongheaded* lunatics pretending to be sane. Their malice is stitched with white threads. They are disguised and ugly. To look at them breeds in my melancholy soul thoughts of murder and suicide — such is my anger and my loathing of their transparent pretences. There is a taint of subtle corruption in their blank voices, in their blinking eyes, in the grimacing faces, in the false light, in the false passion, in the words that have been learned by heart²⁰⁰

A more objective view of Conrad’s frustrated demands and approach to stage production can be found in Curle’s biographical memoir:

He maintained that much unnecessary mystification was made about the difficulties of stage technique, and that every subtle touch of characterization was bound to be lost in the acting. He was almost driven to distraction during the rehearsals of *The Secret Agent* by the inability of the actors to catch, or to interpret, his meaning.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ 17 April 1909, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad Volume 4 1908-11* (eds Karl, F. R. and Davies, L.), Cambridge University Press: 1990, p. 218.

²⁰⁰ 6 December 1897, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad Volume 1: 1861-97* (eds Karl, F. R. and Davies, L.), Cambridge University Press: 1983, p. 419.

²⁰¹ Curle, Richard, *The Last Twelve Years of Joseph Conrad*, p. 125.

John Galsworthy remembers Conrad, during rehearsals of *One Day More*, saying “My dear fellow... this is too horrible for words.”²⁰²

As in the case of Henry James, there must have been an appeal in drama, if not practically, at least theoretically and creatively. Conrad did not deny the “dramatic” in his work, as the opening paragraph of this chapter proved. He goes so far as to say that although “I detest the stage I have a theatrical imagination — that’s why perhaps I detest the stage.”²⁰³ He describes his imagination as “theatrical”, but by implication, the theatre is no place in which to have an imagination. Furthermore, there is a kind of agoraphobia that afflicts some adapting novelists: a horror of the audience. We can find this in Henry James, and in Conrad it finds expression on the opening night of *The Secret Agent* adaptation: “I don’t want to be in the house. Theatres frighten me and always have. I never see plays.”²⁰⁴

In a 1911 letter to Edward Garnett, Conrad comments on the former’s new play, *Lords and Masters*, which “portrayed the entangled relationships and conflicts between a wife, husband and lover”.²⁰⁵ Conrad extends his remarks to cover the “taste” of audiences and successful “serious” drama in general:

You see my dear fellow the état d’âme capable of being moved by such a subject is not a common one. I don’t mean to say that a crowd in the auditorium is incapable of it, only that such a mood is a rare one, everywhere. The pretty-pretty of Maeterlinck is much more their mark — I mean the Pink Goose or whatever kind of bird is being preserved at the Haymarket.²⁰⁶

This mockery of Maeterlinck (the “Pink Goose” was in fact *The Blue Bird*) had been extended to other giants of international drama in a letter to John Galsworthy a few years earlier. In the letter Conrad is humorously writing about the positive aspects of Viscount Althorp’s (in his capacity as Lord Chamberlain) censorship of plays:

²⁰² Quoted in “Introduction” to *Laughing Anne and One Day More*, Castle: London, 1924, p. 6.

²⁰³ To Edward Garnett, 17 April 1909, *Letters 4*, p. 218.

²⁰⁴ Quoted in Mégroz, R. L., *Joseph Conrad’s Mind and Method*, Faber and Faber: London, 1931, p. 24.

²⁰⁵ Jefferson, George, *Edward Garnett: A Life in Literature*, Jonathon Cape: London, 1982, p. 123.

²⁰⁶ 12 March 1911, *Letters 4*, p. 427.

He in his 12 years of office was not afraid of “provoking reaction”. I suppose he knew what he was doing when he choked off Annunzio that dreary, dreary saltimbanque of passion... and Maeterlin(c)k the farceur who has been hiding an appalling poverty of ideas and hollowness of sentiment in wistful baby-talk — two consecrated reputations, not to speak of the sacrosanct Ibsen, of whom like Mrs Verloc of Ossipon, I prefer to say nothing.²⁰⁷

However, if we are curious as to Conrad’s feelings towards the “sacrosanct” Norwegian, Richard Curle can enlighten us:

Indeed, he always expressed contempt for the theatre, and would talk about Ibsen... as “that old fraud”.²⁰⁸

Curle also tells us that Conrad “thought playwriting the lowest of all forms of art — if, indeed, he thought of it a form of art at all”.²⁰⁹ But the fact remains that Conrad nevertheless attempted to write dramatic works, perhaps striving to give his “theatrical imagination” a successful outlet. In the interview with R. L. Mégroz on the evening of *The Secret Agent*’s première Conrad remarks: “I do not enjoy writing plays. It is an exercise in ingenuity.”²¹⁰ Such a remark links Conrad with Thomas Hardy and Henry James, who expressed similar sentiments. Moreover, of the two, Conrad places himself — whether he knew or not — on the side of Hardy: the technical “craft” of playwriting, albeit ingenious, is never a true art because it is restricted by what they imply are its “scientific” demands and limitations. There is a freer rein in fiction: theatrical drama, as they saw it, imposes a control on time, locale, and so on. Henry James also acknowledges the restrictions of drama, but instead of scorning the art form, that is precisely where he finds its appeal. Conrad refers to James’s two French idols — Scribe and Sardou — and praises their skill in a letter of 1911 where he is urging Edward Garnett to write a play about the “literary world”:

²⁰⁷ 24 October 1907, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad Volume 3: 1903-1907* (eds Karl, F. R. and Davies, L.), Cambridge University Press: 1988, p. 503.

²⁰⁸ Curle, Richard, *The Last Twelve Years of Joseph Conrad*, p. 125.

²⁰⁹ *ibid.*

²¹⁰ Mégroz, R. L., *Joseph Conrad’s Mind and Method*, p. 25.

Why not read up Scribe and Sardou (the two good mechanics) a little, and give us a play about *Le Monde où l'on Écrit* — the world where they write! It would be fair game.²¹¹

Could a “good mechanic” ever be the “great artist” in the mould of the one Conrad defines in the Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*?

Conrad’s first attempt at the adaptation of his fiction is *One Day More*, a dramatisation of his short story “To-morrow” (1902). He had completed the adaptation in February 1904, and explains why he wrote it in a letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski in the same month:

Je me trouve soudain sans banque, sans argent, sans carnet de chèques, — sensation atroce dont je frémis encore. Évidemment la chose à faire était d’écrire un drame en un acte. C’est ce que je me suis empressé de faire. La lecture de la pièce a déjà épouvanté un de nos directeurs, — les autres sans doute partageront sa frayeur.²¹²

Despite the “frayeur”, on 23 April 1905 the English Stage Society requested permission to perform it. *One Day More* was given three performances, starting on 25 June. Conrad gives his personal account of going to see the play in a letter to John Galsworthy:

On Tuesday night when we went (like the imbeciles we are) there was some clapping but obviously the very smart audience did *not* catch on. And no wonder! On the other hand the celebrated “man of the hour” G. B. Shaw was extatic (sic) and enthusiastic. “Dramatist!” says he. With three plays of his own running simultaneously at the height of the season, he’s entitled to speak. Of course I don’t think I am a dramatist. But I believe I’ve 3 or even 5 acts somewhere in me. At any rate the reception of the play was not such as to encourage me to sacrifice 6 months to the stage.²¹³

²¹¹ 12 March 1911, *Letters 4*, p. 428.

²¹² February 1904, *Letters 3*, p. 117.

²¹³ 30 June 1905, *Letters 3*, p. 272.

A few months later, with increased hindsight, Conrad writes to H. G. Wells about *One Day More*: “Complete failure I call it. G. B. S. thinks I ought to write another.”²¹⁴ Conrad did write more plays: nearly fifteen years later.

It is interesting to speculate as to why Conrad undertook his dramatic enterprises. We saw in the letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski that one reason was the possibility of financial reward. However, it is additionally significant that Conrad wrote that letter — and his dramatisation — in 1904, which is chronologically more or less at the heart of Conrad’s “great phase”: after *Lord Jim* (1900) and *Nostramo* (1904), and before *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911). There is a case in arguing that in the Conrad of 1904 we see an artist who was not only convinced of, but had proved, his genius and thus set out to excel in a sister art form. Despite Conrad’s attacks on the theatre — expressed with a vehemence only a novelist would dare to muster — he must have acknowledged that it was to a certain degree renascent and perhaps this gave it some appeal. Conrad’s friend, George Bernard Shaw, was living proof of the theatre’s new energy, and another friend, the novelist John Galsworthy, would soon be further evidence of it with his first produced play — the socially concerned *The Silver Box* — which was an immediate success when it opened at the Court Theatre in 1906.

After the disappointment of *One Day More*, Conrad was content to dedicate himself to his principal literary form for a fruitful number of years. The “dramatic year” around 1920 reflects Conrad’s attempt to rejuvenate his creativity: his zenith in fiction had passed, and perhaps he turned to the stage hoping that it might breathe new life into his powers. We could further remind ourselves that Galsworthy was by now a massively successful dramatist, and perhaps served as an encouraging role model. There is a valid argument in asserting that the Conrad-dramatist of 1904 was a self-confident writer of “genius” attempting to conquer the stage as a way of burning up some of his creative energy. In contrast the Conrad-dramatist of 1920 is an anxious writer concerned that he has lost his powers and turns to the stage sincerely hoping that it can release him from the doldrums. This argument receives

²¹⁴ 20 October 1905, *Letters 3*, p. 288.

support from Frederick R. Karl who writes that Conrad “saw the stage not as something to be achieved but as an escape from malaise and stagnation”.²¹⁵

Conrad finished his two-act dramatisation of “Because of the Dollars” (1915) — *Laughing Anne* — in December 1920, but it was not produced in his lifetime. In the “Introduction” to the edition of *Laughing Anne* and *One Day More*, John Galsworthy claims that *Laughing Anne* is an example of a novelist’s “innocence”²¹⁶ as to what is possible or acceptable on the stage. He points out two elements, one concerns a character, the other is a technical demand. One of the figures in the play is a man with no hands and Galsworthy writes:

Conrad probably never realised that a “man without hands” would be an almost unbearable spectacle; that what you can write about freely cannot always be endured by the living eye.²¹⁷

The technical naiveté is on the grounds of the lighting demands in the final scene. But the play itself, Galsworthy would indicate, is not badly written: in fact “To read this play... is a pleasure.”²¹⁸ Conrad could create readable — and even pleasurable — plays, but these never made the shift into practical theatre successfully. He never sufficiently learnt the skills of theatre or at least was never willing to modify his talents for the medium he was attempting to enter. Richard Curle places a paramount emphasis on Conrad’s attitude:

But though his activities in dramatic composition were considerable, he did not regard the drama seriously. I imagine that he dabbled in play-writing partly to prove to himself that any novelist could write a play and partly in the hope of making money. That he was not more successful is perhaps due to the mood in which he approached the subject.²¹⁹

Galsworthy concurs:

²¹⁵ Karl, F. R., *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives*, Faber and Faber: London, 1979, p. 838.

²¹⁶ Galsworthy, John, “Introduction” to *Laughing Anne and One Day More*, Castle: London, 1924, p. 7.

²¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 7.

²¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 8.

²¹⁹ Curle, Richard, *The Last Twelve Years of Joseph Conrad*, p. 111.

One cannot approach the stage successfully without profound respect, and a deep recognition that its conditions are the essentials of an appeal totally distinct from that of the novel.²²⁰

However, Galsworthy also provides an explanation for Conrad's failure beyond the issue of attitude:

His shortcomings were due, partly, to the almost insuperable difficulties of adaptation.²²¹

2. Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*

I have been determined to look at *The Secret Agents* on their own terms and merits as a novel and as a four-act play before tentatively analysing, evaluating and comparing them together in an attempt to investigate the concept and process of adaptation. The fact that I will now analyse the novel and then the play merely has a chronological significance.

2.1 *The Secret Agent*: the novel

In this chapter on the novel of *The Secret Agent* I should like to begin more or less at the very beginning of the text, with the dedication:

To

H. G. WELLS

THE CHRONICLER OF MR LEWISHAM'S LOVE
THE BIOGRAPHER OF KIPPS AND
THE HISTORIAN OF THE AGES TO COME

²²⁰ Galsworthy, John, "Introduction" to *Laughing Anne and One Day More*, p. 10.

²²¹ *ibid.*

THIS SIMPLE TALE OF THE XIX CENTURY
IS AFFECTIONATELY OFFERED (5)²²²

One of the keywords in the critical analysis of Conrad has traditionally been “irony” and we may contend that this dedication is ironic. We need not concern ourselves over the genuineness of Conrad’s “affection”, but it is the reference to *The Secret Agent* being a “simple tale” that can provoke us. This statement could be interpreted as ironic partly because *The Secret Agent* is such a complex novel, at least in terms of its narrative structure. However, we could argue that the central “story” of *The Secret Agent* is in fact a simple tale (something which Conrad himself discovered to his shock when he came to dramatise it) which is told in a complicated way. It is for this reason that I believe Conrad’s dedication is most profoundly ironic on the grounds of the contrasting philosophies of Conrad and Wells. In *The History of Mr Polly* the narrator declares that:

Deep in the being of Mr Polly, deep in that darkness, like a creature which has been beaten about the head and left for dead but still lives, crawled a persuasion that over and above the things that are jolly and “bits of all right”, there was beauty, there was delight; that somewhere — magically inaccessible perhaps, but still somewhere — were pure and easy and joyous states of body and mind.²²³

Mr Polly, H. G. Wells’s “Everyman”, stands as proof that humans need not or, maybe, do not possess a heart of darkness.

In the Wells of the scientific romances there is a significant degree of pessimism: the future dystopia (regardless of whether it is an extrapolation of the Victorian class system) of *The Time Machine* (1895); the para-Swiftian nightmare of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896); the corruption and abuse of science by *The Invisible Man* (1897). But nevertheless there is an important channel of optimism that runs through Wells’s oeuvre, perhaps exemplified in *The War of the Worlds*

²²² All page references to the novel relate to the Penguin edition.

²²³ Wells, H. G., *The History of Mr Polly*, Pan: London, 1963, p. 24.

(1898) where the endangered Earth defeats the Martian threat. Although the victory is not secured by the human race but by bacteria, our world wins through. Most profoundly, Wellsian optimism can be located in the Edwardian novels: *The History of Mr Polly* (1910); and in the two novels Conrad alludes to in his dedication, *Love and Mr Lewisham* (1900) and *Kipps* (1905). A remarkable exception to the optimism in Wells's Edwardian writings is *Tono-Bungay* which, written just a year before the account of Mr Polly's discovery of paradise, is a sustained and panoramic critique of capitalism and western society, and contains an amusing pastiche of *Heart of Darkness*, and ends with a pessimistic vision of "Waste" containing an apocalyptic image of Destiny.

It is thus fair to say that in Wells we find an oscillation between optimism and pessimism. Nevertheless, Wells lived long enough to see the foundations of the optimism he did possess severely battered. He placed all his faith in the power of science and engineering, believing that it could transform our stupid and wasteful society into a sane and efficient one. He declared the first world war to be the "war to end all war", but lived to see the Nazi death camps and atomic bombs drop on Japan. Central to his optimism was his Fabian socialism: the same kind of euphoria can be found in another Fabian writer, George Bernard Shaw. Their nineteenth-century form of socialism led them to indulge in the somewhat elitist fantasy that with a powerful and technocratic individual at the helm of society the future would be inevitably progressive. Especially in Shaw we find the notion of the Superman who can control his will for the good of himself and others. Our view of this must be rather jaded at this late stage of the twentieth century, a century still bearing the scars of too many self-styled Supermen. This is one reason why *The Secret Agent* is such a frighteningly prophetic work in hindsight. Written in 1907 and ostensibly about the nineteenth century, *The Secret Agent* gives an eerie depiction of mentalities and events that were to dominate later.

There were of course many people who concurred with the progressive optimism of Shaw and Wells at the beginning of the century. Indeed, both writers were to become two of the most respected living figures in Europe. But at least one

writer did not share their utopian glee and faith in the power of reason and science to produce a better world for all: Joseph Conrad. In an amusing letter to Cunninghame Graham, Conrad expresses his sentiments towards the giants Wells and Shaw:

The stodgy sun of our future — our early Victorian future — lingers on the horizon, but all the same it will rise — it will indeed — to throw its sanitary light upon a dull world of perfected municipalities and WC's sans peur et sans reproche. The grave of individual temperaments is being dug by GBS and HGW with hopeful industry. Finità la commedia! Well they may do much but for the saving of the universe I put my faith in the power of folly.²²⁴

Conrad, it can be inferred, believes in “individual temperament” and prefers “folly” to rationalism. This can be used, I believe, in relation to Robert Penn Warren’s notion that Conrad suffered a “trauma inflicted by nineteenth-century science, a ‘mystic wound’”,²²⁵ an idea which can be enlightening in an analysis of *The Secret Agent*, as well as placing Conrad as an antithesis to Shaw and Wells. There is a parallel to be drawn here between the idealistic politics of Michaelis and Ossipon, on one side, and the extremist world view of the Professor, on the other. But that is not to cast Conrad entirely in the role of the Professor: there is a social dimension to Conrad’s work, as we shall see later. Indeed, the above quotation is quite useful to relate to *The Secret Agent* because in the novel we are presented with the “rational” world of political activism and conviction which certainly do not reveal any potential to save the universe.

To Conrad, history is a process which is, as Daniel Schwarz writes, “inexorably indifferent to man’s aspirations”.²²⁶ Wells’s optimism can be summed up as depending on the notion of “improvement” (of society and thus humanity). Jocelyn Baines writes about the difference between the two writers, quoting from an anecdote recorded in Hugh Walpole’s diary:

²²⁴ 16 February 1905, *Letters 3*, Cambridge University Press: 1988, pp. 217-8.

²²⁵ Warren, Robert Penn, *New and Selected Essays*, Random House: New York, 1989, p. 147.

²²⁶ Schwarz, Daniel, *Conrad: Almayer's Folly to Under Western Eyes*, Cornell University Press: 1980, p. 162.

Conrad was fundamentally pessimistic and aristocratic in outlook, whereas Wells was optimistic and stridently plebeian. Conrad himself neatly expressed his notion of their temperamental antagonism: “The difference between us, Wells, is fundamental. You don’t care for humanity but think they are to be improved. I love humanity but know they are not!”²²⁷

Conrad’s view was moulded by his own form of pessimism, and by his upbringing under the repressive power of Russia. Born into Russian-occupied Poland in 1857 and five years later exiled into Russian Siberia with his political activist father Apollo Korzeniowski, Conrad doubts the potential of any political solution to change, as it were, “the way of the world”. Allan Ingram describes Conrad as a “political agnostic”,²²⁸ but we should not let this lead us into underestimating the conviction of Conrad’s beliefs and opinions (Polish nationalism, for instance). Conrad was somewhat antithetical when it came to politics: Zdzislaw Najder describes²²⁹ how Conrad was prompted by his radical friend Cunninghame Graham to attend a mass meeting of pacifists in 1899, but sat there “revolted a little” as he listened to Liebknecht, Jaurès and others.

Conrad’s non-fiction can be illuminating for us with regards to politics. In a letter to the publisher William Blackwood, Conrad complains about a review in *Blackwood’s Magazine*²³⁰ of a book by Hallam Tennyson²³¹ in which the reviewer criticises the British “pride in affording an asylum to bloodthirsty ruffians” and makes a pejorative comment about “dirty rascals who wave a cap of liberty upon a pike”. Conrad comments:

Not every man who “waved a cap of liberty on a pike” was a scoundrel. And England has not only given refuge to criminals... Of course I do not defend political crime. It is repulsive to me by tradition, by sentiment, and even by reflexion (sic). But some of their men had struggled for an idea, openly, in the light of day, and sacrificed to it all that to most men makes life worth living.²³²

²²⁷ Baines, Jocelyn, *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson: London, 1960. Walpole's diary account is dated 23 January 1918.

²²⁸ Conrad, Joseph, *Selected Literary Criticism and The Shadow-Line* (ed. Allan Ingram), Methuen: London, 1986, p. 39.

²²⁹ See Najder, Zdzislaw, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle* Cambridge University Press: 1983, p. 251.

²³⁰ Volume 162.

²³¹ *Alfred Lord Tennyson: a Memoir*.

²³² 29 October 1897, *Letters 1*, Cambridge University Press: 1983, p. 401.

This is obviously an interesting remark to consider in relation to *The Secret Agent*: the rejection of political crime and yet the defence of the struggle of certain radicals pursuing, totally and cleanly, one idea. The concept of an “idea” is crucial in *The Secret Agent*, and we shall look at it later. More directly in relation to *The Secret Agent* Conrad wrote that he certainly did not mean to attack revolutionaries. He wrote to Cunninghame Graham: “I don’t think that I’ve been satirizing the revolutionary world. All these people are not revolutionaries —they are shams.”²³³ Similarly, Conrad wrote in a letter to John Galsworthy in September 1906 commenting on the remarks made by Galsworthy on the manuscript of *The Secret Agent*:

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. The general reflections whether right or wrong are not meant as bolts. (...) They are, if anything, mere digs at the people in the tale. As to attacking Anarchism as a form of humanitarian enthusiasm or intellectual despair or social atheism, that — if it were worth doing — would be the work for a more vigorous hand and for a mind more robust, and perhaps more honest than mine.²³⁴

As a point of interest, Conrad defined the true anarchist in the letter to Cunninghame Graham of October 1907:

By Jove! If I had the necessary talent I would like to go for the *true* anarchist — which is the millionaire. Then you would see the venom flow. But it’s too big a job.²³⁵

Obviously this is the kind of comment that would delight a Marxist, with its implication of the chaos that is the capitalist system. It certainly would have delighted H. G. Wells (we might even think of the latter’s novel *Tono-Bungay* in the light of Conrad’s remark). All of the statements by Conrad we have looked at so far

²³³ 7 October 1907, *Letters 3*, p. 491.

²³⁴ Quoted in *Selected Literary Criticism and The Shadow-Line*, pp. 78-9.

²³⁵ 7 October 1907, *Letters 3*, p. 491.

tell us something very important: *The Secret Agent* is a novel about anarchism, and yet the anarchists in the story are all “shams”, and Conrad did not attempt to write solely about that particular political belief. In other words, *The Secret Agent* is about more than just anarchism. Indeed, as Jacques Berthoud stresses when he writes about *The Secret Agent*:

As long as we assume that its main concern is the exposure of anarchism, we shall continue to regard it as a work in which execution completely outstrips content...²³⁶

Berthoud says this to defend the novel against the attacks made on it by Albert Guerard and Jocelyn Baines.²³⁷ We could also add Irving Howe to these names, failing *The Secret Agent*, as he does, on the grounds of exact portraiture of the anarchists.²³⁸ Yet, *The Secret Agent* also has its share of tenacious devotees among Conrad critics. A particularly curious example of the latter is Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan who ignores *The Secret Agent* in her *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper* except in two footnotes. Her work is concerned with “unresolved structural and thematic tensions” — “fault-lines” — in Conrad’s fiction. One of the aforementioned footnotes states:

These fault-lines are not evident in *The Secret Agent*. Conrad has managed to sustain full control of his material by enclosing it in a barrier of acerbic irony, by removing himself from the text and acting, for once, as the indifferent creator who manipulates his characters with ruthless precision and aesthetic economy. This novel, perhaps the least problematic and the most perfectly crafted of Conrad’s works, does not fit into the framework of the present discussion precisely because it is so technically flawless.²³⁹

Earlier I stated that it is not true to say that Conrad does not have a social dimension in his work: *The Secret Agent* is hence failed by certain critics because they

²³⁶ Berthoud, Jacques, *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase*, Cambridge University Press: 1978, p. 132.

²³⁷ See *ibid.*

²³⁸ Referred to in the “Introduction” to Conrad, Joseph *The Secret Agent* (eds Harkness, Bruce and Reid, S.W.), Cambridge University Press: 1990., pp. XL-XLI.

²³⁹ Erdinast-Vulcan, Daphna, *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper*, Oxford University Press: 1991, p. 5n.

concentrate on the Conradian “individual temperament”. There are, however, determinants which lie outside the realm of the individual. We can see this if we quote the beginning of one of Conrad’s most “political” works of non-fiction, the essay “Poland Revisited” (1915):

I have never believed in political assassination as a means to an end, and least of all in assassination of the dynastic order. I don’t know how far murder can ever approach the perfection of a fine art, but looked upon with the cold eye of reason it seems but a crude expedient of impatient hope or hurried despair. There are few men whose premature death could influence human affairs more than on the surface. The deeper stream of causes depends not on individuals who, like the mass of mankind, are carried on by a destiny which no murder has ever been able to placate, divert, or arrest.²⁴⁰

I find Conrad’s notions of the “deeper stream of causes” and “destiny” particularly interesting because of their implication that humans are powerless. This idea is further reflected in Conrad’s idea of the universal “knitting machine”, expressed in a letter to Cunninghame Graham:

It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions — and nothing matters.²⁴¹

Avrom Fleischman gives Conrad’s powerful metaphor a social and political significance when he points out that the knitting machine was one of the bases of the British nineteenth-century economy and is thus

a natural symbol of the modern world. Seen in this light the argument against social progressivism cuts a wider swath: it takes in the widespread Victorian (and modern) faith in progress through industry.²⁴²

Hence it can be seen as another critique of Wells and Shaw.

²⁴⁰ Conrad, Joseph, *Notes on Life and Letters* (1921), J. M. Dent and Sons: London, 1949, p. 141.

²⁴¹ 20 December 1897, quoted in *Selected Literary Criticism and The Shadow-Line*, p. 40.

²⁴² Fleischman, Avrom, *Conrad’s Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad*, Johns Hopkins Press: Baltimore, 1967, p. 27.

Returning to the “political” dimension in the novel, the subject of *The Secret Agent* is society, albeit viewed from a distance and from the outside. Hence, the novel, as a text about society, is very much a *satire* rooted in specific history. Moreover, within this analysis of society — or perhaps we should say “English” or even “London” society — enter the issues of a wider anarchy and its opposite, conservatism, in relation to, in part, politics but also the “human condition”.

Jacques Berthoud contends that the society in *The Secret Agent* is overwhelmingly conservative. The victims that inhabit it are either rooted, whether they know it or not, in this conservatism or they struggle as best they can against it. To be a conservative is to limit one’s view and one’s horizons, it is to be partly “blind” and also rooted to the spot: sedentary. The most obvious example of this is Adolf Verloc.

The narrative provides many examples of and metaphors for Verloc’s mental and physical apathy. One particularly interesting example is when Mr Vladimir says “You are very corpulent”, to Verloc and the narrator informs the reader that this observation was “really of a psychological nature” (52). In this instance, not only is a link made between physical appearance and state of mind, but also between a figure in the text and the narrator. The narrator is arguably one of the most interesting and significant “characters” in the novel. Probably the most thorough indictment of Verloc’s complete lethargy is near the beginning of Chapter II:

Mr Verloc would have rubbed his hands with glee had he not been constitutionally averse from every superfluous exertion. His idleness was not hygienic, but it suited him very well. He was in a manner devoted to it with a sort of inert fanaticism, or perhaps rather with a fanatical inertness. Born of industrious parents for a life of toil, he had embraced indolence... He was too lazy even for a mere demagogue, for a workman orator, for a leader of labour. It was too much trouble. He required a more perfect form of ease; or it might have been that he was the victim of a philosophical unbelief in the effectiveness of every human effort. (52)

Finally, there is an example of the ghastly humour that permeates *The Secret Agent*. During the meeting of the anarchists, Verloc is described as “moody and spread

largely on the sofa, (continuing) to look down the row of his waistcoat buttons” (77). This description is echoed near the end of the novel when we read that Mr Verloc, on the same sofa, “did not seem so much asleep now as lying down with a bent head and looking insistently at his left breast” (251). The essential difference is that in the latter description Verloc is dead while before he was, to all intents and purposes, still alive.

The anarchists who have been given political asylum in Britain discover that they cannot threaten their adopted country: the conservatism of Britain smothers all their political principles into hollow and rather absurd clichés. At least they seem ridiculous when modified by the narrator who, for example, presents us with Michaelis’s glance of “seraphic trustfulness” (79) and relates the ticket-of-leave apostle’s belief that

...history is made with tools, not with ideas; and everything is changed by economic conditions — art, philosophy, love, virtue — truth itself! (79)

These people do not endanger the Britain of *The Secret Agent*. Even the central, public act of the story — which is supposed to masquerade as an anarchist outrage — the Greenwich Park bomb, is more reactionary than revolutionary. While the anarchists panic, the police accept it as being all in a day’s work. Moreover, the bomb is reactionary because it destroys one of the most intriguing characters in the novel: Stevie, whom we shall examine later.

Similarly part of society’s conservatism in the novel are “establishment” figures. Sir Ethelred, the “great Personage” (143) is in fact a Parliamentary radical. It would have been facile to make this Member of Parliament a nineteenth-century Tory, and Conrad resists this. Indeed, the name of the knight’s conservative rival — Cheeseman — is ironic in that it clearly has its origins in trade. Sir Ethelred’s “Bill for the Nationalisation of Fisheries” is described by Toodles as “the beginning of a social revolution (...and a) revolutionary measure” (149). However, with typical Conradian irony, the great man responsible for the Bill is British conservatism personified. Sir Ethelred is rooted in the tradition of British history and his name

itself illustrates this: he is a knight and his Christian name is most obviously associated with an early English king. King Ethelred was known as “The Unready” and so the smothering conservatism of the society in *The Secret Agent*, as well as the inherent conservatism of this revolutionary politician himself, are perhaps re-emphasised with this allusion.

We are told that Sir Ethelred “might have been the statue of one of his own princely ancestors stripped of a Crusader’s war-harness, and put into an ill fitting frock coat” (143). The implication of this is that he would actually look better in medieval armour because his modern coat does not fit properly. Similarly, the struggle the Secretary of State is having getting his Bill through Parliament, especially with the opposition of Cheeseman and his “reactionary gang” (149), is described in medieval terms: “the great man’s thoughts seemed to have wandered far away, perhaps to the questions of his country’s domestic policy, the battleground of his crusading valour against the paynim Cheeseman” (205). It is ironic that contemporary politics, including radical legislation, should be given an analogy associating him with medieval history. Sir Ethelred is “vast in bulk and stature” and is likened to an oak: “indeed the unbroken record of that man’s descent surpassed in the number of centuries the age of the oldest oak in the country” (142). In addition to Sir Ethelred’s rootedness in the social tradition of England he is, in another dimension to the irony of the novel, afflicted with what physically resembles a Verlocian exhaustion through trying to initiate a social revolution in Great Britain. When striving to force a wave of change through the corridors of power one is forced to be sedentary and miserable, as Toodles remarks:

He has walked over from the House an hour ago to talk with the Permanent Under Secretary, and now he’s ready to walk back again. He might have sent for him; but he does it for the sake of a little exercise I suppose. It’s all the exercise he can find time for while this session lasts. (...) He leans on my arm, and doesn’t open his lips. But, I say, he’s very tired, and — well — not in the sweetest of tempers just now. (141)

Sir Ethelred’s conservatism is reflected in his language: “‘No. No details, please.’ The great shadowy form seemed to shrink away as if in physical dread of details...”

(204). We could associate this with conservative “blindness”, a “not wanting to know”. One of Sir Ethelred’s muttered comments is, “He would, would he?” (147) This short question has a symmetry: it ends where it began, two steps forward, two steps back. We are given here an equivalent in language to his walk to and from the House.

Chief Inspector Heat — principal expert on anarchist procedure — is another example of conservatism. Heat is, we are told, “not very wise” (105) and, ironically, it is because of this that he has been successfully promoted in his police career. Despite having senior responsibility and being an expert in the field, Heat is horrified — to the point that he behaves “gingerly” — when he sees the tattered remains of the bomb’s victim. The Chief Inspector holds his ground and “for a whole minute he did not advance” (106), which stands in contrast to the constable’s remark that he himself ran, “As fast as my legs would carry me.” (106) Heat’s most profound conservatism is revealed in his attitude towards crime. He sees work — and the world — in terms of the “game”: and not just as “cops and robbers” but more essentially conservatism and anarchy. He recognises the Professor as being the “enemy”, the other “side”, and speaks to him in police clichés: “I’ll have you yet.” (112) The Chief Inspector has a respect — even a love — for the “ordinary” criminal, the thief. Heat believes that,

Thieving was not a sheer absurdity. It was a form of human industry, perverse indeed, but still an industry exercised in an industrious world; it was work undertaken for the same reason as the work in potteries, in coal mines, in fields, in tool-grinding shops. It was labour, whose practical difference from the other forms of labour consisted in the nature of its risk, which did not lie in ankylosis, or lead poisoning, or fire-damp, or gritty dust, but in what may be defined in its own special phraseology as “Seven years hard”. (110)

Ordinary crime is all part of the “game” to Heat: there is no question of change or movement as far as he is concerned. Anything that is *unfamiliar* and outside the “rules” is despised by him and that is why he hates — and cannot understand — anarchy.

To be a genuine anarchist in the world of *The Secret Agent* is extremely difficult. To summarise Jacques Berthoud's assessment of the novel²⁴³ in the most succinct terms we can argue that:

POLITICAL CONSERVATISM = MODERATION

SOCIAL CONSERVATISM = NORMALITY

The result of this is that by simply

using language at all, one automatically submits to an infinitely subtle system of inherited codes. To even speak intelligibly is to perform a conservative act.²⁴⁴

Berthoud's argument raises fascinating questions about Stevie: through his very nature how far can Stevie ever be normal? How far, therefore, is Stevie a true kind of anarchist?

Another problem in the attempt to be a veritable anarchist is that one must dedicate oneself totally and single-mindedly to the destruction of society as it currently is. Failure to do this means that the proclaimed anarchist is in fact caught up in what is to be destroyed. It is in the light of this argument that we could argue that the two most genuine anarchists in *The Secret Agent* are the Professor and, perhaps surprisingly, Mr Vladimir. Or, to qualify this argument more precisely, these two characters offer, through their political extremism, the boldest opposition to the stasis of Britain. They represent, in their peculiar forms of extremism, what Berthoud describes as "the novel's real principle of opposition".²⁴⁵ Mr Vladimir, First Secretary of the anonymous Embassy, despises certain national characteristics of the country he inhabits: the "absurd... sentimental regard for individual liberty" (64); its "imbecile bourgeoisie" (64) and its police force. He is an extremist of the right wing who, by planning the outrage against the Greenwich Observatory (science

²⁴³ See Berthoud, p. 136.

²⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 137.

²⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 134.

as opposed to religion or art: this is the modern world), hopes to pull England into line at the Milan Conference to support an international repressive legislation. Although within smothering Great Britain Vladimir has a desire for action (even if he wants others to do it for him):

Voice won't do. We have no use for your voice. We don't want a voice. We want facts — startling facts — damn you. (61)

Vladimir is declaring war against the current stasis of British society, a war with no place for rhetoric.

Similarly the Professor stands in extreme opposition to the condition and mores of Britain. He despises British superstition and its “idealistic conception of legality” (96). It is his aspiration to shatter this. He strives to develop the perfect detonator: an ironic pursuit when we consider how useless the one he made for Verloc was, exploding when dropped. The Professor displays the ugliest distortion of aspects of Nietzschean philosophy as could be found in the “beliefs”, as Martin Seymour-Smith writes, of “proto-Nazis such as Nietzsche’s brother-in-law, the swindler and racist Bernhard Förster”. Seymour-Smith adds:

Förster’s widow (Nietzsche’s sister), who became a Nazi, devoted her life to the false demonstration that her brother’s work was cast in the mould of the degraded Förster’s set of shabby beliefs. (...) The Professor, then, is one of those who might believe in the Nietzschean “superman” of the demented Frau Förster-Nietzsche. This superman (never Nietzsche’s own *Übermensch*...) can easily be made into a nihilist.²⁴⁶

The Professor is not least an anarchist because of his insanity: he clutches the indiarubber ball that will detonate the bomb perpetually strapped to his body; he condemns the weakness of others while seemingly oblivious to his own frailty. His extreme, cold logic gives him an abnormal selfishness and a madness in reason: an insane “logic”. Indeed, the Professor’s megalomania, his fear and loathing of humanity — “the odious multitude of mankind” (269) — his love of ruin and

²⁴⁶ Seymour-Smith, Martin, “Introduction” to *The Secret Agent*, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 22.

destruction cradled in cold science (his part chemical, part mechanical detonator) may eerily anticipate the twentieth-century phenomenon of the Nazi.

It is interesting to note, in a letter to Cunninghame Graham, that Conrad did not intend to make the Professor despicable:

He is incorruptible at any rate. In making him say “madness and despair — give me that for a lever and I will move the world” I wanted to give him a note of perfect sincerity. At the worst he is a megalomaniac of an extreme type. And every extremist is respectable.²⁴⁷

The implication is that the Professor is worthy of respect because he is honest. If we look, with the help of the narrator, at the motives and language of the figures in *The Secret Agent*, we realise that very few people say what they actually think. *The Secret Agent* is partly a novel about lying. Indeed, it could be argued that “lying” is one of the central Conradian themes, certainly if we consider a work such as *Heart of Darkness*. Adolf Verloc is one of the most consistent liars in *The Secret Agent*: the irony is that when the truth finally comes out, he is murdered. The exceptions in this hypocritical and deceitful society are the Professor and Stevie. The latter, in addition to being honest, also believes anything he hears or is told, and this proves to be fatal.

Stevie stands outside of the “normality” in *The Secret Agent*. Despite being taken in by what others may say and by his loyalty (most pathetically to Verloc, who regards Stevie as a man who does not like animals looks at his wife’s cat), Stevie sees the world with lucidity. He possesses an immense empathy and a profound kind of logic: while the Professor’s logic has become madness, Stevie’s “madness” (as such) has become a crystal-clear logic. The police “are there so that them as have nothing shouldn’t take anything away from them who have” (170), Winnie informs Stevie. The latter replies, “What?... Not even if they were hungry? Mustn’t they?” (170) The best example of Stevie’s vision is in relation to the cab-ride:

²⁴⁷ 7 October 1907, *Letters 3*, Cambridge University Press: 1988, p. 491.

The contemplation of the infirm and lonely steed overcame him. Jostled, but obstinate, he would remain there, trying to express the view newly opened to his sympathies of the human and equine misery in close association. But it was very difficult. "Poor brute, poor people!" was all he could repeat. It did not seem forcible enough, and he came to a stop with an angry splutter: "Shame!" Stevie was no master of phrases, and perhaps for that very reason his thoughts lacked clearness and precision. But he felt with great completeness and some profundity. That little word contained all his sense of indignation and horror at one sort of wretchedness having to feed upon the anguish of the other — as the poor cabman beating the poor horse in the name, as it were, of his poor kids at home. And Stevie knew what it was to be beaten. He knew it from experience. It was a bad world. Bad! Bad! (168)

This basic observation — subsequently summed up as "Bad world for poor people" (168) — has an honest simplicity and clarity that all the revolutionists in the novel have either lost sight of (for example, behind Michaelis's rhetoric of political idealism) or never possessed anyway. Stevie fits into a literary tradition with precedents in Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy" and in the notion of the truth-speaker (the small child, for instance, in the fairy tale of "The Emperor's New Clothes" who is the first to remark that "The Emperor is naked"). It is extremely ironic that Ossipon describes Stevie as a perfect example of a "degenerate": who is really the "degenerate"? The truth-speaking, compassionate boy or the exploitative and fraudulent "Doctor"?

An example of Stevie's vision at its most mystical is in his drawing. In Chapter III Stevie sits at a table:

drawing circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable. The artist never turned his head; and in all his soul's application to the task his back quivered, his thin neck, sunk into a deep hollow at the base of the skull, seemed ready to snap. (76)

Stevie has a vision of anarchy: the swirling chaos of the universe (reminiscent of the "knitting machine" even if one vision is chaotic and the other chillingly mechanical). It is ironic that "circles" are used: traditionally the symbol of

geometrical perfection and eternity, their aspect of the eternal remains but less “perfection” than hellish “cosmic chaos”. The passage also echoes Vladimir’s “impossible” desire to “throw a bomb into pure mathematics” (67): Stevie’s drawing is an attempt at the “inconceivable” just as Vladimir’s Greenwich bomb is more or less an attempt at the “impossible”. If we accept this “scientific” allusion of Stevie’s sketch, we should add that it is no less genuine than Ossipon’s pseudo-science and no less genuine than the Professor’s philosophy. The difference is that Ossipon and the Professor convert their chaotic views into intellectual systems, while Stevie merely shows things as they are. As well as all the above examples of thematic and ideological irony, it also ironical because of what will happen within the story: Stevie’s neck *will* be snapped and his entire body ripped into a confused mass by the swirling chaos of an explosion. We are thus justified in drawing a parallel between the above passage and that describing Winnie’s “vision”:

Mrs Verloc closed her eyes desperately, throwing upon that vision the night of her eyelids, where after a rainlike fall of mangled limbs the decapitated head of Stevie lingered suspended alone, and fading out like the last star of a pyrotechnic display. (233)

Stevie is by necessity and character abnormally dependent on others, just as the Professor is abnormally independent: self-sufficient and selfish. Yet total self-sufficiency is a fallacy. In *The Secret Agent* the society is, in the words of Jacques Berthoud, “a system of interdependent egoisms”.²⁴⁸ People are wrapped-up in their own egos or in the constructed belief of what their egos are. Hence we may think of Michaelis’s inability to indulge in conversation despite his adept skill at rhetoric. We may think of the Verlocs: dependent on each other, and yet unable to communicate with each other and, in the case of Verloc, horrifyingly selfish. Related to dependence is the question of freedom. This is the key issue that Winnie Verloc signifies. Winnie is an obedient wife: she runs the seedy little shop with “unfathomable indifference” (46) and thinks the F. P. (“The Future of the Proletariat”) tracts they try to sell are rubbish. She is kept in ignorance of Mr

²⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 146.

Verloc's life and the world of the anarchists. This mask put onto Winnie's face is ready to come off when she realises what has been done to Stevie. In her desperate anguish she sits thus:

The palms of her hands were pressed convulsively to her face, with the tips of her fingers contracted against the forehead, as though the skin had been a mask which she was ready to tear off violently. (198)

The subsequent confrontation between Mr and Mrs Verloc — that is, in the “Verloc story” (textually Chapter X intervenes) — is sliced through with irony. “Do be reasonable, Winnie. What would it have been if you had lost me!” (214) declares Adolf Verloc, and in such a way is one cliché of matrimony — the unbreakable bond between a man and his wife — exploded. Another cliché that receives an ironic treatment is one of the oldest stereotypes there is: when Winnie dresses to go out her husband presumes that she is “flying off to her mother, of course” (228).

When Winnie makes her decision the narrator describes her thus:

Mrs Verloc the free woman. She commanded her wits now, her vocal organs; she felt herself to be in an almost preternaturally perfect control of every fibre of her body. It was all her own because the bargain was at an end. (233).

The decision she has made is the decision to take *action*. She kills her husband. The positive notion of the action is counterbalanced by the fact that it is a murder and is therefore negative. Having broken away from normality she enters a moral vacuum. She is free. But what is freedom? As the ticking sound of the clock is metamorphosed into the dripping, then the trickling of a dead man's blood we realise that freedom is, in the terms of the text, a personal anarchy. Freedom is isolation, madness and despair in *The Secret Agent*.

Although wrapped up in their own egos the characters in *The Secret Agent* are dependent — or rather are parasites — on others. Karl Yundt is dependent on a “blear eyed old woman” (81), Ossipon depends on “silly girls with savings bank books” (81) and Michaelis relies on the patronage of “his wealthy old lady” (81). Mr

Vladimir and Winnie are forced to depend on Verloc while the latter comes to depend on Stevie. Stevie, however, is dependent on many people, not just on one feeder: he thrives on his social consciousness. To compare two descriptions near the beginning of the novel. First, here is the description of Stevie as an errand-boy:

he did not turn out a great success. He forgot his messages; he was easily diverted from the straight path of duty by the attractions of stray cats and dogs, which he followed down narrow alleys into unsavoury courts; by the comedies of the streets, which he contemplated open mouthed, to the detriment of his employer's interests; or by the dramas of fallen horses, whose pathos and violence induced him sometimes to shriek piercingly in a crowd, which disliked to be disturbed by sounds of distress in its quiet enjoyment of the national spectacle. When led away by a grave and protecting policeman, it would often become apparent that poor Stevie had forgotten his address — at least for a time. (49)

Stevie is involved in the social activity of the world, albeit with a heightened emotional consciousness. We should take note of phrases such as “comedies of the streets”, “dramas” and “the national spectacle”: we are presented with words connoting *communal* performance. A few pages later we find the description of Verloc in the same streets:

a milk-cart rattled noisily across the distant perspective; a butcher boy, driving with the noble recklessness of a charioteer at Olympic Games, dashed round the corner sitting high above a pair of red wheels. A guilty looking cat issuing from under the stones ran for a while in front of Mr Verloc, then dived into another basement; and a thick police constable, looking a stranger to every emotion, as if he too were part of inorganic nature, surging apparently out of a lamp post, took not the slightest notice of Mr Verloc. (53)

In contrast to Stevie's experience, Verloc, the milk cart, the butcher boy, the policeman and even the cat are isolated and indifferent to one another. There is an increased social consciousness when the narrator uses Stevie as a focaliser. To elucidate, the milk cart is “distant”, the butcher boy is reckless and dashes, the cat is “guilty” and runs: they are all moving away from each other and, like Verloc, have their own personal objectives and secrets (especially the guilty cat!). The policeman

not only ignores Verloc, but he is “a stranger to every emotion”: a stark contrast to the “grave and protecting policeman” that leads Stevie away. To find an even deeper contrast, we could argue that “grave and protecting” is precisely what conventional Victorian society would expect the constabulary to be, not the alienating “inorganic” entity we find in the other passage.

Dependence in *The Secret Agent* is not only parasitic but, in one of the major metaphors of the novel, cannibalistic. Karl Yundt terrifies Stevie with his statement:

Do you know what I would call the nature of the present economic conditions? I would call it cannibalistic. That’s what it is! They are nourishing their greed on the quivering flesh and the warm blood of the people — nothing else. (80)

In one of the F. P. tracts is the description of a German officer tearing off the ear of a recruit (87). In the hospital the remains of Stevie are spread on a waterproof sheet that looks like a tablecloth upon which appears what might have been “raw material for a cannibal feast” (106). Ossipon has an “ambrosial head” (266): ambrosia is the food of the gods. There is also something cannibalistic in Verloc’s appetite after Winnie has learnt the truth:

The piece of roast beef, laid out in the likeness of funereal baked meats for Stevie’s obsequies, offered itself largely to his notice. And Mr Verloc again partook. He partook ravenously, without restraint or decency, cutting thick slices with the sharp carving knife, and swallowing them without bread. (227)

Cannibalism is perhaps the ultimate denial of humanity, and the references to it in *The Secret Agent* imply that these people are becoming monsters. Incidentally, cannibalism is central to an earlier work of Conrad’s: “Falk: A Reminiscence” (1903). In this short story the eponymous hero declares how he survived when lost at sea: “‘Imagine to yourselves,’ he said in his ordinary voice, ‘that I have eaten man.’”²⁴⁹ There is a case in arguing that if cannibalism has traditionally found a place anywhere in our culture it has either been within the xenophobic and racist cliché of

²⁴⁹ “Falk: A Reminiscence” in *Typhoon and other stories*, William Heinemann: London, 1903, p. 239.

tribes of “man-eating” savages (a pith helmeted missionary sits in a cauldron of soup) or within the genre of the sea-tale (sailors, cast adrift on a raft, with few rations left...) which “Falk” itself is, in part, an attempt to subvert. Nevertheless, the use of cannibalism — if only in terms of metaphor — in a story located entirely on the terra-firma of London is very disturbing because it has strayed away from what we may regard as its appropriate cultural “context”.

The dehumanising process in *The Secret Agent* emphasised by cannibalism is reinforced in another way by the use of numerous animal similes: people are compared to pigs, dogs, and so on. In contrast, things seem to come alive (such as the player piano in Chapter IV), they do not need humans anymore.

Despite being partly a political novel or a social satire (regardless of Conrad’s disclaimer: “I dont (sic) want the story to be misunderstood as having any sort of social or polemical intention”),²⁵⁰ *The Secret Agent* is a kind of horror story. The novel has the perfect locale for a tale of terror: foggy Victorian London. Furthermore, things are “ghostly”, “devilish” and “uncanny”. The worn-out old cab, as well as being the inspiration for Stevie’s political comment, is described as the “Cab of Death” (167). Winnie imagines the explosion and has a vision in which “the decapitated head of Stevie lingered suspended alone” (233). The skeletal Karl Yundt is a macabre figure, and at the end of Chapter XII Ossipon (*ossis*, Latin for bone) is some kind of vampire:

The first dawn found him open-eyed... This man who could walk so long, so far, so aimlessly, without showing a sign of fatigue, could also remain sitting still for hours without stirring a limb or an eyelid. But when the late sun sent its rays into the room he unclasped his hands, and fell back on the pillow. His eyes stared at the ceiling. And suddenly they closed. Comrade Ossipon slept in the sunlight. (262)

The most consistent opposition to this gallery of freaks and monsters is embodied in the narrator. Daniel Schwarz argues — in *Conrad: Almayer’s Folly to Under Western Eyes* (1980) — that the major character of *The Secret Agent* is the narrator

²⁵⁰ Letter to J. B. Pinker, 1 June 1907, *Letters 3*, p. 446.

who is engaged in an active assault on a despised world.²⁵¹ The satire of the novel, therefore, lies in the ironic distance between the maelstrom of the cruel, the violent and the irrational and the narrator's civilised voice supposedly signifying sanity, morality and reason. Terry Eagleton, in *Criticism and Ideology*, extends this to Conrad's entire oeuvre:

Conrad's positive values, incarnate above all in the virile solidarity of the ship's crew, are the reactionary Carlylean imperatives of work, duty, fidelity and stoical submission.²⁵²

Earlier I referred to *The Secret Agent* as a novel about "lying". We can extend the implications of this argument by saying that the novel is about *language* as a whole.

Daniel Schwarz refers to the narrator in this respect:

Conrad creates a narrator who despises the devaluation of language in contemporary life. The narrator's verbal behaviour is distinguished from that of the rest of the characters. The stylised syntax, the puns, the proleptic and echoing phrases, the verbal leitmotifs, and the image clusters combine to form an alternative to the language of London.²⁵³

In *Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness* (1979) Jeremy Hawthorn stresses the importance of language being detached from meaning in *The Secret Agent*. This is something that occurs in everyday life: in terms of food, meat-eaters generally speak in terms of beef not cow, pork not pig, lamb not sheep, and so on: the connection is avoided. Hawthorn likens Verloc to a carnivorous man who is suddenly told to kill an animal for dinner. Again we may be reminded of Mr Vladimir's desire not for a sign or a word but a *fact*. In *The Secret Agent* words are a *commodity* and, with the exception of the narrator (and perhaps Stevie) they are used without thought. The text emphasises the importance of having an *idea* behind one's language. In the "Author's Note" Conrad condemns the actual bomb attempt on the Greenwich Observatory, writing that "a man (was) blown to bits for nothing even

²⁵¹ See Schwarz, p. 157.

²⁵² Eagleton, Terry, *Criticism and Ideology*, Verso: London, 1976, p. 134.

²⁵³ Schwarz, p. 160.

remotely resembling an idea, anarchistic or other” (39). The thoughtlessness of the figures in *The Secret Agent* is sometimes manifested on the terms of, for example, Verloc’s obscene expediency; and at other times it is their habitual thoughtlessness such as when Ossipon sees Verloc dead:

The curtain over the panes being drawn back a little he, by a very natural impulse, looked in, just as he made ready to turn the handle. He looked in without a thought, without intention, without curiosity of any sort. He looked in because he could not help looking in. (250)

At some points in the text the narrative parodies the style of newspaper journalism, especially when a human’s significance is summarised in a sequence of appositions. The opening of Chapter XII, for example, presents Winnie — and summarises Stevie — thus:

Winnie Verloc, the widow of Mr Verloc, the sister of the late faithful Stevie (blown to fragments in a state of innocence and in the conviction of being engaged in a humanitarian enterprise)... (236)

Here are two descriptions of Ossipon; first from Chapter III and then Chapter XII:

Comrade Alexander Ossipon — nicknamed the Doctor, ex-medical student without a degree; afterwards wandering lecturer to working men’s associations upon the socialistic aspects of hygiene; author of a popular quasi-medical study (in the form of a cheap pamphlet seized promptly by the police) entitled “The Corroding Vices of the Middle Classes”; special delegate of the more or less mysterious Red Committee, together with Karl Yundt and Michaelis for the work of literary propaganda — turned... (77)

Alexander Ossipon, anarchist, nicknamed the Doctor, author of a medical (and improper) pamphlet, late lecturer on the social aspects of hygiene to workingmen’s clubs, was free... (259)

With the acceleration of the plot, so does the appositional description become more condensed, and it also becomes more blatantly (in other words, less ironically) mocking. Ossipon becomes, quite simply, an “anarchist”; the “study” becomes an

untitled “improper” pamphlet; the “working men’s associations” (by implication educational) become “workingmen’s clubs” (which implies entertainment), and so on. Both digressions provide loosely the same information, and yet they are so different: they show how journalistic language freely modifies facts. These techniques assist in the satirical dimension to the novel and are an example of the way in which Conrad modifies the narrative strategy as the plot proceeds. This occurs not simply to heighten what we might call contempt, but to heighten humane values too: Jakob Lothe argues that as Verloc comes nearer to confronting his wife, “the authorial narrator’s irony is modified by the seriousness and suffering of the human drama he is about to describe”.²⁵⁴

Similarly, expressions from newspapers permeate the text. Ossipon reads the cold, factual newspaper report of the bomb to the Professor in Chapter IV, omitting “mere newspaper gup” (95); Winnie remembers one of the details of executions that newspapers give, written with “affection” at the end of a report: “The drop given was fourteen feet” (238); Ossipon is haunted by the newspaper phrase on the death of Winnie: “An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair.” (266)

Newspapers are constructed out of prefabricated phrases. When there is an act of terrorism we can predict what the headlines will be: “Every newspaper has ready-made phrases to explain such manifestations away.” (66) Obituaries are written in advance. Hence meaning is turned into a commodity, all significance and humanity of the event is obliterated. The dehumanised language of journalism places the despair within society at a distance: it is a “mystery”. In *The Secret Agent* society exists by blindness, by ignoring the horror and madness of the people within it. The most blatant attack on newspapers can be found in the final paragraph of Chapter IV:

In front of the great door way a dismal row of newspaper sellers standing clear of the pavement dealt out their wares from the gutter. It was a raw, gloomy day of the early spring; and the grimy sky, the mud of the streets, the rags of the dirty men, harmonised excellently with the eruption of the damp, rubbishy

²⁵⁴ Lothe, Jakob, *Conrad's Narrative Method*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1989, p. 244.

sheets of paper soiled with printers' ink. The posters, maculated with filth, garnished like tapestry the sweep of the curbstone. The trade in afternoon papers was brisk, yet, in comparison with the swift, constant march of foot traffic, the effect was of indifference, of a disregarded distribution. (101)

We should note how, in the above passage, the sky is “grimy” as though soiled like inky fingers; the newspapers — which are not even graced with that word — seem to have “erupted”, a word which implies a subterranean or even physiologically unhealthy source (like a skin infection). Even the slanders in the papers are not worthy of being described as language: they have merely “soiled” rubbishy paper. The posters are “maculated”: an unusual form of the word, we are more used to the opposite, “immaculate”. This word causes an irony in the reader's reception because of its disjointing, unfamiliar effect.

Linked to journalism — or perhaps more exactly publishing — is the presence of pornography. We could in fact argue that the disgust at thoughtlessness in *The Secret Agent* is parallel with a disgust at lust. In the Verloc's shop cheap pornography mingles with anarchistic tracts: two very different forms of discourse are lumped together into some kind of lascivious journalism. We need only think of Ossipon's pamphlet — “The Corroding Vices of the Middle Classes” — which sounds partly socialistic, partly titillating. The sexuality in the novel is violent:

“Come here”, he said in a peculiar tone, which might have been the tone of brutality, but, was intimately known to Mrs Verloc as the note of wooing. (234)

This occurs after Verloc admits to being involved in Stevie's death. Later, there is something vulture-like in Ossipon's expedience with the desperate Winnie, taking advantage of Verloc's death.

Jeremy Hawthorn argues that, “implied references to contraception abound in the novel”:²⁵⁵ Ossipon's “hygiene” lectures, goods in the Verloc shop, and so on. He goes on to refer to an article by Christine W. Sizemore in which great emphasis

²⁵⁵ Hawthorn, Jeremy *Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment*, Edward Arnold: London, 1990, p. 76.

is placed on the innumerable boxes in *The Secret Agent*, shop boxes, the cash box, the cabs, and so on.²⁵⁶ I would take this further and draw attention to the references to, and use of, shapes and patterns in the novel. There is of course Stevie's "mad art", his whirling circles, which we looked at earlier. Jakob Lothe likens Stevie's art to Kandinsky's first abstract water-colour produced in 1910.²⁵⁷ Terry Eagleton — in *Against the Grain* (1986) — takes things considerably further, writing on the profound significance of Stevie's patterns thus:

The silence of Stevie, symbolized in his scribbled, spiralling circles of infinity, is "mystical" because it gestures towards that which can be shown but not stated, a condition of which art itself is for Conrad the prototype. It is in this sense that Stevie, the "mad artist", defines the status of the text of *The Secret Agent* as a whole. The novel is unable to speak of its contradictions; it is, rather, precisely its contradictions which speak. Stevie's silence is "mystical" in a sense appropriate to Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Language, for the *Tractatus*, can do no more than "show" the structure of the world in the structure of its own world-picturing propositions; it cannot speak of reality directly, but can only intimate obliquely, by allowing itself to be cancelled out, the reality which transcends it.²⁵⁸

A particularly significant shape in *The Secret Agent* is the triangle, especially in connection with Verloc. In Chapter II we read that:

This was then the famous and trusty secret agent, so secret that he was never designated otherwise but by the symbol Δ in the late Baron Stott-Wartenheim's official, semiofficial, and confidential correspondence; the celebrated agent Δ ... (63)

Although Verloc's symbol is of course the Greek letter "delta", its characteristic shape is recurrent. The shop is located on Brett Street:

It branched off, narrow, from the side of an open triangular space surrounded by dark and mysterious houses, temples of petty commerce... (152)

²⁵⁶ See *ibid.*

²⁵⁷ Lothe, p. 260.

²⁵⁸ Eagleton, Terry, *Against the Grain: Selected Essays* Verso: London, 1986, p. 27.

In Chapter IX Verloc eats with “the skirts of his heavy overcoat hanging in a triangle on each side of the chair” (176). This cruelly echoes the fragment of Stevie’s coat:

It was a narrow strip of velvet with a larger triangular piece of dark blue cloth hanging from it. (108)

It is as though Verloc has taken the infinite circles of Stevie and transformed them into the finite dimensions of a triangle. Stevie — a figure whose symbolic pattern represents that which is “beyond language” — becomes a nameable object, a “closed” signifier, a piece of evidence with Verloc’s unmistakable seal. In contrast to the swirl of Stevie and Verloc’s triangles, there is the Assistant Commissioner who feels like “a square peg forced into a round hole” (126)!

Finally, to return to more direct discourse, there are significant patterns in the expressions used, in addition to the intricate and ingenious narrative structure. I have already referred to Sir Ethelred’s “He would, would he?”; a more interesting instance can be found in the description of Verloc I cited earlier:

He was in a manner devoted to it [idleness] with a sort of inert fanaticism, or perhaps rather with a fanatical inertness. (52)

These structures are self-contained — or even self-constrained — and, with their inverse repetition, cannot break away from themselves. They are self-parasitic and this emphasises a nullity and futility, not merely in content but also, discreetly, in form. We could even argue that in Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* we witness an agonised ouroboros. In this light it is interesting to read Conrad’s description of writing *The Secret Agent*:

I manage to write something nearly every day but it is like a caged squirrel running in his wheel — tired out in the evening and no progress made.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁹ To the Galsworthys, 14 August 1906, *Letters 3*, pp. 349-50.

2.2 *The Secret Agent*: the play

Commentary on and Analysis of Act I

Act I of *The Secret Agent* is entitled “THE PRIVATE LIFE” and all the action occurs in the parlour “*behind Mr. Verloc’s shop*” (73).²⁶⁰ The “private life” the audience witnesses is initially that of Winnie Verloc, her brother and her mother. We subsequently see the life of Adolf Verloc, and his dealings with not only his wife and in-laws but also, as the eponymous character, with Mr Vladimir from the Embassy and his political acquaintances.

The first act opens with an imminent departure: an old woman “*sits on the couch, bonnet on, outdoor things by her side*” (73). Her two children — Winnie, “*about thirty*”, and Stevie, “*about seventeen*”, — are also present. The topic of conversation, especially between the two women, establishes the current situation and details of the familial past. Particularly interesting are the references to absent men: Winnie’s deceased father; the latter’s old friends, especially the markedly changed “Mr. Geoffrey” (75); and, above all, “Mr. Verloc”. The Mother (she is never named and thus remains curiously more anonymous than the casually mentioned Mr. Geoffrey) is overcome with emotion, perpetually on the brink of tears, if not actually sobbing. This maternal figure attempts to be optimistic and positive about everyone: Stevie is a “good boy” (84); Winnie is a “good daughter” (84); Verloc is “too good to us all” (74); her husband was “a very fine man” (75). The Mother avoids all conflict as much as possible, and is thus very distressed when Stevie asks, “You aren’t going away because Mr. Verloc isn’t good?” (74) She is similarly upset by Winnie’s flagrant attack on her dead father, but does not dare to argue back:

WINNIE. He was no end of a brute... dad was.

MOTHER. Oh Winnie! How can you? You shouldn’t... Not of the dead! (75)

²⁶⁰ All page references to the play relate to the version contained in Conrad, Joseph, *Three Plays*, Methuen: London, 1934.

The Mother is raising a “moral” point here — one should not speak ill of the dead — more than condemning her daughter. Shortly afterwards, another assault from Winnie provokes an expression of personal suffering and grief from the Mother, as though her daughter’s spleen is her own interior torment:

WINNIE. ... I tell you straight I was glad when dad died. (MOTHER *slight groan.*) (76)

The Mother is moving into an almshouse, “Throwing (herself...) on a charity” (74), as her daughter expresses it. The old woman is conscious of her age and does not want to be any trouble to her forthright daughter and husband. Her departure would seem to be — at least on the surface — an act of selflessness. She is very concerned about Stevie:

MOTHER (*distressed*). ...I am an old woman. I can’t think of myself dead and of poor Stevie thrown on the streets, perhaps in a workhouse infirmary. (77)

The Mother’s fears, her distress, and her sense of mortality all serve to explode her strained positive outlook. These attributes give the play an ominous foreboding which is further emphasised by her daughter’s stubborn insensitivity and her son who is “vacant” (73) and “weak-minded” (76).

The Mother is silent from the moment Mr Verloc enters the stage, and she leaves the play never to return. The arrival of Verloc allows a transformation of the play. In the short space of time in which Winnie and her Mother depart we are shown the awe and adoration Stevie has for his brother-in-law:

STEVIE *lingers to gaze reverently at MR. VERLOC, who takes his hat off his head and holds it at arm’s length. STEVIE rushes from behind to seize it and deposit it respectfully on the sideboard.* (85)

Stevie reveals himself here to be the faithful servant of his master Verloc, but more than that, there is something of the circus in this little hat routine. Stevie is also a

kind of pet, and this is ironically emphasised at the start of Verloc's monologue when Stevie has left the stage:

MR. VERLOC. Dog's life. (...) But I won't be a dog to anybody. (85)

Nevertheless, Verloc does behave like some kind of "dog" with the entrance of another figure essential for the exposition of the play. Mr Vladimir enters the stage and this provokes a "*deferential*" (85) attitude from Verloc, who ends his first sentence to the visitor with "sir" (85). Mr Vladimir is the master in the subsequent confrontation, as what initially may seem to be a request for hospitality reveals:

MR. VLAD. (...) Why don't you offer me a chair?

MR. VERLOC. You're at home here.

MR. VLAD. Ah, yes. Our Secret Service money keeps this establishment. (...) Well, being at home, I will sit down. (*Pulls out chair from under table. Lays down hat and umbrella. Throws himself back in chair.*) For the same reason I won't ask you to sit down. (86)

This demonstrates that Vladimir is even master of the location as well as possessing the greater power. Throughout their subsequent dialogue Verloc remains standing, and Vladimir — despite reclining back in a chair — never removes his gloves (the stage direction that Vladimir "*raises a gloved hand*" (88) draws our attention to it). The gloves signify Vladimir's intimidation of Verloc. In stark contrast, the most significant use Verloc makes of his hands in this encounter is when he "*takes handkerchief out of pocket and wipes his brow.*" (91) Vladimir interrogates Verloc — and frequently interrupts him — with an open contempt for the agent's role and life and with specific remarks about his appearance ("what do you mean by letting yourself get fat like this?" (87)). A good example to illustrate the relationship between the men is to be found after Verloc speaks in a "*great oratorical bass*" (89):

MR. VLAD. (...) Don't bellow at me like this. What the devil do you mean?

MR. VERLOC (*proud humility*). I beg your pardon. My voice was famous years ago. I was always put up to speak at the critical moment. (...)

MR. VLAD. (*touches his bow necktie*). I dare say you have all the revolutionary jargon by heart. Vox et— You have never studied Latin, I suppose.

MR. VERLOC (*growl*). No. You didn't expect me to know it, perhaps? I belong to the million. Who knows Latin? Only a few hundred imbeciles who aren't fit to take care of themselves.

MR. VLAD. Aha, you dare be impudent. (*Gets up, threateningly.*) You dare!
(89)

Vladimir is here attacking Verloc's voice, partly because it is bellowing, and partly because of its "impudent" rhetoric. Vladimir is attacking Verloc's education through the taunts about Latin and also with the very discreet gesture of touching his bow tie, distancing himself from revolutionary jargon. Although Vladimir is clearly the master of the situation, Verloc is not utterly servile, or at least he superficially resists being a "dog". However, Verloc's resistance is reflected solely in his rhetoric. Vladimir is unperturbed, partly because his is the ultimate power:

MR. VERLOC (*...Suppressed fury*). I think all you people should be blown up.

MR. VLAD. (*negligent; detached*). I dare say. And where would you be then?
(95)

There is, in fact, little difference between Verloc's occasional bursts of rhetoric and the following stage direction: "MR. VERLOC *inflates his cheeks and lets the air escape*" (91).

As well as being interesting in terms of power-play, the scene between Verloc and Vladimir helps to establish further the former's identity to the audience: we learn about his past, that he is in fact the title character, what his latest assignment is to be and, significantly, why the mission is to be undertaken. The fact that we realise that Verloc is the eponymous character is ironic because to the audience it is no longer a "secret" who the "agent" is; and perhaps this, as it were, "leak of classified information" does, in a way, portend the grotesque and tragic farce that the operation turns out to be.

Vladimir departs before the return of Winnie and Stevie. The encounter between Winnie and her husband alone elucidates aspects of their marriage (which we shall examine later) but is a short interval before the next major aspect of "THE

PRIVATE LIFE” is displayed. Before the entrance of Verloc’s activist associates, Winnie reveals her characteristic hardness: when it is confirmed that Karl Yundt is coming, she announces: “Nasty old man. It’s time he was dead.” (98) Her opinion of Michaelis, however, is different: “He is a dear.” (98) Her view of Ossipon is unvoiced but suggestive: when Verloc mentions him — and he is, we should notice, “*venomous*” (99) in his delivery — Winnie “*turns her back*” (99) to her husband.

Once the guests have arrived, Verloc is far from welcoming in the way he positions himself as well as what he says: “(*stands out of the way*). I hope you fellows haven’t come to talk half the night here.” (101) He subsequently becomes even more anxious and fidgety:

MICH. (...) We seem to be in the way to-night, Verloc.

MR. VERLOC (*tramping behind their backs*). You make me mad. (101)

During the conversation of the activists, the beliefs that each uphold and represent are contained not solely in the dialogue, but also in the stage directions:

YUNDT (...). You can almost hear the scrunching of the bones.

STEVIE (*slight shrill shriek. Covers eyes with both arms. Perfectly still. VERLOC stops, MICHAELIS looks round, YUNDT unmoved, OSSIPON lounges over. A silence while OSSIPON stands over STEVIE, picks up the sheet and looks at it. Arms fall down. Low anguish*). No, no! It can’t be. Must stop it.

OSSIPON. Very good, very characteristic, absolutely typical. (...) Typical of a certain form of degeneracy. (102)

While Verloc is perhaps simply shocked, the posture of Michaelis implies a certain interest, if not concern; Yundt is unmoved, physically and emotionally; Ossipon ambles over and resembles a cold scientist regarding Stevie as a specimen. Ossipon’s words sound like a scientific report and diagnosis. Interestingly, we are presented with a repeat situation shortly afterwards when Yundt returns to his analogy for oppression:

YUNDT (...). Can’t you smell and hear from here the thick hide of the people burn and sizzle?

STEVIE (...). It must be stopped! (...) Stop it! (*Distracted.*) (YUNDT *unmoved, rigid.* MICHAELIS *shifts position in chair, looks benevolent.* OSSIPON *superior, throws drawing negligently on table.*)

MR. VERLOC (*grumpy*). I don't know what my wife's thinking of to let him come down. (103)

Yundt's extremism is further emphasised; Michaelis now looks openly "benevolent"; and to Ossipon, the specimen of degeneracy is no longer interesting, merely tiresome. Verloc's line is comical in the way it denotes embarrassment and provides bathos: Stevie's universal concern and horror is undercut by his brother-in-law's apology. Furthermore, Stevie is once more Verloc's dog in the solution his master finds to the embarrassing situation:

MR. VERLOC (*to STEVIE*). Stop that fuss. (*Heavily.*) Go over there into that corner. (103)

After the activists have departed, Stevie's rage and terror return:

STEVIE (*suddenly*). Eating human flesh. That can't be allowed, can't, can't. (*Dances with rage. WINNIE looks at him steadily, helpless.*)

MR. VERLOC (*behind his wife*). Here's a circus for you. (106)

Stevie's "dance" and Verloc's remark emphasises the circus/comic nature of the relationship between the two male characters: the "slight" (73) boy and the "bulky man" (84) are a grotesque double-act. Despite the proclaimed love between Stevie and his sister, Winnie is "helpless" during her brother's enraged dance, and it is Verloc who possesses the ultimate power. Verloc informs Stevie that he will punish the "scoundrels":

MR. VERLOC (...). You go quietly to bed, young fellow. I will see to it.

STEVIE (*sudden awe*). What? You? You yourself, Mr. Verloc?

MR. VERLOC (*another step forward*). I tell you I will see to it! Now you go to bed.

STEVIE (*profoundly reverent, after the first astonishment*). I am going this minute, Mr. Verloc. (*Exulting.*) As long as they are punished. Every bad man. All over the world.

(At foot of stairs, already cheered up, blows kiss to his sister. Exit.) (107)

Verloc exercises his power to get Stevie to bed. But what might seem an idle promise to change the world is significant and ironic. Indeed, this small exchange may well be where the tragic element to the play ends, for it is the last time the audience sees Stevie.

The role of Stevie is remarkably challenging: he only appears in Act I, but almost every line of his speeches can be interpreted as ironically or morally significant (in contrast to the clichés, empty rhetoric and lies of the other characters). At the beginning of the play Stevie is described in the stage directions as “*about seventeen, slight, fair, pale, nervous, at times a little vacant*” (73). He is not *explicitly* retarded: this is to come from what others make of him. We have already seen Ossipon’s view of Stevie as a “degenerate”, but to give some other examples:

MOTHER. Poor dad was so disappointed in his boy. It made him feel so small to have a weak-minded son. (76)

WINNIE. He is perhaps a little weak-minded, but he is not an idiot.

MR. VERLOC (*absent-minded*). Isn’t he? — Well, perhaps he isn’t. (97)

Stevie is a victim of what other people make him — his mother, his father, his sister, Verloc, Ossipon — and we should never forget that he was only ever described as “*a little vacant*” by the dramatist, which is a far cry from degeneracy or weak-mindedness. If we refer to the last quote, even a “weak” mind has more presence than Verloc’s “absent” mind!

As we have seen, the audience witnesses Verloc’s abuse of power over Stevie (whether like circus act or man and dog), and this is ironically (when we consider how Stevie will die) stressed by Winnie when she declares to her husband that “this boy would go through fire and water for you” (107). Winnie has an emotional attachment to her brother, and this is most tenderly demonstrated in Stevie’s final blown kiss and in the stage direction where “*STEVIE attempts to take her face in his hands. She lets him.*” (96). In contrast, for example, Ossipon is

detached and analytical. However, even the audience is forced to be analytical in its observation of Stevie. His prank exemplifies this:

(During the last few replicas STEVIE's legs are visible at the bottom of the stairs.)

STEVIE *(jumps straight into the room)*. Hoo!

MOTHER *(slight scream)*. Stevie! You did give me a turn!

WINNIE *(affected severity)*. Were you trying to frighten us, Steve?

STEVIE *(exultant)*. Yes, and I did it too. (81)

Although his mother and sister may have been shocked by his joke, the audience is not surprised because it saw Stevie prepare himself for the jump. The audience is forced to take an analytical perspective of Stevie's behaviour and of the way in which the other characters react to sudden shock. In this way, this brief episode acts as an analogy of the bomb blast which kills Stevie. Later, the audience will watch the shock of Winnie after her brother's death in an explosion which is not visible or audible: the spectators are given a similarly analytical role in the work. This may release the audience from an over-emotional attachment to the characters (Stevie's last appearance is poignant in *hindsight* — his silent, happy kiss blown across the stage to Winnie — while at the time it appears as an innocuous "bed-time"). But if the audience is free from a potentially unbearable empathy with the figures on the stage, it is perhaps forced to bear the similarly difficult burden of over-detachment: the audience witnesses a depiction of some of the lowest depths of society (terrorist activity and corruption in the parlour of a shop which sells pornography). They watch the "Private Life" of their society, and are forced to watch as coldly, analytically and perhaps as hypocritically as Ossipon.

As I stressed earlier, the role of Stevie is remarkably challenging: if an actor overemphasised his "vacancy" this would partly play into the hands of Ossipon — and others — and give credibility to the words they use to describe him. It could also be a disturbing spectacle for the audience: there are not many mentally handicapped characters in drama (not to be confused with figures who go insane). This may, incidentally, remind us of John Galsworthy's comment on Conrad's use

of a man with no hands in *Laughing Anne* (Conrad's adaptation of his own short story "Because of the Dollars") and how what is acceptable in fiction is very different to what can be tolerated on stage. The actor portraying Stevie must therefore be convincing enough in his vacancy of mind and yet still be a forceful enough presence to make a resounding impression in the one act allowed him: indeed, because of Stevie, *The Secret Agent* is perhaps a tragedy in one act. However, we must not overlook the comic potential of Stevie which is apparent in his naiveté and truth-speaking. At one point he turns to the "obese" (100) Michaelis and says "Mr. Michaelis, you are a dear. Winnie says so." (103) There is a delicate humour in his reiteration of Winnie's "feminine" compliment, a humour that would be lost if Stevie were merely imbecilic.

Winnie Verloc is a figure of pivotal significance in the play. In Act I we see her character and traits established, and realise that, to a certain extent, she is stern and narrow-minded. However, particularly interesting is the method in which Winnie's gender and sexuality are utilised. Winnie is the sexual focus of three of the male characters in the first act — Stevie, Verloc and Ossipon — each in a different way. I have already referred to the tenderness between Stevie and his sister revealed when he takes "*her face in his hands*" (96). However, the most complex and dramatically interesting encounter is the following, when Winnie — in her night-gown — calls her brother over:

WINNIE (*tender voice*). Stevie, darling. (...) (*holds him to her breast a moment, then pushes him off*). Stevie, you ought not to have come down.
STEVIE. You never told me not to. But I didn't scream. Only a little. And I love you, Winnie. Say, Winnie, you love me. (*Importunate.*) Say, Winnie.
WINNIE (*not looking at Stevie*). Love you? If I didn't love you I would die. (*Brusque.*) Of course I love you. (105)

There is enormous ambivalence here. Winnie's tenderness — holding Stevie to her breast, saying that she loves him — is counterbalanced with elements of rejection: she pushes him away; she does not look at him and is brusque. It is up to us — and the actor — to decide how to interpret this. On one level it may reveal Winnie's

coldness or perhaps the difficulty she has in manifesting her feelings; but perhaps most obviously it demonstrates that she is forced to cover up an extremely powerful love for her brother.

Although there is not much love between Winnie and her husband, there is lust instead. When they are alone Verloc will suddenly break out of his preoccupations and lumber towards his wife. The first instance of this is when Verloc suggests emigrating:

WINNIE (*startled*). The idea! (*Resolute.*) Then you would have to go by yourself. I couldn't think of it! (MR. VERLOC *looks at his wife as if roused from a dream.*) And you know you couldn't do without me.

MR. VERLOC. No, I couldn't. (*Advances towards WINNIE.*)

WINNIE (*extends her hand*). No, not here. There is a better time for kisses. (98)

It is curious what actually provoked — “*roused*” — Verloc's lust here. Perhaps it merely presented itself, or perhaps it was due to Winnie's remark that he would have to go alone. If the latter is true, it would indicate that Winnie is a sex-object for Verloc, and that is the central reason why Verloc could not do without her. The “better time for kisses” that Winnie promises comes near the end of the act:

WINNIE. Well, well, Adolf, you have done something. (*Submits to MR. VERLOC's arms round her neck, but MR. VERLOC still preoccupied.*) I always told you that this boy would go through fire and water for you. And I must say you deserve it.

MR. VERLOC. Well, then, give me a kiss.

WINNIE (*sullen, coquettish*). Can't you wait the time of getting up the stairs? (*Gives kiss.*) After all these years. (107)

Shortly after this the act ends with Verloc's command from the top of the stairs, regarding the lights: “Put it out.” (108)

Earlier we referred to Winnie's possible attraction to Ossipon when she “*turns her back*” (99) because Verloc mentions him. She also turns her back on Ossipon himself:

OSSIPON (...). (*Lower tone.*) Why do you always turn your back on me, Mrs. Verloc? (*Whispers.*) Winnie!
(*Meantime MR. VERLOC tramps up and down disregarding them completely. Brown study.*)
WINNIE (*detached*). As long as I am the only one to turn her back on you, you needn't mind. (99)

Ossipon's flirting continues, although we soon see his cowardice as well:

OSSIPON (...). Listen! I don't care for anybody on earth...
MR. VERLOC (*tramping up and down*). Damn!
(OSSIPON *obviously frightened...*) (100)

Later, when they are once again alone, Ossipon continues to attempt to charm Winnie:

OSSIPON (*left behind, ...speaks to the invisible WINNIE. Sentimentally*). I stayed behind to say good night to you.
WINNIE (*voice down the stairs, very steady*). You needn't have troubled. I am not that sort of woman. (...)
OSSIPON (*insinuating*). Why don't you come down to fetch (Stevie)?
WINNIE (*voice from above, indignant*). Not likely! In my night-gown.
OSSIPON (*appreciative*). Oh, my word! (104-5)

While Winnie is an object of love to Stevie and physical lust for Verloc, with Ossipon it is a case of playful lust, and it may not surprise the audience that *this* game will become more serious.

Commentary on and Analysis of Act II

In terms of story-time, the events of Act II take place at least a month after the events of Act I: we learn this when Ossipon remarks that he "hadn't seen him (Verloc) for a month" (115). We could, if we so wished, presume that the encounter between Ossipon and Verloc in Act I was their last meeting. While Act I of *The Secret Agent* is entitled "THE PRIVATE LIFE", Act II has no title. The two scenes that make up Act II take us into a more public world, and reflect two contrasting aspects

of it. Scene i is set in “*a small café*” (109) — that is to say the social aspect of the public world — and scene ii is located in the “*Special Crimes Department*” (118), in other words it is part of the administrative, legal system that controls, or at least attempts to cope with, the public world.

In Act I every character who enters the stage (that is, Verloc’s parlour) has integral significance to the life of Verloc if not to the story as a whole. The nearest we get to an “intrusion” — we could even say a “public intrusion” — in Act I is when the “*shop bell rings*” (90), interrupting Verloc and Vladimir’s conversation. The enforced absence of Verloc allows Vladimir to speak his mind and express his opinion of the secret agent — “*Impudent, lazy brute*” (90) — before the shop proprietor returns stating “*I told him I hadn’t got it. It was the quickest way.*” (90) I believe the significance of this episode is that it allows the “public” to make its presence felt and remind the audience — and perhaps even the figures in the play — that there is a world outside the parlour, a world which will in some way be affected by the machinations of this particular “private life”. The bell merely announces the entrance of the public, the male customer remains unseen and unheard. In Act II, sc. i the public is visible: “*Through narrow archway one or two heads of customers in main part can be seen*” (109) as well as the Waiter. Furthermore, a newspaper is present in the first scene — “*OSSIPON enters, folded newspaper in hand*” (109) — and this will fulfil a significant function in the play as a whole.

Act II is characterised by dichotomy and contradiction. Both scenes in the act involve conversations between two people. There is a distinct parallel to be drawn between the two situations which are different aspects of the same public world. Moreover, the parallel we can draw is most significant in terms of satire: scene i concerns activists who ostensibly desire the destruction of society; and scene ii shows us the “law-abiding” and law-enforcing police. There is a satirical parallel in the situation because of the dichotomy between the two pairs. This parallel is lightly ironic, but its satirical significance is perhaps one of the major points of the play. While the men in Act II talk and talk, there is, in both scenes, a third party who is the victim (potential, if not actual) and remains silent. In scene i the “victim” is

the Waiter, a public servant attending to the two activists who are involved in “the destruction of what is!” (118) In scene ii the third party is in the form of a “*ragged piece of dark blue cloth*” (126), a relic of a person killed by a terrorist bomb. An astute member of the audience would realise that the dead person is Stevie as soon as Heat says that “the slight, fair-haired, young chap” (120) was given the “can”. Remembering Winnie’s repeated line in Act I that Stevie “would go through fire and water” (73 and 107) for Verloc, we realise that Stevie’s death is grotesquely the ultimate circus trick, somewhere between the ring of fire and the human cannonball. Both the silent Waiter and the fragments of a bomb victim are objects — victims — of the scornful rhetoric of terrorists and the investigative analysis of policemen.

The stage directions establish the central importance of contradiction at the start of scene i, anticipating — for the *reader* of the text — the contrast between the language and appearance of the Professor:

PROFESSOR *small, frail, sallow, thin whiskers, fair. Large round spectacles. Clothes very ill-fitting, extremely shabby. Deplorable, heavy boots visible under table. Arms far through sleeves, no trace of cuffs. General aspect of inferior physique and poverty contrasted through the scene with speech and demeanour of supreme self-confidence.* (109)

As soon as the dialogue commences further contradictions are revealed:

OSSIPON. Were you out early to-day, Professor?

PROFESSOR. No. In bed till eleven.

OSSIPON. Did you walk all the way from Islington?

PROFESSOR. No. Bus.

OSSIPON (*restless movements, then still*). Have you been sitting here long?

PROFESSOR. About an hour. (109)

The two contradictions followed by the final affirmation fulfil a traditional comic form, where the audience hears a statement, a repetition of this statement, and then finally a new statement. There are other elements of humour to the Professor which we shall look at subsequently.

Contradiction is also apparent in the contrast between the two activists. There is obviously a difference in appearance, but there is also a contrast in attitude: while the anxious Ossipon is “exasperated” (114) and “awed” (115), the Professor is “indifferent” (110), “absolutely unconcerned” (110), and so on. At one point Ossipon succeeds in contradicting himself: “(distracted). Yes. No.” (115) This signifies, just like Verloc’s absent-mindedness in Act I, partly preoccupied thought, but also an inherent emptiness. It is also ironic that a self-proclaimed political activist should be unable to make up his mind.

A more profound contradiction is in terms of the situation. Shortly into the first scene, the Professor reveals that he has a bomb strapped to his body:

I carry it always on me. (*Touches breast of coat.*) In a glass flask. Enough to turn this place into rubble and shambles. (110)

Soon after this statement, the Professor elaborates further:

Nobody in this house could hope to escape. (*Cranes neck.*) I can see a man and a woman in the other room, going up the stairs now. They would vanish into mere shreds. (111)

The first of these statements concerns the Professor himself and what is perhaps a remark on the structure of the building. The second statement is more human — and horrific — in that it stresses the destruction that will affect the people in the “house” (we have already been told what will happen to the building itself). The scene is thus balanced between the public world’s social pleasures — as represented by a café — and complete destruction in “seven seconds” (111). This at once stands on the fine line of a dichotomy, and also gives the scene the potential of dramatic power. This is strengthened by the stage directions: the Professor touching his coat stresses the personal; when he cranes his neck to look at passing strangers he broadens from his personal space and encompasses the social dimension. The dichotomy is further emphasised with the Professor’s toast:

PROFESSOR. (...) (*Stands up, raises glass.*) To the destruction of what is!
(*Finishes beer...*) (118)

It is a grotesque contradiction that the Professor advocates absolute annihilation of society as it is, and yet his words are framed by one of the most conventional of social gestures: he stands and makes a toast. We should note that just before this the Professor stated that “every convention must meet its doom” (117).

Despite the fact that Ossipon says to the Professor, “You don’t keep in touch with anybody” (115), and despite the Professor’s firm and independent will, the bomb-maker is very much aware of the environment. The Professor did, after all, make and give the bomb to Verloc; he introduces the audience to the name of “Inspector Heat” (110), a policeman who will take on a very significant role in the play; he attacks Yundt and the “delegates for revolutionary propaganda” (112); he even went to see Michaelis “the other day” (116). The significant absence from the Professor’s list of acquaintances is Winnie Verloc. When Ossipon asks the Professor if he knew that Verloc was married, the Professor replies, “(*gesture of indifference*). Didn’t know.” (115) Later, the Professor extends this into an attitude of misogyny (intended, at least in part, to satirise wryly Ossipon):

PROFESSOR. (...) Haven’t you got anything better to do? Have you abandoned your collection of women? (*Jovial.*) They are the weak who feed on the strong — what? (117)

Earlier, I argued that there is a comic element to the Professor. The role is indeed challenging, because a fine balance must be drawn between the convincing (his bomb and his will) and its contradictions (irony of appearance). The Professor is inadvertently humorous, but he also possesses a wry wit. For example, here is his description of Michaelis:

He filled a tiny cage of a room, which had a litter of paper on the floor. I noticed a half-eaten raw carrot on the table near him. His breakfast. He lives on a diet of raw carrots and a little milk now. (116)

Ossipon subsequently asks: “How does he look on it?” (116) From the Professor’s description one would perhaps anticipate that he would reply, “Like a gigantic rabbit”, but the Professor undercuts this with his sarcastic one word answer, “Angelic.” (116) [It is interesting to note that later in the act, Inspector Heat describes Michaelis as “a public pet” (125)!] At the end of the scene the Professor is described as “*quietly sarcastic*” (118), and this is an apt description of his humour.

Perhaps the most difficult section for the actor portraying the Professor is contained in the short passage from his description of Michaelis to his words “tomorrow we die” (116-7). In this short section, the actor would be expected to move from humour through mockery and scorn of Michaelis’s utopia; through his own vision, brutality and megalomania; through the interruption of the waiter to his allusion to *Isaiah*.²⁶¹

The second scene of Act II opens with someone looking directly at the audience: “ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER *seated sideways to desk, facing audience.*” (118) This also happened in Act I:

(WINNIE... *doesn't look at her mother, but straight at the audience.*)
WINNIE. Yes, I am lucky... I suppose. (80)

While Winnie is tragic — or at least potentially tragic — the Assistant Commissioner is lightly comic. The latter is supercilious and dreamy while Heat looks at him. Most importantly, the blocking description of these two characters demonstrates power play. As a whole, the scene is more or less entirely an instance of dense plot exposition, relieved with power-play and comic touches.

There are two dominant figures in the scene: the Assistant Commissioner (sitting virtually all the time) and Inspector Heat (perpetually on his feet although, curiously, he “*lays hat, umbrella on chair*” (119) rather than sitting down himself). However, as I mentioned earlier, there is a third party in the form of the relic of

²⁶¹ *Isaiah* 22:13: “And behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen, and killing sheep, eating flesh, and drinking wine: let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die.”

Stevie's coat; and a fourth in the shape of Sir William, the Secretary of State, who never appears but whose presence is distinctly felt.

The Assistant Commissioner is in awe of Sir William while Heat gives veiled attacks on him:

HEAT. I am vexed enough as it is, sir, but gentlemen like Sir William forget that you may watch an anarchist inch by inch for years... (121)

This is a refrain Heat will use again shortly afterwards:

ASSIST. COM. (...) ...this futile outrage, which nevertheless is extremely vexing, extremely annoying, and very serious, from the fact that Sir William has been made angry. He told me that our ideas of efficiency here seemed to consist of making the Secretary of State look a fool. I had a very unpleasant interview. Very unpleasant indeed.

HEAT. That was very unjust, sir. Very unjust to the Department. (*Calm.*) In this case anyhow. (*Discreet smile.*) Gentlemen like Sir William don't quite understand that not everything is fit to be told, and to speak the whole truth, sir, they are so high up that they are not fit to hear everything. What the people at the top never get to know would make a long story. For instance, there are things that don't happen. Just missed happening, I mean. They don't hear of them. I myself have squashed things that if I hadn't held my tongue...

ASSIST. COM. You have all a devoted servant's mistrust of your superiors, I see. (123-4)

This passage reveals Heat's sense of class and departmental loyalty — two almost inextricably linked values — as well as where the Assistant Commissioner's priorities lie (the desire not to upset Sir William, and thus spare himself a headache). But more than that, it is here that the satire of the play is most deeply expressed.

The Assistant Commissioner's last remark implies that Heat also mistrusts him; and, indeed, Heat does display a thinly disguised contempt for his immediate superior. This comes across when Heat refers to how long he has been doing his job. When the Assistant Commissioner wants to know how long Heat has been in contact with "this Embassy spy" (127) — Heat has not yet revealed the name Verloc — Heat answers: "Long before the time of the Assistant Commissioner that was here before you, sir." (127) This riddling answer is the prelude to Heat's long tale, and

also contains the suggestion that while Assistant Commissioners (significantly nameless) come and go, Inspector Heat prevails. The Assistant Commissioner, of course, senses Heat's mistrust as the final words of the act demonstrate: "It's like his damned impudence!" (132)

Heat is a mine of information. This is exemplified when the Assistant Commissioner looks at the ragged piece of Stevie's coat:

ASSIST. COM. (...) What an extraordinary thing! Why should he have gone about labelled like this?

HEAT. I once knew an old gentleman who had his address on all his coats. He was afraid of losing his memory suddenly.

ASSIST. COM. (*who has been looking at the piece of cloth. Reads.*) 32 Brett Street. (126)

Such anecdotes makes him a good policeman, but also something of a "good soldier" *à la* Svejik. Significantly, the Assistant Commissioner chooses to ignore Heat's pearl of wisdom, or at least he does not remark on it.

Heat's lengthy tale recounting his introduction to, and association with, Verloc is humorously given a bathetic ending when he concludes: "He's a lazy dog... like most of them anarchists." (129)

Heat and the Assistant Commissioner give an element of humour to the scene due to their individual aspects and traits. The scene also contains wider humour. For example there is the umbrella placed on the seat; and there is this brief interlude about the weather:

HEAT. (...) A heavy fog was coming on at the time.

ASSIST. COM. We have had these fogs for a month. It's too awful.

HEAT. Yes, sir. Horrible weather.

ASSIST. COM. (*head leaning on hand*). Horrible. (120)

We could argue that these two comic touches are a satire on "Englishness". Furthermore, the scene provides a satire on the police in general. We have, for instance, Heat's notion of "the game" when talking about ordinary criminals:

I will tell you how it was, sir. I was respected. I knew them and they knew me. They played their game and I played my game, and they could not deny that I played it fair. It takes a man to make a good burglar, but any damn fool may turn terrorist from one day to another. That lot don't know what the word "fair" means. (122)

The words "damn fool" are ironic because all the ideologies that are supposed to lie behind terrorist activity might lead one to assume that they are committed intellectuals. However, the audience's experience of observing the "terrorists" prior to this scene may, of course, lead them to agree that they are damn fools. The words "damn fool" are also ironic in that Stevie — on some people's terms a literal "fool" — did briefly, and fatally, "turn terrorist". The speech may also be rather perturbing in that for all Heat's expression of the "fair" play of the criminals in his old investigations, he did work on "murder cases" (121). In this sense, the "game" is obviously more respected and valued by Heat than human life itself. The Assistant Commissioner plays his own kind of game with regards to punishment: his recipe for dealing with employers of secret agents would be to "give them a rap on the knuckles — something that they would remember" (131). One would expect such words to come from a draconian schoolmaster rather than an Assistant Commissioner in the metropolitan police force.

Heat's "game" also extends to work practice: he is "*startled*" (124) when the Assistant Commissioner says to him, "let us regard this conversation as unofficial". He clearly does not get over the shock of this break with form as his last words in the scene indicate: "(...*murmuring viciously the words*). Unofficial, indeed! (*Exit L.*)" Indeed, this final vindication by the lone Heat, and the subsequent judgement from the Assistant Commissioner which we referred to earlier, allow the expression of the true feelings that lie scarcely hidden beneath the professional conduct of both men.

One of the most significant aspects of Act II is in the presence of newspapers. At the beginning of the act Ossipon enters with a "*folded newspaper in hand*" (109) and remarks to the Professor on "the news I have just heard in the street" (109). Finally, Ossipon "*displays paper*" (113) and reads out a report:

Bomb in Greenwich Park. Foggy morning. Explosion felt as far away as Romney Road and Park Place. Enormous hole in the ground. A lot of smashed roots and broken branches mixed up with fragments of a man's body. Blown to bits. H'm, h'm, that's all. The rest merely newspaper gup. (113).

This report provides what the newspaper — mediated through Ossipon — regards as the essential news. Heat's description of the explosion — “a heavy flash of lightning in the fog”, and so on (120) — forms an interesting parallel to this. We should note that in the newspaper report there are more details about the damaged park — a hole in the ground, smashed roots, broken branches — than the dead man.

The Professor launches a number of attacks related to journalism. In connection to newspapers he can mock Michaelis. When Ossipon says that Michaelis “never looks at a paper” the Professor replies “(*quietly sarcastic*) They make him too sad, he says.” (118) He attacks Ossipon and the other delegates for revolutionary propaganda:

The trouble with you is that you can no more think independently than any grocer or journalist of them all, and that you have no character whatever. (112)

He extends this to an attack on the written word as a whole:

The damned social order has not been made with paper and ink, and I don't fancy that a propaganda of paper and ink will ever put an end to it — whatever you may think. (114)

Commentary on and Analysis of Act III

The third act of *The Secret Agent* is, like Act I, given a specific title: “THE UPPER WORLD” (133). This act is the most blatantly satirical (we need only look at stage directions which refer to “*well-bred laughter*” (142)). That is not to say, however, that it is the most *profoundly* satirical; and it is, arguably, far from subtle. The act opens with Lady Mabel being settled onto a couch by a maid. Lady Mabel

remains on her couch throughout the act, and is clearly the central character. She is, it transpires, the patroness of Michaelis. An interesting point of reference here is that the first time we see Michaelis in the play (Act I), he assists Karl Yundt into Verloc's parlour and settles him into a chair, just as Lady Mabel is later settled. In Act I we are introduced to Lady Mabel, although we are not told her name:

MR. VERLOC. ...you have got the devotion of a rich old lady.

MICH. A fine soul. I am trying to blow up in her the fire of universal compassion. The spark is there, a sacred spark in a world of stones. (*Leans forward, spits in the fireplace, sits back placid.*) (101)

This is ironical partly because of the bomb that will later "blow up" in a literal sense; and also because of Michaelis's physical action after his poetical metaphor for lighting a fire within Lady Mabel: he spits into the fireplace, and then sits back placidly. In Act III we see this "rich old lady", and are informed that despite her "white hair" she has "young eyes" (133).

Lady Mabel and the Maid discuss Michaelis. This man is already very familiar to the audience, not so much because of his appearance in Act I, but because of the fact that he is perhaps the most discussed character in the entire play. The Verlocs, Ossipon, the Professor, Heat, the Assistant Commissioner, Lady Mabel and her servant: all these figures talk about Michaelis, with varying opinions. Lady Mabel's aristocratic circle of friends react thus when the ex-convict enters the room:

(MICHAELIS *enters and crosses room to couch. Sudden pause in the voices.*)

1ST WOMAN'S VOICE. Dear Lady Mabel pushes eccentricity too far.

3RD WOMAN'S VOICE. Oh, don't say that. It is so amusing. (134)

This is partly a satirical attack on Lady Mabel and Michaelis, but it is not particularly strong because the aristocratic — and anonymous — Women themselves are such satirical mannequins. Their account of the bomb is succinct and loaded with irony:

2ND WOMAN'S VOICE. (...) Thank God there were no victims.

1ST WOMAN'S VOICE. The horrid anarchist blew himself up apparently. How stupid of him. (133-4)

Even if they would not consider a dead anarchist to be a "victim", the Third Woman is particularly concerned about one potential victim:

3RD WOMAN'S VOICE. (...) Poor Sir George had a narrow escape.

1ST WOMAN'S VOICE. The Astronomer Royal? Was he anywhere near?

3RD WOMAN'S VOICE. I suppose so. Such a charming man. Did you ever hear him lecture? I never went. Astronomy is so difficult, so remote from one's other interests. (134)

The fact that Sir George was not definitely near Greenwich still does not alter his having "a narrow escape". The remark about astronomy being "remote" is also humorous but it is also ironic because of Vladimir's confident claim in Act I that, "Every imbecile does really believe that science matters somehow. It is the modern fetish." (93)

There is much humour to be found in Lady Mabel who could be performed as a lesser kind of Lady Bracknell. This is apparent in statements such as: "They may think what they like. My eccentricity is well known." (145) The relationship between Lady Mabel and Michaelis is also amusing. The latter addresses his patroness as "ma'am" (135), and she asks "why don't you address me as Lady Mabel like my other friends?" (135): we should notice that she would not let the "Lady" drop, even between friends! This is once more referred to when Michaelis uses virtually every possible name for her, with a punch-line after a comic pause:

MICH. (...) I do indeed, ma'am — Mabel — Lady Mabel. (*Pause.*) I get confused in my head a little, sometimes. (136)

The dialogue between these two characters also has a humorous potential when Michaelis is at his most sycophantic and describes his "visions":

MICH. (...) I had a vision of this poor earth blossoming in the glorious firmament like a flower full of sweet honey for every bee. (*Abrupt pause.*) I used to have visions in my cell, you know.

LADY MABEL (*even voice*). I haven't the slightest doubt you had. (136)

The religious implication of "vision" is further emphasised when Michaelis refers to his writing on "Justice and Retribution" (137). There is also the double interpretation we can make of his reference to his "blessed writing" (137). Before his final exit, he refers to Lady Mabel as "a great soul" (138). Shortly afterwards, when the Assistant Commissioner alludes to Michaelis as a "terrorist", albeit not dangerous, Lady Mabel declares: "He is a mere believer. It's the temperament of a saint." (138) She even suggests that some people should "go on (their) knees" (139) to activists like him.

Despite the comic irony of the encounter between Michaelis and Lady Mabel, a more serious element enters their conversation in the form of Stevie. Michaelis describes the powerful moral feelings of the "nice lad" (137), and states that, "When he is older he will know better, he will have more hope." (137) This is perhaps the most damning ridicule of Michaelis's utopian optimism: the "dear lad" (137) is dead, and this is already old news for the audience.

Lady Mabel's guests form a kind of chorus to the more central — and named — figures. I quoted the Women earlier, when they remarked on their hostess's amusing eccentricity. The most interesting use of the group is in the following passage:

LADY MABEL. (...) If that's the stuff revolutionists are made of some of us may well go on our knees to them. (*All faces turn to couch with smiles.*) The poor creature is obviously no longer able to take care of himself. Somebody must look after him.

A MAN (*lean face, grey moustache, approaches couch. Soldierly voice*). He should be recommended to follow a treatment of some sort. Over eighteen stone, and not five foot six. (*With feeling.*) The man is virtually a cripple.

WOMAN'S VOICE. Monstrous.

ANOTHER WOMAN'S VOICE. Most painful to see.

ANOTHER MAN'S VOICE (*mincingly*). Absolutely grotesque.

LADY MABEL. I was anxious to send him to Marienbad this year, but the police objected because of the Prince, who was taking his cure there. As though poor Michaelis could poison the air by breathing in it. (*All faces grave; groups re-form at back of stage.*) (139)

There is something quite eerie in the turning, in unison, of the smiling guests towards the couch; and in their chosen adjectives for Michaelis: “Monstrous” and “grotesque”. Lady Mabel’s reference to poisoned air is enough to force away their smiles and make them reassemble into groups: perhaps they are worried that the air is indeed poisoned.

Lady Mabel’s conversation with the Assistant Commissioner has a comic aspect, just like her conversation with Michaelis. The following passage is set-up like a joke revealing, as it does, the Assistant Commissioner’s personal obsession (if not his *raison d’être*), and subsequently Lady Mabel’s personality:

ASSIST. COM. To begin with, I had to do a very difficult thing.

LADY MABEL. And what was that?

ASSIST. COM. I had to smooth down Sir William. He was furious with the Department.

LADY MABEL. I remember him in his young days. He was an admirable dancer. Better than any one. He seemed to live for it. It was quite extraordinary. (*Musing tones.*) And now he is Secretary of State! Quite an ordinary sort of thing. (139-40)

It is clear that the Assistant Commissioner’s worst nightmare is always an angry Sir William; and that Lady Mabel lives in a world dominated by memory and, more significantly, romance (whether in the form of an ex-convict writing his memoirs or how an unparalleled dancer takes up a job as mundane as Secretary of State).

Although it is impossible (not least socially) that Verloc and Heat could be part of Lady Mabel’s party, they are nevertheless very much present in the Assistant Commissioner’s words. Indeed, the parallel between the two men is increasingly enforced. This is neatly emphasised when Lady Mabel says of Heat, “He’s a great detective” (140), a remark which is echoed later when the Assistant Commissioner says of Verloc that “he is a secret agent” (143). There is a certain equivalence in these two phrases which serves to link Heat and Verloc. Also, the Assistant Commissioner describes Verloc as “a bulky sort of man vaguely resembling Chief

Inspector Heat” (141-2). This line leads on to an amusing account of what the Assistant Commissioner resembles:

ASSIST. COM. (...) He took me at first for an anarchist from the Continent.

LADY MABEL (*shocked*). Harold!

ASSIST. COM. (*resigned voice*). I suppose there must be something in my appearance. (142)

This is humorous — and also satirical — because it shows the audience that even the Assistant Commissioner, who belongs to a more privileged class and was happy to deny individuality to Heat and Verloc (by likening them to each other), can be mistaken for his polar opposite.

The long dialogue between the Assistant Commissioner and Lady Mabel about secret agents (in particular and in general) provides the “moral” of the play: “A secret agent is a being apart. It’s the nearest thing to living under a curse. A secret curse.” (143) But this romantic talk is only a superficial moral. In fact, Act III is a superficial ending to the play as a whole (especially if we refer to the confrontation between the Assistant Commissioner and Mr Vladimir). The mystery is solved.

However, the final act will lead us into further depths by returning us to the Verloc parlour, beyond the seeming simplicity and romance of the world that Act III presents.

Commentary on and Analysis of Act IV

Act IV takes us back to the “THE PRIVATE LIFE” (73), and yet it is not described as such this time. However, as well as seeing the Verloc’s back parlour again (in gas light), we also (in scenes ii and iv) see the famous shop. After the exposition and introduction of characters that has dominated the play so far (and certainly after the triviality of Act III), Act IV has a depth of symbolism and dramatic potential. The mystery — if we can call it such — is solved, and thus the

scene is set for the revelation of Winnie and the confrontation between Winnie and her husband (as well as with Ossipon and Heat).

Scene i presents Winnie "*laying tea*" (148) and the arrival of Verloc. Winnie is the same as ever while Verloc is "*harassed*" (148 and 149), "*shuddering*" (148), "*shivering*" (149), and so on. The commonplace domestic talk, and tasks, of Winnie mix, disturbingly, with Verloc's terror and is thus made ironical:

WINNIE (...) What a wretched day it has been.

MR. VERLOC. (*shuddering. Mutters*). Like a nightmare.

WINNIE (*turns round, a plate in hand*). Have you been getting wet?

MR. VERLOC. Wet? I don't know. No. (*Shudders.*)

WINNIE (*watchful*). I shall have you laid up on my hands. Come to the fire. (148)

While Winnie refers to the weather (we may remind ourselves of Heat and the Assistant Commissioner's discussion of this particular day's weather in Act II, sc. ii), Verloc applies it to everything except the weather. There is another irony when Winnie remarks, "I shall have you laid up on my hands": this is precisely what will happen, not because of a cold, but because Winnie will murder her husband with her own hands. The scene also provides a more profound symbolism. Winnie's seemingly innocent domestic phrase, "Come to the fire", touches on a key symbol of the play. On two occasions Winnie commented that Stevie "would go through fire and water" for Verloc (73 and 107). The wet Verloc symbolises water, while the exploded Stevie is fire. Furthermore, Winnie's phrase can be linked with the sense of nightmare and evil in this act, if not the play as a whole: it is an invitation into hell (other passages help to re-enforce this argument). Another symbol, which will develop as the act progresses, is Winnie's "*dish with beef*" (148).

There is further irony, and anticipation of what is to come, in the following passage:

WINNIE (*turns slowly to cupboard. Deliberate*). Oh, yes, I can trust you. (*Turns away from cupboard, carving-knife and fork in her hand.*) If I hadn't trusted you I wouldn't have married you. (149)

Winnie describes her sense of marital trust while holding the future murder weapon in one hand and — we could even go so far to say — an implement reminiscent of a devil's trident in the other! In these two objects there is the symbol of physical death, and infernal torment as well as, of course, Verloc's tea. There is also something cannibalistic in the way Winnie addresses Verloc with the cutlery in her hands. Soon Verloc talks of emigrating which he describes in this significant way:

MR. VERLOC (...) What I want is to go away for good. Get out altogether — out of this — away to the devil... (150)

In the following interesting passage, Winnie demonstrates if not affection certainly physicality towards her husband:

WINNIE. (...) *(Takes his hand from behind and presses her lips to Mr. Verloc's forehead. MR. VERLOC grips the edges of chair while the kiss lasts...)*
MR. VERLOC. You know how to hold me. (150)

There is a curious dichotomy between action and words here: Verloc's gripping hands would seem to imply that the kiss is excruciatingly uncomfortable for him, despite the superficial affection — or perhaps we should say the superficial lechery — of what he goes on to say. But perhaps this latter point simply demonstrates how easily Verloc can lie.

With the arrival of the Assistant Commissioner, Verloc disappears upstairs. In Winnie's brief conversation with the visitor, there is yet another reminder of how Verloc is trapped:

ASSIST. COM. *(after pause)*. I say, your husband hasn't gone out perhaps.
WINNIE *(surprised)*. He couldn't. This is the only way out. (151)

Verloc becomes increasingly helpless, despite his bravado. Just like in the instance of Winnie's kiss, his physical actions contradict his hollow rhetoric:

WINNIE (...) (*Gives him hat. MR. VERLOC holds it in both hands as if he didn't know what to do with a hat.*) He isn't of that Embassy lot, is he?

MR. VERLOC. Embassy! No! Embassy lot! I would cut their hearts out one after another. But let them look out! I have got a tongue in my head.

WINNIE (*looking at him*). You are not yourself; you are feverish. (152)

Verloc's rhetoric has an ironic undercurrent because of its brutal — even satanic — violence which reminds us of Stevie's horrific demise. Verloc "*plunges hand in breast pocket*" (152) and produces not a human heart but all his bank savings and gives them to his wife. Winnie's action with the money emphasises her physicality — the safest place she can trust is her own body — and also makes her prime bait for Ossipon:

WINNIE, *alone, peeps into pocket-book, looks all round room. Obvious hesitation. A movement towards staircase, a movement towards sideboard. Finally undoes two buttons of her bodice and slips pocket-book there...* (153)

Through the gesture of undoing her bodice, Winnie opens herself out: this represents partly an element of sensuality and vulnerability (in contrast, in Act I, she appears in a night-gown which is "*buttoned at wrist and throat, ample folds, down to the ground*" (105)); but it also indicates that Winnie's rigid character — her not wanting to know — will soon be forced open in revelation. At the end of Act IV, sc. i, Winnie also opens out the realm of the play by leading us into the Verloc shop.

The shop re-introduces certain themes of the play (certainly from Act II) and this serves not only to remind the audience, but to introduce symbolically Winnie to them: "*On counter two or three piles of newspapers, bottles of marking-ink...*" (153) The newspapers reiterate the presence of journalism and the marking-ink reminds us of Stevie's address label. Both points are further developed: a newspaper boy calls out while Winnie sits sewing, just as she must have sewed the label into her brother's coat. Gradually, in the silence, she stops her needlework and her mind drifts away:

(...WINNIE) *Takes three or four stitches. While she is doing this a distant voice outside is heard, high-pitched:*

Greenwich Park outrage. All the details! (WINNIE *sews on. Shrill voice nearer.*) Bomb in Greenwich Park. (*Fainter.*) Latest edition. Bomb... (*Dies out.* WINNIE *lets hands fall on lap and remains lost in thought. The street door opens with clatter of bell.* HEAT *enters.* (153)

The entry of Heat, if well-timed, could startle the audience. After the herald of the newsboy, we realise that Heat will surely be the news bringer. Heat himself does not realise that this is to be his role. Despite being “chucked out of a case” (154), he interrogates Winnie in typical police style, using standard investigative tricks in order to get a description:

HEAT (...) And your brother now, what’s he like — a thick-set, dark chap?
WINNIE (*with fervour*). Oh, no. That must be the thief. Stevie’s slight and fair.
HEAT. Good. (157)

Heat is surprised when he realises that Winnie does not read newspapers and eventually “*throws*” (157) one on the counter along with the remnant of Stevie’s coat. This is all Stevie is to this policeman: a brief newspaper account and a somewhat grisly piece of evidence. The method in which Heat finally gives Winnie all that she needs to discern the truth is astonishingly insensitive, and its impact on her is evident:

HEAT (*snatches cloth out of WINNIE’s hands, saying*) Identification perfect. (*Forcible tone.*) Mrs. Verloc, it strikes me that you may know more of this bomb affair than you yourself are aware of.
WINNIE (*staggers backwards. Staring eyes, still face, changed voice*). (158)

The entry of Verloc interrupts the dialogue and he and Heat — the two similar-looking men finally face to face — go into the parlour, leaving Winnie stunned and “*trembling*” (159). Significantly, she tears the newspaper and the brightening gas light in the parlour throws “*a shadow arm or hat*” (159) against the glazed door. Both these images — the ripping of the newspaper and the report it contains, and the dismembered elements silhouetted by a sudden bright light — may abstractly echo the death of Stevie.

The pace of the play develops as scene iii begins, with the stage directions stressing that “*in the action there is no interval*” (159). The two men are alone together, although the audience is aware that Winnie is listening behind the door. The stage directions emphasise the similarity of Heat and Verloc:

There is a certain similarity in their personal appearance, both big men, clothes the same sort of cut, dark blue overcoats and round hats on. (159)

They are similar not only in terms of their physique and clothes, but also in the way they see the world:

HEAT. Phew! Is that the game you are going to play?

MR. VERLOC. That’s the game. Game for game. Driving a man crazy. That was his game.

HEAT. Whose game?

MR. VERLOC (*venomous*). A pretty, pink-faced gentleman. (*Hits table with fist.*) An embassy swine.

HEAT (*warning*). Don’t make so much noise.

MR. VERLOC (*continuing, shaking fist*). I will do for the lot of them. They will all get fired out.

HEAT (*calm*). Really... I am perfectly aware of who you have been out with just now. (*Wags forefinger.*) Well — don’t trust too much to what you have been promised by that gentleman. He’s as cute as they make them. (159-60)

Here both men speak in terms of the “game”, an idea which Heat expressed in Act II, sc. ii. Both also use the word “gentleman” as an ironic term of contempt.

As well as presenting the parallel between Heat and Verloc — physically and in the attitude towards life and society — the scene also includes symbolic and portentous irony. In the dialogue quoted above Verloc uses the word “fired” reminding us of fire once again, and shortly after this passage he says that he would go with Heat “like a lamb” (160). This latter expression must remind us of “slaughter”, and also Winnie’s roast.

Despite the similarities between the men, Heat is ever the policeman. When he says to Verloc, “I am talking to you privately” (160) — a clear echo of the “unofficial” conversation with the Assistant Commissioner which stunned him so

much in Act II — he adds that he is “Private citizen Heat”: a title that is still some kind of rank.

The two men discuss Stevie — although significantly they do not mention his name — while Winnie is still listening. The best Verloc can say is that “the boy was half an idiot” (161). Just before Heat leaves he describes Stevie’s remains, including the phrase “sticks and bones” (161): a gruesome echo (and even compression) of the children’s rhyme: “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me”. Stevie certainly had his bones broken, but he was also a victim of “words”: of the rhetoric Verloc used to get Stevie to carry the bomb, as well as, after death, in the way in which he is captured in the language of Heat and the newspapers.

The manner in which Winnie enters the stage — like a “*sleep-walker*” (162) — should make it obvious to the audience that she has overheard, and understood. Heat swiftly and obliviously (in that he does not say anything to Winnie) exits, leaving the stage open for the confrontation between Verloc and his wife. Winnie now knows the truth and she consequently “*hides face in hands*” (162), which echoes Stevie taking her face in his hands in Act I (96). She remains in this posture while Verloc utters a combination of clichés and ironic humour:

Well, it can’t be helped. Nothing can be helped now. (*Walks away R., comes back. Earnest. Husky.*) I made myself ill thinking how to break it to you. I sat for hours in the parlour of the “Cheshire Cheese” thinking out the best way. (162)

The cruel and ridiculous, in the circumstances, use of resigned, even comforting, fatalism — “it can’t be helped” — is much the same as declaring “there’s no use crying over spilt milk”. Verloc is still trapped, walking away only to return, and his attempts at being “*earnest*”, no matter how sincere they might be, are undercut by the “Cheshire Cheese”, partly because it is a pub and because it has a rather stupid, prosaic name. Verloc continues to fidget while Winnie remains faceless, and yet signifying so much with her “*visible heave of chest*” (162). Verloc “*bends*”, “*spins*”,

“*steps back*”, “*turns*”, (163) and so on. Winnie eventually reveals her face to accuse Verloc of “murder” (163). Soon afterwards, Verloc is alone on the stage:

What’s a fellow to do? (*Sits down, cuts a piece of meat off, takes a mouthful.*)
(163)

This question is answered by his action: carving off a piece of roasted meat and eating it. We realise that the destruction of Stevie was an almost cannibalistic deed.

The stage directions become more specific in describing the mood to be conveyed by the actors in this scene, reflecting the increasing dramatic tension:

It is to be observed that during the whole scene MR. VERLOC speaks like a man completely absorbed in himself and his own view of the situation. WINNIE must be characterised by a visible rigidity of body. Her voice when coming through the veil is blank in expression. (164)

While Verloc is self-absorbed and self-interested to the point of blindness, Winnie is self-absorbed but to different ends. She has experienced a kind of epiphany which allows her, in her “*close veil*” (164), to become a profound symbol, like, perhaps, the Mary of the pietà. Winnie becomes more objective, repeatedly speaking of her husband as “he” while she still managed to address him as “you” (163) before she put her veil on. While Winnie speaks in a “*despairing tone*” or emits a “*wail*” (165), her foolish husband prattles on trying to justify himself, referring to “the game” (165) or finding parallel situations:

MR. VERLOC (...). (*Earnest*) It’s as much an accident as if he had been run over by a bus while crossing the street.

WINNIE (*voice behind veil, vibrating*). He walked down the street with him.
(165)

In addition to Verloc’s stupid analogy, the two references to the “street” firmly re-emphasise the public world, so important to the play as a whole. Even Verloc’s analogy somehow puts the responsibility of the “accident” into the public’s control.

There is much irony in Verloc’s language, which continues to be as

rhetorical and empty as ever. This is symbolised when one of Verloc's familiar habits (which we witnessed in Act I) is described once more: "*Blows air from cheeks.*" (167) The irony is situational when, for example, Verloc remarks that, "I did try to be a good husband to you" (166); or when he accuses Winnie of playing that "deaf-and-dumb trick" (167), an expression which echoes Heat's question to Winnie about her brother earlier in the act: "He isn't deaf and dumb, is he?" (157) Some of Verloc's statements will be ironical with hindsight: "(If I had seen) that Embassy swine... I would have knifed him in the street." (167) What is more interesting in Verloc's speech is the presence of certain words already used in the act: "You have a devilish way of holding your tongue sometimes" and "Devil only knows what you had in your head." (167) These statements serve to emphasise further the increasing "hellishness" of the act. Verloc seems to precipitate his own death, even ironically and inadvertently provoking Winnie to kill him: "Nothing can touch me at present." (168) But the ultimate provocation is his selfishness; Verloc expresses an interest in Winnie on physical terms: "*(movement to make room on the sofa. Waits a moment. Imperative).* Come here." (168) His sudden lasciviousness, so grotesque in the circumstances, is the last straw.

Act IV, sc. Iv returns to the shop, taking us a step nearer to the public world. After Winnie's panicked entrance from the parlour, she "*closes her eyes to count three, then opens them very wide straight at the audience. Stare of terror*" (168). This is the third specific occasion when a character looks directly at the audience. After staring at the audience Winnie mutters the words, "No! That must never be!" (168) The explanation of this phrase comes later when she adds, "Don't let them hang me." (175) Therefore, her first statement after murdering Verloc is a reflection on the punishment which could be exercised on her for the crime she has just committed. She delivers it directly to the audience: a section of the public and society just like a jury which could objectively describe her as a murderer and pass the appropriate judgement which was, at the time, death by hanging. As well as contributing to the dramatic tension of the work (we should also include here the "*shadow*" on the parlour door and the entrance of Winnie), this serves to emphasise

the public and social dimension of the play, as does the opening sentence of the stage directions for this scene referring to the “*newspaper torn on the floor*” (168).

But to prevent the work becoming too political, Ossipon turns up on the scene. His entrance is somewhat comic in its timing, and his ignorance is displayed with humorous effect and this is emphasised in the stage directions. Ossipon “misses the point” for much of the dialogue, and his hackneyed and vulture-like tactics to coerce Winnie are ludicrous because of his misunderstanding. He searches to find the correct rhetoric (for example, when he speaks of “that silly—I mean that horrible explosion” (172)), and the right point at which to reveal his “love” (170) for Winnie.

Nevertheless, the “hellish” aspect to the act continues at the same time as Ossipon’s foolishness:

WINNIE. (...) Do you know what he (Verloc) was? (*Sinister drop in voice.*) He was a devil!

OSSIPON (*stupidly*). No, I didn’t know. (171)

Ossipon’s “stupid” comment seems to undercut Winnie’s extreme description of Verloc but the tension in the scene increases as we realise that as idiotic as he is, even Ossipon must sooner or later discover Verloc’s fate. Shortly before he sees Verloc (who, at first, he stupidly thinks is “shamming sleep on the sofa” (175)), he asks Winnie, “What the devil are you afraid of?” (174)

After Ossipon discovers the corpse, his motivation must change, but he is still interested in the money:

WINNIE (*vacant. Fixed stare of terror. Points at her breast*). Money? It’s here. I’ll love you. (176)

In Winnie’s gesture and these words, we see a combination of money and sexuality, surrounded by a stare of terror. Money and sex are Ossipon’s main preoccupations, but it is not difficult to interpret them in the framework of a wider critique of society. Winnie also provides some interesting reflections on society — and perhaps

the role of women within it — when she falls to her knees, embraces Ossipon's legs and declares: "I'll slave for you." (176) Shortly afterwards she remarks: "when I struck him I felt as free as air. A free woman." (177) The audience did not witness the actual murder or, in other words, the moment of Winnie's total freedom. We witness Winnie's desperation to be a "slave", such an irony if we recollect her statement that, "We are not down-trodden slaves here" (106) in Act I.

Once Ossipon has recovered from the shock of seeing Verloc's body and the passing policeman, he is able to take control of the situation and plan his escape. He is "*horrified*" (179) at the prospect of the parlour but has enough composure to analyse Winnie: "You resembled each other wonderfully — you and your dead brother." (179) Winnie takes this as a compliment, although the audience probably recalls Ossipon's "scientific" diagnosis, after Lombroso, of Stevie as a "degenerate" in Act I. While Winnie launches into a gush of sentimental emotion — "Stevie, my own darling, my own life" (179) — Ossipon gropes for the key. However, it is significant that Winnie addresses her deceased brother directly because she will soon be abandoned. Ossipon escapes on Winnie's words "blood and dirt" (180), and this seems enough to take Winnie to the threshold not only of the door in pursuit of her saviour, but also to madness:

Oh, Tom, I will live all the days of my life for you. (*Gust of wind inside. WINNIE raises head.*) Tom! Tom! (*Jumps up. Wild.*) Tom! (*Amazed.*) Tom, you must save me! (*Runs to open door to the very threshold. A distant shout and the blowing of a whistle heard. Shriek.*) I won't be hanged. (*Runs back and leans... panting, back to audience. Whole attitude must be expressive of still terror. For a moment the open doorway empty...*) (180)

This taste of freedom again — left alone whilst vowing to slave; the eerie gust of wind; her terror; the symbolic open doorway — sends Winnie insane. For the rest of the play she remains withdrawn, occasionally pleading to be saved from the parlour light and from the gallows. She repeats her phrase "Blood and dirt", and indeed her epiphany (if we may call it such) of freedom and of the universe encapsulated in *The*

Secret Agent, is summed up in her wailing voice: “Nothing! Nothing but blood and dirt!” (184)

In contrast to his last appearance, when he was rather callous, Inspector Heat is the hero of the play’s conclusion (as much as a “hero” is possible in *The Secret Agent*). He represents the return of some form of order and humanism into this rapidly disintegrating — or perhaps self-disclosing — world. Heat orders that the “infernal bell” (181) of the shop be stuffed with paper to prevent it from ringing; he holds Winnie “*in his arms*”, questions her “*very softly*” (181) and declares that he would like to save her “*with all my heart*” (182); he is also “*vexed*” (182) that a crowd might appear. In this way, Heat attempts to bring some tranquillity to this violent and nightmarish place. Ossipon — “*screaming*” and “*dishevelled*” (181) — is a stark contrast to the sympathetic and collected Inspector. Ossipon’s denunciation of Winnie as a “devil” (182) brings the quasi-supernatural dimension to the play to a climax. Winnie has been reduced from Act I’s “angel of the house” — in her long and high-buttoned night-gown speaking “*from above*” (104) and even “*invisible*” (104) for a while like some kind of celestial spirit! — to a “devil”. Winnie’s transformation is caused by her murder, and her taste of “freedom”.

The conclusion of the play is most significantly social or political, in which the symbol of returned order — Heat — confronts the Professor. Despite his indifference to the Verlocs, the Professor comes to the shop: indeed, this does seem contradictory. The Professor states that he is “not interested” (183) in who killed Verloc, and yet he *has* come to their home. The Professor is also rather humorous, sometimes because of his ironic wit: when Winnie lies on the floor and shouts “I won’t be hanged” (183), the Professor remarks that she seems to have “preserved a notion of social justice” (183). But the Professor is also inadvertently amusing, particularly when he provides bathos to his own ideology:

I know no pride — no shame — no God — no master — isn’t that Verloc’s wife? (*Points at WINNIE.*) (183)

Heat accuses the Professor of being no less guilty of Verloc's death than if he had stabbed the man himself. He appropriates Winnie's "Blood and dirt" as the name of the Professor's "game" ("She has named it" (184)), and warns him:

When the time comes you won't find me afraid of the death you are supposed to carry in your pocket. (...) Some day maybe a crowd will tear you to pieces. (183-4)

The Professor denounces the crowd as "vile (...), unconscious, blind" (184), and exits. Outside the public makes itself felt, emitting a "*confused murmur*" (184).

In *The Secret Agent*, neither the explosion nor the murder are witnessed by the audience. Similarly the "public" is off-stage, and is kept distant as the last spoken words of the play make clear: "STERN VOICE (*outside*). Pass along there!" (184) The public is hence kept in ignorance, and is thus a victim almost as much as the two dead people.

2.3 The Dramatic Parameters of *The Secret Agent*: the novel

In November 1906 Conrad wrote to Sidney Colvin:

I haven't been thinking of writing a play tho' Barker has very kindly been encouraging me by promises of performance. As to novels I have written something which certainly is a fiction of a sort but whether it's a novel or not I'll leave to the critics to say.²⁶²

We should remind ourselves that Conrad's play *One Day More* had been staged in June of the previous year. The "fiction of a sort" Conrad refers to is *The Secret Agent*. It is interesting that Conrad — although, of course, exercising his peculiar brand of wry wit — should blur the definition of his novel, especially considering that some thirteen years later he *would* write another play: nothing less than a stage adaptation of *The Secret Agent*. Furthermore, in April 1906, when *The Secret Agent*

²⁶² 21 November 1906, *Letters 3*, p. 381.

was still in embryo — the short story “Verloc” — Conrad emphasises the importance of the “dramatic” at the heart of this work. He writes to Pinker that:

the thing has got to be *kept up as a story* with an ironic intention but a dramatic development.²⁶³

This “intention” clearly did not alter drastically during the transition from prototype tale to published novel, as the dedication that Conrad inscribed in Richard Curle’s copy of *The Secret Agent* makes clear:

As a literary aim the book is an attempt to treat consistently a melodramatic subject ironically.²⁶⁴

The concept of melodrama is useful in reading the novel and still remains obvious to contemporary readers of *The Secret Agent*. The most consistent presentation of “melodrama” is in Chapter XI: the confrontation between Winnie and Adolf Verloc, and his death at her hands.

In *Conrad’s Narrative Technique*, Jakob Lothe frequently uses the word “dramatized” in relation to the story-events in *The Secret Agent*, without examining the implications of this within a narrative framework. To give an example, he quotes the Assistant Commissioner’s remarks to Sir Ethelred: “From a certain point of view we are here in the presence of a domestic drama” (204), and analyses it in the following way:

The dramatic irony resides in the invitation to compare what the Commissioner (as character) says about Verloc with what actually happens to the latter; and it is re-inforced by his ignorance of how accurate the statement is as a formulation of part of the novel’s thematics. But dramatic and authorial irony appear to blend when we think of the Commissioner’s odd mixture of private and official motives: the suggestiveness of his remarks — so accurate that the qualification “From a certain point of view” becomes comic — does

²⁶³ 4 April 1906, *Letters 3*, p. 326.

²⁶⁴ Curle, Richard, *The Last Twelve Years of Joseph Conrad*, p. 100.

not make him immune to a pervasive authorial irony by no means reserved for the anarchists only.²⁶⁵

To analyse this analysis, Lothe's use of the words "character", "comic" and, above all, "dramatic irony" are all-important and are best understood as terms borrowed from dramatic analysis. In this instance the notions of the Commissioner's "character" and the "comic" reside, I believe, in the Commissioner's "voice": the dialogic aspect of the novel, an utterance in direct speech. Moreover, Lothe counts it as an example where "dramatic irony" would seem to be as important as "authorial irony" — in other words, this time the "situation" ("statement" combined with what "actually happens") dominates — which is particularly interesting when we consider that the authorial irony inherent in the narrative tends to dominate critical discussion of *The Secret Agent*. Another example is when Lothe discusses the beginning of Chapter XI where Verloc is about to face Winnie, and he detects a modification in the authorial irony:

It is as though the authorial narrator's irony is modified by the seriousness and suffering of the human drama he is about to describe. As the authorial narrator's irony is reduced, the dramatic ironies, often proleptically coloured, become more frequent.²⁶⁶

Jeremy Hawthorn also recognises the dramatic dimension to *The Secret Agent* when he asserts that this novel contains Conrad's most successful references to melodrama (Hawthorn prefers to see it as an allusion to melodrama rather than a use of it). The main thrust of Hawthorn's work in this area of Conrad, however, is in drawing attention to the "theatricality" of Conrad's *The Rescue* (1920) and the short story "The Return" (from *Tales of Unrest* (1898)) as points of "failure". Among the reasons Hawthorn cites is the contention that:

Conrad is just not used to hearing people like Alvan Hervey ["The Return"] and Travers [*The Rescue*] talking, so that his attempt to give these characters

²⁶⁵ Lothe, Jakob, *Conrad's Narrative Method*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1989, p. 238.

²⁶⁶ *ibid.* p. 244.

speech has to rely upon secondary sources, sources which seem to owe much to melodrama.²⁶⁷

Hawthorn finds support in criticising “The Return” from Conrad himself who wrote to Edward Garnett in October 1897 that the fault of the story was that he “went on creating the moments for the illustration of the idea. (...T)he story is bad art. It is built on the same falsehood as a melodrama.”²⁶⁸ With regards to *The Rescue*, Hawthorn draws attention to a passage which suggests that Conrad himself was very much aware of the “theatricality” of the novel. The narrator states:

This was no stage play; and yet she had caught herself looking at him with bated breath as at a great actor on a darkened stage in some simple and tremendous drama.²⁶⁹

I would like to add that this is interesting for us from a biographical perspective: Conrad completed this novel in 1919, the same year that he began his dramatisations of “Because of the Dollars” and *The Secret Agent*.

The quest for the theatrical in *The Secret Agent* will soon make us realise that it finds its genesis in isolated instances and not in the grand structural scheme of the work. To put it with more lucidity, the “dramatic” essence of *The Secret Agent* is to be found in, as it were, specific vignettes within each chapter, and not in a wider sense because this wider aspect does in fact rely on fragmentation and distortion. To give examples of these vignettes, I would cite, along with the confrontation of the Verlocs, Adolf Verloc and Vladimir; Stevie confronting society; Inspector Heat and the Assistant Commissioner; and the latter’s dealings with the Secretary of State.

Within the narrative accounts of these episodes there are sometimes blatantly dramatic allusions, such as in the following description of Stevie’s failure at his job (a passage I have quoted at greater length, and to different ends, in my analysis of the novel):

²⁶⁷ Hawthorn, Jeremy, *Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment*, p. 85.

²⁶⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁶⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 85.

...he was easily diverted (...) by the comedies of the streets, which he contemplated open mouthed, to the detriment of his employer's interests; or by the dramas of fallen horses, whose pathos and violence induced him sometimes to shriek piercingly in a crowd, which disliked to be disturbed by sounds of distress in its quiet enjoyment of the national spectacle. (49)

We see here three different types of the theatrical: comedy, drama and spectacle. According to the narrator, it would seem that the streets of the city are inherently "comic" while injured horses are "dramatic". However, we must not overlook the fact that both of these statements are quite possibly focalised through Stevie. However, as much as Stevie is a spectator of the comedy and drama of life in a theatrical style, this is extended in the narrative to society as a whole where Stevie becomes a nuisance in the "crowd" — the audience — which quietly enjoys the spectacle. "Spectacle" is a "large-scale and elaborate"²⁷⁰ performance or show. Here, the public is as much the audience to the theatre of life as Stevie. The only difference is that for Stevie the performance is specific and particular (where he experiences severe distress at the "pathos" of a suffering horse, as though it were a leading tragedian), while for the rest of society it is all one big performance. It is important that we realise that in society, according to Chapter I of *The Secret Agent*, the public forms one huge audience. This is, in fact, quite a disturbing prospect. It suggests that everything we see is merely a superficial exhibition — a sham — and that it is impossible to get beneath the surface of the world we see. In other words, it implies that we are never able to behold reality.

In Chapter II, when Vladimir tells Verloc about the type of outrage that is required, various options are discussed. An assassination is still "sensational" (66), but not as much as it used to be; a bomb in a church might be misinterpreted by some "fools" (66) as some kind of religious manifestation. Vladimir goes on to state:

A murderous attempt on a restaurant or a theatre would suffer in the same way from the suggestion of non-political passion; the exasperation of a hungry man, an act of social revenge. (66)

²⁷⁰ *Chambers English Dictionary*, Chambers: Edinburgh and Cambridge, 1988.

Hence a theatre is an obvious target for an act of “social revenge”, but not for a political statement. Furthermore, Vladimir rejects the bombing of the National Gallery and concludes that the best target “is learning — science” (67). But he still refers to the ineffectiveness of attacking a theatre in his celebration of throwing a bomb into “learning”:

the absurd ferocity of such a demonstration will affect them more profoundly than the mangling of a whole street — or theatre — full of their own kind. To that last they can always say: “Oh! it’s mere class hate.” (67)

Vladimir believes that the English theatre is too sensitively reflective of the British class system, and that an attack there would be interpreted as just a spiteful and resentful attack on the “type” of audience, and not the Establishment as a whole. But in another way, it is almost as if an attack on a theatre is inevitably a kind of performance, which is concluded with a succinct critique — “Oh! it’s mere class hate” — as though it were nothing more than a play attempting to make some kind of social statement about British society. In these terms, Vladimir believes that in the theatre reality is stifled out of existence: it is impossible to do anything *for real* in the theatre. But just as it is impossible to *see* reality in Chapter I, perhaps it is impossible to do anything for real at all, even outside of a theatre.

The last half of the final paragraph of Chapter II uses Winnie’s mother as a focaliser and we see her point of view towards her daughter and her daughter’s marriage. We are presented with some retrospective where Winnie’s mother remembers the local butcher’s only son who courted Winnie for a while: “He took her girl to the theatre on several evenings.” (72) But we are informed that after the arrival of,

Mr Verloc, turning up providentially to occupy the first floor front bedroom, there had been no more question of the young butcher. It was clearly providential. (72)

So, it would seem to imply, with the arrival of Verloc evening excursions to the theatre come to an end along with the young butcher. Yet the double reference to providence can be related to more than merely the arrival of Verloc: in a way, “theatre” and “butchery” are destined to return to Winnie in the melodramatic (hence “theatrical”) confrontation with her husband in which she kills him with a carving knife (“butchery”). Although such subtle allusions are easy to overlook, I believe these references to the theatre, butchery and providence serve to suggest ominously the dénouement of the Verloc-story. This is partly in an ironic establishment of the murder as a predestined inevitability and also in an early “theatricalising” of the crime. Winnie is set up as a kind of Grand-Guignol figure (Conrad was only too aware of this aspect of the novel especially, as we shall see later, when he came to dramatise it) in committing the murder, and this characterising of Winnie is intimated as early as the second chapter. As well as an interesting example of the manipulation of character, it also concurs with the predominance of the life-as-theatre concept. Moreover, Winnie is destined to play the role that has been cast for her and this questions the possibility — or existence — of self-determination. This question is further fuelled by Winnie’s confident belief that “No one need be a slave...” (185)

A hostile review of *The Secret Agent* appeared in *Country Life* when the novel was published in 1907:

You can tell a great writer at once, because his analysis is all done, as it were, behind the curtain. He makes his people speak and act, and leaves the reader to judge what is passing in their minds. The course followed by Mr Conrad is exactly the opposite of this. In page after page he discourses fluently about the ideas that were coursing through the brain of a woman who never spoke at all.²⁷¹

This is interesting with regards to theatrical metaphor the reviewer chooses to use. The fact that “Mr Conrad” does not hide behind the “curtain” but prefers to describe the psychological machinations of the characters whilst they are denied a voice does

²⁷¹ *Country Life*, 21 September 1907, quoted in Watt, I. (ed.) *Conrad: The Secret Agent* Macmillan: London, 1973, p. 30.

not necessarily lessen the theatrical dimension to the novel. What is lessened is the *illusion* of reality — mimesis — and the possibility of self-determination. In this way, the theatricality of this novel is like that of puppetry, with the puppet master visible throughout, pulling the strings. This reminds us of Conrad's celebration of marionettes in a letter to Cunninghame Graham:

I love a marionette show. Marionettes are beautiful — especially those of the old kind with wires, thick as my little finger, coming out of the top of the head. Their impassibility in love, in crime, in mirth, in sorrow — is heroic, superhuman, fascinating. Their rigid violence when they fall upon one another to embrace or to fight is simply a joy to behold. I never listen to the text mouthed somewhere out of sight by invisible men who are here to-day and rotten to-morrow. I love the marionettes that are without life, that come so near to being immortal!²⁷²

Leaving aside the obvious associations we can make between this passage and the general question of self-determination in *The Secret Agent*, it is possible to locate a kind of marionette in the novel:

Mr Verloc obeyed woodenly, stony-eyed, and like an automaton whose face had been painted red. And this resemblance to a mechanical figure went so far that he had an automaton's absurd air of being aware of the machinery inside of him. (186)

One of the dominant forms of theatre alluded to in the novel is the music-hall. This is evident in the case of Heat's feelings in his discussion with the Assistant Commissioner in Chapter VI:

He felt at that moment like a tight-rope artist might feel if suddenly, in the middle of the performance, the manager of the Music Hall were to rush out of the proper managerial seclusion and begin to shake the rope. (128)

The fact that the analogy refers to acrobatics would surely take us into the circus more than the music-hall, and this is an area developed further in the stage adaptation. Elsewhere in the novel we would seem to be inside a zoo, such as when

²⁷² 6 December 1897, *Letters I*, Cambridge University Press: 1983, p. 419.

we read that “Stevie prowled round the table like an excited animal in a cage” (83) or when Verloc turns “around the table in the parlour with his usual air of a large animal in a cage”. (216) It is interesting that the same image is used to describe Verloc and Stevie, two characters who are perhaps the most antithetical in the novel. Moreover, we should remind ourselves that Conrad even describes himself as being “caged” in the process of writing the novel. Following on from the image of the zoo, the notion of the circus is important in *Under Western Eyes* (1911) where, for example, the revolutionist Nikita is described in terms that seem to make him resemble a grotesque clown:

The abrupt squeaks of the fat man seemed to proceed from that thing like a balloon he carried under his overcoat. The stolidity of his attitude, the big feet, the lifeless, hanging hands, the enormous bloodless cheek, the thin wisps of hair straggling down the fat nape of the neck, fascinated Razumov into a stare on the verge of horror and laughter.²⁷³

The spectacle of Nikita’s white face, clownish body and squeaking voice turn Razumov into a staring, aghast spectator. Like most members of a circus audience watching the clowns’ performance, Razumov’s response hovers between irrepressible mirth and a deeply disturbing fear.

To return to the passage from *The Secret Agent* where Heat is likened to a tight-rope artist, we can see that it is an expression of Heat’s terror that he might be losing control and this is preceded by the “appearance of astonishment, which up to a certain point was genuine enough”. (128) The Chief Inspector is obviously used to “acting” as part of his job. Furthermore, the narrator informs us that within Heat there is:

some scandalised concern for his art too, since a man must identify himself with something more tangible than his own personality, and establish his pride somewhere, either in his social position, or in the quality of the work he is obliged to do, or simply in the superiority of the idleness he may be fortunate enough to enjoy. (128)

²⁷³ Conrad, Joseph, *Under Western Eyes*, Penguin: Harmondsworth: 1985, p. 260.

One's "art" is in a sense like acting since it can be a liberation from one's own personality, thus allowing people to be, as it were, not "themselves" but "what they are" (in the terms, for example, of their job-title) or "what they do" (their professional function or economic role). However, soon afterwards we read that "We can never cease to be ourselves." (129) But perhaps the problem in *The Secret Agent* is in actually managing to be oneself in the first place: as much as Winnie is destined to murder her husband she is also simply playing her role. Personality and the psychological reality of characters in *The Secret Agent* may be like "meaning" as expressed in what has been made probably the most famous Conrad dictum:

the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.²⁷⁴

Surely if Winnie was "being herself" when she murdered she would satisfy Ossipon's analysis of her as "the sister of the degenerate — a degenerate herself of a murdering type" (254) and could thus be held as living proof of Lombroso's pseudo-science. We must, in fact, accept that her environment and situation determine her actions and thus force her into a cast role rather than believe that the innate personality of Winnie determines the crime.

2.4 Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*: a comparison of the novel and the play

I hope that the two sections of close analysis of the novel and the play have highlighted the merits of each piece within the context of their own genres. I also hope that the section on dramatic parameters has helped explain the inherent dramatic potential that existed before Conrad even considered adaptation. Now I shall attempt to bring together aspects from each section into a comparison of the novel and the adaptation.

²⁷⁴ From Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness*, in *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether*, Oxford University Press: 1984, p. 48.

In the Appendices I have included “A Systematic Presentation of Aspects of the novel and play” and it is hoped that these are helpful in the comparative analysis of the novel and the adaptation, and from time to time I shall refer to them. I have also included a selection of reviews of the original production of *The Secret Agent*, some of which I shall quote in this section.

Chapter 1 of *The Secret Agent* contains no dialogue and the only instance of direct speech is, as Appendix H shows, when one of Winnie Verloc’s statements is quoted. The function of the first chapter is to establish the location and central characters of the story: London and the Verlocs. As the narrator sums up in the opening line of Chapter 2: “Such was the house, the household, and the business Mr Verloc left behind him on his way westward.” (51)

As Appendix C reveals, a large number of locations are established in the novel ranging from the Verloc’s bedroom to the Houses of Parliament. Some places are specifically described: the Verloc address is 32 Brett Street and Conrad exploits the “topographical mysteries” (53) of London with the confusion over the Chesham Square house numbers. Indeed, this is one of the fascinations of the novel: Conrad’s attempt to disentangle and make sense of urban experience — the paradigm of modern existence — as Woolf and Joyce would attempt later. I say this despite Conrad’s disclaimer in the “Author’s Note”:

I had to fight hard to keep at arm’s length the memories of my solitary and nocturnal walks all over London in my early days, lest they should rush in and overwhelm each page of the story as these emerged one after another from a mood as serious in feeling and thought as any in which I ever wrote a line. (41)

Conrad is referring to his first experiences of London which he recalls as a Dickensian place characterised by “freakishly sombre phantasy”²⁷⁵ described so vividly in his essay “Poland Revisited” (1915). There is a case to argue that these eerie and alienating experiences do indeed come near to overwhelming the novel. Particularly memorable is Conrad’s evocation of the London streets as a peculiar experience in their own

²⁷⁵ Conrad, Joseph, *Notes on Life and Letters*, J. M. Dent: London, 1949, p. 152.

right or as a stage on which he recurrently places his characters: Stevie is described in the streets in Chapter 1; Verloc is in Chapter 2; the Professor in Chapters 5 and 13; the Assistant Commissioner in Chapter 7; Winnie and Ossipon in Chapter 12; and so on.

The play cannot use the forty or so specific locations of the novel and, most critically, cannot — in the theatrical milieu of the time — recreate that “overwhelming” sense of wandering through the streets. As Appendix D demonstrates there are five locations in the play: the Verloc’s parlour; a room in a small café; the Special Crimes Department; Lady Mabel’s drawing room; and the Verloc’s shop. Despite these restrictions on the panorama of locale in the novel, Conrad still attempts to create the concept of the city in his play. In Act II, sc i we see the fragmented presence of anonymous Londoners: “*one or two heads of customers... may be seen*” (109). Furthermore, we read that a “*Mechanical piano, not visible, finishes valse tune.*” (109) This player-piano has a framing function, as its presence is again emphasised at the end of the scene: “*Mechanical piano begins to play.*” (118) In the novel, the instrument is described as an “upright semi-grand piano near the door... [which] executed suddenly all by itself a valse tune with aggressive virtuosity” (88). In my analysis of the novel I argued that the player-piano reflects dehumanisation in the urban environment: people are becoming superfluous in Conrad’s vision of the modern city. However, in the adaptation, by keeping the piano off-stage Conrad may have *re-humanised* it, as the audience may presume that someone is playing it.

Conrad’s attempts to convey the presence of the city are especially sophisticated in the fourth act. Act IV, sc. ii opens with Winnie sewing and then the off-stage presence of the news vendor:

...a distant voice outside is heard, high-pitched:

Greenwich Park Outrage. All the details! (WINNIE sews on. *Shrill voice nearer.*) Bomb in Greenwich Park. (*Fainter.*) Latest edition. Bomb... (*Dies out.* WINNIE lets hands fall on lap and remains lost in thought...) (153)

Winnie is playing the “housewife” by sitting and sewing, but the world of the city and journalism begins to encroach on her private domesticity. In Act IV, sc. iv we see the light of a street lamp casting “*a dim sheen*” (178) into the shop and soon afterwards there is the bull’s-eye light and “*measured footsteps*” (178) of a wandering policeman. These intrusions from the public world into the increasingly nightmarish Verloc house become more pronounced as the play draws to an end: Ossipon flees, leaving the shop door wide open which allows a sharp “*gust of wind inside*” after which there is a “*distant shout and the blowing of a whistle*” (180). The breeze is symbolic of the final intrusion of the public world — a dehumanised London — into this ironically “comfy” English household. Once Ossipon is captured we hear him “*screaming in the street*” (181). Near the end of the play there is the following dialogue:

WINNIE (*sudden cry*). Blood and dirt.

HEAT (*pointing finger at PROFESSOR*). *She has named it.*

CONSTABLE (*at the door*). A tidy lot has collected there already, sir.

HEAT (*to PROFESSOR*). Some day maybe a crowd may tear you to pieces.

WINNIE (*a wail*). Nothing! Nothing but blood and dirt!

PROFESSOR. Oh, yes. The vile crowd. The countless multitude, unconscious, blind... Well — let them!

(CONSTABLE *opens the door a little. Exit PROFESSOR, and CONSTABLE shuts the door. Confused murmur of the crowd in the street.*)

STERN VOICE (*outside*). Pass on... Pass along there!

HEAT (*to CONSTABLE*). Nip out and bring a four-wheeler here as quick as you can.

CONSTABLE. Yes, sir. (*Exit. Murmur of crowd swells and dies.*) (...)

STERN VOICE (*outside*). Pass along there! (184)

The play ends a few moments afterwards. The Constable draws attention to the gathering people and Heat reiterates the notion and presence of the crowd. It is significant that Heat warns the Professor that the crowd may tear him “to pieces”. Conrad is constructing a very different sense of the crowd than in the novel: they are more of an audible and potentially violent mob than the amorphous multitude in the novel. Winnie’s distracted, insane exclamations ironically add to this concept. The “dirt” of the street (if we appropriate it thus) had already been emphasised shortly

before when Ossipon was dragged back in and is described as “*muddy*” (181). The Professor is predictable in describing the crowd as a “vile... countless multitude”. What is interesting is the way the stage directions refer to the murmuring of the crowd as “*confused*”, swelling and dying. The “STERN VOICE” is a suitably anonymous emblem of authority attempting to control the crowd of London which is presumably only safe if it is kept moving.

It is interesting that Conrad subtitles two of the Acts: THE PRIVATE LIFE of Act I (73) and THE UPPER WORLD of Act III (133). This marks an attempt to assert location and the resonance of that in the broad context of London. Moreover, through these subtitles, Conrad is striving to emphasise the class stratification of London as he sees it: the nation of shopkeepers in contrast to the powers that be. But as my analysis of the last moments of the play has demonstrated, Conrad also exploits another dichotomy in attempting to bring his vision of London onto the stage: throughout the play there is a dramatic tension between the interior viewed world and the unseen expanses of the city.

Conrad, as a novelist, is perhaps not the greatest writer of dialogue. What is remarkable about his narrative is the way he constructs and takes advantage of context with an idiosyncratic point of view and sense of irony. An excellent example in *The Secret Agent* is Mr Vladimir and Verloc in Chapter 2:

“...No work, no pay.”

Mr Verloc felt a queer sensation of faintness in his stout legs. He stepped back in one pace, and blew his nose loudly.

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: and in the silence Mr Verloc heard against a window-pane the faint buzzing of a fly — his first fly of the year — heralding better than any number of swallows the approach of spring. The useless fussing of that tiny, energetic organism affected unpleasantly this big man threatened in his indolence.

In the pause Mr Vladimir formulated in his mind a series of disparaging remarks concerning Mr Verloc's face and figure. The fellow was unexpectedly vulgar, heavy, and impudently unintelligent. He looked uncommonly like a master plumber come to present his bill. The First Secretary of the Embassy, from his occasional excursions into the field of American

humour, had formed a special notion of that class of mechanic as the embodiment of fraudulent laziness and incompetency. (62-3)

Conrad's narrative is working in a number of ways here. After the end of Vladimir's direct speech, which terminates a substantial section of dialogue, the omniscience of the narrator is demonstrated by the description of the way Verloc's legs feel. This shifts into an external "stage direction" of Verloc blowing his nose. The narrator remains concerned with the external for a moment as the location is described. The repetition of "London" serves to emphasise the context and there is an almost painterly register with the "lukewarm brightness". The visual aspect is further emphasised as it is a moment of "silence". The narrator then focuses on the fly as an emblem of spring but also as an ironic juxtaposition to the "big man". In the next paragraph, the narrator — seemingly as "energetic" as the fly he created — leads us into the mind of Mr Vladimir and the disparaging remarks he has formulated. This is compounded by the reference to the world of "American humour" which is ironic when one considers that the First Secretary is clearly Eastern if not specifically Polish or Russian.²⁷⁶

A stage adaptation could not possibly recreate the material of this short extract which covers not just the anxiety of Verloc and the contempt in Vladimir but London weather and the actions of the first fly of summer. In the play, the equivalent encounter in Act I is somewhat contrived as it is hard to believe that Mr Vladimir would visit Verloc at home. Furthermore, Vladimir's seizing of the moral high ground — "You dare!" (novel 61, play 89) — is diminished with Vladimir in Verloc's shop. In a similar vein, let us look at this extract:

MR. VERLOC (...). Oh, damn! Come out into the shop as quick as you can, sir. I see my wife coming down the street. (*Comes forward, agitated.*) Do go into the shop, sir. You have just time.

MR. VLAD. You are absurd with that wife of yours. Wife! Pah!

MR. VERLOC. Come, sir, you don't want to drive a man into a corner. (*Tries to hustle MR. VLADIMIR towards the door.*) (95-6)

²⁷⁶ For a discussion of the nationality of Mr Vladimir see Sherry, Norman *Conrad's Western World*, Cambridge University Press: 1971, pp. 325-6.

In the novel, the tension of the situation grows to such a point that Verloc is filled with a mixture of contempt, terror and helplessness. It is unthinkable that Verloc would “hustle” Vladimir. Indeed, the whole situation in the play takes on the aspect of a quick exit in a farce, or at least of Joxer Daly making for the door whenever Mrs Boyle approaches in Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* (1924). This problem in *The Secret Agent* is compounded by Vladimir’s comments on Verloc’s wife: in the novel Vladimir ridicules the hypocrisy of a self-confessed anarchist respecting the convention of marriage. The same idea is latent here, but it becomes caught up in the stage business of the exit which diminishes the more profound irony of the concept. Another difficult aspect of this encounter is that it is explained that this is Vladimir and Verloc’s second meeting as opposed to it being their first in the novel: “When I called you to the Embassy I really had no time to go into the whole question.” (86-7) Having established that, most of the dialogue sounds like a first meeting. It is obvious that Conrad felt it unlikely for them to have met for the first time anywhere other than the Embassy. This serves to emphasise how awkward it is to have Vladimir in the shop at all. Moreover, in the words of Robert S. Ryf, “That Vladimir, Verloc’s superior, apparently does not know how long Verloc has been working for them or that he is married seems even less credible in the play than in the novel.”²⁷⁷

Conrad strips away the narrative description and leaves a succinct version of the dialogue. A great deal depends on the actors to convey the mood and manner of the characters: to make Verloc seem something like an awkward “plumber” and, more easily, the malevolence of Vladimir. The additions to the original dialogue in this instance are mainly in order to draw attention to the location and to underline, heavily, the irony: “Funny blind, a shop like this for your real — ah — occupation” (90); “Shop of secret wares — and a shady life” (90); and so on. Vladimir’s early observations to Verloc that he seems to be “dealing in revolutionary literature and obscene photographs” (86) and his subsequent ironic remark about Verloc’s “let us

²⁷⁷ Ryf, Robert S., “*The Secret Agent on Stage*”, *Modern Drama*, Volume XV, Number 1, University of Kansas: May 1972, p. 62.

call them ‘art’ customers” (86) demonstrates that Conrad is attempting to find a compensation for his lost narrative description in Chapter 1. But the predominant function of the encounter is exposition. The dialogue asserts key information or allows it to be aired: “I am your employer” (86); “What were you before? One isn’t born a secret agent” (87); “You know of course of the International Conference sitting now in Milan” (92); and Vladimir’s perilously long speech which culminates in the idea of exploding a “bomb into pure mathematics” (93-4).

There is pressure on Conrad to be as expedient with *dramatis personae* as he is with location. The number of characters in the novel is over twenty-four speaking characters and over thirty-five non-speaking figures, whereas the play has twenty-one characters in the cast and others — café customers, party guests and, off-stage, the news vendor and the STERN VOICE — who are not included in the cast list (see Appendix A). The script is peppered with descriptions of the characters, which are basically a *précis* of the descriptive accounts contained in the novel. In addition there are some interesting statements on the physical appearance of the characters in certain dramatic situations. An example of this is in Act IV, sc. iii where Verloc and Heat “*talk loudly*” to each other and Conrad tells us:

There is a certain similarity in their personal appearance, both big men, clothes the same sort of cut, dark blue overcoats and round hats on. (159)

Conrad’s adaptation is interesting when it lays bare this kind of intention: these are details we can only infer in our reading of the novel. In practical terms, of course, such stage directions are helpful in the process of casting suitable actors for the production.

Conrad retains the majority of the key players in the adaptation. In fact, there is a case to argue that he includes too many of them: Mr Vladimir and even Lady Mabel (the name Conrad gives to the anonymous patroness of Michaelis) might have been kept as off-stage presences. Both function as emblems of power: Mr Vladimir precipitates the bomb outrage and is uncomfortably transported from his ambassadorial bastion in the novel to Verloc’s shop in the play. Similarly, it is

uncomfortable to see the Professor enter the shop in Act IV: we find ourselves asking, quite simply, why on earth would he turn up there? Conrad's London is a tautology: a society that lacks social interaction. The class division is obvious but that is just one facet of the isolation and hollowness of the capital. The "immense multitude" (novel, 103) or "countless multitude" (play, 184) of London may be "industrious like ants" but they are "impervious to sentiment, to logic, to terror" (novel, 103). Shockingly, they are devoid of emotion, reason and fear. By bringing Vladimir and the Professor into the Verloc shop, Conrad damages his construction of London which is so convincing in the novel. He does this simply because Vladimir has an important expository function, and to allow the Professor to be some kind of coda to the play just as he is in the novel.

Although Lady Mabel's scene — Act III — is memorable, it blurs the focus of Conrad's tragic play: in the novel it is an intriguing satirical vignette but in the play it is too much of a digression to warrant an act to itself. Let us consider for a moment why the patroness impressed V. S. Naipaul:

In spite of appearances, this grand lady, patroness of a celebrated anarchist, was not Lady Bracknell... Not Lady Bracknell. Someone much more real, and still recognizable in more than one country. Younger today perhaps; but humanitarian concern still disguises a similar arrogance and simplicity, the conviction that wealth, a particular fortune, position or a particular name are the only possible causes of human self-esteem.²⁷⁸

It is interesting that Naipaul draws a parallel with Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell (even if only to dismiss it) because it makes a link with drama. I have already stressed this comparison, and several of Lady Mabel's pronouncements — "They may think what they like. My eccentricity is well known" (145) — do have a Wildean edge. The challenge for a performer playing Lady Mabel would perhaps be to emphasise this allusion without discounting the deeper significance of the construct that Naipaul defines. Lady Mabel is not Lady Bracknell even if both figures are satirical creations:

²⁷⁸ Naipaul, V. S., "Conrad's Darkness" in *The Return of Eva Perón*, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1981, pp. 208-9.

The Secret Agent and *The Importance of Being Earnest* are both masterpieces of English satire, but operate with different style and vehemence. If Wilde's play is a comic satire, then Conrad's play is a tragic one, or perhaps a melodramatic satire. At least this latter attempt at definition is confirmed if we return to the note scrawled in Richard Curle's copy of *The Secret Agent*, asserting that the literary aim of the book is "an attempt to treat consistently a melodramatic subject ironically".²⁷⁹

Lady Mabel has lost the anonymity (which certainly implies satire) she has in the novel, even if her name remains safely vague. It is not quite the same with the novel's Sir Ethelred. The Home Secretary may not appear in the play, but nevertheless the "great Personage" (novel 143) is still to be felt. In the play Conrad renames him "Sir William" (121) which confirms Conrad's hint in the "Author's Note" that the character is based on former Home Secretary Sir William Harcourt (40). It is interesting that Conrad no longer feels he has to be coy: fifteen years (including a world war) had passed between the novel and the play, and approximately thirty years since Harcourt was Home Secretary.

Lady Mabel is the dominant hostess at her soirée with her society guests and at least it is not jarring to see Mr Vladimir in this context. Vladimir's politics could not be more different from those of Lady Mabel or, on the other extreme, the Assistant Commissioner, but at least all three are of an appropriate social class. Even the presence of Michaelis is excused in the light of his patroness's "eccentricity". In 1991 I received a letter from Christopher Hampton (who was at work on a film adaptation of *The Secret Agent*) in which he states:

The two strands of the story I have decided to omit are those which deal with Michaelis's patroness, the rich old lady, and the dealings between the Assistant Commissioner and the Home Office. I think the reasons for this are probably fairly self-evident.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ Curle, Richard, *The Last Twelve Years of Joseph Conrad*, p. 100.

²⁸⁰ Letter to Richard Hand, 17 July 1991. At the time of writing (September 1996), Christopher Hampton's film version of *The Secret Agent* — his second directorial project — has been completed but not yet released. The theory and practice of screen adaptation is a field which has received more critical attention than stage adaptation, but it is a topic which falls outside the scope of this thesis.

It is interesting that despite the “self-evidence”, Conrad did retain the patroness but does omit the characters from the Home Office. Along with the Home Secretary Sir Ethelred and his secretary Toodles (Chapters 7 and 10), the other most significant characters Conrad decides to omit from the adaptation are Privy Councillor Wurmt (Chapter 2), the maimed cabby (Chapter 8), and Mrs Neale (Chapter 9). The decision to omit these characters can be explained by the problems of location, they only make sense in their context: Toodles and Sir Ethelred in Parliament, Wurmt in the Embassy and the cabby in the city streets. Mrs Neale — “the charwoman” (239) — is the exception inasmuch as she could easily be inserted into the play. However, her role is minor as she is merely a device used to upset Stevie as well as being described as looking like “a sort of amphibious... animal” (177) when she is scrubbing the floor. This latter description contributes to Conrad’s dehumanising vision. Although not impossible, it was probably wise of Conrad to resist attempting to adapt zoomorphism onto the stage. Mrs Neale is thus too slight to be included: she has nothing to add to the plot even if she does fit the context.

Appendices E and F demonstrate the time systems of the novel and play. The complicated time structure of the novel is perhaps what makes it such an enduring work, especially for literary critics. Conrad exploits the narrative time techniques of analepsis, prolepsis and ellipsis. The play is, in contrast, strictly chronological and Conrad only uses the technique of ellipsis, most substantially between Act I and Act II with the passage of approximately one month. One very obvious problem in straightening out the chronology is that Stevie is killed early in the story. As Christopher Hampton concurs:

(My) general feeling at the moment is that by straightening out the narrative — as Conrad did in the play — you risk losing sight of Stevie too early in the proceedings. He’s so pivotal a character.²⁸¹

It is not difficult to argue that Stevie dies too early in a chronological account of the story. This is precisely what happens in the play. The actor playing Stevie would have

²⁸¹ *ibid.*

a very short time to make an impact. After all, Stevie remains as integral to the story in the play as he is in the novel.

Conrad's adaptation seems like a simplification of the work. In some ways it is, and this can have a critical effect on the audience. Christopher Hampton writes on a revival of the play on the London fringe:

What prevented it from working seemed to me to be the tremendously deliberate pace, which made it uncomfortably static.²⁸²

This deliberateness would seem to be a clear result of making the work chronological. As well as having a grave impact on the pace of the story, the effect of straightening the structure is reflected in Conrad's startling revelation about the process of adaptation:

I gave to the narrative a sort of grim dignity. But on the stage all this falls off... It is a terribly searching thing... the stage.²⁸³

Through a loyal process of adaptation which disentangles the complex narrative, the play is not only rendered "tremendously deliberate", it becomes tremendously macabre.

However, if we look closely at this "simplification" — Conrad's technique of adaptation — we can see that there is a convoluted process involved. For instance, Appendix B and, for specific details, Appendix J, reveal that Conrad has constructed Act II, sc. i essentially with the dialogue in Chapter 4, but also with the substantial inclusion of the dialogue in Chapter 13. This makes an interesting demand inasmuch as there is a great difference between the two chapters: the Professor's character may be constant, but in the earlier chapter of the novel Ossipon learns, erroneously, that Verloc died in the bomb blast and in Chapter 13 he is a broken man who knows that

²⁸² *ibid.*

²⁸³ Letter to J. B. Pinker, 11 November 1919, quoted in *Selected Literary Criticism and The Shadow-Line*, pp. 94-5.

all three Verlocs are dead and is haunted by the newspaper story. Conrad adapts the scene in such a way that we do not notice, but it is intriguing to consider in detail.

Another effect of a chronological system can be seen in Act I. Conrad opts to include a great deal in the opening act: it begins with the domestic situation of the Verlocs; it goes on to present Vladimir; and then flows into the anarchist meeting. The Act comprises — as Appendix B reveals at a glance — information from Chapters 1, 2 and 3. The anarchist meeting is covered in Chapter 3 and opens with Michaelis in mid-speech. The play allows the guests to arrive. However, Conrad exploits this situation in an effective way. He allows Ossipon to make sexual advances towards Winnie:

OSSIPON. I have been studying for a doctor at one time, you know, Mrs. Verloc. Oh, yes, he is very interesting, your brother is. (*Lower tone.*) Why do you always turn your back on me, Mrs. Verloc? (*Whispers.*) Winnie! (99)

Later in the novel's account, the departure of the anarchists is abrupt: "Mr Verloc saw his guests off the premises" (81). In the play Conrad once again affords Ossipon some innuendo:

OSSIPON (*...Sentimentally*). I stayed behind to say good night to you.

WINNIE (*voice down the stairs, very steady*). You needn't have troubled. I am not that sort of woman.

OSSIPON (*as before*). Interesting chap, that brother of yours.

WINNIE (*voice down the stairs, softened*). Isn't he? Go away, do. I want to get him to bed.

OSSIPON (*insinuating*). Why don't you come down to fetch him?

WINNIE (*voice from above, indignant*). Not likely! In my night-gown.

OSSIPON (*appreciative*). Oh, my word! (104-5)

This extra material helps to pave the way for an ironic treatment of the romantic aspect of the relationship between Ossipon and Winnie towards the end. In the novel we read in Chapter 12 that "Mrs Verloc had never responded to his glances by the slightest sign of encouragement." (241) With a sentence as simple as this the novelist can establish a fact. In a play a dramatist has to give more leads which Conrad does

with convincing ingenuity. By giving such clues, he successfully renders the relationship between Ossipon and Winnie into a suitably ironic mode: as in the novel, when they do fall into each other's arms it is not a romantic situation but a parody of one.

Act 1 can also be used to demonstrate some interesting contrast in the reaction of the characters even if dialogue remains much the same. In the novel we are presented with Yundt in full flow:

The venomous spluttering of the old terrorist without teeth was heard.

“Do you know how I would call the nature of the present economic conditions? I would call it cannibalistic. That's what it is! They are nourishing their greed on the quivering flesh and the warm blood of the people — nothing else.”

Stevie swallowed the terrifying statement with an audible gulp, and at once, as though it had been swift poison, sank limply in a sitting posture on the steps of the kitchen door.

Michaelis gave no signs of having heard anything. (80)

In the play the equivalent reads:

YUNDT (*venomous*). Do you know how I would call the present social conditions? I would call it cannibalistic. The minority, a mere handful, are nourishing their greed on the quivering flesh and warm blood of luckless human beings. You can almost hear the scrunching of the bones.

STEVIE (*slight shrill shriek. Covers eyes with both arms. Perfectly still. VERLOC stops, MICHAELIS looks round, YUNDT unmoved...*) (102)

There are some minor — and some curious — adjustments to the speech here, exchanging “economic” for “social” for example. More substantial are the differences in reaction. It is interesting that Michaelis is made to notice Stevie's outburst in the play, but does not in the novel. The novel, in this instance, highlights the irony of the great revolutionaries being oblivious to the genuinely oppressed (represented by Stevie). Stevie's reaction in the play — the “*shriek*” and covering his eyes — has a more obvious dramatic impact than the more humble “gulp” and sinking posture. But this stage direction may be an over-direction: the enacting of Stevie's terror and

sagging posture may have proved to be more profound than the arguably melodramatic scream.

There is a constancy of character through Conrad's adaptation. This is because the adaptation is by and large a loyal account of his original story. The great exception is Winnie, but this is only in terms of her fate. As far as character is concerned, Winnie is a direct transposition from the novel. With regards to her appearance, we read in the novel:

Winnie was a young woman with a full bust, in a tight bodice, and with broad hips. Her hair was very tidy. (46)

In the play she is described thus:

WINNIE about thirty, dark hair done up very neatly, quiet bearing, good figure, plain, close-fitting dark dress... (73)

Winnie's spoken language is also replicated. In the novel we are told:

Mrs Verloc, in common with other human beings, was provided with a fund of unconscious resignation sufficient to meet the normal manifestation of human destiny. Without "troubling her head about it", she was aware that it "did not stand looking into very much". (219)

In the play, Conrad cannot use a narrator in this way but succeeds in conveying Winnie's attitude through naturalistic dialogue. In Act IV, sc. ii, she is in discussion with Heat:

WINNIE. I don't trouble my head much about these things. (*Faces HEAT. Hands hanging idle.*) What can I do for you? (155)

And shortly afterwards:

HEAT (...) What do you think, Mrs. Verloc?

WINNIE. I don't trouble my head. (*Listless.*) (155)

The fact that Winnie repeats the line turns it into a catch-phrase. It is interesting to note the directions which stress idleness and listlessness. Winnie is presented in this scene as an unthinking and resigned individual, perhaps a stereotype of the English nation of shopkeepers which Conrad is satirising. This presentation will make the realisation of Stevie's fate all the more hard-hitting.

Winnie's fate in the play follows the same path as in the novel. After she has murdered her husband, Conrad exploits narrative to the full by having her stagger into the street trying to get to the river to drown herself, haunted by the newspaper cliché, "The drop given was fourteen feet", which seems to be "scratched on her brain with a hot needle" (238). In the play, Winnie "*stumbles*" (168) into the shop and after closing her eyes to a count of three gazes at the audience with a "*Stare of terror*" before crying, "No! That must never be!" (168) This stare is very important and is one of the most effective moments in a reading of the play. It seems to me to be one of Conrad's best attempts at compensating for the loss of the urban locale of the novel: by having Winnie stare at the audience, we get the sense of the woman alienated in a sea of people (literally a theatre audience in London, no less). It is also an ironic counterpoint to Act I where Winnie looks at the audience and declares, "Yes, I am lucky" (80): in Act IV Winnie has "fallen" and this time the breaking of the fourth wall is a chilling moment of empathy. Conrad is showing that the most law-abiding, lower middle-class housewife can become a murderer, and that stare into the audience's eyes brings that home.

To return to the novel, after a few pages of Winnie in the streets of London she encounters Ossipon, at this moment in the narrative he becomes the parody of a romantic hero. In the play he is obliged to make his entry much earlier. Their conversation follows much of the language of the novel with a similar pacing of the revelations about Verloc's fate and the true victim of the bomb.

In the novel, Ossipon escorts Winnie to Waterloo and when on board the Southampton train with her he makes, *à la* Lord Jim, his fantastic leap:

He had leaped out at the very end of the platform; and such was his determination in sticking to his desperate plan that he managed by a sort of miracle, performed almost in the air, to slam to the door of the carriage. (261)

This is how Ossipon escapes Winnie in the play:

OSSIPON, *sudden and swift, flings door open, leaps out into the street, leaving door nearly wide. WINNIE, still head on arms... Gust of wind inside...* (180)

Conrad still uses the word “leap” to define Ossipon’s escape, although Ossipon does not succeed this time in performing the miracle of closing the door. However, the open door does permit the play’s symbolic gust of wind. In the novel Ossipon’s miracle is not simply escaping Winnie and surviving the fall, but also escaping the police. The only things he has to contend with in the subsequent and final chapter are his guilty conscience and the mocking condescension of the Professor, while in the play he is arrested. This is the most profound difference between the two versions: in the novel the characters drift away, all effected — in different ways — by what the newspaper coins “madness and despair” (266). The London which Conrad has constructed has — with Winnie’s suicide in the English Channel — extended into the wider world (and we may even consider it as a view of the universe) which is devoid of reason and, mundanely, devoid of policemen. In stark contrast the play seems to have a moral climax as it is brought to a close by the arrival of the police. Far from “getting away with it”, Ossipon is arrested. At one moment in the final act the young revolutionary may have been a parody of the romantic hero, but ultimately Inspector Heat fulfils the role of dramatic hero. In his discussion of the novel Daniel Schwarz draws a parallel between Stevie and both Hamlet and his father:

Like Hamlet, he is a moral creature in a perverse world which patronises him; like King Hamlet, he is murdered by a close, trusted relative. Verloc (Claudius) is sexually aroused on the very day of Stevie’s death.²⁸⁴

²⁸⁴ Schwarz, Daniel, *Conrad: Almayer's Folly to Under Western Eyes*, Cornell University Press: 1980, pp. 172-3.

However, the key difference is that there is “no moral equilibrium”:²⁸⁵ no Fortinbras to set the world right. I would argue that the novel finds its moral equilibrium in the actual narrator. While the Shakespearean allusion may become even stronger because of the dramatic medium, the narrator is, of course, lost in the play. Perhaps that is why Heat’s role is changed so that he becomes the ostensible hero. Yet Conrad’s care in pointing out the physical similarity between Heat and Verloc renders this ironic. Another feature which indicates a moral ending is the confrontation between Heat and the Professor in the unlikely venue of the shop. This is very different to the Professor in the haunting final line of the novel which describes the “shabby” man “unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men” (269). There is a moral subtext even to this statement but what gives the line such resonance is the use of “unsuspected”: the metaphor of secrecy runs through the novel from the title onwards. In the play, with the open confrontation of Heat and the Professor, there is no sense of secrecy or the unsuspected.

In the final tableau Inspector and murderess face each other:

HEAT, *his hand on his chin, stands looking down profoundly at the crouching WINNIE.* (184)

Heat, the representative of justice, legality and reason stands above Winnie, the victim of madness and despair. This is perhaps a much more comfortable ending: justice is seen to prevail. This decision is reminiscent of Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin* adaptation which also makes the moral ending more blatant than in the novel. However, it is possible to see it as just as uncompromising as the novel. In the novel Winnie commits suicide: she has murdered and then taken her own life, but more significantly she becomes a victim of the media. Conrad firmly establishes this, but even in the play with the “*newspaper torn on the floor*” (168) this aspect of her fate is still suggested. In the play she does not kill herself but rather, as *The Sunday Times* reviewer puts it, “The woman ends the play by becoming as imbecile as her brother.”

²⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p. 173.

Perhaps this was an attempt to temper the work, by presenting us with one fewer death. However, her death would have had to have taken place off-stage and maybe Conrad preferred to shock the audience with Winnie's breaking apart before their eyes rather than absent. Her presence also serves to strengthen the idea of the victim alienated in the amorphous crowd. This on-stage disintegration is certainly a challenge for the performer playing Winnie. Conrad was more acutely aware of the challenge it would present the audience:

As to Act Four I daren't even think of it. To make an audience of comfortable, easy-going people sup on horrors is a pretty hopeless enterprise; but I will have developed crazily the ambition of making them swallow their supper and think it fine too. This is the way my madness lies at present.²⁸⁶

Within a few days this trepidation had passed and Conrad expresses his new resolution: "I have resolved that since the story is horrible I shall make it as horrible as I possibly can."²⁸⁷ Hence, we can interpret the final tableau as either a moral concession or as a disturbing, ironic conclusion.

Appendix J presents a parallel version of Act II, sc. i with Chapters 4 and 13. The reason I chose this scene is partly because it is one episode particularly singled out for praise by critics. The reviewer in *The Era* wrote that the exchanges "are largely unessential to the action of the drama, but are of engrossing interest and superbly well written". The same scene is one that Arnold Bennett singles out as "superb".²⁸⁸ More recently, Robert S. Ryf argues that it is one of the most successful scenes in the adaptation — "arresting and vivid"²⁸⁹ — because "it was not transplanted from the novel, but is original to the play".²⁹⁰ This strikes me as a bizarre and inaccurate claim: a glance at the parallel version will reveal that there is scarcely a

²⁸⁶ Letter to J. B. Pinker, 7 November 1919, quoted in Jean-Aubry, *G. Joseph Conrad Life and Letters Volume Two*, William Heinemann Limited: London, 1927, p. 233.

²⁸⁷ Letter to J. B. Pinker, 11 November 1919, quoted in *Selected Literary Criticism and The Shadow-Line*, pp. 94-5.

²⁸⁸ 8 November 1922, *Letters of Arnold Bennett Volume 1: Letters to J. B. Pinker* (ed. Hepburn, James), Oxford University Press: 1966, p. 317.

²⁸⁹ Ryf, Robert S., p. 62.

²⁹⁰ *ibid.*

line which is not lifted from the novel. I think Ryf's oversight can be explained if he failed to take into account the material from Chapter 13. Act II, sc. i is most obviously an adaptation of Chapter 4 (the café setting and expository location in the story) but much of the information about the Professor's character and philosophy that Ryf praises can be discovered in the final chapter.

A close study of the parallel version reveals a number of details about Conrad's process of adaptation. What become obvious are dozens of slight alterations to the language in the dialogue. Conrad re-ordered his novel into a linearity of time and then made surface adjustments rather than, with a few noble exceptions, cut characters or change the plot (except when stage conditions of the period dictate this, such as limits on the number of locations).

The parallel versions reveal how much of the original dialogue Conrad retains with very little readjustment of order (there are merely a handful of examples of this). One of the most notable changes Conrad makes to the dialogue is when he substitutes the "twenty seconds" (92) it takes for the Professor's personal bomb to explode to "seven seconds" (111). This is a typically slight adjustment, but it is one that involves a change of fact rather than the use of synonym which is his standard practice elsewhere in the adaptation of this chapter. Perhaps it makes a subtle connection with the "seven years" (171) of marriage Winnie complains of in Act IV: seven seconds before destruction, seven years before cataclysm.

A few times Conrad cuts down on the amount of information given: less is said about the newspaper (simply because Ossipon is holding one); the explanation of how the bomb works is reduced; the account of Michaelis's life in the country is cut down; and there is a general reduction in the amount of reiteration. Elements removed from the play are the Professor's comments on the workings of Heat's mind; the discussion of America; the account of Verloc's work in France; and the general assault on the nature of English society. Similarly the debate on madness and despair is dropped as it would only make sense after Winnie's death. Indeed, the newspaper's "madness and despair" (266) so important at the end of the novel is absent, but perhaps finds its equivalent when Winnie's haunting revelation of "blood

and dirt" (184) is placed in the foreground. After all, Conrad can easily include the language of the newspaper in the novel through his technique of collage. In the play such a phrase could only be conveyed through other characters — many of whom, like Ossipon, see newspaper rhetoric as "gup" — and so he gives his central character Winnie the maxim.

The omissions are not major and only become apparent on a very close comparative reading. Indeed, looking at the script in this way it seems that too much of the novel's dialogue is left in. It is good that Conrad cuts the account of the newspaper because he can infer a great deal with the image of Ossipon flicking through the pages, but this is a token exception.

Most of the problems that become evident in an analysis of this section are problems inherent in the whole play. I will now endeavour to evaluate the adaptation in relation to the novel.

The essential problem with the adaptation is that Conrad remains too loyal to the original novel. The result is a work that perhaps lacks focus. As the reviewer in *The Observer* states: "There is no unity in the play." A close reading reveals that Conrad must have spent a lot of time in making very slight alterations to the language of the speeches. This gives the impression that the process of dramatisation was pernickety when really a wholesale reorganisation of the plot was required, not least to admit more action. The reviewer in *The Nation and the Athenaeum* asserts:

Action is the necessary skeleton upon which a drama must be articulated; it may be clothed in thought and soul-stuff, but cannot be built upon them.

There is too much dialogue and not enough action. *The Times* critic concurs, arguing that "Conrad has tried, we think, to bring too much of his novel on to the stage. The result is a play with a certain excess of talk."

Conrad's failure to alter the plot creates confusion and some unconvincing episodes. Some incidents — such as Lady Mabel's party — are perhaps rather digressive. There is too much exposition, as Robert S. Ryf says, "Almost every line

contains a 'plant' or necessary bit of information."²⁹¹ Even more critical are the location problems: it is difficult to square the presence of Mr Vladimir and the Professor in the Verloc shop. Why would the all-powerful (at least over Verloc) Vladimir feel obliged to visit the shop frequented by customers in pursuit of pornography? Why would the Professor turn up at the place where the anarchists he has little regard for congregate, let alone so soon after he has provided the ill-fated bomb? As Ryf puts it, "There seems little or no reason for the Professor to be there, particularly as he keeps saying that he is not interested in what is going on."²⁹²

However, the most fundamental problem in the play is caused by making the story chronological. The greatness and ingenuity of the novel is destroyed by the play's linearity. It is interesting that Conrad — probably more aware of the play's inadequacy than anyone — sees the problem as being his loss of narrative control:

As I go on in my adaptation, stripping off the garment of artistic expression and consistent irony which clothes the story, I perceive... how it is bound to appear to the... audience a merely horrible and sordid tale. (...I) gave to the narrative a sort of grim dignity.²⁹³

Conrad bewails his loss of "artistic expression and consistent irony", but it seems to me that there is a wealth of dramatic irony and moments of genuine artistic inventiveness in the play. It is more the simplification of the time system that is the greater critical failing. But it would have been no small achievement to adapt the intricate — and confusing — time system of the novel into dramatic form. Although an English novelist-cum-dramatist like J. B. Priestley wrote some fascinating plays which address and exploit the problems of time,²⁹⁴ these were not written until the 1930s and none of them were adaptations.

On a more positive note there are a number of aspects of the adaptation which are effective. Despite the lack of "unity" that some critics condemned the work for,

²⁹¹ *ibid.*

²⁹² *ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁹³ Letter to J. B. Pinker, 11 November 1919, quoted in *Selected Literary Criticism and The Shadow-Line*, Methuen: London, 1986, pp. 94-5.

²⁹⁴ See Priestley, J. B., *Three Time-Plays*, Pan Books: London, 1947.

others — like *The Era* reviewer — claim that, “It gives us personally more delight than many a play that can boast better construction and more technique.” Where Conrad is bold enough to change the plot — such as with Winnie’s madness — there are rewards. *The Times* critic celebrates Act IV, sc. iv:

The sordid horror of the last scene, when the wretched woman is robbed and deserted by the one man she has turned to for help and is found by the police babbling and crazy, is as terrible as anything in Dostoievsky. This scene, moreover, is superbly played by Miss Miriam Lewes, with a passionate intensity that sends a shudder through the whole house. (...) We left the “inspissated gloom” of the theatre with a certain relief, and minded to read the novel again. For Mr. Conrad is a great novelist, but not yet a great dramatist.

There is an irony here: despite the redeeming qualities of the adaptation which shocked the audience — indicating the success of Conrad’s intention to horrify — the reviewer wants to return to the novel. The critic will not, however, find this scene in the original: the episode the reviewer praises most is an original invention peculiar to the play of this not yet “great dramatist”. It is also ironic that the reviewer compares Conrad to Dostoievsky, a novelist Conrad hated. He rejected Dostoievsky’s work, seeing his characters as “damned souls knocking themselves about in the stuffy darkness of mystical contradictions”.²⁹⁵

One reason the play is capable of sending a shudder through an audience is because we are so close to this array of chilling characters and grotesque events. There are a number of characters we may empathise with in the play, but ultimately Conrad finds a way to deprive us of all of them. Stevie is killed after Act I; Winnie slips into homicide and then insanity; and Heat may be too much Verloc’s doppelgänger. In the novel, either the narrator is our point of empathy or, if that is an overstatement, the narrator does at least sustain our ironic perspective and distance from the characters and events. In a production these are, as it were, in our face.

The sustained irony of the novel translates effectively onto the stage but there are also original dramatic ironies that the stage version generates. The genre of the

²⁹⁵ Quoted in Jefferson, George, *Edward Garnett: A Life in Literature*, Jonathon Cape: London, 1982 p. 320.

play is hard to define, and many themes of the story are certainly a challenge. The concept of the “game” and investigation allude to the realm of Sherlock Holmes detection, but this is far more comfortable in fictional form. The play is not a conventional whodunit or a thriller but rather a macabre satire. There are elements of melodrama which Conrad exploits, as well as allusions to Wilde and late nineteenth-century naturalism, but there is also a quality in the work which can be best described as Grand-Guignol (*The Illustrated London News* reviewer praised the actor playing Ossipon for this style of performance). There are even some facets we could describe as expressionistic. This latter point is especially evident in the use of light and shadow in Act IV. But perhaps the best way to describe the play is as, in the words of Conrad himself, “excessively Conradian”.²⁹⁶ The reviewer in *The Era* concurs:

It has the fascination of the Conrad novel, indeed, we felt on leaving the theatre more as if we had read a Conrad novel than seen a Conrad play.

Christopher Hampton celebrates Conrad’s adaptation:

It’s not surprising that Conrad’s play failed in the climate of the twenties; it was considerably ahead of its time in every respect but the technical.²⁹⁷

The “technical” aspect is the time and pace, and some awkward ellipses such as between scenes ii and iii in Act IV where the action should move swiftly from one room to the next but is bound to be jarring in the real time of the stage. But the issues and themes of the work, and its humorous morbidity are challenging and original, and explain why Hampton sees the play as being “ahead of its time”. Even during the week of the première the radical nature of the work was recognised and celebrated by Arnold Bennett who wrote to J. B. Pinker:

The play is certainly the best I have seen for a very, very long time, and by a long way the best. It is highly distinguished. Twenty years will pass before such a play can possibly hope to have a success in London. London is fed on pap,

²⁹⁶ Quoted in Ryf, Robert S., p. 58.

²⁹⁷ Letter to Richard Hand, 17 July 1991.

and dishonest pap at that. I should think that on the continent the thing ought to have a very considerable success. It is, artistically, a most disturbing play, for the reason that it shows up, in a way that nothing but a first-rate work of art can do, the superlative fatuity, futility, infantility, and falsity of even the respectable better-than-average English plays that we talk seriously about in this here city.²⁹⁸

According to Bennett, not only is the work ahead of its time, but it suffers from being performed in the wrong environment. Like Henry James, Bennett is condemning the English theatre scene in comparison to the rest of a more enlightened Europe. For as Conrad claims of the adaptation: "in its innermost quality it is as Conradian as anything I have ever written".²⁹⁹ All in all, Joseph Conrad may not have done justice to the vision and range of his novel, but the stage version of *The Secret Agent* remains an interesting and at times compulsive experience which the English stage of the 1920s was not ready to receive.

²⁹⁸ 8 November 1922, *Letters of Arnold Bennett Volume 1: Letters to J. B. Pinker*, p. 317.

²⁹⁹ Quoted in Ryf, Robert S., p. 59.

Chapter Five

CONCLUSION

1. Motives for Self-Adaptation

In “Ibsen Triumphant” (1897), George Bernard Shaw assesses Arthur Wing Pinero’s writing and looks at the radical impact of Ibsen on the English theatre scene. Shaw proceeds to sum up the different worlds of fiction and drama, showing concern for the effect of dramatic conventions as well as censorship:

I unhesitatingly say that no novelist could, even if there were reason for it, approach the writing of a novel with his mind warped, his hand shackled, and his imagination stultified by the conditions which Mr Pinero accepted.³⁰⁰

So why did the self-adapting novelists even attempt to write for the stage? A good starting point in an attempt to answer this question is provided by Henry James in May 1889:

I had practically given up my old, valued, long-cherished dream of doing something for the stage, for fame’s sake, and art’s, and fortune’s: overcome by the vulgarity, the brutality, the baseness of the English-speaking theatre today. [...] But... I simply *must* try, and try seriously, to produce half a dozen — a dozen, five dozen — plays for the sake of my pocket, my material future. [Any monetary success will allow] time, leisure, independence for “real literature”.³⁰¹

Thus James contends that a performed play might have benefits in terms of fame, art and fortune: but clearly, the greatest of these was fortune. A successful stage

³⁰⁰ Shaw, G. B., *Complete Works of Bernard Shaw Volume 25: Our Theatres in the Nineties Volume 3*, Constable and Company Limited: London, 1931, p. 144.

³⁰¹ Quoted in *The Complete Plays of Henry James* (ed. Edel, Leon), Rupert Hart-Davis: London, 1949, p. 48.

production had the potential for enormous financial reward, something none of the self-adapters would scorn. Furthermore, James's reference to "fame" emphasises that the theatre could bring an author not only income but popularity. This aspect is a reason why several late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novelists were attracted to the stage. The theatre offered prestige and was certainly glamorous. Some novelists attempted self-adaptation to meet the demands of those in the acting profession. For instance, Thomas Hardy claims that the reason he adapted *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was because of the irresistible supplications from the leading ladies of the 1890s. A similar motive for self-adaptation can be found in the case of an author outside our study, George Moore. Moore dramatised his novel *Esther Waters* (novel 1894, play 1913) because the French actress Yvette Guilbert wanted to play the heroine.³⁰²

Another reason for the novelists' interest in drama is quite possibly due to Shakespeare. Perhaps these novelists, believing themselves to be contributing to some sort of English "Literary Tradition", perceived Shakespeare as their artistic deity and subsequently drama as a keystone of this culture. George Steiner refers to this presence as "the Shakespearean shadow",³⁰³ falling between the knowledge that English drama needed to be rejuvenated and the actual process of writing these new works. Perhaps, writers of this period felt that they should do something "in His image" and attempt to contribute to the theatre. Shakespeare and the Elizabethan tradition loomed large over English writing as Edmund Gosse reveals: "It haunts us, it oppresses us, it destroys us."³⁰⁴

The concept of the literary tradition in relation to drama may also explain James's desire to write drama for "art's sake". Certainly James had a gloomy view of the English stage in the 1870s: "it is sufficiently obvious that the poverty of the English theatre is complete."³⁰⁵ Indeed, James goes so far as to imply that a play in

³⁰² See Davis, W. Eugene, *The Celebrated Case of Esther Waters: The Collaboration of George Moore and Barrett H. Clark on "Esther Waters: A Play"*, University Press of America: Lanham, 1984, p. 6.

³⁰³ Steiner, George, *The Death of Tragedy*, Faber: London, 1961, p. 150.

³⁰⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*

³⁰⁵ "The London Theatres" (1879) in *The Scenic Art*, p. 123.

those days could not be counted as “real literature”. It would seem to fit in with the demand for a “Literary Theatre” that obsessed Henry Arthur Jones and William Archer as I outlined in the introductory chapter. We also saw how Harley Granville Barker’s condemnation of censorship suggests his dismay with the theatrical scene at the time and his empathy with novelists. The extent to which censorship was directly to blame or how far it served to exacerbate the situation is unclear, but what is certain is that other eminent men in English theatre such as Henry Arthur Jones can describe drama up to 1891 as “A Slough of Despond in the wide well-tilled field of English Literature”.³⁰⁶ Likewise, George Bernard Shaw remarks that, “The nineteenth-century novel, with all its faults, has maintained itself immeasurably above the nineteenth-century drama”;³⁰⁷ and elsewhere “prays” that “contemporary drama might be brought up to the level of contemporary fiction”.³⁰⁸ We find other figures, such as William Archer, wishing for the emergence of the English Ibsen or Henry Becque to make “literary drama” a possibility in Britain.

The situation was neither new nor restricted to English theatre. Just as Shaw, Archer and Jones wanted something to rescue English theatre in the 1890s, we find Émile Zola dramatising one of his own novels in an attempt to “rescue” French theatre from what he saw as its own “slough” in the 1860s and 1870s. In both situations, naturalism is seen as the answer. Zola’s adaptation of his 1868 novel *Thérèse Raquin* marks an attempt to begin a naturalist revolution on the stage just as the novel had in fiction. In the *Préface* (July 1875) to “*Thérèse Raquin, drame en quatre actes*” Zola states that “le naturalisme balbutie déjà au théâtre”,³⁰⁹ and that this is a necessary process that must be precipitated if the theatre is to survive: “Ou le drame mourra, ou le drame sera moderne et réel.”³¹⁰

³⁰⁶ Quoted in Turner, Paul *English Literature 1832-1890 Excluding the Novel*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1989, p. 387.

³⁰⁷ 22 May 1897, Shaw, G. B., *Complete Works of Bernard Shaw Volumes 25: Our Theatres in the Nineties Volumes 3*, Constable and Company Limited: London, 1931, p. 144.

³⁰⁸ 15 January 1898, *ibid.*, p. 303.

³⁰⁹ Zola, Émile, *Œuvres complètes: tome XV, le Cercle du livre précieux*: Paris, 1969, p. 123.

³¹⁰ *ibid.*

We could argue that the demand for a literary theatre represented a desire for a similar revolution in the English theatre. The encouragement of English men of letters to write for the stage was an attempt to be radical on this front. Shaw believed that this backfired, as is evident in "The Season's Moral" (27 July 1895) where he evaluates George Alexander's production of Henry James's *Guy Domville*. The production was, of course, a disaster, and Shaw concludes that if Alexander wanted to be radical he should have produced a drama by Ibsen or Sudermann, not a James play for, as he concludes, "those who make half-revolutions dig their own graves".³¹¹

Whether or not the self-adapters saw themselves as "half-revolutionary" is unclear. Certainly James's ambitions were not humble, and Hardy strove to write a play to challenge the dominant trend for the "French" style of drama. Ironically, it is Conrad — probably the least confident of all the self-adapters — who proved to be the most radical dramatist. What is more certain is that the self-adapters were convinced of their creative powers enough to feel capable of conquering another art-form. The fact that Conrad adapted his short story "To-morrow" (1902) as *One Day More* in 1904 is interesting inasmuch as this is the year that represents his creative peak. But by the time we get to Conrad's "dramatic year" of 1920, his zenith in fiction had passed and he turns to the theatre and cinema in an attempt to rejuvenate his creativity. It is not dissimilar with Hardy, or at least St John Ervine suggests an element of artistic atrophy when he writes that Hardy brings *Tess* to the stage "at a time when the fervour of creating her has, perhaps, abated."³¹²

The novelists were certainly encouraged to write plays by some men of the theatre, and this is most obviously reflected in favourable reviews which do, however, refer more to potential than actual achievement. This often betrays a certain territorialism in the men of the theatre. This is neatly summed up by Max Beerbohm when he describes dramatic critics' "mistrust of strangers":³¹³

³¹¹ Shaw, G. B., "The Season's Moral" (27 July 1895) *Our Theatre in the Nineties Volume 1*, Constable: London, 1932, p. 195.

³¹² *The Observer*, 13 September 1925, quoted in Roberts, M., p. xc.

³¹³ Beerbohm, Max, "Mr. Conrad's Play" (8 July 1905) in *Around Theatres*, Rupert Hart-Davis: London, 1953, p. 384.

They do not say "Here is new blood. Let us help it to circulate," but "Here is new blood. Let us throw cold water on it." They do not say of Mr. Conrad "Here is the sort of man that is needed — a man with a wide knowledge of many kinds of life, and a man with acute vision, and with deep human sympathy, and with a passionate imagination — an essentially dramatic imagination, moreover," but "Mr. Conrad has much to learn," or something to that miserable effect.³¹⁴

But the more positive critics include an ecstatic George Bernard Shaw acclaiming Conrad as "Dramatist!" after a performance of *One Day More*, much to Conrad's surprise.³¹⁵

The need for "literary" drama, something which it was felt by the 1890s had been achieved in Scandinavia and France, reflects once again the problematic function of theatre in the English society of the period. The "type" of people in the audience perturbed the governing powers enough to resort to rigorous censorship and this had a detrimental effect on the artistic freedom of the playwright. Furthermore, the theatre was the mass entertainment of the period. In the opinion of Henry Arthur Jones, English drama is simultaneously art and popular amusement:

It is a hybrid, an unwieldy Siamese Twin, with two bodies, two heads, two minds, two dispositions, all of them, for the present, vitally connected. And one of these two bodies, dramatic art, is lean and pinched and starving, and has to drag about it, wherever it goes, its fat, puffy, unwholesome, dropsical brother, popular amusement.³¹⁶

We find here that the dual nature of drama proves to be a problem for one of the key figures in the theatre of the period. Max Beerbohm sees the problem as even more fundamental. In reviewing Conrad's *One Day More* Beerbohm writes:

³¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 384-5.

³¹⁵ See 30 June 1905, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad Volume 3: 1903-1907* (eds Karl, F. R. and Davies, L.), Cambridge University Press: 1988, p. 272.

³¹⁶ Jones, Henry Arthur, "The Theatre and the Mob" (September 1883) in *The Renaissance of the English Drama* (1895), Books for Libraries Press, New York, 1971, p. 11.

The reason the play is inferior to the story is simply that the dramatic form is, generally and essentially, inferior to the literary form. In the one... Hush! Am I not a dramatic critic? And is not my immediate aim to coax Mr. Conrad, for our drama's sake, to further dramaturgy?³¹⁷

With such eminent men of the theatre betraying such concerns, if not prejudice, it will come as no revelation that the nature of drama was even more troublesome for self-adapters. For Henry James, the problem is just as one might predict for a self-adapter: the dichotomy of text (fiction and subsequent script) and practical performance (the theatre). Although we have seen Henry James talking about the money to be made in the theatre, elsewhere he shows a fascination with dramatic form. Indeed, when in full flow as a dramatist he calls fiction "a pale little art".³¹⁸ Allan Wayworth, the playwright in James's 1892 short story "Nona Vincent", contends that,

The dramatic form had a purity which made others look ingloriously rough. It had the high dignity of the exact sciences, it was mathematical and architectural. It was full of the refreshment of calculation and construction, the incorruptibility of line and law.³¹⁹

We can find the same attitude towards drama in James's non-fiction of the same period. In the story, when Wayworth has completed the text of his great play, he gulps in terror: "now the vulgarity will begin".³²⁰ In other words, the *theatre* will get its paws on his dramatic masterpiece. Likewise, James himself had a negative attitude towards the world of theatre. He loved the theatre when things were going well for him, but at other times the alienated James is driven to despair. He pinpoints his problem when he declares that the "whole odiousness of the thing lies in the connection between the drama and the theatre".³²¹

³¹⁷ Beerbohm, Max, "Mr. Conrad's Play" in *Around Theatres*, Rupert Hart-Davis: London, 1953, p. 387.

³¹⁸ To William James, 6 February 1891, *Henry James Letters III: 1883-1895* (ed. Edel, L.), Macmillan: London, 1980, p. 329.

³¹⁹ *The Complete Tales of Henry James Volume 8: 1891-2*, Rupert Hart-Davis: London, 1963, p. 157.

³²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 159.

³²¹ 29 December 1893.

Although Thomas Hardy at times dismisses dramatic form, we do find him launching into his *Tess* adaptation with enthusiasm — almost star-struck — in the 1890s and during the 1920s revival. But his meticulousness and desire for control in the end leaves him frustrated. Conrad's feelings about the stage are ambivalent:

I have no notion of a play. No play grips me on stage or off. Each of them seem to me an amazing freak of folly. They are all unbelievable and as disillusioning as a bang on the head. I greatly desire to write a play myself. It is my dark and secret ambition. And yet I can't conceive how a sane man can sit down deliberately to write a play and not go mad before he has done.³²²

This mixed mood is a rather ominous starting point from which to attempt adaptation. Conrad's unease with the theatre did not change: many years later he would not attend the opening night of *The Secret Agent* because "Theatres frighten me and always have."³²³ Similarly, one of James's dramatic problems was with regards to the audience, which we can find him describing as a "zoo".³²⁴ Thomas Hardy would not go to see *Tess* in London preferring to have a private viewing of the play at Max Gate (although we should note that he was somewhat infirm by this time).

The self-adapters' attitude towards the audience must have affected the way they wrote. In the case of James, William Archer believes that he should "write solely for the ideal audience within his own breast",³²⁵ which would at least "produce works of art, and not improbably successful plays".³²⁶ In other words, Archer believed that despite the divergent receptive environments of fiction and drama, both should be initiated on the same principle: James should write for an ideal audience just as he writes for an ideal reader in his fiction. It is a mistake for James to try and make his work fit the audience based on his assumptions of what the audience expects; he

³²² 6 December 1897, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad 1: 1861-97*, p. 419.

³²³ Quoted in Mégroz, R. L., *Joseph Conrad's Mind and Method* Faber and Faber: London, 1931, p. 24.

³²⁴ 9 January 1895, quoted in Kossmann, R. R. *Henry James: Dramatist* Wolters-Noordhoff: Groningen, 1969, p. 50.

³²⁵ *Daily Chronicle*, 8 January 1895, in Kossmann, p. 68.

³²⁶ *ibid.*

should rather have set his own standard and let the audience match that. The fact that James never did this is best illustrated by his statement on the methodology of the dramatist: “your maximum of refinement must meet the minimum of intelligence of the audience... the intelligence, in other words, of the biggest ass it may conceivably contain.”³²⁷ Max Beerbohm detects this kind of attitude when he writes:

That the English theatre is a hot-bed of stupidity and artificiality is the excuse always pleaded by English masters of fiction for *their* aloofness.³²⁸

These problems of the stage conditions of the time and personal attitude were far-reaching for all the self-adapters one way or another, but it should be stressed that the most significant problems are to do with the nature of specific genres, especially in the process of generic translation, rather than sociological factors. As Bernd Lenz writes:

Am Beispiel der frühen Erzählung *Daisy Miller* läßt sich nachweisen, daß James nicht — wie häufig behauptet — vorwiegend aus theatergeschichtlichen Gründen bei der Dramatisierung scheitert, sondern an Gattungsbedingungen.³²⁹

[In the case of the early narrative *Daisy Miller* it can be proved that James did not fail with his dramatisations because of theatre-historical reasons — as is often maintained — but because of generic conditions.]

2. Methods of Self-Adaptation, and the Problems Encountered

In this section I will initially summarise the method by which our three key novelists adapted the central texts. After this I will provide some general observations on the problems of self-adaptation.

³²⁷ Quoted in *The Complete Plays of Henry James* (ed. Edel, L.), J. B. Lippincott Company: Philadelphia, 1949, p. 52.

³²⁸ Beerbohm, Max, “Mr. Conrad’s Play” in *Around Theatres* Rupert Hart-Davis: London, 1953, p. 384.

³²⁹ Lenz, Bernd, “Intertextualität und Gattungswechsel” in *Intertextualität: Formen, Funktionen, anglistische Fallstudien* (eds Broich, U. and Pfister, M.), Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1985, p. 170.

Daisy Miller

Henry James's *Daisy Miller* adaptation is a substantial rewriting which reveals an understanding of the difference between the genres of fictional narrative and stage drama. The play is loyal to the original locations but is far more radical with characters. The marginal figure of Eugenio and the unnamed (in the novel) Russian princess are expanded into highly integral figures in the play. Daisy's mother is omitted from the play, existing merely as an off-stage presence. Charles Reverdy and Alice Durant are new additions. The most profound alteration to the plot is that although the stage Daisy Miller does become as critically ill as her fictional doppelgänger, she eventually recovers and accepts Winterbourne's proposal of marriage. James thus turns his tragicomic novella into a light comedy. Despite the bold expansions, alterations and omissions, James still clings to the original novella. This is evident when he inserts "from the story" in his stage directions and forces some of his narrative observations (more than exposition, interestingly) into the mouths of the characters. This diminishes the credibility of some of the stage figures. James falls prey to melodrama (in relation, for instance, to the deviousness of Eugenio and the romantic climax), over-uses the aside and sometimes loses his awareness of the conditions of live performance (what a narrator may mention and pick up later is ever-present on stage).

Tess of the D'Urbervilles

Thomas Hardy's *Tess* is extremely loyal to the original novel, and in many ways Hardy's fears that the script might be used as a précis of the original are justified. Hardy keeps most of the central characters, and although he does omit Alec D'Urberville's mother and Angel Clare's father, both remain as significant off-stage characters. The broad time scale of the novel causes problems in the play. The adaptation is a skeleton of the plot which almost reads like a compilation of dramatic highlights with enormous gaps in between. Hardy attempts to compensate for this by

cramming in a large amount of plot exposition. He demonstrates an effective grasp of dramatic image (as in the Stonehenge scene) but a lot of the play functions on the level of a simple melodrama more than the haunting and alienating tragedy that characterises the novel: partly because of the way Hardy rewrites the dialogue, but also because he has lost his narrative voice.

The Secret Agent

Joseph Conrad's adaptation of *The Secret Agent* loses the sense of the city so powerful in the novel. There are very few omissions of characters and some — like Sir William — are powerful off-stage figures. Conrad crams in a great deal of exposition in an attempt to compensate for the loss of narrative description, but the diverse tricks of the omniscient narrator are lost. He makes numerous insignificant alterations to the language contained in the dialogue and he also trims away at some information: the play is certainly less reiterative than the novel. Nevertheless, it is, all the same, loyal to the language and descriptions of the original and includes too much dialogue at the expense of action. The most significant alteration concerns Winnie's non-suicide and a seemingly moral finale (albeit probably ironic). The most crucial problem is the time system: by making the play chronological much of the original's suspense and irony is lost. More positively, Conrad exploits some interesting devices and themes especially when he investigates the concept of heroism (in the form of Ossipon and Heat) which serves as an interesting compensation for the loss of the narrator. The play is also macabre and disturbing, above all with the alienated Winnie's decline into madness intimately witnessed by the audience.

Problems Encountered in Self-Adaptation

We see all the self-adapters struggling with dramatic form. None of them seem able to cope with the loss of narrative although this is evident in different ways and to different ends. They may present dramatic highlights of the novels or burden

their plays with too much exposition. The result of this is a play that is too loyal to the original novel, and this is what flaws Hardy's and Conrad's works. It is the classic danger of adaptation which affects many other authors. For example, George Moore's adaptation of *Esther Waters* is merely, as W. Eugene Davis says, a "stage synopsis of the book".³³⁰ It is interesting that James seems to be the self-adaptor who made the greatest attempt to re-write and re-think his novella and adjust to stage conditions. All the self-adaptors try to include the narrative through dialogue. The language that they use may be convincing for a narrator but often fails to be credible in the mouth of a stage character. Furthermore, Hardy gives his dialogue a melodramatic twist and Conrad tinkers with his dialogue only to make the slightest alterations. Language is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the art of adaptation in the case of Henry James. The increasing complexity of Jamesian language is not to be found only in the fiction. In the plays, the language of the dialogue and stage directions creates difficulty too. *The Times* criticised the dialogue in *The Outcry* for its "wanton use of the interpolated adverb";³³¹ and the actors in the 1911 production of *The Saloon* struggled with their lines. As Kossmann remarks, James's circuitousness never really correlates with its subject matter:

(James's last plays) never achieved the seeming simplicity of high complexity that has characterised the best plays from Aeschylus to Ionesco, but instead offered in them the seeming complexity of the trivial.³³²

One of the most interesting critiques of James's dramatic language can be found in George Bernard Shaw's account of watching *The Outcry* in 1917:

I experimented on my friends between the acts by repeating some of the most exquisite sentences from the dialogue. I spoke fairly and distinctly, but not one of my victims could understand me or even identify the words I was uttering.³³³

³³⁰ Davis, W. Eugene, *The Celebrated Case of Esther Waters: The Collaboration of George Moore and Barrett H. Clark on "Esther Waters: A Play"*, University Press of America: Lanham, 1984, p. 10.

³³¹ 4 July 1917, quoted in Kossmann, p. 101.

³³² Kossmann, p. 106.

And he concludes that,

there is a literary language which is perfectly intelligible to the eye, yet utterly unintelligible to the ear even when it is easily speakable by the mouth... The disastrous plays of James, and the stage failures of novelists obviously much more richly endowed by nature and culture than many of the successful playwrights with whom they have tried to compete, suggest that they might have succeeded if only they had understood that as the pen and the *viva vox* are different instruments, their parts must be scored accordingly.³³⁴

This is probably most appropriate in the case of James whose language often lacks the concision and register of the spoken word. The problem with Hardy's and Conrad's language is that they try to squeeze in too much information. At times it does not read "naturalistically" because the dialogue is burdened with exposition and facts from the novels. It is more a case of the content than the semantics and syntax which affects James's adaptation. David Birch argues that aspects of James's dialogue make it seem "clumsy and complex"³³⁵ to most people — excessive qualifiers and subordination, and so on — but he still takes issue with Shaw's "value judgements". This implies that Birch detects a touch of the "cold water" that, as we saw earlier, Beerbohm describes his peers throwing at the self-adapters.

It was not just in terms of dialogue that James found difficulties: his problem with stage directions betray a novelist working on alien territory. However, we should point out that even an accomplished dramatist may employ such overwhelming secondary text. George Bernard Shaw's lengthy stage directions for *Man and Superman*, for example, reveal, in the words of Manfred Pfister "a highly developed distrust of stage, and of producers and actors, and, by implication, elevate the printed text to an autonomous entity in itself".³³⁶ Shaw explains his use of stage directions when he complains that, since a writer cannot act his own play single-

³³³ Shaw, G. B., letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* (17 May 1923), quoted in *The Complete Plays*, p. 765.

³³⁴ Quoted in *The Complete Plays*, p. 765.

³³⁵ Birch, David, *The Language of Drama: Critical Theory and Practice* Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1991, p. 15.

³³⁶ Pfister, Manfred, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, Cambridge University Press: 1988, p. 14.

handedly, "he must fall back on his powers of literary expression, as other poets and fictionists do".³³⁷ Thus in Shaw we find an instance of a playwright borrowing the technique of the "fictionists" which perhaps serves to put at least one weakness of the self-adapters in a more charitable light.

There is a certain naiveté in the plays of the self-adapters, sometimes evident when they fail to understand the nature of stage conditions: the ellipsis between scenes in *The Secret Agent* where the action needs to flow or in *Tess* where a lot of time has passed between acts and some excessive recapping is needed. John Galsworthy describes as "innocence" Conrad's inclusion of "an almost unbearable spectacle"³³⁸ — a man with no hands — in *Laughing Anne*. Although not as extreme, Hardy's toothless peasants may be a similar case in *Tess*.³³⁹

Although Shaw attacks Henry James's language as unsuited to live performance, he seems to spare this self-adapter from accusations of technical naiveté. However, he takes issue with regards to the *purpose* of drama which reflects his commitment to social and political theatre. As far as he is concerned, James's plays fail because they attempt to be far too aesthetic. In 1907 Shaw writes to James:

People don't want works of art from you: they want help: they want, above all, encouragement, encouragement, encouragement, encouragement, encouragement and again encouragement...³⁴⁰

Although James reflects, to a degree, the assumptions of *l'art pour l'art*, the issue of principles other than the aesthetic was a serious problem for certain self-adapters. Hardy transforms the broad scope of the vision in his novel into a simplified melodrama, which certainly diminishes the philosophical edge to his original

³³⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 15.

³³⁸ Galsworthy, John, "Introduction" to *Laughing Anne and One Day More*, Castle: London, 1924, p. 7.

³³⁹ Similarly, Shaw's reviews draw attention to the naiveté of novelists who are new to drama. W. E. Henley and R. L. Stevenson's *Macaire*, for instance, contained "innumerable deficiencies" most of which seem to be severe miscalculations as to what can and cannot be executed on the nineteenth-century stage, such as flourishing "wine and choice dishes on the stage... in the faces of needy men". See Shaw, G. B., *Complete Works of Bernard Shaw Volume 23: Our Theatres in the Nineties Volume 1*, Constable and Company Limited: London, 1931, p. 150.

³⁴⁰ Quoted in *The Complete Plays*, p. 643.

conception. A fine example of an author compromising “principles” in self-adaptation, outside of our focus of study, is Émile Zola. The novel of *Thérèse Raquin* ends chillingly, with the paralysed Madame Raquin staring at her dead niece and “son-in-law”. In the play, however, she recovers, having voluntarily waited to witness the self-destruction of Thérèse and Laurent. The resurrection of the old woman (not far short of a Biblical miracle) represents a return to stability — indeed, the restoration of a just moral order — not the eternal silence that seems to loom at the end of the novel. The play reflects an inevitable causality, because it is a sealed tragedy with an ending that fulfils the potential of future optimism: the return to order. The play, with its somewhat overstated moral justice and closure is not as satisfactory as the novel which manages to be comparatively open-ended and uncompromising. Although naturalism is a problematic term, the novel would seem to be the more authentically naturalist work of the two. It is interesting that Daisy Miller is, like Madame Raquin, allowed to recover in James’s adaptation. But James’s method of adaptation has a consequence less on the grounds of moral principle than on genre: he converts his work into a comedy. In relation to Zola there is more of a parallel in Conrad who seems to present a moral climax in *The Secret Agent* play but it may, in fact, compound his avowed intention to horrify.

Hardy and Conrad struggle with the form and genre of drama and it is in these two writers that we witness most acutely the *personal* crisis involved in self-adaptation. Ervine’s review of *Tess* points out that, “No one comes between us and Tess in the novel, but several persons, all of them in a different mood, come between us and her on the stage.”³⁴¹ We thus get an indication of the problem facing both the audience and author, the problem of *diffusion*. James may have hated the theatre but he loved the dramatic form in principle because, like “the blessed nouvelle”, it put restrictions on the writing process, forcing him to be economical and rigorously structured, and this is particularly challenging in adaptation when one is reducing a novel into a “succinct” script. By the same token, this is why Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad, in the light of their own experiences, disparage the process. They

³⁴¹ *The Observer*, 13 September 1925, quoted in Roberts, M., p. xc.

believed that the technical “craft” of playwriting as a whole is never a true art because it is restricted by its “scientific” demands and limitations. There is a freer rein in fiction: theatrical drama, as they saw it, imposes a control on time, locale, expression and so on. Hardy states that, “The dramatization of a novel is really only an ingenious piece of carpentry”;³⁴² and Conrad asserts that drama possesses “inferior poetics” which can play havoc with an artist’s “individuality” and falsify “the very soul of one’s work both on the imaginative and intellectual side”.³⁴³ We should take note of Conrad’s emphasis on “individuality” and “the very soul of one’s work” as both serve to emphasise the *focus* that, in Conrad’s opinion, characterises fictional narrative. Drama, and in particular the theatre, is a diffuse art. In the writing of fiction there is a “concentration” in the creative process (in terms of the comparative individual freedom of the novelist) and even in the field of reception where a novelist might write for an “ideal” reader (very different to the zoo of asses that James saw filling up the auditorium). By stark contrast, the theatre is a collaborative art form in which the playwright’s initial “creation” is only one element in the processes of production and reception. But even the text of a dramatic adaptation can be a problem for its author. Thomas Hardy refused to publish his *Tess* dramatisation because he felt it might be used as “a short cut to the gist of the tale”.³⁴⁴ On a basic level, Hardy merely shows us that he is loyal to his fiction which was, after all, the key to his success.

After seeing the adaptation of *Tess*, Henry Arthur Jones writes a sympathetic letter to Hardy:

The difficulties of adapting a novel for the stage are rarely understood and never appreciated... There can be no true or quite satisfactory adaptation of a novel for the stage. To the extent that a play is a consistent organic whole it must differ widely from the novel from which it is quarried, not only in the course of its action, but also in the necessary adjustment of each character to

³⁴² 19 February 1925, *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy Volume Six: 1920-25* (eds Purdy, R. L. and Millgate, M.), Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1987, p. 312.

³⁴³ Quoted in Richard Curle, *The Last Twelve Years of Joseph Conrad*, Sampson Low, Marston and Company: London, 1928, pp. 125-6.

³⁴⁴ 29 November 1924, *Letters Six*, p. 289.

the action. Again, the novelist in writing a play is largely deprived of his chief tool — his style.³⁴⁵

Jones emphasises the structural difference between fiction and drama and how in adaptation — a process of “quarrying” — everything must be altered on every level. Hardy takes Jones’s point that no adaptation is ever true or satisfactory further when he writes to Harley Granville Barker in the same year, asserting that “to attempt to put a novel on stage is hopeless, and altogether a mistake in art”.³⁴⁶ Jones believes that one of the major problems facing the self-adapter is the loss of “his chief tool — his style”, which hinders his exploration of the different genre and cripples his artistic ability. Jones goes on to say that Maupassant, whom he greatly admires as a fiction writer, emerged as “a crude vulgar melodramatist” even though the adaptation of his work was not “unskilful”. A work of fiction can become a melodrama when an original story is divorced from the narrative text and realised in full theatrical actuality. This is a danger that Hardy recognises when he writes that “most novels become mere melodramas in adaptation”.³⁴⁷

The crisis Conrad endures is even more profound and even more personal. On his adaptation of *The Secret Agent* he writes:

As I go on in my adaptation, stripping off the garment of artistic expression and consistent irony which clothes the story, I perceive more clearly how it is bound to appear to the collective mind of the audience a merely horrible and sordid tale. (...I) gave to the narrative a sort of grim dignity. But on the stage all this falls off. Every rag of the drapery drops to the ground. It is a terribly searching thing... the stage. I will confess that I myself had no idea what it was till I came to grips with it in this process of dramatization. (...) I have resolved that since the story is horrible I shall make it as horrible as I possibly can.³⁴⁸

Conrad here has reached a creative heart of darkness. His gloomy revelation is not so much about drama as about adaptation itself. To metamorphose an original work

³⁴⁵ 8 September 1925, *Life and Letters of Henry Arthur Jones*, p. 357.

³⁴⁶ 20 October 1925, *Letters Six*, p. 362.

³⁴⁷ 20 February 1908, *Letters Three*, pp. 297-8.

³⁴⁸ Letter to J. B. Pinker, 11 November 1919, *Selected Literary Criticism and The Shadow-Line*, pp. 94-5.

demands an analysis of the original: an interpretation, as it were, of itself and of himself. It is this issue that broadens our study into a wider theoretical and cultural context.

3. Some Theoretical Aspects of Adaptation and Self-Adaptation

The fascinating thing about the dramatic adaptation of fiction as a whole is that it is an instance in culture where a writer has taken a primary text with the intention of transposing it into another form. This deliberate metamorphosing involves not only the textual process of turning fiction into a script, but a shift between generic worlds. Furthermore, if we study self-adaptation we enter a realm of literature primed, if we so wish, with biographical interest. The question of “artistic respect” is also interesting in this instance as it is certainly unlikely that the novelists would want to subvert their original work. Any instances of self-parody (Henry James’s stage directions included) are surely inadvertent.

Michael Edwards, in *Towards a Christian Poetics*, states:

Cervantes is right to compare a translation to a Flemish tapestry looked at from the wrong side, even though we might argue that it is another tapestry that has been revealed...³⁴⁹

The point that Cervantes is making is that a translation is inferior to the original work, but he also implies that the secondary work may foreground its own technique as well as the structure of the original to the detriment of the latter’s artistic greatness. In other words, a translation is a more analytical and technical exercise than “original creation”. For his part, Michael Edwards reclaims the potential of “artistic greatness” on behalf of the translation, asserting the creative aspect of what is generally regarded as the “secondary” work. Adaptation is, of course, a form of generic translation. To use the terms of the quote above, if translation is a reworking of one work using the same fabrics and craft, adaptation involves creating a version

³⁴⁹ Edwards, Michael, *Towards a Christian Poetics*, Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1984, p. 163.

of a work using different materials and skills: it is, as it were, the production of a mosaic or a bas-relief based on the picture seen in a tapestry.

In his article “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation”, Roman Jakobson states that there are three types of translation:

- (1) Intralingual translation, or *rewording* (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs in the same language).
- (2) Interlingual translation or *translation proper* (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language).
- (3) Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal sign systems).³⁵⁰

In the terms of Jakobson’s differentiation, therefore, theatrical adaptation is a hybrid of categories (1) and (3), being at once an instance of “rewording” (i.e. script) and “transmutation” (i.e. performance). Jakobson contends that complete equivalence in translation is impossible because “poetic art” is, in fact, technically untranslatable. He adds:

Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition — from one poetic shape into another, or interlingual transposition — from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic transposition — from one system of signs into another, e.g. from verbal art into music, dance, cinema or painting.³⁵¹

It does not require much thought to realise that the word “transposition” is relevant to adaptation, and is much more helpful than “translation”, a word loaded with all its familiar connotations and our own expectations. To borrow Jakobson’s terminology, adaptation can thus be defined as a combination of intralingual and intersemiotic transposition.

Susan Bassnett-McGuire emphasises the creative aspect of translation when she states that “the translator is both receiver and emitter, the end and the beginning

³⁵⁰ Quoted in Bassnett-McGuire, Susan, *Translation Studies* (Revised edition), Routledge: London, 1991, p. 14.

³⁵¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 15.

of two separate but linked chains of communication”,³⁵² and she provides a diagram to illustrate this argument:

Author — -Text — Receiver = Translator — Text — Receiver³⁵³

We can easily convert this into a model for adaptation:

Author → Fictive Text → Receiver = Adapter → Dramatic Text → Receiver

If we create one for self-adaptation, we find that it loses its linear structure:

Author = Receiver = Adapter → Dramatic Text → Receiver
 ↘ ↗
 Fictive Text

As can be seen in the latter diagram, in self-adaptation the author, first receiver and adapter are all the same person. The author-receiver is in possession of the fictive text and in his third capacity as adapter transforms the fictive text into a dramatic text. This diagram also serves to illustrate the link between self-adaptation and self-analysis: the same author is the text’s producer and creative-receiver (i.e. receiving a text with a view to adapting it). The author has to subject his own original work to rigorous interpretation in order to transpose it into another genre.

I should stress that in these models the “receiver” of the dramatic text is either the reader of a published play or a blanket term for all the initial readers, directors, performers and so on involved in the first stage of dramatic production. As well as emphasising the generic shift, I have converted Bassnett-McGuire’s “dashes” into arrows in order to give greater emphasis to the fact that a time process is involved. I would even go so far as to argue that the “time process” is even more important in

³⁵² *ibid.*, p. 38.

³⁵³ *ibid.*

adaptation than translation. This is because the question of “origin” is more important in adaptation where, in reception, it is difficult to escape from the shadow of the source; in the case of typical translation (i.e. Jakobson’s “interlingual transposition”), however, there is no generic shift and so the reader may believe the work to be, as it were, the “original itself” merely in a different language. In adaptation the creative “distance” between the original and the secondary version becomes all-important: the receiver of the latter work is probably aware of the time gap and the fact that the work is radically re-interpreted through the process of generic transformation. (This is before the further interpretative process of directing commences). This helps, within certain cultural climates, to create a hierarchical system where an adaptation is usually held as derivative and thus inferior because of its temporal location in the line of production. An example of the difficulty that an adaptation experiences in trying to live down the weight of its source is given by Terry Lovell with regards to a cinematic adaptation of fiction:

The French Lieutenant’s Woman’s status as literary adaptation is confirmed by the manner of its reception. I have been unable to find a single review which does not discuss the film almost entirely in its relation to the novel.³⁴

The same phenomenon — where an adapted work cannot escape its source — is also true of stage adaptations. The great exception to the rule must be Shakespeare whom we tend to regard as producing original work rather than adaptations of Cinthio, Boccaccio and numerous others. But, generally, stage versions of fiction seem to draw attention to their source, even with reference to titles. The audiences that went to see Christopher Hampton’s stage version of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* are confronted with a work that was, in terms of title at least, more akin to Laclos’s novel than the cinema audience at *Dangerous Liaisons*. The fact that the title was not translated did not make the audience expect to see a play in French; it foregrounded the fact that the play was, first and foremost, a version of a classic novel. Moreover, a

³⁴ Lovell, Terry, “Feminism and Form in the Literary Adaptation: *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*” in *Criticism and Critical Theory* (ed. Hawthorn, Jeremy), Edward Arnold: London, 1984, p. 123.

French title in the context of English language theatre did give “a touch of class”. It also honoured Laclos: by not changing the title, he remains the “author” of the story in whatever generic form. It is interesting, and completely unsurprising, that each of the self-adapters we have looked at retained a loyalty to the original titles of their own works.

The fact that a stage adaptation is often unable to escape from the original fiction means that the analysis and reception of the dramatisation can be clouded with value judgements. Such judgements do not take into consideration the different generic criteria that the works may independently establish and the differences they may demand from critical approaches. This, it seems to me, is particularly true in the case of the self-adapting novelists who made themselves irresistible targets for the critics, from the first-night unto eternity.

Milan Kundera reveals the stigma of adaptation in his “Introduction to a Variation” when he writes about his stage version of Diderot’s novel *Jacques le Fataliste*:

Jacques and his Master is not an adaptation; it’s my own play, my “variation on Diderot”, or rather, since it was written in admiration, my Homage to Diderot. (...) this play which is a “variation on Diderot” is at the same time a “homage to variation form”...³⁵⁵

Kundera’s rejection of the word “adaptation” in preference for the words “homage” or “variation” seems to imply that “adaptation” is a pejorative term. I think it is legitimate for us to define the implied meanings of Kundera’s terms for the process of dramatisation thus: “variation” is the production of an original creative work based on themes first developed by another artist; “homage” is the production of an original creative work based on themes first developed by another artist coupled with a feeling of “admiration” for the latter’s original and hence with no intention to subvert it; an “adaptation” is a derivative work which is secondary to an original work of art. If the words “homage” and “variation” succeed in guaranteeing artistic originality on

³⁵⁵ Kundera, Milan, “Introduction to a Variation” in *Jacques and His Master*, Faber: London, 1986, p. 17.

the behalf of their producers, “adaptation” implies diminished creativity. Adaptation may also imply the purely “functional” (consider Hardy’s “carpentry”) or even the “ad hoc”.

If “homage” and “variation” do not detract from the “secondary” artist’s creative power or originality, “adaptation” could be understood as a “dirty” artistic word because it does not suggest originality. It implies something more mechanical than artistic or creative. Whilst Kundera denies that *Jacques and his Master* is an adaptation in the belief — conscious or otherwise — that it safeguards his integrity as an artist, the self-adapters Hardy and Conrad accept that they have produced adaptations but dismiss the process of dramatisation as a purely mechanical experiment in ingenuity (while for James this is its greatest appeal describing it as “the exquisite exercise”).³⁵⁶ Nevertheless Hardy and Conrad also defend their artistic integrity by their disclaiming statements because these serve to ensure that they remain primarily novelists: their art and originality remain squarely in their fiction, and their dramatic enterprises are presented, by themselves, as excursions into technical experimentation. Émile Zola effectively highlights the practical difficulties of adaptation:

J’estime qu’il est toujours dangereux de tirer un drame d’un roman. Une des deux œuvres est fatalement inférieure à l’autre, et souvent cela suffit pour les rapetisser toutes deux. Le théâtre et le livre ont des conditions d’existence si absolument différentes, que l’écrivain se trouve forcé de pratiquer sur sa propre pensée de véritables amputations, d’en montrer les longueurs et les lacunes, de la brutaliser et de la défigurer pour la faire entrer dans un nouveau moule. C’est le lit de Procruste, le lit de torture, où l’on obtient des monstres à coups de hache.³⁵⁷

[I believe that it is always dangerous to dramatise a novel. One of the two works is fatally inferior to the other, and that is often enough to lessen both. The theatre and the novel exist in absolutely different conditions, and the writer finds himself forced to implement veritable amputations on his own thoughts, showing the *longueurs* and *lacunae*, brutalising and disfiguring it to fit it into a

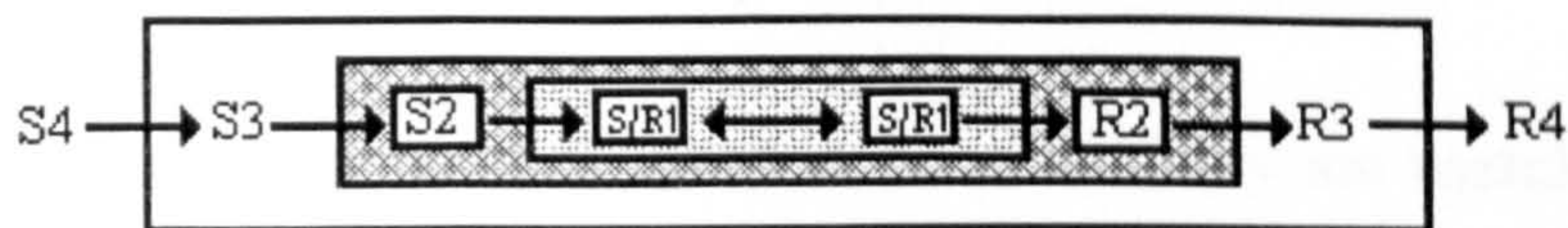
³⁵⁶ Letter to William James, 29 December 1893, quoted in Kossmann, p. 50.

³⁵⁷ Zola, Émile, *Œuvres complètes: tome XV*, le Cercle du livre précieux: Paris, 1969, p. 121.

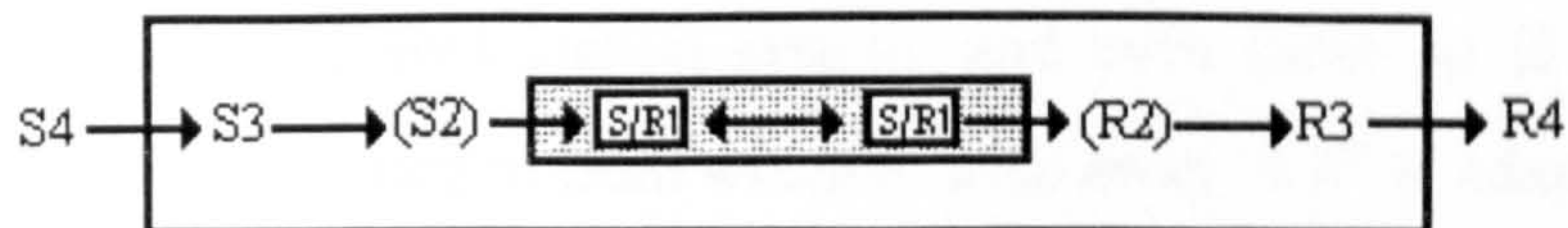
new mould. It is a Procrustean bed, a torture bed, where one creates a monster with each blow of the axe.]

Having established an overview of the concept of adaptation, let us now address the question of *what* precisely is transposed when fiction is converted into drama. In order to do this, let us first look at and attempt to define the differences between “fictive texts” and “dramatic texts”, the essential *literary* forms that our study is engaged with. Manfred Pfister in his seminal *The Theory and Analysis of Drama* provides communication models to show us the difference between narrative and dramatic texts.

a) Narrative texts:³⁵⁸



b) Dramatic texts:³⁵⁹



In both communication models S4 is the actual author in his/her socio-literary role as the producer of the work; S3 is the “ideal” author implied in the text as the subject of the whole work; S2 is the fictional narrator whose role in the work is formulated as the narrative medium; S/R1 are the fictional characters communicating with each other through dialogue; R2 is the fictional addressee of S2; R3 is the implied “ideal” receiver of the whole work; and R4 is the actual reader/receiver. Furthermore, the light-shaded area is Level 1 (L1) of the text — the “internal communication system” — and in the narrative model the darker-shaded zone is the “mediating

³⁵⁸ Pfister, Manfred, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, Cambridge University Press: 1988, p. 3.

³⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 4.

communication system" (L2). The other levels are: L3, the "idealised external communication system"; and L4, the "real external communication system".

The difference between the two models is immediately apparent: in the dramatic model, L2 — the mediating communication system — has disappeared. Subsequently, in drama the internal and external communication systems overlap. If we look at the models above what may seem like a deficiency — and not just simplicity — on the part of drama is explained by Pfister thus:

This "loss" of communicative potential in comparison to narrative texts is compensated for in two ways, however. First, dramatic texts have access to non-verbal codes and channels which are able, in part, to take on the communicative functions of S2 and R2, and secondly, aspects of the narrative function may be transferred to the internal communication system — for example by means of the type of questions and answers from S/R1 designed to inform the audience more than the protagonists do themselves.³⁶⁰

These models are certainly not definitive but I do think they are useful because they help to make clear for us the transformation that is required when adaptation is undertaken. Moreover, if certain writers are more accustomed to working in the narrative model we can see the challenge that faces them if they choose to work without the mediating communication system, and even more so if they select a specific work of their own fiction from which to strip away "L2" in adapting it for the stage. Earlier we saw Henry Arthur Jones asserting that "style" evaporates in adaptation, just as Conrad bewails the fact that his irony and artistic expression fall away. Pfister's model seems to imply that these qualities were to be found in the mediating communication system. These models are simply concerned with different *textual* systems: in other words, they demonstrate the contrasting dynamics between narrative fiction and a dramatic script. There is another world of difference between fiction and drama when we consider the non-textual and non-linguistic dimensions of theatre and this also has a critical effect on the "style" contained in the fiction adapted.

³⁶⁰ *ibid.*

In writing on the novel, Ortega y Gasset stresses that due to “aesthetic necessity the novel must be impervious, it must possess the power of forming a precinct, hermetically closed to all actual reality”.³⁶¹ Moreover, not only should we block reality out, we should forget it altogether: “no writer can be called a novelist unless he possesses the gift of forgetting, and thereby making us forget, the reality beyond the walls of his novel.”³⁶² Ortega y Gasset sets the scene for the cliché of the novelist alone in a cork-lined study *à la* Proust, creating a self-contained world, a substitute reality, on paper. On a purely practical level, the theatre has a more tangible “reality” because a playwright creates a text which a whole group of interpreters will turn into a live event, with dialogue written to be delivered by the human voice. Moreover, as Jiri Veltrusky writes, as well as signifying the character whom s/he portrays, each actor can never cease connoting his or her own reality:

In theatre the sign created by the actor tends, because of its overwhelming reality, to monopolise the attention of the audience at the expense of the immaterial meanings conveyed by the linguistic sign³⁶³

When George Bernard Shaw writes that “most people go to the theatre to escape reality”,³⁶⁴ we should stress that the audience does, in fact, find an *alternative* reality: the stage, with its all-too-evident reality, cannot be escapist in the same way as the sealed-off world of the novel.

If we are not cautious in our reading of Veltrusky, we could find ourselves believing that if there is any autonomy in theatre it is wielded entirely by the actor, and above all by the actor’s body. However, we should not neglect the inherent “dialectic” in theatre. The physical presence of the actor, the fact that he or she is a living entity adds extra dimensions to the “language” of a play. This is something that

³⁶¹ Ortega y Gasset, José, “Notes on the Novel” in *The Dehumanization of Art*, Princeton University Press: 1968, p. 94.

³⁶² *ibid.*, p. 92.

³⁶³ Veltrusky, Jiri, *Dramatic Text as a Component of Theater* (1941), quoted in Burns, Edward, *Character: Acting and Being on the Pre-Modern Stage*, Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1990, pp. 212-3.

³⁶⁴ Shaw, G. B., *Complete Works of Bernard Shaw Volume 23: Our Theatres in the Nineties Volume 1*, Constable and Company Limited: London, 1931, p. 7.

a self-adapter has no power to guide or change. The control exercised in the production of the novel and still asserted to a limited extent in the script of the adaptation disappear when the play goes into theatrical production. Hardy's anti-realist stance on theatre and his notion of theatre-in-the-round stage design do, in fact, affirm that performance should be centred on the actor. The "real and sham-real appurtenances"³⁶⁵ of props and backdrops merely hinder the actors and distract the audience from creating the true landscape that the works ideally require in adaptation: not a little slice of Wessex on the stage with an accurate reproduction of the tools and clothes of country folk; or even the *sound* of Wessex, but as in the novels, a landscape of the mind. This is a concept stressed by Fay Weldon (who adapted *Tess* for the stage in 1992) when she discusses the short-comings of the films based on Hardy's novels:

On film you are limited by the imagination of the man behind the camera. On radio or on stage, you create the landscape in people's heads. And Hardy's landscape is in the head, too.³⁶⁶

But Hardy's adaptation of *Tess* is clearly written for the dominant theatrical mode of his time, the proscenium stage, and suffers as a consequence. Perhaps if the type of theatre that Hardy truly desired had existed he would have produced a major work of drama and not merely a literary curiosity. (It is less obvious but just as fascinating to consider Conrad in relation to this). However, in Hardy's case we should not level too much blame at the proscenium arch. The shift from fiction into drama is enormous and potentially catastrophic if not approached correctly, and I believe that Hardy was unwilling, perhaps unable, to abandon his autonomy. Similarly, Conrad was unwilling to abandon his original story, and James had a stubborn idea as to the recipe of drama.

The "duplexity" of performance — the dialectic between text and performance, between literary construction and physical actor — is the essence of

³⁶⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶⁶ Morgan, Gwyn, interview with Fay Weldon in *Plays and Players*, April 1992, No. 457, p. 45.

theatre. June Schlueter writes on the fictive character within drama, and the way in which the genre gives the character an even more complex identity:

When a fictive character exists in drama, its identity is even more complex. In addition to being an imaginative creation of both author and reader, it also becomes a physical presence functioning before a live audience, which brings to the interpretation not simply the private response of the novel reader, but a collective, communal response as well. Not only does the fictive character take on representational tangibility in drama, but the individual doing the acting also becomes part of the creative process, presenting and interpreting from yet a third creative mentality. Hence, in terms of components and variables, the dramatic character is the most complex of fictive creations.³⁶⁷

Thus the self-adapters' fictive constructs are forced into the complexity of theatre: Daisy, Tess and Winnie become flesh and blood women, and the plays focus the novels into something more tangible. But there is also the threat of "blurring" caused by the loss of specific narrative, by the "doubleness" of the actor, and also by the diffused (three-way, according to Schlueter) process of theatrical interpretation. The conflict and the dialectic which is the very stuff of theatre, and the acceptance of this by a writer and a script which acknowledge the liberating anti-omnipotence of theatre, can create works of as much literary and cultural "value" as those in any other genre. The most worthwhile drama, such as Shakespeare's, continues to be acted (contrary to Hardy's prediction) because of its wealth of opportunity for theatrical *interpretation* as well as academic analysis.

Let us now attempt to look at recognition and cores of meaning. Is it possible to ascertain what is the "essence" of a work of literature? How do we recognise a work as being the "same" despite existing in two genres? According to the Russian Formalists,³⁶⁸ a text presents a reader with a "plot" at the heart of which is a unifying, concrete story. The time structure of a story must be linear while a plot can unfold itself in any conceivable order. This would imply that *The Secret Agent* play, with its

³⁶⁷ Schlueter, June, *Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama*, Columbia University Press: New York, 1979, p. 7.

³⁶⁸ Tomashevsky, B., "Thematics" in *Russian Formalist Criticism* (eds Lemon, L.T. and Reis, M. J.), University of Nebraska Press: 1965, p. 67.

linear time structure, must therefore be closer, as Conrad says, to the “sordid”³⁶⁹ underlying story than the original, more fragmentary (because non-chronological) novel. As Conrad wrote on the opening night of the production:

I found the writing of *The Secret Agent* very trying; it meant cutting all the flesh off the book. And I realized then, as I never had done, what a gruesome story I had written. In writing the novel I had veiled the plot to some extent by all those elements which go to make a book. I had to get to the bare bones of the story in making my play.³⁷⁰

Conrad’s assertion (presented in a similar metaphor to Zola’s “lit de Procruste”) that stage adaptation involves removing narrative details and extraneous support — the mediating communication system — in order to locate the essence of a work is to imply that there is such a thing as a core of meaning. In this instance “meaning” was apparently not the famous Conradian “glow (that) brings out a haze”,³⁷¹ but a kernel which the self-adapter beheld in an even more famous Conradian horror.

It is a valid assumption that all adapters share Conrad’s belief that there is an essence or a “meaning” which is locatable in all works of fiction and can survive generic transposition. Along these lines, Tomashevsky claims that a “theme” is an entity which “summarizes and unifies the verbal material in a work. [...] The development of a work is a process of diversification unified by a single theme.”³⁷² But he also claims that works may have many themes, each of which govern a separate part of the whole creation. The irreducible parts of a work are called “motifs”:

Usually there are different kinds of motifs within a work. By simply retelling the story we immediately discover what may be omitted without destroying the coherence of the narrative and what may not be omitted without disturbing the connections among events. The motifs which cannot be omitted are bound

³⁶⁹ Letter to J. B. Pinker, 11 November 1919, quoted in *Selected Literary Criticism and The Shadow-Line* (ed. Ingram, A.), Methuen: London, 1986, pp. 94-5.

³⁷⁰ Quoted in Mégroz, R. L., *Joseph Conrad’s Mind and Method*, Faber and Faber: London, 1931, p. 25.

³⁷¹ Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness*, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1983, p. 30.

³⁷² Tomashevsky, *ibid.*, p. 67.

motifs; those which may be omitted without disturbing the whole causal-chronological course of events are free motifs.³⁷³

Hence, it would appear that stories are made up of bound motifs and, as we saw earlier, plots are one way of arranging that story's material. If any bound motifs are omitted we are telling a different story. Using these ideas in relation to dramatic adaptation we could argue that an adapter may change a "plot" but may not alter a "story". Free motifs and plot arrangement may all go as long as the story and its bound motifs remain. After all, an original work of fiction and a play based on it can share the same story, even if they convey it in a different way. We thus find ourselves with a neat rule of adaptation: a true adaptation is a play which remains faithful to the bound motifs of an original story. However, things are not quite so clear in practice. Tomashevsky writes that "each sentence, in fact, has its own motif".³⁷⁴ Of course, these may be largely free motifs, but how do we define and decide what precisely are the free and bound motifs within a story? And where does this process end?

Thus with the Russian Formalists, we discover an enormous problem of definition. Although the notion of "story" would seem to be immensely useful for us when looking at adaptation, where and what is adaptation precisely?

Similarly we could apply the idea of myth *à la* Claude Lévi-Strauss to adaptation. "Myth" functions in much the same way as the Formalist "story". Lévi-Strauss contends that a myth can be propelled through any number of adaptations and elaborations but will maintain a basic stability of meaning. The myth of a text, we can say, lies not in its style, syntax, or sound but beyond or beneath all that. But once again this begs the question "where?" In his analysis of *Frankenstein*, Chris Baldick makes use of the concept of "myth". In spite of the plurality of interpretation, a literary text is a fixed entity, whilst a myth

is open to all kinds of adaptation and elaboration, but it will preserve at the same time a basic stability of meaning. As Lévi-Strauss argues, poetry cannot be translated without serious distortion, "whereas the mythic value of the myth

³⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 68.

³⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 67.

remains preserved, even through the worst translation". (This applies, we could add, to translations not just from one language but from one medium to another, although distortion is more likely here.) The reason for this openness to translation is that a myth's true substance as myth "does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax but in the story which it tells".³⁷⁵

Baldick's remark in parenthesis about translation between media is interesting with regard to stage adaptation, but what is most significant in his analysis is the notion of the essential "myth" or, once again, "story". Yet this is not entirely satisfactory and we can take issue with Lévi-Strauss's argument quoted in the final sentence: surely any modification to style, music, syntax — the so-called surface properties — can affect the story?

Aristotle's "mythos" is "the basic action": hence the "story" of a work is the core or essence, freed from the tyranny of narrative, plot and so on. The myth of a work exists at its simplest and most memorable (and to refer to Tomashevsky, irreducible) pattern. Myths are more organic than concretised text: a myth lives, and the "truth" of it is not to be found in the earliest version but, as Lévi-Strauss claims, in all its versions. As Baldick writes:

The vitality of myths lies precisely in their capacity for change, their adaptability and openness to new combinations of meaning. That series of adaptations, allusions, accretions, analogues, parodies, and plain misreadings which follows (...) is not just a supplementary component of the myth; it is the myth.³⁷⁶

If we regard adaptation in this light, it becomes part of a process of myth-making. In this way, an adaptation (and even, by implication, an academic thesis) becomes part of the primary text's legacy: a re-telling and in the case of stage dramatisation, an enacting.

Let us now consider the wider cultural implications of adaptation. In looking at imitation, Joel Weinsheimer stresses that it is a process not completely differentiated from literary activities like these:

³⁷⁵ Baldick, Chris, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1987, p. 2.

³⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 4.

...publication, reprinting, editing, reading, transcription, forgery, quotation, plagiarism, citation, pastiche, allusion, translation, emendation, explication, parody, paraphrase, annotation, adaptation, revision, interpretation, exegesis, renovation, embellishment, performance, enactment, and application.³⁷⁷

This list serves to illustrate the importance of fundamental adaptive processes in our culture (challenging the onus placed on “originality”). All these literary activities have one thing in common: there is a primary work which is in some way modified to produce another work. Each of these literary processes make us consider primary and secondary works and the link between them. In adaptation especially, the link between the two works is foregrounded and we are made aware of the process of transposition and transformation. In establishing a polarity between an original and a secondary work, adapters believe that nothing less than Truth itself is, as it were, translatable. A constant core or essence remains throughout each metamorphosis. But it is often extremely hard to identify this core. In the adaptation of *The Secret Agent* Winnie goes irrevocably insane whilst in the primary version she commits suicide (which is, just for the record, what occurred in the “original” historical event which was Conrad’s inspiration and source: biographical or historicist approaches would locate this as the genesis of the novel, and be relevant to the study of another form of dramatic adaptation, “faction”).

Writing on Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble adaptations, Arrigo Subiotto broadens his work out to offer a wider view of adaptation. Although he is generally interested in the “contemporary” adaptation of the “classic”, he does cover ground that can be beneficially applied to self-adaptation. We can even find relevance in this contemporary/classic dichotomy if we modify it appropriately. Subiotto argues that we must never lose sight of the fact that there are always two poles involved: “the adapter (a contemporary of ours) and the author (usually a ‘classic’)”.³⁷⁸ The concept

³⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁷⁸ Subiotto, Arrigo, *Bertolt Brecht’s Adaptations for the Berliner Ensemble*, Modern Humanities Research Association: London, 1975, p. 191.

of polarity can be found in other writing on adaptation. Patrice Pavis discusses interculturalism in theatre:

The adapter can be the linguistic translator of the text as well as the director, designer, actor, or all those who have a mediating function, adapting, transforming, modifying, borrowing, appropriating source text and culture for a target culture and audience. All these artists necessarily adapt the source culture to the target culture, i.e. mediate or act as a bridge between two poles.³⁷⁹

The polarities that Subiotto addresses, the contemporary and the “classic”, raises the issue of the “literary tradition”. This can lead us onto a wide topic, but there is one essential factor that we should not forget in relation to it: regardless of their style or ideology, writers as different as Brecht and T. S. Eliot are aware that “the writer can find his own identity and meaning only through an active relationship with the past”.³⁸⁰

This assertion can be made relevant to the case of Conrad’s major adaptation by stressing that in this example the “active relationship” is very personal. Conrad is simultaneously the producer — in terms of his socio-literary role — of a classic as well as its subsequent adaptation. It reads like an intriguing conceit, curiously schizophrenic, and as ironic as any of Conrad’s works: a 1920s playwright called Joseph Conrad tackles a classic of Edwardian fiction, written by the same man. Moreover, the notion that a writer is only able to find his own “identity and meaning” through “an active relationship with the past” becomes especially poignant in Conrad’s instance if we accept that Conrad was attempting to rescue his creativity.

There is a theoretical critique of “translatable truth” to be found in Terry Eagleton’s “Translation and Transformation”. Eagleton discusses Julia Kristeva’s concept of “intertextuality” in relation to poetry:

Every text is a set of determinate transformations of other, preceding and surrounding texts of which it may not even be consciously aware; it is within, against and across these other texts that the poem emerges into being. And these other texts are, in their turn, “tissues” of such pre-existent textual

³⁷⁹ Pavis, Patrice, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, Routledge: London, 1992, p. 191.

³⁸⁰ Subiotto, p. 191.

elements, which can never be unravelled back to some primordial moment of “origin”.³⁸¹

Thus Eagleton attacks the notion of “origin”, and we can therefore move away from strict reference to poetry and apply this to the concepts of “story”, “myth” and even “Truth” that we confronted earlier.

I have already referred to Jakobson’s belief that poetic art is untranslatable because complete “equivalence” is impossible. This serves partly to protect the status of the “original”, and yet does not deny that there may be different permutations: in other words, we could say that all translations — and perhaps, in the terms of intertextuality, all works of art — are simultaneously “original” and “unoriginal”.

Charles Tomlinson regards the translation of poetry as a form of “literary metempsychosis”.³⁸² Metempsychosis means the passing of the soul after death into some other body. Adaptation is an even clearer example of “literary metempsychosis” because a change in genre is more obviously the movement into “some other body”; but as delightful as it would be to discover the “soul” of a work, I am afraid this is not feasible. The nearest we could get to “literary souls” in our study of adaptation is by comparing the language of the original and the work of transposition; by attempting to locate methods of intersemiotic transformation; or by venturing into the blurred world of story and myth; or by looking at critical reception. Most interesting (because it is most valid) in the study of the self-adapters is to see what they expanded, marginalised, omitted, and added in the dramatisations of their original fictional works and how their actions were affected by generic conventions and reception.

James’s intention to change the mood and repertoire of the English stage was a noble ambition. Hardy’s desire to see a return to Old English drama and his interest in theatre-in-the-round is also noteworthy. The novel of *The Secret Agent* is, in my opinion, one of the greatest works of twentieth-century literature and the play will

³⁸¹ Quoted in Bassnett-McGuire, Susan, *Translation Studies* (Revised edition), Routledge: London, 1991, p. 104.

³⁸² Tomlinson, p. 73.

always be in its shadow. Having said that, the play is not as poor as the reviews or literary mythology would imply. The plays of the self-adapters have been consigned to the backwaters of literary curiosity. Nevertheless, all the self-adaptations provide a fascinating insight into the way the authors saw their novels. Furthermore, the *process* reveals a lot about, broadly speaking, early modern culture.

In *The Tragic Muse* James accounts for the need for change in the contemporary theatre, and highlights the difficulties that will have to be encountered, when he writes that, "Today we are so infinitely more reflective and complicated and diffuse."³⁸³ This seems to fit in with the mood of early Modernism, explaining why James (and, for that matter, Hardy and Conrad) are sometimes defined as transitional writers or as founders of Modernism. The question of when Modernism began is a favourite in the broad field of cultural studies. However, it could be argued that certain key features of what is defined as Modernist begin to be detected as early as the era of Romanticism. Since that period *creating* has, arguably, become a process as important as *creation*: the principles of artistic, self-contained completion and perfection are utterly rejected in a broader acceptance of fragmentation and variation as a reflection of the modern consciousness. This ties in with other views of Modernism. Peter Osborne explains that in the opinion of Theodor W. Adorno, Modernism is characterised by "a restless dialectic of formal innovation directed toward the continual re-newal of dissonance".³⁸⁴ To quote Adorno himself the Modernist situation is one of "art groping for objectivity in a framework of open-endedness and insecurity".³⁸⁵ In other words, modern existence is seen as particularly precarious and lacking in closure; and so art attempts to devise ways of "capturing" this essence, despite the fact that this essence is impossible to catch. Adaptation denies texts a sense of "completeness", because it forces novels to be challenged textually and generically. By demonstrating that a text can be "exploded" we are

³⁸³ James, Henry, *The Tragic Muse*, p. 51.

³⁸⁴ Osborne, Peter, "Adorno and the Metaphysics of Modernism: The Problem of a 'Postmodern' Art" in *The Problems of Modernity* (ed. Benjamin, A.), Routledge: London, 1989, p. 38.

³⁸⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*

reminded that there is no stability in meaning, that interpretation is heterogeneous. Moreover, in this way, adaptation reflects the nature of modern existence.

Subiotto finds a political significance in adaptation. Since all creative work belongs within its own historical context — within “time” — “classics are now no longer inviolable”.³⁸⁶ He comments that this could be an expression of the “irony” that forms the character of our epoch and also reflects the “democratizing process”³⁸⁷ where no “public figures” have the sacred right to respect and reverence. The significance of this is that the “producer — or adapter — is free now to seek out meaningful connections with the present in a work and modify it accordingly without compunction”.³⁸⁸ These sentiments are clearly stated with specific attention to later modern art (such as post-war Brecht), but nevertheless they are just as interesting bearing a pioneering “Modernist” writer — such as Joseph Conrad — in mind. In line with the broader notion that a contemporary writer has to find a significant way in which to relate to “history”, we can place greater emphasis on the “present” by asserting that the process of dramatic adaptation involves challenging both the status of literary “classics” and the cult of veneration which surrounds the “author”. This has a fascinating dimension if related to self-adapters: it is a profound irony, but it can also be considered as an attempt to find in a past work a “meaningful connection” with the writer’s own creative present.

Subiotto defines the importance of Brecht’s adaptive works thus:

By keeping a tight hold on the conceptual understanding of the dramatic action Brecht tries to ensure a close-knit dialectical unity of the text that is simultaneously an interpretation of itself. Put another way, he presents analysis (*Vorstellung*) of the original in place of portrayal (*Illusion*).³⁸⁹

This may seem solely relevant to the analysis of a Marxist playwright’s adaptations, and yet this touches on a point which is also relevant in self-adaptation. It is

³⁸⁶ Subiotto, p. 192.

³⁸⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸⁸ *ibid.*

³⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p. 197.

particularly pertinent in the case of Conrad when he claims that he had no idea what his own story was until he came to adapt it. For Conrad, self-adaptation is a brutal form of self-analysis where the writer is forced to challenge the integrity of his original work of fiction and also accept the fragmented dimension of our culture. To transpose a novel to the stage involves re-writing it within a different genre, but before this partially new art work is produced, the original must, in fact, be smashed up. This is not a problem for Henry James who welcomes this technical challenge and conveniently blames the audience for his defeat. Thomas Hardy tries to hold on to the integrity and conception of his original novel and accounts for his failure by venting his spleen on everything from the genre to the reviewers. For Joseph Conrad the experience was not far short of a Kurtzian epiphany. Whatever way our chosen self-adapters felt about the dramatic genre, the stage, the process of adaptation, and the reception, all were obliged to face, and unravel, the machinations of their work and creativity: self-adaptation is a simultaneous process of re-construction and deconstruction.

APPENDIX 1

A SELECTED LIST OF SELF-ADAPTERS

Balzac, Honoré de (French, 1799-1850)

Le Père Goriot (1834-5) into *Vautrin* 1840.

Barrie, J. M. (British, 1860-1937)

The Little Minister (1891) adapted in 1897.

Quality Street (1902) adapted from sub-plot in *Sentimental Tommy* (1896).

Beerbohm, Max (British, 1872-1956)

The Happy Hypocrite (1897) adapted in 1900.

Bennett, Arnold (British, 1867-1931)

Mr. Prohack (1922) adapted (with Edward Knoblock) in 1927.

Sacred and Profane Love (1905) adapted in 1919.

Branner, Hans Christian (Danish, 1903-66)

Ryttereren (1947) adapted in 1949.

Bulgakov, Mikhail A. (Russian, 1891-1940)

The White Guard (1925) adapted in the same year.

Christie, Agatha (British, 1890-1976)

Ten Little Niggers (1939) adapted in 1945.

Appointment with Death (1938) adapted in 1956.

Death on the Nile (1946) into *Murder on the Nile* (1948).

The Hollow (1946) adapted in 1952.

Five Little Pigs (1942) into *Go Back for Murder* (1960).

Towards Zero (1944) adapted with Gerald Verner in 1957.

“Witness for the Prosecution” (1948) adapted in 1954.

“Three Blind Mice” (1950) into *The Mousetrap* (1954).

Collins, Wilkie (British, 1824-89)

Woman in White (1860) into play (1871).

The Moonstone (1868) into play (1877).

Conrad, Joseph (Polish/British 1857-1924)

“To-morrow” (1902) into *One Day More* (1904).

“Because of the Dollars” (1915) *Laughing Anne* 1920.

The Secret Agent (1907) adapted in 1919.

Dickens, Charles (British, 1812-70)

The Old Curiosity Shop (1841) nine episodes adapted into *Dialogues from Dickens for House and Home* (1870).

Great Expectations (1860-1) into *Great Expectations: A Drama in Three Stages* (1861).

Doyle, Arthur Conan (British, 1859-1930)

Angel of Darkness: A Drama in Three Acts (draft 1888) based on *A Study in Scarlet* (1888).

“A Straggler of ‘15” (1891) adapted into *Waterloo* (1894).

“A Question of Diplomacy” (1892) adapted into *Foreign Policy* (1893).

A Duet (1899) adapted 1902.

“The Pot of Caviare” adapted into *A Pot of Caviare* (1910).

Dumas fils, Alexandre (French, 1824-95)

La Dame aux camélias (1848) adapted in 1852.

Feuchtwanger, Lion (German, 1884-1958)

Simone (1944) into *Die Gesichte der Simone Machard* (with Brecht, 1956).

Galsworthy, John (British, 1867-1936)

“A Stoic” (1916) into *Old English* (1924).

“The First and Last”, written as both a short story and a short play.

Giraudoux, Jean (French, 1882-1944)

Siegfried et le Limousin (1922) adapted into *Siegfried* (1928).

Goncourt, Edmond (1822-96) and Jules (1830-70)

Germinie Lacerteux (1865) adapted in 1888.

Greene, Graham (British, 1904-91)

The Heart of the Matter (1948) adapted with Basil Dean in 1950.

Greenwood, Walter (British, 1903-74)

Love on the Dole (1933) adapted with Roland Gow in 1934.

Only Mugs Work written as novel and play in 1938.

Handke, Peter (Austrian 1942-)

Langsame Heimkehr adapted in 1979.

Hardy, Thomas (British, 1840-1928)

Far From the Madding Crowd (1874) into *Far From The Madding Crowd: A Pastoral Drama in Three Acts* (1822).

“The Three Strangers” (1888) into *The Three Wayfarers* (1893).

Tess of the D’Urbervilles (1891) adapted in 1894-5.

Hay, Ian (British, 1876-1952)

Happy-Go-Lucky (1913) into *Tilly of Bloomsbury* (1919).

A Safety Match (1911) adapted in 1921.

Ivanov, V. V. (Russian, 1895-1963)

Bronepoyezd No. 14-69 (1922) adapted in 1927.

James, Henry (American/British 1843-1916)

Daisy Miller (1878) adapted into play 1882.

The American (1877) 1891.

“The Solution” (1892) adapted into *Disengaged* (1893).

“Covering End” (1898, itself an adaptation of his 1895 play *Summersoft*) into *The High Bid* (1907).

“Owen Wingrave” (1892) adapted into *The Saloon* (1907).

The Other House (1896, based on 1893 play scenario *The Promise*) adapted in 1909.

Kruczkowski, Leon (Polish, 1900-62)

Kordan i cham (1932) adapted in 1935.

Lagerkvist, Pär (Swedish, 1891-1930)

Bödeln (1933) adapted in 1934.

Lawrence, D. H. (British, 1885-1930)

“Odour of Chrysanthemums” (1911) into *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* (1913)

Laxness, H. K. (Icelandic, 1902-)

Trilogy of novels *Islandklukken* (1943-6) adapted in 1950.

Maugham, W. Somerset (British, 1874-1965)

The Hero (1901) adapted into *The Unknown* (1920).

Moberg, Vilhelm (Swedish, 1898-1973)

Mans kvinna (1953) into *Kvinnas man* (1965)

Din stund på jordan (1962) adapted in 1967.

Moore, George (Anglo-Irish, 1852-1933)

Esther Waters (1894) adapted in 1913.

second part of *The Book Kerith* into *The Passing of the Essences* (1930).

Pinter, Harold (British, 1930-)

“Tea Party” (1963) adapted in 1965.

Priestley, J. B. (British, 1894-1984)

The Good Companions (1929) adapted with Edward Knoblock in 1935.

“Look after the Strange Girl” (from *The Other Place*, 1953) into *Time Was, Time Is* (1953).

Reade, Charles (British, 1814-84)

It's Never Too Late to Mend (1856) adapted in 1864.

Put Yourself in His Place (1869) adapted into *Free Labour* (1870).

The Wandering Heir (1872) adapted in 1873.

Sønderby, Knut (Danish, 1909-66)

En kvinde er overflødig (1936) adapted in the same year.

Steinbeck, John (American, 1902-68)

Of Mice and Men (1937) adapted in the same year.

The Moon is Down (1942) adapted in 1943.

Burning Bright (1950) adapted in 1951.

Sweet Thursday (1954) into *Pipe Dream* (with Rogers and Hammerstein, 1956).

Tarkington, Booth (American, 1869-1946)

Monsieur Beaucaire (1900) into *Beaucaire* (1901).

The Gentleman from Indiana (1899) adapted in 1904.

Unamuno Y Jugo, Miguel de (Spanish, 1846-1936)

Abel Sánchez (1917) into *El otro* (1926).

Wallace, Edgar (British, 1875-1932)

The Squeaker (1927) adapted 1929.

The Flying Squad (1928) adapted in 1951.

The Calendar (1930) adapted 1932.

White, Patrick (Australian, 1913-90)

“A Cheery Soul” adapted in 1962.

Wickram, Jörg (German, c1520-c1560)

Der Jungen Knaben Spiegel (1554) adapted in the same year.

Wodehouse, P. G. (British, 1881-1975)

A Damsel in Distress (1919) adapted with Ian Hay in 1930.

Leave It to Psmith (1923) adapted with Ian Hay in 1932.

Zola, Émile (French, 1840-1902)

Thérèse Raquin (1868) adapted in 1873.

La Curée (1872) into *Renée* (1887).

APPENDIX 2

A SYSTEMATIC PRESENTATION OF ASPECTS OF *The Secret Agent*: novel and play

A. List of characters/dramatis personae in the novel and the play.

A name in italics signifies a character with no direct speech.

The use of parentheses indicates that the character is not included in the list of dramatis personae in the play text.

B. Cross-referencing: chapter sources for each act of the adaptation.

C. Locations used in the novel and the *first* appearances of the characters in the novel.

A name in italics signifies a character with no direct speech.

The use of parentheses indicates the place later in the text where we are given details of a character or location that has been introduced without being named.

D. All locations and characters in the play, complete with entrances and exits.

A character name in bold format signifies first appearance.

The use of parentheses indicates character off-stage.

E. Time structure of the novel.

F. Time structure of the play.

G. Presentation of the participants in all dialogue in the novel.

H. Presentation of all non-dialogic direct speech in the novel (e.g. characters speaking to themselves, etc.).

I. Presentation of all interior direct speech in the novel (e.g. characters thinking to themselves).

J. The dialogue of Chapter 4 (plus Chapter 13) in parallel to the dialogue of Act II Scene I.

K. Reviews of the first production of *The Secret Agent* at the Ambassadors Theatre, November 1922.

A. CHARACTERS IN *The Secret Agent*

NOVEL

Mr Verloc
 Winnie Verloc
 Stevie
The customers
 Winnie's Mother
The cat
a butcher boy
guilty-looking cat
a thick policeman
Embassy porter
Embassy footman
an elderly man
another lackey
 Privy Counc. Wurmt
footman
 Mr Vladimir
a policeman
a wealthy baby
a fly
footman
porter
 Michaelis
 Karl Yundt
 Ossipon
 The Professor
waiter
newspaper sellers
a crowd
 Chief Inspector Heat
 local constable
hospital porter
another man
 Assistant Commissioner
editor
barrister
 Colonel
 Lady patroness of Michaelis
various guests e.g.
a tall, brilliant girl
a man of forty
men with grey moustaches
two mature women
 Private Sec. Toodles
 Sir Ethelred, Sec of State
 Ass. Com.'s secretary
hansom cabbie
waiter
a woman
policeman on beat
 maimed cabbie
 policeman
 Mrs Neale
constables
various guests
 a lady
policeman on beat
cab driver
 barmaid
 train guard
 crowd of railwaymen
men

PLAY

Winnie Verloc
 Stevie
 Winnie's Mother
 Mr Verloc
 Mr Vladimir
 Ossipon
 Michaelis
 Karl Yundt
 The "Professor"
Waiter
 Assistant Commissioner
 Inspector Heat
 Lady Mabel
 A Maid
 First Lady Guest
 Second Lady Guest
 Third Lady Guest
 First Gentleman Guest
 Detective
 First Policeman
 Second Policeman
[café customers]
[other guests]
[voice of news vendor in street]
[torch light of policeman in street]

B. CROSS-REFERENCING *The Secret Agent*: SOURCES FOR THE ADAPTATION

PLAY

NOVEL

Act I

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 8

Act II, scene i

Chapter 4
Chapter 13

Act II, scene ii

Chapter 5

Act III

Chapter 6
Chapter 10

Act IV, scene i
scene ii
scene iii

Chapter 11

scene iv

Chapter 12

C. *The Secret Agent*: the novel

CHAPTER	LOCATION	CHARACTER
Chapter 1		
45 {135}	Verloc's shop {32 Brett Street}	Mr Verloc Mr Verloc's wife and brother-in-law
{46}		{Winnie}
{48}		{Stevie}
47		<i>The customers</i>
48		Winnie's mother <i>The cat</i>
Chapter 2		
51	London streets Hyde Park Corner	
53	Knightsbridge	<i>a butcher boy</i> <i>guilty-looking cat</i> <i>a thick policeman</i>
54	No.1 Chesham Square No. 9 Chesham Square No. 37 Porthill Street The Embassy	<i>Embassy porter</i> <i>Embassy footman</i> <i>an elderly man</i> <i>another lackey</i> Privy Counc. Wurmt <i>footman</i> Mr Vladimir <i>a policeman</i> <i>a wealthy baby</i> <i>a fly</i> <i>footman</i> <i>porter</i>
57		
60	[view of the Square]	
62		
70		
Chapter 3		
73	Verloc's parlour	Michaelis
74		Karl Yundt
75		Ossipon
83	Verloc's bedroom	
Chapter 4		
87	public house	The Professor <i>waiter</i>
101	London street	<i>newspaper sellers</i>

CHAPTER	LOCATION	CHARACTER
Chapter 5		<i>a crowd</i>
101	London street	Chief Inspector Heat
103		local constable
106		<i>hospital porter</i>
107		<i>another man</i>
		Assistant Commissioner
114	Police HQ: Assistant Comm.'s private room	<i>editor</i>
	Ass. Com.'s club	<i>barrister</i>
118		<i>Colonel</i>
Chapter 6		Lady patroness of
119	Lady's house	Michaelis
		<i>various guests e.g.</i>
122		<i>a tall, brilliant girl</i>
		a man of forty
		<i>men with grey</i>
		<i>moustaches</i>
		<i>two mature women</i>
125	Ass. Com.'s office	
Chapter 7		
141	London street	Private Sec. {Toodles}
{147}	Parliament	Sir Ethelred, Sec of
142	a large room	State
148	the outer room	
150	street	Ass. Com.'s secretary
	Ass. Com.'s office	
	street	
	Strand, Charing Cross	<i>hansom cabbie</i>
151		<i>waiter</i>
	Italian restaurant	<i>a woman</i>
152		
	streets	
	Brett Street	<i>policeman on beat</i>
153		

CHAPTER	LOCATION	CHARACTER
Chapter 8		
154	Verloc's house	
157	Brett Street	maimed cabbie policeman
	Whitehall	
	Treasury Buildings	
158	St Stephen's	
159	South London	
166	the Charity	
170	Verloc's shop	
172	streets Verloc's bedroom	
Chapter 9		
175	Verloc's shop	
176	Verloc's parlour	
179		Mrs Neale
181	Verloc's shop	
182	Verloc's parlour	
190	Verloc's shop	
194	Verloc's parlour Parlour/Shop	
Chapter 10		
198	cab Soho, Westminster Parliament House of Commons	<i>constables</i>
205	Ass. Com.'s home Lady's house	<i>various guests</i> a lady
206		
207	streets	
Chapter 11		
210	Verloc's parlour	
211	Verloc's shop	
216	Verloc's parlour	
Chapter 12		
236	Verloc's parlour	
239	Verloc's shop street	
241	Brett Street Brett Square	
249	Verloc's shop	
251	Brett Street	<i>policeman on beat</i>
252	Verloc's shop	
256	street	

CHAPTER	LOCATION	CHARACTER
256	hansom cab	<i>cab driver</i>
258	Waterloo Station	
259		<i>barmaid</i>
260	train	train guard
261		
	Westminster Abbey	crowd of railwaymen
	Victoria	
	Sloane Square	
262	streets	
Chapter 13		
262	Professor's flat	
264	omnibus	
265	<i>Silenus</i> pub	
268	streets	<i>men</i>

D. *The Secret Agent*: The play

ACT AND SCENE	LOCATION	CHARACTERS
Act I: The Private Life		
73	parlour behind Verloc's shop	Winnie's Mother, Winnie, Stevie exit Stevie
74		re-enter Stevie
81		enter Mr Verloc
84		exit Winnie and Mother
85		exit Stevie enter Mr Vladimir
95		exit Verloc re-enter Verloc
96		exit Verloc and Vladimir re-enter Verloc, Winnie and Stevie
99		exit Stevie exit Verloc re-enter Verloc and Ossipon
100		exit Winnie enter Michaelis and Yundt
102		enter Stevie
104	exit Michaelis, Yundt and Verloc	
105	re-enter Verloc	
108	CURTAIN	
Act II, scene i		
109	room in a small café	Professor <i>"one or two...cutomers"</i> enter Waiter enter Ossipon
Act II, scene ii		
118	Special Crimes Department	Ass. Com. and Heat
132		exit Ass. Com. exit Heat re-enter Ass. Com. CURTAIN
Act III: The Upper World		
133	Lady Mabel's drawing room	Lady Mabel, Maid 3 Lady Guests
134		enter Michaelis

ACT AND SCENE

LOCATION

CHARACTERS

138		enter 2 Men and Vladimir enter Ass. Com. exit Michaelis
139		a Gentleman 3 guests speak
145		“general leave taking” of guests Lady Guest
146		CURTAIN
Act IV, scene i		
148	Verloc’s parlour	Winnie enter Verloc
151		exit Verloc enter Ass. Com.
152		enter Verloc
153		exit Ass. Com. exit Verloc
Act IV, scene ii		
153	Verloc’s shop	Winnie [distant news vendor’s voice] enter Heat
158		enter Verloc exit Verloc and Heat
Act IV, scene iii		
159	Verloc’s parlour	Heat and Verloc
162		enter Winnie exit Heat
163		exit Winnie
164		enter Winnie
Act IV, scene iv		
168	Verloc’s shop	enter Winnie
169		enter Ossipon
178		[policeman in street]
180		exit Ossipon enter Heat, Constable
181		enter Detective , 2nd Constable, Ossipon
182		exit Detective , 2nd Constable, Ossipon
184		enter Professor CURTAIN

E. TIME STRUCTURE OF *The Secret Agent*: the novel

Chapter 1: morning (45)

Chapter 2: "half past ten in the morning" (51)

Chapter 3: evening (82)

Chapter 8: "the early dirty night" (159)

Chapter 9: ten days later (175); includes the day of the bomb (181) through to evening

Chapter 4: afternoon after bomb

Chapter 5: includes ellipsis of morning of bomb (105-110)

Chapter 6: day of the bomb

Chapter 7: day of the bomb

Chapter 10: ("half past ten", 210) simultaneous with Chapter 11 and Chapter 12 (10.22 pm, 260)

("Half past twelve", 261)

(dawn, 262)

Chapter 13: ten days later (266)

F. TIME STRUCTURE OF *The Secret Agent*: the play

Act I: afternoon (73)

Act II, scene i: one month later (115); afternoon on day of bomb

Act II, scene ii: afternoon on day of bomb

Act III: evening on day of bomb

Act IV, scene i: evening on day of bomb

Act IV, scene ii: evening on day of bomb

Act IV, scene iii: evening on day of bomb

Act IV, scene iv: evening on day of bomb

G. The Secret Agent: the novel

CHAPTER	PASSAGE OF DIALOGUE BETWEEN
Chapter 2 55-57 57-70 72	Wurmt and Verloc Vladimir and Verloc Winnie's mother and Winnie
Chapter 3 73-80 84-87	Michaelis, Yundt, Ossipon and Verloc Verloc and Winnie
Chapter 4 88-101	Ossipon and Professor
Chapter 5 103-104 107-109 111-114 114-118	Heat and Professor local constable and Heat Heat and Professor Ass. Com. and Heat
Chapter 6 123 123 126-140	Lady and Ass. Com. other voices Ass. Com. and Heat
Chapter 7 141 142-148 148-150 150	Toodles and Ass. Com. Sir Ethelred and Ass. Com. Toodles and Ass. Com. Ass. Com. and his secretary
Chapter 8 155-170 173-175	Winnie and Winnie's mother, policeman, cabbie, and Stevie Winnie and Verloc
Chapter 9 176-179 181-187 187-188 188-189 190-194 194-198	Verloc, Mrs Neale, and Winnie Winnie and Verloc Winnie and Ass. Com. Winnie and Verloc Heat and Winnie Verloc and Heat
Chapter 10 199-201 201-204 205 206-209	Toodles and Ass. Com. Sir Ethelred and Ass. Com. Lady and Ass. Com. a lady, Vladimir, Ass. Com.

Chapter 11
211-234

Verloc and Winnie

Chapter 12
240-258
258-260
261

Ossipon and Winnie
Ossipon and Winnie
Ossipon and railwaymen

Chapter 13
263-268

Professor and Ossipon

H. *The Secret Agent*: the novel

NON-DIALOGIC DIRECT SPEECH

CHAPTER	CHARACTER
Chapter 1 48	Winnie
Chapter 2 71 72	Winnie Winnie's mother
Chapter 3 83	Verloc
Chapter 5 105-106	Heat
Chapter 6 122	man of forty
Chapter 9 176 179 180 181	Mrs Neale Winnie Winnie Winnie
Chapter 12 258 269	Ossipon Ossipon

I. *The Secret Agent*: the novel

INTERIOR DIRECT SPEECH

CHAPTER	CHARACTER
Chapter 6 125 126	Ass. Com. Ass. Com.
Chapter 7 152	Ass. Com.
Chapter 10 199	Toodles
Chapter 11 215	Verloc
Chapter 12 239-240	Winnie

The Secret Agent: novel
Chapter 4

Ossipon. Unless I am very much mistaken, you are the man who would know the inside of this confounded affair. Professor. In principle what one of us may or may not know as to any given fact can't be a matter for inquiry to the others.

O. Certainly not, in principle. Have you been out much today?

P. No I stayed in bed all morning. why?

O. Oh! Nothing. Did you walk down here?

P. No; omnibus.

O. Been sitting here long?

P. An hour or more.

O. An hour. Then it may be you haven't heard yet the news I've heard just now — in the street. Have you? I never thought of finding you here.

P. I come here sometimes.

O. It's wonderful that you of all people should have heard nothing of it. You of all people. Do you give your explosive stuff to anybody who's to asking you for it?

P. My absolute rule is never refuse anybody — as long as I have a pinch by me.

O. That's a principle?

P. It's a principle.

O. And you think it's sound?

P. Perfectly. Always. Under every circumstance. What could stop me? Why should I not? Why should I think twice about it?

O. Do you mean to say that you would hand it over to a tec if one came along to ask you for your wares?

P. Let them come and try it on, and you will see. They know me, but I also know every one of them. They won't come near me — not they.

The Secret Agent: play
Act II Scene I

Ossipon. Were you out early to-day, Professor?

Professor. No. In bed till eleven.

O. Did you walk all the way from Islington?

P. No. Bus.

O. Have you been sitting here long?

P. About an hour.

O. Then maybe you don't know the news I have heard just now in the street. I never expected to find you here.

P. I sit here sometimes.

O. It's wonderful that you of all people know nothing of it. You, of all people. Are you in the habit of giving your explosive stuff to anybody who cares to ask for it?

P. I never refuse my stuff to anybody, as long as I have a pinch by me. On principle.

O. And you think it's a sound principle?

P. Perfectly. Always. Under any circumstances. Why should I think twice about it?

O. Do you mean that you would hand it over to a detective, if one came along to ask you for your wares?

P. Let them try it on.

But no fear. Not one of them will come near me.

O. But they could send someone — rig a plant on you. Don't you see? Get the stuff from you in that way, and then arrest you with the proof in their hands.

P. Proof of what? Dealing with explosives without a licence perhaps. I don't think there's one of them anxious to make that arrest. I don't think they could get one of them to apply for a warrant. I mean one of the best. Not one.

O. Why?

P. Because they know very well I take care never to part with the last handful of my wares. I've it always by me. In a thick glass flask.

O. So I've been told, but I didn't know if —

P. They know. I shall never be arrested. The game isn't good enough for any policeman of them all. To deal with a man like me you require sheer, naked, inglorious heroism.

O. Or recklessness — or simply ignorance. They've only to get somebody for the job who does not know you carry enough stuff in your pocket to blow yourself and everything within sixty yards to pieces.

P. I never affirmed I could not be eliminated. But that wouldn't be an arrest. moreover, it's not so easy as it looks.

O. Bah! Don't be too sure of that. What's to prevent half a dozen of them jumping upon you from behind in the street? With your arms pinned to your sides you could do nothing — could you?

O. Why won't they?

P. Because they know very well that I never part with the last handful of what you call 'my wares'. I carry it always on me. In a glass flask. Enough to turn this place into rubble and shambles.

O. So I have been told.

P. But *they know*. I shall never be arrested. The game isn't good enough for any policeman of them all. I mean one of the best, such as Inspector Heat, for instance. To deal with a man like me you require sheer, naked, inglorious heroism.

O. Or recklessness — or simply ignorance. They have only to find somebody for the job who does not know you carry enough of your stuff about you to blow yourself and everything within sixty yards to pieces.

P. But that wouldn't be an arrest. Besides, it's not so easy as it looks.

O. Bah! Suppose half a dozen of them jumped on you from behind, in the street, what could you do with your arms pinned to your sides? Nothing.

P. Yes; I could. I am seldom out in the streets after dark and never very late. I walk always with my right hand closed round the indiarubber ball which I have in my trouser pocket. The pressing of this ball actuates a detonator inside the flask I carry in my pocket. It's the principle of the pneumatic instantaneous shutter for a camera lens. The tube leads up — The detonator is partly mechanical, partly chemical.

O. It is instantaneous, of course?

P. Far from it. A full twenty seconds must elapse from the moment I press the ball till the explosion takes place.

O. Phew! Twenty seconds! Horrors! You mean to say you could face that? I should go crazy —

P. Wouldn't matter if you did. Of course, it's the weak point of this special system, which is only for my own personal use. The worst is that the manner of exploding is always the weak point with us. I am trying to invent a detonator that would adjust itself to all conditions of action, and even to unexpected changes of conditions. A variable, yet perfectly precise mechanism. A really intelligent detonator.

O. Twenty seconds! Ough! And then —

P. No one in this room could hope to escape. Nor yet this couple going up the stairs now.

In the last instance it is character alone that makes for one's safety. There are very few people in the world whose character is as well established as mine.

O. I wonder how you managed it.

P. Force of personality. Force of personality. I have the means to make myself deadly, but that by itself, you understand, is absolutely nothing in the way of protection. What is effective is the belief those people have in my will to use the means. That's their impression. It is absolute. Therefore I am deadly.

P. Oh, yes, I could. I am seldom out in the dark. I walk always with my right hand closed round an india-rubber ball I have in my trousers pocket. I never let it go. The pressing of this ball would actuate the detonator of the glass bomb I carry in the breast pocket of my coat. The tube leads like this, see!

O. I see. Instantaneous, of course.

P. Sorry to say it isn't. About seven seconds must elapse from the moment I press the ball to the explosion.

O. Ough! Wait seven seconds! Horrors!

I should go crazy.

P. Wouldn't matter if you did. The detonators are always the weak point with us.

I am trying now to invent a detonator that would adjust itself to all conditions of action, and even to unexpected changes of condition. A variable, yet perfectly precise mechanism. A really intelligent detonator.

O. Seven seconds! Ough! And then...

P. Nobody in this house could hope to escape. I can see a man and a woman in the other room, going up the stairs now. They would vanish into mere shreds. In the last instance it's character alone that makes for one's safety. There are very few people in the world with a character so well established as mine.

O. I wonder how you manage it.

P. Force of personality. I have the means to make myself deadly, but that by itself is no protection. What is effective is the absolute belief these people have in my will to use the means. That's their impression — therefore I *am* deadly.

It is absolute. Therefore I am deadly.

O. There are individuals of character amongst that lot, too.

P. Possibly. But it is matter of degree obviously, since, for instance, I am not impressed by them. Therefore they are inferior. They cannot be otherwise. Their character is built upon conventional morality. It leans on social order. Mine stands free from everything artificial. They are bound in all sorts of conventions. They depend on life, which, in this connection, is a historical fact surrounded by all sorts of restraints and considerations, a complex, organized fact open to attack at every point; whereas I depend on death, which knows no restraint and cannot be attacked. My superiority is evident.

O. This is a transcendental way of putting it. I've heard Karl Yundt say much the same thing not very long ago.

P. Karl Yundt, the delegate of the International Red Committee, has been a posturing shadow all his life. There are three of you delegates, aren't there? I won't define the other two, as you are one of them. But what you say means nothing. You are the worthy delegates for revolutionary propaganda, but the trouble is not only that you are as unable to think independently as any respectable grocer or journalist of them all, but that you have no character whatever.

O. But what do you want from us? And what is it you are after yourself?

P. A perfect detonator. What are you making that face for? You see, you can't even bear the mention of something conclusive.

O. I am not making a face.

O. There are individuals of character amongst the police too.

P. Possibly, but it is matter of degree, obviously, since I, for instance, am not impressed by them. They are my inferiors.

Their character is built on traditional morality. It clings to social order. Mine stands free from everything artificial. They are bound in all sorts of conventions. They depend on life,

which is complex, and open to attack at every point. Whereas, I

depend on death, which is simple and cannot be attacked. My superiority is evident.

O. A pretty transcendental way of putting it. I have heard Carl Yundt spout very much in the same way.

P. Carl Yundt has been a posturing shadow all his life.

There are three of you delegates for revolutionary propaganda, aren't there?

The trouble with you is that you can no more think independently than any grocer or journalist of them all, and that you have no character whatever.

O. But what do you want from us? And what is it you are after yourself?

P. A perfect detonator. What do you make that face for? You see, you can't even bear the mention of anything conclusive.

O. I am not making a face.

P. You revolutionists are the slaves of the social convention, which is afraid of you; slaves of it as much as the very police that stand up in the defence of that convention. Clearly you are, since you want to revolutionize it. It governs your thought, of course, and your action, too, and thus neither your thought nor your action can ever be conclusive. You are not a bit better than the forces arrayed against you — than the police, for instance. The other day I came suddenly upon Chief Inspector Heat at the corner of Tottenham Court Road. He looked at me very steadily. But I did not look at him. Why should I give him more than a glance? He was thinking of many things — of his superiors, of his reputation, of the law courts, of his salary, of newspapers — of a hundred things. But I was thinking of my perfect detonator only. He meant nothing to me. He was as insignificant as — I can't call to mind anything insignificant enough to compare him with — except Karl Yundt perhaps. Like to like. The terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality — counter moves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical. He plays his little game — so do you propagandists. But I don't play; I work fourteen hours a day, and go hungry sometimes. My experiments cost money now and again, and then I must do without food for a day or two. You're looking at my beer. Yes, I have had two glasses already and shall have another presently. This is a little holiday, and I celebrate it alone. Why not? I've the grit to work alone, quite alone, absolutely alone. I've worked alone for years.

P. You revolutionists are the slaves of convention as much as the police.

The other day I met Chief Inspector Heat at the corner of Tottenham Court Road. He looked at me very steadily, but I did not look at him.

He meant as little to me as your Carl Yundt. Like to like. The revolutionist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality — counter-moves in the same game.

The police plays its little game — so do you revolutionists. But I don't play! I work fourteen hours a day and go hungry sometimes. My experiments cost money and then I must do without food for a day or two. You are looking at my beer? Yes, I have had two glasses already and shall have another presently. This is a little holiday and I celebrate it alone. Why not? I have the grit to work alone. I have worked alone for years.

O. At the perfect detonator — eh?

P. Yes. It is a good definition. You couldn't find anything half so precise to define the nature of your activity with all your committees and delegations. It is I who am the true propagandist.

O. We won't discuss that point. I am afraid I'll have to spoil your holiday for you, though. There's a man blown up in Greenwich Park this morning.

P. How do you know?

O. They have been yelling the news in the streets since two o'clock. I bought the paper and just ran in here. Then I saw you sitting at this table. I've got it in my pocket now. Ah! Here it is. Bomb in Greenwich Park. There isn't much so far. Half past eleven. Foggy morning. Effects of explosion felt as far as Romney Road and Park Place. Enormous hole in the ground under a tree filled with smashed roots and broken branches. All round fragments of a man's body blown to pieces. That's all. The rest's mere newspaper gup. No doubt a wicked attempt to blow up the Observatory, they say. H'm. That's hardly credible. The fragments of only *one* man, you note. *Ergo*: blew *himself* up. That spoils your day off for you — don't it? Were you expecting that sort of move? I hadn't the slightest idea — not the ghost of a notion of anything of this sort being planned to come off here. Under the present circumstances it's nothing short of criminal.

P. Criminal! What is that? What *is* crime? What can be the meaning of such an assertion?

O. At the perfect detonator, eh?

P. Yes. It's a good enough definition. You couldn't find anything half so precise to define your activity with all your committees and delegations. It is *I* who am the true propagandist.

O. We won't discuss that point. I am afraid I will have to spoil your holiday though. A man has been blown up at Greenwich Park.

Foggy morning.

Explosion felt as far as Romney Road and Park Place. Enormous hole in the ground. A lot of smashed roots and broken branches mixed up with fragments of a man's body. Blown to bits. H'm, h'm, that's all. The rest merely newspaper gup. No doubt, a wicked attempt to blow up the Observatory, they say. That's hardly credible. The fragments of only one man you note. *Ergo*, blew himself up.

Were you expecting that sort of move in this country? I hadn't the slightest notion.

Under the present circumstances it's simply criminal.

P. Criminal! What's that? What is crime? What can be the meaning of such an assertion?

O. How am I to express myself? One must use the current words. The meaning of this assertion is that this business may affect our position very adversely in this country. Isn't that crime enough for you? I am convinced you have been giving away some of your damned stuff lately. You have! No! And are you really handing it over at large like this, for the asking, to the first fool that comes along?

P. Just so! The condemned social order has not been built up on paper and ink, and I don't fancy that a combination of paper and ink will ever put an end to it, whatever you may think. Yes, I would give the stuff with both hands to every man, woman or fool that likes to come along. I know what you are thinking about. But I am not taking my cue from the Red Committee. I would see you all hounded out of here, or arrested — or beheaded for that matter — without turning a hair. What happens to us as individuals is not of the least consequence.

O. If the police here knew their business they would shoot you full of holes with revolvers, or else try to sand-bag you from behind in broad daylight.

P. Yes. But for that they would have to face their own institutions. Do you see? That requires uncommon grit. Grit of a special kind.

O. I fancy that's exactly what would happen to you if you were to set up your laboratory in the States. They don't stand on ceremony with their institutions there.

O. How am I to express myself? One must use the current words. This business may affect our position very badly in this country. Isn't that crime enough for you? I verily believe you have been giving away some of your damned stuff lately. You have! No! And are you really handing it over at large like this, for the asking, to the first fool that comes along?

P. Just so. [α] **The damned social order has not been made with paper and ink, and I don't fancy that a propaganda of paper and ink will ever put an end to it — whatever you may think.** I would give the stuff with both my hands to every man, woman or child that comes along. [α moved from here]

P. I am not likely to go and see. Otherwise your remark is just. They have more character over there, and their character is essentially anarchistic. Fertile ground for us, the States — very good ground. The great Republic has the root of the destructive matter in her. The collective temperament is lawless. Excellent. They may shoot us down, but —

O: You are too transcendental for me.

P. Logical. There are several kinds of logic. This is the enlightened kind. America is all right. It is this country that is dangerous, with her idealistic conception of legality. The social spirit of this people is wrapped up in scrupulous prejudices, and that is fatal to our work. You talk of England. Being our only refuge! So much the worse. Capua! What do we want with refuges? Here you talk, print, plot, and of nothing. I dare say it's very convenient for such Karl Yundts. To break up the superstition and worship of legality should be our aim. Nothing would please me more than to see Inspector Heat and his likes take to shooting us down in broad daylight with the approval of the public. Half our battle would be won then: the disintegration of the old morality would have set in in its very temple. That is what you ought to aim at. But you revolutionists will never understand that. You plan the future, you lose yourselves in reveries of economical systems derived from what is; whereas what's wanted is a clean sweep and a clear start for a new conception of life. That sort of future will take care of itself if you will only make room for it. Therefore, I would shovel my stuff in heaps at the corners of the streets if I had enough for that; and as I haven't, I do my best by perfecting a really dependable detonator.

You revolutionists —
you plan the future.

Whereas, what's
needed is a clean sweep, and a clear
start for an unfettered life.

Therefore, I would shovel my stuff in
heaps at the corners of the streets if I
had enough for that. But as I haven't, I
do my best to perfect a really
dependable detonator.

O. Yes. Your detonators. I shouldn't wonder if it weren't one of your detonators that made a clean sweep of the man in the park.

P. My difficulty is precisely in experimenting practically with the various kinds. They must be tried, after all. Besides —

O. Who could that fellow be? I assure that we in London had no knowledge —

Couldn't you describe the person you gave the stuff to?

P. Describe him. I don't think there can be the slightest objection now. I can describe him to you in one word — Verloc.

O. Verloc! Impossible.

P. Yes. He's the person. You can't say in this case I was giving my stuff to the first fool that came along. He was a prominent member of your group as far as I understand.

O. Yes. Prominent. No, not exactly. He was the centre for general intelligence, and usually received comrades coming over here. More useful than important. Man of no ideas. Years ago he used to speak at meetings — in France, I believe. Not very well, though. He was trusted by such men as Latorre, Moser, and all that old lot. The only talent he showed really was his ability to elude the attentions of the police somehow. Here, for instance, he did not seem to be looked after very closely. He was regularly married, you know. I suppose it's with her money that he started that shop. Seemed to make it pay, too. I wonder what that woman will do now? Intellectually a nonentity. Quite an ordinary personality. You are wrong in not keeping more in touch with the comrades, Professor. Did he say anything to you — give you some idea of his intentions? I hadn't seen him for a month. It seems impossible that he should be gone.

O. Oh, yes, your detonators. I shouldn't wonder if it was one of your detonators that made a clean sweep of the man in the park.

P. My difficulty is precisely in experimenting practically with the various kinds. Detonators have to be tried, after all. Besides...

O. Who could that fellow be? I assure that we, in London, had no knowledge of anything being arranged. Couldn't you describe the person you last gave the stuff to?

P. Describe him! I don't think there can be the slightest objection now. I can describe him to you in one word — Verloc.

O. Verloc? Impossible!

P. That's the person. Surely this isn't a case of giving my stuff to the first fool that came along. He was a prominent member of your group, I understand.

O. Yes. No. Prominent. You don't know anything.

[η] He certainly had a talent for keeping on terms with the police. Here, for instance, they did not look after him at all, [β] Do you know, Professor, that he was regularly married?

P. Didn't know. [ι] and that it was with that that he started the shop. Risky trade. He seemed to make it pay though.

[χ] O. I wonder what that woman will do now. [φ] Intellectually a nonentity.

You don't keep in touch with anybody, Professor. You... Did he say anything to you, as to his intentions? [φ] I hadn't seen him for a month. It seems impossible that he should be gone.

P. He told me it was going to be a demonstration against a building. I had to know that much to prepare the missile. I pointed out to him that I had hardly a sufficient quantity for a completely destructive result, but pressed me very earnestly to do my best. As he wanted something that could be carried openly in the hand, I proposed to make use of an old one-gallon copal varnish can I happened to have by me. He was pleased by the idea. It gave me some trouble, because I had to cut out the bottom first and solder it on again afterwards. When prepared for use, the can enclosed a wide-mouthed, well-corked jar of thick glass packed around with some wet clay and containing sixteen ounces of X2 green powder. The detonator was connected with the screw top of the can. It was ingenious — a combination of time and shock. I explained the system to him. It was a thin tube of tin enclosing —

O. What do you think has happened?

P. Can't tell. Screwed the top on tight, which would make the connection, and then forgot the time. It was set for twenty minutes. On the other hand, the time contact being made, a sharp shock would bring about the explosion at once. He either ran the time too close, or simply let the thing fall. The contact was made all right — that's clear to me at any rate. The system's worked perfectly. And yet you would think that a common fool in a hurry would be much more likely to forget to make the contact altogether. I was worrying myself about that sort of failure mostly. But there are more kinds of fools than one can guard against. You can't expect a detonator to be absolutely foolproof.

P. Told me it was going to be a demonstration against a building.

I had hardly a sufficient quantity for a destructive result. But he was so earnest about it that I prepared for him a varnish can that could be carried open in the hand.

The detonator was connected with the screw top of the can. It would act both to time and shock. Rather ingenious. I explained the system to him.

O. What do you think has happened?

P. Can't tell. Screwed the top on tight, which would make the connexion, and then forgot the time. It was set for twenty minutes. On the other hand, the time contact, having been made, a sharp shock would cause explosion at once. He either ran the time too close, or simply let the thing fall.

O. It's extremely unpleasant for me. Karl has been in bed with bronchitis for a week there's an even chance that he will never get up again. Michaelis is luxuriating in the country somewhere. A fashionable publisher has offered him five hundred pounds for a book. It will be a ghastly failure. He has lost the habit of consecutive thinking in prison, you know. What are you going to do? Solidarity with the extremist form of action is one thing, and silly recklessness is another. I don't know what came to Verloc. There's some mystery there. However, he's gone. You may take it as you like, but under the circumstances the only policy for the militant revolutionary group is to disclaim all connection with this damned freak of yours. How to make the disclaimer convincing enough is what bothers me.

O. Verloc! [ϕ moved from here] [γ moved from here] [η moved from here] except as a man with a shop of that sort. [β moved from here]

O. I have a notion that she must have had a little money, [t moved from here]

P. Some men succeed. Inferior men.

O. He was that.

P. Whereas I have been treated all my life with revolting injustice.

O. The only policy for the revolutionary group is to disclaim all connexion with this damned freak. How to make the disclaimer convincing enough is what bothers me.

P. You might ask the police for a testimonial of good conduct. They know where every one of you slept last night. Perhaps if you asked them they would consent some sort of official statement.

O. No doubt they are aware well enough that we had nothing to do with this. What they will say is another thing.

I must lay hands on Michaelis at once,

P. The fellow didn't know anything of Verloc's death. Of course! [**δ moved from here**] But never mind. I walked into his cottage. Not a soul anywhere. I had to shout half a dozen times before he answered me. I thought he was fast asleep yet, in bed. But not at all. He had been writing his book for four hours already. He sat in that tiny cage in a litter of manuscript. There was a half-eaten raw carrot on the table near him. His breakfast. He lives on a diet of raw carrots and a little milk now.

O. How does he look on it?

P. Angelic... I picked up a handful of his pages from the floor. The poverty of reasoning is astonishing. He has no logic. He can't think consecutively. But that's nothing. He has divided his book into three parts, entitled "Faith, Hope, and Charity". He is elaborating now the idea of a world planned out like an immense and nice hospital, with gardens and flowers, in which the strong are to devote themselves to the nursing of the weak. Conceive you this folly, Ossipon? The weak! The source of all evil on this earth! I told him that I dreamt of a world like shambles, where the weak would be taken in hand for utter extermination. Do you understand, Ossipon? The source of all evil! They are our sinister masters — the weak, the flabby, the silly, the cowardly, the faint of heart, and the slavish of mind. They have power. They are the multitude. Theirs is the Kingdom of the earth. Exterminate, exterminate! That is the only way of progress. It is! Follow me, Ossipon. First the great multitude of the weak must go, then the only relatively strong. You see? First the blind, then the deaf and the dumb, the halt and the lame — and so on. Every taint, every vice, every prejudice, every convention must meet its doom.

P. You might ask the police for a testimonial of good conduct. They know where every one of you slept last night.

O. No doubt they are perfectly aware we had nothing to do with this. What they will say is another thing. And I don't even know how to lay hands on Michaelis at once.

P. Michaelis. He is in the country. Writing a book. I went to see him the other day. He filled a tiny cage of a room, which had a litter of paper on the floor. I noticed a half-eaten raw carrot on the table near him. His breakfast. He lives on a diet of raw carrots and a little milk now.

O. How does he look on it?

P. Angelic... I picked up a handful of his pages from the floor. Only fancy! He has divided his book into three parts, entitled, Faith, Hope, and Charity. He has planned a world like an enormous and nice hospital with gardens and flowers, in which the strong are to devote themselves to the nursing of the weak. Conceive you this folly, Ossipon! The weak! The source of all evil in this world. I told him I had planned a world where the weak would be taken in hand for utter extermination. Do you understand, Ossipon? The weak! They are our sinister masters, the flabby, the silly, the cowardly, the faint of heart and the slavish of mind. They have the power. They are the multitude. Theirs is the Kingdom of the earth. Exterminate! Exterminate! Follow me, Ossipon: first the blind must go; then the deaf and dumb; the halt and the maimed; every taint, every vice, every prejudice, every convention must meet its doom.

O. And what remains?

P. I remain — if I am strong enough. Haven't I suffered enough from this oppression of the weak? And yet I *am* the force. But the time! The time! Give me time! Ah! that multitude, too stupid to feel either pity or fear. Sometimes I think they have everything on their side. Everything — even death — my own weapon.

O. Come and drink some beer with me at the Silenus.

P. Beer! So be it! Let us drink and be merry, for we are strong, and tomorrow we die.

and get him to speak from his heart at one of our gatherings. The public has a sort of sentimental regard for that fellow.

His name is known. And I am in touch with a few reporters on the big dailies. What he would say would be utter bosh, but he has a turn of talk that makes it go down all the same.

P. Like treacle. What's the matter with you, Ossipon? You look glum and seek even my company. I hear that you are seen constantly in places where men utter foolish things over glasses of liquor. Why? Have you abandoned your collection of women? They are the weak who feed on the strong — eh? Tell me, Ossipon, terrible man, has ever one of your victims killed herself for you — or are your triumphs so far incomplete — for blood alone puts a seal on greatness? Blood. Death. Look at history.

O. You be damned.

P. Why? Let that be the hope of the weak, whose theology has invented hell for the strong.

Ossipon, my feeling for you is amicable contempt. You couldn't kill a fly. [ε] **To the destruction of what is.**

O. And what remains?

P. I remain — if I am strong enough. I am a force. But the time, the time! Give me time! Ah, that vile multitude! Sometimes I think they have everything on their side. Everything — even death — my own weapon.

O. Have some more beer.

P. Beer, you say! So be it! Let us drink and be merry, for we are strong, and tomorrow we die.

O. I must organize a little meeting of comrades and get Michaelis to town. He will speak. The public has a sentimental regard for that fellow.

Of course, he talks utter bosh, but it goes down with them.

P. Like treacle. Why do you worry yourself about Verloc? Haven't you got anything better to do? Have you abandoned your collection of women? They are the weak who feed the strong — what? Tell me, Ossipon, terrible man, has ever one of your victims killed herself for you, or are your triumphs so far incomplete? For blood alone puts a seal on greatness. Blood. Death. Look at history.

O. You be damned.

P. Why damn me? Damnation is the hope of the weak whose theology has invented hell for the strong. Ossipon, my feeling for you is friendly contempt. You couldn't kill a fly. To the destruction of what is!

O. And so, and so Michaelis dreams of a world like a beautiful and cheery hospital.

P. Just so. An immense charity for the healing of the weak.

O. That's silly, you can't heal weakness. But after all Michaelis may not be so far wrong. In two hundred years doctors will rule the world. Science reigns already. It reigns in the shade maybe — but it reigns. And all science must culminate at last in the science of healing — not the weak, but the strong. Mankind wants to live — to live.

P. Mankind does not know what it wants.

O. But you do, just now you've been crying for time — time. Well, the doctors will serve you out your time — if you are good. You profess yourself to be one of the strong — because you carry in your pocket enough stuff to send yourself and, say, twenty other people into eternity. But eternity is a damned hole. It's time that you need. You — if you met a man who could give you for certain ten years of time, you would call him your master.

P. My device is: No God! No master.

O. Wait till you are lying flat on your back at the end of your time. Your scurvy, shabby, mangy little bit of time.

P. Ossipon, I think you are a humbug. You are not even a doctor. But you are funny. Your notion of a humanity universally putting out the tongue and taking the pill from pole to pole at the bidding of a few solemn jokers is worthy of the prophet. Prophecy! What's the good of thinking what will be! [**ε moved from here**]

P. What's that paper? Anything in it?

O. Nothing. Nothing whatever. The thing's ten days old. I forgot it in my pocket, I suppose. Stay. Here, what do you know of madness and despair?

P. There are no such things. All passion is lost now. The world is mediocre, limp, without force. And madness and despair are a force. And force is a crime in the eyes of the fools, the weak and the silly who rule the roost. You are mediocre. Verloc, whose affair the police has managed to smother so nicely, was mediocre. And the police murdered him. He was mediocre. Everybody is mediocre. Madness and despair! Give me that for a lever, and I'll move the world. Ossipon you have my cordial scorn. You are incapable of conceiving even what the fat-fed citizen would call a crime. You have no force. And let me tell you that this little legacy they say you've come into has not improved your intelligence. You sit at your beer like a dummy. Good-bye.

O. Will you have it?

P. Have what?

O. The legacy. All of it.

P. I will send you by-and-by a small bill for certain chemicals which I shall order tomorrow. I need them badly. Understood — eh?

O. Confounded ass! To leave such an imbecile business on my hands. And I don't even know if —

[δ] He never looks at the newspapers. They make him too sad, he says.

I wonder what I had better do now?

P. Fasten yourself upon the woman for all she's worth.

O. I am damned if you don't seem to kill everybody, simply by setting eyes on them. Look at that ass Verloc. You made him blow himself to bits.

P. Not a bad death.

O. [χ moved from here] He *was* an ass to leave such an imbecile business on my hands. Yundt has been laid with bronchitis. It will finish him, I think. Michaelis is away, and probably will not even see a paper.

He never looks at a paper.

P. They make him too sad, he says.

O. And I am rather short of cash for the moment... I wonder what I had better do.

P. Do! Fasten yourself on the woman for all she is worth.

K. Reviews of the first production of *The Secret Agent* at the Ambassadors Theatre, November 1922

- a) *The Nation and the Athenaeum*
- b) *The Sunday Times*
- c) *The Times*
- d) *The Observer*
- e) *The Illustrated London News*
- f) *The Era*

The Stage?
see cover

- a)
The Nation and the Athenaeum
Volume XXXII. pp. 262-4
11 November 1922

Ambassadors Theatre: "*The Secret Agent*" by Joseph Conrad.

One is always reluctant to charge a playwright with a failure in dramatic technique. Drama has its technique, as have all the other arts, but it is a far more elastic thing than the text-books admit. Most of the rules, from those of Aristotle onwards, are all the better for being broken, while the French fetish of the "well-made play" usually provides glaring examples of the way in which a play should not be made. Particularly do we dislike raising complaints about form when an author has given us a play full of excellent matter, but sometimes the painful task cannot be shirked. Mr. Conrad has not succeeded in transforming his book "*The Secret Agent*" into a well-constructed play. What he has done (and it is a great deal) is to bring over to the boards, "in earthen vessels" so to speak, a great many of the good things from the book. The psychology and philosophy that inform every fragment of that melodrama of genius are preserved in good measure in the acting version, but the acting version has, nevertheless, no kick in it. The point Mr. Conrad has missed, we think, is the supremacy which action seizes over all the other elements in a story when that story is cast or recast in dramatic form. In fact, and it may be in the book, Mrs. Verloc's knife-thrust is not nearly so significant as the state of Mrs Verloc's soul after she has killed, but on the stage only another event as decisive can save what follows the murder from anti-climax. On a smaller scale several of the earlier scenes show the

same failing. Action is the necessary skeleton upon which a drama must be articulated; it may be clothed in thought and soul-stuff, but cannot be built upon them.

With all that "*The Secret Agent*", to a spectator with a spark of imaginative receptiveness, is an entertainment of absorbing interest. A little flat it may fall here and there, but tasteless it never is. To the pleasure of fine writing is to be added the pleasure of some fine acting. Easily first we must place the Mrs. Verloc of Miss Miriam Lewes. Her immense passionate powers for a part of this kind, with its phases of despair, frenzy, and ultimate insanity, have acquired something like adequate recognition, but to say simply that she is an enormously powerful actress is to omit the real individuality of her style. We can only indicate this by a rather crude comparison. It was always the fashion in the old melodramas to accompany the heroine at her entrances and exits and crises with soft music. It was an exasperating trick, but it was doubtless a rude symbol of a super-sensible melody which neither the author or player had the skill to realise themselves. Just what they failed to do Miss Lewes cannot help doing, even with so grim a part as that of Winnie Verloc. It goes all the time to a special music for the internal ear alone. Visibly the role is all that is sordid, for we cannot grant that a frustrated maternal instinct, side-tracked upon a degenerate brother, justifies every length of hypocrisy, treachery, and cruelty. Invisibly, on the other hand, all is radiance and beauty, as it were by a necessity of Miss Lewes's genius. And we cannot, in this case, fairly complain of the glamor, since Winnie Verloc is something of a Lorelei. ✓

Mr. St. Barbe West (the splendid Cromwell of "Charles I") also does some idealizing as Verloc. Is not *The Secret Agent* in the book more flabby and less virile than as Mr. West portrays him? If so, it is a *felix culpa*, since the tragedy is more poignant if we do not despise the victim overmuch. Mr Frank Vosper is to be congratulated on a clever character-sketch of Mr. Vladimir, the secret-service chief at the "Hyperborean" Embassy. The mingled fatuity and brutality of the Continental militarist type are conveyed with shrewdness. Mr Jevan Brandon-Thomas, in spite of some unaccountable marks of nervousness on the night when we saw him, is well

within the skin of Inspector Heat, not forgetting to temper the duplicity of the character with the appropriate codfish air. Standing at the cross-roads at which every rising actor has to choose between exploiting his personality and undertaking the labor of honest impersonation, Mr. Brandon-Thomas seems resolved to take the right turning.

b)

The Sunday Times

5 November 1922, p. 6

Ambassadors.

"THE SECRET AGENT".

A play by Joseph Conrad based on his novel. Thursday November 2.

This is Mr Conrad's first attempt at a play. He has sought to dramatise his own novel. Other people have tried to put his novels into plays with dubious success, and his own effort is no more successful. The novelist, unfortunately, does not begin to find his medium as a dramatist until his play is nearing the finish. It is not, till the last two or three scenes that he begins to understand that action seen on the stage is much more effective than action described. A novelist gets his results mostly by the use of words. A dramatist can, in the absence of action, obtain little or no result. ✓

The Secret Agent of this drama has, at the instigation of a foreign embassy, to commit an outrage that will provoke Society against his fellows. Instead of blowing up the Greenwich Observatory, as was intended, the plot results in the accidental blowing up of a half-witted youth, the brother of *The Secret Agent's* wife. In revenge the wife stabs her husband to death with a carving knife. A rascal anarchist pretends to love the wife, steals all her money, and is caught by the police. The woman ends the play by becoming as imbecile as her brother.

Now, no one short of a genius could make such a narrative either sweet or acceptable, and when the tale is unfolded, partly with realistic methods and partly with old-time melodramatic touches, it loses whatever distinction it had in the novel and becomes almost nauseous. The dramatist has attempted to compress into his play ✓

too much of the side issues of his novel. We listen to various conversations, mostly duologues, between people who are quite interesting characters, but whose talk diverts our attention from the principal interest. The method of producing the piece did not assist it. Mr. Benrimo has adopted a most unnatural method of lighting his stage, and, an equally unnatural method of keeping it in a state of unbalanced darkness. Many of the minor characters are played in the fashion of amateur theatricals. ✓

Against all this justifiable criticism must be set the fact that the sociological interest of the work is considerable. The psychology of some of the characters and particularly that of three figures — *The Secret Agent*, his wife, and a certain anarchist “professor” — was particularly interesting. We felt it would have been better for the playwright to have explained to us earlier in the story that the wife only married her husband with the object of giving a home to her mother and brother, but that was a small point. The artistic feeling in the piece is undeniable. Miss Miriam Lewes, like the author himself, did not begin to be at home until the concluding portions of the play. In the first act she might have strayed out of the Lyceum, so obvious was her sense for melodrama. In the last act, she rose superbly to the heights of tragedy. No one acted better in the play than Mr. Clifton Boyne as a revolutionary professor. His acting rang true. Mr. Russell Thorndike gave a characteristically rugged show as the amorous Ossipon. The rest of the cast, with the exception of Mr. Jevan Brandon-Thomas, seemed to me unworthy of their opportunities. ✓

c)

The Times

4 November 1922, p. 8

MR CONRAD AS DRAMATIST.

“*THE SECRET AGENT*” by Joseph Conrad.

Winnie Verloc .. Miriam Lewes
Mr Verloc .. H.St. Barbe West
Ossipon .. Russell Thorndike
Lady Mabel .. Amy Brandon-Thomas

Winnie's Mother .. Ellie Potter
Stevie .. Freddie Peisley
The "Professor" .. Clifton Boyne
Michaelis .. Malcolm Morley
Mr. Vladimir .. Frank Vosper
Assistant Commissioner .. Seton Blackden
Inspector Heat .. Jevan Brandon-Thomas
Karl Yundt .. George Barran

Put briefly, this is the tale of a secret agent who, bidden by his employers to explode a bomb, got his half-witted young brother-in-law to do it for him and to get blown up himself. The secret agent's wife, crazed with grief, stabbed her husband to death, and by the time the police arrived was raving mad.

But the tale was originally a novel, and Mr. Conrad has tried, we think, to bring too much of his novel on to the stage. The result is a play with a certain excess of talk. ✓

Why, for instance, the long conversation between the wife and her mother at the rise of the curtain? Why the debate between the anarchists? Why the talk between Lady Mabel and Michaelis in Act II? It is always in itself excellent dialogue, but a good deal of it is irrelevant to the action, and ought to be severely pruned. The rivalry between Inspector and Assistant Commissioner also seems superfluous; that is "another story" which we might be glad to listen to another time, but it simply confuses the present story.

Then there is the "Professor" who makes bombs, and with whom we spend much time at a cafe. He is an interesting figure, but he distracts our attention; he would do capitally for the centre of another story. A novel may wander about in this way; lingering over bits of talk and subordinate interests and any queer people that come along; but a play should concentrate on a single issue.

After the wife has stabbed the husband to death she explained that she had never loved him, for seven long years her married life has been misery and so forth; but this, though you may have guessed it, has not been shown in the play. Something should have been said about it beforehand — in place of much that was said and was not exactly to the point.

But the tragic culmination makes amends. The sordid horror of the last scene, when the wretched woman is robbed and deserted by the one man she has turned to for help and is found by the police babbling and crazy, is as terrible as anything in Dostoievsky. This scene, moreover, is superbly played by Miss Miriam Lewes, with a passionate intensity that sends a shudder through the whole house. Mr Russell Thorndike, too, makes a sinister figure of the cringing, sneaking thief. Mr Clifton Boyne as the "Professor", and Mr Jevan Brandon-Thomas as the police inspector are all good. Mr. Conrad was called but did not appear. We left the "inspissated gloom" of the theatre with a certain relief, and minded to read the novel again. For Mr. Conrad is a great novelist, but not yet a great dramatist. ✓

d)

The Observer

5 November 1922, p. 11

"The Secret Agent" by Joseph Conrad.

Mr Conrad has done us the great honour to express himself in English. Anything that he writes demands and deserves our respect, and so, when we hear that he has written a play, we go to its performance in a vastly different mood from that in which we generally go to the theatre, even if we have little hope that Mr Conrad will furnish us with a play that is fully satisfying. This piece is singularly dissatisfying. Mr Conrad has remarkable technique as a novelist but he makes the mistake commonly made by novelists of thinking that the technique which serves for a novel will serve also for a play. But it won't, any more than the technique which serves for a painter will serve also for a sculptor. Throughout the performance of *"The Secret Agent"* there was a struggle between atmosphere and drama which ended in a complete victory for atmosphere. Mr Conrad has uncanny power to make atmosphere — even in this piece we felt it coming over the place where the footlights in any well-regulated theatre would be — but he has not yet discovered how to make drama — on the stage. ✓

SMT

There is no unity in the play. The majority of its eight scenes are without dramatic significance. We spend a wasteful ten minutes in the society of Mrs Verloc's mother at the beginning of the play, and then find she is leaving the piece for ever. We listen to talk about Mrs Verloc's dead father, but are not enabled to relate it to contemporary events. We are puzzled by the fact that Mrs Verloc is reluctant to submit to her husband's embraces, and are not told until the final five minutes that, in spite of her appearance of affection for him, she loathed him, and had loathed him all through their married life. The best scene in the play is not acted at all: the scene in which the Assistant Commissioner of Police taxes Verloc with complicity in the crime at Greenwich. It is footled away in a tedious scene in Lady Mabel's drawing-room, and a situation which ought to have been tremendously dramatic was rendered entirely undramatic by being described to us, after its occurrence, in a flat and irrelevant manner. We do not see the principle characters at all for a whole act, and that the middle one. Scenes are introduced into the play for no other purpose than to show us characters, such as "The Professor", who could quite easily have been shown to us in other scenes. There never was a piece in which a great man handled his material so clumsily and so unthriftilly as Mr Conrad has handled this one.

It was very well acted, especially by Mr St. Barbe West (who would make a first-class Napoleon, for he has a remarkable resemblance to the Emperor, and is a very good actor), and Mr Russell Thorndike. Miss Miriam Lewes was better at the end of the play than she was at the beginning. The note, in the first act, was too much in a minor key and a sing-song rhythm. But her acting in the final scenes was magnificent. I liked also Mr Clifton Boyne, Mr Frank Vosper, and Freddie Peisley. Mr Seton Blackden was hardly forceful enough as the Assistant Commissioner and Mr Jevan Brandon-Thomas marred a good performance by fluffiness.

St.J.E.

✓

e)

The Illustrated London News

11 November 1922, p. 784

MR CONRAD'S "SECRET AGENT" at the AMBASSADORS

We all love Mr. Joseph Conrad as novelist; we should love to see him conquer fresh renown as a playwright. But it is not to be — at least yet awhile. In the case of "*The Secret Agent*" he has tried acting as his own adapter, and the result is no more successful, alas! than other's persons' adaptations of his novels. What, if one may speak with all deference, Mr. Conrad has not learnt yet in respect of the theatre is that no dialogue is relevant there which does not help on the action; that it is wasteful to introduce characters which are soon to be dropped out of the scheme; that vital relations between leading figures in a play ought never to be left unexplained through whole acts of its progress; and that a dramatic scene is always more effective when acted out before playgoers than described at second-hand in retrospect. Mr Conrad's story, of course, deals with anarchism in the back streets of London, and describes the tragic grief of a woman whose anarchist husband sends to his death her harmless, half-witted brother to whom she is devoted, and the vengeance she takes. A telling play might have been made out of such material, but only by an artist who understood, as Mr Conrad does not yet, that the technique of the novelist and that of the playwright are totally dissimilar things. Unsatisfactory, however, as is the piece, it gives Miss Miriam Lewes some fine moments towards the end in the character of the distraught heroine; and Mr Russell Thorndike has some Grand Guignol spasms in the part of the cowardly agent. ✓
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f)

The Era

9 November 1922, p. 13.

It may not be a really good play, for it is disconnected, incomplete and has superfluous characters, and much irrelevant talk and action, but, nevertheless, "*The Secret Agent*" is one of the plays that is eminently worth while. It gives us personally

more delight than many a play that can boast better construction and more technique. It has the fascination of the Conrad novel, indeed, we felt on leaving the theatre more as if we had read a Conrad novel than seen a Conrad play. It is peopled with the queer, unusual, realistic characters, has the same mysterious, exciting, inevitable happenings, the wonderful atmosphere, the beautiful simplicity. There are conversations in "*The Secret Agent*," notably one between the Professor and Ossipon, that are largely unessential to the action of the drama, but are of engrossing interest and superbly well written. ✓

In its dramatic form much has been left out that might have been retained with advantage, and alterations made that are... well, regrettable. What is retained in the play in full measure is atmosphere. We find ourselves soaked in it from the rising of the curtain on the parlour behind Verloc's shop, where his wife, Winnie Verloc, has an illuminating conversation with her mother, prior to the old lady's departure from her son-in-law's house. You learn (presuming that you have not read the novel, published fifteen years ago) that Winnie married Verloc seven years before the play begins for the sake of her mother and her idiot brother, Stevie, the one creature she loves. There follows a scene between Verloc and his employer from the Embassy, with the bullying dandy, Vladimir, threatening Verloc because his work as agent provocateur has not been sufficiently conspicuous in results. Verloc, heavy, reserved, Napoleonic in appearance, submits like a chained, straining hound to the whip of Vladimir's tongue. In an attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory he uses Stevie as catspaw. The bomb the boy is carrying explodes before its time, and the idiot is blown to bits. This we learn from the enthralling, clever, unnecessary talk between a couple of anarchists, the idle vicious Ossipon, and the "Professor," the starved, fearless, intellectual manufacturer of high explosives. After this the action is more rapid. An extremely interesting scene between Assistant Commissioner and Chief Inspector, admirable in bringing out the characters and abilities of both men as well as furthering the action of the play, is followed by a wearisome and unsatisfactory drawing-room scene. Then in act three "The Issue," tense moments through each of its excellent four scenes representing in turn the back parlour and

shop. Verloc has double-crossed the Embassy not for the first time. Dog-tired, he comes home, miserable, anxious for his safety, craving his wife's affection and comfort. From a conversation between her husband and the Inspector, Winnie overhears the news of her brother's death, and the victim of heredity and circumstance, she kills her husband and loses her reason. Ossipon, the degenerate, always attracted by her beauty, comes in, robs her, then deserts her when he finds she is in danger, only to be brought back as he is running away by the police surrounding the house, and charged with the murder, while the mad woman crouches in a corner with glazed eyes and vacant face, muttering vaguely.

Miss Miriam Lewis was extraordinarily good in the last act, powerfully emotional and uncannily atmospheric, but in her quieter moments at the beginning of her play we did not find her convincing, partly, we think, because she seemed to be trying to infuse too much meaning into her simplest sentences. Mr. St. Barbe-West's Verloc was a clever, consistently sound piece of acting, a little too much on the heavy side. Mr. Russell Thorndike fairly revelled in the part of Ossipon, and played it on strong melodramatic lines. A remarkably fine little thumbnail sketch was given by Mr. Clifford (sic) Boyne as the "Professor", and Mr. Frank Vosper was capital as Vladimir. Master Freddie Peisley (a pupil of Miss Italia Conti's) as the half-witted lad Stevie acquitted himself remarkably well, and Mr. Jean (sic) Brandon-Thomas put in some very neat work as Inspector Heat, in spite of the fact that he was not word-perfect in his part.

The production by Mr. Benrimo deserves warm praise.

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