

This article is downloaded from



<http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au>

It is the paper published as:

Author: Alex Segal

Title: Deconstruction, radical secrecy, and the secret agent

Journal: MFS Modern Fiction Studies

ISSN: 0026-7724

Volume: 54

Issue: 2

Pages: 189-208

Published: MDJohns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2008

Abstract: The article relates Derrida's work on literature and secrecy to Conrad's thematization of secrecy in *The Secret Agent*. It argues that there is striking proximity – Derrida and Conrad both evoke what might be called a secret without secret, a secret beyond the secret which displaces the secret with content – and an equally striking divergence: Conrad does not, at least in this text, share Derrida's passion for the secret without secret. To this extent, Conrad, the article argues, is not among the writers whom Barthes describes as having attempted to loosen "the sway of the Author."

Authors address: asegal@csu.edu.au

URL: http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/modern_fiction_studies/toc/mfs.54.2.html

http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=7592&local_base=GEN01-CSU01

http://bonza.unilinc.edu.au:80/F/?func=direct&doc_number=000099115&local_base=L25SER

CRO Number: 7592

Author's name: Alex Segal

Essay Title: "Deconstruction, Radical Secrecy, and *The Secret Agent*"

School of Humanities & Social Sciences

Charles Sturt University

Locked Bag 678

Wagga Wagga NSW 2678

Australia

Tel. (02) 69332466

Fax. (02) 69332792

Email. asegal@csu.edu.au

Abstract

The article relates Derrida's work on literature and secrecy to Conrad's thematization of secrecy in *The Secret Agent*. It argues that there is striking proximity – Derrida and Conrad both evoke what might be called a secret without secret, a secret beyond the secret which displaces the secret with content – and an equally striking divergence: Conrad does not, at least in this text, share Derrida's passion for the secret without secret. To this extent, Conrad, the article argues, is not among the writers whom Barthes describes as having attempted to loosen “the sway of the Author.”

Deconstruction, Radical Secrecy, and *The Secret Agent*

“My ‘first’ inclination,” Derrida said in 1988, “wasn’t really towards philosophy, but rather towards literature, no, towards something that literature accommodates more easily than philosophy” (“Interview” 73). The impression that at issue here is not a traditional love of literature is reinforced by the way that Derrida’s later work ties his passion for literature to what he calls the secret. This far from self-evident gesture – which suggests that Derrida’s thinking about literature may have a special pertinence to works of literature that explicitly thematize secrecy – is, broadly speaking, my subject here. More particularly, I relate Derrida’s work on literature and secrecy to one of the most famous and brilliant interrogations of secrecy in English literature, Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*. What emerges is a striking proximity – Derrida and Conrad both evoke what might be called a secret without secret, a secret beyond the secret which displaces the secret with content – and an equally striking divergence: Conrad does not share Derrida’s passion for the secret without secret.

I. The Secret That Impassions

Derrida’s views on literature and secrecy emerge in his discussion of Baudelaire’s literary fiction *La fausse monnaie* (“Counterfeit Money”). Although the narrator of this text accepts at face value his friend’s claim that he (the friend) gave a counterfeit coin to a beggar, Derrida hypothesizes that the friend (“a connoisseur of counterfeit money, that is, ... a liar”) “gave real money and then boasted ... that he gave a ‘counterfeit coin’ ” (*Given Time* 150). But Derrida thinks it senseless to wonder “what

actually happened, what was the true intention of the narrator's friend and the meaning hidden 'behind' his utterances"; for, as "fictional characters have no consistency, no depth beyond their literary phenomenon," the secret they carry is absolutely inviolable (*Given Time* 153).

Inasmuch as this absolutely inviolable secret involves nothing that is hidden, the term "secret" is inadequate to it. Hence in question is a "secret without secret." Nevertheless, the term "secret" seems inevitable in a situation in which a reader cannot know the truth of a matter – the matter of whether or not the friend in the story, contrary to his word, gave real money – which is crucial to the reading of the story.¹

The absolute secret is in contrast with the secret with which we are more familiar: the conditional and sharable secret – the secret, that is, where what is secret could be revealed and cease to be secret, where there is some content that could be brought to light. Within the imaginary world represented by Baudelaire's "Counterfeit Money," whether or not the friend gave a real coin is a conditional secret. The conditional secret, Derrida argues, is allowed, in certain circumstances, by the authorities of religion, philosophy, morality, politics or the law; "can and must be made known under other circumstances" (*On the Name* 25); involves "a reserve of potential [*potentiel*] knowing, a potential [*en puissance*] manifestation" (*On the Name* 59)²; and can be played with "as with a simulacrum, with a lure or yet another strategy": when cited as "an impregnable resource," it can enable one "to secure for oneself a phantasmatic power over others" (*On the Name* 30). By contrast the "undetectable, unbreakable," absolute secret (*Given Time* 153) – the secret which

makes for endless hypotheses, and thereby impassions – is not something over which a subject can have mastery. Through its aporetic structure, it displaces the use of (conditional) secrecy to attain power and is thereby tied to democracy.³

The aporia of the secret marks the relationship of text and author. For Derrida any intentions of Baudelaire's about what really happened in *La fausse monnaie* seem to have no more force than, say, an author's intentions about a character's appearance that is not described or evoked in the text: "Baudelaire does not know, cannot know, and does not have to know, anymore than we do, what can be going 'through the mind' of the friend, and whether the latter finally wanted to give true or counterfeit money, or even wanted to give anything at all" (*Given Time* 152). That the author cannot penetrate the secrecy of his or her characters' intentions, that the author cannot secure a depth for the characters beyond their literary phenomenon, permits "all hypotheses, ... groundless and ad infinitum, about the meaning of a text, or of the final intentions of an author" (*On the Name* 24), and consigns the author to a certain absolute secrecy with respect to his or her characters. On what is going through the mind of the friend in *La fausse monnaie*, "there can be no question of [Baudelaire's] responding, of [his] being able to or having to respond"; he therefore "... is not responsible to anyone, not even to himself, for whatever the persons or the characters of his works, thus of what he is supposed to have written himself, say and do, for example. And these 'voices' speak, allow or make to come – even in literatures without persons and without characters" (*On the Name* 28-29).⁴

Secrecy seems then to be tied to a break between text and author. Yet this break – and here the paradox arises – is the condition of a return to the author, of

“augmentation of self,” of “*auctoritas*.” For, Derrida argues, you are enriched, your *auctoritas* enhanced, if what bears your name is “sufficiently free, powerful, creative and autonomous to live alone and radically to do without you and your name. What returns to your name, to the secret of your name, is the ability to disappear *in your name*” (*On the Name* 13). This perhaps raises the possibility that the author must in a certain way intend the secret that breaks with intention. Nor does Derrida ascribe absolute secrecy to all the intentions – through and through – of either characters or author. Using the (italicized) phrase “*in this regard*,” Derrida limits the analogy, concerning the friend’s intentions, between Baudelaire and the reader. For Derrida, attention to authorial intention is a fundamental guardrail in the interpretation of texts.

This complexity of the relationship between text and author informs what Derrida says about the freedom of literature. On the one hand, rendering the author not responsible for what his or her text says, the secrecy essential to literature is tied to the in-principle right of literature to say everything – a right perhaps evident in the sense that it is inappropriate to bring libel actions on the basis of things said in literary works. Because the “possibility of literature goes together – politically – with the unlimited right to ask any question, to suspect all dogmatism, to analyze every presupposition, even those of the ethics or the politics of responsibility,” literature, according to Derrida, “ties its destiny to a certain noncensure, to the space of democratic freedom (freedom of the press, freedom of speech, etc.)” (*On the Name* 28). Moreover, if there is no truth behind the literary phenomenality of the text – this is what the secret amounts to – then the text is not bound to represent some truth behind the text, is free from responsibility to reality. On the other hand, inasmuch as the literary text is tied to authorial intention, the author is responsible for the text and

for the views that it expresses. In the same book that affirms the secrecy (tied to authorial nonresponsibility) of literature, Derrida expresses dismay at those who would neutralize the contempt for human rights, the racism and anti-semitism in Baudelaire's writings and at those who hold Céline "excusable and pardonable, sheltered by literature and language, for having done and said worse things than so many others whom numerous prosecutors today do not allow to get away with anything" (*Given Time* 130). Derrida's contention that "all hypotheses are permitted, groundless and ad infinitum, about the meaning of a text, or the final intentions of an author" does not strip literature of propositional content.⁵

For Derrida, the aporia of the absolute secret is tied to the aporia of the gift. Like the secret, the gift breaks with the mastery of the subject, with return – its condition is "not to return to itself" (*On the Name* 13). Recognition of it constituting a return on it, reducing it to an exchange, the gift must remain secret: "the paradox of the gift that is not a present, the gift of something that remains inaccessible, unrepresentable, and as a consequence secret ... would link the essence without essence of the gift to secrecy" (*Gift of Death* 29-30). The proposition "there is gift" – which might be thought to express the content of the secret of the gift – is in principle inexpressible: what it expresses annuls what it affirms. Of it we might say what Derek Attridge, paraphrasing Derrida, says of the question "What is literature?": "something in the final word retroactively challenges the first two, with their assumptions about essence, identity, and truth" (2). Marked by radical secrecy, the gift and literature displace such assumptions. And paralleling the relationship/nonrelationship of the donor's intention to the literary text, the gift must break with yet remain tied to the intention of the donor: "The simple intention to give, insofar as it carries the

intentional meaning of the gift, suffices to make a return payment to oneself” (*Given Time* 23); “There is no gift without the intention of giving” (*Given Time* 123). The terms Derrida uses to affirm the gift and register its paradoxical relationship to intention could express his passion for literature: “There must be chance, encounter, the involuntary, even unconsciousness or disorder, and there must be intentional freedom, and these two conditions must – miraculously, graciously – agree with each other” (*Given Time* 123).

The tie between secrecy and the gift inscribes an injunction to secrecy in the good itself – as Derrida argues in discussing Kierkegaard: “the absolute responsibility of my actions, to the extent that such a responsibility remains mine, singularly so, something no one else can perform in my place, ... implies secrecy” and “that, by not speaking to others, I don’t account for my actions, that I answer for nothing and to no one, that I make no response to others or before others.” Yet this is paradoxical in the light of “the most widely shared belief” that “responsibility is tied to the public and to the nonsecret, to the possibility and even the necessity of accounting for one’s words and actions in front of others, of justifying and owning up to them” (*Gift of Death* 60).

The relationship between the secret and democracy is similarly paradoxical. Although, as we have seen, Derrida ties the secret to democracy, he argues that the secret contradicts a historically limited concept of “democracy as openness – where all are equal and where the public realm is open to all” (“Deconstruction and Pragmatism” 80), a concept which links democracy to “the concept of a subject that is calculable, accountable, imputable, and responsible, a subject having-to-respond [*devant – repondre*], having-to-tell [*devant – dire*] the truth, having to reveal the

secret, with the exception of certain situations that are determinable and regulated by law.” This contradiction, he writes, “indicates the task (task of thought, also theoretico-practical task) for any democracy to come” (*On the Name* 29). It would seem that the “democracy to come,” like the gift, is a matter of the miraculous, gracious agreement of heterogeneous conditions.

In evoking such a democracy, Derrida affirms what he elsewhere refers to as the messianic or as messianicity⁶ – an openness to a future that is not reducible to the present, that will never become a present and so will be forever secret. Breaking with the present, the secret (and with it the gift and literature) testifies to such a radical future, as do the groundless and ad infinitum hypotheses, to which the secret gives rise, about the literary text, hypotheses never to be verified or falsified in any present. John Caputo comments: “The ‘messianic secret’ is, there is no secret. ... [It] lies on a textual surface, inconspicuous by its superficiality, without a martyr to bear it witness, without a revelation to unveil it, without a second coming or even a first. It is always to come” (102). Precisely because the “voices” of literature – which as we have seen Derrida says “allow or make to come” (*On the Name* 29) – are without depth, without origin, they can summon an impossible future.

So far Baudelaire’s “Counterfeit Money” has served here to illustrate what Derrida means by the absolute secrecy that marks literary fiction. But it is also of interest because it thematizes conditional secrecy and the gift. On the most obvious reading, the narrator’s friend reveals a fact (that the coin he has given the beggar is counterfeit) which he has kept secret from the beggar, the person whom it would seem to concern most. But if the friend lies, then he keeps secret from the narrator the fact

that the coin was true. On either hypothesis, the secret in question is not absolute. What is absolutely secret is which of these two mutually exclusive conditional secrets is “the truth” here. There is a secret without depth concerning the secret with depth, an absolute secret concerning the conditional secret. Unlike the conditional secret, the absolute secret does not occur at the level of the work’s represented content – indeed it would seem to break with representation altogether. Moreover, at stake is not merely the secret of the friend’s intentions. There is also the question of how secret is the secrecy of the narrator’s condemnation of what he regards as his friend’s unforgivable conduct, condemnation which he does not and will not share with the friend whom he now thinks beyond the pale, and condemnation which he bases on a perhaps unjustified confidence that he knows what his friend’s intentions are. If the friend lies to the narrator in order to create an effect on him, then it may be that the friend can surmise something of the narrator’s shock, in which case the narrator’s condemnation may not be as secret as he thinks it is.

At issue in such secrecy about secrecy is arguably a displacement of the authority of the conditional secret. If the friend gave a counterfeit coin to the beggar, then he seems to use the conditional secret – the secret kept from the beggar – to secure a phantasmatic power over him; and if he thinks that he does a good deed, then his conduct seems to be a travesty of the gift and its radical secrecy. And the narrator, believing that he knows the truth of what his friend did and of his friend’s assessment of what he did, judges his friend’s conduct to be unforgivable. The radical secrecy that renders it undecidable whether the friend did give a counterfeit coin seems to displace the authority of these gestures, a displacement connected to the way that for Derrida the absolute secret breaks with the mastery, the power of the subject: “solitude, the other name of the secret, ... is neither of consciousness, nor of the

subject, nor of Dasein” (*On the Name* 30). Moreover, the irreducible complexity, the intrigue as it were, in the relationship between what the text represents (inasmuch as it represents at all) and the textual context of this representation, means that the author cannot pronounce ultimately on, cannot have mastery over, his characters.

How “ ‘voices’ speak, allow or make to come ... in literatures without persons and without characters” is perhaps suggested by the title of “Counterfeit Money.” The title of a text would seem to be connected to its demarcation, its identity. Yet Derrida argues that in so far as counterfeit money is illegal, the title of “Counterfeit Money” is without title – an argument which seems reinforced by Derrida’s point (made in another context) that “the power and import of a title have an essential relationship with something like the law” (*Acts of Literature* 188-89). “Counterfeit Money” is a title, Derrida argues, that does not return to itself, a title without essence or identity. As a title without title, it dissimulates itself and hence is marked by fiction, a trait usually thought of as belonging (in the case of literature) to the main text, whose place the title therefore usurps: the ostensible main text becomes a commentary on the ostensible title, which becomes the main text. In the title – a literary trait without persons and without characters – voices without origin speak. The title itself gives rise to speculation, to endless hypotheses; it is the place/non-place of a radical secrecy. Just as it is in the case of the author’s name conferred upon a text, non-return is the condition of the title.

II. A Secretive Business

Like Derrida's writing on literature and secrecy, Conrad's *The Secret Agent* displaces the conditional secret; it does so even before the novel proper begins, this secret appearing but *merely appearing* to structure the author's preface (added in 1920, thirteen years after the novel was published).

The preface presents itself as an account of the novel's genesis – a genesis which appears to be the secret behind the novel, and the three key moments of which involve conditional secrecy. The germination occurs when, the author having described the 1894 Greenwich explosion as “a blood-stained inanity of so fatuous a kind that it was impossible to fathom its origin by any reasonable or even unreasonable process of thought,” an unnamed friend remarked in a casual and omniscient manner “Oh, that fellow was half an idiot. His sister committed suicide afterwards” – a remark which seems like the revelation of a secret (Conrad speculates that the illuminating facts were gathered at second or third hand) (39). The next important watershed, precipitating an event in Conrad's mind analogous to the way that the addition of a tiny drop of the right kind brings about crystallization in a test tube, was his reading of a conversation concerning an 1880s anarchist outrage, a conversation in which a Home Secretary says to an Assistant Police Commissioner: “ ‘All that's very well. But your idea of secrecy over there seems to consist of keeping the Home Secretary in the dark’ ” (40). What finally yields Conrad something (the story of Winnie Verloc) “ready ... to be dealt with” is the dawning conviction in his imagination – helping him “to keep at arm's length” memories of London that “threatened to rush in and overwhelm each page of the story” – of the sister's

maternal passion with its “*secret ardour*” (my italics) (41). It is as if in revealing the secret of the novel’s genesis, the preface suggests that this genesis, the creative process itself perhaps, amounts to the bringing to light, the mastering of, a secret – a secret which must be conditional, not radical, and which is rendered glamorous by the talk of secret ardour.

But the preface’s failure to relate the Home Secretary’s statement about secrecy – allegedly so important in the novel’s genesis – to the story of Winnie Verloc, allegedly the novel’s subject, and the negativity of its most explicit formulations of the author’s intentions (such as that he had “no perverse intention, no secret scorn” (38), and had “not intended to commit a gratuitous outrage on the feelings of mankind” (43)⁷), suggest that it does not truly reveal the motivation behind the text, or tie the genesis of the novel to the mastering of the secret. Certainly it does not simply affirm such mastery. As Michael Greaney argues, “the frisson of obtaining an ‘inside story’ ” not yet “devalued by widespread dissemination” underpins the credence we accord the friend’s tip-off, and this implicates the reader in a “secret-sharing and prurient curiosity” that links the preface to the pornography from which the preface seeks to demarcate the novel itself (138).⁸

Later I return to the story – of Winnie Verloc – that figures in the preface as a story with a secret at its heart. In moving beyond the preface, I first consider what is already apparent in the preface: the doubleness, the duplicity, of the writing.

The title of the text – *The Secret Agent* – referring to something that breaks with law, is like the title of “Counterfeit Money” as Derrida analyses it, a title without title.

Given the essential relationship between the title and the law, it sets up a sense of intrigue which is redoubled when the opening page describes a dimly lit shop window containing “a few books with titles hinting at impropriety” (45), a phrase applicable to the book we have just begun to read.

And it is perhaps no accident that immediately after the title, the law is invoked, verbally at least, the opening paragraph using the expression “brother-in-law” twice:

Mr Verloc, going out in the morning, left his shop nominally in charge of his brother-in-law. It could be done, because there was very little business at any time, and practically none at all before the evening. Mr Verloc cared but little about his ostensible business. And, moreover, his wife was in charge of his brother-in-law. (45)

What is nominally the case differing from and perhaps concealing what is really the case, the term “nominally” in the first sentence evokes dissimulation and hence secrecy. Moreover, dissimulation marks the explanation of how Mr Verloc is able to leave the shop nominally in his brother-in-law’s charge. For the second explanation, the explanation that in any case Mr Verloc’s wife was in charge of his brother-in-law, seems to render irrelevant the first: that what the brother-in-law is left nominally in charge of is very little and Mr Verloc cares little for it. The doubleness marks the reiteration of the phrase “in charge of his brother-in-law”: its second occurrence evokes an idea (of someone having charge over the brother-in-law) which calls into question the idea (of the brother-in-law having charge over something) evoked by its first occurrence. And the calling into question is not merely retrospective. For the

meaning that the phrase seems intended to convey in its first occurrence is at odds with the phrase itself and would be properly conveyed by the words “in the charge of his brother-in-law”; only in the second occurrence do words and meaning coincide. That the displacement pertains to a phrase that invokes the law compounds the sense of intrigue.

Further dissimulation arises from the ostensibility of the business – an aspect perhaps of the first explanation of how the brother-in-law can have nominal charge of the business. At issue could be a contrasting real business, suggesting perhaps a deliberate concealment, a secret with depth; and indeed there is soon reference to Mr Verloc’s “other business” (48) – the business, that is, which has something to do with politics, for which he leaves the shop, and which is contrasted with “his business of a seller of shady wares” (47). But the ostensibility could also – or perhaps alternatively – evoke the idea that any putative business of Mr Verloc’s is merely ostensible, that he really has no business, in which case there is dissimulation and hence secrecy, but no depth: no intentional concealment, no hidden business, nothing but the ostensible. That “there was very little business at any time” suggests a business that is almost not a business; and Mr Verloc’s extreme indolence – adverted to at the beginning of the next chapter – makes the reality of any business of his questionable.

To the extent that there are two interpretations (one more obvious, more ostensible perhaps; the other more hidden) of the phrase “his ostensible business,” a secrecy, possibly a secrecy with depth, marks the text itself. But the multiplying of incompatible interpretive hypotheses brings with it undecidability and hence unknowability and secrecy – this time a depthless secrecy, a secrecy without secret.

Involving pornography (“shady wares”), thus without respectability and legality (see Chapter 6), the ostensible business – its customers “very young men, who hung about the window for a time before slipping in suddenly” (45) – is itself secretive. So a secretive business may conceal another secretive business. And concerning the possible secret business behind the ostensible business, the first chapter – echoing Mr Verloc, who in wooing Winnie, the chapter tells us, once told her that “His work was in a way political” (48) – seems deliberately secretive. The phrase it uses to describe the business – “his vocation of a protector of society” (47) – conceals as much as it reveals.

Nor is the doubling and redoubling of secrecy limited by further revelations about Mr Verloc’s occupation as protector of society. For the business that the ostensible business conceals is itself double, involving two occupations, one of which conceals the other. When he tells Winnie that “his work was in a way political and that she would have to be nice to his political friends” (48), Mr Verloc appears to refer to his anarchist work – again secretive, albeit legal – as Delegate of the Central Red Committee, and to his anarchist acquaintances. But Mr Verloc is an anarchist only ostensibly. He is in fact someone who spies on anarchists – and such spying is also political (he is not lying when he tells Winnie that his work is in a way political, though what he says is double); and is obviously something that he must keep secret, particularly from the anarchists. So what we have with respect to Mr Verloc is a secretive business (pornography) rendering secret another secretive activity (anarchist political work) behind which is another secret occupation (that of a secret agent).

And even when we learn that Mr Verloc is a secret agent the secret is not out of the bag. For secret agency seems to be the most radically dissimulatory of his occupations. Its dissimulation going beyond that knowingly practiced by a secret agent, it seems to have been concealing a secret from the secret agent himself. Mr Verloc has conceived of secret agency as a matter of spying, of secretly discovering and reporting what would have otherwise remained secret, what already exists. But the diplomats of the Embassy that employs him tell him that he fails to grasp what his job is really, its essence. State Councillor Wurmt dismisses Mr Verloc's reports as merely exposing what is assumed to exist as the first condition of his employment: "What is required at present is not writing, but the bringing to light of a distinct, significant fact – I would almost say of an alarming fact" (56). And Mr Vladimir, presenting himself as master of the secret of Mr Verloc's occupation, propounds an active conception of secret agency: not a reporting of an otherwise secret phenomenon but a provoking of that phenomenon to manifest its nature, to express itself, to reveal its secret. Linking the ostensible to the idle, he charges Mr Verloc with indolence, with being merely ostensibly what he gives himself as being. "We have no use for your voice. ... We want facts – startling facts – damn you. ... You give yourself for an *agent provocateur*. The proper business of an *agent provocateur* is to provoke" (61).

But if Mr Vladimir has finally revealed what is proper to secret agency, revealed the essence of Mr Verloc's business, then in question is something that strips the business of all propriety – of all essence. For what he advocates is not only illegal (more so than is the secret agency hitherto practiced by Mr Verloc) but also vulnerable to the censure, articulated later by the Assistant Commissioner of Police,

that secret agents, being “free from all restraint” and able “to be more reckless than the most reckless of conspirators,” tend to “augment the positive dangers of the evil against which they are used,” and are “without as much faith as is necessary for complete negation, and without that much law as is implied in lawlessness” (144-45). Secret agency, on this interpretation, is marked by a radical dissimulation – a radical ostensibility: its essence, its secret, would seem to be the anarchy that is its ostensible target. Its nature to be at odds with itself, it has no true nature that can be brought to light.

The abyss of secret agency – its enclosing secrets within secrets ad infinitum, secrets that threaten the mastery of the individual engaged in it – informs Mr Verloc’s sense, after his interview with Mr Vladimir, that no occupation “fails a man more completely than that of a secret agent of police.” He “had now the sensation of an incipient fall. The prospect was as black as the window-pane against which he was leaning his forehead” (84). He “felt horribly wakeful” (85) and is left with “the dreary conviction that there is no sleep for him” (87).⁹

And the sensation of an incipient fall comes also to Mr Verloc’s nemesis. In the prospect which for Mr Verloc is as black as the window-pane, “suddenly the face of Mr Vladimir, clean-shaved and witty, appeared enhaloed in the glow of its rosy complexion like a sort of pink seal impressed on the fatal darkness” (84). This image of Mr Vladimir sealing Mr Verloc’s fate is also an image of Mr Vladimir as master of the secret, and as one therefore who can exert a phantasmatic power over others. But when, toward the end of the novel’s action, the Assistant Commissioner conveys to Mr Vladimir that he knows the secret behind the apparent anarchist outrage (knows,

that is, the conditional secret that Mr Vladimir hoped to control), Mr Vladimir, “almost awed by the miraculous cleverness of the English police” (208) is, like Mr Verloc before him, engulfed by the irruption of secrets that go beyond and displace those that he has sought to use in the service of a secretive and oppressive power. A sensation of unfathomability marks his undoing, the narrative itself here seeming to register the displacement of conditional secrecy by radical secrecy, infinite dissimulation.

It may seem that the demise of one would-be master of the secret is tied to the triumph of another, that of the Assistant Commissioner, who, as we have seen, grasps the impropriety of secret agency; and that the novel affirms this triumph which dazzles its victim, seems to uncover the secret behind the outrage, and prevents the framing of an innocent man. But as Greaney points out, the Assistant Commissioner’s investigation is suspiciously straightforward; does not encompass all the ramifications of the mystery; and, far from a comprehensive solution, precipitates “the murder of Verloc, the suicide of Winnie, and the madness of Ossipon – a chain of horrific events that cannot but make the detective’s suave résumé of his little adventure seem egregiously complacent” (147). The miraculous cleverness that overawes Mr Vladimir is illusory. Moreover, his motive (another conditional secret) in uncovering the perpetrator of the crime and preventing the framing of the innocent Michaelis is to preserve not justice or professional propriety but a friendship that makes his personal and domestic life bearable, the friendship of an aristocratic woman friend of his wife’s who, out of a sentimental radicalism, has become the patron of Michaelis. The derisive self-criticism that the impropriety of his motive elicits from him – as this motive is forming – has no tendency toward self-improvement. By the end of his

investigation he seems blind to the fact that some of the words of his résumé (“ ‘From a certain point of view we are here in the presence of a domestic drama’ ” (204)) describe not only what his investigation has uncovered but his own conduct in undertaking the investigation. In this doubling is a depthless, infinite secrecy that undermines his attempt to present himself as the master of the secret. This mastery is undone by the conditional secret that motivates his attempt to master the conditional secret behind the bomb outrage.

The conditional secrecy is an effort to gain power over others – most viciously in the case of Mr Vladimir’s active conception of secret agency and in his positing himself as the master of the secret of secret agency. But if the radical secrecy that displaces the conditional secrecy is to be affirmed for doing so, it is to be affirmed negatively, not in itself but because it undermines an evil. Far from something that impassions, the radical secrecy here pertains to the evil and radical impropriety of secret agency itself, impropriety which is not valued for its displacing of the proper and of essence. The paradoxes of the radical secrecy are for Conrad tied not to any sense of a democracy to come but to mere absurdity and meaninglessness. In Conrad’s indictment of the present, there is no openness to a radical future. A further complexity – one to which I shall return later – arises from the fact that Conrad’s writing, with its doublings and redoublings, seems to accommodate, to be implicated in, the radical secrecy that is for him tied to impropriety and absurdity.

III. The Mystery of the Systematically Incurious

Our consideration of the public realm, the realm of work and politics, has with the Assistant Commissioner's résumé, uncovered the way that imbricated within this realm is the domestic realm. But the idea of the domestic as the hidden core of the novel, a deep secret, seems to be set up to be undone. We have already seen the way in which the central figure of the domestic realm (Winnie Verloc, with her passionate, life-defining sisterly maternal love for her dimwitted younger brother Stevie) is caught up in the intrigue of the first paragraph, its depthless secrecy, its play on the phrase "in charge of his brother-in-law." And this prefigures the way in which she is evoked in the rest of the novel.

Sometimes the unfathomability which is her most salient characteristic – early we learn that "she preserved an air of unfathomable indifference behind the rampart of the counter" (46); that her charms include "the provocation of her unfathomable reserve" (47); that her glance is "straight, unfathomable" – seems linked to depth and a sense of intention. But "seems" only. When the Verlocs' gazes cross, the enlarged pupils of her eyes "received his stare into their unfathomable depths" (224). But merely *receiving* his stare – a receiving the more vacant and mechanical because done by the pupils of the eyes, not the eyes themselves – the pupils conceal nothing of substance, no secret. Later, shortly before her decision to kill her husband – a decision which stems from her secret motive in marrying him – she is likened to "a masked and mysterious visitor of impenetrable intentions" (230). But this contributes to the irony of the narrative, the connotations of subtlety, craft and complexity being utterly at odds with the woman's reality.

Precisely because of its superficiality Winnie Verloc's unfathomability is thought to conceal great depths. Chief Inspector Heat cannot help suspecting that extraordinary hidden knowledge lies behind the listless indifference – which is in fact tied to her ignorance – of her initial response to his questions about the Bomb Outrage perpetrated by her husband (“‘I think,’ he said, looking at her steadily, ‘that you could give me a pretty good notion of what’s going on if you liked’ ” (192)); a little later her avowing “so much ignorance” – in a quiet voice with a “genuine note of wonder” – provokes him beyond endurance (193).

That Winnie Verloc's depths are as it were without depth, her mystery without mystery, is suggested by the narrator's statement that, “Curiosity being one of the forms of self-revelation, a systematically incurious person remains always partly mysterious” (216). Her incuriosity, “her instinctive conviction that things don't bear looking into very much” – which is so entrenched that it is confirmed by the surprise of her husband saying that he is going on the Continent the next day (175) – turns her into something that does not bear looking into very much. Being herself amongst the things that she does not look into, she lacks the self-reflectiveness that makes for inwardness and depth – inwardness to some extent exemplified by the Assistant Commissioner's trenchant self-criticism. It is true that her eschewal of self-reflection prevents her love for Stevie occasioning a self-congratulatory regard. But this does not render the love pure, does not bestow on it the spontaneity and radical secrecy of the gift. For the systematic incuriosity strips the love of spontaneity and, in refusing to waste any portion of “this transient life in seeking for fundamental information,” inscribes the love in an economy – an economy with “all the appearances and some of

the advantages of prudence,” in accord with “constitutional indolence,” and because of which Winnie, in soothing Stevie’s excitement, never fathoms “its twofold character,” its involving both the anguish of immoderate compassion and the pain of innocent but pitiless rage (167). Her own lack of depth prevents her fathoming his depths.

And Stevie’s depths are themselves not deep. Not only immoderate, his compassion, inasmuch as it oscillates with pitiless rage, is primitive, unformed, without steadiness or consistency.¹⁰ And the twofoldness that renders his compassion superficial seems to be displayed by his sister at her most decisive moment: just before she murders her husband, the narrator to evoke her appearance speaks of “the homeless soul of Stevie” flying to her breast (234). As Beth Sharon Ash points out, Winnie, in substituting vengeance for mourning, in enacting talionic justice against Verloc, becomes possessed by “Stevie’s unschooled, unmediated ruthlessness”: in the thanatonic union of Winnie and Stevie, “‘pitiless rage’ overwhelms love and then retreats, leaving behind desolation” (219)

Her conviction that there are no secrets – in effect her only secret apart from her maternal love for Stevie and her motivation in marrying Verloc – makes her in a sense a master of the secret yet hollows out the depth of the secret of which one can be master. And like those other would-be masters of the secret, her husband and Mr Vladimir, Winnie, albeit in more pitiable circumstances, has the experience of a fall in the face of vertiginous secrets. When she in bewilderment identifies the piece of cloth from her brother’s coat – the cloth she herself has attached – Chief Inspector Heat ties her ignorance, which he accepts at last, to complicity: “ ‘it strikes me that you know

more of this bomb affair than even you yourself are aware of' ” (194). Knowing more than she is aware of, she is as it were caught in an unmasterable, infinite secrecy which is testified to by her “boundless astonishment”¹¹ yet which, tied to an astonishment that is the flipside of the systematic incuriosity that has governed her life, is in no way affirmed.

Thus the displacement, in Conrad's portrayal of Winnie, of a secrecy, a reserve with depth, with content, does not open a space for a depthless, radical secrecy that impassions, that invites endless hypotheses; nor for the secrecy of the gift, of goodness. Winnie Verloc's unfathomability strips her passion of passion. Not intrinsic to a genuine love for her brother, her ignorance of him is tied to a systematic incuriosity which is itself a theoretical attitude. Her wilful blindness is not the blindness of spontaneity; her quiet voice – which, ironically, evinces a genuine note of wonder in avowing the ignorance that bespeaks lack of wonder – is not a voice that makes or allows to come.

It is perhaps with respect to a secondary character – Mrs Verloc's mother, who is secondary in particular to Mrs Verloc – that the novel comes closest to affirming a radical secrecy. Thinking that “the less strain put on Mr Verloc's kindness the longer its effects were likely to last” and that therefore his kindness to his wife's relatives should be concentrated wholly on Stevie, she decides to end her dependence on her son-in-law and throw herself on charity, the charity available to destitute widows of deceased victuallers. She acts to this end in secrecy, and even when she reveals to her daughter what she has done, she does not reveal her motive (love and concern for Stevie), nor that she has had to create – through tears and insinuation rather than

through lying words – the false impression that she can no longer rely on her daughter and son-in-law's support. Her motivation remaining secret, her self-sacrificing love goes without recognition and gratitude, rendering it perhaps all the more heroic. Thus secrecy seems to be essential to her gift to her son: "poor Stevie had nothing in the world he could call his own except his mother's heroism and unscrupulousness" (161).

Yet the way that secrecy constitutes this gift seems to undermine it. For Stevie's mother's secrecy, like Winnie's, goes together with her ignorance, with her failure to test her beliefs against reality. Early in the novel we are told: "Her son-in-law's heavy good nature inspired her with a sense of absolute safety. Her daughter's future was obviously assured, and even as to her son Stevie she need have no anxiety" (48). The calculations on which she bases her decision to throw herself on charity are way off the mark; thus she is herself implicated in the way that her action, by fuelling Winnie's efforts to draw Mr Verloc's attention to Stevie, contributes to Stevie's death. Her unscrupulousness pertains not only to her creating a false impression of her daughter's filiality, but to a failure (shared with her daughter) of maternal vigilance. Her heroism and unscrupulousness – the only things she thinks that Stevie can call his own – are death-dealing. Thus once again in this novel we find that meaninglessness and absurdity attend the slightest intimation of a radical secrecy, a secrecy without secret.

IV. A Self-Protective Irony

Despite its calling into question the authority of the conditional secret, *The Secret Agent* is not a text that foregrounds the thing about literature that impassions Derrida: it does not create space for radical secrecy. Paradoxically this makes for a proximity of Conrad and the objects of his scorn: it renders him a would-be master of the secret. The scorn that suffuses this work, the author's thoroughgoing indictment of the superficiality of his characters, depends on his being able to penetrate the secrecy of their intentions. His text cannot risk activating the possibility – which, according to Derrida, pertains to the characters in any literary fiction – of these intentions remaining secret. To show that his characters are ethically without depth, Conrad must rely on the illusion that he can secure a depth for them beyond their literary phenomenon. Had we a sense of there being nothing beyond their literary phenomenality, the characters would invite endless hypotheses and no longer be merely objects of scorn and pity.

Beth Sharon Ash argues that although the narrative irony of *The Secret Agent* solidifies Conrad's identity as a survivor "specially authorized to survey [and know] the dark underside of human experience" and "not break under the strain of such knowledge," it is in fact self-protective; and that because the black "lucidity" of this irony hinders "critical insight into and feeling for the variegated colors and distinctions of life," it "does commit (as the Note to the novel puts it) 'a gratuitous outrage' on the reader": the author peddles "a pessimistic illusion about life and a narcissistic illusion about his own authority to bear it" (194). Although not focused on whether Conrad's bleakness leads him to represent reality falsely, my reading converges with that of Ash. For I have in effect suggested that Conrad in this novel seeks to solidify his own identity, to affirm his authority as author, that he is not here

amongst the writers whom Barthes describes as having attempted to loosen “the sway of the Author” (186).¹² In *The Secret Agent*, the textual doublings and displacements that I have linked to the displacement of the authority of conditional secrecy and which might have evoked a radical secrecy that even he cannot penetrate, and an openness to a future that is not reducible to the present, become as it were vehicles of an authorial irony, tied to scorn and pity, that strips the characters of radical secrecy. For all its brilliance and perceptiveness, *The Secret Agent* is not a text in which “voices” allow or make to come. Its refusal of what Derrida calls the messianic is of a piece with its annulment of the radical secret.

Works Cited

- Ash, Beth Sharon. *Writing in Between: Modernity and Psychosocial Dilemma in the Novels of Joseph Conrad*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1999.
- Attridge, Derek. Introduction. *Acts of Literature*. By Jacques Derrida. Ed. Attridge. Routledge: New York, 1992.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." Trans. S. Heath. *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. 4th ed. London: Arnold, 2001.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.
- Caputo, John D. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Critchley, Simon. *Very Little ... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. Routledge: New York, 2004.
- Conrad, Joseph. *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale*. Ed. Martin Seymour-Smith. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Acts of Literature*. Ed. Derek Attridge. Routledge: New York, 1992.
- . "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone." Trans. Samuel Weber. *Religion: Cultural Memory in the Present*. Ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- . *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Wills. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- . *Given Time, I: "Counterfeit Money."* Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

- . "An Interview with Derrida." *Derrida and Différance*. Ed. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988.
- . *On the Name*. Ed. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.
- . "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism." *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*. Ed. Simon Critchley. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Greaney, Michael. *Conrad, Language, and Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. *Getting It Right: Language, Literature, and Ethics*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- . *One of Us: The Mastery of Joseph Conrad*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Straus, Nina Pelikan. "The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." *Novel* 20.2 (Winter 1987): 123-37.
- Wollaeger, Mark. *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Endnotes

¹ The term “secret,” as used by Derrida in this context, does not imply that in order to be secret, the secret must be kept secret by someone or something. In question rather is something unknowable. Nevertheless, in the case of “Counterfeit Money,” the unknowability pertains to whether what a person did coincides with what he says he did – which is the kind of thing a person might keep secret.

² Conditional secrecy has a certain complicity with what Blanchot calls *the first night* (171): the night that is mastered by sleep, which as Simon Critchley puts it, “allows the night to disappear and transforms it into a reserve of possibility” (31-32). But the radical secret in which we are tied to literary phenomenality in its sheer superficiality evokes Blanchot’s *other or essential night* – the night of the insomniac, the night that cannot be subordinated to the day, cannot be mastered, the night of which there is no beyond in death, in which one is riveted to simple facticity. Derrida argues that literary fiction tells us the essential about the absolute secret, Blanchot that writing has its origin in an experience of the essential night. The resonance with Blanchot reinforces the sense that Derrida wrests literary writing from the category, traditionally tied to manifestation, of the aesthetic. The secret opens literary phenomenality to that which breaks with phenomenality.

³ Derrida adverts to theaporetic structure of the secret, when he argues that “the necessity of defining the transcendental condition of possibility as also being a condition of impossibility” – which “reappears all the time, when I come back to the question of the fatality of aporia” (*Deconstruction and Pragmatism* 82) – must take account of fiction and literature precisely in so far as they keep the secret.

⁴ The way that the secret marks the relationship of text and author is at issue in a footnote to “Passions” that broaches the radical secrecy that pertains to whether literature speaks of something or gives an example of that thing: “Something of literature will have begun when it is not possible to decide whether, when I speak of something, I am indeed speaking of something (of the thing itself, this one, for itself) or if I am giving an example, an example of something or an example of the fact that I can speak of something, of my way of speaking of something, of the possibility of speaking in general of something in general, or again of writing these words, etc. For example, suppose I say ‘I,’ that I write in the first person or that I write a text, as they say ‘autobiographically.’ No one will be able seriously to contradict me if I claim ... that I am not writing an ‘autobiographical’ text but a text on autobiography of which this text is an example. No one will seriously be able to contradict me if I say ... that I am not writing about myself but on ‘I,’ on any I at all, or on the I in general, by giving an example” (*On the Name* 142-43). The undecidability evoked here pertains, we will see (in Footnote 8), to Conrad’s preface to *The Secret Agent*.

⁵ What needs to be noted is that groundless hypotheses can abide by the protocols of traditional commentary. Derrida’s hypothesis about the friend in “Counterfeit Money” is groundless: no revelation about the truth of the matter is possible. Yet it takes into account the standard meanings of words and is based on argument: the friend is “a connoisseur of counterfeit money, ... a liar”; he is presented as one who desires to create an effect, an aim often realized by untruth. Derrida no more consigns literary interpretation to unbridled subjectivism and pure arbitrariness than he severs literature from ethical or political accountability.

⁶ The messianic that Derrida affirms is “without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration,” and hence “without messianicism.” Whereas messianicism anticipates the coming of the messiah as a foreseeable event, for Derrida the messianic coming of the other emerges as a singular event only when “no anticipation sees it coming” (“Faith and Knowledge” 17). It follows that no theological or onto-theological determination of the messianic in democracy to come is possible.

⁷ Geoffrey Galt Harpham argues that the fact that Conrad in the preface offers only negative formulations of his intentions is indicative of his awareness of a failure to produce moral clarity in the text (*Getting It Right* 198).

⁸ Pretending to reveal the genesis and motivation of the novel without really doing so, the preface (which is written in the first person) is exemplary of the secrecy, the undecidability which we saw (in Note 4) Derrida advert to in the case of literature: “suppose I say ‘I,’ that I write in the first person. ... No one will seriously be able to contradict me if I say ... that I am not writing about myself but on ‘I,’ on any I at all, or on the I in general, by giving an example” (*On the Name* 143). This radical secrecy undercuts the secret-sharing (conditional secrecy is at stake here) evoked by the tipoff of the friend of Conrad – or is it “the friend of Conrad”?

⁹ It is as if the irruption of the secret without secret exposes Mr Verloc to what Blanchot calls the essential night, the night that is not obliterated by sleep, that does not replenish the day. But for Conrad, in contrast to Blanchot, such exposure is not a source of value.

¹⁰ Arguing that *The Secret Agent* deals harshly with Stevie's compassion, Mark Wollaeger points to the way that Stevie's death/dismemberment literalizes the novel's figurative descriptions of this compassion (149)

¹¹ Like her husband before her, Mrs Verloc is as it were catapulted into the essential night, the night that is not obliterated by sleep, which does not replenish the day, in which one is riveted to simple facticity.

¹² The question of whether my reading of *The Secret Agent* applies to other works by Conrad that thematize secrecy is too large to be addressed here. To suggest the wider pertinence of the issues I broach, I shall simply cite a couple of conflicting critical responses. Geoffrey Galt Harpham writes: "While Conrad endlessly constructs forms of containment, of things within things (tales within tales, selves sharing selves, men within ships, Europeans within jungles, darkness within hearts or vice versa), he never places anything substantial at the very centre. This failure has become an endlessly repeated disappointment for critics looking for secrets" (*One of Us* 59-60). Such an affirmation of Conrad – if that is what this is – seems to support the sense of a close proximity between Conrad and the Derrida who affirms the secret without secret, a secret beyond the secret which displaces the secret with content. On the other hand, Nina Pelikan Straus argues that *Heart of Darkness* – a text that Harpham, we have just seen, implicitly evokes in terms suggestive of a displacement of secrecy – is "a confirmation of the one gender's access to ... the secret conjunction of art and horror," a secret to which the other gender has no access (" 'horror' is the secret password in the brotherhood of men who 'know' "), and that its undisclosed theme is

the “guarding of secret knowledge” (133-34). In this picture of Conrad as desiring mastery of the secret – a desire linked to gynophobia – the secret at issue must be conditional, the secret with content and depth.