

Conrad's Adaptation: Theatricality and Cosmopolitanism¹

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It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.

– Oscar Wilde, Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Conrad's dramatic adaptation of his well-known novel *The Secret Agent* (1907) was first performed in 1922, that watershed year for literary modernism, and it is striking in its attempts to translate the narrative's innovative theatricality into the play's literal theatre. That this translation is not quite successful is telling, for sure, about Conrad's limitations as a dramatist, but it is rather more telling about the incompatibility between modernist conceptions of culture, which are integral to Conrad's story, and a (mostly) realist dramatic form, with which Conrad tries to replicate the novel's work. Conrad's modernist sensibility is most apparent in the play's few moments of address to its audience, in which Winnie Verloc, the secret agent's wife, looks out from the stage to affirm her spectators as participants and interlocutors. In these episodes, Winnie is reminding her audience that it knows what she knows: that it knows and she knows that her life incorporates habitual scripts and that she is conforming, against her wishes, to a melodramatic plot. From her wry comment in the first act, "Yes, I am lucky" (referring to her marriage, in which she knows she is not lucky), to her assertion late in the play, "No! That must never be!" (referring to prison or hanging), Winnie asks the audience to notice that the gestures and expectations of conventional fiction are internal to the culture that Conrad's fiction represents (*Three Plays* 80, 168).²

As Winnie looks to the audience for sympathy and recognition, Conrad forces his spectators to adopt his character's point of view and also reminds them that the play is invoking social roles and stereotypes with which they – and Winnie – are very familiar. Conrad establishes the audience as a minor actor in his play: the audience serves to register Winnie's options as established social dramas, which may be invoked and recognized because they

have been acted out before. The play is a social drama about the production of social dramas: a story of a woman's attempt to predict and avoid habitual narrative outcomes and of a foreign embassy that stages a crime – the attempted bombing of the Greenwich Observatory – whose sole purpose is to increase anxiety among the English about uncontrollable, purposeless crimes. Conrad has dramatized the production of literary and social effects, in which various characters play at social roles rather than merely inhabit them.

By making his audience responsible in part for the story represented, Conrad seeks to disrupt the conventional separation between actors and audience. Conrad's play thus incorporates elements that we have come to associate with modernist theatre: breaking the frame between audience and actors, forcing the audience to consider its expectations about the experience of attending the theatre and about the kinds of stories that the theatre tends to display, prompting the audience to notice what has become habitual about its own role in the theatre dynamic. These formal elements of theatrical production, which are present in Conrad's drama, have analogues in Conrad's novel, from which the drama takes not only its story but its ruptured perspectives as well. In fact, the novel goes quite a bit further than the drama to fracture the spectator/reader's attention and to keep the spectator/reader aware of changes in his or her point of view; in the earlier text, the reader is made to feel like one more "agent" in a story about social and cultural pretenses – acting, deception, irony – at the heart of English life. For this reason, to say that the play's form is in some way analogous to the novel's is to say too little: the literal theatricality of the drama only begins to convey the complex theatricality of culture that the narrative proposes; in the drama, Conrad largely fails to reproduce the famous effects of his narration, in which he tells the reader, from the very first sentence, that habitual actions are only "nominally" what they seem (*Secret Agent* 45). In the novel, Conrad forces readers to observe their patterns of observation and to observe moreover that patterns of observation (such as reading) are consistent with everyday practices of social interpretation. Much of this article will focus on the narrative version of *The Secret Agent*, in which Conrad developed those models of cultural role playing that the modernist theatre would later integrate as a matter of dramatic form.

To understand how the theatricality of Conrad's novel could be adapted by modernist drama, it is important to notice that we are speaking, really, of two "theatres": theatre as a genre of representation (a play) and theatre as a paradigm of culture, in which social categories and conventions are structured by repetition and reception. In his major study of "the antitheatrical prejudice" in Western culture, Jonas Barish examines both versions of theatre, literal and metaphorical, though he tends to confuse – often, treat as equivalent – stage performance and individual acts of pretending and self-fashioning (1, 464–70). Here's where the confusion comes in: to the extent that dramatists in the early twentieth century began to disrupt the distinctions among elements in

the drama (actors, play, stage, audience), they sought to challenge the traditions of professional theatre, and Barish calls these dramatists "antitheatrical"; however, "antitheatrical" is also the term he uses to critique both religious critics, such as William Prynne, who condemn the very idea of stage performance and also those who, for reasons of social orthodoxy, speak against any experiments in transformation or impersonation of the self (450–70). The so-called anti-theatricality of these last two groups is often directly opposed, in its commitment to cultural and representational stability, to the "anti-theatricality" of the first group, which seeks to promote more flexible strategies of belonging and describing. The conflict in Barish's argument comes in his claim that theatre on the stage should include "representation of the observed and the actual, intelligible configurations of character, narrative coherence, meaningful patterns of action" (464). Barish's theatre, by restricting itself to "the observed and the actual," cannot accommodate models of culture that resist objective perspectives and categorical certainties. Barish's anti-modernist theatricality is embedded in a conception of culture that is based on assumptions of historical consistency and national distinctiveness. In this sense, Barish has not confused stage and culture *enough*; he does not see that, in the early twentieth century, changes in the stage, which he rejects, were prompted by changes in culture, which he defends.³

The kind of theatricality that I associate with cultural and representational transformation – which Barish calls "antitheatricality" – emerges in Joseph Conrad's work as a feature of cosmopolitanism, an aesthetics of negotiated belonging and cultural improvisation.⁴ One can glimpse this kind of cosmopolitanism in Israel Zangwill's well-known play about European immigrants in New York, *The Melting Pot*, which was first performed in 1908, the year after the publication of Conrad's novel. In Zangwill's play, an anti-Semitic Irish maid, who works for the Jewish protagonists, begins to integrate Yiddish phrases into her heavily accented English vocabulary: the British playwright seems to be suggesting that, even if only in America, cultural types can blend into new amalgamations (170).⁵ Taking on the characteristics of Jews, the Irish maid seems to become, in part, Jewish. Interestingly, a non-Yiddish-speaking audience will have to notice that the Irish maid has become, to them, less comprehensible, and thus the play's dialogue becomes less comfortable for the audience even as the characters become more comfortable with each other. Zangwill forces his audience to notice that they have been estranged by the characters' assimilation, that immigrants change English by adding themselves to it. For Zangwill, it is the newness of what he calls "America" – really, the United States of America – that makes these transformations possible, whereas for Conrad cultural blending is the condition of culture everywhere. While Jewishness and Irishness can mix in *The Melting Pot* (the play coined the phrase), and while each type can relinquish or alter its characteristics over time, the play suggests that, were immigrants

to remain in Europe, their ethnic characteristics would remain wholly identifiable and consistent.

An immigrant from Poland to England, Conrad imagined a world not of melting but of mimicking, where defining characteristics depend on what audiences have learned to recognize. *The Secret Agent*, which made Conrad famous as a cosmopolitan writer, offered in 1907 a new approach to theatricality and culture: it made readers see national belonging as a performance of requisite effects, and it presented characters as actors, whose skills of political manipulation rely on their knowledge of spectators rather than of life. In the world of Conrad's novel, culture is adapted and adaptable. Conrad suggests in *The Secret Agent* that new theories of culture require new strategies of representation.

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In the final chapter of *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, Barish describes the absence of strict boundaries between stage and spectator in modernist drama as a symptom of theatre turning "against itself" (450). He expresses regret that many twentieth-century playwrights have renounced the "familiar" sensibilities of the European theatre, though he is willing to grant momentarily that what seems to him like anti-theatricalism may be a "renovation" rather than a rejection (464). Barish offers this optimistic tone, and yet he immediately follows with a sobering comparison between the vilification of traditional acting and the vilification of Jews and cosmopolitans in European history. He thus suggests, by the logic of association, that anti-theatricalism – including the modernist "renovation" he has intimated only a paragraph earlier – is inseparable from anti-Semitism and extreme forms of nationalism (464–70).

In this transition from modernist theatre to anti-Semitism and anti-cosmopolitanism, Barish formulates his most persuasive emotional argument against "the antitheatrical prejudice." He contends that anti-theatricalism is related to anti-Semitism because social critics over the centuries have attributed the same, often negative, characteristics both to actors and to Jews, "the alleged cosmopolitanism, ready adaptability, and linguistic virtuosity of the Jews being felt to have a natural kinship with the mimetic talents of the actors" (467). While it is true that many writers have made such associations, using anti-Semitism as an occasion to condemn other examples of heterodox culture, such as prostitution and acting, Barish's unrefined coupling of modernism and anti-cosmopolitanism implies that modernist art, in its critique of literary realism and traditional theories of imitation, promotes pious authenticity and cultural dogmatism (the characteristics that Barish attributes to anti-Semitism).

As Barish confuses two kinds of theatricality, here he also confuses two discourses of authenticity. At the beginning of his chapter on modernist

theatre (he discusses the work of Beckett, Pirandello, Brecht, Artaud, et al.), which later segues into the discussion of anti-Semitism, Barish attributes modernist critiques of theatre to the "search for authenticity" in representation (451). While it might seem at first that Barish is only unpersuaded by these theatrical innovations, his critique goes further than disaffection: as the chapter continues, "the search for authenticity" becomes "the rage for authenticity" (464), which becomes "hard-line, fundamentalist antitheatricalism" (464); Barish is suggesting that anti-theatricalism *is* anti-Semitism. The proximity between modernist theatre and anti-Semitism in Barish's account is emphasized by the fact that he describes modernists as "impassioned purists" just before observing that there is a "historical connection" between the treatment of Jews and the treatment of actors.⁶ It seems likely that the word "prejudice" in Barish's book title was intended to evoke this "connection."

On the one hand, the demand for representational "authenticity" within modernism and the demand for national "authenticity" within anti-Semitism are absolutely different, because the first demand seeks to undo conformity while the second seeks to assert it. On the other hand, it is important to consider these versions of authenticity together, since, as Conrad and other early modernists suggest, the desire for definable cultures depends on the possibility of absolute referents: anti-Semitism is grounded in strategies of representation that emphasize continuity and coherence. Barish's critique of racial purity in anti-Semitism is undermined by his embrace of "the observed and the actual," by his sense that the cause of anti-racism will be helped by the assertion of definitive races. Conrad suggests otherwise, by associating nineteenth-century racist discourses, such as phrenology and criminology, with practices of habitual reading and unreflective interpretation (see below). Just as one learns that conventional details do not promise what they seem to promise, that not all shops with pornography in the window are in fact pornography shops, so one learns that a person with large ears is not necessarily a criminal, or that a person may become a criminal by being treated like one.

In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad resists the logic of racism by suggesting that all acts of cultural belonging, and not only those attributed to Jews, require habits of adaptation and virtuosity. Conrad proposes this: the cultural styles that foreigners and Jews were thought to imitate are themselves the products of imitation; put another way, the characteristics of Jews and cosmopolitans are *exactly the same* as the characteristics of Englishmen, and both are the result of learned roles and established reputations. This new sensibility contradicts Barish's sense of theatre's essential humanism, its affirmation of already existing social worlds, and for similar reasons it disturbed Conrad's early critics, who, like Barish, perceived culture as objective and immutable. The modernist theatricality of *The Secret Agent*, as a novel of 1907 and a play of 1922, reflects a cosmopolitan theory of English culture, which Conrad demonstrates in his refusal to imagine any English character whose origins are not foreign:

at the heart of England is an international city, which is not less English for all that. *The Secret Agent* conceives of theatre as constructive rather than mimetic: no longer secondary to national culture, theatre becomes integral to its production. It was Conrad's innovation to assert – and to make his readers see⁷ – that cosmopolitan adaptability makes up English culture. In novels and plays, early-twentieth-century writers such as Conrad unsettled national cultures by representing them as practices instead of objects. Conrad offered up Englishness not as the condition of writing but as its effect.

As a Polish national, later a French seaman, later an English novelist, Conrad came to represent English culture and English writing as few Englishmen could: as a foreigner. Conrad was widely praised by his contemporaries for his natural use of the English language, yet it was the visibility of his choice – over Polish and French – that tended to mark his foreign origins. One is reminded that to call someone “a natural” is often to notice how effortless his or her actions appear; it is to notice not nature but naturalness. Where naturalness is culturally and historically specific, because it depends on a projected impression, nature lays claim to timelessness, to a world apart from representation and recognition. As an English writer, Conrad understood the expectations of an English audience, so much so that he argued, writing to his French translator Hugh-Durand Davray in 1908, that his writing could not function in any language other than English. The work, Conrad explained to Davray, “is written for the English – from the point of view of the effect it will have on an English reader” (28). Contrasting his interests with those of Rudyard Kipling, his most acclaimed predecessor in the English literature of empire, Conrad argued,

A national writer like Kipling, for example, translates easily. His interest is in the *subject*: the interest of my work is in the *effect* it produces. He talks about *his compatriots*. I write *for them*. (29; original emphasis)

Making English novels of “effects,” Conrad asserts the reality that writing creates against the locations and national origins that situate writing. Rather than talking “about” Englishmen, transmitting experiences and characteristics that exist before the act of writing, Conrad writes “for” Englishmen, expressing nothing so much as the conditions of reception. It is part of Conrad's purpose to represent his effort: to show off, among his literary effects, the foreignness that is their origin.

While the difference between nature and naturalness was central to Conrad's literary project, his work was produced in the context of a literary culture devoted to categories of national distinctiveness and authenticity. For this reason, one observes in Conrad's public writings a very different set of claims than those he offers in private letters, such as the one to his translator. In his public comments, Conrad claimed to write not for effect but for transparency.

He made these claims in response to early critics and reviewers who perceived him as a foreigner playing the role of an Englishman; the better he played this role, the more foreign he seemed. This was because – it was thought – only foreigners *have to act* English; everyone else simply *is*. Reviews of *The Secret Agent* had attributed the novel's dark view of London to the fact that its author was a foreigner to England and to English culture. These reviews often claimed that Conrad's novel was nothing more than the natural expression of his foreign self. His choice of English as his literary language was thought to confirm this fact, as it emphasized the artifice of Conrad's endeavor: only a foreigner *chooses* a language. Through the rhetoric of choice, Conrad's contemporaries registered his imposture; through the accusation of theatre, of artifice in writing and in culture, early-twentieth-century critics sought to differentiate Conrad's impersonation of Englishness from the nature of Englishness and other national cultures.

The Irish critic Robert Lynd, reviewing Conrad's writing in a London newspaper in 1908, argued that literature should follow and invigorate national traditions: one should only want or choose what one has been given, and everyone is "given," he asserts, something specific and distinct. Lynd writes that

Mr. Conrad, as everybody knows, is a Pole, who writes in English by choice, as it were, rather than by nature. According to most people, this choice is a good thing, especially for English literature. To some of us, on the other hand, it seems a very regrettable thing, even from the point of view of English literature. (Sherry 210)⁸

For Lynd, Conrad's choice is merely a "choice, as it were," because Lynd does not believe that language can be chosen at all. The obstacle for Lynd is not that Conrad fails to be English but that he fails to be Polish, the nationality to which "everybody knows" Conrad belongs. Lynd is concerned less about Conrad's actions (giving up the Polish language, electing to write in English) than about the implication of these actions for the conditions of national culture; Conrad suggests that national culture is a matter of self-identification and practice rather than a matter of race or nativity. Behind Lynd's critique of Conrad is his belief that literature expresses a particular national culture, whose circulation and continuity literature serves to maintain. For Conrad, on the contrary, literature is the medium through which culture is perceived, even produced.

Many reviewers of *The Secret Agent* saw the novel as a turning point in Conrad's career: with *The Secret Agent*, Hugh Walpole wrote in 1916, "a new attitude was most plainly visible" (19). Even those reviewers who sought to defend Conrad from the cosmopolitanism of whimsical, denationalized writing supported him much as Lynd attacked: by locating in his work the manifestation of an "alien [...] genius" (Sherry 185).⁹ Everywhere, critics imposed

the same language of inevitability: for Lynd, Conrad should not write in English because he is Polish; for others, Conrad's choice of English was irrelevant because the writing betrays its author's Polishness all the same. Edward Garnett, who recommended Conrad's first novel for publication, later wrote in the *Nation* that the author of *The Secret Agent* had brought the "secrets of Slav thought" to "our [English] tongue" (Sherry 191);¹⁰ a reviewer in the *Glasgow News* found it "not an irrelevant reflection upon *The Secret Agent* that its author, Joseph Conrad, is of Polish birth" (Sherry 195);¹¹ and Arthur Symons, whose magazine accepted Conrad's first published short story in 1896, celebrated the novelist as a man of "inexplicable mind" (1) who "does not always think in English" (20) even when he uses English words. These reviews seek to isolate cultural elements in Conrad's work, apart from or more authentic than the English characteristics that his novels perform. The reviews are eager to keep the actual apart from the observed.

Rather than dispute the logic of these comments, Conrad spent much of his career, in prefaces and in biographical essays, insisting that his art was a product of natural inclination. This may sound like a direct contradiction of Conrad's sensibility as he described it to his translator, and in some ways it is; however, Conrad's insistence allowed him to refute the negative implications of theatricality (seen as a necessity of foreignness) while also embracing a professional ethos for which naturalness became his principal goal. In a 1919 introduction to *A Personal Record*, first published in 1912, Conrad refutes "certain statements" in the press: that he had "exercised a choice" to write in English and that his work, in its sensibility and themes, reflects its author's "Sclavonism" (iii, vi). Conrad's refutation seems clear enough:

The first object of this note is to disclaim any merit there might have been in an act of deliberate volition. The impression of my having exercised a choice between the two languages, French and English, both foreign to me, has got abroad somehow. That impression is erroneous. [...] English was for me neither a matter of choice nor adoption. (iii-v)

Conrad does not deny a specific interest in English so much as he denies an indulgent one, where his choice of English would suggest that he could have chosen, indifferently, another language altogether. He objects to the values associated with the ability to choose and to the notion that he might be "able to do freakish things intentionally, and, as it were, from mere vanity" (iii). For Conrad, denying choice and adoption becomes the only way to deny the natural foreignness ("Sclavonism") and insincerity ("vanity") that intention has come to designate. The accusation of indulgence leads Conrad to claim imperatives. The novelist conforms to the rhetoric of necessity because the alternative – artifice – would affirm the frivolity he is trying to refute. Once artifice is deemed an attribute of foreigners, it can no longer characterize the deliberate

work of an English writer. Unwilling to give up deliberate effects and unwilling to affirm the transparency of literary expression, Conrad adopts a different tack: he suggests that English is natural to his writing because, through English, through a language and culture that he has had to learn, he has found the topic of his work, that is, the fiction of naturalness. Conrad contends that his encounter with English inspired him to write: "All I can claim after all those years of devoted practice, with the accumulated anguish of its doubts, imperfections, and falterings in my heart, is the right to be believed when I say that if I had not written in English I would not have written at all" (vi). For Conrad, writing is the agent of English "effects," including his own, and he is not interested in "subjects" for which any language would be appropriate. He is not interested in art that merely describes, unless what art describes is the production of description.

In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad focuses on the narrative details that make nature out of national affiliation and cultural trope. He writes about – and writes to produce – what Roland Barthes calls "the reality effect": the impression of authenticity evoked by descriptive details that exist for no other purpose than to build the reputation of the real. These details, Barthes argues, "say nothing but this: *we are the real*; it is the category of 'the real' (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified; in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism" ("Reality Effect" 148). Conrad's theatricality works like this: in *The Secret Agent*, English characteristics are empty signifiers – Barthes would call them "useless details" (142) – that confirm only Englishness. Conrad aligns the world he represents (arbitrary Englishness) with the world of representation (arbitrary signs), and in this sense he obscures the difference between the fictions of English culture and the fictions of his writing. Conrad records the art of English naturalness, where national identity is structured by theatrical adaptation.

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That the deliberate choice of English might be a defining characteristic of "foreigners," as Conrad's reviewers affirm, the novelist suggests in and by *The Secret Agent*, the only one of his novels set entirely in London. Here, the Assistant Commissioner of police, working undercover, transforms himself into a foreigner by adopting a caricature that the narrative has produced. The novel allows characters to detach, take up, and assimilate cultural attributes – as an actor does – but it also argues that these practices constitute the repertoire of attributes to be chosen. Assuming attributes he and we have learned to call "foreign," the Assistant Commissioner investigates the source of the Greenwich bombing by fitting into its milieu. This investigation takes him to the Soho pornography shop owned by Adolf Verloc, spy to the "foreign

embassy" and the most literal "secret agent" of the novel's title. Conrad's text opens with an account of the "customers" who typically call at the shop and whose appearance the novel configures as the manner the Assistant Commissioner will appropriate. The customers are of two main types: "either very young men" or "men of a more mature age." Of the latter group, it is said, they "had the collars of their overcoats turned right up to their moustaches, and traces of mud on the bottom of their nether garments" (*Secret Agent* 45). The reader is given this physical description two chapters before being told who these older men are, before being told that, in fact, they are not "customers" at all. The physical description quickly becomes an apposition, a defining characteristic: "the evening visitors – the men with collars turned up and soft hats rammed down" – nod "familiarly" when they enter the shop (46). Once the "visitors" are named as "anarchists," the apposition becomes the evidence for an identity that it has helped to create. *The Secret Agent* produces the conditions that make identities recognizable; it imagines social and cultural roles by creating their characteristics.

The Assistant Commissioner becomes "foreign" because unremarked aspects of his person become newly meaningful as specific attributes. With a "short jacket" and "low, round hat," the Assistant Commissioner emphasizes "the length of his grave, brown face"; he gives himself "the sunken eyes of a dark enthusiast and a very deliberate manner" (150). This "deliberate manner," better than a "disguise," suits the Assistant Commissioner to his task: he becomes one of many "queer foreign fish," he fits in among strangeness, by looking as conspicuous as possible (150–51). The Assistant Commissioner becomes noticeable by taking notice of himself, for the more closely he considers his activities, the more "unplaced" he feels (152). Checking his image in a sheet of glass, the police supervisor is "struck by his foreign appearance" (151) and thus adopts the details the novel has attributed to anarchists and strangers. The artifice of foreignness makes the Assistant Commissioner feel foreign, so much so that the characteristics of foreigners, invented as "characteristics" by the novel, become natural to him.

In the language of chance and opportunism, the novelist renders the Assistant Commissioner's "inspiration":

He contemplated his own image with a melancholy and inquisitive gaze, then by sudden inspiration raised the collar of his jacket. This arrangement appeared to him commendable, and he completed it by giving an upward twist to the ends of his black moustache. He was satisfied by the subtle modification of his personal aspect caused by these small changes. "That'll do very well," he thought. "I'll get a little wet, a little splashed –" (151–52)

The "subtle modification," intentional but inspired, evokes the recognition (the "foreign appearance") that had provoked it. Some thirty pages later, at the

shop, the Assistant Commissioner is taken for the foreigner he has become. Winnie Verloc, tending the front counter, notices that

he [...] wore his moustaches twisted up. In fact, he gave the sharp points a twist just then. His long, bony face rose out of a turned-up collar. He was a little splashed, a little wet. A dark man, with the ridge of the cheek-bone well defined under the slightly hollow temple. A complete stranger. (187)

For Winnie, it is not just that the Assistant Commissioner looks foreign but that he sounds foreign as well:

There was nothing foreign in his accent, except that he seemed in his slow enunciation to be taking pains with it. And Mrs Verloc, in her varied experience, had come to the conclusion that some foreigners could speak better English than the natives. (187)

A deliberate and precise English, combined with a “turned-up collar” and purposefully sharpened moustache, allows Winnie Verloc to recognize, as it were, that the stranger has come “from the Continent” (187). The Assistant Commissioner has performed foreignness by sounding as “English” as possible. Speaking deliberately is not a sign that the Assistant Commissioner knows his English well so much as a sign that he knows his signs: he knows that conveying foreignness has more to do with reputed truths than with actual ones.

Conrad knows this also. In the third paragraph of his novel, he describes the display window of the Soho pornography shop that serves as a cover for his secret agent’s activities:

The window contained photographs of more or less undressed dancing girls; nondescript packages in wrappers like patent medicines; closed yellow paper envelopes, very flimsy, and marked two and six in heavy black figures; a few numbers of ancient French comic publications hung across a string as if to dry; a dingy blue china bowl, a casket of black wood, bottles of marking ink, and rubber stamps; a few books, with titles hinting at impropriety; a few apparently old copies of obscure newspapers, badly printed, with titles like *the Torch*, *the Gong* – rousing titles. And the two gas jets inside the panes were always turned low, either for economy’s sake or for the sake of the customers. (45)

The pornography shop cloaks Verloc’s activities because it makes the comings and goings of strange, disheveled men seem normal. For Verloc, the shop is convenient in many ways: it allows him to pretend to his anarchist colleagues that he is hiding illicit activities from the police (in fact, he is a police informer); it allows him to pretend to the police that he is pretending to be an

anarchist (in fact, he is the spy of a foreign embassy); it allows him to pretend to his wife and mother-in-law that he has a business at all. Like cosmopolitan London, as Conrad will come to describe it, the pornography shop is made up of diverse, contradictory parts, such as the assorted paraphernalia that it sells: "photographs of more or less undressed dancing girls," "a few numbers of ancient French comic publications," and "a soiled volume in paper covers with a promising title" (45–46) as well as "a bottle of marking ink" and "rubber stamps" (45). In some ways, these are similar objects: the explicit pornography of the first three items is equated in its exoticism with the foreign origins implicit in the "marking ink" (known also as "Indian ink," made in China or Japan) and the "rubber stamps," whose primary material is a natural product of empire. In other ways, however, the last two items are the English conveniences that aid and obscure the sale of eccentric goods. Indian ink and colonial rubber make up the products that make up England.

The pornography that Verloc claims to sell is a useless detail; it serves only to make his real activities unnoticeable, to affirm his reputation as a shopkeeper. Since Verloc is not really trying to sell any of the objects in the window, the care with which their careless presentation has been arranged is yet another reality effect in play: the low light in the window and the nondescript packages lend the shop a coyness that makes its other ruse – the fiction of the shop – less visible. The fact that the shop advertises marking ink and rubber stamps allows customers to pretend, at any given moment, that they are not buying pornography, that they have merely come to purchase unremarkable household objects – objects that any English house might contain. These objects, in their uselessness, convey the authenticity of the pornography shop because pretense – in particular, the pretense of respectability – is crucial to the genre. Verloc understands the usefulness of useless details.

Nicholas Dames has noted that it is hard to find any narrative detail whose meaning, when one looks hard enough, is entirely "useless."¹² Moreover, one might say that the uselessness of details is often purposeful, a fact of cultural norms rather than cultural necessity. *The Secret Agent* begins by suggesting that the authenticity of London is maintained by the reality effects (ink, stamps) that serve to signify nature. Within the world that Conrad describes, these details are "useless," in that they are not recognized, they have no denotative content. For the reader, however, they serve to mark the foreignness whose significance, whose usefulness, has to be obscured. For Conrad, it is part of England's fiction to make its own foreignness as irrelevant as possible.

The foreignness of the pornography shop is reproduced in *The Secret Agent* by two other particularly English sites: the Foreign Embassy, which sponsors the novel's bombing incident, and "the little Italian restaurant round the corner," where the Assistant Commissioner goes to polish his "strange" appearance. The Embassy is defined by a foreignness it cannot occupy: it must reside within the geographic boundaries of one country even as it remains the

representative, by metonymy, of the other country it serves. Similarly, the Italian restaurant is a "peculiarly British institution" (152), whose "fraudulent cookery" could exist, would exist, nowhere in Italy. This fraudulence causes the patrons to lose "all their national and private characteristics," the Assistant Commissioner observes. The people before him "seemed created for the Italian restaurant," as if the place, in its artifice, attracts a fitting clientele or as if it makes its patrons fit by compromising the social categories that usually define them. The local authenticities of London – the turned-up collar, the twisted moustache, the Embassy, the Italian restaurant – are assimilated fictions. What is most foreign in Conrad's novel is a strangeness invented at home, which is strange above all to those for whom things English are most familiar.

Conrad suggests in his novel that interpretation is limited by the meanings that characters and readers are able to recognize. By alternating between omniscient narrative and free indirect discourse, often several times in a single paragraph, Conrad conflates the practice of the novel with practices of social perception, such that the reader's knowledge is shaped by the way that characters read. Conrad's characters assign the individuals they meet to cultural types they have observed or imagined in the past; they make these assignments by naming incidental details as significant characteristics and by conforming these characteristics to the types they have already imagined. Like Winnie, who thinks that the Assistant Commissioner sounds strange after she has already decided that he is a stranger, Mr Vladimir of the Foreign Embassy fits Verloc's appearance to the behavior he has diagnosed:

[...] 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. (62–63)

Mr Vladimir, who thinks from the start that Verloc is lazy, incompetent, and fraudulent, confirms his judgment by finding in Verloc physical and mental characteristics that assure these behaviors. Although the passage begins with these characteristics, it is clear that Mr Vladimir has noticed only those that will correspond to the stereotype he names in conclusion. The stereotype is the perspective that organizes Mr Vladimir's judgment; it is what Barthes calls a "view," a form of description that organizes details into well-established frames (54).¹³ In Conrad's work, the stereotype precedes the characteristics that seem to justify its invocation. Mr Vladimir's observation is ultimately both fixed and unmoored by its definitive origin: Verloc is said to be "fraudulent," but the caricature that justifies this assessment is also some-

thing of a fiction, derived from the “American humour” Mr Vladimir has taken seriously. Verloc embodies a falseness that is as false as the stereotype that confirms it.

Mr Vladimir’s strategies of observation are comparable to those used by Verloc’s anarchist colleague Comrade Ossipon, who relies on a theory of criminality devised by Cesare Lombroso. Lombroso’s theory, which was fashionable in the 1880s (when the novel is set), argued that criminals could be identified by visible marks on their bodies, such as large ears or poor eyesight. Ossipon, it is said, “was free from the trammels of conventional morality – but he submitted to the rule of science” (259). After Winnie has killed Verloc, Ossipon looks at her with new eyes:

He gazed at her, and invoked Lombroso, as an Italian peasant recommends himself to his favourite saint. He gazed scientifically. He gazed at her cheeks, at her nose, at her eyes, at her ears.... Bad! ... Fatal! [...] Not a doubt remained ... a murdering type. (259)

Ossipon had planned to seduce and marry Winnie for her inheritance, but his assessment of her “murdering type” leads him to steal the money and abandon her on a boat bound for the Continent. Ossipon’s judgment is instrumental in his actions: as he transforms Winnie’s body into a type, he transforms his agency into an imperative. As Mr Vladimir looks at Verloc, so Ossipon looks at Winnie: in each case, the perception imposed reflects not curiosity but conformity; Vladimir and Ossipon see what they expect or want to find.

Both of these examples complicate Ian Watt’s famous account of “delayed decoding,” a principal tactic he ascribes to Conrad’s work. The tactic functions, Watt explains, by combining “the forward temporal progression of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside world, with the much slower reflexive process of making out their meaning” (175). *The Secret Agent* does offer many examples that correspond to Watt’s account, such as Verloc’s perception of Privy Councillor Wurmt, who becomes a “person” over the course of several sentences. For Verloc, everything at the Embassy initially seems strange:

Another door opened noiselessly, and Mr Verloc immobilizing his glance in that direction saw at first only black clothes. The bald top of a head, and a drooping dark grey whisker on each side of a pair of wrinkled hands. The person who had entered was holding a batch of papers before his eyes and walked up to the table with a rather mincing step, turning the papers over the while. Privy Councillor Wurmt, Chancelier d’Ambassade, was rather short-sighted. (54)

The effect of the unfolding is to delay recognition for the reader, much as it is delayed for Verloc, and also to force the reader to participate in the assembly

of an identity produced in the collection of details. The reader is given time – and literal space on the page – to notice and join in this process. While the delay between the “black clothes” and the “person” can be attributed in part to Verloc’s “decoding,” it is also caused by a more physical impediment: the Privy Councillor has covered his face with papers. There are really two “delays” here, and the second makes a joke of the first. While it appears at first that Verloc’s recognition is delayed by his perception, the reader sees at the end of the passage that it is not Verloc’s sight but the Privy Councillor’s vision that is most to blame. In this passage, perception is a way of seeing and also a characteristic that informs and differentiates persons who are seen. Conrad will take this insight further in the later examples involving Vladimir and Ossipon, whose perception is constituted by details they have already learned to look for. “Decoding” in these cases follows a different progression: the “meaning” that characters seek to “make out” generates the “messages” that they interpret. The messages are thus never entirely “outside” the perspective through which they are seen. Cultural types are affirmed, even constituted, in the process of recognition.

At the end of *The Secret Agent*, one sees that characters, like Conrad’s readers, are reluctant to embrace their role in the novel’s social conditions and narrative circumstances. Individual acts are thus transformed into passive constructions. Winnie commits suicide, and her death is reported in a newspaper as “[a]n impenetrable mystery” because neither she nor the cause of her distress can be identified (266). The last lines of the newspaper report repeat throughout the last chapter of the novel. They are lines that the anarchist Comrade Ossipon has memorized: “*An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair*” (original emphasis). Ossipon, who had imagined a world governed by inevitable truths, is haunted by the “destiny” for which he is responsible. He sees that he is the (secret) agent of the “impenetrable mystery.”

In Conrad’s vision of English life, domestic ease exists only through the efforts of cultivated naturalness. Winnie Verloc is noted for “the masterly achievement of instinctive tact” (172) and her husband for “calculated indiscretions” (183). Winnie’s “tact” is like the other deliberate characteristics produced throughout the novel, but it condenses in a phrase the structure of description that Conrad elsewhere illustrates in a paragraph or in several chapters: Winnie’s tact is a characteristic that is formative as soon as it is formulated. It is best achieved without achievement because it is, like other local truths, a mastery that works only by avoiding effort. These kinds of artifacts, whose agency is typically secret, beneath notice because without noticeable history, illustrate in Conrad’s narratives the obscured origins of English fiction.

Conrad’s narratives are less like the urban realism of Dickens and Stevenson than they are like the aesthetic modernism of Flaubert and Wilde. This is an important distinction. As Wilde argued that fogs are the result of Impres-

sionist painting, so Conrad argued that adaptation affirms national identity, a contention not so far from Wilde's interests as it may seem. As Wilde famously puts it, with only some irony,

Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? [...] At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. ("Decay of Lying" 1086)

Wilde's "blurring gas-lamps" and "monstrous shadows" could have set the scene for Conrad's novel, which is full of similar, and similarly conventional, opacity. A few paragraphs after his discussion of the Impressionist fog, Wilde remarks, again prefiguring Conrad, that "nations and individuals" like to imagine in their "natural vanity" that art refers to *them*, but rather it is art, Wilde contends, to which "the human consciousness" refers (1087).

The problem with Conrad's dramatic adaptation of his novel is that it fails in almost all ways to incorporate his adaptation of culture:¹⁴ the play unties the recursive chronology of the narrative and thus returns to a more conservative, linear development of cause and effect; spectators can no longer see that they are the subject of art's imitation. This logic of events, in which characters adjust characteristics to meet social categories, Conrad might have learned from Wilde, a pre-eminent scholar of English norms who knew the vital importance of seeming earnest. As an "unnatural" Englishman (as an Irishman, a homosexual, and an aesthete), Wilde had to learn, as Conrad did, how naturalness looks.¹⁵ In the recursive wit of Conrad's descriptions one can hear the echo of Lady Bracknell, who proposes famously that to have a fashionable address one need only change the fashion: that is, one must know, above all, one's audience (Wilde, *Importance of Being Earnest* 266). To the extent that epigram in Wilde tends to surprise the reader or spectator with the habits of socialized language – habits we notice because they are imperfectly reproduced – it functions as an early strategy of modernist disruption: the audience comes to watch its own expectations. In Conrad's novel, expectations are engaged at the level of description and sensory perception; the socialization that the reader sees and experiences is the recognition of national types and defining characteristics. Conrad proposes that English culture is made up of gestures, in speech, body, and social ritual, that are regularly performed and negotiated; he shows, in addition, that these gestures achieve different meanings in different contexts, that there is no characteristic that is naturally English.

The theatricality of culture in Conrad's work requires an "anti-theatrical" theatre. Conrad's strategies of belonging and describing, in which national identity is neither consistent nor coherent, require new styles of representation, to accommodate selves that are discontinuous and flexible and to make

spectators *see* the habits of social perception that keep persons and cultures in place. For Conrad, xenophobia and racism have an anti-theatrical prejudice against cultures that change and people who bring those changes. However, Conrad responds to prejudice not by describing authentic foreigners but by observing artifice at home. The novelist resists prejudice – against impersonation and against foreigners – by making naturalness his topic and his goal, by offering new models of cultural belonging, and by suggesting, finally, that cosmopolitanism has a drama of its own.

NOTES

- 1 I am grateful to Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner for their invitation to write this essay and for their capacious advice along the way. Thanks also to the anonymous reader for *Modern Drama*, whose suggestions were both generous and directive. I presented early versions of this work to the Twentieth-Century Literature and Cultural Theory colloquium and to the graduate seminar on "Sighted Word," both at Harvard, and to audiences at Columbia University, the University of Wisconsin – Madison, and the Modernist Studies Association conference. My thanks to the participants in each of these forums, and particular thanks to Amanda Claybaugh, Philip Fisher, Michael Fried, Marjorie Garber, Barbara Johnson, Mun-Hou Lo, Nick LoLordo, Patrick O'Malley, Henry Turner, Henry Walkowitz, and Judith Walkowitz.
- 2 James Richard Hand's observation that Conrad uses the audience to represent the urban crowd has been helpful to my thinking about the play's attempts to translate the novel's relationship with the reader.
- 3 This blindness is also evident in Barish's readings of nineteenth-century novels, which he presents as examples of anti-theatrical prejudice. In his account of these novels, Barish makes little distinction between critiques of theatrical performance voiced by individual characters (as in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, which has a famous scene of theatricals in the family home) and theatrical scenes of irony, rhetoric, wit, and role playing distributed through narration and metaphor. Indeed, Joseph Litvak has argued that in the nineteenth-century novel theatricality is regularly defused "throughout the culture that would appear to have repudiated it" (x). Litvak uses theatricality to register narrative performances as social scenes, to emphasize "the specific social implications of certain more or less local instances of rhetorical instability" (276). For Litvak, novels may display anti-theatrical values, such as "sincerity, inwardness, privacy" (277), as a theatrical tactic, and even as they give voice to concerns about the social dangers of theatrical performance.
- 4 Conrad's cosmopolitanism does not assume that nations exist as completed entities from which one could possibly detach, as in the well-known Kantian model. Rather, Conrad imagines a cosmopolitanism that is dialectical and critical: immigration and other practices of cultural mobility are the condition through which national communities are formed. On critical cosmopolitanism, see Mignolo; Pollock.

- 5 The maid Kathleen shouts after the grandmother, who speaks only Yiddish, in "Irish-sounding Yiddish." The grandmother has lost her way at a concert, and, retrieving her, Kathleen remarks "we Jews never know our way" (170), suggesting either that she has come to identify, as a servant, with her employers' Jewishness or that she has come to be in part Jewish by becoming American (the melting-pot category that is a mixture of everything).
- 6 See Barish's discussion of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*, in which Barish compares the "passion" of anti-Semitism to that of anti-theatricalism (468).
- 7 Conrad famously announced, in his well-known Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, that the sensory perception of sight is the goal of his work: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*!" (147; original emphasis).
- 8 Lynd's review originally appeared in the *Daily News* on 10 August 1908.
- 9 This unsigned review originally appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* on 20 September 1907.
- 10 Garnett's unsigned review originally appeared in the *Nation* on 28 September 1907.
- 11 This unsigned review originally appeared in the *Glasgow News* on 3 October 1907.
- 12 Dames made this comment during discussion of his paper "Thackeray and the Work of Celebrity." See also Dames, "Brushes with Fame"
- 13 Such description, Barthes explains, consists "not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy" (*S/Z* 55).
- 14 Hand argues also that the play's linear chronology is one of its principal failings, though he sees this mainly as a problem of audience interest: spectators are unable to develop sympathy with characters who die early in the story. Robert S. Ryf argues that the failure of the play may be attributed to its "expository tone," its tendency to relate events rather than perform them (62).
- 15 Francesca Coppa argues that Wilde's plays, as well as his phrases, function as epigrams, because he has mastered the conventions of late-nineteenth-century theatre as well as he has mastered the language of social ritual. Coppa defines "epigram" as the citation and negotiation of one or more previous formulations of knowledge: to master epigram is to be theatrical, as Coppa suggests in the subtitle of her article.

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