

‘The Time of Death: “Passing Away” in *The Secret Agent*, *The Conradian*, 32:1 (2007), 1-18

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IN COMMON WITH the work of many of the writers associated with literary Modernism, Conrad’s fiction demonstrates a real concern with time. In his essay “Conrad’s Clocks” David Leon Higdon goes so far as to describe Conrad as “one of our century’s great time novelists” (1991: 8-9). His essay begins: “Conrad’s fiction contains a rogue’s gallery of malfunctioning, maimed, abused and abusive timepieces which serve their owners perversely... Their presence ... unlocks the secret of several paradoxical structural problems in his novels” (1991: 1). This essay considers the “structural problems” that arise in *The Secret Agent*, arguing that they are inherent in the nature of narrative time and that they are derived from the non-narratable nature of the instant.

Three distinct attacks on time occur in *The Secret Agent*. The most obvious is the attempted terrorist attack on the Greenwich Royal Observatory. The second attack on time can be located in the novel’s complex narrative structure and the final and most successful attack comes in the novel’s consideration of the instant of death and of the impossibility of the instant appearing in narrative. R. W. Stallman effectively deals with the first two and thus the third is the focus here, the two first being briefly discussed.

Attack One

As Sherry (1966) and others have noted, Conrad based *The Secret Agent* on a real-life attempt to blow up the Greenwich Royal Observatory in 1894, by which time Greenwich had been recognized as the zero meridian, the point from which all time zones are measured, and therefore as a symbol of universal time it provided the perfect anarchist

target. The real-life attempt failed when Martial Bourdin, a French anarchist, was fatally injured in an accidental explosion before reaching his target. Verloc's attempt fails when Stevie trips on his way to the Observatory, accidentally detonating the bomb he is carrying. Consequently, in the plot of *The Secret Agent* literally charts the failure of this attempt to destroy clock time.

The second, more effective, challenge to clock time occurs not at the plot level but in narrative structure. Conrad rarely present events in chronologically, instead circling around key moments, elongating stretches of time, and repeating certain events while compressing and omitting others. The novel thus cries out to be read in a way that registers the distinction between story (what happens) and narrative (the way it is organized), what Gérard Genette describes as narrative's "doubly temporal sequence" (1980: 33).

The novel's structural anachrony has been well documented. Stallman suggests that in terms of story time chronology the chapters would run 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10 concurrent with 11, 12, 13. Stallman's conclusion is to link the structure of the novel with its subject: "The theme of *The Secret Agent* has to do with time, the destruction and confusion of time itself, and the confused chronology of narrated events by their disarrangement from time effects a structure which is at one with the theme" (1960: 246). This double temporality acknowledges the fact that narratives are freed from the constraints of a linear time by what Aristotle terms *emplotment*, the arrangement (or rearrangement) of events. The flipside of this is that, providing the novel adheres to another of Aristotle's tenets "wholeness," the sequence can be reconstructed by the reader. That is, put back into a linear order – as Stallman so effectively does. Thus, despite its complex narrative structure *The Secret Agent* does not so much challenge temporal consonance as foreground the human role in shaping time. Paul Ricoeur, particularly in his three-volume *Time and Narrative*, discusses this in some detail.

Ricoeur and Time

Ricoeur regards narrative as a time-bound form, organizing and interpreting events within a temporal framework in order to make them intelligible on what he describes as a "human level," pursuing the hypothesis that narrative is not only *always* temporal but also that it

allows the *only* access to temporality: “Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience” (1984: 3).

Ricoeur’s argument follows from his reading of Augustine and Aristotle. From the former he takes the idea of the “three-fold present.” This formulation, which is taken from the *Confessions*, emerges from Augustine’s attempt to account for the notion that the present has no duration. Augustine writes:

the only time that can be called present is an instant ...that cannot be divided even into the most minute fractions, and a point of time as small as this passes so rapidly from the future to the past that its duration is without length. For if its duration were prolonged, it could be divided into past and future. When it is present it has no duration. (1961: 266)

In order to solve this problem Augustine develops the idea of a three-fold present in which time is conceived as having being only inasmuch as the past and future exist in the present of the mind as memory and expectation.

The usefulness of Augustine’s formulation for the study of narrative, where past, present and future can be equated with beginning, middle and end, becomes readily apparent when Ricoeur introduces Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Ricoeur picks up the idea of “emplotment,” which he describes as “an eminently verbal experience where concordance mends discordance,” or more plainly as “the organizing of events” (1984: 31, 34). This organization is readily apparent in the convoluted narrative structure of *The Secret Agent*. Emplotment is the narrating activity that allows what Ricoeur calls “human time” to emerge.

In common with Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Ricoeur’s analysis pivots on the notion of wholeness, and he quotes Aristotle’s claim that “a thing is a whole if it has a beginning, a middle, and an end” going on to state that “it is only in virtue of poetic composition that something counts as a beginning, middle, or end ... the ideas of beginning, middle, and end are not taken from experience. They are not features of some real action but the effects of the ordering of the poem” (Ricoeur 1984: 38-39).

Thus, the human intervention required by Augustine's three-fold present is comparable to the Aristotelian notion of emplotment. Both are activities by which experience is ordered and through which time is understood. Accordingly, Ricoeur's use of Augustine's philosophical analysis of time and Aristotle's discussion of poetics allows him to conclude that: "time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence" (1984: 52). The three-fold present of human time comes into being with narrating activity.

Time and Death

If the narrative structure of *The Secret Agent* succeeds in depicting time as human time, as organized and narratized time, it would appear that in doing so it makes it clear that human time is a narrating act for which time is characterized as sequential. In this way time asks a question of narrative: If the three-fold model of time is an act of narrating necessary to allow human time to emerge from a sequence of instants, how is narrative sustained when it encounters the problem of narrating the instant *as* an instant, as the non-passage of time? The attempt to narrate the instant is the third challenge to time in *The Secret Agent* and appears in what will prove to be the limit case for narrative: the instant of death.

Skipping over some rather complex ground I justify this use of death by offering a link between Augustine's claim that time "cannot be measured after it has passed, because nothing then exists to be measured" (1961: 269) with Derrida's description of death as an aporia, "as what cannot pass [*passer*] or come to pass" (1993: 23). Thus, in *The Secret Agent*, the instant of death (and death itself) is refused narrative.

It is notable that the narrator of *The Secret Agent* makes a point of recording the times of the story's three deaths. Stevie, who stumbles on his way to plant the bomb at the Greenwich Observatory dies at half past eleven. Ossipon reads the details of his death in a newspaper: "Bomb in Greenwich Park. There isn't much so far. Half past eleven" (59). Adolf Verloc, the next to die, is murdered by his wife at "ten minutes to nine" (198). Finally, Winnie Verloc takes her own life at "five o'clock in the morning" (230). Despite the importance apparently allocated to the times at which the three members of the Verloc household die there is a certain imprecision in the relation. Each of these times is mediated without the

impersonal narrator's authority – by a ten-day old newspaper, by a ticking clock noticed by Winnie moments *after* she murders her husband, and by the crew of the trans-Channel ferry who arrive *too late* to witness the instant of death. This tendency is typified by Stevie's death which, in terms of Verloc's plans, comes at the wrong time. Consequently, when Chief Inspector Heat questions Verloc about Stevie's death, asking, "The bang startled you, eh?", Verloc replies: "Yes; it came too soon" (158). The instant of death presents a problem to narrative for which it can only come either too soon or too late, a conflict encapsulated by the disavowal of Winnie Verloc's idea that "clocks and watches always stopped at the moment of murder for the undoing of the murderer" (202). This failed attempt at precision, the continued ticking of the clock, suggests a refusal, or inability, to include the instant of death in the narrative.

Given that these three deaths are marked, however inaccurately, the obscure manner of their presentation in the narrative also striking. Stallman notes that, "of the three main events – the explosion, the murder, and the suicide – only the murder scene is presented as point-present action, whereas the first and final events are reported piecemeal through multiple points of view" (1960: 245). Terry Eagleton describes this aspect of the narrative:

The killing of Stevie is unrepresented – happens, so to speak, in the reader's absence; and the murder of Verloc is presented with extreme obliquity, squinted at sideways rather than frontally encountered. Both events reveal sinister forces capable of destroying the quotidian forces which must be "shown" at the same time as the novel proclaims the impossibility of attesting textually to their authentic existence. (1996: 160)

Eagleton's use of the word "authentic" indicates what might be described as a doubling of death within narrative. The first death in the narrative is the death of the Other that circulates at the level of language. The second death, the authentic death, which might be called the philosopher's death, is that linked to the aporetic instant and refuses itself to narrative.

This doubling is evident in the depiction of Verloc's murder, which unlike the deaths of Stevie and Winnie, is presented: Verloc, lying on the couch, "saw partly on the ceiling a clenched hand holding a carving knife. It flickered up and down. Its movements were leisurely. They were leisurely enough for Mr Verloc to recognise the limb and the weapon"

(197). The “leisurely” nature of the instant in which Winnie Verloc plunges the knife into her husband continues into the next paragraph as Conrad presents Verloc’s last thoughts, emphasizing this expanse of time, a “flicker” in which Verloc can do no more than utter the word “Don’t.” The next three sentences begin “They were leisurely enough” until the sequence (itself a retardation of time) concludes, “But they were not leisurely enough to allow Mr Verloc the time to move either hand or foot” (197). In this final sentence there is a kind of temporal anachrony that distinguishes between the instant of death and the time of death as it appears in the narrative.

Following on from this notion of doubled death/time, one can read a short passage in which Chief Inspector Heat examines Stevie’s remains. This will make clearer the kind of temporal duality that emerges when death appears in *The Secret Agent*:

The man, whoever he was, had died instantaneously; and yet it seemed impossible to believe that a human body could have reached that state of disintegration without passing through the pangs of inconceivable agony. No physiologist, and still less of a metaphysician, Chief Inspector Heat rose by the force of sympathy, which is a form of fear, above the vulgar conception of time. Instantaneous! He remembered all he had ever read in popular publications of long and terrifying dreams dreamed in the instant of waking; of the whole past life lived with frightful intensity by a drowning man as his doomed head bobs up, screaming, for the last time. The inexplicable mysteries of conscious existence beset Chief Inspector Heat till he evolved a horrible notion that ages of atrocious pain and mental torture could be contained between two successive winks of an eye. And meantime the Chief Inspector went on peering at the table with a calm face and the slightly anxious attention of an indigent customer bending over what may be called the by-products of a butcher’s shop with a view to an inexpensive Sunday dinner. (71)

This passage is selected because of its interrelation of the instant with the “meantime,” a relation enacted both at the level of story, what the extract says, and at the level of narrative, how it is said. The passage is interesting because of the way it illustrates the narrative’s incapacity to render the instant. The word “passage” is used deliberately: narrative as passage, as

movement between beginning and ending, is what this reading focuses on, picking out for attention, at this preliminary stage, “instantaneous,” “passing through,” “till he evolved,” and “meantime.”

The instant, the theme of Heat’s thoughts, is introduced in the first sentence, “The man, whoever he was, had died instantaneously.” As Heat evolves “the horrible notion that ages of atrocious pain and mental torture could be contained within two successive winks of an eye,” the narrative enacts its own elongation of the instant by moving back and forth between Chief Inspector’s mind and the narrator’s voice.

A summary of the narrative structure makes clear the way that the doubly temporal nature of the passage refuses to relate the time of death as an instant. The section begins with a sentence that reveals the process of Heat’s thoughts. It then shifts to the voice of the narrator to comment on Heat and his credentials as a theorist of time: he is “No physiologist, and still less of a metaphysician.” The third sentence signals a return to Heat’s mind, returning both the Chief Inspector and the reader to the opening of the passage, with the repetition of “Instantaneous!”, the multiple syllables of this single word refusing the possibility of containing what it speaks of. The next two sentences reveal Heat’s thoughts as organized by the narrator, gradually increasing the presence of the narrator, who returns in full in the final sentence. This last sentence shifts the mood, removing the scene from Heat’s mind with the grim humour characteristic of the novel. The way in which this passage links Heat’s meditation on the instant with the notion of a non-instantaneous “meantime” demonstrates the contradictions inherent in the attempt to “think through” the instant. In the enactment of the “meantime,” the extract’s narrative structure reveals its nature as passage. Narrative, revealing its three-fold nature must, like the Chief Inspector’s thoughts, “evolve” in a “passing through” that characterizes narrative as a “meantime” that assumes the possibility of its ending.

As Conrad’s text problematizes the instant, the Chief Inspector cannot help but elongate the instant of Stevie’s death. He does this by imagining Stevie at the very moment of his death, “passing through the pangs of inconceivable agony.” This passing through is exactly what death and the instant refuse to time and, simultaneously, what characterizes narrative. Death admits no “meantime,” and the problem of fixing the instant of death, which allows no further passage of time, comes sharply into focus. Recalling Augustine, the three-fold notion of time was introduced to allow the thinking of the present to appear. If the

narrative process “humanizes” time, to use Ricoeur’s phrase, then the instant of death would appear to institute an *aporia* into this notion of time. How, if the present is understood in relation to the past and the future, can the instant of death, which is that for which there is no passage, appear in narrative?

By way of a conclusion, I should like to equate the state of Stevie’s body with the state of narrative. In a “state of disintegration,” it resembles “the by-products of a butcher’s shop” (71). There is a degree of irony in the local constable’s words when he tells Heat, “He’s all there. Every bit of him” (70). As Stallman wryly notes, “Poor Stevie never was all there” (1960: 238). The boy has been scraped up with a shovel and yet the text insists on his completeness: the constable continues, “Well, here he is – all of him I could see” (72), and again, “here he is all complete, velvet collar and all. I don’t think I missed a single piece of him as big as a postage stamp” (73). This insistence on Stevie’s wholeness suggests that his death has lent him a completeness not possessed during his life. It is this completeness towards which narrative moves, and yet it would seem that there is a certain stumbling in the attempt to pronounce the end that leaves the meantime in a state of disintegration.

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