

The Ethics of Reading: Conrad's *The Secret Agent*

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In an article entitled 'Bakhtin, Addressivity, and the Poetics of Objectivity' (1994), Alison Tate discusses the ways in which meaning is shared between speakers (or writers) and readers (or listeners). It is true, she concedes, that 'understanding is an inferential, rather than a simple decoding process' (1994:143-144), hence that there is a need for a theory which will explain how hearers select and use contextual information. Yet if, as she suggests, address can be defined as reader positioning (1994:136), and if, as she asserts, 'Almost every aspect of the packaging of information in texts can be considered to offer guidance or instructions to the reader' (1994:143), the conclusion follows naturally that 'in order to negotiate the discontinuities of the text, the reader has to put him or herself *in the place of the writer* and to *adopt the world organization* signalled by textual organization' (1994:145; e.a.).

Tate's specific interest is in the effects of deixis, or, more broadly, reference. Yet her use of terms such as the 'presupposed of the discourse' (1994:144) and the 'preconstructed of the text' (1994:145) invites one to stand back and consider how texts seek to position readers: how, on occasion, they act in ways which might be described as predation upon those unwary enough to pick them up and read. Texts are dangerous beasts: they can have undesirable or unacceptable or even malevolent intent. Texts can do damage. At the very least they can jar what readers expect them to do or say, and unsettle our minds deeply.

It is a point of which we might have been reminded recently by the Gauteng education authorities, who asked teachers to evaluate a range of texts in line for prescription as school networks. The criteria the teachers were to apply included style, plot, accessibility of language, theme and characterisation, as well as technical aspects such as cover and typeface. Fair enough: most of these are literary criteria—and no one would really quibble that books prescribed for schoolchildren should be accessible to their readers. Less ingenuously, however, teachers were asked to determine 'whether the books promoted the Constitution's values of tolerance, non-discrimination and rejection of racism and sexism' (Cornia Pretorius, in *The Sunday Times*). Did the books do what our Constitution wanted them to do—or did they do different, unsettling, unexpected, even dangerous things?

Not surprisingly, this barefaced enactment of an ideological agenda gave rise to some trenchant debate: 'censorship' and 'social engineering' were two of the

accusations levelled by literary aficionados. Perhaps what rankled most was the proposed exclusion from syllabuses of 'works which belong to the core of the S.A. literary canon, as well as works which rank among the best in world literature', as critic and scholar Andries Oliphant put it, in a petition which was signed by nearly 100 writers. Nadine Gordimer herself remarked that these processes and decisions reminded her of the ways of the old Publications Control Board, at whose hands, of course, her works suffered extensive state intervention by the Old Regime.

Compelling as such controversy might be, it is not new, nor is it peculiar to our own country. In recent years the British press has devoted front-page space at times to efforts to exclude the works of Shakespeare, Austen and Dickens from school syllabuses—master works about which the British reading public is quite willing to express intense nationalist nostalgia. And with some effect, it seems, since the last time I noticed, the Bard had been reinstated to his rightful place in British children's reading programmes. Besides being amused at what seems to me a bit of pedagogic *Sturm und Drang* in a teacup I find myself broadly sympathetic to Oliphant's position. Like him I have read and enjoyed the classics; certainly I hope my children will not be deprived—as a result of the bad decisions of those who must sanction the reading they do at school—of the pleasure and the education that can be got from these texts. On the other hand, one might also wonder whether these texts have been more receptive to my efforts at reading them than they have been to the readings of others.

It must already be evident that I believe both parties to the debate are glossing certain issues, overlooking considerations of readership which bear more detailed scrutiny. Oliphant's plea to have 'selection panels consist of persons with demonstrated literary knowledge and expertise as well as an understanding of the role of literature in education' comes perilously close to an appeal for the return of decision-making power to the experts, and his advocacy of 'fine' literature and 'procedures which respect literary values' might seem to suggest a repudiation of ideological considerations from the literary domain. It would be a pity if this is what he is suggesting, since involving teachers in selecting books and stating openly what guidelines they are to follow has to be a good thing. Teachers are the people who work most closely with books and pupils, and their opinions should surely count. Probably this isn't quite what he is suggesting, and probably the more pragmatic position would be to set up panels of teachers, writers, experts ... and schoolchildren, since after all they are going to have to read these texts. Accepting this, selection panels—and the Gauteng authorities—clearly need to think more carefully about what they're doing. Perhaps the guidelines supplied to the teachers were lousy guidelines. Perhaps guidelines are in themselves a bad thing, because they inevitably prescribe ideological positions when they are based on judgements of value. It is a point which the Gauteng authorities appear to hope will be overlooked.

Either way, entering into questions of value entails entering the terrain of ethics—terrain which it is increasingly important for readers of literature and prescribers of books for schoolchildren to broach. In a recent special edition of *PMLA*, Lawrence Buell points up the distinctive contours of what he terms, variously, 'the ethical turn' and 'ethically valenced literature inquiry': it tends to favour recuperation of authorial agency; and, linked to this, questions of readerly responsibility; it has an interest in desecrating an ethos or implicit ethical teleology in modes, templates or structures of literary works; it is concerned with the relation between disposition and normativity; and, importantly, it addresses the vexing problem of the relation or the distinction between the personal and the socio-political (1999:140). This terrain, I suggest, constitutes an interesting and important ethical background both to Alison Tate's description of the sharing of meaning between writers and readers, and to the injunction to the teachers to check whether books affirm the values of our Constitution. In order to explore the possibilities of ethically valenced literary inquiry, I would like to describe readings of two quite different texts which make ethical demands upon their readers.

A couple of years ago I found myself caught up in an altercation with Honours students who challenged the inclusion in their course of work by J.M. Coetzee, and specifically his early novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*. I must admit that in years gone by I had not considered teaching Coetzee a politically tactful thing to do at the University of Zululand. Nevertheless, the strength of these students' reaction came as a surprise, since Coetzee had by then been on our syllabus at postgraduate level for several years, and our preceding cohort of Honours students had been sympathetic and open-minded in their response to his work. In discussion it emerged that these 1999 students were reacting both to a general sense of Coetzee as a 'great white male', and specifically to the title of his 1980 text. In Tate's terms, they felt themselves positioned by the text as 'Barbarians' and not free to adopt any other stance towards it. Their reaction went further than the claim quite frequently made by students that texts (which they may or may not have read) are irrelevant. This group felt Coetzee's novel to be hostile, inimical to their burgeoning identity as black youths in the era of Mbeki's African Renaissance. Like some of the Gauteng teachers, these students felt this text just would not do.

Given Coetzee's status in the sphere of South African letters, the significance he accords in his writing to reconceptualising South Africanness, his insistence on our connectedness with other times and other places, and, of course, the fact that the students were judging his book by its title let alone its cover, this refusal seemed to me both premature and superficial, and left me feeling, with a good deal of impatience, that it would do them good to read *Barbarians*; to discover that it is possible to confront the versions of oneself that are constructed in and by other people's texts.

Yet I also had a sneaking sympathy for their flat refusal to be defined in terms of the old categories of the old order. In Tate's view, the matter of classification is particularly important to reading and interpretation, since 'the use of referring terms is governed by the assumptions of the speaker or writer about the reader/ listener' (140-141). What assumptions did Coetzee make about his reader/ listener when he titled his book *Waiting for the Barbarians*? Now, you or I might be quite familiar with his allusive method, with his invocation of Cavafy's poem in order to claim a global cast for his concerns. My students weren't. As teacher I was left to balance the arrogance and sophistication of the writer's allusion against the ignorance and suspicion of these students' resistance to it; to arrive at some judgement upon the respective rights and wrongs of writers and readers. As researcher I found myself reconsidering my own ethnographic and epistemological positioning in the situation of teaching across cultural boundaries—as well as the ethical logistics of my own reading of texts both local and canonical. The students' resistance to Coetzee's novel reminded me of my discomfort at being pounced on by texts such as Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*—tendentious texts which seem to me to require excessive collaboration from their readers in order to achieve their narrative purposes. In a nutshell, the students' reaction had the effect of foregrounding the narrative contract held out by Coetzee's (and other) texts; a contract which seeks to position its reader in an ethical relation to its subject. Their refusal of the text's invitation to them to read was a rejection of the 'guidance or instructions' carried in its 'packaging', a resistance to 'adopting the world organization signalled by textual organization' as Tate might have put it. They would not accept the reader positioning the text supplied.

These students' reaction to Coetzee's novel could be seen as another instance of the subjective reaction to texts one does not like which was enacted by the Gauteng teachers, and which was a tad less superficial only because (presumably) the teachers had read the texts before disliking them. More importantly, though, the students' reaction demonstrates that texts have less power than Tate's model might imply—because the narrative contracts they hold out to readers can be refused.

Of course, unlike these students, we may already know beforehand what we're letting ourselves in for, when we pick up a book and read. The second instance I would like to explore is the experience of rereading another text which seems to me to pounce, ethically, upon its readers. Perhaps I'm a little slow, but only in writing this essay did it strike me how often Joseph Conrad deals in his texts with ethical choices or careers. Consider: the theft of silver in *Nostromo*, the rescue of a despot in *Heart of Darkness*, the betrayal of a comrade in *Under Western Eyes*, facing the storm in *Typhoon*, dealing with a double in *The Secret Sharer*, jumping ship in *Lord Jim*, obeying one's father in 'Freya of the Seven Isles', receiving a foreigner in one's

midst in 'Amy Foster' ... and in *The Secret Agent*, of course, blowing up one's brother-in-law and murdering one's husband. It is hardly surprising that a novel which calls itself *The Secret Agent* should thematise secrecy. Yet in taking up this book to read it once again, it was these dominant images of violence I had in mind: the explosion of Stevie, the stabbing of Verloc, the drowning of Winnie and the gallows scene she imagines before her death, with its civilised by-line, 'The drop given was fourteen feet' (1974:270; all references are to this edition). In the course of the action, the lives of three central characters are exploded by violent death. The book would do well to contain a discretionary warning: 'This novel contains scenes of crudity and violence which might offend sensitive readers'.

Conrad was himself conscious of this problem; if not at the time then certainly after the event of writing. In his 'Author's Note' he cites criticisms he received 'based on the sordid surroundings and the moral squalor of the tale', and describes being 'reproved for having produced it at all' (1967:7). The answer he gives these criticisms and reproofs runs thus:

... the thought of elaborating mere ugliness in order to shock, or even simply to surprise my readers by a change of front, has never entered my head. In making this statement I expect to be believed, not only on the evidence of my general character but also for the reason, which anybody can see, that the whole treatment of the tale, its inspiring indignation and underlying pity and contempt, prove my detachment from the squalor and sordidness which lie simply in the outward circumstances of the setting (1967:8).

His treatment of his subject is detached, he says: it is rooted in indignation, pity and contempt, and free from the desire to shock or to surprise his readers. Author's intentions, of course, may not be entirely trustworthy, nor do they offer final rulings on the effects of their texts on real readers. Yet they are illuminating, if we are willing to read their texts as acts of communication. And Conrad's justifications and explanations lend weight to the outrage of some of the writers whose texts were judged by the Gauteng teachers.

The mode his treatment of violence took was that of irony; irony both intentional and enabling:

Even the purely artistic purpose, that of applying an ironic method to a subject of that kind, was formulated with deliberation and in the earnest belief that ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as in pity. It is one of the minor satisfactions of my writing life that having taken that resolve I did manage, it seems to me, to carry it right through to the end (1967:11).

Critics have agreed that the excoriating irony of *The Secret Agent* is what makes it at once so entertaining and so arduous a text to read. They have disagreed about the nature of this irony. Such disparate readers as Thomas Mann and Terry Eagleton have felt that the novel's irony makes it difficult to say which sides, if any, it endorses (Shaffer 1995:461). Gail Fincham, following Paul de Man, claims it reflects a loss of self-control on the part of writer as well as reader. By contrast, Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan suggests that irony supplies a narrative means of functioning in a dysfunctional situation. Either way, Conrad's irony places a heavy ethical burden on the reader, a burden I would like to elucidate by exploring the actions and motivations of Winnie, in whose murder of her husband, I suggest, we can find an ethical paradigm for a response to the novel.

The Secret Agent is named for Mr Verloc, and one of the central incidents that occurs in the novel is the explosion of his brother-in-law which he brings about. However Conrad himself asserts that *The Secret Agent* is the story not of Verloc but of his wife Winnie (1967:10). Winnie has not received very good critical press: Shaffer accuses her of prostitution (1995); Fincham of psychopathology, of 'murderous madness resulting from repression on a massive scale' (1996:48); Biles of being 'an agent, a bringer, of death' to six people, including herself (1981). I am always uneasy at critical tendencies to pass judgement on characters who are defined by their silence. And since Conrad insists that he 'never had any doubt as to the reality of her story ... it had to be made credible, not so much as to her soul but as to her surroundings, not so much as to her psychology but as to her humanity' (1967: 11), it behoves us to be wary of judging Winnie without first understanding her.

We can begin to do so by considering the breakdown of secrecy at crucial points in the narrative. Verloc is a secret agent and, apart from an injunction to Winnie to 'be very nice to his political friends' (7), he conducts his business life in secret from his wife. Winnie is perfectly accommodating, because she abjures the 'inwardness of things' (152) and because she believes that 'things do not stand much looking into' (177). Her own inner life is kept secret from all around her, including her husband, her mother, even herself. Early in the novel the narrator comments (with irony of course) that, 'Nothing now in Mrs. Verloc's appearance could lead one to suppose that she was capable of a passionate demonstration' (38). Winnie may seem unusually passive, dormant, unthinking, but she is construed by Conrad as representative; that is, not particularly unlike the rest of us: 'Man may smile and smile but he is not an investigating animal. He loves the obvious. He shrinks from explanations' (1967:7).

Winnie is not allowed to continue to 'shrink', because the primary action of the novel, in which she does not participate and of which she knows nothing, involves her husband using her brother to carry a bomb to blow up the Greenwich Observatory, and her brother tripping and blowing himself up instead. When Chief

Inspector Heat gives her this news she impresses him with her stoicism. When Verloc presents his account of his actions to her she stabs him. Winnie's ponderous outrage, and her recognition of the reality underlying 'the obvious', is expressed in her comment, 'This man took the boy away to murder him. He took the boy away from his home to murder him. He took the boy away from me to murder him' (246). Her killing of her husband might thus be seen as revenge for his killing of her brother, for whom, as Conrad puts it, she bears the 'maternal passion' which motivates the story.

But there is more to it than this. What triggers Winnie's violent reaction, it seems to me, is not the fact that Verloc has caused her brother's death, but the fact that he expects her to share the blame: 'It was you', he claims, 'who kept on shoving him in my way when I was half distracted' (257). Of course, his exculpation does not work because his mention of Greenwich Park reminds Winnie graphically that 'they had to gather him up with the shovel' (260). And the turpitude of his moral indifference is underscored when he invites her to join him on the couch: 'Come here', he says, in a peculiar tone, which is 'intimately known to Mrs. Verloc as the note of wooing' (262). Conrad is enough of a craftsman to retain a considerable degree of sympathy for Verloc throughout this scene by representing things from his point of view. The simple fact, however, is that Verloc supplied the bomb, and Verloc nurtured and exploited Stevie's trust in order to perpetrate an act of terror. Winnie is quite right in seeing his attempt to share the blame with her as a moral sleight of hand at her expense. His intention is to ease him back into his habitual levels of moral torpor, his 'air of having wallowed, fully dressed all day on an unmade bed' (4). Verloc tries to share his secret with her, to draw her into the private world he has been inhabiting. Instead of entering it, she puts paid to it with a knife.

Two important ethical question arise. First, how are we as readers expected to respond to, and judge, these scenes of 'ugliness', of 'squalor and sordidness'? And second, how does Conrad's irony complicate our response?

In an analysis of another story by Conrad, Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan claims that because fiction falls outside the domain of real action it inevitably entails some aestheticisation of reality, some enclosure in an autonomous sphere which is artistically contained (1993:38, 43). To her, Conrad's use of irony is his way of dealing, in his fiction, with this knowledge. To me, it does not seem necessary to start with a bifurcation of fiction and action, aesthetic and real, since this separates reading out of the realm of ordinary activity and requires for it ethical treatment different to that which we accord ordinary activity. It also implies that it is possible to analyse Conrad's narrative method in isolation from its reader effects.

To me, a more useful basis for an ethical reading of fiction can be found in the conversational model adumbrated by John Shotter, Rom Harré and Anthony Giddens. They argue that 'the primary human reality is conversational' (Shotter 1992:176), that 'it is temporally and spatially situated conversation, not the text, and

not writing, which is most essential to explaining what language and meaning are' (Giddens 1987:176). Shotter's theory sets out the ethical status of grammatical first, second and third persons, the 'ethical logistics' of the exchanges between 'I's' and 'you's' as 'having to do with who has responsibility for what activity in the social construction of the meanings of any communications between them' (Shotter 1989:133). Grammatically, 'to be related as a second-person, rather than as a third-person, to a first-person is both to be situated quite differently and to be assigned a quite different set of privileges and obligations' (Lyons 1968). First- and second-persons (plural or singular) are, even if in fact non-personal or inanimate, always personified (with all that implies for the 'personal' nature of their relation), and are thus, so to speak, 'present' to one another, in a 'situation'. By contrast, third-persons need not be personified (they can be 'its'); nor are they present as such to other beings or entities; nor are they necessarily 'in a situation' (Shotter 1989:134f).

Applying these terms to a reading of *The Secret Agent*, we might recognise Conrad's ironic method as locating his readers in a particular relation to the action and the characters of his text because it puts pressure on us to enter into an 'I-thou' relation with his narrative about his characters, and thus to relegate his characters to third-person—or non-person—status. Conrad shares his story with us about them. We might thus see Shotter's theory as enabling a specification of Tate's claim that 'the reader has to put him or herself in the place of the writer and to adopt the world organization signalled by textual organization'. But Shotter's insistence on 'presence' offers an important qualification. In an intriguing study in the PMLA special issue, Derek Attridge presents a case for ethical reading as reading which 'respond[s] responsibly to the otherness of a literary work', and cites the example Levinas was fond of giving as an instance of ethics in practice: 'the "After you" whereby I invite someone to go through a door before me' (1999:29). To draw analogies from a historical moment at which the role of the reader became particularly acute, I would suggest this gesture has something in common with Ben Jonson's injunction 'To the Reader', to 'read ... well/ That is to understand'; or the 'allowance' we are asked to give to Shakespeare's fools; or the participation we must volunteer in order to enable the 'postulated occasions' Helen Gardner finds in metaphysical poetry (1957:21). These instances conceptualise readers as retaining agency: they construe readers as people who have responsibilities to the texts they read. They remind us that the fulfilment of a textual contract is contingent on the presence and the participation of readers.

The Secret Agent seems to me a text which, more than usually, requires its readers' presence in order to enable its fiction to come into being. We are addressed by the narrative, in what amounts to a private communication about the characters outside and beyond their knowledge. Just as Verloc attempts to entice Winnie into his own pernicious private world in which Stevie lost his life, so the narrative invites us

to share the moral secrets of the novel. Winnie's refusal of this invitation destroys both Verloc and the secrecy in which he operates. Her response, I suggest, offers an ethical paradigm we should recognise, though not necessarily follow.

The narrative contract held out by texts is not incontrovertible, as is clear from the reaction of my students to Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. They refused the reader positioning and the narrative contract the text supplied. Likewise, the Renaissance examples bid us recognise our agency as readers, and, concomitantly, our right to say no to the contract held out by texts. At the same time, recognising this right should encourage us not to exercise it reactively or irrevocably. Texts which deal with ethical issues are going to position us ethically, and the positions in which they place us may be more or less acceptable to us. As readers we cannot disallow the ethics of fiction, but must rather make the allowance consciously and with a sense both of the amount that is required and of the amount we are willing to give. Rather than simply accept, or, as my students did, simply reject the narrative contract of the text, we can choose to be moral audience, I would suggest: we can choose to read characters as moral referents for the narratives that are told about them.

The way this works in the case of Winnie is to see Conrad's irony not as compelling our ethical complicity, but rather as extending an ethical challenge. Applying Shotter's model, we can scrutinise, and question, the 'person' ascribed to Winnie by the text, and in doing so become aware of the 'person' we take up when we read it. In what conversational relation are we asked to stand towards Winnie? Do we accept the role of second person who receives and is complicit with the narrative address? Do we agree, or do we refuse, to treat her as third person, non-person, a thing; the subject of discourse about whom the story is being told? Do we, by contrast, accord her the status of 'overhearer' or 'eavesdropper' to the narrative utterance, the silent but present third party to whom the narrative utterance is necessarily related? If we do so, I suggest, we grant her the ethical status she is due, and understand the narrative act as accountable to her, because it is then, putatively at least, contestable by her.

Ethical responsibility is a recursive responsibility: it asks us to look hard at ourselves as well as at the ethical problem that is before us. As the Gauteng book prescription controversy reminds us, texts can do different, unexpected, unsettling, things; they can, especially for children, be dangerous beasts. In fairness, though, we should concede that texts are not always read by the right readers—they don't always get the readers they want. Instead of being pleased or moved in the right kinds of ways, readers are prone to resist what texts want them to do, how texts want to be read. Part of learning to read is coping with 'being the wrong reader'—being a reader whom the text may not have anticipated, and adjusting our interpretation to that fact. Although our response may be sceptical, politic, although we must exercise caution and a wary eye, this must be balanced by graciousness that grasps what is being

asked of us by a text, and politeness that provides what it requires, allows it what we are able.

Obviously this is not a balance which comes quickly or easily to readers; it is not something which child readers have immediately at their command. There is at least this difference between child and adult readers, between naive and sophisticated readers. Yet one of the points the Gauteng people seem to have missed is that reading is a transformative process. Part of learning to read is developing a skin that protects us from the dangers of the text. Part of learning to read is developing a sense of ourselves as readers as actively constructing the text as well as being constructed by it. Part of learning to read ethically is recognising the moral predation of texts, the complex and forceful demands they make upon us—while at the same time finding ways of choosing the ethical position we take in relation to texts, rather than having such a position thrust upon us. Plainly, the big question for those who prescribe texts is how to get readers from A to B.

The conversational model of ethics seems to me to offer an admirable educational resource because it appeals to the practical consciousness that children already have of social relationships. Reading is not separate from living: it draws upon and helps to refine our ordinary lives. For example, it is fundamental to social interaction to know the difference between talking to people and talking about people; to know the difference between talking in front of them and talking behind their backs. Construing reading as a conversation with a text is one way of helping children become aware both of the power of texts and of their own agency in relation to them. In the article already referred to, furthermore, Derek Attridge roots his model of ethical reading in a sense of the text as other, as stranger which requires a new, an original response. Construing the text as stranger is also something children could understand. Texts are not unique in posing predatory threats: in the violent and crime-ridden society in which we live, there are all too many pressures and influences which children must learn to negotiate in ways that protect themselves without harming others.

The radical educationist Paulo Freire defined education as becoming critically aware of our reality in ways that lead to effective action upon it. It's not the case that texts require ethical action: rather they require us to take up ethical positions when we read. The role of ethical reader is not one which can be narrowly defined, but it does require the best response of which we are capable; it does ask us to activate our best selves when we read. Fundamentally it is our presence which enables works of fiction to come into being, and the influence we bring to bear on the moral universe of texts is just that: being there, being witness or audience, being, in a sense, the 'superaddressee' whom Shotter adduces from Bakhtin, whose 'absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed' in conversation, who functions as witness and judge (1995:50). Ditching dicy texts off school syllabuses is short-term

protection for children at best: how much better to acknowledge the ethics of reading and readership and equip children with concepts and understanding that enable them to respond responsibly to texts, that develop and enhance the ethical consciousness, the ethical being that texts require.

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