

Russia Revisited in Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: October 14, 2018

Accepted: December 19, 2018

Published: January 31, 2019

Volume: 8 Issue: 1

Advance access: December 2018

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

ABSTRACT

Under Western Eyes is often regarded as one of Conrad's political novels, as it deals with the issues of autocracy, democracy and revolution in Tsarist Russia at the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, set in the autocratic state of Russia and overtly political, Conrad cracks open superficial perceptions of what "autocratic state" may imply and what a political novel may mean by digging deep into the personal and psychological struggles of its protagonist, Razumov. Razumov's personal tragedy, viewed in this regard, carries the weight of Russia; his story encapsulates "things Russia". Seeing Razumov's catastrophic end in *Under Western Eyes* as the verdict Conrad delivered on "things Russia", this paper seeks to examine the difficulties Russia confronting in finding its identity when it is challenged with the democratic ideal and economic prosperity embraced by Western Europe.

Key words: Conrad, Russia, Political Novel

INTRODUCTION

Under Western Eyes is often regarded as one of Conrad's political novels, as it deals with the issues of autocracy, democracy and revolution in Tsarist Russia at the turn of the twentieth century. More importantly, as a work set in Russia, the nation that is accountable for the tragedy both familial and national that informed Conrad's fate, *Under Western Eyes* fathoms not just the political undercurrent of Russia, but Conrad's lukewarm attitude towards "things Russia". As Conrad claims in the "Author's Note" to this novel:

... the various figures playing their part in the story also owe their existence to no special experience but to the general knowledge of the condition of Russia and of the moral and emotional reactions of the Russian temperament to the pressure of tyrannical lawlessness, which, in general human terms, could be reduced to the formula of senseless desperation provoked by senseless tyranny (Conrad, 50).

On this occasion, evidently, against the backdrop of a vast land covered by snow, it is the human jungle, or rather, the bloody trails that criss-cross on the snowy territories, that constitute Conrad's subject matter. Covering repugnant and horrendous sights, the seemingly endless fall of snow becomes a metaphor of the omnipresently repressive regime, which threatens to level out every possible distinction of individuality. Against such a background Conrad adumbrates a tentative faith in humanity. On such a canvas, Conrad paints his artistic configurations of the tensions between expectations and disillusionments, fidelity and betrayal, political anarchy and social solidarity and integrity and moral corruption.

As the first glimpse, the primary scenario of *Under Western Eyes* seems to centre on the evolution of Razumov's cast of mind regarding the crime he engages in, brewing slowly to an expected confession. The pervasive themes of betrayal, guilt and redemption that are disseminated throughout Conrad's novels once again form the bedrock of *Under Western Eyes*. The significance of this novel, however, rests on something still deeper than an individual's desperate endeavour for survival. Set in the autocratic state of Russia and overtly political, Conrad cracks open superficial perceptions of what "autocratic state" may imply, and what a political novel may mean, by digging deep into the personal, social and psychological struggles of his protagonist. Razumov's personal tragedy, viewed in this regard, carries the weight of Russia; his story encapsulates "things Russian". An understanding of this novel, therefore, requires a close reading of Razumov's antecedents, which is/to be perceived from different angles and narrated by a third person.

We first meet Razumov as an orphaned student, although in fact the illegitimate son of a Russian aristocrat forsaken by his family, who vainly pins his hope on an academic career. As a man without family ties, Razumov is "as lonely in the world as a man swimming in the deep sea. The word Razumov was the mere label of a solitary individuality. There were no Razumovs belonging to him anywhere" (Conrad, 61). Having no identifiable parentage to begin with, the one single relatedness Razumov can proclaim is his identity as a Russian. The umbilical cord between Razumov and Russia is clearly recognised in and justified by Conrad in the "Author's Note":

[Razumov] is an ordinary young man, with a healthy capacity for work and sane ambitions. He has an average conscience. If he is slightly abnormal it is only in his sensitiveness to his position. Being nobody's child he feels rather more keenly than another would that he is a Russian – or he is nothing (Conrad, 50).

This psychological link, apart from providing Razumov with a sense of identity, carries a further significance. It not only helps to define who he is, it also holds the key to what he is to become: "His closed parentage was defined in the statement that he was Russian. Whatever good he expected from life would be given to or withheld from his hopes by that connection alone" (Conrad, 61). Razumov is "perfectly right in looking on all Russia as his heritage"; however, the heritage he assumes is an autocracy permanently under the threat of revolution: "This immense parentage suffered from the throes of internal dissensions". However, focusing on a future building project, Razumov withdraws into a world of his own and remains blind to the turbulent political undercurrent that lashes at his motherland, "[shrinking] mentally from the fray as a good-natured man may shrink from taking definite sides in a violent family quarrel". As a result, Razumov, who is fully aware of the political and the emotional tension of his time, has adopted a defense mechanism in order to survive: "With his younger compatriots he took the attitude of an inscrutable listener, a listener of the kind that hears you out intelligently and then – just changes the subject" (Conrad, 57).

Razumov's lofty prospect is radically endangered on the day when he finds an uninvited visitor awaiting him in his room. Victor Haldin, a fellow student who is wanted for the assassination of Mr. De P--, the Minister of State, has come to ask for help and protection from Razumov. As a means of escape, Haldin begs Razumov to look for Ziemianitch, who has promised to smuggle him out of the country, in a countryside eating-house. Haldin's request for assistance plunges Razumov into a great quandary and, more importantly, involves him in the situation of political conflict – exactly what he has tried to evade. Razumov finally decides to take side with the autocratic state that helped to raise and define him, and betrays Haldin, the revolutionary assassin who trusts him. Razumov's journey through the snow-covered lands to the eating-house takes him out of his isolated world and affords him a first contact with the land he claims to be his own but indeed knows so little about. It is indeed a journey of no return for Razumov, for after betraying Haldin, he is cast into the moral wilderness forever. It is indeed a heavy price Razumov pays in order to save his own skin. Moreover, as a person whose personal tragedy carries the weight of Russia, and whose story encapsulates "things Russian", Razumov's catastrophic end in the story helps to shed light on the implication of autocratic state and Conrad's so-called "things Russia". So how is the autocratic state of Russia depicted, and "things Russia" represented in the story?

DISCUSSION

As Razumov walks the snowbound streets home, he is suddenly engulfed by a vision of the true Russia as he conceives

it. As befits his treacherous state of mind, the landscape he perceives at the moment of distress is "an inanimate, cold, inert land, like a sullen and tragic mother hiding her face under a winding-sheet without a heart" (78). Drawing a parallel between the snow-covered Russia to an agonising mother pleading comfort and protection from her children, Razumov, behaving like a devoted son, responds to this silent land "with the readiness of a Russian who is born to an inheritance of space and numbers". While Haldin tends to look at this land and see only misery and corruption, Razumov, with an umbilical cord to the state, looks beyond this discord to find harmony and a sense of identity:

It was a sort of sacred inertia. Razumov felt a respect for it. A voice seemed to cry within him, "Don't touch it". It was a guarantee of duration, of safety, while the travail of maturing destiny went on – a work not of revolutions with their passionate levity of action and their shifting impulses – but of peace. What it needed was not the conflicting aspirations of a people, but a will strong and one: it wanted not the babble of many voices, but a man – strong and one! (Conrad, 78-9)

In this remarkable moment, Razumov, affected deeply by his vision of the immense snow-laden land, is touched by, yet also confused with, the immensity of Russia. The land he observes is "a monstrous blank page awaiting the record of an inconceivable history" (78). It is a gigantic emptiness, yet the pages of its history are blank because the Russian has not been free to inscribe his actions upon it (Berthoud, 1978). History itself cannot spontaneously come into being out of nothing. Without "legality and institutions" (157), Russia appears to be a land deprived of tradition and public dialogue. But if Russia is doomed by its historical void, it may also be saved by its geographical enormity, for it is vast enough to induce a sense of mystic vertigo, infinite enough to require the mystery of an incarnation. Looking for Ziemianitch, Razumov finds nothing but hopelessness, and inevitably he seeks comfort in "the one great historical fact of the land": Tsarist absolutism. At the moment of epiphany, Razumov reaches an inevitable conclusion that in a land as massive as Russia, the Messianic leader is the only answer to the problems from which it suffers. Just as a strayed traveller relies on a compass to navigate his journey, the strong leader will offer his people a sense of purpose and direction. Recalling the historical facts of Russia, this is the concept Razumov discovers in the moment of heightened awareness of his motherland, the only "subject" in the world he can call his own. With such a conviction, Haldin, who has vowed to overthrow the government, becomes an element of disturbance in Razumov's eyes. "Haldin means disruption", Razumov concludes, "What is he with his indignation, with his talk of bondage – with his talk of God's justice? All that means disruption" (79). When the verdict against Haldin is delivered, the process of reasoning begins:

Better that thousands should suffer than that a people should become a disintegrated mass, helpless like dust in the wind. Obscurantism is better than the light of the incendiary torches. The seed germinates in the night. Out of the dark soil springs the perfect plant. But a

volcanic eruption is sterile, the ruin of the fertile ground. And am I, who love my country – who have nothing but that to love and put my faith in – am I to have my future, perhaps my usefulness, ruined by this sanguinary fanatic (Conrad, 97).

Seeing autocracy as a kind of cement, binding individuals together and preventing society from losing cohesion and continuity, Razumov commits himself to the reactionary dogma that “absolute power should be preserved ... for the great autocrat of the future” (80). Autocracy becomes a force of stability, security, cohesiveness and confidence. Standing on “the point of conviction”, Razumov’s “train of thought” leads him to associate his vision with the necessity of autocracy (79):

In Russia, the land of spectral ideas and disembodied aspirations, many brave minds have turned away at last from the vain and endless conflict to the one great historical fact of the land. They turned to autocracy for the peace of their patriotic conscience as a weary unbeliever, touched by grace, turns to the faith of his fathers for the blessing of spiritual rest. Like other Russians before him, Razumov, in conflict with himself, felt the touch of grace upon his forehead.

Holding fast to patriotism, Razumov comes to regard Haldin’s revolutionary agenda as “harbouring a pestilential disease that would not perhaps take your life, but would take from you all that made life worth living – a subtle pest that would convert earth into a hell” (77). Seeing things from such an angle, the betrayal of Haldin/humanity is less important than the loyalty to the authorities. It is such arguments and state of mind that induce Razumov’s terrible decision to give up Haldin to the police. And this treachery appears to be justified. Razumov, with the touch of grace upon his forehead, takes on the demonic role to which he commits himself. Judging from the fratricidal sin Razumov perpetrates, “the touch of grace” on Razumov’s forehead is nothing but the mark of Cain, a sign that is subject to two opposite symbolisms. Having its genesis from the bible, the mark of Cain is an emblem of punishment as well as protection, and its dual nature reflects the moral complex of Razumov’s betrayal. On the one hand, having convinced himself that his abandonment of Haldin is in fact an effort expended in preserving the motherland, Razumov no doubt interprets the touch of “grace” as a sign of protection, feeling “the blessing of spiritual rest”. On the other hand, having made clear the dark passages Razumov is trekking, Conrad’s intention for it is to be taken unquestionably as a sign of punishment. For carrying with him the stain of his crime, Razumov is, like Cain, to become “a wanderer, a fugitive on the earth” (Genesis 4-12). The touch of grace has become a grave curse.

From the onset of the novel, we are afforded an insight into Razumov’s mind by a language professor who admits that he has “no comprehension of Russian character” (56). The language professor’s self-confessed “limited imagination” allegedly prevents him from offering “any sympathetic insight into Razumov’s inner predicament. He is honest and objective because that is his western code; but he is utterly impermeable in his complacent disavowal of any human

relationship with the events he recounts” (Tanner, 1981). It can be said that reflected in the language teacher’s lukewarm attitude towards Razumov is in fact a recurring debate, as Zdzisław Najder states, which went on throughout the whole of the nineteenth century. It is a debate between “the apologist of Tsarist autocracy” and “the liberal-minded ‘Westernizers’, who saw Russia as the centre of barbaric despotism in Europe, a nation strangled by monstrous political and spiritual tyranny”. Therefore, under the language professor’s “western eyes”, Razumov is on trial, not just for the crime he has committed, but also for the values – “things Russian” as Conrad calls it – he represents. Implicitly, Russia is also on trial for making Razumov become who he is. As Conrad labours on weaving the story backwards and forwards, the painfully deferred yet always impending crisis hangs on the neck of Razumov. In his utmost restraint of making any comment, it seems to me, Conrad has held a silent trial of the country he loathes.

Councillor Mikulin’s “soft” question, “Where to?”, although addressed directly to Razumov, strikes the very chord of Russia’s fortunes, underlining the difficulties Russia is confronting at the time when it is challenged with the democratic ideal and economic prosperity embraced by Western Europe. But what is Russia? Various attempts are made by various characters in the novel to define Russia. According to the language teacher, who confesses that he has no understanding of the Russian character, “[w]henver two Russians come together, the shadow of autocracy is with them, tinging their thoughts, their views, their most intimate feelings, their private life, their public utterances – haunting the secret of their silences” (136-7). For him, Russia is the only country in which “such a depth of misery can be reached” (170). Or as Natalia Haldin’s passionate accusation attests Russia is a place where, “[t]here is no legality, there are no institutions”. As for Razumov, on the night when he is out looking for Ziemianitch, the motherland he perceives is “a monstrous blank page awaiting the record of an inconceivable history”. Although their views on Russia vary, the criticism they bring up all indicates that Russia is supremely a country in urgent need of change.

Their criticism of Russia as a monstrous land find resonances throughout the history of that country. Pyotr Chaadaev, for example, accuses Russia as a nation that has never known the basic Western moral ideas “of duty, justice, law, and order”. “[W]e never advanced along with other people; we are not related to any of the great human families; we belong neither to the West nor to the East, and we possess the traditions of neither”. “[I]solated by a strange destiny from the universal movement of humanity, we have absorbed nothing, not even traditive ideas of mankind. What is habit and instinct to other people must be forced into our heads with hammer blows”. As the modernizing elite deplore the sluggish state of Tsarist Russia, they tend to undervalue the accomplishments of their forebears. A sense of emergency, spurred, in particular, by the defeat in the Japanese-Russian War, is in fact widely shared amongst the revolutionary leaders of other late developing countries. The antipathy against Russian despotism is depicted as “[having] neither

an European nor an Oriental parentage ... it seems to have no root either in the institutions or the follies of this earth". However, the idea that Russia belongs neither to the West nor to the East, that she remains "outside the stream of progress", is to me, an ill-conceived attack. For since neither the Oriental despotism nor the European one can be credited for the Enlightenment and its many offsprings, laments as such as these only represent the despair acutely felt by the Russian intellectuals. Divided by their political inclinations, the progressives are burdened with the stifling claustrophobia of the land-locked and snow-bound geography, while the conservatives suffer from agoraphobia of the new dawn.

The old Russia, like Razumov's background, is not really an orphan from nowhere. Indeed, the aristocratic pride leaves its imprint everywhere in the persistent aspiration of the young man as well as the remaining hope of the ailing nation. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, it is the bastard status that "dare not speak its name". In *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad takes a rather condescending view of Russia. It seems to him that the poor old lady has run out of ideas. She is alien to the conception of legality, and she has grown in "the shadow of old monarchies of Europe"; she presents an enormous void, "the negation of everything worth living for". But this very autocracy, which precludes any spontaneous development of the national spirit, is the evidence of Russia: "autocracy, and nothing else in the world, has moulded her institutions, and with the poison of slavery dragged the national temperament into the apathy of a hopeless fatalism". The Russians are thus seen as victims and helpless hostages of their system; autocracy "seems to have gone into the blood". Suppression of all liberty and "the brutal destruction of dignity" disqualify Russia from giving "her voice on a single question touching the future of humanity". Whilst virtually all other nations have been so keen to absorb innovations from other countries, to shamelessly rejoice at their success as reinvigorated hybrids, Russia has, in contrast, stuck to the Ancien Regime. Autocracy has deprived the citizen not only of the possibility of serious political thought, but also of rational public action: the Russian either sinks into hopeless submission, or flings himself into desperate revolt.

Fear and wandering over an uncertain future of both the individual and the country as a whole are therefore the main concerns here. Straddling between tradition and modernization, old and new, East and West, Russia, the torn country, must find itself a concrete place in the world, must identify its role in the modern world as its destiny clashes with Western countries. Where to? To autocracy or democracy, feudalism or modernity, obscurantism or enlightenment, these are the questions on which the country's future depends. Overshadowed by Western Europe, hesitating at the crossroads, Russia is itself a country wandering in search of a destination.

To find the answer to Russia's problematic situation, it seems that reform or revolution are the two most likely options. Yet Natalia declares that reform is impossible for Russia, because "there is nothing to reform" (157). From her

point of view, revolution appears to be the only solution to Russia's woes. Although all the evidences in the novel indicate that a revolution is imminent and inevitable, very little indicates that should such a prospect materialise, the uprising could be successful. More importantly, judging from the unhealthy infrastructure, whichever way it goes, it will be the same again. This leads to a repeated "time of troubles" alternating with political stagnancy. This immense land is deprived of vitality. Somehow, Murakami's description of a Disney film, *The Living Desert*, ironically fits the resignation that permeates the Russian mind:

"Our world's exactly the same. Rain falls and the flowers bloom. No rain, they wither up. Bugs are eaten by lizards, lizards are eaten by birds. But in the end, every one of them dies. They die and dry up. One generation dies, and the next one takes over. That's how it goes. Lots of different ways to live. And lots of different ways to die. But in the end that doesn't make a bit of difference. All that remains is a desert".

CONCLUSION

The name of Razumov, in Polish and Russia, means "to understand", and as befits his name, Razumov's journey through the novel is to help the readers understand what a political novel means and how political autocracy is a spreading epidemic that blights opponent and advocate alike. In *Under Western Eyes*, under the narrator's "western eyes", it is not just Razumov is on trial for the values he represents, but also Russia for making Razumov becomes a moral outcast. Although Russia is depicted as a wandering country searching for its identity at the time when it is challenged with democratic ideal, it seems the future for Russia remains bleak. As Razumov's story indicated, the Russians are powerless to reform as well as revolt; at the end, they can only sink into the hopeless submission. The future for Russia, viewed from this perspective, is nothing but a self-defeating prophecy. The rosy future Russians craving for is yet to come, or, as Conrad's harsh verdict on "things Russia" indicated, it is yet to be recognised.

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