INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN RUSSIAN ABSOLUTISM AND OCCIDENTAL LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S "UNDER WESTERN EYES"

Flavian PALADE[*]

Abstract: *The aim of the present paper is to demonstrate that in the novel called* Under Western Eyes *written by Joseph Conrad, both Eastern and Western societies are under the maleficent influence of harmful practices such as betrayal, corruption and deceit. The similar moral degradation of the characters regardless of the social, political and cultural background to which they pertain shows that human nature can be perverted anywhere and this process is not specific to people living in a certain geographical area.*

Keywords: *Intercultural communication, Eastern absolutism, Western democracy, revolutionaries, moral degradation.*

Betrayal: reasons and consequences

In the above mentioned novel, Conrad focuses on the examination of the theme of betrayal whom he had already started analyzing in one of his previous works, *The Secret Agent.* The English author tries to identify the inner reasons that determined Razumov, the central character of *Under Western Eyes* to cooperate with the police in order to lay a trap for his fellow student, Haldin who asked his help after having murdered the brutal Minister of State in the Czarist government, Mr. de P. Besides finding out the motive of Razumov's betrayal, it is worth establishing the damaging effects of his actions on other people's lives.

In order to be better able to understand the reaction of Razumov to the confession of his colleague, it is of high importance to be aware of the former's psychological background. The young student of philosophy at the University of Sankt Petersburg is perceived as being serious, studious and because of the fact he has no family or other acquaintances that could help him build a career, he considers that the only way to advance on the social scale is through hard work. Many of Razumov's traits of character are misinterpreted as his reticence in communication and independence are regarded as signs of a person who has revolutionary beliefs. In fact, he behaves like this because he does not want to give the authorities any reason to become suspicious about his political views. For him, occupying the position of Privy Councillor would represent the greatest possible achievement.

The presence of Victor Haldin in Razumov's room is perceived by the latter as an enormous threat to his future development because being associated with an assassin and traitor would mean the end of his life as he could be deported for such a crime. These thoughts provoke him various feelings such as "anger", "hate", "indignation", "dismay". After holding a discourse with himself during which he appears to be fully conscious of the consequences of his actions, Razumov comes to the conclusion that Haldin cannot be saved anymore and decides to inform General T, a high official in the Ministry of Interior about the revolutionary's escape plan. The next day a strong feeling of agitation grips the main character and he gradually becomes paranoid. Later in the

[*] University of Pitesti, flavian.palade@yahoo.com

BDD-A29930 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:32 UTC)

novel, he is depicted as having strange manifestations, laughing ironically and giving tortured glances. (Panichas, 1998:361)

In Razumov's mind there are several justifications for his cooperation with the Russian authorities and some of them are indeed supported by logical and reasonable systems of thinking. Haldin's unexpected appearance and disturbance of Razumov's peaceful existence creates the latter a state of bewilderment he finds difficult to cope with but that needs to be solved quickly because in this type of situations one cannot adopt a position of neutrality. Bruce Johnson states that "*inaction will be interpreted as action, and neutrality will seem hostile to both sides*". (Johnson, 1971:147) This means that if the young student does not report to the police the murder committed by Haldin and his attempt to escape he could be accused of acting as an accomplice of the revolutionary side. On the contrary, if he does inform the authorities he could as well be regarded with distrust for the mere fact that he was seen as a potential reactionary and his chances of serving in a public institution could be ruined. So it seems impossible for Razumov to be simultaneously an honourable person in front of the revolutionaries and a loyal collaborator of the government.

The protagonist of the novel realizes his moral degradation as he not only betrays Haldin's hopes of helping him, but also accepts to work abroad as an informer of the Czarist regime. In the letter sent to Natalia in the final part of the book, Razumov laments that his life has been dramatically influenced by her brother's action "*Victor Haldin had stolen the truth of my life from me, who had nothing else in the world, and he boasted of living on through you on this earth where I had no place to lay my head*". (Conrad, 1924:.359) Although Razumov had not shown any kind of sympathy for the revolutionary ideals before the fatidical night of Mr de P's assassination, it was precisely his reserved attitude that determined them to appeal to him in such a critical moment. This conviction is reinforced by John Hagan's remark "*By a bitterly cruel irony, Razumov's aloofness from the revolutionary students is the very thing which wins him the fatal reputation of being worthy of their confidence.*" (Hagan, 1969:147)

The act of betrayal represents the starting point of a long series of events that ultimately lead to tragic deaths, ruined lives due to a never-ending state of anxiety, moral confusion and psychological torment. Haldin's execution, his mother falling ill after learning about the miserable fate of the young revolutionary and Razumov's own destruction which results in his crippledom at the end of the novel stand as a proof to the dramatic consequences of the decision made by the protagonist of the novel.

A Western perspective over Russia

In writing *Under Western Eyes*, one of Conrad's main intentions is to bring into the spotlight the characteristics of the Russian people and in order to make these features more easily to be understood by the Western audience, he appeals to an English narrator who is a teacher of foreign languages living in Geneva whose role is to clarify to the readers many of the surprising elements of the plot that prove to be the result of a Slavic regime which seems irrational to most Europeans. Undoubtedly, the narrator endowed with more authority acts as a mediator between Razumov's point of view regarding the evolution of the events presented in his diary and the occidental system of thinking mainly based on clarity and reason. (http://thelectern.blogspot.ro)

Although *Under Western Eyes* is often regarded to be an indictment of Russia which is portrayed as the personification of all unfair and oppressive practices existing in the world, Conrad's target does not consist in associating Eastern Europe with evil

BDD-A29930 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:32 UTC)

and Western countries with good. In spite of the partly justified perception that the novel reflects the writer's resentment towards Russia caused by its occupation of Poland and the hardship endured by the Polish population during the Czarist rule, *Under Western Eyes* deals with much more noble ideals. The author claims that people irrespective of the geographic space in which they live should focus more on guiding themselves in life according to a series of high moral principles and seek to pursue their goals with greater determination, but without resorting to immoral acts that threaten to destroy their own humanity. (Panichas, *op.cit.* :366)

Throughout the novel, Conrad proves to be extremely critical towards the Russian government whose attitude is considered authoritarian, abusive and careless to the people's needs who in their vast majority live in poverty. At the same time, the author depicts the actions of the revolutionaries as being frequently irrational leading to the failure of their movements of protest and ideals.

Razumov's psychological evolution

In addition to the previously mentioned aspects, it is worth highlighting that the novel also deals with significant moral truths, Razumov being the one who goes through a process of moral struggle and suffering. The intensity of his experiences and the awareness of Haldin's impact on his life determine Razumov to realize the fact that his whole moral universe has been turned upside-down and now he has to confront with a strong feeling of guilt caused by his irreversible actions. In this respect, it can be said that the main character of Under Western Eyes is in opposition with the Western societies which prefer a distant and simplistic approach of moral issues ignoring these obvious realities.

Razumov's encounter with the group of revolutionaries living in Switzerland represents an important stage in the process of self-discovering and self-understanding he goes through. The various human typologies he has to interact with reveal traits of character that the protagonist of the novel possesses. Razumov identifies himself as being hypocrite and despotic, characteristics embodied by Peter Ivanovitch, the leader of the revolutionary movement who benefits from the generous financial support of Madame de S. Moreover, the student of philosophy exhibits sincerity and dedication, qualities to be found in Tekla, the faithful *dame de compagnie* of the same baroness who ensures the necessary funds for the organisation of numerous insurgent actions. Another trait specific to Razumov is the honest fanaticism displayed by Sophia Antonovna, a trustful member of the revolutionary group and a very close collaborator of Ivanovitch. (Panichas, *op.cit.* :367)

The psychological warfare between Razumov and Antonovna deserves a special attention due to its extraordinary intensity. The brave woman possesses an amazing power of shrewd perceptiveness and a well-developed ability of anticipating the main character's moves. From the very beginning, she does not seem to trust him and becomes more and more suspicious as the action of the book unfolds. She addresses Razumov several well-hinted questions regarding his involvement in Haldin's execution making him feel very uncomfortable and at the same time accentuating his fear of not being exposed as a traitor. By using these witty techniques of intimidation, Antonovna challenges Razumov's revolutionary beliefs in front of the other partisans of anti-Czarist ideas who perceive him as an extremely valuable and respectable representative of their convictions.

BDD-A29930 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:32 UTC)

Despite the clearly visible conflict between them, the two characters demonstrate a mutual respect. On the one hand, working as an infiltrated spy in the middle of the revolutionary party, Razumov sees in Antonovna a very serious threat to his status of highly appreciated figure inside this group. She is the only person capable of uncovering his secret and this transforms her in his most dangerous enemy. Razumov appreciates Antonovna's devotion to the revolutionary principles as well as her strength of character and capacity of reading his thoughts. On the other hand, Antonovna admits the fact that her opponent proved to be courageous enough to confess publicly that he was the one who betrayed Haldin even though he was not constrained by any external circumstances to acknowledge his guilt. His conscience and the love for Natalia determined him to give up to his privileges and practically ruin his entire future in a moment when nothing seemed to jeopardize his physical integrity.

Finally, Sophia Antonovna's reaction to Razumov's speech during the revolutionaries' meeting in which he recounts the whole story of Haldin's detention and execution is one of forgiveness and her words illustrate best her view regarding the real nature of Razumov's character:

> "*There are evil moments in every life. A false suggestion enters one's brain, and then fear is born-fear of oneself, fear for oneself…but tell me, how many of them would deliver themselves up deliberately to perdition…rather than go on living, secretly debased in their own eyes? How many?...And please mark this-he was safe when he did it. It was just when he believed himself safe and more-infinitely more-when the possibility of being loved by that admirable girl first dawned upon him, that he discovered that his bitterest railings, the worst wickedness, the devil work of his hate and pride, could never cover up the ignominy of the existence before him. There's character in such a discovery*". (Panichas, *op.cit*. :372)

Besides his psychological duel with the old revolutionary woman, Razumov's behaviour over the course of the novel is profoundly marked by his encounter with Natalia Haldin, the sister of the man whom he practically sentenced to death. The young student of philosophy is tormented by the consequences of his actions and feels ashamed while talking to Natalia because he has to dissemble his real feelings and continue pretending that he and Victor Haldin were really good friends. Natalia has no reason not to trust Razumov, furthermore she perceives him as the person who can give her more details about her brother's attack over Mr. de P and the circumstances of his capture by the police. As the main male character gradually falls in love with the young woman, his moral crisis deepens and it becomes more and more difficult for him to conceal the events that took place consequently to the minister's assassination.

The intensity of Razumov's sentiments for Miss Haldin is demonstrated by the following quotation "*He had such a strong sense of Nathalie Haldin's presence that to look at her he felt would be a relief. It was she who had been haunting him now*". The walks they take together as well as their long conversations lead Razumov to see in Natalia the family he has never had. She begins haunting his thoughts which causes his desperate desire of being in her company, but also augments the moral pressure that ultimately determines him to write a letter to Natalia in which he confesses his betrayal. In comparison with other characters, Razumov proves that he possesses a strong moral sense which enables him to admit the errors he committed and at the same time realize that he cannot carry on his life by persisting in hiding the truth. (Panichas, *op.cit.* :369)

BDD-A29930 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:32 UTC)

One of the most important reasons for which Razumov decides to take responsibility for his actions is that he considers Natalia to be a projection of his own personality and himself to have become an embodiment of the traits of character possessed in the past by Victor Haldin. Razumov does not want to take advantage of the woman's kindness and transform her into a victim of his own interests as he believes Haldin managed to do in his case by destroying his chances of advancement in life. The novel's protagonist thinks there is no other solution left for him in order to avoid a sure moral degradation than to confess that he cooperated with the Czarist authorities by warning them about Haldin's escape plan and afterwards he also became a Police informer having as a mission to gather information about the activities planned by the group of revolutionaries living in Western Europe. (Davidson, 1977:27)

The harmful effects of deceit

A recurrent theme throughout *Under Western Eyes* is that of deceit caused by the misinterpretation of one's nature. The most eloquent example is represented by Razumov who, at the beginning of the novel, is regarded by the other students as a reliable and trustful person who shares their revolutionary beliefs and has solid convictions concerning the future of the country and the way it should be governed. The repressive Czarist government perceives him as a young man with a high intellectual potential that has all required qualities in order to serve as a secret agent in the interest of the Russian nation. He is considered to be a true patriot.

Razumov does not have very ambitious expectations regarding his future career, he does not dream of becoming more than a "*a celebrated old professor, decorated, possibly a Privy Councillor, one of the glories of Russia-nothing more*". (Conrad, *op.cit.* :13) The end of the novel proves that none of the assumptions about the book's protagonist were right and he failed to become a successful individual in any field. Razumov himself is disappointed by his moral conduct just as the revolutionaries and the professor of languages are deceived about his actions and he is finally presented as living in a poor countryside house in Russia.

Another relevant example of disillusion is caused by the revelation of the fact that Nikita Necator, the one who cut Razumov's eardrums and crippled him forever, has served for many years as a double agent infiltrated in the group of revolutionaries. In a conversation with Sophia Antonovna, the narrator of the story claims that he has always been suspicious about Nikita's intentions and activities and also pretends he is capable of detecting one's real character with a single glance. He seems not to understand the reason for which the revolutionaries could not exclude the spy much earlier. Despite the narrator's confidence in his ability of guessing people's nature, he was misled by Razumov's behaviour for much of the novel which explains why he insisted on the meeting and later friendship that established between the student of philosophy and the sister of his former colleague, Haldin. (Davidson, *op.cit.* :24)

In addition to the instances of deceit already exposed, it is worth mentioning the case of Peter Ivanovitch, the leader of the revolutionaries and a very active supporter of women's rights who decides to abandon this cause and his companions in order to achieve happiness in his personal life by marrying a peasant girl. The harsh treatment applied to Tekla during the time she has been the dame de compagnie of Madame de S, his main sponsor and protector, shows that his supposedly ardent beliefs in feminism have been mere hypocritical ideas. In spite of these evidences, Antonovna and several other revolutionaries still hold Ivanovitch in high regard. Taking into consideration the

BDD-A29930 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:32 UTC)

way *Under Western Eyes* begins and the manner in which this comes to an end, we are entitled to say that both situations illustrate errors of perception, but the consequences are totally different.

Conclusion

To conclude with, *Under Western Eyes* is a novel intended to expose the cruel reality of the interpersonal relations existing in the modern world. By presenting several cases in which the characters show no remorse in using various dishonouring methods like betrayal, deceit or moral corruption in order to achieve their goals and advance on the social scale, it becomes clear that the situations depicted throughout the book are emblematic for the entire state of both Eastern and Western societies. These are dominated by greed, hypocrisy and superficiality as people lack real values and fail to understand the importance of being united and building up long-lasting and powerful connections.

In *Under Western Eyes*, a strong emphasis is put on the way characters think and the decisions they make in certain circumstances. At the center of the novel is Razumov's interior conflict which does not allow him to evolve as he would like to and gradually leads him to a sort of madness caused by the realization of his previous actions' consequences. Although he is described as having numerous intellectual capabilities "*He is intelligent. He has ideas. He talks well, too*". (Conrad, *op.cit. :*379), none of these proved to help him in making the right choices in life. Intelligence only enabled him at last to realize that he had not known how to apply it properly in the past and this represented his fatal error.

Bibliography

Conrad, J., *Under Western Eyes*, Doubleday and Page, New York, 1924
Davidson, Arnold E, "Deluded Vision in Conrad's Under Western Eyes", 1977, *The International Fiction Review,* 4, 23-31. https://journals.lib.unb.ca (accessed May 26, 2017)
Hagan, John, "Conrad's Under Western Eyes: The Question of Razumov's Guilt and Remorse", 1969, *Studies in the Novel I,* 311
Johnson, B., *Conrad's Models of Mind,* University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1971
Panichas, George A, "Joseph Conrad's Under Western Eyes: In Sight of Moral Discovery", 1998, *Modern Age: A Quarterly Review*, Fall, 129-146. https://isistatic.org (accessed May 14, 2017)
http://thelectern.blogspot.ro/2007/01/under-western-eyes-joseph-conrad.html (accessed June 3, 2017)

BDD-A29930 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:32 UTC)