

Locating the Dislocated: A study of postcolonial relocations in Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*

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Discerning and ruthless in revelation and diligently searching in analysis, *Under Western Eyes* is a psychological study of astounding insight, and as a novel, is entitled to rank with the best work that Joseph Conrad has written. *Under Western Eyes* is Conrad's fictional exploration of "not so much the political state as the psychology of Russia itself" (49). The title of the novel is a notable one; the narrator is an English Teacher of languages in Geneva who comes in contact there with many Russian émigrés, but repudiates his capability to tell the story because he has no understanding of the Russian character. This is clearly not meant to be taken as a humble and ironical disclaimer, for it is repeated in varying forms in various contexts which proves that somewhere the Teacher speaks for Conrad himself:

I will only remark here [he says a little later], that this is not a story of the West of Europe... It is unthinkable that any young Englishman should find himself in Razumov's situation. This being so it would be a vain enterprise to imagine what he would think. This only safe surmise to make is that he would not think as Mr. Razumov thought at this crisis of his fate. (25)

The Western minds are unable to fully understand Russian characteristics and this is what the language Teacher stresses more than anything else. Russia is unlike the West:

In its pride of numbers, in its strange pretensions of sanctity, and in the secret readiness to abase itself in suffering, the spirit of Russia is the spirit of cynicism. It informs the declarations of statesmen, theories of her revolutionaries, and the mystic vaticinations of prophets to the point of making freedom look like a form of debauch, and the Christian virtues themselves appear actually indecent. (67)

Conrad's feelings always went violent as far as the subject of Russia was concerned. There were a number of incidents which added to that- the repression of Poland by Tsarist Russia and the exile and death of his parents were sufficient to excuse almost any bitterness. His antagonism against Russia— his belief that it is fundamentally more evil than the rest of Europe — has been introduced into the novel as it stands in his mind and not some fictional creation. The result of which is an immeasurable and incoherent quality in any assessment of reason & disposition — Russianness.

In *Under Western Eyes*, the cultural background of both the protagonists is different: Razumov is Russian & the language Teacher is English. The narrator- interpreter paradigm is

declared explicitly, since the narrative structure of the novel is based on language- Teacher's retelling of what he read in Razumov's diary. Their relationship dramatizes their ambivalence as well as comment on the experience of banishment and acculturation.

The English Teacher's interpretation of Russia, which constitutes the narrative focus of the novel, is based on his reading of Razumov's diary about his life in Russia, and also about his encounter with Razumov and the Haldin family in Switzerland. Kirylo Sidorovitch Razumov in *Under Western Eyes* is the student of philosophy, a young man of no parentage, whose great grandfather was a peasant, a serf, and whose "closest parentage was defined in the statement that he was a Russian" (61). Razumov in Russian means "of reason," representing Russian intellectual tradition, which is completely distinct from the Western intellectual tradition. In his diary, he reflects upon the fate of intellectuals, who are forced to leave the country. His diary indicates how political events construe into personal histories:

The origin of Mr. Razumov's record is connected with an event characteristic of modern Russia in the actual fact: the assassination of a prominent statesman — and still more characteristic of the moral corruption of an oppressed society where the noblest aspirations of humanity, the desire for freedom and ardent patriotism, the love of justice, the sense of pity, and even the fidelity of simple minds are prostituted to the lusts of hate and fear; the inseparable companions of an uneasy despotism. (58)

Terry Eagleton observes that "Conrad, of course, was continuously preoccupied with a conflict between the structures of English rationality and kinds of experience which those structures failed to encompass" (31). Contemplation of the limitations of one culture is the direction any emigre writer goes irrespective of his/her rational intentions..

Razumov is a charismatic personality. He is continuously aspiring towards the highest goals in his field. He is planning to write an essay, which could bring him the silver medal, the prize offered by the Ministry of Education. He dreams of fame and glory, hoping that distinction "would convert the label Razumov into an honoured name" (63). However, none of this seems possible since Russian political and social reality does not encourage any intellectual creativity, since life outside the University has very little to offer to a man of education and talent.

Razumov's rejection of Ziemantich, Haldin, and bureaucratic circles reflects his dislocation from all political forces of the country: it is a sign of the social vulnerability of a Russian intellectual. Left with untenable political and social choices, Razumov has no spiritual guidance or support either, since Russian Orthodoxy, the dominating religion, is notorious for forming an alliance with secular powers. This is precisely why 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" (61). Since his closest parentage is defined in the statement that he is a Russian, whatever good he expects from life "would be given or withheld from his hopes by that connection alone. His immense parentage suffered from the throes of internal dissensions, and he shrank mentally from the fray as a good-natured man may shrink from taking definite sides in a violent family quarrel" (61). Razumov's loneliness makes him an outcast in his own country:

Razumov longed desperately for a word of advice for moral support. Who knows what true loneliness is - not the conventional word, but the naked terror? To the lonely themselves it wears a mask. [...] Now and then a fatal conjunction of events may lift the veil for an instant. For an instant only. No human being could bear a steady view of moral solitude without going mad. (83)

Razumov feels like a stranger at home as though his land does not hold him. Russia, the grave tragic mother, is not capable enough to protect her children from political structures created by men for their personal benefits. Razumov, a displaced man, a nonconformist unwittingly moves towards emigration. Conrad's view of relationships between intellectuals and revolutions goes well with the maxim which says that revolutions are designed by romantic idealists, executed by criminals, and profited from by fools. By showing Razumov's uprootedness in his own country, Conrad discusses the importance of an individual's creative and intellectual life, which is so easily smashed in a revolution.

Councillor Mikulin's notorious question "Where to?" reflects the insoluble problem: Where does one escape from the issues one can neither control nor cope within one's culture? For an intellectual, according to Conrad, the safest choice is emigration. Emigration, however, is not by any means an attractive or easy solution to Razumov's social and moral entrapment, since it is accompanied by a psychological complex of guilt and betrayal. Razumov has to pay for betraying Haldin after he leaves the country. Trying to escape the haunting presence of his betrayal, he tries to distance himself from the forces he does not want to be loyal to:

Betray. A great word. What is betrayal? They talk of a man betraying his country, his friends, his sweetheart. There must be a moral bond first. All a man can betray is his conscience. And how is my conscience engaged here; by what bond of common faith, of common conviction, am I obliged to let that fanatical idiot drag me down with him? On the contrary — every obligation of the true courage is the other way. (82)

Razumov's relationship with the language Teacher, his Western reader and the Translator of Russian character, begins on the note of mutual lack of sympathy. Razumov aggressively fights the Translator's arrogant and demeaning attitude by questioning and challenging his authority. The Translator's response to Razumov's challenge for a fight signals complete lack of understanding between the two men. Unable to control the frustration of a person dispirited by his exilic condition, Razumov, "hardly able to keep on his feet" (198), administers his anger against the Translator whose close friendship with Natalia Haldin, an admirable Russian girl, is for him a metaphor of being robbed of everything that congruously belongs to him. Thus, Razumov's anger and disappointment in the West is expressed in his relationship with the language Teacher.

Ambivalent relationship of a person living in exile with his country in *Under Western Eyes* is dramatized in two directions: one is Razumov's relationships with Russian men representing the exile's rejection of the political power of his country, and the other avenue is Razumov's relationships with Natalia Haldin metaphorically representing the exile's nostalgia for the land and soul of his country.

Daphna Erdinast—Vulcan is one of many English Critics who describe the obvious cultural differences between the language Teacher and Razumov "as a reflection of an ideological—cultural relationship. The narrator who introduces himself as a sample of the Western mind, who is — as Berthoud points out—'on guard against metaphysics'— represents the alternative to the 'Russian' state of mind. He lives, in Berlin's terms, by the 'negative' concept of liberty. Razumov, who, as we have already seen, is initially trying to opt out of the passionate transcendentalism of his compatriots and glorifies (Western) rationality, eventually, discovers that he cannot break free of the metaphysical, and submits to it. The narrator cannot will himself into Razumov's submission, but as the story unfolds he gradually learns to perceive his inability to do so as a lack, an absence in himself and in what he represents" (122)

The image of two people who try to communicate while existing on two different planes metaphorically represents an outsider's relationship with the adopted culture: however hard he tries to communicate, he always feel the distance and estrangement from the other by virtue of cultural differences. It is on the level of understanding emotions that communication with the foreign culture fails dramatically, and Conrad, particularly sensitive to this problem by virtue of his outcast status, makes emotional incompatibility between the language Teacher and the Russian characters he associates with, the dominant feature of their relationships.

Razumov (of reason) symbolically represents Western rationalism, and his life dramatizes the ambivalent way of rationalism into the Russian mentality profoundly influenced by the Eastern sensibility. According to Conrad, rationalism with its assumption that the most fundamental knowledge is based on reason and that truth is found by rational analysis of ideas independent of empirical data, emotive attitudes, or authoritative pronouncements is alien to the Russian mind. That is why Razumov, the young man of no parentage, is "as lonely in the world as a man swimming in the deep sea. The word Razumov

was a mere label of a solitary individuality. There were no Razumovs belonging to him anywhere” (61).

Erdinast-Vulkan responds to the symbolic nature of Razumov’s orphanhood; however, she interprets it in terms of self and external authority: “Razumov’s orphanhood is, first and foremost, metaphysical. The psychological quest for a father — figure is only a reflection of the need for a sovereign source of authority, a point of reference beyond the protagonist’s fragile and isolated self” (110).

In his dialogue with Haldin, Razumov expressing his quest for his own place in Russian life, points out to Haldin’s emotional connection to his country which he, Razumov has never enjoyed. Razumov stands for the non-violent way of changing the Russian society. His rejection of a revolution as the way to create a better life also reflects his moral position. He feels that “all secret revolutionary action is based upon folly, self — deception and lies” (117). Refusing to “accept blindly every development of the general doctrine” and “to be a slave even to an idea”(242), Razumov declares his aspiration for the absolute independence. This statement conveying Razumov’s individualistic mentality, perfectly acceptable in the Western culture, causes his rejection by the Russian communal culture.

Having realized that by betraying Haldin and accepting the status quo he has lost his independence, Razumov writes to Natalia Haldin:

I suffer horribly, but I am not in despair. There is only one more thing to do for me. After that- if they let me — I shall go away and bury myself in obscure misery. In giving Victor Haldin up, it was myself, after all, whom I have betrayed most basely. You must believe what I say now, you can’t refuse to believe this. Most basely. It is through you that I came to feel this so deeply. After all, it is they and not I who have the right on their side! Theirs is the strength of invisible powers. So be it, only don’t be deceived, Natalia Victorovna, I am not converted. Have I then a soul of a slave? No! I am independent- and therefore perdition is my lot. (333)

Razumov feels no spiritual or emotional connection with the people surrounding him, no “bond of common faith”, no “common conviction” (82). As the rational individualist of the Western type, he has no social support in Russia either, which accounts for the fact that he, unlike Haldin, has neither parents nor family and no home to turn to.

References

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