

# On the Discrepancy in the Narrative Focus of Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*

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## 1. The Language Teacher as an Unreliable Narrator

Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* is narrated by an old British gentleman who teaches languages in Geneva. Although the story of Razumov is remarkable as it squarely deals with Russia for the first time in Conrad's works and draws our interests to the novelist's personal motive and psychology, the British teacher's frame narration is also novel in its somewhat tricky relation to the content it deals with. The narrator has indeed received no less critical attention than Razumov, but the majority of critics view him rather negatively. Some simply attack his personality and lack of perceptiveness (Rosenfield 165; Hay 297; Secor 34; Moore 23; La Bossière 37), and others argue that the narrator is a failure as a device to convey the story of Razumov (Palmer 125-27; Cox 104).

On the other hand, some critics have focused on his unreliability as a narrator itself, seeing it as central to the work. In fact, his nervous self-deprecation about his ability as a narrator, the repetitiousness of which is almost boring, gives, together with his garrulousness, a somewhat suspicious impression about him. His claim that "all [he has] brought to [Razumov's diary] is [his] knowledge of the Russian language" (3-4) is hard to believe literally, and the way he apologises for digression when he makes unfavourable generalisations about Russia several times might even be termed theatrical. Moreover, as Justice remarks, the narrator is a bit dogmatic and full of "preconceptions" (95). He defines the keyword expressing the Russian disposition as "cynicism" (Conrad 67), but in effect, as Rice points out, the term "clearly applies to the teacher of languages himself" (103) who uses sarcasm from time to time during the narration, rather than to the Russians in the text.

Demonstrating how the “whole of *Under Western Eyes* concerns the problem of narrative reliability and unreliability” (277), Lothe points out the narrator’s “characteristic, and often confusing, tendency to blur information which presumably stems from the diary with his own reflections and ideas” (267), and argues that “the reader is meant to question the validity of the language teacher’s narrative *qua* direct or literal transmission of Razumov’s diary” (271). Justice closely analyses the unreliability of the narrator, too: “the narrator vacillates between his objective and subjective viewpoints. . . . The teacher-storyteller is deceptively artful” (18).

In truth, as the narrative unfolds the narrator turns out not to match his apparent figure. At first sight he seems to be modest and self-deprecating, but actually he keeps on making sneaky attempts at self-assertion, as it were. For example, after the tragic end of Razumov, the narrator describes his own reception of a short note from Nathalie as “rewarding my self-denial” (372). Such a dubious impression dimly perceived in the quotation casts a shadow on his character, and Justice supports my view when he points out the narrator’s “self-pitying aspects” and “plea for sympathy” (105), and rightly observes also that he “calls too much attention to himself” (116).

The narrator also seems to be a gentleman who is resigned to his life in a sound and moderate way, accepting his status as a person of advanced age, but here I would like to emphasise the fact that in reality what he feels towards Nathalie is nothing less than covert sexual desire, “notwithstanding his years”. Snyder, quoting the sentence “[w]ithout fear of provoking a smile, I shall confess that I became much attracted to that young girl” (Conrad 102), argues in her study focusing on the bachelorhood of the narrator that he feels guilty of his desire and tries to “ward off, or at least to preempt, charges that his thoughts and feelings are not socially ‘permissible for an old man,’ especially with respect to a woman young enough to be his daughter” (150). The following passage is from an interview scene between the language teacher and Nathalie, which implies his voyeuristic inclination: “She gave me a quick look. Quick, not stealthy. If there was one thing of which she was absolutely incapable, it was stealthiness. . . . *It was I who was looking at her covertly*—if I may say so” (emphasis added. 142). He also says: “I am not ashamed of the warmth of my regard for Miss Haldin” (164), and if “anybody wishes to remark that this was a roundabout way of thinking of Natalia Haldin, I can

only retort that she was well worth some concern" (318), displaying a peculiar self-consciousness about his affection for her. Even more remarkable in this context is the following scene in Part Fourth where the narrator and Nathalie walk together looking for Razumov: "She took my arm confidently, familiarly, and accelerated her pace. ... It never entered our heads to make use of these conveyances. She was too hurried, perhaps, *and as to myself—well, she had taken my arm confidently*" (emphasis added. 332). Here he visibly experiences a kind of ecstasy, and it is impossible to overlook the discordance between these things and the decent image the narrator seemingly assumes. He may be a gentleman, but the impression we receive from his peculiar self-consciousness and garrulousness as to his illicit affection for the young girl seems to be faintly akin to that of Humbert Humbert, the sexually perverted narrator of Nabokov's *Lolita*.

## 2. Trickiness in the Retrospective Form

The discussion above has concentrated on the unreliability of the narrator mainly in terms of his personality, which we could also describe simply as his suspiciousness, and now I will consider an even more important unreliability of his narration connecting it with the general structure of the work. There is an odd fact in *Under Western Eyes* which critics have not paid much attention to regardless of what I would argue is its extreme significance. That is, there are no descriptions of the change of the narrator's attitude towards Razumov despite the fact that he has read Razumov's diary and learned the truth of his betrayal at the time of his writing. During the first-person narration in Geneva the narrator has not yet done so and there is no way for him to know the reason for Razumov's desperate and nervous behaviour, so it is at least comprehensible that he might provoke the narrator's antipathy. His attitude to Razumov is indeed quite harsh and unsympathetic, and his reluctance to understand his psychology almost amounts to callousness. When witnessing Razumov's agonised confession of his betrayal to Nathalie, the narrator condemns him, seemingly outraged by his dishonesty, and later when Tekla comes to inform him about the disastrous end of Razumov, who had been deafened by the revolutionists and run over by the tramcar to become crippled, he states just that he does not "want to meditate very long on the inwardness of

this peculiar episode” (308).

Such coldness is not unnatural only insofar as the narrator is ignorant of the motive of Razumov’s betrayal recorded at length in his diary. In fact, his conduct to Victor Haldin was next to unavoidable. Haldin’s conviction of Razumov being sympathetic towards revolutionary radicalism was a totally one-sided preconception, and Razumov could not jeopardise his status as a promising student considering his orphanhood. We could say that the process through which he is driven to sell Haldin is depicted not less compellingly than Jim’s leap from the *Patna*, and a close reading of Razumov’s diary *should* change the first impression the narrator had during the original event, apart from whether he goes so far as to sympathise with Razumov or not. Nevertheless, there are no descriptions of that sort. Though the whole text mixes the viewpoint of the language teacher in the past with that in the present, the narrator never recounts to readers what he felt when he learned the truth of Razumov’s betrayal. He remains to the end as callous to Razumov as in the original event, and this mysteriously unchanged attitude, despite the enlightening information in the diary, inevitably arouses suspicion about his own psychology. It is true, as some critics have pointed out, that technically speaking there are some obvious contradictions in the British teacher’s narration and the whole structure of the novel, and some readers might say that this unaltered attitude of the narrator should also be disregarded just as a common literary convention. However, whereas it would be fruitless to scrutinise the technical contradiction of the narration from a strictly logical point of view, this fixed attitude of the narrator is, I would argue, worth a close examination because it holds the possibility of leading to a new reading of the novel.

In the previous section I observed that the language teacher is sexually attracted to Nathalie, but what is important here is that in his failed love he feels painfully excluded from the bond between the two young Russians who love each other, namely Razumov and Nathalie. There appears recurrently, even persistently, the description of his position as an onlooker. “I had been standing a little aside, seeing them both in profile” (181); “I made up my mind to play my part of helpless spectator to the end” (336); “[t]o me, the silent spectator, they looked like two people becoming conscious of a spell which had been lying on them ever since they first set eyes on each other” (344-45);

“I never saw him again after the awful evening when I stood by, a watchful but ignored spectator of his scene with Miss Haldin” (377). Besides, sentences such as “[had] either of them [Razumov and Nathalie] cast a glance then in my direction, I would have opened the door and quietly gone out” (345) and “I would have virtually ceased to exist for both these young people” (347) vividly express his forlornness. In Part Second, while talking with Nathalie who has seen Razumov, he remarks: “I perceived that she was not listening. There was no mistaking her expression; and once more I had the sense of being out of it—not because of my age, which at any rate could draw inferences—but altogether out of it, on another plane whence I could only watch her from afar” (170). While thus acutely conscious of being alienated from the two young people, he also shows open hostility towards Razumov which at first sight might appear strange to readers. The following quotation is from the scene where the narrator and Nathalie are talking about her great trust in Razumov and his seeming failure to show up:

“Ah! you are confident. . . . I dare say. But on what ground?” “Because I’ve told him that I was in great need of some one, a fellow-countryman, a fellow-believer, to whom I could give my confidence in a certain matter.” “I see. I don’t ask you what answer he made. I confess that this is good ground for your belief in Mr. Razumov’s appearance before long. But he has not turned up to-day?” (176-77)

The narrator here is disturbingly spiteful, and when Razumov does appear and approaches Nathalie, the narrator turns his head “away from that meeting, and [does] not look at them again till [he hears] Miss Haldin’s voice uttering [Razumov’s] name in the way of introduction” (178). Simply on the basis of this scene, it is quite reasonable to presume that the language teacher is tetchily jealous of Razumov.

As to these facts, Lothe makes a penetrating remark: “it is precisely the narrator’s contact and growing friendship with Miss Haldin that initiate his interest and give a credible motivation for his narrative undertaking” (271). This is an extremely significant observation because it suggests that the whole story is narrated after the event under the influence of the British teacher’s sense of having been excluded by the young people, and that the text itself is

composed of a purely subjective narration that is strongly motivated by his personal emotion. This explains the reason for his callousness towards Razumov which mysteriously remains unaltered to the end. Probably, in the text the narrator's feelings are only partially expressed in language, and it is in this sense that the British teacher's perspective should be regarded as the most unreliable. Therefore, I cannot agree with the view expressed by several critics that the narrator does not realise the complexity of what he narrates due to his lack of perceptiveness. Such a view seems to miss his potential manipulateness, which also contributes largely to the teacher's unreliability. Szittyá argues that Razumov "is also a narrator. *Under Western Eyes* actually consists of two narrations, one contained by the other" (821), but, similarly, he fails to pay enough attention to the power relation in which the narration of the language teacher dominates Razumov's diary. The raw voice of the diary inevitably comes through the filter of the narrator's subjectivity, whether he exerts his manipulative power in reality or not.

### 3. Discrepancy in the Narrative Focus

In this light the problem of Russia is also important. There has been a considerable amount of criticism that has studied the representation of Russia in *Under Western Eyes*. One conspicuous example is Caminero-Santangelo's argument that the novel is complicit in imperial ideologies through the British narrator's discriminatory treatment of Russia. In his discussion on Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*, a novel that is modeled after *Under Western Eyes*, he argues that Conrad, through the British narrator, "creates a clear and unbridgeable distance between Britain and Russia politically, socially, and culturally" (142) in order to condemn Russia's imperialism without reflecting on Britain's own atrocities. In the Author's Note, Conrad himself claims the story to be something like a sketch of Russia, and the narrator, too, gives lengthy generalisations about Russia many times during the narration. The way in which Razumov's and Haldin's thoughts are influenced by their being Russian is stressed, and there recurrently appears a contrast between Russia and Western Europe. "I confess that my very real sympathy had no standpoint. The Western readers for whom this story is written will understand what I mean" (112); "[t]he Westerner in me was discomposed" (317); "I felt

profoundly my European remoteness, and said nothing” (336); “Natalia Haldin might have guessed what was the ‘one thing more’ which remained for him to do; but this my Western eyes had failed to see” (377). Obviously one of the reasons why *Under Western Eye* is remarkable in Conrad’s career is that it deals with Russia, a county he famously loathed for having oppressed his family in his childhood, for the first time in a direct way, and we need to consider that fact carefully.

However, what must be noted here is that the subject of Russia also holds the possibility of being interpreted from the viewpoint I have presented above. That is, in a way we can regard the British teacher’s behaviour as making use of the distance between Russia and Western Europe as a cover to rationalise his failure in approaching Nathalie. It must be quite painful for him, an old “lonely bachelor” (318), to accept the fact that he is no match for Razumov as a man and that he was excluded from the two young lovers in a way that rendered him nearly pathetic. Since age is presumably more convincing as the obstacle to his approaching Nathalie than nationality, the manner in which the narrator persistently foregrounds the causal explanation that he cannot understand Nathalie *because* he is a Westerner allows us to hypothesise that he takes advantage of the dispositional and political gap between the two cultures as a defence mechanism against that pain. The generalisations about the national character of Russia made in the work are, as I have mentioned, rather flimsy, and as to the treatment of Russia in *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad himself writes rather bluntly in his letter: “the fact is that I know extremely little of Russians. Practically nothing. In Poland we have nothing to do with them” (CL3, 490). In this light, we might find something ironic about the title of the novel, *Under Western Eyes*, because it leads readers to expect something like a substantial analysis of Russia and the West, whereas the actual novel has the potential for being read as a story about an old man who tries to come to terms with his failure in courting a girl who is “young enough to be his daughter” by developing a seemingly disinterested theory about the gulf between Russia and the Western Europe.

I have discussed the possible discrepancy between the apparent intention of the novel to contrast Russia with the West and the actual subject matter behind that contrast, but an even more remarkable discrepancy seems to exist in the focus of the narration. We could say that the novel is composed of the

narrated content, the story of Razumov, and the narrative framework, the language teacher's narration. However, that narration, which is naturally supposed to concentrate on the story of Razumov as the framework to present the content, focuses not necessarily on it but rather on some other object—the narrator's unrequited affection for Nathalie.

On the face of it *Under Western Eyes* naturally appears to be a novel about Razumov. In the opening paragraph of the text the narrator ponders whether he could successfully present the personality of Razumov to the readers, and the whole of the Part First describes him exclusively. Moreover, the story is based on Razumov's diary which the narrator troubled to translate in order to record the events which happened around the Russian youth, and a straightforward reading would be to see the novel as a story about Razumov. Nevertheless, the narrator's vague reluctance to understand Razumov's motives and psychology suggests that he is not only unsympathetic but also essentially indifferent towards him.<sup>1</sup> In the text there are actually only a few scenes where the narrator seriously reflects on Razumov's plight, whereas he never fails to be attentive to Nathalie's feelings, giving a somewhat dubious impression. As I have already discussed, a close reading of the British teacher's feelings towards Razumov and Nathalie, callous towards the former and voyeuristic towards the latter, inevitably tells us that his true interest lies rather in Nathalie to whom he is sexually attracted. In truth, during the climactic scene just before Razumov's confession to Nathalie, the narrator himself honestly states: "it was for Miss Haldin, already so tired in her deepest affections, that I felt a serious concern" (351). That is, in *Under Western Eyes* the framework which is supposed to narrate the story of Razumov focuses on another plot in essence, and this focal discrepancy, as it were, between the framework and the content can also be detected in their tone. Whereas the story of Razumov concerning betrayal and conscience takes on a level of seriousness which can be seen in many of Conrad's works such as *Lord Jim* or *Nostromo*, the narrator's attitude lacks the urgency the story of Razumov should require and sometimes smacks of flippancy. This can be perceived, for instance, in the scene I have quoted earlier where he experiences a kind of ecstasy having his arm taken confidently by Nathalie, notwithstanding the gravity of the situation.



## 5. Reading *Under Western Eyes* as a Watershed in Conrad's Mid-to-Late Career

Consequently there comes a question: is this discrepancy a flaw as a novel? If not, what does it mean? What I have discussed above has shown, I hope, that the discrepancy in the narrative focus in the novel suggests that the British teacher's narration more or less dwarfs the story of Razumov's ethical agony. The fact that the essential interest of his narration lies in his unrequited affection for Nathalie, despite its ostensible focus on Razumov's tragedy, undoubtedly has a deflating effect, and this becomes clear when we compare it with the narration of, for example, *Lord Jim*. Although Marlow is ambivalent about Jim's way of life, which is presented as a strange mixture of ethical stoicism and self-deception, and so makes him oscillate between sympathy with and disapproval of Jim, his empathetic narration ultimately functions as an organic device, so to speak, to convey the story of Jim's moral conflict. Juxtaposed with Jim's heroic and dignified end, the poor fate of Razumov's tragedy that is overshadowed by the British teacher's half-hearted and even spiteful narration is quite striking.

When one observes how the British teacher's subjective narration, which should originally have belonged to the framework of the novel, encroaches on Razumov's story by forming within the sphere of the content of the novel a kind of counterplot, namely his unrequited affection for Nathalie, which reveals itself to be rather incongruous and discordant when juxtaposed with Razumov's ethical anguish, it is obvious that the harmonious relation between the narrated content and the narrative framework in *Lord Jim* cannot be found here anymore. We could say that in *Under Western Eyes* the narrative framework threatens the sphere of the object of its narration rather than supports it.

I would suggest here that this rather puzzling fact can be understood to foreshadow the way in which, after *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad would cease to explore themes of morality. Whereas it is unmistakable that Conrad's works abound in modern and postmodern insights which show that he was surprisingly ahead of his time, there is also a consensus among critics that themes of morality such as betrayal, fidelity, conscience, dishonour, human solidarity and dutifulness lie at the centre of Conrad's literature. Throughout

his major novels he had explored his characters' internal darkness in relation to those somewhat old-fashioned motifs, and in *Under Western Eyes* the story of Razumov's ethical anguish is undoubtedly where one might have expected them to be explored since he is one of the Conradian introspective characters like Jim, Decoud and Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. The tragic story of Razumov, however, is dwarfed by the British teacher's subjective narration as I have argued. The discrepancy in the narrative focus undermines any straightforward reading of the central story of the work that was possible in earlier works like *Lord Jim*, and what this consequently indicates is the significant fact that the themes of morality that had been at the core of Conrad's major novels are, even if only to a small extent, rendered comparatively peripheral in *Under Western Eyes*.

This observation, based on the analysis of the structure of the novel, seems to be substantiated when we look at Conrad's works after *Under Western Eyes*. As I have argued in another essay, in the next novel, *Chance*, the central episode of Anthony and Flora is a melodramatic love romance that is almost devoid of ethical themes, and it is overshadowed by Marlow's subjective narration that occupies a large part of the text in its stylistic sophistication. It might be possible to see a parallel between *Under Western Eyes* and *Chance* in that both of the novels introduce a certain kind of irony into the relation between the narrated content and the narrative framework that conveys it, but what is important here is the fact that, as the early critics of the "achievement and decline" theory have rather accusingly pointed out, in the later novels including *Chance*, we can no longer find the characteristic Conradian seriousness in their exploration of the characters' internal darkness in relation to themes of morality.

It would be far beyond the scope of this paper to explain the reason for this change of the late Conrad. The possible inference is that several elements are involved such as Conrad's creative fatigue, the financial and aesthetic need to be read by a wider audience, and his long-time wish to write "the Mediterranean story" which is presumably the germ of the last novels such as *The Arrow of Gold* and *The Rover* (*Letters* 3, 56). I would argue, however, that critics have been rather inattentive to the importance *Under Western Eyes* assumes when we approach that issue. Although sometimes seen as the last of Conrad's political trilogy, the novel has the potential for being juxtaposed with

*Chance*, and when we focus on its narrative structure, it seems to give us a clue in considering the late Conrad's remarkable change that has been puzzling successive generations of critics.

### Note

1 The position of Fincham, who keenly analyses the multilayered aspects of the language teacher's narration, differs from mine in that he emphasises "sympathy" as the centre of his reading. He states not only that the narrator's behaviour "indicates an understanding of, and sympathy with, Razumov's plight" (73), but also that some of the contradictions the narrator shows "conspire to *endear* him to the reader" (emphasis added. 66). My discussion has demonstrated, I hope, that in *Under Western Eyes* sympathy works neither between the narrator and Razumov nor between readers and the narrator.

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