

LORD JIM AND RAZUMOV – INTERPRETATIONS LOST AND FOUND UNDER WESTERN EYES

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Summary

In my article I present various readings and interpretations of two of Conrad's protagonists – Lord Jim and Razumov – in order to show that their conduct cannot be properly understood if the reader does not take into account the moral and cultural codes by which Conrad's characters are bound. Paraphrasing Conrad's title *Under Western Eyes*, I discuss the interpretations of Western scholars who have lost or found the real message of Conrad's works.

Keywords: Conrad studies, Lord Jim, *Under Western Eyes*, interpretation, honour, fidelity, betrayal

LORD JIM AND RAZUMOV – INTERPRETATIONS LOST AND FOUND UNDER WESTERN EYES

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The interpretation of Conrad's message depends to a great extent on the way in which the reader perceives and understands Conrad's cultural background. In this article I would like to discuss various interpretations of two of Conrad's protagonists – Lord Jim and Razumov – in order to show that the conduct and motivation of these characters cannot be fully understood if critics do not take into account the particular moral and cultural codes that govern their lives. Paraphrasing Conrad's title *Under Western Eyes*, I would like to discuss some of these "lost and found" interpretations "under western eyes" – i.e. the interpretations of Westerners who have lost or found the real message of Conrad's works.¹

I would like to begin with a few quotations, which, I believe, will throw some light on the issue I intend to discuss first, namely Conrad's cultural background. In a letter to George T. Keating, Conrad wrote:

Racially I belong to a group which has historically a political past, with a Western Roman culture derived at first from Italy and then from France; and a rather Southern temperament; an outpost of Westernism with a Roman tradition, situated between Slavo-Tartar Byzantine barbarism on one side and the German tribes on the other; resisting both influences desperately and still remaining true to itself to this very day. [...] Apart from Polish my youth has been fed on French and English literature. [...] I am a child, not of a savage, but of a chivalrous tradition, [...] [My mind] was fed on ideas, not of revolt, but of liberalism of a perfectly disinterested kind, and on severe moral lessons of national misfortune.²

Reading Conrad, it is impossible to separate the author from his work, as John G. Peters says "... if ever there was an author who was a product of the historical and

¹ I have discussed various interpretations of the behaviour of Conrad's protagonists with respect to the ideal of fidelity in *The Ideal of Fidelity in Conrad's Works*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2009.

² Joseph Conrad to George T. Keating, 14 December 1922. [In:] *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*. Vol. 2. Ed. G. Jean-Aubry. London: Heinemann, 1927, p. 289.

cultural circumstances in which he lived, it was Joseph Conrad.”³ Zdzisław Najder, who has discussed Conrad’s cultural background at length, claims that Joseph Conrad was a European writer who “(successfully) blended elements of three cultures: Polish, French and English” and lists the elements which Conrad absorbed from these cultures:

From Poland: honour, fidelity and duty as essential moral values; a Romantic literary tradition [...] generally: elements of [...] imagery and basic ethical concepts and problems.

From France: [...] many philosophical and political concepts and problems, elements of historical consciousness, and the artistic criteria which Conrad adopted as his own. [...]

From England: [...] the sea, problems of contemporary society; and [...] the English language as the blending machine.⁴

In Conrad’s works the reader also encounters the presence of other European cultures – Italian, Spanish, Russian and German, as well as Greek and Latin references.⁵

Thus Conrad may be seen as a multicultural writer who presents various cultural traditions and a variety of national views, ideals and conflicts of interest – a writer who describes the clash of cultures as well as analysing the consequences of a “white man’s civilizing mission” backed up by force. While being very sensitive to cultural differences and to injustice, Conrad neither condemns nor makes judgements. It is the reader who must play an active part in the process of understanding the message that the work conveys.

There are numerous contradictory interpretations of Conrad’s works: one need only mention the various readings of *Lord Jim* or *Heart of Darkness*.

Lord Jim is a novel in which the reader encounters a multitude of cultures, nations, moral points of view, narrators, interpretations and reinterpretations. In *Lord Jim* “no point of view is entirely trustworthy.”⁶ In the novel “there is an advanced form of manipulation of readers’ response.”⁷ In the “Author’s Note”, however, Conrad gives the reader a clue by describing the subject of his novel as “the acute consciousness of lost honour”, adding that “... no Latin temperament would have perceived anything morbid in the acute consciousness of lost honour.”⁸

When the reader comes across Jim for the first time, he learns something essential about him from the very first sentence of Marlow’s story, though it is only later that he fully realises what this is (an example, perhaps, of delayed decoding): “He was an

³ John G. Peters. “Introduction”. [In:] *idem. A Historical Guide to Joseph Conrad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010, p. 3.

⁴ Zdzisław Najder. “Joseph Conrad: a European Writer”. [In:] *idem. Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 165–166

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁶ John Hillis Miller. “The Interpretation of *Lord Jim*”. [In:] *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice*. Ed. M.W. Bloomfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970, p. 220.

⁷ Jacob Lothe. *Conrad’s Narrative Method*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 137.

⁸ Joseph Conrad. “Preface”. [In:] *Lord Jim. Conrad’s Prefaces to His Works*. With an introductory essay by E. Garnett and a biographical note on his father by D. Garnett. New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1971, p. 67.

inch, perhaps two, under six feet...”⁹: Jim lacks something. There is some kind of flaw in him. In the course of the story the reader observes his futile attempts to attain perfection.

Jim’s life is ruined by the accident on board the Patna. Although he does not intend to fail in his duty, he abandons the endangered ship, together with her passengers. Jim acts in accordance with his instinct. He does not follow the rules, as he has not learned how to do so. His conduct is governed by his imagination – an imagination that causes fear and trepidation. Jim is frightened and acts by instinct, whereas the anti-emotional and inflexible mariner’s code of conduct demands that he act according to its stipulations. Irrespective of his feelings or desires, he ought to have remained on board.

At first, Jim tries to excuse his escape. All the time between his fateful jump and the inquiry he protests his innocence and searches for reasons to excuse his failure. For Jim, it is his good intentions and not his real deeds that count. He uses the arguments of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (the author of *The Confessions*) who also lays great emphasis on his emotions and intentions, which are inherently good. In this way he tries to deny his responsibility: “I was so lost, you know. It was the sort of thing one does not expect to happen to one.”¹⁰ In actual fact, he does not acknowledge his guilt. Ian Watt argues that Jim annoys Marlow because he does not feel guilty about breaking the mariner’s code: “What really matters to Jim is his personal failure to live up to his ego-ideal.”¹¹

Commenting on Jim’s conduct, Watt uses Gerhart Piers’ definition of guilt as a feeling of moral culpability – shame being a feeling of personal failure.¹² Piers says that “whereas guilt is generated whenever a boundary (set by the Super-Ego) is touched or transgressed, shame occurs when a goal (presented by the Ego-Ideal) is not being reached. It thus indicates a real *shortcoming*.”¹³ By this definition, shame is the emotion that dominates Jim’s life. Marlow juxtaposes these two concepts: on the one hand an inner sense of culpability and disgrace, and on the other hand shame or “loss of face.” Marlow judges Jim in terms of guilt – i.e. in terms of moral culpability – and does not understand him, because Jim thinks only about his personal failure. Jim wants to be seen as a gentleman and as a man of honour. Shame evokes “the fear of *contempt*, which, on an even deeper level of the unconscious, spells fear of *abandonment*, the death by emotional starvation.”¹⁴ Thus, on a social level it is “fear of social expulsion, like ostracism”¹⁵ that makes Jim afraid of being excluded from the seamen’s community and makes him strive to be “one of them.” Although at the very

⁹ Joseph Conrad. *Lord Jim: A Tale*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1994, p. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹¹ Ian Watt. *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979, p. 343.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Gerhart Piers and Milton B. Singer. “Shame”. [In:] *Guilt and Shame*. Ed. H. Morris. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1971, p. 147. Reprint of G. Piers and M.B. Singer. *Shame and Guilt: A Psychoanalytic and a Cultural Study*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1953. Cf. Michael Greaney. “Lord Jim and Embarrassment.” *The Conradian* 25: 1 (Spring 2000), pp. 2–3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

beginning of the inquiry Jim does not admit his guilt, he gradually becomes aware that he has lost face and feels ashamed. While the concept of guilt can be separated from the concept of shame, this is not true of the concept of honour.

For Marlow, the mariner's code of conduct is binding and unequivocal. Although just after his jump Jim realises that he ought to have acted differently, he tells Marlow that he missed a chance to gain glory and does not realise that he has lost his honour. Jim says: "I had jumped [...] It seems."¹⁶ He does not understand why, instead of glory, his behaviour has brought him disgrace. Jim says that he heard shouts "Did I tell you I had heard shouts? No? Well, I did. Shouts for help ... [...] Imagination, I suppose."¹⁷ He does not acknowledge the fact that he is filled with remorse for abandoning the passengers. Remorse comes only when one feels guilty. Jim does not want to be seen in the same way as the rest of the Patna's officers. He says that he is a gentleman. Although he himself has no feelings of guilt, he wishes to face the consequences of his conduct and to learn why he is being condemned – and so decides to participate in the inquiry.

When Jim has understood the import of his failure, he becomes a fundamentalist who is determined to follow the code of conduct and accept all its consequences. The novel is an account of his evolution. Jim eventually becomes what he was seen to be – as Marlow says: "one of us"¹⁸ – "a man initiated in the craft of the sea and committed to its standards."¹⁹ Marlow is more practical: he wonders whether it is right and proper to pay such a high price for a failure of this kind. Jim's position, however, is absolutist: "he demands of himself complete fulfilment of the requirements of his moral code."²⁰ "The only way he can retain his status as 'one of us' is by facing the judgement that will expel him from the ranks."²¹ From now on, Jim no longer stresses his good intentions, but talks only about "a second chance," "paying off" and "a chance to get it all back again."

There are three men²² who understand Jim's behaviour and his problem, though they view him from different perspectives: Big Brierly, the French lieutenant and Stein.

Big Brierly was one of the assessors in the inquiry, who "committed suicide very soon after."²³ Like Jim, Brierly was convinced that he was better than the rest of mankind. He – who "had never in his life made a mistake" – understood, observing and

¹⁶ *Lord Jim*, ed. cit., p. 88.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38. The meaning of these words in the context of the novel is much wider: a biblical allusion to the eating of forbidden fruit; the description of a human being, an ordinary person etc.; See: Zdzisław Najder. "Lord Jim: a Romantic Tragedy of Honour". [In:] *Conrad in Perspective*, ed. cit., p. 84; Cedric Watts. *A Preface to Conrad*. London: Longman, 1993, p. 133.

¹⁹ Jacques Berthoud. *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 65.

²⁰ Torsten Pettersson. *Consciousness and Time. A Study in the Philosophy and Narrative Technique of Joseph Conrad*. *Acta Academiae Aboensis*. Series A, Vol. 61, № 1. Abo: Abo Akademi, 1982, p. 105.

²¹ Berthoud. *Joseph Conrad*, ed. cit., p. 83.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

²³ *Lord Jim*, ed. cit., p. 43

listening to Jim, that he was the same: “... He was probably holding silent inquiry into his own case. The verdict must have been of unmitigated guilt.”²⁴

For the French lieutenant, Jim’s behaviour is a betrayal of honour: “he shows that honour [...] depends on the existence of a fixed code of conduct.”²⁵ There are no exceptions. The lieutenant’s words – “The honour ... that is real – that is! And what life may be worth when [...] the honour is gone [...]”²⁶ – are crucial for an understanding of Jim’s behaviour. The lieutenant represents moral idealism and can be seen as Conrad’s mouthpiece. He realises that the instinct for self-preservation must be defended²⁷ and describes fear as a feeling that ought to be overcome: one can learn how to become courageous “under the eyes of others.” He dismisses all the excuses which Jim made earlier. In the lieutenant’s statement – which alludes to Rousseau’s famous words from the beginning of *The Social Contract*: “Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains.”²⁸ – Conrad presents his own views on Rousseau’s philosophy and his theory of the “natural man.” According to Conrad, Man is not “naturally” good. The lieutenant says: “Man is born a coward [...] But habit – habit – necessity – do you see? – the eye of others [...]. And then the example of others who are no better than yourself [...]”²⁹ People learn only by observing and being observed by others. They have to depend on the experience of previous generations and have to follow the example given by the community in which they live: “for the code is essentially social, both in its origins (as the product of the community), and in its purposes (as the protector of the community).”³⁰

Although he has heard the lieutenant’s explanation of the rules of honour, Marlow considers Jim’s case in practical terms: the conversation comes to an abrupt end when he brings up the question of disgrace and guilt. Marlow does not fully comprehend the consequences of the inflexible nature of the code of conduct: “but couldn’t it reduce itself to not being found out?”³¹ Jim now has to live with the consciousness of his betrayal: he cannot deceive himself any longer. The only way to regain his lost honour is to redeem his crime. He therefore decides to face all the consequences of his deed. “A common faith in the reality of honour” is something that unites the lieutenant and Jim, who “are willing to sacrifice their lives”³² for it. Marlow, for his part, does not accept the irreversibility of moral facts.

It is Stein who explains Jim’s behaviour to Marlow: “He wants to be a saint, and he wants to be a devil – and every time he shuts his eyes he sees himself as a very fine

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁵ Berthoud. *Joseph Conrad, ed. cit.*, p. 69.

²⁶ *Lord Jim, ed. cit.*, p. 115.

²⁷ Berthoud. *Joseph Conrad, ed. cit.*, p. 70.

²⁸ Jean Jacques Rousseau. *The Social Contract*. Transl. M. Cranston. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968, p. 49, quoted by Z. Najder in *Conrad in Perspective, ed. cit.*, p. 144.

²⁹ *Lord Jim, ed. cit.*, p. 114.

³⁰ Berthoud. *Joseph Conrad, ed. cit.*, p. 71.

³¹ *Lord Jim, ed. cit.*, p. 115.

³² Richard Ambrosini. *Conrad’s Fiction as Critical Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 144.

fellow – so fine as he can never be. ... In a dream. ...”³³ “To follow a dream” is Stein’s answer to the question: “How to be?” According to Stein, Jim can live only by following “the dream, and again to follow the dream – and so – *ewig – usque ad finem* ...”³⁴ – for a dream forces a man to do something, to achieve something; it is not a “destructive element”, meaning a destructive force of the imagination. Jim wants to live up to his ego-ideal – to be like his model.

Patusan is Jim’s “second chance”. It is here that he gains the glory he dreamt of when he was on board the Patna. He makes such a promise to Marlow (who is visiting Patusan) because Marlow is the only person there who is able to understand its meaning. In making his promise, Jim does not say to whom or to what he will be faithful. During the conversation, however, he mentions the objects of his fidelity: the Bugis, Jewel, his regained honour and those he will never see again: his family and other seamen. Jim’s conduct in the second part of the novel can be seen as the antithesis of his conduct on the deck of the Patna.

When Gentleman Brown appears in Patusan, Jim has to make a decision. The Bugis want to fight and kill their enemies – this is the only way they know. Jim treats Brown as an enemy, but above all as a human being who has the right to receive fair and humane treatment. Jim remembers that he was given a second chance. He acts like a man of honour: he must be merciful towards his enemies, especially when they plead for mercy. Brown unconsciously alludes to the Patna incident, which reminds Jim of his cowardice, the damage to his reputation, the loss of his self-esteem and the difficult process of regaining his honour. Brown attempts to persuade Jim to let him go free because of a “suggestion of common guilt.”³⁵ It is Brown who tries to hint at “a kind of criminal solidarity” with Jim, but Jim does not feel that he has anything in common with the criminal.

In his letter to Blackwood, Conrad explains that it is the reader who must judge Jim’s behaviour, because he or she has enough knowledge about the novel’s protagonist:

The end of *Lord Jim* in accordance with a meditated resolve is presented in a bare, almost bald relation of matters of fact. [...] It is my opinion that in the working out of the catastrophe psychologic disquisition should have no place. The reader ought to know enough by that time. [...] all the rest is nothing but a relation of events – strictly, a narrative.³⁶

Some critics, however – such as Gustav Morf³⁷ and Dorothy Van Ghent³⁸ – argue that Jim unconsciously identifies himself with Brown. According to Morf – who uses

³³ *Lord Jim*, ed. cit., pp. 161–162.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

³⁶ Joseph Conrad to William Blackwood, 19 July 1900. [In:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Vol. 2: 1898–1902. Ed. Frederic R. Karl and Laurence Davies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 283–284.

³⁷ Gustav Morf. “Lord Jim”. [In:] *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad*. London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co. Ltd., 1929, pp. 149–166.

³⁸ Dorothy Van Ghent. “On Lord Jim”. [In:] *Lord Jim: An Authoritative Text. Backgrounds. Sources*. Ed. Norman Sherry. *Essays in Criticism*. Ed. Thomas C. Moser. New York: Norton, 1968, pp. 376–389. Reprint of *The English Novel: Form and Function*. New York: Rinehart and Co., 1953, pp. 229–244.

the psychology of Freud and Jung to analyse the novel – Brown is the embodiment of Jim’s other self, while the whole novel may be seen as a personal confession on the part of Conrad.³⁹ Thomas Moser claims that Gentleman Brown is Jim’s alter ego.⁴⁰ Van Ghent argues that Jim identifies himself with Brown, who is “an externalisation of the complex of Jim’s guilt and his excuses for his guilt.”⁴¹ Those readers and critics who accept Brown’s suggestion of criminal solidarity are mistaken, however: Jim merely wishes to avoid bloodshed. From his point of view, the decision to let Brown go free is the only possible option.

When Dain Waris is killed, Jim remembers his undertaking that he “was ready to answer with his life for any harm that should come to them”⁴² and therefore has to take the consequences for Brown’s crime. Lord Jim knows that he could escape from Patusan, but in that case he would fail again. He decides to face Doramin and to die as a consequence of abiding by the code of honour. His conduct can only be understood in the light of that code. The Bugis, however, understand neither him, nor his code.

Jewel loves Jim, but she cannot understand him. When Jim wants to be worthy of her love and the esteem of the others she calls him a traitor. Jim has to sacrifice his love: “He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct.”⁴³ He cannot sacrifice the principles he has chosen – if he betrayed them again, his life would not be worth living.

Jocelyn Baines argues that “Conrad’s ‘victories’ and ‘successes’ always had a taste of ashes and death in them.”⁴⁴ Conrad never saw success as “the measure of worth.”⁴⁵ Jim therefore cannot be judged on the practical results of his moral decisions.⁴⁶ The ideal of honour is impractical. It does not matter whether the protagonist succeeds or not. “What matters is fidelity to a principle.”⁴⁷

Marlow writes in a letter to the “privileged man” that Jim professed “a faith mightier than the laws of order and progress.”⁴⁸ Jim’s Romantic vision of the world and his fidelity to the code of conduct are the terms of analysis which enable the reader to see the novel as a whole and in such a way that he or she is able to understand Jim’s decisions – which are quite logical – though, like his fate, also inescap-

³⁹ Morf. “Lord Jim”, *ed. cit.*, pp. 161–166.

⁴⁰ Thomas Moser. *Joseph Conrad. Achievement and Decline*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 33.

⁴¹ Van Ghent “On *Lord Jim*”, *ed. cit.*, p. 381.

⁴² *Lord Jim*, *ed. cit.*, p. 295.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

⁴⁴ Jocelyne Baines. *Guilt and Atonement in Lord Jim*. [In:] *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Lord Jim. A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Robert E. Kuehn. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1969, p. 44

⁴⁵ Zdzisław Najder. *Conrad and the Idea of Honour*. [In:] *Conrad in Perspective*, *ed. cit.*, p. 160.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157. The ideal of honour associated with the ethos of chivalry is discussed by Maria Ossowska in *Ethos rycerski i jego odmiany* [The ethos of chivalry and its variants]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1973.

⁴⁸ *Lord Jim*, *ed. cit.*, p. 255.

able. The other characters see him as being mysterious and strange – “under a cloud”.

Conrad’s obsession with the issues of honour, responsibility, fidelity and betrayal can only be properly understood in the light of Polish Romantic literature and the Polish Romantic tradition. In nineteenth-century England the ethos of chivalry did not play such an important role as it did in Poland. The Polish nobility or *szlachta*⁴⁹ constituted the most important section of Polish Society and – numerically speaking – was considerably larger than the aristocracy in Germany, England or France. “The life of the nation was therefore dominated by the values now commonly called *soldierly* and *aristocratic*”⁵⁰ “descending from the mediaeval ideals of chivalry.”⁵¹ In England money was given noble status and the life of the nation was ruled by the material values of capital and economic progress. To English readers, therefore, the ethos of chivalry seems quite exotic. Although French readers have a better understanding of the ethos of chivalry, only a knowledge of Conrad’s Polish background allows the reader to understand Conrad’s message in its entirety.⁵²

In discussing Razumov – the other Conradian protagonist I wish to analyse in this article – it is impossible not to begin with a presentation of the novel’s narrator, for *Under Western Eyes* is a story told by an old language teacher who translates and edits a secret document – Razumov’s diary. The narrator becomes a “transmitter” of Razumov’s thoughts and emotions. His eyes are the titular eyes of the West. We are surprised when this language teacher – for whom words are the most important medium – says that “words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality.”⁵³ Moreover, he says that although he is able to translate Razumov’s diary, he admits to having: “no comprehension of the Russian character.”⁵⁴ He sees the world “as a place of many words, and man appears a mere talking animal not much more wonderful than a parrot.”⁵⁵ This narrator is aware of the otherness of his subject matter. He also lacks imagination, assuring the reader that he has no talent and his “excuse for this undertaking lies not in its art, but in its artlessness.”⁵⁶ As readers, we can only be puzzled by such an introduction; everything that we see of Russian autocracy and Russian revolutionaries through this particular narrator’s western eyes seems to be incomprehensible and tragic. As he explains:

⁴⁹ The term refers to the Polish nobility or gentry, all of whose members were equal under the law.

⁵⁰ *Conrad’s Polish Background. Letters to and from Polish Friends*. Ed. Zdzisław Najder. Transl. Halina Carroll. London: Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3; Krzysztof Masłoń. Interview with Zdzisław Najder. “Pożytki z Conrada” [The Benefits of Conrad]. *Rzeczpospolita* 1997, № 3, pp. 11–13.

⁵³ Joseph Conrad. *Under Western Eyes*. With an Introduction by Cedric Watts. London: David Campbell Publishers, 1991, p. 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

If to the Western reader they appear shocking, inappropriate, or even improper, it must be remembered that as to the first this may be the effect of my crude statement. For the rest I will only remark here that this is not a story of the West of Europe.⁵⁷

The reader is given a story (that of Razumov) within a story (that of the narrator) – and again, as in *Lord Jim*, it is up to the reader to find the novel's message.

There is a multitude of opinions on the role of the old language teacher in *Under Western Eyes*. A few examples will show just how broad the spectrum of interpretation is. Critics have seen the narrator as Conrad's mouthpiece: Douglas Hewitt⁵⁸ claims that "the teacher speaks for Conrad himself." Jacques Berthoud⁵⁹ says that he is trustworthy and reliable – "a reasonable, liberal Englishman" – and if he does not understand the Russians, then it is "because [...] they are not understandable."⁶⁰

For Keith Carabine "the narrator in the *story time* of Parts Second and Third" is turned into "a stooge and a dupe"⁶¹ because Conrad decided to keep his readers "in the dark". Carabine argues that at the beginning of Part Four the old teacher reveals "the central theme of the novel – humankind's *miserable ingenuity in error*" and at the same time the reader is invited to modify his or her "relation to both the teller and his tale."⁶² When the old teacher sees that Razumov is going to make a confession by telling Miss Haldin the truth, he says that "The westerner in me was discomposed."⁶³ Although in the presence of Russians he felt "profoundly [his] European remoteness", the old teacher "said nothing, but made up [his] mind to play [his] part of helpless spectator to the end."⁶⁴ In the narrator's "western eyes" the Russians become a nation of suffering people:

It is strange to think that, I won't say liberty, but the mere liberalism of outlook which for us is a matter of words, of ambitions, of votes (and if of feeling at all, then of the sort of feeling which leaves our deepest affections untouched), may be for other beings very much like ourselves and living under the same sky, a heavy trial of fortitude, a matter of tears and anguish and blood.⁶⁵

At such a moment the narrator's voice, as Carabine rightly observes, "no longer detaches his creator."⁶⁶ In my opinion, however, it is first and foremost the voice of Conrad the moralist – Conrad the enemy of autocracy – and only in second place that of Conrad the Pole. What appeals to the old teacher (and also to his creator) are "tears and anguish and blood" – i.e. human suffering on the one hand, and a longing for

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵⁸ Douglass Hewitt. *Conrad: A Reassessment*. Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1952, p. 81.

⁵⁹ Berthoud. *Joseph Conrad, ed. cit.*, p. 161.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁶¹ Keith Carabine. *The Life and the Art. A Study of Conrad's "Under Western Eyes"*. Amsterdam, Atlanta: GA Rodopi, 1996, p. 213.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Under Western Eyes, ed. cit.*, p. 396.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 419.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

⁶⁶ Carabine. *The Life and the Art, ed. cit.*, p. 239.

a communality of shared human experience on the other. The teacher realises that the West is not perfect, but certain things simply cannot happen there. As Zdzisław Najder points out: “Democracy may be dull, but it is preferable to autocracy: freedom may be misused in the West, or forgotten, but it is preferable to slavery.”⁶⁷

Like the narrator, Razumov – the subject of the narrative and the main protagonist of the novel – has also inspired numerous interpretations. Being the illegitimate son of Prince K and an archpriest’s daughter, he has no experience of family relationships other than the financial support of his father. Razumov is “officially and in fact without a family.”⁶⁸ Because of his background (and his status as an illegitimate child) he is forced to fight for his position in Society. Razumov realises that only an official certificate can enable him to attain noble status and thus become a member of the upper social class. He thinks that if there is nothing “secret or reserved” in his life,⁶⁹ then he can achieve what he has planned – but he has reckoned without the Russian autocracy. He behaves as if he lived in a State offering “the prospect of an orderly ascent of the professional ladder.”⁷⁰ Razumov resembles Jim on board the *Patna*. His life, too, is lived in his imagination. He does not want to admit that Russia is “a country where an opinion may be a legal crime visited by death or [...] by a fate worse than mere death.”⁷¹ He sees himself as a man with a mind – rational and down-to-earth. Just when Razumov assumes that he is able to shape his own life and does not foresee anything unexpected, Victor Haldin appears in his rooms, saying: “It was I who removed de P– this morning”. Razumov’s reaction to this is: “There goes my silver medal!”⁷² His imagination starts racing. Like Jim, Razumov allows his imagination to govern his conduct: “he saw himself deported by an administrative order, his life broken, ruined, and robbed of all hope.”⁷³ He decides to help Haldin because he is terrified. He wants to rid himself of the revolutionary. At the beginning of the novel “Razumov sincerely and honestly identifies himself with the State”; however, “his sympathy with autocracy is not as definite at this moment as it will be after he meets Ziemianitch.”⁷⁴ When it turns out that Ziemianitch – the only person who could help Haldin – fails, Razumov finds another solution. His “only parentage” – Russia – shows him which direction he ought to take. Razumov decides to betray Haldin, not realising that he is deluding himself. He convinces himself in his own mind: “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.”⁷⁵ He does not realise that Haldin has created a moral bond between them

⁶⁷ Zdzisław Najder. “Conrad, Russia and Dostoevsky”. [In:] *Conrad in Perspective*, ed. cit., p. 137.

⁶⁸ *Under Western Eyes*, ed. cit., p. 10.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷⁰ Berthoud. *Joseph Conrad*, ed. cit., p. 171.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷⁴ Eloise Knapp Hay. *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 294.

⁷⁵ *Under Western Eyes*, ed. cit., p. 44.

by entrusting him with his own safety. Razumov tries to justify and rationalise his deed. He seeks approval and moral support, which he needs desperately, as “no human being could bear a steady view of moral solitude without going mad.”⁷⁶ He finds support in the person of Prince K, who says: “nobody doubts the moral soundness of your action.”⁷⁷

Razumov (unlike Conrad’s readers) does not notice the evident ambiguity and irony in General T–’s words when the latter says: “My existence has been built on fidelity. It’s a feeling. To defend it I am ready to lay down my life – and even my honour – if that were needed.”⁷⁸

Razumov follows in General T–’s footsteps by trying to build his existence on his “fidelity” to the State, which has obliged him to betray a man who trusted him. Baines claims that there is a similarity between Razumov’s action and Jim’s jump from the Patna, as neither of them realises the significance of their deeds, which “were [...] committed in exceptional circumstances by unexceptional people with average moral sensibility.”⁷⁹ Tony Tanner argues that “if conscience is like a worm, then it is at this point in Razumov’s life that it starts to turn and writhe.”⁸⁰ Hay surely exaggerates in saying that “Razumov never felt simple remorse for having sent a fellow mortal to death”⁸¹, for if he had not felt any remorse, Haldin would not have haunted him. As Berthoud rightly observes, Razumov’s “violation of the bond of personal obligation is, like Jim’s breach of the code of honour, a self-betrayal.”⁸² Razumov cannot persuade himself that he is not responsible for Haldin’s death. After Haldin leaves the room Razumov tries to work, but he is unable to read or even think about his essay. The betrayal leads to the disintegration of Razumov’s personality and life. He finds that though he tries hard, he cannot get back to his daily routine. The broken watch reminds him that time – the time of his life – has stopped. Razumov writes down his creed:

History not Theory.
Patriotism not Internationalism.
Evolution not Revolution.
Direction not Destruction.
Unity not Disruption.⁸³

Razumov writes down the values to which he decides to remain loyal and which are the opposite of Haldin’s ideals. In the reality of Russia, however – and in such

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁷⁹ Jocelyne Baines. *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography*. London: Weidenfeld & Nickolson, 1960, pp. 365–366.

⁸⁰ Tony Tanner. “Nightmare and Complacency: Razumov and the Western Eye”. [In:] *Conrad: Heart of Darkness, Nostromo and Under Western Eyes*. Ed. C.B. Cox. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981, p. 175. Reprint of *Critical Quarterly*, 1962, Vol. 3, pp. 197–214.

⁸¹ Hay. *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad*, ed. cit., p. 309.

⁸² Berthoud. *Joseph Conrad*, ed. cit., p. 177.

⁸³ *Under Western Eyes*, ed. cit., p. 80.

circumstances – these words are nothing but a sham. Razumov lists history first, but it is impossible to gain any advantage from history in a country where history is “inconceivable.” Describing Russia, the narrator says that “the snow covered the endless forests, the frozen rivers [...] levelling everything under its uniform whiteness, like a monstrous blank page awaiting the record of inconceivable history.”⁸⁴ Moreover, its pages are blank because “the Russian citizen has not been left free to inscribe his action upon it.”⁸⁵ History must be created by people who love their country and who are devoted to it – not by people who are threatened or forced to serve. Patriotism – as understood by State officials – is nothing more than servility to autocratic institutions. No evolution is possible, because even the slightest change is treated as an attack on the edifice of the State. Administration means absolute submission to State directives and prohibitions. Unity cannot be achieved in a country ruled by fear and terror. Thus Razumov’s creed, instead of “proving” his patriotic convictions, is ironical and ambiguous. The reader knows that the creed merely serves to justify Razumov’s betrayal and that he writes it in a desperate bid to protect his own self-image. It is nothing more than self-delusion and wishful thinking.

Avram Fleishman argues that Razumov’s creed is also Conrad’s profession of faith and that it is not only “an anti-revolutionary utterance, but also an anti-individualistic one. The philosophy that stands behind each of its values is that of the organic state, evolution through history in the direction of patriotic unity.”⁸⁶ Fleishman claims that both men – i.e. Conrad and his hero – want “to separate themselves from [...] the liberal individualism of the West, which minimizes the communal life of men and from the populist revolutionism of Russia, which pushes the theory of organism into mysticism and terrorism.”⁸⁷

According to Carabine, Razumov’s political creed can be read as Conrad’s attempt “to balance the competing ideological traditions of his Polish heritage in relation to the painful accusations of betrayal he endured.”⁸⁸ One might agree with these opinions concerning Razumov’s creed, were it not for the fact that it is written just after he has betrayed Haldin – and also were it not for the fact that Razumov is not living in a democratic country, i.e. in a country where there is no contradiction between morality and legality and where “political institutions are justified by ethical principles and ethical principles substantiated by political institutions.”⁸⁹ Neither Fleishman nor Carabine takes into account the circumstances in which the creed is professed. As they stand in the book, Razumov’s words appear to be derisive.

Quoting Conrad’s words from “A Personal Record”, Carabine reminds us that the author “remains, to a certain extent, a figure behind the veil: a suspected rather than

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁸⁵ Berthoud. *Joseph Conrad, ed. cit.*, p. 173.

⁸⁶ Avram Fleishman. *Conrad’s Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967, p. 228.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Carabine. *The Life and the Art, ed. cit.*, p. 122.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

a seen presence – a movement and a voice behind the draperies of fiction.”⁹⁰ He goes on to explain:

... I attempt to locate *the inner story* and to disclose the *figure behind the veil* in Razumov’s naming and in all of his various writings – his *prize essay*, his *political confession of faith*, his spy report, his final written confession to Natalia, and his personal *record* – all of which intimately intertwine with Conrad’s own life and authorship.⁹¹

To my mind, the idea that Razumov could be Conrad’s surrogate is hardly credible. From a historical point of view it is even ridiculous. The affinities between Conrad and Razumov that are described by Carabine are illusory. Indeed, on closer inspection the two seem to have nothing in common at all. Carabine says:

Razumov, like his creator, is an “orphan”, who believes his “closest parentage” is “defined” by his nationality: and his conviction that “whatever good he expected from life, would be given to or withheld from his hopes by that connection alone” [...] can be read as a secular version of Korzeniowski’s messianic definition for his son of what it is to “Be a Pole!”⁹²

I do not think that there is any point in comparing Razumov’s and Conrad’s heritage or “closest parentage”. Razumov is a Russian subject who has had to fight for his social position. Conrad was born a Polish nobleman – a *szlachcic* – and his social position was never in any doubt. To paraphrase Conrad’s words, Razumov is born into “a savage, not chivalrous tradition.” Tsarist Russia was an absolute monarchy whose subjects owed blind obedience to State officials. Servility, not service, was what was expected of Russians. In Russia there were only “slaves of the Tsar and slaves of slaves of the Tsar”,⁹³ whereas in pre-partition Poland there were citizens who were conscious of their civil rights. Russia was an Asian autocracy, whereas Poland had always been democratic in its structure, politics and philosophy. It is futile to draw similarities between tsarist Russia and partitioned Poland – i.e. between the oppressor and the oppressed. Carabine also claims that:

both the national and personal aspects of Razumov’s dilemma and his different modes of writing began to refract Conrad’s own urgent need to seek “discourse” with, to be understood by and, perhaps, to exorcize his haunting, inescapable Polish “shades.”⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Joseph Conrad. *A Familiar Preface*. [In:] *A Personal Record*. Ed. Zdzisław Najder and John Henry Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 12.

⁹¹ Carabine. *The Life and the Art*, ed. cit., p. 98.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁹³ To paraphrase Speransky’s famous dictum: “Я бы желал, чтоб кто-нибудь показал различие между зависимостью крестьян от помещиков и дворян от государя; чтоб кто-нибудь открыл, не все ли то право имеет государь на помещиков, какое имеют помещики на крестьян своих.

Итак, вместо всех пышных разделений свободного народа русского на свободнейшие классы дворянства, купечества и проч. я нахожу в России два состояния: рабы государевы и рабы помещичьи. Первые называются свободными только в отношении ко вторым, действительно же свободных людей в России нет, кроме нищих и философов.” – М. М. Сперанский, *Проекты и записки*, подготовили к печати А. И. Копанев и М. В. Кукушкина, под редакцией С.Я. Валка, Ленинград: Издательство Академии Наук СССР, 1961, стр. 43.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

I think that what “had long haunted Conrad” was not the “deeply ambivalent relationship to his parents’ messianism and militancy” but distant recollections of his childhood: the atmosphere of mourning, the sadness and despair, as well as the shadow of the omnipotent Russian autocracy, which was the root cause of all family and national disasters. If anything, it was the very name of Russia – associated as it was with secret agents, police, prisons and death – that was a “Polish shade” in need of exorcism. There is no need to look for similarities in names or in Razumov’s writing and so on. These elements existed independently of each other. “To capture the very soul of things Russian” was to show the cruelty and autocracy of the Russian empire and the effect that it had on its subjects. As Conrad wrote in the preface to *Under Western Eyes*: “The oppressors and the oppressed are all Russians together; and the world is brought once more face to face with the truth of the saying that the tiger cannot change his stripes, nor the leopard his spots.”⁹⁵ Conrad’s discourse with his “Polish shades” takes place elsewhere: in “Prince Roman,” “The Crime of Partition” and *A Personal Record*. In *Under Western Eyes* Conrad tries to present the reality of Russia as he sees it. This novel does battle with the “much mightier enemy” that was tsarist Russia.

Furthermore, I believe that Zdzisław Najder is right in arguing that “when we read in Bobrowski’s memoirs the pages devoted to the time he spent at St. Petersburg, it is impossible not to think about an analogy with another student of the same university – Kirylo Razumov of Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes*.” As a student, Bobrowski obtained a silver medal for a dissertation. What is more, Razumov’s opinion about the irresponsible conspiracy in which his peers were involved echoes Bobrowski’s own words: “... what Razumov says about Victor Haldin [...] sounds similar to what Bobrowski writes about Zygmunt Sierakowski, who was later one of the leaders of the 1863 insurrection.”⁹⁶ The “figure behind the veil” might therefore be not Conrad, but his uncle Bobrowski.

Berthoud claims that Razumov could be seen as the “portrait of the narrator as a young man” and that his creed could be described as “a paradigm of the narrator’s convictions.”⁹⁷ If Razumov had grown up in the West, he would indeed have been able to live the quiet life of a conscientious student who was totally absorbed in his studies and – like the narrator – could have become a language teacher. In Russia he became a traitor and a secret agent.

In the end, Razumov decides to tell the truth and to unmask himself. He cannot live the rest of his life pretending to be someone else. It is because of his love for Natalie that he realises this. He says: “You were appointed to undo the evil by making me betray myself back into truth and peace [...] Your light! Your truth! I felt that

⁹⁵ Joseph Conrad. “Preface”. [In:] *Under Western Eyes. Conrad’s Prefaces to His Works*, ed. cit., p. 126.

⁹⁶ Zdzisław Najder. “Joseph Conrad and Tadeusz Bobrowski”. [In:] *Conrad in Perspective*, ed. cit., p. 46.

⁹⁷ Berthoud. *Joseph Conrad*, ed. cit., p. 170.

I must tell you that I had ended by loving you. And to tell you that I must first confess. Confess, go out – and perish.”⁹⁸

Although he ruins his future and his career, he finds peace and tranquillity. He can now withdraw. Razumov realises that “a man’s real life is that accorded to him in the thoughts of other men by reason of respect or natural love.”⁹⁹ He yearns for human understanding. His confession not only brings him inner peace and relief, but also restores his personal identity. He is free from falsehood and suspicion. He can feel his moral rebirth. When he gets wet coming back home he says: “I am washed clean.”¹⁰⁰

Carabine remarks that “From this providential perspective, *Under Western Eyes* is perhaps the most quixotic, enthralling and heroic narrative in modern English fiction.”¹⁰¹ And, once again, it turns out that the world “rests on a few very simple ideas” – that fidelity, honour and sympathy are universal human values.

This, however, is the point of view of a Polish Conrad scholar. If we consider the multitude of different interpretations dictated by various critical approaches, as well as various cultural and moral codes – in short, if we consider the most “Conradian” readings of Conrad’s works – we can but paraphrase the words of Marlow: “we read as we live, alone”...

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⁹⁸ *Under Western Eyes*, ed. cit., p. 448.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 446.

¹⁰¹ Carabine 1996, p. 251.

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