

## ALWAYS A STRANGER: JOSEPH CONRAD AND DETACHMENT

Anne Luyat

Université d'Avignon

The Westerner in me was discomposed.

*Under Western Eyes*

A reviewer commented in *The Atheneum* of October 20, 1911 on the foreign aspect of *Under Western Eyes*, "...the book reads like a translation from some other tongue." (Norman Sherry, *The Critical Heritage*, London: Macmillan, 1973, 24) The apparent strangeness of Conrad's fiction raised problems of interpretation and sometimes led to misunderstandings with readers who were taken off guard by Conrad's practice of detachment and non-interference in his text. After reading *Under Western Eyes*, Edward Garnett, one of Conrad's most trusted readers, accused him of having put hatred into his portraits of Russian exiles. Conrad responded heatedly in a letter on October 20, 1911 accusing him of being too avid a sympathizer of things Russian:

You are so russianised, my dear, that you don't know the truth when you see it – unless it smells of cabbage-soup when it at once secures your profoundest respect [...] Or are you like the Italians (and most women) incapable of conceiving that anybody ever should speak with perfect detachment [...] (*LEG*, 232–233).

The question of authorial detachment, as Conrad immediately realized, was at the center of the misunderstanding.

In his defense of his novel's lack of hateful intent, Conrad went on to explain in his letter that what disturbed him most was Garnett's lack of appreciation for the special care which had been taken with the portraits of the Russian exiles Tekla and Sophia: "But it is hard after lavishing a 'wealth of tenderness' on Tekla and Sophia, to be charged with the rather low trick of putting one's hate into a novel." (*LEG*, 232–233) In his rendering of Tekla and Sophia, Conrad had portrayed two of the traits – dedication to the revolutionary effort and hard work – for which Karl Marx had

praised the Russian exiles in Geneva, whom he felt, were exceptionally effective propagandists: “These persons – most (not all) of them people who left Russia voluntarily – constitute the so-called party of propaganda as opposed to the terrorists who risk their lives. (In order to carry on *propaganda in Russia* – they move to *Geneva!* What a *quid pro quo!*”<sup>1</sup> As representatives of a well known revolutionary effort carried out in Geneva, the characters of Tekla and Sophia were drawn from contemporary history. There could have been a temptation for readers to see them as real people.

Conrad’s portrayal of Tekla in Razumov’s journal and in the reported conversation of Natalia Haldin with the Teacher of Languages is sympathetic to her personal suffering and to that of the Russian people living under autocratic rule. Razumov’s detailed private journal portrayal of Sophia Antonova shows her to be the only revolutionary in exile whom he respects. Razumov reports having identified his destiny with her own in a conversation with her: “And don’t you think, Sophia Antonovna, that you and I come from the same cradle?” (*UWE*, 253)

Neither Tekla nor Sophia, however, will be crowned by Conrad with a halo of revolutionary sainthood. Rather than a halo, Conrad provides Sophia with a “Tyrolese hat of dark cloth which seemed to have lost some of its trimmings” as well as a “red silk shirt that made her noticeable at a distance.” (*UWE*, 238) Sophia is a strikingly visible undercover agent in the somber city of Calvin. Tekla, too, seems to have feet of clay. She reveals to the newcomer Razumov that the supposed genius and great feminist Peter Ivanovitch is merely a plodding scribe who, like Mme de S –, treats her badly. The novel’s readers want to applaud with laughter the overburdened Tekla’s hapless but instinctive gesture of self-defense when she just misses hurling a tea tray and its boiling samovar into the laps of her rigid employers. (*UWE*, 217)

Conrad’s use of irony in his determination to rise above flat realism, the prosaic level of ‘cabbage soup’, represents his detachment from his characters and his willingness to expose their human traits, but it makes him a stranger to Edward Garnett, one of his first readers and closest friends. Milan Kundera has said of irony that “...it irritates. Not because it mocks or attacks but denies us our certainties by unmasking the world as an ambiguity.” (*The Art of the Novel*, 134)

Conrad’s rendering of Tekla and Sophia is kindly ambiguous, while the cruel caricatures, of Mme de S – and Peter Ivanovitch seem to spring from a page of the Gothic grotesque.<sup>2</sup> The scornful satire of Peter Ivanovitch’s autobiography, described by the Teacher of Languages as a kind of *grand guignol*, is a turgid tangle of bombastic, humorless revolutionary prose and self-promotional drivel, The violent de-mask-

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx. “Letter to Sorge.” November 5, 1880. Transl. and ed. Leonard E. Mins. *Science and Society*. Vol. II, no. 2, Spring, 1938, 15–17.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Luyat. “Conrad’s Feminine Grotesques.” *The Reception of Conrad in France*, ed. Josiane Paccaud-Huguet. Lublin: Marie-Curie Skłodowska University Press, 2005.

ing<sup>3</sup> of a prominent propaganda effort as a successful commercial enterprise with its devastating panache is one of the great moments of the novel. Milan Kundera believes that the novel is the art inspired by God's laughter:

It pleases me to think that the novel came into the world as the echo of God's laughter. But why does God laugh at the sight of man thinking? Because man thinks and the truth escapes him. (*The Art of the Novel*, 158)

Like London and Paris, Geneva had long been a refuge for the Nihilists,<sup>4</sup> young, educated Russians who had attempted and failed to teach socialism to peasants and had more than once been betrayed by them to the Tsarist police. Victor Haldin, who explains to Razumov that he has been trying to educate the illiterate poor (*UWE*, 56), would have been welcomed among them. The failed revolution of 1905 in St. Petersburg had also sent many Russians into exile. Albert Camus was to portray by name Kaliavev and his comrades, the anarchist exiles from St. Petersburg, as well as their belief in the necessity of political assassination in his 1949 play *Les Justes*, Camus also published writings of the St. Petersburg anarchists, chosen by Lucien Feuillade and the anarchist Nicholas Lazarévitch, in his Gallimard series "Espoirs" under the title "Tu peux tuer cet homme." (1946) In *L'Homme révolté*, (1950) Camus used the St. Petersburg anarchists, whom he called "les meurtriers délicats," to investigate the nature of murder and assassination.<sup>5</sup> Although Conrad is investigating the nature of murder and assassination, he keeps a greater distance from history.

Garnett may have felt nonetheless that the efforts of Russian exiles involved in propaganda work were being dealt with too lightly by Conrad, who made them an object of laughter. It would be a quarter of a century before Garnett would read the novel again and offer an apology: "I unjustly charged Conrad with putting hatred into the book and after re-reading the story twenty-five years later, I own I was wrong." (*Conrad, Prefaces to His Works*, London: Dent, 1965, 267)

Conrad had actually foreseen the kind of criticism that would be leveled at him when he had the Teacher of Languages remark that the difficulty in dealing with political matters was that they could not be contained within the pages of a book:

The task is not in truth the writing in the narrative form a *precisé* of a strange human document, but the rendering – I perceive it now clearly – of the moral conditions ruling over a large portion of this earth's surface: conditions not easily to be understood, much less discovered in the limits of a story... (*UWE*, 67)

<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson. *Grand-Guignol, The French Theatre of Horror*. Exeter: Short Run Press, 2002. The authors insist upon the violent nature of grand-guignol. Conrad is using an extremely powerful form of criticism.

<sup>4</sup> Ivan Turgenev. *Fathers and Sons*. Oxford: Oxford UP. The use of the term Nihilist becomes well known after the publication in 1862 of Turgenev's novel.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Grenier. *Albert Camus*. Paris: Gallimard, 1982, 207.

Do we need any further proof that Conrad was sincere in writing in defense of his novel to Edward Garnett: that he had never intended to portray specific historical figures with hatred: “Is it possible that you haven’t seen that in this book I am concerned with ideas, with nothing but ideas, *sans arrière pensée*, to the exclusion of everything else?” (*LEG*, 232–233)

### DISCOMPOSURE

Was Conrad asking the impossible from Garnett when he asked him to enjoy the characters in *Under Western Eyes* for their own sake, with a perfect detachment matching his own? Was he asking too much from all of his readers, expecting them to practice detachment as he had done, in order to judge the phenomenon of revolution with irony and its actors with almost total objectivity? With his complex reflecting mirrors of narrator, ironic portraits, and literary satire, was Conrad attempting to put too much distance between himself, his characters and his readers?

Conrad seems to have been aware of his power to upset, startle and unsettle his readers. Like and yet not like, his fiction resembled and yet did not resemble what they expected to find. There may be self irony on Conrad’s part in the disturbing effect the unfolding of Razumov’s story has on his narrator, the usually self possessed and debonair Teacher of Languages, who finds himself forced to make the following admission: “The Westerner in me was discomposed.” (*UWE*, 317) The word discomposed is a hard one to pin down. Its meanings can run the gamut from a slightly pompous, ruffled manner, to a deep sense of confusion or even to the state of being ill and indisposed. There is no authorial emphasis, no whispering presence in the novel to explain to readers how discomposed the Teacher of Languages may or may not have been, beyond his own ambiguous mention, in retrospect, of experiencing a deep sense of apprehension.

On the title page of his novel *Snow* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), the exiled Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk pays tribute to Conrad by quoting the passage. Perhaps the Conrad quotation “The Westerner in me was discomposed” is a word of warning issued by Pamuk, who foresaw the unsettling or discomposing effect his own characters and subject matter would have. By foregoing the practice of authorial emphasis, Pamuk, like Conrad, ran the risk of being accused of putting hatred into his novels. In February, 2007, Orhan Pamuk, heeding repeated threats to his life, left his native Turkey to seek political refuge in New York.<sup>6</sup> The novel *Snow*, which he wrote between 1999 and 2001, prefigured what he felt would be his personal destiny as an author accused of political hatred.

<sup>6</sup> *The London Telegraph*. February 14, 2007, 3.

The fact that Orhan Pamuk's protagonist Ka, like Conrad's Razumov, is an exiled would-be writer and that in both novels the third person narration is written by someone who claims to have composed the story from a private papers belonging to the protagonist increases the resemblance between the two political novels. Pamuk's protagonist Ka, had learned the necessity of detachment:

Many years earlier Ka had confided to me that when a poet was confronted with difficult facts that he knew to be true but that were inimical to poetry, he had no choice but to flee to the margins. (*Snow*, 232)

Like Conrad, Pamuk takes care with the minor characters, the students Necip and Fazil, caught up with Ka in the political aftermath of an unexplained series of suicides by young women, at least one of whom was protesting a ban on wearing headscarves,

An attentive reader of Conrad, Orhan Pamuk creates multiple occasions for miscommunication and tragedy. He has learned from him about the art of leaving readers on the wire with a difficult intellectual and emotional balancing act to perform. Like Conrad, Pamuk takes up the splintered fractions of the world's experience and places the writer in a dangerous position at their center

Despised and mistrusted for his inability to leave his position of objective observer, in the novel, the poet-journalist Ka is forced to flee. Four years later in Frankfort, an assassin ends Ka's life and takes the finished the manuscript of the poems begun in Kars, a manuscript for which the narrator searches feverishly but never finds. It is interesting to note that the narrator, who says that he has been reading from what remains of Ka's notes, finds himself in tears, discomposed, when the novel ends (463)

## UNDER WESTERN EYES

Because Garnett's letter to Conrad has been lost, we can only imagine what his reaction was to the character of the double agent Razumov, the compromised betrayer of Haldin and the enemy of revolution: "Visionaries work everlasting evil on earth." (*UWE*, 95) There were despised double agents in Geneva such as M.K. Elpidin, the revolutionary publisher who pretended to contest the politics of the Tsar and his secret police although he was actually thought to be one of their agents.<sup>7</sup> One of Conrad's most difficult tasks in the novel was to make his unlikely protagonist Razumov a sympathetic figure, one with whom his readers would be able to share the experience of exile, writing, and personal tragedy. To this purpose, Conrad introduced an unlikely companion in arms, the writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

<sup>7</sup> Alfred Erich Senn. "M.K. Elpidin, Revolutionary Publisher." *Russian Review*. Vol. 41, no. 1, January, 1982, 11-23.

Professor Zdzisław Najder has explained the intellectual basis for Conrad's choice and has carefully detailed the "opposition-obsession syndrome" which both attracted Conrad to Rousseau and made him suspicious of his ideas for social reform.<sup>8</sup> The emotional ties which link Conrad, Razumov and Rousseau may also be relevant. As a third year philosophy student, Razumov would have been no stranger to Rousseau, who had many things in common with him as well as with his author, the loss of one or more parents at an early age, education in literature and the classics from the remaining parent or a tutor, a deep interest in writing, and the experience of exile.

Razumov ostensibly chooses to write on Rousseau's Island because he feels that he will be safe there from the prying eyes of the Russian exiles who seek to enlist him in the propaganda effort, a cause which he detests. The editor of *The Living Word*, Julius Laspara, has just asked him to write in order to "develop the great thought of absolute liberty and of revolutionary justice." (*UWE*, 287) In his attempt to flee Western writing with its schismatic division of propaganda and counter propaganda, Razumov places himself directly under a famous pair of Western eyes in the extremely vulnerable position of bending his neck to write a false report to Councillor Mikulin for the Tsarist secret police. The distancing narrator disappears and the reader finds himself next to Razumov's writing figure on the park bench overshadowed by "...the exiled effigy of the author of *The Social Contract* (who) sat, enthroned above the bowed head of Razumov in the somber immobility of bronze." (*UWE*, 291)

Conrad describes Rousseau's statue as being 'exiled', referring to Rousseau's imposed historical exile of 1762 when Geneva's ruling officials burned copies of *Emile* and *The Social Contract* and officially banned their author, who had signed them with his proper title "Citizen of Geneva. The term exiled refers as well as to Rousseau's decision in 1763, to resign his coveted title of Bourgeois Citizen of Geneva, never again to reclaim it."<sup>9</sup> There is also an indication that Rousseau's Island and statue seem to be in a permanent state of exile, almost completely detached from the city, on what Razumov calls an "absurd little island" (*UWE*, 290) in the Rhone river, where no one ever seems to come, the microscopic little island in the center of the novel, where under a famous pair of Western eyes, east and west meet in the act of writing a false document.

What more ambivalent refuge and protector could Conrad have chosen for a character who had aspired to be a writer than a man of letters who, accused of promoting hatred, had been forced to accept both blame and exile? The French critic Jacques Darras has suggested an even more dangerous aspect of Rousseau's opinion of Western writing for the aspiring writer Razumov. Quoting Jacques Derrida's analysis in his *Analyse de la Grammatologie* of Rousseau's *L'Essai sur l'Origine des Langues*, he believes that:

<sup>8</sup> Zdzisław Najder. "Conrad and Rousseau: Concepts of Man and Society." *Joseph Conrad, A Commemoration*. Ed. Norman Sherry. London: Macmillan, 1976, 85.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Oeuvres Complètes*. Ed. Bernard Gagnebin et Marcel Raymond. Paris: Gallimard Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (1959)1782, Biographie, xxii-xxxvii.

Rousseau thinks of writing as an activity closely linked to the degradation of the social bond, with writing progressively replacing the immediacy and the spontaneity of speech just as the values of communal life were progressively replaced by exchange, commerce and the delegation of authority in the modern social order. (*Conrad and the West*, London: Macmillan, 1982, 136)

Pradier's statue of Rousseau has no pointing finger to indicate to the reader if help or harm will come to Razumov for having sought protection at its feet, but the suffering, haunted expression on Razumov's face when he leaves Rousseau's island to mail his report to Councillor Mikulin is what prompts the stunned remark of the Teacher of Languages, who knows nothing of Razumov's torment in being forced to write blatant lies: "The Westerner in me was discomposed." (317)

For the first time in the novel, at the moment when ideas converge on a tiny island in a politically neutral city, the narrator and the reader share the emotions of fear, apprehension, dread, and pity which Conrad knew they must experience for Razumov in order for the novel to exist. It is the absurd, tragic nature of Razumov's fate at the hands of political extremists which interests Conrad. In Razumov's desperate attempt to defy the fates and save his life, writing has lost its power and become meaningless, but the novel in its direct contact with what will become a constant dilemma in a modern human history. May the gods be pardoned for their laughter.

## DOCUMENTS OF REFERENCE

"...the book reads like a translation from some other tongue."

With hindsight, we can consider that the reviewer of the *Athenaeum* may have involuntarily paid a compliment to Conrad's powers of creating an illusion when he said that he felt that *Under Western Eyes* read like a translation from another language. For Conrad or any author to write a novel in English while creating the illusion that it remains very close to an original in another language is a tribute. Did not the Teacher of Languages insist that he has only brought to Razumov's document "his knowledge of the Russian language"? (*UWE*, 3-4)

Milan Kundera has said that fiction must acknowledge its debt to history: "And we know now how the novel dies: it's not that it disappears; it falls away from its history. Its death occurs quickly, unnoticed and no one is outraged." (*The Art of the Novel*, 12-13)

As the only historical text of reference for the narrator and the reader, Razumov's secret journal becomes important to the plot of the story. It has to be written and transmitted unexpectedly, to another character before it comes at last, even more unexpectedly, into the hands of the Teacher of Languages, who is able, with his par-

tial knowledge of events, to piece the story together. The document, said to be the unique source of the story, is constantly in danger of disappearing.

With the rescued text in hand, the Teacher of Languages must then decide what to do with it, whether to keep it private or submit it to public scrutiny. The second choice is the one which he makes in the novel's opening pages. Although the document is no longer in danger of disappearing, it has been in danger of being mistranslated and misunderstood. The Teacher of Languages indicates clearly that he does not pretend to understand the Russian temperament or Russian customs even though he does know the language, Conrad's reader is perhaps more important in this novel than in any other because he is constantly being called up to evaluate the information given to him.

Attempting to walk the fine line between history and creation, Conrad bases his novel about a sensitive political subject on the fragile translation and adaptation of one man's handwritten personal account of events. Conrad then distances himself and his readers from the document by insisting upon its unfamiliar, foreign nature and the impossibility of ever totally comprehending it. The continual intrusions in the story by the Teacher of Languages in his efforts to explain and justify also dilute the document's authority. What is the reader to make, too, of other elements which seem to 'escape' from the document, the detached voices and body parts – the snatches of elegant French echoing from East to West, the gleeful squeaks of Necator, the goggle eyes of General T, the whiskers of Prince K, the Mephistophelian eyebrows of Sophia Antonovna? What further efforts of re-composition must we make in our effort to understand a painstakingly modern collage? Conrad's detachment from his source is noteworthy, a source of creation rather than of imitation.

There is in *Under Western Eyes*, however, another transmission of a personal journal which has found its way into the public eye and which constitutes a final turn of the documentary screw, The source document for Peter Ivanovitch's autobiography, which he says "had a pathetic history" (*UWE*, 121) is not his own but one that was given to him by a young woman in Siberia in tragic circumstances. Peter Ivanovitch's melodramatic handling of the original document, which he confesses he lost during his escape, seems to parody the main text and question the wisdom of a method of narration which depends on the presence of a source document and an interpreter for it.

The Teacher of Languages heaps scorn on the autobiography compiled by Peter Ivanovich, but he may feel secretly tempted to imitate its worldwide commercial success and translation into seven languages by publishing his own first person eye-witness account of the revolutionary process in Russia. With the success of its main symbol, a clanking chain, the autobiography was, to quote the aghast but nonetheless admiring Teacher of Languages, "the wonder of two continents." (*UWE*, 120)

The repetition with variations on the theme of the public publication of a personal document also seems to question the use the Teacher of Languages makes of Razumov's journal, which was entrusted to him for safekeeping. How faithful



a friend, reader, translator, and author can he be? The ambivalent Teacher of Languages, the first in a long line of unreliable narrators to appear in twentieth century fiction, is presenting his version of Razumov's private document as a text which can be read. Where does an author's authority begin and end? What are the ethical problems involved in submitting private writing to the public eye, in this case Western eyes? How far can writing whose existence depends on commercial success be trusted?

In his ironic juxtaposition of the literary fate of two similar source documents Conrad is revealing his own preoccupations as an author. Although he perceived the novel's dependence on history, he refused to write the kind of sensational first person account of human history which sold well and which he detested. He also perceived very clearly the difficulty of transposing for his readers the complex motives which moved his characters either to serve the revolutionary cause or to condemn it. The Teacher of Languages is aware of the fact that few English readers have a first hand experience of revolution: "It is unthinkable that that any young Englishman should find himself in Razumov's situation." (*UWE*, 25)

Even more revealing is the comment of the Teacher of Languages on the unfathomable nature of the anarchist Haldin whose very handwriting was believed by the Teacher of Languages to be: "...cabalistic, incomprehensible to the experience of Western Europe." (*UWE*, 133) By drawing the attention of his readers to writing, which was losing its power to confront and contest, Conrad leaves many important questions unanswered, preserves his detachment from the characters and the events narrated, and refuses closure for his novel.

### SHOULD WE BLAME THE FRENCH?

Should we attribute the seeming strangeness of Conrad's writing to the influence of French writers? The Russian Formalist School of Criticism was the first to define strangeness or *ostranenia* as a positive literary term<sup>10</sup> yet Yves Hervouet made a strong case for French influence in his thorough investigation of possible French sources (*The French Face of Joseph Conrad*, Cambridge University Press, 1990). After Conrad's death, in a book of remembrance contested by both Edward Garnett and Jessie Conrad, Ford Madox Ford indicated that Conrad had begun writing by transposing sentences from Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* (*A Personal Remembrance*, Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1924, 106–107) As readers of Conrad, how far can we trust source criticism? We could begin by looking at what Joseph Conrad actually wrote himself about two of his French predecessors in relation to his conscious position of authorial reticence.

<sup>10</sup> Tobin Seibers. *The Romantic Frantastic*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984, 45.

The credo of austere authorial detachment from the text advocated by the French writer Guy de Maupassant was, by Conrad's own admission in his 1904 *Preface* to the Duckworth edition of Guy de Maupassant's short stories, an important factor. Unlike Ford Madox Ford, who had attempted to make Maupassant popular with the British public by glossing over the difficulty of reading him, Conrad wrote that Maupassant's position of detachment was the cornerstone of his talent: "His determinism, barren of praise, blame, and consolation, has all the merit of his conscientious art...it is the austerity of his talent, of course, that is in question..." (*Preface to Yvette and Other Stories*, vi) Conrad also praised Guy de Maupassant for his courage in ruling out authorial interference, even at the risk of being misunderstood: "That is why he is not always properly understood. His facts are so perfectly rendered that, like the actualities of life itself, they demand from the reader that faculty of observation which is rare, the power of appreciation which is generally wanting in most of us, who are guided mainly by empty phrases requiring no effort, demanding from us no qualities except a vague susceptibility to emotion." (*Preface to Yvette and Other Stories*, ix)

There is another French writer from whom Conrad learned a great deal but whom he refused to imitate. As early as 1898, writing in the April issue of the magazine *Outlook*, he criticized Alphonse Daudet for his emphatic authorial presence: "But it is very hard to forgive him the dotted i's, the pointing finger, the making plain of obvious mysteries...the constant whisper of his presence." ("Alphonse Daudet," *Tract Book*, 10–11) Conrad's use of a narrator in "Heart of Darkness" and *Lord Jim*, when he was first attempting to withdraw to the margins of his text, is contemporary with his *Outlook* article. It is perhaps in this sense, for the effort he makes in creating the illusion of his absence, that we can confer on Conrad the title of Impressionist first conferred on him by the French critic Ramon Fernandez.<sup>11</sup> When an author seems to disappear from his text, its writing takes on a new importance and the reader can enter the story as a full participant in it.

We are only beginning to understand how the apparent strangeness of Conrad's writing changed the concept of what novels and readers should be. As longstanding readers of Conrad, we have perhaps decided more than once to stop reading him and have then gone back to him, book in hand, How should we consider the future? If we decide to heed the advice of Edward Said, who believed that Conrad needed his readers "Conrad has been treated as everything *except* as a novelist with links to an intellectual and cultural contexts."<sup>12</sup> Our return to the discomposing strangeness of his fiction should not disappoint us.

<sup>11</sup> Ramon Fernandez. "L'Art de Conrad." *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. Paris, 1924, Tome XXIII, 31–37.

<sup>12</sup> Edward W. Said. "Conrad and Nietzsche." *Joseph Conrad, A Commemoration*. Ed. Norman Sherry. London: Macmillan, 1976, 65.

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