THE QUEST FOR MENTAL TRANQUILITY IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *UNDER WESTERN EYES*

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Abstract

In Joseph Conrad's novel *Under Western Eyes* (1911), Razumov is a kinless university student in St. Petersburg who involuntarily becomes the government's agent as regard to espionage because of an unwelcome visit from the revolutionist student Haldin. This paper makes use of C.T. Watts' article "*Under Western Eyes*: The Haunted Haunts" published in 2008 as a framework to investigate Razumov's psychological journey: beginning with his decision to betray Haldin through to the consequential action of making a confession to the latter's sister, Nathalie. Watts' article explores both the haunting and exorcist aspects of the novel upon its author, characters and, possibly. the reader. The article primarily focuses on how Conrad's novel intentionally mimics *Crime and Punishment* (1866). Several aspects of the narrative reveal to us that Conrad failed in avenging the haunting effect Fyodor Dostoyevsky's work had upon him. In this paper, the rationale behind Razumov's confession will be investigated in understanding how both physical and mental exhaustion stimulate moral struggles and alter one's assumed ideology. Emphasis will be made on the transformation of Razumov in terms of the effect of acquiring domestic connections and arriving in different geographical locations as the plot complicates.

Key words

Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, nationalism, psychological journey, confession

Introduction

Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* was published in 1911. An essay written by C.T. Watts entitled "*Under Western Eyes*: The Haunted Haunts" was published in *The Conradian* in 2008. It explores both the haunting and exorcist aspects of the novel upon its author, characters and possibly the reader. Watts' discussion has primarily focused on how Conrad's novel is a mimicry of *Crime and Punishment* (1866). Several aspects of the novel reveal to us that Conrad failed in avenging the haunting effect of Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) and his work upon him.

It is worthy to note that Conrad wrote the novel during the time when he suffered from both financial stress and psychological burdens. While the problem of debts pressurized his literary creation, Conrad finally experienced a mental breakdown in early 1910 (*UWE* 2007, xviii). Doctor Clifford Hackney diagnosed

Conrad's state as a "complete nervous breakdown" (Stape 2007, 172). Conrad's massive debts to his literary agent J.B. Pinker (1863-1922) could be a reason that resulted in his exasperation. Besides, it is also believed that the subject matter of *Under Western Eyes*, particularly in relation to Russian despotism, aroused much impact upon Conrad's emotions towards his own upbringing and nationality. In *Collected Letters* (vol. IV) Conrad himself remarked how "[t]he subject has long haunted me. Now it must come out" (qtd. in *UWE* 2007, xix).

Being inspired by Watts' notion of haunting, it is the purpose of this paper to study the rationale behind Razumov's confession in relation to the haunting effect of betrayal and moral struggle. Razumov's initial action is characterized by his fear of uncertainty when he is first involved in Haldin's assassination of Mr. de P-. Owing to the fear of insecurity, many Conrad's characters share the common quality in their everlasting quest for safety. Some notable examples include Amy Foster in the short story of the same title (1901), Adolf Verloc in *The Secret Agent* (1907), and Alvan Hervey in the short piece "The Return" (1932). While the tradition of depicting the theme of safety could have originated from modernist writings that schematize ontological threat, it is not hard to notice that all these works have aligned domestic crisis with safety concerns. In this paper, emphasis would be made on the transformation of Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*, particularly in terms of the effect of acquiring domestic connection and arriving in different geographical locations as the plot complicates.

The Establishment of an Identity

The novel begins with the description of Razumov as a man who needs to secure his position by means of establishing a proper intellectual identity of the Russian tradition. Razumov is, according to the novel, "the man who called himself, after the Russian custom, Cyril son of Isidor - Kirylo Sidorovitch – Razumov" (*UWE* 2007, 5). Being born out of wedlock and thus without a legitimate status, it is obvious that he attempts to wipe off any stains which may affect his future career, particularly in a bureaucratic society. The reader is soon informed that the narrator of the novel, who is a teacher of languages, adopts an ironic tone in referring to Razumov. That the narrator says "there was nothing secret or reserved in his life" ironically foreshadows how Razumov struggles between the possibility of achieving personal fame of a selfish kind and devoting to people's well-being (*UWE* 2007, 8).

When Haldin is facing fatal risk after murdering Mr. de P-, he comes to seek refuge from Razumov. Although they have never been very close, Haldin explains this unusual choice as being related to both Razumov's "superior mind" and absence of domestic ties (*UWE* 2007, 18):

> It occurred to me that you – you have no one belonging to you - no ties, no one to suffer for it if this came out by some means. There have been enough Russian homes

> as it is. But I don't see how my passage through your rooms can be ever known *(UWE* 2007, 18-19).

While Haldin sees Razumov's lack of familial connections as an advantage, the latter holds a drastically dissimilar attitude. Razumov imagines his solitary downfall when being arrested. He believes that criminals with relatives or social acquaintances may be able to obtain necessities and other crucial conveniences through them. Most importantly, he points out the fear of being forgotten as an orphan with no family members or close friends. The dilemma occurs, not only in terms of Haldin's and Razumov's different perspectives, but also within Razumov himself. Haldin's terroristic avenging behavior blooms from his selfless concern towards humanistic progress. Instead of regarding himself as a terrorist or destroyer, he has made a remarkable confession in the novel that "the true destroyers are they who destroy the spirit of progress and truth, not the avengers who merely kill the bodies of the persecutors of human dignity" (*UWE* 2007, 19). He thus regards his act as righting the wrong. On the other hand, Razumov places ontological safety above all. Though he wants to become somebody with status in society, he also tries to be as invisible as possible in this vast country under strict social surveillance. In *Joseph Conrad: Beyond Culture and Background* (1990), D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke analyses the role played by the Russian social identity upon Razumov's individual choices and suggests that "Razumov's ambitions are not intellectual, but social; his social background is more important than his clear mind" (Goonetilleke 1990, 161). Razumov has also confessed to Haldin that "the only ties I have in the world are social. I must get acknowledged in some way before I can act at all" (*UWE* 2007, 52). Being alone, he shows more concerns towards the establishment of a social self in guaranteeing a bright future ahead.

Razumov's Betrayal

A discussion on Razumov's rationale in betraying Haldin is helpful in contrasting the difference in his mentality after his departure from Russia. In paving the way for Razumov's betrayal, Conrad inserts a scene to demonstrate how the incapability of eliminating any potential threats to his safety can enrage this student. With "the desperate desire to get rid of [Haldin's] presence", Razumov looks for Ziemianitch, a man who keep sledges and horses, and also Haldin's sole hope for escaping from his critical stage (*UWE* 2007, 25). Upon realizing that Ziemianitch is drunk and rather incapable to assist Haldin with the plan to escape in the present condition, he behaves like a wild breast facing its rival:

> He looked round wildly, seized the handle of a broken stable-fork and rushing forward, struck at the prostrate body with inarticulate cries. After a time his cries ceased, and the rain of blows fell in the stillness and shadows of the cellar-like stable (*UWE* 2007, 27).

Almost immediately after imposing physical abuse upon Ziemianitch, Razumov experiences a brief period of mental serenity. Still, he hasn't forgotten that the crisis has not been solved, and "he was conscious now of a tranquil, unquenchable hate" (*UWE* 2007, 29). One must remember that it has never been Razumov's wish in offering help to Haldin, a dangerous student from his perspective and that of the despotic government. When Haldin comes to Razumov's apartment unwelcomely with his philosophy, "Razumov wondered why he had not cut short that talk and told this man to go away long before" (*UWE* 2007, 19). Then, Razumov immediately imagines his downfall and sentence. His hatred towards Haldin grows and this foreshadows his betrayal of this man who addresses him as "brother" (*UWE* 2007, 22).

Watts expresses the point of view that "Razumov contrives a philosophical and political rationale for lethal treachery" (Watts 2009, 37). In the early parts of the novel, Razumov's philosophical and political rationale seemingly lies in his autocratic belief that "absolute power must be preserved" (*UWE* 2007, 32). As Razumov ponders his next move, he decides that "Haldin means disruption" because "revolution makes people become disintegrated mass" (*UWE* 2007, 31). Therefore, it is necessary to betray Haldin for the safety of the country. The choice of the Russian setting in St. Petersburg helps to reinforce the idea of aligning Razumov's behavior with autocratic ideology:

> Razumov's Russia is a space hostile to change and to the dispersing of new ideas: students are considered as especially dangerous. While modernity can be seen to enter Russia in some students' desire for the new, this is not the case for Razumov, who makes his home in tradition (Nyman 2000, 173).

Most importantly, this act of betrayal can keep him, as a subject under the protection of the autocracy of Prince K-, safe. Having understood this underlying aim of self-protection, it is easy to conceive that though Razumov aligns the act of betraying Haldin with the necessity of upholding Russian autocratic ideology. He demonstrates the belief of ego centricity. The self becomes a violent autocrat in response to a powerful underlying shock of Haldin's unexpected visit.

As the title of Watts' essay suggests, Razumov's act of betraying Haldin becomes a phantom that keeps haunting him. The extermination of Haldin's physical self has then been reimagined as various forms of reincarnation. Razumov originally believes that the value of a person's physical existence is connected to the mind. For instance, while he understands the insignificance of Haldin and himself as "grains of sands", he thinks that Haldin is a "withered member which must be cut off" (*UWE* 2007, 32). In other words, Haldin's revolutionary mind gives rise to a dangerous self. Razumov thus shows an indifferent attitude towards the destruction of Haldin and tries to distance his own superior self from him:

> If I must perish through him, let me at least not perish with him, and associated against my will with his somber folly that understands nothing, either of men or things. Why should I leave a false memory? (*UWE* 2007, 33).

Although he has successfully prevented himself from being accused of committing the crime of treason, he suffers consequently from a conviction beyond his conscience. The act of betrayal is a conservative conviction that fits the milieu of Russian autocracy and cynicism, but not his conscience. This disastrous outcome that haunts him perpetually has been foreshadowed by his earlier thought

> No! If I must suffer let me at least suffer for my convictions, not for a crime my reason – my cool superior reason – rejects (*UWE* 2007, 32).

Prior to his physical disappearance and eventual death, Haldin has prophesized the haunting power of his revolutionary soul:

> Haunt it! Truly, oppressors of thought which quickens the world, the destroyers of soul which aspire to perfection of human dignity, they shall be haunted. As to the destroyers of my mere body, I have forgiven them beforehand (*UWE* 2007, 51).

As the haunting effect of Haldin upon Razumov begins, the latter's idealized vision of staying in the comfort zone remains questionable. Both Razumov's ontological safety and mental tranquility are at risk, the idea that he would "remain a political suspect all his days" comes to his mind (*UWE* 2007, 61).

The State of Subsequent Horror

To account for Razumov's confession in the later part of the plot, his state of horror after the act of betrayal has to be discussed. As a continuation of his everlasting quest of safety, it is crucial to distinguish the pain of rage and abhorrence towards Haldin from the impact of terror:

> The only difference between pain and terror, is that things which cause pain operate on the mind, by the intervention of the body; whereas things that cause terror generally affect the bodily organs by the operation of the mind suggesting danger [...] (Burke 1958, 132).

It is apparent that the act of betraying Haldin transforms the concern over securing physical safety into psychological horror. In other words, it gives rise to more problems regarding the question of future safety. In justifying his act of betrayal, Razumov previously believes that "[an] act of conscience must be done with outward dignity" (*UWE* 2007, 35). He betrays Haldin out of faithfulness towards

himself. The conversation with a student nicknamed Madcap Kostia reveals that Razumov has been misunderstood by some fellow students as being mysteriously connected to Haldin. This association is then perceived by Razumov as hindering his individual intelligence. It makes Razumov feel that "[h]e lost all hope of saving his future, which depended on the free use of his intelligence" (*UWE* 2007, 71).

There occurs to Razumov a short moment of peace when he learns from Councillor Mikulin that Prince K has made an order to guarantee Razumov's involvement in reporting Haldin "has been kept out of the documents and even from the knowledge of the judges themselves" (*UWE* 2007, 79). The confirmation of Haldin's execution and eventual death gives Razumov a feeling that the unwanted encounter is finally over. Indeed, he is suffering from fatigue. The sense of restlessness is stirred up again when Councillor Mikulin told him that Haldin "had a belief in belief a future existence" (*UWE* 2007, 80). This brings Haldin to the recurring motif of haunting. Although Razumov assures his steadfast faith in autocracy by saying that Haldin "is a mere phantom" to him (*UWE* 2007, 81), such statement has ironically affirmed the latter's prophetic vision that "[t]hey can kill my body, but they cannot exile my soul from this world" (*UWE* 2007, 50). Jennifer Margaret Fraser observes that Razumov's act reflects "he exhibits his power to himself by walking over the ghost of Haldin, rather than listen to it" (Fraser 2011, 30). In fact, Razumov's silence and trembling lips after giving the defensive speech in front of Councillor Mikulin confirm Fraser's suggestion that "Razumov returns to his haunting moment" (Fraser 2011, 36). The haunting experience of mental insecurity persists even after Haldin's death. This serves as a driving force that explains Razumov's choice of confession as the plot complicates.

The change of setting in the novel assists our understanding of Razumov's confession. Making Russia the default setting of the novel sharpens the contrast with the later depiction of the Russian community "La Petite Russie" in Geneva at the first glance. Russia is "where it is not always safe" (*UWE* 2007, 11). To highlight how Russia is perceived under Western eyes, the Englishman narrator has also commented in front of Razumov that "Your Russia *is* a cruel country" (*UWE* 2007, 158). It is exactly under this autocratic circumstance that Razumov aims at protecting his own prospect, the dream of being "a celebrated professor" at all costs (*UWE* 2007, 14). Being away from Russia and residing "in the free, independent and democratic city of Geneva" does not wipe out Razumov's concern on safety (*UWE* 2007, 91). In examining Razumov identity in relation to the political aspect of the novel, Sarkar regards him as "a political victim without directly participating in politics" (Sarkar 1996, 129). It is true that despite living in "the heart of democracy", the Russian acquaintances and Razumov's mandatory stay in Geneva due to his secret mission give him both physical and mental burdens (*UWE* 2007, 170). In short, Razumov's secret identity in Geneva puts his life at even greater risk.

The Restoration of Personal Integrity

Watts initiates that Razumov confesses "as a means to restore personal integrity" (Watts 2009, 39). This assumption seemingly conflicts with Razumov's earlier alignment of revolution with disruption. It is crucial to understand that the persistent, haunting image of Haldin has a long-lasting effect upon Razumov. Months after Haldin's execution, Razumov keeps himself physically safe by telling lies to various people, such as the female revolutionist Sophia Antonovna and Mrs. Haldin. He has been haunted by Haldin's legacy and revolutionary spirit, as both have already inflicted upon his sphere of acquaintance in Geneva. He feels insecure for "[e]very word uttered by Haldin lived in Razumov's memory. They were like haunting shapes; they could not be exorcised" (*UWE* 2007, 139). The meeting with the two Haldin women intensifies the haunting effect:

> It was the other who had attained to repose and yet continued to exist in the affection of that mourning old woman, in the thoughts of all these people posing for lovers of humanity. It was impossible to get rid of him (*UWE* 2007, 281).

Although the narrator mentions "lucky that he doesn't believe in another world", he views Mrs. Haldin as a phantom (*UWE* 2007, 281). Thus, there appears a ridiculing effect regarding Haldin's misplaced idolatry of Razumov. Haldin is actually described by Nathalie as "a man certain of immortality" (*UWE* 2007, 131). However, Razumov is haunted by Haldin, a man who once worshipped him and is later betrayed by him, in a secular manner.

Watts suggests that the joint forces of guilt and superstition result in the haunting effect. We shall understand "Razumov's guilty and superstitious imagination" from a dissimilar perspective here (Watts 2009, 42). Though Razumov keeps denying Haldin's revolutionary ideology, the latter's execution has a fatal effect over his physical condition and mental state. When being interrogated by the revolutionist Sophia Antonovna, Razumov holds firm the principle regarding "the need of perfect safety" (*UWE* 2007, 231). To ensure this, he conceals his relationship with Haldin and acts in pretense:

> Razumov did not mean to speak; he could not have interrupted her now, not to save his life. The contraction of his facial muscles had been involuntarily, a mere surface stir, leaving him sullenly attentive as before (*UWE* 2007, 225).

Razumov shows physical exhaustion in concealing his dark past. This also results in the recurring motif of haunting, as seen from "[t]he ghost of that night pursued him. He stood up to it with rage and with weariness" (*UWE* 2007, 225). Referring to Watts' perspective on superstition, the case of Razumov is not quite related to the belief of Haldin's reincarnation, but how he superstitiously prioritizes the belief in guarding his own safety at the expense of mental tranquility.

It is through Miss Haldin that Razumov shows a sense of guilt. She reminds him of "the unpardonable sin of stealing a soul" (*UWE* 2007, 296). It is through loving her that he has been inflicted by her revolutionary spirit, from which he realizes his guilt and the haunting legacy of Haldin. Ironically, Razumov has been romantically attracted by a female version of the man whom he murders and victimizes. This proves that he betrays his own conscience. Alex Houen studies Conrad's essay "Autocracy and War" (1905) and summarizes Conrad's perception that "the crisis faced by Europe as a whole is not related to the spectacle of Russian terrorism, but rather to the seemingly indefatigable spirit of its autocracy" (Houen 2002, 67). Conrad's political viewpoint is also made clear by means of Razumov's confession. In Razumov's letter of confession to Miss Haldin, he stated clearly that it was himself that he had betrayed basely (*UWE* 2007, 298). In order to give himself a sense of false security, he puts his conscience aside and breaks fraternal trust. He has repressed the self in the name of national stability. This verifies Watts' statement that confession is a means to restore Razumov's integrity.

Watts thinks the novel gives a secular emphasis on Razumov's disillusionment and that he uses confession to withdraw from struggle (Watts 2009, 39). It is actually the disillusionment of false security, putting one from a safe state to a threatening condition, which gives rise to the confession for ontological certainty. Razumov initially views Prince K as patriarchal authority and Russia as his cradle (*UWE* 2007, 210). Being sent by Prince K to Geneva for the secret and dangerous mission, he still believes that it is safe in dealing with revolutionaries as "they no longer care about anything in the world" (*UWE* 2007, 262). However, the haunting effect of Haldin leaves him with no peace. He then decides that ultimate safety at both the ontological and mental levels can be achieved by making a confession, not just to Miss Haldin, but also in front of the revolutionists:

> [...] To-day, of all days since I came amongst you, I was made safe, and to-day I made myself free from falsehood, from remorse – independent of every single human being on this earth (*UWE* 2007, 303).

Through gaining self-autonomy, Razumov achieves ultimate safety. He mentions that "[t]he only thing needed to make me safe – a trusted revolutionist for ever" (*UWE* 2007, 296). He then achieves this by turning himself into such a trusted revolutionist. He has become a deaf man as his punishment for having committed a crime. Deafening carries the implication as a symbolic manifestation of internal refusal, since he refuses to listen to Haldin. This ideology echoes with his pursuit of personal integrity, and meanwhile, fulfills his inner desire to be a revolutionist, instead of an obedient spy. His change of attitude makes Haldin's "prophecy" comes true, that "[his] spirit shall go on warring in some Russian body till all falsehood is swept out of the world" (*UWE* 2007, 21).

Conclusion

Through the characterization of Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad attempted to address to questions related the ontological safety and mental tranquility under a restrictive political environment of government surveillance and bureaucratic social context. With reference to C.T. Watts' article "*Under Western Eyes*: The Haunted Haunts", this paper examines the reasons behind Razumov's original idea of viewing Haldin as a robber who robbed him of his hard work. Razumov's purposeful existence as an individual under the State is related to his concerns over future career and personal success (*UWE* 2007, 295).

Razumov soon finds out how reporting Haldin's revolutionary act only gives him a haunted life. His pursuits of reputation and physical safety are turned into threats of mental burdens. After Haldin's execution, Razumov's encounters outside the Russian borders become unavoidably connected to the former's revolutionary ideology and sphere of acquaintance. Razumov is even attracted by Haldin's sister, Nathalie. Paradoxically, it is Razumov's confession and the self-imposed punishment of having a wounded body that keep him safe from suffering further from either physical or psychological tortures. That he performs out of the sense of achieving integrity brings him a peaceful mind. The novel thus expresses the idea on the importance of erasing established ideology, both in terms of nationhood and one's old self.

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