BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES
The Faculty of International Business and Economics
The Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication of ASE
10th International Conference: **Synergies in Communication (SiC)**
Bucharest, Romania, 27-28 October 2022

WHOSE TEXT IS IT ANYWAY? AUTHORITATIVE AND DIALOGIC TENDENCIES IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *UNDER WESTERN EYES*

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Abstract

In this essay, I address the multiplicity of voices in Joseph Conrad's Under Western Eyes, *showing how it is inherent to understanding the cultural gap posited in the novel between "east" and "west". By tracing three parallel quests for the monologic voice in the novel, those of the protagonist, the narrator, and the reader, I show that, while an authentic voice cannot be differentiated and isolated from other voices influencing it, the search for an individual voice generates a high level of involvement in the reader and may lead to a new understanding of the nature of heteroglossia in text and society. This I do while underscoring the links and dichotomous differences between narrator and protagonist, and how they reflect the east-west gap.*

Keywords: Culture-gap; dialogism; east/west; Edward Said; English literature; heteroglossia; individualism; Joseph Conrad; Mikhail Bakhtin; polyphony; post-colonialism; orientalism; reader's response; the quest of identity.

DOI: 10.24818/SIC/2022/04.04

1. Multiplicity of Voices

Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* is a novel of many voices, the most prominent of which is that of the narrator, an English teacher of languages residing in Geneva. Through his voice and focalization, we hear another voice, that of Razumov, a Russian student, whose activities in St. Petersburg and Geneva make up the action of the novel. The interrelation and convergence of these two voices is the structural principle of the book, supplemented and underscored by the inclusion of a significant number of dialogues between different characters, the unfolding of further inner dialogues in the protagonist's mind, and explicit discussions on the nature of language. The different voices in the novel not only interact but overlap, and the task of differentiating between them proves nearly impossible.

In Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, we could say that various voices, from different social strata, ideological backgrounds, and geographical locations sound in one text, combining, overlapping, and competing for space.[2] In *Under Western Eyes,* the narrator tries to translate Razumov's text into a comprehensive treatise on the Russian character, dichotomously linking Razumov's voice with the "east," while the narrator himself comes to represent the "west." These two voices are in conflict within the text and vie

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[2]Cf. Corola Kaplan: "Conrad's characters are…permeated by what Bakhtin calls Dostoevsky's 'polyphony,' 'a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses' (6), often within the same character" (1995, 109).

for the reader's attention. The dichotomization and hierarchical division of east and west suggest an orientalist approach, which is complicated by Russia's unique position as belonging to both sides of the dichotomy: the European "west" and the mysterious "east."

As the novel progresses, three parallel quests transpire. While the narrator is conducting his research on Russian mentality by interpreting and rewriting Razumov's text, the same text reveals Razumov's quest for his individual voice among the multitude. Caught between the original writer of the manuscript and its translator-interpreter, the reader is sent on an exploration of her own when she is made aware of the narrator's unreliability. This unreliability forces the reader to try to differentiate between the two voices, the narrator's and Razumov's. It may be said that all three quests seek the same holy grail: Razumov's "actual voice," which, for Razumov himself proves elusive in his search for identity; for the narrator, it withholds an intangible definition of "Russianess"; and for the reader therein lies a clue towards the deciphering of the novel.

In this essay, I trace the three parallel quests to show that while an authentic voice cannot be differentiated and isolated from other voices influencing it, the search for the "original" text generates a high level of involvement in the reader and can lead to a new understanding of the nature of heteroglossia in text and society. This I do while underscoring the orientalist rendering of the "eastern" voice by the western narrator and shedding light on the way in which the two voices are dichotomously severed but also, at times, inseparable.

2. Tools and Methods

In tracing the literary quests of *Under Western Eyes,* I combine two approaches. The first is the analysis of narrative voices, played out in the textual discrepancies I follow in the text, which consist primarily of the merging and confusion of narrative voices. Mikhail Bakhtin's terms of heteroglossia and polyphony supply me with the required terms. The second approach is the post-colonial one, a prism through which I study the way in which Conrad frames Russia and "Russianess" as concepts that lie outside the spheres of both occident and orient and establishes the country, its inhabitants, and its apparent "mentality," as removed from convenient conceptualization. Edward Said's canonical work on orientalism, and the scholars who have written on orientalism in Conrad's fiction and non-fiction, pave the way for a reading of *Under Western Eyes* from a post-colonial approach. While its orientalist outlook is less pronounced perhaps than that of *Heart of Darkness* or *Lord Jim*, it is still a vital organizational component of the novel. By combining the two approaches of the pursuit of narrative voices and post-colonialist analysis, I show how the idea of the individual voice plays out in modernist and post-colonial discourse.

3. Razumov's Quest for his Inner Voice

Throughout the novel, Razumov tries to find his monologic voice and assert his individuality. His search for identity is mirrored in Russia's political upheaval, which constitutes the novel's timeline: the first decades of the 20th century, between the failed revolution of 1905 and the revolutions of 1917. It is impossible for Razumov to differentiate between his personal predicament and that of the country, and his search for an individual voice involves him further in the multitude of voices that defines Russia.

Since he has no family affiliation (his very name an invention), Razumov finds himself identifying absolutely with Russia, his motherland (or "fatherland," the Russian "otechestvo"). In a conversation with the exiled revolutionist Peter Ivanovitch Razumov exclaims: "Russia *can't* disown me. She cannot!'… 'I am *it*!'" (Conrad, 2003, 138 – emphasis in original). It is significant to point out that although, at this point in the story, Razumov is already acting the spy, this exclamation is sincere, and Razumov even reprimands himself for its sincerity.[3] Because of the social and political upheaval, the identity of Russia is at stake, and both the revolutionaries and the men in power attempt to define the

[3] "That was not the right sort of talk," he tells himself. "All sincerity was an imprudence" (Conrad, 2003, 138).

unifying language of the land. If the country's identity is in question, so is Razumov's, and his actions show his attempts to, at first, withdraw from the conflict and, later, to take the side more pertinent to his identity quest; Razumov's efforts move from passively preserving his precarious identity to actively seeking it.

While Razumov's familial isolation is circumstantial, his social one is self-imposed. He isolates himself from his fellow students so as not to compromise his attempts to make a name for himself (quite literally). If his lack of camaraderie can be explained by his desire to keep out of politics and rise in the intellectual ranks, this agenda does not suffice to explain the extreme degree of his taciturnity. One explanation could be that his withdrawal from the political conflict is also an attempt to preserve his precarious identity. While he hears various voices and opinions, he does not commit to any of them, refraining from defining his identity on one or another side of the conflict. If he is not aligned with any of the two factions, he need not face the threat of annihilation when one is pulled under the current of change, and the other is triumphant. For Razumov sitting on the fence is a mode of survival. Hence, when Haldin intrudes on his neutrality, Razumov is desperate because his very identity is at stake.

After Haldin's visit, Razumov's quest becomes an active one. With the presence of the revolutionary in his quarters, he must decide which side he belongs to. Razumov chooses the side identified with the monologic voice, for that is what he had been seeking all along. The voice of the revolution sounds to him "luridly smoky" (Conrad, 2023, 21), a "babble of voices," while the understanding that Russia needs "a will strong and one… a man—strong and one!" seems to Razumov to arise from "the clear grasp of [his] intellect" (21) and coincide with his most profound wish for clarity and unity. The autocratic voice is more appealing to Razumov because it is explicitly monologic.[4]

Both the languages of autocracy and socialism are ideologically infused languages, and thus both are violent in their silencing of other voices. They are what Bakhtin terms "unitary languages," which strive for the unification of divergent language strata. All unitary languages "give expression to the same centripetal forces in socio-linguistic and ideological life; they serve the same project of centralizing and unifying the European languages" (Bakhtin, 1995, 271). Bakhtin adds, among the goals of unifying language, "the canonization of ideological systems" (271).

While Razumov tries to find and conceal his "inner voice" from influence, he is unaware of the heteroglossia already at work within him. This is most pronounced in the episode when, returning from his furtive quest of engaging Ziemianitch to conduct Haldin to safety, Razumov has an epiphany while walking through the snow. There he holds a conversation with himself, occasionally interrupting himself, and what transpires is that even when alone, a person is multivocal.[5] Contemplating his betrayal of Haldin, he thinks:

> 'Do I want his death? No! I would save him if I could… let me at least not perish with him, and associated against my will with his sombre folly… Why should I leave a false memory?' It passed through his mind that there was no one in the world who cared what sort of memory he left behind him. He exclaimed to himself instantly, 'Perish vainly for a falsehood! What a miserable fate!' (Conrad, 2003, 22).

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[4]Examining Conrad's political views, it becomes clear that he does not concur with his protagonist. As John Peters writes: "I can think of no author prior to Conrad whose political fiction in effect rejects all politics. Conrad's view is I believe tied to what I see as his general suspicion of ideas because for Conrad all ideas are at best contingent and exist as social contracts not as absolute truths, as the narrator remarks in *Nostromo*, 'A man haunted by a fixed idea is insane. He is dangerous even if that idea is an idea of justice; for may he not bring the heaven down pitilessly upon a loved head?' More important, I think in the end that Conrad valued human interaction and affirmed humanity above all else. Therefore, since Conrad saw ideas as contingent and since he saw individuals consistently caught between opposing political forces, he could have no confidence in such ideas and used his political novels as an opportunity to show the consequences of valuing ideas over individuals" (2018, 12).
[5]As Kaplan shows, "[i]n *Under Western eyes,* as in *Crime and Punishment,* not only do characters who embody divergent ideas contend with each other, but each character quarrels with himself or herself. On the simplest level, such 'double voiced discourse' (Bakhtin 190) takes the form of one character echoing another's words in such a way as to call into question their meaning" (1995, 110).

His inner argument shows that while Razumov's thoughts may be multivocal, some "voices" are more authoritative than others. Thus, he continues: "[Haldin's] was a particularly impudent form of lunacy – and when it got loose in the sphere of public life of a country, it was obviously the duty of every good citizen…" (Conrad, 2003, 36). It is here that his train of thought breaks off and is "succeeded by a paroxysm of silent hatred towards Haldin" (36). His first thought sounds like a quote from autocratic propaganda, while the "silent hatred" betrays a more personal feeling of hurt he feels towards one who has, essentially, ruined his life. In Bakhtin's terms, Razumov has internalized the centralized language of the autocracy under which he lives. This does not mean that the centralized language is not part of his "real" thoughts, or that all the "voices" in his head can be so easily differentiated, but the centralized language does, at times direct his discourse.[6]

Thus, returning home after his epiphany, Razumov "walk[s] with lowered head, making room for no one" (Conrad, 2003, 22), as if afraid of disrupting his lucidity by introducing additional multivocality. We learn from the text that Razumov is known in his social circles as a passive listener, but at this point in the narrative, Razumov's body language suggests that he wishes to shut off voices so that he can think clearly. His conception of identity is so fragile that any voice could now break it. The narrator adds, "Razumov was unanswerably victorious in the silence of his breast" (Conrad, 2003, 21). In the silence of solitude, Razumov remains in the right because no other voice can answer him.

Personal continuity protects one's identity from becoming malleable, and Razumov is wary in his encounters since his identity is unshaped, so he feels easily affected by others' voices. While still in Petersburg, Razumov refrains from having substantial interactions, so everyone around him interprets his voice differently. Both revolutionaries and authoritative personae decide he can be trusted, that he "inspired confidence" (Conrad, 2003, 29). Later, in Geneva, Razumov's silence takes on a different meaning. Now he is a spy in service to the Russian autocratic regime and must keep his guard in his interactions, attempting to disclose nothing and discover as much as possible. In this capacity, the sheer number of encounters Razumov has in a short time is staggering. In this "day of many conversations" (Conrad, 2003, 153), Razumov engages in one conversation after another, and in each, he feels that his very soul is being searched and his identity questioned.

As Hugh Epstein writes, "Conrad's great novel of lonely self-enclosure is conducted upon a series of verbal encounters" in which the characters attempt to "guard against expressiveness" (2020, 261). Razumov's attempts to thwart detection only make his opponents (and readers) all the more curious about him; they are more willing to participate in the rhetorical battle at hand. Thus, we can see that every one of them tries to define Razumov. For Peter Ivanovitch, he is "an extraordinary person" (Conrad, 2023, 135) and "a marked personality" (Conrad, 2003, 136); the narcissistic and noble-born Madam de S- sees him as unlike the "common fellows," which make up most of the revolutionary circle (Conrad, 2003,144); the abused Tekla sees in Razumov someone who can be trusted, the image of her "poor Andrei" (155); and Sophia Antonova assures Razumov she has understood his nature from the first day, and that he is "a man of character" (Conrad, 2003, 163). Conversations with these people are agony for Razumov, who seeks to hide his identity and finds himself unwillingly hinting at the truth time and again. Most importantly, the scrutiny of his opponents disarms and unbalances him, and his precarious voice is on the verge of annihilation. Razumov feels that his integrity is diminishing, not only because he must lie and cheat but also because of the compulsion to listen to so many different voices. In the end, Razumov feels he can no longer contain his voice and makes his confession heard so as to save himself spiritually.

Razumov's need for silence takes on an interesting twist in the conclusion when he becomes deaf and can no longer hear other voices. This could be seen as a reversal, for Razumov, who had only listened - both before his time as a spy when he maintained silence in order not to be politically compromised,

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[6]In Louis Althusser's terms, it could be said that Razumov is in the grips of "legal ideology," having internalized its language and assimilated its ideas in such a way that they are a part of his consciousness (Althusser, 2014, 58-59).

and after, when he was strategically gathering information - is now one who cannot listen, and only speaks.[7] But, I argue, Razumov's deafness is a continuation, indeed a resolution, of his attempt to exclude other voices. Throughout the novel, Razumov had listened to other voices while trying to shut them out and regain control of the monologic one he imagined in his own mind. Indeed, he had even attempted physically to ward them off. In becoming deaf, Razumov has finally managed to shut off those intruding voices. Now, "not a sound reache[s] him from anywhere" (Conrad, 2003, 241).

With silence, Razumov finds his voice. As Sophia Antonovna tells the narrator at the novel's end, Razumov now "talks" (Conrad, 2003, 247). We are not there to hear this final voice and can only assume that, while in his mind there are still various voices, influences, and language strands, the quiet is sufficient for him to, proverbially, hear himself speak. Along with a voice, Razumov has found an anchor, a place to which he is affiliated besides the Russian fatherland. Paradoxically, Razumov finds a surrogate family with Tekla and other revolutionaries. Having chosen the side of the "babble of many voices" that he physically cannot hear, he is no longer adrift in the Russian expanse of multivocality. While this is certainly not the future he had striven and hoped for while working for the prize essay at the beginning of the novel, it is one in which he has a voice.

4. The Reader's Quest for Razumov's Voice

The readers, on the other hand, are left in the dark. When Razumov finally begins to "talk," we are not there to hear him, and even if we were, most of the English readership whom the novel addresses could not understand Razumov without a translator. With only the text before us, we must attempt to find Razumov's voice within the enveloping one of the narrator. It is up to the reader to separate the diegetic levels of the inner story and frame story, but this proves impossible as the narrator's voice takes over that of Razumov's; the latter's text is not only translated by the former but also appropriated, changed, and interpreted.

A fitting metaphor for the convergence and overlap of voices and diegetic levels in the novel is the doubly enveloped letter, used in the novel as a means for espionage. When Razumov receives a summons from Councilor Mikulin, "The envelope [is] addressed in the little attorney's handwriting. That envelope contain[s] another, superscribed to Razumov, in Prince K—'s hand, with the request 'Please forward under cover at once' in a corner. The note inside [is] an autograph of Councilor Mikulin" (199). This form of address ensures secrecy: casual readers should not be able to detect the note's content or its author.[8] The envelope serves as a *mise-en-abyme* for the novel, which structurally adheres to the idea of a text, concealed or misrepresented, whose authority is hidden. Thus, the twice-enveloped text provides a sort of map for its diegetic levels: the outermost envelope is the novel entitled *Under Western Eyes* while the second envelope, "written in a different hand," is the narrator's story. Finally, the text hidden inside is the one written by Razumov. This last level is the hardest to trace, for it appears only in the excerpt in Razumov's narration quoted towards the end and surreptitiously throughout the novel. Like the innermost text, Razumov's actual voice is never detected by the casual reader, and like a detective in espionage fiction, the reader finds the riddle of the text irresistible.

The producer of the hidden text in *Under Western Eyes* is unreliable, placing obstacles on the reader's path toward comprehension. First, the narrator "simply 'knows' far too much about Razumov" to be trustworthy (Moore, 1986, 9). For instance, he claims to know details that Razumov could not have

[7] Epstein theory is of interest: he asserts that the moment when Haldin leaves Razumov's rooms, and the protagonist listens to the desired, albeit alarming, silence is the moment when "the complex interaction that runs the length of the novel between Razumov's desire for silence, and the unbound disconnection it promises, and his need to hear precisely the sounds that convey his release from the bonds that he loathes," begins. Not seeing but listening to the forced conversations in which Razumov does not wish to participate, is the mode of *Under Western Eyes*" (260-261).

[8] In his essay on voices and chronotopes in *Under Western Eyes,* Gene Moore writes: "Three texts, each by a different hand, enclosed one inside the next, their innermost import a summons ('under cover') to a secret meeting at a false address" are emblematic of the messages within messages which abound in this novel (1986, 12).

possibly written down, as when the latter "[flings] the pen away from him to a distant corner" (Conrad, 2003, 240) and the narrator continues to document Razumov's thoughts and actions after the point Razumov has ceased recording them. Second, the narrator warns us that he puts little trust in words, in essence telling the reader not to trust what she is reading ("[w]ords," he informs us at the start of the novel, "are the great foes of reality").[9] Finally, the narrator explains that he has "no comprehension of the Russian character" (Conrad, 2003, 1) while at the same time acting the anthropologist in his interpretation of Razumov's behavior. He tells us in numerous instances that the Russian mind, a Russian story, and Russian circumstances cannot be understood through a western perspective while at the same time establishing himself as viewing Russia from such a perspective.[10] Thus, we must assume that in his reading and subsequent rewriting of Razumov's manuscript, the narrator has either misunderstood, misrepresented, or both. It is from this vantage point that we are asked to accept his interpretation of Razumov and its implications, as the narrator sees them, on the character of Russia in general.

The westerner, positioned in the role of the interpreter while at the same time denying the interpretability of the "eastern" culture he is studying, is an orientalist trope. The east, seen from a western orientalist perspective, is impenetrable, illogical, and so immune to analysis. Even though the westerner may see him or herself as "giv[ing] shape and meaning to the great Asiatic [or other] mystery," it is still, inherently, a mystery (Said, 2003, 44). In his 1905 essay "Autocracy and War," Conrad characterizes Russian mentality as uninterpretable by Western logic:

> From the very first ghastly dawn of her existence as a state, [Russia] had to breathe the atmosphere of despotism, she found nothing but the arbitrary will of an obscure Autocrat at the beginning and end of her organization. *Hence arises her impenetrability to whatever is true in Western thought. Western thought when it crosses her frontier falls under the spell of her Autocracy and becomes a noxious parody of itself.* Hence the contradictions, the riddles, of her national life which are looked upon with such curiosity by the rest of the world (44 – my emphasis).

It is in this way that the relatively "near east" of Russia in *Under Western Eyes* is on par with the more conventional "orient," which is to be found in the Africa of *Heart of Darkness* or the fictional "far eastern" Patusan of *Lord Jim*; all three are seen as mysterious spaces in which contradictions and riddles take the place of rationalism. As Nic Panagopoulos shows, in *Lord Jim,* Conrad problematizes the narrator and makes him open to criticism (Panagopoulos, 2013, 58). If we imply this on *Under Western Eyes,* we can see that the narrator's unreliability has a postcolonial characteristic, which defines the eastern mentality as impregnably fastened shut before the logic of western consciousness.

Said says that:

> Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself vis-a-vis the Orient; translated into his text; this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text-all of which add up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient, and finally, representing it or speaking in its behalf (2003, 20).

The narrator in *Under Western Eyes* is thus conditioned by his stance as a "Westerner." By placing himself on the western side of the dichotomy, he produces a text which cannot but be "tainted" by an orientalist perspective.

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[9]Or, as Bakhtin would have it: "[t]he word… directed towards its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile" (1995, 276).

[10]For instance, he explains that an Englishman could not understand Razumov's plight and his subsequent thoughts when on his way to meet Ziemianitch (Conrad, 2003, 15). Elsewhere, he says: "I suppose one must be a Russian to understand Russian simplicity" (70), or: "it is a vain enterprise for sophisticated Europe to try and understand these [Russian] doings" (83).

The narrator's unreliability makes the task of isolating his and Razumov's voices even more urgent for the reader. But differentiating these voices proves impossible, primarily since we cannot know which passages are focalized by Razumov and which by the narrator. The following extract is an example of this difficulty:

> [Razumov] heard the first vague rumour in the way of bomb-throwing at the table of the student's ordinary, where he was accustomed to eat his two o'clock dinner. But this rumour was made up of mere whispers, and this was Russia, where it was not always safe, for a student especially, to appear too much interested in certain kinds of whispers (Conrad, 2003, 5).

One can imagine Razumov explaining where he was "accustomed to eat" or that he had noticed whispering among the other students. But is he the one who describes the dangers of being a student in autocratic Russia, or is that the narrator explaining to himself and his western readership how the Russian character acts under such circumstances? This is significant because if the focalizer is Razumov, then he exhibits a keen political awareness, but if the passage is focalized by the narrator, then the Russian student displays a different trait and one perhaps more suited to the atmosphere: an instinctive avoidance of danger. While studying and translating his source, the narrator changes it; in his attempt to decipher the text, he creates a new code. Thus, the reader is forced to play the detective or spy in the novel. Like Razumov, we have received an envelope written in code with a hidden text concealed inside it. Unlike him, our envelopes cannot be so easily separated. As Yael Levin shows, "The narrator's record is itself something of a spy report" (2007, 220). The reader, I will add, joins the narrator in his work of espionage as she becomes a sort of "textual" detective.

Wolfgang Iser has shown in his seminal study on reader's response that a text can be read as a set of instructions that are placed before the reader (Iser, 1980, 25). The reader is then asked to fill in the gaps in the instructions. In *Under Western Eyes,* the reader's role is enhanced: while the form of the text begs interpretation, the holes produced by the narrator's actions are too large to be filled. The reader cannot disregard the narrator's explicit denials of authority and blatant breaches of reliability, just as he cannot ignore the same narrator's claim that he has merely translated the text of another. Thus, the reader is left in suspense, not only about the outcome of the plot but also about the very structure of the narrative.

Moreover, while the narrator and Razumov generate different meanings for the words they speak or quote, the reader and her cultural background also influence these meanings. The implied reader of *Under Western Eyes* is an English-speaking one, a fact made clear both from the language and the narrator's attempt to explain Russian culture to "western eyes." The implied reader adds another "western" filter to the text. The actual readers may come from different cultures, but they are influenced by the implied texture of the narrative, inducing them to endorse certain interpretations. Then, the reader's cultural background (gender, political affiliation, profession, and nationality) also comes into play and adds a final level of interpretation (Iser, 1980).

The text, therefore, directs the readers not to take it at face value, at the same time that they are asked to understand and interpret it, and so, are constantly under the impression that they are being manipulated. Exasperatingly, the more we analyze, the more we understand the uncertainty in which we are placed — our interpretive moves are thwarted again and again. Like the narrator and Razumov himself, the reader is frustrated in his attempt to find Razumov's voice. But the search for this voice involves the reader in the narrative to such a degree that he is an active contributor to bridging the gap between east and west.

5. The Narrator's Search for the Voice of Russia

The narrator is also searching for Razumov's voice, and he interprets this individual one as the voice of a people. He reads Razumov as a specimen of "Russianess," and in his attempt to explain and bridge the cultural gap, becomes guilty of cultural appropriation. While searching for the "Russian" voice, the narrator's own "western" one becomes entangled in it. He attempts to separate himself culturally from Razumov, defining himself as being on the far side of the dichotomy from the Russian, acting as the

western observer to the "eastern" other. Meanwhile, similarities between the narrator and Razumov are exposed on a more personal level, and the former's attempt at a rational western study of the other becomes emotionally involved.

Nonetheless, the two characters remain on different sides of the cultural divide, and each represents and identifies with the country of his origin. As we have seen, Razumov identifies with the land of his birth. Meanwhile, the narrator, by remaining nameless throughout the novel, forces the reader to refer to him as "the Englishman," "the teacher," "the narrator," or some such appellation that stresses either his nationality or his authoritative stance.

By placing himself on the "western" side of the dichotomy, the narrator forces an orientalist interpretation on a Russian story. Translating Razumov's story into English for the benefit of an English-speaking readership and reformulating the protagonist's thoughts into conceptual constructions, which the western reader will understand, might be an attempt to bridge a gap, but it is also an act of interpretive violence. We have here a conflict that connotes a colonial attitude: the "other," that is, the Russian or "eastern" individual, is being appropriated by the English or "western" hegemonic culture.

At this point, it is pertinent to elaborate somewhat further on the orientalist nature of western discourse concerning Russia. Although the narrator treats it as a convenient and well-known fact, the idea by which Russia is part of the orient "east" has always been debatable. In "Autocracy and War," Conrad places Russia in a liminal position, not east or west, but an empty void, a "nothingness" (Conrad, 1905, 39), which, on the one hand, is stylized as "west" in contrast to the Japanese "east" and on the other hand referred to in a language submerged in mystical connotations as a "ravenous Ghoul," "a blind Djinn" appearing "with its strange mystical arrogance" (Conrad, 1905, 37). Rachel Hollander summaries Conrad's ambivalent stance regarding Russia, saying:

> Conrad does not associate Russia with the "Oriental" colonies, because he refuses to assimilate it to a familiar (even if adversarial or inferior) relationship with the West. Instead, Russia is defined as geographically and ideologically elsewhere; it defies both European and Asian traditions, indeed even humanness itself. Conrad inverts the famous passage in *Heart of Darkness* that attributes the discomfiting effects of the African natives to the Europeans' awareness of their shared humanity, and instead characterizes the Russian nation in "Autocracy and War" as outside all frameworks for understanding (Conrad, 2015, 4).

For Said, on the other hand, Russia is explicitly European, though set somewhat lower on the scale in comparison with the colonial might of France and Britain.[11] But while Said casts Russia with the imperialistic countries, attributing her acts of colonialism, he too concedes that Russia has also earned the appellation "eastern": "[n]o one will have failed to note how 'East' has always signified danger and threat during this period [since the 1950s], even as it has meant the traditional Orient *as well as Russia*" (2003, 27 – my emphasis).

More recent scholars have also debated the question of Russian orientalism. In *Facing the East in the West,* Barbra Korte describes the origin of the term "Eastern Europe" in the age of Enlightenment as a form of negation against which "Western Europe" could claim sophistication and a higher mark of civilization. This was accentuated during the Cold War and has implications to this day.[12] Correspondingly, Elisabeth Cheauré shows that in "[western] discourses, Russia is stylised as the radical other and contrasted with rationality, intellect and world history. Russia is thus effectively constructed as the 'unconscious' of the Western, historical world" (Cheauré, 2010, 34). Larry Wolff, says Korte, "notes how the construction of Eastern Europe in the West has always entailed a special, paradoxical transculturality of simultaneous ex- *and* inclusion" (Korte, 2010, 17). It is pertinent,

[11]See Said in *Orientalism,* on pages 1, 17, 100, 191, 215.
[12]Korte discusses the differentiation between Russia and countries formerly associated with the Soviet Union, a division which arose after the dismantling of the Soviet Union, although, she claims, "Even today, in a "free Europe," the West is often still blind to the many differences of and within the "East"" (2010, 2).

continues Wolff, to look at Eastern Europe as an "intellectual project of *Demi-Orientalization*'" (Korte, 2010, 17 – my emphasis).

Considering Russia's liminal position as "orient," it makes sense that while among the writers of the late nineteenth — early twentieth century, Conrad is the one most often treated in postcolonial terms, this is usually in reference to *Heart of Darkness* or to works which deal with what is more traditionally termed "the orient." Nicole Rizzuto is an exception. By comparing *Under Western Eyes* with Conrad's "Poland Revisited," she concludes that while *Under Western Eyes* is generally listed among Conrad's later "political novels," in opposition to his "imperialist" ones, the drama of colonialism is still at work in it (Rizzuto, 2010, 80-81).[13] The English narrator is by no means innocent of orientalist biases. His utterances on Russians and Russia are condescending and decidedly stereotypical (to cite just a few examples: the Russians have an "illogical attitude" [Conrad, 2003, 1]; Russia is a "land of spectral ideas and disembodied aspirations" [20]; and Russian mentality consists of "lifting every problem from the plane of the understandable by means of some sort of mystic expression" [69-70]).

Nevertheless, the narrator becomes personally involved in Razumov's story, and his own voice is entangled not only in its writing but also in the events while they are played out. Here lies one of the novel's eccentricities. In the second part of the novel, the narrator, who had begun to tell the story from an outside position, is revealed to be an active character. His authoritative stance is well established by the time he discloses that he is part of the story. The narrator also effectively tries to influence and direct events in the narrative. When walking with Natalia in Bastions Park, he imagines her first encounter with Razumov entirely played out:

> In fact, I thought the Bastions a very convenient place… It was here, I thought… that their acquaintance will begin and go on in the exchange of generous indignations and of extreme sentiments, too poignant, perhaps, for a none-Russian mind to conceive. I saw these two… walking under these trees, their young heads together. Yes, an excellent place to stroll and talk in. It even occurred to me… that when tired they would have plenty of accommodation to rest themselves (Conrad, 2003, 114).

Though he is not actually present in the first meeting between the two young people, the narrator's decision to insert his own version of the encounter subverts both his and his readers' interpretation of the events.

The Englishmen's personal involvement hints at a sympathetic link he has with Razumov. The narrator says that Razumov "looked foreign enough to [him]," but nonetheless, "[he] was upon the whole favourably impressed" (116). While they may be cultural opposites, there are also many similarities between the two men. Both are exiles, isolated in a strange country, and have no immediate family. It is also made apparent that the narrator, though posing as "western," has affinities to Russia: he is fluent in the language, associates mainly with Russians, and has even grown up in St. Petersburg. He calls himself "English," but it is unclear at what point he had actually lived in England, as he claims to have been residing in Geneva for many years. Razumov, too, is culturally liminal. He is accused by Haldin of having a "frigid English manner" (9), wishes to dissociate himself from his fellow students' political discussions, and finally finds himself in Geneva as well. This makes the narrator's interpretation of Razumov even more personally involved.

The narrator not only dichotomizes himself and Razumov into categories of "east" and "west" but also ignores the convergence and entanglement of voices that occurs within language and treats all of Russia as one "voice." Language, Bakhtin tells us, is stratified into (almost) endless varieties. One cannot speak, in English, of a single Russian voice, because this voice is itself subdivided and conflicted. Or, as Moore puts it: "In Bakhtin's terms, what the narrator presents is not so much a translation or

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[13]Rizzuto elaborates: "*Under Western Eyes* is not generally considered a novel of imperialism, but rather one of what Eloise Knapp Hay calls the 'political novels,' representing, as Christopher GoGwilt sees it, the shift in Conrad's oeuvre from the map of empire to the map of Europe, and from colonial conquest and adventure to the internal betrayals of the European state" (Rizzuto, 2010, 80).

paraphrase as rather an objectified 'image' of the languages of Razumov and the other characters, or indeed images of images refracted dialogically through layers of translation and hearsay" (1986, 14).

While the narrator "struggle[s] to overcome the heteroglossia of language" (Bakhtin, 1995, 270) and tries to explain the multitude of Russian voices through the single voice of the young Razumov, he is also embedding his own voice in the process. His voice is both personally involved and culturally distant, a fact which dooms his attempt to bridge the cultural gap, as it is only filled with his own voice.

6. Conclusion: Filling the Gap

In *Under Western Eyes*, the narrator and the protagonist are both incapable of isolating a "clear" voice out of the "luridly smoky" multitude (Conrad, 2003, 21). The characters in the novel are never in complete control of either their own voice or of the paradigm from which they expect to see the world. There are no clear borders between the divergent voices, which represent the two poles of east and west, and gaps of understanding are filled in by readers and interpreters with their own voices, taking control and appropriating the original meanings.

At the topmost extra-diegetic level, the author himself is also a complex cultural figure. This is important since the paradigm of "western eyes" posited in the title is at stake on yet another level. Born in Poland, Conrad emigrated to France and then England, spending his time primarily working on merchant ships and finally settling in Kent. He learned English only in his twenties but is considered one of the masters of English prose. Conrad considered himself an English writer, and in his texts, there is a strange concoction of English and Russian literary influences (the latter he denied, especially in stating he never read Dostoevsky and did not even know the Russian language sufficiently well to do so).[14] As Whaples shows, "Conrad's understanding of human nature, politics, economics, and culture was shaped by his biography" (2020/2021, 411).[15] This further subverts the definitions of east and west, which, as we can see, are not clear-cut on any level of the text, from the author, through the narrator and the protagonist, and to the implied readers. *Under Western Eyes* is, in fact, a novel that is seen and told from under Polish-English eyes, narrated by an exiled and isolated Russian-speaking Englishman in Geneva, and featuring a "frigidly English" Russian student.

Further implying the malleability of language and voices, the very words which make up voices and languages are themselves in question in the novel. The narrator explains in the exposition that a teacher of languages such as himself is bound at some point to consider man as no more impressive than a speaking parrot (Conrad, 2003, 1), and this, we presume, is because all words have already been spoken before, and so are, in essence, devoid of meaning. But on reading the novel, we find ourselves closer to Bakhtin, who says not that all verbal action is mere mimicry but, more subtly, that all words are "already charged with [cultural or political] value" (1995, 276) because the utterer associates the words he speaks with different contexts. People, says Bakhtin, do not get their words out of a dictionary, "but rather

[14] Conrad called Dostoyevsky "that grimacing terror haunted creature" (*CL*6, 78) (qt. in Watts, 2006, 74).

[15] See Whaples, (2020/2021, 411-412). Joanna Skolik's essay on what she calls "Conrad's Polish soul" is also of value in considering the influence of Conrad's biography on his work. Also of interest is John Peters's argument, where he propounds that Conrad's early life and subsequent exile influenced his ideas and made him the most outspoken English writer on colonialism. Even if his views are not radical in our eyes, says Peters, he was more critical of colonialism than any other western author of his day (8): "Born in a country that was a colonized territory rather than a colonizing country…and living out his early youth in exile with his family in a remote region of Russia, as well as spending nearly twenty years as a sailor in the colonial world, provided Conrad with a completely different view of colonialism and imperialism than Galsworthy or any of his fellow contemporary English writers could have had. They simply could not match that difference in experience. As a result, Conrad knew how colonialism affected both the colonized and the colonizer, and, along with his direct experience with colonial southeast Asia, he clearly had Poland's position as a colonized nation in the back of his mind whenever he addressed the problems of the colonial world" (2018, p. 8). Finally, Nicole Rizzuto points to: "Ian Watt, Zdzislaw Najder, Edward Said, Keith Carabine, Geoffrey Gait Harpham, Andrzej Busza, and others [who] have argued that the form of Conrad's work was shaped partly by his ambivalent relationship to colonialism" (2010, footnote 2, 99).

[language] exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions" (1995, 294). Neither the reader, the narrator, nor Razumov himself can clearly define what the latter's "real" monologic voice within the clash of centralizing and decentralizing forces is, and it becomes clear that there is no such thing, for every word, spoken or written, has context and influence. Thus, it is true that all utterances are not entirely one's own but influenced by and filtered through other utterances. But it is also true that, as Bakhtin says, "every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear," each utterance is "an active participant in such speech diversity" (1995, 272). More simply put, each influenced voice is also a voice that influences others, and the convergence of voices in each individual has its own individual characteristics.

While none of the quests we have traced here are crowned with success, each generates a process of creation that propels understanding. Razumov does not find out what his "real" voice has been all along, but he does find an anchorage and a place to begin his self-search, which, he has discovered, is also a self-construction. The reader can never be sure when she is reading Razumov's text and when she is reading the narrator's explication or interpretation, but her active involvement with the text makes her voice a part of the heteroglossia involving both east and west. Finally, the narrator does not manage to find or explain the voice of Russia, but it is his text and his failure to find a coherent voice that propels the involvement of the reader. The gap of understanding between east and west is not breached or comprehended by attempts to fill it, but the involvement of both characters and reader in the intricacies of the voices of the two divergent cultures is attained.

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