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## “Calculated outbursts”: exploding the concept of character in Joseph Conrad’s Under Western Eyes

Yann Tholoniati

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Yann Tholoniati. “Calculated outbursts”: exploding the concept of character in Joseph Conrad’s Under Western Eyes . Alain Jumeau; Annie Escuret; Société française d’études victoriennes et édouardiennes. Hommage à Sylvère Monod, Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, pp.343-360, 2007, 978-2-84269-810-2. hal-01700538

**HAL Id: hal-01700538**

**<https://hal.univ-lorraine.fr/hal-01700538>**

Submitted on 5 Feb 2018

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HOMMAGE À  
SYLVÈRE MONOD

ÉDITÉ PAR  
ALAIN JUMEAU ET ANNIE ESCURET

PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES DE LA MÉDITERRANÉE



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“Calculated outbursts”:  
exploding the concept of character  
in Joseph Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes*

Yann THOLONIAT  
(Université Marc Bloch-Strasbourg)

La littérature n’a pas pour objet privilégié la formation des individus, mais les configurations variables de leur rapports mutuels.<sup>1</sup>

Paradox is a convenient concept to tackle the complexity of Joseph Conrad’s universe. Critics have chosen similar terms to describe the same general phenomenon: “oxymoron” (Michel Le Bris<sup>2</sup>), “désastre” (Jean-Jacques Mayoux<sup>3</sup>) or “janiformity” (Cedric Watts<sup>4</sup>), to quote but a few. As far as the characters in *Under Western Eyes* are concerned, “There is little logic to be expected [...], not only in the matter of thought, but also of sentiment” (189), the Teacher of Languages warns

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1. Bertrand de Saint-Sernin, “La chambre de veille de Joseph Conrad” in *Les Temps Modernes* 555 (1992): 35.

2. “Conrad, ou la morale de l’oxymoron”, in Michel Le Bris, “L’énigme du ‘Wilderness’”, in *Le Magazine Littéraire* 287 (1992): 43.

3. Jean-Jacques Mayoux, *Sous de vastes portiques* (Paris: Papyrus/Maurice Nadeau, 1981) 137.

4. “As Janus is the two-headed god, a janiform novel is a two-faced novel; morally it seems to be centrally or importantly paradoxical or self-contradictory” in Cedric Watts, *The Deceptive Text* (London: Barnes and Noble, 1984) 13.

the reader. The paradox lies in the fact that most characters in *Under Western Eyes* are not what they seem to be, so that the traits or clues the reader might gather so as to construe them are always subject to caution, let alone to interpretation. In this novel, Conrad achieves the paradoxical *tour de force* which consists in building up characters whose secret side is really the core of their psychology: these characters evolve in a world which is fundamentally cynical, hard, ruthless, and where double-agents kill for both camps without compunction. The difficulty in apprehending them resides in the fact that "all secret revolutionary action [is] based upon folly, self-deception, and lies" (117). Not being what they seem to be, not looking what they are, they undermine the traditional logic of nineteenth-century characterization one can find for instance in Conrad's master Gustave Flaubert. With Emma Bovary or Frédéric Moreau, Flaubert explores in depth the social milieu, the psychology and specific moments in the life of his main character. In *Under Western Eyes* the phenomenon reaches a new dimension in that the construction of characters goes hand in hand with the systematic undermining of the elements which have been foregrounded to delineate them. They are reduced to mere labels, and are shown as socially disconnected and psychologically alienated beings. Finally, the paradoxical logic of characters in *Under Western Eyes* is particularly dramatized in a series of explosions.

Conrad's most prominent characters cut very complex figures. To convince oneself of Conrad's attention to them, one has but to read his Author's Notes, which are almost always and sometimes entirely dedicated to a presentation of the main characters. In the Author's Note to *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad wrote about the revolutionists of the novel:

These people are unable to see that all they can effect is merely a change of names. The oppressors and the oppressed are all Russians together; and the world is brought once more face to face with the truth of the saying that the tiger cannot change his stripes nor the leopard his spots. (51)

He speaks highly of Miss Haldin and Razumov, but his tone becomes mordant about Peter Ivanovitch, M<sup>me</sup> de S—and Nikita Necator, respectively "the apes of a sinister jungle [...] treated as their grimaces deserve", and "the perfect flower of the terroristic wilderness" (51). What endows his characters with such prominence and complexity comes from the manner Conrad weaves around them a suggestive network of

signs, which envelops and masks them at the same time as it reveals them. Their definition is never sharp or clear-cut, but is always by omission or by excess. Conrad seems to knead his characters, like Razumov whose face seems to be “modelled vigorously in wax” (57). First, he flattens them out in encapsulating their identity in a name, a label or an objective correlative.

### 1 Homo duplex: names and labels

Conrad’s viewpoint is marked by the absence of a *terra firma*, as he himself quite famously stated: “Mon point de vue, aussi bien sur terre que sur mer, est anglais, mais il ne faut pas en conclure que je suis devenu anglais. Cela n’est pas. Le *homo duplex* a, dans mon cas, plus d’un sens. Vous me comprenez. Je ne m’étends pas sur cette question.”<sup>1</sup> The motif of “*homo duplex*” holds obviously true for the two—(or even many)—sided characters of *Under Western Eyes*. As has been remarked, Razumov’s patronymic (“Kirylo Sidorovitch Razumov”) has a particular significance: “Razumov” means “reason” in Russian, St Isidor wrote, among other things, etymologies, and the Russian (Cyrillic) script was invented by St Cyril. The Cyrillic alphabet is often endowed by Conrad with mystery, as in *Heart of Darkness* where it is believed to be “cipher.”<sup>2</sup> Victor Haldin’s letter in Cyrillic alphabet bears a handwriting which is incomprehensible to the Teacher of Languages (157). Therefore his name purports to associate Russianness and opacity. But ironically enough, Razumov is more governed by his passion than by his reason. Although he affirms: “I am reasonable” (123), he can but acknowledge that “there could be no rational answer” (119) to the situation he is in. And when he argues with himself in order to justify his betrayal of Haldin, he experiences “the irrational feeling that something may jump upon us in the dark” (80). These sudden impulses and his opacity nonplus everybody throughout the novel. The only exception could be “Sophia” Antonovna, who is the only character who comes closest to the truth—the explanation could be that, whether ironically or not, “wisdom” must come to terms with “reason” . . . Moreover, onomastic signifiers tend to follow their own logics and even tend to be shifty: some Russian characters have a westernized designation (Peter Ivanovitch,

1. Letter to K. Waliszewski (December 05, 1903), in George-Jean Aubry (ed.), *Lettres françaises de Joseph Conrad* (Paris: Gallimard, 1929) 61.

2. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Norton, 1988) 40.



Eleanor Maximovna de S—, Gregory Mikulin—whose second name is Matvieitch in I, 3 and surprisingly enough Gregorievitch in IV, 1), whereas others keep their full Russian name (Victor Victorovitch Haldin, Sophia Antonovna). Finally, Miss Haldin is referred to either as Natalia or as Nathalie.

Every character, like Razumov, has a label. The label consists in a kind of nickname that sticks to a character to such an extent that even if the character has a proper name which is known, the label tends to cover it. Thus, a character is most of the time designated by a metonymy, the function standing for the person. Conrad uses such labels in order to evoke or allude to a character throughout the text and to endow him or her with all the force of suggestiveness. First and foremost, the Teacher of Languages is *only* a label, a periphrasis which confines his identity to that of a profession involving a certain *auctoritas*. When the character of Tekla appears (166), she is merely referred to as the “lady companion” when she is with Razumov, and the “*dame de compagnie*” when she is with Nathalie Haldin, before she names herself Tekla in the third part, seventy pages later. And even then, the reader is not sure that it is her real name: “My poor Andrei called me so. [...] That is the lot of all us Russians, nameless Russians” (236). Characters with a proper identity (first name, surname) also receive a label in the course of the narrative. For instance, Peter Ivanovitch is referred to as the “heroic fugitive”. His oxymoronic and ironical label originates in the grudge borne to him by the Teacher of Languages and stresses the duplicity of the man. Sophia Antonovna is the “woman revolutionist”, and one may wonder whether Conrad wanted to see an oxymoron as ironical as the previous one in this label, as if being a woman and a revolutionist at the same time was somewhat or somehow incompatible. Nathalie Haldin is the “frank” or the “generous creature” until she is “matured by her open and secret experiences” (342). Conversely, Nikita, nicknamed Necator “with a sinister aptness of alliteration” (260), has a name which expresses his proclivity to murder.

From the beginning, Victor Haldin is alluded to as a kind of ghost: he leaves Razumov’s home “as noiseless as a vision” (102). Even before Razumov has decided to denounce him, he has hallucinations about Nathalie Haldin’s brother (81). In a few cryptic words, Razumov unwittingly foresees that Haldin’s presence is going to keep hovering about him: “I too, Victor Victorovitch, believe in this world of ours [...]. But you seem determined to haunt it” (98). Victor Haldin is very soon transformed into an actual ghost which seems indeed destined to haunt

Razumov's life as a *memento*: "and all this was Haldin, always Haldin—nothing but Haldin—everywhere Haldin: a moral spectre infinitely more effective than any visible apparition of the dead" (286).

As Razumov is (literally and figuratively) given particular stress, his study shows a tension between imagination and reality, alienation and solitude—a tension characteristic of many Conradian heroes. This tension is dramatized in the reader's mind by an elaborated blur about Razumov's personality. It might be that he reveals himself in the course of the action. As Ramon Fernandez noticed: "L'art de Conrad [...] ne calque pas la réalité devant l'homme, mais l'homme devant la réalité." He went on:

[Conrad] évoque des expériences subjectivement intégrales parce que l'impression équivaut à la totalité de la perception, et parce que l'homme la subit tout entier et de toutes ses forces. Sa grande originalité est d'avoir appliqué cet impressionnisme à la connaissance des êtres humains.<sup>1</sup>

But I think that it is also, as I have argued elsewhere about *Lord Jim* (Tholoniati, 2003), that the "mythological" or literary emergence of the hero originates in the various layers of visions imposed on him. The process is easily discernible in *Under Western Eyes* too: in this novel, the character of Razumov grows out of a palimpsest of viewpoints, and the end-product is similar to what is called an anaglyph, that is to say an image made up of the superimposition of different layers, which are offset so as to produce a depth effect. The Teacher of Languages's judgements about Razumov, Victor Haldin's conception of him, Razumov's journal (filtered through and edited by the Teacher of Languages), Prince K. and General T.'s remarks, and those of Nathalie Haldin, Nikita Necator and Sophia Antonovna about Razumov offer a kind of stereoscopic vision of him. If Razumov seems to be sculpted by a series of flashes, it is because, Fernandez feels: "entrevoir est la meilleure façon de voir, parce que c'est la meilleure façon de conserver l'humain comme embaumé de notre impression tout en respectant la vivante impénétrabilité."<sup>2</sup> It is true that in the Conradian world, the characters are more defined by the surrounding world than from within. Razumov abides by the rule: "Le style de Conrad est ici admirable de sous-entendus et de réticences, de prolongements qui se brisent puis repren-

1. Ramon Fernandez, *Messages* (Paris: Grasset, 1981) 98.

2. Fernandez 98.

nent.”<sup>1</sup> Razumov is but a label (“Distinction would convert the label Razumov into an honoured name”, 63), and more specifically the label “of a solitary individuality” (61), because his father, Prince K—, refused to recognize Razumov as his son. Because Razumov commits an unforgivable mistake in betraying Haldin, the chance to possess an honoured name dwindles as the story proceeds. He is rejected by everybody: “the unrelated organism bearing that label, walking, breathing, wearing these clothes, was of no importance to any one” (113). No wonder then that he sticks to his adoptive mother Russia from whom he expects everything. This is what he asserts several times, especially when Peter Ivanovitch calls him “My dear Kirylo Sidorovitch”:

The very patronymic you are so civil as to use when addressing me I have no legal right to—but what of that? I don’t wish to claim it. I have no father. So much the better. But I will tell you what: my mother’s grandfather was a peasant—a serf. See how much I am one of you. I don’t want any one to claim me. But Russia can’t disown me. She cannot! [...] I am it! (215)

His tragedy comes from his incapacity to take sides “in a violent family quarrel” (61), between Autocracy and Revolution. He refused to side with Victor Haldin: “You are a son, a brother, a nephew, a cousin—I don’t know what—to no end of people. I am just a man. [...] I have no domestic tradition. My tradition is historical. [...] all this land is mine—or I have nothing” (100). When he could have found a “shelter,”<sup>2</sup> or a family in “Natalia Victorovna,” it is “too late” (320). But at the same time as the revolutionist circles of Geneva repeat: “You are one of us—*un des nôtres*” (216), the “familiar” shade of Victor Haldin comes back to haunt him. All the more so as Razumov is on the threshold of Haldin’s family. As he has been praised in passionate terms by Victor, Nathalie Haldin feels attracted to him from the beginning. As the Teacher of Languages says to Razumov: “Your name is a sort of legacy” (201), and again his name gets beyond his control.

The gallery of partial portraits goes on with characters which are evoked by an object, a metonymy of his or her identity. Peter Ivanovitch is a bulk with dark glasses. Whenever he appears, his dark glasses are

1. Albert Saugère, “Quelques recherches dans la conscience des héros de Conrad,” in *Hommage à Joseph Conrad, Nouvelle Revue Française* 135 (December 1924): 98.

2. “So Mr Razumov [...] went to meet Councillor Mikulin with the eagerness of a pursued person welcoming any sort of shelter” (290).

mentioned. Behind them, "he could be as impudent as he chose" (154) and remains "impenetrable" (231, 308). His glasses are his objective correlative, a symbol of his unfathomable duplicity: he proclaims he is a revolutionist but he sponges on the aristocrat M<sup>me</sup> de S—. When Miss Haldin stresses the paradox, he cries: "Prejudice! [...] There is always something to weigh down the spiritual side in all of us" (154). He speaks highly of "the spiritual superiority of woman", but his tirades are undermined by Tekla who reveals that, "behind the scenes" (164), Ivanovitch is an "awful despot" (233).

Another device is to focus on a part of the body which thereby acquires an existence of its own. The essence of the character is concentrated on special spots and the body is deprived of a proper image. It can be Prince K—'s grey whiskers (84), or hands (94), but, as is to be expected from a novel bearing a title mentioning "eyes", the parts of the body singled out are the eyes. When the eyes are focused upon, Conrad links a character with a particular facial expression: Tekla blinks, Councillor Mikulin glances down his beard, Sophia Antonovna's gaze penetrates, Nathalie Haldin's eyes are frank.

Nicknames and labels that evoke or obliquely reveal the essence of the characters go along with a zoomorphic characterization. The device serves to enhance a trait of a character. Considering the character of Tekla, she squats down (166) at her first meeting with Nathalie Haldin, and she tells her how she used to "crawl back and lie on the floor by the side" of her lithographer (172). Later on, as a denizen of the Chateau Borel, she is again explicitly compared to an animal: "At that signal, the lady companion ensconced in her corner, with round eyes, like a watchful animal, would dart out to the table and pour him out another tumblerful" (223). In the same scene, Razumov notices that "the forlorn creature [...] had scuttled out of the room" (226). Sophia Antonovna is compared to an insect. She comes closer and closer to the truth, and tries to feel Razumov's soul as if she had the "antennae of an insect" (249). Reduced to *membra disjecta*, the characters undergo another process of destruction in so far as they are described as socially disconnected and psychologically alienated.

## 2 Loneliness, anxiety and alienation

Conrad was aware of psychoanalysis already at the time it had just been founded, but he quite disliked it. Henri Lenormand, who met him in

Corsica in 1921, discussed the matter with him and diagnosed in Lord Jim a delirium of responsibility, whereas Conrad kept talking about “sense of honour”. Conrad brought the subject to a firm conclusion: “Je ne veux pas *aller au fond*, me dit-il. Je veux considérer la réalité comme une chose rude et rugueuse sur laquelle je promène mes doigts. Rien de plus.”<sup>1</sup> Henri Lenormand lent him an English translation of Freud’s *The Interpretations of Dreams* and *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*. He says:

Conrad, qui parlait de lui [Freud] avec une ironie méprisante, emporta les volumes dans sa chambre. Il me les rendit la veille de son départ sans les avoir ouverts. Ainsi m’était révélée la pudeur de l’artiste devant son œuvre et la sagesse du créateur qui se résout finalement à ne pas forcer le secret de ses créatures.<sup>2</sup>

Conrad would not have wanted to violate the secret of his characters he had taken so much care to endow with mystery. Set in intricate situations, where every step, every jump forwards (let us remember Jim) can become two steps backwards, his characters desperately struggle for and against disembodied beings. What characterizes Razumov is his fundamental inability to distinguish between imagination and reality, because of a “séparation [...] de la conscience subjective et du réel.”<sup>3</sup> He is also deprived of his self by Haldin who takes him for someone he is not; as a consequence, he has to live the life of a revolutionist he has precisely tried to avoid in denouncing Haldin. He then lives in irreparable solitude. From the outset, *Under Western Eyes* presents the great expectations of the hero: Razumov has “an access of elation” when he fancies himself receiving the silver medal offered by the Ministry of Education (61). His imagination always precedes him by a step, and in a movement of retroaction, warps his decisions: after the failure of Ziemianitch in Victor Haldin’s plot, Razumov

saw himself shut up in a fortress, worried, badgered, perhaps ill-used. He saw himself deported by an administrative order, his life broken, ruined, and robbed of all hope. He saw himself—at best—leading a miserable existence under police supervision, in some small, far-away pro-

1. H.-R. Lenormand, “Note sur un séjour de Conrad en Corse,” in *Hommage à Joseph Conrad, Nouvelle Revue Française* 135 (December 1924): 27.

2. Lenormand 28.

3. Jean-Jacques Mayoux, *Sous de vastes portiques* (Paris: Papyrus/Maurice Nadeau, 1981) 140.

vincial town, without friends to assist his necessities or even take any steps to alleviate his lot. (68)

On his way home, he has “a morbidly vivid vision of Haldin on his bed” (77) and Victor will keep haunting his life. It is a “nightmare of a walk”, as he says to Haldin (96). He does not notice the “delirious” (83) drift of his argumentative speech, but he only sees that “between the drunkenness of the peasant incapable of action and the dream-intoxication of the idealist incapable of perceiving the reason of things [...] he was done for” (77). He is lost in hypotheses: “the police would very soon find out all about him, they would set about discovering a conspiracy” (68). Later on, in a flash, he imagines that he stabs Peter Ivanovitch to death “with a horrible triumphant satisfaction” and tries to find an alibi, before realizing that Ivanovitch is still before him as towering as before (215-6).

Razumov's major flaw is his passivity. He is as passive as his remark: “I am being crushed” (78). In the sordid game between Autocracy and Revolution, he is a pawn on a chessboard. Although he is innocent, he becomes a suspect. As a suspect, he is ordered to go to the other side, where he becomes guilty. As he himself says, but almost with pride, he is “but a reed” (122), bending under the strong wind. In his first portrait, the Teacher of Languages notes that “in discussion he was easily swayed by arguments and authority. [...] His good looks would have been unquestionable if it had not been for a peculiar lack of fineness in the features,” a defect rising “either from intellectual insufficiency or from an imperfect trust in one's own opinion” (57). He remains petrified before Haldin: “Razumov wondered why he had not cut short that talk and told this man to go away long before. Was it weakness or what?” (68). Is it because “resignation” is “what's divine in the Russian soul” (70)? He tries several times to cheer himself up: “I must be courageous” (73), “I'm not a coward” (80), but when he comes back from Ziemianitch, he has an epiphany and he feels strongly attached to “the passive land” (78). And all his doubts crystallize: “Haldin means disruption” (79). As a consequence, he sides with “patriotism” (80) . . . only to become, quite ironically, an exile.

The process of disintegration<sup>1</sup> of Razumov's personality begins when he is taken for someone he is not—especially as “an altogether trustworthy man” (57). With the noticeable exception of Nikita Necator, every

1. Jean-Jacques Mayoux, *Vivants Piliers* (Paris: Julliard, 1960) 130.

single character, starting with Haldin, considers him as trustworthy. The situation is at the same time painful and comic, even for him, for instance when Tekla says for the umpteenth time:

Directly I saw you for the first time I was comforted. [...] You looked as if one could trust you. Oh!

She shrank before Razumov's savage snarl of, 'I have heard something like that before.' (234)

Belonging to a line of self-divided Conradian heroes (among whom the most notorious ones are Kurtz, Jim and Nostromo), Razumov becomes schizophrenic: "He felt, bizarre as it may seem, as though another self, an independent sharer of his mind, had been able to view his whole person very distinctly indeed" (232). The Teacher of Languages remarks that it was "as though he were turning the knife in the wound and watching the effect" (325), in an echo of Baudelaire's "*Heautontimoroumenos*" in *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Razumov knows he is on the verge of madness (216, 263, 325). The original blame is to be laid on Victor Haldin: "He, this man who had robbed me of my hard-working, purposeful existence" (331). Razumov is deprived of everything; he has no family ties: "I was afraid of your mother. I never knew mine. I've never known any kind of love" (332). As he states soon after: "I am independent—and therefore perdition is my lot" (333). He has no name, no future: he is lost in the immensity of eternal Russia like a man who drowns himself into the sea, and according to him, his unique opportunity stems from the hope that Russia will, and even must, provide for him: "Russia *can't* disown me. She cannot! [...] I am *it!*" (215). He stresses that: "we have nothing of our own" (246). Nathalie Haldin, like Sophia Antonovna, comes very close to the right diagnosis about him: "His time may not be his own—nor yet his thoughts, perhaps.' [...] 'Or his very life'" (190). Razumov cannot forget and he is "the puppet of his past" (335). A possible solution to his state might be to find some sort of shelter, but: "What did it mean? Was he forgotten? Possibly. Then why not remain forgotten—creep in somewhere? Hide. But where? How? With whom? In what hole? And was it to be forever, or what?" (287).

The feeling of alienation is pervasive in the novel: Tekla is almost an anonymous character; Councillor Mikulin, "the right arm of Autocracy" is crushed. One can try to be more specific about this contagious feeling of alienation by giving it a proper name: anxiety, whose symptoms Conrad manifested throughout his life. Thus, in *Under Western Eyes*, Con-

rad says in the Author's Note: "My greatest anxiety was in being able to strike and sustain the note of scrupulous impartiality" (49). In his article "Anxiety in *Under Western Eyes*" (Berthoud, 1993), Jacques Berthoud takes up Sigmund Freud's definition of anxiety as a "particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it." Razumov is anxious because he has, first, a difficulty to sleep (195, 202, 203), and sometimes to eat correctly (318). He goes through phases of utmost weariness (124, 240, 265). Razumov's anxiety is noticeable in his speeches prone to non sequiturs (with Haldin, 99-100; with Sophia Antonovna, 248). His mental state also wavers between phases of sudden exhilaration (61) and overwhelming anxiety (204, 213, 252). His anxiety comes from the fact that he is under a variety of simultaneous pressures, outward and inward at the same time. But as a matter of fact, everybody is anxious in the novel, and anxiety is contagious: "my companion [Nathalie Haldin]'s natural anxiety had communicated itself sympathetically to me" (313), the Teacher of Languages says.

This pathological state is enhanced for the characters by the impossibility of breaking the circle of their selves. In Conrad's world, characters live as they dream, alone. Both Councillor Mikulin and the Teacher of Languages are bachelors, and several characters follow a trajectory that leads them to live a separate life, as is the case of Nathalie Haldin and Sophia Antonovna. But Razumov's loneliness is the greatest of them all, because he has no friends at all, no reliable connections at all. Besides, when Nathalie Haldin shows herself willing to better his state of solitude (210, 320), the situation is too foreign to Razumov (332). In fact it will be Tekla, as has been announced in a conversation ("if you were to get ill [...] or meet some bitter trouble, [...] I will come to you", 235), who will unite her solitude to that of Razumov as if he were a second Andrei (171-2). Without knowing it, Razumov actually longs for loneliness, the only state of feeling where he can restore the unity of his divided self, torn apart between Autocracy and Revolution. He rejoices in being alone on the island with the statue of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "exiled" like him (280). He wishes he could "go away and bury [himself] in obscure misery" (333). And his eventual deafness cuts him off even more from the outer world with which he had already broken adrift.

This trait of character is the fulcrum by which one can upset his mind: "The obscure, unrelated young student Razumov, in the moment of great moral loneliness, was allowed to feel that he was an object of interest to a small group of people of high position [Councillor Mikulin,



Prince K—, General T—]” (292). Razumov is shown regressing, relapsing into the primitive unconscious state where unity can be restored amid the maternal images of a closed world (the Rousseau island). Mental states of unconsciousness invade him little by little (279, 283), even when he ratiocinates (73, 112, 123, 330). Many of his “secret dialogues with himself” (207) have hidden undercurrents where a decision is taken “even without thinking” (212). He looks like a somnambulist (233, 299). Disturbed states of consciousness are but symptoms of his difficulty to deal with a faulty conscience. Like many of Conrad’s characters, Razumov’s conscience is assailed and easily turned upside-down in an endless play of reversion or reflection.

### 3 Double game, double-bind, double-cross

Conrad’s characters keep presenting us one face and the other in turn, and one cannot make head or tail of them. This is part of the process of reticence of Conrad: suspense, labelling, antagonistic symbols and delayed decoding (Watts, 1984) form an ambivalent world where everything is relative, where everything is seen and has to be seen from a relative point of view. Ramon Fernandez noted:

*Quant au commentaire psychologique, il nous est présenté comme simplement probable. C’est dire qu’il n’intervient aucunement dans la détermination du personnage [...], il demeure tangent à la réalité, d’où vient que l’opacité de l’individu, de la scène, n’est jamais complètement dissipée.<sup>1</sup>*

Thus no judgement can resist its conflicting undecipherability, one opinion undermining the other. Indeed, Razumov evolves through trials and errors and his personality is always elusive. He is all the more easily swayed because he is taken unawares: “I shall never be found prepared” (250). When Razumov decides to confess himself to Nathalie Haldin then to the terrorists, it is of course significant that it is Nikita Necator who gives him the symbolic deathblow. Nikita Necator, “the perfect flower of the terrorist wilderness” (53) is one of “the poisonous plants which flourish in the world of conspirators, like evil mushrooms in a dark cellar” (213). Razumov, who is endowed with the insight of tragic heroes, is doubtful: “how could that creature, so grotesque as

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1. Fernandez 101 (his italics).

to set town dogs barking at its mere sight, go about on those deadly errands and ship through the meshes of the police?" (261), whereas Sophie Antonovna asserts: "there's no malice in him" (264). Nikita Nector is the inverted double of Razumov, who has an "inspiration" (348) about his actual nature: "A squeaky voice screamed, 'confession or no confession, you are a police spy!' [...] 'And what are you?' [Razumov] said" (338).

Not only do the hero and his evil *Doppelgänger* have to undergo a reversal, but so do minor characters. In Conrad's novel a whole process of undermining the characters is at work: the higher a protagonist goes, the deeper he will fall; the one who pretends to be the most trustworthy can turn out to be a fraud of the worst kind. About Peter Ivanovitch, Sophie Antonovna sticks to her errors of evaluation with the concluding words of the novel: "Peter Ivanovitch is an inspired man." As a matter of fact, Peter Ivanovitch is one of Conrad's most ambiguous figures. The "great feminist" claims "the spiritual superiority of woman." Does he believe in what he preaches—or does he delude himself? He is the one who utters a sentence with far-reaching logical and almost nihilistic consequences: "The man who says he has no illusions has at least that one" (214) . . . He is to be paralleled with Councillor Mikulin, since they are the leading representatives of the two parties, Autocracy and Revolution. S. K. Land notes that both have "a highly suspect private morality."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Tekla more than debunks the myth of the great feminist by disclosing the cruel treatment she suffered from him (166-7, 233-4). Moreover, the respect he pays to Madame de S—probably hides a more intimate connection, as is shown by his repeated slips of the tongue: "I needed no urging, but Eleanor—Madame de S—herself has in a way sent me" (152), "I myself was inspired that evening by the firm and exquisite genius of Eleanor—Madame de S—, you know" (154). As for Mikulin, he is "a bachelor with a love of comfort, living alone in an apartment of five rooms luxuriously furnished; and [...] known by his intimates to be an enlightened patron of the art of female dancing" (290). Their trajectories are quite the opposite: while Peter Ivanovitch grows from pariah into revolutionary leader, Mikulin falls from the ranks of the governing class to the social status of a "civil corpse" (291). Half-way through their ascending, or descending, path and at the end of the

1. Stephen K. Land, *Conrad and the Paradox of Plot* (London: MacMillan Press, 1984) 165.

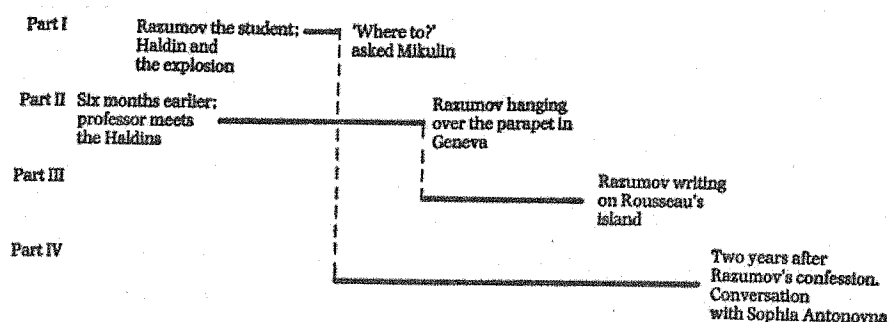
novel, they chance upon each other in a railway carriage and ironically indeed, converse amicably during “half the night” (348).

One might suggest that only female characters escape the pervasive feeling of alienation. It appears that they are either too good or too naïve, or both, in the case of Nathalie Haldin. There is something particularly straightforward and genuine about her: she is a “trustful girl” (133, 183), with a “tranquil frankness” (183, 193, 195, 202); she is self-forgetful (158, 346), generous (202, 203, 332). “I—I—don’t know the world, nor yet the people in it” (184) seems to echo Miranda in *The Tempest*: “O brave new world,/That has such people in it” (V, i, 183-84). Tekla’s past and present sufferance allows her to perceive a clear path to follow. Sophia Antonovna is direct in her speech: “Stripped of rhetoric, mysticism and theories, she was the true spirit of destructive resolution” (257). But despite her Mephistophelian mien and her inquisitive glances, there is something “curiously evilless [...], un-devilish” (307) about her. She is selfless, and defines the men in the novel accurately: “you [...] are fastidious, full of self-love and afraid of trifles” (242). But is Sophia Antonovna who “[keeps] so close to the truth, [departs] from it so far” (273), endowed with a sixth sense or is she extraordinarily naïve? Razumov’s betrayal is a trifle for her who will go on visiting him. She does not care that Madame de S—is an aristocrat: “As to the lady, you must understand that she has her positive uses. See *that* Razumov” (247). Had not her knowledge been biased by Madcap Kostia’s letter, her instinct might have found Razumov out. Her guesses often hit the bull’s eye: “What’s the matter with you is that you don’t like us” (242), “perhaps, you are only playing a part” (248), “You suffer, Razumov” (245, 254). The counterpart of her insight in Razumov is her ingenuity towards Nikita Necator (“There’s no malice in him,” 264) and Peter Ivanovitch, whom she holds for an “inspired man” (247, 347).

#### 4 “They shall be destroyed” (92) — Explosions

*Under Western Eyes* has an exploded structure, marked by a division of time and space (the Occident *vs.* La Petite Russie). The narrative line is also disrupted, as is shown on the diagram produced by Boris Ford<sup>1</sup> in his introduction to the novel:

1. Boris Ford, “Introduction and Notes,” in Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* (London: Penguin, 1989) 25.



The multi-layered “game of make-believe” (257) overlaps a “frightfully disconnected piece of writing” (180). The distortion of the chronological frame has to be put in relation to the tragic strain of events, and the fragmentation of the episodes acts like a disposition of reflectors pouring light on one another. Indeed, the embedded narratives dramatize the antagonistic forces at stake in the novel. But even at a more intimate level the novel is punctured throughout. Most dialogues lapse into aposiopesis and are fractured by ellipses: “Despotic bureaucracy . . . abuses . . . corruption . . . and so on” (80). The stress of the struggle of values is dramatized at the core of the characters, especially Razumov of course, who in the course of the same paragraph,<sup>1</sup> or even in the course of the same sentence,<sup>2</sup> is seen through jarring perspectives. We can go

1. For instance, p. 236: “He understood that the bitterness accumulated in the heart of that helpless creature had got into her veins, and, like some subtle poison, had decomposed her fidelity to that hateful pair. It was a great piece of luck for him, he reflected; because women are seldom venal after the manner of men, who can be bought for material considerations. She would be a good ally, though it was not likely that she was allowed to hear as much as the tables and chairs of the Château Borel. That could not be expected. But still. . . . And, at any rate, she could be made to talk.” The narrator softly blends with Razumov’s perspective and the paragraph ends in free indirect style, before resuming an assumed omniscient stance. Here Razumov is reconstructed by the Teacher of Languages from within at the same time as he is undermined by Conrad, and read and re-read by the readers (among whom are Peter Ivanovitch: “All these days you have been trying to read me, Peter Ivanovitch”, 230).

2. Razumov as a character is consistently torn apart between two perspectives: as a person under the Teacher of Languages’ eyes and as a construct from the same (intradiegetic and homodiegetic) narrator, who speaks sometimes both as the witness of a scene and as the editor of Razumov’s journal, as in the last interview between

as far as to say that Conrad does not so much explore his characters as explode them. Indeed, the narrative is interspersed by explosions, most of them affecting Razumov. There is of course the description of the bomb-attack against Mr de P—, which is staged in two times: the first stage gathers “an excited crowd”, whereas the second bombing perpetrated by Haldin seems to blow the Russian crowd to smithereens: “The first explosion had brought together a crowd as if by enchantment, the second made as swiftly a solitude in the street for hundreds of yards in each direction” (60). This “Big Bang” is gradually internalized by Razumov, although he desperately endeavours to control his emotions, but to no avail: “Razumov discovered that he could not suppress the trembling of his lips” (255). He has recurring fits of convulsions (103, 109, 200, 280, 320, 324) and nauseas (103, 221, 228, 271). The first major crisis occurs when he is confronted with Ziemianitch’s drunken torpor; he beats him up in despair: “Razumov belaboured Ziemianitch with an insatiable fury, in great volleys of sounding thwacks” (76). On his way back home, as a muffled echo to this fit of violence, there is “the crash of two colliding sledges close to the curb” (81), which may suggest the colliding lines of life of Razumov and Haldin or, beyond Haldin, fate. When Razumov last faces Haldin, the discrepancy between the remorse resulting from his betrayal of Haldin and the mask he has to wear crystallizes in a concentration of stress which is almost palpable: “Razumov seemed beside himself; but his mind was lucid. It was really a calculated outburst” (91), “he was beset by an insane temptation to grip that exposed throat and squeeze the breath out of that body” (97), “a paroxysm of silent hatred towards Haldin” (98), “He avoided with difficulty a burst of Mephistophelian laughter” (99). His supersensitive nerves are on the rack: “This absurdity made him start in the chair convulsively. He literally had to shake his head violently to get rid of it” (103), “The faint deep boom of the distant clock seemed to explode in his head — he heard it so clearly. . . . One!” (103). Similarly, the interview with Councillor Mikulin is so dense that Razumov’s mind explodes with such phrases as “A suspect! A suspect!” (118), “Reserve! Reserve!” (123).

Throughout the many tense dialogues that take place in Geneva, the interlocutors are so much under pressure that they always seem on the verge of explosion: they speak “explosively” (127, 219, 270). The workings of the plot turn the character of Razumov, who has “a smouldering

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Razumov and Nathalie Haldin: “There was a breathlessness in his utterance which contrasted with the monstrous hint of mockery in his intention” (320).

fire of scorn in [him]" (227), into a time bomb, and the final climax of the novel also occurs in two stages: after Razumov's two confessions, Nikita Necator cruelly performs a "Big Crush" in bursting his eardrums: "[Razumov] heard a faint, dull detonating sound, as if some one had fired a pistol on the other side of the wall. A raging fury awoke in him at this outrage" (339). The symmetry with the initial bomb-attack is noticeable: "In an instant there was a terrible shock, a detonation muffled in the multitude of snowflakes" (59). Finally, Razumov completes his destruction in "smashing himself" (340) under a tramcar.

Thus Conrad's characters in *Under Western Eyes* are built at the same time as they are undermined. Razumov's double agency cuts him from the society of his fellow beings, and his "real" self is never pierced through—even when his body is—probably because "a soul when it is seen is just that. A vain thing" (228). Conrad respects and protects a halo of mystery around his characters: "Comme les êtres, au bout du compte, demeurent inscrutables, le mieux qu'on puisse faire, pour leur rendre justice, est de les décrire, non de les juger. [...] ce grand silence autour des personnages de Conrad n'est rien de moins que leur complément de vérité."<sup>1</sup> But it is also part and parcel of Conrad's abhorrence of explicitness: "Explicitness [...] is fatal to the glamour of all artistic work, robbing it of all its suggestiveness, destroying all illusion."<sup>2</sup> This conviction is asserted twice in *Under Western Eyes*, once when Razumov fully despises the neatness of the townscape of Geneva: "He thought it odious—oppressively odious—in its unsuggestive finish: the very perfection of mediocrity attained at last" (211), and when the Teacher of Languages explains that "there is always something ungracious (even disgraceful) in the exhibition of naked truth" (281). Coming back to the Author's Note in our conclusion, let us remember that what Conrad deplors about the revolutionists is that "all they can effect is merely a change of names" (51). Between the *auctoritas* of the author taken as autocracy, and the revolutionary quality of his narrative, the reader is reminded that "A man's most open actions have a secret side to them. That is interesting and so unfathomable!" (99).

1. Fernandez 99.

2. Letter to Richard Curle (April 24, 1922), in Richard Curle, *Conrad to a Friend* (London: Doubleday & Company, 1928) 112.

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