Joseph Conrad

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Lothe, Jakob, et al.
The Ohio State University Press, 2008.
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Prolegomena: Narrative Design and Historical Context

The phrase “to make you see” comes from Conrad’s Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”:* “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see!” (Conrad 1979, 147). Jeremy Hawthorn has drawn attention to the authorial compulsion implicit in this often-quoted sentence, noting that coercive looking in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* is “matched by an element of coercion at the level of . . . narrative technique” (2001, 296). My essay starts with a similar yoking together of authorial/narratorial coercion and narrative design. I argue that in *Under Western Eyes* the author orchestrates the double ruse of constructing a “Western” reader and a narrator acceptable to that reader. This double ruse persuades the reader to “see” what the narrator has slowly and painfully learned to see in the daunting process of “translating” Razumov’s story for a Western readership. The reader’s learning to “see” anew is enabled by shifts in narrative perspective and in focalization.

Where other critics have found Conrad’s creation of the language teacher narrator either inept or duplicitous,¹ I argue that the narrator’s mediation is

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¹. “The schoolteacher simply will not do as a narrator,” objects Edward Crankshaw. Irving
essential to the reader’s understanding of this novel of ideas.\textsuperscript{2} The language teacher presents himself as a commonsense empiricist, lacking gifts of imagination or creativity in “translating” Razumov’s story based on the diary composed on the Isle Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Such faith in rationality was of course crucial to the Enlightenment. Equally important to the Enlightenment was the role of sympathy in founding ethics, as was the preoccupation with vision or lucidity in the \textit{siècle des lumières}. I will argue that the \textit{textual} strategies of \textit{Under Western Eyes}—the shifts between rationality and sympathy, narration and focalization—are also \textit{contextual} strategies, linking the novel’s thematics and narrative techniques to the Enlightenment’s preoccupation with the interdependence of rationality, sympathy, and lucidity. The novel may be read as demonstrating Conrad’s conviction that reason without imagination is individually, socially, and politically suspect. Where Tony Tanner contends that the narrator should be seen as the mouthpiece of European complacency against Russian nightmare, I suggest that, on the contrary, he is caught in a precarious and uncomfortable mediation between the two. I shall argue that, through the circumstances under which he undertakes to tell Razumov’s story, the narrator is forced into positions where his Western rationality—and the pragmatism to which he is verbally attached—is overwhelmed by a capacity for sympathetic identification with the subject of his narrative.

In the Author’s Note to \textit{Under Western Eyes}, Conrad writes: “I needed also a sympathetic friend for Miss Haldin” (2003, 282); of Razumov “[he] is treated sympathetically” (282); of the whole cast of characters bar Peter Ivanovitch, Madame de S——, and their cronies: “Nobody is exhibited as a monster here” (282). To translate that sympathy into narrative immediacy he needs a voice more human, fallible, impassioned, erring, and involved than the authorial narrators of \textit{The Secret Agent} or \textit{Nostromo}. The language teacher is elderly, pedantic, imaginative (although he denies this), and manipulative, torn between logophilia and logophobia, Westernizing rationality and Slavophile emotionality, between the irrational fervor of a lover and the control of a writer. Conrad requires somebody like the English language teacher, as opposed to Marlow or his authorial narrators, because he is perfectly placed to capture the Western reader’s confidence: “The old teacher of languages . . . was Howe similarly protests that “the narrator is not simply an awkward intrusion, he signifies a wish on Conrad’s part to dissociate himself from his own imagination” (quoted in Laskowsky 1992, 170).

\textsuperscript{2} I concur with Zdzisław Najder and Henry J. Laskowsky that \textit{Under Western Eyes} is a “novel of ideas.” Najder remarks that comparing Conrad with Rousseau involves, among other things, “an exploration in the history of certain ideas” (Najder 1997, 139). Laskowsky’s position is that “the drama of \textit{Under Western Eyes} comes directly from the fact that it is most importantly a novel of ideas—an epistemological novel as well as a political one” (Laskowsky 1992, 172).
useful to me and therefore . . . must be useful to the reader both in the way of comment and by the part he plays in the development of the story” (282). This is a good example of authorial coercion. Conrad doesn’t invite the reader to consider what kind of narrator might best tell this story. Rather he insists that the language teacher must be useful to the reader, because he was useful to the author. If Conrad “had never been called before to a greater effort of detachment” (281), he had never before created a narrator so adept at manipulating the reader’s response. The psychic urgency of the author’s situation and the narrator’s control of the reader are causally related.

An obvious inspiration for Under Western Eyes is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, on whose island in Geneva (3) Razumov composes his diary. (4) Rousseau’s concerns are echoed in the question Jeremy Hawthorn asks: “What are the respective claims of self-interest, social duty and common humanity? To whom, or to what, do we owe the first allegiance: to ourselves, to our social group or nation, or to the particular claim of another individual who, in extreme circumstances, asks for help?” (Conrad 1983, vii). Critics like Najder and Fleishman who discuss Conrad’s relationship to Rousseau have concentrated on The Social Contract, drawing attention to significant contrasts between Rousseau’s and Conrad’s political philosophies. But Najder characterizes Conrad’s relationship with Rousseau as an “opposition obsession” and maintains that “the ideas [Conrad] condemned left on him an indelible imprint . . . he saw radical social change, the modern nation-state, and democracy itself in characteristically Rousseauan terms” (Najder 1997, 146).

3. If my argument about the rootedness of Under Western Eyes in the Enlightenment triad reason-sympathy-lucidity is correct, the novel is a good example of what Alan Palmer calls the “intersubjective” as opposed to the “subjective” presentation of fictional minds. Palmer is concerned to move beyond “the self-communings [that] lend themselves to the highly verbalized, self-conscious form of thought that is known as inner speech” (Palmer 2004, 9). He believes that “fictional minds [must be] seen not as private, passive flows of consciousness, but as engaged, social processes of mental action” (246). These processes, he maintains, are best revealed, in the analysis of fiction, by what he calls “thought report” as opposed to the “speech categories” which concentrate on individual consciousness. But Under Western Eyes is strikingly anomalous. It uses the “speech categories” to dramatize thinking, but never in purely subjective terms. The novel’s “intersubjectivity” is established by its drawing on the shared intellectual and cultural context of Enlightenment thought. Conrad’s use of Geneva as a social environment in Under Western Eyes demonstrates the “intersubjective” elements theorized by Palmer. Historical site of Western democracy but peopled by complacent citizens, home to Russian revolutionaries and other foreigners like the language teacher, it is a rich source of diverse social interaction.

4. As Peter Knox-Shaw has pointed out to me, Rousseau himself spent a lonely sojourn on the Isle Saint-Pierre in the lake of Bienne, and described this in the fifth section of his Reveries du promeneur solitaire.

5. It seems to me characteristic of Conrad that he anticipates the debate around representation which preoccupies us as readers today. Jacques Derrida in Of Grammatology builds an entire interpretation of Rousseau on his essay On the Origin of Languages, arguing that it proves
A characteristically Rousseauan notion foregrounded in *Under Western Eyes* is the role of compassion or sympathy in balancing rationality. This has received little critical attention, except from Lorrie Clark, who discusses the tension between compassion and skeptical detachment in Conrad’s depiction of Axel Heyst in *Victory*:

This tension between pity as an egalitarian sentiment (a form of non-judgmental compassion or fellow-feeling) and as an aristocratic aloofness from sentiment (a form of judgmental contempt) mirrors the oft-noted tension between democratic and aristocratic—or progressive and reactionary—elements in Conrad’s politics. This indicates Conrad’s profound awareness of the extent to which political institutions must be grounded on, and consistent with, our understanding of human nature. It also . . . reveals the profundity of Conrad’s understanding of modernity, and in particular, of its acknowledged father, Rousseau. It is Rousseau who defined pity as “the democratic sentiment”—who grounded his revolutionary ideal of political democracy in a “universal humanity” characterized by natural, instinctual compassion and fellow-feeling, a natural, pre-political brotherhood of “solidarity” of sentiment on the basis of which corrupt political institutions could be reformed or overthrown. (Clark 1999, 121)

The “politicization” of compassion referred to by Clark is particularly striking in Rousseau’s *On the Origin of Languages*, where imagination is celebrated as the cornerstone of civil society:

We develop social feeling only as we become enlightened. . . . How am I to imagine ills of which I have no idea? How would I suffer in seeing another suffer, if I know not what he is suffering, if I am ignorant of what he and I have in common. . . . He who imagines nothing is aware only of himself; he is isolated in the midst of mankind. (Rousseau [1852] 1966, 32)

Sympathy was also taken to be a founding ethical principle among the British Enlightenment writers and politicians Smith, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson,6

Rousseau’s logocentrism and his attachment to a metaphysics of presence rooted in the authentic speaking self. Paul de Man completely disagrees: “Rousseau escapes from the logocentric fallacy precisely to the extent that his language is literary” (de Man 1983, 139). Whatever Conrad found interesting in Rousseau, it was not the idea that speaking is somehow more authentic than writing (if indeed that is Rousseau’s position). For Conrad speaking and writing can be equally unreliable. *Under Western Eyes* is full of phony orators and phony texts.

6. I am once again indebted to Peter Knox-Shaw, whose *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* (2004) makes extensive references to British thinkers of her time.
and the driving force behind a whole school of radical and “sentimental” fiction inspired only in part by Rousseau. So the narrator, as an English intellectual, might have encountered the notion of sympathy as a founding principle of ethics in his own culture. But it is through his telling of Razumov’s story—that story based on a journal written on the Isle Jean-Jacques Rousseau—that he moves closer to the fusion of rationality and sympathy which the Enlightenment celebrated in its espousal of lucidity. Lucidity, with its multiple connections with light and vision, may be related to the novel’s frequent (obsessive, even) references to sight, vision, and gaze, and these again return us to Rousseau. Martin Jay notes that “Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s . . . ocular preoccupations evinced a passionate personal dimension. His search for transparency sought not merely to reveal the truth of the world, but also to make manifest his own internal truth, his own authentic self” (Jay 1989, 90). Struggling for “crystalline limpidity,” Rousseau dreamed of “a new social order in which humans would be utterly open to each other’s gazes, a utopia of mutually beneficial surveillance without reprobation or repression” (Jay 1989, 92). In Under Western Eyes, there are dozens of references to sight. I shall argue that the novel’s foregrounding of the visual has a cumulative effect, heightening the reader’s capacity for sympathetic identification both with the narrator and with Razumov, while simultaneously informing the reader’s judgment.

Attempting to bring together Conrad’s conception of the Enlightenment triad rationality-sympathy-vision with his narrative strategies in Under Western Eyes, my argument closely follows the novel’s narrative design. In Part 1 the narrator engages the reader’s sympathy for Razumov’s situation by reconstructing and interpreting events in Russia which he has not witnessed. Part 2 is set in Geneva and the narrator now becomes a protagonist. I show how his sympathy for Natalia Haldin infuses his worldview. Part 3 builds toward the climax of Razumov’s story as double agent, and in this section the narrator partially removes himself from the story so that Razumov’s thoughts can be presented in his own words. Finally, in Part 4, the narrator reenters active authorship, though now his account is complicated by a new level of self-irony.

A feature common to all four sections makes the language teacher unlike any other Conradian narrator: narration (who speaks) and focalization (who sees)7 are nearly always disjunct. Two of the most spectacularly visualized sequences in the novel take place in Part 1 where scenes are linked in their imbrication of the physical/visual with the psychological/cognitive. The first

7. I follow Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan in meaning by focalization the perceptual, emotive, cognitive, and ideological angles from which the story is told. See Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 71–85.
is an episode in which Razumov furiously beats the drunken peasant Ziemianitch; the second is a mock-epiphany sequence in which a transfigured Razumov “sees” the frozen wastes of Russia as a *tabula rasa* on which the Perfect Autocrat of the future will inscribe his name. These two sequences have an extraordinarily vivid quality for the reader. As well as attesting to the narrator’s graphic—though always denied—powers of imagination, they stand out from the surrounding text as so exaggerated as to seem grotesque. Time is arrested.\(^8\) These tableaux powerfully impress themselves upon the reader’s consciousness, so that although it is the narrator who speaks of what he imagines a character seeing, that section of text is equally focalized by the reader. The narrator’s descriptions activate in us both a perceptual response (we “see” what is depicted) and a cognitive response (we understand that Razumov’s perceptions are linked to his emotional needs). Forcing the reader not only to *see* but to *understand* is a powerful aspect of the novel’s focalization, and another example of authorial coercion.

The way in which the language teacher characterizes Razumov’s focalization draws attention to the link between conscious choice and unconscious impulse in Razumov’s momentous decision to betray Haldin. Yet the narrator has witnessed neither scene,\(^9\) and is at pains to explain the difficulties he has in comprehending the Russian psyche. That these episodes leave an indelible impression on the reader suggests the imaginative power of the narrator’s focalization, and its successful “translation” into the reader’s response.

Problems in focalization are not confined to Part 1, where the narrator reconstructs a story in which he has played no part: they are conspicuous in the subsequent Geneva sections of the novel where he has become a protagonist. Here the distance between what Ford calls the informed storyteller and the naive or uninformed observer\(^10\) is also the distance between narration and focalization; none of the perceptions recorded are being experienced for the first time. This is of course true of all retrospective protagonist narration.

8. As in the murder sequence in *The Secret Agent* where the recumbent Verloc has time to see in minute detail the shadow on the wall of Winnie’s arm and hand about to descend, wielding the carving knife, but not enough time to defend himself. The reader “sees” this sequence in slow motion and graphic detail. This scene, and the focalized sequences in the Ziemianitch-beating and epiphany episodes in *Under Western Eyes*, are striking examples of the expansion of the moment—the capacity to suspend or stretch time—which Cohn sees as a powerful tool of psychonarration.

9. “Theory helps illuminate narrative texts even as elements of those texts challenge theory and lead to its extension or revision,” notes James Phelan (2005, Preface, x). The language teacher as what Phelan calls a “character narrator” exemplifies this two-way process. He simultaneously enacts and problematizes the narrative processes which constitute his subjectivity. Both protagonist and observer, his focalization of what he *does not* see is as significant as what he *does* see.

but in *Under Western Eyes* the focalization/narration disjunction is even more complex.

As narrator and focalizer the English language teacher’s personality is cunningly characterized. Master of rhetoric (though he denies this), he insists on his rationalist convictions. Craving impartiality, he frequently stands revealed to the reader as vulnerable and bewildered. These contradictions conspire to endear him to the reader, who instantly recognizes his involvement in the drama he unfolds. The language teacher’s congeniality is essential to the success of the narrative, the success, that is to say, of Conrad’s design upon us. However much the reader is aware of factual implausibilities, (s)he must identify emotionally with the narrator’s account.

**Enlisting the Reader’s Sympathy**

Since the narrator casually remarks that the diary entries “proper” only begin after Razumov’s encounter with Councillor Mikulin, on what does he base his detailed knowledge of the previous events that took place in Part 1? This opening section is Conrad’s—and the narrator’s—tour de force. Using the language teacher to construct, interpret and interact with Razumov’s story so as to predispose the reader to suspend judgment, Conrad shifts between third person narrative modes. Hawthorn suggests that “What Conrad seems most concerned to display with regard to Razumov is the verbal nature of his thought processes, his use of words to argue with himself. In the depiction of these thought processes FID [= Free Indirect Discourse] constitutes a variation from the use of Direct Speech” (1990, 57). Equally important, however, is the mediation of a narrator ideally placed to understand and influence a Western reader.

Conrad creates transitions between what Dorrit Cohn describes as *psychonarration, narrated monologue* and *quoted monologue*. These transitions

11. Jakob Lothe draws attention to the narrator’s dual role for the reader: “Anticipating the predominant position of Razumov as a character by drawing attention first to his name and then to his diary, the beginning [of the novel] also hints that the language teacher is to perform a crucial function not only as a narrator in the technical sense (as teller of a story) but also as a reflective observer. His function, it is suggested at once, is not merely narrative but thematic as well” (Lothe 1989, 266).

12. I have retained Dorrit Cohn’s term “narrated monologue” although FID (Free Indirect Discourse) is currently the standard term used for this narrative mode. The advantages for my argument of using this term are twofold. First, “narrated monologue” draws attention to the narrator’s text as a translation—Cohn’s “transposed thought-quotations” (1978, 105). Second, it distinctively colors the emotional register of the narration: “no matter how ’impersonal’ the tone of the text that surrounds them, narrated monologues themselves tend to commit the narrator to attitudes of sympathy and irony” (117).
register the mechanisms of the rationalizing mind, moving almost imperce-
tibly from incontrovertible fact to highly suspect interpretation. In Cohn's
definition psychonarration is “the narrator’s discourse about a character’s
consciousness.” Old-fashioned in including the perspective of the author or
narrator, it is modern in dealing with the unconscious—an area over which
by definition the conscious subject has no control. Quoted monologue is at
the other extreme. Signaled by quotation marks, it records a speaker’s own
words in an imaginary conversation. The third mode of narrated monologue
is somewhere “between the immediacy of quotation and the mediacy of nar-
ration” (Cohn 1978, 106). Here the language a character uses when talking to
her/himself is cast into the narrator’s grammatical forms.

In Part 1, strategic modulations between narrative modes occur in key
passages that sometimes highlight and on other occasions conceal the tensions
between the narrator and Razumov, the West and Russia. Psychonarration is
frequently used to establish a shared set of values with the reader. “Razumov
was one of those men who, living in a period of mental and political unrest,
keep an instinctive hold on normal, practical, everyday life” (8) we read. The
normalizing subtext implicates both narrator and reader as though it read: “we
all agree that maintaining a sense of reality is what keeps us sane.”

Figural preoccupations are glimpsed but they are quickly edited. We are
given Razumov’s greatest ambition in narrated monologue in words he might
use when talking to himself: “a celebrated professor was a somebody. Distinc-
tion would convert the label Razumov into an honoured name” (11). But
the narrator swiftly intervenes with a universalizing perspective: “There was
nothing strange in the student Razumov’s wish for distinction. A man’s real
life is that accorded to him in the thoughts of other men by reason of respect
or natural love” (11). The impact of these words is of course to justify individ-
ual ambition by relating it to communal values in a formulation no Western
reader is likely to contest.

The next instance of narrated monologue virtually erases the distinction
between facts and their interpretation: “This evening’s doings could turn up
against him at any time as long as this man lived and the present institutions
endured” (16), the narrator remarks, evidently “translating” Razumov’s own
thoughts. But his next comment: “They [the present institutions] appeared
to him rational and indestructible at that moment” signals, in its changed

narrative theory, acknowledges that Cohn considers what she calls “psychonarration” (and he calls
“thought report”) to be as important as the speech category modes. Drawing on Cohn, I argue
that it is precisely through the alternation of psychonarration with the speech category modes
that Conrad, through the narrator, dramatizes the shift between individual consciousness and
communal responsibility that the whole novel demonstrates.
pronouns and altered tense, a shift back into what is clearly the narrator’s perspective. His observation about life under autocracy as opposed to democracy makes inevitable—and somehow therefore acceptable—Razumov’s political conservatism. Bridged through concepts the Western reader values—rationality and indestructibility—the narrative now moves back inside Razumov’s mind. A new aesthetic register—emotionally coercive but logically suspect—is introduced: “They had a force of harmony—in contrast with the horrible discord of this man’s presence” (16). This prepares the reader for the heightened rhetoric of the epiphany sequence where political betrayal is figured in pseudo-religious terms.

In the Ziemianitch beating scene the transition to narrated monologue is just as striking. Initially the episode is rendered from the outside with visual and emotional detachment: “Except for the violent movements of Razumov nothing stirred, neither the beaten man nor the spoke-like shadows on the walls. And only the sound of blows was heard. It was a weird scene” (22–23). The narrator moves swiftly to explain Razumov’s feelings: “Ziemianitch’s passionate surrender to sorrow and consolation had baffled him. That was the people” (23). The phrase “that was the people” again returns us to Razumov’s consciousness, acting as a verbalized rationalization to himself of the hopelessness of democracy. We remain in Razumov’s mind in the next sentences: “Between the two [the people and Haldin] he was done for. Between the drunkenness of the peasant incapable of action and the dream-intoxication of the idealist . . . [i]t was a sort of terrible childishness. But children had their masters” (23). In these statements, the frustration that has been building in Razumov since Haldin’s fateful appearance is very clear. Yet they are infiltrated by the narrator’s rationalist assumptions. He has as little sympathy for drunken peasants and dreamy visionaries as has Razumov.

Such shifts in Part 1 take place with great rapidity, sometimes within the same sentence, as in the heightened language of the epiphany sequence: “Razumov stamped his foot—and under the soft carpet of snow felt the hard ground of Russia, inanimate, cold, inert, like a sullen and tragic mother hiding her face under a winding-sheet [psychonarration]—his native soil!—his very own—without a fireside, without a heart!” [narrated monologue] (24). The switch between authorial and figural language is facilitated by the image of Mother Russia. The commentator is acutely aware of the pathos of Razumov’s situation, caught as he is between Russia and Geneva; despite weeks of successful play-acting, he is quickly disarmed by the silent grief of the mother of the man he betrayed. On a first reading this passage about Russia as mother seems to move naturally from physical description to mental image. It is, in fact, carefully constructed by a narrator who knows the story of Razumov’s psychological journey, and who interprets Part 1 in terms of Part 4.
The narrator shares Razumov’s vision of revolutionary activity as covert and sinister, and he understands the mechanisms by which Razumov replaces emotional need with intellectual certainty. Because the Haldin episode belongs to a dark underworld which must be repressed at all costs, Razumov mounts a bullying pulpit from which he hopes to convince an imaginary audience, or perhaps himself:

What’s a man to do? What must be must be. Extraordinary things do happen. But when they have happened they are done with. . . . And the daily concerns, the familiarities of our thoughts swallow it up—and the life goes on as before with its mysterious and secret sides quite out of sight, as they should be. Life is a public thing. (40)

In this quoted monologue and elsewhere in the betrayal sequence the reader is apparently reassured, but actually swept into an emotional vortex of extremism whose logical consequences are too frightening to contemplate. I end my discussion of Part 1 by emphasizing two points. In the public realm—following the form of an imagined conversation with others—the rationalizing mind confirms its own prejudices. And in this realm, with its associations of fair play and verbal exchange based on consensus, the Western reader feels most at home.

**Imaginative Seeing**

Conrad’s strategy in Part 1 is to elicit the reader’s sympathy for Razumov and we have seen how he achieves this by filtering different third-person narrative modes through the perceptions of the narrator. In Part 2 Conrad’s design upon the reader takes a different form. Here we are exposed to anomalies within the account of the language teacher, who has now become an actor in the events he is recording, and is therefore positioned to tell the story from firsthand knowledge.

Part 2 opens with the familiar pretense that the narrator’s account is guided by fact rather than by imagination, moves through Razumov’s query, “How can you tell the truth from lies?” and culminates in Razumov’s hanging over the parapet, staring down at the water below in search—it would seem—of a Rousseauan transparency. This section can be read as exploring the psychologically fluid nature of a protagonist’s focalization.

The narrator’s first aberrant moment in relation to seeing takes place in Switzerland in the context of a discussion with Natalia about class conflict. She has remarked on Occidentals’ failure to understand Russia. He speaks of
practical forms of political liberty and objects that concord cannot be achieved through “blood and violence.” Natalia rejects his rationalism as myopic: “[t]he whole world is inconceivable to the strict logic of ideas” (79). The speakers are conceptually miles apart. Despite this challenge to Natalia’s ideas, the narrator is already focalizing Geneva through Russian eyes—Natalia’s eyes. He sees “the Chain of Jura covered with snow, like a white wall closing the end of the street” (77). His reaction to the setting of the Haldin women’s apartment is similarly empathetic. After breaking the news of Haldin’s death to Natalia, he is overcome by his inability to console her: “I could get hold of nothing but . . . commonplace phrases, those futile phrases that give the measure of our impotence before each other’s trials” (84). Appalled at the depressing transformation in Mrs. Haldin, the narrator now sees the Boulevard des Philosophes as “a singularly arid and dusty thoroughfare” and as “empty” (86). He has found an objective correlative for his sense of the limitations of Western values. Perceiving a mismatch between himself and Natalia he remarks: “The most precise of her sayings seemed always to me to have enigmatical prolongations vanishing somewhere beyond my reach” (88).

At the Château Borel a further shift takes place—and another example of the narrator’s design on the reader. The subject of the transformation is Natalia. The story is told by the narrator in a “reconstructed” section based on her account of the Château Borel—where the language teacher has never set foot. They meet in “the unattractive public promenade of the Bastions.” In a distractingly interrupted narrative the reader is exposed to a reconstructed episode “founded on [Natalia’s] narrative . . . not so much dramatized as might be supposed” (119). Devoted as he is to her, the narrator recognizes a momentous change in Natalia after the Château Borel and he signals this to the reader. The authenticity of Tekla who tells the story of her own life contrasts with the decay and fraudulence experienced by Natalia at the Château Borel. The narrator chooses direct speech, though the context of reconstruction would make represented speech a logical choice. He clearly believes it is essential for Tekla to speak in her own voice. No longer silenced or instrumentalized, she opens her heart to Natalia:

I am indebted for my salvation to an old apple-woman, who had her stall under the gateway of the house we lived in. She had a kind wrinkled face, and the most friendly voice imaginable. One day, casually, we began to talk about a child, a ragged little girl we had seen begging from men in the streets at dusk; and from one thing to another my eyes began to open

14. Bakhtin’s notions of “character zones” and “speech zones” are apposite here.
gradually to the horrors from which innocent people are made to suffer in this world, only in order that governments might exist. After I once understood the crime of the upper classes, I could not go on living with my parents. (111)

The effect of these words on Natalia is now foregrounded: “And Miss Haldin seemed to see for the first time, a name and a face upon the body of that suffering people whose hard fate had been the subject of so many conversations between her and her brother in the garden of their country house” (113). These words, the narrator’s reformulation of what he has been told, have a double effect. They register both the new processes of vision now opening out to Natalia, and the narrator’s own recognition of the momentous implications of such insight. Tekla’s experience converts Natalia’s convictions into action, and it is no coincidence that by the end of the novel both Tekla and Natalia return to Russia to work amongst the most destitute of their compatriots.

By the end of Part 2, then, the narrator appears to have adopted Natalia’s focalization, as Natalia has adopted Tekla’s. He is now so estranged from Geneva that he feels, in Natalia’s company, “like a traveller in a strange country” (125). Descriptions of Geneva and Genevans are consistently negative as he begins to see Razumov in the way she sees him. At the opening of the novel the narrator’s description of Razumov stressed lack of definition: “It was as if a face modelled vigorously in wax (with some approach even to a classical correctness of type) had been held close to a fire till all sharpness of line had been lost in the softening of the material” (4). Now the portrait takes on a sharp clarity:

He had an air of intelligence and even some distinction quite above the average of the students and other inhabitants of the Petite Russie. His features were more decided than in the generality of Russian faces; he had a line of the jaw, a clean-shaven, sallow cheek; his nose was a ridge, and not a mere protuberance. (132)

The contrast is striking. The influence of Natalia on the narrator is profound.

**Verbalizing Solipsism**

Part 3 foregrounds speaking. It contains a high incidence of quoted monologue—the words Razumov uses in conversation with himself—to present
the mental pressures which drive him inexorably toward confession. Trapped in words, his survival dependant on lying, Razumov’s solipsistic loquacity increases as his frustration and loneliness escalate.

Razumov’s speech has becomes symptomatic of unresolved conflict. Simultaneously reckless—teetering on the verge of confession—and duplicitous, it conceals as much as it reveals. Psychologically convincing as this verbal activity is, Conrad’s effort to “show” rather than “tell” what is happening in Razumov’s mind inevitably creates narrative tensions. As readers we know that the story is told retrospectively by a controlling narrator, but his insights as orchestrator of the story jar with our acceptance of the narrator as an involved—and frequently confused—protagonist.

So Razumov’s quoted monologue “What is the meaning of all this? . . . Why has that meddlesome old Englishman blundered against me? And what is this silly tale of a crazy old woman?” (146) is less convincing to the reader than the presentation of speech in dialogues. In this section the conversations between Razumov, Peter Ivanovitch, and Sophia Antonovna are effectively orchestrated demonstrations that social language between practitioners without a common context is futile. Razumov remarks that “cartloads of words and theories” (156) could not bridge the “chasm between the past and the future” (156); to Sophia Antonovna he protests wearily “I will not be played with.” The next sentence, “He had spoken such words before” (197) sounds like the narrator, but could equally be Razumov’s own self-ironizing perception, since the paragraph ends by rendering his thoughts in free indirect discourse.

Ironizing dialogues convince where quoted monologue does not for two reasons. On the level of plot plausibility, it is not impossible that the narrator could have reconstructed them from Razumov’s notebooks. Perhaps more importantly, they ring true psychologically, since every reader has experienced social interactions built on obliquity and half-truth. When a speaker is driven by conflicting impulses both to share and to withhold information, the narrator’s comment that speech seems “given to us for the purpose of concealing our thoughts” (192) is apposite. But conversations that are simultaneously symptomatic and transgressive cannot be sustained forever. In these dialogues there are perhaps two (linked) levels of “being convincing.” The first has to do with narrative plausibility (“are we convinced that these thoughts or words would have gone through the mind of the character?”). The second has to do with our acceptance of the narrator’s understanding of Razumov’s thought processes and emotional reactions. This might be formulated: “Is it convincing that the narrator would know enough to be able to present these thoughts in this way?” It seems to me that Conrad’s design upon the reader ensures the second response. As in many other instances in
the novel, we suspend disbelief in an unrealistic plot construction because we are asked to endorse the narrator's psychological qualifications to enter into the story he is telling.

Razumov's mental turmoil is cast into real and imaginary conversations through the direct speech modes of quoted monologue and dialogue. These monologues and dialogues, conveyed by the characteristically sympathetic narrator, are instigated by Razumov himself. He attempts to exorcise the demons of his own divided consciousness through constant enactments of verbal charades. Word games, however, only exacerbate his unease. The narrator speaks of the silence which Razumov, caught up in bitter word play, secretly craves: “he felt the need of perfect safety, with its freedom from direct lying, with its power of moving amongst [the revolutionaries] silent, unquestioning, listening, impenetrable” (205). At the end of Part 3 his yearning for solitude and silence has been resolved by his withdrawal to the Isle Jean-Jacques Rousseau where he writes the diary. Despite the setting’s bathos this activity soothes Razumov. On the Island he has only to listen to the sound of water around him: “All the other sounds of this earth brought contamination to the solitude of a soul” (291).

The narrator’s observation here indicates an understanding of, and sympathy with, Razumov’s plight. But his attitude toward Razumov seems to have changed dramatically in the closing paragraph which immediately follows this. In dissonant psychonarration, and using maximal distance between authorial and figural consciousness, he comments:

This was Mr. Razumov’s feeling, the soul, of course, being his own, and the word being used not in the theological sense, but standing, as far as I can understand it, for that part of Mr. Razumov which was not his body, and more specially in danger from the fires of this earth. And it must be admitted that in Mr. Razumov’s case the bitterness of solitude from which he suffered was not an altogether morbid phenomenon. (215)

The tone of sardonic pedantry is reminiscent of that of the narrator in The Secret Agent, even to the ponderous distinction drawn between the protagonist’s body and his soul. (See the description of Verloc’s return from his interview with Vladimir in The Secret Agent, chap. 2, p. 33.) It seems out of character with the compassionate presenter of Razumov’s secret thoughts in Part 1. The most obvious explanation is that the predominance of direct speech in Part 3 demonstrates the more negative aspects of Razumov’s personality. The narrator wishes to dissociate himself from this abuse of reason through compulsive and destructive wordplay.
Imagination, Bewilderment, and Self-Irony

The reasons why Razumov engages in verbal hyperactivity are made clear by the narrator in Part 4. Over and above the guilt generated by his betrayal of Haldin (already evident in Part 1), Razumov feels he has become “the helpless prey” of the Russian autocracy. Far from being able to resume a normal life now that Haldin is out of the way, he is embroiled in secrecy and pretence from which there is no escape. And he is conscious of another betrayal: “madcap Kostia” is turned from a buffoon into a thief by Razumov—an act of instrumentalization that is as callous and premeditated as the initial betrayal of Haldin was unsought.

In Part 4 Razumov moves toward the ultimate authenticity of his confession to Natalia. The narrator now resumes an authorial role, shifting back to a mode that will once again predispose the reader toward sympathy. The section begins with the reminder that “Razumov’s youth had no one in the world” which the narrator insists “is but a statement of fact from a man who believes in the psychological value of facts” (216). Claims to reliability notwithstanding, the narrator takes liberties with the construction of the story just as he did in Part 1. As the authorial role partially suspended in Part 3 becomes reestablished, his capacity for sympathetic identification continues to expand, as seen in his relationship with the Haldin women and with Sophia Antonovna.

Prominent among many examples of consonant psychonarration is the narrator’s insight into Mrs. Haldin’s suffering: that what is for the West “mere liberalism” is for her “a heavy trial of fortitude, a matter of tears and anguish and blood” (234). To Natalia he remarks gently: “You think of the era of concord and justice” (243)—concepts attacked in Part 2 as being hopelessly utopian. He even introduces a theological register into his pleas for tolerance from the Western reader. Mikulin is not to be seen as “the Enemy of Mankind . . . holding subtly mendacious dialogues with some tempted soul” (224), nor is Sophia Antonovna to be demonized for her revolutionary views. Her “inquiring glance” is “curiously evil-less . . . I may say . . . un-devilish” (240).

Part 4 has many instances of the narrator’s sympathy for Razumov, and it also retains much Conradian self-irony. When Razumov confesses to Natalia, there are three people—Razumov, Natalia, and the language teacher—present. The setting is described pictorially and dramatically, as a camera obscura and as a theater set. The narrator has become invisible; the younger protagonists are too preoccupied with each other to notice him. A “silent spectator” (253), situated outside the psychological and ideological space which constitutes the “sombre horizon,” “boundary,” or “prison” (253) of their discourse, he sees Razumov and Natalia as actors fully lit on stage, while he sits in the
darkened auditorium. They are in the spotlight, powerful; he is passive and forgotten.

Yet the desire to stage-manage the proceedings lingers in the narrator, who wishes to direct the actors: “standing thus before each other in the glaring light, between the four bare walls, they seemed brought out from the confused immensity of the Eastern borders to be exposed cruelly to the observation of my Western eyes” (254). Marginal and insecure as he feels in a context where he has no speaking role, he still wants to be Master of Ceremonies. In the scene that follows, where the narrator is no more than an eavesdropper, by turns bewildered, frightened, and indignant, he is revealed to the reader as both vulnerable and absurd. Unable to comprehend what is unfolding before his eyes, when at last his turn comes to speak he turns the tragedy into a melodrama: “That miserable wretch has carried off your veil!” (261). In this scene, the play is allowed to unfold without rearrangement. The language teacher could so easily have assigned himself a more dignified part, rather than revealing his impotence. That he does not rearrange the telling bespeaks self-irony—an implied recognition that he is psychologically and culturally out of his depth.

Bewildered by the events that he witnesses, the narrator is back in control when it comes to interpreting the cryptic fragment that is Razumov’s diary—a mere “page and a half of incoherent writing” (262). He recognizes in its halting quality Razumov’s first encounter with “the novelty and the mysteriousness of that side of our emotional life to which his solitary existence had been a stranger” (262). The diary, according to the narrator, is of quite a different order from anything else Razumov has ever penned:15 “In this queer pedantry of a man who had read, thought, lived, pen in hand, there is the sincerity of the attempt to grapple by the same means with another profounder knowledge” (262). Sincerity, then, is not to be confused with the surface eloquence that Razumov as a word-child has always been able to command. The recognition that writing can militate against profound self-knowledge highlights new levels of insight and self-irony in the narrator. Penn Szittya remarks, “the old teacher of languages shows us the possibility of human knowledge which is sophisticated enough to know some of its limitations. . . . Neither Razumov or

15. Jennifer Fraser relates this halting style of writing to the work of grief discussed in Derrida’s Specters of Marx. She remarks: ‘Much as Razumov speaks ‘with difficulty’ and in ‘strangled phrases’ when he tries to express grief . . . Derrida sees mourning as the breakdown of language; in grieving for a friend, he anticipates that his address will ‘traverse speech at the very point where words fail us’” (Fraser, 2005, 254, quoting from Jacques Derrida, The Work of Mourning, ed. Pascale-Anne Braut and Michael Nass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001], 200).
[sic] the old professor is a novelist, but together they express the novelist’s (and Conrad’s) double relation to his fiction: it both is and is not about himself; it is both a confession and a disguise” (Szittya 1992, 202).

Conclusion

The language teacher is simultaneously external focalizer, controlling all the temporal dimensions of the story (past, present, and future) and internal focalizer, confined like the characters to their present. In other words, he is both cognitively privileged and cognitively limited. Moving from external to internal focalization generally involves changing from “objective” to “subjective” registers. But the early sections of the novel argue a close identification with the student Razumov that is hardly objective. And though in the Geneva sections the narrator’s perspective is undoubtedly subjective, the consistently negative depiction of Switzerland and the Swiss is ideologically at odds with what he says to Natalia about democracy. What he says and how he sees are thus entirely different.

In my reading, Conrad’s separation of narration and focalization is a deliberate strategy. Discussing Conrad’s use in this novel of Free Indirect Discourse—the sliding between authorial and figural perspectives—Jeremy Hawthorn notes: “The potentiality of FID to ‘lose the narrator’ is useful to Conrad; it allows the narrative of Under Western Eyes to flow smoothly, with the reader being reminded of its technical origin or chain of delivery only when it suits the author” (Hawthorn 1990, 58–59). But FID also conveniently allows the narrative to lose Conrad as author while drawing attention to the authorship of the narrator.

The authorship of the narrator is crucial in this novel which turns on the narrative convention of paralepsis. This is not a fictional donné, but a choisi, an authorial strategy that has a palpable design on the reader. We must accept the language teacher’s narrative not because it is factually plausible, but because it is psychologically appealing.

What is implied in my account now needs to be spelled out: the author’s concealed presence behind his narrator. The fact that the reader frequently forgets this ghostlike authorial presence attests to Conrad’s skill in creating a narrator who draws us into his story as though he alone were its author. We become aware of the author in the wings only sporadically, as in the camera obscura sequence already discussed, in which the narrator as both voyeur and eavesdropper witnesses Razumov’s confession to Natalia. Here a revealing tension between authorial irony and narratorial self-irony arises. Conrad has
composed the scene in such a way that the narrator is given a minor role, offstage and in the dark, while Razumov and Natalia are center-stage, emblazoned in light. Although the language teacher, inspired by his love for Natalia, has increasingly moved from a rationality-dominated discourse to one infiltrated by sympathy, here his acute jealousy renders him incapable of sympathy. He cannot begin to understand what Razumov is struggling to say. At the same time, he has moved so far away from pedantic self-aggrandizement that he gives an unedited account of his own confusion. The author as controlling force behind the narrator’s failed attempt at control in this scene is signaling that the equilibrium sought by the Enlightenment between rationality sympathy and lucidity is precarious, and can only be achieved erratically.

Several critics have drawn attention to doubling mechanisms in *Under Western Eyes*, pointing out that the narrator’s characterization often parallels Razumov’s, and that both the narrator and Razumov can be read as reflecting Conrad’s own situation. These metafictional elements, in conjunction with the authorial ironies which frame the narrator’s account, complicate the distinction between those sections of the text mediated by the narrator’s imagination which have been the focus of this essay, and those sections which purport to be “rationally” or “factually” derived. “How can [we] tell the truth from lies?” the reader may ask, reiterating Razumov’s question. The answer, I think, lies not in distinguishing different degrees of constructedness in this multiply mediated text, but in relating the trajectory of the novel’s plot to Conrad’s—and Rousseau’s—concerns with rationality, sympathy, and lucidity. “The century of the Enlightenment . . . looked at things in the sharp clear light of the reasoning mind whose processes appear to have been closely akin to those of the seeing eye,” remarks Starobinski.16 But for Rousseau, and for Conrad, this connection between reason and lucidity is inadequate. It is the capacity for imagination that truly conduces to vision, linking the ethical to the political as it links the individual to the collective. In *Under Western Eyes* Razumov the Cartesian rationalist17 has elevated the capacity for thought into a private religion. Lonely, reclusive, and introverted, he is “aware only himself” and therefore is initially “isolated in the midst of mankind.” At the end of the novel, he has retained his intellectual independence, declaring to Natalia “I am not

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17. Roderick Davis comments: “There are elements of Descartes’ thought in Razumov’s recurring sense of his life as a dream, one haunted by apparitions and demons” (1991, 162). The Cartesian first-person view (“that one takes meaning from one’s own case and then extrapolates it to others”) is the reverse of what Palmer theorizes in his explorations of fictional minds’ intersubjectivity. This intersubjectivity is, I believe, built on the sympathy which I have tried to demonstrate in the narrator’s and Razumov’s “doubly embedded” narratives.
converted.” Yet he has come to recognize his connection to others: he now acknowledges that in betraying Haldin he has betrayed himself. Mirroring this move from intellectual control to imaginative identification, the initial rationalism of the narrator in Under Western Eyes is cumulatively eroded by the sympathy required to tell Razumov’s story to Western readers.
Works Cited


