

CDU 820-31.09

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CONRAD'S VIEW OF REVOLUTION/ANARCHISM IN UNDER WESTERN EYES

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It is my main purpose to discuss in this paper three relevant topics concerned with Joseph Conrad's novel Under Western Eyes, namely: the author's view of revolution and anarchism and its relation with his Polish experience; how critical Conrad is of both autocracy and revolution and finally to discuss where in the novel the writer is sympathetic to revolution.

To begin with, let me mention some aspects of Conrad's Polish background. First of all, he was a Pole, born in the Russian-occupied Poland of 1857 as the son of one of the most spirited participants in the Polish National Committee, and with a profound fear of Russian autocratic power in his blood. Politics, nationalism, the forces of imperialism and rebellion, were the first and deepest parts of his inheritance.

Conrad's character was linked to the patriotic and nationalistic ardour of his father's nature, an idealist revolutionary, and to the conservatism of his uncle Tadeuz Bobrowski his guardian during youth. The duality of thought conditioned by Apollo Korzeniowski, the father, and Tadeuz Bobrowski made his character divided all his life long. The political approach in Under Western Eyes exemplifies the writer's duality of thought. In order to write this novel Conrad found suggestions in the writings of Russian novelists, mainly Dostoievsky's Crime and Punishment. Although the book fully justifies this assertion, the writer denies it and even affirmed in a letter to a friend that he had a "Russophobia", and that he did not like the works

of the famous Russian writer. (1)

Baines (2) is one of the critics who discusses the parallels between the course of events in Under Western Eyes and Crime and Punishment. The critic even talks about "verbal echoes" of the latter in the first.

My second aim is to discuss how critical Conrad is of both autocracy and revolution. The critic of Russian autocracy dominates the book. Autocracy controls the destiny of every character in it. Consider the following:

The ferocity and imbecility of an autocratic rule rejecting all legality and in fact basing itself upon complete moral anarchism provokes the no less imbecile and atrocious answer of a purely Utopian revolutionism encompassing destruction ... in the strange conviction that a fundamental change of hearts must follow the downfall of any given institutions.

(from the author's note)

Starting from the idea that Conrad attacks the anarchy of a political movement of the right, it is legitimate to claim that in Under Western Eyes he cultivates an acquired distaste for ideology. General T might be Conrad's mouthpiece when he says:

I detest rebels of every kind. I can't keep it. It's my nature ... I detest rebels. These subversive minds! These intellectual débauches!(3)

On the other hand, Conrad insists that revolutionaries are also victims and that revolt is as hopeless as submission, Haldin's murder of Mr. de P - is caused by autocracy. His betrayal by Razumov is also a result of the autocratic pressure. In a way both are mistaken: Haldin in the sense that his protest

action is useless and Razumov in the sense that through betrayal he believes he is going to escape from a political commitment. He has to pay the price of the "man in the middle". His destruction follows from his desire to insulate himself from the complications of the great world. In the strategy of the novel, Haldin's assassination of a minister has an effect of an act against the individual Razumov as much as against the Russian autocracy. Since politics is total in the modern world and offers no exemptions, Razumov has to think of an identification between himself and his nation.⁽⁴⁾

Consider the following:

I don't want any one to claim me. But Russia can't disown me. She cannot! Razumov struck his breast with his fist. I am it!⁽⁵⁾

In the novel the victims of autocracy are all Russians "under a curse", in their submission or in their revolt. The servants of the autocracy such as Prince K -, General T -, counselor Mikulin and Razumov, and even the utopian revolutionists, are all possessed by the dream of Russia's sacred mission among the nations of the world.⁽⁶⁾ An example of this would be Haldin's words:

My spirit shall go on warring in some Russian body till all falsehood is swept out of the world. The modern civilization is false, but a new revelation shall come out of Russia.⁽⁷⁾

Razumov also tries to justify his betrayal of Haldin according to the dream of Russia's Sacred Mission:

Like other Russians before him, Razumov in

conflict with himself, felt the touch of grace upon his forehead ... grace entered into Razumov. He believed now in the man who would come at the appointed time.(8)

In this criticism of revolutionaries Conrad uses Peter Invanovitch, physically a victim of autocracy "imprisoned in fortresses, beaten within an inch of his life, and condemned to work in mines, with common criminals".⁽⁹⁾ Despite those experiences, the writer does not present him as a hero. He is given the character of an eloquent, woman-exploiting egoist.⁽¹⁰⁾ Peter Ivanovitch takes advantage of Madame de S -, an "avaricious, greedy, and unscrupulous woman". He proclaims in public grandiloquent feminist ideals, but in private life he is a tyrant, a coward who bullies the inoffensive and good-natured Tekla. The character of Peter Ivanovitch probably stands for Conrad's condemnation of the idealist who acts like a fanatic. As a matter of fact, the whole revolutionary enterprise is ironically presented as being corrupt: Madame de S - is always described as a monster, a robot, a galvanized corpse, and the revolutionaries headquarters in Geneva is always described as a desolate place.⁽¹¹⁾

For example:

The Château Borel, embowered in the trees and tricketts of neglected grounds had its fame in our days, like the residence of that other dangerous and exiled woman ... only the napoleonic despotism, the booted heir of the revolution, which counted that intellectual woman for an enemy worthy to be watched, was like the autocracy in mystic vestments, engendered by the slavery of a Tartar conquest.⁽¹²⁾

Ziemianitch (described by Haldin as a "bright Russian soul") is in fact a worthless drunk also

responsible for Haldin's arrest. The latter refers ironically to the first: "It's extraordinary what a sense of the necessity of freedom there is in that man". (13)

Conrad's criticism of politics and autocracy furnishes the observation that atheism lays just a little way beneath the Russian's orthodox ecstasies. An example of this would be the words of the Russian Minister of the Interior: "The thought of liberty never existed in the Act of the Creator". (14)

This quotation reveals again the mystical conception of the Russian autocracy.

As a result of the degeneration of autocracy, Slavophilism arose. (15) It was a response to the French and German romantic stress on idealized conceptions of the nation and the source of strength in folk cultures. This movement is imprinted in most of the characters in Under Western Eyes. Conrad does not believe in the Christian mysticism of the writings of the slavophilist, instead he discusses the apotheosis of the Russian laborer in opposition to the deification of the tsar and state. This is particularly expressed in Under Western Eyes by the hallowing of the sledge-driver Ziemianitch and by the servant Tekla's powerful devotion to all broken and downtrodden people.

"The basic assumption in this section is that the narrator's words summarize Conrad's critical view of revolution: "Hopes grotesquely betrayed", ideals caricatured that is the definition of revolutionary success". (16)

Thirdly, let me discuss the topic of Conrad's sympathy for revolution. This aspect seems to me to be

centered in the treatment of the character of utopian revolutionaries. Their idealistic view of an ideal society involves political commitment. In contrast with this idea the genuine idealist Sophia Antonovna and Viktor Haldin are noble characters. Ironically their nobility is based on optimism and illusion. Haldin sees Ziemianitch (whose drunkenness leads to his arrest) as a "bright Russian soul". Sophia Antonovna (who proclaims, "I don't think, young man, I just simply believe"⁽¹⁷⁾) is deceived by the monstrous Nikita and the hypocritical Peter Ivanovitch. The book closes with Sophia's comment that "Peter Ivanovitch is an inspired man".⁽¹⁸⁾ Besides Sophia and Viktor we should include Natalia Haldin and Tekla, the dame de compagnie, as revolutionaries characterized by a noble humanism and political principles both sound and concrete. An example of this would be the way Viktor Haldin expresses an exalted and principled dedication to the best hopes of man with extraordinary poignancy: "The Russian soul that lives in all of us ... has a future. It has a mission, I tell you, or else why should I have moved to this-reckless-like a butcher in the middle of all these innocent people-scattering death I! ... I wouldn't hurt a fly!"⁽¹⁹⁾

The sympathy of the writer for the humanitarian revolutionaries is greatly evidenced in Natalia Haldin's character. Her words hallow the lives of the conscientious revolutionaries: "Destruction is the work of anger. Let the tyrants and the slayers be forgotten together, and only the reconstructors be remembered".⁽²⁰⁾

Conrad is very sympathetic to Natalia Haldin

indeed. She is a noble and intensely idealistic girl. She has a mystical belief in the superior destiny of Russia: "We Russians shall find some better form of national freedom than an artificial conflict of parties ... there are nations that have made their bargain with fate ... we need not envy them". (21)

Perhaps the author's sympathy for Natalia's unselfish and intelligent character illustrates the fact that she is one of those who "may begin a movement" but one of those who "do not come to the front". Let us consider this:

"If I could believe all you have said I still wouldn't think of myself ... I would take liberty from any hand as a hungry man would snatch at a piece of bread. The true progress must begin after. And for that the right men shall be found". (22)

One could add yet that Miss Haldin stands for the mysticism of political ideas, as does her brother. Noble youths like them have their prototypes in French revolutionists. (23)

If in Conrad's critical approach to autocracy and politics he discusses the diseases of dogma, the corruptions of power, the impoverishment of fanaticism, he also risks his hopes in the private virtues of the noble revolutionaries, who are well represented by Natalia Haldin. Consider her following statement:

"I believe that the future will be merciful to all. Revolutionist and reactionary, victim and executioner, betrayer and betrayed, they shall all be pitied when the light breaks on our sky at last. Pitied and forgotten; for without that there can be no Union and no love". (24)

We may therefore conclude that in spite of

Conrad's dislike for anarchic rebels, he had sympathy for utopian revolutionaries.

In conclusion it is legitimate to claim that Conrad's view of revolution and anarchism in Under Western Eyes is related to his Polish experience. Conrad himself admitted that this novel has a personal relevance. Its subject-Russian character despotism, and revolution - is one which (as a Pole whose nation and family had suffered under the heel of Russian imperialist occupation) he was sooner or later bound to come to terms with in his art. (25)

Secondly, we may assume that the writer is not a partisan of autocracy and revolution but rather he is critical of both.

Thirdly, Conrad's sympathy for revolution can be found in the sympathetic way in which he builds the character of the noble revolutionaries.

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- (23) Knapp, op. cit.
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