

## CONFESSION AND ASSERTION IN CONRAD'S *UNDER WESTERN EYES*

Northrop Frye declares, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, that the "confessional" is one of the elements on which novels could be patterned. A "confession," he states, is "introverted, but intellectualized in content," and "nearly always a theoretical and intellectual interest in religion, philosophy, or art plays a leading role in the confession."<sup>1</sup> Frye's comments serve as an apt preface for an examination of *Under Western Eyes* which like *Great Expectations*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Ulysses* makes effective use of the confessional mode. There is no "one to one" reference between Conrad's novel and Frye's formula, however. Although Conrad introduces political ideology/philosophy into the novel, and his own political biases can be read "against the grain," as it were, he does not dwell at length on a subject that is "intellectualized in content." He uses ideology for an aesthetic purpose, which is to explore the psyche of his main character who throughout the novel is plagued by complex, moral dilemmas. At another level, he employs these ideas as a point of departure to examine the enigma that is the "Russian" experience.

This essay scrutinizes *Under Western Eyes* as a confessional novel by charting Rasumov's search for a confessor. In the process, it compares, briefly, Rasumov's search with Jim's and Marlow's quests in *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness* respectively. The study finally focusses on the larger confession that the novel allegedly brings forth. Conrad's biographers are unanimous in their view that *Under Western Eyes* is perhaps the most intensely personal of all his novels. Aaron Fogel claims, for instance, that Conrad here feels "a coercion to speak;"<sup>2</sup> in other words, Conrad's novel is a confession that is "coerced" from him. This essay also examines the validity of such claims.

A confession, which is usually precipitated by a crisis, is distinct from other forms of self-expression because it is always an act of community. An individual realizes that he has violated a norm upheld by the social world to which he belongs; as a consequence, he feels compelled to explain his "sin" to a confessor who can in some way offer him consolation. Terrence Doody asserts:

In every case, however, the speaker confesses to an audience who represents the kind of community he needs to exist in and confirm his identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (1957) p.308.

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Fogel, *Coercion to Speak: Conrad's Poetics of Dialogue*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press (1985) p.88.

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His need for identity is intrinsic to his personal motive for making a confession; and though he does want to be brought back into "the human family" and into "the wholeness of people and things," his confession itself defines that wholeness according to his own needs and desires, which he embodies in the confessor he creates.<sup>3</sup>

Jim, Marlow, and Rasumov are three persons who seek confessors, but the kind of confessor each individual finally secures, and the manner in which they address these confessors, reveal intriguing parallels and contrasts. After Jim jumps from the *Patna*, he insists that he had "jumped" and not "cleared out." Yet, even in his first confrontation with Marlow, the latter discerns that, Jim "would be confident and depressed all in the same breath, as if some conviction of innate blamelessness had checked the truth writhing within him at every turn."<sup>4</sup> By abandoning the *Patna*, when its passengers were not even aware that the ship was crippled, Jim violates one of the most sacred norms of the Merchant Navy; consequently, he is ostracized by the very community whose respect he had tried so hard earn. In such a situation, he needs a person to whom he can explain his actions, someone who can provide sympathy and understanding. Again and again he tells Marlow, "I leave it to you. You can understand. Can't you. You see it--don't you?"<sup>5</sup> During the same conversation, Marlow speculates on why he was chosen as a confessor, and the following extract captures, in a way that nothing else does, Jim's longing for community:

Hadn't we all commenced with the same desire, ended with the same knowledge, carried the memory of the same cherished glamour through the sordid days of imprecation? What wonder that when some heavy prod gets home the bond is found to be close; that besides the fellowship of the craft there is felt the strength of a wider feeling--the feeling that binds a man to a child. He was there before me, believing that age and wisdom can find a remedy against the pain of truth, giving me a glimpse of himself as a young fellow in a scrape, that is the very devil of a scrape, the sort of scrape greybeards wag at

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3. Terrence Doody, *Confession and Community in the Novel*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, (1980) p.22.

4. Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim: A Tale*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin (1985) p. 64-65.

5. *Ibid.* p. 97.

solemnly as they hide a smile.<sup>6</sup>

The predicament that Marlow finds himself in "Heart of Darkness" is somewhat different. He is one who has gazed on the depths of "darkness," yet he can never fully recount his experiences. He says, "it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence--that which makes its truth, its meaning--its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream--alone".<sup>7</sup> Marlow, confronts this "darkness" again, and in the process he tries to clarify the obscure even partially by recounting "the horror" to his audience: "Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything," he asks his companions. As Daleski concludes:

He [Marlow] does not recount experiences in the light of a gained knowledge,... On the contrary, his striking "the pose of a Buddha, preaching in European clothes" exemplifies as inappropriateness that rubs off on to his conclusions. Since he does not fully understand the meaning of his experience when he begins the narrative, the tale itself becomes not only a reliving of that experience but a progressive attempt to penetrate its significance.<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning of *Under Western Eyes*, Rasumov, according to Albert Guerard, is "the unawakened man".<sup>9</sup> Although he regrets his never having a secure family life, and is subject to loneliness from time to time, Rasumov is content, even selfishly complacent with his lot. He is "unawakened" because he refuses to engage in the world outside his own; furthermore, he is a man of limited ambition. He only aspires to win a silver medal for an essay, and to become a professor someday.

This complacency is shattered, however, when Haldin draws him into the world of politics and anarchy. Daleski suggests that, "when Rasumov returns to his rooms, Haldin's presence there confronts him with a choice between fidelity to an individual and

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin (1983) p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> H.M. Daleski, *Joseph Conrad: The Way of Dispossession*. London Faber (1977) p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> Albert Guerard, *Joseph Conrad: The Novelist*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press (1958) p.232.

loyalty to the state,"<sup>10</sup> but the issues are obviously more complex. Just as Jim's jump from the *Patna* cannot be attributed to his cowardice alone, Rasumov's actions are brought about for a multiplicity of reasons. He is naturally angered by Haldin's actions which threaten his very existence and jeopardize his chances of academic success; in addition, he is provoked by Haldin's presumptuous and unhappily worded comment, "you have no one belonging to you...no ties, no one to suffer for it if this case comes out by some means."<sup>11</sup> Finally, there is his growing conviction that autocracy is the only kind of government suited for Russia. Conrad has rendered Rasumov's conversion with considerable artistic aplomb; what is even more important to note, however, is Rasumov's pathetic longing for a confessor even before he decides to betray Haldin:

Rasumov thought: "I am being crushed--and I can't even run away." Other men had somewhere a corner of the earth--some little house in the provinces where they had a right to take their troubles. A material refuge. He had nothing. He had not even a moral refuge--the refuge of confidence. To whom could he go with this tale--in all this great, great land?<sup>12</sup>

Ironically, this betrayal, though carried out to preserve the *status quo*, eventually brings him not one "moral refuge" but several. Buried in the text is the idea that the betrayal was a compulsion, a psychological necessity. In a manner reminiscent of Lawrence's character Henry, in *The Fox*, who symbolically becomes the fox once he kills it, Rasumov's betrayal of Haldin makes him Haldin.

Just before Rasumov begins the tortuous process which ends with the betrayal, he has a "morbidly vivid vision" of killing Haldin; however, he desists because "The corpse hanging round his neck would be nearly as fatal as the living man. Nothing short of complete annihilation would do."<sup>13</sup> This is certainly one of the most loaded statements in the novel. Rasumov's murder of Haldin by proxy, as it were, binds a corpse round his neck just as fatally. And he carries this burden just as Coleridge's mariner is forced to carry the albatross on his shoulders. The moral weight falls off only when Rasumov confesses. This image, however, operates at yet another level. Because of his jump, Jim too is forced to carry a burden, but his "crime" also enables

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<sup>10</sup> Daleski. *op. cit.* p.187.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin (1985) p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 78.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 77.

him to meet Marlow who, with Stein's help, gives him the opportunity to immerse in the "destructive element." Jim's "success" in Patusan is, of course, qualified, but Rasumov's action awakens him. Not only is he forced to engage in a world that he had long avoided, but this betrayal, which initially was an act of moral failure, leads him eventually to a moral triumph.

Victory, however, is not easily won. He has to undergo mental and physical anguish before the process is complete. Part of his anguish is brought about because after the betrayal Rasumov is forced to play unaccustomed roles. He is regarded variously as a police spy, a revolutionary, Haldin's accomplice, a confidante, and almost Natalia's lover. Often these roles conflict with his search for a confessor. Helen Funk Rieselbach asserts that, in all the confrontations Rasumov has with the revolutionaries in Geneva, he is "on the verge of giving himself away. He is seized by a spirit of perversity that, coupled with his hatred of lying, causes him to deal dangerously in double meanings and in irony..... Rasumov chafes under the suspicion that he is being watched all the time."<sup>14</sup>

The pressure that is brought about because of his "hatred of lying" is so great that Rasumov nearly confesses on several occasions. Rasumov's confrontation with Peter Ivanovitch is perhaps the instance in which he comes closest to self-disclosure:

Ah, Peter Ivanovitch, if you only knew the force which drew--which *drove* me towards you! The irresistible force....

You have been condescending enough. I quite understood it was to lead me on. You must render me the justice that I have not tried to please. I have been impelled, compelled, or rather sent--let us say sent--towards you for a work that no one but myself can do.... Enough of this. Here I stand before you--confessed!<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, Rasumov is being sarcastic here, but there are other forces at work too. At one level, the "force" is Mikulin, but at another deeper level, perhaps even hidden from Rasumov at this time, the "compulsion" is the necessity to confess. The first crisis in his life unmade Rasumov; now, he flirts with danger so that he can precipitate another which will bring him back into community. To Guerard Rasumov's action is "an

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<sup>14</sup> Helen Funk Rieselbach, *Conrad's Rebels: The Psychology of Revolution in the Novels from Nostramo to Victory*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press (1985) p. 74.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin (1985) p. 230-231.

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unconscious effort to appease guilt through re-enactment of the crime." Despite his comment to Ivonovitch, Rasumov, at this point in his career, "does not stand before Ivanovitch confessed, but someday he will."<sup>16</sup>

As was indicated at the beginning of this essay, not every individual can serve as a confessor. If the act of confession is to provide any cathartic value at all, the confessor must represent "the kind of community he [the one who confesses] needs to exist in and to confirm him."<sup>17</sup> In the course of the novel, Rasumov thinks of confessing to Haldin, Mikulin, Prince K, and even Ivanovitch, but he always desists either because he is not ready to confess or because he feels that these confessors will not be able to make him whole. Ironically, or perhaps fittingly, it is when news of Ziemnitch's suicide has cleared him of all suspicion that Rasumov makes the move that destroys him physically and raises him above the rest in moral worth. His final confrontation with the Haldins is the apogee of Rasumov's psycho-moral drama. He forces an encounter with Mrs Haldin for two reasons: he realizes that "his abstention would look strange," and, like Jim, he is supremely confident that "Nothing could touch him now."<sup>18</sup> Once he is in the room, however, the sympathetic identification which proves so crucial to characters in Conrad's other novels begins to affect him too.

Even a cursory, intertextual comparison of this scene with similar encounters experienced by Jim, Marlow, and the crew of the "Narcissus" reveals an intriguing pattern that is simultaneously different and alike. In *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, the crew identify themselves with the malingerer Wait, and this affects their morale, their attitude towards their officers, and their efficiency as sailors. It is only once Wait is dead that normality is restored. By associating with Kurtz, Marlow "wrestles with death" in *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow says, "It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through. True, he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot."<sup>19</sup> Marlow's "inborn strength" and his "own true stuff"<sup>20</sup> do not allow him to succumb to the powers of the dark, however. Jim for his part labours under the delusion that he has buried the ghost of the *Patna* in Patusan. But, Gentleman Brown arrives, and in what amounts to a psychological duel

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<sup>16</sup> Guerard, *op.cit.* p. 235.

<sup>17</sup> Doody, *op.cit.* p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim: A Tale*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin (1985) p. 317.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin (1985) p. 113.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 69.

with Jim, he makes "a subtle reference to their common blood, an assumption of common experience; a sickening suggestion of common guilt, of secret knowledge that was like a bond of their mind and of their hearts."<sup>21</sup> This confrontation, which forces Jim to recall a guilt-ridden past, and ultimately affects his judgement, results in Brown being given a free passage--a move which leads to Brown's treacherous killing of Dain Waris and his followers.

This pattern of identification is also evident in *Under Western Eyes*, but here identification leads to confession and redemption. Like Jim, Rasumov is a slave to his conscience; consequently, when Mrs Haldin acts the way she does, Rasumov's defenses collapse, and he is ready to confess. Ironically, the same "deprivation" which had made him betray Haldin on a previous occasion, now accelerates the process of confession. Haldin flaunts his domestic happiness in Rasumov's face and this is one of the reasons which prompts him to denounce Haldin; observe, however, what transpires during Rasumov's encounter with Mrs Haldin.

And this was the phantom's mother consumed with grief and white as a ghost. He had felt a pitying surprise. But that, of course, was of no importance. Mothers did not matter. He could not shake off the poignant impression of that silent, quiet, white-haired woman... And was it not something like enviousness which gripped his heart, as if of a privilege denied to him alone of all the men that had ever passed through this world? It was the other who had attained to repose and yet continued to exist in the affection of that mourning old woman, in the thoughts of all these people posing for lovers of humanity. It was impossible to get rid of him. "It's myself whom I have given up to destruction," thought Rasumov. "He has induced me to do it. I can't shake him off."<sup>22</sup>

Rasumov realizes, at length, that he has been living a lie. By betraying Haldin he has betrayed himself. He is on the threshold of a confession.

The scene in which Rasumov confesses to Natalia is perhaps the most dramatic and impressive in the entire novel. Rasumov can no longer act a part and he has nowhere to turn. He rushes out of Mrs Haldin's room, agitated and shattered by remorse, and he meets the one person he wants to avoid--Natalia Haldin, the one who reminds him so much of Victor. She stands there naive, trustful, and enraptured by her

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<sup>21</sup>. Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim: A Tale*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, p. 291.

<sup>22</sup>. Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin (1985) p. 317.

brother's friend. Watching Rasumov's heart-rending confession and Natalia's progression from a consciousness of "the obscure form of his suffering" to the realization that Rasumov was her brother's betrayer is the professor, who is incapable of comprehending *in toto* the "Russian" experience that is taking place here.

Rasumov, then, has finally discovered his confessor. After he is "washed clean" by the rain and by his verbal confession, he compiles a more elaborate written confession in which he articulates to Natalia how she was assigned "to undo the evil by making me betray myself back into truth and peace."<sup>23</sup> This written confession is crucial because it introduces Rasumov's diabolical plot to "steal his [Victor's] sister's soul from her;"<sup>24</sup> reiterates the pathological loneliness and the mental agonies he had experienced before the confession; and, more importantly, describes the nature of the catharsis that this confession gives him:

It was as if your pure brow bore a light which fell on me, searched my heart and saved me from ignominy, from ultimate undoing. And it saved you too. Pardon my presumption. But there was that in your glances which seemed to tell me that you...Your light! Your truth! I felt that I must tell you that I had ended by loving you. And to tell you that I must first confess. Confess, go out--and perish.

Suddenly you stood before me! You alone in the world to whom I must confess. You fascinated me--you freed me from the blindness of anger and hate--the truth shining in you drew the truth out of me.<sup>25</sup>

Not only does Rasumov discover "air to breathe" after the confession, but in Daleski's words, he finally "comes to the sort of self-knowledge that is the condition of a full possession of the self."<sup>26</sup>

Rasumov's task, however, is by no means complete. Some commentators claim that the confession to the revolutionaries is redundant, but this is not so. This confession is rendered not merely "to keep us from thinking the political theme unimportant or secondary,"<sup>27</sup> but also to make the confession complete. Rasumov is not without literary precedents in Classical and later literature. Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex*, Christian

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<sup>23.</sup> *Ibid.* p. 331.

<sup>24.</sup> *Ibid.* p. 331.

<sup>25.</sup> *Ibid.* p. 333.

<sup>26.</sup> *op. cit.* p. 208.

<sup>27.</sup> Goodin, *op. cit.* p. 338.



in *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Everyman in *Everyman* are just three individuals who suffer both mental and physical anguish. Similarly, Rasumov, who had sent Haldin to torture and death, can only receive full expiation when he experiences physical torment. This confession is appropriate for yet another reason. While his confession to Natalia allows him to achieve wholeness at a personal level; his confession to the revolutionaries restores him, eventually, to a larger community. George Goodin asserts:

The second confession is necessary to validate the first. Rasumov confesses to Natalia because he needs to love more than he needs safety, but it is far from clear that this confession will cost him anything. He is proceeding in the same manner as other existential heroes seeking the affirmation of their own identities. He must perform an action which is so disinterested that it can have no other purpose except witnessing to the existence of an ultimate which has not been created through pragmatic adaptation to outward circumstances.<sup>28</sup>

Once again Rasumov's confession at the end of the novel can be contrasted effectively with the actions of Jim and Marlow. In the Congo, Marlow encounters a man who has degenerated to such an extent that he is ruled by the most diabolical of human instincts, yet even though Marlow tries his utmost, he does not have the capacity to declare this knowledge to the people who really matter. When he confronts the Intended, Marlow can only respond with the soft lie: "The last word he pronounced-- was your name."<sup>29</sup> Marlow's confession then remains incomplete. Gail Fraser declares that, at a certain point in the narrative,

Marlow's silence has the dramatic effect of delaying the introduction of Kurtz's Intended,<sup>30</sup> but more important, it reminds us that the narrator himself has a voice which, despite its capacity for truth-telling, can never reproduce the shape of experience as it actually is or was... In this passage, Conrad invites the reader to interpret the narrator's silence. He juxtaposes the Intended's "lies" or illusions with Kurtz's egotistic abuse of language and the self-seeking lies of the other

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<sup>28.</sup> *Ibid.* p. 339.

<sup>29.</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin (1983) p. 121.

<sup>30.</sup> This "silence" is a reference to the sequence which reads: "He was silent for a long time. 'I laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie,' he began, suddenly." Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin (1983) p. 84.

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Europeans. The long silence implies the equivocal nature of Marlow's lie in this context, and the uneasy compromises it represents.<sup>31</sup>

Once Brown massacres Dain Waris and the other villagers, Jim's rule in Patusan is effectively over. All he can do is to fight or to escape. Jim, the supreme egoist, is to the last affected by his delusions of grandeur, however. "Nothing can touch me,"<sup>32</sup> he informs Tamb'Itam, as the latter pleads with his master to resist Doramin. He then walks unarmed to Doramin's *campong* and is shot. Jim's action cannot be construed as an attempt to atone for a "sin;" rather, it is a romantic death-wish. He has chosen a glorious way to die.

When Rasumov presents himself to the revolutionaries, however, he is not deluded by any romantic ideals. He is well aware of the danger he faces, but he is also convinced that a complete confession is both necessary and desirable. Unlike Marlow, he does not make a speech which is calculated to deceive, but speaks the truth and lays himself open to the tender mercies of Nikita. And, by acting thus, he achieves an apotheosis denied to Jim and to Marlow. True enough, Conrad reduces the poignancy of the sacrifice by informing the reader at the end of the novel that Nikita is a double agent. Furthermore, at the last, Rasumov is confined to a "little two-roomed wooden house, in the suburb of some very small town, hiding within the high plank-fence of a yard overgrown with nettles." And, he is "crippled, ill, getting weaker every day."<sup>33</sup> This description of his parlous condition, however, cannot detract from the moral awareness he achieves; Tekla's devotion; and the respect he is accorded by the revolutionaries. Rasumov has finally achieved community.

A biographical analysis of a novel is at best speculative, and there is no evidence to suggest that such an examination of *Under Western Eyes* will prove to be different. Furthermore, although Conrad has structured the novel as a confessional, it does not follow that the novel is his confession too. One cannot totally ignore, however, the claims made by his biographers. Fredrick Karl writes in *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives*,

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<sup>31</sup>. Gail Fraser, *Interweaving Patterns in the Works of Joseph Conrad*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press (1988) p. 65.

<sup>32</sup>. Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim: A Tale*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin (1985) p. 310.

<sup>33</sup>. Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin (1985) p. 347.

One can understand Conrad's mind at the time not only from his letters... but from the psychological situation in the novel he was writing from 1908 to early 1910, *Under Western Eyes*.... The Rasumov of that novel is all irony and ambiguity; every course he has marked out for himself leaves either death or suicide as a consequence. He is baffled in the labyrinth, whether of Russian bureaucracy or of his own desires for the future.... Thus, Conrad stages a psychodrama of defeat, frustration, self-loathing, misdirected ambitions, ambiguity, and anonymity: the literary equivalents of a mental breakdown.<sup>34</sup>

In this extract, and in other sections of his biography, he argues that Conrad's nervous breakdown could be attributed to his writing of this very personal novel.

Leo Gurko takes the argument a step further. He enunciates that "the Russians brought him to a rapid boil, and aroused in him an emotional response from some deeper part of himself which in life he was never able to identify."<sup>35</sup> Gurko concludes:

Art again came to his rescue, for he was able to achieve in fiction that control of powerful feeling that escaped him in present experience. *Under Western Eyes* (1911) turned out to be a safety valve from the rush of angry sentiment about his country's hereditary enemy and, in however obscure or oblique a fashion, an escape hatch for his tangled feelings about Poland.<sup>36</sup>

Both Karl and Gurko convince the reader about the intensely autobiographical nature of the novel; there is little evidence to suggest, however, that this novel is Conrad's "confession" for his "betrayal" of Russia, and for the reservations he had about the Polish revolutionaries who were exiled from their country. Indeed Aaron Fogel takes the argument to a ridiculous level when he claims that,

To "the familiar reader"... the whole scene of the spy writing... is an oblique picture of Joseph Conrad as *forced to write*, and a picture of what a novel, as a "social contract," really is, and is like in its production: it is a forced writing embodying and reenacting the

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<sup>34</sup> Frederick Karl, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill-Ryerson (1979) p. 668.

<sup>35</sup> Leo Gurko, *Joseph Conrad: Giant in Exile*. New York: Macmillan (1962) p. 182.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 182-83.

historical forcedness of other relations (emphasis added).<sup>37</sup>

Conrad, clearly, does not seek a confessor, nor does he wish to find community within the ranks of a people whom he despised. One could say more confidently, however, that in this novel Conrad makes assertions about issues that are extremely personal, assertions which are tempered by his artistic sensibility. These comments avoid the stridency of his essays; consequently they are more convincing.

In "Autocracy and War," Conrad makes a scathing attack on Russia and on revolution. The following extract is a representative example:

In Russia...there is no idea....she is and has been simply the negation of everything worth living for. She is not an empty void; she is a yawning chasm open between the East and West; a bottomless abyss that has swallowed up every hope of mercy, every aspiration towards personal dignity, towards freedom, towards knowledge, every enabling desire of the heart, every redeeming whisper of the conscience. Those that have peered into that abyss, where the dreams of Pan Slavism, of universal conquest, mingled with the hate and contempt for Western ideas, drift impotently like shapes of mist, know well that it is bottomless; that there is no ground for anything that could in the remotest degree serve even the lowest interests of mankind.<sup>38</sup>

But, even a cursory perusal of *Under Western Eyes* reveals that there are other forces at work. Conrad always displays a certain ambivalence towards his characters, and this novel is no exception. He employs ambiguity here to provide a balanced portrayal of the autocrats, the revolutionaries, and the Western world. Irving Howe complains in *Politics and the Novel* that, "by failing to restrain his antipathy towards the emigres, and by casting most of them as knaves or fools, Conrad undermines the dramatic integrity of his book."<sup>39</sup> One must insist, despite Irving Howe, that nothing could be further from the truth. Conrad the essayist and Conrad the novelist do not always write in the same vein.

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<sup>37</sup>. Aaron Fogel, *op.cit.* p. 213.

<sup>38</sup>. Quoted in Frederick Karl, *op.cit.* p. 17-18.

<sup>39</sup>. Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel*. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press (1956) p. 90.

Peter Ivanovitch and the other revolutionaries certainly pose a challenge to Conrad. Although Conrad hated messianic leadership and revolutionary doctrine of any kind, he has, in this novel, deliberately chosen to write about these issues. A lesser artist would have made the revolutionaries into caricatures; Conrad, however, understands the revolutionaries at the same time that he deplores their actions. Sophia is one character who is regarded with a double perspective. Conrad certainly questions her ideology and her grandiose statements about revolution; at the same time, however, he makes the reader aware that she is a tireless worker, a faithful revolutionary whose dedication to the cause is genuine. Conrad's portrayal of Ivanovitch, however, is even more effective. Here is a man who represents everything that Conrad loathed. He is a vain man, who is both a hypocrite and a parasite. He certainly has a penchant for purple prose. Consider the following tirade:

No, we have no classes. But we have the Russian woman. The admirable Russian woman! I receive most remarkable letters signed by women. So elevated in tone, so courageous, breathing such a noble ardour of service! The greatest part of our hopes rests on women.<sup>40</sup>

There is, however, a great divide between precept and practice. While he lavishes praise on the Russian woman for her courage and her "noble of ardour of service," Ivanovitch treats Tekla like a servant, and is himself a lackey to Madame de S. Then again, subsumed in the text, is a suggestion that he articulates these radical feminist views as part of an elaborate plan to seduce, or at least to make himself more appealing to women. Yet Conrad is able to identify some positive traits even in this odious man. Although he is one of the "apes of a sinister jungle,"<sup>41</sup> his traumatic experiences as a convict are depicted at some length, and the reader shares the compassion of the woman who frees him. For all his faults, he is a man of passion, of restless energy, and of considerable resilience. While Conrad questions Ivanovitch's excesses, and deplores his political inclinations, these denunciations are often tempered by occasional references to some positive attributes.

If Tekla, Peter, and Sophia represent the "senseless desperation" in Russia, Prince K, and Mikulin are members of "the senseless tyranny"<sup>42</sup> which forces the revolutionaries to act the way they do. Prince K is a peripheral figure, but Mikulin's role is central to the novel. Like Peter, he is treated with some ambivalence. Undoubtedly, Mikulin is a tool of a repressive regime, and the reader is supposed to

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<sup>40</sup>. Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin (1985) p. 146.

<sup>41</sup>. *Ibid.* p. 51.

<sup>42</sup>. *Ibid.* p. 50.

regard his exploitation of Rasumov with revulsion, yet he is on the whole a mild-mannered man, dedicated to his task. Ultimately he too is a victim, and although the following passage is loaded with irony, Conrad still manages to generate some sympathy for him, in this description of Mikulin's fall from grace:

Later on the larger world first heard of him in the very hour of his downfall, during one of those state trials which astonish and puzzle the average plain man who reads the newspapers, by a glimpse of unsuspected intrigues....Mikulin went under, dignified, with only a calm, emphatic protest of his innocence--nothing more. No disclosures damaging to a harassed autocracy, complete fidelity to the secrets of the miserable *arcana imperii* deposited in his patriotic breast....For the terribly heavy sentence turned Mikulin civilly into a corpse, and actually into something very much like a common convict.

It seems that the savage autocracy, no more than the divine democracy, does not limit its diet exclusively to the bodies of its enemies. It devours its friends and servants as well.<sup>43</sup>

The action in this novel is for the most part rendered by the teacher of languages, and given Conrad's affiliation to the West, this narrator could have become too obviously Conrad's spokesman. Conrad, however, has portrayed him with great conviction. This narrator sees, but he does not always perceive. He is so detached from the world of the emigres that he rarely recognizes the complexities in the issues involved. The reader, for instance, recognizes the narrator's shallowness of feeling when he shows surprise at Sophia's announcement that she had visited the ailing Rasumov. To some extent the narrator is like Rasumov. He too wishes to view the world from a distance. Yet, while Rasumov's confession makes him grow as a character, the narrator to the last refuses to engage, and his personality, therefore, remains static. As Gurko states, "If the Russians suffer from an excess of feeling, the Western Europeans are hobbled by a dearth of it."<sup>44</sup>

Through his unflattering depiction of Geneva and of its citizens, Conrad takes pains to point out that the West is not necessarily a happy alternative to autocratic Russia. At one point the Bastions is described as a "plot of ground of deplorable banality," and the young Russians, Rasumov and Natalia, are compared favourably with the Swiss couple whose

Fate was made secure from the cradle to the grave by the perfected

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<sup>43</sup>. *Ibid.* p. 290-291.

<sup>44</sup>. Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin (1985) p. 195.

mechanism of democratic institutions.... The man, colourlessly uncouth, was drinking beer out of a glittering glass; the woman, rustic and placid, leaning back in the rough chair, gazed idly around.<sup>45</sup>

The Russia that Conrad presents, then, has no middle ground, only extremes of various kinds. Those individuals who do not fit into any extreme are either forced to live in anonymity or brought into this divisive world against their will and ultimately destroyed. There is a sense in which every one in Russia is a victim. Is there a way out of this abhorrent situation? Normally, it would be ridiculous to pose such a question in relation to Conrad's work because, as an examination of *Lord Jim* and "Heart of Darkness" reveals, no "solutions" are usually posited in his novels. *Under Western Eyes*, however, is a different kind of novel. Gurko insists that, "love is one of the sentiments in Conrad that releases men from the sufferings of narcissism and the emptiness of non-involvement."<sup>46</sup> Certainly, love redeems Rasumov, and to his dying day he has a devoted nurse in Tekla. Furthermore, this novel also privileges the importance of domestic harmony; nevertheless, while love triumphs in individual instances, in his concluding pages, Conrad gives more prominence to Ivanovitch's hypocrisy, Sophia's delusions, Rasumov's failing health, and the narrator's insensitivity. There is little to suggest that, as Natalia predicts, "the anguish of hearts shall be extinguished in love"<sup>47</sup> one day. To read *Under Western Eyes* as a novel in which love and loyalty prevail over evil and adversity, then, is too limiting. It is more rewarding on the whole to regard the novel as one which exploits the potentialities of the "Confessional" mode by exploring the challenges faced by an individual who grapples with the irreconcilable claims of self-interest, State, and loyalty to one's fellows. Rasumov is not alone in this regard, however. The dilemmas faced by his creator are equally challenging. Confronted by a situation in which his political convictions could adversely affect his artistic integrity, Conrad contrives to write, if not his own "confession," certainly a series of balanced assertions about the revolutionaries, the autocrats, and the Western world.

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<sup>45</sup>. *Ibid.* p. 189.

<sup>46</sup>. Gurko, *op.cit.* p. 195.

<sup>47</sup>. Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin (1985) p. 345.