

ROAD TO PERDITION: THE MAKING OF AN IDEALIST IN CONRAD'S *UNDER WESTERN EYES*

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ABSTRACT

Compared to Razumov, whose metamorphosis is the backbone of *Under Western Eyes*, Haldin seems to be a relatively minor character. Although proportionally insignificant, the role Haldin plays in *Under Western Eyes* is pivotal in every aspect. It is his unexpected visit in Razumov's room that rings up the curtain on the world of the Russian revolution, an appearance that produces a tidal wave that sweeps through the world of *Under Western Eyes* even after his death. As an idealistic revolutionist, Haldin is a man who "believe[s] in the power of a people's will to achieve anything", and this faith is so strong that "it becomes his religion". In the end, Haldin is crucified for his political belief. Conducting bloody campaign to achieve his goal, Haldin is presented with a typical Conradian moral dilemma. Tracking Haldin's trajectory from bright prospect to utter destruction in *Under Western Eyes*, this paper thus seeks to examine Conrad's attempt of making an idealist.

Keywords: Idealism, Autocracy, Political Novels.

INTRODUCTION

Under Western Eyes is often regarded as one of Conrad's political novels, as it scrutinizes the conflicts between autocracy and revolution in Tsarist Russia at the turn of the twentieth century. However, in Conrad's own view, this novel should be read as "a sort of historical novel dealing with the past" and what it attempts to render is not "so much the political state" but "the psychology of Russia itself". Indeed, as claimed in the Author's Note" to this novel, Conrad states,

... the various figures playing their part in the story also owe their existence to no special experience but to the general knowledge of the condition of Russia and of the moral and emotional reactions of the Russian temperament to the pressure of tyrannical lawlessness, which, in general human terms, could be reduced to the formula of senseless desperation provoked by senseless tyranny (Conrad, 50).

Conrad's sympathy for "Russian temperament" is obvious, for "all these people are not the product of the exceptional but of the general – of the normality of their place, and time, and race". They were reduced to a state of "senseless desperation" simply because "the ferocity and imbecility of an autocratic rule rejecting all legality and in face basing itself upon complete moral anarchism provokes the no less imbecile and atrocious answer of a purely Utopian revolutionism encompassing destruction by the first means to hand, in the strange conviction that a fundamental change of hearts must follow the downfall of any given human institution" (Conrad, 51). Conrad appears to be sceptical about possible transformation revolutionism may

bring for Russia. Seeing from this perspective, Haldin, a student-turn-revolutionist, deserves our attention, as his trajectory in the story not only fathom the political undercurrent of Russia, but more importantly, by depicting Haldin as a revolutionist who dares to seek order under “the pressure of tyrannical lawlessness”, Haldin becomes an idealist Conrad often portrays in his work. Conducting bloody campaign to achieve his goal, Haldin is presented with a typical Conradian moral dilemma. And not surprisingly, Haldin is crucified for his political belief in the end. Therefore, through tracking Haldin’s trajectory in *Under Western Eyes*, we come to observe Conrad’s making of an idealist and, judging from Haldin’s catastrophic end, his road to perdition.

DISCUSSION

Compared to Razumov, whose metamorphosis is the backbone of *Under Western Eyes*, Haldin seems to be a relatively minor character. Although proportionally insignificant, the role Haldin plays in *Under Western Eyes* is pivotal in every aspect. It is his unexpected visit in Razumov’s room that rings up the curtain on the world of the Russian revolution, an appearance that produces a tidal wave that sweeps through the world of *Under Western Eyes* even after his death.

A quintessential idealist, Haldin is a man who “believe[s] in the power of a people’s will to achieve anything”, and this faith is so strong that “it becomes his religion” (157). Counter to Razumov, who hypnotises himself into regarding absolutism as “a guarantee of duration, of safety and peace” (78) and become submissive to the autocracy that terrorises the land, Haldin feels disillusioned and consequently turns to revolution for an answer. Seeking to implant his political belief in the barren land of Russia, Haldin engages himself in the campaign to topple the autocratic government., and the approach he takes is terror and assassinations. As a matter of fact, turning increasingly ruthless in his pursuit of political ideology, Haldin murders the dictatorial minister as well as blameless people. In the name of a better future, the deprivation of innocent lives becomes a necessary evil in Haldin’s eyes. In every aspect, Haldin’s drastic means is a testimonial of Emily Gould’s observation of her husband in *Nostromo*: “A man haunted by a fixed idea is insane. He is dangerous even if that idea is an idea of justice; for may he not bring the heaven down pitilessly upon a loved head?” (379)

However, is Haldin’s action justifiable? It is an open-ended question and Conrad does not afford us his authorial judgment. It is not unusual for author to leave his readers to find their own answer on such a note. In this book, however, this unanswered question appears intriguing. It becomes intelligible that, bearing in mind Haldin’s political opinions and his trajectory in *Under Western Eyes*, the creation of Haldin, apart from serving a fictional purpose, carries a personal weight for Conrad. The similarities between Haldin and Apollo, Conrad’s father, is remarkable. Both are men of the public, and in their honourable pursuit of literature and justice, those closest to them inadvertently pay a hefty price. Despite the obvious similarities between Apollo and Haldin, one significant difference remains. Apollo sacrificed himself voluntarily for his political idealism; Haldin, on the other hand, offered other up recklessly for his political commitment. In this novel, Conrad didn’t afford us his direct judgement on Haldin’s political ideology. Instead, he introduces Razumov, the man whose future shattered because of Haldin’s political belief, to raise doubt about Haldin’s persistent idealism. Therefore, through Razumov’s verdict on Haldin, we come to observe the downfall of an idealist.

We meet Victor Haldin on the day he has come to ask for help and protection from Razumov, after his attempt of assassination of Mr. De P--, the Minister of State. As a means of escape,

Haldin begs Razumov to look for Ziemianitch, who has promised to smuggle him out of the country, in a countryside eating-house. While preying on Razumov's humanity for help, Haldin justified the murder of the Minister of State as an act of patriotism. In his conversation with Razumov, Haldin insists that anyone who has "enough heart to have heard the sound of weeping and gnashing of teeth [the Minister of the State] raised in the land. That would be enough to get over any philosophical hopes. He was uprooting the tender plant. He had to be stopped" (Conrad, 67). The assassination of Mr. P--, seeing from this perspective, is nothing but an honourable decision a patriot made to protect his motherland.

Like many other Conradian idealists before him, Haldin is fully aware of the moral consequence the assassination brings. "You suppose that I am a terrorist, a destructor of what it is", Haldin says to Razumov, "[b]ut consider that the true destroyers are they who destroy the spirit of progress and truth, not the avengers who merely kill the bodies of the persecutors of human dignity". Haldin concludes that "Men like me are necessary to make room for self-contained, thinking men like you. Well, we have made the sacrifices of our lives, but all the same I want to escape if it can be done. It is not my life I want to save, but my power to do. I won't live idle. Oh no! Don't make any mistake, Razumov. Men like me are rare" (68). While glorifying the bright future his action may bring for Russia, Haldin also seeks to instil a sense of patriotism in Razumov,

"Men like me leave no posterity, but their souls are not lost. No man's soul is ever lost. It works for itself--or else where would be the sense of self-sacrifice, of martyrdom, of conviction, of faith--the labours of the soul? What will become of my soul when I die in the way I must die--soon--very soon perhaps? It shall not perish. Don't make a mistake, Razumov. This is not murder--it is war, war. 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. Ha! you say nothing. You are a sceptic. I respect your philosophical scepticism, Razumov, but don't touch the soul. The Russian soul that lives in all of us. It has a future. It has a mission (Conrad, 70)

Of course, for Haldin, this mission is to overthrow the autocratic state and a modern Russia will thus be built from ashes. For that, Haldin, the idealist, proudly claims that "when the necessity of this heavy work came to me and I understood that it had to be done – what did I do? Did I exult? Did I take pride in my purpose? Did I try to weigh its worth and consequences? No! I was resigned. I thought 'God's will be done.'" It is obvious that insisting on viewing revolutionism through the prism of his own illusion, Haldin pursues his idealism relentlessly and with little concern about the reality. Like many of Conradian heroes before him, Haldin is soon confronted with a reality check by circumstances, and eventually becomes the victim of his own idealism. Indeed, Haldin's romantic quest for idealism, seeing from Razumov's eyes, is not a force for change, but of destruction.

Haldin's request for assistance plunges Razumov into a great moral quandary. He cannot refuse Haldin's plea, for it is presented to him on the grounds of humanity; consequently, rejecting it would be like committing an archetypal sin, similar to the murder of a friend or a guest. However, knowing the nature of the autocratic regime he lives under, helping Haldin means he would have to risk his own safety by involving himself in the situation of political conflict – exactly what he has tried to evade. To be or not to be, that is certainly the question for Razumov. Required to choose between loyalty to the autocratic state that helped to raise and define him, and loyalty to a revolutionary assassin who trusts him, Razumov has no choice of honourable

action. Tony Tanner fittingly analogises Razumov to “a character in a morality play, except that neither of the opponents are angels. Between them they drag Razumov into the spectacle of morality, to that testing moment when choice is both unavoidable and damning”. Razumov’s final decision is to comply with Haldin’s request, a decision made not by virtue of his homage to human solidarity, but as a considered act for self-preservation, since he cannot afford to have Haldin be seen leaving his room. In all aspects, it is a decision made to serve his best interests. This aptness for survival helps to shed a light on Razumov’s frame of mind, for it is this desperation for self-protection that later conjures up the demon of disloyalty, leading Razumov into a moral wilderness.

Razumov understand perfectly that a simple act of humanity may jeopardise his future and he could be sinking “into the lowest social depths amongst the hopeless and destitute – the night bird of the city” (Conrad, 72). Any hope for the future would soon evaporate. More importantly, after he discovers that Haldin is taking advantage of his orphanhood: “It occurred to me that you – you have no one belonging to you – no ties, no one to suffer for it if this came out by some means” (Conrad, 67). With this confession, Haldin unwittingly signs his own death warrant. Razumov becomes convinced that his isolation has been abused, and made a sacrifice to Haldin’s political ideology, a cause he does not even subscribe to.

Through the lens of contempt and indignation, Razumov sees himself being fatefully trapped between Ziemianitch and Haldin, between “the drunkenness of the peasant incapable of action and the dream-intoxication of the idealist incapable of perceiving the reason of things” (Conrad, 77), without a hope of escape. This judgement, understandably, leads Razumov to condemn revolution as a “childish game”. Looking at these irresponsible creatures, he holds a self-assuring judgement that “children had their masters”. With such a conviction, Razumov resorts to the order of autocracy. Indeed, while Haldin tends to look at this land and see only misery and corruption, Razumov looks beyond this discord to find harmony and a sense of identity. Haldin is thus condemned,

"What is this Haldin? And what am I? Only two grains of sand. But a great mountain is made up of just such insignificant grains. And the death of a man or of many men is an insignificant thing. Yet we combat a contagious pestilence. Do I want his death? No! I would save him if I could--but no one can do that--he is the withered member which must be cut off. If I must perish through him, let me at least not perish with him, and associated against my will with his sombre folly that understands nothing either of men or things. Why should I leave a false memory? (Conrad, 96)"

With such a conviction, Haldin, who has vowed to overthrow the government, becomes an element of disturbance in Razumov’s eyes. “Haldin means disruption”, Razumov concludes, “What is he with his indignation, with his talk of bondage – with his talk of God’s justice? All that means disruption” (79). When the verdict against Haldin is delivered, the process of reasoning begins:

Better that thousands should suffer than that a people should become a disintegrated mass, helpless like dust in the wind. Obscurantism is better than the light of the incendiary torches. The seed germinates in the night. Out of the dark soil springs the perfect plant. But a volcanic eruption is sterile, the ruin of the fertile ground. And am I, who love my country – who have nothing but that to love and put my faith in – am I to have my future, perhaps my usefulness, ruined by this sanguinary fanatic (Conrad, 97).

Seeing autocracy as a kind of cement, binding individuals together and preventing society from losing cohesion and continuity, Razumov commits himself to the reactionary dogma that “absolute power should be preserved ... for the great autocrat of the future” (80). Autocracy becomes a force of stability, security, cohesiveness and confidence. Standing on “the point of conviction”, Razumov’s “train of thought” leads him to associate his vision with the necessity of autocracy (79):

In Russia, the land of spectral ideas and disembodied aspirations, many brave minds have turned away at last from the vain and endless conflict to the one great historical fact of the land. They turned to autocracy for the peace of their patriotic conscience as a weary unbeliever, touched by grace, turns to the faith of his fathers for the blessing of spiritual rest. Like other Russians before him, Razumov, in conflict with himself, felt the touch of grace upon his forehead.

Holding fast to patriotism, Razumov comes to regard Haldin’s revolutionary agenda as “harbouring a pestilential disease that would not perhaps take your life, but would take from you all that made life worth living – a subtle pest that would convert earth into a hell” (77). Seeing things from such an angle, the betrayal of Haldin/humanity is less important than the loyalty to the authorities. It is such arguments and state of mind that induce Razumov’s terrible decision to give up Haldin to the police. Like Conrad’s father Apollo, Haldin finally becomes a martyr, sacrificing himself for his political ideology.

CONCLUSION

In this novel, Conrad once again depicts a man’s trajectory from bright prospect to utter destruction. Conrad’s verdict of Haldin and Razumov could be found in a letter he wrote to Cunningham Graham in 1898, in which he recognises that:

... [w]hat makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victim of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. To be part of the animal kingdom under the conditions of this earth is very well – but as soon as you know of your slavery, the pain, the anger, the strife – the tragedy begins ... There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope: there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that ... is always but a vain and floating appearance (Jean-Aubry, 226).

Such is the agony that bedevils Razumov, who once prided himself on being a man with a “mind”, a characteristic he believes differentiating him from the Russian masses. Haldin, on the other hand, is spared such agony. Unlike Razumov, Haldin remains true to himself. However, while romanticising the assassination of Mr. P—as an opportunity to serve his country, Haldin is blind to the causality and suffering his passionate idealism causes. Living in a world created by self-inflicted fantasy, like many Conradian heroes before him, Haldin is destined to fall when he is confronted with a reality check by circumstances. Idealism, once again, is questioned, and the idealist is mocked by Conrad in *Under Western Eyes*. As a Conradian idealist, Haldin’s fate is sealed from the onset of the story. Perhaps for Conrad, the journey he maps out for his idealist is often not a journey towards self-fulfilment, but indeed a road to perdition.

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