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In Search of a Perfect Form and Style: Turgenev and Conrad's Emphasis on Visual Impression

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The human face as a mask that can both hide and emphasise the main traits of human personality and thoughts was used by Turgenev and Conrad. In the society depicted in such novels as *Under Western Eyes*, *Virgin Soil* and *Smoke* where secrecy and hypocrisy are a universal condition of man, face reading becomes an essential factor. The references to eyes as well as words and outside look indicate something about the characters concerned and can be considered as a means attributing a moral significance to physical appearance. As eyes are closely related to communication and knowledge, comments about the characters' eyes implicate their knowledge and honesty with which they communicate with other people.

Keywords: power of eyes, sensory and visual impression, facial expression, complicity of vision

The impact of Turgenev on European literature and the European reading public was largely due to the Russian's attitude to his art and life which were generally more acceptable and comprehensible to European sensibilities and fitted him more closely than his great contemporaries Tolstoy and Dostoevsky into the European literary tradition. A representative of the new Russian intelligentsia, as much at home in Paris or Berlin as in Moscow or St Petersburg, a man of noble birth, liberal inclinations and cultivated tastes, extraordinarily gifted and well-read, Turgenev was a man of convinced Westernist views, whose leisurely prose evokes faultlessly both a period and a people. Professionally generous „European”

Turgenev was one of the most popular members of the French literary circle, a friend of the Brothers Goncourt, Prosper Mérimée and Gustave Flaubert. Turgenev also had English connections, principally through his translator, William Ralston. The idea for his novel *Fathers and Sons* was conceived during a visit to the Isle of Wight, and in 1879 he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University of Oxford. His influence on Anglo-American literature came through Henry James, who looked up to him as a master. Yet for all Turgenev's cosmopolitanism, he was deeply concerned with Russian issues. According to Patrick Waddington, the novelist's long residence outside Russia „had blunted his feelings, no doubt; but it had also broadened the scope of his observation”¹.

Like Turgenev, Conrad was an outsider who valued Western civilization and culture a lot. Although perceived by some English people as a „bloody furriner” as Conrad was aware, and identified as a „Slav”², Conrad nonetheless insists that Poland is a part of the West, contrary to Russian imperialism and his identification of the latter with the East. He endorses the aesthetic and cultural values of the Western canon and marginalizes non-Western and non-canonical works, for example, of Dostoevsky. It comes as no surprise that Turgenev, a Russian who adhered to Western beliefs and European principles appealed to Conrad. The universal attributes, as they were expressed in Turgenev's works, as well as his literary preferences and masters, appealed to Conrad. The great Russian novelists of the nineteenth century aroused mixed feelings in Conrad. Although Lev Tolstoy was considered by Conrad „perhaps (...) worthy”³ of Constance Garnett's translation, he was treated with reserved respect and suspicion as being too mystical for Conrad's taste. His chief antipathy was reserved for Dostoevsky – „the grimacing, haunted creature, who is under a curse”⁴ – in contrast to the civilized, liberal and humane Turgenev, who was one of Conrad's literary predecessors and masters, next to Flaubert,

¹ P. Waddington, *Some Silent Phases of Turgenev's Critical Reception in Britain. Part I, 1853–1870; Part II, 1870–1883*, in: *Ivan Turgenev and Britain*, ed. P. Waddington, Oxford 1995, p. 19.

² *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, eds F.R. Karl, L. Davies et al., vol. 3, Cambridge 1983–2008, p. 492.

³ *Ibidem*, vol. 5, p. 71.

⁴ G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad. Life and Letters*, vol. 2, London 1927, p. 290.

Maupassant and James⁵. The contrast is crucial for it shows how Conrad viewed Turgenev as a pure artist tragically caught between his apollonian gifts and the mire of the world, while he viewed Dostoevsky as a grim, graceless writer who lacked all that Turgenev possessed. We may also agree that avoiding being accused of rejecting all „things Russian” and all Russian writers, Conrad found it easiest to praise Turgenev, who combined in himself and in his writing national and universal values in a satisfactory balance.

Conrad's unreserved admiration for Turgenev dated from his childhood. „As a boy”, Conrad wrote to Garnett on 2 May 1917, „I remember reading *Smoke* in Polish translation” and „*Gentlefolks* in French”⁶. Edward Garnett, for whom Turgenev was „a great poet and artist”, in his introduction to *On the Eve* writes: „If Tolstoy is a purer native expression of Russia's force, Turgenev is the personification of Russian aspiration working with the instruments of wide cosmopolitan culture”⁷. It should be stressed that Constance Garnett's translations of Turgenev's novels, which appeared between 1894 and 1899, consolidated Conrad's knowledge of Turgenev, and contributed to Edward Garnett's persistent insistence upon reading Conrad as a second Turgenev.

Undoubtedly, the most eloquent tribute to Constance Garnett's translations of Turgenev's works comes in a letter to her husband Edward written by Conrad in May 1917: „Turgeniev for me is Constance Garnett and Constance Garnett is Turgeniev. She has done that marvellous thing of placing the man's work inside English literature and it is there that I see it – or rather that I *feel* it”⁸.

Acknowledging that Turgenev was a great artist „whole-souledly national”, Conrad saw his created world as „universal”, declaring that „for non-Russian readers, Turgenev's Russia is but a canvas on which the incomparable artist of humanity lays his colours and his forms in the great light and the free air of the world”⁹. In the preface he contributed to Ed-

⁵ Conrad was twenty-six years old when Turgenev died in 1883. *Almayer's Folly* – his first novel was published twelve years later in 1895.

⁶ G. Jean-Aubry, op. cit., p. 192.

⁷ E. Garnett, *On the Eve*, trans. C. Garnett, in: *Ivan Turgenev and Britain*, p. 131.

⁸ G. Jean-Aubry, op. cit., p. 192.

⁹ J. Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*, London 1921, p. 46.

ward Garnett's study on Turgenev, Conrad praises the Russian writer for his „penetrating insight and unflinching generosity of judgement, an exquisite perception of the visible world and an unerring instinct for the significant”¹⁰ which „should make (him) sympathetic and welcome to the English-speaking world”¹¹.

While various personal factors often affected Conrad's valuations of his own novels, a careful reading of his letters, prefaces and autobiographical essays indicates that he devoted much thought both to his own artistic means and to the art of the novel in general. This can also be applied to Turgenev who in his correspondence and *Literary Reminiscences* revealed much about himself that is of value in determining his own attitude to his art and literature in general. One of the most distinctive qualities of Turgenev and Conrad's writing is their strong visual sense.

The specific nature of influence is often problematic, but there can be little doubt that

Conrad used the Jamesian impressionistic manner of communicating action, images and emotions through each character's individual consciousness. Both James and Conrad valued fiction, a personal, direct impression of life, to be analysed as the expression of the writer's mind and history. As often as James compared the novel to an organism – to a tree or a plant that seemingly forms itself, he figured the novel as a building or a tapestry which the novelist creates. In *The Art of Fiction*¹² James asserts: „A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression”¹³. According to James the novel „is of all pictures the most comprehensive and the most elastic. All it needs is a subject and a painter. But for its subject, magnificently, it has the whole human consciousness”¹⁴.

Conrad says nothing about his methods of constructing his novels. Methods he regarded as essential in producing the illusion of life. In the

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 48.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 47.

¹² H. James, *The art of fiction*, „Longman's Magazine” no. 4, 1884, p. 502–521.

¹³ Idem, *Literary Criticism. Essays on Literature. American Writers. English Writers*, ed. L. Edel, New York 1984, p. 50.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 102.

„Preface” to *The Nigger of the „Narcissus”* Conrad describes the aim of the work of art as „a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect”¹⁵. All art, according to Conrad, appeals emotionally to our senses of pity and beauty, pain and mystery. And how, Conrad asks, can art – particularly fiction – catch this air of sensory reality; how does it penetrate to the colours of life’s complexities? Art must, he says, „strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music”¹⁶. Thus, the implications of the concern with precision kept bringing Conrad back to the ideas set in his „Preface” to *The Nigger of the „Narcissus”*. Visual precision remained the first requisite for a suggestive use of prose language, while verbal precision continued as the first condition for the effective evocation of the symbolic power of words. When Conrad expresses his belief in the „power of the written word”¹⁷ he is careful to connect the notions of „impression” on the senses and „appeal” to temperament, so as to point out in what way the artist’s descent into himself can uncover „the very truth” of the „visible universe”¹⁸. The way is the novelist’s fidelity to the moral commitment which must underlie his narrative and linguistic choices. In the preface Conrad writes that the task of the conscientious writer is not to edify, console, or amuse, but „by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see”¹⁹. This begs the question of what he wants us to see, and how, and why, because apart from direct vision, seeing can also mean to see things with one’s mind’s eye, to understand things, to see someone’s point of view, or to see a truth, or „the truth manifold and one”²⁰.

Conrad was well acquainted with Turgenev’s Nezhdanov from *Virgin Soil*. Calling one of Galsworthy’s characters „incapable”, Conrad observed: „Of the two incapables that come to one’s mind, the loquacious

¹⁵ J. Conrad, *The Nigger of the „Narcissus”*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, Harmondsworth 1986, p. 11.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

and the nervous, Rudin and Nejdanof, that cannot be said in the absolute sense"²¹.

Under Western Eyes, Conrad's great political novel about tsarist Russia is presented in the 1920 „Author's Note” as „an attempt to render not so much the political state as the psychology of Russia itself”²². In a letter to Edward Garnett on 29 October 1921 Conrad declared that in writing his novel he was „concerned with nothing but ideas”²³, and he denied any knowledge of the Russians, so it comes as no surprise that things Russian in the novel are viewed by Western eyes. That is why it is worthwhile to examine both writers' emphasis on visual expression because in the society depicted in such novels as *Under Western Eyes* and *Virgin Soil*, where secrecy and hypocrisy are a universal condition of man, face reading becomes an essential factor.

Although both *Virgin Soil* and *Under Western Eyes* are much concerned with words, the title of the latter puts emphasis upon eyes – that feature of the face that almost every character is described in terms of Turgenev and Conrad's literary master – Flaubert also valued the power of eyes. In his opinion human life is „a spectacle, a thing to be looked at, seen, apprehended, enjoyed with eyes. What our eye shows us is all that we are sure of”²⁴.

In his „Author's Note” to *Under Western Eyes* Conrad claims that aesthetic insight is resolutely sensual, „and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words” art also makes its appeal through the senses²⁵. Instead, falsehood and truth correspond to two orders of corporeal sight: that of gaze, which is associated with the surveillance practiced by Russian autocrats and revolutionaries, and in a different form, with the ineffective eye of the Western narrator; and the glance or glimpse into which the moral reality of Russian life upon occasion emerges clearly. Conrad's novel devotes much of its attention to the first of these modes of vision, one that is associated here with Russia because it is shared by both revolu-

²¹ G. Jean-Aubry, op. cit., p. 80.

²² J. Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, London 1923, p. VIII.

²³ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, p. 489.

²⁴ H. James, *Literary Criticism. French Writers. Other European Writers. The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. L. Edel, New York 1984, p. 170.

²⁵ J. Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. IX.

tionaries and the state, which is organised along a panoptical principle of compulsory visibility. Michel Foucault in his 1975 work *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (published in English in 1977 as *Discipline and Punish*) unpacks the disturbing implications of Panopticon, a prison designed by the eighteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham. The Panopticon was designed so that an inspector could observe its inmates from a vantage-point that remained unseen. The intent behind it was „to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power”²⁶. For what Foucault sees in the panopticon are the origins of modern surveillance society: the shift from the detached, contemplative view of Descartes, to a dominating gaze. For Foucault, „the power to see, the power to make visible, is the power to control”²⁷.

When we move from actual history into fictional history of *Under Western Eyes*, two special dimensions emerge by which some of the meaning of the novel is to be conveyed. On the one hand, there is the West, a vague geographical entity which may simply mean Geneva or may even mean the world west of Russia. Though at times the narrative makes us assume that we are directly within the mind of the Russian Razumov, we are always under Western eyes, having our experience filtered for us by the old English narrator of the story who announces that he will translate and edit Razumov's diary. The English language teacher residing in Geneva whose function in the novel is that of a chorus and intermediary between the reader and the several sources of information which present the multiple points of view gathered by an „objective” narrator. But, as Conrad himself remarked in the „Author's Note”, the old teacher of languages was useful to him in several ways and „he must be useful to the reader both in the way of comment and by the part he plays in the development of the story”, as an eye-witness to „produce the effect of actuality” as a friend and listener for Miss Haldin „who otherwise would have been too much alone and unsupported to be perfectly credible”²⁸.

²⁶ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Harmondsworth 1977, p. 201.

²⁷ *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. D.M. Levin, Berkeley 1993, p. 4.

²⁸ J. Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. IX.

The narrator sees Razumov through the eyes of his deluded fellow-men, but is also able to understand from the inside the implications of his double entendre, his physical convulsions, and, finally, his struggle towards the confession in the Haldin's anteroom.

Thus the narrator introduces Razumov, a very ambitious student at the University of St. Petersburg and illegitimate son of Prince K – and an archpriest's daughter, now dead. He has no family, no home to give him political sympathies and opinions. His life is transformed when he arrives home one evening to find his fellow student Haldin, a revolutionary and assassin, waiting in his flat. When Victor Haldin appears before Razumov and announces that he had assassinated the Minister of Justice, Razumov sees physical consequences of not giving him in to the police – imprisonment, ill-treatment, restricted residence in provinces. Razumov is tormented by his decision to turn Haldin in to the police. It is a situation in which neither of the possible decisions is satisfactory. The „brain” does not appear to offer a solution. He informs the authorities and is soon enmeshed in a web of counter-espionage and revolutionary intrigue.

Once Haldin possesses Razumov's soul, then the latter's eyes no longer function simply as organs to perceive phenomena of the world of objects. Rather, he begins to have hallucinations which mirror his internal chaos.

In Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* illusion is seen to be bound up with the moral culpability of preferring subjective fantasies to objective knowledge. The more a protagonist acts selfishly the more subject he is to hallucinations and misperceptions, and the more a person flees from the truth the less he knows what the truth is. Furthermore, if eyes are chosen by Conrad to recall the personality of the character – if indeed they are the „mirror of the soul” – they are also the means by which the soul of a man may be influenced by another and may reveal the possession of that second soul. When Razumov decides to betray Haldin he has a vision of „Haldin, solid, distinct, real, with his inverted hands over his eyes”²⁹, lying in the snow. Nevertheless, although the image that haunts Razumov does not exist as an empirical reality, it is so lifelike, so believably „real”, that it overshadows its living counterpart. The hallucination has such a solidity of

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 36–37.

aspect that Razumov at first wonders if Haldin has in fact left his room, and he impulsively assures himself that the key is still in his pocket. He then deliberately walks over the spot on which he sees Haldin's body lying. Turning to look, he sees „only the unbroken track of his footsteps over the place where the breast of the phantom had been lying”³⁰. His conclusion is that he has had „an extraordinary experience”, and he makes his decision: „I shall give him up”³¹. The hallucination confirms Razumov in the speculation which leads to his self-justification for the betrayal.

The central paradox of Razumov's situation is that as an indirect consequence of his having identified himself with the public image he means to project, he finds himself being gradually forced out of a candid public existence, compelled to present a false face to the world. If the eyes are truly the windows of the soul, then it is ironic that Razumov, whose own soul craves recognition above all things, should be obliged to conceal his eyes, and even literally mask them on occasion. Consequently, the circumstance that Mikulin selects an oculist's establishment as a venue for his meetings with Razumov contributes to the irony of the latter's false situation. Razumov visits the oculist in order to elude surveillance, to avoid the „eye of others”, and at the same time these sessions make him see not better but worse as he is gradually alienated from his previous way of life and levered into a fraudulent position with respect to his fellows and himself. It is appropriate that in order to make these visits appear plausible he must feign an ailment of the eyes, and even wear an eyeshade when visitors call³². In consequence therefore of his obligation to dissemble, to present a false front, Razumov is severed from any possibility of genuine communion with his kind. When meeting Natalia Haldin for the first time he averts his gaze, and on a subsequent occasion „did not look into her eyes which were so ready for him”³³. Yet, Natalia's „trustful eyes”³⁴ had a more powerful influence on Razumov. Only through Natalia's truthfulness can Razumov see the baseness of his attempts to protect himself at the expense of others; only through her unselfish, trusting nature does he begin to sense

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 37.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Ibidem, p. 309.

³³ Ibidem, p. 179.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 358.

the importance of solidarity. Her trustful eyes which are not able to detect deceit persuade Razumov to be innocent – to reveal his guilt to her. It is clear in the course of the novel that until this moment Natalia's existence has been largely insulated from the worst brutalities of Russian life, that she has had very little first-hand experience of suffering. Now, as she receives Razumov's halting confession, she begins finally to see, and is able to inform the teacher of languages some time later that „my eyes are open at last”³⁵.

It comes as no surprise that Turgenev may have despaired of any change in Russia in the 1860's, but as the revolutionary tide began to rise he undertook „a penetrating analysis of the Russian revolutionary movement”³⁶, and the dedication of the young revolutionaries whom he portrayed in *Virgin Soil*. His protagonist Nezhdanov is, like Razumov, the illegitimate son of Prince G. „a rich adjutant-general, and of his daughter's governess, a pretty «institute girl», who had died on the day of his birth”³⁷. Nezhdanov and Razumov's lack of family makes them more acceptable as symbolic characters, since the archetypal hero typically has an obscure parentage. Not possessing a secure self-image or an immediate intuition of an autonomous personality Nezhdanov, like Razumov, cannot perceive himself except vicariously, and is therefore entirely dependent for his sense of identity upon his status in the social world and his standing in the eyes of others. But at the same time the young man, who is able to establish his identity only through other people's perception of him, is condemned to move through a world teeming with eyes, a universe of observation directed always at himself. Nezhdanov, like Razumov, is also compelled to present a false face to the world.

In going among the people, as Nezhdanov understood his mission, he had little use of his aristocratic birth and his efforts to politicise the people merely amount to adopting their clumsy dress and their depraved passion for cheap vodka. He feels „like a bad actor in the wrong part”³⁸, and secretly longs to give up politics for his art. He writes political pamphlets, but he is also disillusioned. The peasants „stared at Nezhdanov and seemed

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 376.

³⁶ L. Schapiro, *Turgenev. His Life and Times*, Oxford 1978, p. 263.

³⁷ I. Turgenev, *Virgin Soil*, trans. C. Garnett, New York 2000, p. 33.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 270.

to be listening to his address with attention; but they had evidently not understood a word he had said"³⁹. His yearnings to be understood recall the very similar inner cry – „I want to be understood"⁴⁰ – of Conrad's Razumov. Soon Nezhdanov realised that he was one of the isolated group of dreamers who had read only their own aspirations to the Russian people. „All are asleep!" runs like a refrain through Nezhdanov's poem *Sleep*, only the „Tsar's gin-shop never closes an eye"⁴¹. „Our people are asleep", Nezhdanov writes in his postscript. „I fancy if anything ever does wake it"⁴² is the implied question. He admits to the „exquisite girl"⁴³ Marianna who loves him – „a poor homeless devil"⁴⁴ that he lost all his political illusions and does not „believe in the *cause itself*"⁴⁵ Turgenev's Marianna, like Conrad's Natalia – a woman with true and honest nature, has „pure, passionate nature"⁴⁶. She is for Nezhdanov, like Natalia for Razumov, „the incarnation of everything good and true on earth – the incarnation of all the love of mother, sister, wife"⁴⁷. Turgenev's truth in *Virgin Soil* reveals itself in what people do and how they look, not in what they say. Nezhdanov symbolizes the alienated and misunderstood individual who is seen in bad light, and therefore ignored and rejected by society. The physical separation of Nezhdanov from the peasants mirrors the spiritual separation of the individual artistic ego and public will. Set apart from others, only the artist realizes the importance of his ambitions and accomplishments. The further he goes in pursuit of perfection and becoming one of the people, the further away he moves from the understanding of the people for whom he performs.

Since *Virgin Soil* trod on dangerous ground, Turgenev was careful to leave much unsaid, and decided to choose the middle way between criticising and idealising the revolutionaries, and thus to get closer to the truth

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 290.

⁴⁰ J. Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 39.

⁴¹ I. Turgenev, *Virgin Soil*, p. 275.

⁴² Ibidem.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 124.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 332.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 142.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 124.

– to show that the revolutionaries' cause is so false and remote from life that it must end in a complete fiasco. In *Virgin Soil* Turgenev seems to have been sceptical about revolution, and his revolutionaries, like in Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*, are not portrayed as attractive personalities. Even the factory foreman Solomin, in whom Turgenev gave the glimpse of the future of Russia, and who was also not far from the nostalgic portrait of early-nineteenth-century Russia presented by Turgenev in the whole range of revolutionaries and their hangers-on, with all their ill-examined motives, was not an attractive personality: he was „tall, lean, broad-shouldered, with light eyebrows and eyelashes; he had a long yellow face, a short broad nose, very small greenish eyes, a placid expression, large prominent lips, white teeth, also large, and a cleft chin covered with a faint down”⁴⁸.

Both Turgenev and Conrad agreed that it is easier to lie in words than by gesture or facial expression. It is important to recognise that both writers' novels demonstrate the complicity of vision and power. As eyes are closely related to communication and knowledge, comments about the characters' eyes implicate their knowledge and honesty with which they communicate with other people. According to Y. Lotman the way a protagonist is presented through the eyes of another personage, it means in his own language, in his own notion; characterises both the person being described and the one who does it⁴⁹. One glance, one wrinkle, one quiver of a muscle in the face, may express the unutterable. The relation between a physical expression and the state of mind that goes with it is often firmly established and conventionalised. Both Turgenev and Conrad make use of such correlations and indicate without having to describe them what emotions and sensations their characters experience by referring to their physical actions.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 128.

⁴⁹ J. Łotman, *Struktura tekstu literackiego*, Warszawa 1984, p. 361–362.