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‘COSAS DE RUSSIA’: JOSEPH CONRAD’S CONFESSIONS ABOUT RUSSIA AND RUSSIANS. PART 2



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Abstract. The paper addresses a very controversial subject in Conradian scholarship and criticism: Conrad's representation of the 'Cosas de Russia.' So far, it has been largely (but not necessarily correctly) interpreted as either Russophobia (in his non-fiction) or Russophilia (in his fiction). Conrad himself evaded any clear answer as to his precise stance and its respective background. But his narrative strategies are telling enough. They contain some carefully guarded secrets, but also unintentional confessions. The question therefore is: how much did he really know about Russia and Russians, how familiar was he with Russian culture, language and literature? These issues are explored through a combination of British Cultural, Linguistic and Literary Studies, but also Slavonic Studies. The methods employed are close reading, narratology, deconstruction and contextualization. Apart from Conrad's novels "Under Western Eyes" (1911) and "The Secret Agent" (1907) his essays "Autocracy and War" (1905) and "Turgenev" (1917) will be used for elucidation. Among the Russian works of fiction studied in comparison to Conrad's works are Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Demons" (1871–1872) and "The Brothers Karamazov" (1879–1880) and Ivan Goncharov's "Oblomov" (1859). The major attention, however, will be directed to Nikolay Gogol's short stories "Nevsky Prospekt" (1835) and "The Overcoat" (1842) as well as his novel "Dead Souls" (1842). After reconsidering central issues and correcting some misassumptions in literary criticism, the paper attempts to add a few new aspects to the debate by focusing on issues of intertextuality. What emerges from all this is that Conrad's 'Cosas de Russia' represent a kind of hidden master knowledge whose significance still needs to be fully recognized.

Key words: Joseph Conrad; Cosas de Russia; representation of Russian culture, language and literature; intertextuality; comparative studies of English and Russian literature; issues of translation.

Nikolay Gogol

In the famous short story “Nevsky Prospekt” (1835) there are detailed and very vivid and inspired sociological-psychological descriptions of this most famous boulevard of Russia at different hours of the day with changing passers-by on foot or in carriages. They frequent the place for different reasons, depending on the time – for work/business or for leisure (cf. Bakhtin’s chronotopes). We see citizens of diverse social backgrounds, professionals, workers, strollers, people of dubious morality, including women. This evokes the descriptions of St. Petersburg when Razumov crosses the city on his way to locate Ziemianitch’s quarter. But also of Verloc’s walk across London to the embassy in *The Secret Agent*. This walk alone, across various quarters in the heart of the British Empire, epitomizes social diversity and contrast.

In “Nevsky Prospekt,” the narrator eventually describes the time when dusk is falling and the watchman lights the lamps. It is then that in the low shop windows etchings begin to appear that must not be seen during the day [Gogol 1976: 7]. This evokes associations with the ambiguous shop of Verloc and Winnie, which takes on different outward shapes in the daytime and at night. The chronotopes embody highly ambivalent connotations. The shop has an external and an internal life. It is ambiguously associated with respectability, a modest lower middle-class existence, a meeting place for people with dubious political opinions and even

dangerous political connections, and, last but not least, a place that sells erotic items under the counter and political pamphlets, which are as dubious. In “Nevsky Prospekt,” after the introduction of the boulevard, the subsequent focus of the narrative is on the different fortunes of two friends, Lieutenant Pirogov and the painter Piskarev. We see the Nevsky Prospekt as conducive to fashioning ambiguous existences and identities. The story ends upon reflections about how the boulevard in fact lies, deceives and cheats [ibid.: 34–35]:

But strangest of all are the incidents which occur on the Nevsky Prospekt. Do not trust this Nevsky Prospekt. I always wrap myself more tightly in my cloak when I walk along it and I try not to look at the objects I encounter. It is all a delusion. It is all a dream. Nothing is what it seems to be. [ibid.: 34]

People, clothes, human reactions, talks, women, shop windows are not what they seem to be. Least of all can the women be trusted [ibid.: 90–91]. In *UWE*, we have a juxtaposition of St. Petersburg and Geneva, places that likewise fashion the most varied kinds of problematical existences, lifestyles and identities. Under the eyes of Easterners and Westerners in Russia and in Switzerland the most dangerous political activities take place under the surface of normalcy and innocence. Throughout the novel Conrad thematizes the clash between appearance and reality in things and people.

In Gogol's story "The Overcoat" (1842) the major protagonist is a conscientious civil servant in a department in Petersburg. Akaky Akakyevitch Bashmatchkin is a government clerk. His official grade in the service is that of a perpetual titular councillor. Akaky Akakyevitch is the eternal copying clerk. At his work place, nobody pays attention to him or respects him; he is almost overlooked [Gogol 1954: 215–17]. This bears a certain resemblance to Razumov's isolated, inconspicuous position in St. Petersburg.

Akaky Akakyevitch lives in very modest circumstances, has a shabby overcoat, which unfortunately turns out to be beyond repair one day. With an effort the clerk resolves to commission a tailor to make him a new coat. Although troubled by many pangs of conscience, he also enjoys part of the preparations, the planning, the many decisions to some extent (though not the discussion of expenses): the choice of material, cut and colour (cf. also Chichikov in *Dead Souls* and Woolfs' *The New Dress*). When the coat is finally ready, Akaky Akakyevitch wears it for the first time in a festive mood. His colleagues want him to celebrate his new overcoat with them. But he cannot afford a party. Eventually he is invited to a soirée by the assistant of the head clerk. Akaky relishes the way across the streets of Petersburg, clad in this magnificent new overcoat. His walk from the poorer to the richer/richest quarters [ibid.: 233ff.] exemplifies the social spectrum of Petersburg and parallels the observations

accompanying Razumov's walk to Ziemianich and that of Verloc's to the embassy. The clerk sees everything as if for the very first time because he had not been out in the streets in the evening for years [ibid.: 234]. The soirée is an extraordinary event for him. Though he does not stay to the end of it, he takes his farewell later than he had meant to. But then, unexpectedly, on his long way back, on a huge square that is rarely frequented at this late hour, he is robbed of his coat by several men with moustaches [ibid.: 234–36].

The subsequent chain of events and reactions very much resembles what happens to Razumov in St. Petersburg: the young man only wanted to study and make himself *useful* (the opposite of being a 'lishnyjchelovek'), but then his life is turned upside down from one moment to the next. In Gogol, the incident itself is trivial, a mock-heroic precursor of *UWE*, but the consequences are nonetheless as tragic and disastrous. The sentry at the sentry-box does not help Akaky, pretends not to have noticed and just sends him off to talk to the superintendent the next day. Akaky's old landlady (cf. Razumov's landlady) advises him to go straight to the superintendent (who is known to her) and not just to the police constable of the quarter. When Akaky calls on that man the next morning he is told that he is still asleep. After having called three times and still being refused a meeting with the superintendent, Akaky asserts himself for the first time in his life. But the superintendent only asks minor/irrelevant questions (a contrast to Mikulin's procedure).

Also for the first time in his life Akaky does not go to his office. The next day he appears in his old 'dressing jacket,' which looks yet more miserable. Many colleagues pity him, but some also jeer at him. The subscription collected for him is insignificant. One of his colleagues gives him the advice not to turn to the district police inspector, but to appeal to a Person of Consequence (cf. Razumov's appeal to Prince K- and then his drive with Prince K- to General T-). But this man only explains the official channels to him, suspects insubordination, demonstrates his own status. Akaky leaves in a state of devastation, petrified. Never has he been so severely reprimanded by a general. Outside, in the snowstorm, he catches a fever and dies. Akaky's department only learns about his death three days after the burial. Only one day later a new clerk begins his work in the department [ibid.: 237–45].

What Gogol thematizes through this Kafkaesque, nightmarish chain of events (cf. Razumov's experiences) is a central theme of Russian literature: a senseless, absurd death out of the blue (cf. the 'lishniy chelovek'), the unpredictability and arbitrariness/despotism of life in an autocratic regime, the tragic fortunes of 'the little man,' of outsiders, the insignificance of a single human life. It is not worth anything, is trodden into the dust after a frantic, desperate struggle for survival, dignity and respectability and much human suffering. The sense of tragedy, of empathy with human woe and the suffering of little people is overwhelming for

the reader. This is a strong parallel with *UWE*.

The difference from Conrad is Gogol's use of magical realism. The narrator talks about the surprising afterlife of Akaky, as if to make up for a life ended in total oblivion (perhaps a case of poetic justice). He announces an unexpectedly fantastic ending/turn of his poor story. A rumour spreads across Petersburg that the corpse of a clerk has appeared in the neighbourhood of the Kalinkin Bridge and some distance beyond, who troubles passers-by by stripping overcoats from their shoulders, regardless of their calling and grade. It is recognized as the corpse of Akaky. Even the police are not able to catch it. The Person of Consequence is overcome with pity now, feels pangs of conscience when hearing about Akaky's sudden death in delirium and fever. In the evening, the man visits a friend to distract himself. Though he is a husband and father of a family, he plans to yet visit his lover afterwards. In his sledge he is then suddenly haunted by Akaky's ghost, who claims his overcoat. Hastily the man flings his overcoat off his shoulders and escapes home. The ghost does not reappear (because the overcoat of the general fits him well, as the narrator remarks tongue-in-cheek). It is only seen one more time by a sentry in Kolomna who does not dare to stop it and leaves off quickly when addressed by the ghost in a threatening way. But the ghost is taller than Akaky, wearing immense moustaches. Eventually it turns to the Obuhov Bridge and vanishes into the darkness [ibid.: 245–50].

Nikolay Gogol's "Dead Souls" (1842) is perhaps Gogol's most important and best known work. It is about Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov, a collegiate councillor [Gogol 2004: 9], who is as ignored in his job [ibid.: 21] as is Akaky Akakyevitch in "The Overcoat." Being caught up in various existential difficulties, Chichikov makes up his mind to travel across Russia in search for landowners who are ready to sell them their 'dead souls.' These are serfs who have died, but whose names are still kept in the official registers, and for whom the landowners would have to pay taxes still. Chichikov suggests a deal: he offers to take these serfs off their hands for little money. Busy with this 'mission,' he crosses the huge land, stays on the estates of numerous landowners, meets the most diverse kinds of people in villages and towns and on estates during his journey. Like Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" (c. 1387), the novel "Dead Souls" describes a broad cross-section of contemporary life, offers a huge and highly differentiated socio-cultural panorama of the conditions of society at that time.

A discerning eye can detect various parallels between *UWE* and "Dead Souls": Chichikov's name is not famous, his rank not prominent [ibid.: 28], his origins are obscure and modest; his parents were of the gentry [ibid.: 255; a parallel to Razumov's origin and station in life]. As is gradually revealed, Chichikov's dream is to have a family, a wife and offspring, to make himself *useful* (the opposite of the 'lishnyj chelovek'). He

aspires to domestic bliss, longs for warmth and sincerity [ibid.: 363–64]. Even when his dubious financial transactions are discovered (and that he has no family at all) and he faces punishment, he makes a plea for having wanted "to fulfil the duty of a man and a citizen, so that ultimately I might be truly worthy of the respect of my fellow citizens and the authorities" [ibid.: 402]. Only for this reason, as he later presents it to old Murazov, "[t]o live out the rest of my days in ease, to leave something to the children I intended to acquire for the good, for the service of the fatherland!" [ibid.: 406]. When being urged by Murazov, who wants to stand up for him, to mend his ways, he senses that there is a duty that man has to fulfill on earth. This can be done everywhere regardless of circumstances [ibid.: 411]. These details parallel Razumov's circumstances: he is inconspicuous, has no family of his own, wants to make himself useful by becoming a civil servant, perhaps a professor.

In the course of Gogol's narrative Eastern Europe is constantly juxtaposed to Western Europe – as in Conrad's *UWE*. Germany, England and France and their populations and cultures are frequently referred to comparatively. Gogol points out general differences in language, speech and conversation, but also in clothing and behaviour in Russians and Westerners.

With the exception of fear of God as a case of positive stereotyping, Gogol incorporates many negative Russian stereotypes (as does Conrad in *UWE*). [Cf. Bimberg 2006: 183ff..]. Everywhere,

the travelling and reflecting narrator encounters instances of the Russian phenomenon of *Oblomovshchina* (termed after Goncharov's *Oblomov* and its main protagonist): the lack in willpower to realize important, useful or badly needed things or to reform and mend the prevailing conditions. The lively felt desire to do so is fading away only too quickly, often after the first attempt already. Chichikov complains about the general lack of action, sluggishness/lethargy/laziness. There are several passages when he recalls his poor childhood and fatalistically links it to his later failure in life [ibid.: 409]. A decisive factor is 'the loneliness of a life without a family' [ibid.: 409] – also a feature of Razumov's life in *UWE*.

It was as if something within him wanted to awaken, something remote, something that in childhood had been prematurely crushed before it could develop, by harsh, dead admonitions, by the bleakness of a dreary childhood, by the desolation of his parental abode, by the loneliness of a life without a family, by the destitution and poverty of first impressions, as if that which had been crushed by the harsh gaze of a fate that looked on him sullenly, through a opaque snow-drifted window, now wanted to break out and be free [ibid.: 409]

The passage sums up all factors able to impact a child's development and socialization negatively. They echo Rousseau's critique about children's upbringing and education in his own time. Chichikov's father practiced a very rigid

moral education that was completely senseless and wrong, the more so because he violated his own rules [ibid.: 479]. His example was more powerful than any precepts [ibid.: 409].

The land-owner Tentetnikov, an example of 'the superfluous man' par excellence, suffered similar unfortunate circumstances that hindered his development. Sloth and lethargy determine his life for a long time. Luckily enough he used to have a very rare teacher, but unfortunately that extraordinary mentor died prematurely. The descriptions and comments about his fortune explain the necessity of the word 'onwards.' The suggestion that a Russian always has to be pushed to do or achieve something is a typical Western negative stereotype, here suggested by a Russian writer:

<...> now there was no one in the whole world who had the power to rouse his forces, weakened as they were by constant vacillating, and his impotent will, which was lacking in resiliency, no one who would cry out to his soul in a stirring cry the heartening word 'Onwards!' for which the Russian of all classes and callings and occupations yearns, whatever the rung on which he stands.

Where, then, is that man who in the native language of our Russian soul might be able to speak this all-powerful word 'Onwards' to us? Who, acquainted with all the powers and properties, with all the depths of our nature, might, with a single magical wave of his hand, be able to point us towards a higher life? With what tears, with what love would the grateful Russian repay him!

But age after age passes, all is enmeshed in the shameful sloth and mindless activity of callow youth <...> and no man capable of uttering this word has been sent by God! [ibid.: 305–06]

Especially through the passages centering round Tentetnikov Gogol unmasks sloppiness and untidiness, the huge discrepancy between theory and practice or good will/best intentions and practical realization everywhere in Russia. This leads to reflections on intercultural differences, elaborations on the Russian national character (cf. Conrad). The bad business morals of the time are critiqued (that Chichikov, however, is only too ready to exploit himself when there is no other or only a more difficult solution available), the general indifference and insensitivity/dullness. The social critique extends to corruption (especially among civil servants), protectionism, waste and mismanagement, but also general profit-seeking, cheating and the great love of splendour. These observations mount to a ridicule of science and enlightenment, a satire on reforms, a critical view of social changes and social utopias (cf. also Conrad). All this is narrated with unsurpassed irony.

As to the Russian national character, Gogol often inserts instances of very contrary, and, additionally, rapidly changing emotions (as Conrad does in *UWE*, especially in Razumov whose behaviour often appears as inexplicable and contradictory whenever people try to ‘read’ him).

Furthermore, lots of socio-cultural particu-

larities are integrated: references to Russian customs and habits (e.g. alcoholism and superstition), signifying practices like meals, mealtimes, table manners. This is underpinned by lots of Russian proverbs and sayings and modes of expression, Russian themes in conversation and discussion. The Russian addresses of ‘little father,’ ‘little mother’ or ‘my little soul’ often turn up, the Russian custom of kissing and embracing thrice. Gogol offers a huge spectrum of social differences within Russia, vivid examples of the contrast between life in towns and villages, the lifestyles and careers in Petersburg and Moscow, the habits of people from various social strata. His narrator observes the striking contrast of absolute poverty and luxury, often occurring side by side, even within the same family. Gogol allows fascinating insights into the system of civil servants, the relationships between peasants/serfs, landowners (cf. English squires) and stewards, the system of serfdom, various models for solution of the huge social problems involved (e.g. education/schools for the peasants), but also the very special relationship between Russian masters and servants. These observations include gender, the contemporary concept of femininity, female education, female accomplishments, the cult of women (a far cry from Dostoevsky). In a similar way, Conrad is very observant about such details in *UWE*.

The way that the narrator describes the walk of Ulinka, the daughter of a general, whom Tentetnikov falls in love with (again, without

any results) resembles Conrad's description of Nathalie Haldin. Ulinka is 'a strange and unique being,' 'as living as life itself' [ibid.: 306], was brought up in a singular way, taught by an English governess [ibid.: 306]. In terms of character she is a far cry from Nathalie Haldin, perhaps even embodying what Nathalie regards as her opposite (cf. above): spoilt, self-willed, capricious and impulsive (though sensitive to matters of injustice or poverty; 306–07). But her walk has parallels to that of Nathalie Haldin in its fearlessness and determination. "Her enchanting, special walk, which belonged to her alone, was so casual and carefree that everyone would instinctively make way for her" [ibid.: 307].

Characterizations like these in Gogol's *Dead Souls* are Russian social history and Russian psychology (cf. Conrad) at their best. Last but not least, however, the images of Russia that Gogol creates, are particularly impressive. They show up the connection with Conrad very clearly.

The first image chosen for illustration here connotes the distance, expanse and extension of the land. The narrator describes Chichikov's travel across the country by *britska* (a special type of Russian carriage), how he passes through Russian towns, looks at freshly ploughed black

strips on the steppes. He is hearing a song struck up from afar¹ and church bells whose pealing fades away in the distance. The horizon he is looking at is without end [ibid.: 250–51]. Chichikov/the narrator in his comment/stream-of-consciousness gets immersed in the wide, infinite panorama of the land and longingly breaks out into: "Rus! Rus! I see thee, from my wondrous, beautiful far-away, thee I see: <...>" [ibid.: 251].² Everything is poor, scattered and comfortless. The vistas of Russia are not picturesque at all: everything appears open, desolate and flat; nothing charms the gaze [ibid.: 251]. And yet the observer feels drawn to the land by an inscrutable, secret power. Though expressed by a Russian writer, we see the Western stereotypes of inscrutable, mysterious, vast Russia, but also the logical chain of association in much Russian thinking in the nexus of size/space and greatness: it is an endless, unlimited land, therefore the thinking is also boundless (cf. the quote below). Moreover, the Western myth of Russia is exemplified through the reference to the 'bogatyry,' a mythic type of hero in Russian epic poetry and fairy tales. The immensity of the land is seen as providing a fitting environment for his range of action (suggesting: heroes are not born

¹ The German translation of 'ein *langgezogenes* Lied in der Ferne' [ibid.: 290; my emphasis, C.M.B.] seems to be more fitting because it considers the nature of this type of Russian song more precisely and, moreover, links the acoustic impression of the song perfectly to the sense of immense space.

² A footnote in the German edition on p. 290 explains that Gogol wrote this while in Italy ("von dem wunderschönen, fernen Lande aus, in dem ich weile, sehe ich Dich").

or made in small countries?). But the passage also evokes the stereotypical Western fear of the Russian giant (cf. Conrad):

But what, then, is the inapprehensible mysterious force that draws one to thee? Why is thy plaintive song heard, why does it resound, unremitting, in the ears, as it carries through all thy length and breadth, from sea to sea? What is in it, in this song? What calls, and sobs, and clutches at the heart? What sounds are these that painfully caress me and seek to plumb my soul and twine about my heart?¹ Rus! What is it that thou wantest from me? What inapprehensible bond lies hidden between us? Why lookest thou thus at me, and wherefore has everything within thee turned eyes filled with expectation upon me? ... And still, filled with perplexity, stand I unmoving, and already is my head oershadowed by an ominous cloud, heavy with oncoming rains, and benumbed is thought before thy expanse. What does this unembraceable space portend? Is it not here, is it not in thee that a boundless thought is destined to be born, since thou thyself art without end? Is it not here that a bogatyr is destined to live, since there is room for him to spread himself and stride about? And awesome is the mighty expanse that will embrace me, reflecting itself with terrible force in my very depths; by an unnatural power have my eyes been illumined. Ooh! What a glittering, wondrous distance unknown to this world! Rus!... [ibid.: 251–52]

Later, Gogol uses the typical Russian means of transport by horsepower, the troika, as a metaphor of Russia: Chichikov enjoys the quick drive of his driver Selifan, jouncing on his leather cushion. He simply loves fast driving [ibid.: 281–82]. It seems innate in every Russian, responds to something deeply buried in his soul, a very adequate mode of being. It connotes an authentic identity that is based on passion, transgression, the irrational, a feeling of recklessness. This passion is exactly what Razumov misses in Geneva: he despises the Genevans for its lack, for their smug indifference. In *Dead Souls*, the train of thoughts describes the elevation, the feeling of being transported as if by an invisible power. It is like flying; you feel elevated, lifted up, carried away by the thrill of speed. The emotion/the state of mind and body described is similar to the one in the quote above, when the narrator looks at the immense flat land lying before him (only ‘passing by’ because of the drive in the carriage). But this time the effect is yet more dynamic. And in both descriptions do we have a suggestion of the uncanny, the hidden powerful:

And what Russian is there who does not love fast driving? Why should his soul, which yearns to revel and roister and sometimes say, ‘May the Devil take

¹ This passage describing a trance-like state triggered by a song evokes a parallel to similar descriptions of the effects of mystic music in Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows*, e.g. when the Mole and the Water Rat are in the presence of Pan [cf. Binder, ch. 7.2.5].

everything! – why should his soul not love it? Not love it when something rapturous and wondrous can be sensed in it? ‘T would seem an unknown power has caught you up on its wing, and you yourself are flying, and everything is flying: <...> and something dread lies within all this fleet flashing by, where a vanishing object has no time to assume firm form; <...>. [ibid.: 282]

Over time this eulogy moves on to a praise of the troika itself, this winged team of three horses and a cart, which produces those wonderful moments and states of rapture. The question is posed who devised this vehicle. It could have been born “only among a spirited people, in a land that has no love of joking, but has flung itself, smooth-flat, o’er half the world, so just try counting the verst-posts till your eyes begin to swim” [ibid.: 282].

The praise extends to the maker and the driver of the troika then (and later even to the horses). The skills of the tradesman and the driver become metaphors of Russian competence and authenticity. The passage exudes the self-pride in Russian achievements. You can see the background of the debate of (supposed) Eastern inferiority versus (supposed) Western European superiority: the Russian vehicle is no clever,

travelling-contraption (like a Western European invention), *not clamped together with iron screws*. Instead, *a handy muzhik from Yaroslavl slapped it together, only with an axe and a chisel*. The *driver does not wear foreign top boots*.¹ Bearded and with mittens he is *sitting on the Devil knows what*, and when he raises himself and brandishes his whip and starts to sing, the steeds speed off like a whirlwind so that a passer-by stops short and cries out in fear. Eventually only something that stirs the dust and bores through the air can be seen in the distance [ibid.: 282; my emphasis, C.M.B.].

This enthusiastic passage mounts into a climax then: eventually the whole of Russia is likened to this marvellous troika: reckless, not to be overtaken by anybody, leaving everybody else behind, like a divine marvel/apparition, sent from heaven, storming ahead terrifyingly. Again, speed, power, terror, the unknown combine; we have political connotations of the description of travelling, people and landscapes:

Art not thou too, O Rus, rushing *onwards* [cf. above – C.M.B.] like a spirited troika that none can overtake?
Smoking like smoke under you is the road, thundering
are the bridges, all falls back and is left behind. The

¹ It is interesting to note that the German translation reads: “Und der Kutscher trägt keine deutschen [as in the Russian original – C.M.B.] Stulpstiefel;” [ibid.: 328]. Obviously it was important to stress the cultural phenomenon of foreignness in the translation. But this could mean different things for Brits and Germans respectively. The explanation for this is perhaps a more general cultural phenomenon: the Russian term ‘nyemzy’ was originally used for all foreigners who did not speak Russian idiomatically. Later it was only used for the Germans – perhaps because the Russians had the most intense social and cultural relations with them as foreigners [Bimberg 2006: 189].

onlooker comes to a stop, struck by the divine miracle: is this not a lightning bolt flung down from heaven? What is the meaning of this awe-inspiring movement? And what manner of unknown power is contained within these steeds, who are unknown to the world? [ibid.: 282–83; my emphasis, C.M.B.]

This leads to the question where this Russia goes to, Russia's destination and future, a frequent issue in Russian novels of the nineteenth century.

<...> and on rushes the troika, all-inspired by God! Rus, whither art thou racing? Give an answer. She gives no answer. The bells set up a wondrous jingling: rent to shreds, the air thunders and is transformed into wind: all that exists on earth flies by, and, looking askance,¹ other peoples and nations step aside and make way for her. [ibid.: 283]

The passage looks like a vision of a future powerful Russia, convinced of its own value and position in the world, equal (if not superior) to other countries, especially Western Europe. The attitude behind it parallels Razumov's contempt for the supposed values, attitudes and achievements of Western Europe.

Gogol's most amazing metaphor of Russia, however, is a musical one: a long tonic key-note in singing, very melancholic. A young broad-shouldered lad, one of several rowers in a boat, leads off the singing. His pure and resonant

voice, which produces the opening notes, seems to come from a nightingale's throat. Five other singers take the song up [ibid.: 341], "six more carried it further" [ibid.: 341]. That it is indeed a long tonic key-note is not mentioned in the English translation, which only refers to the opening notes of the *song*. Only the German translation, which mentions the first *stanzas* of the song before, expressly says: "die sechs übrigen hielten einen *Grundton* lange aus" [ibid.: 398; my emphasis, C.M.B.]. Again, the German version seems more authentic.

The pouring out of the song is equalled to Russia, is as infinite [ibid.: 341]. The connotations are infinity, powerfulness and melancholy. For Chichikov it is an epiphany, a moment of revelation, of utmost identification as a Russian with Russia. Razumov would certainly have agreed to that from the bottom of his heart:

<...> and out it poured, boundless as Rus. And Petukh, rousing himself, would add his own bellowing to strengthen the chorus whenever it flagged, and Chichikov himself felt like a true Russian. Platonov alone thought: 'What's so good about this mournful song? It disposes the soul to even greater boredom.' [ibid.: 341]

Gradually all those lovely, vivid, either amusing, pitiful or shocking, observations of the traveller-narrator result in larger perspectives:

¹ Whereas 'askance' suggests awe, the German rendition 'scheelblickend' implies enviousness.

reflections on the contrast between appearance and reality in human lives (private and public); a deeply probing search for the importance of one's position in life, the roles of vocation and predestination; the charm and the value of travelling per se; the use of Cultural Materialism for literary representation; the shaping and conditioning of historical/collective memory; the employment of chronotopes; the narrative transformation of locations and places into psychic space(s); observations on life and art; issues of metafiction. So, thematically, spiritually and narratologically there are significant parallels between Gogol and Conrad.

However, in spite of various similarities in descriptions, themes, assessments and messages, the differences cannot be denied either. They refer to style and atmosphere for example. Gogol can also be melancholic at times, but most of the time he is strongly ironical and humorous. The best example is Chichikov's newly made frock coat (cf. Akaky). The cloth he selects is poetically and hyperbolically called 'Navarino flame and smoke' [ibid.: 399]. All the references to it are brimming over with satirical irony.

First of all, Chichikov's vanity in all matters of fashion is mocked at. He is possessed by the desire to see himself at once in the new frock-coat, immediately after it has been delivered to him by his tailor. The trousers fit his legs perfectly – one could have painted his portrait right away. It is only his drum-like belly that spoils the effect a little [ibid.: 399–400]. Gogol employs a lot of

body talk here that could be regarded as slightly indecent by an English writer.

But all in all Chichikov is utterly satisfied with the impression he makes. His only objection that the frock-coat is too tight under his right arm is cleverly refuted by the tailor's professional hint that this makes the coat cling to the waist even better. He assures Chichikov that with the exception of Petersburg nowhere is tailoring done so well. This triggers ironic observations about the competition going on in fashion between Petersburg, London and Paris, the ambition of that tailor [ibid.: 400]. We see the intercultural comparisons and hierarchies, symbolically represented through items of fashion. This is yet enhanced by Chichikov's pride that he has the figure of a court chamberlain or the kind of gentleman who chatters in French and does not even curse in Russian when in a rage, but uses French for it: the mark of true refinement [ibid.: 400]. Again, we have a mock version here: of the general linguistic debate of Russian versus French at the time.

The second stage of irony is reached when, instead of showing himself in public at once in this new frock-coat, Chichikov is summoned to the Governor-general. He has to enter the carriage waiting outside as he is, without even being allowed to change: in his new dress and with the alarming prospect of being arrested and packed off to Siberia without any trial or much ado. This lowers his spirits at once [ibid.: 401; cf. Razumov].

In a third stage, things become fully ridicu-

lous and absurd: the Prince makes clear to him at once that his crimes are much worse than those of the poor people *in peasant caftans and sheepskins*, while he is looking at his *new frock-coat* [ibid.: 402]. Pleading for mercy and arguing with a disastrous coincidence of circumstances, Chichikov throws himself at the prince's feet – in all the splendour of his frock-coat, waistcoat, cravat, trousers and coiffed head, perfumed with eau de Cologne [ibid.: 402–03]. Once more, the German translation is more expressive, vivid and culturally specific than the English. Whereas the English rendition does not mention the detail at all, the German version refers to the fact that Chichikov “warf sich hin und schlug mit der Stirn auf den Fußboden” [ibid.: 471].¹ His undignified, embarrassing behaviour is even climactically enhanced yet when he refuses to be taken away by the soldiers and, instead, winds his arms around the prince's boot, presses it to his chest and slides with it across the floor [ibid.: 403]. This evokes a fully hilarious picture for the reader and, moreover, a mock version of saintly adoration and veneration as practiced in the Russian orthodox church.

In the fourth and last stage, instead of, as originally planned, attracting the attention of his fellow-countrymen with his new frock-coat, Chichikov is imprisoned. He is not even allowed to take essential items, his money or his papers

with him [ibid.: 404]. Taken to his prison cell, he tears off his satin cravat in full despair and then rips the frock-coat apart [ibid.: 405]. It is in this deplorable physical and mental state that he is being admonished by old Murazov to take better care of his poor *soul* [ibid.: 405].¹ This is irony and humour at its very best.

By comparison to Conrad, Gogol's humour and irony appear as more physical, sensuous, truly humorous, emerging very organically. Conrad's is much more bitter, purely intellectual and wordy. It is in fact more sarcastic and cynical than really fully enjoyable. The laughter gets stuck in your throat as it were. Conrad's irony/humour are rather gloomy, more British/Irish in their bleakness than Russian. True Russian humour (as I think) makes you laugh without inhibition. Generally speaking the atmosphere in Gogol's texts, though he also refers to very problematic, even tragic or fateful things, is less gloomy.

Conrad's contribution and the question of influences

The true merits behind Conrad's representation of the Cosas de Russia have only been recognized and esteemed by few.

It became his special purpose to hold in double focus two views of the Russian fate – that of the Russians

¹ A practice of Russian orthodox believers.

² The washerwoman's dress, used by the Toad for disguise in Kenneth Grahame's “The Wind in the Willows”, undergoes a similar metamorphosis [cf. Binder, ch. 7.2.2].

themselves (and the respect the book first won in Russia perhaps testifies sufficiently to his success on this score) and that of their alien observers who represent the standards of Western life. This alone, quite apart from its difficult moral theme, gives the work its characteristic Conradian complexity. It also gives it what no Russian novelist – except possibly a Turgenev or Tolstoy in the nineteenth century or a Pasternak in the twentieth – would be likely to give it: a quality of intense personal commitment combined with a severe discipline in moral and humanistic objectivity. [Zabel: 128]

<...> but Conrad's book is recognizably a descendant of the type classically established by Stendhal, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and James, and prophetic, as much through its acumen of historical insight as through the accident of the contemporary events it foreshadowed, of the novels that were to come after it from writers like Malraux, Silone, Sartre, Koestler, Camus, Orwell, and Pasternak. Its continuing and increasing relevance to the twentieth century takes on the force of a compensation for the neglect to which it was treated on its first appearance in 1911. [ibid.: 135]

Conrad, like any valid novelist, had to become in some sense a Russian to write the book, and it became his paradox as the artist of his subject to convert his Pol-

ish life and inheritance into a means of that imaginative and moral authority. [ibid.: 136]

So what could Conrad contribute that those great Russian writers mentioned above 'were not able to do themselves'? Via his Polish legacy he absorbs the themes, motifs, conflicts and modes of expression of Russian fiction into English fiction, and thus a different language, literature and socio-cultural context, into an English-speaking medium – not only emotionally, but also rationally, and not without its linguistic problems, as demonstrated above.¹ The fact that he took up Russian themes and concerns at the beginning of the twentieth century and presented them in his own inimitable way, is a remarkable phenomenon at a time when Russian literature was only just beginning to achieve full artistic acclaim in the West and internationally, also due to the availability of translations.²

For me this triggers the question: To what kinds of influences can Conrad's literary representations of the *Cosas de Russia* be traced – apart from 'real life,' when we consider the artistic appropriation of reality in literature: only from Russian literature or perhaps also or even predominantly from Polish literature? Does that

¹ Cf. also [Durkin: 83–84] (with a view to Conrad's transformation/narrative appropriation of Pushkin).

² In his essay "Turgenev" Conrad congratulates Garnett on being perfect as both translator and critic for judging Turgenev's qualities [Conrad 1924a: 45]. Zabel points out that "[t]he Russian novelists were seizing the public attention in Constance Garnett's translations, <...>" [Zabel: 114]. "Conrad's friends Constance and Edward Garnett were busy in England translating and writing propaganda for the Russian classics, <...>" [ibid.: 122]. For more information about English translations of Russian novels see Matlaw and Moser.

perhaps prove the kinship of Russia's Slavic temper with Conrad's own [Zabel: 139]? Adam Gillon actually relates a number of literary elements to a Polish influence [Gillon: 686; cf. fn xi in this essay]. Maybe there will never be a final answer to this question. Gillon comes to the conclusion:

Conrad's fictional study of the Russian character, of anarchism and tyranny must be related to his Polish political and literary tradition no less than to the Russian literary influence, particularly that of Dostoevsky. The fusion of the Polish and the Russian elements is particularly responsible, I think, for the prophetic insights of novels like *Under Western Eyes* and *The Secret Agent*". [ibid.: 694]

Andrzej Busza, in "Conrad's Polish Literary Background and Some Illustrations of the Influence of Polish Literature on His Work" (1966), offers a study of the influence of Polish literature on Conrad's work through general and special examples, a study of Conrad's environment, people and literature: his father, minor guardians and his uncle; cultural milieus (e.g. Vologda, Galicia); Polish culture and literature. He specifically refers to Polish romantic literature, the positivist mode of thinking, and more specific instances of Polish literary influence in Conrad's fiction. One could deduce from this (as I suspected before) that there must be a number of affiliated themes in both Polish and Russian literature/culture. Just take the example of the

'lishniy chelovek' (cf. above). In Polish romantic poetry, as Busza writes, there is a focus on commitment. The hero is concerned with his private happiness, but suffers from a sudden personal misfortune, an unhappy love affair or a rash act of passion or weakness, which triggers disastrous consequences. Personal tragedy lets the hero recognize the true values; he becomes an ardent patriot, ready to make huge sacrifices for his country [Busza: 206]. To me, this looks like a shift from private to political motives. In Russian literature, cause and effect seem to work the other way round: because there is no chance for a meaningful other or larger social/political commitment, the private life has to make do or is spent in less satisfactory ways. Furthermore Busza mentions "that some of the major themes of Polish romantic literature also appear prominently in Conrad's works. Among these are betrayal, guilt and expiation, and the transformation of a man into a morally responsible individual under the stress of suffering". [ibid.: 241]

In the context of contemporary English literature, Conrad's obsession with betrayal seems idiosyncratic, and his attitude to it, at times, morbid and hysterical. Against the background of Polish literature, it is a natural interest in a universal moral problem. Indeed, an examination of the theme of betrayal, as it appears in the works of the Polish romantic poets, helps one to understand some of the moral and psychological intricacies of such works as *Lord Jim*, *Under Western Eyes*, "The Secret Sharer" and the *Rescue*. [ibid.: 242]

Yes, but the close connections with themes in Russian literature are evident as well so that it is eventually impossible to clearly decide which elements in Conrad came from what literary or socio-cultural background. A telling example is also the representation of women. (Cf. Jones).

As can be deduced from all those observations, there is no ultimate proof for Conrad's specific connections with Russian contexts or his indebtedness to certain 'models.' Contemporary literary criticism abstains from asking about an author's intentions because they will always have to remain a matter of speculation to some extent. Instead, it turns to a more reliable study of narrative strategies. In a similar way my study does not make a claim to having finally solved the secret of Conrad's artistic indebtedness to or knowledge about Russian language, culture and literature. My aim was to just to use a study in intertextuality as a legitimate and rewarding means of coming closer to this issue.

Conclusion

All in all, we see well-balanced and well-informed attitudes to and opinions about Russia and Russians. They are embedded in highly differentiated intercultural perspectives on Eastern and Western Europe conveyed through Conrad's representations of the Cosas de Russia. Discourse and counter-discourse are an integral part of a very complex and authentic mode of narration. Obviously, Conrad posed questions and suggested/implied multifaceted answers

to extremely complex issues/dilemmas that the West did not even dare or intend to address. The role of a prophet, a visionary, is a difficult one for a writer, often a very ungrateful one, especially if his/her environment is rather ignorant, but to me it does Conrad credit.

Virginia Woolf writes about Russian and English literature:

They [the Russian writers – C.M.B.] are right perhaps; unquestionably they see further than we do and without our gross impediments of vision. But perhaps we see something that escapes them, or why should this voice of protest mix itself with our gloom? The voice of protest is the voice of another and an ancient civilization which seems to have bred in us the instinct to enjoy and fight rather than to suffer and understand. <...> But any deductions that we may draw from the comparison of two fictions so immeasurably far apart are futile save indeed as they flood us with a view of the infinite possibilities of the art and remind us that there is no limit to the horizon, and that nothing – no "method," no experiment, even of the wildest – is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence. [Woolf: 1998–99]

This sounds like fusing the best qualities of Russian and English fiction – similarly to Woolf's concept of androgyny, the ideal fusion of female and male qualities in a person (cf. "A Room of One's Own"). Well, perhaps this is what Conrad attempted to some extent. For such a presentation of the Cosas de Russia no doubt Conrad's special position and presuppositions as some-

body who was Easterner and Westerner at the same time, outsider und insider, passionate and critical, pay off advantageously here.¹ He brings knowledge, understanding and sympathy, but also critique to bear upon the theme. These are enlightened positions which the West was in bitter need of then, though it did not always

recognize or fully appreciate them yet. As a result, Conrad's "Under Western Eyes" has to be assigned the status of one of the earliest and most intelligent contributions within British literature to the Western discourse about Russia – not only at the beginning of the twentieth century, but even today.

¹ What Conrad was able to achieve is formulated by Zabel in the following way: "And a *foreigner* may have a contribution of importance to make in writing about another nationality. His *outsider's* point of vantage, if sufficiently informed by knowledge and sympathy, makes it possible for him to add something of importance, in critical insight and judgment, to a native tradition. <...> Conrad, divided between a reasonable fear of tyranny or fanaticism and the demands of the justice to which his art committed him, achieved in *Under Western Eyes* what is possibly the most searching portrayal of Russian character and history that has yet been arrived at in a non-Russian novel. <...> Its justice is more than a matter of the detachment or impartiality he claimed for it. It is a matter of the charity and compassion that have their origins in sympathy and suffering [Zabel: 129; my emphasis, C.M.B.]. I should just like to confirm once more that Conrad was neither a real foreigner, nor an outsider to Russian issues. "When he came to write his drama of Russia Conrad put himself to the test of reconciling his effort at sympathy ("impartiality") with a realistic view of what the Russian threat to Europe involved. That view required both the practical judgment of a political realist and the humane objectivity of a historical intelligence" [ibid.: 141]. As explained by me above already, Conrad's representations agree precisely with what Virginia Woolf appreciated in Russian fiction. This becomes evident through the following quote from Zabel: "The justice with which it deals is *painful and baffling*, but his treatment of it, whatever its complexity of insight or insight, is *not evasive*, and the workings of truth and conscience are *neither shirked nor disguised* [ibid.: 144; my emphasis, C.M.B.]. Zabel pays tribute to Conrad's obligation to literature's moral indebtedness and artistic truth here. Yet one has to note as well that it took the West some time before it fully recognized the excellence of Russian fiction. It comes as no surprise to see that it was therefore not ready yet for some of Conrad's visionary insights either. Zabel just formulates the moral obligation of the West not to forget the Russian vision and ethos: "Perhaps, as Mr. Pritchett has said, Conrad wrote the book "to bring a harder Western focus upon a theme of Dostoevsky." The book has, at any rate, the quality of translating the Dostoevskian vision and ethos into the terms of a moral necessity which the West, whatever its compromises or failures of principle, can never forget, and which it will forget now only at its peril" [ibid.: 144]. As Zabel emphasizes, great works of art, and so also Conrad's, are precisely great because they transgress their own time and are therefore sometimes not fully appreciated in it yet: "That Conrad should have been able to illuminate that necessity by means of a subject so deeply involved in his personal history, and to achieve in doing so a version of the Russian fate that calls for comparison with the art of the Russian masters themselves, testifies to the risks he was willing to take in his art and to the vision and insight that rewarded him. <...> It proposes a major question to the age, and it leaves that question pending the moral decision of Europe and the West. The novel thus becomes more than an experience in the drama and craftsmanship of one of the most scrupulous and searching modern novelists. It becomes an example and a portent for an era in history whose crisis Conrad, through his own experience of it and the severity of vision it yielded him, was able with a remarkable prophetic instinct to foresee" [ibid.: 144].

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*All the publications under the name 'Bimberg' are titles of the author of the present essay.

‘COSAS DE RUSSIA’: JOSEPH CONRAD’S CONFESSIONS ABOUT RUSSIA AND RUSSIANS

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Abstract. The paper addresses a very controversial subject in Conradian scholarship and criticism: Conrad’s representation of the ‘Cosas de Russia.’ So far, it has been largely (but not necessarily correctly) interpreted as either Russophobia (in his non-fiction) or Russophilia (in his fiction). Conrad himself evaded any clear answer as to his precise stance and its respective background. But his narrative strategies are telling enough. They contain some carefully guarded secrets, but also some unintentional confessions. The question therefore is: how much did he really know about Russia and Russians, and how familiar was he with Russian culture, language and literature? These issues are explored through a combination of British Cultural, Linguistic and Literary Studies, but also Slavonic Studies. The methods employed are based on close reading, narratology, deconstruction and contextualization. Apart from Conrad’s novels “Under Western Eyes” (1911) and “The Secret Agent” (1907), his essays “Autocracy and War” (1905) and “Turgenev” (1917) will be used for elucidation. Among the Russian works of fiction studied in comparison to Conrad’s works are Fyodor Dostoevsky’s “Demons” (1871–1872) and “The Brothers Karamazov” (1879–1880) and Ivan Goncharov’s “Oblomov” (1859). The greatest attention, however, will be directed towards Nikolay Gogol’s short stories: “Nevsky Prospekt” (1835), and “The Overcoat” (1842) as well as his novel “Dead Souls” (1842). After reconsidering central issues and correcting some misassumptions in literary criticism, the paper attempts to add a few new aspects to the debate by focusing on issues of intertextuality. What emerges from all this is that Conrad’s ‘Cosas de Russia’ represents a kind of hidden master knowledge whose significance still needs to be fully recognized.

Key words: Joseph Conrad; Cosas de Russia; representation of Russian culture, language and literature; intertextuality; comparative studies of English and Russian literature; issues of translation.

