



Facets and Artifices of War: A Historical Reading of “The Warrior’s Soul” by Joseph Conrad

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Abstract— *This paper closely observes the code of conduct of the war actors engaged in a Napoleonic war. In “The Warrior’s Soul”, the latter, as a palimpsest, is reminiscent of no other crisis than the Grand Army’s invasion of Tsar Alexander’s Russia in 1812. Narrowing down its attack and occupation field in this short-story under our study, this history-based conflict unfolds to show a manifest Franco-Russian opposition if we consider Moscow and Paris metropolis as a space-time. In the second and final phase of the short-story, what we find as the Moscow narration, the story on the war bends exclusively over the military herds which are depicted from a battlefield equally chaotic and horrific. In such apocalyptic disorder, the patriotic and conservative will of the Russian adjutant and Officer is put in competition with a heroic altruism we relate to the Tomassov-De Castel case. By looking deeper and deeper into the story of experience marked with the Russian pride and patriotism and that of the Franco-Russian duo, our analysis of “The Warrior’s Soul” as a polemic and historic writing further exposes the horrors and illusions of a war to better exalt honour, ethics and dignity within humans.*

Keywords— *War, Napoleonic, Cossack, Grand Army, Honour, Ethics.*

Résumé— *Le présent article observe de plus près le code de conduite des acteurs d’une guerre napoléonienne en palimpseste. Cette dernière ne figure dans “The Warrior’s Soul” une autre crise que celle causée par l’invasion de la Russie du Tsar Alexandre par la Grande Armée de Napoléon en 1812. En rétrécissant son champ d’attaque et d’occupation dans la nouvelle à l’étude, ce conflit se dévoile comme une manifeste opposition Franco-russe qui a pour espace-temps de prédilection Moscou et Paris la métropole. Dans sa phase finale, qui est l’étape de Moscou, le récit de la guerre se penche exclusivement sur les hordes militaires présentées sur un champ de bataille aussi chaotique qu’horrible. Dans ce désordre apocalyptique, la volonté patriotique et conservatrice de l’adjutant et de l’Officier russes est mise en compétition avec un altruisme héroïque propre au cas Tomassov-De Castel. En pénétrant de plus en plus un récit de l’expérience marqué par la fierté et le patriotisme russes et celui de ce dernier duo Franco-russe, notre analyse de “The Warrior’s Soul”, en tant qu’écrit historique et polémique, fait avec les horreurs d’une guerre pour mieux exalter l’honneur, l’éthique et la dignité en l’humain.*

Mots-clés— *Guerre, Napoléonien, Cossack, Grande Armée, Honneur, Éthique.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Joseph Conrad’s “The Warrior’s Soul” reads as a duplicity of a specific war. This short-story makes a mix and match of the facts and the artefacts of a historic war: the Napoleonic war in Russia in 1812. Depictions of the Grand Army, and Russian military troops respectively show

processions of land-soldiers, Cossacks and stragglers belonging to both warring parties. This visible and surface presentation of the battlefield actors and components goes always together with a moral of troops which essentially defies the normal one. Due to diet and weather situations beyond their resilience capacities, the engaged Russian patriots as well as the Napoleonic herds surrender by

lending their ears and hearts to the romantic experience of two of their fellows: Tomassov and De Castel. The former, a former active agent in a Russian mission in Paris, is sentimentally and diplomatically binomial to the latter who is a French Officer deeply involved in the Grand Army's expedition in Russia.

Two types of stories invest the story-telling ground in "The Warrior's Soul". The old Russian officer's, which is quite referable to as the Moscow episode, gives free flow to a patriot's voice whose young audience of stragglers sounds dissident, distant from his visions of the army. At the end of his wits, the old officer narrator bridges his flashbacked story with Tomassov's in-person voice. Then, the Paris episode, second the Moscow episode, starts with the young and humane Tomassov who relates events past from Paris onto the very war-field in Moscow. Through a complete lack of tension in the narration, the Napoleonic war steps out of its dynamics to become instead a tribune of soft *salon-war*. Making an anti-war use of the cult of high-class society in Paris, with the prominent presence of an exquisite French lady, the omniscient story revisits a cultural aristocratic prestige somehow required in times of inhumane shots and knocks.

Our analysis combines both short-story as text and history as subtext. As complementary textual elements, Conrad relies diversely on each of the two as an aesthetic of narration to sound impartial, though anti-Russian. Therefore, we use objectively these historical data to highlight the fictional facts in a century-old war. As testified within the soul of the Russian and French warriors, the shock between a Napoleonic imperialist vision and a patriotic tsarist nationalism has unexpectedly resulted in a new *humane* order in "The Warrior's Soul".

II. WAR WITHOUT WARRING: "RUSSE SAUVAGE", THE HUMANE TOMASSOV AND DE CASTEL

Shifting the hardly held floor from some young Russian stragglers, the story instance puts the same floor in the hands of an old officer. The latter monopolizes and even manipulates the meaning we can give to the flashback story he tensely unfurls. As a former straggler, his experience serves as a pre-eminence as well as a proof of trustworthiness. Fragmented with references to history, his post-war viewpoints close where Tomassov picks up the floor to tell a story which prevails in time and substance over the old officer's. With Tomassov, it is another side of the war which is given as a matter for thought. Contrary to the horror and dehumanization facts congruent with the while-war episode (Conrad 1987: 88), Tomassov's active part in "The Warrior's Soul" reads as confluence of

aristocrat and romantic testimonies. His soldierly engagement towards the Russian cause is recalled at will to differentiate him from his fellow stragglers. Nicknamed "the Humane Tomassov" (Conrad 100) to oppose him to all the other Cossacks who are referred as "Des Russes sauvages" (Conrad 89), Tomassov finds his selfless kind in the supreme humaneness of a French Officer named De Castel. Between the two stands the French Lady as an intermediate character we can slightly compare to the adjutant. The latter assumes in the time and space of war an undefined responsibility which almost always gets him between the old officer and the Humane Tomassov.

The past forms in "The Warrior's Soul" a bellicose motif. As a narrative pretext, it enables protagonists of military and civilian backgrounds to use the historical Grand Army's invasion of Czar Alexander's Russia as a single and unique story with various intents. And depending on the narrating voice and the role played in the pre-, while- and post-war, the story changes to vehicle an inculcating aggrandizing image of the Cossacks, a revision of war as an aristocratic field or a great test of romantic grandeur. In contrast to the former dimension of the war-story as told by the old Russian officer, the latter two aspects make a mix and match the French and Russian protagonists (and antagonists in a way) to evidence a supreme appropriation of the conflict.

"The Warrior's Soul" privileges age and experience in front of youth and inexperience. As an implicit choice of its narration, the floor is given to the character of the old officer, a former Cossack and Straggler, whose reminder of the past suspends any action of the present as a non-time. Through the voice of the self-imposing Russian Officer is depicted what is known as the Grand Army's invasion of Moscow. While relating the horrors remarked on both sides of the French and Russian troops, the old omniscient narrator details on the absence of civility and formality in a bipartite conflict we assume exclusively bellicose. Following in a picturesque representation which rather dehumanizes than glorifies the war scenes, the panoptic character of the Russian Officer gives an apocalyptic overview of the Napoleon's Grand Army. A sparse procession of hunger-stricken and frost-suffering soldiers who struggle to stand on their feet. In the history of the Grand Army, such a sickly representation of Napoleonic regiments trapped in the Russian winter and tundra contrasts with what Gompert *et al.* say of the Grande Armée: "His [Napoleon's] instrument was the first truly national, popular army—superb, bold, meritocratic (like the new French order), and seemingly inexhaustible. Most of Napoleon's adversaries—mercenary armies in the hire of aristocrats—were no match" (Gompert *et al.* 41). It was an "imperialist Europe adventuring" (Brodsky 190) whose

bold and blind élan, once faced with the unexpected as infused in the chronotope of "The Warrior's Soul", failed to defeat the humane bellicosity we later on apply on Tomassov and De Castel.

A decadence of Napoleon's war spirit is throughout reflected with the narration of the Russian Officer. His story of the war spouses in fact one patriotic form which cannot help demeaning both the invaders and the invaded. With no doubt, we can deduce from the old omniscient narrator that both Russian and French troops suffer from the absence of human and logistic resources, not to mention their indifference to their losses at human, and moral levels. An irony of war lies in this equidistant analysis of the Napoleonic war in "The Warrior's Soul" in spite of this recurring stigmatization which exclusively falls on the Cossack figure: The "Russe sauvage". Unnamed throughout the short story, the character of the old officer, like the rest of the committed Russians, enters in the category of Cossacks whose nationalistic instinct has no limit. While evidencing their shootings on a retreating Grand Army, the omniscient story balances this lack of restraint, say humanity, with an aristocratic dimension of warring: "The Conradian ideal of heroism" (Skolik 2015: 202).

Embedded within the story of the old officer, the story Tomassov tells has a military audience in need of relaxing and discovering the flipside of a war beyond their will and commitment: "The word war was being whispered in drawing rooms louder and louder and at last, was heard in official circles" (Conrad 98). Focused on the Paris mission Tomassov had had before the beginning of the war, it exposes the aristocratic experiments of a "primitive youth [Tomassov]" (Conrad 96): "He [Tomassov] found himself in distinguished company there [the French lady's salon], amongst men of considerable position" (Conrad 93). It goes without saying that that high culture and society of France adds to Tomassov's sociability as it draws now all the attention of the military Russians. Such a bourgeois background keeps feeding the narration with elements which, though recounted in the war field, keep the soldierly community away from the "tragedy and exigencies of war" (Peters 38). All along his narrative display, Tomassov's bourgeois identification calls in the short-story this spirit of war heroism: "A 'shrine' to love's 'divinity'" (WS 10), the salon in "The Warrior's Soul" is both a House of Venus and, with de Castel's presence, a temple of Mars" (Brodsky 192).

Still, the sphere concretely delimiting in "The Warrior's Soul" the war remains vast and open to a community broader and wider than the fixed, stereotyped soldier society which is referred to as the Cossacks or the Grand Army. The victimization of the Napoleonic and Russian troops, as hinted at by the old officer, points an

accusing finger to a collective responsibility which makes an abusive use of war stakes and tactics: "As Alexander intended, hunger and exposure caused losses in Napoleon's army far beyond what Russian forces could and did cause. By the time Napoleon took Moscow, the Grande Armée was at half strength, while Russian forces—in retreat but not defeated—were growing stronger" (Gompert *et al.* 46). A plain form of battle led upon emptied fields and grounds, which is worsened with the interference of inhospitable weather elements. Eco-critical/conscious, that voice in the omniscient narration of "The Warrior's Soul" sounds a material annihilator since it puts both sides under the same test of Nature's fury.

Narrowing down towards a "framed story" (Kingsbury 163) with such a setting as a salon; "a fashionable assemblage of notables (such as literary figures, artists or statesmen) held by custom at the home of a prominent person" (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*), "The Warrior's Soul" aligns Tomassov and De Castel challenge the military war with situation-based conducts which unquestionably have to do with self-restraint. The symmetric characterization has some impairments due to the unbalanced intervention and participation of each of the two in the short-story. While Tomassov is flashbacked by the old officer, De Castel takes foot on the salon-setting in Paris, Tomassov's first and foremost battleground. On meeting on the lady's salon, the two enjoy a company kept as such with the charm and charisma of "the exquisite lady" (Conrad 93). Hardly taken for a trio as compact as a block, the very triangle of relationships binding together the salon-characters (Tomassov, De Castel and the French Lady) leaves out a tight tandem in the persons of Tomassov and De Castel.

In any case, by equitably assuming the role of a Platonic lover for both the French Officer and the Russian youth, the French Lady exercises a kind of romantic monopole over the two military men. As "an extraordinary woman" (Conrad 92), her power transcends the sole salon-space to influence the secrets of armed men. And her character being one of a mediation-type, she has "something very distinguished; a social center" (Conrad 92) to turn potentially warlike actions "into a nice point of honor" (Conrad 97). As soft and silent as a finesse congruent with what we earlier mean by war artifices, the exquisiteness of the French lady impacts positively the antecedents and precedents of the Napoleonic war in "The Warrior's Soul". Through the whole process, she acts as a receptacle in close collaboration with underground European decision-makers.

Writing beyond the Slavic borders, Conrad invites to reading "The Warrior's Soul" with a focus on difference and diversity. References to the Grand Army fit in this Pan-

Slavism, Pan-Europeanism, even if the story prevents itself from telling: "Napoleon led not just a French army but a European one that included Italian, Austrian, German, and Polish forces into Russia" (Gampert *et al* 44). The clash between Napoleon and Alexander was not a mere confrontation between two imperial parties. The two dragged along in the war their allies, which positioned Poland, a neighbour and dominion to the Tsar, the enemy they used to be towards Russia. Conrad keeps undead the patriotic fibre in "The Warrior's Soul". His expectations for a free Poland grow on in the latter story be as great as "The hope of defeating Russia and thereby securing Polish independence" (Kingsbury, note 2, p. 166). A failure of the Grand Army to come up to such Conradian ideal is somehow caught up in "The Warrior's Soul" with the Franco-Russian alliance of Tomassov and De Castel.

Before analysing in-depth this "soldierly communion" (Yamamoto 86), interest should be taken in France and Conrad's return to the French high-society in "The Warrior's Soul". Paris, opposed to Moscow with its "Russes sauvages", has a metropolitan dimension with its salons and ladies of honour. The comparison keeps on and applies to the military men from the two countries. Their Officers show gaps and profiles which the society they belong to justify. If De Castel, a French officer, is "a man of the best society besides" (Conrad 94), the old Russian officer cannot be considered so. De Castel's aristocratic code counts and impacts his military personality. Instead of insisting on the hierarchy guiding the men and the troops, he looks beyond these army parameters. For De Castel and his fellow French soldiers, there is "a sort of brotherly feeling for all who bore arms, even if it was against them" (Conrad 94).

Between Tomassov and De Castel exists a strong brotherly bond that begins in a fluid city of Paris and ends up in a wintry Moscow. In fact, the Paris episode, while preceding and predicting the invasion war in Russia, lays out the "theme of the aristocrat who holds to the code in a world that is witnessing the death of honor" (Fleishman 146). De Castel embodies this aristocrat who is to bear the burden of accomplishing actions beyond his military predispositions: "The fate of those people [Russians] is of no military importance to us [French]" (Conrad 97). Indeed, De Castel's aristocratic cause transcends the war and the warriors in "The Warrior's Soul". So does Tomassov's. "Yes, he [Tomassov] was full of compassion for all forms of mankind's misery in a manly way" (Conrad 100). As an individual impromptu decisive in the collision between Napoleon's imperialism and Tsar Alexander's patriotism, this sense of community/commonness consistently counterbalances such predicament: "For Conrad,

individuals are always the ones crushed between larger political forces" (Peters 38).

III. "THE WARRIOR'S SOUL": A TALE ON PATHOS AND ETHOS

"The Warrior's Soul" can be validly considered a short-story; "a work of prose narrative shorter than a novel, usually concentrating on a specific episode or experience and its effect" (*Harrap's 21st Century Dictionary*). Its condensed form conforms to the short-story genre while its "temporal and spatial dislocation" (Yamamoto 2010: 79) dissuades from reading it as a form of novella. Added to that, the delegation of voices along with the overlapping of individual war-reports contrast with the way short-stories maintain their plots somehow centralized. No doubt, Conrad alters the plotting here as he deliberately sets in an audience with no responsive say in the tale told by the old Russian officer. The dialogic box shaped with the two-side setting prevails within the narration of the latter who, till the final words connecting him towards Tomassov, reflects the role of a soliloquizing confessor.

The psychoanalytic side of the story plays deep in the protagonists as eye-witnesses and active participants in Napoleon's war against Russia. Because of the moral and military traumas weighing down on his patriotic conscience, such a war veteran and survivor as the old officer is rather complaining than explaining to the young Cossacks the "safe" retreat which had been guaranteed to Napoleon's Grand Army. In fact, the omniscient narrating voice keeps moving to and fro an emotional register which coalesces with pathetic allusions framed as a "despair's conflicting claim" (Brodsky 190) in "The Warrior's Soul". In other words, what is ever lost during and after the war requires more specific actions than the individual memory can carry out. Telling the story about the war and its proceedings is far from being the only rhetoric fact which can symbolically sustain the individual commitment to the humane cause. No doubt, the narrating Officer's old age and abundant experience from the war altogether build up a memory which is contradictorily questioned by an omniscient story: "Memory is a fugitive thing. It can be falsified, it can be effaced, it can be even doubted" (Conrad 90). In fact, the memorial hegemony characteristic of the old Russian officer experiences its limits once faced with the "humane" considerations:

For him [Tomassov] love and friendship were but two aspects of exalted perfection. He had found these fine examples of it and he

vowed them indeed a sort of cult. It affected his attitude towards Frenchmen in general, great patriot as he was...He grieved at the appalling amount of human suffering he saw around him (Conrad 100)

At its peak, Tomassov's blind compassion for the Napoleonic troops goes beyond the military men. He encapsulates in a single altruistic vision both the Cossacks and the Europeans engaged in the Grand Army. In this singular posture favourable for a deletion of the barriers and interests standing between Russia and Napoleon, Tomassov's presence among the Cossacks echoes a silent and passive dissidence.

The pressure which the military ideology puts upon the soldiers parallels with the sacrifices endured by the individual – "The abstract principle of the value of self-sacrifice" (Peters 2012: 40) – to cut short to the dehumanization process in "The Warrior's Soul". In spite of the harsh and deadly conditions surrounding the Cossacks, Tomassov's humane character brings in a friendly atmosphere. His references to Paris, France, and the salon lady meet the silenced expectations of the Russian field soldiers. His experience of love and seduction in the French high society suffices to soothe and quieten the shooting instinct of the latter: "the humane Tomassov" among his fellow soldiers who no doubt envy...Tomassov's experience with the Russian diplomatic corps in Paris before the war" (Kingsbury 158).

Additionally, the inexistence of any need to fire on the human relics of a Grand Army does more than raising a moral consciousness among the Cossacks, starting indeed with Tomassov: "That surely is artificial. I am all for natural feelings. I believe in nothing else" (Conrad 97). The contradictions omnipresent in the war under process in "The Warrior's Soul" tend to be more significant when they are brought down upon the individuals. As such, their effects, if effects be, break completely away from the collective will incarnated by the fighting armies. Since "Had it been left up to Tomassov and De Castel (friends before war but opponents after its outbreak) the war never would have occurred" (Peters 38). Opposed to this soft and underground side of warriors is the more radical one which involves such characters as the adjutant and the old officer. Based upon their respective war-doctrines, the moral differences opposing the Tomassov-De Castel duo to the Adjutant-Officer one will be interesting to deepen in another paper.

The traditional ways of waging war with armed regiments, infantries and battalions keep on in "The Warrior's Soul". The only difference – which a major demarcation from the classic war-way – is Tomassov's and De Castel's sense of honour which ethicizes the Napoleonic war. This stratum present in the text on the war can be significantly summed up "profound moral struggles of the story's protagonist" (Peters 38). The Paris experience proves Tomassov and De Castel mature enough to commit themselves to causes of a noble moral dimension: "fidelity to a cause – (about) loyalty, human solidarity and (having) a sense of duty, all of which were values that were essential to the soldiers of the Resistance movement" (Skolik 201). And as a testing ground, the war in Russia reunites them in the worst conditions to question their friendship and, say, their "knightly ethics of honour" (Tkachuk 2015: 81). This figure of the aristocrat and active soldier emerges more and more frequently in a war-space which the omniscient narrator reduces to the twinned characters of Tomassov of De Castel – "The twin idolatries of venerable and martial" (Brodsky 2001: 190) heroism.

What we expect as a frontal confrontation between the Russian Cossacks and the Napoleonic men never takes place due to a fragmentation of the war ground into ghost-like villages and provinces in secluded Russia. An evident chaos in space which compels the troops to wander for the enemies and, in need, bivouac to give a break to a war lost in advance. This military aimlessness lasts long and will not leave Tomassov and De Castel out of its human toll. Though the dynamic of the story – very similar itself to a gyrosopic lens – has no real focus on any of the two protagonists, the voices of the latter keep confessing to try to fill in an emotional gap still overt in "The Warrior's Soul": "Love at its highest should be the origin of every perfection" (Conrad 96). "An altogether different sort of lover from himself" (Conrad 99), Tomassov is a typical altruistic true to the Conradian gentleman "who must always and everywhere excel over the others" (Tkachuk 78). In a matter of life or death, this embodiment of heroism is always the one who pays his existence for the survival of the others. In the specific case of war in "The Warrior's Soul", the sacrifice of the military self adequately ranges in a more consequential code of honour: "War has put Tomassov and De Castel in moral predicaments; each has relied on an accepted set of values to make a choice" (Kingsbury 161). Tomassov and De Castel decide then to wage the war in a manly but humane way. Instead of fighting to kill, and humiliate, they deliberately choose to inculcate into their fellow soldiers honour and moral strength, "giving them hope in hopeless situations and enabling them to find meaning in their lives" (Skolik 201).

Shifts of the omniscient narrating voice from the empire-level war into moral and ethical ordeals replace "The Warrior's Soul" in a writing trend anchoring upon human dignity, among other man-concerned issues. Being the central point in the story process, man under his military guise suffers what some of some critics and biographies of Conrad typify as a system (Skolik 202). As a hegemonic structure subtly present throughout the war, the system as an imperial force (including both Napoleon's invaders and Tsar Alexander's Cossacks) generates its own objects (armies) to perpetuate an exploitation law hardly detachable from a class-struggle complex. Victims of higher decision-makers – some avatars of power – the fighting French and Russians unconsciously contribute to the maintaining of tsarism or napoleonism as a political ideologies. The authorial will to subvert such superstructures never fails. It reinvents itself through those protagonists whose "human loneliness on the one hand" imposes a "human solidarity on the other" (Skolik 203).

Like the Napoleonic war which is one lost in advance, the individual's challenging the deeply implanted system turns out to be a failure in "The Warrior's Soul". In reality, the opposition between the two imperial forces sets up a ground or battlefield conformist enough to entrap the dissident, anti-ideological military mind-set. The earlier rebellion which the old officer had nipped in the bud of his prolixity comes around in the subtle but persecuting form of a "personal moral conflict and guilt" (Peters 38) true of both Tomassov and De Castel. No doubt, the two nations in conflict induce a friction of the French culture and the Russian one. And applied to the respective patriots and warriors, a friction cannot be avoided between a *Russe sauvage* and the "exquisitely accomplished man of the world, De Castel" (Conrad 96). Yet, Tomassov and De Castel get beyond the cultural differences by looking ahead for this: "The clemency born of a notion of human worth that shuns its degradation" (Fleishman 146). This quest goes on and even closes up the war-story with an indefectible commitment of Tomassov and De Castel to human honour; "another vision beyond contemporary history" (Fleishman 147).

IV. CONCLUSION

As a polemic story, "The Warrior's Soul" opens up to a revisionist reading of war. What Conrad idealizes as the "true gentleman-aristocrat" (Tkachuk 78) includes way and manners blind to nation and culture borders. A humane "compassion [that] can be seen as embracing all humanity beyond the binary oppositions between friend and enemy, "we" and "they"" (Yamamoto 82). By the end of the Napoleonic war, Tomassov and De Castel manage to take

the pioneering steps towards a pan-Europeanism dear to Conrad. The tragic, which is a ransom to their honour-debt, leaves none of the two armies safe, and unvanquished.

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