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# Reading, Traveling, Conversing

c r i t i c s :  
Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech, *Travels with Conrad: Essays (Podróże z Conradem. Szkice)*, Kraków 2016.

The title of Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech's book might strike the reader as an odd fit. Literary travel writing is not the book's primary focus, nor is the author interested in wandering in the footsteps of an author or the heroes of his prose. Yet it would be unfair to assume that the signpost *Travels after Conrad* only functions here as a heading that holds together various essays with little in common. The image of reading and interpretation as acts of travel seems straightforward and even a little too obvious. In the case of Conrad's work, however, you would be hard pressed to find a more appropriate concept to grasp the map of his literary invention (spanning just about the whole planet), the wonders of navigation that provide the very context of narration, the simultaneous risk and promise of an encounter with the Other, cultural borders, foreign languages and spheres of initiation...

When preparing for a journey, the first, indispensable step is to collect maps, guidebooks, useful information, and in this case: a sampling of good literature on the subject. Adamowicz-Pośpiech provides a scrupulous overview of the readings offered by her predecessors, sometimes following their cues and often polemicizing with them. These references never overwhelm the reader, however, and in reading the book, you never feel bombarded by footnotes. Instead, you feel confident that the book's interpretations are new but rooted in tradition.

Any journey, or perhaps the departure of a ship, can only start with an encounter with the captain, for his word decides all. It seems appropriate, then, that Adamowicz-Pośpiech opens her book with an essay discussing the integration of autobiographical elements into Conrad's books. Although this is a favorite theme among Con-

rad acolytes and has already been the subject of much scholarship (much of which is derivative of Zdzisław Najder's foundational study),<sup>1</sup> Adamowicz-Pośpiech introduces the term "anti-confessional autobiography," which allows her to grasp the matter more precisely than her predecessors. Using this insightful formula, she builds upon Najder's premises. Najder has argued that embedded in Conrad's *Lord Jim* is a challenge to Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the founder of modern confessional literature and its tendency to seek the exotic and rationalize infidelity and impotence.<sup>2</sup> Adamowicz-Pośpiech centers her reflections around the volume *A Personal Record*, which embodies the tenets of the Conradian autobiographical pact. These tenets include an aversion to speaking directly of the self, the displacement of emphasis to the places he visited and the people he met, and a tendency to process existential experiences through the prism of literature, relying on allusion, citations, and unattributed references. These strategies set up a game of concealment and revelation that is rife with red herrings and subterfuges. Paradoxically, however, while Conrad conceals himself, he simultaneously reveals the essential hallmarks of his work and personality. As Adamowicz-Pośpiech points out, Conrad rejects the convention of confession but simultaneously divulges the very principles he "expressed in his works, but more importantly, those by which he lived his life, such as self-possession, self-control, sobriety, duty, and an infinite sense of loyalty" (p. 15).

Adamowicz-Pośpiech situates the volume *A Personal Record* against an expansive backdrop of theories of personal writing and its poetics (drawing from the work of Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska, Phillippe Lejeune, Mieczysław

Dąbrowski and Maria Czermińska, among others). In doing so, she reveals the volume's singular quality as a mediated autobiography that embeds the writer's life in a diverse body of references to literary tradition and allusions to the lives of others, second-hand anecdotes, and portraits of the places he visited. Adamowicz-Pośpiech manages to persuasively elevate the longstanding dialogue on the "integrity" of Conrad's confessions to a new level.

Aside from the dispute over the autobiographical status of his prose, the second issue that looms large in Conrad criticism (particularly in Poland) is the ethics of his stories' protagonists. Adamowicz-Pośpiech has also decided to contribute her "two cents" (p. 31) to this discussion in the book's second chapter. Tracing the formation of the value system with which Conrad identified, she underscores the importance of Korzeniowski's family life (to use his Polish name). When he was a toddler, the young Conrad was exiled with his parents to the Russian interior for their involvement in conspiracies and an uprising. Although these experiences rarely enter into Conrad's prose explicitly, Adamowicz-Pośpiech highlights this background as a significant context that deserves further scrutiny.

The book offers a contribution of extreme value and originality, however, in the form of its schema for four variations among Conrad's heroes. She proposes a typology that can be applied to nearly all the major characters encountered throughout the reader's journey with Conrad. To start off, Adamowicz-Pośpiech singles out the "simple hero:" this figure is brave, reliable, and unwaveringly faithful to his professional code of conduct. We see this archetype reflected in Singleton from *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus,'* the French lieutenant in *Lord Jim*, and Captain MacWhirr from *Typhoon*. The next cluster consists of "sensitive heroes" whose personalities are crippled by some weak point that ultimately forces them into a moment of reckoning. In this group,

<sup>1</sup> Zdzisław Najder, *Życie Josepha Conrada Korzeniowskiego*, Krakow 2014.

<sup>2</sup> See also: Zdzisław Najder, *Conrad i Rousseau*, [in:] idem, *Sztuka i wierność. Szkice o twórczości Josepha Conrada*, Opole 2000, pp. 149-162.

we find Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness* and Jim from Conrad's masterpiece. We can also distinguish a group of "reflective heroes" united by a common tendency to live by straightforward and consistent principles who are nonetheless cognizant of the risk of moral downfall and entirely aware of their own weaknesses and fears. This archetype characterizes Marlow, a narrator who appears in several of the author's works. The final typology consists of Conrad's "anti-heroes" who are entirely bereft of shame and moral intuition. Adamowicz-Pośpiech informs us that this type "has little appeal for Conrad due to the wholesale deviation from society it represents" (p. 50). This claim seems to hold true if we limit ourselves to the examples of Donkin (from *Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*), and Chester, Robinson, Cornelius and Brown (who all hail from *Lord Jim*). However, in the case of Jones from *Victory*, it becomes harder to determine whether this character is compelling for the author and his readers. Willems, from *An Outcast of the Islands*, is another ambiguous case. At any rate, Adamowicz-Pośpiech's notion remains extremely useful and opens up a space for new readings, including those that revise or refine her schema. Moreover, the scholar has once again managed to contribute a new approach to the traditional and widely discussed theme of Conrad's ethics and their contexts.

The strongest section of the book by far and the most thrilling stage of *Travels with Conrad* consists of three essays devoted to Conrad's individual novels and stories. In the first essay, a reading of *Lord Jim*, Adamowicz-Pośpiech proves herself as a scholar of English letters with her ability to point out nuances that have been lost in translation. Here, I should mention that Adamowicz-Pośpiech is also the author of *Conrad's "Lord Jim": Readings ("Lord Jim" Conrada: Interpretacje)*.<sup>3</sup> This book consists of thorough,

systematic and erudite schemas offering various interpretations of the novel. The scholar adds her own approaches to the scholarly tradition she knows so well. Her main preoccupation is the issue of impeded (and often downright impossible) mutual understanding among people from different cultural spheres due to their prejudices, ignorance, preconceptions and stereotypes.

Adamowicz-Pośpiech's approach adopts some insights grounded in the anthropological discourse introduced in Marek Pacukiewicz's book on the subject.<sup>4</sup> Adamowicz-Pośpiech analyzes the figure of Marlow as a subject who is vulnerable to prejudices of his own and tends to treat others as foreign and inferior. Given that the novel's core theme is the pursuit of the truth of others through dialogue and by compiling the stories of others, the "communicative discontinuities" (p. 51) in *Lord Jim* (to use Adamowicz-Pośpiech's words) become particularly severe. Many factors underlie these fundamental misunderstandings, such as racial aversions, language gaps, and psychic blocks. In her analysis, the author effectively reveals the "didaskalia" offered by Marlow's dialogues with other characters, in which moments of understanding run up against moments of distortion that either obstruct the pursuit of truth or make it altogether impossible. The situations grows even more complex when the main protagonist relates a story secondhand, now filtering its content through his own identity and proclivities. In this light, Marlow becomes an ambiguous character, and to a certain extent a figure more intimate to the reader. This relationship is analogical to how Marlow himself becomes closer to the figure of Lord Jim gradually surfacing through a morass of metaphors (particularly abundant in the tales told by the character Stein). Marlow gradually pieces together a portrait of the eponymous hero from various, fragmented testimonies.

<sup>3</sup> Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech, *"Lord Jim" Conrada. Interpretacje*, Krakow 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Marek Pacukiewicz, *Dyskurs antropologiczne w pisarstwie Josepha Conrada*, Krakow 2008.

On the surface level, Conrad's novella *Typhoon* might seem to contain little depth or mystery. In this case, however, Adamowicz-Pośpiech has also managed to propose a new reading of the text. Her approach focuses on the letters and books that circulate among the novella's characters. This perhaps simple impulse yields wonderful results. Captain MacWhirr, the mechanic Rout, and the first officer Jukes all pen letters in the novel. Each one portrays events from their own perspectives, and none of them disclose the whole story. In nineteenth-century realist literature, letters often figured as valuable pseudo-documents offering a record of the protagonists' spiritual lives and substantially supplementing the third-person narration.

In her reading of *Typhoon*, Adamowicz-Pośpiech does a brilliant job of conveying the story behind the letter that readers surely find most intriguing: Captain MacWhirr's notes to his wife. Reading the novella, one might expect these personal notes to provide an access point to the emotions and motives of this commander who is rather terse towards his crew. Yet Adamowicz-Pośpiech points out that the captain's wife is not at all interested in her husband's professional life. She receives news of the typhoon with total indifference. Bored, she gives the letter only a cursory glance. Meanwhile, the reader, who depends on the captain as his only entry point to the manuscript, is forced to rely on oblique hints, omissions, and loosely quoted snatches of text. This insightful interpretation reveals fine detail in the narrative structure: again, we are dealing with an instance of Conrad's experimentation with literary convention and yet another pretext for "communicative discontinuity," misunderstanding and otherness.

Adamowicz-Pośpiech also frames the correspondence between the two protagonists as examples of the ironic distance the writer maintains towards the reader's desire to rely on the

book as a reliable record of the crew's clash with the elements. The letters penned by Rout, the steamship's chief mechanic, reveal more about the intimate details of his marriage than they do about the voyage. They are meant to appeal to his wife, and to postpone the story itself until his homecoming, which they both await eagerly. Jukes, on the other hand, who comes across as an upstart and wise guy, pens a letter to a friend of his in the Navy that touches up the truth in order to downplay his own cowardice.

These three epistolary addenda to the main text, so distinct from one another, broaden the text's context substantially by introducing new characters, places and themes. At the same time, they give the reader little access to the main events of the dramatic voyage. Adamowicz-Pośpiech's reading helps us discern ambiguous moments in the text that had previously gone unnoticed in criticism. She also sheds light on the heroes' manipulations of these letters to convey their personal experiences, self-reflexivity (or self-deception, as the case may be) and commentary on others. The scholar elaborates on MacWhirr's thesis that "there are some things for which books have no words" with a valuable insight: in the novella *Typhoon*, there are no words to describe the actual moment when the typhoon attacks the ship.

If today, Captain MacWhirr's tale of this ill-fated voyage is rarely taken seriously among Conrad scholars, then the novella *Idiots* might be situated on the very fringe of Conrad's oeuvre. Adamowicz-Pośpiech begins to correct this state of affairs by reading *Idiots* in conversation with Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent*. Her reading focuses on two female characters, Susan Bacadou and Winnie Verloc. Once again, she finds a simple but original angle of interpretation that yields remarkable effects. Her parallel reading is very much to the benefit of both texts and only to the detriment of the

(unfortunately populous) Conrad scholars who have accused the author of failing to conceive vivid and persuasive female characters. As Adamowicz-Pośpiech demonstrates compellingly and in detail, Conrad does in fact cultivate literary portraits of the longstanding violence to which women have been subjected over the years and men's tendency to treat them as a mere means for satiating their needs. The female protagonists of these two works both demonstrate strategies of self-preservation and hold themselves at an aloof distance in order to weather assaults on their self-worth. As it happens, both protagonists ultimately commit crimes.

The three sections discussed above make up the middle of the book and prove to be its most inspiring, innovative and complex passages. The ideas collected in these sections would benefit any reader, from the veteran Conrad scholar who has read these texts many times over, to the one who knows nothing about them. Adamowicz-Pośpiech treats both readers with equal respect. Her expansive knowledge of existing scholarship on Conrad allows her to carve out an original path for her own approach, and these three essays all root their readings in different perspectives: from the observation of cognitive limits embedded in cultural differences, thought systems, and preconceptions (as in her reading of *Lord Jim*) to her deep analysis of a specific but instrumental element of narrative structure (the letters in *Typhoon*) and her subtle comparative character analysis of two of Conrad's works (the novella *The Idiots* and the novel *The Secret Agent*).

The expansive concluding chapter, titled *Conrad in the Political World*, has somewhat less to offer. Adamowicz-Pośpiech starts the chapter off by giving us a rather cursory and laconic recap of the political debates surrounding Conrad's work: from the great emigration of talent at the end of the nineteenth century to the af-

termath of Jan Kott's essay *O laickim tragizmie (On the Secular Tragedy)* and Jerzy Andrzejewski's afterward for the 1956 edition of *Lord Jim*, and twentieth-century debates on the literary canon. This overview leads to the rather obvious conclusion that Conrad's work has been instrumentalized and exploited to serve various agendas. Adamowicz-Pośpiech provides a historical overview of the political controversies surrounding Conrad, which she then supplements with more recent and representative opinions. Although her arguments here are entirely justified, comprehensive overviews of these themes were already available in earlier criticism.<sup>5</sup>

It is somewhat difficult to glean the purpose of the four-page subsection titled *Politics in Conrad's Letters*. It would be impossible to do justice to this issue, so substantially and frequently addressed by Conrad scholars, in one brief essay. Adamowicz-Pośpiech's contribution merely consists of identifying a few valid concepts and elaborating on a few motifs (such as the symptom of weakness and the disintegration of Western European democracy). This section does, however, offer valuable insights on Conrad's influence on the work of Gustaw Herling-Grudziński. This issue could very well be the subject of its own monograph. She offers an extensive analysis of Herling-Grudziński's polemics with Jan Kott, who wrote *O laickim tragizmie (On the Secular Tragedy)*. In 1947, Herling-Grudziński published an article in the émigré journal "Światło." At the time, he was not necessarily in a good position to properly engage in the debates circulating in his country. Defending Conrad from Kott's attempts to scandalize the author on behalf of communist cultural politics, Herling-Grudziński drew focus to the artistic and ethical implications of

<sup>5</sup> See also: Stefan Zabierowski, *Dziedzictwo Conrada w literaturze polskiej*, Krakow 1992, idem, *W kręgu Conrada*, Katowice 2008.

Conrad's oeuvre. According to Adamowicz-Pośpiech, Conrad represented the ideal writer for Herling-Grudziński. She then expands this thesis in the next few pages in the form of an essay demonstrating Conrad's influence on Herling-Grudziński's techniques for representing these extreme situations (suffering and death).

"The journey proposed follows only one of many possible routes. This leaves many others yet to be traveled, with different paths for the reader and for myself," (p. 174) – with these words, the critic concludes her book. This sentiment conveys the book's very nature: it draws from

an enormous knowledge base of Polish and English literature on the subject (one glance at the footnotes and the extensive bibliography confirms this). At the same time, the book is a testimony of analytical originality and a true talent for forging one's own analytical paths.

For the reader, addressed in this case as a traveling companion, the biggest takeaway from the book is its ability to shed new light on inconspicuous regions of Conrad's prose. As we journey onward, we might bring Adamowicz-Pośpiech's perspectives with us to forge new navigational tools and maps, this time unearthing insights on our own.

# KEYWORDS

*travel in literature*

## JOSEPH CONRAD'S OEUVRE

### ABSTRACT:

In the first chapters of her book *Travels with Conrad (Podróże z Conradem)*, Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech addresses the critical themes of Conrad criticism. Although the autobiographical valences of the writer's works have been discussed many times over, Adamowicz-Pośpiech introduces the term "anti-confessional autobiography," which turns out to be an original and effective interpretive tool. The scholar subsequently attempts to outline the four main hero archetypes of this body of work, revealing new aspects of Conrad's ethics. The book also offers refreshing analyses of specific novels and stories by Conrad. In *Lord Jim*, Adamowicz-Pośpiech points out "communicative discontinuities" produced by the characters' cultural differences, preconceptions, and biases. In her analysis of *Typhoon*, she focuses on the decisive role letters play in portraying the novella's world. She reads the novella *Idiots* in parallel with the novel *The Secret Agent*, reaching new conclusions on Conrad's ability to create psychologically plausible female characters and convey their long-term struggles against violence and degradation. *Travels with Conrad* is an example of contemporary scholarship on Joseph Conrad that is compelling and has many new perspectives to contribute.

## ethics in literature

## personal letters

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Wiesław Ratajczak (b. 1969) is a Professor of the history of literature at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. He researches Polish culture from the late nineteenth century. He has written the following books: *Teodor Tomasz Jeż (Zygmunt Miłkowski) i wiek XIX* (2006), *Słownik motywów literackich* (2006), *Literatura polska XIX wieku* (2008), *Conrad i koniec epoki żaglowców* (2010), and 'Stąd konserwatyzm jest pozytywizmem'. *Myśl społeczno-polityczna młodych konserwatystów warszawskich i ich adherentów 1876-1918. Antologia publicystyki* (2018). He has co-edited several anthologies, including *Poznań Czerwiec 56. Sens pamięci* (2006), *Europejskość i rodzimość. Horyzonty twórczości Józefa Ignacego Kraszewskiego* (2006), *Cóż wiesz o pięknie? Szkice o literaturze, filmie, muzyce i teatrze* (2007), *Norwid – artysta* (2010), *W kręgu młodokonserwatyizmu warszawskiego 1876-1918* (2015), and *Kraśiński i Kraszewski wobec europejskiego romantyzmu i dylematów XIX wieku. (w dwustulecie urodzin pisarzy)* (2016). He has written articles on late nineteenth-century Polish prose, religious symbolism in literature, and stereotypes and national myths in novels. He has also published methodological essays and literary and film reviews.