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Author: Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech

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AGNIESZKA ADAMOWICZ-POŚPIECH

Uniwersytet Śląski
Katowice

A POSITIVE MECAENAS OR A NEGATIVE MENTOR? A SURVEY OF TADEUSZ BOBROWSKI'S CHARACTER PORTRAITS

One of the most influential and authoritative persons in Conrad's life (apart from his father) was his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski – a lawyer, a justice of peace in Podolia (Ukraine). A highly controversial individual: portrayed by some relatives, historians and Conradians positively, by others – negatively. Each noteworthy biographer of Conrad devoted much attention to the description and analysis of his personality and character, beliefs and ideals. Those presentations varied, hence nowadays one faces a broad range of diverse assessments of the Bobrowski-Conrad relation. The aim of this article is twofold; firstly, to delineate how the evaluation of Bobrowski's role in Conrad's life changed from the partisan and hasty acclaim or downright condemnation to more balanced views considering both the advantageous and harmful aspects of the avuncular guidance. Secondly, to prove that the latest studies upgrading Bobrowski's influence on his nephew seem to be, in my opinion, the least tendentious and biased, thus rendering the relationship most comprehensively.

The uncle's extreme importance for Conrad was acknowledged by the writer himself shortly after he had received the information about the death of his relative and guardian: 'it seems as if everything has died in me. He seems to have carried my soul away with him.'¹

Ten years later the thirty-four-year old nephew revealed:

I cannot write about Tadeusz Bobrowski, my uncle, guardian and benefactor, without emotion. Even now, after ten years, I still feel his loss. He was a man of great character and unusual qualities of mind. Although he did not understand my desire to join the mercantile marine, on principle, he never objected to it. [...] I attribute to his devotion, care, and influence, whatever good qualities I may possess.²

These were private disclosures whereas Conrad wanted to pay homage to his uncle publicly as well. He referred to him with kindness and generosity on the pages of *Personal Record*:

¹ A letter to M. Poradowska, 18 II 1894, F. R. Karl, L. Davies, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, Cambridge 1986, I, p. 148. Hereafter cited as CL.

T. Bobrowski died on 1 of February.

² A letter to K. Waliszewski, 5 XII 1903, CL, III, p. 88.

He [...] had been for a quarter of a century the wisest, the firmest, the most indulgent of guardians, extending over me a paternal care and affection, a moral support which I seemed to feel always near me in the most distant parts of the earth.³

Undoubtedly, the nephew regarded his uncle as a guide and mentor – a figure which provided him not only with financial support but also (or above all) with psychic and moral sustenance. That was the main reason why Conradian scholars took interest in uncle Tadeusz.

Before presenting the positive as well as negative assessments of the role of Bobrowski in Conrad's life made by the Conradians, let us attend to the voice of another of Bobrowski's wards – Jan Perłowski.

Perłowski perceived Bobrowski as 'an outstanding man to whom several generations were indebted for maintaining our Ukrainian world on its noble and traditional level.'⁴ He had the character of the people from the Enlightenment epoch:

Lively, full of vigour, Bobrowski had their mentality- lucid, completely reasonable. Similarly to them he bothered only about earthly matters and even in critical moments he retained his optimism which sometimes resembled indifference. His sense of humour was succinct and sharp as the humour of that sarcastic epoch. He had a tendency to epicurism and was a gourmet. He got interested in social causes. He was ambitious, however, he performed the civic duties with care and he was righteous to the utmost.⁵

We can infer from Perłowski's description that he admired and was grateful to his guardian. The former ward emphasised especially the consideration and respect that Bobrowski inspired among his contemporaries:

Whenever there were matters of legal or social import he was always ready to advise, influence and arbitrate. In those situations Mr Bobrowski's judgement became the judgement of the public opinion. He was surrounded by ubiquitous esteem. The disputes quietened, the relaxed postures straightened when during the contracts in Kiev the short figure of Bobrowski entered the conference room.⁶

On the basis of Perłowski's testimony one can form the opinion that whatever drawbacks Bobrowski possessed they were outweighed by his great merits and services towards the local community.

Let us juxtapose the ward's reminiscences and a report made by a historian Stefan Kieniewicz – a contemporary editor of Bobrowski's *Memoirs*.⁷ He paints the portrait of Tadeusz making use of the extant documents. He was one of the most talented among his siblings, having graduated from a gymnasium in Kiev and studied law in Petersburg 'he defended a master's dissertation which was unusual for the descendants of the landed

³ *A Personal Record*, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988, p. 31.

⁴ J. Perłowski, *Conrad i Kipling [On Conrad and Kipling]* [in] B. Kocówna (ed.), *Wspomnienia i studia o Conradzie*, Warszawa 1963, p. 111. All the translations are by Agnieszka Adamowicz unless otherwise specified.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁶ Since this extract was censored in Kocówna's edition, I quote from S. Kieniewicz (ed.), *Przedmowa wydawcy [Editor's Preface]*, [in] Tadeusz Bobrowski, *Pamiętnik mojego życia [Memoirs]*, vol. I-II, Warszawa, 1979, p. 12. Hereafter cited as PMŻ.

⁷ S. Kieniewicz (ed.), *Przedmowa wydawcy [Editor's Preface]*, [in] PMŻ, pp. 5–28.

gentry'.⁸ However his plans for civil servant's career in Russia were ruined due to the untimely death of his father, Józef Bobrowski. Consequently, the son was compelled to come back to his familial countryside in order to preside over the homestead (at the age of 22). He got involved in public life in Ruthenia. Among other things, he was an active participant in the preparatory work for agrarian reform. He was an opponent of all nationally-oriented movements and 'became an ironic witness of the 1863 catastrophe'.⁹ The January Uprising (1863) made it impossible for him to pursue an official career in his country. Widowed (1858), after the loss of his only child Józefina (1870) he settled in Kazimierówka (Podolia). 'He did not like agriculture [...]. But he took delight in passing judgement in property and financial disagreements among the gentry. He was the guardian of several orphans, supervising their education and upbringing as well as looking after their financial affairs. It entailed numerous travels, correspondence, and a great deal of other activities which he performed dutifully and disinterestedly.'¹⁰

Let us confront the above accounts with the self-characterization made by Tadeusz on the pages of his *Memoirs*: 'a convinced doctrinaire, deeply confident in the inflexible and unchanging laws and duties of reason, analytical judgement and free will which make man a master of his own fate and history, and rejecting all external influences of feeling, passions, and one's environment, possessing for every problem of life a ready formula obtained by abstract reasoning'.¹¹ We can infer from this self-portraiture that Bobrowski tenaciously relied on the accuracy and infallibility of reason, denying any role that emotions might play in man's life. He had a high opinion of himself and his powers of judgement and put his person above others.

He formulated his credo, only once, in a very intimate confession in a letter to his nephew, Konrad Korzeniowski:

Thus my assertion is: that although this world is not the best that one could imagine, it is nevertheless the only one we know and it is tolerable to the extent that we neither know any other nor are we able to create one; that society is not quite as bad as some seem to think and that it can't be different from the people who constitute it; and that it is open to improvement provided that individuals try to improve themselves, - which in turn is bound to take place provided that with the idea of duty (already recognised as the guiding star in human ethic) they will combine, not the idea of compulsion and necessity, as it has been hither to - and that is especially so in the 'quasi' intelligentsia the members of which are mainly concerned with enjoying life and not with its duties - but the thought and conviction of the satisfaction arising from fulfilling altruistic duties - the origins of which as well as of the pessimism or the optimism, are contained in the soul of a newly-born man though their development and application are the flower of a Civilization which has been well absorbed and well directed - this, in my opinion, will be a matter for the future. One must be able to look closely in order to see the good or at least the tolerable side of life and of people, in the worldly order, the fate of which is not entirely in our hands - but one thing is certain and that is that if one must judge with one's intellect one must appraise with one's heart [...].

I have gone through a lot, I have suffered over my own fate and the fate of my family and my Nation, and perhaps just because of these sufferings and disappointments I have developed in myself this calm

⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

⁹ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 20-21.

¹¹ Bobrowski, PMŻ. Quoted after Z. Najder, *Joseph Conrad and Tadeusz Bobrowski* [in:] *Conrad in Perspective. Essays on Art and Fidelity*, Cambridge 1997, p. 47.

outlook on the problem of life, whose motto, I venture to say, was, is, and will be 'usque ad finem!' The devotion to duty interpreted more widely or narrowly, according to circumstances and time – this constitutes my practical creed [...]. (28 Oct. / 9 Nov. 1891)¹²

One of the conspicuous features of this gentleman from Ukraine which permeates all the descriptions is his steadfast belief in the power of reason and man's free will; at the same time he marginalises the emotional side of human psyche. From Conrad's and Perłowski's reminiscences as well as Kieniewicz's report we can conclude that Bobrowski was respected and relied on by his countrymen who trusted him with custody of orphans together with their financial matters and called for him to settle disputes. I am of the opinion that the far and wide reverence and trust which people placed in him gave rise to his self-satisfaction and his holding himself in high esteem, bordering on conceit. However, bearing in mind Perłowski's account one must admit that Bobrowski had good grounds for considering himself to be above the average level.

Let us now proceed to the descriptions of the uncle that have been made by Conrad biographers. The first Conradian scholars, probably following in Conrad's footsteps, regarded Tadeusz Bobrowski as the ideal guardian. According to Jean-Aubry the uncle was, from the very beginning, affectionate, liberal, and lenient towards his nephew.¹³ The French biographer simplified, to my mind, the emotionally fluctuating guardian-ward relation by stating that the older man understood and accepted the younger one's ideas and fancies. Jean-Aubry pictured Bobrowski as a quiet, fastidious man, legally erudite, who was trusted not only by his compatriots but also by the Russian authorities. The only flaw which the Frenchman detected was Bobrowski's lack of understanding for the literary production of his brother-in-law.

Jean-Aubry took for granted the difference that the custodian would make between the rational Bobrowskis and the fervent Nałęcz Korzeniowski family:

Uncle Tadeusz draws the distinction, which he was fond of stressing again and again, between the two strains in Conrad's inheritance, from the Bobrowskis on the one hand and the Korzeniowskis on the other. Throughout this correspondence, whenever his nephew portrays a leaning to wildness, or to what appeared as such in his uncle's eyes, the blame is put upon the Korzeniowski blood; when he acts prudently, credit is given to the Bobrowski strain in him.¹⁴

Leo Gurko¹⁵ also noted mainly the positive qualities of Bobrowski's character: perseverance, dutifulness, professionalism: 'once Conrad had detached himself from the Polish community, he [T. B.] urged him to embrace another, since civilisation involved belonging to a community and was conceivable only in terms of work, duty and professionalism.'¹⁶ For him the Ukrainian landowner was a patriot fulfilling his duties to such an extent as it was possible. Gurko claimed: 'Tadeusz Bobrowski was a believer

¹² *Conrad's Polish Background. Letters to and from Polish Friends*, Z. Najder (ed.), London 1964, pp. 153–154. Hereafter cited as CPB.

¹³ Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, vol. I–II, London 1927.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 38–39.

¹⁵ L. Gurko, *Joseph Conrad: Giant in Exile*, New York 1962.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

in order, reason and balance [...]. Inside the Russian occupation he adjusted himself to political realities while maintaining his identity as a Pole. Was it possible to live like a civilised man and still maintain political and patriotic honor? To this delicate question his answer was Yes [...].¹⁷ Gurko evaluated Bobrowski's political choices (which were conciliatory towards the Russian authorities) positively, portraying him as a man of honour and exceptional political wisdom.

However, there also existed utterly different opinions concerning uncle Tadeusz among the Conradians. Jerry Allen in a monograph devoted to the nautical period of Conrad's life, depicts Bobrowski as a strict and always reprimanding guardian.¹⁸ He demanded from his nephew absolute obedience, otherwise he threatened to relinquish his custody. To Allen, Bobrowski was 'an ultra-conservative fifty-year-old man who took pride in the fact that never in his life did he behave unreasonably; he was a puritan Victorian. Having been brought up in the Ukrainian seclusion, in a family estate, he expressed provincial views'.¹⁹

It ought to be noted that in Allen's study there were a great number of dubious interpretations of data among which I would classify the presentation of Bobrowski.²⁰

Not so much lopsided a picture of the Kazimierówka nobleman and thus a more comprehensive one was presented by Frederick Karl.²¹ He puts forward the hypothesis that Bobrowski took over the role of a mother towards Konradek rather than the proper role of the uncle: 'He saw himself not as an uncle to the twelve-year-old Conrad but as a mother, indeed a mother hen'. Karl emphasises Bobrowski's emotional covetousness for his nephew's feelings, sentiments and warmth: 'Tadeusz, in a real sense, appropriated Conrad to his own line, attempting to purge the Korzeniowski lineage' (K, 83). Among his stratagems to achieve this was concealing from the boy his mother's complicity in Apollo's political conspiracy and modelling her image as a victim of his father's ideas and beliefs.

The biographer hints at a revealing analogy between the relation of uncle Bobrowski and nephew Konradek versus uncle Beethoven and nephew Karl. Beethoven exercised meticulous care to control every facet of his ward's life which led to such a strong feeling of guilt in Karl that he tried to take his life:

Conrad's suicide attempt, like Karl's at twenty, and with a gun, ostensibly over unpaid gambling debts, did in a sense free him from his uncle's reproofs. A serious suicide attempt is so complicated that no explanation can suffice, but for the person who survives it, it becomes a form of rebirth. In Conrad's case, the attempt was a real display of independence – however self-destructive – and it was one way of exorcising his uncle directly [...] from his past' (K, 83).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁸ J. Allen, *The Sea Years of Joseph Conrad*, New York 1965. The page references refer to the Polish edition of this work: *Morskie lata Conrada*, trans. M. Boduszyńska-Borowikowa, Gdańsk 1971.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 136–137.

²⁰ Cf. I. Vidan, *New Approaches to Conrad*, "The Massachusetts Review" 1970, pp. 545–547. Cf. also D. M. Zabel *Review: J. Allen, The Thunder and the Sunshine*, 'New York Herald Tribune Book Review', 17 VIII 1958, p. 1: "she has [...] left her account unverified by footnotes and documentary references".

²¹ F. Karl, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives. A Biography*, New York 1979. Hereafter cited within the main text in parenthesis as K.

This parallel implies a 'toxic' influence which might have been exerted by Bobrowski upon the adolescent. However Karl stresses that those analogous liaisons should not be understood too literally.

As has already been indicated, Bobrowski's portraiture by Karl is not one-sided. Besides pejorative facets of his character the critic also perceives his merits. Uncle Tadeusz was the first stable parental figure in Konrad's life. Karl depicts Bobrowski as a member of landed gentry who indulged in a moderate lifestyle. He commiserated with the hard-working serfs in Ukraine. He was an admirer of the French Revolution ideals. At the same time he believed in the *noblesse oblige* principle and acknowledged the values discredited by the 1789 Revolution. Those mutually exclusive beliefs allow Karl to consider Bobrowski 'a minor-league Dostoevsky' (K, 87). His political convictions are summarised by Karl in the following way:

Withal, Bobrowski felt that Poland must accumulate material wealth, become self-sufficient, and rejuvenate itself from within, without opposing Russia unitary. [...] He was especially careful of the individual human life, which he felt should not be sacrificed to the unknown or thrown to the winds. (K, 87)

Those views, according to Karl, caused Bobrowski to become an antagonist of Apollo. What is more, the uncle deliberately amplified the differences between himself and Conrad's father, which gave rise to an acute conflict of emotions and values in the would-be writer. 'Overall, there were the conflicts of ideology which he [Conrad] must have noted as he became attached to Tadeusz, a man who mixed kindness and generosity with much stern fatherly advice and who was, implacably, set against nearly everything Apollo had stood for.' (K, 94).

Let us analyse yet another portrait (or to be precise portraits) of Bobrowski that can be found in the numerous studies of Zdzisław Najder.²² In my view it should be stressed that Najder's assessment of Tadeusz evolved from decidedly unfavourable to more balanced. In his first articles Najder was inspired by the publications of Rafał Marcei Blüth.²³ We will not discuss them in detail²⁴ but only highlight the key thesis of Blüth's work. Uncle Tadeusz intentionally juxtaposing himself against Apollo's heritage brought about a set of

²² Najder's studies in which we can observe a gradual evolution of his assessment of the role of T. Bobrowski in J. Conrad-Korzeniowski's life comprise the following:

Polskie lata Conrada, 'Twórczość' 1956: 11.

Conrad w Marsylii, "Życie Literackie" 1957: 40.

Conrad's Polish Background.

Conrad i Bobrowski, [in:] *Nad Conradem*, Warszawa 1965, pp. 46–69.

Preface to Conrad under Familial Eyes, Cambridge 1983.

Życie Conrada-Korzeniowskiego, Warszawa 1980. The English version *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, Cambridge 1883. Hereafter cited as ŻC-K.

Joseph Conrad and Tadeusz Bobrowski [in:] *Conrad in Perspective. Essays on Art and Fidelity*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 44–67.

Postłowie [in:] *Szaleństwo Almayera*, Warszawa 1998, p. 178.

²³ R. M. Blüth, *O tragicznej decyzji Konrada Korzeniowskiego*, 'Verbum' 1936: 2, reprinted in B. Kocówna (ed.), *Wspomnienia i studia o Conradzie*, Warszawa 1963, pp. 379–405; R. M. Blüth, *Dwie rodziny kresowe*, 'Ateneum' 1939: 1.

²⁴ Has already been done by S. Zabierowski, *Conrad w Polsce*, Gdańsk 1971, pp. 32–34.

complexes in Conrad psyche, e.g. a *complex of mother*, a *complex of father*, and a *complex of solitude*. Najder, in his first studies, though not completely denying some positive results of Bobrowski's influence, accentuates mainly the negative consequences of his control:

We know from Conrad's own testimonies that uncle Tadeusz influenced him very much and that the ward – not without justice – regarded this influence as beneficial. But it is not difficult to see that the uncle's authority and example fought (and fought knowingly) against the authority and example of his father. What a great number of complexes must have arisen in the boy during that contest, before the hard schooling of life and the stern voice of the guardian ordered the shade of the father-poet to hide.²⁵

The relationship of the uncle and nephew was discussed thoroughly by Najder in an article devoted solely to that issue.²⁶ The division is made not into positive and negative effects of that guardianship but rather to the didactic and literary ones. To understand the intricacies of Bobrowski's educational guidance, the Polish biographer examines his personality and opinions. He portrays him as a talented jurist who among country folk 'earned the reputation of an excellent legal adviser, honest, scrupulously fair and independent. He served as an executor of many testaments, arbitrator of conflicting estate claims, and a legal guardian of numerous wards – widows and orphans.' (JC&TB, 47) He kept away from politics and disapproved of any irredentist movements. His patriotism, in Najder's opinion, should rather be perceived as a certain type of nationalism, since it was heavily tinted with conciliatory and contemptuous attitudes towards Russia.

Both in his memoirs and in his letters Bobrowski repeatedly declares his deep attachment to Polish culture and tradition, and we have no reason to doubt his sincerity. However, this attachment seems to have been only a passive one. We find no evidence of his doing anything – outside his family circle – to oppose the officially enforced Russification [...]. Bobrowski's attitude towards Russians was a mixture of spite, fear and resignation. He considered them culturally inferior to Poles. (JC&TB, 51)

Najder takes issue with those who describe Bobrowski as a liberal. Nineteenth-century Polish liberals called "Positivists", were activists, whereas Tadeusz, though he did take part in the local committees of landowners which prepared, for the central government, proposals of laws emancipating the peasantry, otherwise remained extremely cautious of any progressive ideas.

Tadeusz's aversion towards Apollo made a considerable impact on the relation between the guardian and ward. Najder supposes that the cold and rationalistic Bobrowski must have envied his affectionate brother-in-law his fame and fondness of the compatriots.²⁷ Contrary to Jocelyn Baines, Zdisław Najder does not believe in friendship between these two family members.²⁸ Bobrowski tolerated his brother-in-law but he did not like

²⁵ *Polskie lata...*, p. 147.

²⁶ *Conrad i Bobrowski*. Hereafter cited within the main text in parenthesis as CB. Whenever possible I quote from the English version of that article *Joseph Conrad and Tadeusz Bobrowski* (although it has been substantially redrafted), hereafter cited within the main text in parenthesis as JC&TB.

²⁷ This hypothesis was accepted and repeated by many western scholars. Cf. e.g. J. Bachelor, *The Life of Joseph Conrad*, Oxford 1994, p. 11.

²⁸ Baines was of the opinion that "[...] later, in the provinces, they [Apollo and Tadeusz] became close friends". (J. Baines, *Joseph Conrad. A Critical Biography*, Harmondsworth 1960, p. 14)

him. When he became the guardian of Konrad Korzeniowski he did not hide his disapproval of the child's father's ideals and political convictions. On the contrary, the uncle frequently peppered his letters with caustic remarks or acrid innuendoes regarding the paternal legacy.

The major objective of Bobrowski's educational efforts was to present the figure of the father in an unfavourable light. That is why the uncle made up family legends which Conrad imbibed and handed down as his own reminiscences. One of them was the prevalent story about the death-oriented, depressed Apollo and his engrossment in morbid religious mysticism after the untimely death of his spouse. Another one was recounting that the father-poet destroyed his manuscripts; still one other was the persistent portrayal of Ewa Korzeniowska as a martyr and victim of her husband's *idée fixe*. Najder claims:

Deliberately and purposefully the uncle did everything to make it difficult for Conrad to understand his father. On the basis of Bobrowski's stories and comments the boy must have created a portrait of Apollo as an irresponsible dreamer and fanatic who sacrificed the life of his loving wife in return for futile dreams. (CB, 51)

Those and many other educational methods made the nephew form an ambivalent – yet more negative than positive – image of his father. Consequently, according to Najder, the much-discussed aversion to father-figures which can be traced among Conradian heroes is not accidental.²⁹ Uncle Tadeusz did not attempt to explicate the significance of the parents' suffering and distress. Quite the contrary, he claimed that their sacrifice was futile, 'thus infecting the young romantic Conrad with bitterness and pessimism.' (CB, 52)

Bobrowski influenced also his ward's political convictions, especially those concerning Poland and the Poles. Since the uncle looked into the future without hope, his nephew assimilated this sort of resignation tinted with disdain. To prove this point the Polish biographer quotes Bobrowski's letter of 9 November 1891:

My dear lad, whatever you were to say about a good or bad balance of the forces of nature, about good or bad social relationships, about right or wrong social systems, about the boundless stupidity of crowds fighting for a crust of bread – and ending up in nothingness – none of this will be new!! You will never control the forces of nature, for whether blind or governed by Providence, in each case they have their own pre-ordained paths; and you will also never change the roads along which humanity goes, for there exists in social development an historical evolutionary compulsion which is slow but sure, and which is governed by the laws of cause and effect derived from the past and affecting the future. If, on this road, the will and work of man mean anything – if in this field all the endeavours of men and their chosen individuals – the geniuses – are effective – everyone may and even ought to contribute to it his hand or head, according to his strength and talents – but not himself dreaming of being the chosen Apostle of the people – for that way he may only meet with bitter disappointment – but rather thinking of himself as a modest tiny ant which by its insignificant toil in fulfilling its modest duty secures the life and existence of the whole nest!³⁰

²⁹ The same conclusions were drawn by G. Morf, *Conrad versus Apollo*, *Conradiana* 1979:3, p. 282 and J. Meyers, *Joseph Conrad: A Biography*, London 1991, p. 23.

³⁰ CPB, p. 154.

Discussing this item of correspondence, Najder concludes that the stance in life which the uncle is advocating to Conrad is that of **passive resignation**: 'What Bobrowski tries to persuade Conrad to do [...] is to take the reality as it is without complaining too much and without wanting to change it radically. It is by no means a gospel of optimism or even courage: it is *a gospel of resignation*; he does not attempt seriously to convince his nephew that the world is better than he thinks, but only that he cannot help it being as it is'.³¹ Najder highlights only one facet of the letter, namely that of inert acceptance of what the fate or historical development brings. While at the same time he neglects the other one mentioned in the second part of this letter, in which the uncle promotes day-to-day work not eulogised but performed assiduously.

Najder disputes Karl's views that Bobrowski was a vindicator of the French Revolution and a 'minor-league Dostoyevski'. He classifies them as 'absurd'³², since Tadeusz was a severe critic of the revolution; and he must have found the convictions as well as emotionalism of Dostoyevski repellent.

Not much space is devoted to the discussion of the positive results of the guardian's educational strivings. Although Najder claims that 'the evaluation of Bobrowski's influence as negative would be unjust'³³, he does not, to my mind, manage to produce a balanced assessment of the uncle's custody. The only positive aspect that the biographer points at is the mentor's toil at forging the nephew's character; particularly his efforts 'to inculcate in his ward the qualities of responsibility, thrift'³⁴ and perseverance in the chosen aims. The guardian's letters abound in remarks of the type:

... don't idly learn, and don't pretend to be a rich young gentleman and wait for someone to pull your chestnuts out of the fire – for this will not happen... do something, earn something, for one cannot be a parasite.³⁵

You would not be a Nałęcz, dear boy, if you were steady in your enterprises... But I would not be myself and your uncle if I did not discourage you from changing professions and did not warn you that such changes make people become declassé... Work and perseverance are the only values that never fail.³⁶

In his two-volume biography of Joseph Conrad,³⁷ Najder tones down to some extent his criticism of Tadeusz Bobrowski. Firstly, he accentuates Bobrowski's merits: common sense, constancy, reliability, scrupulousness in performing his duties. He doubts whether aboard the ships Conrad could find anyone matching Bobrowski's broad intellectual horizons.

However, afterwards we are faced only with pejorative features of the Ukrainian nobleman: lack of sympathy for people more emotional than he was, excessive ambitions, acrimoniousness, maliciousness. The Polish scholar disagrees with Baines and Karl,

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19; emphasis mine.

³² *ŻC-K*, I, p. 356.

³³ *CB*, p. 52.

³⁴ *JC&TB*, p. 65.

³⁵ 26 VI/ 8 VII 1878, *CPB*, p. 55.

³⁶ 18/30 V 1880, *CPB*, p. 63.

³⁷ *Życie Conrada-Korzeniowskiego*.

who consider Tadeusz a progressive and enlightened liberal or democrat due to his active participation in the local committees of landowners drafting the proposals of laws abolishing serfdom (1859–1861): ‘Indeed he might be regarded as a democrat since he respected the intelligentsia – lawyers, doctors, *littérateurs*, scientists – even if they were not of noble origin. He might be seen as a progressive only against the groups of ultra-conservative *szlachta*.’³⁸

In his latest publications Najder once again undermines the portrayal of Bobrowski as a democrat:

Even within the committees Bobrowski’s position was that of a moderate; and we have to remember that men of radical persuasion were ipso facto excluded from the assemblies invited to address the Russian authorities [...]. Bobrowski attached great importance to the work of the committees and described it in his memoir in valuable detail. It is true that they formed a useful and unique platform for socio-economic discourse; however, the Tsarist authorities not only ignored their proposals, but in fact had never intended to consider them. [...]

The abolishing of serfdom apart, Bobrowski – a cautious, sober-minded man – did not share many of the lofty illusions of his more idealistic or more impatient contemporaries. He did not hide his disapproval of the ideas of the ultra-democrats, like his brother-in-law Korzeniowski, his brother Stefan [...]. It is worth pointing out, however, that those ‘radicals’ did not advocate granting the non-enfranchised masses any more privileges than those enjoyed by that time by the subjects of the emperors of Austria or Germany. This is the measure of Bobrowski’s ‘progressiveness’.³⁹

It seems to me well-founded to claim that in Najder’s publications the negative results of Bobrowski’s ‘schooling’ outnumber the positive ones.

Let us now proceed to the suggested literary influence Bobrowski could have exerted on Conrad. Najder names him ‘the true discoverer of Conrad’s literary talent’. It was the uncle who tried to induce Konrad Korzeniowski to take up correspondence with a well-known Warsaw weekly *Wędrowiec*⁴⁰ on a regular basis.

As thank God you do not forget your Polish (may God bless you for it, as I bless you) and your writing is not bad, I repeat what I have already written and said before – you would do well to write contributions for the *Wędrowiec* in Warsaw. We have few travellers, and even fewer genuine correspondents: the words of an eyewitness would be of great interest and in time would bring you in money. It would be an exercise in your native tongue – that thread which binds you to your country and countrymen, and finally a tribute to the memory of your father who always wanted to and did serve his country by his pen.⁴¹

Although Conrad did not pen any contributions for the magazine, recognising his literary flair was correct.

Najder claims that Bobrowski’s literary influence can be split into several layers. The most obvious one is the word for word translation of some of the passages from the uncle’s *Pamiętniki* and annexing them as Conrad’s own reminiscences. This similarity

³⁸ ŻC-K, I, p. 221.

³⁹ JC&TB, p. 52.

⁴⁰ *Wędrowiec* – a weekly published in Warsaw from 1863 to 1906. Till 1884 it dealt mainly with travels and geography. When Gruszecki became the editor the magazine was more socially and culturally oriented, (*Literatura polska. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny*, Warszawa 1985, II volume, p. 575.)

⁴¹ 16/28 June 1881, CPB, p. 71.

has already been observed by Jean-Aubry or Rafał Blüth⁴² but it is Najder who meticulously collates the relevant paragraphs from the ancestor's memoirs with the excerpts from Conrad's volume, *A Personal Record*. Those borrowings consist among others of the presentation of Ewa Korzeniowska and her sister Teofilia, uncle Bobrowski, and Bobrowski's uncle – Mikołaj Bobrowski. To illustrate the parallels let us compare two sections quoted from the two sources respectively:

I was the most frail at birth of all the children. For years I remained so delicate that my parents had but little hope of bringing me up; and yet I have survived five brothers and two sisters, and many of my contemporaries; I have outlived my wife and daughter, too – and from all those who have had some knowledge at least of these old times, you alone are left. It has been my lot to lay in an early grave many honest hearts, many brilliant promises, many hopes full of life.

The years of infancy and childhood did not augur well for my life or health... Yet things turned out contrary to human expectations! Among numerous and much stronger siblings I survived four brothers and two sisters and many other contemporaries, as well as my wife and daughter. In my family only one brother and one nephew are left. Thus, many of hopes full of life I had to bury prematurely...⁴³

Yet even if Conrad rewrote some fragments from *Pamiętniki*, in the process of creating his narrative, Najder stresses that he 'developed and adjusted Bobrowski's text, making his anecdotes more pointed and adding lyrical or ironic comments'.⁴⁴

Not as straightforward an influence could be discerned when Conrad borrowed from his uncle only single words or expressions and put them into new context, thus conferring upon them different meanings, not infrequently opposite to the ones they had originally. Those borrowings come from the guardian's letters to his ward. To see just one instance of this let us examine a letter from Bobrowki to Konrad Korzeniowski, who was at that time travelling up the Congo River:

You are probably looking around at people and things as well as the 'civilising' (confound it) affair in **the machinery of which you are a cog** – before you feel able to acquire and express your own opinion. Don't wait however until it all crystalises into clear sentences, but tell me something of your health and your first impressions. (12/24 June 1890)⁴⁵

It reminds the avid readers of a similar phrase used by the writer in *Heart of Darkness* but in a quite different context. Najder points out that in the novella 'it is not the narrator Marlow, but the monstrous Kurtz who goes into the depths of the Congo believing in his "civilising" mission'.⁴⁶

Taking into account all the pros and cons, the Polish scholar regards as the most salient in this guardianship the emergence of conflicting points – tragical tensions inspiring the artist's creativity (CB, 68). Those conflict-provoking opinions of Bobrowski can be traced in his over twenty-year correspondence with the nephew. This correspondence

⁴² Blüth, *O tragicznej decyzji...*, p. 396.

⁴³ JC&TB, p. 62.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴⁵ CPB, p. 128–129.

⁴⁶ JC&TB, p. 59.

leads, Najder to conclude that the friendship between so dissimilar personalities developed gradually, alongside with Conrad's maturation. This view undermines other biographers' statements who maintained that Bobrowski bestowed his ward with always the same affection. On the contrary, the relationship between them evolved from a very stand-offish and tense to a very emotional one. Najder paid particular attention to those fluctuations when writing his version of Joseph Conrad's biography. As an example of the exceptionally tart treatment of the eleven-year-old orphan, the critic quotes Bobrowski's first letter to the lonely child:

It has pleased God to strike you with the greatest misfortune that can assail a child – the loss of its Parents. But in his goodness God has so graciously allowed your very good Grandmother and myself to look after you, your health, your studies and your future destiny. You know that the whole affection we felt for your Parents we now bestow upon you. You know too that your Parents were always worthy of that affection – so you as their son should be doubly worthy of our love. [...]

Without a thorough education you will be worth nothing in this world, you will never be self-sufficient, and a thorough education is gained only by thoroughly mastering the beginnings of every subject which is necessary for every cultivated man – which we hope you wish to become and we hope to see you become; therefore, my dear boy, apply yourself to mastering thoroughly their first principles. [...]

Therefore, not that which is easy and attractive must be the object of your studies but that which is useful, although sometimes difficult, for a man who knows nothing fundamentally, who has no strength of character and no endurance, who does not know how to work on his own and guide himself, ceases to be a man and becomes a useless puppet. (8/12 Sept. 1869)⁴⁷

Najder comments upon the mentorship style of the letter in the following way: 'although later Conrad deserved such admonitions many a time, it is doubtful whether at that time he had already been guilty of lack of persistence or systematic diligence'.⁴⁸ Further correspondence (especially the Marseille years) consists mainly of numbers, accounts and harsh reprimands which the irritated Bobrowski did not spare the easy-spender. Najder perceives a change of the guardian's attitude during the early 80s (1881 or 1882). Since then the relationship evolved more and more towards friendship: the uncle's letters became 'warmer and more friendly; there are fewer admonitions and at the same time a thread of common understanding can be traced in them'.⁴⁹ One is able to detect a growing number of signs of emotional attachment to the ward.

In any case, may your judgement guide your decision, and if my blessings may help I send them to you with all my heart, and I warmly embrace you. (8/20 Jan. 1882)⁵⁰

You were right in supposing that on returning to Toeplitz I was sad and melancholy, sitting down alone to my evening cup of tea, opposite the empty chair of my Admiral!!! (19/31 Aug. 1883)⁵¹

I would like you to find some fresh news on your return to London and therefore although you should find waiting for you at Mr. Krieger's the previous letter I wrote, here you have a second and more recent one, by which I welcome you back and embrace you. Send me as speedily as possible all your news, for I miss it badly[...]. (12/24 Apr. 1886)⁵²

⁴⁷ CPB, pp. 35–36.

⁴⁸ ŻC-K, I, p. 57.

⁴⁹ Ibid. I, p. 115.

⁵⁰ CPB, p. 80.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 93.

⁵² Ibid., p. 102.

According to the biographer's opinion two factors influenced the betterment of this relation; firstly Conrad's maturation and secondly Bobrowski's increasing seclusion.

Recapitulating Najder's presentation of Bobrowski one can state that for the Polish biographer he undisputably played the roles of mentor as well as mecaenas in Joseph Conrad-Korzeniowski's life. However the influence he exerted upon his nephew was of ambivalent nature. On the one hand, it was he who kept persuading the young emigré to stick to the once chosen occupation, at the same time providing the 'filthy lucre'⁵³ indispensable for Conrad's nautical schooling. Furthermore, he systematically scolded the young Ulysses, shaping in him such features of character as responsibility, assiduity, and dutifulness, and driving out overspending, fickleness and inconsistency. Najder concludes that even 'if he did not fully succeed in making the adult Conrad stable in his plans and reasonable in his financial affairs, at least his lessons were fully absorbed in the moral messages conveyed in Conrad's work' (JC&TB, 65).

On the other hand, there was also a negative side of that guardianship. Tadeusz, who did not approve of Apollo, passed down to the child a pejorative portrait of the father by ignoring or distorting certain facts from the ancestor's biography. Bobrowski's ironic or sarcastic attitude towards Apollo and Ewa's legacy gave rise to a vehement conflict of values in Conrad's psyche. In consequence, the ward was doomed to an excruciating choice between the fidelity to his father's ideals and loyalty and love for his guardian. Yet by causing the conflicts Bobrowski strengthened 'the tragic tensions that form the base of Conrad's best work: the tensions between enthusiasm for man's abilities and a merciless exposure of the hidden weaknesses of the noblest heroes; between the protest against injustice and disbelief in the possibility of change; between the romantic urge to improve this world and the conviction of the futility of all great human endeavours; between patriotic fidelity and despair in the chances of the Polish struggle' (JC&TB, 67).

Such presentation of Conrad's mentor is called into question by Addison Bross and Keith Carabine.⁵⁴ Bross claims that the biographies and monographs written by Karl, Watt and Najder promulgate a false myth of the uncle poisoning 'the young Conrad's mind against his father'.⁵⁵ Bross disagrees with the prevailing opinion that the influence of the maternal uncle 'raised self-doubt and conflicts in Conrad which persisted throughout his life, emerging often in his novels'.⁵⁶ He claims that if we read the landowner's *Memoirs* and interpret them as a polemic, as an analysis stemming from specific moral convictions, we would perceive its author as a:

special kind of patriot [...] [whose] most disturbing, yet central idea was that social reform, at least in the Polish Ukraine, should take precedence over national independence – that the evil system of unpaid peasant labour would have to be abolished and a culturally and economically unified society created

⁵³ 14/26 V 1882, CPB, p. 84.

⁵⁴ A. Bross, *Tadeusz Bobrowski's Memoirs: Some Conradian Aspects*, "Joseph Conrad Today" 1985: 2; A. Bross, *Kilka uwag o roli Tadeusza Bobrowskiego w życiu Conrada*, *Literatura Polska na Obczyźnie: Prace Kongresu Kultury Polskiej*, 1985; K. Carabine, Review: Z. Najder, ed., *Conrad Under Familial Eyes*, "Conradiana" 1986: 1, p. 48–59; cf. also K. Carabine, *Conrad, Apollo Korzeniowski, and Dostoevsky*, "Conradiana" 1996: 1, p. 3–25.

⁵⁵ Bross, *Tadeusz Bobrowski's...*, p. 278.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

through hard 'organisational work'. His refusal to join the Rising of 1863 was not evidence of bourgeois conservatism, cowardice, or appeasement; it was vindicated by the result of the Rising: defeat, many deaths in battle, executions, exiles [...].⁵⁷

In Bross's opinion Tadeusz Bobrowski was and still is a misunderstood man.

Carabine's views correspond with Bross's. The British Conradian believes that Najder's 'own political prejudices and partial historical perspectives [...] mar his account'⁵⁸ of the Ukrainian landowner. He is ready to 'ridicule'⁵⁹ Bobrowski's political convictions at the same time abstaining from depicting the contemporaneous historical backdrop:

[...] such as the failure of the 'Reds' either to think through a solution to the peasant problem (an extremely difficult issue given that Poland was not a state and therefore could not pass its own laws), or, more importantly, to realize that the very peasants he [Apollo] idealised and wished to liberate were often (especially in the ethnic areas of the Old Commonwealth) indifferent, even hostile to 'gentry-Polish' national aims. As Andrzej Walicki [...] demonstrated the 'inner dialectics' of the romantic nationalist's beautiful vision of ethnic co-existence within the framework of one state 'were self-destructive', because the emancipation of the non-Polish peasantry could only lead to the awakening of their own linguistic and ethnic nationalism.⁶⁰

All too easily Najder blames the guardian for Conrad's pessimism and his lack of faith in Poland's future. Carabine takes issue with Najder's interpretation of Bobrowski's letter to his nephew of 9 November 1891.⁶¹ Juxtaposing *resignation* and *optimism* as it was done by the Polish critic, means unequivocal rejection of the former together with its (potential) positive consequences. Carabine argues:

'Resignation' for Conrad, while not 'the last word of wisdom,' was a strong quality because when 'not mystic, not detached, but... open-eyed, conscious, and informed by love, it is the only one of our feelings for which it is impossible to become a sham.'⁶²

In the eyes of the British scholar, Bobrowski's letter seems to be wiser and more positive than Najder's reading of it.

To outweigh Najder's arguments Carabine quotes another letter in which the uncle corrects his youthful nephew's scorn for 'the boundless stupidity of crowds fighting for a crust of bread.'⁶³

And those crowds [...] so detestable to all visionaries, have their *raison d'être*; to fulfil the material needs of life; and they no longer seem detestable when [...] a more thorough evaluation reveals that they embellish their existence, their work and often even their shortcomings, by some higher moral idea of a duty accomplished, of a love for their family or country to whom they leave the fruit of their endeavours and labours in the form of sacrifices or bequests.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

⁵⁸ Carabine, *Review*, p. 49.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁶¹ Discussed on page 497 of this article.

⁶² Carabine, *Review*, p. 54. He quotes Conrad's *Personal Record*, London: Dent 1946, p. XIX.

⁶³ CPB, p. 154.

⁶⁴ CPB, p. 155.

The Conradian believes that although Bobrowski's argumentation sounds bourgeois it is also prudent, humane and sane.

In conclusion it must be emphasised that the assessments of Bobrowski's role in Conrad's life have varied substantially. On the one extreme, we find the positive evaluations of the guardian, on the other, the deprecatory ones. It is revealing to study all of Bobrowski's portraits and to confront them, especially those most radical ones. None of them is entirely true, yet each may uncover for us a truthful aspect of the guardian's personality. However, I am inclined to believe that the most valued descriptions are those which discuss Bobrowski's merits as well as vices and accentuate the ambivalent nature of his relationship with Joseph Conrad.