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## Light in August: *Melville and Conrad in Poland*

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“Literature is among the most important means of furthering understanding of ideas and differing visions of the world among people and societies. Thanks to its dual role of preserving the past and enlightening the present, great literature unites generations and brings nations closer.”<sup>1</sup> This vision came alive in Szczecin, where many scholars of various nationalities (American, Polish, English, Japanese, Turkish, Spanish, to name a few) pored over the writings of Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad. It was a unique occasion for academics to make “both ends meet,” those of theory and of practice, since theoretical divagations were aired among breath-taking windjammers of thought.

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Ashe, *Preface to Paweł Jędrzejko, Melville w kontekstach*. (Sosnowiec: BananaArt, 2007), xiii.

On our first day (August 4) we participated in the official opening of the conference *Hearts of Darkness* aboard a Polish sailing ship *Dar Młodości* (*The Gift of the Youth*). In a convivial atmosphere on the lower and higher decks, Melvilleans and Conradians admired Szczecin's quay alongside which such beauties as *Cuauhtemoc*, *Kruzensztern*, *Lord Nelson*, and *Alexander von Humboldt* were moored. *Dar Młodości* neighbored with a state-of-the-art *Lord Nelson*, designed to facilitate the disabled in their maritime adventures; on the other side it rubbed shoulders, or rather decks, with a true Nestor of seafaring, the *Kruzensztern*, which at the beginning of the twentieth century sailed from Hamburg to Chile for a cargo of saltpetre and to Australia for corn.

The Tall Ships' Races were inaugurated more than a half century ago when an Englishman, Bernard Morgan, a lawyer and a devoted sailor, came up with the idea of organizing a regatta of the world's largest sailing ships. He wanted to save from oblivion the "winged birds of the ocean" that were pushed out of the trade routes by steam liners. Those sailing vessels brought thousands of tons of tea and other delicacies for the European landlubbers. The gourmet and diarist Samuel Pepys recorded in his *Diary* on 25 September 1660: "I tried a cup of tea, a China drink, of which I never drank before." One of the best known tea-clippers that was turned into a museum is *Cutty Sark*. It was one of the fastest clippers on the tea route from China to England.

It was only right that our Polish ships mingled with Mexican, Russian, and Malaysian ones, similarly to the scholars from all around the world who for a brief luminous moment in August discussed and admired the written word and the "winged birds." They too, like Melville and Conrad, fell under the spell of the "wave-skimmers."

But enough of free sea-roving: let us drop anchor and rivet our attention on the letters. The text(s) unravelled before us two eminent Conrad and Melville specialists: Laurence Davies and John Bryant respectively. In the darkness of the Modern Theatre Hall Davies brilliantly introduced the motif of the uncanny in Conrad. The dead, ghosts and machines of torture, appeared and disappeared in front of the spell-bound listeners. The editor of Conrad's *Letters* commenced with a reference to our national composer Stanislaw Moniuszko and his masterpiece, an opera *Straszny Dwór* ("Haunted Manor"). An opera-lover, Conrad could have imbibed (albeit unconsciously) the aura of the spooky, even more since he was soaked with the romantic tradition of the bizarre and the inexplicable. Davies also mentioned Adam Mickiewicz's *opus magnum Dziady* ("The Forefathers' Eve,") searching for common elements between the Polish and Celtic beliefs in communion with the dead. Thus, he compared the Polish custom of the poet-shaman acting as an intermediary between the dead and the living and the Irish habit of sin-eating. In both

traditions the living ones took the burden of memory, the sins of the ancestors upon themselves and by retelling stories from the past (like the poet-shaman or Marlow) they rendered justice to the invisible world.

Davies navigated through a plethora of Conrad's texts ("The Black Mate," "Karain," "The Inn of the Two Witches," *The Shadow Line*, and many others) visualizing before us black-haired mates who turn gray, beds which suffocate, coins which turn amulets, dead skippers "roping the blowing wind," only to jump to the high seas of *Moby-Dick*, with Ahab elaborating on the types of sea monsters which turn out to be mere rain drops. In Melville's, as in Conrad's works, things reveal a different (often subversive) meaning from what they seem to suggest on their faces. Even the ancient *nostos* becomes a reversed homecoming in the case of Lingard (*Rover*) and Israel Potter, where the idea of home is unhomey. But home sparkles with thousands of meanings. Similarly to Margaret Atwood's Penelope, who is no longer that inaudible and housebound wife, in the eyes of Melville and Conrad home is no longer the safe and immutable nest. Laurence Davies brought his wanderings to a sharp if shocking conclusion: namely that of sin-eating, which is a ritual meal of bread and salt and beer eaten on the graveyard. One thinks of the baffling frequency of Conrad's alluding to the man-eaters (Robinson, Falk, the cannibals).

John Bryant exuded further the aura of uncovering new senses of familiar words by swishing the pendulum to Melville's manuscripts. Similarly to Davies, the second keynote speaker began with a definition, this time however, of a cosmopolitan. On the basis of Dr. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* of 1755, known for eccentric word definitions, Bryant quoted the following explication of the cosmopolitan: "nowhere a stranger" This was juxtaposed with a more modern definition by Noah Webster—"at home at every place"—which reveals different cultural perspectives of the renowned lexicographers and traces the evolution of language.

Bryant showed how Melville was sensitive to man's cultural identity and recognized ethnic suppression in his metaphoric Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish doctrine: "What was America in 1492 but a Loose-Fish, in which Columbus struck the Spanish standard by way of waiving it for his royal master and mistress? What was Poland to the Czar? What Greece to the Turk? What India to England? What at last will Mexico be to the United States? All Loose-Fish." Bryant's pivotal questions asked: How do we comprehend others' identity or ethnicity? Can literature help us to respect the other? The lecturer listed many factors that enabled those two writers to transgress the restrictive boundaries of their national perspective optics. Then Bryant set off in an enthralling textual voyage to demonstrate how a close study of the manuscript can help us gain insight into the otherwise-invisible ideological bias of the final published

version. Tracing the text's metamorphoses the reader can observe how a writer plays with readers' cultural awareness. By an illuminating analysis of *Typee* and the chameleonic transformations of one phrase *favored/paradisical abode/valley* to the final *their own abode*, Bryant showed how Melville pruned the culturally laden twigs of text. A sapling that sprouted directly from such textual study was the Longman Critical Edition of *Moby-Dick*, in which the reader can savor for himself the culturally-influenced emendations in the first British edition of the novel. In that version words like "bridegroom" and "honey-moon" proved to be unacceptable to the editors when applied to Queequeg and Ishmael. Bryant discerned the future of the Melville or Conrad corpus in such studies, since they make invisible texts visible to a wide group of readers and not only to the editors and scholars.

After the inauguratory talks we rushed to the conference rooms, pausing along the way among the multitude of food stalls where we could taste some Polish specialities like thick slices of home-made bread with "smalec" (schmaltz, lard) or gingerbread with chocolate or marmalade, and admire from the upper level of the terraces of the Castle of Pomeranian Dukes the tall ships anchored down at the bank of the Oder River. All that tempted us to stop and enjoy the bright rays of the August sun. Indeed on my way, I got enticed to the Polish Ksiznica [Polish Old Library (museum)] which housed an impressive exhibition of paintings capturing the beauty of billowing sails and the thrill of nautical vicissitudes.

During the presentations one could perceive a dominant division between the Conradians and the Melvilleans. Although some of the scholars tried to consider both giants closely, the majority of them concentrated either on Conrad or on Melville. Some of them openly admitted that they aimed at the impossible with the twenty minute time limit. For example, Ilana Pardes, who planned to focus in her speech "Infidel Pilgrims" on the motif of pilgrimage in *Moby-Dick* and *Heart of Darkness*, eventually limited herself only to the American writer. Stimulating discussion was the fact of Conrad's direct refusal to write a preface to *Moby-Dick*. In her presentation "Looking for Mr. Kurtz or Serving under Captain Ahab," Wendy Stallard Flory enumerated the reasons why Conrad turned down Oxford University Press's proposal to pen a foreword to the American novel, calling it a "rather strained rhapsody" in which he could see "not a single sincere line." Flory called our attention to the distinctive narrative modes of Melville and Conrad, highlighting the differences between them. Another engrossing moment of the conference was a retort to the notorious accusation of Conrad as a racist. Malika Rebai-Maamri in her paper "The Human Factor in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" defended the novelist by arguing that critics blaming Conrad completely neglect the

human factor in the novella, which she duly elaborated on. This paper matched well with the theme of Fabio De Leonardis, who suggested in “‘Good God, What Is He Meaning?’: The Representation of the Other in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” that Marlow was not able to represent the African standpoint. Both talks provided ample food for thought as well as for an ensuing debate, and it was compelling to observe what impassioned responses a one-hundred-year-old tale can still evoke.

Such emotional rejoinders could also be heard in the Polish-language sections of the conference, where discussion after the presentations of Polish translations of Conrad was quite heated. Rather than pose questions, guests voiced their own opinions concerning Joseph Conrad and his émigré years and moved from that topic to contemporary American emigrants of Polish origin. It is a pity that we could not compare Polish translations of Melville’s works. Indeed, there was no scholar willing to discuss the “Polish” face of Melville. Hence it is only right that Paweł Jędrzejko’s latest books are in Polish,<sup>2</sup> since for the Polish general reader Melville seems still to remain *terra incognita*.

The conference was befittingly accompanied by visual interpretations of Melville’s and Conrad’s texts as well. In a cosy little cinema the participants could immerse themselves in film adaptations of the writers’ works. This ancient theatre, the *Pioneer*, a rarity among present-day technical wonders, was supposedly commemorated in a captivating poem by K. I. Gałczyński, *Little Cinemas*:

Little cinemas are the best  
 In disquiet and in torment  
 With velvet-covered seats  
 Red like hearts.<sup>3</sup>

Yet another aural treat were the *Banana Boat* performances, during which scholars were flooded with the festivity and free-spirit of the sea-dogs.

William Faulkner denied that Melville and Conrad were his “favorite authors,” but at the same time he admitted that there were two books he would have liked to have written: *Moby-Dick* and *The Nigger of the Narcissus*.<sup>4</sup> Similarly during the conference contradictory opinions on Melville and

<sup>2</sup> P. Jędrzejko, *Melville w kontekstach* [Melville in Contexts] (Sosnowiec: BananaArt, 2007) and *Płynność i egzystencja* [Fluidity and Existence] (Sosnowiec: BananaArt, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> K. I. Gałczyński, *Serwus, Madonna* [Hello, Madonna], trans. A. Adamowicz-Pośpiech (Warszawa: Czytelnik 1987) 183.

<sup>4</sup> *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner 1926–1962*, ed. James B. Meriwether et al. (New York: Random House, 1962), 21.

Conrad were voiced, and not infrequently speakers bridged over the paradoxes, bringing those two novelists together. Now when gloomier and darker winter days have set in, I am recollecting the moments in Szczecin, and I can only hope that this dazzling light emanating paradoxically from the August "Hearts of Darkness" will dazzle us again some time in the future.