Title: Joseph Conrad's Polish soul

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BOOK REVIEWS

Joseph Conrad's Polish Soul
G.W. Stephen Brodsky
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Nihil novi nisi commune consensus (Nic o nas bez nas; Nothing of us without us) one may say about yet another book on the Polish background of Conrad, but this old Polish dictum does not apply to Brodsky’s monograph because he seems to be one of us, Poles . . . But first things first.

The volume opens with a personal introduction by George Gasyna who appreciates Brodsky’s analyses of Conrad’s relationship with Poland because his “insider/outside tension reverberates” with Gasyna’s own position on Poland. “In many ways”—Gasyna clarifies—“I identify with Conrad’s decision (and Brodsky’s exposition of its consequences) to turn away from some more pathological manifestations of defensive Polishness, as he went on to forge a multidirectional composite cultural self” (9). Gasyna sketches a short biography of Brodsky whose ancestors similarly to Conrad stemmed from Polish borderlands (for Brodsky it was the village Brody, for Conrad, a half day’s drive from it, Berdichev) (4).

There are two main organizing ideas of Brodsky’s book: Conrad’s Polish soul and lieu de mémoire. Brodsky claims that many foreign scholars did not acknowledge Conrad’s Polish cultural heritage and even if they did, they considered him to be of homogeneous central Poland stock whereas he came from the Polish borderland minority which indelibly stamped his perception of reality. The second unifying principle is Pierre Norra’s concept of lieu de mémoire (locus memoriae): “often some [. . .] artifact, anthem, monument, building town square, ritual, book or poem embodies a community’s cultural heritage, [. . .] a community’s shared past. [. . .] Having the power of a symbol, as a reification of a collective soul, the lieu de mémoire [. . .] evokes strong bonds of fellow feeling in a people, a folk—all the more poignantly for a folk threatened with annihilation [. . .]” (29). Brodsky is right to believe that the Polish lieu de mémoire are, among others, the nation’s cemeteries of personal and national pasts (Powązki Cemetery in Warsaw, Rakowicki Cemetery in Cracow; and I would supplement the list with modern necropoli: Cemetery of the Defenders of Łwów (Cemetery of Eaglets), Polish Cemetery at Monte Cassino) (10). To show the significance of Conrad’s Polish past Brodsky applies also the works of Michael Rothberg who proves that memories are not static, fixed in time and competitive with new memory, but rather, incorporative. Memory thus has potential as “the source of [. . .] powerful creativity,” the “ability to build new worlds out of the materials of older ones” (Rothberg 5 in Brodsky 29).

Brodsky introduces the readers to his detailed studies of various aspects of Conrad’s life and letters with a “Familiar Preface to J. Conrad’s Polish Soul.” His life-long personal adventure with Conrad began in the nineties of the Twentieth Century when Gorbacev’s Perestroika and Glasnost prompted the fall of the communist regime in Poland and allowed Polish scholars to open up to the West and he was asked to participate in the First International Joseph Conrad Conference in Poland in 1991. The main body of the volume consists of eight essays (there is also Brodsky’s Preface and Afterword) written over a quarter century, which have been published mostly in Wieslaw Krajka’s prominent Conrad: Eastern and Western Perspectives series but all of them have been extensively revised, elaborated and updated for the volume in toto constitute a cohesive study unified by a “subterranean stream of Conrad’s Polish mind and spirit” (12).

At the beginning, Brodsky clarifies what he means by “Polish Soul.” It is an umbrella term for Conrad’s Polonism which encompasses not only the concepts of fidelity and betrayal, courage and fear, honour and shame which being universal do not distinguish a “Polish Soul”; yet it is these qualities combined with “a Polish sensibility, attitude, world view and ethos shared by the szlachta” that as a unique whole constitute Polishness (13). Brodsky claims that a personality’s formative years are from nine to twelve and it is in adolescence that the ethos of the native culture is interiorized. “Thus, Conrad’s responses to his world as an English sailor and writer remained essentially Polish” (13). Consequently, Conrad’s personality was unstable since his past and present made “conflicting claims” on him. Some of these contradictions in Conrad’s world view Brodsky sets out to explore in the subsequent chapters (for example Conrad’s secular world view versus his Catholic frame of thought; infatuation with Napoleonic contests versus hatred of martial glory as honor’s sham; his liberalism versus instinctive pessimism, conservatism and nationalism; his lack of illusions versus his works in which illusion is a necessary correlative for life itself. In his Preface Brodsky provides an informative outline of Polish history (the absolute cum moribund love of freedom, the nihil novi act, the liberum veto law, the profound impact of French culture on Poland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the heroic struggle for independence, the uprisings and ensuing Great Emigration). Knowledge of all these cultural and historical facts is indispensable in understanding Conrad’s Polonism mirrored in his narratives. Since Conrad’s reverence for his szlachta tradition has been neglected by the majority of Western critics, it resulted in “rather
grotesque distortions of Conrad’s oeuvre, as well as
downright errors of fact” (22). Hence this book could be
seen as a campaign to redress the cultural imbalance be-
tween what Conrad has written and its reception (22).
However, Brodsky wants to explicate rather than criti-
cize and, to me, this has been achieved since the illumi-
nating and contextualizing potential of each chapter can-
not be overstated.

The first chapter entitled “Under Western Eyes: Con-
rad’s Two Past—Thirty Years of Critical Misrule and a
Renaissance” appropriately offers a survey of Conrad’s biographical scholarship. Its polemical thesis is that Western biographies to a large extent have ob-
scured or misunderstood Conrad’s Polish heritage, and
it starts with G. Jean-Aubry’s The Sea Dreamer (1957)
which established a “critical mythology of guilt” (49) and
comes with John Batchelor’s The Life of Joseph
Conrad (1994) which “jeetisoned Conrad’s Poloni-
ism” (68) in the interpretations of his works. Brodsky
points out the cultural lacunae (in retrospect inevitable)
in the history “of major scholarly Conrad criticism in
the West” during the decades from the 1960s through
the 1980s. In this informative discussion of more than
twenty biographies Brodsky omitted a distinctive biog-
raphy by Gustav Morf, The Polish Heritage of Joseph
Conrad (1930) which adopted a novel approach based
on C. G. Jung’s depth psychology (in particular Jung’s
concept of the collective unconscious which, in some
aspects, seems similar to Nora’s lieux de mémoire).
Brodsky rightly maintains that with barely an exception,
Western critical biographers dwelt on alienation in Con-
rad’s life and mind, virtually to the exclusion of his loy-
alty to the ethos of his class (31). The litmus test for the
scholars’ misconceptions is the interpretation of Jim’s
death which is often viewed as suicide rather than fidelity
usque ad finem. Brodsky mentions that Muriel Brad-
brook’s, Zdzisław Najder’s and Andrzej Busza’s works
which accentuated the writer’s noble Polish ethos had
little impact (58). However, the chapter ends with an opti-

mistic note: a renaissance in Conrad’s scholarship. The
latest biographies of J. H. Stape, The Several Lives of
Joseph Conrad and E. Schenkel, Fahrtns Geheimnis:
Joseph Conrad, Eine Biographie “herald a new era of
critical biography as literature, an art form recreating the

texture of the life and the art, achieving Conrad’s own
ideal [...] ‘to make you see’” (71). Schenkel portrays
Conrad as a “literary bridge” and his writing as a “con-
tact with the West” and the German scholar believes
that his writings help readers in the West rediscover to-
day’s Poland and the East as part of the larger European
culture (74).

In another engrossing section entitled “Dispos-
session Encoded: Conrad as Exile” Brodsky discusses
the neglect of Conrad’s “more distant past” (79). What
past is it then? It should not be mistaken simply for the
history of Poland before the Partitions, but more specifi-
cally it is the history of the writer’s forebears in the bor-
derland. Brodsky being well versed in Polish complicat-
ed cultural and social history, is the first Western Con-
rad scholar to distinguish between ethnic central Poland
and old Poland’s eastern borderland (parts of it consti-
tute today’s Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus). “The cul-
tural and psychological signifiers of this frontier heart of
darkness in Conrad’s oeuvre mark him as a preeminent-
ly unique species of the genus Homo Duplex” (80). He
puts forward the thesis that Conrad’s borderland szlach-
ta perspective is expressed in English and encoded in
his foreign settings (81) (which is meticulously explored
in a chapter on Conrad’s Polish Orient). Brodsky depicts
over three centuries of Conrad’s family’s borderland vi-
cissitudes. He does not aim at undermining the generally
known assumptions that Conrad’s lives encompass his
Polish, English and maritime experience but rather he
wants to show that Conrad’s temperament and attitudes
were molded by several generations of eastern border-
land szlachta history and experience “not shared by
Poles in the Polish heartland” (82). His admirable re-
search traces Conrad’s direct paternal Nałęcz Ko-
reniowski line harking back to 1600 when Piotr Ko-
reniowski left west central Poland for Livonia (91).
Brodsky continued to trace the movements of Mateusz
Korzeniowski, Stanisław Korzeniowski and Teodor Ko-
reniowski revealing that this landed gentry with con-
spicuous military tradition followed a pattern of “hopes
of a prosperous and permanent homeland dashed repeat-
edly, to produce in each generation of Nałęcz Ko-
reniowski descendants a sense that the only perma-
nence for them was transience” (95). He poignantly
shows that the Nałęcz Korzeniowski family’s fortunes
had been an inexorable series of “dispossessions and
degradations, until at the last nothing was left but family
pride, a patch of land [...] and loyalty to [their] class
and to a nation” (111). Brodsky mentions Teodor and
his three sons (Robert, Hilary, Apollo) but he omits the
fact that there was also a daughter Emilia Korzeniowska,
who was arrested in 1863 for the possession of the clandes-
tine patriotic journals Labour and Fight and participation in inscriptionist conspiracy.
And, to my mind, it is her figure rather than Marguerite-
Emilie Chodžko that might have been a source for Con-
rad’s choice of Emilia Gould’s name (182).

All those subtle distinctions made by Brodsky
between heartland and borderland Poles are much de-
sired since Conrad himself stressed this nuance: “It is
widely known that I am a Pole [...]” and he qualifies
himself further as “a gentleman from the Ukraine” (CL2:
322-23). Conrad’s self-identifying epithet “gentleman
from the Ukraine” “appears to be a compulsively em-
phatic insistence that he was not to be dismissed as an
ethnic Ukrainian or Ruthenian [...]”. It is not widely
known that heartland Poles—Varsovians, and Craco-
vians—then as now, regarded western Ukraine as a fron-
tier cultural wasteland. One senses in this letter to a
Cracovian, whose Polishness even in Austrian Galicia
was beyond question, a defiant note in Conrad’s assertion of his Polonism” (90). Brodsky’s observation is all too true.

But in spite of this ubiquitous sense of dispossession permeating the predicament of the Korzeniowski, I can’t agree with Brodsky that the words written by the Brody-born Austrian Joseph Roth could have been written also by Conrad: “Now I was born and belong nowhere. It’s a strange and terrible thing, and I seem to myself like a dream, without roots and without purpose, with no beginning and no end, coming and going and not knowing whither or why” (86). Conrad knew where he was born and he had a strong sense of belonging to the szlachta cultural tradition who was the repository of the nation’s spirit. After many years of exile he still remembered and cherished the words of Stefan Buszczyński that wherever he may sail he was always “sailing towards Poland” (CL1: 7).

One more absorbing chapter is “Dogs and Duels . . .” in which Brodsky moves from typically borderland szlachcic features to “fundamentally Polish ethical values: fidelity, solidarity, honour” (199). On the basis of the analysis of Conrad’s works Brodsky shows that the writer “had exported a fascination with the romance of dueling as an item of his Polish cultural luggage” (200). As in the previous chapter, he is thoughtful to make another fine distinction between culte de gloire and inner honor to oneself. “Rationally”—Brodsky argues—“Conrad understood that there was no genuine honour in a duel!” but on the other hand, he maintains and confirms his uncle Tadeusz’s fib about his own duel to his son John and some of his friends; as if this military ritual were to cover the shameful act of suicide (202). Brodsky is right to believe that asserting the absurdity of dueling as murderous folly, “the antithesis of honour” in “The Duel” Conrad could have meant the duel of his maternal uncle, who, being shortsighted, had been slain in a pistol duel at Cracow by Count Adam Grabowski, his political opponent (202). This is one of the manifest contradictions in Conrad’s personality and works that Brodsky thoroughly explores: he convincingly demonstrates how Conrad transformed the noble old Polish warrior tradition with an acute sense of honor “which made the szlachta repeatedly offer themselves on the altar of liberty” (210) to contemporary British maritime service expressed in the stern dictum “do or die.” “Conrad shows Nicholas’s [Bobrowski] Polish spirit alive in himself during his initiation into [. . .] ce métier de chien. An ambivalent symbol of false hope, duty usque ad finem, and a life of hard slogging, the idea of a dog, both material and metaphorical, meant for Conrad what Napoleon meant to Nicholas” (215).

Military tradition is also the core of another essay entitled “Saint Roman . . .,” which is, according to Brodsky, an epiphany of Conrad’s Polish soul (39). The Sanguszkos were one of the great families of Poland’s magnate class, and Brodsky perceptively notes that the history of their origins in Lithuania and Ruthenia mirrors Poland’s past. The author persuasively shows how the biography and history of Prince Roman Sanguszko was recast in “Prince Roman” as patriotic legend. Prince Roman S— becomes a soldier-saint, a paradigm for all Poland. Arguing that the fictional Prince Roman “is entirely Conrad’s creation of a composite generic figure whose fortunes represent the Polish experience, but which have no basis in fact relating to the historical Prince Roman,” Brodsky poses the question why Conrad fictionalized not only Prince Roman Sanguszko but also the fiction’s historical frame. Comparing and contrasting myth and history in this panoramic essay, Brodsky concludes that “Conrad simply conjured a noble pilgrimage for his monastically humble Prince Roman, by compressing time [. . .]. He may have thought it symbolically important, that his Prince Roman S— make a conscious choice to set off on his own fight for Lithuania’s freedom. That way, Price Roman may be seen as an icon of the sacred Polish-Lithuanian Union.”

The only essay which, to me, is slightly extraneous, is the one elaborating on the biographies of Józef Korzeniowski and Joseph Roth whose only similarity to Conrad is the name or place of birth. Yet for those unfamiliar with their biographies one detail might be informative: the Korzeniowski who had a statue towering over Brody’s market square is the one mentioned by Eliza Orzeszkowa as a positive exemplum against the émigré Conrad, in her notorious attack in 1899.

Brodsky’s studies demonstrate conclusively that Conrad’s Polish soul speaks to us today in codes of language, time and place alien to their origins. In my opinion this volume of excellent essays is an indispensable compendium to navigate the readers through the life and letters of this “Polish nobleman casesd in British tar.”

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