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BOOK REVIEWS

Joseph Conrad's Polish Soul

G.W. Stephen Brodsky

Edited and with an Introduction by G. Gasyna

M. Curie-Skłodowska UP / Columbia UP, 2016

416 pp. \$60.00

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/outsider 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 *lieux de memoir*. 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 *lieux de memoir* (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 *lieux de memoir* [. . .] 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 *lieux de memoir* 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 Lwów* (*Cemetery of Eagles*), *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 Gorbachev'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 Wiesław Krajka's prominent *Conrad: Eastern and Western Perspectives* series but all of them have been extensively revised, elaborated and updated for the volume and *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 between what Conrad has written and its reception (22). However, Brodsky wants to explicate rather than criticize and, to me, this has been achieved since the illuminating and contextualizing potential of each chapter cannot be overstated.

The first chapter entitled "*Under Western Eyes: Conrad's Two Pasts—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 obscured 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 closes with John Batchelor's *The Life of Joseph Conrad* (1994) which "jettisoned Conrad's Polishness" (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 biography 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 memoir*). Brodsky rightly maintains that with barely an exception, Western critical biographers dwelt on alienation in Conrad's life and mind, virtually to the exclusion of his loyalty 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 Bradbrook'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 optimistic note: a renaissance in Conrad's scholarship. The latest biographies of J. H. Stape, *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad* and E. Schenkel, *Fahrt ins 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 "contact with the West" and the German scholar believes that his writings help readers in the West rediscover today's Poland and the East as part of the larger European culture (74).

In another engrossing section entitled "Dispossession 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 specifically it is the history of the writer's forebears in the bor-

derland. Brodsky being well versed in Polish complicated cultural and social history, is the first Western Conrad scholar to distinguish between ethnic central Poland and old Poland's eastern borderland (parts of it constitute today's Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus). "The cultural and psychological signifiers of this frontier heart of darkness in Conrad's oeuvre mark him as a preeminently unique species of the genus *Homo Duplex*" (80). He puts forward the thesis that Conrad's borderland *szlachta* 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 vicissitudes. 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 borderland *szlachta* history and experience "not shared by Poles in the Polish heartland" (82). His admirable research traces Conrad's direct paternal Nałęcz Korzeniowski line harking back to 1600 when Piotr Korzeniowski left west central Poland for Livonia (91). Brodsky continued to trace the movements of Mateusz Korzeniowski, Stanisław Korzeniowski and Teodor Korzeniowski revealing that this landed gentry with conspicuous military tradition followed a pattern of "hopes of a prosperous and permanent homeland dashed repeatedly, to produce in each generation of Nałęcz Korzeniowski descendants a sense that the only permanence 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 clandestine patriotic journals *Labour* and *Fight* and participation in insurrectionist conspiracy. And, to my mind, it is her figure rather than Marguerite-Emilie Chodźko that might have been a source for Conrad's choice of Emilia Gould's name (182).

All those subtle distinctions made by Brodsky between heartland and borderland Poles are much desired 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 emphatic insistence that he was not to be dismissed as an ethnic Ukrainian or Ruthenian [. . .]. It is not widely known that heartland Poles—Varsovians, and Cracovians—then as now, regarded western Ukraine as a frontier 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 Korzeniowskis, 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 cased in British tar."

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