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Title: Review of the sea of discourses in Conrad's texts : Marek Pacukiewicz, *Dyskurs antropologiczny w pisarstwie Josepha Conrada (...)*

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Citation style: Adamowicz-Pośpiech Agnieszka. (2008/2009). Review of the sea of discourses in Conrad's texts : Marek Pacukiewicz, *Dyskurs antropologiczny w pisarstwie Josepha Conrada (...)*. „Yearbook of Conrad Studies. Poland” (Vol. 4, 2008/2009, s. 167-169)



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REVIEW OF
THE SEA OF DISCOURSES IN CONRAD'S TEXTS
MAREK PACUKIEWICZ, *DYSKURS ANTROPOLOGICZNY*
W PISARSTWIE JOSEPHA CONRADA.
KRAKÓW: UNIVERSITAS, 2008

Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech

Numerous dissertations, monographs and articles have been written on Conrad and it would be difficult to find a blank space in the field of Conradian studies that could be filled with impressive meanders of interpretation. Yet Marek Pacukiewicz has achieved what seems almost unachievable: he has discovered a new relation between Conrad and the sea – or, to be precise, between Conrad and the sea of discourses.

With great erudition Pacukiewicz outlines the semantic area that the sea has occupied in European culture. As early as in ancient Greece, people tried to capture and describe the essence of 'sea-ness'. This was done by means of three concepts: *pelagos* (the open sea, space), *pontos* (a bridge) and *hals* (saltiness). However, from the very beginning the nature of the sea eluded the formal and curbing bridle of language and one more notion – of older Cretan etymology – appeared, namely *thalassa* (the sea). From the onset, then, within the fabric of language, which was engaged in naming reality (and thus ordering it, making it submissive to Man), there occurred a covert fissure – a difference of contexts. It clearly demarcated the boundaries or the hiatus of two cultures and two diverse cultural contexts: that of the Greek mainland and that of thalassic Crete (Pacukiewicz 11).

Pacukiewicz painstakingly traces the connotations of these terms in Greek civilization and reveals how the initial opposition between *pontos* and *pelagos* (in other words, between the familiar and the foreign) gradually ebbed. In the end the colonized sea changes into a bridge "joining the *polis* with the colonies" (17). The open space ceases to be, owing to its indeterminacy, a boundary and becomes transformed into a space that is propitious for sailing with the mind (19). The metaphor of sailing as gaining knowledge has been unearthed by Pacukiewicz in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. It is they who first collated *episteme* and the sea. "This mode of reasoning leads us to the fact that knowledge can be present by means of one ripple both in the *polis* and

in the colony” (20). Pacukiewicz traces the protean metaphor of the sea, which in the cradle of European civilization takes the form of “a fertile area of knowledge”. In the 19th century the sea – engulfed by the ‘rationalized’ earth – became transformed into an epistemological trope (18). The simile of the sea and sailing emerges in the evolutionary anthropology of Edward Burnett Tylor. The distinctive feature of this stage is the belief in the continuity and homogeneity of knowledge.

It is at this time that the sea evolves into a machine for transforming the unknown into the map of knowledge, the representation of familiarized terrain. Furthermore, in 19th-century discourse of culture the sea becomes a metaphor for the subject. Pacukiewicz illustrates his thesis with the works of Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Dante, Gabriel Rossetti and Alfred Tennyson. The sea, being the mirror of subjectivity, is filled with interpretations concerning the inner side of Man, while “the deep becomes a pretext to disarm and contextualize mystery” (20). Pacukiewicz juxtaposes the aforementioned discourse of culture with Conrad’s text, where one cannot find any speculations about marine depths – on the contrary, the deep is always located on the surface. Conrad chooses remote territories that bewilder, emphasizing the specific discourses and trying to find a breach between them. “He does not look at the land from the sea in order to chart the shape of the land, nor does he look from the land to the sea in order to gain an opportunity to fill the marine space with discourse. The world and the sea are quite different, though, when perceived from the perspective of a narrow sandy shoal: enormous and unfathomable and at the same time immovable – this is precisely ‘sea-ness’” (21).

Towards the end of the 19th century the sea turned into a space that was saturated with boundless interpretations. Poets, novelists and scientists shaped the scope of the oceans in their own ways and for their own particular needs. It is this type of sea – which ceases to be a synonym for the homogeneous truth and changes into an accumulation of discourses – that interests Pacukiewicz most. He compares visions of the sea in Nietzsche and Conrad. In the writings of the German philosopher we discern the sea of eternity, whereas in Conrad we pursue a dependable craft of the subject “through which we perceive the sea” (26). In Pacukiewicz’s opinion, Conrad focuses on the finality and repetitiveness (of traditions) and within their realm he searches for that breach, fissure, difference or *thalassa*.

Coming back to the domesticated context of *pontos*, *pelagos* and *hals*, Pacukiewicz states that Conrad, remaining within the domain of European *episteme*, at the same time adopts an innovative writing strategy. Namely, he exposes the interplay of relations between the specific parts of the discourse of *pontos*, *pelagos* and *hals*, pointing to their separateness or even the disparity between them. “The components of knowledge are not on a par, quite the opposite: they fight for dominance in Man, while the systemic obviousness and rhetorical functionality of knowledge – which man creates and on which he would like to rely – are illusory” (28). Conrad shows this by thickening the web of oppositions. Upholding the sea-land antinomy, he superimposes on it the axis of travels, which is both the mark of division and a framework. Starting with

the above-mentioned prime opposition of sea and land, Conrad differentiates space by creating among Man, sea and land a complex web of boundaries (28). The Polish scholar knowledgeably identifies the keystones of Conrad's texts. Although apparently rootless, a mariner is not able to sever himself completely from the land and from his culture. One of Conrad's central motifs is the probing of that knowledge which is transmitted by Man. At these moments the difference of cultures is revealed owing to the hiatus between context and knowledge. Conrad is interested in transgressive situations, in which it is impossible to separate or shield one's own system of knowledge from the surge of the foreign. For Pacukiewicz 'Typhoon' serves as an epitome of the case when the well-ordered space of knowledge is disrupted by the destructive "element of the Far East." At such moments Conrad observes how Man behaves in a situation which is not culturally and epistemologically standardized (30).

A reading of *The Mirror of the Sea* makes Pacukiewicz think that for Conrad the sea becomes "a shadow line" – a kind of illness which the subject must go through – *rites de passage*, which break the stereotypes of the sea and restore its 'sea-ness' (31). The scholar claims that Conrad reveals how "the active dimension of context may be appropriated by discourse" (32). Pacukiewicz summarises thus: "what can be heard in Conrad's voice is the swoosh of the ocean of discourses; Man continuously attempts to mediate dialectically between the reality of the world and the world of knowledge. Conrad shows that this process never ends in complete synthesis" (31). According to Pacukiewicz the vision of the sea in Conrad's writing in a way reflects the writer's way of thinking about culture as Man's reality, consisting of *pontos*, *pelagos* and *hals* (39).

Conrad's texts encourage us, the readers, to sail, but not on the smooth territory of the *pelagos*, where in case of danger we discern a safe passage via the *pontos*; on the contrary, we are lured to the stormy sea of the *thalassa*, where shallows and crevices make peaceful sailing impossible. What course should be taken so that our ship is not eventually blown off course? We will not discover any definitive interpretation of the signs in this journey. However, Conrad seems to hint that we should observe the relations between interpretations and how they complete or falsify one another. We must be aware of any sandy shoal or fissure and traverse it anew.