

HOW MUCH CONRAD IN CONRAD CRITICISM?: CONRAD'S ARTISTRY, IDEOLOGICAL MEDIATIZATION AND IDENTITY

A COMMEMORATIVE ADDRESS ON THE 160TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE WRITER'S BIRTH

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Abstract: The eponymous question of the present address as well as its main premise concern the issue of reading Conrad as opposed to the issue of Conrad's readings. Although the writer insisted on the priority of artistic expression in his oeuvres over their thematic content, he tends to be analyzed with a view to precedence of content over form. Moreover, his application in his less known short fiction of the then novel modernist device of denegation usually ascribed to Faulkner, is hardly given its due in criticism. What distorts Conrad is, likewise, ideological mediatization of his fiction and biography. And, last but not least, comes insufficient appreciation among Western Conradians of the significance for his writings of his Polish background, and especially his borderland *szlachta* heritage, where also Polish criticism has been at fault. As emphasized, in comparison with Conrad's Englishness, which comes down to the added value of his home, family, friends, and career in England as well as the adopted language, his Polishness is about *l'âme*: the patriotic spirit of Conrad's ancestry, traumatic childhood experience, Polish upbringing and education, sensibilities and deeply felt loyalties deriving from his formative years in Poland. Therefore, one of the premises put forward in the present address is that perhaps Conrad should be referred to as an English writer with his Polish identity constantly inscribed and reinscribed into the content and form of his oeuvres, rather than simply an English writer of Polish descent as he is now. The three eponymous aspects are thus hardly to be ignored in Conrad studies, even if a significant part of Conrad criticism to date has done precisely that.¹

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, artistry, ideological mediatization, borderland heritage, Polish identity

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INTRODUCTION

Given the level of artistry of Conrad's oeuvres and his insistence on the importance of art in his fiction, it may seem surprising that so many interpretations of Conrad's works appear to be quite literal, resplendent with geographical identification of his exotic locations, classification of his characters' psychological states, mindsets and moral attitudes, as well as cataloguing of his father figures, women, villains, ... animals, etc. The explanation of this phenomenon should perhaps be sought for in the historical, geographical, and cultural tangibilities of his settings as well as his experience "twixt land and sea" in the remotest corners of the globe.

The fact that, contrary to Conrad's own recommendations, concreteness in his studies often does get the better of the consideration of art is highlighted by Jakob Lothe (1989):

Most Conrad criticism to date appears to have proceeded from the critical assumption [...] that literary content precedes the form [...]. [M]y book focuses instead on Conrad's narrative method as a most significant constituent aspect of his fiction. It also includes comments on the intriguing interplay of form and content in Conrad, or more specifically of narrative method and the thematics this method helps to shape.²

Lothe's reading of Conrad appears to converge with Conrad's own perception of his art in his letter to Richard Curle, in which Conrad voices his impatience with downplaying the artistry of his fiction at the expense of its literal understanding:

*Explicitness, my dear fellow, is fatal to the glamour of all artistic work, robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusion. You seem to believe in literalness and explicitness, in facts and also in expression. Yet nothing is more clear than the utter insignificance of explicit statement and also its power to call attention away from things that matter in the region of art (emphasis mine).*³

Conrad's words cited above as well as Lothe's perception of the essence of his artistry are not necessarily reflected in Conrad criticism. One could cite his less known short fiction as the case in point, for the writer's use in it of the then novel modernist device of denegation, which is usually associated with and ascribed to Faulkner, is hardly given its due in criticism. And it is precisely denegation—defined by François Pitavy in the Faulknerian context as affirmation through negation—that drives the narratives of, for example, "Freya of the Seven Isles" and "A Smile of Fortune," the stories from Conrad's *Twixt Land and Sea* volume (1912), as it, likewise, seems to lie behind the epistemological uncertainty of his *Within the Tides* tales (1915)⁴.

² J. Lothe, *Conrad's Narrative Method*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, pp. 1-2.

³ J. Conrad, "A Letter to Richard Curle (24 April, 1922)" [in:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad: 1920-1922*, eds. L. Davies and J. H. Stape, vol. 7, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005.

⁴ In Pitavy's understanding, denegation is a psychological term, which refers to the speaker. In calling Sutpen a "nothusbad" Rosa Coldfield does not mean that he did not ever become her spouse but that he was "the more present for being perceived as the negative of a husband" (F. L. Pitavy, "Some Remarks

In “Freya”, Conrad’s heavily denegative descriptive passages, especially those concerning the villainous Heemskirk, as well as the dialogues between Freya’s father and the narrator, where each new word, phrase, or sentence negates the previous one, only to be itself negated by what follows, are curiously reminiscent of the denegative phrasing in the stream-of-consciousness passages of Rosa Coldfield’s section in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), just as are the narrative twists and ambiguities of character and motive in “A Smile of Fortune.” Considering the dates of publication, the striking stylistic analogies between the two great world writers, make Conrad rather than Faulkner—contrary to what is commonly taken for granted—the precursor of denegation as a the then novel modernist method of narration.⁵ This is hardly surprising, in view of Faulkner drawing on Conrad, if not plagiarizing him, for his 1949 Nobel Prize Address without ever acknowledging the indebtedness.⁶

ARTISTRY UNDERVALUED: CONRAD’S SHORT FICTION, EDITORS, CRITICS, AND DENEGATION

Just as in consequence of his anti-tsarist conspiratorial activities prior to the outbreak of the 1863 January Uprising in the partitioned Poland and the resultant exile of his family to Vologda, Conrad’s father Apollo Korzeniowski was forced to follow the demands of art rather than those of life, a generation later, in an exile enforced by the demands of life in view of his prospective conscription into the tsarist army, his son Konrad, followed in his father’s footsteps by choosing artistic expression as a medium of communication. While, in the Preface to his play *Akt Pierwszy* (1869), Apollo Korzeniowski explained his choice in terms of “writing only because [he] cannot act,” in the words of Czesław Miłosz, a Polish poet and 1980 Nobel Prize Winner, Apollo’s son Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski justified his “by the sheer impos-

on Negation and Denegation in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*” [in:] *Faulkner’s Discourse: An International Symposium*, ed. L. Hönnighausen, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1989, p. 29). For a more detailed analysis of “Freya of the Seven Isles” see G. M. T. Branny, “The Unfathomability of Conrad’s ‘Shallow Waters’ in ‘Freya of the Seven Isles’: An Intertextual Reading of Conrad’s Story,” *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 2015, 10, pp. 127-150; Branny’s article “What ‘A Smile of Fortune’ Has to Hide: An Intertextual and Comparative Reconsideration of the Texture and Theme of Conrad’s Tale” (forthcoming).

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the relevant passages from this Conrad’s short story and Faulkner’s novel see G. M. T. Branny, “The Unfathomability...,” *op. cit.*, pp. 137-143.

⁶ The striking similarity in phrasing and metaphor between Faulkner’s Nobel Prize Address and Conrad’s essay “Henry James: An Appreciation” (1904) was first noted and discussed briefly by Eric Solomon, “Joseph Conrad, William Faulkner and the Nobel Prize Speech” (*Notes and Queries* (1967), 14(7), pp. 247-248). My comparative study of the two authors in *A Conflict of Values: Alienation and Commitment in the Novels of Joseph Conrad and William Faulkner* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo “Sponsor,” 1997, pp. 113-114) identifies another unacknowledged Faulkner debt to Conrad in the form of a word for word paraphrase in *Absalom, Absalom!* of the most famous passage from *Lord Jim* (i.e. “to the destructive element submit yourself...”).

sibility of creating an automatic emotional bond with his foreign reader, whom he could only win over by means of his literary art.”⁷

Even so, Conrad came up against lack of understanding as regards the artistic aspect of his works already with his publishers, who, not infrequently, insisted on cuts, for instance, for the sake of serialization, as in the case of “A Smile of Fortune,” which was only restored to the original form in which Conrad had seen it fit for publication, in 2007. Hence, in his 17th November, 1910 letter to his editors, Beaumont (and then to Pinker), the writer complains about the prospective alterations to “the inner texture” of his work, which, as he claims, distort his “art of expression.”⁸ Likewise, with “Freya of the Seven Isles,” which was turned down by the American magazine the *Century*, Conrad came face to face with American mentality demanding a more optimistic ending to the story.⁹ To this he responded in no uncertain terms in his letter to his editor Edward Garnett: “As to faking a ‘sunny’ ending to my story I would see all the American Magazines and all the american (sic) Editors damned in heaps before lifting my pen for the task.”¹⁰

With some critics, Conrad’s undervaluation as an artist in his less known short fiction largely results from under-appreciation of his favourite devices of irony, ambiguity, oxymoron, and anti-thesis as well as polyphonic narration, all of which seem to be used in his tales interchangeably in the service of denegation,¹¹ the letter, at best, found to be confusing by some Conrad’s critics, and, at worst, considered ludicrous. Hence, for instance, the general perception by Ted Billy of “A Smile of Fortune” as an incongruous “*reductio ad absurdum*” type of tale, although, paradoxically, the critic unwittingly acknowledges its denegative structure in stating that “Conrad converts nearly everything he establishes at the outset into its opposite by the end of the story.”¹² Similarly, the title of Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan’s 1999 volume on Conrad’s tales, describes the writer’s short fiction as “strange,” even though the critic finds it “powerful and compelling.”¹³ Moreover, Vulcan recognizes “Conrad’s conversion of his Romantic legacy into the currency of Modernism,” without as much as identifying the device of denegation as the latter’s key feature.¹⁴

⁷ A. Korzeniowski, *Akt Pierwszy*, Lwów: M. Altenborg, 1869, p. vi; Cz. Miłosz, “Stereotyp u Conrada” [in:] *Conrad żywy*, ed. W. Tarnawski, transl. R. E. Pyłacz, London: B. Świdorski, 1957, p. 99.

⁸ J. Conrad, “A Letter to Beaumont (17 November, 1910)” [in:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad: Uncollected Letters and Indexes*, eds. L. Davies, O. Knowles, and G. M. Moore, vol. 9, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007.

⁹ T. Billy, *A Wilderness of Words: Closure ad Disclosure in Conrad’s Short Fiction*, Lubbock: Texas Tech UP, 1997, p. 265, n. 27.

¹⁰ J. Conrad, “A Letter to Edward Garnett (August 4, 1911)” [in:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad: 1908-1911*, eds. F. R. Karl and L. Davies, vol. 4, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990, p. 469.

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of Conrad’s use of denegation in his short story see: G. M. T. Branny, “The Unfathomability...,” pp. 137-143; and “What ‘A Smile of Fortune’ Has to Hide...” (forthcoming).

¹² T. Billy, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

¹³ D. Erdinast-Vulcan, *The Strange Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad: Writing, Culture, and Subjectivity*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

With “Freya of the Seven Isles,” it is its denegative subtitle—“A Story of the Shallow Waters”—as well as Conrad’s own depreciative comments on the story that may have, in the long run, proven self-defeating, by detracting from the tale’s artistic value in the eyes of most of its critics.¹⁵ As demonstrated elsewhere, it is only through “Freya”’s intertextualization against William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and a play titled *Freja – zimna boginii miłości* [*Freya, a Cold Goddess of Love*] written by a Polish playwright Leszek Prorok and inspired by Conrad’s tale, that this Conrad story comes into its own, disclosing its full denegative dimension skillfully encoded in the oxymoronic ambiguity of the eponymous Nordic deity, particularly as regards the tale’s phrasing, foreshadowing and ending.¹⁶

The same appears to be true about, for example, “A Smile of Fortune,” another undervalued Conrad tale, which reveals its own subversive denegative format not only as regards narration and character shifts but also resolution, message and theme once it is subjected to an intertextual consideration against Faulkner’s two novels *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August* as well as Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* and Bernard Malamud’s short story “The Magic Barrel,” on the one hand, and a comparative reading in the context of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” and Peter Taylor’s “Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time,” on the other hand.¹⁷ This may account for the story’s confused evaluation by S. W. Reid, who, while referring to “A Smile of Fortune” as one of Conrad’s “lowest moments—[. . .] as low as he ever got,” simultaneously admits that “the revised version that Conrad favoured—may have something to contribute to a reassessment of its perceived weakness.”¹⁸

¹⁵ For example, see S. Monod, “Heemskirk, the Dutch Lieutenant,” *The Conradian* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 2006), pp. 85-91; for a detailed critical analysis of Monod’s article see G. M. T. Branny, “The Unfathomability of Conrad’s ‘Shallow Waters’ . . .,” pp. 131-135.

¹⁶ As both texts revolve around the issue of Freya’s ambivalence in her being both a goddess of fertility and death, love and revenge, conjugal devotion and promiscuity, they shed reciprocal light on each other’s nuances of meaning. Thus Prorok’s deliberate exploitation of the Conradian motifs of elopement, Wagnerian music, the colonial Seven Isles, etc. in his play about the Nazi *Lebensborn* programme leads to novel conclusions about the nature of Freya’s “illness” in Conrad’s tale (and the reasons for her unexpected death) as well as exposes the role of colonial ideology in the story. Conrad’s antithetical style in his foreshadowing passages introducing Heemskirk and in Freya’s father’s confused final dialogue with the narrator, demonstrates striking similarities to Faulkner’s denegative stylistics in the Rosa Coldfield section of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the fact which has epistemological implications for Conrad’s tale (for a detailed analysis see G. M. T., Branny, “The Unfathomability . . .,” pp. 127-150).

¹⁷ The tale’s intertextual consideration against Malamud’s story and Melville’s novel helps to disentangle its apparent narratological knots, the ambiguity of its protagonists’ motives, and their behavioural inconsistencies. Its ‘close reading,’ coupled with the comparative linguistic and thematic approach in relation to two 19th century stories of Poe and Hawthorne as well as the 20th century one by Taylor, has epistemological consequences in exposing the otherwise unrecognizable theme of incest in Conrad’s tale. Moreover, when pitted against Faulkner’s two novels, Conrad’s “A Smile of Fortune,” written in an oxymoronic and denegative mode, reveals the subversive role of denegation in Conrad’s story, which helps decipher the seemingly irresolvable issue of its ending and final message (see G. M. T. Branny, “What ‘A Smile of Fortune’ Has to Hide . . .”, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ S. W. Reid, “The Unpublished Typescript Version of ‘A Smile of Fortune,’” *The Conradian* 31, no. 2 (Autumn 2006), p. 97.

As it appears, an intertextual, comparative and denegative approach to Conrad's less valued short fiction may provide a clue to its real epistemological value and artistic significance. Unfortunately, the charge of marginalizing Conrad's artistry can likewise be laid at the doorstep of Conrad studies in Poland, which have mostly been focused on the biographical, ideological, or ethical aspects of his works. This focus seems to have been historically conditioned by the tragic national experience of Poland wiped off from the face of the earth for 123 years in effect of partitioning by Russia, Prussia and Austria (1772-1918), to which Conrad himself and his family most poignantly fell prey, and which has thus left an indelible mark on the predominance of the Polish readings of Conrad. Coupled with that has been the everlasting national debate over his exile and writing in English, subject to swinging from one pole to the other since Orzeszkowa's seminal accusation, through the two totalitarian regimes which followed after Poland had regained her independence in 1918, up to the present when the balance between the biographical, historical, ideological and ethical readings of Conrad's oeuvre, and a literary analysis of their artistry is being restored.

IDEOLOGICAL MEDIATIZATION OF CONRAD AT HOME AND ABROAD

This brings us—to borrow the word from Peter Lancelot Mallios's study of Conrad's American contexts in *Our Conrad: Constituting American Modernity*—to the issue of two “contrapuntal” early and mid-twentieth century Polish ideological mediatization of the writer: the *patriotic* and the *negative exilic*.¹⁹ The former, first construed as anti-Nazi, after WWII received anti-Bolshevik coloring; the latter, launched by Eliza Orzeszkowa's infamous attack on the writer in her article “Emigration of Talent” (1899), established Conrad's voluntary exile in the years of Poland's partitioning as tantamount to treason. In fact, as is now widely known, Conrad left his native land in 1874 on the advice and conviction of his Uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski, chiefly to avoid a certain conscription to the tsarist army a year later as a son of a former Insurrectionist and a Siberian exile himself as a child rather than for pecuniary gains, as was Orzeszkowa claimed.²⁰

The *patriotic* mediation, especially relevant for the WWII defenders of Warsaw during the anti-Nazi national Warsaw Uprising of 1944, became synonymous with uncompromising heroism, defence of honour, and “fidelity to oneself,” all reminiscent of Lord Jim's sacrificial death in the name of the human bond and for the preservation of personal honour in the article of certain death and defeat although, in fact, the very concept of “fidelity to oneself,” which drove the Warsaw youth in their struggle against the Nazis, as pointed out by Najder, does not really appear in Conrad.²¹ Used twice in his oeuvre, the phrase in fact rings with irony, suggesting fidelity to a principle rather

¹⁹ P. L. Mallios, *Our Conrad: Constituting American Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010, p. 97.

²⁰ E. Orzeszkowa, “Emigracja zdolności,” *Kraj* 16 (23 kwietnia 1899).

²¹ Z. Najder, “Sztuka i wierność: dziedzictwo kulturowe i program literacki (Fragment)” [in:] *Polskość i europejskość w Josepha Conrada wizjach historii, polityki i etyki*, ed. W. Krajka, seria Joseph Conrad

than to oneself, the Polish interpretation of the phrase deriving from a faulty translation of the ending of *Lord Jim* by Aniela Zagórska (1933), most certainly another case of an early twentieth century Conrad mediatization.

The dichotomous pre-war mediatizations of Conrad continued in post-WWII Poland under the communist rule although in a different configuration, with the *patriotic* mediatization adopted by the political dissenters at home, and, this time the *positive exilic* one embraced by political emigration abroad, both juxtaposed by the official *decadent bourgeois* mediatization of Conrad propagated by a pro-communist critic Jan Kott. Ironically enough, the latter, built on the same alleged principle of “fidelity to oneself,” which he referred to as “the fidelity of slaves” deprived of “the right to rebel” and whom he condemned for their “scorn for all social values.”²² Hence, however contrapuntally positioned, the Polish ideological mediatizations of Conrad had little or nothing to do with the reality of his oeuvre.

Similarly misapplied—from the Polish perspective—were the 1920 American mediatizations of the writer in the American South, discussed by Peter Mallios in his book, which, after the publication of *Notes on Life and Letters* (1921), with Conrad’s two political essays “Autocracy and War” and “The Crime of Partition,” construed the writer as a champion of the “lost cause”—the notion having, however, two diametrically opposed meanings in the Polish context and the Southern one.²³ In the former, the phrase refers to the nation’s patriotic fight for Poland’s Independence, the cause for which five generations of Poles lost their estates, freedom and lives—which was also the case of Conrad’s immediate family—while in the latter, it relates to a nostalgic hankering after the glories of the plantation South, with its economy grounded in slave work and human ownership, and its aristocratic bearing far from *noblesse oblige*, steeped in incest and miscegenation instead.

As Peter Mallios claims, this rather perverse Southern appropriation of Conrad had wide-ranging racist implications and far-reaching consequences for the writer, quite apart from the annoyance it caused him in his lifetime. In the latter half of the twentieth century, it led to Chinua Achebe’s attack on Conrad after his 1974-75 visit to the USA.²⁴ To add to that, soon afterwards, in 1978, this mediatization of Conrad surfaced in a misconstrued parallel drawn by William Styron between Poland and the South in his *Sophie’s Choice*, this time over the issues of slavery and the Holocaust, as if it had been Poland that was responsible for the latter. On balance, as pointed out by Mallios, it is to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*—curiously renamed *The Children of the Sea* upon its publication in the US—that William Faulkner owes finding his own unequivocal voice in matters of race and the Other.²⁵

a Polska, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia i Świat, vol. 2, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii-Curie Skłodowskiej, 2013, pp. 280-281.

²² J. Kott, “O laickim tragizmie,” *Twórczość* 1945, 1(2), p. 160.

²³ P. L. Mallios, *op. cit.*, pp. 265-266.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 356-375.

CONRAD'S IDENTITY: HIS POLISH LEGACY V. LIFE AND CAREER IN ENGLAND

The eponymous question of this paper, as indicated before, also relates to the issue of Conrad's identity as manifested in his oeuvres. In his 5 December, 1903 letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski, a Polish and French historian and writer, Conrad thus explains his "Englishness":

Both at sea and on land my point of view is English, from which *the conclusion should not be drawn that I have become an Englishman*. That is not the case. *Homo duplex* has in my case more than one meaning. You will understand me. I shall not dwell upon the subject (emphasis in the English language lines added).²⁶

Twelve years later, in 1914, these words are echoed in Conrad's interview for a Polish journalist Marian Dąbrowski, a husband of a famous Polish writer Maria Dąbrowska:

English critics—and after all I am an English writer—whenever they speak of me they add that there is in me something incomprehensible, inconceivable, elusive. Only you can grasp this elusiveness, and comprehend what is incomprehensible. *That is Polishness*. Polishness which I took from Mickiewicz and Słowacki. My father read *Pan Tadeusz* aloud to me and made me read it aloud. Not just once or twice. I used to prefer *Konrad Wallenrod*, *Grażyna*. Later I liked Słowacki better. You know why Słowacki? *Il est l'âme de toute la Pologne, lui*. (emphasis in the English language lines added).²⁷

The French phrase the writer uses to capture the essence of his preference for Słowacki over Mickiewicz expresses the very core of the difference between Conrad's *Englishness* and his *Polishness*, which comes down to *l'âme*: the soul, the spirit, which is never an added value but always remains inherent to one's identity, just as do Conrad's ancestry, childhood experience, upbringing, education, sensibilities and deeply felt loyalties, as opposed to the added valued of his home, family, friends, and career in England as well as his adopted language.

In addressing the issue on the 160th anniversary of Conrad's birth, one may therefore wonder about Conrad's identity, which is usually construed as that of *an English writer of Polish descent*, and ask whether it might not perhaps be more precisely and faithfully defined as that of *an English writer with his Polish identity constantly inscribed and reinscribed into the content and form of his oeuvre*. For that, it is only appropriate to examine the process of the writer's identity shaping, literally from the very moment of his birth, if not by himself at that point, most certainly by his father and his patriotic lullaby written to celebrate his son's christening and arrival into this world in "*the 8th year of Muscovite captivity*," as Apollo Korzeniowski indicates in its

²⁶ J. Conrad, "A Letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski (5 December, 1903)" [in:] *Conrad's Polish Background: Letters to and from Polish Friends*, ed. Z. Najder, transl. H. Carroll-Najder, London: Oxford UP, 1964, p. 240.

²⁷ Z. Najder, *Conrad Under Familial Eyes*, transl. H. Carroll-Najder, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983, p. 199.

title. The solemn, almost mournful words of the song appear remarkably prophetic, and in more than one sense too, with the father urging his newly born son to be a “Pole” and live “without land, without love, / without Country, [...] / so long as Mother-Poland is in her grave” and “—When the time is ripe [...] / Give Her, [himself]: *immortality*” (emphasis added; translation mine).²⁸ Likewise, the very name of “Konrad” given by Apollo to his son, is *the* iconic Polish name for all times, evoking the tragic fates of two Polish Romantic literature heroes, whose self-sacrificial choices were conditioned by and intertwined with the nation’s fight for freedom from imperialist domination.

Moreover, in his statement of his plans for his son’s ideological upbringing, delineated eleven years later in a letter to Stefan Buszczyński (17 March, 1868), Apollo Korzeniowski expresses his desire “to bring up Konradek not as a democrat, aristocrat, demagogue, republican, monarchist [...]—but only as a Pole” (translation mine).²⁹ Curiously enough, in accounting for his own lack of interest in socialism because of his “fidelity to an absolutely lost cause, to an idea without a future,” Conrad echoes these wishes in his 1899 (8 February) letter to Cunnighame Graham.³⁰ His words in turn find their confirmation in Józef Heronim Retinger’s reminiscences in his book *Conrad and his Contemporaries* (1941), where its author, the co-founder of the idea of the United Europe and a man, to whom Conrad owes his involvement in matters Polish before the British Government with his memorandum “A Note on the Polish Problem” (1916), compares the writer’s and his own roads to free Poland, calling Conrad’s “totally new, different and alien to the one followed by the people to whom he belonged, but in no way opposed to them,” while seeing his own as an expression of a desire “to live unhampered by the frontiers and passports, by the sinister atmosphere of the past, [...] but still devote [his] work to [his] country,” referring to Conrad and himself as “nothing else than [...] Pole(s).”³¹

Furthermore, looking back at their common childhoods in the partitioned Poland, quite apart from a space of a generation between them, Retinger describes both as “controlled by the past, [...] by the everlasting sadness of [their] surroundings, by the tedium of living among the dead.”³² And indeed, in her June 20, 1861 letter to her husband, Ewelina Bobrowska, Conrad’s mother writes: “I have been busy all day sewing a mourning garb for Konradek. It is so black here, even children, that the boy is asking for it himself. So what could I do but to conform to his wish?”³³ (translation mine). This story demonstrates Conrad’s deep, if morbid, awareness of his

²⁸ Z. Najder, *Życie Conrada Korzeniowskiego*, vol. 1, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Alfa, 1996, p. 29.

²⁹ A. Korzeniowski, “A Letter to Stefan Buszczyński (17 March, 1868)” [in:] J. Najder, *Conrad Under Familial Eyes*, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

³⁰ J. Conrad, “A Letter to Cunnighame Graham (8 February, 1899)” [in:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad: 1898-1902*, vol. 2, eds. F. R. Karl and L. Davies, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986, p. 161.

³¹ J. H. Retinger, *Conrad and his Contemporaries*, London: Minerva, 1943, p. 152.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³³ E. Bobrowska, “A Letter to Apollo Korzeniowski (20 June, 1861),” *Scenographic Scripts*, Joseph Conrad Museum in Berdyczew, the Ukraine. Zdzisław Najder claims that the letter was written a month earlier, on May 18, 1861 (*Życie Conrada...*, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 31).

national identity at a very early stage of his life, as, what his mother is referring to, is the national mourning that followed the failure of the 1863 January Uprising in the partitioned country, for the participation in the preparation of which her husband had been arrested a year before it broke out and exiled into Siberia, together with his wife and their little son.³⁴

That this morbid national atmosphere forever became part of Conrad's identity as a Pole can be proven by his own words written 35 years later in his 9 June, 1897 letter to Wincenty Lutosławski, in which Conrad thus remembered the time of his father's arrest at the Warsaw Citadel: "In the courtyard of that citadel—characteristically [for] *our* nation—begin my childhood memories" (emphasis added; translation mine).³⁵ Indeed, it is to the Citadel that little Konradek with the help of his Grandmother sent cookies to his Father, the fact mentioned in the child's well-known 1863 dedication to his Granma written on the reverse of his photo sent to her from Vologda during their time in Siberia, the boy's signature featuring "grandson, Pole—Catholic and nobleman KONRAD" (translation mine).³⁶ This dedication of a five-year-old, even if perhaps suggested to him by his parents, when placed against the context of his earlier childhood demand for a mourning tunic, shows a heightened if morbid awareness of identity in the writer from a very early age, the awareness derived both from the then general atmosphere in the partitioned Poland and the example of his parents' political activities, their convictions and fidelity to the national cause, for which they paid with their freedom, health and eventually their lives. All that, sealed with Conrad's childhood memories of Vologda's Polish patriots—never revolutionaries, as Conrad insisted, correcting Western terminology—gathering at their far-off Siberian home, later found its expression in Conrad's *Personal Record*.³⁷

Throughout his lifetime, Conrad's deeply-felt Polish identity surfaces in his use of the pronouns *we* and *our*—either while addressing other Poles, or in relation to his English interlocutors or correspondents—and invariably placing himself in line with the former and in opposition to the latter, as, for instance, in his letter to Edward Garnett: "*you* forget that *we* have been used to go to battle without illusions. It's *you Britishers* that 'go in to win' only. *We* have been 'going in' these last hundred years repeatedly, to be knocked on the head only..." (emphasis added).³⁸ In the formerly quoted passage about visiting his father in the Warsaw citadel, Conrad likewise aligns himself with his Polish roots, by referring to his painful experience as characteristic of "*our* nation." Moreover, in his famous justification for his choice of English over Polish as a medium of artistic expression, he calls Polish literature "beautiful" and refers to it as "*our*," implying an opposition between *we* and "*the English* [for whom]

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³⁵ J. Conrad, "A Letter to Wincenty Lutosławski (9 June, 1897)" [in:] Z. Najder, *Życie Conrada...*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³⁷ J. Conrad, *A Personal Record: Some Reminiscences*, New York & London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1912, p. xiv.

³⁸ J. Conrad, "A Letter to Edward Garnett" [in:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad: 1908-1911*, vol. 4, p. 492.

my gifts are sufficient and secure my daily bread.”³⁹ Even considering Conrad’s cordiality in always rising to the expectations of his interlocutors or correspondents, it makes one wonder about the deep meaning of one of his best known phrases “one of us,” given its outspoken mediatization in Conrad criticism in the West. Significantly enough, Stefan Zabierowski’s recent article on the Polish reception of Conrad, titled “He was ‘one of us,’” ends with a conclusion that Conrad “was not only a great English writer, but was very much ‘one of us’—and that is the secret of his undying presence in the Polish cultural world” (emphasis added)⁴⁰.

In the light of the above, Conrad’s refusal—on the grounds of his holding a Polish nobility title—to accept English knighthood conferred on him in 1924 by King George V in recognition of his contribution to English literature as well as his declining—as a Catholic—to accept membership in an Anglican club, hardly come as a surprise.⁴¹ What’s more, these decisions constitute a powerful and moving confirmation of Conrad’s uncompromisingly consistent sense of his own identity as Pole, Catholic and Nobleman, in a truly admirable convergence with his childhood dedication on the Vologda photograph.

WESTERN CONRAD SCHOLARSHIP AND CONRAD’S POLISHNESS

The already cited Czesław Miłosz claims that Conrad’s Polish background and his identity as a borderline *szlachcic* had shaped the writer’s political, ideological and cultural sensibilities *before* he left Poland at the age of 17, and irrevocably remaining “unchanged by his new experiences in other spheres” all throughout his career. The Polish Nobel Laureate compares this legacy to “a talisman” that “Conrad carried with him [...] intact [by] his separation from the land of his fathers.”⁴² Hence, the question of a full appreciation of Conrad does not only concern a more comprehensive recognition of his artistry, especially in his so-called “weaker fiction,” but also a wider recognition of his Polish heritage and its implications for his oeuvres, the issues which have, more often than not, been downplayed, or undervalued in Western scholarship. It is in this context that one should consider the recommendations put forward by a Canadian scholar G. W. Stephen Brodsky in his recently published *Joseph Conrad’s Polish Soul* (2016) that Polish Conradians should keep a critical distance to Western Conrad criticism and be wary of and skeptical about some Western interpretations of Conrad’s works, often “resulting in sheer misunderstanding,” chiefly through their authors’ insufficient awareness of the role and importance of the writer’s

³⁹ Z. Najder, *Conrad Under Familial Eyes*, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

⁴⁰ S. Zabierowski, “‘He Was One of Us’: The Polish Reception of the Work of Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski,” *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 2015, 10, pp. 171-191.

⁴¹ F. R. Karl, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives: A Biography*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979, p. 881; Z. Najder, *Życie Conrada...*, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 252.

⁴² Cz. Miłosz, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

Polish roots.⁴³ Therefore Brodsky calls for an “overdue” need “for redress of a critical imbalance” to allow for the unique role of Polish Conrad scholarship in filling the gaps, supplying the missing links, and correcting some Western views on Conrad’s writing.⁴⁴ Brodsky is quite explicit about an array of one-sided interpretations of Conrad, which view him solely as an Anglo-Saxon writer and ignore or misinterpret his Polish heritage so as to quickly return to the stamping ground of either British or American scholarship, with its archetypes and stereotypes: “Largely restricted in knowledge and sentiment to their own cultural tradition, Western critics found it mirrored in the Conrad canon against the dark background of a Polish cultural *terra incognita*. This neglect of Conrad’s centuries-old heritage resulted in some grotesque interpretations.”⁴⁵

All that, as Brodsky claims, happened despite Zdzisław Najder’s seminal publications, whose aim was to bring to the attention of the West the importance of the centuries-old Polish *szlachta* heritage of Conrad, and especially its chivalric ethos. This, one might add today, semi-postcolonial attitude to Conrad’s Polishness, evidently a legacy of both the 123 years of successful European imperialism at the heart of Europe and the 44 years of Soviet rule on the Polish territory in effect of Yalta, with first the tsarist and then the Soviet Russia pandered to by the West, coupled with lack of access by Western scholars to the Polish and Ukrainian archives as well as the language barrier have created a gap between Polish and Western criticisms of Conrad, which is only subject to bridging in our times. On the other hand, in the same article Brodsky also blames earlier ideology-ridden Conrad studies in Poland for failing to perceive the importance of Conrad’s “second past,” which Czesław Miłosz, from his the then exilic Western perspective, perceived as *dianoic* (i.e., defining Conrad as a repository of the borderland *szlachta* heritage).⁴⁶

In this context Brodsky’s *Conrad’s Polish Soul* (2016), whose chapters have appeared over the years in Wiesław Krajka’s multi-volumed Conrad series *Eastern and Western Perspectives*, proves to be of particular importance for bridging the gap between Polish and Western Conrad scholarships in that it brings the borderland *szlachta* perspective, from which to view certain aspects of the writer’s biography anew, to the attention of Western scholars. The echo of Conrad’s Polish heritage in his oeuvres, the implications of which for his fiction have until recently been extensively tackled almost exclusively by Polish and Ukrainian scholars, resonates in such recent publications of Western critics as Jean M. Szczypien’s “*Sailing Towards Poland*” *With Joseph Conrad* (2017), unearthing a legacy of Polishness in the writer’s themes and imagery in his most important novels, and Maya Jasanoff’s *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* (2017), linking Conrad’s heteroge-

⁴³ G. W. S. Brodsky, *Joseph Conrad’s Polish Soul: Realms of Memory and Self*, ed. G. Z. Gasyna, Eastern and Western Perspectives Series, ed. W. Krajka, Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska UP, 2016, pp. 47-48.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

⁴⁶ See J. Dudek, “Czesław Miłosz on Conrad’s Polish Stereotypes,” *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 2014, 9, p. 110.

neous biography to global history, his oeuvres and our times. Finally, the two 2007 biographies of Conrad, English and German: *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad* by John Stape, and Elmar Schenkel's *Fahrt in Geheimnis Joseph Conrad: Eine Biographie*, are both hailed by Brodsky as ground-breaking in Conrad studies in the West in departing from the standard Western narration of alienation to embrace the issues of "fidelity to the ethos and ethical values of his class," both related to his Polish heritage.⁴⁷ Hence, it seems that at last the efforts in that respect undertaken by Polish scholarship through such leading serial Conrad publications as the Lublin *Eastern and Western Perspectives*, edited by Wiesław Krajka (since 1993) and the Opole-Kraków *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* edited first by Zdzisław Najder and by Jolanta Dudek running since 2005, have been brought, at least partly, to fruition.

To conclude, quite apart from the number and variety of different interpretative possibilities and approaches that Conrad's works occasion, the three most sensitive and yet largely neglected areas of interpretation for unadulterated Conrad seem to include "the inner texture," or "artistic expression," of his fiction (as opposed to primarily or exclusively its themes), steering away from ideological mediatization—whether of Conrad's biography or his oeuvre—and, last but not least, an awareness of the presence and role for his fiction of Conrad's deeply-rooted *l'âme de toute la Pologne*.

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⁴⁷ G. W. S. Brodsky, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

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