

A LETTER IN A BOTTLE: CONRAD, NORWID AND THE END OF THE AGE OF SAILING SHIPS

Wiesław Ratajczak

The Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

Abstract: a perusal of Conrad's novels and Norwid's *Civilization* easily allows us to discern a similarity of ideas. Both authors analyse the social consequences of technological progress and are particularly disturbed by the illusionary feeling of security that it brings, coming from a conviction that the forces of nature have finally been subdued. Modernity deprives Man of his greatness – it “takes the spell away”. With the disappearance of the common toil that holds people together comes a loosening of social bonds. Norwid wrote his *Civilization* after he learnt of the sinking of the *Pacific* – a steamship on which he had once returned from America. Conrad for his part was fascinated by the greatest sea disaster of his times: the sinking of the *Titanic*. The reluctance of both authors to acknowledge progress as an absolute entity may be explained by their shared Romantic view of the world, which was incompatible with any order based solely on “material interests”.

Keywords: topoi, the crisis of values, Conrad, Norwid, the idea of progress, the decline of civilization, tradition, the era of the great sailing ships

The smiling greatness of the sea dwarfed the extent of time.
Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*

Nothing in Conrad's letters and memoirs would seem to suggest that he was in any way influenced by the writings of Norwid – or, indeed, that he was aware of their existence.¹ It would be far easier to point to the influence of other Romantic writers, whose works may well have been recommended to Conrad by his father Apollo Korzeniowski – an ardent patriot and (minor) author in his own right – who for a time was the young Conrad's sole educator.² For obvious reasons, the writings of Norwid could not have featured in this “syllabus”, which reflected the difficult personal cir-

¹ The present article is a modified version of the fifth chapter of my book *Conrad i koniec epoki żaglowców* (Poznań, 2010), which in turn is based on my study *List z butelki, czyli koniec epoki żaglowców* published in “Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka”, Poznań 1997, No. 4 (24), pp. 193-205.

² It was without any malicious intent that Tadeusz Bobrowski held up Apollo Korzeniowski's *Siedem słów z krzyża* (*Seven Words from the Cross*) – which he describes as being “very beautiful and known only in manuscript” – as proof that Apollo was “one of the best imitators of Krasieński”. – T. Bobrowski. *Pamiętniki mego życia*. Ed. S. Kieniewicz. Warszawa 1979, vol. I, p. 426.

cumstances of father and son. Conrad's first "meeting" with Norwid came many years later, in the columns of the 'Young Poland' "Chimera" journal,³ which had "rediscovered" the forgotten Romantic Norwid and where Maria Komornicka had published a favourable review of *Lord Jim*.⁴ By contrast, a review of the same novel published in the St. Petersburg "Kraj" journal by Wiktor Gomulicki – one of Norwid's first scholarly biographers – asked whether Conrad was a Pole or an Englishman (*Polak czy Anglik?*).⁵ Neither then nor later, however, did it occur to anyone to make a closer comparison of the two writers' modes of thought, which is somewhat surprising, given that what Conrad has to say on certain subjects – art and work, loneliness and solidarity, tradition and present times – unfailingly brings to mind similar reflections by Norwid.

Norwid's story entitled *Cywilizacja*⁶ (*Civilization*, published in 1862) – which Roman Pollak called "the first seafaring short story in Polish literature"⁷ – shows that both writers held similar views on what they saw as a turning point in the history of civilization. Norwid and Conrad both analyse the same illusion, which is as dangerous as it is childish. In the present article I shall therefore take up Pollak's suggestion that "there are serious grounds for considering Norwid to be a precursor or distant forerunner of Conrad."⁸

1. WORK

Norwid's story begins *in medias res* with a conversation between the main protagonist (who is also the narrator) and his young friend. In this short passage the word "young" appears no less than four times. They talk about the differences between travelling by sailing ship and travelling by steamer – a comparison that becomes the point of departure for an examination of the historical turning point to which the world has come. The young man speaks of what to him is an unfamiliar world of sailing ships – a world of which he can only "dream". For the narrator, however, these same images are fragments of a remembered past. As he says, "There was a time when ..." – a phrase which begins chapter XIII of Conrad's *The Mirror of the Sea*, speaking of the preparations that are required before a sailing ship can put out to sea.⁹ In this dialogue and in the entire story the sailing ship and the steamer become

³ Cf. S. Zabierowski. *Conrad w Polsce*. Gdańsk 1971, p. 150.

⁴ "An awe-inspiring book of extraordinary content and artistry – a delightful treat for any slightly more discriminating reader." – Włast [the pseudonym of Maria Komornicka]. "Powieści. *Lord Jim* przez Conrada (K. Korzeniowskiego)." *Chimera*, 1905, vol. IX, p. 333.

⁵ W. Gomulicki. "Polak czy Anglik?" *Życie i Sztuka* (supplement). *Kraj*, 1905, No. 1, pp. 7-8.

⁶ I shall be quoting from: Cyprian Norwid. *Pisma wszystkie*. Ed. J.W. Gomulicki. Warszawa 1971, vol. 6, pp. 43-60 (abb. *PW*).

⁷ R. Pollak. *Uroda morza w polskim słowie*. Poznań 1947, p. 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ J. Conrad. *The Mirror of the Sea*, chapter XIII. a purely fortuitous coincidence, of course, though somewhat intriguing and perhaps not insignificant: "There has been a time when a ship's chief mate,

synonyms of “yesterday” and “today”, which are separated by a turning point in (western) civilization. In Conrad’s essays the history of maritime navigation is at one and the same time the history of culture – an imperative deriving from foundations that were laid many centuries ago:

The cradle of oversea traffic and of the art of naval combats, the Mediterranean, apart from all the associations of adventure and glory, the common heritage of all mankind, makes a tender appeal to a seaman.¹⁰

In Norwid’s *Civilization* the narrator’s reminiscences of sea voyages are intertwined with the words and melody of a sea shanty, whose distinct iambic rhythm – reinforced by catalexis in every other line – reminds us of the circumstances in which these songs came into being: a simple refrain consisting of phrases that were shouted out made it easier for sailors to work in a group. It is worth noting that in this stylized passage Norwid confers a universal dimension on the story of an individual – a story about separation and hard work. Thanks to the call “Oh, man!” (*o! człowiecze*) the imperative to act can move all of us. A poem inserted in the narrative also tells of a deep experience of time and space – an awareness of danger as a principle of life. As can easily be noticed, there is no group singing accompaniment to the voyage of the steamship *Civilization*. This ship for modern times is a cold, obedient tool in the hands of emotionally detached professionals without whom, one might add – quoting the words of the protagonist of Conrad’s story *The End of the Tether* – it is nothing.

A laid-up steamer was a dead thing and no mistake; a sailing-ship somehow seems always ready to spring into life with the breath of the incorruptible heaven; but a steamer, thought Captain Whalley, with her fires out, without the warm whiffs from below meeting you on her decks, without the hiss of steam, the clangs of iron in her breast — lies there as cold and still and pulseless as a corpse.¹¹

As a result of changes in their construction ships have been turned into lifeless objects, whereas they used to be almost living beings — beings that in a sense were even sanctified by virtue of the source of their power:

The [sailing ship] seems to draw its strength from the very soul of the world, its formidable ally, held to obedience by the frailest bonds, like a fierce ghost captured in a snare of something even finer than spun silk.¹²

The sailing ship – a powerful set of components that has been perfected over centuries (“[an] array of the strongest ropes, the tallest spars and the stoutest canvas”)¹³ – came into being as a result of Man’s observation and imitation of Nature. It has al-

pocket-book in hand and pencil behind his ear, kept one eye aloft upon his riggers and the other down the hatchway on the stevedores, and watched the disposition of his ship’s cargo, knowing that even before she started he was already doing his best to secure for her an easy and quick passage.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, chapter XXXVII.

¹¹ J. Conrad. *The End of the Tether*, chapter VI.

¹² J. Conrad. *The Mirror of the Sea*, chapter X.

¹³ *Ibid.*

ways been and always will be a frail affair. By contrast, the voyage of the ship for modern times is a demonstration of Man's independence with regard to the forces of Nature. By the same token, however – and this is something that is stressed by both writers – technology has separated Man from Nature. In the words of Conrad:

The machinery, the steel, the fire, the steam, have stepped in between the man and the sea.¹⁴

Being technically superior, these new tools enable us to gain an ever greater advantage over the elements, yet at the same time we see them as being something increasingly alien to ourselves. The nature of work, which used to be connected with art and heroism, has evolved along with technological change and has now become a cold carrying out of procedures in which there is “ [... a] lack of close communion between the artist and the medium of his art.”¹⁵ It is worth noting that in Norwid's poem *Praca (Work)* sea navigation becomes a universal image of human toil – toil that is marked by failure and the necessity to start all over again:

„– Ekonomistów zbierz wszystkich i nagle
 Spytaj ich, co jest pracy abecadłem?
 Zacząć mam z czego? gdy na skałę wpadłem,
 Lub wiatr mię zdradził, zerwawszy pierw żagle;
 Od czegoż zacząć? czy od dłoni potu?
 Od ramion potu?... gdy brak i narzędzi! ...
 Gdy otchłań wkoło, a ty – na krawędzi ...

 Zacznij ... by w głowie nie było zawrotu,
 Więc głos ogromny znów jak pierwej woła:
 „Pracować musisz z potem twego CZOŁA!” (PW 1, 387)

Gather all your economists together and then
 Ask them: “What are the first principles of work?
 Where am I to start if I've run aground,
 Or the wind has let me down just after tearing away my sails.
 Where do I start? With the sweat on my hands?
 With the sweat on my arms? With no tools?
 Standing on the edge of the abyss that is all around me ...

 Above all ... make sure you don't get dizzy,
 For again you'll hear a voice like thunder booming out:

“You have to toil by the sweat of your BROW!” [Transl. R.E.P.]¹⁶

This fundamental link between work and consciousness is also present in Conrad's descriptions of the labours of seamen – who, when confronted with the might of Mother Nature, must indeed cope with feelings of dizziness, as well as having to

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, chapter XXII.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, chapter VIII.

¹⁶ In the present article all translations of excerpts from the works of Cyprian Norwid have been made by R.E. Pyplacz.

overcome their fears, resist the instinctive urge to flee to safety, give and carry out orders and generally concentrate on the task in hand:

A ship is not a slave. You must make her easy in a seaway, you must never forget that you owe her the fullest share of your thought, of your skill, of your self-love.¹⁷

In Conrad's mind – as Mark D. Larabee observes in his discussion of Conrad's essay entitled *Tradition* – work, ideals and conduct were inextricably linked.¹⁸

As described in *The Mirror of the Sea*, sailing would seem to be the fulfilment of Norwid's idea of linking art and work. Interestingly, both authors speak of utility being transformed into beauty. In his poem *Promethidion* Norwid cautions against crude practicalism, enjoining his fellow compatriots not to forget ...

Że użyteczne nigdy nie jest samo,
Że piękne – wchodzi nie pytając bramą! (PW 3, 441).

That utility never comes alone,
That beauty comes along invited or not!

Conrad calls the work involved in a traditional sea voyage “a race against time, against an ideal standard of achievement outstripping the expectations of common men.”¹⁹ Describing the captains, the officers and the ordinary seamen who manned the sailing ships, he speaks about people who were masters of their art, about their knowledge of the craft of seamanship and about their various idiosyncrasies. Given Norwid's dictum that beauty is “a form of love” (Kształtem jest Miłości – PW 3, 437), it comes as no surprise that Conrad sees the labours of seamanship as being something more than consummate skill, calling them “a subtle and unmistakable touch of love and pride beyond mere skill; almost an inspiration which gives to all work that finish which is almost art – which *is* art.”²⁰

Work, utility, art, truth, beauty ... the dedication with which Conrad's fictional heroes carry out their professional duties – erroneously mistaken by some to be nothing more than blind obedience to “the shipowners of this world”²¹ – would seem to have a cause that is as profound as it is unfathomable. It approaches that which is

¹⁷ J. Conrad. *The Mirror of the Sea*, chapter XV.

¹⁸ M.D. Larabee. *Joseph Conrad and the Maritime Tradition*. [In:] *a Historical Guide to Joseph Conrad*. Ed. J.G. Peters. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 61.

¹⁹ J. Conrad. *The Mirror of the Sea*, chapter IX.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, chapter VII.

²¹ Here it is worth recalling a passage from the famous essay in which Jan Kott laments the fact that the seamen in Conrad's fiction display a lack of revolutionary fervour: “The Conradian fidelity to oneself is the fidelity of slaves, for to obey a master whom one despises and to care only about one's own integrity is to be a slave. This, I think, is precisely why Zygmunt Jarosz writes: ‘Looking at Conrad's heroes, I begin to understand just how difficult it is going to be to build a socialist Society.’ The blind obedience of Conrad's heroes to the shipowners of this world is a far greater danger to Society than their inner haughtiness and their spiritual solitude.” – J. Kott. *Mitologia i realizm. Szkice literackie*. Warszawa 1946, p. 156.

eternal, fundamental and immutable in Man – something that Norwid conveyed in his religious image of the recovery of lost holiness:²²

Gdy jak o pięknie rzekłem – że jest profil Boży,
Przez grzech stracony nawet w nas, profilu cieniach,
I mało gdzie, i w rzadkich odczuwaniach sumieniach –
Tak i o pracy powiem, że – zguby szukaniem,
Dla której pieśń – ustawnym się nawoływaniem. (PW 3, 438)

Just as I have said of beauty that it is an aspect of the Divine,
Lost through sin even in ourselves, who are mere shadows of that aspect,
And barely present anywhere, save in the rare stirrings of some consciences,
So too I say of work – that it is the search for what has been lost,
And for what Man pines in his never-ending song.

2. THE BROKEN THREAD

Norwid himself experienced the hardships of travelling on a sailing ship – something which he saw as an opportunity to see basic things in a new light. As Tomasz Łubieński writes:

The arduous sixty-two-day voyage allowed him to take a long, cool look at the world of falsehood, empty phrases and deceptive appearances with which he was all too familiar. Norwid uses dramatic and lofty language to write about the voyage, having discovered that a normal, everyday “How are you?” spoken at sea really did mean “How are you?” In this totally new situation he felt at one with himself.²³

The voyage to America on the *Margaret Evans* lasted from 13th December 1852 to 11th February 1853²⁴ and had more than its fair share of extraordinary and dramatic events, as Norwid notes in a letter to Józef Bohdan Zaleski:

I disembarked having taken sixty-two days to get there by sailing ship – in winter, in one frock coat and with two Napoleon coins in my pocket – and having seen two wrecked ships (witnessing the wrecking of one of them with my own eyes), the smashing of the crosspiece of our own mast, four burials at sea and our sails being torn away a total of four times. [PW 8, 226]

In a less laconic letter to Maria Trębicka Norwid writes of “enormous sharks” and of tremendous storm waves that were like “chasms reaching up to half the height of the masts, making the ship creak on all sides under the pressure of the waves”, as well

²² “According to Norwid, civilization is a product of work, which – having been imposed on Man as a punishment and penance following his fall from Grace for having rebelled against Divine Law – has nevertheless become the instrument of his purification and renewal – indeed, his path to resurrection.” – M. Żmigrodzka. *Norwid i romantyczna wizja historii*. [In:] *Idem. Przez wieki idąca powieść. Wybór pism o literaturze XIX i XX wieku*. Ed. M. Kalinowska and E. Kiślak. Warszawa 2002, p. 356.

²³ T. Łubieński. *Norwid wraca do Paryża*. Kraków 1989, p. 116.

²⁴ Cf. Z. Trojanowiczowa and Z. Dambek et al. *Kalendarz życia i twórczości Cypriana Norwida*. Poznań 2007, vol. I: 1821-60, pp. 523-4.

as nights that “inspired the greatest religious awe, being terrifyingly silent or terrifyingly tempestuous.” [PW 8, 196-7].

In his story entitled *Civilization* Norwid reveals the universal meaning of these hardships and struggles – the essence of a voyage during which one is at the mercy of the elements – which shows up Man’s insignificance, but also his ability to confront the unknown and to join with others in the fight against adversity.

In the envoi of his poem entitled *Z pokładu „Marguerity”* (From the deck of the *Margaret Evans*), which was written on the day Norwid set out on his transatlantic voyage, he speaks of uncertainty and risks:

Ja nie wiem ... końca, nigdy nie wiem może,
Lecz ...
(tu mi przerwał sternik)
... szczęście wam Boże ... [PW 1, 215]

I don't know ... the end, perhaps, one never knows,
But ...
(here I was interrupted by the helmsman)
... Godspeed!

On a horizontal plane, the route of the voyage that has just begun connects distant parts of the world. At the same time, however – as Norwid writes in *Civilization* – the masts lead the eye of the seafarer upwards, towards the heavens. Conrad makes a similar use of this symbolism in *The Mirror of the Sea*:

[...] I remember moments when even to my supple limbs and pride of nimbleness the sailing-ship's machinery seemed to reach up to the very stars.²⁵

Looking upwards, Norwid's seafarer sees images that have religious associations: the sails bring to mind an airborne tent or tabernacle,²⁶ while the three masts are a reminder of the three crosses of Calvary. One can easily see that in his drawing entitled *Na oceanie*²⁷ (*On the ocean*) – which was made during the voyage – Norwid alludes to the iconography of the crucifixion.

Both Norwid and Conrad see that the advent of steamships and the resulting demise of sailing ships coincides with a change in European culture that is fraught with consequences, namely the fading away of a certain consciousness of symbolism – and with it the feeling that there is a metaphysical order that transcends human standards and human comprehension.

²⁵ J. Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea*, chapter X.

²⁶ “As a temporary abode, the Tent has become a symbol of the fleeting nature and frailness of human life. [...] On Mount Sinai God Himself gave precise instructions for the building of the Holy Tabernacle. [...] This symbolism (tent – incarnate Logos) is explained by St. Gregory of Nyssa, among others: ‘Moses was figuratively initiated into the mystery of the tent which encompassed the whole world: this would be Christ, the power and wisdom of God.’” – D. Forstner OSB. *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej*. Transl. W. Zakrzewska, P. Pachciarek and R. Turzyński. Warszawa 1990, pp. 366-7.

²⁷ C. Norwid. *Na oceanie* (dokument ikonograficzny), The National Library in Warsaw, drawing No. 606.

A sea voyage allows one to have a wealth of intense experiences, including the quite dangerous feeling – described by Norwid – of “the dull and absolute silence of the weary material world” (PW 6, 47). An awareness of the relative insignificance of Man’s strength can lead to a feeling of resignation and expectations of impending death. This human trait, which is discussed in the “sailing” part of Norwid’s *Civilization*, is perhaps best described by Pascal:

For after all, what is Man in nature? A nothing in relation to infinity, everything in relation to nothing, a central point between nothing and everything and infinitely far from understanding either. The ends of things and their beginnings are impregnably concealed from him in an impenetrable secret. He is equally incapable of seeing the nothingness out of which he was drawn and the infinite in which he is engulfed.²⁸

In his *Pensées* Pascal expresses both the greatness and the paltriness of Man – who, he says, is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature. The link between the philosophy of Pascal and the vision of Man’s fate that we find in Conrad’s writing would therefore seem to be quite obvious.²⁹

Working on a sailing ship, the seaman connects to the past by virtue of his membership of an ancient fraternity – by virtue of the things he does with his hands, which are both a repetition and a continuation of the efforts of many previous generations. The narrator of Norwid’s *Civilization* conjectures that the cries of contemporary sailors are echoes of the curses uttered by their ancient Phoenician counterparts. Conrad for his part speaks of the amazement and admiration felt by modern sailors whenever they look at old woodcuts showing “the caravels of ancient time”³⁰ which were manned by “his direct professional ancestors”.³¹ And what of the sailors of the future, say three hundred years from now?

They will glance at the photogravures of our nearly defunct sailing-ships with a cold, inquisitive and indifferent eye. Our ships of yesterday will stand to their ships as no lineal ancestors, but as mere predecessors whose course will have been run and the race extinct. Whatever craft he handles with skill, the seaman of the future shall be, not our descendant, but only our successor.³²

We may well ask whether this manner of contrasting the old world of sailing ships with the modern world of steamers – equating the former with life lived at its fullest

²⁸ B. Pascal. *Myśli*. Transl. T. Żeleński (Boy), Warszawa 1989, p. 63. Norwid makes references to Pascal in his laconic notes on history (PW 7, 360).

²⁹ Cf. Y. Hervouet. *The French face of Joseph Conrad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 101-2 ff. For more about the traces of Pascal’s influence on Conrad’s writing see: B. Johnson. *Conrad’s Models of Mind*. University of Minnesota Press, 1971. Razumov, the protagonist of Conrad’s novel *Under Western Eyes*, “presents himself proudly as a ‘thinking reed’ (p. 89) but, unlike Pascal, whose famous formula he repeats, he negates and wants to escape the tragedy inherent in such a vision of human existence – the tragedy which Victor Haldin accepts.” – Z. Najder. *Conrad, Russia and Dostoevsky*. [In:] *Idem. Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 134.

³⁰ J. Conrad. *The Mirror of the Sea*, chapter XXII.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

and the latter with soulless machinery – was something that was obvious and natural in Conrad's (or even Norwid's) day and whether there was any evidence of it among mariners of the time.

Norwid and Conrad certainly idealize the quality of life on sailing ships, creating a utopia, so to speak. In *Civilization*, both the narrator's monologue and the poem stylized as a sea shanty speak of the seaman's work as being as spiritually uplifting as it is physically demanding. However, one may doubt whether this was really true. Zdzisław Najder observes that – in his reminiscences –:

Conrad also idealized the quality of life in sailing ships. In his memoirs (but not in his fiction!) he never so much as hints at the dirt, rats, stupefying toil, drunkenness, and fear, or at the heat, cold, and damp that menaced the health of seafarers. Silent, dignified ships without engines cannot fail to appeal to our imagination, but work in them could be lethal to both body and mind.³³

Mark D. Larabee for his part draws attention to the fact that on the issue of the importance of the author's maritime experiences Conrad critics are divided into two camps. Some critics play down the role of these experiences and stress Conrad's links with literary tradition and the world of his own times. Others, however, stress the important role that Conrad's maritime career must have played in forming his personality and in allowing him to gather material for the books that he was to write in the future.³⁴

The Romantic loftiness of maritime service on sailing ships may therefore be called into question – as may Norwid's portrayal of sailing ships as symbols of a by-gone age. The reality was quite different. Historians have convincingly shown that technological progress in the middle of the nineteenth century manifested itself not only in the increasingly wider use of steam engines, but also in the design of sailing ships and the equipment used on them. The impression that sailing ships were all of a sudden replaced by steamers is chronologically erroneous with regard to the period during which Conrad Korzeniowski was in the British Merchant Marine, to say nothing of the time when Norwid sailed to America ("There was a time ..."). Sailing ships and steamers competed for a good many years and in both cases the pace of technological change was comparable.³⁵ This, after all, was the age of the great tea clippers such as the famous *Cutty Sark*, which was built in 1869 and which could travel 263 nautical miles in a single day. Researchers have also cast doubt on "the Conradian myth of the beauty and sublimity of life in sailing ships as contrasted with the ugliness and mechanical commercialism of steamships."³⁶

It would therefore seem that Conrad (in his reminiscences) and Norwid (in the narrator's monologue in *Civilization*) are guilty of mystification – or rather, let us say, selective exaggeration of certain aspects of reality. In both cases the goal is the same:

³³ Z. Najder. *Joseph Conrad. a Life*. Transl. H. Najder. Rochester and New York: Camden House, 2007, p. 188.

³⁴ M.D. Larabee, *ed. cit.*, pp. 47-9.

³⁵ Z. Najder. *Joseph Conrad. a Life, ed. cit.*, p. 188.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

to show how technological change goes hand in hand with changes in basic human values. On the surface, all is as it was before: ships continue to transport people and goods and sailors continue to do their work, but there has been a fundamental break with tradition. The contrast between the work done by the crew on a sailing ship and that on a steamer is a measure of the change in contemporary attitudes to work.³⁷ As Conrad puts it in *The Mirror of the Sea*:

And therein I think I can lay my finger upon the difference between the seamen of yesterday, who are still with us, and the seamen of tomorrow, already entered upon the possession of their inheritance. History repeats itself, but the special call of an art which has passed away is never reproduced. It is as utterly gone out of the world as the song of a destroyed wild bird.³⁸

Conrad takes the stance of a participant, as well as that of a witness who is conscious of the irreversible nature of the fading away of the bonds of love that tie him, as a worker and as an artist, to the medium of his art – to the tools of his trade, so to speak – and also of the irreversible nature of his separation from Nature, given that:

The taking of a modern steamship about the world [...] has not the same quality of intimacy with nature, which, after all, is an indispensable condition to the building up of an art.³⁹

This last remark about the artist's intimacy with Nature deserves to be quoted along with Conrad's famous definition of art as an attempt to do justice to the visible world.⁴⁰ In the same preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* Conrad goes on to speak of the artist's efforts to find "the very truth" of the existence of "the aspects of matter" and "the facts of life" that make up the "visible universe":

It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential – their one illuminating and convincing quality – the very truth of their existence.⁴¹

In a very deep sense, the sailor's work is a search for and at the same time a test of truth, as Conrad remarks in *The Mirror of the Sea*:

Of all the living creatures upon land and sea, it is ships alone that cannot be taken in by barren pretences, that will not put up with bad art from their masters.⁴²

³⁷ Por. M.D. Larabee, *ed. cit.*, s. 67.

³⁸ J. Conrad. *The Mirror of the Sea*, chapter XVIII.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ "And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect." – J. Conrad. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. New York: Doubleday, 1914, p. xi.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² J. Conrad. *The Mirror of the Sea*, chapter IX.

3. THE WARRANTY OF PROGRESS

It is worth noting when and where the narrator of Norwid's *Civilization* utters his monologue on the subject of sailing in the old days and in modern times. He addresses his young interlocutor just before the steamer is about to leave port. This may be their last meeting, but in any case they will not be seeing each other for quite a long time. Having left his young friend on the quay after imparting something in the manner of a testament to him, the narrator does not fall silent, but goes on to address his remarks to the reader, who remains his only listener. Although he stresses the sublime quality of traditional sailing, he has nevertheless ultimately decided to make his next sea voyage on a comfortable steamship, his excuse (given to his young friend) being that he is tired and has been tempted by the comfort and speed of this new way of travelling. What, then, does the steamship *Civilization* have to offer its passengers in place of the risks and hardships involved in travelling by sailing ship? In other words, what is modernity's answer to remaining in the fragile uncertainty of the past? The most important point is that the transatlantic voyage is to be made under the standard of what Norwid terms "the warranty offered to us by the age in which we live" ("rękojmi, które człowiekowi epoka ofiaruje" – PW 6, 47). This guarantee is all the more trustworthy for being independent of human strength or courage, as confidence is assured by the perfect nature of procedures and mechanical devices.

Conrad too draws attention to the fact that modern shipping is no longer dependent on the forces of Nature:

Its effects are measured exactly in time and space as no effect of an art can be.⁴³

Until recently, the final outcome was in the hands of the gods and in this respect nothing had changed since the times of Odysseus. Nowadays, sea transport was "simply the skilled use of a captured force, merely another step forward upon the way of universal conquest."⁴⁴ Courage, which used to be a prerequisite for the task of arriving at one's destination – though that alone was no guarantee of success – had given way to brute force, as machines had ultimately triumphed over the elements. In Norwid's story the fact that everything works "so beautifully and so smoothly" (PW 6, 49) elicits amazement and admiration from the ambassadors of a small exotic country.

The steamship's voyage becomes an image of progress – in Conrad's words: "the march of an inevitable future".⁴⁵ However, it turns out that taking advantage of what Norwid calls "the warranty offered to us by the age in which we live" leads to an inevitable dissipation of fundamental values. Although he acknowledges the achievements of modern marine technology, Conrad asks "whether it is not a more subtle and more human triumph to be the sport of the waves and yet sur-

⁴³ *Ibid.*, chapter VIII.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, chapter XI.

vive, achieving your end.”⁴⁶ Technological progress diminishes Man’s greatness, making him blind to the unfathomable and depriving the world of its “magic”. A storm at sea causes no fear among the passengers of the *Civilization*, who see it as a mere tourist attraction and not as something to stand fast against. In *An Outcast of the Islands* Conrad gives a suggestive account of this killing off of the unfathomable:

Then a great pall of smoke sent out by countless steam-boats was spread over the restless mirror of the Infinite. The hand of the engineer tore down the veil of the terrible beauty in order that greedy and faithless landlubbers might pocket dividends. The mystery was destroyed. Like all mysteries, it lived only in the hearts of its worshippers. The hearts changed; the men changed. The once loving and devoted servants went out armed with fire and iron, and conquering the fear of their own hearts became a calculating crowd of cold and exacting masters. The sea of the past was an incomparably beautiful mistress, with inscrutable face, with cruel and promising eyes. The sea of to-day is a used-up drudge, wrinkled and defaced by the churned-up wakes of brutal propellers, robbed of the enslaving charm of its vastness, stripped of its beauty, of its mystery and of its promise.⁴⁷

Both Norwid and Conrad see the breaking of social ties as yet another consequence of this turning point in the history of civilization. Life having been freed of its burdens and tragedies, there is no longer any need for communal efforts, and so the ties that used to bind people together can now be loosened. The Conrad critic Avrom Fleishman describes this malaise as “anomie – radical disorder in the social structure and consequent personal dislocation”⁴⁸

The protagonist of Norwid’s *Civilization* clearly distances himself from most of his fellow passengers, looking down on them with pity and referring to them with a sarcasm that can be called cutting.⁴⁹ He sees their petty intrigues, conventional poses and bizarre misunderstandings. The place of true mystery has been taken by a multitude of trivial secrets. He feels alienated by what he observes and the expansiveness which he displayed when talking to his young friend on the quay is now gone. He does not join in the conversations which he hears on deck. The only activity which brings him and the other passengers together (albeit only for a short while) is poking fun at relics of the past – in this case the presence of a Catholic missionary priest and a group of Catholic nuns, who – mindful of their embarrassingly anachronistic status – keep to their cabins.

Such a picture painted by Norwid brings to mind Ortega y Gasset’s famous distinction: “Noble Life and Common Life, or Effort and Inertia”, nobility and effort being the domain of the world of sailing ships, while commonness and inertia are the preserve of technological modernity. As Ortega y Gasset observed, one of the signs

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, chapter XXII.

⁴⁷ J. Conrad. *An Outcast of the Islands*, chapter II.

⁴⁸ A. Fleishman. *The Symbolic World of the Secret Agent. English Literary History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965, Vol. 32, No. 2 (June), p. 218.

⁴⁹ Cf. Douglas Hewitt’s remarks on Conrad’s use of irony: “The irony of *The Secret Agent*, and of other early works in which it is less pervasive, is offensive, it is a weapon to undermine comfortable assumptions and to make us scrutinize more deeply our beliefs and values.” – D. Hewitt. *Conrad. A Reassessment*. Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1952, p. 88.

of the feeling of well-being experienced by the “man of the masses” is an ignorance of the past – a conviction that the contemporary world is far superior to previous times. On Norwid’s steamer, the only passenger who *might* be able to sound a note of caution for the present by reading the past is an archaeologist, who — having no knowledge of religion — is unable to “understand what he knows” (“pojąć z umiejętności swojej”) about bygone ages. Ortega y Gasset wrote thus of the consequences of technological progress:

Whereas in past times life for the average man meant finding all around him difficulties, dangers, want, limitations of his destiny, dependence, the new world appears as a sphere of practically limitless possibilities, safe and independent of anyone.⁵⁰

Modern Man does not look to traditional authorities and deems all external justification of his behaviour to be quite unnecessary. Realizing that this is so, the protagonist of Norwid’s *Civilization* draws his final conclusions. His question is: “What [values] do we [still] share?” (“W czymże jesteście sobie współ-udzielni?”). Pride? Not any more – its place has been taken by ad hoc agreements:

Prawda jestże tylko ostatecznością wynikłą ze starcia się i wzajemnego odpychania jednostronnych humorów [...]? [...] Prawda jest wynikiem samej redakcji myśli i zdań? (PW 6, 55)

[Is] truth merely the outcome of the clash and mutual repulsion of partisan moods [...]? [...] [Is] truth the result of a mere rearrangement of thoughts and sentences?

What binds us together, then, is merely the warranty given to us by technological progress – i.e. faith in man-made power. This observation by Norwid is accompanied by a funeral wreath, which heralds the inevitable disaster to come:

Szczególnej natury powiew i poświst zerwał płaski kapelusz jednemu z chłopców okrętowych, porzucając go precz, daleko na fale Oceanu – a na kapeluszu tym wokoło była wstęga czarna i był złożony na niej napis: Cywilizacja. (PW 6, 55)

All of a sudden, with an incredible whoosh, a gust of wind blew away the flat cap of one of the ship’s boys, hurling it far out onto the ocean waves. The cap had a black band which bore the gold-lettered inscription: CIVILIZATION.

4. DISASTER

When the feeling of security given by modern technology ultimately proves to be unfounded, the real threat of imminent disaster fails to galvanize the passengers of the steamer into action – or to change their social attitudes. On the contrary, their previously observed negative traits become evident as never before. The remedy turns out to be as cruel as it is senseless: several drunken sailors are murdered by the

⁵⁰ J. Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*. Transl. anon. (Teresa Carey?), The New American Library of World Literature, Mentor Books, 1950, chapter VII.

ship's captain. Drowning one's fears in drink, political haggling or violence inflicted by someone in authority – these are the only responses to a critical situation. It is worth noting that the narrator – with whose point of view the reader is surely meant to identify himself – also does nothing to mitigate the effects of the disaster and is content to be a passive onlooker. Interestingly, the story does not end with the sinking of this nautical symbol of contemporary humanity. The last paragraph is devoted to what is ultimately the most important matter: death and the salvation of one individual.

Is the disaster facing the *Civilization* unavoidable? Not according to Marek Adamiec, who argues that the story is not cast in the 'catastrophist' mould and that it is still possible to change the ship's course, as long as the passengers and crew remain constantly vigilant.⁵¹ Such a view, however, fails to take into account the fact that constant vigilance and a change of course are hardly possible, given that all the principles that could justify and facilitate a collective effort in this critical, life-threatening situation have earlier been called into question and declared redundant. Although the sinking of the steamer is the inevitable consequence of the processes that have been discussed in the story, we cannot speak of total disaster, for there is still the narrator's young friend whom we left on the quayside and who dreams of a world based on traditional principles and values. And, of course, there is also the reader, who hears a message from what turns out to be a different world. This, Adamiec argues, is exactly what Norwid is trying to achieve:

[Norwid] sets his reader a truly gigantic task: to toil by the sweat of his brow in order to achieve a much needed shift in the course of European civilization, i.e. to restore a proper hierarchy of values.⁵²

The world has not come to an end – and as for today's civilization ... in the dynamic portrayal of history that comes to us from the pages of Norwid's writing its fate is sealed, for the one distinguishing and rather disturbing feature of contemporary culture is perhaps the fact that future generations will be forced to look beyond it for their fundamental values.⁵³ Norwid's story cannot be described as a 'catastrophist' work in the sense that it gives expression to an awareness of the annihilation of values that are regarded as being particularly important⁵⁴ and constitutive of a given culture. Perhaps we should therefore speak of a 'redemptive catastrophism'⁵⁵ that has a purgative function? As Maria Żmigrodzka writes, in revealing the contradictions of each

⁵¹ M. Adamiec. *Cypriana Norwida „świat na opak”*. [In:] *Cyprian Norwid w setną rocznicę śmierci poety*. Ed. S. Burkot, Kraków 1991, p. 102.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁵³ In the *Epilogue to Promethidion* we read: "A desperate void is opening up between the past and the future ... who exactly will the generation of people born within this void be, suspended as they are between the past and the future and joined by nothing? ["Pomiędzy przeszłością a przyszłością otwiera się próżnia rozpaczliwa ... w tej próżni zrodzone pokolenie – między przeszłością a przyszłością nie złączonymi niczem – czymże w rzeczywistości ma pozostać?"] (PW 3, 466).

⁵⁴ Cf. M. Szpakowska. *Światopogląd Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*. Wrocław 1976; A. Werner. *Katastrofizm*. [In:] *Słownik literatury polskiej XX wieku*. Ed. A. Brodzka et al. Wrocław 1992, p. 445.

⁵⁵ J. Kryszak. *Katastrofizm ocalający. Z problematyki tzw. Drugiej Awangardy*. Warszawa 1978.

civilization, Norwid stresses the fact that their negative qualities become the cause of their destruction, thus acting as “the scourge of God”.⁵⁶

Norwid wrote *Civilization* in 1861 after reading of the sinking of the steamship *The Pacific*, which seven years earlier had taken him back to Europe from the United States. He pasted a newspaper cutting from “Le Moniteur Universel” into his “souvenir book”, together with his ticket for the voyage from New York to Liverpool. Next to the cutting he wrote: “A letter in a bottle, which to date is all that remains of the ship” (PW 7, 520). The article in the French newspaper quoted a note written by a certain Mr Graham – the ship’s helmsman – who had placed it in a bottle that was washed ashore on the west coast of the Hebrides:

On board the *Pacific* from L’pool to N.Y. – Ship going down. [Great] confusion on board – icebergs around us on every side. I know I cannot escape. I write the cause of our loss that friends may not live in suspense. The finder of this will please get it published. W.M. GRAHAM.⁵⁷

From this dramatic and laconic note Norwid created an image of the steamship *Civilization* heading for a collision with an iceberg – and of the ensuing panic on board. It is worth noting that – on the level of internal relations (within the text) – the story itself becomes “a letter in a bottle” addressed to the young man to whom the narrator has bid farewell on the quayside. On a higher, more general level, it becomes a note written by a shipwrecked artist who is witnessing the destruction of civilization.

Another shipwreck that ought to be mentioned in this context is that of the *Titanic*. After he had retired as a mariner, Conrad – who was not wont to participate in newspaper discussions – wrote scathingly about the atmosphere of the public debate which followed the sinking of the *Titanic* in circumstances that were reminiscent of the sinking of the *Pacific* (and Norwid’s *Civilization*). The greatest feat of modern technology – a supposedly unsinkable luxury hotel ship – had gone down after being hit by an iceberg. What Conrad found particularly irritating were the attempts on the part of some to cover up the truth about the real causes of the disaster. He castigated officials who were bent on finding a scapegoat among the members of the crew and had no less harsh words for those journalists who waxed lyrical about the ship’s orchestra playing on till the very end:

But I, who am not a sentimentalist, think it would have been finer if the band of the *Titanic* had been quietly saved, instead of being drowned while playing – whatever tune they were playing, the poor devils.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ M. Żmigrodzka, ed. cit., p. 358. Żmigrodzka’s quotation comes from a series of lectures by Norwid entitled *O Juliuszu Słowackim w sześciu publicznych posiedzeniach* and published in 1861 – the year in which he wrote *Civilization*.

⁵⁷ Cf. Z. Trojanowiczowa and Z. Dambek et al. *Kalendarz życia i twórczości Cypriana Norwida*. Vol. II: 1861-1883. Poznań 2007, p. 34.

⁵⁸ J. Conrad. *Certain Aspects of the Admirable Inquiry into the Loss of the Titanic* (1912). [In:] *Idem. Notes on Life and Letters*. Part II.

In Conrad's view, looking among the members of the crew to find someone to blame was nothing more than an attempt to ignore the simple fact that there are forces which are more powerful than Man:

And if ever a loss at sea fell under the definition, in the terms of a bill of lading, of Act of God, this one does, in its magnitude, suddenness and severity; and in the chastening influence it should have on the self-confidence of mankind.⁵⁹

The judgements meted out to the officers – including those who drowned – were yet another symptom of the blind conceit that governed public opinion in Conrad's day. One salutary effect of the tragedy could have been the realization that a fatal error had become the mainspring of contemporary culture:

We have been accustoming ourselves to put our trust in material, technical skill, invention, and scientific contrivances to such an extent that we have come at last to believe that with these things we can overcome the immortal gods themselves.⁶⁰

It would be an exaggeration to say that the writings of Norwid or Conrad were one harsh critique of technological progress. Norwid's ambiguous attitude to historical change has been well documented. On the one hand he exposed the weaknesses of the culture of the 'age of mercantilism', while on the other he reminded Poles of the need to catch up with other nations in the field of technological progress. He was "neither a solemn preacher hurling curses at the modern Babylon, nor a naive worshipper of steam-driven machines and bank accounts."⁶¹ Conrad for his part remained loyal to the civilizing mission of his adopted homeland, presenting British colonialism in a more favourable light than the colonialism practised by Belgium or Holland. Both authors, however, spoke out against the tendency to turn the idea of progress into an absolute entity – perhaps as a result of their common Romantic view of the world,⁶² which in this case meant a refusal to accept that the world was founded entirely on "material interests" (to use a key phrase from Conrad's *Nostromo*).

"He set off on his search for a creed – and found only an infinity of formulas. No angel's voice spoke from above to him."⁶³ – that is how, in his unfinished novel entitled *The Sisters*, Conrad describes the predicament of a young artist who has come to

⁵⁹ J. Conrad. *Some Reflections on the Loss of the Titanic* (1912). [In:] *ibid.*

⁶⁰ J. Conrad. *Protection of Ocean Liners* (1914). [In:] *ibid.*

⁶¹ A. Witkowska and R. Przybylski. *Romantyzm*. Warszawa 1997, p. 437.

⁶² Cf. Conrad's remark – made in an interview in 1914 – about being "one of the last Romantics". – M. Dąbrowski. "Rozmowa z J. Conradem." *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, 1914, No. 16.

⁶³ J. Conrad. *The Sisters*. [In:] *Idem. Congo Diary and Other Uncollected Pieces*. Ed. Z. Najder. New York: Doubleday, 1978, p. 45. Cf. J. Conrad. *Siostry*. Transl. W. Tarnawski. [In:] *Idem. Dzieła*. Ed. Z. Najder. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1974, Vol. XXIV, p. 131 (*Opowieści zasłyszane. Siostry*).

Western Europe from the distant Ukraine. The fate of this character brings to mind Kazimierz Wyka's remark about "the erratic roaming of his elder brothers during the Great Emigration"⁶⁴ – and also the analysis of contemporary relativism made by Norwid in *Civilization*:

Ale sama przez się azali, powtarzam, prawda nie jest niczym, tylko czczością myślenia? – tylko jestże ona jakoby tym miejscem na coś przypadkowego, i tą jakoby idealnie pojętą próżnią, o której się mawia w umiejętnościach, wiedząc wszelako, iż próżni nigdzie nie ma? Jednym słowem – jestże więc prawda kłamstwem? (PW 6, 55).

Is truth in itself, then, nothing but empty thought? But being a receptacle, as it were, for almost anything, is it not perhaps that ideal vacuum of which teachers of science speak, knowing all too well that it is nowhere to be found? In a word, therefore, is truth falsehood?

Although this question could be examined still further, we can already see that Conrad shared the ability of the Polish Romantic poets to take a long, hard look at the key problems of Western civilization – an ability that came at the price of feeling constantly alienated.

This is not the only parallel between Norwid and Conrad.⁶⁵ As well as sharing the concept of writing as a peregrination, the two writers shared a deep awareness of rupture, knowing that they were living in times of disintegration. Norwid's idea

⁶⁴ "Wyspa na polskiej zatoce" (postscript by Kazimierz Wyka). [In:] J. Conrad. *Siostry*. Transl. W. Tarnawski. Warszawa 1967, p. 76.

⁶⁵ There is, for example, a similarity between the portrayal of London in Norwid's poem *Larwa* (*Larva*) and in Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent*. The protagonist of Norwid's poem is the embodiment of emptiness and despair. Asked where he is going, he answers: "Where there's nothing, for sure!"

Takiej-to podobna jędry
Ludzkość, co płacze dziś i drwi;
– Jak historia?... wie tylko: „krwi!...”
Jak społeczność?... tylko – „pieniędzy!...”

– C. Norwid. *Vade-mecum*. Ed. J. Fert. Wrocław 1990, p. 39.

Today's Humanity is like an old hag
Who weeps and sneers;
Of history, it can only say "Blood! ..."
Of Society, it can only say "Money! ..."

Conrad's *The Secret Agent* ends with a scene of similar import. Having learnt the real story behind the terrorist attack, the reader sees the Professor – an anarchist who always carries a bomb with him ready for use – walking down a London street:

And the incorruptible Professor walked too, averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind. He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable – and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men.

– J. Conrad. *The Secret Agent*, chapter XIII.

of *Vade mecum* presupposed the action of wandering as a condition for creation and, indeed, the reader himself must be ready to endure the hardships of the journey that he is making in the company of the poet. For Conrad, on the other hand – as Mark D. Larabee observes – writing seemed to be a continuation of his vocation as a mariner. In *Some Reminiscences* he reveals that he made his first attempts at writing novels while he was at sea, adding that when he later retired from the merchant marine and became a writer, he continued to adhere to the maritime ideals of fidelity and exactitude.⁶⁶ Keeping the ship's log had become the source of Conrad's own conceptualization of the writer's work.⁶⁷

Translated by R. E. Pyplacz

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⁶⁶ Cf. M.D. Larabee, *ed. cit.*, p. 71.

⁶⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 73.

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