

## CLIMBING WITH CONRAD: JAN JÓZEF SZCZEPAŃSKI'S MOUNTAINEERING STORIES

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**Abstract:** Jan Józef Szczepański, who is well known as a Polish “Conradian” author and translator of Conrad’s novels, was also a mountain climber. In his mountaineering stories, along with traces of the Conradian model of ethics, we also find the liminal experience of the “visible universe” to which Szczepański tried to “render the highest kind of justice”. This article examines the work of both authors in order to discover the parallels that can be drawn between the experience of climbing mountains and sailing the seas.

**Keywords:** mountaineering, cultural landscape, Joseph Conrad, Jan Józef Szczepański

In this article, I would like to bring to light the links that exist between the writing of Joseph Conrad and that of Jan Józef Szczepański – not only through the optic of explicit declarations made by the latter, but also – being mindful of Andrzej Werner’s observation that “[...] although they undoubtedly exist, the affinities between the work of Joseph Conrad and that of Szczepański have been somewhat exaggerated by Polish critics”<sup>1</sup> – I would like to place my emphasis not on ethics in the broad sense, but rather on the ontological dimension of experience shaped by a particular historical and cultural context. Specifically, I would like to bring more light to bear on a particular cultural model concerning the experience of landscapes, this being not only an expression of sensitivity to the world of nature, but also the basis of a unique attitude towards liminal situations. Paradoxically, the unifying factor in this case is mountaineering. Although the mountains and the sea would seem to be two worlds that are mutually incompatible, echoes of Conradian attitudes and Conradian situations are to be found in the ethics of mountaineering. Not only this – in Western culture, mountaineering comes as the discovery of a new kind of experi-

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<sup>1</sup> A. Werner. *Wysoko, nie na palcach. O pisarstwie Jana Józefa Szczepańskiego*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2003, p. 166. Szczepański gave a concise account of his attitude to Conrad in an article entitled “Conrad mojego pokolenia”. *Życie Literackie* 1957, № 49, p. 3, where he says that during the German occupation literary texts were treated as “something more than literature” – a code of behaviour that worked on the principle of “a bubble of air in a spirit level”.

ence which is fundamental to a new type of cultural landscape<sup>2</sup> that is different from the cultural landscape which we find in Conrad's novels. This change in the cultural model can be clearly observed in the mountaineering stories of Jan Józef Szczepański.

One of the most surprising things to be found in Conrad's rather eccentric reminiscences is the fact that the site of the symbolic gateway which led him to the sea when he was still a child is given as the Furca Pass in the Alps. It was there that – in the year 1873 – he experienced his “first contact with British mankind”<sup>3</sup> and it was there that his tutor – a student of the Jagiellonian University who was exasperated by his inability to talk Conrad out of the idea of becoming a sailor – said to him: “You are an incorrigible, hopeless Don Quixote. That's what you are.”<sup>4</sup> The tutor's rhetorical endeavours finally melted away as they contemplated the majestic Alpine landscape:

I walked behind him for full five minutes; then without looking back he stopped. The shadows of distant peaks were lengthening over the Furca Pass. When I came up to him he turned to me and in full view of the Finster-Aarhorn, with his band of giant brothers rearing their monstrous heads against a brilliant sky, put his hand on my shoulder affectionately.

“Well! That's enough. We will have no more of it.”

And indeed there was no more question of my mysterious vocation between us. There was to be no more question of it at all, nowhere or with any one. We began the descent of the Furca Pass conversing merrily. Eleven years later, month for month, I stood on Tower Hill on the steps of the St. Katherine's Dockhouse, a master in the British Merchant Service. But the man who put his hand on my shoulder at the top of the Furca Pass was no longer living.<sup>5</sup>

It has often been pointed out that Conrad's autobiography is an extremely elaborate literary and cultural construct that allows the writer to give cohesion and a sense of purpose to his life as well as placing it within a specific and complex cultural tradition.<sup>6</sup> Here things are no different. There would seem to be every reason for Conrad's life-changing decision to be taken in this mountain setting. It is there that he meets an “unforgettable Englishman” whose calves are in “marble-like condition” and whose eyes are “innocently eager and triumphant”.<sup>7</sup> The delicately sketched Alpine landscape is at one and the same time symbolic and sublime:

I tell you it was a memorable year! One does not meet such an Englishman twice in a lifetime. Was he in the mystic ordering of common events the ambassador of my future, sent out to turn the scale at a critical moment on the top of an Alpine pass, with the peaks of the Bernese Oberland for mute and solemn witnesses? His glance, his smile, the unextinguishable and comic

<sup>2</sup> See: B. Frydryczak. *Krajobraz. Od estetyki the picturesque do doświadczenia topograficznego*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> J. Conrad. *A Personal Record*. Ed. Z. Najder, J. Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> See: S. Modrzewski. “Konwencje autobiografii a wypowiedź osobista”. In: S. Modrzewski. *Conrad a konwencje: autorska świadomość systemów a warsztat literacki pisarza*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, [1992].

<sup>7</sup> J. Conrad. *A Personal Record*, p. 47.

ardour of his striving-forward appearance helped me to pull myself together. It must be stated that on that day and in the exhilarating atmosphere of that elevated spot I had been feeling utterly crushed. It was the year in which I had first spoken aloud of my desire to go to sea.<sup>8</sup>

On the one hand we have elements of the symbolism of the sacred, which Mircea Eliade sees as being fundamental components of human space.<sup>9</sup> According to Eliade, the archetypes of the *axis mundi* – the threshold and the border – have never left mankind and continue to shape even secularized aspects of our world. It hardly bears thinking that a trying experience and existential change in the life of the author of *The Shadow Line* could be conveyed in a “neutral” setting. Let us note that here the might of Nature is associated with the figure of the English engineer, whose superhuman nature can be seen above all in the way he walks: his “Englishness” reveals its “natural” strength in action.

This fact leads us to a transgressionality that has been sketched into this situation with equal subtlety. Conrad tells us of the physical dimension of existence that makes itself felt during his walking tour of the Alps: “[...] in the shadows of the deep valley and with the habitations of men left some way behind, our thoughts ran not upon the ethics of conduct but upon the simpler human problem of shelter and food.”<sup>10</sup> Although Conrad and his tutor are not engaged in any dangerous climbing, the exceptional character of their surroundings is quite evident. They spend the night in a “strange hostelry, which in its severe style resembled the house which surmounts the unseaworthy-looking hulls of the toy Noah’s Arks, the universal possession of European childhood.”<sup>11</sup> This would seem to be a kind of magical portent of Conrad’s maritime future. The situation is made even more uncanny by the fact that the boy goes to sleep in total solitude but – on waking up – is informed of the presence of other guests: “In the morning my tutor [...] woke me up early, and as we were dressing remarked: ‘There seems to be a lot of people staying in this hotel. I have heard a noise of talking up till eleven o’clock.’ This statement surprised me; I had heard no noise whatever, having slept like a top.”<sup>12</sup> This somewhat fairy-tale atmosphere, which is perhaps a little reminiscent of the singularity of *Don Quixote*, is a prelude to the meeting with the Englishmen. In nineteenth-century Europe, it would have been hard to find a better place for such an ‘initiation’.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, the landscape sketched out by Conrad brings to mind the category of the sublime, which has been analysed and described in detail by Edmund Burke. The emotional experience of the sublime has as its source a feeling of terror

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> See: M. Eliade. “Święty obszar i sakralizacja świata”. In: M. Eliade. *Sacrum, mit, historia. Wybór esejów*. Transl. A. Tatarkiewiczowa. Warszawa: PIW, 1970.

<sup>10</sup> J. Conrad. *A Personal Record*, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Englishmen carried out an intensive exploration of the Alps in the second half of the nineteenth century: by 1865 they had climbed to the tops of more than 50 peaks (including Matterhorn). See: E. Roszkowska. *Alpinizm europejski 1919-1939. Ludzie – tendencje – osiągnięcia*. Kraków: Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego im. Bronisława Czecha, 2007, pp. 256-257.

flowing from the ontological qualities of the world of Nature (which are clearly identified by Burke).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it also determines the perspective of time, which is why Conrad sees the English engineer he meets in the Alps as a figure that is half supernatural and half mundane: “Was he in the mystic ordering of common events the ambassador of my future, sent out to turn the scale at a critical moment on the top of an Alpine pass [...]?”<sup>15</sup> The figure of the Englishman – whose strength is drawn from the power of experience – is perfectly integrated into the permanence and self-evidence of Nature: “The light of a headlong, exalted satisfaction with the world of men and the scenery of mountains illumined his clean-cut, very red face, his short, silver-white whiskers, his innocently eager and triumphant eyes.”<sup>16</sup> Perhaps this explains why – in his characteristically perverse way – Conrad found a mountain setting for the gateway that would lead him to the sea. By being able to draw on the symbolism of the sublime, he somehow made his decision appear to be more in tune with Nature, integrating it with the self-evidence of experience. Comparing Jan Józef Szczepański’s writing with that of Conrad, Andrzej Werner gives an excellent description of the relationship between the mountains and the sea: “For Szczepański the mountains are more or less what the sea is for Conrad, but without any ostentation or overt symbolization.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Werner draws attention to the ontology of the mountains and the sea and the consequent differences in the ethical stances of the two authors:

Once again, the similarities and differences between Szczepański and Conrad come down to the symbolism of the mountains and the ocean, both of which are equally alien, hazardous and independent of mankind, posing challenges and accepting no compromise. The existence of both is all too objective, but oh, how different! The amorphousness of water, with its Protean changeability of appearance and mood, symbolizes the chaos of the world which surrounds us – its unpredictability, mystery and perhaps its inscrutability. Mountains, by contrast, are an immutable and recognizable shape. They too can conceal or shield their mystery beneath a veil of mist, but this mystery does not belong to the world of phenomena.<sup>18</sup>

What is of utmost significance is, of course, the ethical factor that brings together the attitudes of both writers towards these two phenomena: “One has to face up to what is real and what exists, hoping to find some kind of support, but having no illusions.”<sup>19</sup> We must be careful, however, not to over-generalize these two attitudes, for it must be remembered that both authors were also professionals when they were not writing novels. Conrad, of course, was a mariner, while Szczepański was an experienced mountaineer, though not by profession. An analysis and comparison of both attitudes will allow us to observe their evolution with regard to experience and the concept of liminality in European tradition at the turn of the twentieth century.

<sup>14</sup> See: E. Burke. “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful”. In: *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*. Vol. I. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854.

<sup>15</sup> J. Conrad. *A Personal Record*, p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>17</sup> A. Werner, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Jan Józef Szczepański began his love affair with mountain climbing in the Tatras – during the German occupation. He climbed with (among others) Jerzy Wicherkiewicz and above all with Stanisław Siedlecki, who had taken part in one of the pre-war climbing expeditions to Svalbard and whom he accompanied on an expedition to Spitsbergen in 1959. Szczepański was therefore a member of the post-war generation. He joined the Cracow Mountaineering Club in 1945. However, given his beginnings in mountaineering, we can say that his climbing background dates back to pre-war times, when the sport was still relatively new in Poland. In the words of the veteran Polish mountaineer Józef Nyka, Szczepański “[...] climbed [...] without any competitive aspirations, though there was a period during which he did some intensive climbing.” In the 1940s he led teams on “climbing routes that at that time were held in quite high regard.” As he further recalls: “His old companions remember him as being an uncommonly good climbing partner: always cheerful, dependable on rock faces and inured to the hardships of living under tents.”<sup>20</sup>

Conrad was certainly present in the minds of Polish mountaineers, especially in Cracow.<sup>21</sup> In Szczepański's case, however, analogies with Conrad are perhaps rather to be explained by the particular experience of his generation, as it was during the war that he began his climbing career (which fact is reflected in his story entitled *Hokejka*). As he later recalled, people of his generation often viewed wartime realities through the optic of “Conradian situations”:

The “Conradian situation” – and especially that of Lord Jim – seemed to be the aptest description of the threat that hung over our heads, as it did not seem to be a ghetto situation. It was universal and we did not want to succumb to the paralysing Polish sense of fatalism. [...] What we were looking for was a justification of fidelity that would not require us to lose touch with reality. We also wanted to know where the bounds of compromise between necessary risk and weakness actually lay.<sup>22</sup>

In an extremely important text entitled *Uwagi o górskiej śmierci (Remarks on death in the mountains)* Szczepański compares the experience of the “Kolumbowie” generation (born just after World War I) with that of mountaineers:

Anyone who did any mountain climbing during the occupation will remember the particular kind of resignation with which the possibility of an accident was accepted at that time. But in those years there was an abundant supply of young deaths and the cruelty which accompanied them made the prospect of losing one's life as the result of a fortuitous risk – untainted by hatred – seem less terrifying.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> J. Nyka. *Jan Józef Szczepański*. Retrieved from: [http://www.nyka.home.pl/glos\\_sen/pl/200303.htm](http://www.nyka.home.pl/glos_sen/pl/200303.htm), accessed: 25/06/2014.

<sup>21</sup> For example, in the archive of Zofia and Witold Paryski in one of the biographical folders there are as many as twenty newspaper cuttings about Conrad (nr katalogowy TB-P/57) See: <http://www.fundacja-paryskich.pl/index.php/projekty/archiwum-zofii-i-witolda-paryskich/68-tb-p-a-d>. The reception of Conrad's work in these circles would merit further enquiry.

<sup>22</sup> J.J. Szczepański. “W służbie Wielkiego Armatora”. In: J.J. Szczepański. *Przed Nieznanym Trybunalem*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997, pp. 9-10.

<sup>23</sup> J.J. Szczepański. “Uwagi o górskiej śmierci”. In: *Błękitny krzyż*. Ed. S. Maciejewski. Kraków: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1981, p. 128.

This analogy shows us that Szczepański's understanding of the "Conradian situation" is not limited to "the issue of the now celebrated fidelity to oneself, one's principles and one's moral convictions or that of fulfilling one's duty to remain absolutely faithful to others in extreme situations."<sup>24</sup> He often draws attention to the existential foundation of an occurrence or experience and "the necessity of preserving one's separate identity and of instantly eschewing confrontation."<sup>25</sup> This entails keeping to the Conradian "visible world", though "the proud Conradian 'That's how it has to be done' while denying oneself the right to metaphysical consolations [...] is beyond the strength of most of us."<sup>26</sup> Above all, it is really the concept of the borderline in its ontological and ethical aspect that is the basis of the deep analogy encompassing Conrad's sea and the mountains of the "Kolumbowie" generation:

Respecting Conrad's refusal to cross the frontiers of the visible world, we must note that his awareness of the existence of these frontiers must have been a matter of fundamental importance for him. Here the maritime analogy may help us once again. The loneliness of the sailor in the middle of an indifferent ocean could not signify aimless wandering. It was an endeavour – an endeavour made by the sense and order which we carry in ourselves without being aware of their essence.<sup>27</sup>

It is worth noting that the Polish model of mountaineering which took shape at the beginning of the twentieth century also stressed ontology to the exclusion of metaphysics. In the 1930s, Jan Alfred Szczepański (who was no relation) declared that real mountaineering had its beginnings in the "bankruptcy" of the "metaphysics" of earlier, Romantic generations who had "gushed over universal being".<sup>28</sup> Focused as they were on the specific ontology of the mountains which they saw and experienced while climbing, Polish mountaineers quite consciously chose to ignore previous models of "experiencing" mountains – together with the highland myth associated with the culture of the Polish Tatras. With great meticulousness, they examined their physical surroundings and were able to spot details "in an unbroken mountain range divided into a 'ridge' and a 'precipice'".<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, the ontology of the climbing route<sup>30</sup> becomes the basis for the creation of a new model of personal conduct – a particular mountaineering ethos.<sup>31</sup> Jan Józef Szczepański adopted this way of life: "Anyone who has devoted the best

<sup>24</sup> S. Gawliński. "Sytuacje conradowskie". In: *Studia conradowskie*. Ed. S. Zabierowski. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1976, p. 170. See: S. Zabierowski. "Jan Józef Szczepański". In: S. Zabierowski. *Dziedzictwo Conrada w literaturze polskiej XX wieku*. Kraków: Oficyna Literacka, 1992, p. 175 et seqq.

<sup>25</sup> J.J. Szczepański. "Przed Nieznanym Trybunałem". In: J.J. Szczepański. *Przed...*, pp. 101-102.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>28</sup> J.A. Szczepański. "Taternictwo 1910-1932, próba bilansu. Część druga: przekrój w głąb". *Taternik* 1934, z. 1, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> J.A. Szczepański. "Z aktualnych zagadnień taternictwa". In: *Czarny szczyt. Proza taternicka lat 1904-1939*. Ed. J. Kolbuszewski. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1976, p. 252.

<sup>30</sup> See: A. Matuszyk. *Humanistyczne podstawy sportów przestrzeni (na podstawie alpinizmu)*. Kraków: Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego im. Bronisława Czecha w Krakowie, 1998, pp. 127-140.

<sup>31</sup> See: M. Pacukiewicz. *Grań kultury. Transgresje alpinizmu*. Kraków: Universitas, 2012.

years of his life to the mountains knows that there is nothing marginal or supplementary about it, but that it is quite another dimension of life that shapes you for ever."<sup>32</sup> In this context, Andrzej Sulikowski goes as far as to say that the mountains are a "basin of values",<sup>33</sup> though it must be stressed that it is not the mountains themselves, but a unique mountaineering model of experiencing them that becomes the basis for the development of a particular ethos. The mountaineer's path goes beyond the world of mountains and very often determines his attitude towards cultural realities, this being a logical consequence of Albert Frederick Mummery's declaration that "The essence of the sport lies not in ascending a peak, but in struggling with and overcoming difficulties."<sup>34</sup> Here we might quote – as does Andrzej Sulikowski – Gabriel Marcel's metaphor *homo viator*, which signifies not only "acceptance of the world", but also confidence in oneself and in one's own existence.<sup>35</sup> The mountaineer must therefore confront the world in all its aspects – from its ontic basis to the values which manifest themselves in moral choices. He must furthermore display self-reliance and determination when dealing with difficulties. His path has its specific goals and introduces order into the apparent chaos of the world. Let us not forget that Joseph Conrad's definition of sailing was no different and ran contrary to the idea – put forward by so many (including Nietzsche) – of the "boundlessness" of the sea: "From land to land is the most concise definition of a ship's earthly fate."<sup>36</sup> In the case of both writers, the route or path shapes the model of the represented world. In this context, Stefan Zabierowski treats the motif of a journey as a thematic and structural analogy.<sup>37</sup>

In Szczepański's writing, the path always begins in the world of things,<sup>38</sup> this being a reflection of the attitude of the mountaineer. Equally important, however, are the successive frontiers with which the wayfarer must come into contact. In my opinion, the title of a book on Conrad by Wiesław Krajka – *Izolacja i etos*<sup>39</sup> (*Isolation and Ethos*) – happens to ideally convey the attitudes and challenges of mountaineering,

<sup>32</sup> J.J. Szczepański. "Droga przez góry i życie. Wspomnienie o Janie Kazimierzu Dorawskim". *Tygodnik Powszechny* 1975, № 5, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> A. Sulikowski. "Problematyka górską w twórczości J.J. Szczepańskiego". In: *Góry i góralszczyzna w dziejach i kulturze pogranicza polsko-słowackiego (Podhale, Spisz, Orawa, Gorce, Pieniny). Literatura i język*. Eds. M. Madejowa, A. Mlekoć, K. Sora. Nowy Targ: Podhalańska Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Zawodowa w Nowym Targu, 2005, p. 71.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in: J. Kurczab. "Historia taternictwa i alpinizmu". In: *Materiały z teorii i dydaktyki alpinizmu*. Ed. A. Matuszyk. Kraków: Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego im. Bronisława Czecha, 1990, p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> See: A. Sulikowski. "Nie można świata zostawić w spokoju". *O twórczości Jana Józefa Szczepańskiego*. Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1992, p. 218 (in this context the author also cites Roman Ingarden).

<sup>36</sup> J. Conrad. *The Mirror of the Sea & A Personal Record*. Ed. Z. Najder. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> S. Zabierowski. "Jan Józef Szczepański", pp. 173, 209. Zabierowski also observes that although both authors often depict landscapes in motion, "the convergence with Conrad would here seem to be coincidental."

<sup>38</sup> See: A. Werner, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>39</sup> See: W. Krajka. *Izolacja i etos. Studium o twórczości Josepha Conrada*. Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1988.

for it is in the experience of isolation, be it geographical or mental – i.e. being cut off from one's native cultural context – that a certain cultural ethos makes itself felt. This ethos must deal with the sphere of transgressional experience, but cannot be applied in a direct and uncritical manner. And here Conradian questions come to the fore. The Conradian situation in mountaineering is therefore a liminal situation. However, it does not exceed the bounds of this concept as set by Karl Jaspers,<sup>40</sup> who compares liminal situations to a wall with which the subject is suddenly confronted. When he faces a frontier, the mountaineer must persevere, using not only climbing techniques, but also cultural models of action. An apter description of mountaineering transgressionality is therefore Victor Turner's concept of liminality.<sup>41</sup>

Turner further clarifies the concept of liminal or borderline experience by describing it as a kind of experiment, the aim of which is to reconfigure cultural models and values, this being part of an ongoing process. In this case, the individual must harmonize his knowledge and his experience, so to speak. As often as not, the result of such an undertaking is *communitas*, i.e. social bonding built not on the basis of previously existing social hierarchies, but on that of shared experience. Using a term which Sulikowski applies to Szczepański's writing, we can say that within the sphere of this new experience we can discern something in the nature of a "geography of culture":<sup>42</sup> the model of native culture is applied to a concrete situation and is observed from a new perspective. This is by no means to say that here we are dealing with a fluid dialectic of experience and model. Elucidating the relationship between Szczepański and Conrad, Beata Gontarz observes that conflict is very often an inherent part of experience: "Szczepański would seem to intentionally reveal Conradian contradictions, while at the same time pointing to their deep and (perhaps) knowingly hidden connections. Self-limitation and usurpation, the physicality of the world and an intimation of eternity – these are the two necessary poles of human creative existence."<sup>43</sup> Conrad scholars in any case know only too well that Conrad's celebrated "simple truths" are not at all simple when one has to confront reality.

However, whereas in a transgressional situation the "ethos and isolation" model is common to both writers, the very nature of experience and the model of the boundary sets them apart.<sup>44</sup> In this context, Andrzej Sulikowski's observation is inspiring: Szczepański's inner need to take part in a struggle with the elements is something modern.<sup>45</sup> It is worth examining these differences in order to put them in the broader

<sup>40</sup> Karl Jaspers is cited by A. Sulikowski. „*Nie można...*”, p. 108: “[...] the ‘self’ recognizes that there are other dimensions of reality of which it has until now had no inkling”.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. V. Turner. *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969.

<sup>42</sup> A. Sulikowski. „*Nie można...*”, p. 235.

<sup>43</sup> B. Gontarz. *Pisarz i historia. O twórczości Jana Józefa Szczepańskiego*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2001, pp. 153-154.

<sup>44</sup> Stefan Zabierowski gives a concise account of the differences between Conrad and Szczepański in: “Klucze do Szczepańskiego”. In: *Twórczość literacka i filmowa Jana Józefa Szczepańskiego*. Ed. S. Zabierowski. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1995, pp. 33-35.

<sup>45</sup> A. Sulikowski. „*Nie można...*”, p. 257.



context of the transformations undergone by the European *episteme*. We must therefore return to our mountain pass.

Writing about Conrad's encounter with an Englishman on the Furka Pass, I have drawn attention to the experience of the sublime, which – quite naturally, so to speak – imbues that meeting with the quality of a watershed. Here the emphasis is on the experience of a wayfarer – something that is very different from the experience of a mountaineer. We find Szczepański's protagonist on a different mountain pass – in the Tatra or Beskid mountains, perhaps. Although he is a skier, his experience and his relationship with the mountains would seem to be that of a mountaineer. As a result of an accident, he finally realizes that the battle in which he is engaged is not just a "game", but "a real battle. A battle to the death."<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, he realizes that "until now, life had spared him its terrifying 'where to?' and 'why?'"<sup>47</sup> which were strictly Conradian thoughts. The experience of being in the mountains is somewhat different, however: "The emotion throbbing in his throat was that unparalleled joy which was a hair's breadth away from the shudder of fear."<sup>48</sup> In the plenitude of its sensuality, the experience of mountaineering is no mere intoxication, as is often suggested, but is controlled. Szczepański himself describes his mountain-climbing experience thus:

I can feel the taste of each section of that route. The rough feel of the rock and its sulphurous smell. The pleasing exhilaration of crossing an exposed traverse. The treacherous hardness of the snow underfoot. The fear prior to entering the narrow, sheer depths of a chimney. The dryness of cracked lips. The solemnity of concentrating on the protection of a fellow climber, when one's thoughts wander casually, as when one hums unconsciously while working.<sup>49</sup>

Szczepański discovered "the beauty of fear" during his first climbs: "An awareness of the terrible frailty of one's existence and of the intoxicating triumph over one's own weakness."<sup>50</sup> However, in writing openly about "experiencing a mountain route",<sup>51</sup> what he had in mind was the full participation of all the senses.

Conrad gives the impression of being more like a spectator contemplating a landscape, whereas Szczepański's characters interact with the landscape with every fibre of their being. The differences are obvious and can be explained by the historical context. When Conrad was on his walking tour in the Alps, mountaineering had not yet developed into a fully fledged sport and Alpine climbing was the preserve of members of the English gentry. Another basic factor was the change in the model of experience that occurred at the turn of the century. By this I mean the distinction between

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<sup>46</sup> J.J. Szczepański. "Za przełęczą". In: J.J. Szczepański. *Za przełęczą. Wybór opowiadań*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1986, p. 342.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 333.

<sup>49</sup> J.J. Szczepański. *Zatoka Białych Niedźwiedzi*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1964, p. 87.

<sup>50</sup> J.J. Szczepański. "Hokejka". In: J.J. Szczepański. *Historijki*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1990, p. 87.

<sup>51</sup> J.J. Szczepański. "Sizal". In: J.J. Szczepański. *Opowiadania dawne i dawniejsze*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1973, p. 229.

*Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*<sup>52</sup> that was first made by Wilhelm Dilthey and later developed by Walter Benjamin. *Erfahrung* is to be found in the community and, being a continuation of tradition, has been cognitively structured within that tradition. *Erlebnis*, on the other hand, is the discovery of modernity and is to be found outside long cultural narrations, being ephemeral, unique, fragmentary and often solitary.<sup>53</sup>

Although it would, of course, be going too far to say that Conrad and Szczepański were poles apart in this respect, certain structural features of the models of their respective worlds (not only the “sea factor” or “mountain factor”, but also certain attitudes towards mountains and the sea) place Conrad nearer the *Erfahrung* tradition and Szczepański nearer *Erlebnis*. One might even venture to say that in the Conradian model, the role of experience is, as it were, to test existing cultural structures. The transgressional situation may lead to the discovery of yet another sphere of ethos. In this sense, Conrad would be nearer to the sublime as it was understood by Kant: “[...] the sublime is that, the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense,”<sup>54</sup> hence “[...] true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the [subject] judging, not in the natural object.”<sup>55</sup> This attitude is in accordance with Conrad’s search for “simple truths” which are impervious to the influence of the world but which are not metaphysical, for Kantian transcendence is also responsible for the sphere of ethics. Conrad’s attitude may therefore be the result of a critical reading of the Romantics.

For his part, Szczepański the mountaineer is somewhat paradoxically drawn to the English tradition of Burke, i.e. to sensuality. In his case, we see how a fleeting experience – which in one of his books is compared to a short-lived “Japanese flower” – becomes the starting point and fabric of the cultural construct of personality. Szczepański is faithful to tradition, but – unlike Conrad – is a witness to its transformation during the course of the war as well as in the mountains. He takes part in the events he witnesses and creates them.<sup>56</sup> of course, as Werner observes, “[...] early on in their literary careers, both writers arrived at their own particular heart of darkness” – both tackle the problem of finding a route to follow before (and, above all, after) a transgressional experience.<sup>57</sup> However, both the nature of this route and the manner in which it is completed differ somewhat.

Returning to the “sea factor” and the “mountain factor”, let us first recall Conrad’s assessment of the sea:

<sup>52</sup> On the turning point concerning experience in European tradition see: M. Jay. *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

<sup>53</sup> See: B. Frydryczak. *Świat jako kolekcja*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Adama Mickiewicza, 2002, pp. 30-32.

<sup>54</sup> I. Kant. *Critique of Judgment*. Transl. J.H. Bernard. New York: Hafner Press, 1951, p. 89.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>56</sup> S. Zabierowski. *Dziedzictwo ...*, pp. 181-182, observes that “[...] in the case of Conrad the source of trials is above all the cruelty of Nature, while in the case of Szczepański it is history with a capital ‘h’.”

<sup>57</sup> See. A. Werner, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-30.

Faithful to no race after the manner of the kindly earth, receiving no impress from valour and toil and self-sacrifice, recognising no finality of dominion, the sea has never adopted the cause of its masters like those lands where the victorious nations of mankind have taken root, rocking their cradles and setting up their gravestones. He – man or people – who, putting his trust in the friendship of the sea, neglects the strength and cunning of his right hand, is a fool! As if it were too great, too mighty for common virtues, the ocean has no compassion, no faith, no law, no memory. Its fickleness is to be held true to men's purposes only by an undaunted resolution and by a sleepless, armed, jealous vigilance, in which, perhaps, there has always been more hate than love.<sup>58</sup>

Man is therefore of scarce significance in the face of this element – which, however, is an ambiguous sphere, being at one and the same time an open space and a journey which must be completed.<sup>59</sup> Hence the fundamental role played by the ship in Conrad's hierarchy – as a cultural tool that serves not so much to “subdue” the element as to create a sort of cultural island within its space. The fascination of the Englishman whom Conrad met on the Furka Pass may well have been due to the fact that he was most probably a surveyor. Measuring mountains was the first modern method of bringing them under control: a surveyor measuring open spaces is somewhat similar to a sea captain setting the course of a ship. In the Conradian world, however, the element itself recedes into the background: “[...] it is, after all, the human voice that stamps the mark of human consciousness upon the character of a gale.”<sup>60</sup>

The sea is therefore a vast space that must be criss-crossed by routes charted out by sailors who grapple with it using ideas and standards of procedure. And, of course, there are also chasms at sea<sup>61</sup> – narrow frontiers that appear and disappear in the twinkling of an eye, as we see in the case of Jim's jump. The frontier of the sea is a broad one, however, and the characters of Conrad's novels examine its cultural construction.<sup>62</sup> Szczepański for his part grapples with a frontier which often seems to “speak” for Man and which endures in its changeability and diversity. It is a path with a goal, but devoid of pragmatism. For Conrad, there is no doubt that sailing is a craft whose aim is to tame an unpredictable element. For Szczepański, the mountains are a frontier whose existence is permanent: they are “solitary and incredible – the same as they have always been,”<sup>63</sup> while mountaineering is “neither a sport nor a pastime, but something far greater and far more important.”<sup>64</sup> Service is the essence of sailing,

<sup>58</sup> J. Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea & A Personal Record*, p. 135.

<sup>59</sup> I have written on the subject of the ontology of the sea in a book entitled *Dyskurs antropologiczny w pisarstwie Josepha Conrada*. Kraków: Universitas, 2008, pp. 7-44.

<sup>60</sup> J. Conrad. *The Mirror of the Sea & A Personal Record*, p. 79.

<sup>61</sup> See: A. Werner, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

<sup>62</sup> In this context we must, of course, bear in mind Szczepański's own struggle with the “shadow line” in his capacity as a translator. See: S. Zabierowski. “Granica (czy smuga) cienia”. In: *Granica w literaturze. Tekst – świat – egzystencja*. Eds. S. Zabierowski, L. Zwierzyński. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2004. See also: A. Adamowicz-Pośpiech. *Seria w przekładzie. Polskie warianty prozy Josepha Conrada*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2013, pp. 241-249.

<sup>63</sup> J.J. Szczepański. “Sizal”, p. 240.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

which is a medium of civilization, whereas mountaineering is a cathartic escape from that dimension of the human world: "It was a feeling of relief produced by gratuitous peril and not peril tainted with human anger or human cruelty. It was the pure, soothing strength of indifferent granite and sky – not of paths created for human feet."<sup>65</sup>

The unique nature of this experience allows us to bring more light to bear on the difference in the nature of the respective cultural landscapes in the work of both authors. Using a method of differentiation created by Beata Frydryczak,<sup>66</sup> in this context we can speak of a "panoramic landscape" in the case of Conrad and a prevalently "topographic landscape" in the case of Szczepański. Let us note that Conrad's characters are very often *confronted with* the landscape. Panoramic vision is perhaps not the standard mode of acquisition here, but the landscape is either a screen on which the emotions and attitudes of the characters are projected (the "Malay trilogy") or a curtain behind which danger lurks (*Heart of Darkness*). Hence the frequent comparisons of the landscape to a stage or stage scenery. The landscape therefore creates the boundaries of the characters' model of the world and all their experience is directed towards testing the permanence of those boundaries. Even in the well-known "mountaineering" scene in *Nostromo*, when the title character has a moment of enlightenment as he surveys Sulaco from the top of the hill, the landscape is a unique, symbolic construct contemplated from a distance.

With Szczepański, things are different. Here the characters are *immersed in* the landscape: "[...] polysensory topographical experience becomes a medium through which we experience and organize the world."<sup>67</sup> In the author's mountain fiction we do not find a typical panoramic "view from the top", as the most important thing is the route. Similarly, in his other works – especially those set in wartime – the characters are thrown into the landscape and bombarded with fragmentary impressions or splinters of reality. It is only in these that they can attempt to find a cultural (and especially an ethical) bond – a panorama that could become a model ordering their lives. In this case, instead of a clash of ethos and context we have intensive interaction – to mention but the way in which the partisans are portrayed in the stories *Wszarż* or *Buty*. In a story entitled *Granica* (*The Border*), we are shown a particularly expressive contrast between pre-war and post-war Warsaw – seen through the optic of a soldier's experience of the beginning of World War II (the Polish September campaign of 1939):

This was the kind of Warsaw he had thought of while marching in scorching hot weather, during battles fought at the edges of forests swathed in smoke and in the narrow lanes of deserted villages, where he used his mess tin to draw water for his horse from the muddy bottoms of exhausted wells. All the juice had been squeezed out of the earth, whose breast had been sucked dry. What was left was moist, foul-smelling slime from which his horse turned away its quivering nostrils in sadness. But the memory of Warsaw – teeming with people, looking a treat and vibrant with life, like some immense spring – had remained unchanged.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> See: B. Frydryczak. *Krajobraz...*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>68</sup> J.J. Szczepański. "Granica". In: J.J. Szczepański. *Motyl*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1962, p. 175.

In Conrad's work, we are still in the realm of the aesthetics of "the picturesque", which must confront a new and intense experience, whereas in Szczepański's work we discover the spirit of modernity: the very fabric of the world is experience, in whose abundance characters must often search for paths towards "panoramas" of morality and identity – paths which are not to be found on any map of ethics.

Translated by R. E. Pyplacz

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