

STANISŁAW LEM'S CONRAD. A CHOSEN, ALBEIT PROBLEMATIC FILIATION

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Abstract: Stanisław Lem betrayed his fascination with Joseph Conrad's writing relatively early. The first references to *Lord Jim* can be found in his first novel, entitled *Szpital Przemienienia* (*Hospital of the Transfiguration*). However, the nature and the extent of this Conradian inspiration was based on Lem's reading of Jan Józef Szczepański's well known study entitled *W służbie Wielkiego Armatora* (*In the Service of the Great Shipowner*) and his much less well known *List do Juliana Strykowski* (*A Letter to Julian Strykowski*), in which he presents his understanding of the Conradian principle of "meting out (not 'doing') justice to the visible world". Indeed, it would seem that Lem follows Szczepański in adopting the Conradian principle of axiological absolutism. Unlike Szczepański, however, Lem sees this principle not as the result of a broadly understood rational procedure, but instead detracts from its rationality by bringing within its scope the problem of the so-called randomness of supra-universal and supra-global cosmic reason. For Szczepański, the most important phase of his own approach to reading Conrad was undoubtedly *Lord Jim*. Although Lem betrays a partiality for Conrad's short (and longer short) stories, he does not single out one particular story. In the present article, I venture to suggest that given Lem's belief in "radical solitude in the cosmos", the story whose import would best correspond to this conviction is *The Shadow Line*.

Keywords: Stanisław Lem, Joseph Conrad, Jan Józef Szczepański, "bring the visible world to justice", "mete out justice to the visible world", the ontology of a seaman, the ontology of an astronaut, axiological absolutism, rationalism, irrationalism, The Inn of the Two Witches, *The Shadow Line*

I imagine the future to be something like this: there'll be some sort of catacombs where advocates of Conrad and Shakespeare will gather to read their works in whispers. It won't even be particularly frowned on by the authorities.

S. Lem, *Literatura nowego tysiąclecia* (*The literature of the new millennium*)¹

Although Polish Conrad studies have included comprehensive and significant research on the reception of Conrad's works in Poland – much of it carried out by

¹ S. Lem. "Literatura nowego tysiąclecia" [sprawozdanie ze spotkania i dyskusji w Wydawnictwie Literackim w Krakowie, wypowiedzi: Czesław Miłosz, Ewa Lipska, Stefan Chwin, Sławomir Mrożek, Stanisław Lem, Teresa Walas, not. i koment. Marek Oramus]. *Nowa Fantastyka* 1999, № 2, pp. 74-75.

Stefan Zabierowski² – we still have a long way to go when it comes to providing a satisfactory answer to the question as to the exact nature of the role model which – figuratively speaking and seen in a Polish context – Joseph Conrad became for Stanisław Lem, whose reception of Conrad is conspicuous by its absence in Conrad research devoted to the Polish 1920 generation. Hence, no doubt, the refreshing character of the first findings in this area, which as yet come not from Conrad scholars themselves, but from scholars investigating the work of Lem – scholars whose main focus is not so much on literature as on philosophy or *Weltanschauung*. Paweł Okołowski, the author of the most interesting recent study on Lem’s philosophy, shows that Lem has drawn in equal measure on Conradian axiology and the so-called Lwów-Warsaw school of philosophy. Invoking the famous principle of “rendering the highest kind of justice to the visible universe”, he concludes that

Like Elzenberg and also some of the members of the Lwów-Warsaw school of philosophy – Czeżowski and Tatariewicz in particular – Lem in essence accords a logical value to ethical judgements. He does so in the name of Conrad’s motto of “meting out justice to the visible world”.³

Tempting as it is, this intriguing assertion is doubly disconcerting to a Conrad scholar. Okołowski maintains that the foundation of Lem’s ethics – his innovative theory of values – is largely based on one of Conrad’s most important imperatives. Here, however, this imperative functions in Aniela Zagórska’s gross mistranslation of Conrad’s original English version – “[...] art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to *render* the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, [...]” (my italics) – as “*wymierzać* sprawiedliwość widzialnemu światu”, i.e. “*mete out* justice to the visible world” (my italics).⁴ For a long time, Lem gave credence to this totally unjustifiable paraphrase, somewhat simplistically ascribing the idea of literature being a “cosmic court hearing” to Conrad. In this he followed his friend Jan Józef Szczepański – a Conrad enthusiast who had written a book on ethics entitled *Przed nieznanym trybunałem* (*Before an Unknown Tribunal*)⁵.

United as they were in their personal fascination with Conrad, Lem and Szczepański differed in their preferences concerning individual works. Szczepański’s

² See: S. Zabierowski. *Conrad w Polsce. Wybrane problemy recepcji krytycznej w latach 1896-1969*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1971; S. Zabierowski. *Conrad w perspektywie odbioru. Szkice*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1979; S. Zabierowski. „Autor-rodak”. *Pisarze polscy wobec Conrada*. Katowice: Śląsk, 1988; S. Zabierowski. *Dziedzictwo Conrada w literaturze polskiej XX wieku*. Kraków: Oficyna Literacka, 1992.

³ P. Okołowski. *Materia i wartości. Neolukrecjanizm Stanisława Lema*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2010, p. 117.

⁴ J. Conrad. “Przedmowa”. Transl. A. Zagórska. In: J. Conrad. *Murzyn z zalogi „Narcyza”: opowiadanie o Kasztelu*. Transl. J. Lemański. Preface transl. A. Zagórska. Warszawa: Ignis, 1923, p. 9.

⁵ After the year 2000 Lem must have made a correction in the Polish wording of Conrad’s precept, since in “Lampa i Iskra Boża” (published in 2007) he wrote that Conradianism (in a selection of stories by Szczepański entitled *Obiady przy świecach*) was first and foremost a matter of “doing justice to the visible world” (**oddawanie** sprawiedliwości widzialnemu światu, to jest conradowskie) [my emphasis]. S. Lem. “Upustki i wypustki”. In: P. Dunin-Wąsowicz. *Rozmowy Lampowe*. Warszawa: Lampa i Iskra Boża, 2007, pp. 215-226.

love of *Lord Jim* found its expression in his outstanding essay entitled *W służbie Wielkiego Armatora (In the Service of the Great Shipowner)*.⁶ Lem for his part confessed (in a conversation held in 1986) that he preferred Conrad's short (and longer short) stories to *Lord Jim and Nostromo*⁷ – something that was almost certainly connected with a significant incident in his childhood and that was willingly recalled by him in a Conradian context – first in *Wysoki Zamek (Highcastle)*⁸ and later in his column entitled “Mówi Lem” (Lem speaks) in the “Nowa Fantastyka” magazine. The incident in question was connected with Conrad's story entitled “The Inn of the Two Witches”. Lem was reluctant to mention the titles of particular works written by Conrad and “The Inn of the Two Witches” was the only short story to which he made a direct reference. Although he (quite understandably) did this for sentimental reasons, his evident preference for Conrad's shorter literary forms – which was completely at variance with that of Szczepański – was revealing:

I remember when the first radio set was brought into our flat. It was a huge “Ericsson” box which ran off acid accumulators, with an aerial wire that was wound onto wooden crosses. I remember how my father and my uncle tried to get some station on it – for the most part this radio reception consisted of horrendous crackles – and how for the first time we succeeded in tuning in to Radio Lwów. A man with a lugubrious voice happened to be reading Conrad's story “The Inn of the Two Witches”. It made a colossal impression on me – so much so that to this day I consider it to be one of Conrad's most interesting tales.⁹

How, then, did Lem understand this somewhat vague idea of “meting out justice to the visible world”? Where exactly can we find this admittedly distorted Conradian precept of just behaviour in Lem's rich literary output? It so happens that Okołówski – who first suggested the parallel between Conrad and Lem – is the author of the entry “Stanisław Lem” in the eighth volume of a Russian-Polish-English lexicon entitled *Ideas in Russia*. In it, he gives the essential aspects of Lem's *Weltanschauung*. These are tychism, axiological absolutism and anthropological pessimism. As far as tychism is concerned, we read that “Lem's philosophy is a philosophy of fate, i.e. one of reconciling oneself to one's fate”, which is “an unjust and totally unpredictable demiurge who is deaf to us.”¹⁰ Our fate is “set as if by a spell in the zygote”, for “the genotype determines the phenotype” and in the zygote “our soul – mankind in its generality, together with its physical, intellectual, emotional and moral diversity – lies dormant.”¹¹ As far as the absolutism of values is concerned, “Lem pinned his

⁶ J.J. Szczepański. “W służbie Wielkiego Armatora”. In: J.J. Szczepański. *Przed nieznanym trybunalem. Autograf*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1982, p. 11.

⁷ I. Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. “Twenty-Two Answers and Two Postscripts: An Interview with Stanisław Lem”. Transl. M. Lugowski. *Science-Fiction Studies* 1986, Vol. 13, part 3, nr 40, pp. 242-260. Also version online: <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/lem40interview.htm>.

⁸ S. Lem. *Wysoki Zamek*. In: S. Lem. *Wysoki Zamek. Dzieła*. T. XIV. Warszawa: Agora SA, 2009, pp. 33-34.

⁹ S. Lem. “Mówi Lem (Fragmenty ścieżki dźwiękowej filmu *Przypadek i ład*)”. Chosen by M. Oramus. *Nowa Fantastyka* 1991, № 1, pp. 63-67.

¹⁰ P. Okołówski. “Stanisław Lem” [entry]. In: *Idee w Rosji. Leksykon rosyjsko-polsko-angielski*. Vol. 8. Ed. J. Dobieszewski. Łódź: Ibidem, 2014, p. 194.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

posthumous hopes on the ability of the Cosmos to generate a never-ending succession of intellects that will pursue absolute values such as the quest for truth and the defence of the innocent.”¹²

Lem therefore would seem to understand the Conradian attitude to be quite simply one of pathos, concerned as it is with ways of conferring “human dignity” in a totally unpredictable “tychistic” world in which genetics is a lottery. It is also a hermeneutic attitude, for understanding – sealed by mutual accord – is a necessity in a universe that is a cosmic court hearing. Here the motto of “meting out or doing justice” essentially constitutes the basis for a theory of values – the literary expression of Lem’s axiological absolutism, whose purpose is to attack aleatorisms, which are the dark paths and dark “dreams of power” of contemporary literature.

This Conradian precept taken from the author’s preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* accompanies Lem in all manner of circumstances – often exceptional circumstances and not always in the realm of literature. In his study entitled *Poza granicą pojmowania (Beyond the Limits of Comprehension)*, he classifies the problem of mutual recriminations between Poles and Jews concerning the Judaisation or Polonisation of the Auschwitz concentration camp museum in the context of the impossibility of meting out justice.¹³ Elsewhere, he uses “the Conradian meting out of justice to the visible world” to refer to criticism of electronic direct democracy, which “would assuredly be a greater misfortune than indirect democracy”. His witty and sarcastic explanation for this is that since “people basically suffer from stupidity that is either short-sighted or long-sighted”, “periods of moderate stability” were the result of “people adapting themselves to the Procrustean bed of existing conditions” rather than “Society’s experience of blissful states”.¹⁴

The image of Lem’s “own” Conrad that emerges from the sum of his (i.e. Lem’s) convictions is thus almost universally and without much serious questioning acknowledged to have been wholly derived from Jan Józef Szczepański’s view of the world. One of Lem’s epistolary soliloquies – the so-called *Letter to Julian Strykowski* – is particularly illuminating in this respect. In reality, the letter itself was a “mystification”¹⁵ which Szczepański used in order to write a treatise that had “the form of a private conversation or even a personal revelation”, as this suited the subject matter better than “the acoustics of an open forum”.¹⁶

After an introduction of about two pages, the letter takes on the form of an essay or treatise. The aim of this epistolary dialogue with Strykowski was to analyse the Conradian precept of meting out justice, which Szczepański problematized in several respects. What struck him first was the matter of the “visibility” of the so-called Conradian visible world. Not only did he realize that “The Conradian approach does

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹³ S. Lem. “Poza granicą pojmowania”. In: S. Lem. *Lube czasy*. Kraków: Znak, 1995, p. 18.

¹⁴ S. Lem. “Przyszłość jest ciemna”. In: S. Lem. *Wejście na orbitę. Okamgnienie. Dzieła*. Vol. XXXI. Warszawa: Agora SA, 2010, p. 357.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ J.J. Szczepański. “List do Juliana Strykowskiego”. In: J.J. Szczepański. *Przed nieznanym trybunałem...*, p. 94.

not provide that calm self-confidence that comes from moving within a space that has been precisely mapped out",¹⁷ but he also found that – on the contrary – it was only too clear that what he was dealing with was the truly frightening experience of beholding "terrifying realms of infinity"¹⁸ – horror perceived (both structurally and philosophically) as being the result of a definitive loss of security. It is precisely here that we have one of the most fundamental similarities between the architectural framework of Szczepański's universe and Lem's cosmos, with its uniquely ritualistic and aggressive encounters in outer space, for like Conrad's ocean, Lem's cosmos is at one and the same time an arena of sublimity and a place of arduous work where professions are learnt and perfected.

Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński – the author of a short essay (written for the general reader) entitled *Lem jak Conrad (Lem, like Conrad)* – has drawn attention to the unique similarity that exists between Conrad's ocean and Lem's cosmos. However, unlike the Conradian waters, which are "the silence of silences" and "the shadow line", Lem's cosmos is unexpectedly transformed into "the voice of the Master" and sometimes (but only to those who over the years have acquired the ability to hear it) reveals its abstract being and real nature: transcendence – the only possible form that – as cosmic reason – can be taken by God.¹⁹ Works such as *Solaris* or *His Master's Voice* are good illustrations of the fact that Lem's axiological absolutism is in reality stronger than Conrad's analogical absolutism. Lem is an absolutist in the Platonic sense, being closer (in a very particular meaning of the word) to Christianity. Conrad for his part is an absolutist in the Aristotelian sense and to all appearances would seem to be close to traditional metaphysics. Whereas Conrad gives pride of place to 'circumstances' (or, in a wider sense, 'chance'), Lem opts for the permanence, fecundity, finality and essentiality of cosmic reason in its temporal incarnations or "generations" which reveal themselves in time – ethical "generations" deriving from the nature of the *rationes* themselves (to use Okołowski's term yet again).

Notwithstanding their differences, the Conradian sailor and his 'twin' the Lemian astronaut are the mediums of these two worlds. Faced with the task of "meting out justice to the visible world", they go much further (as is also evident from Szczepański's remarks, with which Lem must have been familiar). Let us recall yet again the *Letter to Julian Strykowski (List do Juliana Strykowskiego)*: "The first duty of literature is to rescue Man from his servitude to the pacts which, time and time again, he concludes with himself and with the world."²⁰ Servitude to pacts includes servitude to ethos, codes of conduct and – what is of particular relevance to us here – servitude to professions, this clearly being a trait that is common to both Conrad and Lem. Pirx, Ijon, Tichy, Lingard, Marlow and the protagonist of *The Shadow Line* are all examples of metaphysicists who transcend the golden cages of their professions, allowing us to read the works of Lem and Conrad not as novels of manners, but as novels about Man (in the broadest ethical and existential sense):

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁹ E. Wnuk-Lipiński. "Lem jak Conrad". *Tygodnik Powszechny. Apokryf* 2001, № 17, p. 12.

²⁰ J.J. Szczepański. *List...*, p. 96.

It was only when Conrad came along that the “ontology of sailors” which he had ennobled gained equal status with literature’s “non-professional” approach to life. Prose had evolved in the direction of contemplating “Man in general”. In accordance with this dominant attitude, personality was seen as being a constant. However, new professions and the growing acceleration of technological change are capable not only of inspiring someone to demonstrate his instrumental qualifications, but also to provide unprecedented qualities of existence.²¹

The loneliness of the astronaut is immeasurably harder to bear than that of the sailor – and, it must be said, requires greater maturity and a greater feeling for transcendence. Be that as it may, the Lemian astronaut of technological, post-modern times – like the sailor witnessing incipient modernity – must respect the Conradian “resolve to stay within the limits of the visible world”. Under no circumstances – writes Szczepański – must he cease his de facto “aimless roaming”.²² His voyage, be it in space or across the ocean, must prove to be “a test of the sense and order which we carry in ourselves, without knowing their essential nature”. It must also accept a certain metaphysical impoverishment, notwithstanding the numerous enrichments that are borne of this: “No being or concept must stray beyond the limits of our field of vision or our scope for determining causes.”²³

So much for Szczepański’s interpretation, which rationalizes Conradian ethics. There is indeed something to be meted out to the world: the justice of the so-called Great Shipowner, which in fair proportion must be imparted to everyday reality here on Earth. Lem for his part gives a non-rational justification for this same ethos. Precepts for just conduct are issued not by an absolute being, but by cosmic reason – an amorphous (non-)being which constitutes an irrational sequence (that is non-existent in the existential, human sense) of coming into being and for which human existence is but one link – the smallest, the most static and the most ossified, perhaps – in a chain of development. Here the place of Szczepański’s justice of the Great Shipowner is taken by the justice of the living ocean in *Solaris*. Szczepański chose *Lord Jim* as the source of his Conradian inspiration and wrote his essay entitled *In the Service of the Great Shipowner (W służbie Wielkiego Armatora)*. For Lem, however, the true significance (or relevance) of *Lord Jim* would seem to have been limited to his novel *Szpital Przemienienia (Hospital of the Transfiguration)*.²⁴ Though never mentioned by Lem, Conrad’s *The Shadow line* – with its “ironically melancholic”

²¹ S. Lem. *Fantastyka i futurologia*. Vol. 2. *Dziela*. Vol. XXIV. Warszawa: Agora SA, 2009, p. 137.

²² J.J. Szczepański. “List...”, p. 98.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

²⁴ Lem finished writing *Hospital of the Transfiguration* in 1948, during his final year at university, i.e. not long after Dąbrowska’s polemic (in *Warszawa* 1946, nr 1, pp. 148-163) with Kott, whose article had been published in the autumn issue of *Twórczość* in 1945. “Woch would not have touched a book like that. He did not need to sail the oceans in order to find the problem of *Lord Jim*”; “He did not believe in anything. He was a perfect clock with one little screw missing – a writer with a clock weight missing. All he needed to become a Polish Conrad was a little trifle, but the matter was beyond repair.” [Transl. R.E.P.] “Woch nie wzięby takiej książki do ręki, za problemem *Lorda Jima* nie potrzebował wyprawiać się w oceany”; „On w nic nie wierzył. To był doskonały zegar bez jednej małej śrubeczki, pisarz bez ciężarka. Brakowało mu głupestwa, żeby zostać polskim Conradem, ale to było nie do naprawienia”. S. Lem. *Szpital Przemienienia. Dziela*. Vol. IX. Warszawa: Agora SA, 2008, p. 107.

message, as Ian Watt puts it – would seem to have the closest affinity with Lem's need to de-rationalize Conrad's ethics:

Contrary to the existential version of the shadow line, we do not choose various kinds of solidarity with the past or the present, but come to them, just as we come into the world – unconsciously and not of our own free will. Indeed, we are usually dragged to them kicking and screaming.²⁵

In order to determine the rudiments of Lem's non-rational interpretation of Conrad, we must start with didacticism, for Lem sees Conrad as a didactic author in the profound philosophical sense of “didacticity that does not proceed from a didactic premise”, i.e. in the sense of didacticism as a non-rational concept. As Lem explained in 2002, “All this secular ethos is given. It cannot be justified with the aid of functors or qualifiers.²⁶ In a passage of *The Philosophy of Chance* (*Filozofia przypadku*), Lem adds that it is given in an extra-logical and extra-cybernetic sense. And it is given in a cultural sense. Whereas Lem sees a work of literature as being the denotation of an empty name represented by its title, he sees the Conradian “meting out of justice to the visible world” as an unexpected and paradoxical filling of this name – which has hitherto been universally considered to be empty – with non-empty content. Somehow, therefore, the work communicates with reality, though not in a logical or cybernetic way. Indeed, through this reality it finds the path of “meting out justice”, though it does not detract from this reality or try to supplant it in any degree, for this is not the justice of the Great Shipowner – i.e. A rationalized model of just conduct, as Szczepański saw it, building a sequence of definite actions – but quite the reverse. Here we must discern not only the sources of Lem's non-rational didacticism, but also his complete de-rationalization of the whole Conradian ethic:

Truth is by definition an arbitrary relation that is established between the title of a work [of literature] as an empty name and its text. We can now say the same with perfect precision – using a general quantifier – in order to state that “for any x : if x is the title of a work of literature, then x is an empty name whose definition is $a, b, c \dots z$, i.e. the text of the work. The most serious objection that can be raised [here] is that on the whole people do not think that works of literature have absolutely nothing to say about any kind of “reality” and that even if that were the case, literature would probably be bereft of its cultural significance and its creators would not be able to speak in the spirit in which Conrad spoke when he said that it “meted out justice to the visible world.”²⁷

Lem's Conrad is not, when all is said and done, that of Jan Józef Szczepański or even that corresponding to the latter's particular attitude to Conrad. Nor is he the Conrad of “a certain generation of Poles”. He is a personal Conrad – a Conrad apart,

²⁵ I. Watt. *Fabula i myśl w „Smudze cienia” Conrada* (*Story and Idea in Conrad's “The Shadow-Line”*). In: *Conrad w oczach krytyki światowej*. Ed. Z. Najder. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1974, p. 644.

²⁶ S. Lem. “Postępy hochsztaplerki” [w rozmowie z A. Fulińską]. *Dekada Literacka* 2002, № 1/2, p. 18.

²⁷ S. Lem. *Filozofia przypadku. Literatura w świetle empirii. Dzieła*. Vol. XXVI. Warszawa: Agora SA, 2010, pp. 99, 101-102.

who is unique and different from all others. Although Lem's writing is not devoid of traces of reverence towards Conrad, this reverence is by no means limited to such traces. It is hardly likely, I think, that Lem saw the precept of "meting out justice to the visible world" as merely yet another aphorism or famous saying which he adopted after the example of Szczepański or (in part) Dąbrowska. I myself would go much further, following the lead of Paweł Okołówski's investigations into Lem's philosophy. Lem bases his own literary "futurology" on what he saw as the Conradian maxim of justice (and which had in fact been grossly mistranslated by Zagórska). His interest therefore lies in the individual prototypes of Conrad's characters and also in their ethics. Parallels can be drawn between Marlow and Pirx, while sequences of allusions to *Lord Jim* (which is treated as a model as far as the creation of attitudes is concerned) can be found in *Hospital of the Transfiguration* (*Szpital Przemienienia*).

As well as commenting on Conrad's popularity in wartime Poland,²⁸ Lem gave his opinion on the matter of the emigration of Conrad's talent,²⁹ his bilingualism³⁰ and on the so-called Conradian concept of "secular tragedy". However, he refrained from taking a direct part in disputes concerning Conrad and remained silent during the 1957 centenary commemorations of the author's birth, when – having published *The Magellanic Cloud* (*Obłok Magellana*) – he was already known to the Polish reading public.

Unlike Szczepański, Lem is not a perceptive observer of the progressive usurpation of judgements about the world. His attitude to Conrad would seem to be basically that of a "non-rational hermeneutist". The matter of "understanding the visible world" is Lem's primary condition for "meting out justice". In a certain sense, therefore, this idea is not as radical and jurisdictional as that of Szczepański. Instead of holding a court hearing that is terrestrial, interpersonal and national – and instead of the easily specifiable dimension of "the service of the Great Shipowner" – here Man is continually subjected to the tension that exists between himself and the cosmic court hearing, which is an enigma – a superintelligent project for justice that, being the product of superintelligence, is both unfathomable and awe-inspiring. Here Szczepański's radicalism is set aside and gives way to the feeling of helplessness that is associated with "a gradual loss of strength in the race for understanding".³¹ In this case, Lem wishes us to understand him literally. When someone for purely biological reasons exhausts his mental potential and his ability to understand, thus ceasing to participate in science and the development of the world, he ceases to mete out justice. The meting out of justice is therefore also a human domain and exists not only as super-justice, this being the domain of superintelligence. It is also in the gift of the ordinary material intelligence of human beings. As such – being human and material – justice must at the same time be reduced to an inclination for living justly. It is

²⁸ S. Lem. "Rozważania sylwiczne CXX". In: S. Lem. *Sex Wars. Dzieła*. Vol. XIX. Warszawa: Agora SA, 2009, p. 463.

²⁹ S. Lem. "Sukces" [a polemic with Jerzy Andrzejewski in *Z dnia na dzień*]. *Kultura* 1978, № 14, p. 5.

³⁰ S. Lem. "Rozważania sylwiczne LVII". *Odra* 1997, № 5, p. 89.

³¹ W. Jamrozak. "Nie sądzicie, że wiecie wszystko o Stanisławie Lemie". *Nurt* 1972, № 8, p. 7.

therefore a temporary and unstable possession which is by no means something that is at our eternal disposition and that we have a right to demand, whatever the circumstances, for this faculty is entirely dependent on our competences, or – more exactly – on our potential for competence: our potential for continually pushing back the frontiers of the world – i.e our potential for transcendence.

It is in Man that Lem's axiological absolutism comes up against its real limitation – and this is also a move that goes against Szczepański: Man is outside the axiosphere and can only approach it by searching beyond himself – by crossing the frontiers of his understanding. That is why Lem sees the matter of the usurpation of the right to mete out justice – which for Szczepański is a real question of *Weltanschauung* – as being an established certainty in a system of anthropological pessimism. It is a certainty which is not dwelt upon. In his attempts to reach the axiosphere, Man wends towards cosmic court hearings that exist in his own imagination, but is eventually stopped short in a way that is as natural as it is grotesque or tragic. This may be why Lem preferred Conrad's short (and longer short) stories to great "character odysseys" in the manner of *Lord Jim* and *Nostramo*, which had been viewed with admiration by Szczepański and most Polish men of letters during the war. We know that he had a particular fondness for "The Inn of the Two Witches", which Andrzej Zgorzelski described as "the emergence of 'polished form and right proportions'" from a tangled constellation of "accumulated layers, contrasts and oppositions".³² What may also have fascinated Lem is – as Marek Pacukiewicz has pointed out – the fact that this story brings home the truth that "convention is never 'transparent'" but "is always a contextualized point of view."³³ Lem may have seen this as a particularly valuable lesson. He would seem to have seen *The Shadow Line* as being a halfway house between the short (and longer short) stories and the great personal narrations.

And this, I think, is Lem's real "pan-Conradian space" – his real Conradian *locus amoenis*, which he may or may not have consciously explored. There is no evidence to suggest that Lem ever read *The Shadow Line*, which some critics consider to be Conrad's "last masterpiece".³⁴

Translated by R. E. Pyplacz

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³³ M. Pacukiewicz. "Conrad i Potocki: dwa „rękopisy"". *Pamiętnik Literacki* 2010, z. 3, pp. 8-9.

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