


ANDRZEJ BOBKOWSKI AS A CONRAD'S BELIEVER

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Abstract: The article reflects on Joseph Conrad's influence on Andrzej Bobkowski – a Polish writer and an airplane model maker (1913-1961), whose devotion to Conrad remains an example of readership that challenges one's life. The key issue discussed is the concept of patriotism and a pattern apparent in Conrad's life and works elaborated by Bobkowski.

Keywords: Andrzej Bobkowski, Joseph Conrad, emigration, freedom

The title of the article refers to Stefan Zabierowski's essay on Rafał Marcelli Blüth¹ because its aim is to familiarise the wider range of audience with another Polish intellectual of the 20th century to whom Joseph Conrad was a point of reference.

The text reflects on Joseph Conrad's influence on Andrzej Bobkowski – a Polish writer and an airplane model maker (1913-1961). Not only did his devotion to Conrad's prose shape his writings in the mode resembling that of Conrad, but also shed some light on his biography. In effect, in my opinion, Bobkowski elaborated a modern concept of patriotism rooted in Conrad's life and works.

One can argue that Conrad became a pattern of an émigré in general through his literary output and his life.² It is worth noting that Conrad's choices and values were appealing to Poles during and after the Second World War, particularly to those who, like Bobkowski, were deprived of the right to return to the Polish People's Republic from different parts of the world where they dispersed. They were fully aware of the price for being part of the new political order, of "people's democracy."

The label "Querido Bob," given to Bobkowski by Józef Czapski,³ sustains, in my view, its significance because the author of *Sketches with a Quill* through all his life demonstrated unshakeable and undisputed bonds with Joseph Conrad, and therefore he cannot be classified just as an ordinary Conrad's reader. Bobkowski can serve as

¹ Stefan Zabierowski, "Rafał Marcelli Blüth as a Conrad Scholar," *Yearbook of Conrad Studies* 12 (2017), pp. 7-26.

² For further analysis, see the highly inspiring volume: *Migration, Modernity and Transnationalism in the Work of Joseph Conrad*, eds. Kim Salmons and Tania Zulli (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

³ Józef Czapski, "Querido Bob," *Kultura* 9 (1961), p. 4.

an example of a follower who turns to be a faithful believer, identifying himself with the chosen author to an unexpected extent.

To elaborate on this thesis, I shall present a short biography of Bobkowski which will provide the background to his concept of a “Cosmo-Pole” – a term he created in relation to Conrad. In Bobkowski’s literary oeuvre many characters refer to Conrad on various levels, however, I will refer to the two works, that is, a short story “Alma,” which serves as a commentary on Conrad’s *Victory*, and “The Point of Balance” – a story which examines the “Lord Jim’s complex,” as well as to the essay “Biografia wielkiego Kosmopolaka” [Biography of the Great Cosmo-Pole].⁴

Bobkowski was born in Wiener Neustadt in Austria in 1913, as a Pole, the son of Henryk Bobkowski, professor of the Theresian Academy,⁵ and Stanisława Malinowska. His family moved several times (Lida, Vilnius, Modlin, Cracow). He studied economics at the Warsaw School of Economics (1933-1936) and in March 1939, he moved to France together with his wife. He initially opened a laundry and then started to work in the munitions factory in Châtillon near Paris. After France’s surrender, the factory was moved to the south. When his attempts to join the Polish army failed, he decided to return to Paris by bike. An account of his amazing journey was published later under the title *Sketches with a Quill*. After his return, Bobkowski worked in liquidation Office Atelier de Construction de Châtillon and secretly assisted Polish labourers. In the post-war period Bobkowski was a manager of the Polish Bookshop, and after a while a storekeeper at YMCA and a co-editor (with Andrzej Chciuk) of the magazine *Razem Młodzi Przyjaciele* [Young Friends Altogether] published illegally in Lyon from 1944.

Bobkowski, like numerous Poles highly disappointed with Yalta and Postdam outcomes, decided to stay in the West after the Second World War. He got involved in works of “Independence and Democracy” – an organization established in exile. His decision was very pragmatic as the return to the Polish People’s Republic would have meant serious troubles. Hanna Gosk, referring to the unpublished report found in Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences of America (PIASA), suggests that Jarosław Iwazkiewicz and Jerzy Borejsza met Bobkowski in Paris in May 22, 1948, and encouraged him to return to the Polish People’s Republic.⁶ However, being a Polish émigré in Europe, in Paris particularly, was not only a chance but rather a challenge to confront the long tradition of Polish émigrés who settled there after the November Uprising (1830), January Uprising (1863). This burden of history and current politics led him to compare his own to Conrad’s biography. At the beginning of 1948, Bobkowski made a radical decision to leave Paris and Europe for Guatemala. He abandoned everything: Poland in the shape given at Potsdam and Yalta, but also

⁴ Andrzej Bobkowski, “Biografia wielkiego Kosmopolaka” [Biography of the Great Cosmo-Pole], *Kultura* (1960), pp. 19-32.

⁵ Andrzej Bobkowski 2003, 27.10.1913-26.06.1961, <https://culture.pl/en/artist/andrzej-bobkowski> [accessed: 2.08.2021].

⁶ Hanna Gosk, “Emocje Bobkowskiego,” in *Buntownik, cyklista, kosmopolak. O Andrzeju Bobkowskim i jego twórczości*, eds. Jarosław Klejnocki and Andrzej St. Kowalczyk (Warszawa: Towarzystwo “Więź,” Muzeum Literatury im. Adama Mickiewicza, 2011), pp. 98-107.

Europe which, according to him, betrayed its heritage. He opted for life in a primeval land as he expected Guatemala to be, but also a land without Polish organisations, Polish community, without any support and any traditions of Polish emigration. I would suggest that his decision meant also his noble *liberum veto* to historical reality and to the comfort seeking attitude that overwhelmed the post-war world.⁷ One can also argue that it was the decision of an artist looking for new stimuli, but equally that was a decision of a man who took responsibility for shaping his own fate.

What lies at the root of this decision is also maximalist ethics assuming that a man is what he makes of himself and that he can always become something more than he is; hence, his ultimate stipulation is the continuous transgression of the limits of his possibilities.

Without doubt, this was a pompous and romantic gesture which can be regarded as typically Polish in its emotional intensity, yet bringing extraordinary consequences. It can be said that Bobkowski was proud of his "wildness" he called himself a hooligan of freedom, and wrote to Jerzy Turowicz, the editor-in-chief of the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, that he was "a wild one,"⁸ brave enough to jump into the unknown.

Bobkowski left France without money, without a command of the language, even without a clear idea what he would do in Guatemala, which evidences hazardous features of the writer, too. As he wrote to his wife's sister, Anna Seifert: "I am simply, humanly, pulled to another world, climate, people, nature [...]. There is something in me that tightens up and rises to the sun."⁹ To his uncle he confessed: "Well—Bobkowski is the one who is going on a conquest. I really have something of an adventurer in myself. It makes me happy."¹⁰

Later on he summed up his first years in Guatemala as going through the typhoon. His utmost desire was independence: he did not seek a safe, well-paid position, neither did he want fame nor carrier. He opened a workshop with flying airplane models and, finally, the Guatemala Hobby Shop. His modest literary output, a considerable part of which consists of essayistic forms and commentaries on Polish affairs focuses on the condition of the human being in confrontation with the challenges of modernity. He visited Europe only once, by no means for sentimental reasons, but only to take part in a competition of flying models in Stockholm, and he stayed for some time in Paris, Munich and Geneva. After several years of heroic struggle with terminal illness, Bobkowski died of cancer on June 26, 1961, in Guatemala. "I want to write

⁷ Stefan Zabierowski, "Conrad's Noble Heritage," trans. Ewa Kowal, *Yearbook of Conrad Studies* 4 (2008/2009), pp. 103-118.

⁸ Andrzej Bobkowski, *Listy do Jerzego Turowicza 1947-1960*, ed. Maciej Urbanowski (Warszawa: Towarzystwo "Więź," 2013), pp. 40, letter from 31.05.1948.

⁹ Jan Zieliński, "'Ode mnie przynajmniej listy coś są warte.' O listach Andrzeja Bobkowskiego do rodziny," *Twórczość* 8 (1984), p. 87.

¹⁰ Andrzej Bobkowski, *Listy do Aleksandra Bobkowskiego 1940-1961*, ed. Joanna Podolska (Warszawa: Towarzystwo "Więź," 2013), p. 43, letter from 21.03.1948.

this because there may be no one except myself to whom Conrad is so alive.”¹¹ In these words Bobkowski expressed his deepest admiration of Conrad in a letter to Aniela Mieczysławska, explaining why he agreed to write a chapter for the book entitled *Conrad Alive*, edited in 1957 by Wit Tarnawski and Bohdan Świdorski.

Taking into account Bobkowski’s personality and life decisions, to participate in a common effort to commemorate a famous writer by his fellow Poles might be seen as surprising compromise. Nevertheless, a simple fact that he was invited to write a chapter proves his recognition as a Conradian.

It was Bobkowski who coined a neologism “Kosmopolak”—a Cosmo-Pole which he used in his essay on Conrad entitled “Biography of the Great Cosmo-Pole,” penned after he was diagnosed with stomach cancer, and realized how little time remained.

In my opinion, this particular essay was not only a homage to Conrad but, equally, it was a very intimate testament and an autobiographical testimony. The testimony of an émigré, who lost everything, even hope for a return to the mother country, nevertheless, he remained himself and cherished his compound biography.

Starting with basic questions surrounding Conrad’s departure from a politically non-existent Poland, Bobkowski confirmed the already known findings of Conradians,¹² but also pointed out something new and important.¹³ Conrad’s decision to leave Poland was, according to Bobkowski, just particular contribution to a general emigration wave. In Bobkowski’s view, Conrad escaped from the “Galician illness,” from Cracow’s special mourning atmosphere, from pompous patriotic funerals and from Grottger’s engravings.¹⁴

Artur Grottger was a Polish artist, who after the January Uprising (1863-1864), made five series of engravings: *Warsaw I*, *Warsaw II*, *War*, *Polonia*, and *Lithuania*. They all referred to the events of the January Uprising, and their main protagonist was the Polish nation. Grottger depicted neither the leaders of the uprising nor any specific battles, but showed anonymous characters struggling and suffering. These engravings facilitated patriotic identification and had a tremendous impact on the common imagination. Without going into a detailed analysis, all these sketches present characters as victims, helpless yet proud, sentenced, forced to unfair struggle, overwhelmed by the forthcoming catastrophe, in a predicament where there was no way out, or rather a situation which could be escaped only through death.

According to Bobkowski, up until the end of the 19th century, emigration from Poland was a flight for life, for survival, triggered by the imminent danger from the

¹¹ Andrzej Bobkowski, *Przyśląłem sobie, że jeśli umrę, to nie w tłumie... Korespondencja z Anielą Mieczysławką 1951-1961* [I Swore to Myself not to Die in a Crowd. Letters to Aniela Mieczysławska], ed. and Introduction by Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk (Wałbrzych: Ruta, 2003), 96.

¹² Stefan Zabierowski, *Conrad w perspektywie odbioru* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1979); Stefan Zabierowski, “Conrad’s Polish Career. 1896-1968,” *Conradiana*, Lubbock, TX no. 3 (1974), pp. 198-213.

¹³ Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech, *Joseph Conrad. Spory o biografię* (Katowice: “Deni-Press” Usługi Wydawnicze i Reklamowe, 2003).

¹⁴ Andrzej Bobkowski, *Biografia Wielkiego Kosmopolaka*, in *Coco de Oro. Szkice i opowiadania* [Biography of the Great Cosmo-Pole. The Sketches and the Short Stories] (Warszawa–Lublin: Towarzystwo Opieki nad Archiwum Instytutu Literackiego w Paryżu, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 1998), p. 240.

East, from Russia intensifying its post-uprising repressions. He emphasized a similarity with his contemporary times, and thus indicated the common ground with Conrad in this experience: "How much our today's Drang nach Westen was proportional to the Drang von Osten."¹⁵ Bobkowski enumerated the great men and women of that exile to the West, among them:

- Henryk Sienkiewicz (Polish winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, for *Quo vadis* 1905),
- Adam Chmielowski (a talented painter, renowned as the author of *Italian Cemetery* and *Ecce Homo*; then as Saint Brother Albert. Finally he stayed in Poland and chose "inner emigration." He invented a new Roman-Catholic order for men and devoted his life to the homeless people),
- Helena Modrzejewska (an actress who pursued her career in the USA in the American theatre; her son Ralph Modjeski became one of the best American architects specializing in building bridges and awarded with numerous honours),
- Maria Skłodowska (married a Frenchman Pierre Curie, discovered radioactive elements. She was awarded the Nobel Prize twice: in 1903, together with Professor Henri Becquerel, in Physics, and then in 1911, with her husband Pierre Curie, in Chemistry).

All of these artists and scientists escaped to the Western Europe in order to remain themselves and be able to realize their potential. Bobkowski left Europe, just like they left partitioned Poland. He wanted to live in the literal as well as in figurative sense in order to save his physical life and preserve spiritual life, as he wrote in March 1942:

Beginning with Gregory of Tours, and finishing with Gide, I do not care about this at all; starting from Bogurodzica to Nałkowska, I do not care either – I am leaving. I have had enough of all this cradle of culture and concentration camps, called Europe, I have had enough of seeking the absolute – I only want to live. [...] I want to talk to myself directly, not through the absolute; I want to learn to live freely. Freely, without desire or belief in anything, I want to be good not because a teacher of religion orders so but because every man ought to be loved.¹⁶

Bobkowski agreed with Tadeusz Bobrowski when he reproached his nephew for recklessness, waste of money and a carefree attitude. He even referred to Conrad as a typical "graceful Polish impostor and schemer,"¹⁷ simultaneously presenting himself from the time of his adolescence in a similar way as "not being able to stand his family circle and doing his best so that this family circle would not stand him."¹⁸ For instance, he analyzed the technique of shooting in a duel, ruling out the possibility of the version in which Conrad was injured, and thus he accepted the likelihood of the author of *Lord Jim* retouching his biography.

¹⁵ Bobkowski, *Biografia Wielkiego Kosmopolaka*, p. 241.

¹⁶ Andrzej Bobkowski, *Szkice piórkem. Francja 1940-1941*, vol. 2 (Paryż: s.n., 1957), p. 71.

¹⁷ Bobkowski, *Biografia Wielkiego Kosmopolaka*, p. 242.

¹⁸ Andrzej Bobkowski, "Synopsis życiorysu," in Jerzy Giedroyc and Andrzej Bobkowski, *Listy 1946-1961*, ed. Jan Zieliński, Archiwum "Kultury" (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1997), p. 693.

He referred quite skeptically to Conrad's relations with women, claiming that the writer must have been shy and not very sophisticated with women.¹⁹ He regarded the story of Conrad's adolescent love as exaggerated, and indicated Heyst and Lena as the most probable portraits of both Conrad and Rita in this secret affair. Moreover, he claimed that an element of *tante* Paradowska appears in all Conrad's women characters. According to Bobkowski, she was the source of many women figures in Conrad's prose and, what is more: "Conrad's women have the outstanding traits of such imagined women and I would describe the majority of them as non-anatomical beings."²⁰ However, he acknowledged Lena as the most beautiful female figure in world literature, which will be discussed later in the text.

Bobkowski referred with restraint to the Conrad's biography as to the story of success, however, he also distanced himself from the martyrological post-Romantic version of it. There was something more important to him between the two edges of fate: one of the brilliant orphan, a martyr of his nation, and the second of the conqueror. His analysis of Conrad's professional life was extremely pragmatic. For him, Conrad was a captain, which entailed certain consequences: he was simply a clerk dependent on his bosses and employers, an ordinary official, which did not go hand in hand with a sense of independence, dignity and value. Conrad changed ships many times and did not get on well with his superiors, not because he did not cross his "shadow line," but because:

Conrad was "a nobleman," he had something typically Polish, something which foreigners are not able to grasp and what, for example, Russians and Czechs will never be able to accept in us. And on ships and in harbours he had to swallow large doses of ordinary caddish behaviour.²¹

For Bobkowski, being a nobleman meant being free and independent. Such profile can be disastrous for an individual, yet it makes him unpredictable and resistant to influences. This implies that nobility means more than blood ties, family, or education, or upbringing. Nobility is a value which determines the identity of an individual, setting high standards and issuing high bills for decisions without burdening anyone except the subject himself.

Seen from this perspective, being a writer meant more than being a captain, because it carried a notion of independence, freedom and greater risk. Yet Bobkowski did not probe into why Conrad was writing in English, he neither defended him nor explained, nor theorized, but rather considered the ways he acquired a command of the language. For himself, being a nobleman was made a manifest in the work he was doing in Guatemala. He took his freedom to the ultimate degree: in Guatemala "I am

¹⁹ For more see Monika Malessa-Drohomirecka, *Konwencje, stereotypy, złudzenia. Relacje kobiet i mężczyzn w prozie Josepha Conrada* (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych "Univeritas," 2017).

²⁰ Bobkowski, *Biografia Wielkiego Kosmopolaka*, p. 244.

²¹ Bobkowski, *Biografia Wielkiego Kosmopolaka*, p. 247.

finally free, so free that I can even die of hunger freely. I will be allowed, and this is the greatest feeling."²²

In his review of Baines's biography of Conrad, he criticized the author for his dependence on Polish interpretations, in which *Lord Jim* is an attempt to confront the complex of betrayal of the mother country. In Bobkowski's interpretation, Jim is rather a character in the mode of Hamlet and Don Quixote, because both protagonists left some sort of Patna.

Mother country is a mother country, Poland is Poland but a much more significant thing is deeper, uniquely human, and does not belong to any nation: the conscience. This is "what needs to be done," which cannot be deceived; this is a helpless desire to justify oneself, when one fails to follow these five words. What excuses are made then. This inspired many writers to create and many of them wrote their own "Lord Jim" under various titles.²³

He also emphasized the relevance and presence of the problem in the contemporary history of Poland, referring to the events of October 1956 and to such texts as *Transatlantic* by Witold Gombrowicz and *Native Realm* by Czesław Miłosz.

Such an attitude revealed not only his own convictions, but also his respect for this master. He believed that reading Conrad's novels "between the lines," the way Poles were accustomed to since the partition and due to the censorship, is no more legitimate. It can be one of many possible interpretations rather than a proper and authoritative commentary on hidden meanings. He claimed that Conrad succeeded to a large extent in doing what Gombrowicz suggested to Polish "wheatish-larkish" writers and what he dared name "liberation from Poland," and therefore after his return from Africa, Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness* and not a novel for the adolescents *In Desert and Wilderness* by Henryk Sienkiewicz²⁴ he sarcastically noted that depriving Cosmo-Poles of the right to their special status, despite their different yet related spiritual formation and outlook, is like accusing them of betrayal, desertion and isolation. At the same time, the accusers themselves boast of them in front of strangers, since it turns out that it is only by virtue of such renegades that the world has heard of Poland at all.²⁵ So too did he consider himself as a Conradian Cosmo-Pole, and as such wanted to be remembered.

I received a letter from Kazimierz yesterday. He says that he has sent me his new volume of poetry (published by Jerzy – our breathless governor can be a diplomat at times, can't he?), which I am very glad of, the more so as there is a poem dedicated to me, so thus I will pass on to posterity. This is also worth something. Miss Halina spent 12 days in Poland and she returned shocked. It's a pity – we are already Cosmo-Poles (brilliant term of Andrzej Bobkowski, which

²² From Bobkowski's letter, source: Tadeusz Żółciński, *Kosmopolak z Gwatemali* [A Cosmo-Pole from Guatemala], *Więź*, no. 2 (1963), p. 160.

²³ Bobkowski, *Biografia Wielkiego Kosmopolaka*, p. 249.

²⁴ Bobkowski, *Biografia Wielkiego Kosmopolaka*, p. 252.

²⁵ Bobkowski, *Biografia Wielkiego Kosmopolaka*, p. 253.

would be handed on to sociology) and we would not be able to live there. May Guatemala-Costaguana live long.²⁶

This term has been recognised and even popular among next generations, for example, Jacek Kaczmarski, a Polish poet, singer and songwriter known as a voice of the Solidarity trade union movement in the 1980s in Poland, used it in 1991 as a title of his songs album.²⁷

I would suggest that referring to Bobkowski as Cosmo-European would be more accurate, since Bobkowski's attitude towards Poland, built upon Conrad's achievements, constituted only a prefiguration of his attitude towards Europe. This prefiguration transmuted and extended into his attitude not only towards culture, tradition and history but mainly towards the politics and social order of the post-war continent.

In one of his letters to Andrzej Chciuk from Guatemala in 1957, he claimed:

As far as I am concerned, I exist and I am fine with it. I adore my foster country, I feel perfect here and I would return to my country only if I went crazy [...] no one will take me in because in this system, even of post-October socialism, nothing can ever be built.²⁸

Bobkowski was fighting his own war against sentimentalism and patriotism full of clichés. He abhorred “gargling” with Poland and the mother country and refused to accept Polishness as a ritual of suffering and death. Like Conrad and Gombrowicz, he desired to liberate himself from so called “Polishness” in order to be a Pole in fact, and to be able to accomplish something substantial for Poland. He rejected the socialist country, he hated communism just like any other ideology which attempts to subordinate the individual. To him totalitarian system was something essentially opposed to the European hierarchy of values. Bobkowski protected himself from the banalities of life in emigration that consisted in “settling down” or “living with the mother country's affairs.” In his letter to Tymon Terlecki, he realistically stated that Polish sincerity and Latin American esprit are equally theatrical and puffed up. Unfortunately to Polish disadvantage, because while Latin Americans perform the drama as a cold one, Poles always perform it as a hot one, always sincerely, crossing without concern and too easily boundaries of performance in direction of real blood. “When there is comedy over there, we are the audience of gloomy tragedy.”²⁹

Andrzej Bobkowski noted bitterly and sarcastically that the entire liberation from Polishness borders on the impossible for Poles because the Russians will never allow the Poles to forget about it. Hence this pressure becomes a source of irredeemable Polish animosity towards Russians. This element of Polishness reappears constantly in both Conrad's and his own writings. For example, in Bobkowski's story “The

²⁶ Bobkowski, *Przysięgłem sobie*, p. 175. He refers to a volume by Kazimierz Wierzyński and his poem “Medicine.”

²⁷ Joanna Skolik, “Jacek Kaczmarski jako uczestnik i kronikarz spraw ważnych,” in *Unisono w wielogłosie IV. Rock a media*, ed. Radosław Marcinkiewicz (Sosnowiec: Wydawnictwo GAD Records, 2013), pp. 297-307.

²⁸ Terlecki Tymon, *Spotkania ze swoimi* [Meetings with Our People] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1999), p. 154.

²⁹ Terlecki, *Spotkania ze swoimi*, p. 155.

Point of Balance,” an American man Burt asks Pochwalski (eponymous surname: Mr. Praising) many questions assuming that he, being a Pole, could help him to understand Conrad's anti-Russian attitude constituting, in Burt's understanding, the Polish spirit and identity.

Instead of providing answers, for various reasons Pochwalski avoids them – a personally difficult moment in his life, the consciousness of unavoidably passing time, the need to find a wall on which he can smash his head – all these come together in his unrealistic idea of rescuing the plane stacked on the lagoon. An act of rescuing the plane was meant to be a stage in a process of overcoming “Lord Jim” complex to Burt. Unexpectedly, Pochwalski starts to feel physically ill and at the same time he realizes that he is afflicted with the same complex as Burt, but part of his illness is memory, his quest for a meaning in his past and origin which were isolated and excluded from his life without a sparkle of hope as to how they could be assimilated into his experience:

Every evening I went on a long unnecessary walk back, only in order to return from these trips with a taste of ash in my mouth. With terror upon seeing my own, others' and the whole epoch's foolishness. I was not able to remember, I was not able to miss, reconstruct ruins and get sentimental on seeing old documents and photographs. I felt remorse on account of this, because there is no other nation where patriotism and attachment to motherland is measured with such an amount of nonsense and pocket sanctities.³⁰

Mr. Praising (Pochwalski) is uncomfortable because he feels in a different way from that which is expected of him and which is considered to be appropriate without questioning, but he is perfectly sure that cheap feelings weaken one's ability to face both real pain and real life. They do not comfort, do not provide strength nor direction for future. He had a strong sense of the emptiness of all these old terms and ideas, their shameful uselessness in a different world. Surprisingly enough, he suddenly started speaking on behalf of his generation:

We are an odd generation. In our youth we believed a little or did not believe at all, we were a bit cynical and a bit pathetic, barren mentally. Our only preoccupation was Poland, and it still is – unfortunately. Then we died in turn whether it was necessary or not, without a word of contradiction, beautiful and intelligent, like a moth flying towards a flame. Therefore, after all this, some of us adopted with such easiness the nonsense of the “new faith” while others followed the “old faith,” opting for the least inconvenient facets.³¹

Pochwalski's diagnosis can be easily taken as Bobkowski's own, which seems to break his consistency in following Conrad's principle “it needs to be done.” He rather poses a question about what needs to be done not how.

Bobkowski criticized the political order in Europe and the state of European culture itself. In the 50th edition of *Culture* in 1951, he wrote about Western Europe collapsing under its own impotence in *Questions of Savages*:

³⁰ Andrzej Bobkowski, “Punkt równowagi,” in *Coco de Oro*, p. 145.

³¹ Bobkowski, “Punkt równowagi,” p. 148.

[...] Europe? compromising and cowardly *pars pro toto* replaced the concept of Europe and its essence and content dissolved in this so smoothly that even the most brilliant Europeans fail to realize it.³²

The sense of bitterness evident in the above quotation constitutes a specific commentary on the political situation – after Yalta Europe was divided, crippled, and dependent on the Americans and Soviets. In *Culture* Bobkowski expanded upon the motivation behind his own emigration: “I suffocated in Europe like millions of people have been suffocating to date. It was not Europe that repudiated me but it was me who repudiated Europe. [...] “The European, who is not willing to become free, ceases to be European. To be one, I had to leave.”³³

Therefore, Bobkowski not only left Poland, but he also left Europe, remaining paradoxically its child. He opposed European culture, seeing its decline and frailty, while being simultaneously its great representative. He opposed to a course of history which determined his decisions and choices, yet he was aware that they neither determine nor have any impact on history, and in their oneness and rebellion they appear as theatrical gestures, as manifestations without meaning for everyone except him. He demonstrated unwillingness and inability to return to Poland, yet never totally liberated himself from thinking about Poland and Europe.

It is difficult to assess whether Poland belonging to Europe was the point of balance for him, though one thing is certain – they were Bobkowski’s point of reference. Bobkowski remained faithful to Conrad’s principles of the writer’s honesty and the mutual correlation between life and creativity, manifesting this faithfulness in his life choices: “If you want to print in Poland, come back here with everything and bear the consequences you would have to bear as a writer. If you are in exile, bear all the consequences this entails, including a limited circle of readers.”³⁴ However, in his intellectual and spiritual schemes he failed to maintain his master’s consistency by constantly referring to Europe and Poland. It would seem that one aspect, disadvantageous to the process of separation from them, was paradoxically Conrad himself.

While reading Conrad, Bobkowski seems to be seeking evidence of his criticism of and distance from Europe, as if he wanted to confirm his own convictions and, at the same time, provide nourishment and understanding for his entanglement in Europe. He is incapable of escaping from it also because of the fact the he is perceived as a European by others.

Hence, according to Bobkowski’s reading, the depiction of Europe in Conrad’s writings is bleak, particularly in his novel *Victory*: London is compared to a graveyard, Heyst is “the suspected Swede,” Schomberg is a dismal German creature, whose motto of “adequate entertainment for white people” read in the post-war period acquires ominous connotations, Jones is a bored and spoilt “nobleman,” Alma seems to be a by-product of culture and society, white people are generally corrupt and continue to corrupt the world, Wang is a Chinese man who claims he knows

³² Andrzej Bobkowski, “Pytania dzikich ludzi,” in *Coco de Oro*, p. 84.

³³ Andrzej Bobkowski, “Na tyłach,” *Culture*, nr 16-17 (1949), p. 181.

³⁴ Bobkowski’s letter, source: Giedroyc and Bobkowski, *Listy 1946-1961*, p. 391.

whites well and dislikes them. They dislike one another too, know little of one another and do not fight to achieve any common goal. Marcin Ricardo dislikes them too, expresses it and, in effect, his and Wang's opinions dominate in the judgment of whites. In writing "Alma," Bobkowski reached for a similar strategy as a tribute to Conrad. The first-person narrator of the story, a Pole, and the American, John, are ridiculed by native Guatemalans who accompany them on their journey to discover a tropical paradise – to get away from it all on an unspoiled Pacific beach. They are ridiculed as those from "the North" who can neither work nor relax nor live without tormenting themselves with literature.

The character of "Alma," Lena, is considered by John to be the most important, while this most complete woman figure in all literature is disdainfully compared by Enrique to "Tosca from Indonesia," which becomes a bone of contention between the two men. Enrique taunts: "They cannot relax. There is no sea, there is no sun, they are not able to be where they are. They are no longer here. [...] We were observed by them like two sophisticated chess players – it seemed – with a shade of unconscious jealousy."³⁵

The men from the North are united by literature and regard themselves and their unity as an object of admiration and jealousy which justifies their sense of superiority. When asked about the most interesting woman figure by John, the narrator reviews Polish literature thoroughly, yet the results of this review are mediocre and limited to such epithets as: "a goose," "a doll," a "pernicious anaemic," "the senses in their forties hungry for caresses." Then he moves on to a similar review of French, English and German literature – looking in vain for a paragon. *Nota bene*, Bobkowski took advantage of this situation to portray maliciously European cultural stereotypes of woman directly. A woman is regarded as "a by-product, accelerating reactions, a mirror of male actions, facilitating the description of an unlimited number of reflections, yet is she essential?"³⁶ Following this established view of women's mediocrity in Europe, the reader is confronted with the American's statement full of displeasure, which I quote in full:

Don't take any offence, but I must insist to you that they are not able to understand us... Tosca from Indonesia! They will be talking about culture, they will be jealous, yet they fail to see that our entire culture is woman, our attitude to woman. From the dawn of time. Starting from Greece. Who is woman to them? And that's why they don't have any literature at all, and they won't have it until the woman remains what she is now.³⁷

Bobkowski demonstrates how European culture is perceived by an American, who tries to understand the representatives of "the North." What can be said then about a woman in European culture – does a woman determine it from its very foundation, or perhaps, is woman absent from it? Or is there no culture, bearing in mind that the narrator is unable to indicate even one example of a real woman in literature? Or

³⁵ Andrzej Bobkowski, "Alma," in *Opowiadania i szkice* [Short Stories and Sketches] (Warszawa: Interim, 1994), p. 31.

³⁶ Bobkowski, "Alma," p. 31.

³⁷ Bobkowski, "Alma," p. 34.

perhaps, he is unable to do so because he is a disappointed European and he cannot see anything positive in the old continent? I am quoting these excerpts to demonstrate not only the complexity of Bobkowski's reflections, but also his technique of playing with the reader, his way of presenting hypotheses and gathering arguments, which can help yet also hinder the choice of an unequivocal answer.

The narrator and John agree at last about one thing, that is, the most beautiful woman figure is Lena – the protagonist of Conrad's *Victory*: weak, pushed to the margins of society, non-idealized, yet truly good, not strikingly beautiful, yet charming, exploited and persecuted and lonely, heroic and judging reality in the most realistic manner, mysterious, yet apparently unsophisticated, melodramatic, and eventually – tragic. Following John's reflection above one is prompted to ask whether European culture is similar to Alma.

Heyst, on the other hand, is regarded as a character who is the closest to Conrad himself.³⁸ But is this accurate? Axel Heyst, raised by his father, under his powerful influence, a man who consciously opts for the bystander's position in life, lives according to the principle of not being involved in events and staying apart from the world. He is afraid of being dominated by people to whom he opens his heart. Most of all, he desires freedom and independence. The man who kills no one and loves no one – is this the way in which Bobkowski perceived Conrad, or does he wish to identify with the master through one of Conrad's protagonists?

Heyst was not conscious of either friends or enemies. It was the very essence of his life to achieve solitude, accomplished not by hermit-like withdrawal with its silence and immobility, but by a system of restless wandering, by the detachment of the impermanent dweller amongst changing scenes. In this scheme he perceived a means of passing through life without suffering and almost without a single care in the world – invulnerable because elusive.³⁹

In my opinion, neither Conrad nor Bobkowski met these criteria, and Bobkowski's thesis would appear to be one more game with the reader, leading to a private search for an ideal which the reader might like to imitate and which he would regard as applicable to himself. Anyway, Bobkowski suggested that "Samburan's mystery" was of existential nature, and anticipated Sartre's and Kafka's themes. Heyst represents Thought which is enslaving man and he is disregarded by others expecting him to embody a "hairy ideal of a man" who despises thinking. For Bobkowski, this is "a logical contradiction in which we struggle seeking liberation in Thought, and find it through simultaneously sliding into a trap from which there is no way out."⁴⁰ Heyst is a man caught in such a trap, a man disappointed not only with culture, for which his father instilled disdain in him, but also with himself.

Other characters in Bobkowski's prose are also permeated by an awareness of Europeanism. Among them are: Pochwalski in "The Point of Balance,"⁴¹ who treats Burt with irony and leniency, as a representative of Americans. He does so impul-

³⁸ Bobkowski, "Alma," p. 36.

³⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Victory. An Island Tale* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 86.

⁴⁰ Conrad, *Victory*, p. 37.

⁴¹ Bobkowski, "Punkt równowagi," p. 138.

sively and does so not because Burt deserves it, but because he is European and was brought up in such a system of thinking. Yet he acquires self-awareness and endeavors to look objectively and without prejudice at his companion. He does not claim he understands him, yet he notices a barrier preventing him from complete openness towards him. Autoironic analysis of his own behaviour allows him to discover a Romantic fanaticism in contrast to the American's composure and pragmatism. Yet Bobkowski does not force himself to judge these two characters: Pochwalski does not humiliate himself, he does not glorify his companion's common sense, he concentrates rather on the immovable division "we – they." Pochwalski is inexorably constructed by Burt, subjected to a process of creating stereotypes, while at the same time he acquires knowledge in a stereotypical way, through accepted, ready-made schemes: "I do not know, why but in relation to them we often try to be perceived as cultural Spartans. [...]. Our psychological shrewdness with respect to them reminds me of the intelligence of a cat creeping up on birds chirping in radio speakers."⁴²

Mr. Praising (Pochwalski) acknowledges his Europeanism even in relation to machines and technology,⁴³ in his attitude to work, which for a Pole or a European can become the essence of life, whereas for an American – a challenge at the most. When a heart condition brings to mind thoughts about death, he addresses God instinctively, while the meeting with the missionary shows him how shallow his faith has been, based on ritual, pose and bigotry, so widely accepted in his country. This reveals to him how misleading the myth of Poland as a truly Catholic country can be and how far the myth of Christian Europe is from its internalization: "[...] it was then that I realized with a bitter inner smile that if we lack the courage not to be Catholics in public, we often lack courage to be them in private."⁴⁴ He tries to reverse this lie in himself, and after making an unconventional confession, he receives an interesting briefing from a Franciscan priest, which can be read in the European cultural context as a new Faustian statement, as well in the autobiographical context of Bobkowski's last years when he was struggling with cancer: "Try. This is what also counts. We all need to try. Sometimes saints result from these trials."⁴⁵

Bobkowski identified himself with Conrad on many levels including Conrad's moral insistence on remaining loyal to the plain truths of honesty and honour. By creating the term "Cosmo-Pole," he established a new category of patriotism relieved of pocket sanctities and cheap feelings. The characters in Bobkowski's stories make their fortunes abroad on their own and gain independence, they struggle with their limitations and shape their lives as the characters in Conrad's novels do. All of them face moral dilemmas; in fact, their whole lives consist of acts of making choices. For them, to exist is tantamount to forming themselves and taking responsibility for this process. Bobkowski considers these values to be the most important in Conrad's writings.

⁴² Bobkowski, "Punkt równowagi," p. 142.

⁴³ Bobkowski, "Punkt równowagi," p. 143.

⁴⁴ Bobkowski, "Punkt równowagi," p. 151.

⁴⁵ Bobkowski, "Punkt równowagi," p. 153.

Bobkowski agreed with Conrad, yet he went further. He criticized what was happening in Poland, he was involved in debates and discussions, he provoked his fellow patriots, he did not fight “for the sake of...” but “with” – he always needed to confront a real and identifiable enemy. He wanted to owe everything to himself only; he despised any form of dependence, in particular the financial one. Józef Czapski⁴⁶ emphasized that Bobkowski was a son of Conrad and a rebel in raw nature, undermining all authorities and uncovering not only Polish stereotypes, and such extreme individualism tends to be troublesome. Yet he was unable to liberate himself either from Polishness or Europeanism. He was not allowed to do so because of his love for Conrad and because he was perceived by others in exclusively Polish national and cultural categories. He experienced a constant tension between fascination and rejection, between the elevated ideal that he aimed to achieve, and a reality full of lies and falsehood, which filled him with abhorrence.

Conrad could have liberated himself more fully, or more consistently. In my view, his silence on Polish affairs (excluding of course *Prince Roman*, his political writings and personal records and letters) was in fact the only way of expressing his unity with Poland. He did not use a language which was illegal in Europe, he did not write about a country that had vanished from European map, he did not woo the Western audience by playing with which was unknown to it. With his attitude and mastery of writing, he triggered a question about where he came from and what had shaped him, which resulted in a further question about the unknown and absent Poland. On the one hand, he fulfilled his father’s expectations expressed in the poem “Baptismal Song”; on the other, he created a pattern of new patriotism built upon axiology. Bobkowski followed him but not without struggle. His idea of patriotism belongs to the totally different world after the Second World War which questioned faithfulness and honour and all values of European culture. Bobkowski asks what “needs to be done” rather than “how it needs be done.” To the last question exists an obvious answer: like Conrad – consciously, uncompromisingly, radically, taking responsibility to the very end. These features demand faith and responsibility. Bobkowski believed in the truths expressed by Conrad and also he believed Conrad that he will lead him to the safe coast of one’s integrity. This kind of trust enables one to put at risk everything in order to confirm the made choices. Bobkowski’s faith in Conrad has nothing in common with a blind admiration, rather it reveals tremendous need of authority, of spiritual and moral compass to which Conrad responds universally.

Paradoxically, to Bobkowski complete severance from Poland and Europe would have been an act of betrayal of Conrad’s ideal, an escape from taking responsibility for failure and downfall, a kind of false comfort, like leaving Patna in the time of post-war chaos.

⁴⁶ Czapski, “Querido Bob,” pp. 3-9.

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