Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)
Vol. 13 2018, pp. 129–134

JOSEPH CONRAD: A CITIZEN OF A GLOBAL WORLD

Review of Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World*, Penguin Press 2017, pp. 376, with Index, maps and illustrations

Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech
University of Silesia

> "One day, putting my finger on a spot in the very middle of the then white heart of Africa, I declared that some day I would go there."[1]

On the dust jacket one can see a silhouette of a well-built man against the stormy sea (definitely too tall to be Conrad himself), standing on a downward spiral (symbolizing the downfall of civilization?) and next to it the blurb "enlightening, compassionate, superb," a recommendation by John le Carré—surely, as we shall see, the author of *The Tailor of Panama* would know what to recommend… but first things first.

Nowadays we observe a boom in popularizing biographies that try to bring us closer to the classic writers (e.g. S. Greenblatt's *Will in the World*, or A. Sismon's *John le Carré: The Biography*). An impressive example of such a book is Maya Jasanoff's *The Dawn Watch* which is an expansion of the biographical convention with one major difference. Instead of placing Joseph Conrad in the centre, it locates world history there and views Conrad as "an object of history" so as to "shape his biography from outside in" (10). Maya Jasanoff is Coolidge Professor of History at Harvard University who received several prestigious awards for her historical books (the 50th Duff Cooper Prize and the Windham-Campbell Literature Prize, among others). She retells Conrad's life story to "link the histories of Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America […] and to consider what Conrad said about them in four of his best-known novels: *The Secret Agent*, *Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *Nostromo*" (9). She grapples with this subject to prove her main thesis: "What I found in Conrad's life and

[1] J. Conrad, "Geography and Some Explorers" [in:] *Last Essays: The Cambridge Edition of the Works of J. Conrad*, eds. H. R. Stevens and J. H. Stape, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010, p. 4.

fiction […] was a history of globalization" (9). Her task was to use appropriate words to show it or, in other words, "to render justice" to Conrad's life and letters through the lens of globalization. And indeed on this point she succeeds brilliantly since she discusses the process of globalization in each part of the book so that we obtain a broad socio-historical and economic context. To achieve that Jasanoff embarks on a journey to Kinshasa aboard a cargo ship and up the Kongo river by boat to experience what Conrad had experienced. Strangely enough, there are a great deal of similarities with Conrad's expedition: a lot of red tape, corrupt officials, difficulties to get to Kongo ("My contacts pressed their contacts" (2) much as Conrad's aunt pressed her friends).

One might pose the question why explore the life of a long-dead white man once again? There have been so many biographies of Conrad so far. Jasanoff offers a direct answer: because he is our contemporary.

> As I […] read more of Conrad's books, I found myself […] amazed by the prophetic sweep of his 'particular way of looking at the world'. After 9/11 and the rise of Islamist terrorism, I was startled to remember that the same author who'd condemned imperialism in *Heart of Darkness* had also written *The Secret Agent* (1907), which centers around a terrorist bomb plot in London. After the 2008 financial crisis, I found Conrad in *Nostromo* (1904) portraying multinational capitalism getting up to the same kinds of tricks that I read about in the daily newspaper. As the digital revolution gathered pace, I discovered Conrad writing movingly, in *Lord Jim* (1900) […] about the consequences of technological disruption in the industry he knew best: shipping. As debates about immigration unsettled Europe and the United States, I marveled anew and afresh at how Conrad had produced *any* of these books in English – his third language, which he'd learned only as an adult. (5)

Jasanoff is scrupulous to accentuate the contemporariness of Conrad's writing examining the very issues which we debate today. For example, in *The Secret Agent* we see the Russian government interfering in the affairs of a democratic state. Does it ring a bell? The latest Sergei and Yulia Skripal's affair sounds familiar… In *Nostromo*, we observe "the British Empire facing the threat of being eclipsed by America just as our own empire now sees the rise of China" (313).

In the first part entitled *Nation* whose backdrop is *The Secret Agent* Jasanoff outlines the Polish childhood of Conrad, his sea years in Marseille and sojourns in London. The biographer skillfully entangles the particulars with the global developments.

> At the time of his birth, the failure of a bank in Ohio touched off a financial panic that toppled firms in Hamburg. British troops struggled to suppress a rebellion in India. Indian troops sailed to Canton to threaten Chinese imperial officials. Chinese settlers rebelled on a river in Borneo, in a Malay state ruled by a European. European cloth and guns were traded up the Congo basin for ivory […]. (19)

The reader gets a complete picture of the world social and economic affairs, and with a magnifying glass traces a spec—a boy born somewhere near Berdychiv. Astonishingly, Jasanoff unearthed the Polish saying "send a letter to Berdychiv" which nowadays means "send a letter to nowhere," which intensifies the clash between the local and the global.

A considerable asset of Jasanoff's popular historic biography is the rich texture of her narrative which sparkles with colours, scents, and flavours as if the reader was really there, for instance, seeing Marseille for the first time with Conrad's eyes.

> Marseille, city of olive oil, orange trees, sweet wine, and sacks of spice, mouth open to the Mediterranean and eye cocked toward the Atlantic, city of Crusaders, revolutionaries, the Count of Monte Cristo. Konrad walked down the hill from his lodgings to the Vieux Port. Masts poked above the roofline like shorn wheat. He walked past café of clacking dominoes and twinkling glasses of vermouth, peasant women holding panniers of goat cheese for sale, an old North African cranking his barrel organ over the dissonant screech of trams. In and out the shipping offices came the captains, faces creased like old papers. Knuckles of sun punched the water in the harbor. "Monsieur Georges!" called a pilot, collapsing "Korzeniowski" in his French mouth. (54)

It is as if we were just passing by witnessing a scene of a morning meeting of two friends at the quay in a sunny Mediterranean harbour.

The second part *Ocean* revolves around *Lord Jim*. Not surprisingly we meet Marlow who grapples with Jim's story: "Marlow spun, knitted, and snipped: sometimes an actor in Jim's story; sometimes a curator, piecing it together from what other people told him […]" (147). Quite imaginative is Jasanoff's explanation of the novel's meandering narrative mode which, according to her, owes "much to Conrad's maritime perspective" because sailors "spin yarns about adventures and encounters from the past, which—*like the lines they coil and mend*—come at length, and with twists and turns" (146, emphasis added).

In this part we can find a detailed fragment depicting the daily routine on board, including the eponymous dawn watch (morning watch). I will quote it in extenso for, to my mind, it is one of the best passages in the book which reveals Jasanoff's storytelling skills in full swing:

> "All on the starboard watch, ahoy!" A shout in the dark, banging on the scuttle. "Do you hear the news there, sleepers?" Ordinary Seaman Konrad Korzeniowski opened sticky eyes to a stack of bunks and slumbering bodies. […] He breathed in the mold and sour breath and registered where he was. On board the Duke of Sutherland […] seven bells into the morning watch. He swung his feet over the rim of the bunk and clambered up the companionway, heels tender from the nighttime nibbling of rats. A quick rinse and wipe down with a cloth, then into the galley to scoop a few ladles of gray porridge from the kid. He propped himself against a sail locker to eat, gulping coffee from a tin cup. In the early morning sun the sea blazed white. Eight bells, eight A.M.: start of the forenoon watch. He took his orders from the bosun, Mayers, a mean, swaggering Barbadian. […] Seven bells: dinner for the off-going watch. Yesterday was pork and peas, so today would be beef, bulked up with cracker hash, and a dose of lime juice […]. Eight bells, twelve p.m.: afternoon watch, and then eight bells, four p.m.: first dogwatch. More coiling lines, stowing gear, sweeping and washing. […] Four bells, six p.m.: second dogwatch. The beginning of a new 'day' in sea-keeping time. […] Konrad had his supper in the twilight and watched the water slice away from the ship in foam-capped strips. Eight bells, eight p.m.: first night watch. His turn to take a two-hour trick at the helm […]. The 'little one' bell marked midnight. He went down […] and tumbled himself into his bunk. […] Another day done: December 3, 1878, his twenty-first birthday. (89-93)

Happy Birthday!—the reader would like to say—after attending with Konrad to all the duties all day long. On reading this passage one can feel the fatigue and strain of the routine on board. Most importantly, however, it points to Jasanoff's meticulous background reading of thousands of sources including parliamentary and official documents, shipping records, accounts of sailor's life, histories of British maritime and, of course, modern scholarship which never come to the surface but shimmer under the factually rich narrative.

Similarly to the previous part, Jasanoff painstakingly portrays the global context for Conrad's decision to become an English sailor and later to go into steam. "When Conrad […] went to sea in the 1870s […] a surge in steamships was disrupting the maritime world. […] The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 gave steamships a critical edge over sail on the busy Europe-to-Asia route […]. A sailor didn't need to see the statistics to know that there were more jobs available in Britain than anywhere else, and a wider range of ships to work on" (95-96).

Yet, nowhere else but in part three (*Civilization*) is the personal with the global more tightly interwoven. The section focuses on *Heart of Darkness* and irrefutably shows that Conrad indeed was only "a cog in a machine". Jasanoff thoroughly presents the chain of historical and economic processes that "transformed […] Africa from a place scarcely broached by outsiders into one of the most brutally exploited colonies on earth" (168). Interestingly, she also points that "if a few transactions had gone differently Konrad Korzeniowski might have found himself sailing among Belgians around south East Asia and never have visited Africa at all" because King Leopold II investigated many options "he traveled to Egypt, India, and China, scoping for colonies" and "approached the British adventurer James Brook about making the Borneo province of Sarawak into a Belgian colony" (174). The Harvard historian is at her best when she depicts the broad panorama of the maneuvers going on "behind the scenes": "Wherever Stanley and the association's agents went, they held palavers (negotiations) with [African] local chiefs and handed them treaties to 'sign' with an *X*. By many of these documents, the chiefs agreed […] 'to give up … the sovereignty and rights … to all their territories'. […] Meanwhile in Europe, King Leopold II and his agents conferred with representatives from the great powers, seeking diplomatic recognition of the budding state" (177).

Jasanoff gives us several descriptions of the journey up the Congo river (Stanley's, Delcommune's, Konrad's and her own). The one-thousand-mile trip was the beginning of the whole bookish enterprise: to step or sail in the wake of the writer. Jasanoff did what no other biographer of Conrad had done: she actually sailed in a small boat up the Congo river, eat smoked monkey heads and batted away tsetse flies, slept in a small cabin for weeks. Maybe this enabled her to write such extraordinarily vivid (and informative) descriptions as, for example, that of collecting latex from rubber trees in the jungle:

> Rubber grew in the jungle for the taking, but extracting it was a beastly business. You had to go into the rain forest, your feet squelching deep into mud and standing water, hoping not to step on a snake, ears pricked for the rustle of leopards a pounce away. You had to pick out a rubber vine in the vegetable tangle, then shimmy up its stalk to a point soft enough that you could slice

> into it to release the sap. […] You had to wait for the creamy liquid to drip into your pot, then wait for it to thicken and gum into latex. (209)

The last part *Empire* orbits around *Nostromo* persuasively showing the influence of the experience of Conrad's friend, R. Cunninghame Graham in South America on its composition. Once again as in the previous parts, Jasanoff stresses the global background forces operating behind the fictitious plot. *Nostromo* became "a novel about the new, hard fact of American imperialism" (260). She argues that the historical events happening in Latin America in 1903 presented Conrad with "a real-time, real-world example of precisely the type of story he was now trying to tell. It was a tale of U.S. intervention on behalf of a valuable asset: a long-dreamed-of project to build a canal in Panama" (263). Her descriptions of the intrigues and treachery behind the construction of the canal equal those of le Carré in *The Tailor of Panama*. Not surprisingly, the publisher chose his recommendation for the blurb; *The Dawn Watch* is a thrilling (intellectually) reading. To quote just the beginning of the gripping plot:

> Meanwhile in Panama, a conspiracy was fully under way. It was hatched over lunch one summer Sunday by a group of Panama City businessmen and civic leaders, under the auspices of the U.S. consul general. Plans for the revolution were freely discussed […]. The secessionists dispatched a representative to New York to secure money, weapons, and the backing of the U.S. federal government […]. What they didn't expect was that one of the conspirators would turn around and reveal the plot to the Colombian ambassador. (268).

The historical and economic processes always come to the fore and the novels serve as a backdrop. I have deliberately used the word backdrop since Jasanoff is not a literary critic. She acknowledges the complexity of Conrad's works but does not offer any novel interpretations of her own. And yet there are some astoundingly fresh comments on his works which prove that there is still a considerable potential in Conrad scholarship. One fine example is her general discussion of the crucial points of *The Secret Agent*:

> *The Secret Agent* mapped the contours of his [Conrad's] early life. There's a family filling the roles of father, mother son and sometimes grandmother: Apollo, Ewa, and Konrad Korzeniowski, sometimes joined by Teofila Bobrowska. There's a coven of revolutionaries in the family home, just as Conrad vaguely remembered having seen "appearing and disappearing in that immense space" of the family's flat on Nowy Świat in 1861, in the weeks before the police came for his father. There are revolutionary organizations, papers, and pamphlets, like his father's Committee of Action, *Dwutygodnik*, and *Kraj*. There's a spectacular event that goes off too soon and kills the wrong person, like the Polish insurrection that backfired in 1863. There's a sinister, autocratic foreign power, manifestly Russia. There's a haven for exiles, namely England. And there's a central figure who lives a double life, like Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski. (81)

Jasanoff is aware that following in the writer's footsteps in nothing new and she duly pays homage to Norman Sherry who "'did hero's service' by hunting down specific sources for Conrad's fiction" (10). One more predecessor should be mentioned here, the writer, photographer and traveller Andrzej Braun who travelled to Asia and South America to bring closer to the reader Conrad's world in pictures (e.g. in such

travelogues as *Conrad – dotknięcie Wschodu* [*Conrad: The Touch of the East*], *Kreacja Costaguany: świat południowoamerykański u Conrada* [*The Creation of Costaguana: Conrad's South American World*]). Yet none of them used such richly textured narratives, and poetic style to describe what Conrad could have seen. For one, the description of Singapore harbor: "Arriving at the riverfront, he seized up the stocky profile of British power. The Harbour, Post Office, and the Flint Buildings, with its warren of offices, lined the embankment, stout and overdressed in the heat. An iron suspension bridge straddled the canalize river like a policeman with his hand on his hips" (119). The literary figure of anthropomorphization is similar to those used by Conrad's in *The Sisters.* As if that was not enough, Jasanoff continues to pile up more and more vivid details for the reader's imagination to digest: "Konrad looked down into the river's inner harbor. Junks with pleated fins of sail, ketch-rigged fishing boats, broad-beamed lighters topped with lean-tos, tusk-shaped *perahus* curling from the water with painted eyes that peered over the waterline" (120). Is it still a biography of Conrad—one may wonder—or maybe an excerpt from one of his books? (For instance, in *Victory* Conrad described the Sourabaya quayside in a similar way.) Another fragment to show Jasanoff-cum-Conrad descriptive skills:

> Now he strolled through the city center under the eaves of interlocking shophouses. Their shuttered faces were like the tropical version of the Islington terraces he'd left behind. He passed lintels signed in Chinese and bobbing with red lanterns: teahouses, bankers, tinkers, tailors. Sailors tumbled out of crudely signed tavern, "The Silver Anker" and "The Original Madras Bob". He looked into the forecourt of a Taoist temple hazed in incense; he glimpsed the pea-green minarets of a mosque. Chinese rickshaw pullers trotted past him, and Tamil bearers balanced parcels on their turbans. […] The onion stink of durians followed Konrad down the street. (119)

I have never eaten a durian but I can smell it distinctly thanks to Jasanoff's synecdochic and expressive descriptions.

Facts aside, Jasanoff is frequenly very poetic, making the reader pause to reflect on the significance of common things and events: "Estuaries are liminal spaces" (128), "Even when you can trace the fault lines, there's no knowing where or when an earthquake will strike" (295), "As what you see on the face of things may or may not tell you much about what it means—the same way you can be hypnotized by the play of light and shadow on a pool of water without ever knowing how cold or salty it may be" (147); "A spider in a worldwide web of somewhere, London caught the world in lines of news" (58).

Using "the compass of the historian, the chart of the biographer and the navigational sextant of the fiction reader", Jasanoff gives us a fascinating story of the life of an uncommon man allowing us to share with her the visions she experienced. Definitely, Conrad *is* one of us (not "was" as Jasanoff writes (12)): a citizen of our global world, an astute observer whose comments are more perspicacious and far-reaching than we would suppose at first reading.