

LESZEK PROROK AS ONE OF CONRAD'S SUCCESSORS. ON BEING ENRAPTURED

Wiesław Ratajczak

The Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

Abstract: The work of Leszek Prorok (1919-1984) has long been of interest to Polish Conrad scholars. Not content with writing commentaries on Conrad's novels and stories, Prorok also made references to them in his own original fiction. In this paper I discuss three issues. First I recall Prorok's *Inicjacje conradowskie (Conradian Initiations)* and in particular the chapter entitled *Naturaliter Christiana*, in which Christianity is shown to be an indispensable context for Conrad's writing. Moving on to the intertextual links between the two writers, I present a comparative interpretation of Conrad's *Freya of the Seven Isles* and Prorok's short play entitled *Freja – zimna bogini miłości (Freya – the Cold Goddess of Love)*. Both authors use the romantic theme of an unsuccessful elopement in order to concentrate the reader's attention on those forces which stand in opposition to human happiness. Whereas Conrad's story is set in the islands of the Indian Ocean, Prorok's play is set in the stark realities of the Second World War. I then go on to compare two other works: Conrad's *The Shadow Line (Smuga cienia)* and Prorok's *Smuga blasku (The Radiance Line / The Radiant Line)*. The links between the two novels have been discussed by Adam Gillon and others. The question I would like to pose here is whether Prorok, by writing a 'continuation' of *The Shadow Line*, was trying to highlight Christian thematic threads, which is something that would have been in conformity with a suggestion to be found in the relevant chapter of his own book entitled *Inicjacje conradowskie (Conradian Initiations)*.

Keywords: Christian inspirations, World War II literature, Conrad in Polish literature, rapture

Polish Conrad scholars have long been interested in the author Leszek Prorok (1919-1984), who not only interpreted Conrad's works, but also made allusions to them in his own writing. His perspective on Conrad is well laid out in his *Inicjacje conradowskie (Conradian Initiations)* and in particular in an extensive chapter entitled *Naturaliter Christiana*, where he argues that the Christian context is indispensable for any interpretation of Conrad's fiction. If we take a look at Prorok's writing for the theatre, we can see the intertextual links between his short play entitled *Freja – zimna bogini miłości (Freya – the Cold Goddess of Love)* and Conrad's story *Freya of the Seven Isles*. In these works, both authors use the theme of an unsuccessful elopement in order to concentrate the reader's attention on forces which conspire against human happiness. Conrad sets his story in the islands of the Indian Ocean, while Prorok combines the Conradian motifs (alluded to in the very title of his play)

with the realities of the Second World War and the conventions of non-fiction. Another pair of works that are worth reading together are Conrad's *The Shadow Line* (*Smuga cienia*) and Prorok's *Smuga blasku* (*The Radiance Line / The Radiant Line*). Although the links between the two novels have been the subject of many discussions (the first being the study by Adam Gillon), it might be worth supplementing existing interpretations by asking whether Prorok really did attempt to highlight Christian motifs – as would appear from the chapter title *Naturaliter Christiana* – by “writing in” what he saw as the missing elements in the biography and work of his favourite author.

“Fair and honest beyond reproach, altruistic and modest, he also possessed the rare gift of being able to organize things. He was one of those people you could rely on in any difficult situation.”¹ Such was Jan Józef Szczepański's assessment of his friend Leszek Prorok on the tenth anniversary of the latter's death. Both had worked together for many years as members of the Polish Writers' Union (*Związek Literatów Polskich*) and had continued their cooperation even after the suspension and ultimate dissolution of that organization by the Polish authorities after martial law was declared in 1981. Both had been members of the Polish Resistance during the German occupation and both had related this experience (as well as its postwar continuation) to their reading of Conrad. In a book containing his reminiscences of interrogation and imprisonment during the Stalinist period, Leszek Prorok's account of this connection between life and literature runs as follows:

These two inclinations which were sown at my pre-war school and which had been reinforced during my encounters with Conrad – i.e. loyalty and fidelity – have cost me dear if my life is to be judged from a superficial point of view. To this day I have had to face the consequences of those decisions and the obstacles thrown up by reality – a reality that brings harassment and, in the midst of numerous setbacks, an awareness of the existence of long-standing hidden restraints and surveillance on the part of unknown, albeit assiduous obstructors. Today, however, I can say with full conviction that one can learn more from one's defeats than from one's victories – a sentence that might easily have been written by the author of *Lord Jim*, though I have not found anything like it in the texts of his novels. In large measure, no doubt, it is thanks to my defeat – the course and the circumstances of which the present little book is intended to be a chronicle – that I have avoided illusions and the placement of trust in systems of appearances and hypocrisy.²

Szczepański and Prorok stressed the continuing relevance of Conrad's moral philosophy and both – though in differing degrees – linked it with Christianity. In his last article on Conrad (published in the year of his death), Prorok placed Conrad's ideas in the context of twentieth-century thought:

With his tragic vision of the world – which makes him our contemporary – Conrad is one of the very few writers from the not-so-distant past who strike a particular chord with us. In delineating boundaries and determining the possibilities of living consciously, he comes close to the existentialists, though he differs from Sartre – the best known of them – by his heroically positive programme which borders on Gabriel Marcel's Christian variety of existentialism and brings him closer to the convictions of Camus (in *The Plague*) on the subject of dignity and the sense

¹ J.J. Szczepański. “Wspomnienie. Leszek Prorok”. *Gazeta Wyborcza* 1994, № 288, 12th December.

² L. Prorok. *Smutne pól rycerzy żywych*. Warszawa: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1989, p. 30.

of alliance which unites people of fortitude and goodwill in their efforts to combat the epidemics that have bedevilled our difficult century – diseases not so much of the body as of the spirit.³

Zdzisław Najder – who reviewed Prorok's *Inicjacje conradowskie* (*Conradian Initiations*) – is of the view that when the questions of Conrad's Christian inspirations and the presence of the transcendental in his writing are eventually tackled by scholars in the future, the pioneering role of the studies of Antoni Gołubiew and Leszek Prorok will finally be fully acknowledged.⁴

In his exploration of the spiritual dimension of Conrad's writing, Prorok – in *Naturaliter Christiana* – came up against elements of Manichaeism. It is difficult not to agree with this finding, as in Conrad's novels and stories the opposition between light and darkness and the struggle between good and evil seem to be something of prime significance. However, it is worth adding the qualification that in Conrad's writing there is no Manichaean contempt for the material world (or, to put it another way, the 'visible world'). Prorok himself notes that Conrad was averse to "all manner of ideological, philosophical or moral codifications" and thus favoured "a creative experience and practical portrayal of every concrete event, situation and personality."⁵

The writer's path therefore begins with the concrete reality of life – the details of human existence – and leads him to ever uncertain generalizations and barely outlined ideas. According to Prorok, Conrad "held the fundamental conviction – common to all currents of existentialist thought – that the universe is unfathomable chaos."⁶ He associated Conrad above all with Albert Camus, who did not create a precise positive programme, "but – in a town beleaguered by a metaphorical plague – caught a glimpse of two values which might just be able to give meaning to existence in a meaningless world: the possibility of combating evil, i.e. the possibility of personal self-fulfilment in purposeful and sensible activity as a member of a group of people of good will who are engaged in a collective struggle and whose existence and closeness is revealed by the cataclysm, which relieves each one of them of at least part of the burden of utter loneliness."⁷ Heroism and solidarity would therefore seem to be those fundamental ideas which link Camus with Conrad, who – Prorok claims – is even closer to Gabriel Marcel (whose views he quotes from the study by Władysław Terlecki). Marcel's main tenet was that Man can only search for the truth without ever being able to possess it. Beset by loneliness, *homo viator* strives to overcome his isolation because to exist means to exist with somebody – to exist together. These two basic premises link Marcel with Conrad. Seen in this light, the novelist's dialogue would seem to be the antithesis of being shut up in ordinary, everyday solitude, as talking to someone makes it possible to form bonds with other people.

Given the popularity of Michał Komar's book *Piekło Conrada* (*Conrad's Hell*), Prorok suggested posing the question "Is there a writer's heaven?" In other words, in

³ L. Prorok. "Odszedł przed 60 laty". *Tygodnik Powszechny* 1984, № 34.

⁴ Z. Najder. Review of *Inicjacje conradowskie*. *Tygodnik Powszechny* 1988, № 31, p. 8.

⁵ L. Prorok. *Inicjacje conradowskie*. Kraków: Znak, 1987, p. 76.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

depicting the power of evil, does the writer also offer us a prospect of rebirth or salvation? Prorok did not favour the concept of ‘secular tragedy’. He stressed the value of personal sacrifice which is present in Conrad’s fiction and which “corrects the destructive workings of chaos”⁸ as well as being “a vehicle of Hope”⁹. of course, he did not dispute the view that Conrad in his writing gave expression to an ethic that was independent of any transcendental sanction. At the same time, however, he maintained that there was a respect for the mysterious in this writing, as well as the oft-repeated question as to what lies beyond the visible world. Prorok summed up his attempt to grasp Conrad’s relationship with Christianity thus:

In each encounter with Conrad there is nothing to prevent us from stating yet again that the array of spiritual weaponry at the disposal of his characters (both main and minor) – together with their behaviour in extreme situations – bears the mark of being related to that trait which the apologist Tertullian ascribed to the human soul in general, considering it to be universally *naturaliter Christiana*, regardless of differences of faith or [religious] delusion.¹⁰

One of the more interesting indications of the presence of Conradian motifs in Prorok’s writing is his short play entitled *Freja – zimna bogini miłości* (*Freyja – the Cold Goddess of Love*), which had its first performance on 9th May 1975 at the Stara Prochownia theatre in Warsaw. The stage director was Andrzej Przybylski. Prorok makes use of the typically Conradian structure of a tale within a tale. The wartime reminiscences of the main character are placed within the context of testimony given by two medical expert witnesses – the Polish Dr Kulicz and the German Dr Hassbach – who have prepared a report on medical experiments carried out by the Nazis. Although the action takes place many years after the war, the hearing makes an elderly lady relive her tragedy of years gone by:

I look at you both. This old woman – a guinea pig from Ravensbrück, whose body was to have provided an answer to the question of how to deprive entire defeated nations of their offspring – is now an object of investigation in the hands of two doctors.¹¹

The first literary context that comes to the reader’s mind is Zofia Nałkowska’s book *Medaliony* (*Medallions*). In both cases, the literary narrative is intended to be as factual as possible. Nałkowska’s book relates testimony given by those who witnessed Nazi crimes, while Prorok’s play – fictional as it would appear to be – is based on a thorough knowledge of the facts of the matter. The second literary context that comes to mind (and suggested by the title of the play) is Conrad’s story *Freyja of the Seven Isles*. There are similarities between the two characters even in their appearance, for it is their beauty that brings misfortune. As Conrad wrote:

Freyja Nelson (or Nielsen) was the kind of girl one remembers. The oval of her face was perfect; and within that fascinating frame the most happy disposition of line and feature, with an ad-

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹¹ L. Prorok. *Freja – zimna bogini miłości. Mały teatr*. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1977, p. 15.

mirable complexion, gave an impression of health, strength and what I might call unconscious self confidence – a most pleasant and, as it were, whimsical determination. I will not compare her eyes to violets because the real shade of their colour was peculiar, not so dark and more lustrous. They were of the wide open kind and looked at one frankly in every mood. I never did see the long dark eyelashes lowered – I dare say Jasper Allen did, being a privileged person – but I have no doubt that the expression must have been charming in a complex way. She could – Jasper told me once with a touchingly imbecile exultation – sit on her hair. I dare say, I dare say. It was not for me to behold these wonders; I was content to admire the neat and becoming way she used to do it up so as not to conceal the good shape of her head. And this wealth of hair was so glossy that when the screens of the west verandah were down making a pleasant twilight there, or in the shade of the grove of fruit trees near the house it seemed to give out a golden light of its own.¹²

It is not for nothing that Freya's name is that of a Nordic goddess. Her beauty enraptures not only Jasper Allen, whose love she reciprocates, but also attracts the sinister Heemskirk, whose "nature was malevolent enough".¹³ The beauty of Prorok's character Agnes for its part would seem to have aroused the interest of those Germans who had been entrusted with the task of purifying the Nordic race. Subjected to forced labour, she had attracted the attention of an SS officer:

I sensed his looks from every direction. Eventually he approached and asked about my background, age and surname. He took my plait in his hand. I wore my hair in a long, thick plait and apparently looked very Aryan [...].¹⁴

Having been selected for the Nazi eugenics project, the girl is placed in the "Freya" house in Lorch am Rhein, whose real name is the Hilchenhaus (which Prorok remembered from a visit to Germany in 1973) and which – perhaps on account of its Wagnerian setting – has been turned into a Lebensborn centre.

Both characters – Freya and Agnes – are imprisoned in what at first sight appear to be idyllic locations. However, Freya and her father are under the thumb of Heemskirk, whose power is backed up by the Dutch colonial authorities, while Agnes – though no longer a slave labourer – has been sent to a place where her body is to be used as a tool in the development of a master race.

In both works, the chance of escape is bound up with love, which – as portrayed by Conrad and Prorok – reveals what is most beautiful in human beings as well as affording delight. In each case, however, the feeling that the vicissitudes of the characters must surely end in tragedy never leaves the reader.

In Conrad's story, Jasper Allen and Freya set their hopes for the future on the brig "Bonito" – a beautiful sailing ship that is to be their home after they flee the island. Prorok's Agnes for her part is in love with a German officer, which is perhaps the most serious breach of the principles of the insane Nazi system:

¹² J. Conrad. *Freya of the Seven Isles. A Story of Shallow Waters*. Ed. J.A. Berthoud, L.L. Davis, S.W. Reid. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 124-125.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁴ L. Prorok. *Freja...*, p. 16.

For this girl you're listening to – the girl I myself once was – Peter came as a shock. He was gentle with her. [...] I've already mentioned that we girls were merely biological tools. Love, which eluded the authority of the Führer, was considered to be an out-and-out rebel – an enemy of German order.¹⁵

Blinded by love, both couples plan an escape that the reader must surely know is doomed to failure from the very beginning. Once again, Conrad – and Prorok after him – uses a denouement that is typical of Greek tragedy: before the final catastrophe, the characters display an ominous self-confidence, believing that they can reverse the inexorable decrees of fate. In both cases the vicissitudes of love end in tragedy. Heemskirk's destruction of the "Bonito" – which thwarts the lovers' plans – leads to Freya's death and Jasper's madness. In Prorok's play, the lovers are arrested. Agnes is then sent to a concentration camp, where she is subjected to medical experiments.

In Conrad's story, the fate of the main characters leads the narrator to conclude that "There are occasions when the irony of fate, which some people profess to discover in the working out of our lives, wears the aspect of crude and savage jesting."¹⁶ Can this outlook be reconciled with Prorok's view that Conrad's writing can be shown to have a Christian dimension? This is hardly possible in the case of *Freya of the Seven Isles*, where nothing – not even love – can halt the destructive workings of evil and where hope has been banished. In his allusion to Conrad's story, Prorok accordingly casts the enveloping narrative (based on Agnes's reminiscences of the German occupation) in a different mould. Although the passage of time has in no way alleviated her suffering or lessened her sense of loss, Agnes no longer feels any hatred. Her final words in the play (which are addressed to the German doctor – a descendant of her torturers – and preceded by the reservation: "I don't like words that are tainted with pathos. Though there's some pathos in what I have to say, I must say it.") concern the spiritual side of life: "You know it's not just about biology, so please turn to look in that other direction, which is more important ..."¹⁷

Prorok's book entitled *Inicjacje conradowskie (Conradian Initiations)* also contains a passage devoted to the genesis of his *Smuga blasku (The Radiance Line / The Radiant Line)*. Although the title is an obvious allusion to Conrad's *The Shadow Line (Smuga cienia)*, Prorok claimed that the inspiration of Conrad's *Freya of the Seven Isles* was no less important:

I constructed the image of Eugenia – imagined onto the ship's deck – [...] on the basis of elements which were more or less like those which the writer used in *Freya of the Seven Isles*. Similarly, the image of the white ship – which the main character of my book dreamt would carry the couple away into the vast expanses of the ocean – was based on the continually recurring motif of a white sailing ship in Conrad's works, where it is a setting for beauty or goodness that are trampled underfoot in the vicissitudes of life.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁶ J. Conrad. *Freya...*, p. 184.

¹⁷ L. Prorok. *Freja...*, p. 35.

¹⁸ L. Prorok. *Inicjacje...*, p. 145.

In order to give a Christian optic to a novel whose primary inspiration was Conrad's fiction, Prorok makes use of a prop – a gimbal. This object, consisting of two rings pivoted at right angles, has long been used on ships to keep the compass horizontal. It also keeps the wind rose parallel to the horizon. Prorok sees this device as having more than just a practical function – something that is suggested by Conrad himself in his story *The Secret Sharer* – and writes about it thus:

Here the symbolic meaning of that double protective ring – which brings the object placed within it back to an upright position from any angle it has been tilted to – was particularly useful, as is evident from the text of *Smuga blasku* (*The Radiance Line / The Radiant Line*). However, I decided to take advantage of the beneficial effects that the gimbal could have on the book's atmosphere and implied meaning only in such cases when Conrad himself made but one reference to that ideally simple and effective device in his writing.¹⁹

The plot of Prorok's novel is woven around Conrad's voyage from Sydney to Melbourne as captain of the barque "Otago". The voyage lasted from August 1888 to January of the next year and took him through the Torres Straits and Port-Louis in Mauritius. While *The Shadow Line* abounds in "waiting for the wind",²⁰ the risk of imminent death and a dogged struggle against adversity, in Prorok's *The Radiance Line* the voyage becomes the image of the life of a person who experiences immense joy. Unnamed forces which decide the course of human lives would seem to be favourably disposed towards the lofty dreams and ambitious ventures of a daredevil, allowing him to safely navigate the perilous route along the Great Barrier Reef. The young captain of Prorok's novel trusts the sea and his own capabilities, feels at one with his crew and his ship – and knows that the world is on his side. Not for him the struggles and desperate expectations of the main character of *The Shadow Line*. Instead, he finds satisfaction and fulfilment.

In his novel, Prorok juxtaposes this euphoric experience with a fictionalized account of Conrad's ill-fated love for Mlle Renouf, of which there is later no mention in the writer's letters and reminiscences. After this bitter experience, however, the life of the main character of *The Radiance Line* recovers its equilibrium, as if held in place by an invisible gimbal. Hence the following reflection made by the young captain at the end of the novel:

But now that he was on sun-drenched land, having survived that strangest of sea storms which had heeled him over, he began to regain his balance and was sure that he would not change his decision for anything in the world, even it were to cost him his life's greatest opportunity – the unity that exists between an expert rider and a thoroughbred steed or a captain and his beautiful, proud, wonderfully manoeuvrable and obedient ship. Even if it came to that! Because one should never retrace one's steps after suffering defeat in love. There are still enough other places in the world where one can fight the eternal battle of life and try for victory once again.²¹

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

²¹ L. Prorok. *Smuga blasku*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1982.

We might add that for Prorok the metaphysics of love – like a voyage on a sailing ship – involves being enraptured. Intoxicated by the extraordinary intensity with which he perceives the beauty of the world, the smitten protagonist of *The Radiance Line* participates, as it were, in a world that is of a better and higher order than the everyday world in which we live.

In his novel, Prorok would seem to suggest that the capacity to be enraptured by the world is one of the most important of all human traits. Conrad also allows his main characters to experience this feeling, but their momentary delight is usually followed by eventual disappointment, for the beauty of the world draws attention away from dangers, relaxes their vigilance and ultimately leads to disaster. It is here, perhaps, in his treatment of the experience of being enraptured, that Prorok differs most from his literary predecessor. Some theologians venture the opinion that this particular attribute can also be ascribed to God:

In His unceasing concern for His creation, the Creator, while remaining beyond the bounds of creation, is in a continual state of ecstasy or delight on beholding the work of creation – and Man in particular. This eternal Divine ecstasy is revealed in stretches of time – in the episodes of human history. Divine revelation is quite simply the historical manifestation of eternal ecstasy or a moment of heightened ecstasy.²²

Prorok presents ecstasy as a moment that is common to both God and Man, thus departing from the Conradian vision in which more emphasis is placed on shadows and darkness.

The recurring comparison between sailing ships and steamships that we find in Conrad's works is put to good use by Prorok. In reply to the argument that the new era of steam will free Man from his dependence on the wind, the main character of his novel says:

– Kindly allow me to observe that that is the most beautiful state of dependence in which you can possibly find yourself. And it doesn't leave you entirely helpless. It appeals to your endurance and ingenuity. [...]

– If that's the way you see it, I'd have thought that at this point you'd mention religion.

Captain Korzeniowski held out the palms of his hands in a gesture that was as puzzling as it was polite.²³

In *The Radiance Line*, therefore, Prorok prefers to have the main character (and his favourite author) abstain from making an outright profession of faith.

Translated by R. E. Pyplacz

²² W. Szczerbiński. "Znaczenie objawienia w teologii głębi Abrahama Joshuy Heschela". *Studia Theologiae Fundamental* 2010, № 1, pp. 273-284. The quotation refers to the theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel.

²³ L. Prorok. *Smuga...*, p. 122.

WORKS CITED

- Conrad, Joseph. *Freja z Siedmiu Wysp. Opowieść o płytkich wodach*. Transl. Aniela Zagórska. In: *Między lądem a morzem*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1973.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Freya of the Seven Isles. A Story of Shallow Waters*. Ed. J.A. Berthoud, L.L. Davis, S.W. Reid. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Twixt Land and Sea*. Eds. Jacques A. Berthoud, Laura L. Davis, S.W. Reid; assistant editor Raymond T. Brebach. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Najder, Zdzisław. Review of *Inicjacje conradowskie*. *Tygodnik Powszechny* 1988, № 31, p. 8.
- Najder, Zdzisław. [review: Prorok, Leszek. *Inicjacje conradowskie*. Kraków: Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy "Znak", 1987]. *Tygodnik Powszechny* 1988, № 31.
- Prorok, Leszek. *Freja – zimna bogini miłości. Mały teatr*. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1977.
- Prorok, Leszek. *Inicjacje conradowskie*. Kraków: Znak, 1987.
- Prorok, Leszek. "Odszedł przed 60 laty". *Tygodnik Powszechny* 1984, № 34.
- Prorok, Leszek. *Smuga blasku*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1982.
- Prorok, Leszek. *Smutne pół rycerzy żywych*. Warszawa: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza "NOWA", 1989.
- Szczepański, Jan Józef. "Wspomnienie. Leszek Prorok". *Gazeta Wyborcza* 1994, № 288, 12th December.
- Szczerbiński, Waldemar. "Znaczenie objawienia w teologii głębi Abrahama Joshuy Heschela". *Studia Theologiae Fundamentalis* 2010, № 1, pp. 273-284.