

REVIEW OF
W KRĘGU CONRADA (WITHIN CONRAD'S CIRCLE) BY
STEFAN ZABIEROWSKI. KATOWICE: WYDAWNICTWO
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INDEX; SUMMARIES IN ENGLISH AND FRENCH

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Stefan Zabierowski's important new book entitled *W kręgu Conrada* (Within Conrad's Circle) is a unique blend of research, scholarly insight and humour. It is a collection of essays that take a fresh look at some engaging episodes in Conrad's life and at some of his writing.

The volume opens with a multi-faceted interpretation of the 1914 press interview which Conrad gave to the Polish journalist Marian Dąbrowski and which has hitherto received far less scholarly attention than it deserves. Zabierowski specifies the goals which Dąbrowski set himself in presenting the then celebrated British author to Polish readers. Posing nationally-biased questions, Dąbrowski tried to pigeonhole Conrad into the Polish stereotype of a national bard. Conrad would not be drawn on this, however, and instead presented his own vision of his past life, accentuating the pursuit of his personal dreams: "On his own merit, some insignificant boy from the eastern borderlands, from a godforsaken province, from some place called Poland, became a master mariner in the British Merchant Marine."

Zabierowski also seeks to throw some light on Józef Hieronim Retinger — the ambitious young man behind the scenes who had actually arranged the interview. Retinger had been sent to the West from Galicia as a representative of the National Democratic Party and was — to use modern parlance — a Polish foreign agent; his biography has yet to be thoroughly researched. His plans vis-à-vis Conrad were undoubtedly political, and so Zabierowski makes a hypothetical reconstruction of his probable objectives. Retinger played an important role in Conrad's life, for it was he who arranged the Conrads' trip to Poland during that fateful summer of 1914. This essay sheds new light not only on the interview given to Dąbrowski, but also on Conrad's friendship with Retinger.

Another authoritative and comprehensive essay is the chapter devoted to Cracow, which is in keeping with a recent development in Conrad studies, namely that of examining the various cities in which Conrad had occasion to stay (cf. *Conrad's Cities*,

Ed. G. Moore). There are a number of moot points connected with Conrad's Cracow years: his illnesses, his schooling and his decision to leave the country. Zabierowski gives a systematic account of the places connected with Conrad Korzeniowski's sojourns in the city: Poselska Street, Szpitalna Street, St. Anne's Grammar School and — during his later visit to Cracow in 1914 — the Grand Hotel in Sławkowska Street. For some strange reason Cracovians have yet to take advantage of these venues in order to promote their city and familiarize the throngs of tourists who go there with Conrad's Polish heritage. In this connection one thinks of Bloomsday, when the whole of Dublin celebrates (albeit superficially) James Joyce's *Ulysses* on 16th June and crowds of tourists retrace the footsteps of Leopold Bloom (cf. J. Brooker, *Vacationists in the Home Island: Joyce and the Irish Heritage*).

No Conrad scholar can afford to disregard the writer's noble ancestry. Zabierowski distinguishes two planes on which Conrad's noble heritage operates. The first is that of his lifestyle and his code of conduct — amply illustrated by the fact that Conrad declined to accept the offer of a British knighthood on the grounds that he was already a nobleman by birth. Other manifestations of his attachment to the traditional lifestyle of the Polish nobility (or *szlachta*) are the inclusion of the Nałęcz coat of arms in the collected edition of his works and — not least — his extravagance and his nonchalant attitude towards money. The rooms of his house were furnished in the style of Polish manor houses, while the elegance of his attire was also reminiscent of that of the Polish nobility. Paul Langlois — a French acquaintance from Mauritius — has left us the following description of the way Conrad dressed: "In contrast to his colleagues Captain Korzeniowski was always dressed like a dandy. I can still see him [...] arriving almost every day in my office dressed in a black or dark coat, a waistcoat, usually of a light colour, and "fancy" trousers, all well cut and of great elegance; he would be wearing a black or grey bowler tilted slightly to one side, would always wear gloves and carried a cane with a gold knob" (Zabierowski 77).

The second (and more significant) plane on which Conrad's noble heritage operates is his pursuit of the ideals of the Polish nobility and what would seem to be his re-examination of them in his works. First and foremost, there is the idea of honour. This concept, "stemming from the ethos of chivalry, became an integral part of the Polish nobility's system of values" (Zabierowski 68). David Garnett contrasted Henry James, who thought about "nothing but money," with Conrad, who, "in his way — thought about 'nothing but honour'" (qtd. in I. Watt, *Essays on Conrad*, Cambridge 2000, p. 189). The notion of honour, according to Zabierowski, is crucial for an interpretation of many of Conrad's narratives, e.g. *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, *Duel* or *Chance* — something which has already been stressed by other Polish scholars such as Zdzisław Najder and Wiesław Krajka.

An intriguing and not very well known detail (as far as Conrad's reception in Poland is concerned) is the fact that attempts were made to adapt his novels for the stage. We know that Conrad himself was closely involved in the preparation of the script for the stage version of *Victory*, which — with actor-producer Marie Löhr in the role of Lena — enjoyed a run of over eighty performances at London's Globe Theatre in 1919 and remains the most successful stage adaptation of Conrad's fiction

(cf. R. Hand, *Conrad's 'Victory'*). Zabierowski unravels the arcane Polish context of adaptations of Conrad's novels that were staged a hundred years ago, outlining long-forgotten reviews that are now extremely difficult to find. Thanks to the author's wide reading and his acute sense of cultural history, readers may savour the theatrical ambience of Warsaw, Cracow and Lwów at the beginning of the twentieth century. This aspect of reception — the fact that Conrad's works have found a resonance in the performing arts — requires further study. We may note that Zabierowski's interdisciplinary essay is in keeping with a new trend in Conrad studies, which has given rise to a growing number of (English-language) publications on the subject of stage adaptations of the writer's work, e.g. Richard Hand's *Conrad's Victory: The Play and Reviews* and Katherine Isobel Baxter's *Joseph Conrad and the Performing Arts*.

Zabierowski's book ends with a lively essay on Polish translations of *The Shadow Line*. With an occasional touch of humour, the author presents the Polish vicissitudes of the eponymous expression. The inside story of a squabble between the two eminent Polish writers Gołubiew and Szczepański is revealed. Szczepański, who was to make a new translation, planned to change the Polish title (*Smuga cienia*), which was already rooted in Polish culture and had attained the status of a time-worn phrase. Gołubiew took this personally and publicly warned him not to do so, saying: "If you change the title it'll be the end of me!" (Zabierowski 155).

Zabierowski's *W kregu Conrada* (Within Conrad's Circle) offers a new appreciation of Conrad's Polish heritage and of the novelist's own cultural reception in Poland. It is a valuable resource for scholars as well as being an absorbing read for all Polish fans of Joseph Conrad.

Contents: On Marian Dąbrowski's *Conversation with Conrad in 1914*; Conrad and Cracow; Conrad's Noble Heritage; Joseph Conrad and '-isms'; Five Modes of Interpreting *Lord Jim*; Conrad's *Lord Jim* in Poland; Conrad on the Polish stage (between the wars); A shadow or border line?; *Conrad żywy* (Living Conrad) by W. Tarnawski and its reception in Poland; Leszek Prorok's encounters with Conrad.