

**REVIEW OF “*LORD JIM*” CONRADA.
*INTERPRETACJE (CONRAD’S ‘LORD JIM’.
INTERPRETATIONS)***

BY AGNIESZKA ADAMOWICZ-POŚPIECH

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CONRADIAN RINGS OF INTERPRETATION

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It is surprising how often contemporary scholars use the image of “concentric rings” in order to analyse and describe Conrad’s work. To give just a few examples: Wiesław Krajka presents Conrad’s characters through the prism of the “rings of isolation” that surround them; Michał Komar shows us round the successive rings of “Conrad’s hell”; Stefan Zabierowski’s latest book bears the title *W kręgu Conrada* (*Within Conrad’s Circle*). This approach is also used in writing about individual novels – *Lord Jim* in particular. In an attempt to clarify the central place of Lord Jim’s jump in the novel’s plot, Przemysław Mroczkowski makes the following comparison: “The stone falls into the water and the ripples [“concentric waves”] spread out.” There is no doubt that this fondness for the metaphor of rings testifies to the complexity and multilayered nature of Joseph Conrad’s writing: the ripples created by the weighty *Lord Jim* have indeed caused serious commotion – not only in the waters of literary criticism, but also in the imagination of the general reader.

In her book dealing with the interpretations of *Lord Jim* Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech has made a very successful effort to help readers and critics navigate the waters of Conrad research. She outlines the most important currents and tendencies which to date have prevailed in analyses and interpretations of *Lord Jim*. Zdzisław Najder once gave an excellent description of the role which the main character plays in the author’s vision of the narrative of this novel: “[...] Jim is a stick that has been poked into an anthill. The author is interested in the stick, but devotes even more space to the behaviour of the ants.” A paraphrase of this opinion, I think, could be applied to [...] the novel itself and the line of research adopted by Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech, who – in declaring *Lord Jim* to be an “open work” – treats it as a stick that has been poked into the “anthill” (or, to use the English idiomatic equivalent, the “hornets’ nest”) of Conrad criticism.

Wishing to give the reader the broadest possible multidimensional picture of this novel, Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech does not bring him face to face with its turbulent complexities, but sees it as her priority to guide him through the meanders of the interpretations that have been proposed to date, as well as familiarizing him with the current state of research – with particular emphasis being placed on those interpretations “that have stood the test of time”.

The first “ring” is formed by those interpretations of *Lord Jim* whose aim is to reconstruct the personal, situational and topographical realities that lie behind the novel. As the author observes, these studies do not limit themselves to providing a merely descriptive inventory of the facts which Conrad used in writing his text – they also show us how these facts were transformed by the writer’s imagination. As well as revealing the “wealth of experience on which Conrad drew”, such an analytical approach allows us to “understand the way in which Conrad wrote.”

The second “ring” is formed by those interpretations which attempt to uncover all the possible autobiographical allusions that the novel contains. Here pride of place goes to the symbolic aspect of *Lord Jim*, dictated by the author’s “feelings of guilt” for having (possibly) “betrayed” his native land. An important feature of Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech’s presentation of these interpretations is that she shows that they have all been determined by the cultural or academic outlook of each particular critic – an example being the extremely unfair treatment meted out to Conrad by Eliza Orzeszkowa, which is shown in the broad context of contemporary newspaper discussions on the question of “Polishness”.

In the third part of her book Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech discusses those interpretations of *Lord Jim* which are governed by an ethical perspective and which see the novel as a “disquisition on morality”. She observes that in this regard some critics are guilty of conceptual conflation in that they frequently apply categories used in psychology – e.g. “feelings of guilt” – to problems of ethics, whereas Conrad’s ethics are manifestly dictated by the context of the traditional ethos of chivalry, the code of honour and the culture of the Polish nobility.

The next chapter – devoted to those interpretations which are governed by an artistic perspective – is divided into two parts. In the first part Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech presents views on the various aspects of *Lord Jim* that are connected with the question of genre. The number of borrowings made by Conrad in developing the artistic form of his novel is truly impressive and, in this connection, it is to the author’s credit that she has taken pains to provide her readers with a very broad range of critical opinion.

In the second part of this chapter the author turns her attention to the novel’s narrative structure. Musings on the considerable “fragmentization” of the text and on shifts in chronology within its constituent parts incline Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech to describe the novel by using a metaphor borrowed from Hugh Clifford: it is a mosaic novel which is nevertheless a coherent and meticulously formed whole. Conrad does not privilege any of its components, nor does he make any of them the “key” to a proper interpretation of the book, thus forcing the reader to search on his own. It would seem to me that this same metaphor could equally well be applied to

Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech's study. It has a mosaic structure and has been written using a similar strategy. The author presents opinions voiced by a variety of critics without privileging any of them, contenting herself with verifying their plausibility and usefulness within the whole context of Conrad scholarship, for the meaning of *Lord Jim* emerges from the midst of successive (albeit possibly false or controversial) readings of the novel.

The study ends with a chapter devoted to the Polish translations of *Lord Jim* that have been made so far. Comparing three of them, Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech painstakingly lists their good and bad points as well as commenting on the way they have influenced the reception of *Lord Jim* in Poland. This last chapter will therefore be of interest not only to Conrad scholars, but to every (Polish) reader of *Lord Jim*. It is also an excellent illustration of the manifold problems connected with the translation of literary texts. With its wealth of analyses, Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech's "ring" of translations is the last "ring of interpretation" of Conrad's *Lord Jim*.

This novel can never be confined to just one "ring of interpretation". Its meaning is constantly to be found in between several "rings", straddling several frontiers. Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech has succeeded in conveying this dynamism of Conrad scholarship thanks to a meticulously objective analysis and presentation of the views of several generations of critics. It is all to the good that this "map" which she has given us – presenting as it does the work that has been done by critics up to the present time – does not attempt to limit the vast expanse of meanings and contexts which can be found in Conrad's *Lord Jim*, but also suggests new lines of research and further rings of interpretation.

Translated by R. E. Pyplacz