

JOSEPH CONRAD'S ESSAYS AND LETTERS IN THE LIGHT OF POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to explore the feasibility of using the analytical and interpretational tools offered by postcolonial criticism in order to reassess those texts in which Joseph Conrad expressed his political views. The author's basic aim is to present the methods which Conrad used in his political essays in order to make a critique of great power politics in Central and Eastern Europe, and in particular to draw attention to techniques and content that were specifically designed to deconstruct the imperial practices of Germany and Russia. The article also shows how Conrad constructed a characteristically Polish defensive national identity, thus placing his political thinking within the context of the tradition of Romantic theories of nationalism, which found their finest expression in the writings of Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and Conrad's father Apollo Nałęcz-Korzeniowski.

Keywords: Conrad studies, postcolonialism, imperialism, nationalism, tsarism, autocracy

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“But the greatest figure of the times through which
we have lived was The People itself, *la Nation*”¹

1

In the introduction to his ground-breaking study entitled *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said dubbed Conrad:

the precursor of the Western views of the Third World [i.e. the former imperial colonies in South America, Africa and the Far East] which one finds in the work of novelists as different as Graham Greene, V.S. Naipaul and Robert Stone, of theoreticians of imperialism like Hannah Arendt and of travel writers, filmmakers and polemicists whose speciality is to deliver the non-European world either for analysis and judgement or for satisfying the exotic tastes of European and North American audiences.²

In Said's opinion, however, the perspective suggested by Conrad is highly ambivalent. Although there is no denying Conrad's extremely critical stance on imperialism as an ideology, his outlook on imperialism – according to Said – clearly remains within certain confines and is immutably rooted in the narrow framework of the Western paradigm. Hence Said formulates the following conclusion:

It is no paradox, therefore, that Conrad was both anti-imperialist and imperialist, progressive when it came to rendering fearlessly and pessimistically the self-confirming, self-deluding corruption of overseas domination, deeply reactionary when it came to conceding that Africa

¹ Joseph Conrad to Disney Colvin [21st June 1917]. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Vol. VI. Ed. Laurence Davies, Cambridge: Frederick R. Karl & Owen Knowles, 2002, p. 74 (further as *CL*.).

² Edward W. Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994, pp. xvii–xviii.

or South America could ever have had an independent history or culture, which the imperialists violently disturbed but by which they were ultimately defeated.³

Whether or not one agrees with this interpretation – which has been the subject of much debate and has given rise to many commentaries – it is worth noting that it contains one significant omission that has hitherto received insufficient attention – especially among Western scholars – namely the absence of any reference to Conrad's experience of life under Russian imperial rule in Poland. Said merely remarks in passing that Conrad was a Pole who "never [became] the wholly incorporated and fully acculturated Englishman"⁴ and who "therefore preserved an ironic distance in each of his works."⁵ He would seem to be totally oblivious, however, to the question of the extent to which Poles were subjected to the effects of government by foreign imperial powers. Conrad's traumatic experiences as a young child can hardly have had no bearing on his sceptical attitude to the mystique of empire. This paradox is all the more significant as it is symptomatic of the vast majority of postcolonial studies. Significantly, Conrad's name is always present in the bibliographies of these studies – and almost invariably in the context of *Heart of Darkness*, which functions as a pivotal (albeit controversial) text. The connection between this novella and the author's native land, however, is discussed only sporadically and even then in the vaguest manner.⁶

Such a state of affairs is, of course, the result of a much wider problem. The long established opposition between the "First World" and the "Third World" in postcolonial research totally excludes not only the history of Poland – notwithstanding that country's abundant associations with colonial rule – but also the very phenomenon of colonialism in Eastern Europe. In her pioneering and inspiring study dealing with the introduction of the postcolonial approach to the field of Russian studies, Ewa Thompson gives the main reason for this:

Paradoxically, white Europeans subjected to Russia's or Germany's (or imperial Turkey's, in centuries past) colonial drive are dead last in coming to a realization that they were in fact colonial subjects. They have looked at their Russian or Turkish or German occupiers as the people who won a war against them, not as those who engaged in a long-term colonialist project. They have not yet told their story to the world [...] even though their native cultures have encouraged the articulation of problems in ways compatible with Western epistemologies.⁷

In the field of Polish studies, however, Ewa Thompson's postcolonial approach has been received with great scepticism and the viability of any attempt to directly implement even an adapted version of this approach in order to give an account of the Polish experience of imperial rule has been called into question. In a discussion to be

³ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ See: Clare Cavanagh. "Postkolonialna Polska. Biała plama na mapie współczesnej teorii". *Teksty Drugie* 2003, № 2/3, p. 64.

⁷ Ewa M. Thompson. *Imperial Knowledge. Russian Literature and Colonialism*. Westport, CT–London: Greenwood Press, 2000, p. 40.

found in the *Dziennik* newspaper, Zdzisław Najder says that he is categorically opposed to any such attempts to view the partitions of Poland in colonial terms, arguing that – above all else – there was no significant disproportion between the cultural level of the Polish nation on the one hand, and that of the partitioning powers on the other:

From a cultural point of view Poland has never been a colony. It is a well-known paradox that the Russian empire subjugated countries whose cultures were on a higher level than its own. Neither did the Austrians have any credible grounds for believing – or indeed making the Poles believe – that their culture was more highly developed: it was no accident that so many Poles held the highest offices of State in Vienna. The progress of civilization in the countries of our western neighbours and in Gdańsk – a great multicultural city belonging to the Polish Crown – is a phenomenon that has nothing at all to do with the partitions.⁸

Reservations of an equally fundamental nature have been voiced by Grażyna Borkowska, who points out that one of the essential conditions for the existence of a state of colonial dependency is the inability of the subjugated culture to develop its own narration, which leads to its total marginalization as a consequence of its inability to contradict the narration generated by the empire. In a paper presented at a conference entitled “What kind of literary anthropology is feasible today?” (held in Poznań in 2007) she argues:

In passing I would like to say that the broadening of the concept of postcolonialism to cover every cultural discourse of power seems to me to be an illogical misuse of the term, detracting as it does from the significance of Said's findings. This concept was reserved by Said for cultural relations in which one of the parties is condemned to accept an alien discourse because – owing to its exotic nature or its remoteness from the acknowledged cultural centres – it has no representation of its own. In no way does this concept refer to relations between European cultures and their attitude towards Russia. Hence my scepticism towards the studies of E. Thompson and C. Cavanagh, as well as their Polish emulators.⁹

Such unequivocally formulated doubts and reservations cannot easily be dismissed. Seen in this light, the drawing of a simple analogy between the fate of the nineteenth-century overseas colonies of European powers and that of Poland after the partitions is, of course, a completely fruitless undertaking that can lead only to distortions.¹⁰ That being so, however, it would seem to be a little rash to reject the tools offered by the postcolonial approach out of hand. With appropriate modifications they can serve both to reassess the characteristics that define Polish identity and to shed new light on phenomena inherent in the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed – a relationship that has been a feature of Polish history for the last two centuries. Such an option is not ruled out by Włodzimierz Bolecki, who remarks in

⁸ Zdzisław Najder. “Kultura i imperializm. Czy Polacy są ‘postkolonialni’?”. *Dziennik. Magazyn Europa*, 29th June 2005.

⁹ Grażyna Borkowska. “Polskie doświadczenie kolonialne”. *Teksty Drugie* 2007, № 4, p. 16.

¹⁰ Jan Kieniewicz. *Ekspansja. Kolonializm. Cywilizacja*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo DiG, 2008, p. 248.

this connection that Polish literary critics have on the whole been slow to adopt the innovations of western literary criticism:

It goes without saying that any adaptation of the term “postcolonialism” in a country which in modern times has itself been a colony for almost two hundred years is bound to raise doubts. And rightly so, for the mechanical application of “postcolonialism” to Polish circumstances can only produce a caricature – or disquisitions that have no scientific value. What we have to understand is that it is not the literal meaning of the term (and its synonyms, e.g. orientalism), but the phenomena of modern history (and also literature) which it describes that should inspire us and indeed challenge us to tackle the problems of our times.¹¹

Such is the methodological proposal of Clare Cavanagh, who is of the opinion that the option of undertaking a pan-European critique of the effects of power politics based on Conrad’s work has largely not been taken up.¹² But can the tools of postcolonial criticism really enable us to complete this task? In other words, can what Edward Said – writing about *Heart of Darkness*, *Nostromo* or *Lord Jim* – calls the “prescience” or extraordinary intuition of Conrad’s critique of Western imperialism¹³ be said to apply in equal measure to that part of Conrad’s work which deals directly with the mutual relations and imperial politics of the great powers of Central and Eastern Europe?

The aim of the present article is to try and find answers to these questions, i.e. to see whether the analytical and interpretational tools of postcolonial criticism can be used to examine the essays and articles of Joseph Conrad in order to bring to light techniques and content whose aim was to make a direct deconstruction of the imperial machinations of Germany and Russia on the one hand, and on the other to identify the ways in which Conrad constructed a typically Polish defensive national identity. In doing so, the author of the present article hopes to throw new light on the connection between the Polish period of Conrad’s biography and his scepticism with regard to any pretence that colonialism performed a civilizing mission, as well as to the practice of using cultural differences as a means of legitimizing the idea of empire.

2

I can not admit the idea of fraternity that includes the westerners whom I so dislike. [...] I can not admit the idea of fraternity, not so much because I believe it impracticable, but because its propaganda (the only thing really tangible about it) tends to weaken the national sentiment, the preservation of which is my concern. [...] A definitive first principle is needed. If the idea of nationhood brings suffering and its service brings death, that is always worth more than service to the ghosts of a dead eloquence – precisely because the eloquence is disembodied. [...] I’m not indifferent to what concerns you. But my concern is elsewhere, my thinking follows

¹¹ Włodzimierz Bolecki. “Myśli różne o postkolonializmie. Wstęp do tekstów nie napisanych”. *Teksty Drugie* 2007, № 4, p. 7.

¹² Cavanagh. “Postkolonialna Polska”, *ed. cit.*, p. 66.

¹³ Cf. Said. *Culture and Imperialism*, *ed. cit.*, p. xvii.

another path, my heart wants something else, my soul offers from another kind of importance. Do you understand? You who devote your talents and enthusiasm to the cause of humanity, you will understand no doubt why I must – I need to – keep my thinking inviolate as a final act of fidelity to a lost cause.¹⁴

So wrote Conrad in a letter to Cunninghame Graham on 8th February 1899. He was replying to an invitation from Graham to take part in a rally of the Social Democratic Federation which was scheduled to take place in London a month later. The context is significant in that – at that time – this letter was Conrad's first extended formulation of his general political beliefs. Commenting on this letter, Zdzisław Najder writes:

It was Conrad's hopeless fidelity to the memory of Poland that prevented him from believing in the idea of "international fraternity", which he considered, under the circumstances, to be just a verbal exercise. At Graham's meeting, Russian émigrés and representatives of German socialists were to speak from the platform. Against the first Conrad harboured the grievance that they talked about freedom and preached world brotherhood, while keeping silent on the subject of his own oppressed nation. [...] Conrad accuses social democrats [...] of actions directed toward a weakening of "the national sentiment, the preservation of which [was his] concern"; of attempting to dissolve national identities in an impersonal melting-pot.¹⁵

For a long time – almost until the outbreak of World War I – Conrad saw no possibility at all of a change in Poland's plight. In his correspondence, however, the motif of a particular attachment to the Polish national cause appears again and again,¹⁶ eventually to find its fullest literary expression in the famous passage in "Prince Roman", this being one of the very few highly personal statements in Conrad's fiction that refer directly to his native land:

How much remained in that sense of duty, revealed to him in sorrow? How much of his awakened love for his native country? That country which demands to be loved as no other country has ever been loved, with the mournful affection one bears to the unforgetten dead and with the unextinguishable fire of a hopeless passion which only a living, breathing, warm ideal can kindle in our breasts for our pride, for our weariness, for our exultation, for our undoing.¹⁷

In the context of postcolonial research, these patriotic values, which are so deeply rooted in Conrad's political sensibility, can be related to the fundamental opposition between defensive nationalism – whose aim is to defend the identity of a given national group by encouraging efforts to cultivate its history and its idealized traditions – and aggressive nationalism, whose aim is to impose its own identity and to seek self-confirmation through conquest and the suppression of the traditions of other

¹⁴ Joseph Conrad to Cunninghame Graham [8 February 1899], CL: 2, pp. 158–161.

¹⁵ Zdzisław Najder. *Joseph Conrad. A Life*. Transl. Halina Najder. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007, p. 290.

¹⁶ Examples being the letters written by Conrad to Spirydion Kliszczewski (13th October 1885), Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham (8th February 1899) and to Kazimierz Waliszewski (15th November 1903).

¹⁷ Joseph Conrad. "Prince Roman". [In:] *idem. Tales of Hearsay*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1925, p. 51.

nations.¹⁸ The domain of the former – which is the voice of the minority – is the periphery, i.e. the subjugated nations. The domain of the latter – which is part of the imperial discourse – is the centre:

Defensive nationalism characterizes those memory communities that perceive themselves as being at risk, either because of their smallness (Lithuanians, Georgians, Chechens) or because their expansionist neighbours threaten them. Those affected by it tend to look inward rather than outward, and consequently they fail to develop successful ways of dealing with the outside world. **Defensive nationalism is a means of resisting the encroachment of the hostile Other upon one's identity, yet it is all too often interpreted as xenophobia or antisocial behaviour.**¹⁹

Examples of this type of national consciousness are – according to Ewa Thompson – the nineteenth-century Romantic theories of nationalism and in particular the writings of Central European patriots, centred as they are on the fundamental categories of religion, geography, customs and history. Ewa Thompson sees these as being of particular value, as they were some of the first voices that so forcibly contested the ideological motives of the expansionism of the principal European powers, which ruled out any possibility of self-confirmation on the part of small and medium-sized nations. Given the obvious pre-eminence of the imperial historiographies of Germany and Russia, it is hardly surprising that the mediatory function of appeals made by Adam Mickiewicz, Lajos Kossuth or Juliusz Słowacki was completely suppressed and relegated to the peripheral zones of European intellectual histories:

Adam Mickiewicz's and Juliusz Słowacki's writings on Russian colonialism are particularly valuable, but they reside in the archives of Central European thought, which the American community of interpretation has ignored, privileging instead the Russian and German interpretive hegemony.²⁰

Strong criticism of the annexationist policy of the Russian autocracy was, of course, one of the most unchanging elements in the political journalism of Polish Romanticism. Exponents of this tendency were – apart from Mickiewicz and Słowacki – many other intellectuals, including Joachim Lelewel, Maurycy Mochnacki, Erazm Rykaczewski and Józef Zaliwski.²¹ Another author who belongs here is Apollo Nałęcz-Korzeniowski – above all for his memoir entitled “Poland and Muscovy”, which was published in 1864. This is a general indictment of tsarist Russia and the peculiar nature of its autocracy, its imperial policy and the consequent dangers it posed to the international situation in Europe. The picture painted by Apollo Nałęcz-Korzeniowski's “Poland and Muscovy” contains almost all the constitutive motifs of Polish nineteenth-century conventional images of Russia. This memoir – founded on the basic opposition of civilization and barbarism, which later develops into the more

¹⁸ See: Thompson. *Imperial Knowledge*, ed. cit., pp. 1, 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²¹ See: Andrzej Wierzbicki. *Groźni i wielcy. Polska myśl historyczna XIX i XX wieku wobec rosyjskiej despotii*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2001, p. 26.

specific oppositions of freedom and tyranny, truth and falsehood, rationality and irrationality etc.²² – is a complete and utter negation of the Russian cultural and civilizational “syndrome”:

But then, the whole of Muscovy is a prison. Beginning with the Ruryks, and then with the Tartar thralldom, the oppression of Ivan, under the knouts of various tsars and empresses and so forth, Muscovy has been, is and always will be a prison – otherwise it would cease to be itself. In that prison committed crimes and flourishing deceit copulate obscenely. The law and official religion sanctify those unions. Their offspring: the falseness and infamy of all religions, of all social, political, national and personal relations.²³

This hyperbolically negative account of Russian despotism is complemented by a direct reference to the growing danger of its imperial expansion, which Apollo Nałęcz-Korzeniowski sees as an essential precondition for the existence of tsarism. The partitions of Poland – “the most shameful crime that has occurred since the days of Christ”²⁴ – merely opened the door to the realization of further annexationist ambitions on the part of Russia (to invoke yet another deep-seated Polish cultural myth, namely that of Poland being the *antemurale christianitatis*):

And yet governments and peoples watch Muscovy without anxiety. Governments and peoples look at Muscovy, and although she makes them sometimes shudder with disgust, they fail to notice the urgency of danger. Meanwhile, in all likelihood, the release of the world's criminals is but a trifle in comparison with Muscovy, standing unrestrained, organized and ready to spew out millions of her criminals over Europe. [...] Countless swarms of Muscovites, corrupted and infested with vermin, are out to destroy everything that man, conscious of his human dignity, has built, in the course of a centuries-long effort of mind, and for the price of blood. These swarms, consisting of government, clergy, bureaucracy, army, and all social classes, wait, ready to attack Europe. Meanwhile, to keep in training, Muscovy chews living Poland as if she were dead. Poland has been swallowed but not digested. The process of digestion has just begun. When it ends, the turn of other nations will come. The most hideous slavery, because inflicted by a debased hand, hangs over Europe.²⁵

This presentation – albeit highly condensed – of the contents of “Poland and Muscovy” will later serve as one of several reference points for an analysis of the content of Conrad's political writings. Can his essays and letters – like the writings of his father – be seen as expressions of Polish defensive nationalism? To what extent can Conrad be justifiably said to continue the tradition in which Ewa Thompson places the writings of Mickiewicz and Słowacki?

²² Cf. Andrzej Wierzbicki. *Wschód-Zachód w koncepcjach dziejów Polski*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1984, p. 10.

²³ Apollo Nałęcz-Korzeniowski. “Poland and Muscovy. Memoirs of xxx. Begun in 186...” [In:] *Conrad under Familial Eyes*. Ed. Zdzisław Najder. Transl. Halina Carroll-Najder. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 78.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

“Poland and Muscovy” was written and published just after the end of the January Uprising, at a time when Mikhail Katkov – the editor of the journal “Russkii Vestnik” and the newspaper “Moskovskie Vedomosti” (described by Valuev as the Moscow equivalent of “The Times”) – redoubled his activities and exerted a profound influence on Russian public opinion.²⁶ Now seen as the “pioneer of twentieth-century mass-media propaganda targeted at an audience consisting of many thousands of people”²⁷, Katkov – who invented among other things the infamous legend of the “Polish St. Bartholomew’s Eve”²⁸ – unambiguously defined his editorial line as the defence of the *raison d’état* of the Russian empire.²⁹ Conrad makes a direct reference to this kind of journalism in his *Personal Record*:

Over all this hung the oppressive shadow of the great Russian Empire – the shadow lowering with the darkness of a new-born national hatred fostered by the Moscow school of journalists against the Poles after the ill-omened rising of 1863.³⁰

Katkov’s extremely nationalistic journalism – dubbed “the metaphysics of hate” by Jan Kucharzewski³¹ – used the language of political pamphlets, which was free of any doubts or qualms. In his campaign he skilfully combined the threat which the outbreak of the 1863 January Uprising posed to the territorial unity of the empire with an opportunity to hit back at the Russian radicals, who were supported by the “Sovremennik” magazine and the Russian émigré community in London.³² The Polish Question therefore became one of the foremost issues in this ideological struggle. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to give even a bare outline of the gradual evolution of the views of the “Moscow dervish”³³ (as Katkov was known) it is worth recalling those key points in his programme which referred directly to Poland, as for a certain time this programme enjoyed universal approval as the expression of official tsarist policy towards the peripheries (*okrainy*) of the empire.

In Katkov’s opinion, the Polish-Russian conflict was a clash of two completely different political systems: on the one hand that based on the idea of individual freedom bordering on anarchy, and on the other hand that based on a centuries-old centralist tendency aimed at building a strong, unified State.³⁴ The main geopolitical axis

²⁶ See: Henryk Głębocki. *Kresy imperium. Szkice i materiały do dziejów polityki Rosji wobec jej peryferii (XVIII–XXI wiek)*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Arcana, 2006, p. 301.

²⁷ Henryk Głębocki. *Fatalna sprawa. Kwestia polska w rosyjskiej myśli politycznej (1856–1866)*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Arcana, 2000, p. 306.

²⁸ Accusing Polish insurgents of treacherously murdering Russian soldiers in their sleep on the eve of the outbreak of the January Uprising. See: *ibid.*, p. 302.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Joseph Conrad. *A Personal Record*. New York, 1924, ch. I, p. 24.

³¹ Głębocki. *Fatalna sprawa*, *ed. cit.*, p. 301.

³² See: Głębocki. *Kresy imperium*, *ed. cit.*, p. 258.

³³ Głębocki. *Fatalna sprawa*, *ed. cit.*, p. 307.

³⁴ Głębocki. *Kresy imperium*, *ed. cit.*, p. 274.

of this conflict was the battle for the Lithuanian and Ruthenian (Ukrainian) lands, whose membership of the Polish Commonwealth was the result of unbridled Polish expansion carried out by the Polish nobility, whom Katkov described as a degenerate, greedy and belligerent caste. In his articles, therefore, Katkov not only frequently aired, but also intensively propagated the view that the existence of Russia as a great European power depended on her possession of these lands – which he saw as Russia's national heritage – and any voluntary relinquishment of her right to them would automatically turn the Russian empire into just another Asian state.³⁵ The solution openly and unashamedly proposed by Katkov's "Moskovskie Vedomosti" was comprehensive Russification – not only through the medium of the State administration, but also that of language and the schools.³⁶ Katkov's programme sought to marginalize the influence of the Polish nobility – the most important bastion of "Polonism", Polish irredentism and the bearer of Polish national ideals – and assimilate and win over to the government side the inert peasant masses by means of radical agrarian reforms, thus achieving the final – i.e. social and national – partition of Poland and the full union of the Kingdom of Poland with the Empire.³⁷

An examination of the concepts used by Katkov in his propaganda campaign produces some interesting results. As well as announcing a definitive confrontation with Polish history and the ultimate, devastating exposure of its bankruptcy, Katkov was the first Russian intellectual and journalist to directly invoke an image that was very common in Polish Romantic poetry, namely that of the Polish nation as a spirit searching for its body.³⁸ Moreover, Katkov's recreation of the myth of a deceased Poland – which he adapted for his own purposes – was a direct reference to Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*):

Poland has died, but her ghost, like a vampire, comes to suck the blood of the living. This vampire of Poland is the greatest scourge of the Poles.³⁹

And further:

Polish patriotism is a phantom that clambers out of its grave, ready to drink the blood of living persons.⁴⁰

Analysing the phenomenon of the mutual relationship between imperial discourse and narration that is characteristic of defensive nationalism, Helena Duć-Fajfer writes:

The reply is usually not less, but more radical in its essentialization and its dichotomization than is the voice of the centre.⁴¹

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 274–275.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 280–285.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

³⁹ Quoted by *ibid.*, p. 268.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Helena Duć-Fajfer. "Etniczność a literatura". [In:] *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy*. Ed. M.P. Markowski, R. Nycz. Kraków: Universitas, 2006, p. 437.

This observation may be applied to the marked escalation of the use of stereotypes, phobias and oversimplifications both in Katkov's articles and in Apollo Nałęcz-Korzeniowski's "Poland and Muscovy". The existence of a common level of inter-textual references – albeit used for diametrically opposite ends – can only enrich such a mutual relationship. Later we shall see that it can be complemented by the literal correspondence of individual expressions in the political writings of Joseph Conrad.

4

Before discussing Joseph Conrad's public declarations of his political convictions it is worth quoting an interesting piece of testimony from the period immediately preceding that of his literary career. This is a letter sent from Montreux-Vernet by Tadeusz Bobrowski, who – unhindered by tsarist censorship – has no qualms about bringing up political subjects:

What you write of our hopes based on Panslavism is in theory both splendid and feasible, but it meets great difficulties in practice. You don't take into account the significance which actual numbers have in the affairs of this world. Each of the more influential nations starts by relying apparently on the Panslavonic ideal and by forgetting about its own interests – but secretly and almost unconsciously relies on some aspect of its existence which will ensure its leadership. You yourself have fallen into the same error, attributing to our country certain positive qualities, which are partly but not wholly true. And so Russia does not interpret Panslavism otherwise than as a means of russifying all other nations or even converting them to the Orthodox church, justifying themselves by the argument that they have a population of 80 millions (which is false). And to our claim that we have the higher culture and a longer history they reply: this was only the life and culture of one class which claimed to be a nation (this contains a grain of truth) and that only she, Russia, will develop the real elements of the people. The Czechs are told: your nation is too small. Both they and we are accused of representing a bastard mixture of East and West while Russia's culture is real, being purely Eastern (which doesn't exist anyway). Other nations are told that they are small and are all of Eastern origin as well and should therefore bow to a more numerous nation (Russia, of course!) in order not to perish entirely. They, however, maintain that as they are still in the cradle they are the true representatives of the pure Slavonic idea. And thus the argument goes on without end, with everyone believing himself to be in the right. I am certain that eventually out of this chaos some form of federation will emerge, but by that time I shall be long dead and possibly you will be too.⁴²

Unfortunately Conrad's letters to Tadeusz Bobrowski have not come down to us, so we cannot know exactly what the latter had read before penning this reply. Working back, however, we can formulate several surprising conclusions about the general outline of the twenty-four-year-old Conrad's political thinking. The most important of these is his declared allegiance to the ideology of Pan-Slavism, which was one of the main instruments of tsarist imperial policy and which gained particular popularity and significance during the period immediately preceding the outbreak of war with

⁴² Tadeusz Bobrowski to Konrad Korzeniowski [11/23th September 1881]. [In:] *Conrad's Polish Background. Letters to and from Polish Friends*. London: Oxford University Press, 1964, pp. 79–80.

Turkey (1877–1878).⁴³ Conrad's hope that – thanks to their historical traditions and their more advanced civilization – the Poles might become the leaders of the Slavonic world testifies to the naivety of his political predictions, as Bobrowski rightly observed. Konstantin Aksakov – one of the main propagators of Pan-Slavism at that time – was quite unambiguous about his programme for Slav unity:

Thus a new way is open for Russia to acquire greatness and power [...] A new era approaches – one of the greatest in the history of mankind: a lasting alliance of all Slavs under the supreme patronage of the Russian Tsar. Moldavia and Wallachia – as lands inhabited by nations of no significance as independent entities – should, of course, be simply annexed by Russia. Nor can the existence of Constantinople be assured, it would seem, by anyone but ourselves. As the ignoble and ungrateful Austrians have acted against us and broken all ties with us, we are free of all obligations towards them. Our hands are no longer tied and even there Russia will fulfil her mission to liberate her ethnic brothers, who for the most part belong to the Orthodox Church. By annexing Galicia, which used to be ours, the whole Slavonic world will breathe easily under the patronage of Russia, who will at last have fulfilled her Christian and fraternal duty.⁴⁴

Tadeusz Bobrowski's letter is the only evidence we have of Conrad's interest in the ideas of Pan-Slavism. Later, it is only in the *Note on the Polish Problem* – an official document addressed to the British Foreign Office (with the participation of Józef Hieronim Retinger) – that Conrad returns to the idea – albeit in a completely modified form – of the need for Russian participation in a political project whose aim was the gradual restoration of Polish sovereignty:

An Anglo-French protectorate would be the ideal form of moral and material support. But Russia, as an ally, must take her place in it on such a footing as will allay to the fullest extent her possible apprehensions and satisfy her national sentiment. That necessity will have to be formally recognised.⁴⁵

5

In 1905 the subject of imperial rivalry on the continent of Europe was taken up by Conrad in earnest in an essay entitled "Autocracy and War", which – though ostensibly an indictment of the political and social traditions of Russian autocracy – was really an examination of the conflicting imperial ambitions of the two greatest continental powers: Germany and Russia. In the nineteenth century the balance of political power in Europe was decided by the outcome of this particular antagonism.

The Russo-Japanese War, which is mentioned at the beginning of the essay, is subsequently dismissed as being little more than a skirmish and serves merely as

⁴³ See: Andrzej Walicki. *W kręgu konserwatywnej utopii. Struktura i przemiany rosyjskiego słowianofilstwa*. Warszawa: PWN, 2002, p. 363.

⁴⁴ Quoted by *ibid.*, p. 364.

⁴⁵ Joseph Conrad. "A Note on the Polish Problem". [In:] *idem. Notes on Life and Letters*. New York: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1924, pp. 138–139.

a pretext to expose the illusory nature of tsarist might – this being the author's main aim. Significantly, in order to deconstruct this myth, Conrad uses the very metaphor that was earlier used by Katkov to illustrate the danger that Poland posed to the existence of Russia:

Never before had the Western world the opportunity to look so deep into the black abyss which separates a soulless autocracy posing as, and even believing itself to be, the arbiter of Europe, from the benighted, starved souls of its people. This is the real object-lesson of this war, its unforgettable information. And this war's true mission, disengaged from the economic origins of that contest [...] was to lay a ghost. It has accomplished it. [...] The task of Japan is done, the mission accomplished; the ghost of Russia's might is laid.⁴⁶

Conrad was of the opinion that the conflict in Manchuria would eventually result in substantial shifts in the balance of power, for a weakening of Russia – compounded by internal dissension – would inevitably encourage the “arrogant, Germanising tendencies of the other partner in iniquity”.⁴⁷ He foresaw that the area where the coming revision of established spheres of influence was bound to take place was that of the old Polish lands:

The very fear of this spectre being gone, it behoves us to consider its legacy – the fact (no phantom that) accomplished in Central Europe by its help and connivance.⁴⁸

At the end of his essay, therefore, Conrad concentrates our attention on the Pan-German *Weltpolitik* of his day – obsessed with Germanic superiority and hungrily eyeing new opportunities for territorial expansion. Here Conrad evokes the vision of a Germany that will swallow up the West and – as part of a new *Drang nach Osten* – will extend its reach to the Baltic provinces:

Pan-Germanism is by no means a shape of mists, and Germany is anything but a Néant where thought and effort are likely to lose themselves without sound or trace. It is a powerful and voracious organisation, full of unscrupulous self-confidence, whose appetite for aggrandisement will only be limited by the power of helping itself to the severed members of its friends and neighbours.⁴⁹

Stressing the ideological basis of the German *Drang nach Osten*, Izabela Syrut writes:

The *Drang nach Osten* concept was itself not entirely free of overseas connotations, as the legitimization of German appropriations of territory in Eastern Europe was based mainly on statements about “the law of history and its overall development”, i.e. on the superior rights of those whose civilization was more advanced and whose nobilitation had been carried out in a scientific manner by means of the theory of evolutionary development.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Joseph Conrad. “Autocracy and War”. [In:] *idem. Notes on Life and Letters*, ed. cit., pp. 89–90.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵⁰ Izabela Syrut. “Badania postkolonialne a ‘Drugi świat’. Niemieckie konstrukcje narodowo-kolonialne XIX w.” *Teksty Drugie* 2007, № 4, p. 36.

To illustrate this proposition Izabela Syrunt quotes the following terse commentary made by Ferdinand Lassalle:

Having the law [of history] on their side, the Anglo-Saxon race conquered America, France conquered Algeria, England conquered India and the Germanic peoples seized land that belonged to the Slavs.⁵¹

This theme of the operationalization of cultural difference in German “domination discourse” is not discussed directly in “Autocracy and War”, but it resurfaces in “Poland Revisited” and especially in “The Crime of Partition”, where Conrad refers to it explicitly:

The Germanic Tribes had told the whole world in all possible tones carrying conviction, the gently persuasive, the coldly logical; in tones Hegelian, Nietzschean, war-like, pious, cynical, inspired, what they were going to do to the inferior races of the earth, so full of sin and all unworthiness.⁵²

In “Poland Revisited” the hegemonic aspirations of the German nation are presented in descriptive form, using the technique of “nationalizing” the passing landscape seen from the train – accumulating unequivocally negative German national traits – and also that of the stereotypical description of a casual German acquaintance on the boat, this being a gross caricature of the irrational megalomania that is clearly visible in his characteristic manner:

I had never lingered in that land which, on the whole, is so singularly barren of memorable manifestations of generous sympathies and magnanimous impulses. An ineradicable, invincible, provincialism of envy and vanity clings to the forms of its thought like a frowsy garment. Even while yet very young I turned my eyes away from it instinctively as from a threatening phantom.⁵³

And further:

Yet, thanks to the unchangeable sea I could have given myself up to the illusion of a revised past, had it not been for the periodical transit across my gaze of a German passenger. He was marching round and round the boat deck with characteristic determination. Two sturdy boys gambolled round him in his progress like two disorderly satellites round their parent planet. He was bringing them home, from their school in England, for their holiday. What could have induced such a sound Teuton to entrust his offspring to the unhealthy influences of that effete, corrupt, rotten and criminal country I cannot imagine. [...] He trod the deck of that decadent British ship with a scornful foot while his breast (and to a large extent his stomach, too) appeared expanded by the consciousness of a superior destiny. Later I could observe the same truculent bearing, touched with the racial grotesqueness, in the men of the LANDWEHR corps, that passed through Cracow...⁵⁴

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Joseph Conrad. “The Crime of Partition”. [In:] *idem. Notes on Life and Letters*, ed. cit., pp. 124–125.

⁵³ Joseph Conrad. “Poland Revisited”. [In:] *idem. Notes on Life and Letters*, ed. cit., p. 164.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

6

Citing the findings of the American scholar Homi Bhabby, Ewa Thompson has pointed out that an essential component of defensive nationalism is the tendency of postcolonial nations to create a myth of their own past greatness, which was supposedly destroyed by colonial intervention. In the opinion of Jan Kieniewicz, who has made the same observation, in the Polish national consciousness this type of therapeutic function was performed by an idealization of Poland's history, as well as by a belief that Poland's civilization was superior to that of her Russian oppressors:

Although the Polish national movement would appear to contradict the colonial concept, in actual fact it included more and more compensatory themes. The feeling of being different from and superior to the Russians became more and more illusory and the gap between Poland and Europe did not cease to widen.⁵⁵

This principle, observed by E. Thompson and J. Kieniewicz, is quite faithfully reflected in the narration to be found on the pages of Conrad's essay entitled "The Crime of Partition", which is the writer's most eloquent piece of pro-Polish propaganda.⁵⁶

The matter of cultural differences between Russians and Poles, as well as the historical anachronism of the social and political system of tsarist Russia had, of course, been the subject of scathing criticism in "Autocracy and War". In "The Crime of Partition" Conrad denounces Russian despotism from a civilizational standpoint by deconstructing the real premises that lay behind the partitions of Poland. Conrad openly questions the ideological justifications for Russian expansion propagated by Mikhail Katkov, Konstantin Aksakov and Nikolai Danilevsky – namely Russia's new and permanent role as a European power in the international political arena. He had already made this point in "Autocracy and War":

Considered historically, Russia's influence in Europe seems the most baseless thing in the world.⁵⁷

In Conrad's opinion, the real reason for the partitions was the threat posed to the social and political order in Europe by two centres of liberal ideas: France and Poland. Poland's geographical position was a factor that could assure the success and security of the French Revolution:

The only States which dreaded the contamination of the new principles and had enough power to combat it were Prussia, Austria, and Russia, and they had another centre of forbidden ideas to deal with in defenceless Poland, unprotected by nature, and offering an immediate satisfaction to their cupidity.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Kieniewicz. *Ekspansja. Kolonializm. Cywilizacja*, ed. cit., p. 257.

⁵⁶ Zdzisław Najder. *Polityka w pismach Conrada*. [In:] *idem. Nad Conradem*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1965, p. 134.

⁵⁷ Conrad. "Autocracy and War", ed. cit., p. 92.

⁵⁸ Conrad. "The Crime of Partition", ed. cit., p. 117.

Conrad contrasts the moral crime of the partitions with the moral value of the historical and political traditions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, of which he paints an extremely idealistic picture:

The spirit of aggressiveness was absolutely foreign to the Polish temperament, to which the preservation of its institutions and its liberties was much more precious than any ideas of conquest. Polish wars were defensive, and they were mostly fought within Poland's own borders. [...] Territorial expansion was never the master-thought of Polish statesmen. The consolidation of the territories of the SERENISSIME Republic, which made of it a Power of the first rank for a time, was not accomplished by force. [...] The slowly-matured view of the economic and social necessities and, before all, the ripening moral sense of the masses were the motives that induced the forty-three representatives of Lithuanian and Ruthenian provinces, led by their paramount prince, to enter into a political combination unique in the history of the world, a spontaneous and complete union of sovereign States choosing deliberately the way of peace.⁵⁹

In this passage one cannot help but notice that Conrad has passed over in silence episodes such as the thorny question of the Dymitriads – i.e. the Polish-Muscovite War (1605–1618) – and Polish military intervention in Moscow during the “Time of Troubles”. What is of particular interest, however, is that Conrad brings up the question of the Polish presence in the eastern borderlands of the old Commonwealth – a presence that had been presented by ideologically motivated supporters of Russia's claims to these lands as the consequence of unbridled Polish expansion and the degeneration of the Polish nobility into a greedy and belligerent caste. Stressing the unprecedented nature of the phenomenon of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Conrad's narration expresses the traditional Polish view and experience of the borderlands as an area of peaceful coexistence where one could meet and talk to people from many totally different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. This differentiation is all the more significant when one realizes that “The Crime of Partition” was written in 1919, at a time when Poland had recovered her independence – but also at a time when the ethnic and political make-up of Eastern Europe had undergone considerable change.

It is worth comparing the discourse of Conrad's last political essay with his sketch of the realities of the eastern borderlands in the autobiographical volume entitled *Some Reminiscences*. Although Conrad dwells briefly on that part of Poland where he was born and bred, even these few passages allow us to pinpoint two significant details that go some way towards conveying the social realities of this part of the old Polish Commonwealth.

Examining the question of the mutual relationship between the Polish nobility of the eastern borderlands and the peasantry, Mirosław Ustrzycki lists several basic aspects which define this relationship. The first of these – resulting from the fundamental cultural inequality of the two classes – is the caring function of the local manor house, which – together with the local Catholic or Orthodox church – fulfilled the age-old role of the centre:

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 119–120.

The established manner of viewing the relationship with the peasantry was based on a belief in the naturalness of the patriarchal system. The peasants, who were of low birth and were poorly educated – having a much lower standard of living, very different customs and a completely different outlook on life – could not be treated as partners.⁶⁰

At the same time, however, a certain characteristic differentiation could be detected in the attitudes of the landed gentry towards the people in their immediate vicinity. This was particularly evident in the special treatment given to domestic servants. Here too their attitude to servants was entirely patriarchal – despite the fact that the latter were often recruited from the ranks of impecunious members of other noble families⁶¹ – and every aspect of their lives (including their private lives) was strictly controlled. What set them apart from other commoners, however, was the fact that they acted as a certain protective shield for the lifestyle of their masters:

The fiction of close relations with the peasantry was maintained by the landowners – who probably even believed it themselves – and also by the existence of domestic servants. [...] These, however, were no ordinary peasants, but people who had been carefully selected and often brought up from early childhood to live within the same circle of events and to make parts of the gentry's culture their own – to be fully adapted to the rhythm of their masters' lives and to be dependent on them. In short, they were absolutely lovable. Attitudes towards older servants varied greatly and were often the result of memories from childhood: children were sometimes neglected and left to the care of servants; indeed, they may even have preferred their company. And, of course, it also happened that the gentry took a real interest in everything that concerned the household. [...] This was therefore not a purely economic relationship, though neither was it a family relationship of the ancient Roman variety. It was rather the "feudal" model of the good servant whose childhood never came to an end and who was dependent on the care of those who were more powerful than him.⁶²

And such, more or less, is the picture suggested by a reading of Conrad's memoirs. Here the portrait of the "trusty" Joseph,⁶³ whom Conrad fondly remembers as the person who first let him take the reins and "play with the great four-in-hand whip",⁶⁴ is not at all out of place. Neither is the description of the ill-fated winter sleigh journey made by Conrad's aunt, during which their servant Valery showed great devotion and caring. A note of discord in this idyllic portrayal of life in the borderlands is struck by an account of the pillaging and vandalizing of Nicholas Bobrowski's manor house by local peasants – while a troop of Cossacks looked on –

⁶⁰ Miroslaw Ustrzycki. *Ziemianie polscy na Kresach 1864–1914. Świat wartości i postaw*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Arcana, 2006, p. 281.

⁶¹ In this regard accounts that are to be found in diaries and memoirs written during this period are of particular interest. Wacław Pohorski wrote: "An absolutely unique feature – and one that was unheard of in other parts of Poland – was the huge number of domestic servants and the patriarchal manner in which they were treated. This was a left-over from the relatively recent feudal system." – Wacław Podhorski. *Ziemianie na Ukrainie*. Rkps BJ 9831 (manuscript held by the Jagiellonian Library). Quoted by Ustrzycki. *Ziemianie polscy na Kresach*, ed. cit., p. 311.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 310.

⁶³ Conrad. *A Personal Record*, ed. cit., p. 21.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*: "I remembered perfectly the trusty Joseph who used to drive my grandmother. Why! he it was who let me hold the reins for the first time in my life and allowed me to play with the great four-in-hand whip outside the doors of the coach-house."

shortly after the outbreak of the 1863 January Uprising. This grim incident heralds the end of "Jagiellonian" unity half a century later. As Mirosław Ustrzycki observes:

The 19th century witnessed a slow but consistent development of the social and national consciousness of the peasantry and a concomitant growth in the number of conflicts. [...] The peasantry, which seemed to be close to the landowners – "our good old peasantry" – grew more and more distant and inscrutable and was not so very much "ours" any longer. [...] An even graver problem that was beginning to make itself felt was how to deal with the threat posed by the growing number of attacks on country manors.⁶⁵

7

To date, scholars have only sporadically concerned themselves with Conrad's political writings – and then mostly in order to draw attention either to their Romantic inspiration or the author's indebtedness to Polish nineteenth-century political thinkers.⁶⁶ Conrad's political essays and letters have also been invoked during discussions of *Under Western Eyes* as an additional argument in an effort to reconstruct Conrad's view (or image) of Russia.⁶⁷ By using the concepts of the postcolonial approach to analyse and interpret these writings, we can place them in a somewhat different context and thus considerably enhance their universal significance. Many of the distinctive elements of defensive nationalism which Ewa Thompson has defined in her study and which are clearly discernible in "Autocracy and War" and in "The Crime of Partition" enable us to see Conrad's political essays as a form of narrative that is directly aimed at countering the domination of imperial discourses generated by the main partitioning powers, i.e. Germany and Russia. By contrasting the deformation of the idea of nationhood – brought about by the imperial ambitions of these two powers – with the idea of European solidarity, Conrad came very close to thinking about Europe in categories that we now recognize as ours. As Zdzisław Najder has pointed out, in the ideal held up by Conrad we can discern his vision of a Europe of Nations.⁶⁸

This service of unification – Conrad wrote in "Autocracy and War" – creating close-knit communities possessing the ability, the will and the power to pursue a common ideal, has prepared the ground for the advent of a still larger understanding: for the solidarity of Europeanism, which must be the next step towards the advent of Concord and Justice; an advent that, however delayed by the fatal worship of force and the errors of national selfishness, has been, and remains, the only possible goal of our progress.⁶⁹

Translated by R. E. Pyplacz

⁶⁵ Ustrzycki. *Ziemiaństwo polscy na Kresach*, ed. cit., p. 281.

⁶⁶ See: Julian Krzyżanowski. "U źródeł publicystyki Józefa Conrada". *Ruch Literacki* 1932, № 8.

⁶⁷ See: Zdzisław Najder. *Conrad in Perspective. Essays on Art and Fidelity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 119–138.

⁶⁸ Zdzisław Najder. "Europa Josepha Conrada". *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny* 2001, Vol. 1, № 1, p. 181. This article is the expanded translation of a lecture given at the Polish Embassy in London on 1st July 1997.

⁶⁹ Conrad. "Autocracy and War", ed. cit., p. 97.

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