

CONRAD AND MALINOWSKI: THE PREDICAMENT OF CULTURE AND THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

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The confrontation of such important and unique authors as Joseph Conrad and Bronisław Malinowski is an inevitable task, yet not a simple one. Of course, one can point out some obvious similarities between them: both are Poles writing in a foreign language about exotic cultures. This juxtaposition, however, cannot constitute the base for a comparative analysis of the writer and the anthropologist. We cannot compare Conrad's and Malinowski's works only in terms of authors' biographies. This is why I have decided to look for some underlying similarities. I would like to examine how Conrad and Malinowski write about the cultural context and what strategy of culture cognition they use. I am certain that indirect similarity between the two exists, and it is much more important than any superficial likeness. The problem with the comparison of the two different outputs – literary and anthropological – appears with Malinowski's well known declaration: “[W.H.R.] Rivers is the Rider Haggard of Anthropology: I shall be the Conrad!”¹ If Malinowski is “the Conrad of Anthropology,” then is it possible for Conrad to be “the Malinowski of Literature”? It is worth to recall here the two radical critical standpoints. John W. Griffith in his study suggests the resemblance of Marlow's character to an anthropologist fieldworker, who usually takes the position of a participant-observer. He also tries to show that Marlow's isolation is very close to the anthropological strategy of cultural immersion.² For that reason “Marlow represents the initial stage of the anthropological urge – to understand and interpret,” however Griffith stresses that his “ethnographic curiosity never

¹ Quoted in: James Clifford. *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1988, 96.

² Cf. John W. Griffith. *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma: 'Bewildered Traveller.'* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, chapter “Cultural Immersion and Culture Shock in Conrad's Fiction.” Wit Tarnawski even suggests a resemblance between Conrad's observations on “primitive peoples” and Malinowski's functional method (Wit Tarnawski. “O artystycznej metodzie i formie Conrada.” *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny* 1–2 (1958), 75–76.

develops into genuine understanding.”³ Although Griffith’s proposal is a very intriguing one, I cannot fully agree with the conclusion he draws. He states that the difference between Marlow and an anthropologist depends only on the fact that Conrad’s character “is an observer but not a participant:” that is why Marlow is finally “removed from cultural immersion,” and his culture shock does not cause intensive cultural cognition.⁴ This opinion is based on the stereotype that anthropological fieldwork is above all immersion in cultural experience. However, the core of Malinowski’s anthropological work is mainly a new method of examining culture. Later I will try to prove that this style of cognition, which is the basis of Malinowski’s scientific method, is quite similar to Conrad’s creative method. Although using facts of different nature, they both represent quite a similar model of knowledge. This does not mean, however, as James Clifford, another radical interpreter of Conrad’s and Malinowski’s work suggests, that anthropology is just a literary creation: “One is tempted to propose that ethnographic comprehension [...] is better seen as a creation of ethnographic *writing* than consistent quality of ethnographic *experience*.”⁵ In this opinion one can also find a sharp division between “immersion” and the creation of “cultural fiction,” seen by Clifford as nothing but an anthropological lie.

Of course Malinowski’s predilection for literature, and the literature of Conrad in particular, should also be stressed. In the Introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* Malinowski discusses his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands and remarks: “I had periods of despondency, when I buried myself in the reading of novels, as a man might take to drink in a fit of tropical depression and boredom.”⁶ We know from his *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* that Conrad’s works featured among the books he read during the expedition and as well as being charmed, he also compared his life situation to the novels he happened to be reading.⁷ But when he writes that for all day he has been reading Conrad and *Notes and Queries*,⁸ the basic case-book for the anthropological fieldwork, it is rather naive to take this as a serious argument for mixing anthropology and literature in his own work. Furthermore, when one wants to study the literary influence on the unique language of Malinowski’s Trobriand monographs, one should also consider his friendship with Witkacy and his connections with Polish modernist bohemia.

As I have mentioned, both standpoints, the “anthropological” and the “literary” comparison of Malinowski’s and Conrad’s works, imply one simplified division of

³ Griffith, 62.

⁴ Cf. Griffith, 64–65.

⁵ Clifford, 110.

⁶ Bronisław Malinowski. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific. An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. With a Preface by Sir James George Frazer. London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., 1932, 4.

⁷ For example he is “wildly impressed” by *Lord Jim*. Cf. Bronisław Malinowski. *Dziennik w ścisłym znaczeniu tego wyrazu*. Ed. Grażyna Kubica. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001, 337.

⁸ Malinowski, *Dziennik*, 315.

cultural cognition into two different fields: the field of experience and the field of literature. In this perspective one of those fields must dominate and compensate for the other. We should rather examine the kind of knowledge that both authors use to build their own models of culture. That is why I suggest to use here the archaeological method of Michel Foucault.

Foucault sees “knowledge” as a

...group of elements, formed in a regular manner by a discursive practice; and which are indispensable to the constitution of science, although they are not necessarily destined to give rise to one [...]. Knowledge is that of which one can speak in discursive practice, and which is specified by that fact: the domain constituted by the different objects that will or will not acquire a scientific status.⁹

This means that both, Conrad’s and Malinowski’s works appear within the same model of knowledge. They use similar idea of culture and similar strategies of its cognition, and they respect the same epistemological preconditions. To be more precise: the works of both belong to the same discourse, a term which Foucault defines as “a group of statements that belong to a single system of formation;” and “the law of such a series” can be called a discursive formation.¹⁰ That is why the system of formation which gives the right of existence to both Conrad’s and Malinowski’s statements can be called “anthropological discourse.” Because Foucault defines “statement” as “the modality of existence proper to [...] group of signs,”¹¹ in case of both authors one can treat their literary or scientific works as statements. I assume that both works derive from a new unit of knowledge founded on anthropology. This does not merely mean its direct connection with a new branch of science, but also, in a broader sense, its relation to the widespread awareness of the idea of culture.

The notion of culture was redefined at the turn of the 20th century and – after much debate – has become one of the basic terms of the humanities. To examine the relation between Conrad’s and Malinowski’s statements within anthropological discourse, one should explore three fields of their formulation,¹² including, in particular, the special position of anthropology as a science. Firstly, what is the form that the idea of culture receives in both authors’ statements? Secondly, what kind of perspective in the cognition of culture do both authors take? Thirdly, what kind of sources do they use and how do they apply them?

In the second half of the 19th century the two following ideas of culture prevail and interact. The first one is humanistic and as such it is represented by Matthew Arnold. The second one, represented by Edward Burnett Tylor, is anthropological. In *Culture*

⁹ Michel Foucault. *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Transl. A.M. Sheridan Smith. London and New York: Routledge, 2006, 201.

¹⁰ Foucault, 121.

¹¹ Foucault, 120.

¹² Cf. Foucault, 120: “...we could call *formulation* the individual (or possibly collective) act that reveals, on any material and according to a particular form, that group of signs.”

and *Anarchy* Arnold defines culture as “a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world.”¹³ This idea of perfection as “an *inward* condition of the mind and spirit is at variance with the mechanical and material civilisation.”¹⁴ This means that culture is an extraordinary part of human existence and it is absolute in its own sublimity. In other words, the humanistic idea of culture is selective and evaluative.

The new approach to the idea of culture begins with the birth of new science dedicated to examining man and his culture, the science of anthropology. The approach should be associated with the first definition of culture given by Edward Burnett Tylor in his *Primitive Culture*:

Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.¹⁵

In this first anthropological reflection, the notion of culture is submitted to the idea of progress of mankind through the succeeding stages of development. Civilisation is viewed as the main and superior category for defining and analysing culture. In a work titled *Ancient Society* written by a precursor of American anthropology, Lewis Henry Morgan, this standpoint is reflected:

Out of a few germs of thought, conceived in the early ages, have been evolved all the principal institutions of mankind. Beginning their growth in the period of savagery, fermenting through the period of barbarism, they have continued their advancement through the period of civilization.¹⁶

In this anthropological theory culture is for the first time treated as a “mode of life.” Yet, it is simultaneously made just a part of the evolutionary scheme, which is the base for any reflection on culture in its universal meaning: “Each of these periods has a distinct culture and exhibits a mode of life more or less special and peculiar to itself. This specialization of ethnical periods renders it possible to treat a particular society according to its condition of relative advancement, and to make it a subject of independent study and discussion.”¹⁷ In the consequence of such approach, the context of particular culture is not taken into account. It happens because for evolution-

¹³ Matthew Arnold. *Culture and Anarchy*. Edited, with an Introduction by J. Dover Wilson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 6.

¹⁴ Arnold, 49.

¹⁵ Edward Burnett Tylor. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*. London: John Murray, 1871, 1.

¹⁶ Lewis Henry Morgan. *Ancient Society or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization*. Gujramvala, Pakistan: Bharti Library, 1944. Downloaded 18.07.2007 from: <http://marx.org/reference/archive/morgan-lewis/ancient-society/index.htm>

¹⁷ Morgan, Part 1, Chapter 1.

ary anthropologists "...in all major areas of human activity, 'culture' reached its full flowering only in the third stage."¹⁸

George W. Stocking, Jr. suggests then that Tylor's "idea of culture was perhaps closer to that of this humanist near-contemporary Matthew Arnold than it was to the modern anthropological meaning."¹⁹ Although Arnold has criticized civilisation, the idea of perfection is quite similar to the idea of progress and development. That is why we can agree with Stocking that Tylor "...simply took the contemporary humanist idea of culture and fitted it into the framework of progressive social evolutionism."²⁰ There is also another similarity between Arnold and Tylor. Claiming universality of their respective points of view, they both examine culture using only one cognitive perspective determined by their own cultural context, which suggests not only ethnocentrism, but also absolutistic model of knowledge.

The very difference between this first anthropology and modern anthropology started by Malinowski is not only the difference between an archive work of a historian reconstructing history of mankind and a fieldworker examining particular cultural context. This is also the difference in understanding culture and using different cognitive model of science.

The starting point for all cultural research and reflection of Malinowski is to treat particular and contextual culture as a complete phenomenon. How close to that point of view is Conrad as a participant of anthropological discourse then? The word "culture" never appears in his work. What is more, we do not find any clear and secure ethnographic knowledge or facts in Conrad's work. Although sometimes Conrad is being qualified as an expert in Malayan cultures, he never regarded himself as such.²¹ The truth is that, when reading Conrad, an anthropologist could be somewhat surprised by the multiplicity of "ethnographic images,"²² Victorian rhetoric and even stereotypes used by Conradian characters for describing different cultures. For that reason Chinua Achebe finds racism in "Heart of Darkness," where Africa is just a "...setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor."²³ But the exoticism used in Conrad's works is a very specific one. It is not a simple scenery, a kind of a fascinating appendix, but rather the origin of unawareness and ignorance. Besides, we cannot equate Marlow's perspective with that of Conrad's; as Frances B.

¹⁸ George W. Stocking, Jr. "Matthew Arnold, E.B. Tylor, and the Uses of Invention." *American Anthropologist* 65 (1963). Downloaded 16.08.2007 from: <http://www.aaanet.org/gad/history/044stocking.pdf>

¹⁹ Cf. Stocking.

²⁰ Cf. Stocking.

²¹ Cf. Robert Hampson. *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad's Malay Fiction*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2000, 3–5.

²² See: Alcida Rita Ramos. "Reflecting on the Yanomami: Ethnographic Images and the Pursuit of the Exotic." *Cultural Anthropology* 2 (1982).

²³ Chinua Achebe. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'." Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness. An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, and Sources, Criticism*. Ed. Robert Kimbrough. London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1988, 257.

Singh puts it, Conrad shows Marlow's terms as limited.²⁴ His knowledge is limited by the unknowns of the new cultural context in which Marlow is thrown. This, I presume, is the base for Conrad's anthropological reflection on culture, mainly, his way of confronting different cultural points of view in a situation of isolation, and showing the tension between narration and cultural transgression. Most of Conrad's characters use the rhetoric of his times for the recognition of strange cultural reality, but their notions are never congruent with it, sometimes they are completely false and give rise to misunderstandings. As Allan Hunter claims, Joseph Conrad tests some scientific theories, re-writes them and re-applies them to the "real" world;²⁵ Edward Said confirms this point of view: Conrad draws our attention to "...how ideas and values are constructed (and deconstructed) through dislocations in the narrator's language."²⁶

We have such a cognitive situation in the case of Marlow in *The Heart of Darkness*. Marlow uses evolutionary rhetoric to interpret his journey: "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world."²⁷ It is present also when he names natives "prehistoric men."²⁸ But limitation and vagueness of context make Marlow admit: "We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings."²⁹ Of course there is no particular cultural cognition in Conrad's work, but there is a very important anthropological observation: a universal cognitive point of view is not enough in the situation of cultural transgression. That is why different cultural context cannot be the exclusive ground for the discourse of our knowledge. Unawareness is a starting-point for anthropological reflection. Yet, it is very hard to reach through our universal knowledge, which we often use to explain everything. We find an example of such a "research disposition" in Conrad's work and Robert Hampson calls it "...Conrad's strategy of ignorance: representing through situated misrepresentation."³⁰ All of the above mentioned qualifies Conrad's work as part of the anthropological discourse.

Stanisław Modrzewski indicates three variants in which "culture" appears in Conrad's works: in the first variant Conrad confronts two or more cultural perspectives; in the second variant Conrad tests individual vision of reality by transgressive experience; and in the third variant Conrad confronts different, culture conditioned, patterns of understanding and interpreting the same parts of human existence.³¹ In short, Conrad verifies our cultural knowledge in different cultural contexts and in

²⁴ Frances B. Singh. "The Colonialistic Bias of *Heart of Darkness*." Conrad, 277.

²⁵ Allan Hunter. *Joseph Conrad and the Ethics of Darwinism. The Challenges of Science*. London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1983, 6.

²⁶ Edward W. Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, 29.

²⁷ Conrad, 35.

²⁸ Conrad, 37.

²⁹ Conrad, 37.

³⁰ Hampson, 174.

³¹ Cf. Stanisław Modrzewski. *Conrad a konwencje. Autorska świadomość systemów a warsztat literacki pisarza*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 1992, 27–28.

relation to other cultural viewpoints. This fact implies the relativity of Conrad's vision of culture in proper, anthropological, not ethical sense: "...Conrad's exploitation of the 'dialogic possibilities' of multiple viewpoints and competing narratives anticipates the 'dialogic modes' of modern anthropology."³² That is why the problem of culture is always an opportunity to examine our knowledge by cross-cultural comparison. Such cross-cultural encounters as cross-cultural dialogues are present in Conrad's work, however, they seldom succeed in understanding.

I have recalled Modrzewski's standpoint and cannot agree with James Clifford's opinion that the "predicament of culture" places culture as a "collective fiction," with both Conrad and Malinowski simply embracing the serious fiction of "culture."³³ Even if we admit that culture is fiction of our knowledge, Conrad is still more interested in exposing cultural reality and context (even as unknown) and rather forges this universal fiction than confirms it. Clifford favours Conrad, when he writes:

The author of *Argonauts* devotes himself to constructing realistic cultural fictions, whereas Conrad, though similarly committed, represents activity as a contextually limited practice of storytelling.³⁴

We must remember that for Conrad cognition is never limited to narration but is a continuous struggle with one's experience and one's knowledge. For Malinowski as well, "anthropological narration" is never an easy fiction but mainly the problem with expressing the results of empirical examination of culture:

In Ethnography, the distance is often enormous between the brute material of information – as it is presented to the student in his own observations, in native statement, in the kaleidoscope of tribal life – and the final authoritative presentation of the results. The Ethnographer has to traverse this distance in the laborious years between the moment when he sets foot upon a native beach, and makes his first attempts to get into touch with the natives, and the time when he writes down the final version of his results.³⁵

This kind of "anthropological dilemma" we can call "cultural hermeneutics,"³⁶ and this is the crucial point of anthropological discourse: it teaches us to approach both the Other and our knowledge with humility, to find a balance between experience and erudition, and between different points of view.

And this is the reason why Malinowski wanted to be "the Conrad of Anthropology" in opposition to Rivers vis-à-vis Rider Haggard. That is not merely a problem of some literary creation, but the problem of cognitive perspective. In Haggard, just like in early anthropology represented by Rivers as well as by Tylor, anthropological dilemmas and the polyphony of different cultures disappear in the one and only univer-

³² Hampson, 25.

³³ Clifford, 10.

³⁴ Clifford, 100.

³⁵ Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 3–4.

³⁶ Cf. Griffith, 23–24.

sal truth of a superior narrator or scientist. As Robert Hampson points out, Conrad's narration "problematizes truth,"³⁷ although he uses the same comparative method which is based on the comparison of different cultures and times and was the foundation of evolutionary anthropological research. For Haggard, exoticism is always obvious and reasonable; for Conrad, the experience of a different cultural context is always an opportunity to change one's cognitive perspective.

Now, it is worth examining how Malinowski unites the anthropological dilemma with scientific precision. For Malinowski "the goal of ethnographic field-work must be approached through three avenues:" firstly, "the organisation of the tribe, and the anatomy of its culture must be recorded" by the method of concrete, statistical documentation – Malinowski names it the "skeleton" of a tribe. Secondly, "the imponderabilia of actual life, and the type of behaviour have to be filled in" through detailed observations – this is the "flesh and blood" of culture being examined. Thirdly, "a collection of ethnographic statements, characteristic narratives, typical utterances [...] has to be given as a *corpus inscriptionum*, as documents of native mentality" that Malinowski calls the "spirit" of culture.³⁸ What we find in this method is a double innovation in cognitive point of view. Above all, Malinowski increases here the number of sources, he increases both quantity and quality of perspectives (statistics, observations, quotations). Malinowski is also the first ethnographer who has let the "subject" of his researches speak through the *corpus inscriptionum*, and this is the way he crosses the limitations of his own point of view.

Of course we will not find any cultural "skeleton" or "flesh and blood" in Conrad's narrations, but we can point out here a kind of European *corpus inscriptionum* which illustrates this modern model of mind with its stereotypes, patterns in style of interpretation and the principles of thinking and communicating. As Robert Hampson stresses, Conrad has used the same material for his books as British evolutionary anthropologists: the reports of explorers, travellers, sailors and colonists,³⁹ the kind of material whose credibility Malinowski has impaired. The difference is that Conrad has used it not only to describe different cultures, but also to expose the manner of interpretations and to describe their interpreters. That is why he uses such a non-professional material, but his scope is quite anthropological.

The conclusion of this essay is that Conrad's authorship is found on "anthropological discourse," and it is located between evolutionary anthropology and modern field anthropology. It can be said that Conrad uses the previously applied substance and notions but gives a new form to them: working on the knowledge of his times, he anticipates a new style and scope of cognition. Said claims that "...we see Conrad

³⁷ Robert Hampson. "Frazer, Conrad and the 'Truth of Primitive Passion'." *Sir James George Frazer and the Literary Imagination. Essays in Affinity and Influence*. Ed. Robert Fraser. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1990, 180.

³⁸ Cf. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 11–25, esp. 24.

³⁹ See: Hampson, Frazer, 175.

both criticizing and reproducing the imperial ideology of his time.”⁴⁰ I think that we can observe the same on a deeper, on an epistemological level, which makes Conrad not just a kind of “an observer in Malaya,” but rather an anthropologist of the European mind.

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⁴⁰ Said, xx.