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MIŁOSZ AND CONRAD IN THE *TREATISE ON MORALITY*

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Abstract: It would appear that Czesław Miłosz's *Treatise on Morality* — one of whose aims was to "stave off despair" — was largely inspired by the writings of Joseph Conrad. That Miłosz had no wish to draw his readers' attention to this is perfectly understandable, given Conrad's particularly low standing in the eyes of communist State censors. This long poem, which extols human freedom and pours scorn on socialist realism (together with its ideological premises), is one of Miłosz's best known works in his native Poland, where it was published in 1948. The *Treatise on Morality* may well have been inspired by three of Conrad's essays that were banned in communist Poland: *Autocracy and War*, *A Note on the Polish Problem* and *The Crime of Partition*. Conrad's writings would appear to have helped Miłosz to diagnose Poland's political predicament from a historical perspective and to look for a way out of it without losing all hope. An analysis of the *Treatise on Morality* shows that only by reconstructing the Conradian atmosphere and context — alluded to in the text — can we fully grasp all the levels of the poet's irony, which culminates in a final "punch-line" alluding to *Heart of Darkness*. Apart from suggestive allusions to the brutal colonization of the Congo, the fate of post-war Poland is also seen through the optic of those of Conrad's novels that deal with the subject of depraved revolutionaries: *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*. Conrad's ideas for ways to fight against bad fortune and despair are suggested not only by his stories *Youth* and *Typhoon* — and by his novels *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *Lord Jim* — but also and above all by his volume of memoirs entitled *A Personal Record*, in which he relates his yearning for freedom as the young, tragic victim of a foreign empire. In an article entitled *Joseph Conrad in Polish Eyes* and published in 1957 — on the hundredth anniversary of Conrad's birth — Miłosz writes that, through his writings, Conrad fulfilled the hopes of his father (who gave him the name "Konrad") and that although "the son did not want to assume a burden that had crushed his father, he had nevertheless become the defender of freedom against the blights of autocracy."

Keywords: *a Note on the Polish Problem*, *A Personal Record*, *Autocracy and War*, colonialism, communism, Congo, Czesław Miłosz, freedom, *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad, solidarity, *Treatise on Morality*, *Typhoon*

> *Yet under a destructive pressure, of which Western Europe can have no notion, applied by forces that were not only crushing but corrupting, we have preserved our sanity.*[1]

[1] Joseph Conrad. "The Crime of Partition" (1919). [In:] *idem*. *Notes on Life and Letters*. Ed. John H. Stape and Andrew Busza. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 104: lines 38–41.

Excerpts from *The Crime of Partition* (*Zbrodnia rozbiorów*) and *A Note on the Polish Problem* (*Nota w sprawie polskiej*) appeared in the émigré journal *Kultura* (Rome / Paris) in 1948: № 6, pp. 128–133

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[...] the question is [...] how to live. [...] In the destructive element immerse [...] That was the way. To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream — and so — ewig — usque ad finem.

(*Lord Jim*)

Wiersz mój chce chronić od rozpaczy,
Tej właśnie, jaką miał Witkacy …
[*My poem is intended to stave off despair,*
— that same despair which haunted Witkacy ...][2]

1. THE *TREATISE ON MORALITY* IN THE LIGHT OF THE WRITINGS OF JOSEPH CONRAD

As Zdzisław Najder has observed, Conrad "treated the texts of eminent writers, and also texts of documents, as raw material of the same kind as the content of his own memory. The elements taken from other authors functioned often as allusions — they directed to another text, becoming components of a complex construction, sometimes polemical: it is so with references to Dostoevsky (without using his name) in *Under Western Eyes*, or Rousseau (whose name is used) in *A Personal Record*."[3]

The same can also be said of Czesław Miłosz,[4] who belonged to the first generation that had been "brought up on Conrad"[5] and whose postwar writing is permeated

(transl. J.M.). An editor's note says that the essays which Conrad published during the First World War contain many apt observations that may be of interest to contemporary readers.

The Censor of Plays (*Cenzor sztuk teatralnych*), *The Crime of Partition* (*Zbrodnia rozbiorów*), *Autocracy and War* (*Autokracja i wojna*), *A Note on the Polish Problem* (*Nota w sprawie polskiej*) and the *Author's Note* to the novel *Under Western Eyes* were removed by communist censors from the 1972–1974 edition of Conrad's Collected Works edited by Z. Najder and were first published in Poland as late as 1996 in a separate volume (№ 28) entitled *Dzieła: Szkice polityczne* (Political Essays) — reproducing the text of the 1975 London émigré edition, which contained all the texts that had been removed by the communist censors. Cf. Joseph Conrad. *Dzieła.* Ed. Zdzisław Najder. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1972–1974 (vols. 1–27); 1996 (vol. 28).

[2] *Traktat moralny* (A Treatise on Morality) by Czesław Miłosz first appeared in the journal *Twórczość* in 1948: № 4, pp. 5–16. I quote from: Czesław Miłosz. *Utwory poetyckie. Poems.* Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1976, pp. 143–156 (abb. *Tm, Upp* 1976). Witkacy is the pen name of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939), an avant-garde painter, writer, philosopher and thinker. "On September 17, 1939, learning that the Red Army had crossed the eastern border of Poland, he committed suicide by taking veronal and cutting his wrists." — Czesław Miłosz. *The Captive Mind*. Transl. Jane Zielonko. New York: Vintage Books, 1990, p. 5.

[3] Zdzisław Najder. *Joseph Conrad. A Life*. Transl. Halina Najder. Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2007, chapter XII, p. 457.

[4] During the war Miłosz was not too fond of Conrad, whom he read in translation and considered to be too romantic. Cf. Czesław Miłosz. *Abecadło*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001, p. 64. Once the war was over, Miłosz returned to Conrad — first covertly in the *Treatise on Morality*, then openly in the *Treatise on Poetry* (*Traktat poetycki* — 1956) and in his essays. Cf. Czesław Miłosz. *New and Collected Poems (1931–2002)*. New York: Ecco, 2003, pp. 113–114.

[5] Stefan Zabierowski. *Dziedzictwo Conrada w literaturze polskiej XX wieku*. Kraków: Oficyna Literacka, 1992, IV, p. 75 ff.; Cf. Czesław Miłosz. "O książce" (1934). [In:] *Upp* 1976, p. 17.

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(albeit covertly) with the "spirit of Conrad"[6] — an author who, as Miłosz observes in his 1957 essay entitled *Joseph Conrad in Polish Eyes*,[7] was immediately blacklisted as an ideological enemy and a "depraver of youth" by postwar Polish Stalinists, who accused him of being an "incorrigible exponent of western civilisation."

In the same essay, Miłosz writes that the communist apparatchiks saw Conrad above all as a champion of the "aristocratic scale of values, dear to [his] sailors, pirates and soldiers," which "was not compatible with the creation of individuals completely subservient to the State." They therefore proceeded to undermine his good standing with Polish readers by accusing him of cosmopolitanism and by grossly distorting his moral stance — claiming, for instance, that "when he depicted a crew's loyalty towards its captain and ship, he was in reality serving the interests of the ships' owners."[8]

The very fact that Conrad's works were once again being published in Poland after 1955 was, Miłosz notes, a sure sign of the authenticity of the current political "thaw."[9] The last word of this essay — "autocracy" — might well be an allusion to Conrad's political essay entitled *Autocracy and War* (1905), in which the author contrasts Russian and Prussian autocracy with the ideal of liberal democracy. Miłosz concludes his article with the following observation: "[…] by a strange detour, his father's wishes in giving him the name Konrad were finally fulfilled. The son who did not want to assume a burden that had crushed his father had nevertheless become the defender of freedom against the blights of autocracy."[10] In his own essay, Conrad writes that Russian autocracy is based on "the brutal destruction of dignity, of truth, of rectitude, of all that is faithful in human nature."[11]

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[6] *Jest w poezji Miłosza duch Conrada, pisarza, który tak wiele zajmie miejsca w Traktacie poetyckim* … (The poetry of Czesław Miłosz is suffused with the spirit of Conrad — a writer who figures so prominently in the *Treatise on Poetry*) — Jerzy Kwiatkowski [In:] *Poznawanie Miłosza*. Ed. *idem*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1985, p. 44.

[7] Czesław Miłosz. "Joseph Conrad in Polish Eyes" (1957). [In:] *Joseph Conrad. Critical Assessments*. Ed. Keith Carabine. The Banks, Mountfield: Helm Information Ltd., 1992, vol. I: *Conrad's Polish Heritage, Memories and Impressions, Contemporary and Early Responses*, pp. 92–102. Source: Atlantic Monthly 200.5, November 1957.

[8] See: Jan Kott. "O laickim tragizmie: Conrad i Malraux". *Twórczość* 1945, 1.2, pp. 137–150. Kott's article was inspired by an earlier (1926) text: "Upton Sinclair's derogatory statements about Conrad as a writer who had sold out to capitalist interests, notably to shipping companies" — cf. Adam Gillon. "Conrad and Poland". [In:] *idem*. *Conrad and Shakespeare*. New York: Astra Books, 1976, p. 226. Cf. Stefan Zabierowski. "Polskie spory o Conrada w latach 1945–1949". [In:] *idem*. *Conrad w perspektywie odbioru*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1979; cf. *idem*. *Dziedzictwo Conrada w literaturze polskiej XX wieku*. Kraków: Oficyna Literacka, 1992, pp. 214–215, 275; cf. Rafał Szczerbakiewicz. "Jan Kott's Joseph Conrad". [In:] *A Return to the Roots: Conrad and East-central Europe*. Ed. Wiesław Krajka, Boulder–Lublin–New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 107–130; cf. Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech. "Gustaw Herling-Grudziński as a Reader of Conrad". [In:] *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, vol. III. 2007, pp. 181–193; cf. Mark D. Larabee. "Conrad and the Maritime Tradition". [In:] *A Historical Guide to Joseph Conrad.* Ed. John Peters. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

[9] Miłosz. "Joseph Conrad in Polish Eyes", *ed. cit.*, p. 101.

[10] *Ibid*., pp. 101–102.

[11] Joseph Conrad. "Autocracy and War". [In:] *idem*. *Notes on Life and Letters*, *ed. cit.*, p. 82: lines 38–39.

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In his poem entitled *A Treatise on Poetry* (*Traktat poetycki* — 1957) Miłosz distinctly suggests that it was Conrad who — in *Heart of Darkness*, which was written at the turn of the century — first mapped out and analysed the chain of events that would lead to slaughter on a massive scale on the continent of Europe:

> […] The moment still exists
> When, in a deserted street, in humid Brussels,
> He walked slowly up the marble stairs
> And pushed a bell marked by the letter S,
> The Anonymous Society, listened to the silence,
> Entered. Two women, knitting, pulled at threads —
> They seemed to him Parcae —, then put away
> Their skeins and gestured toward a door,
> Behind which rose the managing director,
> Also anonymous, to shake his hand.
> It was in this way that Joseph Conrad
> Came to captain a steamer on the Congo,
> As was fated. For those who would hear it,
> His tale of a jungle river was a warning:
> One of the civilizers, a madman named Kurtz,
> A gatherer of ivory stained with blood,
> Scribbled in the margin of his report
> On the Light of Culture: "The horror." And climbed
> Into the twentieth century.[12]

In 1957 Miłosz also published an essay entitled *Stereotyp u Conrada* (*Conrad's Stereotypes*),[13] in which he discusses the subject of the image of the Russian in the Polish national consciousness. In the previous year he had published an essay devoted to Conrad's father, in which he writes that Conrad's 1916 memorandum on the Polish question is ample proof that "Conrad did remain faithful in his own way to *an idea without a tomorrow*"[14] — i.e. the "lost cause"[15] of Polish independence. All these

[12] Miłosz. *New and Collected Poems (1931–2002)*, *ed. cit.*, p. 114. Cf. *Upp* 169.

[13] Czesław Miłosz. "Stereotyp u Conrada". [In:] *Conrad żywy.* Ed. Wit Tarnawski. London: B. Świderski, 1957. Miłosz here examines Conrad's political views, which reflect the typical pattern of Polish political sensibility rooted in the experience of Russia as "a barbaric and servile autocracy with a totally alien civilisation; this aversion embraces equally the Russian promoters of autocracy and the revolutionaries who fight against it. Yet in spite of this a Pole bears the Russian people no ill-will and often his feelings towards them are those of sympathy" (*ibid.*, pp. 283–284). Miłosz also discovers this pattern in his own consciousness and considers it to be typical of Poles living in the eastern borderlands. Later the poet identifies its source as being an archetype rooted in the national memory and draws attention to Adam Mickiewicz's *Digression* (*Ustęp*) to the third and final part of his *Forefathers' Eve* (*Dziady*) as well as to Conrad's *Under Western Eyes.* See: Czesław Miłosz. *The History of Polish Literature.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, pp. 224, 225; Czesław Miłosz. *Życie na wyspach*. Kraków: Znak, 1998, p. 53.

[14] Czesław Milosz. "Joseph Conrad's Father". Transl. Reuel K. Wilson. [In:] *idem*. *Emperor of the Earth. Modes of Eccentric Vision*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977, p. 184; Cf. Czesław Milosz. "Apollo Nałęcz Korzeniowski" (1956). [In:] *idem*. *Prywatne obowiązki*. Kraków: Znak, 2001, p. 287.

[15] Cf. J. Conrad to R.B. Cunninghame Graham, 8th February 1899: "Moi je regarde l'avenir du fond d'un passé très noir et je trouve que rien ne m'est permis hormis la fidélité à une cause absolument per-

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texts bear eloquent testimony to the fact that — in the poet's mind — the cause of human freedom, which figures so prominently in the first decade of Miłosz's postwar output, was in those years inextricably bound up with the name of Joseph Conrad.

The *Treatise on Morality* was written in America in 1947, at a time when there was a growing fascination with Conrad.[16] It was published in 1948 in the Polish *Twórczość* literary magazine, "just before the onset of socialist realism."[17] In his 1983 interview with Renata Gorczyńska, Miłosz describes this work as being not only a thinly veiled satire on socialist realism, but also the original first sketch for *The Captive Mind* (1953).[18] Shortly after the *Treatise on Morality* was published, Miłosz — having been overcome by a sense of hopelessness and an all-pervading fear,[19] and now faced with the real threat of mental enslavement — took the decision to defect to the West and become an émigré.[20]

At first sight, the traditional form of the *Treatise on Morality* — shot through as it is with satire and sarcasm — may seem to have been inspired by Swift.[21] Many elements, however — including the final envoi / punchline:

> Idźmy w pokoju, ludzie prości.
> Przed nami jest
> – „Jądro ciemności".[22]
>
> Let us go in peace, we the simple-hearted,
> For before us lies … the "Heart of Darkness".[23]

— would seem to indicate that the main optic through which Miłosz viewed the political situation of his day were the works of Joseph Conrad (and *Heart of Darkness*

due, à une idée sans avenir." *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 2. Ed. Frederick Karl and Lawrence Davies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 159–160.

[16] Cf. John Peters. *The Cambridge Introduction to Joseph Conrad.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, Chapter 6: *Conrad Criticism*; Cf. *The Portable Conrad*. Ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel. New York: Penguin Books, 1947.

[17] The doctrine of socialist realism was imposed on Polish artists and writers in August 1948 during the World Congress of Intellectuals for Peace held in Wrocław. At this conference the Soviet delegate Alexander Fadeyev declared: "If hyenas could type and jackals could use a fountain pen, they would write like T.S. Eliot, Dos Passos, Sartre and Malraux."; Cf. Jolanta Dudek. "Główne wątki polskiej recepcji T.S. Eliota od Borowego do Miłosza". [In:] *eadem*. *Granice wyobraźni, granice słowa. Studia z literatury porównawczej XX wieku.* Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2008, pp. 263–264.

[18] Cf. Miłosz. *The Captive Mind*, *ed. cit.*

[19] Czesław Miłosz. "Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz: a Writer for Today" (1967). [In:] *idem*. *Emperor of the Earth*, *ed. cit.*, p. 48; *idem*. *The History of Polish Literature*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 414–420.

[20] In 1946 Miłosz took up his post as a Polish diplomat in New York. In the autumn of 1950 he gave up his job after being transferred to Paris, where he applied for political asylum on 1st February 1951. Cf. Czesław Miłosz, Renata Gorczyńska. *Rozmowy*. *Podróżny świata*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2002, pp. 78, 85, 90.

[21] The poems entitled *Do Jonathana Swifta* (To Jonathan Swift) and *Traktat moralny* (A Treatise on Morality) — published in: Czesław Miłosz. *Światło dzienne*. Paris, 1953 and in: *Upp* 1976 — are not included in: Czesław Miłosz. *New and Collected Poems (1931–2002)*. New York: Ecco, 2003.

[22] *Tm, Upp* 1976, p. 156.

[23] In the present article all translations of excerpts from Miłosz's *Treatise on Morality* are by R.E. Pypłacz.

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in particular).[24] Tsarist Russia — imperial and autocratic, crushing individual freedom and darkly foreshadowing the Soviet Union — reminded Miłosz of the "amorphous chaos of the Congo, which ensnared ivory traders" (such as Kurtz)[25] and had been portrayed by Conrad in his novels *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*[26] — also in his essay entitled *Autocracy and War* and the memorandum entitled *A Note on the Polish Problem*,[27] which among other things speaks of the "complete and ineradicable incompatibility" between "Polonism" and "Russian Slavonism,"[28] which is forever bent on the ruthless subjugation of individuals and entire nations alike.[29]

The *Treatise on Morality* also alludes to other works by Conrad,[30] including his volume of autobiographical reminiscences, which encompass the Polish national uprisings and the author's childhood, which was overshadowed by the "great empire" and the personal tragedy of his parents, whose bitter lot he shared in their exile. Some Polish critics would go as far as to say that the entire *Treatise on Morality* is a commentary to one "well-known and somewhat disturbing sentence"[31] in Conrad's reminiscences. This sentence neatly conveys the writer's irreverent attitude to ethical theories of history, as well as his apparent belief that "all human values are of man's own making":[32]

> The ethical view of the universe involves us at last in so many cruel and absurd contradictions, where the last vestiges of faith, hope, charity, and even of reason itself, seem ready to perish, that I have come to suspect that the aim of creation cannot be ethical at all. I would fondly believe that its object is purely spectacular: a spectacle for awe, love, adoration, or hate, if you like, but in this view — and in this view alone — never for despair![33]

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[24] Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was first published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899. In book form it appeared later in the volume: J. Conrad. *Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories*. Edinburgh–London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1902. Cf. Joseph Conrad. *Jądro ciemności* (Heart of Darkness) and *Młodość* (Youth). [In:] *idem*. *Pisma zbiorowe*. Transl. Aniela Zagórska with a foreword by Stefan Żeromski. Warszawa: Dom Książki Polskiej, 1930, vol. 6. The Polish title had been suggested by Conrad. Cf. Conrad. *Dzieła*, *ed. cit.*, vol. 6: *Młodość i inne opowiadania* (1972). Transl. A. Zagórska.

[25] Cf. Miłosz. "Stereotyp u Conrada", *ed. cit.*, pp. 94–95.

[26] J. Conrad, *The Secret Agent. A Simple Tale* (1907), *Under Western Eyes* (1911).

[27] See footnote № 1.

[28] Conrad. *Notes on Life and Letters*, *ed. cit.*, p. 109: lines 19–23: "That element of racial unity which may be called Polonism, remained compressed between Prussian Germanism on one side and the Russian Slavonism on the other. For Germanism it feels nothing but hatred. But between Polonism and Slavonism there is not so much hatred as a complete and ineradicable incompatibility."; "The barrier seems to have arisen from what Joseph Conrad called "incompatibility of temper" — Czesław Miłosz. "Russia". [In:] *idem*. *Native Realm*. Transl. Catherine S. Leach. New York: Farrar, 2002, p. 128; Cf. Joseph Conrad. *A Personal Record.* Ed. Zdzisław Najder and John H. Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 197, lines 5–37.

[29] Cf. Miłosz. *The History of Polish Literature*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 281–283.

[30] *The Nigger of 'The Narcissus'* (1897); *Typhoon* (1902).

[31] Tadeusz Skutnik. *W imię Conrada*. *Joseph Conrad w poezji polskiej.* Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1977, p. 21; cf. Józef Ujejski. *O Konradzie Korzeniowskim.* Warszawa: Dom Książki Polskiej, 1936, p. 109.

[32] Zdzisław Najder. "A Personal Record". [In:] *idem*. *Conrad in Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 106.

[33] Conrad. *A Personal Record*, *ed. cit.*, p. 86, lines 34–41.

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From the very beginning of the *Treatise on Morality* Conrad functions as an essential and recognizable, albeit covert reference point for the poem's subject matter. In the confrontation with evil, he would seem to personify the incisive yet empathetic wisdom of the Stoics, who advocated inner calm in the face of sudden and unexpected misfortunes and cautioned against yielding to any form of hubris or "unbridled emotionalism,"[34] i.e. either to "senseless desperation provoked by senseless tyranny"[35] or to "do-nothing heroics."[36]

2. AN ANALYSIS OF THE *TREATISE ON MORALITY* IN THE CONTEXT OF CONRAD'S WORK

The first stanza of the *Treatise on Morality*, with its gloomy image of the "so-called dawn of peace," takes us back to the *The Arrow of Gold* and its *Author's Note*, in which Conrad says: "*The Arrow of Gold* is my first after-the-war publication. The writing of it was begun in the autumn of 1917 and finished in the summer of 1918. Its memory is associated with that of the darkest hour of the war, which, in accordance with the well known proverb, preceded the dawn — the dawn of peace."[37] In common with the autobiographical *The Mirror of the Sea*, the novel has "the quality of initiation (through an ordeal which required some resolution to face) into the life of passion."[38]

The overriding task of the moment for the protagonist of the *Treatise on Morality* — who sees himself as being bereft of the attributes of leader and prophet — is to save the Earth from annihilation — something which is now a distinct possibility, given that the "so-called dawn of peace" has destroyed people's faith in the moral sense of history, as well as their hopes for a better future, bringing instead bitterness, mutual distrust and indifference. His introductory questions, which reflect everyone's anxieties, are therefore immediately followed by comments brimming with ironic allusions:

TRAKTAT MORALNY

„Gdzież jest, poeto, ocalenie?
Czy coś ocalić może ziemię?
Cóż dał tak zwany świt pokoju?
Ruinom trochę dał powojów,
Nadziejom gorycz, sercom skrytość,
A wątpię, czy obudził litość." (Tm, 143)

[34] Najder. *Conrad in Perspective*, *ed. cit.*, p. 106.

[35] *Author's Note* (1920) to: Joseph Conrad. *Under Western Eyes*. New York: Doubleday, 1963, p. lx.

[36] Joseph Conrad. *Three Sea Stories. Typhoon, Falk, The Shadow-Line.* Ed. Keith Carabine. Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1998, p. 43.

[37] *Author's Note* (1920) to: Joseph Conrad. *The Arrow of Gold. A Story Between Two Notes*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1924, p. vii.

[38] *Ibid*., p. ix.

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A TREATISE ON MORALITY

"O poet, where is our salvation?
Is there anything that can save the Earth?
What good has come of the so-called dawn of peace?
Bindweed now grows over the ruins,
Our hopes are full of bitterness, while our hearts are secretive,
And I doubt that it has aroused any compassion."

The first stanza of the *Treatise on Morality* is a kind of exposition that presents a double moral threat — external and internal — as in Conrad's *Typhoon*. It also alludes to Conrad's words in the preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*:

> […] the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom: to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition — and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation — and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts: to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity — the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.[39]

According to Conrad, it is this solidarity and empathy that binds together "a few individuals out of all the disregarded multitude of the bewildered, the simple and the voiceless," enabling them to act together in order to come through an ordeal.[40]

These words, which many critics hold to be Conrad's artistic creed, would — in the *Treatise on Morality* — seem to be a reference point for an examination of the role of the poet in the search for a way to save the world from annihilation. Not without some irony, the protagonist tries to exhort his readers — who, like the crew of the *Narcissus* are "bewildered, simple and voiceless" — to overcome their "inner paralysis" caused by boredom and fear[41] and to return to the most basic human emotional reflexes and duties in order to work together for the common good, as "a gauge of perpetual renewal, and an undying hope for the species."[42]

[39] Joseph Conrad. *The Nigger of 'The Narcissus'*. Ed. Cedric Watts, London: Penguin Books, 1988, p. xlviii (Preface).

[40] *Ibid.*, p. xlviii. Cf. Miłosz's analysis of a free creative act in the chapter "Man this Enemy". [In:] *idem*. *The Captive Mind*, *ed. cit.*, p. 217.

[41] Cf. Miłosz. "Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz: a Writer for Today", *ed. cit.*, p. 48.

[42] The *Treatise on Morality* (*Traktat moralny*) recommends the same "hardly noticeable" "heroism of duty" which later Miłosz links to Conrad in his remarks about Maria Dąbrowska: "A certain heroism, hardly noticeable, with which people assume their duties was for her a gauge of perpetual renewal, and an undying hope for the species. Perhaps this heroism of duty is a link between her and Joseph Conrad, who occupied her thoughts for many years. Her book *Essays on Conrad* (*Szkice o Conradzie*, 1959) is valuable for those who take an interest in Conrad's ties with Polish Romantic literature. Her philosophy, less bitter than Conrad's, seems to translate her feeling of submersion in the human mass which, in spite of its defeats and failures, creates something constantly through its network of small labors and commitments. For Dąbrowska, that mass was the Polish nation." — Miłosz. *The History of Polish Literature*, *ed. cit.*, p. 421.

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This can only be achieved, however, by accepting the need for a particular kind of intellectual discipline — "the discipline of elimination," as Miłosz terms it — which requires that one reject all views of life and history that are based on illusion or smack of deceit, as — instead of setting the world to rights — they merely destroy our innate sense of community, bringing in their wake annihilation and death:

> Więc tak się moja rzecz zaczyna:
> Potrzebna tobie dyscyplina
> Eliminacji. Po teorie
> Nie sięgaj grzecznie i pokornie.
> Zmieni się zespół zdań najrzadszy,
> Gdy zmienisz punkt, z którego patrzysz:
> […]
> Tak na dzisiejsze spojrzyj baśnie.
> Trochę z ukosa. Choć poważnie. (Tm 143)

> Here, then, is what I have to say:
> What you need is discipline —
> The discipline of elimination. As for theories,
> Don't adopt them with meekness and humility.
> The most original set of views can change
> When looked at from another angle.
> […]
> That's the way to approach today's fairy tales.
> A bit from the side. But seriously, mind.

These lines also acquire their full meaning in the context of the writings of Conrad, who viewed revolutionary intellectual trends and utopian sociopolitical doctrines — whose results were quite unpredictable — with extreme scepticism. He was of the opinion that all advocates of such 'corner-cutting' ideas were invariably people who were full of vanity and who themselves were loathe to make any kind of personal effort:

> The majority of revolutionists are the enemies of discipline and fatigue mostly. There are natures too, to whose sense of justice the price exacted looms up monstrously enormous, odious, oppressive, worrying, humiliating, extortionate, intolerable. Those are the fanatics. The remaining portion of social rebels is accounted for by vanity, the mother of all noble and vile illusions, the companion of poets, reformers, charlatans, prophets, and incendiaries.[43]

The "discipline of elimination" prescribed by Miłosz ensures that all ideologies are kept at a safe, Conradian distance and are made to stand the test of time — to see whether or not they improve the lot of ordinary people. In Conrad's own words:

[43] Joseph Conrad. *The Secret Agent. A Simple Tale*. Ed. Peter Lancelot Mallios, New York: Modern Library, 2004, Chapter III, p. 44; *idem*. *Tajny agent. Opowieść prosta.* Transl. Agnieszka Glinczanka, postscript Zdzisław Najder. Warszawa: Świat Książki, 1999, pp. 58–59.

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> The true greatness of a State […] is a matter of logical growth, of faith and courage. Its inspiration springs from the constructive instinct of the people, governed by the strong hand of a collective conscience and voiced in the wisdom and counsel of men who seldom reap the reward of gratitude. […] That the position of a State in reference to the moral methods of its development can be seen only historically, is true.[44]

The protagonist of the *Treatise on Morality* would seem to echo Conrad's view that many radical blueprints for a better world fail because they are based on the illusion of a *future* reality[45] rather than on experience and on a knowledge of human nature, which never changes.[46] In the *Treatise on Morality*, which foreshadows *The Captive Mind*, Miłosz for the first time and with great clarity warns his readers against succumbing to the mental enslavement offered by contemporary totalitarian ideologies purporting to be reflections of scientific truth. He also warns against the mindless imitation of advocates of violence and the use of force, for these — as Conrad himself discovered — for their short-term gains are willing to forego the timeless, "simple" principles of human conduct, while their destructive ambitions lead them to "climb upward on the miseries or credulities of mankind."[47]

The main line of reasoning in the *Treatise on Morality* would seem to echo Conrad's dictum that "[…] the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests notably, among others, on the idea of Fidelity."[48] In Conradian terms, this concept — which Polish critics were quick to note[49] — means (according to Zdzisław Najder) first and foremost "fidelity to human solidarity and fidelity to mankind's moral heritage".[50] Like Miłosz, Conrad contrasts this kind of fidelity with the spirit of revolution, which "is mighty convenient in this, that it frees one from all scruples as regards ideas. Its hard, absolute optimism is repulsive to my mind by the menace of fanaticism and intolerance it contains."[51]

In the third stanza of the *Treatise on Morality* Miłosz invokes the testimony of two Greek historians — the mythologising Herodotus and the more complex Thucydides, author of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* and the father of critical historiography, i.e. history that is based not on legend, but on a knowledge of human nature and the reconstruction of real events on the strength of evidence given by eye-witnesses. This methodology can also be seen in Conrad's fictional works, e.g. in *Nostromo*, which reveals the reproducible mechanism of revolutions and armed conflicts, whose origins lie in people's illusions, unfulfilled cravings and unbridled desires.

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[44] Conrad. "Autocracy and War", *ed. cit.*, p. 77. Cf. Miłosz. "Który skrzywdziłeś człowieka prostego" (1950): *Upp* 1976, p. 160; cf. Miłosz. "You who Wronged a Simple Man". [In:] *idem*. *New and Collected Poems (1931–2002)*, *ed. cit.*, p. 103.

[45] *Tm, Upp* 1976, p. 146.

[46] Cf. "Men may deteriorate, they may improve too, but they don't change." — Joseph Conrad. "The Crime of Partition". [In:] *idem*. *Notes on Life and Letters*, *ed. cit.*, p. 104, lines 11–12.

[47] Joseph Conrad. "A Familiar Preface". [In:] *idem*. *A Personal Record*, *ed. cit.*, p. 16, lines 25–26.

[48] *Ibid*., p. 17, lines 14–17.

[49] Ujejski. *O Konradzie Korzeniowskim*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 19, 33, 34–63, 100, 102, 114, 119, 228, 256.

[50] Zdzisław Najder. "Epilogue". [In:] *idem*. *Joseph Conrad. A Life*, *ed. cit.*, p. 578.

[51] Conrad. "A Familiar Preface", *ed. cit.*, p. 17, lines 19–22.

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Given the political context of the year 1947, we may safely assume that Miłosz invokes the testimony of Thucydides as an antidote to the speculative historical theories of the followers of Hegel and Marx,[52] who extol the inevitability of progress while ignoring the part played by individuals and unchanging human nature.[53]

Thucydides, who was banished from Athens, took part in the Peloponnesian War. As an eye-witness, he exposed the ruthless drive for hegemony on the part of the Athenians, which led to a bloody revolution on the island of Corcyra, in the course of which the meanings of words were changed in order to accommodate them to the new revolutionary reality:

> When troubles had once begun in the cities, those who followed carried the revolutionary spirit further and further and determined to outdo the report of all who had preceded them by the ingenuity of their enterprises and the atrocity of their revenges. The meaning of words had no longer the same relation to things, but was changed by them as they thought proper. Reckless daring was held to be loyal courage; prudent delay was the excuse of a coward; moderation was the disguise of unmanly weakness; to know everything was to do nothing. Frantic energy was the true quality of a man. A conspirator who wanted to be safe was a recreant in disguise. The lover of violence was always trusted, and his opponent suspected. […] he who could outstrip another in a bad action was applauded, and so was he who encouraged to evil one who had no idea of it. […] The seal of good faith was not divine law, but fellowship in crime. […] Revenge was dearer than self-preservation.[54]

Thucydides showed how years of fratricidal conflict and moral anarchy eventually ruined Greece and contributed not only to the fall of individual states, but also to the demise of the very idea of democracy. The allusion to the Peloponnesian War in the *Treatise on Morality* therefore functions as a credible, though stylistically elaborate "human footprint on the legend" — a warning as well as a source of hope. It reminds us that although history often repeats itself, its outcome is unknown, as it is determined by an unpredictable interreaction between continually changing circumstances and the impulses of our more or less unchanging human nature:

> Jeżeli wiesz, co było potem,
> To dziwnie ci nad Herodotem.
> Mając znajomość z nocy kresem
> Zasiadaj nad Tukydydesem
> I purpurowy sok destyluj,
> Aż palcem dotkniesz ziarna stylu
> I szukaj, jaki wtedy będzie
> Ślad stopy ludzkiej na legendzie. (Tm, 144)

[52] Cf. Avrom Fleishman. *Conrad's Politics. Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1967.

[53] Miłosz refers to and quotes *Thucydides* (*Tukidydes*) again in his political novel *Zdobycie władzy* (*The Seizure of Power*) (1955). Kraków: Znak, 1999, pp. 13–15; *The Seizure of Power*. Transl. Celina Wieniewska, London: Abacus 1985, pp. 3–6. The quotations from Book III of *Thucydides* are there given in the translation by Richard Crawley.

[54] Here I quote from Thucydides Book III in the translation by Benjamin Jowett: Thucydides. *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Transl. Benjamin Jowett. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900.

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If you know what came later,
You must feel strange, poring over Herodotus.
Being familiar with the end of the night,
Study Thucydides
And distil the crimson juice,
Until your finger can touch the grain of the style
And then see what sort of human footprint
You can find on the legend.

The symbolic motif of the 'end of the night' here reminds us that we cannot escape responsibility for our own words and deeds. It is an allusion to Louis-Ferdinand Céline's semi-autobiographical book entitled *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (*Journey to the End of the Night*).[55] Céline — a writer, doctor and social activist — was an opponent of colonialism.[56] During the Second World War, however, he collaborated with the German Nazi régime and subsequently fled to Denmark. In 1950 he was declared a national disgrace and was given a year's gaol sentence in his absence. He returned to France in 1951, after being granted an amnesty. In the *Treatise on Morality*, Céline functions as a contemporary version of Kurtz. The title of his famous book — *Journey to the End of the Night* — brings to mind the title of Conrad's African novella *Heart of Darkness*. Céline's fate serves as a warning to all those writers who have embraced the ethics and aesthetics of the 'New Faith',[57] which will not last for ever. The deceptive 'cocoon' of the present style[58] does not excuse us from our duty to actively resist the enslaving delusion brought about by empty words, which paint a distorted picture of the real world:

Podobnie w nasze dni zamglone,
Stylem zasnute jak kokonem,
[…]
Czyń, póki dni ci się nie skończą. (Tm, 144)

Likewise, in our own hazy times,
Enveloped in the cocoon of style,
[…]
Act while your days are not yet over.

An active and courageous approach such as this is adopted by Captain MacWhirr, the main character of Conrad's story entitled *Typhoon*. Confronted for the first time in his life with the terrifying might of a typhoon, MacWhirr prefers to rely on his own judgement of the situation rather than on the definitions and instructions given in manuals. No less courageous are the crew of the *Judea* in another of Conrad's stories — and one that was highly regarded by the young Miłosz — entitled *Youth*.[59] During

[55] Louis-Ferdinand Céline. *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. Paris: Denoël, 1932.

[56] Miłosz praises Céline's straightforward style in a letter to J. Iwaszkiewicz (28 May 1940). See: Czesław Miłosz. *Rosja.* Warszawa: Zeszyty Literackie, 2011, vol. II, p. 72.

[57] Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, *ed. cit.*, p. xi.

[58] An allusion to socialist-realism.

[59] Andrzej Franaszek. *Miłosz. Biografia*. Kraków: Znak, 2011.

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an eventful and extremely dangerous voyage to the Far East they hold fast to the motto "Do or die" which is painted on the side of their ship.

Following in Conrad's footsteps, Miłosz contrasts the self-imposed "discipline of elimination" recommended by the protagonist of the *Treatise on Morality* with the automatic, textbook approach of the revolutionaries, which — as we read in *The Captive Mind* — enjoins people to "adapt in order to be able to live in moulds that have been manufactured according to specifications given in the book, but which later turn out to be of the wrong size."[60] The revolutionary method requires the ruthless obliteration of all traces of the past before a new and supposedly better civilisation can be built on the ruins of what has gone before. In the *Treatise on Morality* this task is enthusiastically and mindlessly carried out by people who think of themselves as being 'progressive', though Miłosz somewhat disdainfully refers to them as the "liquidators" and "gravediggers" of civilisation. They are reminiscent of the members of the Levellers' Party in Witkacy's anty-utopian novel entitled *Pożegnanie jesieni* (*A Farewell to Autumn*):[61]

Żywot grabarza jest wesoły.
Grzebie systemy, wiary, szkoły,
[…]
Pełen nadziei, że o wiośnie
Cudny w tym miejscu kwiat wyrośnie.
A wiosny nima. Zawsze grudzień.
Nie rozpraszajmy jednak złudzeń. (Tm, 145)

A gravedigger's life is full of cheer.
He buries systems, faiths and schools,
[…]
Full of hope that in the spring
A lovely flower will be growing in this place.
But there ain't no spring. It's always December.
Let us not dispel any delusions, however.

The last line of this stanza reveals the decision taken by the protagonist of the *Treatise on Morality* regarding his choice of allies in the great confrontation which Conrad, in his essay entitled *Autocracy and War* (1905), saw as an inner conflict of civilisations — a conflict between self-seeking barbarism and selfless humanitarianism based on solidarity. In 1946 T.S. Eliot described this conflict, which had become

[60] Transl. R.E. Pypłacz; cf. "Nigdy chyba dotychczas człowiek nie był poddany równemu ciśnieniu i nigdy chyba nie kurczył się tak i nie zwijał próbując przystosować się i żyć w foremkach skonstruowanych według książki, ale, jak się zdaje nie na jego miarę" — Czesław Miłosz. "Ketman" [In:] *idem*. *Zniewolony umysł* (Paryż 1953). Kraków: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1989, p. 85; cf. "Surely man has never before been subjected to such pressure, never has he had to writhe and wriggle so as to adapt himself to forms constructed according to the books, but obviously not to his size." *The Captive Mind*, *ed. cit.*, p. 71.

[61] Written in 1925 and published in 1927. Cf. Czesław Miłosz. "Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz: a Writer for Today", *ed. cit.*, p. 45. Cf. Jan Błoński. "Witkacy i rewolucja". [In:] *idem*. *Witkacy na zawsze.* Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2003, pp. 391, 396.

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embedded in the history of modern Europe, as a 'war of cultures'.[62] Witkacy for his part viewed it through the optic of the antagonism between sophisticated artists and primitive philistines, whom he associated with the revolutionaries.[63]

In the excerpt from the *Treatise on Morality* quoted above Miłosz dissociates himself from the primitive,[64] home-grown activists who have taken it upon themselves to put into practice the revolution's delusionary plans for the future. His imaginary audience of choice consists of ordinary people — whom Witkacy does not even notice — and with whom he shares his life experiences and his faith in values that are worth salvaging from the historical cataclysm unleashed by the "gravediggers" of civilisation, who are completely devoid of any qualms of conscience — conscience being, in the words of Conrad:

> […] that heirloom of the ages, of the race, of the group, of the family, colourable and plastic, fashioned by the words, the looks, the acts, and even by the silences and abstentions surrounding one's childhood; tinged in a complete scheme of delicate shades and crude colours by the inherited traditions, beliefs, or prejudices — unaccountable, despotic, persuasive, and often, in its texture, romantic.[65]

In a manner reminiscent of the *Biblia pauperum*, the ninth stanza of the *Treatise on Morality* recalls the story of the Flood and the precautions taken by Noah, who built his Ark in order to save people from annihilation. Miłosz calls on his readers to do likewise — to salvage for their "grandchildren" what is left of their spiritual and material heritage, whose destruction during the time of the nineteenth-century uprisings was symbolized by the fate of Chopin's piano at the hands of Russian soldiers.[66]

Miłosz expresses the idea of saving our cultural heritage from destruction by using the motif of a "treasure" that must be carried through the blackness of the night to the light of day, when it will be found and duly appreciated by the symbolic "grandchild," who would appear to be closely related to the "future grandchild" of Norwid's famous poem entitled *Fortepian Szopena* (*Chopin's Piano*).[67] The whole of this barely sketched image illustrates Conrad's understanding of the concept of fidelity being (even) fidelity to a lost cause — which, as Miłosz notes in his essay on Conrad's father Apollo Nałęcz Korzeniowski,[68] may turn out to be not entirely ill-advised. In the *Treatise on Morality* Miłosz reminds us of this by expanding the Conradian motif of

[62] See Anon. (Zoe Zajdlerowa). *The Dark Side of the Moon*. Ed. with an introduction by T.S. Eliot. London: Faber and Faber, 1946; Tymon Terlecki. "Norwid i Eliot" (1956). [In:] *idem*. *Szukanie równowagi*. London: Oficyna Poetów i Malarzy, 1988, pp. 373–405; Jolanta Dudek. "Polska recepcja T.S. Eliota: od Borowego do Miłosza". [In:] *idem*. *Granice wyobraźni, granice słowa. Studia z literatury porównawczej XX wieku*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 262–264.

[63] Cf. Jan Błoński. "Doświadczenie dekadencji". [In:] *idem*. *Witkacy na zawsze*, *ed. cit.*

[64] Their primitive nature is reflected in their sloppy pronunciation: *ni ma* instead of *nie ma*.

[65] Conrad. *A Personal Record*, *ed. cit.*, Chapter V, p. 88.

[66] The instrument was thrown out of an upper floor window into the street below.

[67] Cf. "Ciesz się, późny wnuku, / Jękły głuche kamienie: / — Ideał sięgnął bruku!" — Cyprian Kamil Norwid. "Fortepian Szopena". [In:] *idem*. *Dzieła zebrane*. Ed. Juliusz Wiktor Gomulicki. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1966, vol. I, p. 514.

[68] Miłosz. "Joseph Conrad's Father", *ed. cit.*, p. 184.

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a 'forest suddenly emerging out of the mist' with the addition of a shining tiny centre of learning hidden inside it:[69]

Ciebie zapraszam dziś do arki,
Która przez czasu potok wartki
Na nowe brzegi nas poniesie.
Lądujesz w zatopionym lesie,
Mgły opadają, w górze tęcza,
I gołąb liść zielony wręcza.
Za sto, a może za lat dwieście,
[…]
Maleńkie centrum nauk błyśnie
I hasło nowej da ojczyźnie.
Patrz, jak zmieniona perspektywa:
Już nie to wielkim się nazywa,
Co się nam wielkim wydawało.
Kroniki są już kartą białą.
Ci, którzy dzisiaj dzieje tworzą,
Pod darń trawników głowę złożą,
Wnuk barbarzyńców zamyślony
W słońcu tam czyta stare tomy,
Dawny mu wawrzyn czoło pali,
Myśli o tych, co zachowali
I poprzez ciemność skarb przenieśli,
O którym znów się składa pieśni. (Tm, 145–146)

Today I invite you into the ark,
Which, sailing down the fast-flowing river of time,
Will take us to new shores.
You end up in a flooded forest,
The mist lifts, a rainbow appears overhead,
And a pigeon delivers a green leaf.
In a hundred, perhaps two hundred years,
[…]
A tiny centre of learning will shine out
And will give the new country a rallying cry.
See how everything looks different:
What once appeared to be great
Is called great no more.
The chronicles are now just blank sheets of paper.
Those who today are making history
Will rest their heads under the turf of lawns.
Lost in thought, the barbarians' grandson
Is there in the sun, reading old volumes;
Laurels of old now burn his brow,
As he thinks of those who preserved
The treasure and carried it through the darkness,
For songs to be sung about it once again.

[69] Cf. Miłosz. "O książce" (1934), *Upp* 1976, p. 17.

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Miłosz, however, has no intention of deluding his readers with a glowing vision of the future. Mindful, perhaps, of Conrad's youthful motto "Do or die," he is quick to remind us of the need for every individual to face up to present realities without delay in order to put a stop to — or, at the very least, to mitigate — the cruelty of the current historical cataclysm:

Po przyszłościowej cóż iluzji,
Jeżeli dniom codziennym bluźni
[…]
Żyjesz tu, teraz. Hic et nunc.
Masz jedno życie, jeden punkt.
Co zdążysz zrobić, to zostanie,
Choćby ktoś inne mógł mieć zdanie. (Tm 146)
[…]
Nie jesteś jednak tak bezwolny,
A choćbyś był jak kamień polny,
Lawina bieg od tego zmienia,
Po jakich toczy się kamieniach.
I, jak zwykł mawiać już ktoś inny,
Możesz, więc wpłyń na bieg lawiny.
Łagódź jej dzikość, okrucieństwo,
Do tego też potrzebne męstwo.
[…]
Zbyt wieleśmy widzieli zbrodni,
Byśmy się dobra wyrzec mogli
I mówiąc: krew jest dzisiaj tania —
Zasiąść spokojnie do śniadania,
Albo konieczność widząc bredni
Uznawać je za chleb powszedni. (Tm 147)

What use are illusions about the future,
If they make a misery of our everyday lives?
[…]
You're living here and now. Hic et nunc.
You've only got one life — one little dot.
What you manage to do will last,
Whatever other people might say.
[…]
You're not as numbed as you think,
And even if you're like a pebble on the ground,
Together with many other pebbles
You can change the course of an avalanche.
And, as someone else used to say,
If you can change its course, then do so.
Blunt its ferocity and savagery,
That also requires courage.
[…]
We've seen too many crimes,
To be able to renounce virtue
And with the words "now blood is cheap"

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To be able to calmly sit down to breakfast,
Or, seeing how nonsense prevails,
To be able to accept it as the norm.

Readers of *Youth* and *Typhoon* can easily see that the eleventh and twelfth stanzas of the *Treatise on Morality* are imbued with a typically Conradian spirit of active stoicism, which Miłosz contrasts with Witkacy's post-revolutionary catastrophist approach.[70] We are urged to make a thorough assessment of the new order of things and — on an individual basis — to resist the hostile and inhuman avalanche of imposed revolution in order to protect the remnants of good that dwell in every human being. As an alternative to doctrines announcing the inevitability of annihilation and death[71] Miłosz proposes Man's age-old dreams of earthly happiness — as expressed in many a European work of art:

A więc pamiętaj — w trudną porę,
Marzeń masz być ambasadorem,
Tych marzeń sennych z głębi mroku,
Co mają pulchną twarz baroku,
Albo spokojny żart etruski
W powiekach jak sosnowe łuski.
I trzy tysiące lat się wplata
W twój sen i przeszłość opowiada,
A politycznym twym wybiegom
Wtóruje rechot Rabelego. (Tm 147)

Remember, then — when things get tough,
You're to be an ambassador of dreams,
Those dreams from the sleepy depths of night,
Chubby-faced, like the Baroque,
Or a bland Etruscan joke
In eyelids like pine scales.
And three thousand years are woven
Into your dream and tell about the past,
And all your political manoeuvring
Is accompanied by roars of laughter from Rabelais.

We may therefore say that the imaginary reader whose portrait is gradually sketched out in the *Treatise on Morality* is an ordinary person whose inner being harbours a potential artist. The theory of linear progress notwithstanding, this reader is above all aware of Man's centuries-old cultural heritage (as T.S. Eliot would have wished) and — at the same time, as a potential artist — will be able, as Stein tells Marlow, to: "In the destructive element immerse. […] To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream — and so — *ewig — usque ad finem* …"[72] in order to speak "to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to

[70] Błoński. "Witkacy i rewolucja", *ed. cit.*, p. 306.

[71] *Ibid.*, p. 406.

[72] Stein's remarks show that he is full of understanding for Jim's Romantic sensibility: Joseph Conrad. *Lord Jim. A Tale*. Ed. Susan Jones. Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2002, Chapter 20, p. 134.

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our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation — and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts: to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity — the dead to the living and the living to the unborn."[73] The idea of such an 'ambassador of dreams' being caught up in the politics of revolution strikes the protagonist of the *Treatise on Morality* as being a bitter irony of fate whose grotesqueness is worthy of Rabelais himself (hence the roars of laughter).

In the poem's thirteenth stanza Miłosz cautions his ideal reader (with a fair amount of irony) against the temptation to become intellectually subservient to the "distraught Clerks" of Heidelberg and Paris, whose influence is now under threat. His criticism is that — being totally oblivious to the recent experience of war — in their writings they continue to propagate the pre-war philosophical discourse of the Parisian elite, which has no relevance at all to current political realities and is indifferent to the fate of the inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe, who have had totalitarian régimes forced upon them. The protagonist of the *Treatise on Morality* appreciates the elegance of Sartre's arguments and the persuasive force of his style,[74] but has to admit that at the present time there is practically nothing in Sartre's books that could be of any use to him. Although the same cannot be said of Witkacy's prophetic vision of grim post-revolutionary reality, with its forcible levelling, our protagonist cannot endorse Witkacy's "questioning of the value of life"[75] — born of despair — or his failure to see the creative contribution to history and civilisation made by good, 'simple folk' — probably not unlike the Yanko Goorall of Conrad's *Amy Foster* or the "human group" of Polish peasants whom Miłosz meets at a railway station in the depths of the Soviet empire when the war is at its worst.[76] The reader is therefore advised "not to count too much on people abroad" (Tm 149) and to read anything that keeps his feet firmly on the ground:[77]

Wiersz mój chce chronić od rozpaczy,
Tej właśnie, jaką miał Witkacy,
[…]
Balzak na niego jest odtrutką:
Wszystko co trzyma ciebie krótko

[73] Conrad. *The Nigger of 'The Narcissus'*, *ed. cit.*, p. xlviii (Preface).

[74] Wit Tarnawski contrasts Sartre's existentialism with Conrad's sense of solidarity with the members of one's community: Wit Tarnawski. "Conrad przeciwko Sartre'owi". *Wiadomości*, London, 1947, № 14/15, p. 3; Wit Tarnawski. "Conrad and Sartre". *The Journal of The Joseph Conrad Society (U.K.)*, vol. 5, № 1 (November 1979), pp. 1–3; see: Zabierowski. *Dziedzictwo Conrada w literaturze polskiej XX wieku*, *ed. cit.*, p. 278; cf. Adam Gillon. "Conrad and Sartre". [In:] *idem*. *Conrad and Shakespeare*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 153–161. Cf. Czesław Miłosz. "Shestov or the Purity of Despair". [In:] *idem*. *Emperor of the Earth*, *ed. cit.*, p. 109.

[75] Błoński. *Witkacy na zawsze*, *ed. cit.*, p. 406.

[76] Miłosz. "The Lesson of the Baltics". [In:] *idem*. *The Captive Mind*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 248–249.

[77] Cf. Stefan Żeromski's foreword to the 1923 Polish edition of Conrad's selected works (*Pisma wybrane*) — reprinted in: *Wspomnienia i studia o Conradzie*. Ed. B. Kocówna. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1963, p. 163.

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I rozszerzając ziemski gmach
Budzi namiętność ludzkich spraw. (Tm 149–150)

My poem is intended to stave off despair,
That same despair which haunted Witkacy,
[…]
A good antidote against him is Balzac:
Anything that keeps a tight rein on you
And, broadening the earthly edifice,
Awakens the passion of people's concerns.

The protagonist's main concern is to prepare his reader for action. He warns him against "unsuitable company" (Tm 150) — meaning those who have taken it upon themselves to bring in the new world order[78] and whose behaviour betrays disturbing symptoms of the irreversible personality change that also afflicts the white colonizers in Conrad's novella.[79] He sees that the results of irresponsible actions on the part of party apparatchiks are like a natural disaster that does permanent damage to the nation's social fabric and shows how — by rejecting Conrad's message of "solidarity […] which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity […]"[80] — representatives of the 'New Faith'[81] lose their human identity and — following in the footsteps of Kurtz — perhaps even some of their sanity. The immediate cause of this schizophrenia-like psychological disintegration turns out to be the practice of separating the sphere of well-known moral principles and traditional European values from that of the criminal acts which they are ordered to carry out in their everyday lives:

Bo schizofrenia – rozdwojenie
Istoty na kwiat i korzenie,
Poczucie, że te moje czyny
Spełniam nie ja, ale ktoś inny.
Kark skręcić komuś jest drobnostką.
Potem Komedię czytać Boską,
Czy stary oklaskiwać kwartet,
Lub dyskutować awangardę.
Na mniejszą skalę, to codzienne,
Ktoś mówi: zło jest bezimienne,
A nas użyto jak narzędzi.
Ma rację. I ku zgubie pędzi.

Fenomen ten, jak nam się jawi,
Jest skutkiem naciskania lawin

[78] Here he is referring to W. Gomułka and the members of the secret police (UB). Cf. Miłosz, Gorczyńska. *Rozmowy*. *Podróżny świata*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 88–89.

[79] Cf. Marlow's visit to the Company's doctor before leaving for the Congo: Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness & Other Stories*. Ed. Gene M. Moore. Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1999, Chapter 1, p. 39; cf. Conrad. "Autocracy and War", *ed. cit.*, p. 76, line 40, p.77, lines 1–2.

[80] Conrad. *The Nigger of 'The Narcissus'*, *ed. cit.*, p. xlviii (Preface).

[81] Cf. Miłosz. *The Captive Mind*, *ed. cit.*, p. 4.

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Na glebę, gdzie złożyły wieki
Mocno osiadły kult dla etyki. (Tm 151)

It's schizophrenic — splitting
A being into flower and root,
The feeling that those deeds of mine
Are done not by me, but by someone else.
Breaking necks is all in a day's work.
Later we can read the Divine Comedy,
Listen to an old string quartet,
Or talk about the avant-garde.
On a smaller scale, it happens all the time;
As someone said: evil is anonymous,
And we've been used just like tools.
He's right. And he's doomed.

This phenomenon, it would seem,
Has been caused by the pressure of avalanches
On ground where, for many centuries,
There has been a well-established cult of ethics.

This split-personality syndrome affecting the builders of the new world order is reflected in the manner in which they address their fellow citizens: depending on the circumstances, their language is either high-flown or contemptuous. In *The Captive Mind* (1953) — and in particular in the third chapter, entitled *Ketman* — Miłosz analyses the ambiguous behaviour of those whose minds have become enslaved.[82] In his *magnum opus* of 1974 the poet describes his own situation as that of someone who had suffered a "bitter sting" (*gorzkie ukąszenie*) as a result of "the curses of the godless" (*złorzeczeństwa niezbożnych*),[83] i.e. the amoral behaviour of State officials. In the *Treatise on Morality* these two-faced, cynical and vindictive representatives of the New Order remind the protagonist of their immediate predecessors — the Gestapo. What they have in common is contempt for ordinary people, a consumerist approach to culture and an unquestioning readiness to carry out the most ruthless orders of their faceless superiors.[84] The protagonist therefore advises his readers to avoid the company of these vicious people, who are both ethically and emotionally unbalanced:

Unikaj tych, co w swoim gronie
Pograwszy w polityczne konie,

[82] Miłosz. *The Captive Mind*, *ed. cit.*, p. 57; cf. Miłosz, Gorczyńska. *Rozmowy*. *Podróżny świata*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 97–98.

[83] Czesław Miłosz. "Gdzie wschodzi słońce i kędy zapada". [In:] *Upp* 1976, p. 351. It is interesting to note that the whole line containing these expressions — *A złorzeczeństwo niezbożnych bardzo gorzkie jest ukąszenie.* (The curses of the godless have a very bitter sting. [transl. R.E. Pypłacz]) — has been left out of the 1988 *New and Collected Poems* English translation of the poem "Gdzie wschodzi słońce i kędy zapada". In the original Polish version the third stanza has seven lines, whereas in the English translation it has six, the fourth line being missing. Cf. Miłosz. *New and Collected Poems (1931–2001)*, *ed. cit.*, p. 278.

[84] An allusion to W. Gomułka. Cf. Miłosz, Gorczyńska. *Rozmowy*. *Podróżny świata*, *ed. cit.*, p. 89.

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Gdy na kominku ogień trzaska,
Wołają: lud, a szepczą: miazga,
Wołają: naród, szepczą: gie. (Tm 152)

Avoid those who amongst themselves
Backing this or that political horse,
As logs crackle in the fireplace,
Cry out "the people", but whisper "mush",
Cry out "the nation", but whisper "sh**".

The State officials portrayed in the twenty-fourth stanza of *A Treatise on Morality* are much worse than the rank-and-file officials of the Belgian Upper Congo Trading Company, as they are in the very last stages of moral decline. Having freed themselves of the age-old dictates of conscience — and in particular the commandment "Thou shallt not kill" — they think nothing of breaking a neck or two and, having betrayed their own individual consciences,[85] they have of their own free will become barbarians who take a perverse pleasure in tormenting their fellow citizens, for whom they feel nothing but scorn.

Although the picture Miłosz paints of the new rulers[86] is just as anonymous as that painted in the novels of Conrad, we are shown a bunch of degenerates who are openly cynical and whose grotesque megalomania, callousness and contempt for ordinary people know no bounds. In their minds, the idea of helping other people for the common good has been replaced with that of building a New Order on the ruins of European civilisation. What Marlow recognizes as "some kind of primitive honour"[87] among African cannibals — closely connected with Man's age-old code of behaviour dictated by the voice of conscience and a sense of responsibility for one's own actions — is completely alien to them. They are living proof of Conrad's observation that "The revolutionary spirit is mighty convenient in this, that it frees one from all scruples as regards ideas."[88] As those whose job it is to carry out the orders of the faceless authorities, they hold prominent positions in Society and care only for material gain and their own rather dubious prestige, though for some strange reason they like to come into occasional contact with the world of art. The only thing for which they really have any respect is brute force.

The protagonist's sympathies therefore lie with the masses — the "mush" or "pulp" (*miazga*), as they are deprecatingly referred to by those in power — who have no voice and are left to their own devices, but who — like the black natives of *Heart of Darkness* — have not yet lost their humanity and have not yet been completely beaten into submission. Like Conrad, Miłosz places his hopes for the world's salvation in the silent majority of ordinary people who share the same fate and who are bound together by the same dreams and desires and the knowledge …

[85] Cf. Razumov's remark: "All a man can betray is his conscience" — J. Conrad. *Under Western Eyes*, *ed. cit.*, Chapter II, p. 30.

[86] Cf. Czesław Miłosz. *The Captive Mind* (*Zniewolony umysł* — 1953) and *The Seizure of Power* (*Zdobycie władzy* — 1955).

[87] Cf. Conrad. *Heart of Darkness & Other Stories*, *ed. cit.*, Chapter 2, p. 69.

[88] Conrad. *A Personal Record*, *ed. cit.*, p. 17 (A Familiar Preface).

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> […] of what was just and unjust. It was they — one day […] who would protect with their hands the uncertain light, and without any illusions that they were discovering absolute truth. Though he was not one of them, he was here with them."[89]

Needless to say, it is among these ordinary people that the protagonist of the *Treatise on Morality* hopes to find his readers. Once again, we see that the ideal reader whom he would seem to be addressing brings to mind the artless Captain MacWhirr of Conrad's *Typhoon* (written shortly after *Heart of Darkness*), who — "Having just enough imagination to carry him through each successive day, and no more"[90] and being "such a stupid man"[91] — breaks all the textbook rules and calmly decides to keep his vessel on course in the face of a typhoon, maintaining discipline among the crew. Also — to the great surprise of his extremely critical and sceptical chief mate — he does "something rather clever"[92] by treating his coolie passengers with the respect due to human beings — thus avoiding unnecessary strife and loss of life — after the chests containing their savings get broken up during the terrible storm. By allotting an equal share of all the money that has been recovered to each passenger, MacWhirr not only maintains order on the ship, but also saves its owners unnecessary litigation and protects their good name.

In the words of Ujejski, MacWhirr is one of those Conradian characters who — being "strong people with children's hearts"[93] — seem to have enjoyed a particularly high standing in the eyes of the author. According to the same critic (who wrote the first serious Polish study of Conrad's work in 1936):

> The most general description of this type of person is given by Marlow, who says of Lord Jim: *I liked his appearance; I knew his appearance; he came from the right place; he was one of us. He stood there for all the parentage of his kind, for men and women by no means clever or amusing, but whose very existence is based upon honest faith, and upon the instinct of courage. I don't mean military courage, or civil courage, or any special kind of courage. I mean just that inborn ability to look temptations straight in the face — a readiness unintellectual enough, goodness knows, but without pose — a power of resistance, don't you see, ungracious if you like, but priceless — an unthinking and blessed stiffness before the outward and inward terrors, before the might of nature and the seductive corruption of men — backed by a faith invulnerable to the strength of facts, to the contagion of example, to the solicitation of ideas. Hang ideas! They are tramps, vagabonds, knocking at the back-door of your mind, each taking a little of your substance, each carrying away some crumb of that belief in a few simple notions you must cling to if you want to live decently and would like to die easy!*[94]

In the twelfth stanza of the *Treatise on Morality* this inborn, instinctive courage which so impresses Marlow appears as a moral imperative, as there is no escaping the fact that the virtue of courage (*męstwo*) — together with inner discipline, pity and

[89] Czesław Miłosz. *The Seizure of Power.* Transl. Celina Wieniewska. London: Abacus, 1985, Chapter 21, p. 241. *Zdobycie władzy* 1999, p. 201.

[90] Conrad. *Three Sea Stories. Typhoon, Falk, The Shadow-Line*, *ed. cit.*, Chapter 1, p. 12.

[91] *Ibid*., Chapter 6, p. 77.

[92] *Ibid*.

[93] Ujejski. *O Konradzie Korzeniowskim*, *ed. cit.*, p. 227.

[94] *Ibid*. Cf. Conrad. *Lord Jim. A Tale*, *ed. cit.*, Chapter 5, p. 28.

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respect for others — is needed in order to make an effective stand against evil. Here the enemy is not the raging sea — which, as Żeromski[95] observes, Conrad saw as the sailor's principal and most deadly "foe"[96] — but an avalanche:

Nie jesteś jednak tak bezwolny,
A choćbyś był jak kamień polny,
Lawina bieg od tego zmienia,
Po jakich toczy się kamieniach.
I, jak zwykł mawiać już ktoś inny,
Możesz, więc wpłyń na bieg lawiny.
Łagódź jej dzikość, okrucieństwo,
Do tego też potrzebne męstwo. (Tm 147)

You're not as numbed as you think,
And even if you're like a pebble on the ground,
Together with many other pebbles
You can change the course of an avalanche.
And, as someone else used to say,
If you can change its course, then do so.
Blunt its ferocity and savagery;
That also requires courage.

As we can see, the *Treatise on Morality* draws much of its strength from the inspiring example of Conrad, who — though he himself denied ever having posed as a moralist[97] — has been seen by Polish writers[98] and by the Polish reading public (especially since the Second World War) as a guardian of time-honoured principles of good conduct and as a master of the difficult art of living courageously through moments of great trial. This reading of Conrad would seem to be shared by the poem's protagonist, who speaks of "[…] ground where for many centuries / There has been a well-established cult of ethics" (Tm 151):

[…] glebę, gdzie złożyły wieki
Mocno osiadły kult dla etyki. (Tm 151)

As we know, one possible reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is that — at the time of its writing — it had broadly anticolonial overtones and even undermined British government policy. Like the Irishman Sir Roger Casement — whose report on the abuses committed by agents of European trading companies in the Congo he supported[99] — Conrad had strong personal and historical reasons for opposing the theory and practice of colonialism. Both writers knew all too well that the dehumanisation of particular individuals, social groups, nations and races — together with their por-

[95] Cf. Stefan Żeromski's foreword to the 1923 Polish edition of Conrad's selected works (*Pisma wybrane*) — reprinted in: *Wspomnienia i studia o Conradzie*, *ed. cit.*, p. 163.

[96] Cf. Conrad. *The Mirror of the Sea*. Chapters XXII and XXXVI.

[97] Conrad. *A Personal Record*, *ed. cit.*, p. 12: lines 18–25 (A Familiar Preface).

[98] Cf. G. Herling-Grudziński. "Rozmowa imaginacyjna z bohaterem *Tajfunu*" (1945). [In:] *idem*. *Żywi i umarli. Szkice literackie*, Lublin: FIS, 1991, pp. 60–65.

[99] Najder. *Joseph Conrad. A Life*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 149–151, 163, 337, 480–481, 632.

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trayal as barbarians for propaganda purposes — was invariably a prelude to their planned enslavement or elimination and served merely to justify or distract attention from acts of violence and terror which — though officially committed in the name of lofty ideals — were in reality motivated by insatiable financial greed and cold political calculation. A similar fate — public disgrace followed by death — awaited Casement himself for his part in the struggle for Irish independence during the First World War.[100]

It is no wonder, then, that Conrad sees the phenomenon of colonization as being structurally related to that of revolution — and, indeed, any sociopolitical transformation that is imposed by force. All of these bring in their wake chaos and the suffering of innocent people, while the temporary beneficiaries are clever individuals who are utterly devoid of moral values. In Conrad's works, the real manifestation of barbarism — understood as the inability to feel compassion or to act in a selfless way — is the fully conscious decision to yield to the dictates of the dark side of human nature, which is selfish, greedy for material gain, cowardly, cruel, despotic, perverse and even sadistic.[101]

The mechanism of violence that is founded on moral degradation and that is directed against ordinary people can be seen in all its hideousness in autocratic states such as the Russian Empire. That is why Conrad strongly objected to the Polish uprisings being called 'revolutions' by the partitioning powers, as they were organized by people who were willing to die in the cause of defending their cultural identity — something that is also stressed by Miłosz in his essay devoted to Conrad's father.[102] Writing about the part his father played in the preparations for the 1863 uprising, Conrad describes him not as a revolutionary, but as a patriot.[103] In *Nostromo* (1904) he lays bare the economic factors, i.e. the "material interests" that are behind all revolutions, together with the appalling psychological and social phenomena that accompany them. Despite its seemingly lofty atmosphere, the novel is shot through with scepticism and irony verging on satire — and the same can also be said of the atmosphere which pervades Miłosz's *Treatise on Morality*. The characters of *Nostromo* can be divided into two groups: on the one hand there are the 'authentic', true-to-life people who freely choose to be good or bad, whilst on the other hand there are those individuals who are reminiscent of Witkacy's "unwashed souls," being narrow-minded, dishonest with themselves, mentally disjointed, vain, cowardly, devious, domineering and

[100] Cf. W.G. Sebald. "V. Conrad i Casement". [In:] *idem*. *Pierścienie Saturna* (Saturn's Rings). Transl. Małgorzata Łukasiewicz. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2009, pp. 117–155; For the reception of *Heart of Darkness* see: Joseph Conrad. *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether*. Ed Owen Knowles, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad).

[101] Cf. Joseph Conrad. *Nostromo*. *A Tale of the Seaboard*. Ed. Robert Hampson, Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2000; Cf. the humiliation and torture of Don José Avellanos (II, Chapter One, pp. 94–95) and of Dr Monygham by the *sombre imbecile fanatic* general Guzman Bento — "The Citizen-Saviour" of the country (III, Chapter Four, pp. 249–251); the capture, torture and death of the Jewish merchant Hirsch (III, Chapter Eight, p. 286; Chapter Nine, pp. 300–301).

[102] Miłosz. "Joseph Conrad's Father", *ed. cit.*, p. 184.

[103] Conrad. "Author's Note". [In:] *idem*. *A Personal Record*, *ed. cit.*, p. 6, lines 24–29.

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having no moral backbone.[104] In the nineteenth stanza of the *Treatise on Morality* the protagonist advises his readers to keep such people — like madmen — at arm's length:

Lepiej, byś miał się wydać oschły,
Byleby ciebie nie obrosły
Mchy tropikalne dusz niemytych,
Straszliwej nocy stalaktyty.
Metodą moją ludzi zlicz-no:
Najściślej arystokratyczną. (Tm 150)

Far better to be seen to stand aloof,
Than to be completely overgrown
With the tropical mosses of unwashed souls,
Stalactites of the terrible night.
Gauge people using my method:
It's aristocratic through and through.

It is worth noting that Conrad himself fell foul of some contemporary critics because of this aristocratic *sécheresse de coeur*,[105] which — jealously guarding his own personal convictions and his "dignity"[106] — prevented him from following the latest literary and intellectual trends. In his 1957 essay entitled *Joseph Conrad in Polish Eyes* Miłosz writes that Conrad was seen as an ideological enemy by communists precisely because of his individualistic ethics and his "aristocratic scale of values," which were incompatible with totalitarianism:

> […] Conrad belonged irremediably to Western civilization, and its prestige had to be deflated. The bureaucrats, gifted with a sound Party instinct, realized that the aristocratic scale of values, dear to Conrad's sailors, pirates and soldiers, was not compatible with the creation of individuals completely subservient to the State.[107]

The protagonist of the *Treatise on Morality* shares this ironic conservatism. He is impervious to the aesthetics of socialist realism that are currently being imposed by party officials and — in order to protect people from despair:

Wiersz mój chce chronić od rozpaczy,
Tej właśnie, jaką miał Witkacy, (Tm 149)

My poem is intended to stave off despair,
That same despair which haunted Witkacy,

— in the twenty-third stanza of the poem he sketches a grotesque and satirical collective portrait of those who support totalitarianism,[108] foretelling their eventual disgrace:

[104] Conrad. *Heart of Darknes & Other Stories*, *ed. cit.*, p. 44.

[105] Conrad. "A Familiar Preface", *ed. cit.*, p. 14, line 17.

[106] *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15, lines 40–42.

[107] Miłosz. "Joseph Conrad in Polish Eyes", *ed. cit.*, vol. I, p. 101.

[108] Here he refers to the members of the secret police (UB). Cf. Miłosz, Gorczyńska. *Rozmowy. Podróżny świata*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 88–89.

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Jak ich rozpoznać? Wykrój powiek
Mają nie ten, co zwykły człowiek,
I w oczach mętny błysk owadzi —
Ten ich najczęściej nagle zdradzi.
Cała ta wizja mi nie obca:
Widziałem to już w gestapowcach,
U Hieronima także Boscha,
Gdzie diabli, na piekielnych łożach,
Wsadzają w potępieńców widły.
Więc widok swojski, choć obrzydły.
Umieją się maskować zresztą,
Więc z pewnym przybliżeniem bierz to. (Tm, 152)

How can you recognize them? The shape of their eyelids
Is different from that of ordinary people,
And a dull, insect-like glint in their eyes
Will all of a sudden give them away.
It's a sight I'm quite familiar with:
It was the same with members of the Gestapo,
To say nothing of the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch,
In which devils stand over hellish bedsteads,
And stick their pitchforks into the damned.
So it's a familar, if disgusting spectacle.
They're good at disguise, you know,
So treat this as a rough guide.

In *Heart of Darkness*, in a grotesque and diabolical setting not unworthy of Bosch, we see that the indolent and mindless Europeans who have been entrusted with the task of colonizing Africa — being overwhelmed by the local environment — gradually lose not only their health, but also their energy, common sense and humanity. In their African isolation, the officials of European trading companies begin to behave exactly like the cynical local mercenaries who ruthlessly oversee the work of their enslaved African brothers. In charge of this nightmare — as Marlow observes — is no ordinary devil:

> I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men — men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly. How insidious he could be, too, I was only to find out several months later and a thousand miles farther. For a moment I stood appalled, as though by a warning.[109]

The topos of the world being turned upside down and people forfeiting their reason for the illusion of a better future — thus rejecting the "belief in a few simple notions you must cling to if you want to live decently and would like to die easy"[110] — would therefore seem to be an essential theme linking *Heart of Darkness*, *The*

[109] Conrad. *Heart of Darkness & Other Stories*, *ed. cit.*, p. 44.
[110] Conrad. *Lord Jim. A Tale*, *ed. cit.*, Chapter 5, p. 28.

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Secret Agent (set in the capital of the civilized world) and the *Treatise on Morality*, which laments the fact that the diabolical madness caused by the split-personality syndrome of revolutionaries has now taken hold in the very heart of Europe:

Nie sądź poza tym zbyt pochopnie,
Bo różne są obłędu stopnie
I z chęcią, czy też mimo chęci,
Wszyscy jesteśmy nim objęci.
Tak się ten przykry sens odsłania:
Obłęd dziś ceną jest działania
I chyba tylko eremita,
Co w wieży Augustyna czyta,
Sądzi, że umknąć mu się uda.
Wątpliwa jednak to zasługa.
Myśl, co uważasz za stosowne,
Ja tutaj tylko ci przypomnę,
Że diabeł, jak z lektury wiem,
Jest *séparé de lui-même*. (Tm 152)

Don't judge others too hastily, mind,
Because there are degrees of madness
And, whether we like it or not,
We're all affected by it.
And so the harsh truth is revealed:
Today madness is the price of action
And only a hermit, perhaps,
Reading Augustine in his tower,
Can think he'll be able to escape.
But it's not much to be proud of.
Think as you see fit.
Don't forget, though,
That the devil, from what I've read,
Is *séparé de lui-même*.

This stanza brings to mind Conrad's ironic comment — quoted above — on the subject of ethical theories of history.[111] Faced with a contemporary world that has been turned upside down, the protagonist's moral instinct is to studiously avoid excessive lecturing of his readers — or, indeed, any attempt to persuade them to adopt a particular mode of conduct. In this — with varying degrees of success — he follows in the footsteps of Conrad, who in his autobiographical volume confesses that:

> One's literary life must turn frequently for sustenance to memories and seek discourse with the shades; unless one has made up one's mind to write only in order to reprove mankind for what it is, or praise it for what it is not, or — generally — to teach it how to behave. Being neither quarrelsome, nor a flatterer, nor a sage, I have done none of these things; and I am prepared to put up serenely with the insignificance which attaches to persons who are not meddlesome in some way or other. But resignation is not indifference. I would not like to be left standing as a mere spectator on the bank of the great stream carrying onwards so many lives. I would fain

[111] Conrad. *A Personal Record*, *ed. cit.*, p. 86, lines 34–41.

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claim for myself the faculty of so much insight as can be expressed in a voice of sympathy and compassion.[112]

A tone of compassion can be detected in the words of the protagonist of the *Treatise on Morality* when he expresses the hope that his readers will be able to find the "right path" — i.e. the right way to behave — on their own:

A zresztą intuicją wsparty,
A także porcją zdrowej wzgardy,
Lepiej odnajdziesz dobrą drogę,
Niżeli tobie wskazać mogę. (Tm 153)

But anyway, aided by your own intuition,
Together with a fair amount of healthy disdain,
You'll find the right path — and better
Than I could show you.

The protagonist tries his best to help each of us find our own "right path" in life. He does so in a more direct way than Conrad, speaking outright of the importance of self-control, the imperative of selfless service for the common good[113] and the concept of fidelity — not to philosophical and political doctrines, but to tried and tested principles of conduct that are essential for "a healthy mind and balanced emotions" ([…] *zdrowie / Umysłu, serca równowaga,* — [Tm 155]). He warns against illusions spread by those who are enthralled to a destructive utopian ideology and sets great store by people's "way of life" (*sposób życia*):

Zwróciłeś pewnie już uwagę:
Nacisk na sposób życia kładę.

As you've no doubt already noticed,
I stress the importance of how one lives. (Tm 154)

He dismisses authoritarianism — which merely imposes a phoney external discipline on individuals — and points out that a lack of inner discipline leaves the human spirit open to destruction. Conrad himself discusses these questions — taking to task both Rousseau and Dostoevsky — in his novel entitled *Under Western Eyes*.[114]

Stanzas 26–29 of the *Treatise on Morality* — which would seem to allude to the frightening account of life in tsarist Russia contained in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and de Custine's *Letters from Russia* (*Lettres de Russie* – 1839)[115] —

[112] Conrad. "A Familiar Preface", *ed. cit.*, p. 14.

[113] "[…] but the fact is that I have a positive horror of losing even for one moving moment that full possession of myself which is the first condition of good service. And I have carried my notion of good service from my earlier into my later existence." — *Ibid.*, p. 15, lines 25–28.

[114] Later Miłosz mentions Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* and *A Note on the Polish Problem* in the chapter entitled "Russia": Miłosz. *Native Realm*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 132, 128.

[115] In the Notes (*Noty*) added to the original Polish version of the essay "Rosja" (*Russia*) Miłosz draws attention to the Russophobic writings of Karl Marx (published in 1850). He also quotes from de Custine's *Lettres de Russie* (*Letters from Russia* — 1839): Czesław Miłosz. *Rodzinna Europa* (The Polish version of *Native Realm*). Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1998, pp. 182–188.

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warn readers against cynicism and drunkenness (i.e. the lifestyle of "slaves of the empire")[116] and a possible repetition of the iniquities of the "civilisation of blood and tears / La civilisation des punaises":[117]

Kto w smutnym znalazł smak cynizmie,
Ten się losowi nie wyśliznie.
A z dobrą miną do złej gry
Na pewno nie chadzają lwy.

Zwróciłeś pewnie już uwagę:
Nacisk na sposób życia kładę.
Masę masz zrobić na tym polu,
Pomówmy więc o alkoholu.
[…]
Zjawisko wódki jest ciekawe,
Warto poświęcić mu rozprawę,
Ze wszystkich trunków ona jedna
Dymom zagłady jest pokrewna.
W niej miast płonących widać migot,
Przez cienkie szkło skazańcy idą,
A kiedy w nocy domy syczą
I w oknach pożar jest źrenicą,
Nad litrem z osowiałą twarzą
Zasiedli bracia Karamazow.
[…]
„Cywilizacja krwi i łez,
La civilisation des punaises". (Tm 153–154)

Whoever develops a taste for joyless cynicism,
Will not elude his fate.
And lions certainly do not walk about
Putting on brave faces.

As you've no doubt already noticed,
I stress the importance of how one lives.
There's a great deal to be done in this regard,
So let's have a little talk about drink.
[…]
Vodka's an interesting phenomenon,
And a subject worthy of dissertation;
Of all drinks, it and it alone
Is akin to the billowing smoke of annihilation.
In it you can see the flicker of burning towns,
There are convicts walking through this thin glass,
And when the houses smoulder in the night

[116] Cf. "Eternal Slaves": Miłosz. *The Captive Mind*, *ed. cit.*, p. 250 ("The Lesson of the Baltics").

[117] These are lines 15 and 16 of the following stanza (30) *Tm*, *Upp* 1976, p. 154. Here Miłosz evokes the threat of moral decline that his reader must now face by reminding him of the picture of Russia painted by Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*. He sums up the passage in French: *La civilisation des punaises* — alluding to de Custine's *Lettres de Russie* (1839).

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And fire peeps out through the windows,
The brothers Karamazov sat themselves
Long-faced over a bottle of vodka.
[…]
"A civilisation of blood and tears,
La civilisation des punaises".

Taking leave of his 'ideal' reader, the protagonist of the *Treatise on Morality* thoughtfully "hands" him (*z rąk do rąk podajmy*) the age-old principles of conduct that were also favoured by Conrad — as a "humble gift of modest wisdom" (*skromnej mądrości dar zwyczajny*), i.e. wisdom that is bereft of any ideological connotations. This gift is also a symbolic "treasure" that must be carried through the darkness of the night and into the light of day — because it is mankind's only hope of escaping annihilation. Moreover, the poem's 'ideal' reader is presented as the only trustworthy custodian of this treasure:

Żegnaj mi. Z rąk do rąk podajmy
Skromnej mądrości dar zwyczajny.
Jak widzisz, nie mam ja recepty,
Do żadnej nie należę sekty,
A ocalenie tylko w tobie.
Jest to po prostu może zdrowie
Umysłu, serca równowaga,
Bo czasem prosty lek pomaga,
A lekarz, kiedy jest znużony
Odpowiadaniem na androny
I szarlataństwa mu dopieką —
Zaleca befsztyk, rosół, mleko.
Oto twój świat na ostrzu miecza:
Zrywa się wiatr, na trawie wznieca
Uschniętych liści małe wiry,
Gołębie się nad daszek wzbiły,
Zaszczekał pies, przebiegło dziecko,
Ktoś komuś daje znak chusteczką.
Oto twój świat. On jest na szali.
Politycy grę już przegrali,
Triumfy ich tylko pozorne
Jak błyskawice są wieczorne,
Choć nikt z nich nigdy nie utraci
Ufności w moc indoktrynacji,
[…]
A to, co z góry teraz leci,
Na likwor sypie się stuleci
I wynik będzie całkiem różny.
Że w końcu dobry, tak załóżmy.
[…]
Na dziś nie daję ci nadziei,
Nie czekaj darmo treuga Dei,
Bo z życia, które tobie dano,
Magiczną nie uciekniesz bramą.

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Idźmy w pokoju, ludzie prości,
Przed nami jest
– „Jądro ciemności". (Tm. 155–156)

It's goodbye, then. Let's pass on from hand to hand
This humble gift of modest wisdom.
As you can see, I have no easy solution,
Nor do I belong to any sect,
And only you can save us.
Perhaps it's just a matter of
Mental health — emotional balance.
A simple remedy sometimes does the trick,
And when a doctor's had enough of
Replying to silly remarks
And being riled by the pronouncements of charlatans,
He prescribes steak, broth and milk.
Here's your world on the edge of a sword:
The wind's picking up, and already in the grass
There are little swirls of dry leaves,
The pigeons have fluttered onto the roof of the porch,
A dog's just barked and a child's run across the road,
Someone gives someone a signal with a handkerchief.
This is your world. It's in the scale pan.
The politicians have already lost the game,
Their triumphs are only illusory —
Like flashes of lightning at day's end.
Mind you, none of them will ever lose
Their faith in the power of indoctrination,
[…]
What now comes down on us from on high,
Is absorbed by the distillate of centuries
And the end result will be quite different —
A good one, I think we may safely assume.
[…]
I can't give you any hope for the present,
Don't wait in vain for a Truce of God,
Because there's no magic escape route
From the life that you've been given.
Let us go in peace, we the simple-hearted,
For before us lies … the "Heart of Darkness". [Transl. R.E. Pypłacz]

And with this somewhat sarcastic appeal for inner calm (as a means of preserving one's own private, 'civilized' world), the protagonist — harbouring no illusions about the near future — together with other "simple-hearted" people (i.e. those who also thirst for justice) walks defiantly into the eye of the storm, just as Captain MacWhirr sails into the eye of his typhoon.

The title of Conrad's African novella — quoted in the poem's final line — serves as a symbolic reminder of the irony that Poland — having undergone a historic up-

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heaval of cataclysmic proportions in the very heart of Europe — is now going to share the fate of the Congo during the times of Conrad and Casement.

The ironic import of the final envoi/punchline derives from the triple historical analogy drawn by the poem's protagonist — colonialism, the Romantic struggle for freedom and the New Order which (at the time of writing) is being foisted on Poland by Soviet Russia. The direct reference to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* illustrates the backward course of history, i.e. the opposite of the glowing vision of the future propagated by revolutionary and totalitarian ideologies.

By another irony of fate, Miłosz himself cannot deny the fact that this individual fidelity to the moral achievements of European civilisation — which, given the present situation, would seem to be the only hope of 'collective salvation' — inescapably brings to mind the Polish Romantic ideal of fidelity to the 'lost cause' of national and personal freedom.

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