

**REVIEW OF**  
***THE IDEAL OF FIDELITY IN CONRAD'S WORKS***  
**BY JOANNA SKOLIK.**  
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*The Ideal of Fidelity in Conrad's Works* by Joanna Skolik is an interesting and highly competent introduction to the writings of Joseph Conrad – not the easiest of authors – and will no doubt be of great help to younger readers and budding Conrad scholars alike. Although the author exhibits a thorough knowledge of the huge number of books which to date have been written on Conrad, her own book is both eminently readable and inspiring in its own right.

The “fidelity” to which Joanna Skolik refers in the title of her book was a key concept in Polish literature of the Romantic period and – perhaps not surprisingly – also in the Polish reception of Conrad from the outbreak of the Second World War right up to the end of the twentieth century. For the last sixty years or so Conrad has inspired those Polish writers and critics who have sought to preserve Poland’s cultural identity, sandwiched as it has been between two hostile ideologies. This can be seen, for example, in an essay entitled *Conrad i kryzys powieści psychologicznej* / Conrad and the Crisis of the Psychological Novel (1935) by Ludwik Fryde, in Gustaw Herling-Grudziński’s essays entitled *Żywi i umarli* / The Living and the Dead (1946), in Czesław Miłosz’s *A Treatise on Poetry* (1957), in Maria Dąbrowska’s *Szkice o Conradzie* / Essays on Conrad (1959), in Zbigniew Herbert’s poem *The Envoy of Mr Cogito* (1974) – and, of course, in Zdzisław Najder’s *Essays on Art and Fidelity* (1997).

Joanna Skolik sees fidelity as one of the basic concepts of anthropology and axiology, as well as being one of the principal foundations of European civilization. Analysing the concept of fidelity succinctly and with great clarity against a vast backdrop of tradition, culture, philosophy, religion, morality and ethics, she says that “In European tradition the concept of fidelity is, as Zdzisław Najder says: ‘most closely associated with the ethics of mediaeval chivalry’ which survives as a moral force ‘because in every age there are men who love courtesy, faithfulness, courage, truth and moderation’” (p. 16).

Citing various sources, the author progressively isolates the essential components of the European concept of fidelity: conscience (p. 10), honour (p. 18), selflessness (p. 22), the non-egotistic choice of a personal cause (p. 23), a feeling of solidarity with others (p. 28), faith in a human being, love of a human being (p. 29) and trust (p. 64). She contrasts fidelity with the concept of betrayal, which brings with it a loss of honour or good reputation, as well as a loss of one's own identity.

Joanna Skolik reminds us that "Being a member of the seamen's community imposes obligations which can be described in terms of fidelity. A seaman must be committed to the standards of the craft of the sea. The seaman's code demands that one disregard other motives of behaviour apart from remaining faithful to its rules [...]" As Conrad once wrote: "Faithfulness is a great restraint, the strongest bond laid upon the self-will of men and ships on this globe of land and sea."<sup>1</sup> (p. 63).

Analysing the case of Lord Jim, "who does not feel guilty while breaking the mariner's code" (p. 64), Joanna Skolik recalls Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* and also the well-known division of cultures into so-called shame cultures, governed by the pressure of public opinion and the principle of honour, and so-called guilt cultures, based on the principle of moral duty (pp. 65, 75) and the dictates of conscience: "Marlow contrasts these two concepts: of guilt (an inner sense of culpability) and of disgrace (shame or "loss of face"). Marlow judges Jim's conduct in terms of guilt – thus of moral culpability; he does not understand Jim, who thinks only of his personal failure. Jim strives [to ... ] be perceived as a gentleman, a man of honour. The concept of honour cannot be separated from the concept of shame (the concept of guilt can): so Jim realises that he has lost face; he feels ashamed, though at the very beginning of the inquiry Jim does not admit his guilt." (p. 66)

Joanna Skolik's aim is "to survey various readings of Conrad's fictional works – namely *The Return* (1897), *Youth* (1898), *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim* (1900), *The End of the Tether* (1902), *Nostromo* (1904), *Prince Roman* (1910), *Under Western Eyes* (1911), *Chance* (1914) and *The Rover* (1923) – and to demonstrate that the ethical concept of fidelity (in the rudimentary sense of being faithful to something other than oneself – to an idea, person, or principle) – may be used to elucidate the thematic concept and Conrad's message in these stories and novels." (p. 29)

The greater part of this investigation is devoted to taking a long, hard look at the most well-known interpretations of each particular work. The outcome is a review of, or rather a guide to the several varieties of fidelity that emanate from Conrad's works: the hypocritical (*The Return*, p. 34); the true (*Youth*, p. 49); the controversial (*Heart of Darkness*, pp. 51–52); that based on the conflict between psychology and ethics (*Lord Jim*, p. 62); the romantically heroic, which is utterly subordinated to the hopeless love of "a lost cause" and the world of values (*Prince Roman*, p. 108); and finally that false variety of fidelity which is based on vanity, hidden "material interests"

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Conrad. "The Faithful River." [In:] *The Mirror of the Sea*.

(*Nostramo*, p. 92), self-deception (*Under Western Eyes*, pp. 115,116) or a mistaken loyalty (p. 128) to a false cause (p. 125).

Fidelity to a cause, a person, a community, a principle or an ideal may entail the tragic necessity of having to choose between different “loyalties” (as in *Lord Jim*, p. 75, *The End of the Tether*, p. 80 and *The Rover*, p. 147), which may lead to a process of understanding “that honour rests on a fixed code of conduct”. It may also result in a subsequent change of behaviour (*Lord Jim*, p. 68) or even a spiritual regression produced by a “bad”, i.e. superficial and obsessive understanding of the knightly ideal of fidelity, as in *Chance* (p. 132), which is a “comedy of manners” in the form of a novel.

Joanna Skolik’s review of the various possible actualisations of the concept of fidelity leads us to the human and social dimension of Conrad’s ideal of fidelity, which always goes hand in hand with a feeling of solidarity with other people – be they alive, dead or not yet born. This has always been Conrad’s message. In the preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* he speaks of the “invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts: [...] 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.”

