

THE 2014 JOSEPH CONRAD CONFERENCE AT THE JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY: “POLAND AND THE CONRAD PROBLEM”

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The conference was organized by the Jagiellonian University Joseph Conrad Research Centre and the Joseph Conrad Society (Poland) to mark the 100th anniversary of Joseph Conrad's return visit to Cracow in 1914 and the 90th anniversary of his death in 1924 – as well as the 650th anniversary of the founding of the Jagiellonian University. The venue of the conference was the Michał Bobrzyński Room, which is located on the second floor of the Collegium Maius. Needless to say, its historic interior made the atmosphere of the conference quite unique and special.

The main aim of the conference was to recall the evolution of Conrad's reception in Poland and to stress the importance of its historical and political context. However, apart from papers dealing with typically Polish matters, there were also papers on other subjects presented by Conradians from abroad.

The welcoming address was delivered by the Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Polish Language and Literature Prof. Anna Łebkowska, while the opening address was delivered by the director of the Jagiellonian University Joseph Conrad Research Centre Prof. Jolanta Dudek, who greeted all the guests and presented the idea of the conference.

The first day was dominated by papers concerning Conrad's reception in Poland. As well as presenting interpretations by Polish critics and writers, contributors also presented interpretations of their own. The first paper – *Conrad's Visit to Cracow under Polish Eyes* – was by Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech of the University of Silesia (Katowice), who discussed “the way in which Polish translators ‘manipulated’ the English texts” about Conrad's 1914 visit to Cracow in order to tailor them to the needs of Polish readers and to the times in which they were living.

In a paper entitled ‘*Oh, I hope he won't talk!*’ – *Confronting the Other in “Amy Foster”*’ – analysing the motif of the Other in Conrad's “Amy Foster” – Agata Kowol of the Jagiellonian University argued that the Conradian character Yanko Goorall exemplifies a human loneliness that is universal owing to the impossibility of really understanding one's fellow individuals. There are always barriers between people, of which the linguistic and cultural “are but a small fraction”.

Andrzej Juszczuk of the Jagiellonian University discussed utopian elements in the political novels of Joseph Conrad, i.e. *Under Western Eyes*, *The Secret Agent* and *Nostromo*. The speaker concentrated on the last novel, showing similarities between Conrad's texts and the classical utopias of Thomas More, Francis Bacon and Tomaso Campanella. According to Juszczuk, "Conrad's political novels can be interpreted as being both a positive and a negative vision of social development" – i.e. as utopias or dystopias.

Brendan Kavanagh of the University of Cambridge analysed "vibrational convergences between thermodynamics and information theory in *The Secret Agent*." The aim of this paper was to show "how Conradian depictions of vibration merely provide a mirage of structure for the ghostly representation of gestural communication (as opposed to discursive communication)" and also that such a representation "serves to structure *The Secret Agent* as a 'media assemblage' of various media forms."

The next session brought a paper delivered by Anna Szczepan-Wojnarska of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University (Warsaw) who characterised the famous Polish Conradian Rafał Bluth. The author recalled that – as a literary critic and specialist in Russian literature and literary history – Bluth made a comparative analysis of the works of Conrad and Dostoevsky in the context of Polish and Russian Romanticism. Bluth not only admired Conradian values, but also presented Conrad himself as an admirer of true virtues and as a writer who offered the hope that human life was meaningful. According to Szczepan-Wojnarska, such a description of Conrad should be taken into account in discussions of Conrad's reception in Poland during the Second World War.

Wiesław Ratajczak of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań sketched a portrait of Leszek Prorok, whom he sees as Conrad's Polish successor. Commenting on Prorok's *Conradian Initiations*, he recalled the chapter *Naturaliter Christiana*, in which Christianity is presented as the key to an understanding of Conrad's writing. Ratajczak also analysed Prorok's connections with Conrad – not only as a critic, but also as a writer, presenting a comparative interpretation of two pairs of works, the first pair being Conrad's *Freya of the Seven Isles* and Prorok's *Freja – the Cold Goddess of Love* and the second pair being Conrad's *Shadow Line* and Prorok's *The Radiance Line*.

The last paper presented on the first day of the conference was *The image of women in Conrad's prose – the case of Winnie Verloc*, given by Monika Malessa Drohomirecka of the Jagiellonian University. The author recalled Winnie Verloc's story and discussed various interpretations which critics have put forward to explain the motives for Winnie's actions, which are seen in the light of the socio-political contexts in which her life has been analysed. Winnie's fate may be interpreted from a social, psychological or political perspective, as a consequence of the disintegration of the bourgeois world, inborn predispositions, the emancipation of women or "her unwitting involvement in a complicated political game."

The second day of the conference began with Polish interpretations of Conrad, although there were also papers discussing high culture and pop culture or connections between art and literature in relation to Conrad's works. Marek Pacukiewicz of

the University of Silesia presented a paper entitled *Climbing Mountains with Conrad: Jan Józef Szczepański's Mountaineering Stories*. The speaker followed mountaineering threads in the works of Jan Józef Szczepański, who was an admirer of Conrad as well as being a great mountaineer. In Szczepański's stories we can find traces of the Conradian model of ethics. Marek Pacukiewicz also presented parallels between the experience of climbing and that of sailing. He concluded by saying that the ethos of the seaman was very similar to that of the mountaineer.

Margreta Grigorova of the St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo (Bulgaria) searched for traces of Joseph Conrad's seafaring philosophy and poetics in *The Life of Pi* (the book and the film), pointing to the "cinematic potential of Conrad's works and its realisation in film interpretations." This potential arouses widespread interest in the original, i.e. in Conrad's books. Another film presented by the author was *All is lost*, directed by J. C. Chandor.

Katarzyna Koćma of the Jagiellonian University spoke about the importance of Conrad's works for popular culture. Focusing on transtextual relations between Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and science fiction and fantasy novels, she showed how the novella has influenced not only popular literature, but also the cinema, the theatre, music and even computer games. She analysed Robert Silverberg's *Downward to the Earth* as the best example of such a transposition, pointing out the complexity of the connections between the two texts.

Karol Samsel of the University of Warsaw gave a paper on *Stanisław Lem's Conrad*. Discussing Stanisław Lem's complicated affinities with Conrad, he noted that it was his friend Jan Józef Szczepański who introduced him to this English author. Samsel described the relations between the two writers, showing "the way in which [Lem] and his philosophy – including his versions of axiological absolutism and anthropological pessimism – were influenced by the Conradian ethic."

Before the last session of the conference, all the participants had an opportunity to take part in a guided tour and also to visit the Jagiellonian University Museum in the Collegium Maius, which – being the oldest university building in Poland – has a history which begins in the year 1400. The College is on the corner of Jagiellońska Street and St. Anne's street – the same streets which Joseph Conrad walked along as a young teenager and later as a famous author during his return visit to Cracow in 1914. When Conrad was still a child, St. Anne's grammar school was housed in the Nowodworski College (Kolegium Nowodworskiego), which is literally next door to the Collegium Maius. During this year's Conrad conference, the door of the old passageway which connects the two buildings was opened so that participants could see just how easy it must have been to go from one quad to the other.

The first paper of the closing session – entitled *The concept of the gentleman in the works of Joseph Conrad* – was given by Olena Tkachuk of the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Ukraine). Discussing the notion of the gentleman in Conrad's works, the speaker presented Conrad as the descendant of an old Polish noble family who saw himself not as a Slav (in the tsarist Pan-Slavonic sense), but as a European who claimed that Poland belonged to the Western World. At the end of her paper, the speaker noted that "The British hereditary Earl Bertrand Arthur William

Russell and the Polish nobleman Józef Teodor Konrad Nałęcz-Korzeniowski were united by those values which were otherwise known as the aristocratic code of honour.”

The last two papers dealt with the subject of Conrad being “one of us”, though each presented the issue from a different perspective. Joanna Skolik of Opole University analysed Conrad’s reception in Poland by noting the attitudes of scholars, critics and general readers towards Conrad over the years, concentrating on the period between 1945 and 1989, when Poland was under communist rule. Because of political conditions – censorship in particular – Conrad was perceived as a classic who was not much preoccupied with the problems of the modern world. The speaker argued that Conrad is still “one of us” and that – although he is a difficult and demanding author – he is very much needed in present-day Poland.

Stefan Zabierowski of the University of Silesia presented a paper in which he summed up Polish critical reception of Joseph Conrad’s life and letters in the years 1897-2014. As well as describing the importance of Conrad’s reception in partitioned Poland and in the interwar period, the speaker stressed the role played by Conrad’s writing during the Second World War and discussed Marxist condemnations of Conrad after the war. He recalled that the political “thaw” of 1956 brought a relative liberalization which enabled Polish editions of Conrad’s works to be published once again and that – after the next political “thaw” of 1970 – Zdzisław Najder “played a leading role in the process of publishing, interpreting and popularizing [Conrad’s] works.” He concluded by saying that although young Conrad scholars offering new interpretations had appeared in Poland after the restoration of democracy in 1989, it had to be admitted that the general reading public was on the whole not interested in Conrad, who nevertheless has always been considered to be “one of us” on account of his Polish heritage and his own considerable influence on Polish culture.

At the end of the session Prof. Jolanta Dudek made her closing remarks, summing up the conference and thanking all those who had contributed to the event – both the speakers and those who had taken part in what at times had been heated discussions.

The conference ended with dinner at the Grand Hotel, where Conrad had stayed with his family a whole century earlier during their famous and eventful visit to Cracow in 1914. In the highly congenial atmosphere of the hotel’s “mirrored” dining room, Conradian discussions were continued and Conrad’s spirit was surely present among those who were at table that evening. During dinner, our thanks went to the organizers for having created a wonderful atmosphere for the conference: above all to Prof. Jolanta Dudek – who had been the driving force behind the project – and to Monika Malessa Drohomińska, who had managed the logistics and had taken good care of all of us.