

UNDER BULGARIAN EYES: THE RECEPTION OF JOSEPH CONRAD IN BULGARIA

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Abstract: This article examines the trends in Bulgarian critical appraisals of Conrad's writing and the transformations they have undergone over the last hundred years. Though few in number, these appraisals are nevertheless profound and perceptive, keeping in focus the most essential messages of Conrad's works, as well as the facts of the author's remarkable life. The scope of these critical endeavours has long been of a rather limited nature, but in some of the articles there has definitely been a noticeable trend towards a monographic approach. The growing fascination with Conrad in Bulgaria became particularly evident during the celebrations to mark the 150th anniversary of the writer's birth. The Polish Institute in Sofia contributed significantly to this event, organizing university lectures and film projections – not only in the capital, but also in other parts of the country. In addition, the Warsaw 150th anniversary exhibition entitled “Twixt land and sea” was invited to Sofia (the co-author of the present article being one of those who took part in the opening ceremony). This heightened interest in Conrad – the man and the writer – is partly the result of current trends towards intensive cultural interaction and also a growing fascination with migrant writers coming from multicultural backgrounds. It may well be that these recent developments have contributed to the publication of two monographs on Conrad: Stefana Roussenova's comparative study entitled *Dialogues in Exile: Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, Eva Hoffman* (2010) – which addresses the problems of exile and migration in some of Conrad's works – and Margreta Grigorova's monograph entitled *Joseph Conrad: the Creator as Seafarer* (2011), which not only reviews the seminal achievements that have contributed to the expansion of Conrad studies in Bulgaria, but also builds on them and takes them to completion.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Bulgarian critical reception, migrant writer

THE BULGARIAN CONNECTION

One hundred years ago, during the First Balkan War, Bulgaria briefly came to Conrad's attention when, after a series of sweeping victories, the Bulgarian army

¹ Translated by Petya Tsoneva.

continued its push towards Constantinople. Alarmed that the Bulgarians (whose political aspirations had almost always run counter to British interests) might take the Ottoman capital, Conrad wrote an open letter to the editor of “The Times” (*The Future of Constantinople* – published on 7th November 1912)² proposing that Constantinople be granted the status of an independent city-state.

We should bear in mind that in May 1878 Conrad had stopped off in Constantinople while he was sailing on the *Mavis* – the last ship of his “Marseilles period” (and which belonged to the British merchant marine). He reached Constantinople about two months after the signing of the treaty of San Stefano and the experience – at a time when Bulgaria had at long last gained its freedom – seems to have grieved him. In *a Personal Record* he writes that he was enraged to see Russian military tents pitched on Balkan soil. Conrad spent about three weeks on shore before returning to the *Mavis* in order to continue his voyage to Britain. During that time he “enters this busy cosmopolitan and multi-lingual city, famous for its street markets, saunas and whirling dervishes, a seat of Islamic culture and customs.”³ Perhaps it was then that the impressions and ideas which lay behind his political vision of 1912⁴ were already taking shape in Conrad’s mind. In his letter, he argues that – by virtue of its particular location and history – Constantinople could perform the functions of an autonomous polis-like Balkan city that would maintain the political and cultural equilibrium and benefit from changes in the European political arena. In this context, we should also recall Conrad’s overall vision of the Mediterranean as a “nursery” of the sailor’s craft (cf. *The Mirror of the Sea*).

It was from 1878 to 1912 that Conrad was most closely preoccupied with Bulgaria and the problems that it then faced. To date, however, we have no evidence of any Bulgarian feedback on Conrad’s letter of 1912. Bulgarian historians have noted and described the American concept of the autonomous city-state of Constantinople. During the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, Woodrow Wilson – the leader of the American delegation – stated with the confidence of an arbiter that the city of Constantinople could well be accorded the status of a state and an American protectorate. Parts of Bulgarian Thrace would also have been included in this political entity.⁵

At the time of Conrad’s birth, Bulgaria, which was one of the oldest states in Europe (having been founded in 681 and having been a stronghold of Orthodox Christianity since 864) had been part of the Ottoman empire for nearly 470 years. Somewhat like partitioned Poland, Bulgaria was a spiritual entity. Since the 1760s, the dedicated goal of cultural figures, authors and translators had been to revive the Bulgarian national spirit and to catch up with the rest of Europe – a process that had gathered momentum in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Works of English

² J. Conrad. *The Future of Constantinople*. [In:] *Idem. Last Essays. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 115-6.

³ J. Stape. *Joseph Conrad*. Trans. J. Chmielewski. Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2009, p. 59.

⁴ Conrad’s letter to *The Times* has been translated into Bulgarian for the first time by Petya Tzoneva and published in the appendix to Margreta Grigorova’s book *Джозеф Конрад Коженьовски. Творецът като мореплавател*, Велико Търново: Унив. изд. „Св. св. Кирил и Методий,” 2011, pp. 346-7.

⁵ X. Христов. *Българите, Балканите и мирът. 1919*. София: Наука и изкуство, 1984.

literature had started to appear in Bulgarian, but – with a few notable exceptions, such as *The Pilgrim's Progress* – these translations had been made not from the English original, but from French, Russian or German versions.

Conrad was not introduced to the Bulgarian reading public until after his death. This event was reported in the “ABV” (“ABC”) newspaper in its issue of 15th September 1927, which also listed the titles of several of his works. A total of four all too brief and sketchy articles on Conrad appeared in the Bulgarian press in the years from 1926 to 1930. One can therefore hardly speak of any critical reception of Conrad in Bulgaria at that time. However, some real work was done by the translators.

THE TRANSLATORS

The fact that in Bulgaria critical reflection has been dominated by the reception of translated literature can be explained by a natural willingness to draw the reader as close as possible to Conrad's far-reaching itineraries, Man's encounter with the elements and the “delectation” of his spectacular stylistics. As many as thirteen translators have contributed to the rendering of Conrad's works into Bulgarian. The biggest edition of his works was published in 1987 (in five volumes) and included old and new translations made by three translators. It was compiled by Hristo Kanev – one of Conrad's best Bulgarian translators – and was reviewed by Nikolai Aretov in the “Literary Thought”⁶ magazine in an extensive article on the subject of translating from English, German and the Scandinavian languages.

One positive aspect in the reception of these translations was a critical evaluation which aimed at their refinement and improvement. Both Nikolai Aretov and Asparuh Asparuhov – along with several authors of critical articles – detected a number of weak points relating to stylistic imprecision and the translation of Conrad's marine terminology. The opinion of Aretov, however, was that the importance of rendering the specifics of life at sea should not be exaggerated, as “it would be ridiculous to reduce the difficulties faced by Conrad's translators to that one particular field.”⁷ Asparuhov's systematic review of the way in which the translation of Conrad's works into Bulgarian has developed⁸ may be summarized as follows:

- A phase of growing interest in Conrad in the 1920s and the 1930s, beginning immediately after the writer's death, when information about him first began to appear in Bulgarian literary journals. Conrad is presented as an outstanding figure and as a ‘borderline’ author insofar as national identity is concerned.

⁶ Н. Аретов. *Преводна проза '86 (Англиски, немски и скандинавски езици)*. Сп. „Лит. Мисъл”, 1987, No. 7, pp. 109-114.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁸ А. Аспарухов. *Джозеф Конрад*. [Ип:] *Преводна рецепция на европейска литература в България* (8 vols). Vol. 1: *Английска литература*. Ed. А. Шурбанов, В. Трендафилов. София: Акад. изд. “Проф. М. Дринов,” 2000, pp. 338-43.

- Relative stagnation and even a downward trend in the 1940s and 1950s, which could partly be explained by the biographically defined anti-Russian attitudes of Conrad as an author.
- A resurgence of interest in the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in the five-volume edition of his works published in the years 1985-1986.

The translator Rusi Rusev – a distinguished member of the English Department at Sofia University, with nearly seventy publications to his name – comes first in every respect. Like most of the other Bulgarian translators of Conrad in the 1920s and 1930s, who chose to translate the popular works of an author who had pointed out that he could never be really popular, Rusev introduced Conrad as a major writer to the Bulgarian reading public by translating *Typhoon* – a story that is both popular and an integral part of the Conrad canon. This first Bulgarian-language version of the story (published in 1928)⁹ captures the spirit of the original and after eighty years still has not lost any of its charm. An even more impressive achievement is Rusev's translation of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (made eleven years later in 1939)¹⁰ which, besides being very accurate, also conveys the powerful poetry of Conrad's prose. Regrettably, because of the disturbing nature of Conrad's text, this masterly translation has never been reprinted and *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* is practically unknown in Bulgaria today.

The only moderately successful translation of *The Arrow of Gold* (1928) – by Assen Radoslavov – no doubt appealed to the popular taste of the time because of the novel's strong love theme and aestheticized atmosphere. Another favourable circumstance must have been the relatively short time span separating the Bulgarian version from the date of the novel's first publication in England.

Two competent translations appeared in the "Morski Sgovor" magazine: *Youth* in six instalments (translated by Boshnakova – 1929)¹¹ and *The Sinking of the Tremolino* in three (translated from the German by D. Vasilev – 1933).¹² However, the translations of *The Lagoon* (the translator's name has not come down to us), *Freya of the Seven Isles* (translated by Yuli Genov – 1937),¹³ *Karain* (1938)¹⁴ and *The Return* (1939)¹⁵ (both in Evgenia Spasova's translation), which are notable for their colossal inaccuracies and numerous omissions, can at times be better described as summaries rather than translations, as they virtually destroy the works which they set out to popularize.

The new rulers of Bulgaria after World War II were not much interested in Conrad – "a spokesman for the individualist modernist intelligentsia", who had nevertheless "paved the way for the contemporary epic of Man" – as one newspaper had it

⁹ Д. Конрад. *Тайфун*. Trans. and Ed. P. Русев, София: Ив. Г. Игнатов, 1928.

¹⁰ Д. Конрад. *Негърът от Нарцис*. Trans. P. Русев. София: Сл. Атанасов, 1939.

¹¹ Д. Конрад. *Младост*. Trans. Б. Бошнакова, сп. Морски сговор, 1929.

¹² Д. Конрад. *Потъването на „Тремolino“*. Trans. Д. Василев, Морски сговор, 1929, No. 1-3.

¹³ Д. Конрад. *Девојката от седемте острова*. Trans. Ю. Генов. София: Модерна домаќиня, 1937. Библиотека Модерна домаќиня. Г. XIII, No. 5.

¹⁴ Д. Конрад. *Спомен*. Trans. Е. Спасова. София, 1939.

¹⁵ Д. Конрад. *Завръщане*. Trans. Е. Спасова. София, 1939.

(“Narod”, No. 36, 1944), commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the author’s death. As far as the reception of Conrad’s works is concerned, the silence that fell after the war remained almost unbroken for twenty years. The only exception was a clumsy translation of *Youth* made by Lyuben Sechanov in 1948,¹⁶ which abounds in errors and omissions.

The first rift in the fog that had enveloped Conrad’s writing in post-war Bulgaria occurred in 1966, when translations of *Typhoon*, *The Secret Sharer* and *Falk* (made by Svetoslav Piperov)¹⁷ saw the light of day. However, these fairly good translations are deficient from a stylistic point of view, which is something that can be said even of most of the better renderings of Conrad’s texts into Bulgarian. It is hard to see what made this new version of *Typhoon* necessary, as the previous one by Rusev is far superior.

Hristo Kanev has translated more of Conrad’s works than anyone else in Bulgaria. We are indebted to him for the Bulgarian versions of *Lord Jim* (1968),¹⁸ *Nostromo*, *Youth* and *The Shadow Line* (all three of which were published together in 1971).¹⁹ Although the overall standard of Kanev’s translations is consistently high, he is not without fault when it comes to rendering niceties of style. These infelicities are fewer in *Nostromo*, but in *Lord Jim* important implications are lost. In the second sentence of Chapter Three the following words are missing from the Bulgarian version:

... and the Arabian Sea, smooth and cool to the eye, extended its perfect level to the perfect circle of a dark horizon.

Of course, Conrad repeatedly points out that an observer’s field of vision at sea represents a circle. This, coupled with the fact that the linear movement of a ship cuts through the circle described by the horizon, often provides the immediate justification (inherent in an individual’s perception of actualities at sea) for Conrad’s use of contrasts between circularity and linearity. This graphic opposition conveys the basic meaning of the third chapter of *Lord Jim*. The circles are associated with safety and stillness, while the lines – which inevitably clash with the circles – signify the threat of destruction. Since Jim’s state of mind is a reflection of the safety and peace which is apparent everywhere – and given that he keeps watch on the bridge (and an observer’s field of vision at sea represents a circle) – the circles are here associated with his way of looking at things.

Lord Jim has gone through four editions in Bulgarian translation (including one in the *Teenager’s Library* of adventure stories), but the above portion of text has never been emended. Kanev shows a certain preference for the dash in attributive phrases and clauses, as a result of which some of his sentences sound too abrupt. Although Kanev sometimes fails to render Conrad’s rhetorical repetitions, his version of *Youth* is the best of the three to date. Kanev’s translation of *The Shadow Line* was reprinted

¹⁶ Д. Конрад. *Младост*. Trans. Л. Сечанов, София: Нар. книга, 1948.

¹⁷ Д. Конрад. *Тайфун. Тайният спътник. Фалк*. Trans. С. Пиперов, София, 1966.

¹⁸ Д. Конрад. *Господарят Джим*. Trans. Х. Кънев, София: Емас, 1999.

¹⁹ Д. Конрад. *Ностромо. Младост. Прагът на зрелостта* (Vol. 1). Trans. Х. Кънев, София: Нар. култура, 1971.

in 2005 in the *Golden Library* of twentieth-century masterpieces,²⁰ whose goal is to encourage reading in the new century.

Heart of Darkness did not appear in Bulgarian until 1971. Wishing no doubt to bring Conrad's text closer to the contemporary reader, the erudite translator Grigor Pavlov²¹ – a lecturer in American literature at Sofia University – sometimes breaks up Conrad's longer sentences into shorter ones and compresses some of his phrases.

Freya of the Seven Isles and *The Shadow Line*, along with four short stories, appeared in a new translation by Boris Mindov in 1981. In the case of *Freya of the Seven Isles* this is the first translation in the full sense of the word, as the preceding attempt (made in 1937) is so inaccurate that it is better described as a retelling of Conrad's work rather than as a translation. This new rendering of *The Shadow Line*, however, is less accurate than that of Kanev.

Many of the translations of the 1960s and the 1970s were reprinted in a five-volume edition of Conrad's works that came out in 1985 and 1986.²² This ambitious undertaking brought together the best Bulgarian translations that had been made so far. Half of them were new: *The Lagoon*, *An Outpost of Progress*, *The End of the Tether*, *Almayer's Folly* and an excerpt from *The Mirror of the Sea* – translated by B. Blagoev. These translations deserve praise, although they are not free from some of the usual stylistic deficiencies. A presence implies an absence, however, and this otherwise impressive five-volume edition makes one aware of the regions where Bulgarian translators fear or do not wish to tread. A little less than half of the space in the five volumes is taken up by Conrad's novels, of which only three are included. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* is not one of them – understandably, perhaps. However, there has been a marked tendency for the same works to be translated again and again: *Youth* (3 translations), *Typhoon* (3 translations) and *The Shadow Line* (2 translations), while others have been republished without any noticeable revisions: *Lord Jim* (four times). Meanwhile, not only *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, but also *Chance*, *Victory*, *The Rover*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, *The Rescue*, *Amy Foster*, *a Set of Six* and *Tales from Hearsay* all await their Bulgarian translators.

CONRAD'S CRITICAL RECEPTION

Though few in number, Bulgarian critical appraisals of Conrad's writing are nevertheless profound and perceptive, keeping in focus the most essential messages of the author's works, as well as the facts of his remarkable life. The scope of these critical endeavours has long been of a rather limited nature, but in some of the articles there has definitely been a noticeable trend towards a monographic approach.

²⁰ Д. Конрад. *Прагът на зрелостта*. Trans. X. Кънев. София: Mediasat, 2005.

²¹ Д. Конрад. *Сърцето на мрака*, Trans. Г. Павлов, София: Нар. младеж, 1971.

²² Д. Конрад. *Съчинения в 5 т.* Ed. X. Кънев; [С предг. от Дмитрий Урнов]. Варна: Г. Бакалов, 1985-1986.

One of the major contributors to the renewal of interest in Conrad in the Bulgarian literary world during the 1920s and 1930s was the eminent scholar Petar Dinekov – an expert on Bulgarian and Slavonic languages and culture who studied in Warsaw (1934-1935) and Cracow (1935). During his studies he began to work as a cultural correspondent, keeping the Bulgarian literary press informed of noteworthy developments and personalities in the cultural life of Poland. Dinekov's experiences in Warsaw and Cracow had a remarkable impact on his literary thinking and directed his attention towards Conrad. He became acquainted not only with the main trends in the Polish reception of Conrad, but also with the effect that Conrad's "return to his home country" had had on him, as well as the most representative critical perspectives on his works and the conflicting views on his 'borderline' position as regards national identity. Dinekov attended Józef Ujejski's lectures at the University of Warsaw and read his monograph on Conrad.²³ He was particularly impressed by an article entitled *Dusza Conrada (Conrad's Soul)*, written by his favourite critic – Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński.

Dinekov wrote on Conrad in 1935 and also in 1939, four years after he returned to Bulgaria. His first reflections took the form of correspondent's reports from his 'base' in the magical city of Cracow, where he became immersed in the inimitable atmosphere of the Old Town, its history, museums, the artistic spell of "Young Poland" and Boy-Żeleński's bohemian *Zielony Balonik* café-cum-cabaret. Dinekov translated Boy-Żeleński's article on Conrad's soul and published it in the "Literary Voice" newspaper (1935 – issue No. 277).²⁴ He spells Conrad's name with a letter "zh" ("Zhosef") – unlike the later officially accepted spelling with a "dzh [j]" ("Dzhosef") – and precedes his text with a telling critical remark in this regard:

In Bulgaria, as all over the world, Joseph Conrad – the author of numerous novels about life at sea, among which *Typhoon* seems to be the most popular – is commonly regarded as an English writer. Although he did write only in English, he was Polish by birth and his family name was Korzeniowski. For a long time, the Poles themselves saw him as a foreign writer and it is only in recent years that, being more informed about his works, they have attempted to find a place for him in the development of Polish literature. His books are translated with unabashed eagerness and the number of critical appraisals of his works continues to rise. Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński's article, which is extremely sincere in its tone, portrays one of the stages of these attempts to return Conrad to his home country.²⁵

As can be seen, Dinekov was impressed by the writer's "return" to his native land – by the Polish aspect of his outstanding achievement. Dinekov derived his knowledge of Conrad's situation under the guidance of his literary teacher Boy-Żeleński and, in his own turn, wished to acquaint Bulgarian readers with its peculiarities. The Polish critic's article took as its starting point the problem of determining the national literary identity of Polish-born writers living abroad. This was addressed in two

²³ J. Ujejski. *O Konradzie Korzeniowskim*. Warszawa: Dom Książki Polskiej, 1936.

²⁴ Т. Бой-Желенски. *Душата на Жозеф Конрад*. Trans. and not. П. Динеков. *Литературен глас*. No. 277, pp. 3, 6ff.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

different ways: either by reconnecting such writers to Poland, or by acknowledging their disconnection. Boy-Żeleński was not in favour of the former stance, but was opposed to the tendency to “take” Polish writers and artists “away” from Poland – which, he observed, could be explained by the Polish political situation. He was also extremely irritated by epithets that appeared to define Poland as “the poor cousin of Europe”. He noted that the Polish features of Conrad’s work were initially studied not by a Pole, but by Jean-Aubry – a French scholar, translator and friend of Conrad, who believed that a full understanding of the author and his work could not be gained without taking into account his biography and his Polish origins. Żeleński paid particular attention to Jean-Aubry’s visit to Poland, which took place as a symbolic act of bringing back home Poland’s once spurned literary genius. Finally, the article drew parallels between Conrad and Nietzsche, suggesting that Conrad opens the English language to exciting new possibilities in the same way as Nietzsche enriches German, but to a greater extent (according to the competent opinion of Przybyszewski). Boy-Żeleński also drew attention to another aspect of Conrad’s impact on the English world: its relationship with the sea. He found it curious that a foreign author should be able to reveal so much to the English about the sea – their sea – in their own language and in the most profound way. We may add that this observation was developed more extensively by Stefan Żeromski, who called Conrad a cultural “conqueror” and noted that he managed to show the nature of the sea to the English, who had been sailing the seas for several centuries.

Dinekov wrote about Conrad for a second time on the pages of the “Bulgarian Thought” magazine, where in 1939 he published a review of the *Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, translated into Bulgarian as *Негърът от Нарцис* by Rusi Rusev. Dinekov’s text, however, is not confined to a study of the recently published translation, but reflects on Conrad’s biography and his work taken as a whole. In the introduction, Dinekov portrays Conrad as “one of the most fascinating figures in European literature of the last forty years”, being the author of outstanding works about the sea which have “very few rivals”. In many respects, Dinekov’s article adopts Boy-Żeleński’s critical views, which he elaborates and expands. Once again, Dinekov focuses on the increasing intensity of work on Conrad’s reception in Poland and the growing awareness of his affinity with Polish literature. The inevitable question “To whose literature does Conrad belong?” is asked once again and answered in an ambiguous way:

Conrad himself said that he would never have become a writer if he had not begun to write in English. He did not consider English to be a foreign language. On the other hand, however, he had always been emotionally attached to his home country; his affection for Poland and its fate had never ceased and whenever it was necessary, he would wholeheartedly stand in defence of his country.²⁶

In his critical reading, Dinekov refers to Józef Ujejski’s monograph and the evaluations of Richard Curle and Gustave Kahn, but without providing proper references.

²⁶ П. Диников. *Негърът от Нарцис. Роман от Джозуеф Конрад, преведе от англ. Р. Русев*, библ. Златни зърна. *Българска мисъл*, 1939, No. 3, p. 201.

He borrows the formula of the “romantically mysterious overwhelming musicality of the other race” from Curle, while Kahn provided him with the formula of “un puissant rêveur”²⁷ – the conviction that Conrad’s work partakes of the spirit of Slavonic writing. Dinekov believes that it is not merely his origins, but this particular feature of his art that determines Conrad’s association with Polish literature. Adopting the widely established paradigm of homo duplex, Dinekov insightfully observes that this can also be applied to *The Narcissus*, where the two aspects of Conrad’s identity – his Polish and Slavonic soul – combine to produce the vocal perspective of the novel: “the Englishman has an expert knowledge of the sea, while the Slav can perceive the depths of the mystery of the universe.”²⁸ According to Dinekov, Conrad’s portrayal of the world of the sea reveals not only the elemental nature of the sea, but also the thrill of the “mystery of the world”: “the unearthly and the mysterious” is part of the psychology of his writing. Dinekov also notes the themes of human solidarity and devotion to duty in Conrad’s portrayal of the ship’s crew and his presentation of the ship as a living being.

The longest Bulgarian critical study devoted to Conrad appeared in 1965 in a collection of papers on contemporary English writers, which included an extensive in-depth study of Conrad’s work made by Paulina Pirinska. As the point of departure in her analysis Pirinska chooses to focus on Conrad’s long-lasting friendship with John Galsworthy, which began when both writers were still at the beginning of their respective roads to literary fame. Pirinska ponders over the strong impression that Conrad’s narrative skills – together with their ambiguous character of delicate sensitivity, firmness and sharpness – had made on Galsworthy:

He was one of the most remarkable narrators I have ever encountered. He had stories to tell for the coming 20 years. Stories about ships and sea-storms, the Polish revolution, his adventurous youth, the Malay Sea and the Congo [...] about people, about many people.²⁹

In the next section of her study, Pirinska concentrates on the role of the English language in Conrad’s writing career, shifting the focus of her interest from Conrad’s choice of language to the way the language he chose shaped not only his writing skills, but also his nature and character.

²⁷ Dinekov was not familiar with Joseph Conrad’s displeasure at the remarks of both of these benevolent critics, whom he suspected of being either naive or too sweet. In a *Personal Record* Conrad writes: “I make a point of it because a couple of years ago, a certain short story of mine being published in a French translation, a Parisian critic – I am almost certain it was M. Gustave Kahn in the “Gil Blas” – giving me a short notice, summed up his rapid impression of the writer’s quality in the words un puissant rêveur. So be it! Who could cavil at the words of a friendly reader? Yet perhaps not such an unconditional dreamer as all that. I will make bold to say that neither at sea nor ashore have I ever lost the sense of responsibility. There is more than one sort of intoxication. Even before the most seductive reveries I have remained mindful of that sobriety of interior life, that asceticism of sentiment, in which alone the naked form of truth, such as one conceives it, such as one feels it, can be rendered without shame.” J. Conrad. *a Personal Record*. Ed. Z. Najder and J. Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 101.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

²⁹ П. Пиринска. *Джозуеф Конрад*. [Ип:] *Съвременни английски писатели*. София: Наука и изкуство, 1965, p. 19.

Pirinska makes a critical examination of several novels by Conrad – *Almayer's Folly*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Nostromo*, *Chance*, *The Secret Sharer*, *The Shadow Line*, *Lord Jim* and *The Mirror of the Sea* (the chapter on *The Tremolino*). In her observations, she refers to Conrad's self-assessment as a writer who produces stories about distant exotic lands, but steers away from the popular adventure novel in a quest to present the "interaction of circumstances, settings and figures".³⁰ She sees the defeat of some of Conrad's protagonists in their inconstancy, which in most cases is due to their obsession with material prosperity. In her examination of *Almayer's Folly* she pays close attention to the way in which Conrad portrays the Malay world. She focuses on the anticolonial attitudes of his writing, its "emotionally intensive" style and the concept of "insanity", which is one of the pivots of the novel. Pirinska applies this strategy again in her reading of *Heart of Darkness*, where the key concept is, of course, "horror". Concentrating on the Gothic features of the novella, Pirinska stresses that "none of the Gothic romances has managed to construct a world that can match the nightmare experiences which we find in this story about real people and real disasters inflicted by human beings on other human beings in their pursuit of wealth."³¹ She stresses the alienated presence of Kurtz – who is presented as a man who is "alive in his death" – and meditates on the effects of nausea and the concept of evil as madness and death: evil-doers end their lives as victims of the same evil that they have attempted to inflict on others.

Pirinska defines *Nostromo* as "Conrad's most complexly nuanced book – a book that evokes a gallery of images, each of which imparts its own nuance to the world constructed by the author."³² She makes the parallel between Conrad's novel and Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* – which many critics tend to employ in their reading of Conrad. She also shares some critical remarks on the novel that were once commonly regarded as "understandable", notwithstanding Conrad's expectations that writing *Nostromo* would help him reach the high point of his career.

Pirinska also discusses key aspects of the creative process that was the result of Conrad's literary quests. She focuses on one of the major fears that Conrad experienced as a writer – that his work might be accessible only to a limited number of readers. She does not overlook his appeal to solidarity based on shared human experience and feelings and sees the strategy of "implicit narration" as a positive narrative feature of his writing. She discovers the power and predominance of Conrad's "sea-obsessed personality" and sees him as a writer who is overwhelmed by the sea: the sea is his ultimate power and determines the sacrality of his creative quests. Conrad's marine books are dominated by a sense of levity and freedom and the poeticisation of the sea conditions his skilfully written prose:

It is clear that the sea, not dry land, is Conrad's preferred place of self-revelation [...] There is something impure and corrupt in dust, but the sea is always pure."³³

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Pirinska draws parallels between Conrad and Coleridge, focusing on their presentation of the struggle with the sea. She highlights Conrad's masterful portrayal of seascapes and the effect of timelessness that is achieved when the wind ceases and the sea and the ship seem to be a painted picture. She also dwells on Conrad's love for ships, noting that the English word "ship" is a feminine noun and that this aspect opens its significance to readings of the feminine heart. She takes one particular ship, the *Tremolino* – which many experts on Conrad believe is imagined – and discovers its high standing among his numerous favourite ships: the *Tremolino* is the "fluttering" ship that "runs merrily in the face of death". Pirinska also investigates Conrad's evident commitment to give a conscientious depiction of those in charge of the ship, whom he invests with his own sense of responsibility. Dwelling on Conrad's heroicisation of his Corsican protagonist Dominic Cervoni in *The Mirror of the Sea*, she explains how this real-life figure becomes a version of Conrad's own personality.

In short, Pirinska's critical appraisal provides the most perceptive basic directions for further investigation in the field of Conrad Studies in Bulgaria; they are extensive and can be developed into a monograph.

Conrad's work has also been discussed by Bulgarian experts on English literature. The first of two ventures of this kind was a piece of research done by Grigor Pavlov, who translated *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo*. In 1967 Grigor Pavlov published a critical essay on the theme of alienation and some aspects of presentation in *Nostromo*. In 1969, perhaps when he was still translating *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo*, Pavlov published *Two Studies in Bourgeois Individualism by Joseph Conrad*,³⁴ in which he attempts to interpret these works, not without having recourse to Marxist literary sociology. Pavlov is also the author of two of the introductions to the editions of Conrad's works which came out in 1971 – *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo*.³⁵ In 1987 the co-author of the present article (A.A.) contributed a series of four articles on metaphor and scene in *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, *The Rescue* and *Chance*. The other major study on Conrad is Asparuh Asparuhov's "Metaphor, Symbol and Scene in *The Rescue*", published in the University of Sofia's yearbook.³⁶ It examines Conrad's creative method by studying the relationship between symbol and metaphor and the way they operate in his construction of scenes.

Asparuhov begins his study by shedding light on the role of the circle and the line in Conrad's work. He goes on to explain that they are employed as geographical, not geometrical terms, which form an oppositional pair. He bases his observations on Conrad's essay *Geography and Some Explorers*, in which the writer expresses his dislike of geometry and his preference for geography, giving examples of how figures are employed in geography. This is a highly productive idea which Asparuhov uses in

³⁴ G. Pavlov. "Two Studies in Bourgeois Individualism by Joseph Conrad". *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 1969, No. 3, pp. 229-38.

³⁵ Г. Павлов. *Сребро и смърт*. [In:] Д. Конрад. *Ностромо*. София, 1971, pp. 7-24. Г. Павлов. *Ужас! Ужас!* [In:] Д. Конрад. *Сърцето на мрака*. София, 1971, pp. 5-10.

³⁶ А. Asparuhov. "Metaphor, symbol and scene in *The Rescue*". *Годишник на Софийския Университет Св. Климент Охридски. Факултет по класически и нови филологии*, 1995, Vol. 88, No. 1, pp. 5-30.

order to explain the geographical oppositions in *Victory*, *Typhoon*, *Lord Jim* and (in greater detail) *The Rescue*.

Another seminal critical work – Ivailo Velev’s article entitled “The Symbol of the Snake in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and World History” – was published in 2013.³⁷ It studies the symbolic significance of the snake in the spiritual practices of Eastern religions and the form it takes in *Heart of Darkness*. According to Velev, Marlow’s posture and his ascetic appearance, together with his unequivocal association with the religions, practices and philosophy of ancient India, merit further investigation. The author makes bold connections (some of which are rather arbitrary) between Conrad’s work and the genre of ancient tragedy, as well as Kafka and Dostoevski’s *The House of the Dead*. He concludes by saying that “the modernity of this Polish writer who writes in English lies in his ability to generate mythologems, parables and proverbs. They provide opportunities for different interpretations that complete each other. The principles of decoding these ideas and symbols can be found in Conrad’s work taken as a whole.”

The Bulgarian contribution to Conrad studies also includes the observations which the illustrious Bulgarian-born French literary critic Tsvetan Todorov made on *Heart of Darkness* in his book entitled *The Poetics of Prose* (in the chapter in which he discusses the construction of the void in *Heart of Darkness*).³⁸ Todorov finds himself under the spell of one of Conrad’s most captivating works and succumbs to its mysteries. He begins by observing that if we are to understand Conrad, we need to step over the bounds of the conventional, beyond which things are no longer what they seem to be. The conventional beginning does not meet our expectations, the critic observes. The risks which the company doctor predicts are intrinsic: he examines the skulls of all those who are about to embark on a journey and questions them about the presence or absence of genetically transmitted madness in the family. The danger comes from within. The adventures take place within the explorer’s mind and not as externally experienced situations. Todorov goes on to argue that the continuation of the story merely confirms this initial impression. The described events are insignificant, he argues, as the only thing that matters in the story is their interpretation. The narrative organization of the activity (the “mythological story”) is needed only in order to facilitate the unfolding of the gnoseological story. The reported events are of minor importance, since all narrative attempts aim at unveiling the mystery of life. Todorov’s interpretation admits that the author’s intention results in hermeneutic attempts to assert the state of “knowing” over the experience of “doing” – to claim that the meaning is more important than the events. Thus Todorov sees the role of metaphors and symbols as being closely related to the problem of cognition. The very process of cognition in *Heart of Darkness*, however, turns out to be an attempt to know a void space, as the internal significance of the events appears to be missing. Kurtz is “the heart of darkness” – Todorov observes – but that heart is emp-

³⁷ И. Велев. “Символът на змията в „Сърцето на мрака” от Джоузеф Конрад и световната история.” *Езиков свят*, 2001, No. 1, pp. 36–42.

³⁸ Ц. Тодоров. *Познание за празното*. [Ип:] *Поетика на прозата*. Trans. А. Стамболова. София: Изд. къща „Лик”, 2004, pp. 178–91.

ty. Cognition is thus impossible, since the very heart of darkness is veiled in darkness – that is the overall message of the book. The Word which is expected to enlighten the benighted world fails to dispel its darkness.

Conrad's novella holds the critical reader in the tight grip of hermeneutic tension, urging him or her to embark on a journey along the "river" of the text in search of signposts. Todorov concludes by arguing that Conrad's writing is certainly allegorical, but its allegorical pattern is intrinsic to the text and belongs to an endless chain of mutually reflexive symbolic figures. Todorov's formula may well provide a clue that might explain ongoing critical efforts to understand *Heart of Darkness* – assuming that these quests for meaning are perpetuated by the vacuity that opens beneath the surface.

Todorov's interpretation underlies Diana Ivanova's comparative reading of *Heart of Darkness*, published in the renowned Bulgarian electronic journal "Liternet". Ivanova employs Todorov's perspective to assert the impossibility of the fulfilment of childhood dreams. She discovers points of convergence between *Heart of Darkness* and *The Tender Spiral* (*Нежната спирала*, 1984), a short story by the contemporary Bulgarian writer Yordan Radichkov (1929-2004). Ivanova uses Nathalie Sarraute's perspective as a comparative tool and claims that "the protagonists of the novella seem to enter, in Sarraute's words, the 'era of suspicion',³⁹ where their impressions operate as the hidden stimulus of their actions and gestures and all external events are perceived and transformed by Marlow's mind (*Heart of Darkness*) and the minds of the hunters (*The Tender Spiral*)." In *The Tender Spiral* a few hunters suddenly find themselves in front of a rose bush thickly set with rose-hips. They could easily have passed it by, but the short story locates the focal point of its plot exactly at the moment when they stop to examine it. The hunters perceive the bush as a living being which belongs to a mysterious world and which can, perhaps – Ivanova writes – also be read as another configuration of the "heart" of darkness and inevitability, signifying life's mystery. She sees the protagonists' impressions as the engine of narrative development in both works and argues that they both address the same cognitive situation. "This cognitive situation consists of the relationships between the "knowing" / "I"-subject – the hunters in Radichkov's story and Marlow in Conrad's novella – and the perceived information (their experience) and the things they seek in order to know (the world). The knowing subjects in both narratives deny the possibility of complete or true knowledge of the world – a world, which, in any case, is disconnected from the subject and his or her experience."⁴⁰

Apart from the above-mentioned critical readings and studies, a number of short newspaper articles and articles published on specialized websites have also been devoted to Conrad. The cinema news website *Operation Kino* has announced the pre-

³⁹ Д. Иванова. *Да попаднеш в "Сърцето на мрака" или да се оплетеш в "Нежната спирала"*. [Повестта на] Джоузеф Конрад и [разказа на] Йордан Радичков. [In:] Научни съобщения на СУБ – клон Добрич, 2003, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 231-7. Liternet: <http://liternet.bg/publish4/divanova/radichkov.htm>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

mière of a new film version of *Heart of Darkness* entitled *Into the Darkness*.⁴¹ The website's commentary is that the film belongs to the genre of fantasy and that Conrad's works can undergo such interpretations because there are latent elements of fantasy in them. The author of the commentary has his doubts, however, as to whether this new film version directed by Peter Cornwell (with screenwriters Brandon Morgan and Tony Giglio) will be in the same league as Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) or the rival adaptation by Nicolas Roeg (1993). It is significant that the première of *Apocalypse Now* stimulated a renewal of interest in the novella on the part of critics and the public alike, which resulted in a wave of new interpretations. The co-author of the present article (M.G.) remembers that in the 1980s university students began to read *Heart of Darkness* on a massive scale. Three elements of Coppola's film version seem to have attracted younger readers in particular – Jim Morrison's voice, Wagner's *Walküre* and Marlon Brando's acting.

A fairly informative article by Yordan Kosturkov entitled *Joseph Conrad, the Outstanding Englishman of Polish Origin*⁴² has appeared in the "Duma" newspaper. The article gives an account of Conrad's life and stresses the question of language, the erudition of the writer's parents, his contacts with other writers and the fate of his works, with particular attention being paid to film adaptations. The apparent surge in public interest in Conrad which could be observed in 2005 was in part due to a greater interest in the man and his work on the part of the media. Tatiana Chipeva's article entitled "Between the Dry Land and the Sea"⁴³ appeared in the "Dneven Trud" newspaper. a mixture of reporting and artistic journalism can be observed in an article written by Vladimir Trendafilov and entitled "Legends that haunt our lives. 'The Shadow Line' by Joseph Conrad",⁴⁴ which was published by the "Trud" newspaper. The article also offers an excerpt from the edition of *The Shadow Line* that is included in *The Golden Collection of the 20th Century* – a series of memorable works published by the "Trud" and "24 Chasa" newspapers in 2005. This particular book by Conrad was widely discussed following the showing of Andrzej Wajda's intensively advertised film adaptation, which took part in the 2013 Sofia International Film Festival.

The growing Bulgarian fascination with Conrad became particularly apparent during the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the writer's birth. The Polish Institute in Sofia contributed significantly to this event, organizing university lectures and film projections – not only in the capital, but also in other parts of the country. In addition, the Warsaw 150th anniversary exhibition entitled "Twixt land and sea" was invited to Sofia (the co-author of the present article being one of those who took part

⁴¹ *Сърцето на мрака – мрачно, но неясно* – fpsy 2.07.2011, 25.11.2011, <http://operationkino.net/tag/into-the-darkness/>.

⁴² Й. Костурков. "Джоузеф Конрад – гениалният англичанин-поляк". *Дума*, No. 247, 21.10.2006, p. 26.

⁴³ Т. Чипева. "Джоузеф Конрад между морето и сушата". *Дневен труд*, No. 250, 14.09.2005, p. 15.

⁴⁴ В. Трендафилов. "Легендите, които витаят в живота. *Прагът на зрелостта* от Джоузеф Конрад". *Труд*, No. 255, 19.09.2005.

in the opening ceremony). This heightened interest in Conrad – the man and the writer – is partly the result of current trends towards intensive cultural interaction and also a growing fascination with migrant writers coming from multicultural backgrounds. It may well be that these recent developments have contributed to the publication of two monographs on Conrad: Stefana Rusenova's comparative study entitled *Dialogues in Exile: Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, Eva Hoffman* (2010)⁴⁵ – which addresses the problems of exile and migration in some of Conrad's works – and Margreta Grigorova's monograph entitled *Joseph Conrad: the Creator as Seafarer* (2011), which not only reviews the seminal achievements that have contributed to the expansion of Conrad studies in Bulgaria, but also builds on them and takes them to completion. In her book entitled *Dialogues in Exile* (Sofia 2010) Professor Rusenova devotes a chapter to *Amy Foster*, where Conrad "brings together the theme of exile and the act of narrating and draws attention to the importance of the border, the gap and the subversion of binarism."⁴⁶

The most exhaustive Bulgarian study of Conrad to date has been conducted by Margreta Grigorova, who teaches Polish language and literature at the University of Veliko Turnovo. In her book entitled *Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski: the Artist as Seafarer* (Veliko Turnovo, 2011) – written in Bulgarian – she throws light on all Conrad's works that are centred around the sea and draws a number of illuminating parallels with Polish authors. She provides a wealth of information about Conrad's Polish background, cites numerous Polish critics and devotes a whole chapter to the reception of Conrad in his native Poland.

Conrad has often been looked on as a writer whose works demand a certain level of intellectual and emotional preparedness on the part of the reader. It is important to keep this in mind if we want to read and interpret his works correctly. Understanding Conrad calls for "initiation", the right state of mind and a "certain belief in the writer", as Wit Tarnawski⁴⁷ points out, adding that these levels of reading are related to the emotional and spiritual needs of the reader. Conrad's style of writing demands an exquisitely creative approach to translation, favours new translations and enriches the art of translation. Reading Conrad stimulates scholars to pursue their research ever further, leading them on to explore new fields of knowledge, and yet leaving them with a sense of unfathomability. Conrad's Bulgarian readers – enthralled by the sea and the writer's journeys to the ends of the world – regard him in exactly the same way.

⁴⁵ S. Roussenova. *Dialogues in Exile: Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, Eva Hoffman*. Sofia: Polis, 2010.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴⁷ W. Tarnawski. "O artystycznej osobowości i formie Conrada". [In:] *Idem. Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1964, pp. 283-4.

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