

Spaces beyond the horizon? Alternative imaginative geographies between Europe and the Orient.*

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Abstract

Post-structuralist and post-colonial discourses in contemporary human geography often make reference to the works of Joseph Conrad, albeit not infrequently in an iconized fashion. This essay reviews some grounds for feeling that these readings are missing geographies of the Orient implicit not only in Conrad's work, but in treatments of geographies of imprisonment and deportation east of the Vistula over centuries. Attention is drawn to the work of Adam Mickiewicz and Joseph Brodsky, and to the legacy of the czarist and soviet penal systems. The essay concludes by

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pointing to the contribution that broader, alternative views of empire and oppression may make in adding depth to our discourse.

1 Introduction

Observing the changes taking place in the world as we know it, and in the expected reflection of that, or those, worlds in geographical discourses, one can hardly help but be struck by the power of agenda-writers and gatekeepers. They are by their own declaration far from wishing to impose any concept or thought on their readers, interlocutors or students, and willingly admit how partial their perceptions are, or at any rate the best of them express these reservations clearly enough.¹ Despite this, it may be argued that their less erudite and empowered pupils will be guided in their choice of further reading and study within the conceptual realms in which the discourses are conducted. Geographies are being stretched by the density of reference accorded to concepts, topics, and their contexts, leaving potential “others” beyond the ken of social-theory informed participants, spaced out, one could say.

While Derek Gregory is surely justified in taking up the challenge issued by Edward Said regarding the rethinking of geography, there may be reason to wonder how many interpretative layers may be placed between the subjects implicated in the ensuing discussion. It remains relevant to turn Gregory’s remark about Said back on the author: where does Gregory’s geography come from?² Gregory has the advantage of many human geographers in retaining and developing a sensitive relationship with historical geography, as is evidenced in much of his work, including that on imaginations and imaginaries. His concerns, and, through him and those in his intellectual space, the concerns of dominant tendencies in human geography are not only attenuating scholarly communication with other

geographers of other traditions, but are also overlooking themes and voices potentially within the purview of imaginary geographies. Of course one cannot demand or expect that scholars encompass more than humanly possible, but the sad feeling of *déjà vu* that comes upon one after seeing things known represented as things new is always depressing.

This essay is then a modest and unfinished expression of frustration that the main line of human geography is in danger of becoming sufficient unto itself in reference, and is for this reason reducing potentially fruitful avenues for further imagination to dead ends. In his eminent essay addressing Said, Gregory iconizes Joseph Conrad in an aside, invoking an association with Said's interpretations of the connections between Conrad's story-telling, colonialism and imperialism.³ Gregory is of course far from being alone in placing or mapping others; contemporary human geography is peppered with similar references.⁴

This, in a way, may foreclose on other readings of Conrad, on the Orient, and on other experiences than those foregrounded in the academy at present. Among these are configurations of European horizons which, while not specifically excluding other readings, concentrate attention on favoured discourses, leaving the others at best in penumbral disregard. This stage direction — management of illumination — perhaps follows from the undoubted difficulties of communication which arise in the academy when privilege is withdrawn from single voices; the voices that make themselves heard can hardly be blamed for speaking. But in speaking, they may disenfranchise the mute, raising questions of ethics and morality in postmodern times.⁵ The mute necessarily include all who do not belong nor aspire to the English-speaking academic intellectuals, bounded further by critical and/or social theory, or who have not been “translated”, raising the poignancy of Eva Hoffman's intervention.⁶ There are worlds of which imaginary geographies have not dreamt, and which deserve to be given

voice. It is not because I feel authority to speak on behalf of these that I have begun this essay. Rather I would like to draw attention to issues presently in the shade; there are certainly many others, and my sight is not good, but will have to suffice for now.

2 Joseph Conrad

Backtracking from Gregory to Said, we find an acknowledgement that Conrad was not just a regular English colonial writer.

What makes Conrad different from the other colonial writers who were his contemporaries is that, for reasons having partly to do with the colonialism that turned him, a Polish expatriate, into an employee of the imperial system, he was so self-conscious about what he did.⁷

In the following, I would like to extend the same warning as Najder in considering the associations that a closer examination of Conrad's work may arouse, and sidestep any attempt to demonstrate what has or has not influenced Conrad. Najder comments that:

Influence is always hypothetical: we have to assume that *X* has read or heard of something which made him, consciously or not, reshape his own beliefs or style or interests. I want to base my contentions on safer ground and am going to present my case in the terms not of influence, but of affinity, similarity and continuation.⁸

Joseph Conrad was born Józef Teodor Konrad Nałęcz Korzeniowski in December 1857 to Apollo Korzeniowski (1820–1869) and Ewelina neé Bobrowska (1833–1865). At his birth his father, a writer, dedicated a poem to him:

To my Son Born in the 85th Year of Muscovite Oppression:

...

Baby son, tell yourself

You are without land, without love,

Without country, without people,

While Poland — your *Mother* is in her grave.

For your only *Mother* is dead — and yet

She is your faith, your palm of martyrdom.⁹

His father was arrested for conspiracy against Russia in October 1861, and the family was exiled to Vologda in Northern Russia. His mother died in exile, and his father two years after his release to Austria's partition of Poland. Four years later, at the age of 17, Józef translated himself into being a sailor. Which readings might one trace between 19th Century Polish emigrants and colonialism? Might they be associated with partition, with exile from a non-existent Poland? Had Conrad's self-consciousness anything to do with his experience of a childhood in enforced exile with his parents, who were driven to early death for reasons partly having to do with czarist oppression? Both Najder and Miłosz advise us to pay attention to Conrad's background. Miłosz writes that:

Apollo Korzeniowski holds an honorable place in Polish letters, and his dual attitude as an ironic realist and an indomitable knight cannot be ignored by any student of the writings of Joseph Conrad.¹⁰

Najder writes that his father left Conrad

... a formidable psychological legacy: an exceptionally intense emotional life; a rigorous and desperate love of his country, and a spontaneous, instinctive belief in democracy; a hatred of invaders, ...¹¹

Of course Conrad was not his father, and lived his adult life under different circumstances, but both his reflections on politics in Russia and in particular *Under Western Eyes* show an abiding concern. The circumstances of the writing of the novel do however suggest that Conrad was possessed by an obsession about ‘senseless tyranny’, as he himself puts it in the author’s note. His life in exile is otherwise typical of many others of his kind throughout the world, wherever they happened to find engagement.¹² He remained devoted to his uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski, who adopted him after his father’s death; it was his uncle’s connections that had saved the family from worse punishment in 1862 than exile to Vologda. Conrad, then a four year old child, nearly died during the hazardous journey under armed escort, and throughout his life his health was never very strong.¹³

Although both Vologda, and Perm, where Korzeniowski had requested to be detained but was refused, are in European Russia, west of the Urals, both the manner of administrative banishment, and the image of the escorted closed prison carriage, *kibitka*, communicate the dread of Siberia. The boundary obelisk shown in Figure 1, dated 1835, between Europe and Asia at the village of Rieshoty in the Urals, can well be associated with the Dantean ‘*Lasciate ongi speranza voi ch’entrate*’ — ‘Abandon all hope ye who enter here’ for those travelling from West to East.¹⁴

Banishment and hard labour in these infernal regions was the fate of countless through centuries, not just rebels and political prisoners from subject nations and Russia herself, not just offenders against social discipline and other deviants, but anyone who caught the eye of the tyrant.¹⁵ Space as prison, geography as punishment, a legacy of dread, a tradition of resistance. Joseph Conrad was well versed in all this; ought not this also speak to us before he is ‘sampled’ into our frames of reference?



Figure 1: Aleksander Sochaczewski: *Pożegnanie Europy* (Farewell to Europe), oils; Muzeum Historycznych Ruchów Niepodległościowych i Społecznych, Warsaw. Photo. Eugeniusz Helbert, frontispiece in Trojanowiczowa, op. cit., p. 1.

3 Adam Mickiewicz and Conrad

Why Conrad? It turns out that, as a boy, he was called Konrad by his family, from among his many names.¹⁶ Conrad is a far from typical Polish first name, but had achieved a very specific resonance from the 1830's by its use in several works by Adam Mickiewicz. While Conrad is himself not very forthcoming concerning influences on his life and writing, he does admit to drawing inspiration from Mickiewicz and Słowacki.¹⁷

Mickiewicz himself caught the eye of the tyrant as a young man, born just 200 years ago in 1798 in or near Nowogródek, between Vilnius and Mińsk.

He and many of his friends were seized, detained for a year, and forbidden from living in western provinces of the Empire. One of the key themes of their 'conspiracy' was meeting to recite the works of Laurence

Sterne. He himself was never banished to Siberia, nor did he suffer forced labour. After five years spent in the company of his Russian contemporaries, one of whom, Decembrist Kondraty Ryleyev, paid the highest price for his convictions,¹⁸ and another, Alexander Bestuzhev, was sentenced to hard labour, he managed to sail from Kronstadt, escaping the imminent cancelation of his passport, and travelled through Germany to Rome.¹⁹

Schama discusses at some length the position of Mickiewicz's epic verse in his *Landscape & Memory*²⁰, especially *Konrad Wallenrod* and Mickiewicz's "masterpiece of woodland nativism: *Pan Tadeusz*". In *Konrad Wallenrod*, set in the borderland between the Teutonic Knights and Lithuania, the hero Konrad is seized as a child from his Lithuanian family, and brought up by the Knights. Rising to the very top of the Order, his suppressed identity is awakened by the singing of a bard. The resolution of this crisis is found by his leading the Knights to certain and total defeat against his own people.²¹ Konrad sacrifices everything in the name of his regained identity, and in combat with the oppressors of that identity. As Miłosz suggests:

An American reading this tale would inevitably think of romantic stories about Indians brought up in a white settlement but who, responding to the call of the wild, return to their tribes to take vengeance upon the white man.²²

The name Konrad is also used in Part III of Mickiewicz's theatrical work *Forefathers' Eve*. In Parts II and IV, written in 1823, the hero is Gustaw, an introspective spiritual figure making frequent reference to traditional beliefs (Part I was never completed, and is replaced by a preface entitled 'Spectres'; the work is read: 'Spectres', Part II, Part IV, Part III, 'Digression'). *Forefathers' Eve* is built up of fragments joined together by

‘a kind of dream logic’, and was first staged in 1901, having been regarded as of such technical difficulty as to preclude performance until then. We return here to Miłosz’s account of the translation between the Gustaw of the 1823 version, and the coming of Konrad in the new sections written in 1832 in Dresden, following the poet’s exile in Russia, and the failure of the 1830–31 uprising against czarist tyranny in Poland:

In the preceding parts we saw Gustaw with his unhappy love; here we find him in a czarist prison, an alter ego of Mickiewicz during his half-year imprisonment in Wilno. There comes a night when the prisoner is transformed from a man preoccupied with his personal problems into a man dedicated to the cause of his nation and of humanity. To mark it, he even changes his name to Konrad . . .²³

As well as adding Part III to the pre-existing text of *Forefathers’ Eve* in Dresden, Mickiewicz also added a description of his experiences in Russia, and reports of experiences of others heard there, entitled ‘Digression’, and concluded by a poem dedicated to his ‘Muscovite friends’, especially Ryleyev and others oppressed for their opposition to tyranny.²⁴ The link onward to Conrad is, according to Miłosz’s, quite clear:

The ‘Digression’ can be called a summation of Polish attitudes to Russia in the nineteenth century, and Joseph Conrad, who of course had read that poem, seems to repeat its contents line for line in some of his writings, especially in *Under Western Eyes*.²⁵

4 Which Orient?

The eye of the tyrant is captured in a most striking way in Igor Newerly's memoirs of the Bolshevik Revolution, when he finds himself in Kyiv in 1923, a young man drifting towards the Menshevik Social Democratic youth movement after active service on the side of the Reds, all to his family's alarm and dismay. Their repatriation to Poland is arranged, all that remains is to sit tight and wait.

In this situation mother's voice - sit still, we're leaving! — possessed the full weight of sense and obvious rationality, all the activities and perspectives of Kyiv lost their meaning, just carry on cautiously taking care and I was cautious, I did take care, in the club I permitted myself sincerity only among a few trusted colleagues, whom I was leaving behind, but the Never-sleeping Eye lifted its lid, scorching me in a way that shattered my reserve in its blast.²⁶

He found that all but one of his friends had been arrested during the night; the two of them stung into action began to duplicate pamphlets protesting at the betrayal of socialism; he was apprehended without delay:

The sledge was already waiting outside the gate, we drove closely embraced. I could not stand, or call out, long live socialism, the discrete grip restraining my shoulder and a warning mutter — no nonsense or I'll hurt you — made me realise that I was in the grasp of the GPU.²⁷

This is an Orient where the choice of Black or White Sea is a whim of the tyrant, the Never-sleeping Eye. It is an Orient expressed in many tonalities by Joseph Brodsky, born in then Leningrad but choosing St Petersburg as his own, sentenced to hard labour north of Vologda, near

Archangelsk, and finally exiled to the West. His essay *Flight from Byzantium*, penned in 1985, by a ‘son of a geographer’²⁸ - his father was both geographer and journalist - expresses in its often violent forms much of what I wished to illuminate here: there is more to imaginary geographies, or nightmare geographies, than has hitherto been admitted in discourse. Maybe this is special pleading, but Brodsky can better speak for himself:

I’m not a historian, or a journalist, or an ethnographer. At best, I’m a traveller, a victim of geography. Not of history, be it noted, but of geography. That is what still links me with the country where it was my fate to be born, with our famed Third Rome.²⁹

To get a good picture of one’s native realm, one needs either to get outside its walls or to spread out a map. But as has been remarked before, who looks at maps nowadays. If civilizations — of whatever sort they are — do indeed spread like vegetation in the opposite direction to the glacier, from south to north, where could Rus, given her geographical position, possibly tuck herself away from Byzantium? Not just Kievan Rus, but Muscovite Rus as well, and then all the rest of it between the Donets and the Urals. And one should, frankly, thank Tamerlane and Genghis Khan for retarding the process somewhat, by somewhat freezing — or, rather, trampling — the flowers of Byzantium. . . . There was nowhere else for Rus to go to get away from Byzantium — any more than for the West to get away from Rome. . . . Rus received, or took, from Byzantium hands everything: not only Christian liturgy but also the Christian-Turkish system of statecraft (gradually more and more Turkish, less vulnerable, more militarily ideological), not to mention a significant part of its vocabulary.³⁰



Figure 2: Tomasz Kizny: Photograph from the cycle: *Kołyma*, shown in the exhibition: *Czas Imperium* (The Time of the Empire), Zachęta Gallery of Contemporary Art, Warsaw, June — July 1997; photograph taken October 1995.

Figure 2 is taken from a cycle expressing the desolation of the former gold mines of *Kołyma*, north of Magadan. The picture is of course in no direct way connected to *Heart of Darkness*, but it is difficult not to

associate the two symbolically:

'I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass, then found a path leading up the hill. It turned aside for boulders, and also for an undersized railway-truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air. . . .'³¹

Ryszard Kapuściński is able to guide us towards the heart of this darkness:

One walks about the streets of Magadan through deep corridors dug out of the snow. They are narrow, and one has to pause to permit others to pass. Sometimes it happens that I meet some older man eye to eye. The same question always comes into my mind: Who were you? Torturer or tortured? Why does this intrigue and fascinate me? Why can I not look at that person normally, without this unbearable and troublesome curiosity? Were I though to steel myself and ask, and were he to be honest, I might well hear this answer: You see before you both the torturer and the tortured.³²

The construction of Magadan, at the northern end of the Sea of Okhotsk, was begun in 1929 in order to supply and support the gold mines in the Kolyma-Magadan Mining District.³³ Kapuściński reports:

We reached Nagayeva Bay and halted by the water, by the abandoned, rusty ships. It is a symbolic place, a place which documents, of the weight of the Camp Gate at Auschwitz or the Railway Ramp at Treblinka. The bay, the gate, the ramp are three different settings of the same scene: the descent to hell. Of the millions of people who were thrown onto the stony shore on which we are now standing, three million never returned.³⁴

5 Conclusion

These are at least a few of the spaces beyond the horizons that have bounded our discourse; there are surely many more. But all hope is not out while life still courses; Brodsky puts it succinctly:

I remember, for instance, that when I was about ten or eleven it occurred to me that Marx's dictum that "existence conditions consciousness" was only true for as long as it takes consciousness to acquire the art of estrangement; thereafter, consciousness is on its own and can both condition and ignore existence.³⁵

Thus there are other stories, other geographies; the infernal Orient of serfdom, forced labour and fear may be reclaimed as the individual people involved make their dreams real — consciousness conditioning existence. However as both Marlow and not least Kurtz, even imagined if not real, also suggest, there is no easy way to handle the freedom of ideology as conscience in shaping existence, a terrible freedom manifest in the symbols Kapuściński alludes to.

I would not like to suggest that post-structuralist and post-colonial discourses in human geography are invalidated by their selectiveness in reading. I do however regret that they have not been enriched by a broader understanding and knowledge of such alternative 'Orient', which in my opinion would contribute to deeper reflection and perhaps greater responsibility in our "everyday practices" in the academy.

Notes

1. Derek Gregory, in his preface to *Geographical Imaginations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, dwells on the importance of his move to

Vancouver in 1989 in throwing his previous “everyday practice” into relief (p. ix).

2. Gregory, D. 1995: Imaginative geographies. *Progress in Human Geography* 19, 447–485; his questioning of Said’s geography is quoted from p. 448.

3. Said, E. 1983 *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 90–110, and Said, E, 1992 *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto & Windus; see especially pp. 20–35, among others.

4. Among many others, Felix Driver often engages Conrad: in ‘Heart of Empire? Landscape, space and performance in imperial London’ written with David Gilbert (*Society and Space*, 1998, 15, pp. 11–28), Conrad enters through the Thames (Cf. also Schama, S. 1996: *Landscape & memory*, London: Fontana, especially pp.4–5); in ‘Visualizing geography — a journey to the heart of the discipline’ (*Progress in Human Geography*, 1995, 19, pp. 123–134), ‘Under western eyes’ is a section heading for a discussion of Gregory’s *Geographical imaginations*. Said himself has not escaped “mapping”: Kasbarian, J. A. 1997: Mapping Edward Said: geography, identity and the politics of location. *Society and Space*, 1997, 14, pp. 529-557.

5. Bauman, Z. 1993: *Postmodern Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell, and Bauman, Z. 1995: *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*. Oxford: Blackwell. Bauman also raises the very pertinent question of the silence of the social sciences about the Holocaust, a sibling silence to that voiced here; cf. Bauman, Z. 1989: *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

6. Hoffman, E. 1991: *Lost in Translation*. London: Minerva.

7. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 25; here I will not attempt to discuss views of Conrad as ‘an employee of the imperial system’.

8. Najder, Z. 1997: *Conrad in perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 200.
9. Ibid, p. 14.
10. Miłosz, Cz. 1983: *The History of Polish Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 266.
11. Najder, Z. 1984: *Joseph Conrad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 29.
12. Davies, N: 1981: *God's Playground, Volume II*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 275–293.
13. Bobrowski, T. 1979 (originally 1900): *Pamiętnik mojego życia II*. Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, pp. 457–459.
14. Trojanowiczowa, Z. 1993: *Sibir Romantyków*. Poznań: W drodze, pp. 7–9. Comparisons between czarist-soviet oppression, especially forced labour in Siberia, and Dante's *Inferno* are commonplace, and also occur, for example, in the work of Alexander Solzhenitsin and Vladimir Vysotsky.
15. Anton Chekov travelled in the Far East from 1890, and presents a detailed picture of what he, a doctor, found there in *The Island: a Journey to Sakhalin*. London: Century, 1987.
16. Najder, Z. 1972: Wstęp, p. IV, in Conrad-Korzeniowski, J. *Wybór Opowiadań*, Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy imienia Ossolińskich.
17. Ibid., p. XVIII; see also Najder, op. cit. 1997, pp. 201-2, and especially p. 212.
18. Ryleyev was the first translator of Mickiewicz's poetry into Russian, and was executed in 1826. There is reason to believe that Mickiewicz used the name 'Konrad' in his 1828 epic poem *Konrad Wallenrod*, and subsequently in the 1832 Part III of *Dziady — Forefathers' Eve*, in homage to his dead friend.
19. Miłosz, op. cit., pp. 208–32.

20. Schama, S., op. cit., pp. 53–60; Schama also touches on the friendship between Mickiewicz and Fennimore Cooper, whom he met in Rome, and who subsequently worked in a solidarity committee for Poland in Paris.

21. Miłosz, op. cit., p. 220–21.

22. Ibid., p. 220; Mickiewicz refers to Cooper in his own note to lines 132–133 of the poem, a reference pre-dating their meeting in Rome in 1829.

23. Ibid., p. 222.

24. Trojanowiczowa suggests either that Astolphe de Custine may have based some parts of his *La Russie en 1839*, first published in 1843, on ‘Digression’, or more probably that both reflect a shared view of tyranny in Russia that had crystallised among the intelligentsia in Russia from the mid 1820’s (op. cit., p. 521). Najder suggests that a possible common source is Pyotr Chaadaev’s 1829 *Philosophical Letters*, for which the author was declared insane by the Tsar (1997, op. cit., p. 120).

25. op. cit., p. 225; as Najder points out, this view was not specifically Polish, but was shared by Russian liberal, democratic, and radical thinkers, such as Lermontov, Herzen, and indeed Chernyshevski, author of a phrase quoted by Lenin himself: “A wretched nation, nation of slaves: from top to bottom — all slaves” (1997, op. cit. pp. 120-1.).

26. Newerly, I. 1989: *Zostało z Uczty Bogów*. Warsaw: Czytelnik, p. 374 (my translation). The reader is free to object that this is also a clip, a subjective sound-bite. I would respond, though, that if you had, as I did, read it in the first edition (1981), having carried it out of a Polish internment camp on the Soviet Border in the snows of late January 1982, the objection might perhaps be moderated. As far as I am aware, Newerly’s book has not been translated.

27. Ibid., p. 376 (my translation).

28. Brodsky, J. 1987: *Less than One*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. The essay is to be found on pp. 393–446, while this quotation is an aside on p. 440, in full: ‘Yet, a son of a geographer, I believe that Urania is older than Clio; among Mnemosyne’s daughters, I think, she is the oldest.’

29. Ibid, pp. 443–4.

30. Ibid, pp. 436–7.

31. Joseph Conrad, 1902: *Heart of Darkness*, p. 63 in the 1995 edition, Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin Books. I was shocked to find precisely the same association being made by Najder, 1997, op. cit., pp. 179–180, after having completed an earlier draft of this paper. Najder quotes the lines immediately following those I had chosen, comparing the chain gang with Soviet and Nazi labour camps, and the grove of death with Kołyma or Auschwitz.

32. Kapuściński, R. 1993: *Imperium*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, pp. 218–9, my translation.

33. ‘Kołyma, called the “extreme of cold and cruelty” is a symbol of the Gulag. Lying at the northeastern tip of the Soviet Union, this massive spread of camps and mines in which gold, tin, tungsten, coal and uranium were extracted was one of the harshest places of deportation. It owed its notoriety to the Arctic climate and the ruthless exploitation of prisoners (the Soviet state needed endless supplies of gold and strategic minerals for industrial development, arms production, and to buy grain from Canada). Adding to the severity of the conditions were the isolation — the boundless expanse of Kołyma is cut off from the outside world for six months a year — and the desolation of the Siberian wastelands.’ Kizny, T. 1997: *Czas Imperium — exhibition catalogue*. Warsaw: KARTA Centre, p. 28.

34. Kapuściński, op. cit., pp. 210–11, my translation.

35. Brodsky, op. cit., p. 3.