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Return to the Roots: Conrad, Poland and East-Central Europe
(review)

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Wiesław Krajka, ed. *Conrad: Eastern and Western Perspectives: Volume XIII. A Return to the Roots: Conrad, Poland and East-Central Europe*. East European Monographs #658. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 312 pp. 0-88033-557-2

This series of publications and this volume are edited by Wiesław Krajka (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin). Both are evidence of his continuing contribution, as individual and editor, to Conrad studies, especially to the dissemination of Polish Conrad scholarship. Of this there has been a steady, gratifying increase, in both the numbers of Polish Conrad academics and accompanying scholarship, following the pioneering work of Zdzisław Najder, Gustave Morf, and the Polish scholars active in the years prior to the removal of the Soviet hegemony, such as Aniela Kowalska, Róża Jabłkowska, and Barbara Koc.

A major focus of Polish Conradian scholarship has naturally been the relationship of Conrad to his native land. Although Poland did not exist as a political entity between Conrad's birth and 1918, so he never possessed Polish nationality, I shall follow the usual convention and refer to the partitioned territory as "Poland" and to Conrad as "Polish." Conrad-and-Poland studies, whether or not by Poles, may conveniently be grouped as follows, noting that the categories are not watertight:

1. Konrad Korzeniowski's experiences in Poland, and Russia, prior to his departure.
2. Representations of, and references to, Poland, direct or encoded, in Conrad.
3. Perceptions of Conrad's works in Poland over time.
4. Conradian influences on Polish life and culture.
5. The development of Conrad studies in Poland.
6. Polish and other Slavonic language intertexts.
7. Conrad's attitudes to and relationship with Poland after his departure.
8. Polish cultural influences on Conrad's character and writing.

The fourteen papers of this collection, nine from Poles, were given initially at the Third International Joseph Conrad Conference in Lublin and Kazimierz Dolny, 29 May–1 June, 2001. They are grouped in three sections: 'Conrad and Poland'; 'Amy Foster'; and 'Conrad and Russian Literature.'

In the last section are four papers in category six above: two on Conrad and Turgenev, and two on Conrad and Dostoevsky. I begin with the latter, as the nature of the relationship between *Crime and Punishment* and *Under Western Eyes* has long been a focus of Conrad-and-Russia criticism, as Harry Sewall indicates in "Crime Becomes Punishment: An Intertextual Dialogue."

Sewall leaves aside the question of Conrad's knowledge of Russian, but usefully reviews and extends the parallels of several kinds proposed by the critics drawn upon. It is a long and interesting discussion, which, I believe, succeeds in its aim of demonstrating that "The thematic, structural and autobiographical links between these novels enrich their interpretative suggestiveness and allow for a more textured and nuanced reading of both texts" (230). But there is a danger in claiming that "several elements in *Crime and Punishment*, both literary and nonliterary, have been replicated either consciously or unconsciously in *Under Western Eyes*," because this implies that Conrad had definitely read the Russian novel, perhaps in French (230). He obviously could not have "replicated" elements of it if he had not read it (230). Given his stated repugnance for Dostoevsky, which is a staple of this comparative exercise, any replication would surely tend to be unconscious. It would be safer simply to pinpoint the textual parallels, leaving aside Conrad's relationship to the Russian text. Sewall concludes that "this study has also ratified the theoretical construct of intertextuality as a tool to enable excursions into texts across linguistic, national and ideological boundaries" (230). This "tool" had actually been "ratified" well before 2001, not least by the Kristevan work suggested (*Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*) as the urtext for this kind of criticism, but the textual relationships which Sewall adduces are the real point of the paper, and they are feasible and interesting.

We remain in intertextualand with Monika Majewska's "Conrad and Dostoevsky and Winnie and Nastasya Filippovna." Discussion of *The Secret Agent* and *The Idiot*, in terms of Stevie and Prince Myshkin, has been done, but the main focus of this paper is an inter-relating of Winnie Verloc and Nastasya Filippovna, and this may be original. Whether or not you find the comparison convincing is another matter. While respecting the attempt I regret that I do not find it convincing.

Katarzyna Sokołowska's "Images of Nature in Conrad and Turgenev" is dense and ambitious in its presentation of examples from five Turgenev works in English translation, and from collections in Russian, in relation to ten Conrad works. The discussion draws on an overview

of changing views of nature during the nineteenth century, with major reference to Arthur Schopenhauer. As with Sewall's paper, I think the sheer weight of theoretical material tends to obscure the comparisons between the texts and blur the points being made. This is interesting and valuable material which could do with some pruning and streamlining to have the effect it deserves to achieve, as the textual relationships are rewarding for those who, like me, love both writers.

Brygida Pudełko's "*The Mirror of the Sea* and Turgenev's *Sportsman's Notebook*" forms an interesting companion piece to Sokołowska's, since it also deals with the two writers' representations and concepts of nature. It gains by limiting itself to two texts only and deploying the background material clearly. It succeeds in establishing the basis of comparison, that both works are a series of sketches of a particular kind, and in citing a series of analogies between them, in terms of 'their figurative language [...] their treatment of nature's indifference to man [...] their depiction of the sympathetic relations of figures to landscape' (297). Knowing Conrad's admiration for Turgenev, this paper's overall effect is highly satisfying, as it not only succeeds in inter-relating the two texts but in drawing the two writers more closely together.

The three "Amy Foster" papers tend, naturally, to overlap. But Anna Brzozowska-Krajka has the advantage of drawing on another Korzeniowski, and a Józef at that, whose works I do not know. My ignorance is not too much of a hindrance, however, as the work in question, *Karpaccy górale* (*Carpathian Mountaineers*), is well enough discussed for me to follow the textual comparison, which "consists primarily in the application of the literary programme of Polish domestic romanticism" (168). In other words, this interesting paper operates more within my category 8 than within my category 6.

Mary Harris's "'Amy Foster': A Case of 'Colonisation' within Europe" is since 2001 apposite to the English county I live in, because Lincolnshire is, lately, receiving Yanko Gooralls in droves. Previous waves of Polish immigrants largely tended to be educated, urban professionals and artisans, with some, or good, English, and to have settled or worked temporarily in cities, including Lincoln, where it is quite common nowadays to hear Polish spoken in the streets and shops. But since Poland's joining the European Union, about 25,000 unemployed agricultural workers from rural eastern Poland have arrived in the county as migrant workers. Like Yanko, these are peasants, with limited education and little or no English. They are regarded with suspicion by the natives, often mistaken for asylum seekers when their existence is acknowledged at all. Half of them are ruthlessly exploited by

gangmasters. A reverse colonization is in process: the colonizers do not travel to the colony and there exploit the natives; the natives are lured here and "colonized" here.

Harris's paper is a sound rehearsal of the events and psychological traits involved. She points out that while the Kent villagers' "unfriendliness towards Goorall is reciprocated by Goorall's assumption that they will be welcoming to him [. . .] because both are peasants, a very basic element of their lives is comparable" (177). This is not now the case here. It is precisely because there are no longer any Lincolnshire "peasants" that the Yankos are required. There is, indeed, a much greater similarity between the topographical conditions in the flat fenland of south Lincolnshire, where the Poles work, and those of eastern Poland than there is between Kent and the Carpathians. Perhaps fortunately there are very few Amy Fosters.

Yannick le Boulicaut also rehearses Yanko's differences from the Kentish villagers, but his examination delves much much deeper, not only to make points not made by the other two "Amy Foster" papers but to reach beneath the events and the psychology to the underlying humanistic-religious philosophy. He emphasizes language and points out that Yanko is actually en route to America, and that he "eventually becomes Amy's prey, she picks him up as she does with mice and toads, and she swallows him up, as it were, acting a sort of cannibal" (197). Le Boulicaut reminds us Conrad was writing "Falk" at the same time with its running theme of cannibalism.

The other interesting point made is that

The community of Colebrook [. . .] is not a community of uneducated barbarians; some educated members know French and Spanish, Italian and German since they have read Dante, Goethe and Cervantes, but their approach is not humanistic, it remains literary. It does not help them to cope with reality. Their knowledge does not help them see the advent of the human in man, in any man. . . . There is indeed a lighthouse in Colebrook but that light is a limited one, it does not throw the light of knowledge and reason. (197-8)

Le Boulicaut's treatment is a timely reminder that it is a vital responsibility of the humanities to humanize, and even to pass beyond the simply humanistic:

Yanko's life, fate and significance make—in some sense—a postfiguration of Christ. Appearing from nowhere—he is a man without a past for

the people of Colebrook—Yanko is a good shepherd [. . .] He even performs a miracle; his sight is so good he manages to rescue a little girl from drowning. (200)

The tracing of Yanko's Christlike characteristics and fate is compelling, down to the significance of Amy Foster's two names. This paper has a passion and insight which make it not only the best of the three "Amy Foster" pieces but probably the most powerful and stimulating contribution to the collection. It is above and beyond my eight categories, not being limited just to Polish Conrad studies but being a richly satisfying textual explication.

Amar Acheraïou's "The Shadow of Poland" operates largely within my category 2 and reflects that

The intricate relationship between Poland and England makes it indeed hard for Conrad to choose one or the other. In having, consciously or unconsciously, decided to preserve some of his roots at the thick of exile and remain loyal to his adopted country in the meantime, he adopts an oblique mode of expression to satisfy both sides. (57)

The paper interestingly explores the dualities and the hybridity of Conrad's style. It quotes Rudyard Kipling's remark that when reading Conrad he felt he was reading a translation. This is, in fact, one of the stylistic qualities which appeals to me and the discussion leading up to this point elucidates some of the characteristics not just of the style but of the figures and subtext which contribute to this sense of reading a translation. The piece holds also to the Conrad-Poland relationship in its widest sense, and I recommend it because it adopts an unusual and useful perspective.

The four Polish-authored papers in the "Conrad and Poland" section are informative and contribute to Conrad studies within my categories 2, 7, 8, and especially to 1. Not knowing anything about Antoni Golubiew, little about Witkacy and not enough about Jan Kott, I must pass them over and simply recommend these pieces, especially to Polish scholars and students who would profit considerably from studying them.

I must also recommend the editor's own thorough presentation of Conrad's family and cultural origins and their effects on him. It musters material new to me, and, I suspect, to other non-Polish Conradians, and some Polish ones. Here is a representative summary of part of the paper:

It is [. . .] crucial for an understanding of Joseph Conrad's personality and works to establish the true relationship between the influences of the romantic father and the pragmatic-positivistic maternal uncle—i.e. whether they coexisted or whether the second authority replaced, suppressed or eliminated the former one. (41)

This was a matter which tantalized me when young and first reading Jocelyn Baines. I would now like someone to pursue the point in relation to Stein and his "destructive element" and the elder Heyst and his "look on, make no sound." The discussion of Konradek's early life is especially interesting. Without attempting further summary or comment I simply commend the paper to all Conradians, of whatever stage and nationality, because they must all be interested in the formative influences on the great writer.

My impression is that there have been fewer treatments within my category 7 than in any of the other categories. One result of this, or of my ignorance, is that Don Rude's paper reviewing and discussing "Anthony Czarnecki's 'An Evening with Conrad': An Interview on Politics and Poland Recovered" was, for me, the other major piece of the collection, alongside Le Boulicaut.

Don Rude has the scholarly talent for finding documents that librarians did not even know they had, and for making use of items whose existence is known but which have not been previously discussed. The latter is the case for the 1919 Czarnecki interview. The main focus is Conrad's reasons for declining to join in 1915 the International Committee for the Relief of Poland and the misunderstandings which resulted from his refusal. As Rude puts it: "Czarnecki's account of his evening with Conrad is important [. . .] because it helps to explain a controversial moment in the author's life" (72).

Quoting Najder, the explanation is, as Conrad told Ignaz Jan Paderewski, that he could not join a committee which included the Ambassador of Czarist Russia. The reactions of other Polish participants on the Committee, such as Henryk Sienkiewicz, were hostile and helped to create the impression that Conrad did not support the cause of Polish freedom. But he was in a tricky position as a naturalized Britisher. As Rude elaborates the situation, continuing to paraphrase Najder:

Conrad's reticence, according to Joseph Retinger, may have been heightened by his awareness that Great Britain's foreign policy relegated the Polish question and its solution to Russia, treating the matter as the

internal affair of the Czarist government, a policy that may reflect the belief that the existence or non-existence of Poland had no consequences for British trade or politics. (72)

Four years after his refusal to join the Committee, Conrad told Czarnecki:

As a Britisher I could not give the Polish leaders the reason for not serving on the committee, for to have done so might have given offense to those who were Great Britain's allies. My friends understood and needed no explanation. The others persisted in misunderstanding and misrepresenting my views, though they never enquired about them. It was that experience that caused some of the Polish leaders to judge me as one who forgot the land of his fathers. (qtd. in Rude 77)

Of course Conrad was far from abandoning the Polish cause, for which his parents, and he himself, had suffered so much, as he reminded Czarnecki:

My father fought to overthrow the yoke of foreign oppression in Poland and by order of the czar was exiled when I was a little boy. To me the partition of Poland was a crime and the brutal persecution by the foreign rulers of the people of Poland was always abhorred by me. The Russian czar, the German kaiser, and the Austrian emperor were to me always the symbols of tyranny, as were their representatives and agents. (qtd. in Rude 76)

It should be borne in mind that the interview of many hours, going long past midnight, was, it is implied, conducted in Polish, so that what we have is Czarnecki's translation, presumably made from notes made, in either language or both languages, at the time. This may be important in that although Czarnecki is surely representing Conrad as accurately as possible, some of the emotional nuances may have been lost.

The interview and the paper go on to deal with Conrad's conclusions about the civil disorder in Lemberg, which was represented in some quarters to the dishonor of the new Polish authorities as a pogrom. As Rude concludes,

It is not farfetched to suppose that Czarnecki's visit, having made Conrad aware of the continuing controversy generated by his refusal to participate in the relief committee, prompted the author to publish "A

Note on the Polish Problem" in *Notes on Life and Letters* and "Poland: The Crime of Partition" in *The Fortnightly Review* and "The Crime of Partition" in *Notes on Life and Letters* in the months that followed. (82)

Whether or not the interview stimulated those pieces it serves now as an important addendum to them, clarifying that particular moment in Conrad's life, when he was both a naturalized Britisher and an exiled Pole.

It is also an uncomfortable reminder for present-day Britishers and Poles of the later twentieth-century history of their two countries. Great Britain relegated the Polish question to Czarist Russia during World War I, but, in facing up to the Nazi menace, declared war in 1939, ostensibly to honor her treaty. But she abandoned Poland once more to the Russian, this time Soviet, hegemony at Yalta, and then accepted a once-again free Poland into the economic and political union within which thousands of her citizens migrate to Britain to undertake the hard labor the British themselves will not pay their own citizens enough to undertake.

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