

CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ ON CONRAD'S POLISH STEREOTYPES¹

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Abstract: In an essay entitled *Conrad's Stereotypes* – published in 1957 – Miłosz sees Conrad as “the typical old Polish nobleman who remained faithful to the way in which he had lived and thought as a young man.” Miłosz speaks of his own affinity with Conrad (and Mickiewicz), explaining that it derives from a set of shared emotional and historical experiences that were deeply ingrained in the minds of the inhabitants of the ‘Eastern Borderlands’ of the old Polish-Lithuanian-Ruthenian Commonwealth. This ‘Eastern Borderlands’ cultural identity may well have enabled Conrad to give an authentic portrayal of the Russian characters in *Under Western Eyes*. The counterpart to Mickiewicz’s and Conrad’s condemnation of autocracy and the fairness of their attitude towards Russians was Miłosz’s willingness to maintain friendly relations with contemporary Russian ‘dissidents’ who had stood up against the oppressive political system of the Soviet Union. Surprisingly, however, he does not draw any parallels between the Polish stereotype of Russia and the portrayal of Russia which is to be found in Russian political literature. Miłosz concludes by observing that in *Under Western Eyes* it was only through the purely artistic merits of his writing that Conrad could have hoped to win over his English-speaking readers, while at the same time remaining “faithful to a tradition that would have seemed exotic to anyone living in another country” – and for this achievement he deserves praise.

Keywords: Czesław Miłosz, Joseph Conrad, Poland, Lithuania, Ruthenia, Ukraine, Russia, Apollo Korzeniowski, Adam Mickiewicz, Astolphe de Custine, *Poland and Muscovy*, *Forefathers' Eve*, *Under Western Eyes*, *The Secret Agent*, *Heart of Darkness*, *A Treatise on Poetry*, *A Treatise on Morality*.

A volume of articles published by Polish émigrés in 1957 in order to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of Joseph Conrad’s birth contained a pioneering essay by Czesław Miłosz entitled *Stereotyp u Conrada (Conrad's Stereotypes)*.² Although both Conrad and Miłosz had been accused of cosmopolitanism by officials of the Polish communist régime, this article portrayed Conrad as a writer who – like him –

¹ This article is a modified version of the sixth chapter of my book *Miłosz wobec Conrada 1948-1959*. Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2014, pp. 165-172.

² Cz. Miłosz. “Stereotyp u Conrada” [In:] *Conrad żywy*. Ed. W. Tarnawski. London: B. Świdorski, 1957, pp. 92-99.

remained true to Polish tradition that went back to Mickiewicz,³ who had preserved the cultural legacy of the old Polish Commonwealth of Poland, Lithuania and Ruthenia (Ruthenia – in Polish *Ruś* – being the old word for the Ukraine). This tradition had lasted longest in the so-called “Taken Lands” (*ziemie zabrane*), meaning those parts of Lithuania and Ruthenia which had been ‘confiscated’ by the tsar and officially incorporated into Russia itself.

Miłosz’s essay begins and ends with an eloquent parallel which can be seen as an allusion to his own *Treatise on Poetry*⁴ and which bears witness to a profound community of mind and heart that existed between Conrad, who hailed from the south-eastern borderlands of the old Polish Commonwealth and his “close cousin from the Wilia and Niemen river basins” in Lithuania – with whom Miłosz happened to be very well acquainted. Given that the ‘spirits’ of Apollo Nałęcz Korzeniowski and Adam Mickiewicz would seem to have presided over this community, the reader of the essay is drawn almost unawares into the realm of a type of community of thought, feelings and values which Aristotle (in his treatise on rhetoric) calls *dianoia* and associates with *topoi* or ‘common places’.

Miłosz for his part associates this kind of community – which facilitates mutual understanding – with the concept of stereotypes.⁵ His essay discusses the subject of *dianoia* – seen as a historically and culturally determined community of thought, feelings, values, ideas and all the linguistic means (including rhythm and intonation) that are used to express them. He sets out to discover why “the political views embedded in Conrad’s prose” seem to be so familiar and close to him and why, whenever he reads Conrad, he is certain that the author is “a well known acquaintance”. Miłosz even goes as far as to claim that he has succeeded in determining Conrad’s cultural sensibility by recalling his own memory of “the typical old Polish nobleman who remained faithful to the way in which he had lived and thought as a young man”⁶ and whom he saw in his mind’s eye as Conrad’s cultural “double” in the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, where – as in the Ukraine – the cultural tradition of the old Polish Commonwealth lived on into the twentieth century:

I belong to the generation who still knew Conrad’s contemporaries, though in this regard age is not of primary significance. Cultural transformations continually displace one form of civilization, replacing it with another. It does not often happen that a particular form of civilization manages to remain preserved in a pristine state outside of time. [...] This happened in the region where I spent my school days, i.e. in Wilno and in Lithuania, understood both as lands belonging to the former Grand Duchy and as one of the Baltic States. It was here that the typical

³ *Idem. Ziemia Ulro*. Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1977.

⁴ *Idem. Traktat poetycki* (1957) [In:] *Idem. Utwory poetyckie, Poems*. Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1976.

⁵ In Miłosz’s essay the concept of the stereotype oscillates between that of the modern notion of topos and that of the archetype. From the perspective of recent research this stereotype could also be seen as a symptom of the defensive nationalism or patriotism which is characteristic of subjugated nations. Cf. R. Kopkowski. “Joseph Conrad’s essays and letters in the light of postcolonial studies” [In:] *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)*, 2011 vol. VI, p. 36.

⁶ Cz. Miłosz. “Stereotyp u Conrada” [In:] *Conrad żywy, ed. cit.*, pp. 92-99. In the present article the translations are by R.E. Pyplacz.

old Polish nobleman, who remained faithful to the way in which he had lived and thought as a young man, survived longer than anywhere else. [...] Purely on the basis of external appearances, however, I would not have associated him with the person of Conrad. [...] What happened was that certain words and intonations of voice which I had remembered suddenly gave me the key to at least one of the features of Conrad's prose, namely the political views that were embedded in it. [...] From then on I read Conrad in the presence of a witness and compared the views which he held on the subject of various European nations with the voice which I had reconstructed from my memories.⁷

Miłosz is quick to point out that this voice of “an old Polish nobleman, who remained faithful to the way in which he had lived and thought as a young man” was also his own voice, which bore the stamp of “Polish political sensibility”:

To be sure, this voice belonged not only to the witness, but also to me, for the continuity of patterns of sensibility is something that is exceptionally strong. At the same time, I was easily able to tell when the old Polish nobleman simply spoke using the words of Mickiewicz. I noticed that in his political (or rather civilizational) pronouncements, Conrad was in complete and utter agreement with what his double was muttering over a glass of tea. In this way, I made a discovery which amazed me: Conrad represents the *stereotype* of Polish political sensibility. That is why some passages in his works could be provided with whole columns of quotations from Polish nineteenth-century literature. It would then become apparent that whenever he touches on the subject of politics [...] he writes variations on a ready-made theme that has already been developed.⁸

Indeed, several other essays on Conradian subjects written by Miłosz could be called variations on the age-old Polish political predicament which he shared with Mickiewicz and Conrad. In this context, *Stereotyp u Conrada (Conrad's Stereotypes – 1957)* and *Rosja (Russia – 1959)* can be seen as Miłosz's considered responses and commentaries – imbued, perhaps, with the tentative hopes engendered by the political “thaw” that followed the events of 1956 – to Conrad's essays *Autocracy and War* and *a Note on the Polish Problem*, his novels *Under Western Eyes*, *The Secret Agent* and *Heart of Darkness* – and also his private letters. Miłosz associates all these texts with the Russian theme in Conrad's writing, which is made all the more impassioned by his memory of the pattern of political sensibility represented by the Polish nobleman living in the eastern borderlands, who typically had a “physical aversion” to tsarist Russia. As Miłosz reminds us, this stereotype had its unending source in the centuries-old rivalry between the old Polish Commonwealth – which was a parliamentary democracy – and Russia, which Poles saw as a civilization of barbarians and slaves ruled by a despot:

Its source is to be found in that feeling of dread which eastern autocracy inspired in Polish parliamentarians, orators and compulsive litigants – from the very first time they came into close contact with it during the course of continual wars. For several centuries, no one questioned the superiority of the Poles over the Russians, who themselves acknowledged it in their snobbish eagerness to learn Polish and to call their first works of poetry ‘Polish poems’. In murdering his

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

⁸ *Ibid.*

son for accusing him of being afraid of the Poles, Ivan the Terrible in a sense bore witness to the fact that this was also a superiority of armed might.⁹

Originally, therefore, the Russian attitude towards Poland was dominated by fear and admiration, while that of Poles towards Russia was dominated by repugnance, dread and a feeling of cultural superiority. Miłosz observes that when the old Polish Commonwealth lost out to Russia in “some of the highest stakes ever played for in history, relations between Poles and Russians became entangled by two complexes – inferiority and superiority.”¹⁰ He adds that the Russians “always vaunted their power and sneered at those who were weak and *perverse* – as is shown by Pushkin’s anti-Polish poems.”¹¹ On the Polish side, however, Miłosz does not see any hatred. Likewise, in his *Note on the Polish Problem*, Conrad stresses the fact that the Poles’ perception of Russian civilization as being something totally alien to them is not accompanied by hatred. Looking more closely at the pattern of political sensibility which is to be found in Conrad’s works, Miłosz observes:

Strangely enough, Conrad’s double did not bear the Russians any hatred. Without exaggeration, one could say that he was somehow drawn to them and even liked them. He was able to coexist with them, though only by observing them from a distance, which in Dostoevsky’s eyes would have merited the appellation “two-faced Polack”. He hated Russia only as a type of civilization and regarded the people who had been brought up in it – be they good or bad – as bearers of a stigma that was independent of their will. This ambivalence, which was marked by a fair amount of sympathy, allowed me to understand Conrad’s attitude. The idealistic and noble terrorist Haldin in the novel *Under Western Eyes* and his equally idealistic and noble sister both bear this stigma, but not as human individuals. It is their Russianness that acts together with the force of necessity, hurling them into a milieu where enthusiasm, dedication and crime are one and the same thing – entwining their fates with that of the agent provocateur Razumov, who is also no monster, but rather a person who is trying to solve the Russian dilemma in a way which – though different – also results in a crime, as the Russian dilemma is quite simply insoluble.¹²

Miłosz also detects the presence of this ambiguous stereotype of Polish political sensibility in *The Secret Agent*. However, his commentary goes beyond the narrow framework of the stereotype and – by showing how patterns of political sensibility are rooted in differing models of culture and civilization – reveals Conrad’s broader view of fundamental similarities and differences between various human communities which continually strive – each in their own way – to determine the nature of relations within the community and the course of history itself. Thus *The Secret Agent* shows that:

Conrad and the nobleman from the eastern borderlands were equally wary of both sides of the divide – i.e. Russian supporters of tsarist autocracy and the Russian revolutionaries – as in their view the conflicting rallying cries referred to a common model of civilization which – to make matters worse – escaped the awareness of those concerned. In *The Secret Agent*, the tsarist

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

diplomat Mr Vladimir – who supports a campaign of political subversion in London – symbolizes a genuine ignorance of all moral compunctions and principles of decency. He might well serve as an illustration to *Poland and Muscovy* – a political pamphlet written by Conrad's father Apollo Korzeniowski – in which we read that the autocratic Russian State “lounges around the seats of European governments like a household thief.”

Further comments made by Miłosz also throw light on the analogy – which is to be found in his *Treatise on Morality* as well as in his *Treatise on Poetry* – between Russian and Soviet imperialism on the one hand and *Heart of Darkness* on the other:

In a way, Mr Vladimir is a relative of Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness*: Russia is the same as the amorphous chaos of the Congo which ensnares the ivory trader. Not that the revolutionaries are spared by Conrad. Even the attempt on the life of a government official which is carried out by the terrorist Haldin – a man who “wouldn't hurt a fly” – sets off a chain of provocations and crimes, in accordance with the inexorable law of series.¹³

Miłosz is of the opinion that this motif of distrust towards “both Russian camps” which runs through Conrad's works had an effect on Polish history in the twentieth century:

Thanks to this, it was practically impossible for the Polish and Russian enemies of tsardom to come to an understanding, hence the strength of the Polish Socialist Party and the weakness of the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and of Lithuania – hence the alienation of people like Feliks Dzierżyński and the subsequent failure of the Polish Communist Party and its liquidation by Stalin in 1937.

With his characteristic irony, Miłosz concludes:

As we can see, the old Polish nobleman – the bearer of tradition – and Conrad – who gave expression to it – are a factor that cannot be overlooked by historians.¹⁴

Conrad's attachment to the British Empire and his “sharp sense of the confines of Western European civilization” are viewed by Miłosz as “a transposition of his faith in the old Polish Commonwealth as a bulwark of Christendom.” Invoking once again the political views of Apollo Korzeniowski, Miłosz adds that “In the minds of Poles, especially those of Lithuania and the Ukraine, Islam and Byzantine Russia were that very same foe and anti-civilizational element which continually strove to destroy Europe.”¹⁵

Citing de Custine's *Letters from Russia* and the writings of Karl Marx, Miłosz reminds us that Poles were not alone in their assessment of the threat posed by Russia – a threat that was comparable with that of Islam and Genghis Khan, whose mission to conquer the world was – in the opinion of Marx – taken up by Peter the Great.¹⁶ Miłosz observes that “For the Polish reader, these words constitute a stereotype because that is exactly how Russia is described by the whole of nineteenth-century

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 96. Cf. K. Marx. *La Russie et l'Europe*. Ed. B.P. Hepner. Paris: Gallimard, 1954.

Polish literature.” Surprisingly, however, he does not draw any parallels between the Polish stereotype of Russia and the portrayal of Russia which is to be found in Russian political literature of the period.¹⁷

Miłosz goes on to ask: “But where is Europe? Where has its elusive spirit chosen to reside?” The answer is that “Nineteenth-century Poles saw the old Polish Commonwealth as belonging to Europe, but a Europe which did not necessarily include Prussia, from which they were separated by the rift with protestantism and their resistance to the *Drang nach Osten*.” He reminds us that in Polish tradition and Polish literature the Prussian “is generally a wooden doll which moves and talks as it has been wound up and whose discipline and pedantry make it almost non-human.” Hence Mickiewicz’s dislike of Hegel and the “comic” character of Buchman in *Pan Tadeusz*. Similar feelings about Poland’s neighbours are expressed in a letter written by Conrad to Sir Hugh Clifford in 1919 and in which – Miłosz observes – Conrad “uses epithets that would not be amiss in the mouth of a Polish nobleman from the eastern borderlands. He even goes as far as to describe Poland’s neighbours as being a Russian mangy dog and German learned pig.”¹⁸ In all fairness, it should be noted that this was written not only in a private letter, but also at a time when Poland was once again engaged in a desperate confrontation with her predatory neighbours in an effort to establish her new borders.¹⁹ The recurring nature of this situation meant that in the Polish national consciousness “The centre of Europe [was] moved further to the west.” Miłosz stresses that “Conrad’s attitude towards the West, in which Poles had placed their hopes ever since the partitions, was far from simple.” To prove his point, he quotes a sarcastic remark which Conrad made in the same letter to Sir Hugh Clifford: “It is a great relief to my feelings to think that no single life has been lost on any of the fronts for the sake of Poland. The load of obligation would have been too great [...]”²⁰ In these words Miłosz hears “the voice of a man living at the frontier of civilization – a voice in which one can detect cordiality and bitterness, envious admiration for those who are unwilling to die for fanciful causes and the sorrow of disappointment.”²¹

Once again, therefore, Miłosz indirectly invokes Apollo Korzeniowski’s bitter comment – echoed by many a Polish nobleman in the eastern borderlands – that “they do not understand us.” He also draws his reader’s attention to the fact that this “hint

¹⁷ This theme is taken up (in relation to Chernyshevsky) in Miłosz’s essays on Dostoevsky. See: Cz. Miłosz. *Rosja. Widzenia Transoceaniczne*. Warszawa: Fundacja „Zeszytów Literackich”, 2010-2011, vol. I, part II, p. 104.

¹⁸ *Idem. Stereotyp u Conrada*, ed. cit., p. 96. Cf. Joseph Conrad to Sir Hugh Clifford, 25th January 1919 [In:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Ed. L. Davies, F.R. Karl and O. Knowles. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, vol. 6, 2002, pp. 349-350.

¹⁹ We must remember, however, that a positive Conradian character who particularly stands out is the German Stein – a Romantic dreamer who took part in the Spring of Nations and who defends Lord Jim. Other positive characters are the two Russian women Natalia Haldin and Zofia in *Under Western Eyes* and the titular hero (a Russian) of “The Warrior’s Soul”.

²⁰ Joseph Conrad to Sir Hugh Clifford, 25th January 1919 [In:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. cit., vol. 6, p. 350.

²¹ Cz. Miłosz. “Stereotyp u Conrada” [In:] *Conrad żywy*, ed. cit., p. 97.

of disdain for well-mannered and indifferent Western Europeans is the only thing that Poles and Russians have in common: the fraternity of enemies as brothers in adversity.” Miłosz repeats this observation in 1980:

Poland and Russia have gone their separate ways, but there is also some common ground: we both stand face to face with Western Europe; we are close to each other, whereas Western Europe is something different. This is paradoxical, of course, because – looking at it from your point of view – Poland can be said to be a Western country, but – looking at it from the point of view of the West – Poland and Russia are Eastern Europe.²²

He gives typical examples of this attitude among Russians in modern times and – on the Polish side – examples taken from Conrad's novel *Under Western Eyes*, where – in his opinion:

Conrad's solidarity is divided. Although the world of Russian conspirators is murky and is marked by deceit and self-delusion, it is intense and it was perhaps no accident that Conrad situated it in Geneva – a city which he disliked on account of its atmosphere of satiated boredom. The English narrator is an exemplary European who does not understand eastern iniquities and whom the author envies for not needing to understand them.²³

Having examined Conrad's work for the presence of typically Polish literary themes and stereotypes relating to Polish political sensibility, Miłosz comes to the conclusion that:

Conrad's political sensibility had already been fully formed by the time he left Poland and was left unchanged by his new experiences in other spheres. This meant that if – owing to a pace of historical progress that was slower than elsewhere – the Wilno region preserved nineteenth- and at times even eighteenth-century tradition, Conrad carried with him a talisman that remained intact because of his separation from the land of his fathers.²⁴

Keeping in mind the “frightening” examples to be found “particularly in Polish prose and also in post-Romantic literature”, Miłosz concludes his essay by asking what role is played by political stereotypes in literature: “Stereotypes share the advantages and disadvantages of folk wisdom [...]: an accurate observation which serves as a starting point is presented as a generalization, with a tendency to idealize one's own community or tribe.” The disadvantage of stereotypes is that they “free us from the obligation to think because they immediately and quite unjustifiably create an emotional bond between the reader and the author, who can dictate his terms, knowing in advance what to expect.” The advantage of stereotypes is that they strengthen social cohesion, which is why “great works of literature draw on the strength of such useful generalizations.” Here Miłosz cites the examples of *The Iliad*, *The Song of Roland*, *Pan Tadeusz* and *Dziady (Forefathers' Eve)*, “whose emotional impact has proved to be more enduring than economic and legal structures, which suffer the vicissitudes of fate.”

²² *Idem. Rosja. Widzenia Transoceaniczne, ed. cit.*, vol II, p. 403: “Zamiast zakończenia”.

²³ *Idem. “Stereotyp u Conrada” [In:] Conrad żywy, ed. cit.*, p. 97.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Although Miłosz freely admits that we do not really know “what filters the author should construct in order to give a boost to political stereotypes”, he is of the opinion that “Polish schoolchildren ought to read the descriptions of Russa which are to be found in Mickiewicz’s poetry together with some of Conrad’s texts; one of the exercises could be to search for the particular wordings used by each writer to express the very same content.”²⁵

He ends by suggesting that – thanks to the discovery of this deeper community of thought and feeling – Conrad finds favour with their “close cousin from the Wilia and Niemen river basins” in Lithuania – who, together with his descendants, remains faithful to the tradition of his forefathers. However, Miłosz is aware of the fact that Conrad was writing for English-speaking readers who were on the whole favourably disposed towards Russia. His overall verdict is that Conrad deserves praise for having remained faithful to the tradition of his forefathers while he was in the process of establishing a rapport with his English readers and also for having avoided the pitfalls of “intellectual automatism” which beset those of his contemporaries who wrote novels in Polish:

We may suppose that it was because he had emigrated that Conrad – who had been given the Christian name Konrad by his poet father in memory of the author of *Dziady* (*Forefathers’ Eve*) and *Konrad Wallenrod* – managed to avoid the errors of intellectual automatism to which Polish novelists of the time succumbed. This filter was imposed on him by the sheer impossibility of creating an automatic emotional bond with his foreign reader, whom he could only win over by means of his literary art. At the same time – and to no lesser a degree than his cousin from the Wilia and Niemen river basins in Lithuania – he remained faithful to a tradition that would have seemed exotic to anyone living in another country.²⁶

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²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

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