

## Zdzisław Najder

Our dear friend has left us.... Without giving us time to arrange our thoughts or prepare our phrases.

It is most appropriate to open this recollection with this paraphrase of Virginia Woolf's farewell to Conrad since, as Edward Said observed, "Like Conrad, Mr. Najder is a Pole. He is also a distinguished critic, essayist and editor. [...]. Exile, the strong affinity with French and British culture, the sense of Poland as a place lost to Russian power, the remorseless effort to keep working and writing in environments less than perfect - these things bind Mr. Najder to Conrad [...]"<sup>1</sup>

Zdzisław Najder (31 October 1930 – 15 February 2021) was born in Warsaw and studied at Warsaw University, obtaining doctoral degrees in philosophy and Polish literature. He continued his studies at St Anthony's College, Oxford. Then he returned to Poland to teach at Warsaw University as a professor of literature. Najder was a visiting scholar at Oxford University when martial law was declared in Poland in 1981, and he decided not to return to his mother country. He took a position in Germany with Radio Free Europe becoming chief of its Polish-language section. As a result of this decision, he was condemned to death in absentia by the Polish government.<sup>2</sup>

During that time of hectic political activities, he published three groundbreaking studies on Joseph Conrad, which gave Western scholars access to the Polish heritage of the writer: *Conrad's Polish Background* (1964), *Conrad under Familial Eyes* (1983), and *Joseph Conrad. A Chronicle* (1983). They comprised, among other things, translations of the Polish letters of Tadeusz Bobrowski, Apollo and Ewa Korzeniowscy, excerpts from Bobrowski's *Memoirs*, the documents about Conrad's baptism and the financial cost of his upbringing and education, and early recollections of Konrad by his Polish friends. One letter, in particular, was crucial for Conrad scholars: it was Borowski's letter to Stefan Buszczyński clarifying the circumstances of Conrad's 'attempted suicide'. It laid the ghost of his duel to rest forever and disclosed Bobrowski's lie and the reasons for spreading it. The culmination of this set of publications was Najder's biography of Conrad (substantially revised in 2007), which is

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Said, "The Remaking of a Writer", *The New York Times* (on the web) 11 December 1983, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/10/03/specials/said-conrad.html> (accessed 15 February 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Jan Pawelec, Paweł Szeliga, *Nadgonić czas... Wywiad rzeka ze Zdzisławem Najderem* [Catch up the time... An Interview with Z. Najder], Warszawa, Świat Książki, 2014, p. 67-94.

regarded as the cornerstone of Conrad scholarship. The book became, according to Richard Hand, “instantly a key work in Conrad studies”, while Najder himself earned international renown as a pre-eminent Conrad scholar.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, Najder was invited as a visiting scholar or professor to the Universities of Columbia, Yale, Northern, Illinois and California. He also taught Polish Literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

Najder continued research not only into Conrad’s biography but also into his works. He explained certain nuances in Conrad’s fiction and clarified their interpretation. For one thing, he argued that we should interpret the conduct of Lord Jim (which puzzled many critics as well as Marlow himself) with reference to the “chivalric ethos [...] which survived as an element of social and moral reality” in Poland longer than in most other Western European countries.<sup>4</sup> Another pivotal essay was on Conrad’s concepts of man and society and his opposition to Rousseau’s ideas. It was a nuanced analytical study demonstrating not only the novelist’s opposition to but also an obsession with the French philosopher. Najder incisively conjoined Conrad, Rousseau and modern political ideas:

Conrad saw radical social change, the modern nation-state and democracy itself in characteristically Rousseauian terms. Although he chose to become a British subject, he understood democracy neither in the way in which most English theorists saw it – as a system gradually introduced from above, with the electorate broadened out step by step – nor in the Jeffersonian manner – as a system of government by equal and fully enfranchised individuals. Rather democracy meant for him (like for a typical French conservative), a mechanistic government of the mob, with an inbuilt tendency to autocracy. [...] Conrad criticized the modern democratic [...] state on two grounds. Firstly, in a way Rousseau would agree with, for depersonalizing and emasculating its citizens [...]; and secondly, for achieving what Rousseau had demanded: getting rid of traditional bonds and institutions, atomizing the human community”.<sup>5</sup>

However, the essay that I find particularly illuminating is the one on biography as a study of culture. Najder observed that “in Conrad's case, there can be detected a natural, inherent propensity of biographical research to lead the scholar away from 'pure' biography towards social and intellectual history, towards ethics and politics”.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, “what may have seemed to be a private code [...] turns out to be a cultural language, a public system of signs, which carry meaning independently from the reflections of the novelist’s own personality”.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hand, “Still Potent Force in the Art of Darkness”. *Times Higher Education*, 5 October 2007, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/still-potent-force-in-the-art-of-darkness/310667.article> (accessed 15 February 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Zdzisław Najder, “Lord Jim: A Romantic Tragedy of Honour”, in: Z. Najder, *Conrad in Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> Zdzisław Najder, “Conrad and Rousseau: Concepts of Man and Society”, in: Z. Najder, *Conrad in Perspective*, p. 146-7.

<sup>6</sup> Zdzisław Najder, “Conrad’s Polish Background, or from Biography to a Study of Culture”, in: Z. Najder, *Conrad in Perspective*, p. 17

<sup>7</sup> Zdzisław Najder, “Conrad’s Polish Background, or from Biography to a Study of Culture”, in: Z. Najder, *Conrad in Perspective*, p. 15

Najder returned to Poland in 1990 and became an adviser to Lech Wałęsa and Jan Olszewski.<sup>8</sup> In addition to his political activities, Najder also returned to Polish academia, taking a position at the University of Opole as a professor of English literature. He became the President of the Polish Joseph Conrad Society in 1994 and established a Conrad research centre in Opole, then in Kraków. Najder was awarded many prizes and orders of merit: in 1983, he received the Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta from Edward Raczyński, President of Poland in exile; in 2005, he was given the National Order of the Legion of Honour, and in 2009 he was awarded by the Committee for French-German-Polish Cooperation (Weimar Triangle) the Adam Mickiewicz Prize for services to French-German-Polish reconciliation.

How to bid a final farewell to a friend? Let the words of a poet speak for us:

Twilight and evening bell,  
And after that the dark!  
And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crost the bar.<sup>9</sup>

Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech  
University of Silesia, Poland  
Vice President of the Polish Joseph Conrad Society

---

<sup>8</sup> Jan Pawelec, Paweł Szeliga, *Nadgonić czas*, p. 550-576.

<sup>9</sup> Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'Crossing the Bar'.