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Caught in the Process of Remembering: "Amy Foster" and "Prince Roman" as narratives negotiating identity.

The idea for this paper resulted from a problem posited to the students of my module, namely that the process of remembering is a double-edged sword and at once a kind of a trap. For Conrad himself remembering the past he had left behind provided both a source of inspiration and, as many critics came to argue, an expression of guilt. Remembering transferred to broader contexts may capture an entire nation focused on the wrongdoings experienced rather than wrongdoings committed, especially in situations where the former connects strongly with a consoling moral imperative and authority. However, there is perhaps not a more ambiguous figure than that of the victim.

For the protagonists of both "Amy Foster" and "Prince Roman" remembering is, on the one hand, a means of survival and, on the other hand, an imperative to act in accordance with recorded impressions. In both cases, the status of the remembering subject is liminal. In "Amy Foster" we are dealing with a shipwreck coming from somewhere in Eastern Europe, that place, according to Draga Alexandru "often perceived as locked in perpetual liminality as both Europe and the other of Europe" (Alexandru 1). In foreign land, he reaches for memories of home. However, his homeland has become a spectre locked away beyond the line of the horizon. For Prince Roman the notion of homeland is also ghostly, politically non-existent. More importantly, in both stories the remembering subjects are victims. Yanko is an intruder, constructed by the English village folk not as a person but as a "monster", an exotic curiosity. He represents the

otherness from which he comes. Moreover, his case reflects the way otherness is oppressively constructed. Words used to describe Yanko are predominantly negative. He is a "miry and non-descript creature" (*Complete Short Fiction* 45), a "tramp" (*Complete Short Fiction* 45), "an escaped lunatic" (*Complete Short Fiction* 46). One of the best examples of the clash between intention and understanding comes in Yanko's first confrontation with one of the villagers who is not aware that the creature "jabbering in a most discomposing manner" addresses the former as a "gracious lord" (*Complete Short Fiction* 46). The attitude to Yanko remains hostile throughout the story. The more Yanko becomes oppressed, the more he withdraws to his own memories. Yanko's perspective, also expressed within the story, reflects, in turn a sense of wonderment. Everything in this surrounding is new for him. The clash of perspectives found in "Amy Foster" highlights the sense of divide in constructing alterity. The situation is analogical to western travellers travelling in Eastern Europe throughout the 18th century, describing travelling to Europe as if to a different country altogether; travelling across Eastern Europe was like going backwards in time. Larry Wolfe points out that such was "the invention of Eastern Europe" (4; 358)

Prince Roman is also a victim of circumstance with far more tragic consequences. Born to an aristocratic family on whom the Russian circles kept watchful eyes, Roman is forced to be a stranger in his own home, or rather what should be his home. The beginning of the story consequently led my students, unfamiliar with the nuances of the context, to ask who is Prince Roman? A Russian or a Pole?

The problem that the students discovered is that answers to these questions about belonging are never easy. For instance, both Adam Mickiewicz, Polish Romantic poet,

and later in 20th century Czeslaw Milosz, refer in their work to "Lithuania" rather than "Poland". Milosz himself emphasized that his identity was shaped by the multi-ethnic environment of Grand Duchy of Lithuania and refused to categorically identify himself as either a Pole or a Lithuanian. He wrote that

we should have considered ourselves Polish-speaking Lithuanians ... but no one wanted that -neither the Lithuanians who were bristlingly defensive towards Polish culture because it was denationalizing nor all those Polish speakers who thought of themselves as simply Poles" (qtd in Radulescu 155)¹

Polish Romantic ideology hailed Mickiewicz as one of the greatest "Poles", perhaps omitting the fact that the victim discourse of Polish Romanticism, focused on its divinely ordained martyrology, may have overshadowed the voices of all "others" within its vicinity. A similar case could be made for Sienkiewicz's historical novels, which sustained national myths at the cost of somewhat negative valorization of the "Other".

In Roman's case, the awakening of the reader to the Prince's Polishness defined through the ideal of moral duty unfolds gradually within what Debra Romanick Baldwin calls a narrative of "solidarity". This Polishness finds its full expression in the story's culminating point. The Russian aristocrat detected among Polish "rebels" is taken in for questioning. While his parents struggle to save his son from "the consequence of his madness" (*Complete Short Fiction* 963), Roman provides proof, in writing, that he "joined the national rising from conviction" (*Complete Short Fiction* 965) Through this, he achieves a victory and manifests a sense of superiority. "Prince Roman" emanates with a sense of great love, but one that is cursed or doomed², as in this passage:

¹ See also: Milosz further writes about a sense of separatism in *Native Realm* (55-67; 96)

² Conrad, as we know, for a long time he saw no possibility of change in Poland's situation. His correspondence, however, reveals his attachment to the Polish national cause For example in letters to Spirydion Kliszczewski (13th October 1885), or Cunninghame Graham (8th February 1899)

How much remained in that sense of duty, revealed to him in sorrow? How much of his awakened love for his native country? That country which demands to be loved as no other country has ever been loved, with the mournful affection one bears to the unforgotten dead and with the unextinguishable fire of a hopeless passion which only a living, breathing, warm ideal can kindle in our breasts for our pride, for our weariness, for our exultation, for our undoing. (*Complete Short Fiction* 964)

There is perhaps something oppressive in strictly adhering to such ideals and as Robert Hampson discussed yesterday and as others argued earlier Conrad was perhaps focused more on bringing out the patriotism of the sea, trying to escape, though not necessarily successfully, that sense of oppressiveness. Conrad's work seems crucial for trying to define the post-colonial in the Eastern European context because as a well-travelled writer of dual identity he was in a position to evaluate the impact of both western and Russian empires on the fate of the countries they conquered and subjugated. In the context of post-colonial studies, as Rafal Kopkowski comes to argue, these values may emerge in the opposition between defensive and aggressive nationalism.³ Defensive nationalism becomes the voice of the periphery by defending the identity of a given national group by cultivating a community's idealised traditions and history. Aggressive nationalism is the voice of the centre which seeks to impose its own identity on others and suppress their own traditions (Thompson 1; 6).⁴ Nineteenth century Romantic

³ As Rafal Kopkowski has observed (7;27)

Many of the distinctive elements of defensive nationalism which Ewa Thompson has defined in her study and which are clearly discernible in "Autocracy and War" and in "The Crime of Partition" enable us to see Conrad's political essays as a form of narrative that is directly aimed at countering the domination of imperial discourses generated by the main partitioning powers, i.e. Germany and Russia.

⁴ Thompson writes that:

Defensive nationalism characterizes those memory communities that perceive themselves as being at risk, either because of their smallness (Lithuanians, Georgians, Chechens) or because their expansionist neighbours threaten them. Those affected by it tend to look inward rather than outward, and consequently they fail to develop successful ways of dealing with the outside world. Defensive nationalism is a means of resisting the encroachment of the hostile Other upon one's identity, yet it is all too often interpreted as xenophobia or antisocial behaviour (9)

ideologies certainly provide an adequate illustration of defensive nationalism as they attempt to contest the expansionism of major European powers. This is just one part of the problem, however. Its other part lies in trying to define the notion of the victim itself.

Romanticism subjugated most of its themes to the idea of the victim by elevating it through notions of moral authority and leadership written into the divine plan. The most important aspect of a victim is innocence. At the same time, one of the attributes of victimology, according to Malgorzata Czerwinska (92), seems to be the assertion that rejecting the innocence of victims is a fundamental tactic used by the oppressor to justify their own aggression or to protect themselves. By collectively isolating Yanko from the community, the locals may believe they are protecting themselves, but instead they demonize Yanko. But is Yanko himself guiltless? In the Polish Romantic tradition the victim is privileged on grounds of morality whose power is to bring salvation. However, Yanko's own discourse acts against him, perhaps subconsciously, as a tool of his own brand of oppression. In fact, it is Yanko's use of native tongue during his illness that pushes Amy away. Until this point she has been able to communicate with him as an equal, mostly through body language and gestures. Zdzislaw Najder suggests that in order to understand the "language of [Yanko's] body" one must have "a readiness to accept him as human"(26), which Amy does until the moment Yanko falls ill. Yanko's isolating language triggers Amy's anxiety, and in the end leads to her "unaccountable fear"(*Complete Short Fiction* 59).

The captivity and lack of dependence made Homeland become a ghost. This ghost is a subject of martyrological devotion defined as an ideal to strive to by a victim experiencing heroic, but divinely ordained suffering as evidenced by Prince Roman and

Yanko. Thinking about home for centuries remained entrenched in the discourse of wrongs done to victims of violent acts, but the figure of the victim itself and even more so remembering this situation of victimisation is problematic. Even though Poland has been free and independent, the imagination of the community is still entrenched in attributes developed in Romanticism. However, the fact of the matter is that the cultivated innocence is no longer obvious. Even though the Romantic discourse to some extent still prevails in the Polish consciousness, its revision began in 20th century, especially in connection to Jedwabne and the participation of Poles in the Holocaust.

In this context, the post-colonial paradigms may emerge, perhaps, as a discourse of post-dependence underlying the psychological scars left by the past to account for the duality of the position of the victim. The situation of both dependence and victimisation rely on idealisation as a way of seeking refuge and hope. Creating myths of greatness as well as of the important role to play in Europe becomes a medium of asserting cultural and moral superiority over the oppressor in order to ensure the threat does not extinguish, to borrow Mickiewicz's words, the internal fire of a nation. Thompson's postcolonial approach to Eastern Europe has met with much scepticism and criticism, which build on notions of cultural discrepancy and extreme marginalization leading to a lack of possibility of developing one's own narrative (Borkowska 2007:16)⁵. Furthermore, as Kopkowski observes, we cannot overgeneralize the notion of "colony" as it could lead to simplistic distortions (25).

This scepticism is, however, met with a response from those critics who argue for a more universal use of the term 'postcolonial' as a tool for a critique of western power, based on the general history of imperial domination in the world. Marcel

⁵ See also: Kopkowski 25

Cornis-Pope notes, for instance, that

The postcolonial framework . . . can help a number of eastern European cultures, located at the intersection of three empires (Ottoman, Habsburg and Tsarist/Soviet), to understand the postcommunist phase as a “decolonization”, an attempt at liberating them not only from Soviet domination, but also from older colonial vestiges . . . (146)

including forced Russification. These countries had a subaltern position and in this sense, some proponents of the approach argue, they can be considered at least semi-colonies⁶.

Furthermore, it is my contention that post-colonial paradigms can be useful in reassessing the dialectic between the oppressor and the oppressed as well as in readdressing attributes which for centuries defined Polish identity. In this way, we could further veer the discussions away from a paradigm of exclusively heroic victimhood towards more subtle tensions which negotiate victimhood and oppression as conflicting claims.⁷ The question that warrants more attention is exactly in what ways those paradigms could be applied.

⁶ Cornis-Pope further notes that postcolonial paradigms may not fit Eastern Europe since, these countries were never fully “occupied”, at least not for a very long time, nor did they consider themselves “colonies” of the Soviet Union. They had a certain “autonomy”, obtained with great pains at the end of the Stalinist period. However, the “postcommunist transition” undergone by eastern European countries has involved leaving behind the memory of a certain political and cultural “occupation”. (146)

⁷ Especially considering the role of borderlands as a site of perceived exoticism.

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