

‘LOST IN TRANSLATION’: COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND CONRAD AS A READER

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Bruno Winawer (1883–1944) was a phenomenon on the Polish literary scene between the wars. A physicist with a Ph.D. from Heidelberg, he gave up a promising scientific career for one in the realm of letters, becoming one of the most prolific Polish playwrights of the period. Apart from 25 comedies, which combined social and scientific topics and were staged all over Poland, he was also responsible for two novels, two long short stories and twenty volumes of essays on science. In the latter capacity he had his own column in three leading Warsaw magazines of the time. Although immensely popular in Poland before World War II, after the war he fell into total obscurity, chiefly because the topics of both his essays and his comedies had become outdated.¹

Winawer came into contact with Conrad in May, 1921 when he sent Conrad a copy of his *Book of Job*² with a view to having it translated into English and possibly staged in England. Although in his June 10/12, 1921 letter to Winawer the writer refused to do the job, two months later, on August 10, he sent Winawer a copy of his translation of *The Book of Job*, which, according to Jean-Aubry, he must have completed by June 25.³ Eventually the play was never staged in England but it was published there ten years later, in 1931, by Dent. In a gesture of reciprocity Winawer cooperated with Aniela Zagórska in translating the theatre version of Conrad’s *Secret Agent* and helped to put

¹ For a more extensive overview of Bruno Winawer’s life as well as his scientific and literary careers see my article “Bruno Winawer’s *The Book of Job*: Conrad’s Translation”. *The Conradian* 27:1 (Spring 2002), 1–23.

² Bruno Winawer. *Ks. Hjoba: Komedia nudna w 3 aktach*. Warszawa: Nakładem autora, 1921.

³ *Conrad’s Polish Background. Letters to and from Polish Friends*. Ed. by Zdzisław Najder. Transl. Halina Carroll. London: Oxford University Press, 1964, 268, n. 4. For information about the Conrad–Winawer correspondence, see: *ibidem*, 267, n. 1. For the controversy surrounding the date of the letter see: *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Vol. 7, 1920–1922. Ed. Laurence Davies & John. H. Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005, 300, n. 2.

the play on stage at the *Bagatela* Theatre in Cracow on March 26, 1923 (cf. Branny 5–6).

Conrad's apprehensions as to the accessibility of Bruno Winawer's *Book of Job* to an English audience find their paradoxical echo in Tadeusz Żeleński-Boy's review of the comedy,⁴ following its appearance on stage at the Słowacki Theatre in Cracow on May 21, 1921. While in his letter of August 10, 1921 Conrad explains to Winawer: "In one or two places I have altered the phrasing so as to make the thought more accessible to the English or American public..."⁵ in his review Żeleński-Boy derides the Polish version of Winawer's comedy for its foreignness and exoticism, chiefly on account of its "paradoxes tailored after an English fashion" (Żeleński 30),⁶ which he sees as much more in keeping with the cosmopolitan spirit of Warsaw than the provincial interests of Cracow where the play saw its first performance. Curiously enough, what appeared 'foreign' about *The Book of Job* to Żeleński, and was thus supposed to be perceived as such by the Polish public, was also recognized as 'foreign' by Conrad from the perspective of the English public, and was therefore altered in his translation of the play.

Żeleński's ironic alteration of the subtitle of Winawer's work from "Boring Comedy" to "Warsaw Comedy" as well as his severe and unbending evaluation of this most highly acclaimed of Winawer's comic pieces can only be understood in the context of the actual plot of the play. An accomplished but impoverished scientist, Dr. Herup, lets himself be jailed out of sheer necessity, as it were, to save his wife, an academic turned cabaret dancer, from being prosecuted for associating with gamblers as well as to save himself from the disgrace of being financially supported by her for lack of his own means as a scientist. Thus, in reality his apparently Quixotic gesture, mistakenly perceived exclusively as such by an English reviewer of Conrad's translation, has distinctly pragmatic overtones. Upon his return from prison Herup takes up the menial job of a mechanic in a generating station to secure his financial status, but is soon persuaded to give it up for a prestigious academic post abroad, offered to him by an American Company, which has purchased his invention of an X-ray "tube," for which he has also been granted membership of the Royal Society in London.

Żeleński's doubts as to the pertinence of Winawer's far-fetched twists of the plot seem to shed further light on the reasons for Conrad's major alteration in his translation of *The Book of Job*, contrary to his assertions of having changed the phrasing only "in one or two places." What Conrad in fact does is turn Winawer's accomplished scientist into a mere fraud, whose ground-breaking invention appears to have been stolen from someone rather than devised by Herup himself. Thus, both Żeleński and Conrad seem

⁴ Tadeusz Żeleński-Boy. *Flirt z Melpomeną i inne flirciki*. Kraków: Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 1922, 29–35. T. Żeleński was a leading theatre critic of the day as well as a prolific translator of French literature into Polish.

⁵ Conrad's letter to Winawer dated August 10, 1921 was included in the writer's translation of *The Book of Job* published for the first time in a Warsaw literary magazine carrying the French title *Pologne Littéraire* in 1931. Comp: Z. Najder, Ed., 1964, 269; L. Davies, Ed., *CL* 7, 323.

⁶ My translation.

to take Winawer's paradoxes too much at face value rather than for what they are meant to be: a jocular portrayal of the absurdities of the contemporary Polish social scene, with its curious reversal of roles, where, as Winawer says, a scientist stoops to the position of a plumber, chiefly for financial reasons, while a butcher is heard discoursing on science and philosophy.

Żeleński's main charge against Winawer is that his hero appears to be a completely unrealistic creation because, for as long as the world has existed, famous scientists and great artists have followed their vocations and passions against all odds, heedless of impoverishment or even persecution. The social phenomenon which Żeleński finds quite implausible, and which out of local Cracovian patriotism he refers to as a "Warsaw Comedy,"⁷ may have been perceived by Conrad in terms of his national patriotism, especially in view of his other translatorial changes to the play, designed to eliminate any details which might detract from the good name of Poland in the eyes of the prospective English audience (cf. Branny 15–18); hence, perhaps, Conrad's reduction of the play's hero to the level of a common crook, as if to justify Herup's comic betrayal of his scientific vocation for prospective material gain. Thus, in Conrad's English translation Winawer's introductory remark about Herup having "nothing in common... with conventional Scientists in Comedies," acquires the exact opposite meaning to what was intended (Winawer 2).⁸ Where Winawer jocularly emphasises Herup's distinctiveness from the stereotype of a scientist in terms of appearance (no spectacles) and exceptional dedication to science as well as a preference for the laboratory work to honours, Conrad seems to fear that Dr. Herup's paradoxical twists of fortune might paint a somewhat grotesque picture of Polish science, to the detriment of the image of Poland "under Western eyes."

Moreover, despite Conrad's further assertions in his letter to Winawer that he "... summarised rather than translated the preliminary descriptive matter..." (CL 7, 324), some stage directions in his translation depart from their Polish original exactly for the reasons mentioned above. Thus, where Winawer sets the action of the play in Warsaw, in times of "the decline of dramatic art" (Winawer 8), Conrad talks about the "utter degradation of intellect" (2) in the country, as if wary of the self-defeating effect of Winawer's blunt admission that the theatre is dead in Poland, for fear that *The Book of Job* might, ironically, be taken for the case in point. In Act I Conrad also omits Winawer's suggestion of Herup's worldliness implied by an assortment of luggage stickers from all over the world on his suitcases, as well as by an array of souvenirs and photos from his numerous foreign trips. Conrad's total reticence on the subject of Dr. Herup's extensive travels seems to foreshadow the writer's consistent practice

⁷ Żeleński's subtitle seems to reflect a long-standing rivalry or even hostility between the two most important cultural and political centres of Poland, a result of the bitterness of the Cracovians over King Sigismund III Waza moving of the capital of Poland from the historic seat of Polish royalty in Cracow to Warsaw in 1596.

⁸ My translation. All references to the Polish version of *The Book of Job* are to the 1921 edition of the play.

throughout his translation of eliminating all details which might help to establish Winawer's hero as a respectable figure rather than a fraud.

Conrad not only refrains from mentioning Herup's experiments with the pendulum but even fails to introduce him as a physicist (possibly still unaware himself at this point of Winawer's own scientific career). In the last scene of *The Book of Job*, when, in the original, Herup's scientific merits are at last recognised, Conrad introduces a number of alterations to achieve the opposite effect. Unlike Winawer, who quotes excerpts from the official letter of honour that Herup receives from London as well as the private one from his friend Fitz-Gerald in their original English versions, Conrad incorporates those excerpts directly into the characters' lines, using no quotation marks, as if questioning their authenticity. Moreover, he refrains from citing the exact topic of the scientific paper which wins Herup international acclaim, where Winawer states that it is "relativity" (Winawer 67), which, incidentally, coincides with the topic of one of Winawer's own essays on science.⁹ Furthermore, where as in Winawer's original, the official letter from London, addressed to Herup, is signed by the four most renowned world physicists of the day (including a scientist named Fitz-Gerald), Conrad deliberately ignores all but one, replacing the respectably sounding Fitz-Gerald with the jocular Paramore, and putting into the mouth of one of Herup's prison inmates the claim that he "Can't make them [the names] all out..." (5). Finally, Herup's admission that his "tube" is not really his but a "modification of Crook's thing" (5) leaves no doubt as to the consistency of Conrad's attempts to question Herup's authenticity as a scientist and thus play down Winawer's tone of mockery and paradox.

Some other changes that Conrad makes in his translation of *The Book of Job* point to his attempts to remain loyal to the country of his choice, or 'politically correct,' as it were, to use contemporary jargon. Thus, in ignoring Winawer's self-mocking review added to the play in its first 1921 Polish edition, he might well have tried to avoid offending the British public, by not repeating Winawer's ironic remark about Poland following in the footsteps of the more cultured Britain in the general deterioration of the dramatic arts, with the theatre of Shakespeare and Shaw being supplanted by music-halls and the British writers' union reduced to "an assembly of bald, toothless and ageing troglodytes" (Winawer 71).

Other instances of 'political correctness' on the part of Conrad concern his omission in his translation meant for the British public of virtually all of Winawer's numerous references to the French cultural context. Thus, he ignores the fact that Macker, the arch-gambler, used to study in Paris, and fails to translate the latter's metaphor for his unquestionable proficiency in a card game under a French name (which, incidentally, becomes anonymous in Conrad's translation) because it revolves around a French detail, i.e. the Napoleonic moral code.

⁹ Cf. "Jeszcze o Einsteinie: teoria względności z lotu ptaka," 1923 (More on Einstein: A Bird's-Eye View of the Theory of Relativity).

Elsewhere Conrad's 'politically correct' omissions refer to phrases and sentences in French occasionally appearing in the Polish version of the play, which Conrad invariably translates into English. Likewise, he turns a blind eye to things French in Macker's memories of his and Herup's sojourn in prison, where the former would keep a record of the results of Herup's scientific experiments in French, which appear totally incomprehensible to him, as he admits, despite his fluency in the language, acquired in conversing with Parisian flower girls. All that Macker's recollections amount to in Conrad's translation is to be found in the following sentence: "After a week or so he [Herup] wrote on a piece of brown paper, which I got for him" (5). What is missing is the object of the verb "to write," which in Winawer's version was: "something in French" (Winawer 59).

Curiously enough, in one place Conrad briefly translates a reference to Napoleon and Julius Caesar as the "greatest men of history...[who]...were not clever at all...[and]...couldn't pass the smallest exam now" (4). However, already in the next sentence, unlike Winawer, Conrad refrains from mentioning Napoleon in the context of poor school grades in geography, while suggesting serious difficulties in trigonometry for Julius Caesar. In view of the above, Conrad's omission here may be regarded as hardly a matter of chance and may have been dictated by his Polish loyalty to Napoleon, whose reputation, despite his notoriety everywhere else in Europe, remains intact in the Polish collective memory and rests chiefly on his re-instatement of the semblance of an independent Polish state in the form of the short-lived Duchy of Warsaw (1807–1815), as well as both his actual and attempted, albeit brief subjugation of Poland's three partitioning powers. In this case, therefore, Conrad's collective Polish memory seems to have supplanted his otherwise 'politically correct' attitude to the country whose hospitality he enjoyed for most of his life.¹⁰ His other attempts in his translation to avoid mentioning the 'French' topic where Winawer harps on it, may have been dictated by his realisation that the privileged social position the French language and culture had for centuries enjoyed both among Polish aristocracy and 19th century intelligentsia, would hardly appeal either to British cultural or political sensibilities.

A separate issue to be discussed in connection with Conrad's translation of Winawer's play is the question of register and style. This becomes particularly relevant in Act III, where Winawer constantly refers to what has given his comedy its title, i.e. the biblical *Book of Job*, the only *book* to which Herup and Macker have access in jail. Winawer highlights the alleged quotations from the Bible by placing them in inverted commas, while Conrad completely ignores the quotations, especially at the beginning of Act III, as if not yet fully aware of their bearing on the title of the play. In other places he fails to put the quoted lines into quotation marks, as stylised, perhaps, rather than authentically biblical; or renders them in very colloquial language,

¹⁰ Conrad's dislike of Napoleon expressed by him in *Personal Record* is only one of numerous contradictions, depending on the occasion and the expectations of his correspondents, to be found in the author's letters, essays and his personal statements, also referred to in footnote 10 of the present article.

thus obliterating their distinctly biblical ring. Conrad's meddling with those passages may be a direct consequence of his transformation of Winawer's authentic scientist into a fraud. A less plausible, though not entirely unlikely explanation might be Conrad's Polish reservations, despite his apparent religious scepticism, about using the Bible for the purpose of a farcical comedy like *The Book of Job*.

On the other hand, following Winawer's lofty style elsewhere in Act III, Conrad occasionally imitates the latter where Winawer chooses to be highly colloquial, by changing his casual form of address into an unnecessarily formal one. While in his letter to Herup, Fitz-Gerald addresses him as an old friend, using the English phrase – "Old Chap" (Winawer 67), Conrad translates it into a typically Polish form of address "My Dear Herup" (5), which is also much less casual than Winawer's original. Elsewhere, while rendering Herup's explanation of how and why he quit his university job, where Winawer remains highly colloquial and does not mention the rector at all, Conrad sounds deliberately formal: "I hastened to send my resignation to the illustrious Rector of the University and became a candidate for the situation of junior assistant fitter at a generating station" (4). Conrad's consistent thwarting of Winawer's intended register might be a result of his reversal of Herup's status as a true scientist, whereby the hero's grotesquely formal style attributed to him by the translator might serve to discredit him and turn him into an object of ridicule rather than a figure commanding respect or sympathy. Conrad's customary scepticism must have made him doubt whether the average English reader would be prepared for Winawer's far-fetched paradoxes and his peculiar literary sensibilities, not exactly in keeping with the English sense of humour and the working class British culture dominated by anti-intellectualism. Finally, perhaps also at stake here were Winawer's hopes and Conrad's efforts to have the play staged in England, hopes that were dashed by the failure of Conrad's own stage version of *The Secret Agent* (incidentally, prepared by Winawer and Zagórska) in London, as Conrad himself suggests in his 8 Nov. 1922 letter to Zagórska.¹¹

Before concluding, one should emphasise a striking linguistic feature of the English translation of *The Book of Job*, especially in view of Conrad's numerous and diverse alterations of Winawer's details, i.e. its verbal and idiomatic *literalness*, which can be easily accounted for in terms of Conrad's assertions in his August 10 letter to Winawer that his translation is "strictly idiomatic" and that "the idioms...are employed in strict accordance with [Winawer's] artistic intention" (CL 7, 323). Hence Conrad's literal translation of specifically Polish idioms and expressions in the following: "Why are you making me that scene?" (3) instead of 'Why are you making a scene?'; "Can this affair be strangled in its cradle?" (3) for 'Can this affair be nipped in the bud?'; "I had to manage an exchange ('transfer') to the juridical department... (2):" "I regret that our ways part so widely" (5) for 'It's a pity we can't see eye to eye with each other'; "...whether my signature has any legal value" (5) for 'whether it is legally bind-

¹¹ Najder 1964, 282; CL 7, 575.

ing; "all the world is thrown open to me" (5) for 'the world is my oyster;' "the cream of the nation has been spreading itself abroad" (5) instead of 'the cream of our society have always resided abroad.' The polonisms to be found in Conrad's translation include phrases like: "an early answer" (5) for a 'prompt reply,' "to decide one's quarrel with somebody" (5) instead of 'settle a dispute,' "damning evidence" to mean 'incriminating evidence.'

To sum up, the alterations that Conrad made in his only translation from Polish literature into English seem to confirm what follows from his varying statements, depending on the nationality of the addressee, on what Polish or foreign writers he read¹² or from some of his correspondence – 2 Sept. 1921 letter to E. Garnett¹³ and Feb. 20, 1920 letter To Prince Eustachy Kajetan Sapieha¹⁴ – as well as from his refusal to translate other contemporary Polish authors, like Stefan Żeromski¹⁵ or Waław Sieroszewski,¹⁶ namely his apparent scepticism as to the possibility of making specifically Polish experience and sensibilities accessible to an English audience, even in the case of a literary work as ahistorical as Winawer's comedy. Whatever is lost in Conrad's translation of *The Book of Job* is the consequence of his double perspective as both its Polish reader endowed with the collective memory of his nation and its English reader concerned with a 'politically correct' response to a work that, as he sensed, was somewhat alien to British sensibilities, in whose translation he was indeed lost, considering the quantity and the nature of the alterations he introduced as well as the tempo with which he worked on Winawer's play.

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¹² Conrad's statements on his reading apparently depended on what his interlocuters wished to hear. Thus while talking to a Polish interviewer, Marian Dąbrowski, Conrad mentions only Polish Romantic poets; in his Jan. 20, 1900 letter to E. Garnett (*CL* 2, 244) he only cites Jan Kochanowski, Józef Korzeniowski and his father, while in his *Memoirs*, targeted chiefly at foreign readers, he mentions only European writers and no Polish names at all.

Cf. Karol Kosek "'Bagaż literacki' z Galicji i polskie dziedzictwo kulturalne w twórczości Conrada-Korzeniowskiego." *Rocznik Przemyski* (1990), 44–45, 51, 54.

¹³ *CL* 7, 336.

¹⁴ *CL* 7, 29–30; *Polskie zaplecze Josepha Conrada*. Vol. II. Ed. Z. Najder and J. Skolik. Lublin: Gaudium 2006, 111–112. Both letters (to E. Garnett and to E. Sapieha) constitute a comment, veiled and overt, respectively, on the lack of interest on the part of the West in things Polish. Cf. Kosek, 50, 51.

¹⁵ Cf. 2 Sept. 1921 letter to E. Garnett, *CL* 7, 336.

¹⁶ Cf. 27.4.1922 letter to E. Pinker, *CL* 7, 459–460. Cf. Kosek, 53.

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