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Conrad's *Lord Jim* and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*: Contrastive Axiologies¹

For a number of years I have taught a senior undergraduate course entitled: "Conrad in a European Context." When I first conceived this course my motives were quite ingenuous. I wanted to teach a class in which I would be able to discuss some of my favourite authors: Conrad, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Nietzsche, Thomas Mann. And, indeed, teaching the course has always turned out to be a thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding experience. Then, on reflection, I realized that the approach was not a novel departure but the consummation of a life-long project.

I began my serious study of Conrad by writing a thesis, which later became a monograph, on his Polish literary background. In effect, I proposed the reading of Conrad's work in relation to themes and motifs prevalent in nineteenth-century Polish literature and culture. The value and validity of this critical approach is now a commonplace of Conrad studies.

Although my inquiry was grounded not in some well thought-out theory, it did have theoretical ramifications; the theory to which I unconsciously subscribed ran counter to the then hegemonic New Critical orthodoxy. The latter claimed that "the purest criticism attends only to the text, which it conceives as floating in a timeless vacuum: a text and meaning immutable, created by no flesh-and-blood writer and without flesh-and-blood readers in mind²"; whereas I have always favoured a less pure, more secular (in Edward Said's sense³) approach, especially when dealing with writers so embroiled in historical reality as Conrad and, perhaps even more obviously, Dostoevsky.

¹ A revised version of a paper given at the triennial meeting of the International Association of University Professors of English in Vancouver in 2004. The essay is to be included in a selection of my essays to be published by Editions Rodopi: Amsterdam – New York.

² A. J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958, p. 1.

³ E. W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 1-3.

I found support and a kind of rationale for my contextualist bias in the work of the English philosopher R. G. Collingwood, who developed out of his disagreement with “logical atomism” his question and answer logic. In his philosophical autobiography Collingwood writes:

... you cannot find out what a man means by simply studying his spoken or written statements, even though he has spoken or written with perfect command of language and perfectly truthful intention. In order to find out his meaning you must also know what the question was (a question in his own mind, and presumed by him to be in yours) to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer⁴.

Truth and intention in fictional narratives are highly complex issues, but they are not altogether irrelevant and meaningless. And one can argue that although Conrad wrote his texts in English, some of the “answers” relating to the whole gamut of axiological questions are, as it were, responses to questions posed in Polish. In consequence the non-Polish reader may miss or mishear some of their more culturally specific inflections.

Later, I turned to a novel in which Conrad’s text is in significant part a polemical response to a multiplex set of questions drawn from his reading of things Russian, and especially the work of Dostoevsky. In *Under Western Eyes* Conrad writes the protagonist’s tragic story into the imaginative space created by Dostoevsky’s narratives in order to define as sharply as possible his ideological disagreement with Dostoevsky, as well as to subvert the latter’s postulates. Thus a truly informed reading of *Under Western Eyes* requires a knowledge of the extra-textual scaffolding of the Russian questions. On its own, Conrad’s text offers an incomplete equation.

There is yet another way in which fictional narratives (that can be viewed as existing synchronically – i.e. in a timeless dimension – each time I read *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov murders Alyona Ivanovna) relate to the extra-textual, historically determined world. The axiology – the value system – that permeates and structures the thought-world from which the text has emerged formulates many of the questions to which the text presents answers in fictional form. And just as the underthought of my argument here correlates to questions raised by the contemporary hermeneutic crisis in the humanities – questions of intentionality, referentiality, originality, etc. – so, Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and Conrad’s *Lord Jim* constitute analogous and contrastive responses to the nineteenth-century axiological crisis, particularly in the sphere of ethics.

The early 1860s in Russia, when Dostoevsky was working on *Crime and Punishment*, were also a period of dramatic social and political change, aggravated and perhaps in part fuelled by an economic crisis and reflected in intellectual ferment and restlessness. “In our times,” wrote Dostoevsky, “all is confusion [...] everywhere people are quarrelling over foundations, principles [...] Scepticism and the sceptical view are killing everything,

⁴ R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 31.

even the very view itself in the final analysis [...] Who among us in all honesty knows what is *evil* and what is *good*?⁵ And just as Descartes once replied to the scepticism of Montaigne's essays with the *Discourse on Method* and *The Three Essays using this Method*, so Dostoevsky undertook to counter the "spirit of nihilism" in his fiction. In *Notes from Underground*, published in 1864, Dostoevsky caricatured the central tenets of the socialist radicals and revealed through his parodic method the hopeless dilemmas and paradoxes (the aporia, if you like) at the core of the ideology. Two years later, in *Crime and Punishment*, he proceeded to demonstrate the consequences of applying the utilitarian philosophy (and in particular Chernyshevsky's philosophy of "rational egoism") in a ruthlessly logical and extremist way, and then offered an alternative by seeking to ground ethics in a kind of religious existentialism, which finds a parallel in Kierkegaard's "leap of faith."

Dostoevsky's intense involvement with the intellectual life of his day (the titles of the two journals which Dostoevsky published with his brother Mikhail are telling; *Vremya* [Time] and *Epokha* [Epoch or the Age]) is directly evident in his fiction; with Conrad things are different. Many of his narratives are set beyond the horizon of topical concerns. Even the world of his political novels is only metaphorically related to historical reality. Topical allusions are relatively rare and often deliberately veiled. Nevertheless, at a deeper level, *Lord Jim* seems to be as much a product of the philosophical climate of the turn of the century as *Crime and Punishment* is a reflection of the ideological turmoil of the 1860s.

In *The Sense of an Ending* Frank Kermode gives the philosophical significance of the year 1900.

In 1900 Nietzsche died; Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*; 1900 was the date of Husserl's *Logic*, and of Russell's *Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*. With an exquisite sense of timing Planck published his quantum hypothesis in the very last days of the century, December 1900. Thus, within a few months, were published works which transformed or transvalued spirituality, the relation of language to knowing, and the very locus of human uncertainty, henceforth to be thought of not as an imperfection of the human apparatus but part of the nature of things, a condition of what we may know⁶.

Clearly, *Lord Jim* which Conrad completed on July 14th, 1900, also belongs to this pattern. Not only is it a revolutionary work from the point of view of narrative technique; but it also embodies as part of its theme the epistemological revolution which was transforming Western thinking. Where Dostoevsky dramatizes ideas, Conrad offers imaged correlatives. The new view of reality is conveyed with poetic concentration and suggestiveness in a memorable sequence from Chapter 20 of *Lord Jim*:

⁵ R. L. Jackson, ed. *Dostoyevsky: New Perspectives*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1984, p. 3.

⁶ F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 97.

He [Stein] lit a two-branched candlestick and led the way. We passed through empty dark rooms, escorted by gleams from the lights Stein carried. They glided along the waxed floors, sweeping here and there over the polished surface of the table, leaped upon a fragmentary curve of a piece of furniture, or flashed perpendicularly in and out of distant mirrors, while the forms of two men and the flicker of two flames could be seen for a moment stealing silently across the depths of a crystalline void. (163-64)

It is a world of fleeting impressions, of shadows, of distorting perspectives, of incertitude, where, in Marx's celebrated metaphor, "All that is solid melts into air"⁷. Although like Dostoevsky, Conrad continues to resist "what is the most obstinate ghost of man's creation [...] the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct" (43). The reaction of the two writers to the "crisis of Nihilism" – to use Nietzsche's phrase – is, of course, tellingly different. Before going on to examine these differences, however, let me point out some arresting "marginal" similarities between *Crime and Punishment* and *Lord Jim*.

In addition to their foremost and firmly established place among the classics of fiction, both novels have come to be regarded (rightly or wrongly) as the most characteristic works of their respective authors. This is no doubt partly the result of the fact that each represents the first major achievement in the writer's career. Next, each novel is closely linked to a slightly earlier and shorter text – *Notes from Underground* in Dostoevsky's case and *Heart of Darkness* in Conrad's – which, as it were, prepares the ground for the richer and fuller investigation by focussing on the negative side of the axiological equation. Thus, the metaphysically grotesque egomania of Kurtz: "I saw him open his mouth wide – it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (106) – becomes in Jim "exalted egoism," romantic and ambiguous, which seduces Jim away from life and into "his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct" (313). Similarly, the Underground Man's theoretical polemic with rationalism is reinforced and supplemented in *Crime and Punishment* by a practical demonstration of the folly of trying to base human conduct on cold reason alone. On the formal level, each pair of texts marks an important stage in the writer's development of narrative technique. According to Bakhtin, it is precisely in *Notes from Underground* and *Crime and Punishment* that Dostoevsky first realizes his polyphonic ideal, whereby individual characters are rendered completely autonomous, being neither reduced to, nor suppressed by, the single authoritative voice of the author. Hence, the totally absorbing, indeed, often frighteningly so, quality of Dostoevsky's two texts. In a parallel way, Conrad relativizes his narration by developing Marlow in the dual function of narrator and fully participating character.

Generically, both *Crime and Punishment* and *Lord Jim* are hybrids, combining a popular narrative form with more sophisticated types of fiction.

⁷ K. Marx, F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*. Translated by Samuel Moore. Edited by A. J. P. Taylor. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1967, p. 83.

While Dostoevsky mixes the crime thriller with psychological drama and the novel of ideas, *Lord Jim* is "both an exotic adventure story [...] and a complexly wrought 'art novel' in the tradition of Flaubert and James"⁸. This welding of disparate modes produces strange harmonies as well some discords.

Finally, one notes parallels in the circumstances of the writing of the two books. Both are the product of early middle age (Dostoevsky was forty-five, Conrad forty-three) – of that true shadow line in an individual's life; yet each tells the story of a twenty-three-year-old who blunders perversely or else is jettisoned into the age of responsibility. And both books were written against the background of enormous problems and difficulties, psychological as well as material: Dostoevsky draws on his immediate experiences and translates them into fiction; Conrad seeks in fiction a way of transcending reality.

One could easily go on multiplying such parallels – some obvious, some banal, some intriguing – however, it is the *differences* that really matter and in the final analysis are more illuminating. Indeed, you may have noticed that, as I was listing the various parallels, I could not refrain from introducing discriminations. From now on tracing differences will be my primary endeavour.

To begin with the titles: *Crime and Punishment* and *Lord Jim* – the first offers a literal, concise rendering of the thematic core of the novel; the phrase is clear and unambiguous. *Lord Jim*, in contrast, is puzzling from the start. The conjunction of "Lord" and "Jim" is unusual: as a rule we do not follow a honorific title with a familiar name. So, we are tempted to read the phrase ironically. Our hero is a "Jim" who puts on the airs of a "Lord." Or maybe by analogy to "Queen Bess" it is a term of endearment? There is another complication: "Lord Jim" is in fact a mistranslation of "Tuan Jim" – a closer equivalent would be something like "Mr." or even better the Polish "Pan," as in the title of Mickiewicz's poem "Pan Tadeusz." One way, then, of translating the theme of *Lord Jim* into the terms of the title would be to say that it is the story of a young man called "Jim" who dreams of becoming "Lord Jim" – the hero of a book. When tested on two occasions, he fails to live up to the title, the reverberations of which become increasingly hollow and ironic. In the end, however, he vindicates himself and earns the title "Lord," if not in the eyes of all, then at least in his own and perhaps of Stein and Marlow, too. Thus the title of Conrad's novel also summarizes its theme but in a much more complex and context-bound way. "Crime and Punishment" is a transparent and transitive title; "Lord Jim" is opaque and self-referential.

As we proceed to read the two texts, their distinctive and contrasting tendencies define themselves more sharply. Let me refresh your memory of the two famous openings. First, *Crime and Punishment*:

⁸ T. C. Moser, "Preface." In *Lord Jim* by Joseph Conrad. vi-viii. New York: W. W. Norton, 1968, p. vi.

At the beginning of July, during an extremely hot spell, towards evening, a young man left the closet he rented from tenants in S---y Lane, walked out to the street, and slowly, as if indecisively, headed for the K---n Bridge.

He had safely avoided meeting his landlady on the stairs. His closet was located, just under the roof of a tall, five-storied house, and was more like a cupboard than a room⁹.

And now *Lord Jim*:

He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet, powerfully built, and he advanced straight at you with a slight stoop of the shoulders, head forward, and a fixed from-under stare which made you think of a charging bull. His voice was deep, loud, and his manner displayed a kind of dogged self-assertion which had nothing aggressive in it. It seemed a necessity, and it was directed apparently as much at himself as at anybody else. He was spotlessly neat, apparelled in immaculate white from shoes to hat [...] (9)

Dostoevsky begins with an orderly, straightforward, factual account which establishes the setting and describes the behaviour and feelings of the protagonist. The style is unobtrusive, documentary, concrete, and strives to create a sense of authenticity and verisimilitude. The masking of place names is a strategy aimed at reinforcing the connection between words and the external reality to which they refer. This is going to be a story about real people in a real world – hence worth attending to. The main emphasis of the passage is on the tension between the protagonist and his environment. The July heat both reflects and augments the young man's feverishness; his sense of entrapment both finds its correlative in and is in part caused by the stifling setting. The connections are predominantly metonymic.

While much of the thematic force of the Dostoevsky passage is located in the action, Conrad's opening is essentially analytic. Under the guise of an impressionistic portrait, Conrad begins his investigation into Jim's moral and psychological essence. The questions that return over and over again concern the relationship between surface and inner meaning, between action and being. Can someone, lacking heroic stature by an inch or two, be a hero? What underlies Jim's dogged, though unaggressive self-assertion which is directed at himself? Or in Tony Tanner's words, who offers a fine reading of the passage: "Is Jim 'white' all through, or does the clean linen conceal a stain?" (17).

Raskolnikov's behaviour is riddled with contradictions: "This time, however, as he walked out to the street, even he was struck by his fear of meeting his creditor. "I want to attempt such a thing [i.e. murdering Alyona, the old pawnbroker], and at the same time I'm afraid of such trifles." (3-4). As his very name implies (*raskol* = schism; *raskolotsya* = to split), he is a divided man. His friend Razumikhin tells Raskolnikov's mother: "I've known Rodion for a year and a half; sullen, gloomy, arrogant, proud [...] Magnanimous and kind. [...] At times, however, he's [...] just inhumanly cold and callous, as if there really were two opposite characters in him, changing

⁹ F. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*. Translated and annotated by R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky. New York: Vintage classics, 1993, p. 3.

places with each other." (215). Conversely, Jim, to use Stein's metaphors, is a butterfly who keeps on acting like a beetle. Marlow is fascinated and horrified by the discrepancy between the impression that Jim makes and the reality of his conduct: "I watched the youngster there. I liked his appearance; I knew *his* appearance; he came from the right place; he was one of us [...] He was the kind of fellow you would, on the strength of his looks, leave in charge of the deck – figuratively and professionally speaking" (38–39). Marlow continues, "I would have trusted the deck to that youngster on the strength of a single glance and gone to sleep with both eyes shut – and, by Jove! it wouldn't have been safe. There are depths of horror in that thought. He looked as genuine as a new sovereign, but there was some infernal alloy in his metal" (40).

In the most general terms, therefore – and I realize that I am indulging in generalizations which no doubt require qualifications and refinement – one could argue that Conrad's view of human nature is essentially ironic and his model of the human make-up is hierarchical. That is: he recognizes in human beings a stratified coexistence of higher and lower tendencies – the former being self-centred anarchical instincts; the latter, community enhancing purposes and trends; the latter, self-centred anarchical instincts. Our moral task and the measure of our humanity consists in disciplining and sublimating the lower instincts and passions. Here, I find Bertrand Russell's comments on Conrad's philosophy of life particularly illuminating:

I felt – Russell writes – that he thought of civilized and morally tolerable human life as a dangerous walk on a thin crust of barely cooled lava which at any moment might break and let the unwary sink into fiery depths. He was very conscious of the various forms of passionate madness to which men are prone, and it was this that gave him such a profound belief in the importance of discipline. His point of view, one might perhaps say, was the antithesis of Rousseau's: "Man is born in chains, but he can become free." He becomes free, so I believe Conrad would have said, not by letting loose his impulses, not by being casual and uncontrolled, but by subduing wayward impulse to a dominant purpose¹⁰.

Dostoevsky's view is very different. Emphasizing as he does the dangers of perverted reason – perverted because unchecked by love and cut off from the realities of life – in some sense locates goodness in nature and the human heart. Since he also finds there cruelty, greed, self-seeking and blind passions and lust, there emerges a paradoxical vision. Dostoevskian man as well as his world is torn by dualities. Reason is opposed to love; pride to meekness; aggression to submissiveness; and self-assertion to self-effacement. Raskolnikov's progress can be seen as a zigzag course between these polarities. Crushed by poverty, oppressed and humiliated by the squalor of his circumstances, he elaborates a theory which not only is to release him from degradation, but is to turn him into a superman and a benefactor of mankind:

¹⁰ B. Russell, *Portraits from Memory and Other Essays*. 86–91. London: Allen & Unwin, 1956, p. 87.

Passing the Yusupov Garden, he even became much absorbed in the notion of setting up tall fountains, and of how they would freshen the air in all the public squares. Gradually he arrived at the conviction that if the Summer Garden were expanded across the entire Field of Mars and even joined with the garden of the Mikhailovsky Palace, it would be a wonderful and most useful thing for the city. (73)

In his own terms he will be transformed from a louse into a Napoleon. In murdering Alyona, Raskolnikov asserts the ruthless part of his nature, but being forced to kill her meek sister Lizavieta – he involves his own compassionate side. The very motives of the murder are similarly mixed: he kills to prove a theory and thus to assert himself; but he also has altruistic concerns: he wants to help his family. He wants power in order to change society – in other words, his ultimate goal is altruistic. In a compulsive, almost maniacally schematic way (the *Notebooks* make this even more obvious)¹¹ Dostoevsky confuses and blurs moral categories: we have a good murderer; a saintly prostitute; a lovable drunk; a sympathetic police investigator; a reluctant rapist – and so on. The whole fabric of traditional morality is turned topsy-turvy and shaken.

In *Lord Jim* moral categories as such are never in question; what is at issue is the degree of Jim's responsibility for his actions. Conrad arranges circumstances in such a way that Jim is almost not guilty. And Jim tries desperately *not* to see the unvarnished truth of his conduct: "There was not the thickness of a sheet of paper between the right and the wrong of this affair," he protests. To which Marlow replies: "How much more did you want?" (101).

Marlow tries to guide Jim to recovery following his moral disaster ("It was as if I had jumped into a well – into an everlasting deep hole. . . ." [88]) through the exercise of reason and sympathetic understanding; Sonia, in contrast, guides Raskolnikov to the threshold of spiritual recovery not rationally but through love and the teachings of Christ. It cannot be otherwise since reason has led him into ultimate folly¹².

Finally, let us consider the expiatory phase of each story. Jim errs through being excessively absorbed with himself, and fails to live up to a code that is communal in its essence. Having eventually recognized his failure under the tutelage of a member of the community, he must try to regain his position of trust and responsibility and thus to re-establish his bond with society. Insofar as this involves fidelity to his idealized conception

¹¹ In the drafts and plans the characters are riddled with many more contradictions than in the finished novel, in which Dostoevsky simplifies some of the figures (notably, Sonia) and integrates them in the larger framework of narrative dialogism and the paradoxes of his religious axiology.

¹² Ryszard Przybylski discusses the fundamental conflict at the heart of Dostoevsky's novel – the conflict between the "Truth of Reason" and the "Truth of Christ" in the context of the Russian Orthodox tradition, and in particular its roots in the Byzantine mysticism of Maxim the Confessor (580–662). See: R. Przybylski, *Dostojewski i "Przekłete Problemy"; Od „Biednych Ludzi” do Zbrodni i kary*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1964.

of himself (a form of altruism) he succeeds. Raskolnikov cuts himself off from humanity through his sin against nature, mankind, God. In order to achieve re-integration he must submit his wilful ego to natural law: "Instead of dialectics there was life, and something completely different had to work itself out in his consciousness." Through love, through total commitment to an individual human being, Raskolnikov is being re-united with mankind, nature, the All. In Dostoevsky redemption entails the loss of self. In Conrad's *Lord Jim*, the tragic hero asserts individuality by sublimating the self. But in neither text do we have full closure.

Given the similarity of concerns and the fundamental differences in approach and axiology, it is not surprising that Conrad found in Dostoevsky a natural antagonist – quite apart from the "racial antipathy" as he somewhere misleadingly called it. Ten years after writing *Lord Jim*, Conrad returned to the Jim theme, and this time situated it in an overtly Dostoevskian framework. But that is another story.

Conrad's *Lord Jim* and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*: Contrastive Axiologies

Summary

When the author of this paper began studying the works of Joseph Conrad half a century ago, literary studies were still dominated by New Criticism, which claimed that the purest criticism attends only to the text, ignoring by and large the historical context, the flesh-and-blood writer, and the horizon of expectations of the readers. The author, however, has favoured a less "pure", contextualist approach, especially when dealing with writers so embroiled in historical reality as Conrad, and perhaps even more obviously, Conrad and perhaps even more obviously, Dostoevsky. Finding support for his approach in the "question and answer logic" of the English philosopher R.G. Collingwood, the author argues that Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Conrad's *Lord Jim* offer contrastive responses to the nineteenth-century axiological crisis – particularly in the sphere of ethics. Conrad's view of human nature is essentially ironic and his model of the human make-up hierarchical. Our moral task and the measure of our humanity consists in disciplining and sublimating the lower instincts and passions. Dostoevsky, in contrast, emphasizes the dangers of perverted reason and locates goodness in nature and the human heart. Since he also finds there cruelty, greed, self-seeking and blind passions, there emerges a paradoxical vision. Dostoevskian man as well as his world is torn by irreconcilable dualities, which can only be transcended.

Key words:

Conrad, Dostoevsky, nineteenth-century axiological crisis

Lord Jim Conrada i Zbrodnia i kara Dostojewskiego: aksjologie kontrastywne

Streszczenie

Kiedy pół wieku temu autor tego artykułu rozpoczynał studia nad twórczością Josepha Conrada, w literaturoznawstwie wciąż dominowały tezy Nowej Krytyki, która twierdziła, że

właściwe badanie odnosi się tylko do samego tekstu, pomijając w zasadzie kontekst historyczny, osobę pisarza, a także horyzont oczekiwań czytelników. Autor jednak opowiadał się za mniej „czystym”, a bardziej kontekstualnym podejściem, szczególnie w przypadku pisarzy tak związanych z rzeczywistością historyczną, jak Conrad i – może nawet bardziej – Dostojewski. Znajdując uzasadnienie dla swojego podejścia w „logice pytań i odpowiedzi” angielskiego filozofa R. G. Collingwooda, autor twierdzi, że *Zbrodnia i kara* Dostojewskiego i *Lord Jim* Conrada przedstawiają różne odpowiedzi na dziewiętnastowieczny kryzys wartości, szczególnie w sferze etyki. Conradowskie postrzeganie ludzkiej natury jest zasadniczo ironiczne, a jego wizja potrzeb człowieka jest hierarchiczna. Ludzką powinnością moralną i miarą naszego człowieczeństwa jest dyscyplinowanie i sublimacja niższych instynktów i namiętności. Dostojewski natomiast podkreśla niebezpieczeństwa spaczzonego racjonalizmu i umiejscawia dobroć w naturze i ludzkim sercu. Jest to jednak wizja paradoksalna, ponieważ znajduje on tam również okrucieństwo, chciwość, egoizm i ślepe namiętności. Człowiek Dostojewskiego jest więc – jak jego świat – rozdarty przez sprzeczności nie do pogodzenia, które mogą być tylko transcendowane.

Słowa kluczowe:

Conrad, Dostojewski, aksjologie kontrastywne