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NATIONAL HISTORY AND NOSTALGIA IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *NOTES ON LIFE AND LETTERS*

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Abstract: The article investigates the interface between the national history of Poland and nostalgia as featured in Joseph Conrad's collection *Notes on Life and Letters*. It is suggested that Conrad's perception of history stands at odds with contemporary postmodern criticism. Initially Conrad's stance on Poland's national history is investigated in his political essays, "Autocracy and War" (1905), "A Note on the Polish Problem" (1916), and "The Crime of Partition" (1919), which, in my view, feature the "definitive history" as discussed by Jenkins and Evans. Further, the lines of intersection between history, nostalgia, and politics are delineated. It is claimed that in Conrad's works history is still assigned the classical role of a teacher, i.e., the Ciceronian *historia magistra vitae*, which, as I argue, corresponds with his view on literature as part of the historical record. Next, two autobiographical essays in the collection "Poland Revisited" (1915) and "First News" (1918) are examined in order to claim a heightened mode of nostalgia, on the one hand, with a simultaneous withdrawal of the attention from state affairs, which involves a re-positioning of the focus to Conrad's personal experiences, on the other hand. Boym's concepts of *restorative* and *reflective* nostalgia are juxtaposed and their deployment in the collection explored. I suggest that nostalgia underpins the internal integrity and interrelatedness of the essays included in Part II: "Life" of *Notes on Life and Letters* as regards their thematic scope and generic affiliation, the genre preconditioning the extent and intensity of the modal application of nostalgia. Finally, I contend that the mode of nostalgia largely explains the factual inconsistencies in Conrad's autobiographical essays.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, national history, restorative nostalgia, reflective nostalgia, autobiography

In his comprehensive study of the past and its twenty-first century representations, David Lowenthal argues that nowadays "truth in the old sense – a veridical account of the past based on consensually agreed evidence – has become passé."[1] Keith Jenkins adds that "the notion of 'definitive history' is thus passé; we have arguably

[1] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country: Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 14.

come to the end of history."[2] In the context of contemporary criticism,[3] Jenkins traces and expounds the sources of the postmodern, radical dismissal of a *definitive history*, a history once understood as a quasi "natural phenomenon" of translating past events into a historicized past in which time is expressed historically and frequently imbued with ideological claims.[4] Among a variety of such ideological implications Royle identifies "teleology, eschatology, elevating and intermingling accumulations of meaning, a certain kind of traditionality, a certain concept of continuity, of truth."[5] In Jenkins' opinion, nowadays the intertwinement of history and ideological implications has been discredited and arguably "nobody believes in such teleological imaginaries anymore."[6]

Although today the emancipation of past time from historical articulation seems to be a fact – or, at least, several major postmodernist scholars proclaim it to be so[7] – the focus of the present study has been deliberately placed on several aspects of *definitive history* which are, in my opinion, quite conspicuous in Joseph Conrad's *Notes on Life and Letters*. The collection consists of two parts, I and II, titled "Letters" and "Life," respectively. Albeit its apparent precedence, the former seems to be of lesser significance for in his 1920 Author's Note, Conrad rather provocatively admits that "this collection […] has more to do with life than with letters."[8] Thus, the focus of the present article is on the second part of *Notes on Life and Letters* and it is suggested that Conrad's attitude towards national history, i.e., the history of Poland under partition, is informed by the mode of nostalgia. Interestingly, Conrad's view of Poland under partition in Part II: "Life" is marked by nostalgia in a twofold way: while in his political essays, "Autocracy and War" (1905), "A Note on the Polish Problem" (1916), and "The Crime of Partition" (1919), it becomes a mode of perception hardly voiced on the textual level, in "Poland Revisited" (1915) and "First News" (1918),

[2] Keith Jenkins, *Why History: Ethics and Postmodernity* (London–New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 89.

[3] Jenkins, *Why History*, p. 11. To explain the origins of the postmodern, somewhat dismissive approach towards history, Jenkins elaborates on the writings of Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, and Jean-Françoise Lyotard – cf. Jenkins, *Why History*, pp. 37-90. On more recent counter-claims, consider Ewa Domańska's idea of the so-called "rescue history" which emphasises the formative function of the voices from the periphery, i.e., the Central-Eastern Europe – see Ewa Domańska, "Historia Ratownicza," *Teksty Drugie* no. 5 (2014), pp. 12-26.

[4] In his discussion of *definitive history*, i.e., a history prior to the postmodernist approaches, Jenkins differentiates between a so-called "upper case history," which assigns "objective significance to contingent events," and a "lower case history," which is a disinterested study of history *per se.* Cf. Jenkins, *Why History*, pp. 1-13, 95-114.

[5] Nicholas Royle, *After Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 18.

[6] Jenkins, *Why History*, p. 11. However, some scholars still argue in favor of the former conceptions of history. See Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 2001). In the Introduction Evans evokes the notion of the objective truth of history; thus, he links it to ethical implications and certainties.

[7] Jacques Derrida deconstructs both *definitive history* and ethics; on the impact of Derrida's stance on historiography see Royle, *After Derrida*, *passim*, and, particularly, p. 18f. Jean Baudrillard locates the end of history to the disappearance of the prestige of an event, which entails a historical re-visionism – cf. Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994); discussed in Jenkins, *Why History*, pp. 62-70.

[8] Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 3.

the autobiographical pieces relating Conrad's memorable 1914 visit to Cracow, nostalgia shapes both the adopted attitude towards things past and the texture of both essays.

It is hardly surprising that Conrad considered the national history of Poland a serious issue, an issue which in those days was *definitive* and indeed defining for every Pole, on the one hand, and yet viewed as intractable by the majority of Europeans, on the other. Naturally, the reasons for Conrad's intense interest in the national history of Poland are personal: Polish national history, *videlicet* a history marked by the imperialistic aspirations of the adjacent super powers – Russia, Prussia, and Austria-Hungary – must have been problematic for an author whose patriotic parents fell victim to the ruthlessness of the Russian state, and whose remaining relatives were still subjects of the imperial power. Thus, arguably, Conrad felt a need to sensitise his hosts, the British, to the injustices the Polish state was subjected to through the acts of partition in 1772, 1793, and 1795. The exigency was compelling since, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the European past was being re-negotiated within the European political scene: this struck a particularly dissonant chord to the ears of an author-in-exile dependent on and subordinate to his host country, a Western imperial power.[9] However, as noted by Edward W. Said, Conrad's involvement "in the history and dynamics of political existence is remarkable."[10] Yet despite this, a bone of contention in the eyes of several of his compatriots in Poland was Conrad's allegedly equivocal position on the international arena:[11] the writer appeared as a traitor of the Polish *raison d'etat* and as an author who did not even write in the Polish language.[12] Thus, the issue of his personal commitment to Poland's national aspirations must have appeared to Conrad as crucial as the problem of the national history of Poland which, in his own words, was "shaped by the actual [critical] circumstances of the time."[13]

As noted above, Royle's description of the traditional conception of history as being informed by a "certain kind of traditionality, a certain concept of continuity, of truth"[14] is, in my view, exemplified in Conrad's essayist output, and, particularly, in *Notes on Life and Letters*. Indeed, it can be argued in Conrad's case that the *definitive* notion of history corresponds with the idea of literature the novelist values the most:

[9] Zdzisław Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, trans. by Halina Carroll-Najder (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983), p. 592, Note 200.

[10] Edward W. Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge–Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), p. 15.

[11] Cf. Eliza Orzeszkowa, "The Emigration of Talent," *Kraj* 12 (1899); J. Perlowski, "On Conrad and Kipling." Both included in Zdzisław Najder, *Conrad Under Familial Eyes*, trans. by Halina Carroll-Najder (Cambridge: CUP, 1983); the former on pages 182-192 and the latter on pages 150-170, respectively.

[12] Conrad's literary output is produced exclusively in English – Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley–Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), p. 32. In his article on Conrad, J. Perlowski recalls he himself having objected to Conrad's English output by claiming: "Laughing, I replied not too politely: 'Why not say it in Polish?'" – Perlowski quoted in Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, p. 156. This rather judgmental attitude was quite common in Polish circles.

[13] Conrad, *Notes on Life*, p. 5.

[14] Royle, *After Derrida*, p. 18.

> Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing. But it is also more than that; it stands on firmer ground, being based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena, whereas history is based on documents, and the reading of print and handwriting – on second-hand impression. Thus fiction is nearer truth. But let that pass. A historian may be an artist too, and a novelist is a historian, the preserver, the keeper, the expounder, of human experience.[15]

Conceptually, the quotation which comes from Conrad's essay on Henry James included in Part I of *Notes on Life and Letters*,[16] revolves around the notions of truth and continuity which constitute the intersection between history and literary fiction. In the context of the present discussion, however, it is preferable to emphasise the chiastic correspondence expressed in the final sentence of the above quotation: "a historian may be an artist too, and a novelist is a historian."[17] In my view, this encapsulates Conrad's understanding of the art of writing: not only does the chiasmus equalise the novelist and an artist, but it also inextricably links literature with history. Interestingly, a century has elapsed since Conrad's essay and yet this statement still attracts the critical attention of postmodern scholars who, as a matter of fact, reiterate Conrad's view which, as Nancy F. Partner shrewdly observes, "is certain to arouse the ire of [contemporary] historians."[18] In her article dedicated to the interface of fiction and history, Partner posits that "history – the real [actual] world as it evolves in time – is made sense of in the same way that the poet or novelist tries to make sense of it, i.e., by endowing what originally appears to be problematical and mysterious with the aspect of a recognisable, because it is a familiar, form."[19] It seems that for Conrad the problematical and mysterious aspect of life was located in and interwoven with a particular sub-type of history, namely the national history of his motherland – an issue approached in both the political and autobiographical essays collected in *Notes on Life and Letters*.

The political essays in question, namely "Autocracy and War" (1905), "A Note on the Polish Problem" (1916), and "The Crime of Partition" (1919), instantiate a subjective conceptualisation of history, a history which, in Conrad's prose, becomes a valuable point of reference with ethical ends attached. Hence, in these essays, history is assigned the classical role of a teacher, of the Ciceronian *magistra vitae*.[20] Conrad perceives history in a classical, and indeed, cyclical way: he delineates the

[15] Conrad, *Notes on Life*, p. 19. The interrelatedness of history and fiction has been the subject of postmodern literary studies – cf. Nancy F. Partner, "Historicity in an Age of Reality: Fictions," in *A New Philosophy of History*, eds. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), pp. 21-39.

[16] Conrad was extremely appreciative of Henry James's literary style and is believed to have been strongly influenced by him – cf. Watt, *Conrad*, pp. 200-214.

[17] Conrad, *Notes on Life*, p. 19. Accordingly, "Henry James – an Appreciation – 1905" concludes with "Mr. Henry James, great artist and faithful historian […]" – cf. Conrad, *Notes on Life*, p. 20.

[18] Partner, "Historicity," p. 98.

[19] Partner, "Historicity," p. 32–33.

[20] Cicero's famous lines from *De Oratore* (II, 34) read as follows: "Historia vero testis temporum, lux veritatis, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis, qua voce alia, nisi oratoris, immortalitati commendatur?" They are translated as: "And as History, which bears witness to the passing of the ages, sheds light upon reality, gives life to recollection and guidance to human existence, and brings tidings of ancient days, whose voice, but the orator's, can entrust her to immortality?" – *Ad Quintum Fratrem Dialogi Tres*

processes regulating the then course of events in Europe, moving towards new alliances such as that envisioned in "A Note on the Polish Problem." As the *magistra vitae* teaches, the alliances may yet be hampered by a too lenient policy of Western Europe towards the autocratic and acquisitive European states of Russia or Prussia. The biting sarcasm of Conrad's "Autocracy and War" stigmatises what Grażyna M. T. Branny terms "the pastoral naivety of the West."[21] As a result of this, the western European states have a tendency to sentimentalise the Russian absolutist monarchy, which, in Conrad's opinion, then becomes a "ghost of Russian might."[22] Conrad's voice is that of a disillusioned patriot who links certain events in the national history to axiological categories since – to adduce his own words – "considered *historically*, Russia's influence in Europe seems the most *baseless* thing in the world: a sort of convention invented by diplomatists for some *dark purpose* of their own […]."[23] Although from the postmodern perspective such a statement may give rise to justified objections on nationalistic grounds, it contains Conrad's subjective stance on the issue of European politics, a stance that Najder terms "historical moralism."[24] However, Conrad's moral viewpoint here is not identified with any particular idea or intellectual system as indeed the writer is known for a certain hostility to theories, which, according to Hynes, results from lack of philosophical training on Conrad's part.[25] In fact, to some extent, the writer himself legitimises such opinions with statements similar to this one, also included in *Notes on Life and Letters,* in which he dismisses "the authority of a school" as "a weakness of inferior minds."[26]

In the field of historical studies, a subjective view on history such as that held by Conrad may be conceived of as a fairly natural phenomenon: as Jenkins observes, "each generation writes/rewrites its own history" and it is only in a further step that this history may be again rewritten to suit certain ideologies, tendencies, or interests.[27] Conrad belongs in the first category: as a member of his generation, a generation scarred by the stigma of a non-existent home country, Poland, he voices a critique of the imperial interests of world powers regardless of their nationalities, be

De Oratore. Loeb Classical Library, https://www.loebclassics.com/view/marcus_tullius_cicero-de_oratore/1942/pb_LCL348.225.xml [accessed: 9.06.2020].

Cf. Ewa Solska's stance on the concept of the *magistra vitae* in "Koncept *historia magistra vitae* w badaniach dziejów i dyskursie historycznym," *Sensus Historiae* XXX, no. 1 (2018), pp. 39-56.

[21] Grażyna M. T. Branny, "Contextualising and Intertextualising 'Conrad's Imperialism': Reading 'Heart of Darkness' Against His 'Notes on Life and Letters' and Cormac McCarthy's 'Blood Meridian,'" in *Conrad: Eastern and Western Perspectives*, ed. W. Krajka, XXIII (2014), pp. 135.

[22] Conrad, *Notes on Life*, p. 73.

[23] Conrad, *Notes on Life*, p. 55, my emphases.

[24] Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, p. 416.

[25] Samuel Hynes, "Conrad and Ford: Two Rye Revolutionists," Quoted in Watt, *Conrad*, pp. 77, 147.

[26] Conrad, *Notes on Life*, p. 12.

[27] Jenkins, *Why History*, p. 99. In Jenkins's terminology, the latter instantiates "the old upper case metanarratives" – cf. Jenkins, *Why History*, p. 1. Both upper and lower case history relate to and describe the traditional approaches to the field of study; neither agrees with the postmodernist view on history.

they Russian, British, or German.[28] This is achieved by a skilful deployment of certain rhetorical means, namely understatement, sarcasm, and irony, rather than by marking the discourse with ideological clarity. As Branny observes, "Conrad was particularly sensitive to the subtleties and falsities of colonial discourse,"[29] which, she argues, he applied in his political essays in order to reveal the "well-disguised hypocrisy" of the Western states governed by policies of "mental imperialism"[30] towards his motherland, then under Russian imperial power.

In his treatment of history as a *magistra vitae,* Conrad assigns a special place to the notions of time and transience, which are crucial to the establishment of the mode of nostalgia. In "The Crime of Partition" (1919)[31] he specifically emphasises the passage of time in the process of establishing historical truth, admittedly, a truth of Conrad's own vision. In the ultimate paragraph of "The Crime of Partition" he states: "The only influence that cannot be restrained is simply the influence of time which disengages truth from all facts with a merciless logic and prevails over the passing opinions the changing impulses of men."[32] This statement redefines the interdependence of time and truth while addressing the inversely-proportionate relationship between them: as time passes, historical facts – often inconvenient and unwelcome – are, at best, forgotten, or at worst, distorted. The finality of Conrad's claim is strengthened by its place in the essay: included in the closing paragraph, it is bound to be considered as the final inference of the moot point alongside the concept of crime – an issue belonging to the field of ethics and, hence, a feature of *definitive history* – which constitutes the title and the content of the opening section of the essay.

The provocative conclusion of "The Crime of Partition," which, like a structural bracket, links the concept of political crime with a distortion induced by the passage of time, and thus registered in the historical record, stands in apparent contradiction to the findings of postmodern history scholars, who refute the idea of ethical implications conveyed by historical processes. If analysed from the postmodernist perspective, the national history of Poland featuring in Conrad's essays is likely to be categorised as the author's subjective interpretation of things past. Jenkins observes that "while historical representations ostensibly refer to a past outside of themselves, the past, in the very process of becoming historicised (theorised, constructed, interpreted, read, written…) loses its 'pastness,' its radical alterity to us, and becomes totally textual, totally 'us,'"[33] Conrad's representation of Poland's national history in his political essays is

[28] Jeremy Hawthorn asserts that "for Conrad Russia['s] […] exercise of power was […] morally on or below the level of much of the European exercise of power in Africa or the East" – Jeremy Hawthorn, "Power and Perspective in Joseph Conrad's Political Fiction: the Gaze and the Other," in *Conrad at the Millennium: Modernism, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism*, eds. Gail Fincham, Attie De Lange, Wiesław Krajka (Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska, 2001), p. 291.

[29] Branny, "Contextualising," p. 137.

[30] Branny, "Contextualising," p. 135.

[31] "Crime of Partition" was completed in December 1918 – cf. Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, p. 436. A compelling discussion on the historical circumstances *ibidem.*

[32] Conrad, *Notes on Life*, p. 107.

[33] Jenkins, *Why History*, p. 50.

totally 'him': his is the voice of a concerned patriot who pleads the cause of his motherland. The vision – in his view historical, and in the view of certain contemporary historians merely fictional – is displayed in a manner characteristic of a nostalgic speaker focused on yesterday. In "Poland Revisited" Conrad calls this state of mind "a reminiscent mood,"[34] a mood defined in nostalgia criticism as "a highly subjective and emotive kind of remembrance."[35]

All that has been said above notwithstanding, it can be claimed that Conrad's deep awareness of the passage of time and transience may have yet another, impersonal cause: even if fuelled by his personal experiences and the contested issues of national history, the writer's fascination with the past may have its foundations elsewhere, namely in the modernist attitude of a nostalgic re-consideration of the once-whole-and-complete past, which, as currently agreed,[36] generally governed the modernist perception. It is in the mode of nostalgia that Jean-François Lyotard locates the fundamental difference between modernism and postmodernism: as a spokesman for the postmodern, Lyotard declares war on "the nostalgia of the whole and the one," which, he argues, characterised the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.[37] In another study, *The Postmodern Condition*, the scholar further elaborates on the mode of nostalgia, which, in his opinion, influences "the unpresentable" in the modernist fiction – a concept which he describes as "the unpredictable possibilities for thought, personhood, and society."[38] Lyotard posits that, in modernism, "the unpresentable" is conveyed through "an aesthetic of the sublime" that rests on the nostalgic longing for "the missing contents"; by contrast, the recognisability of the form guarantees the modernist speaker certain consolation and pleasure.[39] From this perspective, Conrad's essays in *Notes on Life and Letters* are rooted in both the nostalgic urge to reflect upon the past and to express anxieties about the disintegration of the present – including the historical record – by applying the traditional forms of expression. In my opinion, the different genres of the essays in *Notes on Life and Letters*, the political and the autobiographical alike, generate divergent applications of nostalgia: while Conrad's political essays are informed with a persistent re-consideration of

[34] Conrad, *Notes on Life*, p. 125.

[35] Gabrielle McIntire, "You Can't Go Home Again: Ambivalent Nostalgia in T. S. Eliot's Poetry," in *Modernism and Nostalgia: Bodies, Locations, Aesthetics*, ed. Tammy Clewell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 60.

[36] *Modernism and Nostalgia*, p. 8. See also Helmut Illbruck, *Nostalgia: Origins and Ends of an Unenlightened Disease* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), pp. 197-199; see also Jenkins, *Why History*, pp. 72-82.

[37] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. by T. M. Pefanis (London: Turnaround, 1992), p. 24.

[38] Cf. Jenkins' elaboration on the concept of "the unpresentable" as understood via the Kantian understanding of the sublime in Jenkins, *Why History*, pp. 72-74. In short, it is constituted by the conceptual gap between ideality and reality; the gap is unbridgeable and the realisation of this is bound to be equivocal since it means both a capacity to conceive and an incapacity to present the intended content; hence, "the unpresentable" character.

[39] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington, Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 81.

the central issues of Poland's national history, i.e., they are imbued with Lyotard's "missing contents," without the application of the mode of nostalgia on the formal level, Conrad's autobiographical essays are both fuelled by a nostalgic longing, at the same time, displaying a nostalgic vision to the readers. Thus, it is the generic form of the essays that preconditions the extent and intensity of their modal application of nostalgia.

As mentioned above, the outer form[40] of Conrad's political essays evades the rhetoric of nostalgia which may involve such a trope as a journey back into childhood or express an exilic longing. The reason for the evasion could be pragmatics: the mode of nostalgia seems incompatible with an argumentative address intended as a moot point in a harsh political struggle, as was "A Note on the Polish Problem" (1916). This text describes an idealistic vision of the Polish Commonwealth recreated under an Anglo-French Protectorate, which was delivered to the British Foreign Office but whose claims were instantaneously rejected.[41] Similarly, another essay written by Conrad, "Crime of Partition," served as a major argument in a political debate of 1918 when the Entente considered the viability of Poland's independence.[42] As Najder asserts, Conrad was aware of the fact that several British politicians were against the idea of an independent Poland; hence, the harsh, yet persuasive, tone of the essay.[43] The pragmatic considerations seem to preclude nostalgic or sentimental undertones. Moreover, in the case of the first text the focus placed on Poland's national past is ultimately subordinated to the issue of Poland's future: with the past serving as a recurrent point of reference, "A Note on the Polish Problem" looks into the future hypothetically freed from the burdensome recollections of the disintegration and collapse of the Polish state.

Interestingly, as criticism of nostalgia studies has demonstrated, nostalgia has found its application in the historical and political essay, the mode being smoothly incorporated into texts which evoke the national past. In her seminal study, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym makes a distinction between two fundamental kinds of nostalgia: *restorative* and *reflective.* The critic argues that:

> Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* [the return] and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. The first category of nostalgics do not think of themselves

[40] Here I refer to a generic differentiation between the outer form of a literary work (e.g. a specific metre or structure) and the inner form (e.g. an attitude or tone). Cf. Paul Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 45-50. Cf. also René Wellek, Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956), p. 221.

[41] In his 1920 Author's Note, which prefaces *Notes on Life and Letters*, Conrad includes a paragraph in which he expounds upon the circumstances of the composition and delivery of "A Note on the Polish Problem" in 1916; the tone of the fragment is that of an ironic *apologia pro [facto suo]*. However, Najder observes that the Note did not pass unnoticed: its echoes may be found "in an anonymous memorandum prepared at the Foreign Office in the autumn of 1916, at the request of Herbert Henry Asquith, the prime minister." Cf. Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, p. 417.

[42] According to Najder, the essay was completed in December 1918 at a time when the Allied Powers had not yet formally recognised the just-reborn Polish state. Cf. Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, p. 436.

[43] Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*. See also Note 200, p. 592.

> as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth. This kind of nostalgia characterizes national and nationalistic revivals all over the world, which engage in the anti-modern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories.[44]

The differentiation furnished above draws on the etymology of the term: as I argue elsewhere,[45] the modal subtleties of nostalgia are sensitive to emphasis, which is either placed on the first constituent, i.e., *nostos* (the return), or on the second. i.e., *algos* (the painful longing). In the case of the former, the attention is directed towards the spatial distance; by contrast, in the case of the latter, the distance, i.e., Lyotard's "missing contents," is translated into a temporal dimension. Certainly, the emphases may shift and overlap in a process of adaptation, which seems generically induced.[46]

In the quotation above, Boym argues that the nostalgia which is valued by the proponents of national history centers around the first constituent, i.e., the *nostos,* by a return to the memory sites of the national history. Contrary to popular knowledge, such nostalgia has little to do with sentimentalism: according to Boym, *restorative* nostalgic is "dead serious […]."[47] Moreover, the speaker is also serious because the final goal they attempt to achieve is to "spatialize time," i.e., to add the former national greatness of the state and the nation to its present condition. As Boym convincingly argues, this has happened in Europe quite often and indeed quite recently.[48]

Hypothetically, the interface of *restorative* nostalgia and national history, aggrandised and elevated, might be applicable in Conrad's political essays, with the *nostos* being Conrad's visit to Poland in 1914, together with the focus on past matters that were given saliency in his essays. However, in the case of the political essays, it appears any attempt at the restoration of Poland on the map of Europe was precluded *a priori* since to mention Poland's recent past would have involved discussing its political impotence and final collapse in 1795. Arguably, this would have been similarly unavoidable if the focus in the essays had been placed on the pre-partitioning history of the Polish state from before 1772. In both cases, avoiding any mention of Poland's disintegration would have been impossible. Thus, *restorative* nostalgia would not have been an appropriate mode of expression in the political essays included in *Notes on Life and Letters*; neither would it be the tone of popular sentimentalism commonly linked with nostalgia discourse, which was in fact abhorrent to Conrad.[49] Therefore, the nostalgia of Conrad's political essays merely characterises

[44] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2001), p. 41.

[45] Cf. my forthcoming article: "*Nostos*, Nostalgia, and Pastoral in 20th-century British Prose Fiction."

[46] For example, the elegy will be naturally centered around *algos.*

[47] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 49.

[48] As a Russian by descent, Boym is particularly focused on the political discourse in contemporary Russia; the critic examines the workings of nostalgia as an effective political tool (Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, pp. 57-71).

[49] Conrad frequently expresses his aversion to "sentimental assumptions" – Conrad, *Notes on Life*, p. 29. See also the opening paragraphs of "Autocracy and War." As regards nostalgia, the sentimental paradigm has become quite popular and even induced a pejorative connotation of the mode. In the article, sentimental nostalgia is not discussed in detail.

the attitude of the speaker who – interested in the various facets of Poland's national history – shuns expressing himself by means of a distinct mode and particular rhetoric.

As has already been mentioned, the essays in *Notes on Life and Letters* represent a variety of genres which involve and deploy a number of modes. The autobiographical essays included in Part II: "Life," and, particularly, in "Poland Revisited" (1915), are openly nostalgic, their tone being diametrically opposed to that of the cynical, yet desperate cry uttered in the preceding political essays. This seems to be due to a deliberate modal choice made by the author, a choice facilitated by the primary generic affiliation of the texts in question, nostalgia being the mode frequently applied in an autobiography or a memoir. Published during WWI,[50] "Poland Revisited" features Conrad's personal reminiscences of his two-month visit to southern Poland, still under partition, on the eve of the Great War. Centered on a rendition of movement and motion, the essay includes a few insights into the Austro-Hungarian partition of Poland and the focus is moved from a historical record of the Polish state towards a personal recollection of a recent journey to the motherland – revisited by Conrad after 36 years.

If considered in the context of nostalgia criticism, "Poland Revisited" instantiates the idea of *nostos* accomplished in reality: the spatial distance between the adopted country and the motherland is reported as being covered within a few days. Movement and a gradual rapprochement of 'here' and 'there' parallels an implosion of 'now' and 'then' since, on his departure, Conrad divulges setting off on a spiritual return to the country of his youth, his "*pays du rêve*."[51] The phrase intentionally highlights the fulfilment of a wistful longing: "a voyage *au pays du rêve*" activates nostalgic associations.[52] Moreover, the nostalgia of "Poland Revisited" becomes a leading mode in the autobiographical text which immediately follows the three political essays discussed above and is itself followed by a series of other autobiographical pieces among which solely the first, "First News" (1918), addresses Poland's national history.[53] Thus, the sequential order of Part II: "Life" re-enforces the modal discrepancy between the political and autobiographical texts, making the deployment of nostalgia one of the structural principles of the second part of *Notes on Life and Letters*.

As already indicated, "Poland Revisited" opens the autobiographical sequence in *Notes on Life and Letters*, in my view, by forming a point of intersection: while the political essays merely display a focus on the past characteristic of a nostalgic speaker, "Poland Revisited" deploys nostalgia as a mode. In the subsequent essays,

[50] Najder asserts that "Poland Revisited" was the only text written within six months of the family's return from Poland to England in late 1914. Cf. Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, p. 405. See also Note 4 in Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, p. 583.

[51] See the actual description in Conrad, *Notes on Life*, p. 85, italics original.

[52] Illbruck, *Nostalgia*, p. 62-63.

[53] The order of the essays in Part II: "Life" is also determined by the thematic content of each text: the first group is formed by the political essays; the second by the autobiographical texts focused on things Polish; and the third is also autobiographical but addresses various aspects of life at sea.

i.e., those following "Poland Revisited," nostalgia surfaces on the formal level even if the thematic scope of the essays broadens and the focus shifts from the historical to maritime interests. My contention is that in "Poland Revisited" the deployment of the mode exemplifies what Boym calls *reflective* nostalgia as it is applied in an act of "temporalizing space" which, according to the critic, is "ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary."[54] In "Poland Revisited," space – the city of Cracow and, indeed, the south of Poland – is repeatedly re-imagined as a historical site imbued with memories of both private and of historical bearing; the result is a fusion of the present and the past. An intermingling of temporal layers, which is typical of nostalgia, is made deliberately suggestive by means of conventional rhetoric e.g., the trope of "a great dusk over all this."[55] In addition, Conrad explicitly admits that "[his] present […] would stand by [him] in this test of the reality of [his] past."[56] Typically, the nostalgia in "Poland Revisited" reads as a sweet-sour emotion:[57] notwithstanding Conrad's emotional anticipation of "bodily venture," he admits to feeling apprehensive about it even if, as he says, "fear in itself may become a fascination."[58] In my view, this attitude implies nostalgic intensity combining pleasure with anxiety – in line with Lyotard's modernist reading of the Kantian sublime.[59]

It can be argued that Conrad's deployment of nostalgia is not accidental; neither does it merely result from a temporary inclination, or the passing mood of the author. I wish to argue that the nostalgia interfacing with other modes in the collection – for instance, the Gothic mode – depends on the immediacy of war. Since nostalgia has increased saliency in times of political turmoil,[60] it is hardly surprising that in Conrad's *Notes on Life and Letters* the mode also gains in intensity in texts which recount the advent of WWI, i.e., in "Poland Revisited" and its sequel, "First News."[61] Once nostalgia becomes distinguishable as a mode, the thematic focus of the essays is re-directed from the national history of the state towards the history of an individual. In my view, this shift is not only symptomatic of the modal change but also quite natural: an increase in subjectivity involves narrowing of the angle of vision. This, in turn, favours *reflective* nostalgia as defined by Boym, to the disadvantage of its *restorative* counter-part which centers upon state and national issues. In my opinion,

[54] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 49.

[55] Conrad, *Notes on Life*, p. 117.

[56] Conrad, *Notes on Life*, p. 117.

[57] In his comprehensive study of nostalgia, Illbruck discusses the ambivalent longing of nostalgia in a chapter entitled "Critics of Nostalgia: Kant, Schopenhauer and the Question of Time," in Illbruck, *Nostalgia*, pp. 127–142.

[58] Conrad, *Notes on Life*, p. 117.

[59] Jenkins, *Why History*, p. 73–75.

[60] Thomas Dodman, *What Nostalgia Was: War, Empire, and the Time of a Deadly Emotion* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), pp. 70-75; Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 28. Nostalgia entered modern vocabularies in the late 1600s – see Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 32.

[61] It is worth noting that Conrad rejected the idea of recounting the memorable events before the outbreak of WWI in a more detailed or effusive way: in a letter to Pinker, the novelist admits that he eschews "touching on the political side of the present situation [September 1918]." Conrad quoted in Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, p. 434.

reflective nostalgia is applied in the autobiographical essays of *Notes on Life and Letters,* quite apart from their thematic focus: introduced specifically as a mode of expression in "Poland Revisited," it persists in both the war-time and maritime essays.[62]

If examined from the standpoint of historical truth – contested though the concept may be in contemporary criticism – the deployment of nostalgia can also account for the factual inconsistencies in Conrad's autobiographical work. Indeed, as Najder states, the writer's "reminiscences cannot be regarded as documentary evidence: most accounts of events require correction, and there are also surprising omissions."[63] This is certainly true and the issue has been frequently discussed. However, as regards recollections, inconsistencies are quite common because, according to Lowenthal, "recollection helps digest and comprehend [the past]. Memories are selective reconstructions, remade by subsequent actions and perceptions, freshly envisioned by changing codes of knowledge."[64] In his study on Conrad's writing, Najder expounds on the discrepancies between historical evidence and Conrad's autobiographical account of events by surmising that the writer adopts a strategy of "self-mythologizing," and unwittingly, distorts certain facts.[65] As Marek Pacukiewicz, a cultural anthropologist, argues, the incongruence between historical facts and their rendition in fiction may be predetermined by the very nature of fiction, which hardly ever offers a mimetic reflection of reality.[66] Instead, literary works feature the imprinted cultural patterns of the society in which they have been created and of which they are part. Pacukiewicz claims that, in Conrad's case, it was "the cultural model of Polish nobles from the eastern borderlands."[67] Thus, Conrad's autobiographical nar-

[62] I wish to argue that once deployed as a mode, nostalgia shapes and models all the subsequent essays in the collection. However, since their thematic frame is maritime, it is of no concern to me in the present article.

[63] Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, p. 504. Here Najder comments on Conrad's *A Personal Record.* Since the collection also represents the autobiography, I adduce the quotation above. Further in *Joseph Conrad. A Chronicle* Najder re-asserts that "Conrad's recollections of his stay in Cracow, written in 1915 and 1918, have to be treated cautiously as biographical documents, not only because their author confuses the dates and chronology of current events, but primarily because […] his account there […] is contradicted by his own letters […]." – cf. Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, pp. 398-399. See also Note 13 on page 582.

[64] Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 332.

[65] Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, p. 504 and p. 582.

[66] Marek Pacukiewicz cites E. Kosowska's stance on literature according to which "both the form and the content of a work of literature are culturally determined" – cf. Ewa Kosowska, *Antropologia literatury. Teksty, konteksty, interpretacje* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2003), p. 24. In the case of autobiography, the inference is that it is a testimony to the life story of an individual as well as to that of a nation or, as Pacukiewicz after Gomóła posits, that of a generation – cf. Anna Gomóła, *Jan Michał Witort. Wprowadzenie do antropologii pokolenia "ludzi naukowych"* (Poznań–Katowice: Wydawnictwo Exemplum, Uniwersytet Śląski, 2011), p. 54.

[67] Marek Pacukiewicz, "Cultural Aspects of Joseph Conrad's Autobiography: On the Digressive Structure of 'Some Reminiscences,'" *Yearbook of Conrad's Studies (Poland)* VII (2012), pp. 72-74. On the interface between an individual and community see also Marek Pacukiewicz, *Dyskurs antropologiczny w pisarstwie Josepha Conrada* (Kraków: Universitas, 2008), pp. 152-159.

ratives are culturally determined and as such are representative not merely of his own individual past, but also that of his fellow compatriots.[68] In this sense, Conrad's personal history is part of the national history of Poland under partition, often recollected with a nostalgic longing which is as alluring as it is idealising, and, consequently, sometimes unfaithful to reality. Pacukiewicz explains the processes of idealisation through the concept of the "ideal patterns" of Conrad's homeland, which, the critic claims, became part of the writer's mind in the new social context. In endorsing Pacukiewicz's claim, yet another stance, namely that of nostalgia criticism, has to be addressed: I would argue that the factual discrepancies between history and literature – or facts and fiction, respectively – are both distinctive features of the genre of autobiography and the mode of nostalgia in its *reflective* version. An unsystematic concept, nostalgia does not preclude the existence of personal records which are contradictory or mutually exclusive. Conrad's approach in *Notes on Life and Letters* is selective, each essay constituting separate, self-contained entity, the selectivity instantiating the modernist interest in both the fragmentary and the interiorised as well as reflecting the serialised form of the initial printed versions of the essays. Hence, Said's description of the collection as a "skeletal figure"[69] seems to capture the character of Conrad's *Notes on Life and Letters* particularly well.

Since *reflective* nostalgia centers on an emotional recollection of the past, it may distort certain records. Conrad's account of the events on the eve of WWI in *Notes on Life and Letters* is framed against a multiplicity of accounts of this decisive moment in Poland's national history. This accords with the findings of Boym, who posits that "in the emotional topography of memory, personal and historical events tend to be conflated. It seems that the only way to discuss collective memory is through imaginary dialogues with dispersed fellow citizens, expatriates and exiles."[70] Thus, a plausible justification of the historical inconsistencies in *Notes on Life and Letters* results from the generic and modal alignment of the collection: while historical accuracy is not a distinctive feature of autobiography – which is *sui generis* subjective and, consequently, biased – the mode of nostalgia regards the historical record as a mere starting point, factual accuracy thus being of secondary importance.

To conclude, it appears that nostalgia is deployed as one of the modes discernible in Conrad's *Notes on Life and Letters*. It informs both the political and the autobiographical essays of Part II of the collection called "Life," with a reservation that in the former it only describes the adopted attitude of the speaker who assigns a stage-centered position to the past, while in the latter, it is both a mode of perception and a mode framing reflective consideration. However, Conrad does not deploy the sentimental paradigm of popular nostalgia, a paradigm which, as proven, was quite foreign both to his taste and way of thinking. Rather, the mode of nostalgia in Conrad's collection accords with the characteristics of modernism as defined by Lyotard.

[68] Since "Poland Revisited" and "First News" feature Conrad's recollections of Poland, I leave the question of Conrad's national identity aside. In this context, the issues of globalisation and the adaptability of cultural patterns are addressed by Pacukiewicz, "Cultural Aspects," pp. 73-74.

[69] Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction*, p. 23.

[70] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 52.

Conrad's fascination with the past, both individual and national, is imbued with pain intertwined with pleasure. Nostalgia appears to be the structural pivot of *Notes on Life and Letters*, a pivot around which the collection is constructed and which marks not only the shifts in the genres of the essays included, but also signals a broadening of their thematic scope, which covers the wartime and maritime themes. And finally, the mode of *reflective* nostalgia in the autobiographical essays included in Part II: "Life" accounts for the episodic framework of the texts and their ironic overtones as well as for certain factual inconsistencies concerning both to Conrad's personal history and the collective memory of the Polish nation.

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