

CULTURAL ASPECTS OF JOSEPH CONRAD'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY.

ON THE DIGRESSIVE STRUCTURE OF *SOME REMINISCENCES*

Marek Pacukiewicz

The University of Silesia, Katowice

Abstract: In this essay I attempt to analyse Joseph Conrad's 'autobiography' — as it is presented in *Some Reminiscences* — with particular reference to the enduring cultural patterns that it exhibits. According to the configurationist or "culture and personality" approach elaborated by American anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict and Ralph Linton, patterns of behaviour transmitted within particular cultural groups permanently configure the personality model of its members both at the level of everyday behaviour and at the level of ideal patterns. This is confirmed by an analysis of Conrad's autobiography, in which the writer draws on the ideal patterns of the culture of the Polish eastern borderlands (which he acquired during the process of socialization) — not only in order to analyse his own personality, but also to govern his behaviour in completely different cultural contexts. Even more interestingly, these behavioural patterns have configured the particular model of the world that is reflected in the very structure of Conrad's works. In this connection the influence of the *gawęda* or 'Polish nobleman's tale' would seem to be indisputable. It is not so much that Conrad alludes to this literary convention in his autobiographical reminiscences, but rather that he uses it to re-create the model (based on cultural patterns) of the imagination of a Polish nobleman from the eastern borderlands. Moreover, this culturally determined writing strategy is used in Conrad's other works.

Keywords: autobiography, cultural anthropology, cultural patterns, *gawęda*, Joseph Conrad

While acknowledging the achievements of his predecessors, Roger Tennant — in the preface to his own biography of Joseph Conrad — draws our attention to several important problems that arise whenever we read accounts of this author's life. Jean-Aubry, for instance, places too much trust in the "autobiographical" clues to be found in Conrad's prose, while Jerry Allen "patches the fragile fabric of the legend." Although Jocelyn Baines is more scientific in his approach, he is nevertheless "insufficiently skeptical" (*sic*).¹ Tennant expresses a truth that contemporary Conrad schol-

¹ Roger Tennant. *Joseph Conrad*. London: Sheldon Press, 1981, p. v.

ars know all too well: in attempting to reconstruct certain biographical facts, they very often find that the least credible source is the author himself — and, as often as not, this applies in equal measure not only to his literary fiction, but also to letters and documents that bear his signature. Over and above all this, however, more general questions arise. What sources can be used to reconstruct the author's biography? Can the literary texts help us in any way? And how should we interpret discrepancies in the memoirs, to say nothing of the particular character (and above all the form) of Conrad's autobiographical works?

Scholars have variously interpreted Conrad's inventive approach to his own biography. Without wishing to make a value judgement, Zdzisław Najder calls it "self-mythologizing,"² while Edward Said in his canonic book entitled *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* suggests that Conrad might have been "hiding himself within rhetoric"³ and that even in his autobiographical texts there is a "combination of evasion with a seemingly artless candour".⁴ Although Said stresses that there is no clear and obvious dividing line between real "life" on the one hand and, on the other, "literature" that has been created, the concept of "autobiographical fiction" is based on this very distinction. Zdzisław Najder for his part points out that although the whole of Conrad's "autobiographical" writing clearly serves the purpose of modelling the author's own past, "Conrad cherished various self-images, which sometimes contradicted not only the facts, but each other. But it would not do to accuse him of 'lying'".⁵

Here I think that an observation made by Clifford Geertz (in a different context) on the subject of anthropological interpretations of culture may be more than helpful. The latter, he says, are fictions, but not in the sense that they are "false, unfactual, or merely 'as if' thought experiments." Rather, they are constructs, as the Latin etymology of the word *fictiō* — denoting "something made" or "something fashioned" — suggests.⁶ From the point of view of a cultural anthropologist — who views the world of culture as a whole (albeit a complex whole) — the particular cultural context to which a given group of cultural artefacts belongs is more important than the dividing line between reality and literature.

Literature may also be seen as a cultural artefact. In proposing a "cultural anthropology of literature," Ewa Kosowska stresses the complexity of the cultural determinants of a literary text:

Literature is not only a domain of artistic creation. It is also a source of knowledge about ways of creating new worlds from old components. Both the form and the content of a work of literature are culturally determined — and at the same time make some aspect of the real,

² Zdzisław Najder. *Joseph Conrad: A Life*. Transl. Halina Najder. Rochester: Camden House, 2007, p. x.

³ Edward W. Said. *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

⁵ Najder. *Joseph Conrad: A Life*, ed. cit., p. xi.

⁶ Clifford Geertz. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture". [In:] *idem. The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 15.

non-literary world the subject of artistic creation. Fiction is always based on elements of reality, whereas the latter — being invariably part of the artificially created configuration of a ‘represented world’ — become building blocks for the creation of ‘possible worlds’.⁷

This means that we need not assume that literature provides us with a mirror-like reflection of cultural reality. Moreover, the way in which this cultural reality is transformed may itself be culturally determined. Literature may be seen as a cultural artefact that is at one and the same time a cultural construct. A work of literature, “being fiction on the level of surface structure, may hold the key to socially recognizable truth about the hidden mechanisms of culture.”⁸ Kosowska’s proposition would therefore allow us to apply the methods and concepts of cultural anthropology to literary research.

Whereas Zdzisław Najder makes the point that “We cannot put an equation mark, nor any other sign of strict correlation between the personal and the cultural, transcendental ‘I,’”⁹ the cognitive perspective offered by the anthropology of literature assumes that both these sets belong to the same cultural system, though they use different means of expression. This, however, does not in any way imply a biographical approach to literary research. Even when he reflects a reality that is alien to him or creates a totally imaginary world, the writer acts within a certain system of intellectual and emotional reactions to a particular spectrum of experience — a system that has been learned and inculcated during the process of his upbringing. Zdzisław Najder would therefore seem to be perfectly justified in calling for the biography of Conrad to be made “a study of culture” and its language to be analysed as “a cultural language, a public system of signs.”¹⁰ In this context Najder draws particular attention to certain ‘motifs’ such as questions of fidelity, honour and patriotism. We can, however, direct our attention not only to matters of content, but also to matters of form, thus discovering possible cultural determinants in the very structure of Conrad’s works.

At this juncture we must clarify the concept of the ‘cultural pattern’, which has been taken from the American school of anthropological research (known as configurationism or the “culture and personality approach”), whose exponents include researchers such as Ruth Benedict and Ralph Linton. One of the basic precepts of this school of research is that cultural tradition is examined via a personality model and *vice versa*:

A culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action. Within each culture there come into being characteristic purposes not necessarily shared by

⁷ Ewa Kosowska. *Antropologia literatury. Teksty, konteksty, interpretacje*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2003, p. 24.

⁸ Ewa Kosowska. *Postać literacka jako tekst kultury. Rekonstrukcja antropologicznego modelu szlachcianki na podstawie „Potopu” H. Sienkiewicza*. Katowice: Śląsk, 1988, p. 36.

⁹ Najder. *Joseph Conrad: A Life*, ed. cit., p. xi.

¹⁰ Zdzisław Najder. “Conrad’s Polish Background, or from Biography to a Study of Culture”. [In:] *idem. Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 15. See: Najder. *Joseph Conrad: A Life*, ed. cit., p. ix: “the proper study of the biographer is a study of culture.”

other types of society. In obedience to these purposes, each people further and further consolidates its experience, and in proportion to the urgency of these drives the heterogeneous items of behaviour take more and more congruous shape.¹¹

In the words of the same writer:

“[...] culture provides the raw material of which the individual makes his life.”¹²

Here “raw material” means not only experience or ready-made cultural accoutrements, but also time-worn models of shaping reality — a total model of man and the world — for, ultimately:

Society [...] is never an entity separable from the individuals who compose it. No individual can arrive even at the threshold of his potentialities without a culture in which he participates. Conversely, no civilization has in it any element which in the last analysis is not the contribution of an individual.¹³

It must be stressed that Ruth Benedict sees culture as being composed of “traits” — “strands which are braided in many combinations”¹⁴ — selected from Man’s broad existential potential and shaped in a unique way — just as each language selects its very own range of sounds.¹⁵ The resulting cultural pattern — which is a configuration of manifold features — shapes various aspects of reality. By shaping the overall context, this cultural pattern creates an appropriate personality model for all members of a given community. Research using such an approach presupposes an all-embracing examination of a particular culture in its various manifestations — though always in context — taking into account not only individual components, but above all their structure.

Ralph Linton narrows the concept of the cultural pattern as a standard of behaviour by defining culture as “the configuration of learned behaviour and results of behaviour whose component elements are shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society.”¹⁶ On the level of individuals, we have (in this case) a “fairly well-integrated configuration which may be called the *Basic Personality Type*.” Furthermore: “The existence of this configuration provides the members of the society with common understandings and values and makes possible the unified emotional response of the society’s members to situations in which their common values are involved.”¹⁷ Logically, therefore, we should be searching for such a “basic personality type” in the case of Conrad — but where?

Several attempts to reconstruct the personality model of Joseph Conrad have been made by Polish researchers — including literary scholars — and these may be seen

¹¹ Ruth Benedict. *Patterns of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1935, p. 46.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 251–252.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 45–50. The language analogy: pp. 23–24.

¹⁶ Ralph Linton. *The Cultural Background of Personality*. London: Routledge, 1968, p. 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

as referring to the concept of a cultural pattern. Czesław Miłosz once argued that Conrad was a typical Polish nobleman from the eastern borderlands and therefore represented the “stereotype of Polish patriotic sensibility.”¹⁸ Rafał Kopkowski also sees Conrad as being a dyed-in-the-wool nobleman from the east of Poland.¹⁹ Stefan Zabierowski for his part — writing about “Conrad’s noble heritage”²⁰ — draws attention not only to the central place occupied by honour in the lives of these noblemen, but also to their particular manners, their proverbial daredevil streak and their extravagance, all of which qualities can be observed in Conrad’s own behaviour — so much so, that Zabierowski ventures the opinion that Conrad “turned the most precious elements of his noble heritage into universal values.”²¹

It must be said, though, that this approach very often presents us with findings from two separate worlds: on the one hand there is the world of ideas and cultural values gleaned from Conrad’s writings, while on the other hand there is the world of ‘life and manners’ that has been reconstructed on the basis of observations made by Conrad’s friends and acquaintances. There is, however, another option: it would seem that traces of cultural patterns can be found not only in the content of Conrad’s texts, but — particularly in the case of his autobiographical writings — also in their form. In the present article I would like to make use of the research guidelines proposed by Anna Gomółka, who postulates the possibility of examining autobiographical texts above all with a view to reconstructing attitude models. An autobiography, she maintains, can be “not only the account of an individual life, but also the trace of a period of history — a testimony to the experiences of a generation.”²²

In the case of Conrad’s texts, of course, two serious reservations concerning such an analysis spring to mind. Firstly, we must ask whether the author’s rich and far-reaching multicultural experience — to mention but the French and English spheres of culture, in which he felt quite at home — did not blur his ‘native’ Polish personality model, in which case we may be dealing with nothing more than scraps that over the years have been pigeonholed as ‘stereotypes’, to use Miłosz’s term. Paradoxically, the question we ask of Conrad’s biography is still being asked today: to what extent can globalization (variously understood), postmodernity, transculturalism etc. erase the cultural identity of the individual. Anthropologists, however, have long held that cultural models have a very long life and should be seen neither as fossilized stereotypes, nor as volatile entities. While they are relatively stable, they are also very flexible, which means that we can speak not so much of the long life of a particular cultural pattern, but of that of its variations. Moreover, the most intensive process of

¹⁸ Czesław Miłosz. “Stereotyp u Conrada”. [In:] *Conrad żywy*. Ed. Wit Tarnawski. London: B. Świdorski, 1957, pp. 92–93.

¹⁹ See: Rafał Kopkowski. *Szlacheckie dziedzictwo Conrada. Conrad w kręgu tradycji szlacheckich*. Katowice, 2012 [computer printout of part of a University of Silesia Ph.D. thesis].

²⁰ Stefan Zabierowski. “Conrad’s Noble Heritage”. [In:] *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, vol. IV (2008–2009), p. 103.

²¹ Stefan Zabierowski. “Szlacheckie dziedzictwo Conrada”. [In:] *idem. W kręgu Conrada*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2008, p. 81.

²² Anna Gomółka. *Jan Michał Witort. Wprowadzenie do antropologii pokolenia „ludzi naukowych”*. Poznań–Katowice: Wydawnictwo Exemplum, Uniwersytet Śląski, 2011, p. 54.

socialization takes place during childhood — and this was certainly the case of Conrad. And, of course, let us not forget that we are culturally moulded not only in the sphere of language or that of conscious patterns of behaviour, but also in the non-verbal sphere. It sometimes happens that a gesture, a way of speaking or an emotional reaction that we would not normally associate with a particular cultural tradition lasts longest. Such behaviour may also express the writer's particular way of seeing the world — something of which he may not be conscious. As Kosowska points out, in this case we may speak of a 'translation', as it were, of a cultural reality (together with the codes required to understand it) into the language of literature. We may therefore surmise that the formal structure of Conrad's writing — and in particular that of his autobiographical texts — reflects the contextual cognitive forms that shaped his view of the world. Paradoxically, these forms become even more apparent when the author uses them to explain the complexities of moving between certain cultural contexts and cultural spheres.

The second reservation concerning the question of examining Conrad's autobiographical texts in order to reconstruct the cultural model of his personality is that we must decide whether the factual discrepancies in Conrad's autobiographical texts can also be treated as an expression of contextual cultural patterns. Here we may invoke one of the principles of anthropological field studies, which states that even a falsehood provided by an informant counts as a certain cultural truth, being an expression of his attitude to the world. It therefore comes as no surprise to see that scholars have drawn attention to the fact that Conrad's "self-mythologizing" (to use Najder's term)²³ is an expression of the cultural model of Polish nobles from the eastern borderlands, who were often not averse to embellishing the truth. We may, however, invoke yet another principle of research into cultural models — one that goes beyond the dichotomy of truth and falsehood — namely Ralph Linton's concept of "ideal patterns":

These are abstractions which have been developed by the members of a society themselves. They represent the consensus of opinion on the part of the society's members as to how people should behave in particular situations. [...] [However,] no group ever develops ideal patterns of behaviour corresponding to all situations. [...] [In general,] ideal patterns appear to be developed most frequently with respect to those situations which a society regards as of primary importance and particularly with respect to those involving the interaction of individuals in different positions in the social system.²⁴

One might go as far as to say that ideal patterns can come into play not only on the borderlines between certain social groups, but also on the borderlines between cultures. When differing contexts meet, certain constructs become necessary in order that individuals representing a given culture may define themselves. It must be remembered, however, that the functioning of ideal patterns is governed by an important rule:

²³ Najder. *Joseph Conrad: A Life*, ed. cit., p. x.

²⁴ Linton. *The Cultural Background of Personality*, ed. cit., p. 34.

Ideal patterns may not and indeed usually do not agree with the construct patterns which the investigator develops through his observations of actual behaviour. In some cases this lack of agreement may reflect nothing more than a failure of the ideal pattern to keep abreast of the realities of a changing culture. It is based on memories of things as they were rather than on observation of things as they are. In other cases the ideal pattern probably never has been in agreement with the mode of real culture pattern. [...] In either case ideal patterns exercise some normative effect, discouraging too wide a divergence from the standards which they set. However, when such ideal patterns become thoroughly verbalized and crystallized they tend to lose some measure of their influence. They acquire an independent existence and instead of representing the proper response to a particular situation become themselves the proper response to a particular question. [...] Such verbalizations are themselves patterns in real culture, but they are to be classed with the literature of a society and give no more indication of the actual behaviour of its members than do any other bits of folklore.²⁵

It would seem to me that this lengthy quotation very neatly describes not only the case of Conrad, but also the problem of analysing cultural models through the optic of works of literature. Being partly isolated from his native culture and certainly having no contact with the cultural reality that was typical for his personality model, Conrad — I think — more or less consciously applied the “ideal patterns” of Polish culture in order to cope with the new context in which he found himself and also to clarify his own existential situation. By the same token, when Conrad wrote his autobiographical texts he was more concerned with maintaining the coherence of “ideal patterns” — the basic reference points that were part of the cultural reality that had been impressed on his mind — than with the faithful reproduction of facts.

This *modus operandi* is most clearly visible in the volume entitled *Some Reminiscences*, but before examining this text I would like to come back to the subject of autobiographical writing — not to discuss literary questions, such as its genre,²⁶ but to examine its cultural dimension and its cultural function. Once again, I will make use of guidelines suggested by Anna Gomółka:

An autobiography in this meaning is therefore a multilevel document with multiple facets — the recorded account of the author’s grappling with himself on at least two planes: with himself as a human being (i.e. as an individual and at the same time as the representative of a certain

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 34–35.

²⁶ Gomółka. *Jan Michał Witort. Wprowadzenie do antropologii pokolenia „ludzi naukowych”*, ed. cit., pp. 53–57.

Anna Gomółka lists the following characteristics that distinguish an autobiography from a diary:

1. An autobiography gives an account of experiences and not of external things.
2. The author of an autobiography has an “enquiring attitude towards his own life”, whereas a diarist merely records memories.
3. An autobiography attempts to describe an entire lifetime and not just isolated memories.
4. The aim of an autobiography is to sum up a life.

Seen in this light, therefore, an autobiography clearly emerges as a kind of anthropological document: the cultural awareness of the individual becomes a lens, as it were, through which we can also see the context that shaped the narrator. It is also worth noting that this description of an autobiography fits Conrad’s *Some Reminiscences* — which, though dealing only with a fragment of the author’s life, are nevertheless intended to present the entire life as a coherent whole.

group) and with his fate and his past (i.e. as a creative impulse and as the subject matter for his writing). This entails a concurrent grappling with the very process of writing.²⁷

It would seem that such cultural patterns are also to be found in *Some Reminiscences*, — as is actually shown by the author/narrator construction created by Conrad. Stanisław Modrzewski is of the opinion that the personality model that emerges from *Some Reminiscences* “is highly polarized. The author of the memoirs is a Pole who has become an Englishman. He comes from a patriotic noble family and has become a sailor. He is a sailor who has become a writer.”²⁸ This multipolarity, according to Modrzewski, is ultimately brought together to form a logical whole — “a very Romantic self-portrait”²⁹ — but at the same time “in these memoirs the author as a person is lost, for the role he assumes is not that of a protagonist, but first and foremost that of a witness.”³⁰

It must be said, however, that Conrad’s testimony has a structure all of its own. Twice, during a digression devoted to reminiscences of his great uncle Nicholas, he slips in the observation that “Each generation has its memories.”³¹ In this way, Conrad draws our attention to the contextual nature of certain models of describing the world. On the level of narrative he confirms this hypothesis by quoting whole excerpts from the memoirs (*Pamiętniki*) of his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski.³² Digressions are in any case a normal feature of Conrad’s writing — and his autobiographical writing is no exception. His digressions are always set deep in the particular context that is being described. They attempt to present a certain segment of reality as seen through the eyes of a witness and described in his or her own words. Just as in *Lord Jim* the main character is successively sketched out by other characters who have met him, so too in *Some Reminiscences* the quotations from Bobrowski’s memoirs perform a similar function, as do the pieces of gossip collected by Conrad on the subject of his model for the character of Almayer, which overshadow the description of his appearance — “I had heard of him at Singapore; I had heard of him on board; I had heard of him early in the morning and late at night; I had heard of him at tiffin and at dinner; [...]”³³ — and which take the form of an oral enumeration that speaks to us not so much about Almayer (or even Conrad himself) as about the context of the Malaysian Archipelago — that singular mix of traditional cultures and western colonial systems.

These digressions always convey a picture of reality as seen through the eyes of a participant, which is why — in Conrad’s opinion — “written words have their accent

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁸ Stanisław Modrzewski. “Konwencje autobiografii a wypowiedź literacka”. [In:] *idem. Conrad a konwencje. Autorska świadomość systemów a warsztat literacki pisarza*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 1991, p. 126.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³¹ Joseph Conrad. *A Personal Record*. Ed. Zdzisław Najder and John Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 60.

³² See: Zdzisław Najder. “Joseph Conrad and Tadeusz Bobrowski”. [In:] *idem. Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity*, ed. cit., pp. 44–67.

³³ Conrad. *A Personal Record*, ed. cit., p. 74.

too” and “the right word” may be found “amongst the wreckage.”³⁴ A digression allows some detail in the context to be linked to an all-embracing vision of the world made up of the polyphony that surrounds us. The same rule also applies to the author as a person. Rather than invention, he must use his imagination:

Only in men’s imagination does every truth find an effective and undeniable existence. Imagination, not invention, is the supreme master of art as of life. An imaginative and exact rendering of authentic memories may serve worthily that spirit of piety towards all things human which sanctions the conceptions of a writer of tales, and the emotions of the man reviewing his own experience.³⁵

Let us note the fundamental view of the relationship between Man and reality that emerges from these words, for this intuition is in accord with the model used by today’s anthropologists to describe the relationship between Man and culture. Conrad’s reluctance to acknowledge the creative aspect of imagination is quite surprising — reminiscences, it would seem, are in themselves a certain string of variations on the subject of reality.

Similarly, the cultural model of the world has an influence on the form taken by individual attitudes. The writer must therefore simultaneously pay attention to the subject and its / his / her world. He cannot keep them apart, for reality can only be known by being filtered through an individual. That is precisely why “the creator can only express himself in his creation.”³⁶ His imagination is formed by culture. Describing a given segment of reality, the writer uses a model of perceiving and understanding reality that has been provided by a particular cultural context. This overlapping of memory and imagination accords with Ewa Kosowska’s hypothesis that the continuity of culture is made possible not only by accumulation and transmission, but also by the transformation of its various elements.³⁷

The fact that in this article I have been using some of the terminology of modern anthropology in order to describe Conrad’s concept of writing may, of course, raise some eyebrows. Let us note, however, that even if we use a ‘common sense’ approach, we will find that Conrad is not far removed from the anthropological view of him. Here is how he explains his much cherished concept of fidelity:

The fidelity to a special tradition may last through the events of an unrelated existence, following faithfully too the traced way of an inexplicable impulse.³⁸

In presenting his coherent “vision of a personality”³⁹ — i.e. that of an intercultural person who nevertheless remains faithful to his own tradition — Conrad sug-

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁷ Ewa Kosowska. “Kulturowa antropologia literatury. Wprowadzenie”. [In:] *Antropologia kultury – antropologia literatury. Na tropach koligacji*. Ed. Ewa Kosowska, Anna Gomółka, Eugeniusz Jaworski. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2007, pp. 17–18.

³⁸ Conrad. *A Personal Record*, ed. cit., p. 44.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

gests that while the surface structure is subject to change, the deep structure is strong enough to leave an indelible mark on one's personality:

Yes. There is the manner. The manner in laughter, in tears, in irony, in indignations and enthusiasms, in judgments — and even in love. The manner in which, as in the features and character of a human face, the inner truth is foreshadowed for those who know how to look at their kind.⁴⁰

In this quotation a model of human behaviour is juxtaposed with its facial expression. Nowadays we know that Man's existential dimension may be shaped by culture even down to the level of gesture and facial expression — the only problem being the adoption of a suitable method of observation that would bring to light the contextual factors, which in everyday life are so obvious as to be barely perceptible. In Conrad's view, therefore, it would seem that there are features of a writer's personality that can be determined not only by the content of his writing, but also by its form; as we recall: "written words have their accent too." It may well be that — when he is describing his noble roots (which he contrasts with "Sclavonism")⁴¹ — Conrad's fidelity to tradition is also to be found on the level of the particular form that he gives to his narrative.

The digressive nature of much of Conrad's writing (fictional or otherwise) has often been linked to the traditional Polish *gawęda*, or 'nobleman's tale', which "was particularly suited to the volatility of the Polish imagination"⁴² — an opinion shared by Polish writers for many, many years. In this regard Marian Maciejewski quotes Józef Ignacy Kraszewski as saying that the *gawęda* is not so much a Polish as a Polish nobleman's genre — something that would indicate its even deeper contextualization. Melchior Wańkowicz — another writer quoted by Maciejewski — invokes his own writing as proof of the importance of the 'nobleman's tale' in Polish intellectual life. Maciejewski himself speaks of a "*gawęda* culture."⁴³ We might add, however, that this "culture of the nobleman's tale" is not simply a feature of Polish Romanticism, but is still very much alive in Polish literary tradition. Andrzej Busza provides us with a concise definition of the genre:

The *gawęda* is a loose, informal narrative, told by a speaker in the manner of someone reminiscing. It is often involved and full of digressions. Little attention is paid to chronology. At first, seemingly unimportant details and fragmentary episodes come to the fore, then gradually a coherent picture emerges. By the time the speaker has finished, everything has fallen into place. This form of narration, originating from an oral tradition, first appeared in Polish literature during the Romantic period. It was used both in poetry and prose.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5 (Author's Note).

⁴² Wit M. Tarnawski. *Conrad the Man, the Writer, the Pole. An Essay in Psychological Biography*. Transl. Rosamond Batchelor. London: Polish Cultural Foundation, 1984, p. 30. Here the word *gawęda* has been translated as "the gavenda."

⁴³ Marian Maciejewski. "Gawęda jako słowo przedstawione". [In:] *idem. Poetyka – gatunek – obraz. W kręgu poezji romantycznej*. Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1977, pp. 30–33.

⁴⁴ Andrzej Busza. "Conrad's Literary Background and Some Illustrations of the Influence of Polish Literature on His Work". *Antemurale*, Roma, 1966, № X, p. 208.

The very fact that the *gawęda* or ‘nobleman’s tale’ originated as an oral form in the Polish eastern borderlands means that we are here dealing with something that is first and foremost the dissemination or handing down of a particular form of culture — not just a literary genre. However, what theorists of literature have to say on the subject may also help us to achieve a deeper understanding of the structure of the ‘nobleman’s tale’ from a cultural point of view.

Kazimierz Bartoszyński⁴⁵ speaks of the “amorphic” nature of the ‘nobleman’s tale’ and draws attention to the redundancies that are typical of oral genres, as well as to the discrepancies in the order of events (as compared with that of the “real” events). The whole of this digressive edifice — together with its “reinterpretation of perspective” (i.e. the modification of the meaning of earlier events in the light of interpretations resulting from later parts of the story) — lead this scholar to speak of the “functional synchronization of elements” in the ‘nobleman’s tale’, meaning that the various sections of text that make up the story are not presented in any chronological order, but are broken up into several series of digressive, “passing asides” that are interwoven with each other and that sporadically reappear in various parts of the story.

In *Some Reminiscences* we see this in the recurring motifs of the manuscript, the dog, the sea etc., which appear to have been randomly scattered throughout the entire text. Here too we have an amorphic work because of the great accumulation of what are often haphazard bits of information. As a result, there is no clear hierarchy of sources in the text, the reading of which is not helped by continual shifts from one source or one point of view to another. We have already seen this kind of overabundance in the excerpt concerning Almayer, where the accumulation of rumours conveys the complexity and richness of the context. And, of course, this also has an effect on the structure of the narrator himself, who ‘lacks credibility’: on the one hand he is at the centre of events, while on the other he is often obscured by a multitude of quotations and redundancies. As all these elements are present in Conrad’s writing, we can also use the term ‘amorphic’ to describe the narrative of *Some Reminiscences*.⁴⁶ This strategy can also be seen quite clearly in Conrad’s literary texts, where it fits in with the techniques of ‘delayed decoding’ and ‘frame narration’.⁴⁷

Marian Maciejewski sees the ‘amorphism’ of the *gawęda* (or ‘nobleman’s story’) not as a fundamental structural feature of the text, but rather as “the dialectic of chaos and rigour,”⁴⁸ which results from the vital role played by quotations in the structure of the story. These may be self-quotations, references to ‘tales of hearsay’ rooted in local cultural tradition, snippets of literary accounts or the words of eye-witnesses. While this apparent ‘information noise’ detracts from the clarity of the main story-

⁴⁵ Kazimierz Bartoszyński. “O amorfizmie gawędy. Uwagi na marginesie *Pamiętek Soplicy*”. [In:] *idem. Teoria i interpretacja. Szkice literackie*. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1985, pp. 208–246.

⁴⁶ Modrzewski. “Konwencje autobiografii a wypowiedź literacka”, *ed. cit.*, p. 137.

⁴⁷ See: John G. Peters. “Point of View in Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness’ and the Ultimate Uncertainty of Knowledge”. [In:] *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)*, Cracow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2006, vol. II, pp. 23–30.

⁴⁸ Maciejewski. “Gawęda jako słowo przedstawione”, *ed. cit.*, p. 49.

line, it gives us an overall insight into the cultural context that is the basic intellectual framework of the story's 'represented world'. This picture emerges from the digressive subplots of the narrative, which are so common in Conrad's literary works. A similar dialectic can be seen in *Some Reminiscences*, where a disciplined text imitates the free-and-easy atmosphere of an oral tale.

Ewa Kosowska points out that the phenomenon of the 'nobleman's tale' cannot be treated solely as a problem of poetics. It is also "a significant record of the dissemination or handing down of a particular form of culture — a source of traditional knowledge and the record of a particular way of thinking."⁴⁹ By way of illustration, she quotes an excerpt from K.W. Wóycicki's *Stare gawędy i obrazy*:

In the nobleman's house and the lord's castle the water that we nobles drank was the gawęda [...] [which] was an academy and a school, especially given the social life of our fellow landowners [...]. The gawęda gave one the exact history of each family and even that of national events.⁵⁰

While Maria Janion draws our attention above all to the cultural content of the 'nobleman's tale', describing it as "a compendium of knowledge about the life of the nobility in the second half of the 18th century"⁵¹ — something that can also be said of Conrad's *Some Reminiscences*, which place the story of the author's life within the context of the story of his family, which in turn is part of the greater context of national tradition — Kosowska sees the *gawęda* above all as a way of disseminating and handing down a particular culture; also as a model of cultural awareness, understood as a contextually determined intellectual framework.

Wit Tarnawski gives an excellent description of the cultural function of the *gawęda* (or 'nobleman's tale') and the influence it had on Conrad's *Some Reminiscences*. Thanks to the *gawęda*-like digressions, he says, Conrad "looks at everything by keeping his eye on the entire horizon — he is at one and the same time both inside and a little outside each situation."⁵² The form of the 'nobleman's tale' can therefore be seen as a comprehensive model of the world in which contextual details become the constituent parts of an all-embracing historical whole. This particular model of generalization — rooted very much in the culture of the Polish nobility of the eastern borderlands — allows Conrad to apply ideal models to various culturally disparate elements of reality. Conrad not only succeeds in combining the 'personal identities' of the nobleman, the mariner and the writer, but also succeeds in applying the concept of fidelity — the mark of a nobleman — to the profession of the mariner and that of the writer.

Using a cultural model in this way is possible only within the framework of a model of cultural awareness that links contextual details to an overall picture. One might even go as far as to say that the 'ideal patterns' and the model of the world that

⁴⁹ Kosowska. *Postać literacka jako tekst kultury*, ed. cit., p. 26.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁵¹ Maria Janion, *Wstęp*. [In:] Wincenty Pol. *Wybór poezji*. Ed. eadem. Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1963, pp. XCIX–CI.

⁵² Tarnawski. *Conrad the Man, the writer, the Pole*, ed. cit., p. 32.

were used by Conrad had already been functionalized — and in a somewhat similar manner — by the Polish nobility of the eastern borderlands, who, living in a multi-cultural environment, also had to rely on a coherent vision of reality that was guaranteed by ‘ideal patterns’.

Conrad’s writing technique need not be regarded solely as a problem for literary historians.⁵³ As we can see, the critics of Conrad’s day were mistaken in classifying it as a stream-of-consciousness approach.⁵⁴ The structure of Conrad’s texts is determined by context. Coincidentally, however — and interestingly — the form of the *gawęda* (or ‘nobleman’s tale’) overlaps (partly, at least) with Laurence Sterne’s digressive narrative technique. Bartoszyński sees this similarity as a “delicate matter”⁵⁵ and suggests that there might be some sort of general category of ‘amorphic’ prose, as it were.⁵⁶ It would seem, however, that this unique intertwining of synchrony and diachrony in the narrative, combining the particular and the universal, is — according to the criteria established by Claude Lévi-Strauss — a mark of myth.

Zdzisław Najder’s description of *Some Reminiscences* as “a splendid piece of personal mythology”⁵⁷ might therefore be amended to read “a splendid piece of cultural mythology” — myth here being “a kind of logical tool”⁵⁸ that shapes Man’s vision of the world and seeks to neutralize the oppositions that appear in our lives. Commenting on Conrad’s somewhat perverse declaration in the *Familiar Preface* to this volume that “In these personal notes there is no [...] veil,”⁵⁹ Najder observes that Conrad has simply woven another cloth — one that has both a protective and a decorative function.⁶⁰ Let us not forget, however, that the warp for its wefts is the contex-

⁵³ Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech. “Joseph Conrad’s *A Personal Record*: An Anti-Confessional Autobiography?”. [In:] *Repetition and Recycling in Literary and Cultural Dialogues*. Ed. Wojciech Kalaga, Marzena Kubisz, Jacek Mydla. Częstochowa: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Lingwistycznej, 2008, p. 97.

Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech rightly observes that “Conrad’s *A Personal Record* could be viewed as an elaborate literary game which can be played only by readers who know the vast instruction of how to play – the instruction called literature.” However, we must not forget about the cultural foundation of this construction.

⁵⁴ See: Ray Stevens. “Essays and Memoirs”. [In:] *A Joseph Conrad Companion*. Ed. Leonard Orr and Ted Billy. London: Greenwood Press, 1999, pp. 306–307.

⁵⁵ Bartoszyński. “O amorfizmie gawędy. Uwagi na marginesie *Pamiętek Soplicy*”, *ed. cit.*, p. 237.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁵⁷ Zdzisław Najder. “A Personal Record”. [In:] *idem. Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity*, *ed. cit.*, p. 104.

⁵⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss. “The Structural Study of Myth”. *The Journal of American Folklore* 1955, vol. 68, № 270, p. 434.

⁵⁹ Conrad. *A Personal Record*, *ed. cit.*, p. 12.

⁶⁰ Najder. “A Personal Record”, *ed. cit.*, pp. 107–108: “Professing that ‘in these personal notes’ there was no ‘drapery of fiction’ such as the ‘veil’ which separates the novelist from his reader (p. xiii), Conrad wove a different fabric, less obviously conventional but not less artful, protective and decorative at the same time. It exhibits the unity of artistic and psychological principles on which the book is built, and enables Conrad to create his private mythology — an artefact of his life, as it were — without blatant distortion of facts.”

And there are many distortions, but blunted and obfuscated by the way of telling, to be exposed only by an inquisitive researcher. They are of scant importance for the appreciation of *A Personal Record*, but they are significant in pointing at the book’s fundamental idea. This idea was formulated by Conrad him-

tual framework of rationality inherent in the *gawęda*, which was an expression of the cultural awareness of the Polish nobility of the eastern borderlands.

Translated by R.E. Pypłacz

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self: to give the vision of 'a coherent, justifiable personality both in its origin and in its action' (p. xxi). All departures from factual truth are explainable by reference to this basic idea, to that underlying need: to impress coherence on his life, with all its anomalous passages, unusual decisions and sudden changes, with all its uncertainties, typical of a man prone to depression, the most severe bout of which, confining him to bed for many weeks, occurred only a few months after the writing of *A Personal Record*. This search for consistency, the real need of it, is shown not only in various omissions of events which would put it in question, and by adducement of events imagined, but, most visibly, in the avoidance of any suggestion, typical in the autobiographies of writers close to Romanticism, of internal tensions within his mind, of the Faustian 'two souls in one breast', of hesitancy, conflicting desires and aspirations. Conrad wants to and does present himself as being of one piece.

To call this fictional, 'created' Conrad 'public' as opposed to 'private' (i.e., real) is, I think, misleading. It is not the private and public faces that are in question here, but rather the actual Conrad and Conrad as he wished himself to be. Writing about himself was for Conrad a way of dealing not only with his readers, but first with himself. He wanted to be, not only to be seen, like that."

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