

Nostalgia for the Sailing Ships and the Sea Gone in Joseph Conrad's Autobiographical Fiction

Marite Opincane

Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Daugavpils University
Vienības iela 13, Daugavpils, LV-5401, Latvia
Email: marite.opincane@rta.lv

Abstract English modernist writer Joseph Conrad, born in a Polish nobleman family stayed a real Victorian gentleman in his life and world view. Being a sailor in the British Navy he saw the harmful influence of civilization and industry development on the sea, ships, and in human relationships. The writer knew the sea and the ships very well as he was a sailor for 20 years, which is why his autobiographical fiction is based on his real-life experience and knowledge. Steamers started substituting sailing ships at the end of the 19th century. They seemed ugly and impersonal to Conrad in comparison to sailing ships, which the writer and the sailors loved like their women, admired, and compared to the beautiful birds, and treated like alive beings. Steamers poisoned the sea and as Conrad considered, brought the sea life to an end. The spot of the ash on the surface of the old sea seemed tragic to the writer and he stayed nostalgic for the sailing ships and the sea gone in his life and writings. The synthesis of different methods has been applied during the research: biographical, historico-cultural, literary-historical, interpretational, and semiotic ones.

Keywords autobiographical fiction; nostalgia; sailing ships; steamers; the sea ¹

Author **Marite Opincane**, Dr. philol., is a researcher at the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Daugavpils University (Latvia). Her research area is mainly West-European (British) literature), particularly the writings of Joseph Conrad and Iris Murdoch. She is the author of more than 60 research articles. She has experience in the implementation of international projects such as

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Introduction

The English writer Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) got shaped as a writer under the influence of positivist–realist culture traditions and gradually became one of the most outstanding representatives of the artistic paradigm of modernism. Conrad started writing during the Victorian era (1837–1901). In the middle of the 19th century, England was the largest colonial power in the world. The rapid flourishing of positivism was based on the conviction that England can achieve everything. Considerable technical achievements facilitated and consolidated the significance of the positivism philosophy in Victorian England.

Conrad's writing is marked by the recognition of the multi-layered structure of reality and his conception of literary character as an unpredictable entity that can never be fully revealed. In Conrad's understanding, a partial vision is no less significant than omniscience; moreover, it may gain an even greater significance. Conrad's novels are related to the status of the fact, the existence of several truths, and subjective impressions. His protagonists reveal a complicated structure of individual subjectivity, which has been derived from their social and psychological experiences. Conrad's narrative moves in time, unsettling the certainty of narrative, as if unbalancing a reader from the stable position of interpretation. Conrad's prose, and also his autobiographical prose demonstrates epistemological absorption into national identity and individual subjectivity that became more and more topical in the second half of the Victorian era.

Conrad deeply perceives the world as an ontological system, he has a modernistic artistic consciousness. The germ of modernism in literature grows simultaneously from the established rules, traditions, and conditionality. Modernism is characterized by a *fresh* way of looking at human's position and function in the universe and diverse experiments in form and style. It is particularly concerned with the language and its use (Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* 516).

A substantial feature of modernism is neo-mythological consciousness that puts forward the key binary oppositions: *reality–supra-reality*, *time–eternity* in the system of world comprehension. Myth is reflexive and intellectual in modernist

conception, wherewith it is intricately linked with a writer's individually subjective world perception. Thereby, the author's worldview is offered as a result of the recreation of myth and the formation of mytheme. The features of early modernism in Conrad's sea prose become strikingly apparent. Christopher Butler points out that early modernism doubted the values of Western civilization and disputed the existence of God and universal moral principles. Early modernists experimented with form and style in the arts (Butler, *Early Modernism: Literature, Music, and Painting in Europe, 1900 – 1916* 67). The writer could create the whole epic with its own mythology within the format of a short novella or a short novel. Psychology in the depiction of protagonists' subconsciousness is immensely important, but the external events have a deep and symbolical subtext. Protagonists undergo the loss of illusions, the good no longer holds a victory over the evil, and a man cannot find harmony neither in himself nor around him.

Conrad's worldview and writing have been affected by a number of philosophers, who made a great impact on the culture of modernism generally. Among them, two major philosophers of the late 19th and early 20th century, Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer must be mentioned. Conrad wrote to the Belgian writer Andrea Reuters: The problem of life is just not so simple. I suspect you know that as well as I do. The great minds (I am thinking of Nietzsche) don't notice it. Their job is not to look so closely (Karl, Davies, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. 204).

Nostalgia in Conrad's Life and Fiction

Literature and memories provide a wide range of research on the complexity of nostalgia. Literature, memories, and practical research have all illustrated the role of nostalgia in sustaining meaning, identity, and social connectedness. Niklas Salmose and Eric Sandberg have stated that the relationship between nostalgia and literature is particularly close, as:

Literature deal persistently and repeatedly, with an evocation of past experience that can be considered under the rubric of nostalgia. Modern literature is especially poised for nostalgia, as it is shaped by a powerful tension between an attraction toward the past and an equally powerful drive towards the future. (Salmose, Sandberg, *Literature and Nostalgia: Vestiges of Paradise Get access Arrow* 192)

Nostalgia involves revisiting personally cherished memories that involve his

close people, places, and time. Lawrence Grossberg and Janice Radway state that nostalgia always looks backwards in search of authentic origins and stable meanings (Grossberg, Radway, *Cultural Studies* 12). Nicola Sayers has emphasized that nostalgia is aligned with memory; whether on a personal, historical, or metaphysical level (Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia* 16).

Conrad continuously returns to his past experience through narrative in his autobiographical fiction. His narrative mirrors his past experiences—the sailor's experiences into the writer's experiences. Memories are one of the most essential concerns of Conrad, mainly because of his biographical background. He was born in a Polish family, worked in British Navy, lived in England, and wrote in English. He experienced political exile and cultural displacement. Conrad tried to comprehend the past and was looking for intellectual inspiration in his autobiographical fiction. He wrote to James Pinker about the book *Mirror of the Sea* in 1904: Essays—impressions, descriptions, reminiscences, anecdotes, and typical traits - of the old sailing fleet which passes away for good with the last century. Easy narrative style (Karl and Davies, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* 114).

Conrad's Autobiographical Fiction

Latvian literary theorist Ausma Cimdirina considers that the development of the autobiographical genre is a late phenomenon in world literature, and it is linked with the manifestation of the individual's freedom and self-awareness:

Memory is always a selective and discursive activity, which depends on the context of the past update, and therefore autobiographical works have to be evaluated as the art of memorizing, as a creative but not a reproductive activity. As it is reflected in the title, the regularities of the author of the semantic units (a human, I), bios (life) and graphie (notes, a text) are essential in the autobiographical texts. (Cimdirina *Teksts un klātbūtne* 54)

Conrad's autobiographical book *Mirror of the Sea* was compiled of a series of sketches, which were first written to popular magazines and were based not only on the writer's personal memories but also on his knowledge of the sea. The title of the book has a different, more essential meaning as it is often typical for Conrad's works. The sea can be perceived as the mirror of the Universe and in the thirty-fourth chapter the author writes about the wonder of the deep:

[...] the most amazing wonder of its deep is its unfathomable cruelty. (Conrad,

Mirror of the Sea 134)

The Bible allusion on the Lord's deeds can be seen here: They saw the deed of the Lord, his wondrous works in the deep. (Holy Bible Ps. 107: 24)

Already at the beginning of the book, the reader gets the hint that the memories and the impressions of the writer contain also philosophical motives. It contains statements which express the most essential concepts of Conrad. A reader becomes aware from the very beginning that the author is a specialist who relies not only on his knowledge but also on his own personal experience. The author introduces the reader to the world of sailors and ships. However, in the book, more attention has been paid to the ships than to the sea. The ships, which leave the port and return to it, their anchors, sails, cargos, catastrophes, and captivity have been discussed in six out of fifteen essays, and the seventh one is an anthem, to the particular ship *Tremolino*. Both in England and in America the book was published in 1906. The reviewers and his contemporaries, particularly J. Galsworthy, H. James, R. Kipling and H. G. Wells praised it.

The second autobiographical work by Conrad *Personal Record* is a short collection of memories, which was written for a literary periodical. The book is a perfect sample of personal mythology. The structure of the narrative caused some embarrassment, as the literary methods, which the author used in the book were most common for Polish than for English literature. Despite the dominating conversational atmosphere, there are few fortuities in the book. The change of themes and opinions sometimes made playfully, serves for specific artistic and emotional purposes. The tone of narration is cheerful, with cool wit and sarcasm, which flashes from time to time. This tone forms the cover of self-irony, through which the reader perceives personal, confusing, and sometimes intensively emotional themes: Conrad's memories about his parents, leaving Poland with its huge patriotic inheritance, his writing in the foreign language, the dream to become a sailor, becoming a professional writer. But there is little direct intimacy in *Personal Record*, except a few sentences about his parents. The associative flow of memories lets Conrad move from a particular subject to a general problem. The events of the writer's life have been reflected in sudden flashes of reflections. The writer expresses his main ideas and opinions in the book: that the aim of creating cannot be ethical at all, and therefore all human values have been created by the human mind itself; that the secular world has been based on some very simple ideas and one of them is the idea of fidelity; that the main source of arts is imagination and not the invention. This is continuing of the ideas, which have been expressed

in the famous preface to the Conrad's novel *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*. The distance, which the writer keeps between himself, and the reader has been increased by the fact that a lot of stories in the book come from the other source, that is from the memories of his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowsky. It encourages Conrad to create his own personal mythology – to mythologize the artifacts of his life without strikingly misrepresenting them.

Both autobiographical books supplement each other. *Personal Record* tells about the writer's national origin and about the beginning of his both professions—a sailor and a writer. *Mirror of the Sea* in its turn reflects his experience as a sailor. Both books also supplement each other as Conrad's narration to the readers. A lot of the details, which seem unimportant at first sight in both books are biographical.

Latvian literary theorist Vitolds Valeinis has stated that the comprehension of the work of art is based on the comprehension of art (Valeinis *Latvijas, literatūrteorijas vesture* 78). Vladimir Nabokov has emphasized: “The three facets of the great writer—magic, story, lesson — are prone to blend in one impression of unified and unique radiance, since the magic of art may be present in the very bones of the story, in the very marrow of thought” (Nabokov *Lectures on Literature* 39).

These three aspects also characterize Conrad's autobiographical books.

The Sea in British and Conrad's Writings

The sea has been one of the most essential spatial categories of European culture in all time periods. Starting with the early stages of human consciousness, the most essential mythological and culture archetypes were formed attributing an important function to the elements of the sea and water in it.

In England, the sea has become a symbol of the power of the Empire since the times of the Invincible Armada in 1508. The sea is one of the central paradigms of English consciousness appearing even in the English national anthem: Britannia! rule the waves (Thomson, *The Poems* 9).

The importance of the sea and seafaring throughout the centuries has turned the sea into a national myth. It was most precisely reflected in the sea text.¹

Conrad received European education; he went to the sea for 20 years and perceived the sea both as a well-known element and a huge store of symbols, which had been compiled by culture over the centuries. The sea is one of the main topoi in Conrad's writing. The life philosophy of the writer is closely concerned with his sea-farers philosophy and his attitude to the sea.

1 Sea text includes the sea topic texts, for example, limericks, poetry, prose, autobiographical texts, etc.

The repercussions of this conception appear vaguely also in some of Conrad's *sea prose* works. The romantic and dreamer's idea of the sea voyage just for an adventure is soon dispelled in his autobiographical work *The Mirror of the Sea*, where Conrad identifies the prosaic and practical skills of sea-going that form the moral side of bread-winning.

Conrad's *sea prose* is inseparable from his political opinions. He was among those who considered that the land was hopelessly demoralized and the sea was the last unblemished, honourable, and sacred place in the world, and this conviction inspired his most splendid works and attributed a bright quality to his vision of the sea. Conrad was born in a Polish family and in the country, which in fact did not exist; he spent difficult exile years in Russia, after his parents' death he had problems with acquiring of citizenship; hence, one can draw a conclusion that the writer had not had the place on the land where he would have felt free and happy. He found this sense of freedom and happiness in the sea. Conrad created his own, completely original conception of the sea. O. Knowles and G. Moore consider that Conrad's sea world cannot be understood only as an inflected form of the sea life:

Rather it offers a wholly different form of knowledge, complete with its own signifying system and test of truth. That the world of the sea has its own unique concepts is revealed in the precision of nautical language that renders these stories convincing yet mysterious to ordinary readers. (Knowles and Moore, *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad* 368)

A distinctive feature of his writing is that the writer describes most of the scenes that reflect the sea in a very detailed way, using a lot of details, but some important invariant, an ontological essence can be noticed through these seemingly private scenes. The seas and the rivers are concerned with particular geographical places, and Conrad's outstanding achievement was his giving the name to every sea he depicted.

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Conrad creates a double-sphere model in the form of expression that was characteristic of the romanticists, yet this model is already different. The sea in his

works has the semantics of the infinite and mysterious divine space. The writer constantly mentions the heavens, thereby forming the vertical vector, which has always marked the idea of the divine in European culture. Conrad's *sea prose* is deeply symbolic. The sea as the sphere of nature is in absolute opposition to the modern civilization.

For Conrad civilization is a hostile power of the social environment that destroys the unity between a human and nature. The characters' obsession with water dominates the writer's *sea prose*; he forms the world, which is opposite to the real one – a mirror world of shimmering lucidity, unblighted by the horrors of the nineteenth-century industrial democratic life. His love for the former is sustained by the hatred of the latter, and it is poignantly sharpened by Conrad's foreboding about the dying age in the life of the sea. The writer saw the loss of universal harmony embodied in the sea, notified by the appearance of steamers.

John Peck emphasizes that Conrad is the first writer who consistently offered a negative impression of the sea:

Britain was proud of its sea heritage, but in J. Conrad's works, this tradition is already considerably stunted. A lot of sea actions are covert and illegal. The loss of enthusiasm, energy, objective and direction becomes an overall feeling. (Peck, *Maritime Fiction: Sailors and the Sea in British and American Novels, 1719 – 1917* 171)

Thereby, the sea is one of the most essential topoi in the artistic worldview of Conrad's autobiographical books. To a certain extent, it developed under the influence of the conception of the sea of previous cultures. The writer forms his own universal and monolithic neo-myth. The sea turns out to be an ontological sphere that is concerned with eternity and not the short-term period in all the accuracy and detailed elaboration of its depiction. The sea is concerned with the divine from the very dawn and it strives for harmony. However, when it comes to insoluble contradictions with the civilized man-made world, the sea demonstrates to a man its archaic, disruptive, and malevolent nature.

Conrad's Sail Ships versus Steamers

Ship has always been an important image since ancient times appearing already in myths. It became a symbol of discovering new lands (Argo, Odyssey's ships) or a symbol of power (ahayahs' flotilla that sailed to Troy). Noah's Ark in the Bible became a symbol of life and salvage. Every historico-cultural epoch created its own

image of the ship.

Ship is an essential topos in Conrad's autobiographical fiction, and its semantics and symbols are rather varied and multi-layered:

Landfall and departure mark the rhythmical swing of a seaman's life and of a ship's career. From land to land is the most concise definition of a ship's earthy fate. (Conrad, *Mirror of the Sea* 41)

Conrad preferred sailing ships made of wood; he associated them with the Golden Age of the sea life, while steamers were associated by the writer with the Iron Age and the end of the sea life:

For a ship with her sails furled on her squared yards, and reflected from truck to water-line in the smooth gleaming sheet of a land-locked harbour, seems, indeed, to a seaman's eye the most perfect picture of slumbering repose:

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All the ships that serve best in his works and are worthy of human love are compared to white-winged birds:

In reality, she was a true balancelle, with two short masts raking forward and two curved yards, each as long as her hull; a true child of Latin Lake, with a spread of two enormous sails resembling the pointed wings on the sea. (Conrad, *Mirror of the Sea* 14)

Sailing ships are aristocrats among other ships for the writer. However, Conrad's appeal for sailing ships goes far beyond their innate grace and beauty to the nostalgic evocation of the past with its unique positive virtue of the close bond uniting the seamen and the ship, the bond that is gone in the clatter of engines and the hiss of steam. The sailing ships and their men are like a united whole:

Here speaks the man of masts and sails, to whom the sea is not a navigable element, but an intimate companion. The length of passages, the growing sense of solitude, the close dependence upon the very forces that, friendly to-day,

without changing their nature, by the mere putting forth their might, become dangerous tomorrow, make for that sense of fellowship which modern seamen, good men as they are, cannot hope to know. (Conrad, *Mirror of the Sea* 54)

The emergence of steam engines, turbines, and diesel engines intruded in the world reigned by sailing ships in their own right and outlined the horror of the 19th century industrial life. The steamers for him are only cargo carriers that do not know triumph, victory, or fame, but only fight with the sea:

[...] cargo carriers that would know no triumph but of speed in carrying a burden, no glory other than of a long service, no victory but that of an endless, obscure contest with the sea. (Conrad, *Mirror of the Sea* 129)

Words like “romance, adventure, and glamour” do not match the steamers; these are the very attributes that seem to have been lost to the seafarers’ world with the advent of the steamship:

I never went into steam—not really. If I only live long enough I shall become a bizarre relic of a dead barbarism, a sort of monstrous antiquity, the only seaman of the dark ages who never gone into steam—not really. (Conrad, *Mirror of the Sea* 189)

Conrad was happy on board of the ship, but he was never really happy ashore. A respectable ship that sailed under the English flag in the 1880s was like a small monarchy with a ruling and undisputable power of the aristocratic class over the faithful mass of lower citizens. There was no democracy there. During his sailor’s career from 1874 till 1893 Conrad had sailed on 18 ships.

A ship is sailors’ home and the sea is their native country because they spend much more time on the sea than on the land. A cabin is like home because there is light in it when the darkness rules all around. A ship is a disciplined and orderly world, where the routine seldom changes and every man has his own appointed role. A ship is an understandable world of the orders given, received, and carried out.

An anchor is a very important attribute of the ship that has both a practical and a metaphorical meaning. Conrad calls an anchor *the symbol of hope*. The writer highly values history, former times, former seamen and ships, also historical objects. The anchors of sailing ships in some way were the most efficient tools because they were hand-made and kept historical experience in their functions. On board the ship

no other appliance that is so small performs such big work that is so essential for the life of the ship. An anchor is forged and fashioned for reliability.

In Conrad's autobiographical prose, a ship is like a living being, which follows her own discretion and does not obey a man's will. The relationship between men and ships begins in trust and ends in love:

A ship is not a slave. You must make her easy in a seaway, you must never forget that you owe her the fullest share of your thought, of your skill, of your self-love. If you remember that obligation, naturally and without effort, as if it were an instinctive feeling of your inner life, she will sail, stay, run for you as long as she is able, or, like a sea-bird going to rest upon the angry waves, she will lay out the heaviest gale that ever made you doubt living long enough to see another sunrise. (Conrad, *Mirror of the Sea* 78)

Love, which Conrad envisions between man and ship, is rather the love of a man for a woman. The basis for feminizing a ship transcends her grace and beauty and her capacity for loyalty. A ship on the land or in the port in Conrad's autobiographical works is always a miserable and hopeless prisoner. Even demoralized and unreliable seamen rely on the fidelity of the ship. In the case of failure it is not the ship's fault, but the men who serve on the ship are to blame.

Hence, there is no ambivalence, uncertainty, or equivocation in Conrad's, and possibly his described seamen's, attitude to the ships, which can be observed in their attitude to the land and the sea. A seaman fully trusts his ship. It is essential that, when creating the image of the ship, the writer constantly uses important symbolical meanings, which have acquired the value of archetype, e.g. crossroads, crucifixion, resurrection, and the distribution of Holy Communion. The writer often compares the sea life to the priesthood. The strict daily routine of the ship could represent a secular substitute for the monastery routine. Sea life is perceived as sacred because it is dedicated to a superhuman ideal that makes it such, and compromising this ideal may in some way lead to perdition.

Conrad's autobiographical prose represents an essential stage in building the comprehension of the image of a ship as a component of the universe. Ships in the writer's prose make up their own microcosm, but everything that is happening on them symbolically reflects the events of the world.

Conclusion

In his autobiographical books, Conrad writes about sea voyages where the spirit of

adventure disappears, giving the place to greed and self-interest. He writes about the sea-polluting steamers, which replace the noble and beautiful sailing ships. In Conrad's opinion, it signals the end of sea life. Nature is remarkably essential in Conrad's temporal model. Nature's (geological) time is the time of eternity. All turning points of civilization are insignificant as measured against it. Hence, Conrad created a neo-mythological model of a procedural denial of history in the face of approving of its finiteness.

It is indicative that Conrad demonstrates in many of his ego documents the strategies of his autobiographical fiction. In his *Personal Record* Conrad compares himself to Cervantes's protagonist Don Quixote. Such essential conceptions as fall and atonement, grace and sacrifice, and, above all, spiritual revival reveal the author's imaginative world perception and become the most essential metaphors in his writing.

The neo-myth created by Conrad in his autobiographical fiction has a tragic character; the Iron Age acquires the nature of eternity. The present time in Conrad's *works* is negatively marked. Civilisation has influenced the sea life and the writer anticipates an imminent end to it.

It is obvious that Conrad created his own time conception that was explicitly neo-mythological and modernistic and was based on the heritage of the past literature and culture. According to it, the most valuable and best things that have existed have sunk into the past, the present is influenced by civilization and its consequences – degradation, and decay, but the future does not exist at all. Modernist narrative activates the time of memory, memory work, and mechanism of memorizing; the images of the past flake on one another and are transformed in a peculiar way. It seems as if time throws a veil on objects blurring the clearest conceptions of art.

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