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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Affective politics: On Joseph Conrad's decision to emigrate

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Abstract

This article engages with a commonplace in Conrad studies: the causes, implications, reception, and political significance of Joseph Conrad's decision to emigrate from Poland. Previous studies suggest that emigration lies at the root of Conrad's ethical politics and contributes to his enduring presence in literary discourse. Against this background, the article offers a literary-critical analysis and interpretation of Conrad's autobiographical writings, particularly *A Personal Record* and *Poland Revisited.* Drawing on sociolinguistic perspectives and autobiographical threads, the article reinterprets Conrad's decision to emigrate primarily in terms of its affective impact. The analysis demonstrates how this experience shaped the author's artistic identity and influenced his literary aesthetics. The principial conclusion is that the political dimension of Conrad's decision should be viewed within a wider frame: as an intimate, youthful, and emotionally charged experience ultimately grounded in the writer's personal past.

Keywords

Joseph Conrad, Emigration, Affect, Modernist Politics, Artistic Identity

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1. The "politicality" of Conrad and its reception: Exploring emigration

There is no doubt that Joseph Conrad's fiction has had a lasting influence on readers and critics, and that its relevance continues to manifest itself in contemporary socio-political discourse. Joanna Skolik, in her recent article *The Resonance of Conrad in Contemporary Europe*, describes it as "a sinister resonance", one suited to turbulent times marked by "Brexit, Russia, and its politics, [and] international terrorism." (Skolik 2024, 292). Worth noting is that in recent years, within the vast and ever-growing body of Conrad scholarship, a strong emphasis has been placed on transnational and global perspectives, which challenge its Euro- and Western-centrism.[1] Conrad's major works have been examined in relation to the contexts of diasporic migration and political violence, central to, for example, contemporary Indian cultures (Mukherjee 2023, 173–186). Nevertheless, when attention turns to the novels most commonly regarded as political, *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911) stand out above the rest. Skolik describes them as "highly topical", which seems justified by their engagement with Russian politics – a perspective that remains relevant today but was also historically so powerful that, even after 1956, when the ban on Conrad was lifted in communist Poland, these two works continued to be censored. At the same time, Conrad's political imagination extended beyond these novels: for instance *Heart of Darkness* (1899), as a critique of imperial and (post) colonial violence; *Amy Foster* (1901), as a story confronting the anxieties surrounding immigrant otherness; *Nostromo* (1904), as an exploration of multinational capitalism; *Victory* (1915), as a meditation on nihilism, all testify to the breadth of political concerns woven into fiction.

A fundamental problem arises in distinguishing between what might be called Conrad's "politicality" — his ethical and affective disposition toward the political — and the "politics of Conrad", understood as his explicit ideological stance. Politics, in its conventional sense, implies the endorsement of particular views, the support of causes, or being a part of some institutions – commitments Conrad consistently avoided. In a letter to John Galsworthy, regarding *The Secret Agent*, he stressed that:

> The whole thing is superficial and but a tale. I had no idea to consider Anarchism politically or to treat it in its philosophical aspect […]. The general reflections whether right or wrong are not meant as bolts. You can't say I hurl them in any sense. They come in by the way and are not applicable to particular instances, – Russian or Latin. They are, if anything, mere digs at the people in the tale. As to attacking Anarchism as a form of humanitarian enthusiasm or intellectual despair or social atheism, that – if it were worth doing – would be the work of a more vigorous hand and for a mind more robust, and perhaps more honest than mine (Conrad 1927a, 37).

Conrad never cast a vote in a British election, nor did he take any active political role in relation to Poland; he distrusted socialism, despised capitalism, rejected revolution, and kept his critical distance from British imperialism – even though in 1886 he was naturalized as a British citizen. His attitude to the politics of his time emerges perhaps most vividly in his reaction to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Asked what he thought would happen next, Conrad replied: "[…] 'Nothing', and having a great repugnance to consider murder as a factor of politics, I dismissed the subject. It fitted with my ethical sense that an act cruel and absurd should be also useless" (Conrad 1994, 331). This remark, however, despite Conrad's admission of his own ignorance (in the context of the outbreak of the First World War), points to another aspect of his political sensibility – namely, the ethical grounding of his political judgment. As Irving Howe observes, for the writer "problems of morality and problems of politics [come] to seem very much the same" (Howe 1954, 7). Similarly, Roger D. Spegele notes that "[…] Conrad's writings are not didactic or propagandistic. One does not find him preaching or prophesying the future but probing and questioning the limits of political action. Conrad saw, one could say, political struggles, crises and instability as part of a deeper problem concerning human nature and knowledge" (Spegele 1972, 319–320). In this sense, Conrad's political disposition is closely intertwined with his ethics and, one might add, with an anthropological awareness of human behavior and its relevance to the formation of community.

Yet this political ethics emerges from a more foundational source, one that has often been noted but rarely fully explored, and what Eloise Knapp Hey in her book *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad* (1963) described as "Conrad's first important decision," namely, **his act of emigration**. She argues that leaving Poland was not only a conscious choice but also one that shaped Conrad's moral outlook – a turning point from which everything else followed, around which much of his "politicality" revolved, and one that directly molded both his national and authorial identity: "The only case to be made," Hey describes, "is that accidents of national origin and family background compelled him from earliest childhood to see in life a political dimension that strongly affected his perspective of all human affairs" (Hay 1963, 10). This early sense of politics had to be connected with the actions of his parents: his father, Apollo Korzeniowski, a writer and patriot, and his mother, Ewa Bobrowska, were actively engaged in preparations for the January Uprising during the partitions of

[1]For representative recent studies, in addition to *The Routledge Companion to Joseph Conrad* (Romanick Baldwin 2024), see Zulli 2019; Salmons and Zulli 2021; Kavanagh, Branny, and Adamowicz-Pośpiech 2023; Hampson 2024.

Poland. For this, the entire family – including the four-year-old Conrad – was sentenced to exile. His mother died in exile when Conrad was seven; he lost his father four years later, after they had returned to Kraków. Having lost both parents at an early age, Conrad was placed under the guardianship of his uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski. This brought into play a second formative family influence, one still concerned with national affairs, but articulated in a different register — eschewing ideological agitation and armed resistance in favor of pragmatic efforts directed toward the country's long-term future. Critics have often argued that Conrad inherited elements of both traditions, though the unresolved tension between them may equally have fostered the caution and skepticism that characterize his later engagement with political questions.

Yet his decision to emigrate was an independent one – unexpected by his relatives and taken against their wishes. This issue carries further implications, as Conrad's biographical and geographical trajectories – from leaving Poland (1874), to life at sea (until 1894), and ultimately, to becoming a British writer (1895, with the publication of his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*) – have been interpreted in diverse ways. In outlining Conrad's entanglement with diverse forms of politicality in the context of his decision to emigrate, it is important to recall not only his biography but also the often ideologized reception of this act, which has been framed in relation to the national-martyrological heritage of the Korzeniowski family. Situating Conrad within the context of the romantic ideal of Polish national identity produced a certain tug-of-war in the critical reception of his work: from Eliza Orzeszkowa, who in her article *Emigracja zdolności* [The Emigration of Talent] accused Conrad of betraying the Polish cause by writing in a foreign language rather than serving a national mission (Orzeszkowa 1899, 271–272) to his later rehabilitation and enthusiastic recognition in the scholarship of Wiesław Krajka, who argued that "it is precisely the ideology of Romanticism that constitutes one of the main Polish contexts of his [Conrad's] work" and even described Conrad's oeuvre as "one of the very few instances of the global transmission of the Polish – especially Romantic – ethos" (Krajka 2011a, 73, 83, translation by I.S.). Western criticism, however, was not free from its own biases. Robert Lynd, for example, raised his suspicion of Conrad as a writer who had abandoned "his own language", suggesting that he could therefore never produce great literature (Lynd 1908, 210–212). In his influential book *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad*, Gustav Morf advanced the thesis that Conrad's work was haunted by an all-encompassing sense of guilt (Morf 1965). Amar Acheraïou, in turn, identified in Conrad's fiction a pervasive, if repressed, "shadow of Poland" (Acheraïou 2004, 47–70). At the same time, certain misconceptions about the Polish socio-political context have marked Western readings: Polish patriots struggling for independence were often mischaracterized as revolutionaries or "nationalists," a distortion that went hand in hand with frequent misunderstandings of Conrad's stance toward Russia. Contemporary scholarship seeks to correct these and other misconceptions, yet they continue to resurface from time to time.[2]

What is still too rarely emphasized is that Conrad's emigration was, at its origin, a deeply personal decision made by a young man. Does this, however, preclude its political significance? That remains the crucial question to be pursued further. What cannot be denied is that Conrad's emigration has often been ideologized and politicized in discourse surrounding his work – and that this (critical) reception, more strongly than his writing, turned Conrad into an exile, though in a sense very different from the genuinely political exile of his father.

2. Emigration in language: Conrad's artistic identity

Personal choice was a fundamental element of Conrad's emigration, reflecting a conscious commitment to the shaping of his artistic identity. While his decision to leave Poland was significant in itself, his choice to write and build an entire literary career in English – not merely a second but a third language – constituted quite another challenge. This dual decision already hints at Conrad as a representative of transnational modernism, yet one very different from writers such as Henry James, T. S. Eliot, or Ezra Pound, residing in London; James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, both in Paris; or American expatriates like Hemingway, Djuna Barnes, and Henry Miller – all associated with the late-modernist artistic bohemia, all living outside their native countries, and all writing in English. And although these writers also emigrated in order to consciously construct their literary identities, Conrad cannot be considered an expatriate in the same sense: he never returned to his homeland, he changed his nationality; while he shared with them a concern for the "politics of modernist individualism,"[3] his acute sensitivity to social collectives – perhaps inherited from the Polish national tradition[4] – set him apart. Too deeply engaged with social realities to be avant-garde, yet too modernist in outlook to

[2]Bernard C. Meyer writes that Korzeniowski participated in "illegal" meetings with Polish "nationalists" (Meyer 1970, 23). Some errors in Anglo-American interpretations of *Under Western Eyes* are discussed by Joanna Skolik (2023, 203–212). Another Polish scholar, Grażyna Maria Teresa Branny, addresses inaccuracies concerning the historical context of the Austrian and Russian partitions of Poland in her review of G. W. Brodsky's *Conrad's Polish Soul: Realms of Memory and Self* (Branny 2018, 98–103).

[3]Using a comparative approach, Zoë L. Henry situates Conrad within modernist politics and aesthetics – in constructing character and individual interior life, where one is capable of reconciling "political contradictions" (Henry 2024, 258–259).

[4]As Hey interestingly observes, nineteenth-century Polish writing, unlike its British counterpart, was less focused on individualism, since there was no fundamental opposition between the individual and the nation; in the Polish literary context, the individual acted on behalf of the nation, and a collective, solidaristic perspective remained stronger (see Hey 1963, 46).

be strictly realist, Conrad occupies a distinctive position within the modernist – transnational and emigratory – literary landscape. Unlike some of his contemporaries – Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, or D. H. Lawrence, for instance – Conrad resisted fashionable modernist currents, such as a fascination with Russian culture. Nor did these other writers adopt a new language in the same way; for them, English was an inherited medium, used at a time when it was progressively establishing its dominance over French. What unites them, however, as Edward Said notes in his essay "Reflections on Exile", is the element of choice:

> Expatriates voluntarily live in an alien country, usually for personal or social reasons. Hemingway and Fitzgerald were not forced to live in France. Expatriates may share in the solitude and estrangement of exile, but they do not suffer under its rigid proscriptions. Émigrés enjoy an ambiguous status. Technically, an émigré is anyone who emigrates to a new country. Choice in the matter is certainly a possibility (Said 2000, 181).

The matter of choice is particularly significant in the context of linguistic emigration. Conrad's decision to write in English seemed at odds with the expectations attached to someone who bore not only the family name Korzeniowski but also the symbolic first name Konrad – the name of one of the most famous protagonists in Polish literature, drawn from the works of the great Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz (*Konrad Wallenrod* and *Forefathers' Eve*). As Wiesław Krajka observes, "Giving the boy this name may have been a conscious attempt on the part of his parents to raise him according to a Romantic-patriotic-martyrial axiological pattern" (Krajka 2011b, 92; translation I.S.). In this sense, Conrad was almost destined to become a Romantic patriot, and if not, then at least a Polish writer – an heir to the Romantic aesthetic. And although many scholars discern significant echoes between Conrad's work and the tradition of Polish literary Romanticism (see f.e. Samsel 2023; Davies 2023), his place within any national canon remains problematic. Was Conrad a Polish or a British writer?

Zdzisław Najder once characterized Conrad's prose as "written in English, suffused with Polish and French elements, and essentially European." (Najder 1995, 175). Yet if we approach the writer's emigration not from a transnational perspective but from a linguistic one, it becomes necessary to consider more precisely the role of each language in shaping his multilingual identity. His linguistic attentiveness undoubtedly enabled him to construct literary characters with distinctive idiolects and varied nationalities (see Kujawska-Lis 2023, 95–98; 2022, 129–141), however, the issue here is much simpler: it comes down to the matter, as was mentioned, of conscious, creative choice. Unlike Nabokov, who shifted from Russian to English, or Kundera, who oscillated between Czech and French, Conrad chose to write exclusively in English. Although he was fluent in French – a language he had known since childhood, much like any upper-class youth of his time – he never regarded it as a medium for his artistic expression. His knowledge of French was a feature of a standard education. What, then, of Polish? Letters from his uncle indicate that Conrad's command of Polish was excellent, and in 1881 Bobrowski even praised the maturity of his style, urging him to publish accounts of his travels in the Warsaw journal *Wędrowiec.* Writing in Polish, as Bobrowski explained to his nephew, "would form a tie with your own country, and it would be an act of piety to your father, who wished to serve, and did serve, his country with his pen."[5]

The reasons for Conrad's refusal, as Ewa Kujawska-Lis observes, were not connected with a desire to distance himself from an overwhelming heritage, but rather, as she notes, "related to Conrad's new linguistic identity" (Kujawska-Lis 2022, 132–133). He declined because, by that time, he was already deeply committed to a new environment. That environment was the British navy, and the language was English – a language he had acquired only in his twenties, and primarily through the sailors' idiom of plain communication. Yet just as becoming a "British seaman and no other"[6] was a conscious choice, so too was the decision to transform from Konrad Korzeniowski (the son of Apollo Korzeniowski) into Joseph Conrad (the writer). Seen from a sociolinguistic perspective, adopting a new language could either restrict his identity or release its full potential. As Kujawska-Lis notes, this possibility of liberation always depends on the "linguistic-cultural opportunities" that each language embodies; political and cultural power are inseparably attributed to particular languages. Thus, Conrad's literary identity was bound not so much to his nationality as to the social dimension of language, and his embrace of English carried with it distinct socio-cultural implications – its novelty and its authority:

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[5]On June 20, 1881, Bobrowski writes to his nephew: "[…] Since you do not forget your Polish tongue (may God bless you, you have my blessing!), and even write very well, I will revert to a subject I have already mentioned. It would be an excellent thing if you wrote for the *Wędrowiec* [the Traveller] at Warsaw. We have very few travellers or even correspondents of that kind. I am sure what you wrote would interest everybody greatly, and after a time they would pay you. It would form a tie with your own country, and it would be an act of piety to your father, who wished to serve, and did serve, his country with his pen. Think about this. Put together some recollections of your voyage to Australia and send them in as sketches. […]" (Conrad 1927b, 64). For another English version of the letter, see (Najder 2007, 86).

[6]As Conrad wrote in *A Personal Record*: "I had thought to myself that if I was to be a seaman, then I would be a British seaman and no other. It was a matter of a deliberate choice" (Conrad 1925: 119).

> He can be considered as one of those cases wherein an individual undergoes a personal struggle to adapt to the perceived dominant language and culture, yet never eradicating his original cultural heritage. He then exemplifies the emancipatory possibilities of language in its ability to power alternative identities. **Adopting a globally powerful language** – English – liberated young Conrad by providing him with a new (powerful) identity in social and economic terms. His professional careers, first as a mariner, then as a writer, **would not have come into being had it not been for his command of English** (Kujawska-Lis 2022, 134; emphasis I.S.).

It appears that, according to Kujawska-Lis, Conrad's linguistic choice to write in English involved adopting a form of symbolic power. Such a choice – personal at its core, as it engages the close ties between identity and language – was therefore, at least in part, also a political act, and perhaps, if not fully calculated, then certainly deliberate, aimed at shaping his literary career. It is not wrong to state that Conrad, especially later in life, was aware of the costs involved in establishing himself as a British writer. The emotional costs of losing his native language must have collided with his desire to develop his career and thus maintain his readership – it is said that one reason he did not depict Poland in his fiction was his fear of losing his British audience, which was not interested in the affairs of a foreign Eastern European country.[7] This fear was not necessarily unfounded, especially when compared with the reflections by another Polish literary émigré, Nobel Prize laureate Czesław Miłosz, who sought political asylum in France in the 1950s and, from 1960 lived in the United States, while being regarded in communist Poland as a traitor and a renegade. Although Miłosz wrote several decades later, his observations on exile retain a universal resonance: he observed that what is regarded in one's home country "with seriousness as a matter of life or death is of nobody's concern abroad or provokes interest only for incidental reasons. Thus a writer notices that he is unable to address those who care and is able to address only those who do not care" (Miłosz 1994, 36). Yet one may still ask whether this strategic approach truly applies to Conrad, especially when it comes to his linguistic emigration. Of particular interest is Kujawska-Lis' observation in the final sentence of the passage quoted above. The issue at hand is less a matter of determining which national canon Conrad should be assigned to – whether he should be regarded as a transnational writer – and more a question of profound personal significance: would Conrad have become a writer at all, had it not been for English? At this point, it is necessary to consider this question in Conrad's own words, reflecting on his relationship with the language.

A Personal Record is Conrad's rarely purely autobiographical prose. It was serialized under the title *Some Reminiscences* in the *English Review*, a literary periodical founded by his friend Ford Madox Ford, between December 1908 and June 1909. Of particular interest, especially given the small number of Conrad's autobiographical writings, are the two prefaces he wrote for *A Personal Record*: *A Familiar Preface* (1912) and, less well known, the *Author's Note* (1919). It is in the latter that Conrad addresses questions of language. Before turning directly to his relationship with English, he clarifies, what is more, one small misunderstanding with Mr. Hugh Clifford, who had apparently misinterpreted Conrad as having "exercised a deliberate choice between French and English". Conrad's actual position was more nuanced: "*had I been under the necessity* of making a choice between the two, and thought I knew French fairly well and was familiar with it from infancy, I would have been afraid to attempt expression in a language so perfectly 'crystalized'" (Conrad 1925, vii). While he does not specify precisely what he means by "crystalized", the passage confirms that French was never a suitable medium for his thoughts as a writer. It also underlines that his linguistic orientation was neither a fully conscious choice nor guided by any political agenda but rather an existential and affective orientation. This personal and emotional approach to language is most evident in Conrad's reflections on English, and it is here that we encounter a direct answer to the question posed earlier:

> The truth of the matter is that my faculty to write in English is as natural as any other aptitude with which I might have been born. I have a strange and overpowering feeling that **it had always been an inherent part of myself**. English was for **me neither a matter of choice nor adoption**. The merest idea of choice had never entered my head. And as to adoption – well, yes, there was adoption; but it was I who was adopted by the genius of the language, which directly I came out of the stammering stage made me its own so completely that its very idioms I truly believe had a direct action on my temperament and fashioned my still plastic character. […].
>
> **A matter of discovery and not of inheritance**, that very inferiority of the title makes the faculty still more precious, lays the possessor under a lifelong obligation to remain worthy of his great fortune. But it seems to me that all this sounds as if I were trying to explain – a task which I have just pronounced to be impossible. If in action we may admit with awe that the Impossible recedes before men's indomitable spirit, the Impossible in matters of analysis will always make a stand at some point or other. All I can claim after all those years of devoted practice, with the accumulated anguish of its doubts, imperfections and falterings in my heart, is the right to be believed when I say that **if I had not written in English I would not have written at all** (Conrad 1925, vii–viii, emphasis I.S.).

[7]For more on this, see Hampson, who, interestingly, demonstrates that this fear was unjustified and that the British reader was mainly interested in Conrad's autobiographical writing (Hampson 2023, 189–201).

Juxtaposing these remarks with the thesis advanced earlier by Ewa Kujawska-Lis seems appropriate, since Conrad's own words provide a form of confirmation. Yet two further observations from his preface emerge. First, the notion of "adopting" a language – linked by Kujawska-Lis to a sphere of cultural choice – appears in Conrad's text only to be firmly, even decisively, rejected. His account insists, with striking precision, that his encounter with English was less a matter of conscious decision than of revelation: an illumination, even a discovery, rather than an act of deliberate choice. Secondly, however, Conrad's reflections do not seem entirely consistent. On the one hand, he declares that English was not an "inheritance"; on the other, he admits that "it had always been an inherent part of myself". The first example, clearly resonant with the biographical context of his Polish descent and "destiny," underscores that English was acquired rather than received by birthright. At the same time, the second suggests that turning towards a so radically different language amounted to a rediscovery of the self. In this sense, acquiring English allowed Conrad to uncover something he felt had always been within him, and although distant from his native culture, it became, paradoxically, a return home.

3. Love, loss and the power of youth: Affective (emigratory) aesthetics

The search for a renewed sense of home through emigratory writing is a topic certainly worth pursuing – one that has often been addressed in the past[8] – and will be taken up again towards the end of this text. For now, however, while continuing an analysis of *A Personal Record*, it is important to look more closely at Conrad's poetics, which are strongly shaped by affect when describing experiences related, directly or indirectly, to emigration. Conrad frequently employs emotionally charged diction and a strong rhetorical emphasis when explaining his encounter with the English language – a theme to which he repeatedly returns in his autobiographical work. The following passage offers another account of this experience:

> It was a very intimate action and for that very reason it is too mysterious to explain. The task would be as impossible as trying to explain **love at first sight**. There was something in this conjunction of exulting, **almost physical recognition**, the same sort of **emotional surrender** and the same pride of possession, all united in the wonder of a great discovery; but there was on it none of that shadow of dreadful doubt that falls on the very flame of our perishable passions. One knew very well that this was forever (Conrad 1925, viii).

The above passage functions not merely as a confession but as a crucial illustration of Conrad's affective poetics. The decision to emigrate linguistically is driven by "love at first sight", a hidden desire, and even a physical sensation. A distinct sensuality – an embodied poetics – characterizes passages that relate to migratory experiences, such as the decision to become a sailor. When Conrad describes his first encounter with a British ship, he writes: "when I bore against the smooth flank of the first English ship I ever touched in my life, I felt it already throbbing under my open palm" (Conrad 1925, 137). Within these experiences, references to the English language reappear with familiar intensity:

> A few strokes brought us alongside, and it was then that, for the very first time in my life, I heard myself addressed in English – the speech of my secret choice, of my future, of long friendships, of the deepest affections, of hours of toil and hours of ease, and of solitary hours too, of books read, of thoughts pursued, of remembered emotions – of my very dreams! (Conrad 1925, 136).

Interestingly, Conrad also acknowledges how this decision might appear inappropriate, especially to his fellow countrymen. When describing the reasons for leaving his homeland in favor of the unknown sea, he refers to an "unanswerable question" and adds: "Alas! I have the conviction that there are men of unstained rectitude who are ready to murmur scornfully the word desertion" (Conrad 1925, 35). Conrad is fully aware of the accusations leveled against him and of how his decision to emigrate – understood by some as a form of treason – might affect the reception of his work, as already discussed in earlier sections of this article. In *A Personal Record*, the autobiographical attempt functions, to some extent, as a way of justifying himself or of approaching the decision to emigrate. Yet the only viable means of explanation ultimately becomes literary form – aesthetic expression is able to capture the inexplicability of the experience.

Conrad does not psychoanalyze his personal encounters, nor does he frame them in socio-cultural analyses (although, as we know from his other politically-inflected novels, he certainly could). When he examines himself, what emerges, is not only the figure of a writer, but more, interestingly, the figure of a romantic artist – one who feels more intensely, propelled by an inexpressible force, for whom the decision to emigrate constitutes a "mysterious vocation" (Conrad 1925, 44). The dramaturgy of events surrounding his departure from Poland, and later his joining the British Navy, is closely intertwined with emotive language – just as romantic heroes might cast themselves into the arms of a beloved or pursue a lost nation,

[8]Joseph Brodsky remarks that leaving one's country is always running away from the worse toward the better: "what takes place is a transition from a political and economic backwater to an industrially advanced society with the last word on individual liberty on its lips. And it must be added that perhaps taking this route is for an exiled writer, in many ways, like going home – because he gets closer to the seat of the ideals that inspired him all along" (Brodsky 1994, 4).

he throws himself into the space of uncharted lands, a new culture, and a foreign language. His departure is, in a way, narrated as an affective performance. Notably, Conrad's aesthetics were often criticized for their pathos and excessive use of adjectives – something that, in the above passages, seems quite justified. Edward Said addresses these critiques in his book *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, noting that: "Thus his extravagant or chatty prose – when it is most noticeable – is the groping of an uncertain Anglo-Pole for the least awkward, most 'stylistic' mode of expression. […] If at times he is too adjectival, it is because he failed to find a better way of making his experience clear" (Said 1966, 4). According to Said, Conrad's extravagance – or what should also be understood as his affective, modernist prose – might be linked to his uncertainty and his condition as an émigré. Yet the force of Conrad's experience, as seen, for example, in the passages cited above, does not fully correspond to any supposed uncertainty. What emerges, rather, is a form of self-assurance achieved through artistic articulation. Experience and expression engage in a process of reciprocal reinforcement, in which affect generates form and form, in turn, intensifies affect. To some extent, Conrad clearly seeks to convey the driving force of intense feeling, rather than a sense of deprivation or what might be called an "exilic rhetoric" marked by stylistic fragmentation or a lack of finesse. He may feel moments of doubt, but at the same time he demonstrates certainty.

This argument can be further supported by another text, equally important from an autobiographical perspective and in relation to Conrad's decision to emigrate: *Poland Revisited* (1915). The essay recounts Conrad's only return to Poland since leaving the country as a young man. Traveling with his entire family, he finds himself there at the outbreak of the First World War – and as Conrad himself acknowledged in the text, his awareness of the political tensions at the time was limited. One notable aspect of the text is that it provides very few details about his actual stay in Poland, a point to which I will return shortly. More importantly, the journey functions as a voyage through time, bringing Conrad back to the moment of his youthful emigration. At the beginning of the essay, the author describes in detail his first arrival in London, his disorientation in its labyrinthian cityscape, and how, despite this sense of being lost, an unyielding certainty guided him to the place he set out to reach:

> Youth is the time of rash pledges. Had I taken a wrong turning I would have been lost; and if faithful to my pledge I might have remained lost for days, for weeks, have left perhaps my bones to be discovered bleaching in some blind alley of the Whitechapel district, as it has happened to lonely travellers lost in the bush. **But I walked on to my destination without hesitation or mistake, showing there, for the first time, some of that faculty to absorb and make my own the imaged topography of a chart, which in later years was to help me in regions of intricate navigation to keep the ships entrusted to me off the ground.** The place I was bound to was not easy to find. It was one of those courts hidden away from the charted and navigable streets, lost among the thick growth of houses like a dark pool in the depths of a forest, approached by an inconspicuous archway as if by a secret path; a Dickensian nook of London, that wonder city, the growth of which bears no sign of intelligent design, but many traces of freakishly sombre phantasy the Great Master knew so well how to bring out by the magic of his understanding love. And the office I entered was Dickensian too. The dust of the Waterloo year lay on the panes and frames of its windows; early Georgian grime clung to its sombre wainscoting (Conrad 1994, 338, emphasis I.S.).

Conrad appeals here to a kind of intuitive, youthful certainty, a power that enables him to navigate his path with unerring confidence – a quality also reinforced through the literary imagination, hence the reference to Dickens. In connection with Conrad's emigration, the inspiration he drew from books is crucial; English literature – although Conrad first encountered it in translation – seems to have provided him in childhood with an early artistic anchor, one that continued to develop over time. In *A Personal Record*, Conrad reflects on his early reading and recalls his first encounters with English literature. While Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* played an important role in his literary education, he explicitly highlights William Shakespeare, in particular *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a work translated – as should be noted – by his own father:

> It was during our exile in Russia, and it must have been less than a year after my mother's death, because I remember myself in the black blouse with a white border of my heavy mourning. We were living together, quite alone, in a small house on the outskirts of the town of T——. That afternoon, instead of going out to play in the large yard which we shared with our landlord, I had lingered in the room in which my father generally wrote. What emboldened me to clamber into his chair I am sure I don't know, but a couple of hours afterward he discovered me kneeling in it with my elbows on the table and my head held in both hands over the MS. of loose pages (Conrad 1925, 71).

This passage is particularly significant because Conrad's first encounter with "Englishness" – understood here both as a linguistic and cultural sensibility – is shaped by the experience of his family's political exile, yet is deepened through his intimate relation with his father, all occurring in the shadow of his mother's death. The psychological implications of such an origin can only be speculated upon, yet they illuminate the depth of affective displacement that underlies his sense of

belonging. The episode is worth recalling here, as it resonates with a later scene in *Poland Revisited*, where Conrad's return to his native land becomes, in essence, an emotional revisiting of the "father-land" understood both geographically and literally, as the land he inhabited and shared with his father.

As has already been noted, *Poland Revisited* contains little about Conrad's actual stay in Poland during the summer of 1914. What Conrad does dwell on, however, is his first walk through Kraków – through the very places he had known as a boy. That walk, parallel in some respects to his stroll through London described in earlier parts of the essay, becomes a return to his childhood experiences. What is interesting is that he takes his son with him on this walk, with the boy being almost as a living reminder of Conrad's own perspective as a child – a companion resembling a younger version of the writer himself. Walking through Kraków, Conrad recalls the paths he used to take regularly as a child. In Miłosz's "Notes on Exile" one can read: "Imagination, always spatial, points north, south, east and west of some central, privileged place, which is probably a village from one's childhood or native region. As long as a writer lives in his country, the privileged place, by centrifugally enlarging itself, becomes more or less identified with his country as a whole. Exile displaces that center or rather creates two centers." (Miłosz 1994, 38). It's no surprise then that the geographical return to the native land gives one the sensation of returning home. The bond between an emigrant and his country is always intertwined with the sphere of childhood – the lost homeland is not simply a political or geographical entity, but is actually the home remembered. There is, however, an additional layer of importance here: for Conrad, this return is bound to the decisive event of his father's death. Thus, during a visit to Poland – at a moment, it should be recalled, when hope for independence was rising with the outbreak of the war, and arguably the most pivotal political moment in Polish history – Conrad actually revisits a deeply personal memory:

> This was the time of my father's last illness. Every evening at seven, turning my back on the Florian Gate, I walked all the way to a big old house in a quiet narrow street a good distance beyond the Great Square. There, in a large drawing-room, panelled and bare, with heavy cornices and a lofty ceiling, in a little oasis of light made by two candles in a desert of dusk I sat at a little table to worry and ink myself all over till the task of my preparation was done. […] Later in the evening, but not always, I would be permitted to tip-toe into the sick room to say good-night to the figure prone on the bed, which often could not acknowledge my presence but by a slow movement of the eyes, put my lips dutifully to the nerveless hand lying on the coverlet, and tip-toe out again. Then I would go to bed, in a room at the end of the corridor, and often, not always, cry myself into a good sound sleep. […] There was nothing in my aching head but a few words, some such stupid sentences as, "It's done," or, "It's accomplished" (in Polish it is much shorter), or something of the sort, repeating itself endlessly (Conrad 1994, 348–349).

In Conrad's autobiographical writing, when he tries to capture the sources of his emigratory state, whether it is an emigration into language or his first experiences reading English literature, or the actual, geographical return to the country from which he had emigrated, Conrad continually turns his thoughts to his father and to the formative moments of his childhood. This deeply personal and emotionally charged experience becomes a moment in which what seemed the most political in Conrad's life and work effectively becomes the most personal; where affect starts to mediate between history and intimacy.

4. Conclusion

Emigration, as a source of Conrad's authorial identity, ultimately functions as a mode of return: a return to home understood not as a stable geography but as the remembered space of his youth and childhood. This space is characterized by unbridled energy, a pursuit of the new, and a desire to transcend both personal and geographical boundaries, driven by genuine enthusiasm – including, notably, a linguistic one. Conrad attempts to revisit these experiences in *A Personal Record*, yet traces of this autobiographical sensitivity can also be found, albeit more subtly, in his novel *A Shadow-Line* (1916). Conrad's autobiographical writing reveals the affect inherent in the political experience of emigration, as well as the affective aesthetics designed to express that experience. Both geographical emigration and emigration in language operate as paradoxical gestures: simultaneous distancing and approaching, in which the escape towards another culture, filtered through the poetics of the written word, eventually returns to its sources and re-anchors in private experience. In this sense, Conrad's "homecoming" is inseparable from revisiting his father's death and the exile they once shared. This is why *Poland Revisited* holds such particular importance. It exemplifies how the political intersects with the most personal, how national destiny converges with the memory of familial intimacy. As Said noted: "Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with, one's native place; what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both." (Said 2000, 185). Conrad's work confirms this paradox, showing that emigration, rather than erasing home, inscribes it more deeply into the imagination as the very ground of literature.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study. All sources analysed are cited in the References.

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