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## Politics and the Inadequacy of Words in Joseph Conrad's Non-Fiction

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### Abstract

The Polish-born English novelist, Joseph Conrad, once challenged the general public with a statement which stigmatized the printed word in wartime coverage as being cold, silent, and colorless. The aim of this article is to investigate the manner in which the writer himself applied words in his wartime non-fictional works in order to bestow a lasting effect on his texts. It is argued that irony renders his non-fiction memorable. Thus, the focus is first placed on the manner in which irony features in Conrad's political essays, collected in *Notes on Life and Letters*, from 1921. It is argued that irony applied in his non-fiction represents what Wayne C. Booth termed *stable* irony. Further, it is claimed that, as a spokesman for a non-existent country, Conrad succeeded in transposing the Polish perspective into a discourse familiar to the British public. This seems possible due to the application of the concept of the body politic and the deployment of Gothic imagery. Finally, the paper examines the manner in which words are effectively used to voice the stance of a moralist on truth and the lie of the printed word in the turbulent times around the end of the 19th century.

*Keywords:* the Polish problem, *stable* irony, binary oppositions, the body politic, Gothic imagery

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## Introduction

The contemporary world seems to be governed by the written word: the media and information technologies are replete with bold headings and hyperlinks, and users worldwide find nothing untoward in unceasingly clicking on links that transfer them to new sites. Arguably, this does not necessarily entail a proportionate increase in knowledge, and neither does it expand mental horizons: as Nicholas Carr convincingly contended, the more often we click, the more superficial and cursory are our findings (Carr, 2010, pp. 6–7, 136–137). Consequently, internet users are left with an overabundance of words and informational chaos which hardly enriches them, instead leaving them confused and overwhelmed. Frequently, the verbal message is accompanied by images which render the process of chaotic discovery even more bewildering. This is particularly so in the case of politics, since, arguably, each party involved in a political debate aims to find favor with the most readers, viewers, or users possible. The words they employ frequently leave no trace in the minds of the recipients and this seems to render them flawed, or inefficient.

The issue of the adequacy of a verbal representation of reality and the capacity of language to faithfully represent the world attracted academic attention in the 20th century with particular force: several 20th-century philosophers and linguists – the most famous probably being Martin Heidegger,<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida,<sup>2</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure,<sup>3</sup> and Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>4</sup> –

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<sup>1</sup> Although Martin Heidegger did not deliver any systematic critique of language, the philosopher dedicated several works to related issues, for example, *On the Way to Language and Poetry, Language, Thought*. A discussion on Heidegger's stance on the philosophy of language and speech is included in Wayne D. Owens (1988, pp. 49–66).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, (2011, pp. 39–44).

<sup>3</sup> For an insightful description of Saussurean thought on semantics see Ricoeur (2003, pp. 140–146).

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein investigated language in terms of language games in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

enquired into the nature of language in both its written and oral forms.<sup>5</sup>

However, since Joseph Conrad openly argued against “the authority of a school [as] a weakness of inferior minds”<sup>6</sup> (Conrad, 2008, p. 8), I do not intend to discuss the theoretical and philosophical considerations; instead, I wish to trace Conrad’s particular way of applying language in order to create his own literary vision.<sup>7</sup> In his 1914 literary manifesto,<sup>8</sup> the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*,<sup>9</sup> Conrad described his artistic craft thusly: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*” (Conrad, 1964, 23; italics original). This paper aims to delineate the process of creating such a vision in texts that focus on European politics in the first half of the 20th century. Particular attention is placed on Conrad’s non-fictional, political essays: “Autocracy and War” (1905), “The Crime of Partition” (1919), and “A Note on the Polish Problem” (1916).<sup>10</sup> Although the essays were published in different years, they all feature in the 1921 collection of non-fiction, entitled *Notes on Life and Letters*.

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<sup>5</sup> The philosophers listed above regarded as fundamental the differentiation between language conceived of as speech and the linguistic sign system; since the frame of this article is different, I leave the question aside.

<sup>6</sup> A negative view on Conrad’s explicit dismissal of literary schools and movements is expressed by Samuel Hynes and quoted in Watt (1979, pp. 77, 147).

<sup>7</sup> The term “vision” is evocative, since it appears as a literary concept in Conrad’s essays and non-fiction; see also “the surrounding vision of form and color, of sunshine and shadows” and “a moment of vision” in Conrad (1964, p. 64). and a “direct vision of a fact” in “Autocracy and War” in Conrad (2008, p. 50).

<sup>8</sup> Zdzisław Najder called it “[Conrad’s] best known theoretical piece” (Najder, 1983A, p. 211).

<sup>9</sup> It was not included in the British version of *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, a subject recorded in the Foreword written for American readers in the 1914 American edition of the novel.

<sup>10</sup> Conrad’s fiction is generally perceived as being “concerned with a capacity for political vision” (Niland, as cited in Stape, 2015, p. 29).

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### Joseph Conrad and Politics

It is not exactly surprising that Joseph Conrad viewed politics as a serious matter. The Polish-born English writer, Józef Konrad Korzeniowski, published his works in Britain at the end of the 19th century, which was a time of major political transformation in Europe – particularly in Poland, which regained its independence after 123 years of being partitioned. As a son of political prisoners who were victims of Russian persecution, Conrad went with his parents into exile in Siberia, during which time his mother died, followed by his father four years later. Thus, the issue of a punitive political struggle which often victimizes individuals was a personal matter for Conrad. Moreover, since Conrad's life experience involved the aftermath of a lost political cause – a cause defeated by a much greater power, namely, Russia – the inadequacy of words to express his despair appears to be a major issue. Conrad's case is still further complicated, as his adulthood was to be inextricably linked to the good fortune of another imperial power; in 1886 Conrad became a naturalized citizen of Great Britain. Consequently, his position in the political arena was problematic: on the one hand, the writer openly expressed his disapproval of Russia as an imperial state and its Eastern culture and authoritarian policies; on the other hand, Conrad endorsed and felt part of a Western empire – Great Britain. Finally, Conrad's literary output was composed exclusively in English,<sup>11</sup> which has been a point of contention among his compatriots, who, like Perłowski, argued against his alleged patriotism. In an article on the British writer, Perłowski stated that "in all [Conrad's] works there was no mention of Poland" (as cited in Najder, 1983b, p. 159)<sup>12</sup> The critic added, "evidently, Conrad does not believe in Poland's future but still nurtures a deep hatred for her oppressors" (Perłowski as cited in Najder, 1983a, 159). The ambivalence of Conrad's attitude towards the politics of his homeland raises questions regarding the way the "deep hatred

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<sup>11</sup> For more on this issue see Watt (1979, p. 32).

<sup>12</sup> Perłowski's article, titled "On Conrad and Kipling," is included in Najder (1983, pp. 150–170).

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for [Poland's] oppressors" is made evident in Conrad's non-fictional, political essays. In my view, Conrad's audacious openness, which is characteristic of a spokesman for freedom and democracy and is exhibited in the essays, stands in stark contrast to the suggestive, yet spare style of writing in his political novels – as is the case with, for example, *Under Western Eyes*. However, in both cases the opposition between East and West appears to be a fundamental concept; in fact, the binary opposition is a crux around which Conrad's hatred of the Russian autocracy is revealed.

### **Irony and Linguistic Efficiency**

It is no coincidence that Conrad's predilection for irony left its distinct mark on the rhetoric of his essays and novels focusing on pre-WWI European politics: the idea of a political conflict, whose cause was lost even as it was formulated, was a fundamental issue in the mind of a writer whose parents and Polish compatriots were the victims of a totalitarian power. Thus, the mode of irony must have seemed quite natural to expose and, in a way, to neutralize the aftereffects of such a lost cause. As far as his essays are concerned, arguably, the mode of irony serves particularly well the aim to expose controversial allegations in a manner that observes the common rules of decency and respect while at the same time establishing a basis for calling into question an apparently straightforward statement. In other words, an ironic point is safely made. As Wayne C. Booth put it, irony "delimits a world of discourse in which we can say with great security certain things that are violated by the overt words of the discourse" (Booth, 1974, p. 6). However, as indicated, irony may also assist in the processes of neutralizing specific content that is linked to unwelcome memories. As regards such processes, David Lowenthal asserted that irony is one of the mechanisms which helps debar past memories from their oppressive impact on an individual (Lowenthal, 2015, pp. 129–142).

Interestingly, Conrad's 1905 political essay, "Autocracy and War," included in the 1921 collection *Notes on Life and Letters*, opens with

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a seemingly lengthy, even confusing and at times ironic digression on the Russo–Japanese War. It feels protracted because, instead of contributing a commentary on the war – as the title suggests – it somewhat provocatively devotes considerable attention to the issue of language; indeed, after a few opening lines built upon the pattern of the exotic – which David Lodge termed “the mediation of an ‘abroad’ to an audience assumed to be located at ‘home’” (Lodge, 1992, p. 159) – Conrad apparently leaves the Japanese to one side and shifts his attention to Europe. It becomes apparent that the Russo–Japanese war serves as a mere pretext to engage in a debate upon European politics. However, before shifting the focus from the Japanese war to Europe, the essayist pondered on language and its efficiency. Conrad observed that

we have seen these things [i.e., the war], though we have seen them only in the cold, silent, colorless print of books and newspapers. In stigmatizing the printed word as cold, silent, and colorless, I have no intention of putting a slight upon the fidelity and the talents of [writers and journalists] .... I only wished to suggest that ... the war ... has been made known to us, so far, in a grey reflection ... a reflection seen in the perspective of thousands of miles, in the dim atmosphere of official reticence, through the veil of inadequate words. (Conrad, 2008, p. 50)

Although it is not as clear as in subsequent passages of “Autocracy and War,” the irony of the initial sentences quoted above can easily be discerned by those who have read Conrad’s literary manifesto from *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. In the Preface to that book, a specific emphasis is placed on the power of literary fiction to create a vision, in other words, to “make [the readers] see” (Conrad, 1964, p. 23). Thus, the overt “we have seen these things,” a statement immediately questioned by the concessive “though,” ironically affirms the incapacity to appropriately visualize the war on the part of those who have only read the dry accounts furnished by British newspapers. The covert, ironic indictment suggested

in the passage is the very opposite of what is overtly stated: nothing can be “seen” since it is misrepresented by weak, “inadequate” words and cold statistics. The careful choice of words, which violate neither grammar nor semantics, allows for an ironic reconstruction of meaning. In addition, a further suggestion makes it clear that a verbal, inadequate (mis)representation creates “a grey reflection” which in fact constitutes a distortion of reality – blurred, indistinct, and “veiled.” It *re-flects*, or even *de-flects*, the actual vision owing to the huge, geographical distance between the actual theatre of war – Manchuria – and Britain, as well as by the divergent cultural contexts and the lack of necessary knowledge on the part of both the readership and the authors of the “inadequate words.”

Arguably, Conrad makes explicit his attitude towards inappropriate language use in order to prepare the ground for his own “adequate” commentary on politics: despite stigmatizing the printed word, Conrad at a later stage in the essay attempts his own interpretation through the mode of irony; indeed irony permeates the entire text of “Autocracy and War” and is one of the modes applied in Conrad’s later political essays, “A Note on the Polish Problem” (1916) and “The Crime of Partition” (1919). In “Autocracy and War,” Conrad’s ironic tone becomes particularly daring – even openly sarcastic – when stigmatizing the alleged over-sensitivity and naivety of the British – for example, in a passage deriding “these Arcadian tears” of the Victorian sentimentalists (Conrad, 2008a, p. 51) – as well as the propagated, self-imposed greatness of “Russia’s might” (p. 53). If examined against these ironic patterns, Conrad’s later political essays evince the same semantic fields of ironic stigmatization, that is, denouncing European sentimentality and the authoritarian and autocratic designs of both Russia and Prussia. Thus, in “The Crime of Partition,” Conrad ironically deplores “the diplomatic tears [shed] over the transaction [of Poland’s final partition]” (p. 67) and in “A Note on the Polish Problem” he ironically posits that the Russian “public recognition of a mistake in [the act of Poland’s partition] cannot damage the prestige of a powerful State” (p. 80). Certainly, a contextual analysis of the essays reveals that Conrad persisted in the idea of Russian weakness and lawlessness,

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Prussian arrogance, and the sentimental turn of mind of the Western European states.<sup>13</sup>

As numerous critics have emphasized (Booth, 1974, 1983, pp. 300ff; Fludernik, 1993, pp. 350–356; Muecke, 2017, pp. 56–102), irony may be examined in a variety of ways. Since my particular interest in this case is non-fiction and the genre of the political essay, I will discuss only a subcategory – favored by such a discourse – namely, the “stable irony” (Booth, 1974, pp. 1–31). It seems that *stable* irony is particularly applicable to non-fiction since it does not depend on a subjective reading, but is a permanent feature of the text – even if it is reconstructive in nature (pp. 33–44). In his seminal work, *The Rhetoric of Irony*, Booth claimed that stable irony exhibits four major features: it is *intended* by the author, it alludes to *covert* meaning whose reading is *stable* or fixed, and it is *finite* in application (1974, pp. 5–6). In other words, stable irony presupposes a level of communication between the speaker and the listener, and the act of determining the ironic point cannot be an matter of negotiation: stable ironic statements are finite as regards the limits of their reconstruction. Thus, it differs from the popular concept of irony “in the sense that once the reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions .... [since] the reconstructed meaning ... [is] in some sense local, limited” (p. 6). I wish to suggest that Conrad’s ironic vision of the difficult relations between the states of Europe at the end of the 19th century can be reconstructed in one way only: that it is biased against an authoritarian Russia and, as a consequence, shows little appreciation for its Eastern culture, literature, and politics. In this sense, the ironic discourse of Conrad’s political essays is stable and its stability is rather provocatively aimed at igniting a discussion – in other words, it serves a pragmatic aim.<sup>14</sup> The provocative nature of irony is, in fact, an intrinsic property since,

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<sup>13</sup> Arguably, due to pragmatics, the tone of “A Note on the Polish Problem” is subtler, since it is aimed at a clearly defined political target – the realization of a protectorate – achieved with Russia’s agreement. Cf. (Conrad, 2008a, p. 5).

<sup>14</sup> Consider Conrad’s commentary on the delivery of “A Note on the Polish Problem” (Conrad, 2008a, p. 5).



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according to Monika Fludernik, “irony is always a pragmatic phenomenon of an implicational nature ... which ... requires a recuperatory move on the reader’s part” (Fludernik, 1993, p. 352).

Interestingly, in Conrad’s political essays, “the recuperatory move” is facilitated, as it is suggested in the semantics of the straightforward passages; in the latter, Conrad openly reveals his hatred towards autocratic states, and particularly towards Russia. The overt passages describing “the ill-omened phantom of Russia’s might” (Conrad, 2008a, p. 56) form a definite basis for the ironic passages and serve as a guide for the less direct expressions. Indeed, in Conrad’s political essays, stable irony is intertwined with straightforward seriousness and, at times, overt outspokenness concerning the political systems of 20th-century Europe. Thus, if Conrad is ironic about the extent of “the real progress of humanitarian ideas” (p. 50), he becomes harsh and outspoken when elaborating upon “Russia’s influence in Europe” (p. 55). This interlacement of straightforwardness and irony is not unexpected, particularly in critical commentaries; as Booth observes, “stable irony does [express condemnation] much more forcefully, because it contains the invitation to a further judgement about both ... the use of irony and the fairness of employing such a weapon of contempt” (Booth, 1974, p. 43). Thus, the effectiveness of language in the essays examined above depends on its modal characteristics, that is, having an ironic overtone.

### **Eastern and Western Polarity**

As indicated above, the inefficiency of a verbal representation of the reality of life was an important issue for Conrad who, as a *homo duplex* with divided loyalties (Pacukiewicz, 2008, 146–159), must have been constantly struggling over the manner in which to address the problem of political supremacy. As a Pole in his heart, alongside his fellow compatriots he belonged to the oppressed; as a Briton by choice, he represented the supremacy of a European superpower. As has already been underlined, the mode of irony proved an efficient means with which to comply with

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the rules of propriety in word and print, yet, at the same time, to infer an assessment of certain contested issues that could prove to be unwelcome. Apart from irony, another means that enabled the expression of Polish viewpoints on European politics is the application of the East–West binary in his prose. I wish to suggest that, particularly in “Autocracy and War,” the polarity between Eastern and Western Europe is made salient: the binary forms the crux not only of this essay, but also of Conrad’s other writings which encompass European politics.<sup>15</sup>

The polarity is carefully constructed and the construct draws upon both verbal and non-verbal means of expression. Since “Autocracy and War” opens with an admission regarding the inefficiency of the printed word, the speaker – a Westerner<sup>16</sup> – uses language in a subversive manner through irony and sarcasm. The disclaimer with respect to language efficiency is circumvented by both the mode of irony and negative imagery. Thus, the verbal layer is supplemented, and indeed strengthened, by visual means. It seems that in order to win over the minds of the British, and indeed the Western world in its entirety, in his struggle against autocratic aspirations,<sup>17</sup> Conrad satirically overplays the Western concept of the body politic. Arguably, the introduction of this concept, interlaced with the binary opposition of East and West, helps transform the unfamiliar viewpoint of the Polish *raison d'état* into a political concept which sounds familiar to a Western audience. However, the manner in which Conrad applies the concept of the body politic is idiosyncratic: the writer employs an overdrawn Gothic version, with his political essays investigating and exploring a distorted version of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *The Body Politic*. In Chapter 11, Book II, the well-known philosopher claims that “the body politic, as much as the human body, begins to die from its birth on, and bears within itself the causes of its destruction” (Rousseau,

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Conrad’s fiction, *Under Western Eyes* and *The Secret Agent*.

<sup>16</sup> The speaker’s cultural background is distinctly Western: he refers to Italian literature (Dante’s *Inferno*) and mentions legendary ancient warriors such as Scipio and Hannibal (Conrad, 2008a, pp. 52–53).

<sup>17</sup> The speaker stigmatizes Russian autocratic tendencies and Prussian imperialism alike.

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2012, p. 91). The implied finality of the destruction suggested by Rousseau seems to constitute the point of departure for Conrad's hypothesis – that the Russian state has ceased to exist and become a ghost, a ghost still revered by naïve European states. Conrad affirms:

for a hundred years the ghost of Russian might, overshadowing with its fantastic bulk the councils of Central and Western Europe, sat upon the gravestone of autocracy, cutting off from air, from light, from all knowledge of themselves and of the world, the buried millions of Russian people. (Conrad, 2008, pp. 51–52)

What Rousseau merely intimated in his treatise becomes transformed into the overt culpability of Russia, culpability which is also reiterated in Conrad's other political essays: Russia as a state has deteriorated over time. The application of a well-known political concept includes a disarrangement which is executed in a Gothic fashion; apparently, it assists Conrad in debunking the alluring myth of Russian greatness disseminated in Europe by the discourse of propaganda. Ironically,<sup>18</sup> Conrad (2008) utilizes one of the fundamental Western concepts to explode the myth of the power and strength of the Eastern superpower. Thus, the body of the Russian state is visualized as a decomposing colossus on the verge of collapse and is consistently portrayed as "a gigantic and dreaded phantom" (p. 51), "a phantom which is disappearing now" (p. 56), and an "oppressive ghost" (p. 65). The rhetoric of the Gothic culminates in a sentence in an early part of the essay that reads, "the decrepit, old, hundred years old, spectre of Russia's might still faces Europe from across the teeming graves of Russian people" (p. 53). It can be inferred from the context that in this quotation Europe is equated with "the Western world" (p. 53).

As previously noted, "Autocracy and War" was Conrad's first political essay to articulate his indictment against Russia; it was written in a time of war, namely, the Russo–Japanese War. In two other political, non-fictional

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<sup>18</sup> Here I use the word "ironically" in the more common, *unstable* way discussed by Booth (1974, pp. 2–3).

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texts centered around the polarity of Eastern and Western Europe, "A Note on the Polish Problem" (1916) and "The Crime of Partition" (1919), the geopolitical binary is sustained: Russia is consistently depicted as a dangerous, autocratic country. Although the major concern in both "A Note on the Polish Problem" and "The Crime of Partition" is the issue of Poland's independence,<sup>19</sup> which is beyond the scope of the present paper, I wish to emphasize that the essays were written with a pragmatic end in mind: they were designed as an official contribution to the debate upon the legitimacy of Poland's re-introduction to the maps of Europe. This could be said to be crucial when considered together with the title of the present article, because the ideas propounded in his essays, if not meant to achieve a specific political success, were at least to exert a certain influence on the potential readers, namely, the British, or Western Europeans. Thus, intended as a contribution to a political debate, the words were meant to be "good words" – in this case, "good" meaning "effective." To some extent, the words did indeed prove to be effective. Written and delivered to the British Foreign Office during WWI, "A Note on the Polish Problem" is believed to have informed "an anonymous memorandum prepared at the Foreign Office in the autumn of 1916, at the request of Herbert Henry Asquith, the prime minister" (Najder, 1983a, p. 417) in support of the Polish cause – to re-create Poland as an independent state in Europe.

As with irony, the polarity between East and West can be considered as being stable irony in Conradian prose: while the Eastern superpower, Russia, consistently features as a savage and totalitarian state, Western Europe is blamed for being weak and sentimentalist. The direct stance concerning the compelling need to adopt a new, unyielding approach towards Russia, alongside the outspoken charges against Europe's responsibility for the state of affairs, must have rendered the essay difficult to deal with in 1905; similarly, the other essays discussed above openly

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<sup>19</sup> Since "The Crime of Partition" was published in 1919 – when Poland had already regained its independence – it seems outdated: why re-assess long-established facts at the beginning of a long-awaited post-war era? However, at the time of the essay's first publication, not all European states had officially acknowledged Poland's independence (Najder, 1983a, p. 436).

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blame Western leniency toward Russia, which according to Conrad did not change in either 1916 or 1919. Thus, his standpoint on the issue of Poland's independence deserved a proper, "adequate" linguistic representation in print.

### Conrad's (In)adequacy

After a century, Conrad's essays still appear too outspoken and too direct: apparently, herein lies the reason for the recent decrease in popularity of the author among the contemporary readership. As pointed out above, Conrad argued that the printed word is efficient if it manages to recreate a vision in the minds of the reading public, a vision which might gain a distinct sharpness if it is visualized with the help of clear imagery. Described through the use of numerous metaphors, "the phantom of the Russian might" becomes visible by virtue of explicit Gothic traits and the application of the East–West binary. However, the contemporary world seems to not encourage explicitness and unambiguity: a "good" word today is not located in the stable binaries. Arguably, the removal of clear-cut definitions and notions may be located within the theory of relativism. It may also be rooted in several postmodern ideas which, quite convincing as they certainly are, challenge traditional theories and conventions.

As far as the issue of binary oppositions is concerned, it was investigated by Jacques Derrida; his findings prove quite helpful in delineating Conrad's application of the East–West polarity in his prose. In an interview included in *Positions*,<sup>20</sup> Derrida (1981) explains that binary oppositions are founded on the notions of accumulation and hierarchy, "a violent hierarchy" (p. 41) to be precise. According to Derrida, the structure of opposition is subordinating: "one of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand" (p. 41). Each

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<sup>20</sup> *Positions* is a collection of three interviews discussing Derrida's concepts on literature and language that are elaborated upon in *Writing and Difference* and *Dissemination*.

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binary consists of two elements, the first of which is superordinate; it is supplemented by the second, subordinate element. The former accumulates and accrues a series of other superordinate meanings with regard to related binaries – as shown above in the case of the range of axiological terms and values represented, in Conrad's view, by the Western world. According to the postmodernist philosopher, the primary elements accrue and form a logocentric core around which the subordinate members gather, forming a periphery. However, Derrida argues that neither of the elements is expedient and that the second member of a binary pair, even if subordinate, has a vital meaning for the superordinate concept. Although Derrida, as a postmodern critic, ultimately rejects the necessity of polarization in contemporary thought, Conrad, as a representative of a previous era, did employ the traditional understanding of binary oppositions when considering international relations in 20th-century Europe: the negative images and values associated with Russia and Eastern Europe enhance the positive associations with the Western counterpart. Thus, if the Russian state wriggles in "the convulsions of a colossal body" (Conrad, 2008a, p. 60), "a possible re-grouping of European Powers" offers itself to a new Europe, and so prompts a "voice of surmise" (p. 65). It is a Europe freed from the menacing "figure out of a nightmare" (p. 54), a Europe for whose wellbeing the resurrection of the Polish state will serve as "an outpost of the Western Powers" (p. 79).<sup>21</sup>

Today, the polarization of the attractive and repellant, characteristics at opposite geographical ends, seems traditional and outdated, respectively: postmodern critics call for a neutralization of the binaries. Nowadays, neither end is to be assigned distinct features, either positive or negative. Moreover, it is not enough to replace the ends, nor to relocate the values, since, as Derrida says, "we know what always has been the *practical* (particularly *political*) effects of *immediately jumping beyond* oppositions, and of protests in the simple form of *neither this nor that*"

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<sup>21</sup> "A Note on the Polish Problem" was delivered to the Foreign Office in 1916, that is, during WWI. Here Conrad's view on Russia's role in Europe has changed: he diminishes its role in European politics and affirms that "in reality Russia has ceased to care much for her Polish possessions" (Conrad, 2008, p. 80).

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(Derrida, 1981, p. 41). Naturally, such claims diminish the legitimacy of the traditional worldview based on the notions of polar extremes; consequently, Conrad's prose becomes problematic as it upholds such oppositions, their hierarchies, and their axiological implications; moreover, they seem to be the structural and conceptual crux of his works, particularly of those discussed above.

### **Conclusion**

Much has been written on the potential sources of Conrad's consistent picture of the world based upon the notions of virtue and fidelity to traditional rules and codes of behavior (Skolik, 2009, pp. 9–23; Najder, 2007, p. 256f, 1997, pp. 205–207); in the context of the present article, it seems worth emphasizing that in Conrad's prose, both fiction and non-fiction, the "good word" is outspoken, coherent in its message, and effective in its targeted impact on the reading public. The "good word" in non-fictional texts is, quite justifiably, different from the "good word" in Conrad's fiction, because the latter is less direct and its language is often veiled and allusive. By contrast, in his political essays the message underscoring his dissatisfaction with the authoritarian oppressor is expressed quite openly and unambiguously through stable irony, razor-sharp and finite, as well as the polarized imagery that involves a range of figures which connote decay and decomposition. As observed, the Gothic imagery helps create a vision.

However, Conrad's unrelenting outspokenness is, in my view, the reason behind the decreasing appreciation of his work today: the contemporary reader, and the wider public, is used to their views being worded in a manner that is within the delimitations of political correctness, which will not allow an expression of open contempt towards any nation, state, or race. In present-day Poland – and, arguably, in Europe as well – the interest in Conrad's prose has declined due to, in my opinion, the fact it is too straightforward and calls for radical, often heroic deeds and actions. Read with greater enthusiasm in times of oppression and crisis

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(Zabierowski, 2015, p. 189), Conrad's prose is too uncompromising with regard to European politics. A post-truth society hardly seems compatible with and is likely to be puzzled by a heroism which, along with an outspoken contempt of a totalitarian state, arguably belongs in old books.



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