JOSEPH CONRAD

NOSTROMO:

THE CONCEPT OF TIME

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BY

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It is my view that an understanding of the concept of time is central to a reading of Nostromo. For Joseph Conrad, the community of mankind was held together by the illusion of civilization. Behind this illusion exists a hostile, malignant universe that reveals itself, at will, to certain individuals. Conrad's major fiction was directed to exposing this underlying reality and shattering the illusion. Thus the radical time shifts within the form of Nostromo effectively destroy what is essential to preserving that illusion -- an unquestioning belief in sequential, coherent time. The individual for whom this sense of time no longer exists penetrates the illusion to discover the destructive element in reality. The destruction of chronological time and the discovery of reality are, in Conrad's fiction, achieved through a perfect union of theme and technique. This thesis will not attempt to separate these aspects of Nostromo, but rather it assumes that theme and technique are one.

TEXTUAL NOTE

Works not listed in the bibliography are given full reference in the footnotes. Those footnotes that appear in shortened form (for example, Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality) are listed fully in the bibliography.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

My sincere thanks to Dr. Alan Bishop for his kind and patient assistance; and my appreciation to my husband Michael, for his comments and suggestions which constantly inspired me to new ideas and directions of thought.

"Bitterness is the very condition of human existence . . . Intelligence itself [is] a thing of no great account except for us to torment ourselves with. For directly you begin to use it the questions of right and wrong arise and these are things of the air with no connection whatever with the fundamental realities of life."

(Joseph Conrad, Letter to Edward Garnett,
16 May 1918).

I

INTRODUCTION

> "The real significance of crime is in its being a breach of faith with the community of mankind . . ." (Lord Jim, 121)

"The time is out of joint, O cursèd spite/ That ever I was born to set it right!" (Hamlet, I, v,). After Hamlet's encounter with his father's ghost, he becomes an outsider to the human community, alienated from his society. In a moment of insight Hamlet perceives the falseness of the world to which he once belonged and recognizes the reality that underlies it. "The time is out of joint" because Hamlet is trapped within the moment of contact with his father's ghost; all subsequent thought and action on his part will be determined by this particular moment. His consciousness becomes obsessed entirely by the charge of his father's spirit to avenge his death. Only this moment of experience has meaning and relevance in his mind. He must now live in that timeless world where he is committed to his destiny. Everything in Hamlet's experience that preceded or follows his meeting with the ghost can no longer be meaningful to him. "The deepest experience of truth is a moment which is neither past, present, nor future, but out of time altogether, like death itself."[1] When a character has experienced this moment of "truth", he subsequently lives in the tragic vision.

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1. Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality, p. 31.

Those who possess the tragic vision are completely dominated by a subjective perspective that obeys its own morality; such a perspective no longer acknowledges the existence of a macrocosmic unity and order. The individual consciousness transfers the centre and source of value to himself. Thus everything outside the individual acquires arbitrary value as it is assimilated into his consciousness. When this happens, the man becomes a nihilist; in J. Hillis Miller's definition of the term, nihilism is "the nothingness of consciousness, when consciousness becomes the foundation of everything."[2]

Part of the purpose of this thesis is to show that Conrad's fiction represents a culmination of a nihilistic tendency in post-Renaissance and, more especially, in post-Romantic literature.

> The special place of Joseph Conrad in English literature lies in the fact that in him the nihilism covertly dominant in modern culture is brought to the surface and shown for what it is . . . Conrad is part of European literature and takes his place with Dostoevsky, Mann, Gide, Proust, and Camus as an explorer of modern perspectivism and nihilism . . . It remained for Conrad to explore nihilism to its depths . . . .[3]

A nihilistic world is essentially a timeless world. The concept of chronological time is a means by which man attempts to give his life order and meaning. Through it, he patterns his consciousness in spatial terms; that is, he can order and separate his thoughts and emotions in the same way as physical objects are ordered and separated in space. Thus, a man feels that his perceptions and emotions are comprehensible and not a chaotic fluidity of interpenetrating states of consciousness.

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2. Ibid., p. 3.

3. Ibid., pp. 5-6.

A conception of past, present and future allows for an illusory sense of freedom in that an individual believes he can transcend his past to find change and renewal in the future. When the illusion of time is shattered, the human consciousness experiences psychological disorientation from a moral order once believed to underlie human existence. Then one is forced to confront an alien amoral universe. Conrad's characters experience this kind of psychological process. After the shocking moment of cosmic revelation, these characters are caught within the tragic vision and become victims of their own subjectivity. Kurtz, Lord Jim and Winnie Verloc are three such characters. So are Giorgio Viola, Dr. Monygham, Nostromo and Decoud in Nostromo, which will be the main subject of this thesis. However it is desirable to consider the former characters in the novels in which they appear before beginning a study of Nostromo. A brief analysis of Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim and The Secret Agent will serve as a suitable context in which to place Nostromo, because these novels strikingly manifest the basic themes and techniques that Conrad was to develop more fully and completely in Nostromo.

Heart of Darkness is primarily about two characters, Marlow and Kurtz, who are forced to confront the moral implications of nihilism. Kurtz makes himself the absolute moral centre of the universe, behaving according to the demands of his own subjectivity. He is like Lord Jim in his devotion to a romantic conception of himself through which he becomes his own standard of conduct. Kurtz's dedication to the ideal of civilizing the African savages betrays him; instead of serving the ideal he personally identifies with it. He becomes the absolute master and deity of the savage tribes, the price of which is his full participat-

ion in their way of life. Kurtz's cry "Exterminate all the brutes"[4] thus expresses not only a desire for self-annihilation but also a desire to annihilate the primordial darkness, the source from which he came. His tragic vision is the knowledge that civilization exists by momentarily annihilating the darkness upon which it is built: "We live in the flicker --", as Marlow puts it (7). The "horror" in which Kurtz finds himself is that "original chaos", the "secret substance of all things"[5] to which all things inevitably return. Attempts to preserve civilization, that "sunny arrangement of small conveniences",[6] are almost impossible when not in direct contact with it. Kurtz perceives the truth of existence "stripped of its cloak of time" (60).

Unlike Kurtz, who totally immerses himself in "the destructive element", Marlow makes a deliberate commitment to civilization in his symbolic lie to "the Intended". Marlow's obsession for rivets is symbolic of his need to keep things together, to keep the illusion intact. The "miracle" chief accountant evokes his respect and admiration because of his ability to preserve the illusion of civilization in the midst of moral darkness.

> ". . . I respected the fellow. Yes, I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair. His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's

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4. Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer, (ed. Franklin Walker New York: Bantam, 1969), p. 84. All subsequent quotations from Heart of Darkness will be taken from this edition, referred to only by page numbers.

5. Hillis Miller, p. 28.

6. Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p. 236. All subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition of Lord Jim and indicated by page numbers.

> dummy; but in the great demoralization of the land, he kept up his appearance. That's backbone. His starched collars and got up shirt-fronts were achievements of character." (28)

Marlow's way of maintaining contact with civilization is merely by keeping busy -- "When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality -- the reality, I tell you -- fades. The inner truth is hidden -- luckily, luckily" (56).

Although Kurtz occupies a central place in the novella, the real centre is Marlow, and indeed it is his story. The main concern of Heart of Darkness is with Marlow's growing self-awareness and the way in which he deals with it. Although he has glimpsed the horror which Kurtz embraces, he draws back his "hesitating foot." He deliberately affirms his allegiance to the human community in his lie to "the Intended". The horror of this act appears to Marlow as he becomes increasingly aware of the metaphoric identification of "the Intended" with Kurtz. He went to the Congo for ivory so that he could marry her. She is the symbol of all his desires and future reward, the ideal which caused him to act. The identities of Kurtz and his "Intended" merge in the image of the ivory which is used to describe both characters. Marlow perceives Kurtz's physical appearance in terms of ivory: "I could see the cage of his ribs all astir . . . It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand . . ." and "I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride . . ." (101; 118). He emphasizes the whiteness of the Intended's forehead: "But with every word spoken the room was growing darker, and only her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love" (127). They are further associated through their common relationship to darkness. The

"Intended's" link with the darkness becomes most intense when Marlow sees in her the African woman.

> She put out her arms as if after a retreating figure, stretching them back and with clasped pale hands across the fading and narrow sheen of the window . . . a tragic and familiar Shade, resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness. (130)

"The Intended" represents what Kurtz was before he had to face himself, and thus her name and relation to Kurtz are extremely ironical. She embodies the pure idealism that can comfortably exist within the context of the illusory world of man; Kurtz is the tragic result of the confrontation between the idealism born out of illusion and the horrific reality of the cosmos.

Marlow is left to grapple with his knowledge of both worlds. The only meaningful activity left to him is in telling his story. In doing this, he creates a delicate connection between the Appollonian world of man and the Dionysian abyss which contains it. Only through language can Marlow reveal, though momentarily, the reality of the universe. Though not able to capture the essence of the darkness, language can convey its image, so that man knows the value of preserving the illusion. If everyone acknowledges the lie of the human world, then it can be sustained against the abyss. This act of acknowledgement constitutes the only meaningful bond between men. In abandoning himself to the other world, Kurtz breaks his allegiance to the human community.

Marlow sees in both Kurtz and Lord Jim an experience which is potentially his own. Captain Brierly has the same attitude to Jim, but escapes the burden of this knowledge through suicide. The narrator of

Heart of Darkness suggests that Marlow is changed by his experience and is not a typical seaman. He describes Marlow in passive terms, having an ascetic aspect, resembling an "idol", "indistinct and silent" like a "meditating Buddha." Whenever Marlow appears in Conrad's novels he is a passive observer of life, never directly involved. It can be assumed that because of his knowledge he can no longer directly involve himself in human affairs. His need to tell his story shows that he is caught within his past; every time he repeats his story, he must re-enact the past and grapple with that darker aspect of the human soul which destroyed Kurtz and Jim. Although Marlow is not totally beyond time like Jim and Kurtz, he is caught in a kind of limbo between two unacceptable and incompatible worlds; one of time and illusion, the other of timelessness and horror.

Although similar themes are worked out in Lord Jim, Conrad experiments much more with time and perspective in this novel. Like Isabel Archer in The Portrait of a Lady, Jim is betrayed by a romantic imagination. His attempts to transcend the limits of ordinary human experience plunge him into the cosmic void. He is caught within the moment of deserting the "Patna" and his existence is shaped by the memory of that act and the desire to eradicate it. Jim is committed to a double-edged destiny: he must satisfy the demands of a romantic imagination while repeating his act of betrayal against the community of mankind. Jumping from the "Patna" resulted in his alienation from human society because he committed a crime against mankind. Yet his connection with Patusan and Jewel prevents his total isolation, at least temporarily. In allowing Brown to escape he again betrays humanity; in refusing to defend

himself against Doramin, he betrays Jewel. Thus his romantic obsession leads to a three-fold betrayal which ends for Jim in the total isolation of death.

> Not in the wildest days of his boyish visions could he have seen the alluring shape of such an extraordinary success! For it may very well be that in that short moment of his last proud and unflinching glance, he had beheld the face of that opportunity which like an Eastern bride, had come veiled to his side. (313)

Jim faithfully answers the call of his "exalted egoism", abandoning "a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct" (313). Unlike Kurtz, Jim is never fully conscious of his situation. He continues to believe in his own capacity for heroic action, and believes that he can expiate his guilt. It is Marlow who sees through Jim's delusion: " 'A clean slate, did he say? As if the initial word of each our destiny were not graven in imperishable characters upon the face of a rock' (143). Marlow is interested in Jim mainly because he sees him as a version of everyman; as he says, Jim "was too much like one of us not to be dangerous" (85).

The structure of Lord Jim reinforces the novel's themes. In technique, Lord Jim is near to The Secret Agent and Nostromo because of its use of the multiple perspective and dislocation of temporal sequence. The novel is a kaleidescope of histories of secondary characters who put Jim's situation in a communal context. Although each character's reaction to Jim's conduct intensifies its significance, his action still evades total understanding. By the end of the novel, Jim remains "under a cloud, inscrutable at heart" (313).

Stein is probably the one character in the novel who is notably like Jim in temperment and understands him best. " 'I understand very

well. He is romantic!' " (162). He also hints at a similarity between his own past and Jim's. " 'And do you know how many opportunities I let escape, how many dreams I had lost that had come my way?' " (166). Jim tries to eradicate his guilt and transcend his situation, whereas Stein immerses himself in "the destructive element" (164). Yet Stein does believe in the existence of an orderly, harmonious cosmos which manifests itself to him in the image of the butterfly. " 'This is Nature -- the balance of colossal forces. Every star is so -- and every blade of grass stands so -- and the mighty kosmos in perfect equilibrium produces -- this. This wonder; this masterpiece of Nature -- the great artist' " (158).

Isolated from the rest of mankind, Jim experiences a very different cosmos than does Stein; one without sense and order. The dislocation of the time sequence in the novel conveys the sense of timelessness and confusion that Jim experiences. Because of this technique the reader also feels something of the psychological disorientation that Jim feels. Yet, because of the frequent time shifts and use of multiple perspective, Jim is so distanced from the reader that he remains an impenetrable mystery. The reader also senses a disequilibrium which prevents him from penetrating Jim's situation. To keep Jim a mystery seems to have been Conrad's intention. In a letter to William Blackwood concerning Lord Jim, Conrad wrote that "in the working out of the catastrophe, psychologic disquisition should have no place."[7] Jim's character is never extensively developed because Jim is not the real subject of the novel; it is Marlow's reaction to Jim, and what he learns

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7. Wright, Joseph Conrad on Fiction, p. 24.

through him, that is the theme of Lord Jim.

As I maintained earlier, language can only momentarily capture the image of the true nature of the universe. The only means of developing this image is to view it from a multiplicity of perspectives, drawing it out gradually. The general narrator of Heart of Darkness expresses this kind of method in referring to Marlow's way of telling a story:

> . . . to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine." (7)

J. Hillis Miller also realizes the great difficulty of sustaining the kind of theme that Conrad creates in his fiction. He explains it thus:

> Writing can only oscillate perpetually between truth and falsehood, and endure endlessly its failure to bring what is real, the darkness, permanently into what is human, the light. Every story is necessarily a failure. In the moment that the darkness is caressed into appearing by the words of the story, it disappears. Though writing is the only action which escapes the imposture of the merely human, at the same time all literature is necessarily a sham. It captures in its subtle pages not the reality of the darkness but its verbal image.[8]

The novel can only hope to sustain the effect it is trying to produce by examining it from all points of view. The illusion of spatialized, mechanical time must be destroyed if the reader is to grasp any insight into the nature of reality that Conrad is trying to reveal. Conrad does

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8. Hillis Miller, p. 38.

not write about the definite and the concrete, but about the indefinite and insubstantial. The world of human civilization is posed like a "house of cards"[9] over a vast and black abyss. It is the function of language to maintain this house while recognizing what is just below it.

The importance of time is one of the major themes of The Secret Agent. Vladimir knows the only way to frighten society is to attack the Greenwich Observatory. Such action threatens destruction to the basis of human existence; it is in the Greenwich Observatory that the source of human time lies. As R. W. Stallman has pointed out in his essay, "Time and The Secret Agent",[10] time and space are measured from Greenwich. Verloc's mission is to destroy time and space, the ordering, harmonizing principles of human existence. To attack religion or government would not be so effective because they no longer represent the presence of an absolute, moral order. "The fetish of today is neither royalty nor religion. Therefore the palace and the church should be left alone,"[11]

Since mankind has made his subjective consciousness the "foundation of everything," the basis of his faith must lie with his own fabrications. Science replaces religion and government to become the standard by which man orients himself to the empirical world. Science creates the objective world in that it allows man to believe he has penetrated the mysteries of the universe. "The demonstration must be against learning -- science.

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9. Ibid., p. 6.

10. Stallman, ed., The Art of Joseph Conrad, pp. 234-253.

11. Joseph Conrad, The Secret Agent, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 34. All subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and indicated by page numbers.

The attack must have all the senselessness of gratuitous blasphemy . . . it would be really telling if one could throw a bomb into pure mathematics" (36).

Greenwich, as the centre of human psychological orientation to the physical world, establishes an illusory relationship between man and nature. Verloc's mission is to perform the supreme act of treachery against humanity. Instead, he murders Stevie and betrays the trust of both Winnie and Stevie.

Until Winnie learns of Stevie's death, he is the only character, along with the professor, who exists beyond the limits of ordinary mechanical time. Stevie is the "unconscious genius", the mad artist trying to make sense out of a chaotic senseless universe. He lives within the tragic vision, instinctually aware of the true nature of the universe. His circles suggest a "rendering of cosmic chaos" (46) while also symbolic of the innate isolation of the characters from each other. They also represent the timelessness of the universe; as Ossipon says, "eternity is a damned hole", (245) and Stevie's circles are the holes in time that symbolize his contact with eternity. When Mrs. Verloc learns of Stevie's death, she inherits the "madness" and "despair" of the tragic vision in which he lived. With his death the "supreme illusion of her life" (198) is destroyed and she loses herself in the void. From that moment on she is committed to her destiny, that is an obsession to rid herself of Stevie's murderer. The fulfillment of her destiny must result in her own death; Winnie's crime against Verloc breaks her connection with the human community. In a moment of profound insight, Winnie Verloc perceives the world to be a sham. Her new awareness is conveyed by her

attitude toward time.

> Nothing moved in the parlour till Mrs. Verloc raised her head slowly and looked at the clock with inquiring mistrust. She had become aware of a ticking sound in the room. It grew upon her ear, while she remembered clearly that the clock on the wall was silent, had no audible tick. What did it mean by beginning to tick so loudly all of a sudden. Its face indicated ten minutes to nine. Mrs. Verloc cared nothing for time, and the ticking went on. She concluded it could not be the clock, and her sullen gaze moved along the walls, wavered and became vague, while she strained her hearing to locate the sound. (213-214)

Mrs. Verloc can no longer comprehend time, nor believe in its existence, because she is beyond it. The ticking of the clock fades into the trickling sound of her husband's blood. Through her act of murder she is totally isolated, caught in the void. Like Jim and Kurtz, she can never go back and her attempt to save herself from the inevitable through Ossipon is doomed.

> She was alone in London: and the whole town of marvels and mud, with its maze of streets and its mass of lights, was sunk in a hopeless night, rested at the bottom of a black abyss from which no unaided woman could hope to scramble out. (218)

As a result of his betrayal of Winnie, Ossipon inherits the "madness and despair" of the tragic vision. The phrase with which the newspapers describe Winnie's suicide, "this act of madness or despair" (248) captures Ossipon's mind, threatening to destroy him by insanity which would effectively isolate him from the world.

The effects of timelessness and isolation are strongly reinforced by the structure of The Secret Agent. Many scenes overlap and correspond with each other in this novel, producing the effect of suspended time. The murder scene of Verloc in Chapter XI occurs simultaneously with the confrontation between the Assistant Commissioner and Vladimir at the

end of Chapter X. The explosion which causes Stevie's death is revealed early in the novel, after which it backtracks to portray scenes in which Stevie is still alive. The reader learns after Stevie's death that his mother leaves the family to ensure Stevie's welfare and, that Mrs. Verloc regards her husband and brother to be as father and son. The effect of this technique is heavily ironic and in itself exposes the illusions of the characters.

Like Lord Jim and Heart of Darkness, The Secret Agent contains little direct action. Most of the "action" in these novels is conveyed through verbal encounters between characters. These novels continually circle back on themselves; Heart of Darkness ends where it begins, in the same setting with Marlow telling the story. The narrative structure of Lord Jim always refers back to the "Patna" episode because that moment conditions all that occurs in the novel. In The Secret Agent scenes echo each other; the scene between Vladimir and Verloc is echoed in the confrontation between Vladimir and the Assistant Commissioner at the end of Chapter X, which is further reflected in the scene between Winnie and Verloc, as he attempts to justify Stevie's death. Stevie's death in the attempt to destroy the first meridian is portrayed in exactly the same manner as Winnie's suicide -- through Ossipon's reading of them in a newspaper in the Silenus restaurant. This kind of structure creates the effect of time standing still, not progressing into the future.

Nostromo bears strong similarity to these three works in both structure and theme. In this novel, the illusion of chronological time is totally destroyed, and Conrad reveals the interior time of human consciousness which imprisons his characters. In Nostromo, the past

determines the future; the memory of the past fosters the desires for the future, and thus consumes the present. This concept of time means essentially that humanity can never escape its primitive origins, and its belief that it can transcend that past through the movement of time is completely undercut in Nostromo.

II

> "There is no getting away from a treasure
> that once fastens upon your mind."
> (Nostromo, 379)

The concept of time, as it is worked out in Nostromo, is central to an understanding of that novel. By the "concept of time", I do not mean the description of the time sequence of the novel, nor do I feel it is necessary to rearrange its time shifts in order to find a chronological, linear pattern. This has been attempted by various critics, but the novel still remains obscure. Rather, I refer to a kind of philosophical idea of time and its relation to human existence, the meaning of which is conveyed partly through the novel's time shifts. I believe that the sequence of Nostromo should not be rearranged to form a chronological time scheme; all that emerges from this process is a different novel. Conrad destroys the convention of linear time for a valid purpose and it is the obligation of the critic to try to discover what this purpose is. Major criticism of Nostromo has inadequately dealt with the theme of time, if at all. Even major studies on attitudes toward time in the modern novel fail to include Conrad. Criticism of Nostromo usually consists of analysis of events and characters, and often includes biographical references to the author's personal experience. In The Great Tradition, F. R. Leavis does not even refer to the novel's time shifts, preferring to comment on it as "Conrad's supreme triumph in the evocation of exotic life and colour."[1]

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1. Leavis, The Great Tradition, p. 210.

Dr. Leavis prefers to concentrate upon the vivid representation of life that the novel achieves. Arnold Kettle defines Nostromo as "a political novel in the widest sense."[2] His most interesting comment is that:

> Conrad's purpose is to establish a solid background because this is a solid novel, a novel about the real world, about a particular republic in a particular part of the world at a particular epoch in history.[3]

Nostromo is indeed about the "real world" but not the empirical world. Also, while the novel creates the illusion of portraying a "particular republic" in a "particular epoch" in time, it is only an illusion. In fact, Nostromo creates this illusion in order to discover the reality which underlies it. This thesis will attempt to go beyond Professor Kettle's statement and show that Conrad's world of Sulaco is not so much a particular world as a symbolic world.

Albert Guerard, a major critic of Conrad's fiction, has attempted to deal with the theme of time in Nostromo. But Guerard is unable to penetrate beneath the novel's technique and is, in fact, baffled by it. His objections to Nostromo could very well represent those of most readers when first encountering the novel:

> We have . . . a combat between author, material and reader . . . The first part of Nostromo invites and then frustrates the normal objectives of readers to an astonishing degree. A reader's first objective may be to identify with one figure and then use him

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2. Kettle, An Introduction to the English Novel, II, 65.

3. Ibid., pp. 62-63.

> as a post of observation. But each opportunity -- Captain Mitchell, Giorgio Viola, Nostromo, Sir John, Mrs. Gould, Charles Gould -- is withdrawn almost as soon as offered. So too it is a normal if unconscious ambition of the reader to live vicariously through an imagined experience; to live through scenes. But every promised scene is here broken off, at most after a few pages . . . the reader incorrigibly longs to locate himself in time and space, and incorrigibly wants to apprehend experience in its order and degree of importance. But this longing is frustrated from beginning to end of the first part. The common reader's notorious general aim -- to enter into the book and become one of its characters -- is carefully and austerely baffled. The novelist (shifting scene, time, emphasis, focus, post of observation) maliciously chops at his hands. Nostromo is, surely, one of the most uneven of the great English novels . . . it exposes more clearly (or fails to conceal through rhetoric and narrative device) what Conrad could not yet do well: above all, the handling of dramatic action and the rendering of intense emotion imagined as occuring in a present place and time.[4]

Guerard's main objection is that Conrad's technique in Nostromo causes the reader unnecessary confusion. He implies that the primary obligation of the novelist is to allow the reader to orient himself in time and space, so that he may "apprehend experience in its order and degree of importance." Guerard seems to suggest that there is an absolute order and degree of importance in human experience that is universally known and agreed upon. What Guerard has done in criticizing Nostromo is to judge the novel from the standpoint of a preconceived notion of what a novel should be. Because Nostromo does not conform to this preconception, Guerard assumes the novel to be defective. In fact, it is Guerard's critical method that has prevented him from understanding

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4. Guerard, Conrad: The Novelist, p. 215-216.

the novel's technique. As Northrop Frye has said in Anatomy of Criticism: "The axioms and postulates of criticism . . . have to grow out of the art it deals with."[5] According to Frye, the critic must discover his critical method through his experience of the literature and find the "conceptual framework" within which it is written. Nostromo must be treated in this way. The time shifts are an essential part of the novel's structure. If the reader is to be aware of a meaningless, random universe, he must be forced to experience it. The frequent time shifts and disruption of narrative sequence successfully achieve this effect. But although the form of Nostromo imitates and reflects chaos and meaninglessness, it is not itself chaotic and meaningless. The reader is made to perceive reality in a way different from that to which he is accustomed. By the end of the novel, his vision must correspond to that of the narrator. The reader, who is not allowed to share any particular character's perspective for too long, must look to another dimension in the novel beyond that of the characters. The reality of the situation lies beyond the human, empirical realm in Nostromo; the particular events and the lives of the characters provide a medium through which Conrad explores a more profound, philosophical conception of human existence. The basis of his method lies in his treatment of time.

There are two kinds of time in Nostromo: mythological time and chronological, or historical time. Mythological time, which is associated with the geographical landscape in Nostromo, is static and unchanging.

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5. Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays, (New York: Atheneum, 1970), pp. 5-6.

As such it creates a timeless, symbolic world. Chronological, historical time, which is part of the psychological landscape of the novel, exists within this mythic framework. The frequent description of the time sequence has the effect of dissolving the historical aspect of the novel into its mythological framework. In fact, the mythical, timeless aspect of Nostromo constantly impinges upon the time-oriented lives of the characters. The histories of the characters lose their individuality and are absorbed by the mythological history of Sulaco.

The opening chapter is of crucial importance to the entire structure of Nostromo. It contains in legendary and undramatic form what is to be dramatized throughout the novel on an individual, historical basis. The characters have, essentially, no present and no future because they can never break free of the past of Sulaco.

The geographical landscape of Sulaco is described in the opening chapter as without palpable, concrete form. The description is conveyed as a series of impressions without interpretation. The rocky Azuera penninsula is not easily distinguished, but "seems to be an isolated patch of blue mist [that] floats lightly on the glare of the horizon,"[6] From a closer perspective, it resembles a "wild chaos of sharp rocks" (17), never appearing to have a definite form. The very description of the landscape undercuts its particularity; moreover, the names given to the various parts of the landscape give Sulaco an allegorical status. The

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6. Joseph Conrad, Nostromo, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 17. All subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition of Nostromo and indicated by page number.

name Golfo Placido", meaning a "peaceful, calm gulf"[7] becomes ironic within the whole context of the novel. Its insubstantiality is implicit in the description of it as: "an inviolable sanctuary", a "solemn semi-circular and unroofed temple open to the ocean, with its walls of lofty mountains hung with the mourning draperies of cloud" (17). As the description of the landscape progresses, it becomes increasingly sinister, as the above quotation shows. Cape Punta Mala, (the name means "evil point") appears as no more than "a shadow on the sky" (17). In the first chapter, the narrator is creating a nightmare world where geographical phenomena appear to have no concrete form or substance. This kind of descriptive technique is reminiscent of Tennyson's "The Lotus-Eaters" where a stream is described as "a downward smoke" (11. 8) and a pine tree as "the shadowy pine" (11. 18). In both the novel, and the poem, nature is deprived of its physical force; this consequent insubstantiality lends an ominous overtone to the description. Moreover, through its portrayal of the landscape, the opening chapter seems to suggest the existence of an independent, malevolent power. What is a suggestion in the opening chapter becomes an articulated fact by the end of the novel.

As the narrative account of the geography continues, it becomes apparent that the reader is being drawn into the heart of a frightening darkness. The land is sterile, not because of scientific reasons, but "as if [it were] blighted by a curse" (17). The narrator is not describing a "particular place" in a "particular time"; he is setting forth a vision of a kind of underworld. That the clouds are "mourning draperies"

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7. Reynolds, The Italian Cambridge Dictionary, I, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1962).

and that the defining qualities of the landscape are darkness and formlessness, should indicate the underlying presence of death in this created cosmos. The legendary gringos who inhabit this landscape are the living dead, in that their spirits cannot leave the treasure of the Azuera. So far, Conrad has created a setting which would seem incompatible with human existence. When civilization (represented by the commercial ships) intrudes across "the imaginary line drawn from Punta Mala to Azuera" (19) into the Golfo Placido, the strong ocean wind disappears. The thick clouds that roll out onto the Gulf at sunset cause the visible landscape to disappear. It would seem as if the geography itself tried to resist the intrusion of the outside world.

> The Cordillera is gone from you as if it had dissolved itself into great piles of grey and black vapours that travel out slowly to seaward and vanish into thin air . . . At night the body of clouds advancing higher up the sky smothers the whole quiet gulf below with an impenetrable darkness, . . . sky, land and sea disappear together out of the world when the Placido -- as the saying is -- goes to sleep under its black poncho. (19-20)

The closing image of this paragraph, with the Placido going to sleep under its poncho, personifies the landscape giving it a status almost human, yet indifferent to humanity. The narrator is not so much describing a particular physical landscape as he is creating a symbolic world, representative of the cosmos. This dimension of the geography is further reinforced by several casual details interspersed throughout Nostromo. Sharks never enter the Golfo Placido "though on the other side of the Punta Mala the coastline swarms with them" (404). Sea-birds, "for some good and valid reasons beyond mere human comprehension" (408) avoid the Isabels. Toward the end of Nostromo the narrator mentions

the spirits of good and evil who inhabit the landscape as guardians over the silver. Sulaco is not an ordinary place; as I asserted earlier, it is a symbolic landscape, with cosmic dimensions. In fact, it represents the kind of universe in which humanity must live. As a context for human existence, it is indifferent, a characteristic embodied in the silent, white, Higuerota "whose cool purity seemed to hold itself aloof from a hot earth" (35). The darkness of the Gulf is a kind of metaphysical darkness which is the foundation of human existence; it becomes associated with death and destruction especially when Decoud and Nostromo have to make their way through it when they cross the gulf. This darkness is also amoral in nature.

> The eye of God Himself . . . could not find out what work a man's hand is doing in there; and you would be free to call the devil to your aid with impunity if even his malice were not defeated by such a blind darkness (20)

Conrad, then, constructs through Sulaco and its physical description a cosmos which is indifferent, amoral and permeated by death. He carefully creates this kind of world as a setting for his characters and it is not surprising that the characters will reflect the traits of this cosmos in their activity. The sterility of the universe will inevitably manifest itself in the human realm. This is a theme that Conrad explores repeatedly in his fiction. During the novel the major characters will reveal the degree to which they are aware of their cosmic predicament, while the activity of others will manifest the essential nature of human morality.

Sulaco as the background for human existence implies a contrast between reality and illusion; that is, the human world is an illusory

fabrication made in order to obliterate from human consciousness the reality beneath it. As such, it is a time-oriented world of history that exists within a timeless world that transcends the historical realm. There are no temporal distinctions as there are in the historical world. The mythological names of the O.S.N. company's steam ships are one of the symbolic ways in which Conrad blurs distinctions between past and present because in the timeless world of Sulaco, myth is not distinguished from ordinary, empirical fact.

> Their names [that is, the names of the ships], the names of all mythology, became the household words of a coast that had never been ruled by the Gods of Olympus. The "Juno" was known only for her comfortable cabins amidships, the "Saturn" for the geniality of her captain and the painted and gilt luxuriousness of her saloon, whereas the "Ganymede" was fitted out mainly for cattle transport, and to be avoided by coastwise passengers. The humblest Indian in the obscurist village on the coast was familiar with the Cerberus, a little black puffer without charm or living accommodation to speak of . . . (21-22)

Foreign mythology, as well as the indigenous mythology of the gringos, is immediately absorbed into the consciousness of the inhabitants, becoming not only part of their own history, but also of their "present."

By incorporating the names of Greek mythology into their daily vocabulary and in believing that the spectral gringos still inhabit the Azuera -- "the two gringos, spectral and alive, are believed to be dwelling to this day amongst the rocks" (18) -- they make of the past a living, present reality. Already the novel hints that the present, as far as it is understood to be dissociated from the past, does not exist in Sulaco. As we shall see, the inhabitants have neither psychologically progressed in a linear time scheme nor have they transcended their past; rather, the mythic past has become their present. All the characters are

included in this psychological pattern, as will be shown later. The relationship between Sulaco and the characters who live there is symbolic of a wider relationship between man and the cosmos. Essentially, the created cosmos of Nostromo is alien to human existence. Objective standards of morality cannot exist in this world. Religion, the most universal manifestation of man's belief in the existence of an absolute ground of morality beyond himself, cannot endure in Sulaco. The residence of an ecclesiastical official becomes a social club for aristocrats; the religious icon which stands before the building is itself in a state of ruin and decay. Spiritual matters are of secondary concern to material interests in Sulaco; Father Corbelàn, the most powerful representative of the Church in Sulaco, is obsessed with the return of confiscated church lands. That desire provides the motivation for his activity in the revolution.

A further defining quality of the world of Nostromo is its inherent isolation, a factor encouraged not only by the nature of the geography but also by the inhabitants.

> But in Sulaco -- the Occidental Province for whose very development the railway was intended -- there had been trouble. It had been lying for ages ensconced behind its natural barriers, repelling modern enterprises by the precipices of its mountain range, by its shallow harbour opening into the everlasting calms of a gulf full of clouds, by the benighted state of mind of the owners of its fertile territory -- all these aristocratic Spanish families, all these Don Ambrosios this and Don Fernandos that, who seemed actually to dislike and distrust the coming of the railway over their land. (43)

This paragraph shows an interesting compatibility between the inherent qualities of the landscape and the consciousness of its inhabitants, who seem to protect its interests. This aspect of Nostromo,

hinted at in such paragraphs as the one just quoted, has extremely important thematic implications in the context of the entire novel. The characters embody essentially those same qualities inherent in the surrounding geographical landscape; as the novel will eventually show, the characters' lives and desires are manipulated by supernatural forces within the landscape. These forces are mythologized in the gringo legend. The individual lives of the characters become absorbed into the mythology of the landscape; all human activity and desire in Sulaco serves to fulfill the demands of the myth. The pivot of the myth and the actions of the characters is material treasure; through their relationship to the silver of San Tomé, the characters re-enact the gringo legend. It was Conrad's intention to make the silver the centre of his novel, as he wrote in a letter to Ernst Bendz, March 7, 1923: "Silver is the pivot of the moral and material events, affecting the lives of everybody in the tale."[8] The silver is the common object of human desire in the novel, while also providing the common basis of isolation which divides the characters from each other. Paradoxically the characters are united in a common purpose, yet totally separated from each other. The silver provides the link between the landscape and the characters; it is the bridge between myth and human history. It is the means by which the themes of death, isolation and timelessness are transmuted to permeate human existence. Through the silver, the supernatural forces of the geographical landscape are able to actively participate in the psychological

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8. Jean-Aubry, Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters, II, (Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1927), p. 296.

landscape. A brief analysis of the novel's main characters will demonstrate their psychological entrapment by the supernatural will of the landscape and the way in which they relive the myth.

Charles Gould's obsession with the San Tomé mine is inherited from his father before he even sees the Gould Concession. His past is not entirely his own, but is inextricably bound with his father's: "By the time he was twenty Charles Gould had, in his turn, fallen under the spell of the San Tomé mine . . . Mines had acquired for him a dramatic interest" (60-61). His devotion to the mine and its treasure is motivated by an obsessive need to vindicate the failure of his father's past and avenge his death: " 'It has killed him!', he repeated. 'He ought to have had many years yet. We are a long-lived family' " (63). Both Gould and Lord Jim have in common a past disgrace; both centre their lives around the failure of the past and are determined to transform it into a success. The narrator comments that Gould's "imagination had been permanently affected by the one great fact of a silver mine" (75). His need to transform the "absurd moral disaster" of his father into a "serious and moral success" (66) deludes Gould into believing that he is motivated by humanitarian impulses. He idealizes his actions as a moral crusade which will bring about social-political stability in a country that has almost totally dissolved itself in chaos. But his supreme delusion is that the wealth of the San Tomé mine will invest the country with a strong moral fibre, that the success of material interests will be the political, economic and moral salvation of Sulaco.

> What is wanted here is law, good faith, order, security. Any one can declaim about these things, but I pin my faith to material interests. Only let the material interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound

> to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist. That's how your money-making is justified here in the face of lawlessness and disorder. It is justified because the security which it demands must be shared with an oppressed people. A better justice will come afterwards. That's your ray of hope. (81)

This speech by Charles Gould is ironic because of its absurd notion that a new world can be realized through material wealth. But the irony becomes more intense when one considers the great care taken by the narrator to establish the demoniacal aspect of this world that is the moral context in which the characters live. Gould becomes the most devoted servant to the god of Mammon; it is his only existence. He annihilates his spirit, like the legendary gringos, to live as protector and servant of the silver.

> The Gould Concession had to fight for life with such weapons as could be found at once in the mire and corruption that was so universal as to almost lose its significance. He was prepared to stoop for his weapons . . . There was no going back. (82)

Gould shows himself willing to abandon his moral integrity to immerse himself in the universal immorality that characterizes the world in which he lives.

Gould is not the only character trapped in the frustrated desires of an unfulfilled past. Don José Avellanos and his daughter Antonia who at first seem more sympathetic characters than Gould, are also incapable of transcending the past. Having lived through the former tyranny of Guzman Bento, Don José allies himself with the Gould Concession. He too "pins his faith" in the ability of material interests to free his nation from the oppression and suffering which characterized its chaotic past. For Don José, as for the other aristocrats of Sulaco, the Ribierist

government is the means by which the San Tomé mine will be protected and developed; it is not a government formed directly for the benefit of the people but for the mine. And the government considers its first duty to the mine and the foreign developers who come to lay the railway. Sir John, thinking to himself about the opposition to the railway is comforted by the knowledge that the government will help him at any cost to the public.

> The Government was bound to carry out its part of the contract with the board of the new railway company, even if it had to use force for the purpose . . . and so he imagined to get the President-Dictator over there on a tour . . . culminating in a great function at the turning of the first sod by the harbour shore. After all he was their own creature -- that Don Vincente. (43-44)

Don José Avellanos, desiring peace and prosperity for his country, supports an essentially immoral government. It is impossible for such a government to withstand the forces of chaos and social unrest which work against it. Don José deludes himself that the Ribierist government will establish a new world, a new era of peace. The realization that there is no change and progression from the past through the "new" government confronts him in the Monterist uprising. This knowledge results in destroying him; when he is forced to compromise his political beliefs to save Sulaco the shock kills him. In the past, Don José always believed in Federation; it is impossible for him to transcend the ideals of his past and accommodate himself to the changing needs of the country. One must finally perceive the gulf between Don José's desires and ideals, and the actual needs of his country.

Antonia Avellanos inherits her father's desire for political

Federation and is determined to see his hopes realized even after a social order has finally been formed.

> 'How can we abandon, groaning under oppression, those who have been our countrymen only a few years ago, who are our countrymen now?' Miss Avellanos was saying 'How can we remain blind, and deaf without pity to the cruel wrongs suffered by our brothers? There is a remedy.
>
> 'Annex the rest of Costaguana to the order and prosperity of Sulaco,' snapped the doctor. 'There is no other remedy.'
>
> 'I am convinced, Señor Doctor,' Antonia said, with an earnest calm of invincible resolution, 'that this was from the first poor Martin's intention.' (418)

This speech by Antonia has startling implications. A witness to the horror of revolution on more than one occasion, Antonia Avellanos shows herself quite willing to incite another for the realization of a past ideal. Her last sentence, which imputes intentions to Decoud that he did not have, manifests the quality that all the characters of Nostromo share. It is the "sentimentalism" in which they dress every impulse and motivation that is articulated, ironically, by Martin Decoud. He perceives " 'the sentimentalism of the people that will never do anything for the sake of their passionate desire, unless it comes to them clothed in the fair robes of an idea' " (203). Antonia Avellanos, who in relation to the rest of the characters in Nostromo is presented as one of the more morally upright, shows herself to share in the inherently amoral, nihilistic nature of the world in which she lives. Sulaco is devoid of morality; any attempt to introduce morality or justice or order results in the establishment of the opposite. Charles Gould comments on this when he says: " 'The words one knows so well have a nightmarish meaning in this country. Liberty -- democracy -- patriotism -- government.

All of them have the flavour and folly of murder' " (337). This speech can be extended to comment on the earlier one by Antonia, where she speaks of more murder and chaos through the façade of alleviating social oppression. No price is too high to fulfill her private obsession The physical appearance of the Avellanos house -- "grey, marked with decay, and with iron bars like a prison" (156) -- acquires metaphoric significance toward the end of Nostromo. Like her father, Antonia is locked within a psychological stasis that will not allow her to transcend her past. The objective welfare of her country becomes confused with the private desires of the past. It is the fulfillment of these desires that matter ultimately.

Giorgio Viola, who should represent a moral contrast to the other characters because of his disdain for material interests, also shares in the psychological atmosphere of Nostromo. Even his passionate devotion to a humanitarian ideal cannot redeem him. The ideal to which he devotes his life is an anachronism that bears no relevance to life after Garibaldi. Spiritually, he is a dead man because he tries to regulate his existence on exactly the same principles which determined his behaviour under Garibaldi. His inability to transcend his past isolates him from his family and the rest of society. The fanaticism born in the past reduces his every response to absurdity. Imprecations of hatred once directed against an "accursed Piedmontese race of kings and ministers" are now incited by domestic mishap.

> When sometimes a frying-pan caught fire during a delicate operation with some shredded onions, and the old man was seen backing out of the doorway, swearing and coughing violently in an acrid cloud of smoke, the name of Cavour

> -- the arch intriguer sold to kings and tyrants -- could be heard involved in imprecations against the China girls, cooking in general and the brute of a country where he was reduced to live for the love of liberty that traitor had strangled. (32-33)

The only relic surviving that past time besides Viola's memory is a faded lithograph of Garibaldi that his devoted follower cherishes as his wife does her rosary. Giorgio Viola values a memory of a past time that no longer exists, more than his family or any human being. From this devotion to a past ideal, Giorgio Viola derives an absurd notion of honour that leads him to murder, mistakenly, the man he values as his own son. The narrator's reference to Viola after Nostromo's murder as "the immaculate republican, the hero without a stain" (458) is savagely ironic, especially since the reader has known all along that his role in the struggle for liberty was that of Garibaldi's personal cook. Giorgio Viola, whose life principle was a kind of "puritanism of conduct" (39) is trapped within the past.

Pedrito Montero is caught within his personal past also, but unlike Giorgio Viola, his past is consumed by the greater mythic past of Sulaco. The psychology of his actions consists of the most simple synthesis of the pressures of the indigenous legend and those of his own past. His lust for material wealth is motivated in part by desires born out of an imagination which nourished itself on reading "the lighter sort of historical works in the French language" (321). What Pedrito Montero finds in his reading is an ideal self that he wishes to become.

> But Pedrito Montero had been struck by the splendour of a brilliant court, and had conceived the idea of an existence for himself where, like the Duc de

> Morny, he would associate the command of every pleasure with the conduct of political affairs and enjoy power supremely in every way . . . And yet this was one of the immediate causes of the Monterist Revolution. (321)

Pedrito Montero uses the revolution as an opportunity to fulfill personal grandiose ambitions. In his need to become another Duc de Morny, he makes the history of a foreign country the ideal goal of his "future". But Pedrito Montero has no future; he is devoted to reliving the past. In doing so, he helps Sulaco's history to repeat itself.

Dr. Monygham, whom some critics mistakenly refer to as "redeemed" in the novel, is caught in a similar psychological trap. He is like Lord Jim in that his consciousness is dominated by the memory of a past disgrace. He too made a breach of faith with the human community when he betrayed his friends. His subsequent way of life is determined by that moment which imposed upon him a reserve toward his fellow men. Dr. Monygham makes "an ideal conception of his disgrace" (311) in attributing to all men the innate weaknesses and failures of his own life. His conception of himself that the narrator refers to as "the imaginative exaggeration of a correct feeling" (312) determines his response to other human beings; the moment of failure in his past causes him to make himself the absolute moral standard by which to measure all humanity. Dr. Monygham's inability to value other men arises from his inability to value himself. This is the cause of his essential isolation from the rest of mankind. His lack of faith in humanity is based upon "the particular instance in which his own manhood had failed" (357); mankind is merely an extension of himself. In every individual he sees the moral reflection of himself, refusing to recognize the objective moral value

of another person. Dr. Monygham's feeling of disgrace has led him to embrace a perverted egotism. In fact, all the characters mentioned are perversely egotistical in the sense that they invest the world around them with their own values. They fashion a self-created world which reflects their personalities; each character creates the external world in his own image. The common centre, however, of their worlds is the silver. In the world of Nostromo, nothing has value in itself but the silver. It is the only objective reality the characters recognize and as such, it dominates their lives. Dr. Monygham's loyalty to Mrs. Gould is not a thing in itself, but is so enmeshed with his loyalty to the mine that the narrator speaks of his feeling in terms of the silver." . . . Dr. Monygham had grown older, with his head steel-grey and the unchanged expression of his face, living on the inexhaustible treasure of his devotion drawn upon in the secret of his heart like a store of unlawful wealth" (414). This paragraph obviously anticipates Nostromo's devotion to the store of unlawful wealth of the hidden silver. It also hearkens back to the gringos' secret vigil over the gold of Azuera: ". . . the two gringos, spectral and alive, are believed to be dwelling to this day amongst the rocks, under the fatal spell of their success. Their souls cannot tear themselves away from their bodies mounting guard over the discovered treasure" (18). In the light of such passages, Dr. Monygham's devotion to Mrs. Gould takes on a sinister aspect. The narrator deliberately puts the doctor on the same moral plane as the gringos and Nostromo; in fact, all the characters inhabit the same level of morality. No one can escape the moral corruption which permeates the metaphysical and psychological atmosphere of the novel. The basis of

every action and every desire is the silver. Sotillo comes to recognize in his meeting with Dr. Monygham the essential moral nature of all men. "He could bear no longer that expressionless and motionless stare, which seemed to have a sort of impenetrable emptiness like the black depth of an abyss" (291).

Dr. Monygham's nightmares almost disappear after the revolution because he believes that his behaviour during the Monterist political crisis has vindicated the disgrace of his past. But he will never transcend his past, nor the pressures of the legendary past of Sulaco, since his actions were determined by both. Like Charles Gould, Dr. Monygham must transform the failures of the past into moral success. This moral success could only come about through unswerving devotion to the mine. The degree of moral success that both characters achieve is determined by the degree to which both subjugated themselves to the demands of the silver.

Besides devotion to the silver of San Tomé, what the characters of Nostromo also have in common is an inability to live beyond the past. Time has no meaning for these characters because the past ever consumes the present and determines the "future". When a group of such characters form a society, the history of that society will inevitably repeat itself. In Nostromo each individual, while trapped within his own past is, in the collective society, rooted in the mythic past of the country. Each character perpetually re-enacts his own past in terms of the general consciousness of Sulaco.

The psychological landscape of the novel is an extension of the

geographical landscape in that the lives and actions of the characters manifest the essential qualities of the cosmos in which they exist. The isolation and timelessness which characterize the physical world pervade into the realm of human existence.

The next chapter will attempt to show how the novel's two main characters, Decoud and Nostromo, together with Mrs. Gould, are most completely and effectively manipulated by the supernatural will of the landscape. It is through these two characters that the mythological and historical dimensions of Nostromo fuse most completely together.

III

> "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods;
> They kill us for their sport." (King Lear, IV,
> i, 36-7).

Martin Decoud, Nostromo, and Mrs. Gould will be considered separately from the other characters. They, of all the main characters, are the only ones who come to share the narrator's tragic vision of human existence. Decoud and Nostromo are characters whose identity is self-created, rather than imposed upon them by the past. Both characters create artificial identities for themselves which disintegrate when they confront the cosmic vacuum embodied in the physical landscape. This confrontation occurs as a result of their devotion to the silver; after the dissolution of identity, Decoud and Nostromo emerge as spiritually dead men, totally enslaved to the will of the treasure. They discover, as did the gringos, that the silver is the only reality. Decoud commits suicide because he cannot live with this knowledge, but Nostromo goes on, like the living spectres of the gringos and most fully and completely relives the myth.

The pressures of the Sulacan mythology are most effective on Decoud and Nostromo because they possess no subjective resources with which to resist them. The defining quality of Decoud's existence is his scepticism which he refines and nourishes to the extent that it forms the basis of his whole consciousness. His entire being is nothing more than an artificial mask, an acquired pose that he has adopted for

himself. Thus Decoud is like Kurtz, a hollow man with no substance beneath the mask.

> He imagined himself Parisian to the tips of his fingers. But far from being that he was in danger of remaining a sort of nondescript dilletante all his life. He had pushed the habit of universal raillery to a point where it blinded him to the genuine impulses of his own nature. (135)

On the other hand, it is this same scepticism which makes Decoud one of the most important characters in the novel. His sceptical attitude toward life allows him to have very valuable insights into the characters and the nature of the situation around him. Decoud exercises this power most effectively in "The Isabels" where he attains temporarily the status of omniscient narrator in his letter to his sister. It is Decoud who notices Nostromo's peculiar attraction for silver, a fact to which the narrator has alluded from time to time in the novel: "this man seems to disdain the use of any metal less precious than silver" (192). Decoud adds particular force to this very important fact, in mentioning it to his sister. He also understands that the defining quality of Nostromo's existence is " 'to be well spoken of' " (208). These two factors are vital to understanding what happens to Nostromo later on in the novel. Decoud also perceives the essential immorality of all the characters in Nostromo who idealize the motivations for their activities with "the fair robes of an idea" (203). Decoud knows what the novel has been constantly suggesting: no character is committed to an absolute standard of morality or the actualization of a beneficent idea. That scepticism which allows Martin Decoud sufficient detachment from the society around him to penetrate beneath its idealism and sentimentality is the very scepticism which eventually destroys his

identity. The narrator, who has from the outset been critical of Don Martin's scepticism, has been preparing the reader for his eventual destruction.

> As a matter of fact, he was an idle boulevardier . . . This life, whose dreary superficiality is covered by the glitter of universal blague, like the stupid clowning of a harlequin by the spangles of a motely costume, induced in him a Frenchified -- but most un-French -- cosmopolitanism, in reality a mere barren indifferentism posing as intellectual superiority. (134)

It is due to passages like this that the reader must always view Decoud with some detachment and disbelief. When he rails at the hypocrisy of the other characters who do not acknowledge their real desires, one must be somewhat sceptical toward Decoud himself when he says: " 'And I'm not so much of an unbeliever as not to have faith in my own ideas, in my own remedies, in my own desires' " (183). One inevitably wonders if Decoud sentimentalizes his role in the revolution with his love for Antonia. The narrator, even while allowing Decoud to share the omniscient perspective, continually undercuts his character in breaking up the flow of the letter with his own interjections. Although Decoud offers valuable insights into the situation around him and reveals a more sympathetic side of his character, it is difficult for him to maintain complete credibility when the narrator refers to him with such phrases as "the exotic dandy of the Parisian boulevard . . . the man with no faith in anything except the truth of his own sensations" (195). In emphasizing the total subjectivity of Decoud's impressions and responses to the world around him, the narrator has carefully prepared for the complete destruction of his personality.

The disintegration of character begins before Decoud embarks upon his journey across the Golfo Placido. The most interesting aspect of his letter is that he manifests a growing awareness of the "silence" and "solitude" that surrounds him. " 'I have the feeling of a great solitude around me . . . the solitude is . . . very real. The silence about me is ominous' " (196-97). Decoud is beginning to adopt the metaphors and adjectives that the narrator used in the opening chapter to describe the landscape. He gradually comes to share the vision of the narrator when he perceives the vague intangibility of the landscape, describing the Azueras as "a faint blue cloud on the horizon" (207). His sense of a concrete material world is dissolving at this point in the novel. Yet while he is losing his sense of the physical world he is beginning to discover the true nature of himself.

> Looking out of the window, Decoud was met by a darkness so impenetrable that he could see neither the mountains nor the town, nor yet the buildings near the harbour; and there was not a sound, as if the tremendous obscurity of the Placid Gulf, spreading from the waters over the land, had made it dumb as well as blind. (195)

In this symbolic passage Decoud gazes not only into the dark silence of the universe, but also into the dark emptiness of himself. This paragraph marks the beginning of an inward voyage, analogous to that interior journey undertaken by Marlow in Heart of Darkness. From this point on in Nostromo, Decoud perceives reality in terms of blackness and silence and uses their adjectives more frequently. At the same time, he is becoming more aware of the unreality of his own existence; he refers to himself as " 'a man with a passion, but without a mission' " (207). He ends his letter unsure of who he is:

> 'And I . . . don't really know whether to count myself with the living or with the dead . . . the whole thing, the house, the dark night, the silent children in this dim room, my very presence here -- all this is life, must be life, since it is so much like a dream.' (210)

The journey of Decoud and Nostromo across the Golfo Placido is both a physical and psychological one; as they advance farther into the darkness they descend farther into the depths of themselves to find nothing there. Symbolically, their journey is a descent into the underworld, and both characters undergo a ritual death from which they can never emerge renewed. The later suicide of Decoud and murder of Nostromo only physically manifest an established metaphysical fact; both men "die" in the Gulf. When Nostromo pushes the boat away from the shore, he and Decoud cross the invisible barrier between the fragile, illusory world of man and cosmic chaos. They are plunged into a blackness which obliterates the familiar world and their own individuality. On a metaphysical level, the Golfo Placido is a place of non-being in the sense that being is negated; the geographical surroundings, "sea, sky, the mountains, and the rocks were as if they had not been" (220). Decoud perceives Nostromo "as if he were not" (220). Conrad's use of the negative form of the verb "to be" indicates that Decoud and Nostromo have entered a state of "non-being" on both an individual and cosmic level. In fact, what they experience is a cosmic negation that destroys the validity of human existence and the world that man has created for himself within that cosmos. Familiar modes of perception are useless in the midst of the Gulf's darkness; Decoud's senses, except the tactile sense, cannot help to orient him in space. He can only tell that the boat is

moving when he feels the water slip through his fingers. Both men lose hold of their former identity in the timeless chasm of the Placid Gulf. Decoud, from whose point of view the journey is mostly related, is aware of this fact before Nostromo. He perceives himself "in the toils of an imaginative existence" (223) in which his former life appears to him as "the maddest of dreams": "Even his passionate devotion to Antonia into which he had worked himself up out of the depths of his scepticism had lost all appearance of reality" (224). In the midst of this total cosmic negation where the illusions of life have no reality and where man experiences most intensely the unreality of his own existence, Decoud discovers that the resources he previously relied upon have no meaning. "Intellectually self-confident, he suffered from being deprived of the only weapon he could use with effect. No intelligence could penetrate the darkness of the Placid Gulf" (231).

The way in which Decoud and Nostromo defined themselves in the human community has no effect in this situation. Isolated from humanity, left totally alone to their own subjectivity, they find that they have no existence. As the narrator later comments: "In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part" (409).

Having discovered his own impalpability and lack of substance and individuality, all that is left to Decoud is to obliterate the physical shell in suicide. He has discovered the tragic vision that he will later pass on to Nostromo. He knows that the only reality is that life is unreal, without meaning. His façade of intellectual scepticism betrays him; it was merely the mask covering a hollow emptiness. "The brilliant

Costaguanero of the boulevards had died from solitude and want of faith in himself and others" (408).

Decoud's spiritual and physical death are a result of the confrontation between himself and the landscape. Ultimately, it is the will of the landscape that destroys him. It mercilessly tears at his acquired facade, exposing to him his lack of individuality and substance. The confrontation between Decoud and the Golfo Placido is similar to that between Marlow and the Congo jungle; in both instances, the physical world clutches at these characters like a primordial parent, trying to draw them into itself. With Decoud, it succeeds totally: "After three days of waiting for the sight of some human face, Decoud caught himself entertaining a doubt of his own individuality. It had merged into the world of cloud and water, of natural forces and forms of nature" (409).

The striking contrast between the description of nature and Decoud's state of mind as he goes to kill himself suggests strongly that a hostile, malevolent universe is manipulating him to his destruction. This section of the novel carries the appalling implication that some supernatural force is playing a terrible, grim joke on Decoud. The narrator describes his preparations to commit suicide thus: "Taking up the oars slowly, he pulled away from the cliff of the Great Isabel, that stood behind him warm with sunshine, as if with the heat of life, bathed in a rich light from head to foot as if in a radiance of hope and joy" (411). Decoud's actual shooting of himself takes place at dawn the next day. The narrator reinforces the discrepancy between Decoud's state of mind and the natural world in giving a lyrical description of nature that immediately precedes the account of his death.

> The dawn from behind the mountains put a gleam into his unwinking eyes. After a clear daybreak the sun appeared splendidly above the peaks of the range. The great gulf burst into a glitter all around the boat; and in this glory of merciless solitude the silence appeared again before him, stretched taut like a dark, thin string. (411)

One wonders at Decoud's lack of sensitivity to the visible beauty around him; while the landscape appears infused with joy and life, he feels only "profound indifference" (408). Thus it is hard for the reader to sympathize with Decoud's situation because the description of nature makes his suicide somewhat unreal and ridiculous. At the same time, one feels uneasy, as if some monstrous, supernatural force has tricked Decoud and is enjoying its game. Conrad rejects the literary convention wherein nature sympathizes with the emotions and predicament of a character that has the effect of investing him with almost super-human status. Instead, Decoud's importance as a character somewhat greater than the others is undercut because nature does not respond to his situation.

The demands of the landscape absorb the lives of the characters; the time-oriented histories of individuals are consumed by the timeless world of myth in Nostromo. Like the gringos, Decoud and Nostromo become totally subjected to the service of the San Tomé silver. Decoud has no existence in Sulaco beyond the limits of its mythology. His life does not develop or change, but becomes increasingly absorbed into the general consciousness of the land. Nostromo, however, whose existence is as much a sham as Decoud's, most literally re-enacts the gringo myth. Through his obsession with the silver, he becomes transformed, as one of those living spectres that guard the treasure of Azuera.

References to Nostromo's fascination with silver occur throughout the novel and it is through these references that the narrator primarily develops his character. He rides a silver-grey horse, adorns himself with silver buttons and ring -- to mention only a few items. Thus the narrator carefully prepares for Nostromo's vulnerability to the silver which occurs later in the novel. Nostromo and silver are associated semantically; both are referred to as "incorruptible" (207 and 251). In fact, the only character development Nostromo has is in terms of silver. Because of the silver, Nostromo completely re-enacts the legend of the gringos by the end of the novel. It ends where it began, with the focus on the myth; historical action is totally absorbed into the legend. Nostromo shows an awareness of a kind of association between himself and the gringos when he says: "The things will look well enough on the next lover she gets, and the man need not be afraid I shall linger on earth after I am dead, like those gringos that haunt the Azuera" (217).

It is absolutely necessary to the completion and balancing of the novel's structure that it end with the focus on Nostromo. In his essay on Nostromo, Albert Guerard objects to this emphasis, however.

> . . . the experimentalism and the intense, austere, serious drama of Parts I and II . . . have surrendered, in Part III, to a relaxed method and a much more popular story. There is no reason to believe that Conrad, on reaching page 250 or 300, decided to popularize his novel or attenuate his theme. We can refer instead to his own account of his struggle for the creation and assume a temporary exhaustion. In novel-writing the surrender to the obvious and the easy is not always -- even, not usually -- conscious.[1]

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1. Guerard, Conrad: The Novelist, p. 216.

This kind of criticism misinterprets the artistic demands of Nostromo. Conrad had to finish his portrayal of Nostromo, especially after his trip across the Golfo Placido, if he wanted to make his novel complete. The end of Nostromo's life completes his character development as it was meant to fulfill the legend. The gringo mythology has been impinging itself upon his life throughout the novel, demanding its perpetual re-enactment through him. Only in this way will the silver remain protected. The process taking place in Nostromo has been that of the timeless and the cosmic absorbing what is bound in time and in the particular. The time-oriented life of Nostromo dissolves into the timeless world of mythology.

Of all the characters, Nostromo becomes most like the gringos who linger after death, unable to relinquish the treasure. Along with Decoud, Nostromo undergoes a symbolic death during the journey across the gulf. The very first thing that he sees on awakening after his journey is the ominous bird of prey, the vulture that watches him "for the signs of death and corruption" (341). The bird is a prophetic symbol; it mistakes Nostromo for a physical corpse, which he is on a metaphysical level. The bird symbolizes his destiny. Nostromo emerges from the darkness of the Gulf a dead man because his former existence is no longer valid. In taking the silver ingots across the Gulf, he believed he could crystallize his created self in the most "famous and desperate affair" (222) of his life. He imagines this event will be "talked about when the little children are grown up and grown men are old" (223). This existence is also a façade that covers an essential emptiness; it has neither meaning nor validity after his encounter with

the negating powers of the universe. "The Capataz of the Sulaco Cargadores had lived in spleandour and publicity up to the very moment, as it were, when he took charge of the lighter containing the treasure of the silver ingots (341).

Nostromo's subsequent feeling of betrayal -- "He had been betrayed!" (345) -- is a result of the knowledge that his existence is no longer valid. He tells Dr. Monygham: "The Capataz is undone, destroyed. There is no Capataz. Oh, no! You will find the Capataz no more:" (359). No longer able to live in terms of his public reputation, Nostromo discovers that he has no inner substance to which he can revert. The necessity of hiding negates his existence and he has no alternative except to totally devote himself to the treasure.

Nostromo is now one of the living dead, and like Decoud, possess the tragic vision that understands human existence to have no objective reality when viewed from a cosmic perspective. Both characters lose their identities in serving the silver. But the parallels between them are even closer; Nostromo becomes a kind of vehicle through which Decoud continues to live. In fact, the novel strongly suggests that Decoud's soul enters Nostromo's body while he sits in the boat used by Decoud before he died, speculating as to what became of him.

> . . . his excitement had departed, as when the soul takes flight leaving the body inert upon an earth it knows no more. Nostromo did not seem to know the gulf. For a long time even his eyelids did not flutter once upon the glazed emptiness of his stare. Then slowly, without a limb having stirred, without a twitch of muscle or quiver of an eyelash, an expression, a living expression came upon the still features, deep thought crept into the empty stare -- as if an outcast soul, a quiet, brooding soul, finding that untenanted body in its way, had come in stealthily to take possession. (405)

Furthermore it is significant that when Nostromo returns to the Great Isabel, he sits in "the same pose, in the same place" (412) as Decoud before him. The narrator even uses similar sentence structure and vocabulary to emphasize the likeness of the two characters. Where Decoud is "a victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the retribution meted out to intellectual audacity" (412), Nostromo is a "victim of the disenchanted vanity which is the reward of audacious action" (412) -- both sentences begin subsequent paragraphs. Nostromo cannot die because it is for him (and Decoud through him) to maintain constant vigil over the treasure. The only reality left is the silver: ". . . the fascination of all that silver, with its potential power, survived alone outside of himself" (410). No longer in possession of an independent will, Nostromo is chosen by the unseen forces that inhabit the geographical landscape to fulfill its will. The novel has been suggesting all along that the characters have been manipulated by some supernatural, cosmic force. "And the spirits of good and evil that hover about a forbidden treasure understood well that the silver of San Tomé was provided now with a faithful and lifelong slave" (412).

Nostromo's very name embodies all that happens to him in the novel. As I illustrated in Chapter II, the allegorical dimension of Nostromo partly manifests itself in the use of names. Through analysis of his name, Nostromo can also be seen as a part of the novel's allegorical dimension, which is inevitable since he re-enacts the gringo legend. His popular name is a corruption of "Nostro Uomo" meaning "boatswain" or "Master"; as such, his name is emblematic of his public role. Before crossing the Gulf, he was master of the Cargadores and the common people.

His real name, "Giovanni Battista Fidanza" suggests faithfulness in a religious spiritual sense since he is named after John the Baptist. With this implication in mind, his changing his name to just "Captain Fidanza" has very sinister connotations; the "Giovanni Battista" disappears and "Fidanza" comes to be emblematic of his existence as "Nostromo" was before the crossing of the Gulf. The two most frequent uses of the word "fidanza" in Italian imply reliance upon someone ("fare a fidanza a uno di una cosa")[2] or entrusting something to someone ("dare fidanza a uno di una cosa").[3] Thus Nostromo's new name acquires deeply meaningful overtones when one realizes that all his faith and loyalty is invested in the silver. His new name also embodies the implication that he has been singled out by some force beyond himself which has entrusted the keeping of the silver to him. Conrad reinforces the idea that Nostromo's soul is controlled by a malignant force when he ceases to use the "Giovanni Battista" and concentrates on "Captain Fidanza." Thus, Nostromo's becoming part of the allegorical dimension of the novel corresponds with his being absorbed into the mythological, timeless world of Sulaco.

Nostromo reveals more than one level of reality in that while each character has his own subjective conception of what reality is, the novel reveals another level of reality that exists beyond the characters' perceptions. Only Decoud and Nostromo come to perceive the cosmic reality in the presence of which subjective existence disappears; the silver is the symbolic manifestation of that level of reality. Nostromo is aware of this fact: "His courage, his magnificence, his leisure, his work,

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2. Reynolds, The Cambridge Italian Dictionary.

3. Ibid.

everything was as before, only everything was a sham. But the treasure was real. He clung to it with a more tenacious, mental grip" (429). All forms of life in the world of the novel seem to confirm the truth of Nostromo's discovery that the only reality is the treasure; not even the sea-birds of Azuera are beyond its powers: "The rocky head of Azuera is their haunt, whose strong levels and chasms resound with their wild and tumultuous clamour as if they were for ever quarrelling over the legendary treasure" (408).

Even Mrs. Gould, whose intentions are most benevolent and disinterested cannot escape the supernatural forces that inhabit the landscape. She fulfills their will unconsciously when she refuses to allow Nostromo to reveal the whereabouts of the silver. In this way Mrs. Gould rejects the only opportunity, however slight, to defeat the control of the silver. She condemns Nostromo eternally to its power; even in death he cannot be released. Nostromo realizes this himself: " 'Alas! it holds me yet!' " (457). The consistently ironic attitude of the novel insists that Mrs. Gould be drawn into the innate corruption and degradation generated by a malign universe. The forces of good and evil that dominate the novel triumph finally over the will of the characters. The last paragraph of Nostromo confirms this victory in the image of the "big white cloud shining like a mass of solid silver" (463) over the gulf while Nostromo dies. The emphasis on the silver at the end of Nostromo is reminiscent of a similar emphasis at the end of Heart of Darkness where Marlow sees the merging of the whiteness of the "Intended's" forehead with the whiteness of the ivory. Both works reveal a frightening level of reality, the heart of which is material interest that provides

the only basis and motivation for human action. Nostromo gradually unfolds a vision which perceives the fragile world of humanity locked within total cosmic darkness, devoid of morality or meaning. The darkness without serves only to reflect the darkness within the characters. Mrs. Gould, at the end of the novel, perceives this vision, already revealed to Decoud and Nostromo; she is the only character that remains whose perspective is that of the narrator's. Mrs. Gould is betrayed by her own benevolence and sincerity, as Decoud was by his scepticism; she believed too much in the power of material interests to bring about good, while never considering its capacity to produce a evil. The vision of horror that lies just under the surface of the novel floods Mrs. Gould's consciousness all at once. In a moment of insight, she recognizes the real basis of human motivation: "There was something inherent in the necessities of successful action which carried with it the moral degradation of the idea" (427). At this point her perspective merges with that of Decoud who earlier in the novel talked about man's need to idealize his passions in the "fair robes of an idea." She also recognizes her own essential isolation: "Mrs. Gould's face became set and rigid for a second, as if to receive, without flinching, a great wave of loneliness that swept over her head. And it came into her mind, too, that no one would ever ask with solicitude what she was thinking of" (427).

Of all three characters, Mrs. Gould's suffering is the most poignant; there is no disparity between her public and private self. She did not have to contrive a false mask to hide an empty darkness, like Decoud and Nostromo. Her belief in material interests arose from the most unselfish intentions. Nevertheless, she devoted herself no

less than any other character to the silver; while a victim of a malevolent cosmic will, Mrs. Gould is also a victim of her own nature. She stands condemned to live with her vision for eternity; her survival is her tragedy. Decoud and Nostromo at least are able to obliterate the vision from consciousness through death. Ironically, because her existence is faithful to the impulses of her own nature, she can resist the destruction which befalls Decoud and Nostromo. "With a prophetic vision she saw herself surviving alone the degradation of her young ideal of life, of love, of work -- all alone in the treasure house of the world" (428).

Decoud, Nostromo and Mrs. Gould are the only characters who discover the tragic vision in Nostromo. Through them Conrad shows that while manipulated by a hostile, evil cosmos, man shares in the responsibility of his own moral corruption. Decoud, Nostromo and Mrs. Gould are tragic figures in that they are aware of this fact. As Conrad wrote in a letter to R. B. Cunningham-Graham:

> What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it . . . as soon as you know your slavery, the pain, the anger, the strife, -- the tragedy begins . . . There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope: there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that . . . is always but a vain and floating appearance.[4]

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4. Jean-Aubry, Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters, I, p. 226.

IV

> "It had come into her mind that for life to be large and full, it must contain the care of the past and of the future in every passing moment of the present." (Nostromo, 427)

> Though mechanical time can, in a sense, be speeded up or run backward, like the hands of a clock or the images of a moving picture, organic time moves in only one direction -- through the cycle of birth, growth, development, decay and death -- and the past that is already dead remains present in the future that has still to be born.[1]

It is this disparity between organic time and illusory, mechanical time that Conrad explores in Nostromo. Historical time that can be marked in periods or "epochs", as Captain Mitchell calls them is at odds, in the novel, with subjective human experience. As I have shown in the previous chapters, the future of the characters in Nostromo is present in their past; moreover, the historical dimension of the novel is absorbed into its mythical framework. Human history is rendered unintelligible in the novel by radical time shifts. Captain Mitchell's historical narrative is broken off at various points in the novel, with the effect that the events portrayed in Nostromo are confused.

The technique of Nostromo attempts to reveal that chronological time, through which man believes himself to progress and change, is an illusion. In Nostromo, individuals are incapable of transcending the limitations and failures of their past, while human history dissolves into the mythology of the landscape. The events of the novel are not

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1. Mumford, Techniques and Civilization, quoted in Harvey, Character and the Novel, p. 104.

given enough detail to distinguish them as having various degrees of importance. The narrator seems to deliberately blur the differences between the Monterist and Bento revolutions, so that the reader often confuses them. The events of both revolutions are interspersed with each other. The spatial organization of Nostromo does not allow continuous narration of a particular event or experience of a character, thus depriving these aspects of the novel of the necessary cohesiveness that would realize their potential importance. Conrad relies chiefly on fragmentation of sequence to achieve such an effect. Decoud's suicide is not dramatized until after the reader knows of his death through Captain Mitchell's tour speech. The fact of his death comes as a casual reference in Mitchell's generally pompous and monotonous oration; the potential impact of this knowledge is already deflated. Before the reader is aware of Decoud's death, he also knows of the redemption of the Great Isabel from the total isolation that Decoud experiences. Decoud's sense of isolation on the island is not as credible for the reader as it might have been if the presence of the lighthouse had been mentioned earlier. Because Decoud's suicide is dramatized so late in the novel, it is deliberately emptied of its climactic potential.

The battle between General Barrios and Pedrito Montero is never dramatized, but also related through the over-inflated rhetoric of Captain Mitchell; it, too, never realizes its climactic potential. The Barrios victory comes as no surprise to the reader by the time Captain Mitchell mentions it, because he already knows that political "Separation" is an established fact. The Monterist revolution, mentioned as early as

Chapter II of "The Silver of the Mine", is never allowed to build up the necessary momentum to render it a forceful event. There are no climactic moments in Nostromo because of this technique which continuously fragments the narrative sequence.

This kind of technique also has a highly ironic effect. The world Conrad envisions in Nostromo is one devoid of morality or heroism. The Ribierist government, that Don José Avellanos believes will establish a new age in Sulaco, is exposed as a corrupt institution. It is a puppet government set up by foreign developers like Charles Gould and Sir John -- the "man of railways" -- to represent and protect their material interests. Again, it is Captain Mitchell who mentions this government's defeat as early as the second chapter in the novel, before the narration of events that should logically lead up to it. The inauguration of the railway and the celebrations for President Ribiera are treated with extreme irony because they occur after the reader knows of the president-dictator's defeat. The last chapter of "The Silver of the Mine" returns to the account of his downfall: "Next time when the 'Hope of honest men' was to come that way, a year and a half later, it was unofficially, over the mountain tracks, fleeing after a defeat on a lame mule, to be only just saved by Nostromo from an ignominious death at the hands of a mob" (118). The tone of this passage is not only ironic -- it is ridiculing; coming at the end of the first section of the novel, it undercuts the events which preceded it. Ribiera's defeat frames the celebrations of the new government and the optimism of the characters for a new world, thus totally undercutting these aspects of the novel. The failure of the government and the denial of the characters'

expectations are established first through technique, and then, through the theme.

Conrad takes war, love and death, themes of archetypal importance to the human consciousness, showing them to possess neither nobility nor meaning. In the universe envisioned in the novel, these concepts are divorced from their traditional associations with heroism and moral seriousness. The Monterist revolution, is portrayed as no more than an incredible, pathetic farce; its slogan -- "Viva la libertad! Down with Feudalism! Down with the goths and Paralytics" (194) -- is emblematic of its essential character. A mutual love relationship is impossible in the world of Nostromo; Mrs. Gould experiences her deepest suffering in her relationship with her husband, who can love nothing but the San Tomé Mine. Love becomes an excuse for Decoud's action in the revolution, and a mask to cover Antonia's private ambitions to annex Costaguana. The structure of the novel, with its constant time shifts and disruption of narrative sequence, largely promotes the effect of destroying the idealism around human experience. If Nostromo had preserved a more orthodox, linear time scheme, such events would have possessed greater stature than they are actually allowed. Conrad's intention seems to have been to expose the futility of human existence which pursues the ideal in life. In another letter to R. B. Cunningham-Graham, Conrad wrote: "Into the noblest cause, men manage to put something of their baseness . . . Every cause is tainted: and you reject this one, espouse that other one as if one were evil and the other good, while the same evil you hate is in both, but disguised in different words."[2] The

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2. Jean-Aubry, Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters, I, p. 229.

ideal concepts upon which man builds his civilization are no more than insubstantial illusions born out of vanity. In destroying the illusory foundations of civilization, Conrad destroys the medium through which human history feels itself to progress, especially on a moral level. As Nostromo reveals, there is no moral advancement and the changes that take place in human history are only ones of surface detail. Humanity can never surpass its primitive origins; it can only momentarily obliterate the living reality of its past from consciousness by the illusion of civilization. This is the common theme that runs throughout Conrad's fiction. Conrad's treatment of time is one of the major ways through which he conveys this vision of life; only when the reader is totally confused and has lost his bearings in clock-time, can he begin to perceive this vision which penetrates the cosmic chaos as the reality underlying human existence.

The process of reading the novel allows one to maintain a necessary double perspective; the reader can remain in his illusory world while able to simultaneously see the abysmal reality. Language, while a means of exposing this reality, also maintains the necessary distance from it. Without this distance, man is plunged into the destructive universe. Marlow is spared the destruction that befalls Decoud and Nostromo because of his ability to articulate his knowledge. He has the double advantage of being sufficiently distanced from the cosmic vacuum that destroys, while being able to maintain the vital link with his community. Marlow inhabits this precarious position between the two worlds through language. He is similar to the Ancient Mariner in that although trapped in absolute knowledge discovered in a past

moment, both characters can continue to live as long as they repeat the experience to others. In this way Marlow is able to commit himself to the world of mankind while ever aware it is a sham: he must be faithful to the illusion while being aware it is an illusion. This is the crucial paradox of Conrad's fiction. Marlow is not like Decoud and Nostromo who cross the barrier between the illusion and the abyss; rather, he inhabits the middle region. The reader should ideally achieve this perspective through Nostromo.

In the first and second chapters of "The Silver of the Mine", Conrad juxtaposes the timeless world of mythology with the time-oriented world of human action. This structual juxtaposition represents the two levels of involvement that occupy the entire novel. Human history must be considered against its cosmic background, represented in Nostromo by the geography. The mountain called Higuerota becomes emblematic of the cosmic backdrop in the novel:

> Knots of men ran headlong; others made a stand . . . single figures on foot raced desperately. Horsemen galloped toward each other wheeled around together, separated at speed . . . the movements of the animated scene were like the passage of a violent game played upon the plain by dwarfs mounted and on foot, yelling with tiny throats, under the mountain that seemed a colossal embodiment of silence. (35)

Visually this scene is like a cinematic technique where the camera closely focuses on the activity before it, capturing its vitality and vividness. Slowly the camera draws backward and upward to the height of the mountain, focusing downward to encompass the scene in its physical context. From this perspective the vitality dwindles, the voices fade and the scene loses its grandeur so that the action becomes little more

than a farcial game. It is significant that the scene ends with the emphasis on silence, since silence and darkness are the two main defining qualities of the created universe in Nostromo.

The lighthouse on the Great Isabel and the temporary stability brought to Sulaco after the Monterist defeat represent the establishment of civilization over the underlying abyss. But the lighthouse, representative of the mercantile values that are taking root in Sulaco, will never penetrate the symbolic darkness of the Placid Gulf. Similarly, the economic benefits brought to Sulaco by the success of material interests will not maintain the political stability necessary to prevent another revolution. By the end of Nostromo the ironic attitude of the narrator is most explicit; faith in material interests has betrayed its believers and the former chaos will reassert itself in a new revolution. The moral principles with which the characters invested the pursuit of material interests is exposed as a façade to disguise individual moral corruption.

The novel ends essentially where it began; its final focus on Nostromo completes its cyclic structure in that the myth has been fully re-enacted. The last foreboding references to new political unrest with the imminent possibility of another revolution not only help to reinforce the novel's circular structure, but along with the account of Nostromo's destiny, the illusory nature of time is emphasized. Nostromo has not progressed beyond its opening chapter in the sense that everything that occurs in the novel is contained on a symbolic level in that chapter.

Conrad's main concern in Nostromo is not to tell a particular story, or to explore the dimensions of a character. On the other hand, it would be totally false to deny that Conrad has created a convincing literal narrative; as Oscar Wilde wrote: "All art is at once surface and symbol."[3] Rather, Conrad works through the narrative and the characters in order to discover a vision. In his essay on Nostromo, Arnold Kettle agrees that: "Some kind of 'moral discovery', Conrad wrote, 'should be the object of every tale.' He was no Art-for-Arter, this artist . . . and by 'moral discovery' he did not mean merely the illustration of some preconceived moral truth. It was in the creation of the work of art that the discovery was made."[4]

F. R. Leavis, dubbing Nostromo as a masterpiece of English prose fiction, feels that: "for all the rich variety of the interest and the tightness of the pattern, the reverberation of Nostromo has something hollow about it . . ."[5] The "hollowness" that Leavis feels after reading Nostromo does not arise from any faultiness within the novel, but rather in the nature of the universe that Conrad conveys. His purpose was not to flatter human illusions by asserting the existence of an ordered, harmonious cosmos; instead, he exposed the universal moral vacuum into which mankind was born. This is the aspect of human existence in which Conrad is most interested. Through direct confrontation with

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3. Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949), p. 6.

4. Kettle, An Introduction to the English Novel, II, p. 3.

5. Leavis, The Great Tradition, p. 211.

the cosmos, man discovers the reality of his own nature. Marlow's journey into the Congo parallels a descent into the self, where he finds nothing. His recognition of kinship with the primitive tribes of Africa confronts him with the knowledge that mankind has not developed morally beyond his primitive ancestors, despite the passage of centuries.

The future of humanity lies in its primordial past. But mankind cannot face the reality of its existence; it must obliterate it with the presence of a grand illusion. Yet the more mankind tries to blot out reality, the more he shrouds himself in illusions, denying himself the possibility of a future through which he might hope to overcome some of the limitations of his existence.

I have devoted this thesis to showing that the concept of time is fundamental to understanding Nostromo. The true nature of time that Conrad reveals in this novel is best expressed in the opening lines of T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets":

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.
> If all time is eternally present
> All time is unredeemable. (11 1-5).

For Eliot, this idea of time is hypothetical, whereas for Conrad it is reality. Because time past contains time future, then there is no possibility for human existence to renew itself through time. Thus time, for Conrad, is unredeemable. Human existence may change through surface detail, but essentially it is static, confined within its own origins. For Eliot, man is redeemed through time by the Incarnation; thus the opening lines of "Burnt Norton" are rejected as a hypothesis by the poet. But for Conrad, God does not intervene in human history; for man,

there is no possibility of redemption through time.

EPILOGUE: CONRAD AND THE TRADITION

> "Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spiderweb of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue." (Henry James, "The Art of Fiction").

Having devoted this thesis to a detailed analysis of Conrad's major novel, Nostromo, I find it becomes necessary, in conclusion, to make a more general statement about Conrad and place him in the tradition of English novel-writing. F. R. Leavis, in attempting to locate Conrad in the tradition, writes:

> The impressiveness [of Nostromo] is not a matter of any profundity of search into human experience, or any explorative subtlety in the analysis of human behaviour. It is a matter rather of the firm and vivid concreteness with which the representative attitudes and motives are realized, and the rich economy of the pattern that plays them off against one another.[1]

Nostromo is a "magnificent" novel for Leavis because it "addresses the senses, or the sensuous imagination";[2] it is great because of its "life-like convincingness"[3] of characterization. While one cannot argue against these statements as being incorrect, one can reject them as valid tenets of criticism and as improper reasons for including Conrad (or any novelist, for that matter) in a great tradition. It is Leavis' critical criteria which cause him to overlook the essential "profundity of search into human experience" that is a vital part of Nostromo. Rather, one

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1. F. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition, p. 215.
2. Ibid., p. 211.
3. Ibid, p. 216.

must see Conrad as part of a tradition that extends back beyond Jane Austen into the Renaissance and foreward beyond D. H. Lawrence to include such writers as Joyce, Faulkner and Samuel Beckett. The "great" tradition to which Conrad belongs is one that began with René Descartes' philosophical dictum "Cogito ergo sum": it is the tradition which is predominantly preoccupied with the question of consciousness.

In his review of Chance, Henry James recognized an artisitc technique akin to his own when he wrote of that novel as "a prolonged hovering flight of the subjective over the outstretched ground of the case exposed."[4] The concern of subjectivity, or consciousness, is central to the art of both James and Conrad. James describes this kind of technique in his Preface to The Portrait of a Lady:

> 'Place the centre of the subject in the young woman's own consciousness,' . . . 'and you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you could wish. Stick to that -- for the centre; put the heaviest weight into that scale, which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself.'

Conrad's technique is similar to James' method in his major fiction, especially in those works where Marlow appears. In Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim and Chance, the subject or central concern is Marlow's consciousness as it broods upon the "case exposed." Through his interaction with Kurtz, Jim or Flora de Barral, Marlow comes to discover and understand the true nature of his own self. It is the effect of experience upon the central consciousness with which these works are largely concerned. Yet whereas James tends to concentrate upon one central consciousness in his

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4. Henry James, The Art of Fiction and Other Essays (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 204.

novels, Conrad is more interested in the negative implications of consciousness in more than one particular character. The story of Kurtz affects two minds, those of Marlow and the general narrator of Heart of Darkness; the same can be said of Lord Jim and Chance. Thus characters like Kurtz and Jim are at once the means through which Marlow (and the actual narrator) discover themselves, while they are also a symbolic representation of the extreme implications of the predicament of consciousness. Kurtz and Jim are similar to Isabel Archer in that they are deceived also by a romantic ideal, the centre of which is the self. All three characters are possessed by their own egotism and tend to interpret the external world in terms of their personal desires and aspirations. But Conrad goes farther than James in exploring the horrific implications of consciousness as the centre of everything. Consciousness (the subjective perspective) in Conrad's fiction tends to become identified with a will to power over the external world. Kurtz desires to recreate the savage darkness of the Congo jungle in his own image; his beneficent intentions are in fact a mask to disguise a self-exalted ego. He discovers, to his horror, that the true image of his self lies in that primal darkness that he is trying to convert. In the depths of the impenetrable jungle· Kurtz sees reflected there the essence of his self. Decoud and Nostromo discover the same thing. In his fiction Conrad explodes the implications of "Cogito ergo sum" -- that everything exists as the object of human thought. In this respect Conrad reprsents a culminative point in the tradition of the English novel. J. Hillis Miller agrees that:

> The development of fiction from Jane Austen to Conrad and James is a gradual exploration of the fact that for modern man nothing exists except as it is seen by

someone viewing the world from his own perspective.[5]

This comment could very easily be applied to Chance, where the basic narrative is refracted through a multiplicity of consciousnesses until it is finally told to the reader. It becomes increasingly obvious in Chance that the possibility exists that the story of Flora de Barral was very different than we are told, since even Marlow does not receive all his information first hand. The growing hostility that the reader senses between Marlow and the actual narrator raises the problem that perhaps the latter may be distorting Marlow's story. The reader, having no other information, must finally accept the story of Flora de Barral as it is related by Marlow and the actual narrator. The same problems arise with Lord Jim: " 'He existed for me, and after all it is only through me that he exists for you" (171).

In accounting for the very possibility of the novel-genre, Ian Watt attributes it to the new concept of the individual consciousness as the basis of reality.

> The novel is the form of literature which most fully reflects this individual and innovating reorientation. . . . literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience -- individual experience which is always unique and therefore new. The novel is thus the logical literary vehicle of a culture which, in the last few centuries, has set an unprecedented value on originality, on the novel; it is therefore well named.[6]

Watt also refers to the fact that "from the Renaissance onwards, there

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5. Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality, p. 4.

6. Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 13.

was a growing tendency for individual experience to replace collective tradition as the ultimate arbiter of reality."[7] Conrad is very much a part of this post-renaissance tradition; he also begins another tradition, along with Henry James, which interprets the centrality of consciousness in a negative way. D. H. Lawrence interpreted the light of rational consciousness as a death-like state. Hermione in Women in Love is a diseased, dying character because of her need to absorb everything in the external world into her own consciousness. In Lawrence's terms, Hermione murders or annihilates life because she does not allow it to exist in its own right. Birkin's accusations of Hermione best illustrate her sickness:

> 'It's all that Lady of Shalott business,' he said . . . 'You've got that mirror, your own fixed will, your immortal understanding, your own tight conscious world, and there is nothing beyond it. There, in the mirror, you must have everything . . . you want it all in that loathsome little skull of yours . . . what you want is pornography -- looking at yourself in mirrors, . . . so that you can have it all in your consciousness, make it all mental.'[8]

But Lawrence went beyond Conrad in that he not only exposed the negative implications of consciousness, but he also attempted to resolve them. Lawrence was able to foresee a new world where the light of consciousness would form a perfect union with the darkness of the blood-unconsciousness.

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7. Ibid., p. 14.

8. D. H. Lawrence, Women in Love, with a foreward by the author and an introduction by Richard Aldington (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), pp. 35, 36.

Samuel Beckett is perhaps nearer to Conrad in the sense that he too concentrates upon the negativism of consciousness without really resolving it. In his work, Beckett explores the inadequacy of human consciousness to deal with reality and its metaphysical dimensions. His characters are only able to cope with trivia; it is impossible for them to reckon with concepts that transcend the realm of the mundane and the simple. The narrator can only account for himself and his misfortunes in terms of physical circumstance. The story focuses on the inept way in which the character walks, which, to him is a means by which to explain his present predicament.

> . . . I refer to the period which extends . . . from the first totterings . . . I had then the deplorable habit, having pissed in my trousers, or shat there, which I did fairly regularly early in the morning, . . . of persisting in going on and finishing my day as if nothing had happened. The very idea of changing my trousers, or of confiding in mother . . . was unbearable, . . . and till bedtime I dragged on with burning and stinking between my little thighs, or sticking to my bottom . . . Whence this wary way of walking, with the legs stiff and wide apart, and this desperate rolling of the bust, no doubt intended to put people off the scent, to make them think I was full of gaiety . . . without a care in the world, and to lend plausibility to my explanations concerning my nether rigidity, which I ascribed to hereditary rheumatism . . . I became sour and mistrustful, a little before my time, in love with biding and the prone position. Poor juvenile solutions, explaining nothing . . . we may reason to our heart's content, the fog won't lift.[9]

It appears that the Beckett character cannot bear the weight of reality. His consciousness is unable to deal with it, except in the most simplistic terms. In Molloy, the consciousness of the narrator is incapable of dealing with murder, and must revert to a contemplation of incidentals.

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9. Samuel Beckett, Stories and Texts for Nothing, (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), pp. 14, 15.

According to Hillis Miller, the belief that God was ever present in the external world gave man a sense of unity and order in his own life and the world around him. But when man posits his individual consciousness as the basis of reality, God disappears and the human ego is not strong enough to maintain the sense of unity that came with a God-oriented world. Thus consciousness can only retreat back upon itself until there is nothing. This is essentially what happens in Conrad's novels; Kurtz, Jim, Decoud, Nostromo -- this type of character lives within the supremacy of his own consciousness which is only possible within the communal context. But when such characters are removed from this context and are forced to confront the physical world alone, consciousness cannot hold and dissolves into reality. At this point in human experience, man discovers the infinite nothingness of his ego. As Conrad wrote to R. B. Cunningham-Graham:

> Of course reason is hateful, -- but why? Because it demonstrates (to those who have the courage) that we, living, are out of life, -- utterly out of it. The mysteries of a universe made of drops of fire and clods of mud do not concern us in the least . . . Life knows us not and we do not know life.[10]

Thus Conrad devoted himself ultimately to the problem of the subjective consciousness and discovered the logical conclusions of the Cartesian philosophical dictum out of which the modern world was born. It is significant that Conrad was writing, with Henry James, at the beginning of a century which is seriously examining the principles upon which it was founded. "It remained for Conrad to explore nihilism to its depths, and, in doing so, to point the way toward the transcendence of

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10. Jean-Aubry, The Life and Letters of Joseph Conrad, I, p. 222.

nihilism by the poets of the twentieth century."[11] Lawrence was able to achieve this transcendence by forgoing a new vision which creates a marriage between soul and body; Beckett does the same in the sense that he explores the comic potential of a despairing situation. Any transcendence of nihilism could not have been possible unless Conrad had confronted it head-on and exposed it in his work. Thus Conrad not only belongs to a great tradition, he is also a crisis point in it.

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11. Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality, p. 6.

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