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THE NATURE OF THE SYMBOLISM IN CONRAD'S
NOSTROMO

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English at
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the Father Michael about this red time
of the white terror equals the old regime
and Margaret is the social revolution while
cakes mean the party funds and dear thank
you signifies national gratitude

James Joyce: Finnegans Wake, p. 116

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Abstract:

Conrad's writing is frequently described as symbolic, but few critics agree on the application of this term. There are those critics who identify Conrad with the French Symbolist poets and discuss his works only with reference to the essence, the ideal and the general, ignoring the literal, the experience level, and avoiding all mention of the narrative in which the symbolism is based. And there are those who pick out particulars from the narrative and match them up with a series of one-to-one correspondences, thus missing the general and universal implications. Both of these interpretations, and a good many analyses in between, do Conrad a serious injustice. His work is first of all narrative—his novels are, among other things, rollicking good adventure stories—but beyond the literal and the particular it also contains a wealth of suggestion and association that defies rigid interpretation. Above all there is an underlying ambivalence, a sense of the relativity of things: assigned values are subject to sudden inversion and nothing can be accepted as ultimate. To attempt to categorize such art is to restrict the free play of the imagination which goes beyond the "temporary formulas" of literary criticism, as Conrad himself calls them. To attempt to interpret the symbolism systematically not only extracts the symbols from the narrative on which they depend for their scope and force but introduces an element of the finite that is inappropriate in Conrad.

This study is a discussion of the symbolic nature of Nostromo in an attempt to rediscover the novel as a whole, to, as it were, put the trees back in the wood. The theory of symbolism is discussed briefly in order to cancel any restrictive critical categorization and in particular to disentangle Conrad from too close an association with the

French Symbolist poets. A number of interpretations of Nostromo are looked at in detail to demonstrate how attempts at definitive criticism can distort and restrict as much as they can elucidate. Finally there is a focus on some aspects of the novel as an indication of the intricate way in which the literal and the symbolic are interwoven and interdependent: an appreciation of the texture of the surface and of the infinity of its translucence.

Introduction:

In this study I have taken as my cue Conrad's oft-quoted statement from the Preface to The Nigger of the 'Narcissus':

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand—and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.

To snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life, is only the beginning of the task. The task approached in tenderness and faith is to hold up unquestioningly, without choice, and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood. It is to show its vibration, its colour, its form; and through its movement, its form, and its colour, reveal the substance of its truth—disclose its inspiring secret: the stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment. In a single-minded attempt of that kind, if one be deserving and fortunate, one may perchance attain to such clearness of sincerity that at last the presented vision of regret or pity, of terror or mirth, shall awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate, which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world.¹

It is clear from this that in his art Conrad is attempting to render experience through a particular existence, to render the total and the universal through a portrayal of the individual. This multidimensional effect is described by Conrad himself as "symbolic": "All the great creations of

¹ Joseph Conrad, The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'/Typhoon/and Other Stories (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1963), p. 13.

literature have been symbolic, and in that very way have gained in complexity, in power, in depth and in beauty."²

It is difficult, however, to place Conrad's symbolism in the context of various definitions given to the term by critical theorists. His approach seems so much more varied than the definitions allow, his vision and its effect on the reader so much more encompassing.

Nostromo, with its cinematic structure and pervasive images, its portrayal of relative values and the ambiguities evident in its characters, is Conrad's most complex and symbolic novel and is by no means the best understood. Critics have yanked about the fine texture of the work to extricate the irony which, once extricated, loses its ironic power. They have tried to formalize the narrative in order to show the effect of the shattered time scheme, and in doing so have shattered the effect. They have pulled out images like threads from cloth and wondered why both thread and cloth seemed less impressive. Very few have looked at the novel as a whole, focusing here on this and there on that, but keeping the total in view throughout. If a novel is a work of art, and Conrad insists that it is, it must be considered as such. No one, critic, lover or lay person, would look at a painting and appreciate it in bits. To take out all the browns would ruin the original and leave one with only a brown mess, but to notice the browns in context would show how here the conjunction with gold throws added lights and there an overlay of black gives depth. If the painting is symbolic one would look into the deeper suggestiveness of the canvas, but one would not remove the literal referent. Nor would one extract each focal point and observe

² G. Jean-Aubry, Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters (London : Heinemann, 1927) II, 205.

it in isolation. If we are to see, as Conrad would have us do, then the novel with its various enriching qualities intact, must be viewed as a whole.

In order to discuss Nostromo with particular reference to the symbolic quality, it seemed necessary to discuss, at least in general terms, some of the critical interpretations of symbolism and this is the subject of my first chapter. The second chapter is a discussion of some critical writings on the symbolism in Nostromo and I have tried to show the distortions that arise if one considers the symbolic aspects apart from the total work. In the third chapter I make a hesitant attempt to consider some aspects of the symbolism as it appears in context.

My aim is not to provide a definitive interpretation of the symbolism in Nostromo but to convince the reader that there is no such thing. The individual reader is free to exercise his own symbolic imagination in exploration of the suggestiveness of Conrad's art. All a critic can do is direct attention to the total canvas and to aspects within it which seem to illuminate the whole: a critic can suggest ways of looking but only the reader can see.

I Symbolism: Some General Comments

man is the symbolizing animal: he is able to hold some particular patch of experience, sensed or imagined, up to contemplative attention, not for what it₃ is, but for what it indicates or suggests.

The use of "symbolism" as a critical term is much discussed in modern critical literature and many shades of meaning have been assigned. It is necessary, therefore, to look briefly at some general opinion on this topic in order to decide where Conrad fits in: in what sense or senses the term "symbolic" may be appropriately applied to his work. In doing so, I do not pretend to understand fully the aesthetics of symbolism, but attempt only to place Conrad's use of the symbolic within the overall context of literary symbolism.

Accepting that the term has, in literature, a designation beyond that of "sign", where every word is a symbol, that it is a part of critical terminology and describes a figurative use of language, difficulties arise in defining the exact use of language to which it is applied. Coleridge, writing in 1817, stated that:

a symbol . . . is characterized by a translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative.⁴

³ Philip Wheelwright, The Burning Fountain (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954), p. 17.

⁴ S.T. Coleridge, The Portable Coleridge, ed. I.A. Richards (New York : Viking, 1950), p. 388.

This definition places a symbol as a part of the real world, a particular that calls into focus the whole general and universal and eternal existence of which it is a representative.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, however, a number of French poets, now referred to as the Symbolists, developed a usage of the symbolic with a rather different emphasis. Rejecting the particular and individual as representative of the general, the Symbolists concentrated their art on the general and universal only, in an attempt to render symbolically the essential Idea; this generally Platonic approach being more immediately derived from the Swedish philosopher Emmanuel Swedenborg. The Symbolist Movement, as it became known, was first given recognition and definition in England by Arthur Symons, whose major work on the subject, The Symbolist Movement in Literature, was published in 1899. In this book Symons discusses the work of poets such as Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud and Huysmans who, he argues, perceived "a reality which is opposite to the world of appearance", who understood "the organic unity of the world of appearance."⁵

Charles Chadwick goes a little further in his definition with reference to the French Symbolists, and identifies two aspects of symbolism, "human symbolism" and "transcendental symbolism":

Symbolism can, then, be finally said to be an attempt to penetrate beyond reality to a world of ideas, either the ideas within the poet, including his emotions [human symbolism], or the Ideas in the Platonic sense that constitute

⁵ Arthur Symons, The Symbolist Movement in Literature (London: Archibald Constable, 1899), p. xiii.

a perfect supernatural world towards which man aspires [transcendental symbolism]. In order to thus get behind the surface of reality there is often a fusion of images, a kind of stereoscopic effect to give a third dimension.⁶

As Chadwick points out, such symbolism is often confused and obscure since to render a specific image too clearly would deflect the reader's attention from the essential Idea. A quick glance at any Symbolist poetry confirms this lack of the particular. While there are images, they serve only to illustrate the essence and do not have concrete existence, nor is there any clearly defined setting or landscape. The persona, whether singular or plural, first, second or third person, is typically nameless, featureless and in limbo. Clearly such treatment would be inappropriate in the novel form, where plot, character and setting must also play their part. This does not mean that symbolism is not present in novels such as those of Conrad, but rather that the symbolism is a part of and is adapted to the narrative form and is therefore not the symbolism of the French Symbolist poets. It is more nearly symbolism as defined by Coleridge (quoted above), that which "partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative".

In an unpublished thesis, Paul Farkas discusses certain literary affinities between Conrad and the Symbolist poets Rimbaud and Baudelaire, whose works Conrad certainly read, but his comparison is limited to the use of Symbolist techniques such as the journey into the subconscious, usually portrayed on the literal level as a sea voyage. The most obvious example of such a journey in Conrad's writings is, of

⁶ Charles Chadwick, Symbolism, The Critical Idiom Series (London : Methuen, 1971), p. 6.

course, Marlow's journey up the Congo in Heart of Darkness, but there are many others that allow this interpretation, including, in Nostromo, the lighter voyage of Nostromo and Decoud to the Isabels, and Nostromo's return. While no one would deny there are similarities in the devices used by the Symbolist poets and those used by writers of symbolic novels, it does not follow that their brands of symbolism are identical. Conrad has himself refuted such a notion:

a work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art, the more it acquires a symbolic character. This statement may surprise you, who may imagine that I am alluding to the Symbolist School of poets or prose writers. Theirs, however, is only a literary proceeding against which I have nothing to say. I am concerned here with something much larger

So I will only call your attention to the fact that the symbolic conception of a work of art has this advantage, that it makes a triple appeal covering the whole field of life. All the great creations of literature have been symbolic, and in that very way have gained in⁷ complexity, in power, in depth and in beauty.

Conrad is concerned with something much larger: a complex and complete novel. Farkas also quotes the above letter and says of it:

It is not clear from the context exactly what Conrad means by calling the Symbolist school a 'literary proceeding' or by asserting that he is concerned with 'something much larger' If the larger scope is a universal essence, then Conrad's objection to a 'literary proceeding' likely refers to mere word play, bizarre innovations in language, and self-conscious concern with technicalities of verbal communication—all of which are at least part

⁷ Jean-Aubry, II, 205.

of Symbolist poetry.

What is clear is that Conrad did speak of himself in relation to the Symbolist school and critics of Conrad have noticed similarities.⁸

Although Conrad does not make it clear what he means by "literary proceeding", a novel is certainly something "much larger". And it is a fair assumption that the author of, among others, Heart of Darkness, Under Western Eyes and Nostromo, who based his symbolism firmly and concretely in the real world and interwove it with action and character, would consider the poetic evocation of an Idea without reference to particular reality just a "literary proceeding". What is clear, though, is not just that Conrad spoke of himself in relation to the Symbolist school but that he did so with the conscious awareness that his brand of symbolism was not their brand. He was aware of basic differences which Farkas, in pursuance of similarities, has chosen not to explore.

While Farkas is aware of Conrad's attention to literal detail, he sees it as a technical difference only and maintains that Conrad and the Symbolists have an identical symbolic quality:

In the final analysis, Conrad comes closer to life, for his minutely rendered world is mostly credible while at the same time being revelatory of the spiritual mysteries which lie beneath surfaces. The artist does not haphazardly plunge into mysteries while disregarding the surface. Rather, the mysteries emerge in the very manner in which the artist presents the surface.⁹

⁸ Paul D. Farkas, "The Aesthetics of Darkness: Joseph Conrad and the Aesthetics of the Symbolists", Ph.D. Thesis (Louisiana State University, 1972), pp. 14-15.

⁹ Farkas, p. 168.

My feeling would be not to change any of Farkas' arguments but simply to turn his thesis on its head: Conrad worked from the particular to the general, inventing a specific reality which suggests symbolically the general, the universal, the eternal and the ideal: "And also you must remember that I don't start with an abstract notion. I start with definite images and if their rendering is true some little effect is produced".¹⁰ The Symbolists rejected the particular and presented the general Idea in concentrated form. There is, therefore, a fundamental philosophical difference in the nature of their symbolism, although one can find a number of technical similarities such as the night journey, the use of the occult, etc.

Not only do the two differ in their philosophical basis, they also differ in function. The Symbolists aimed to direct attention to the general, the essence, the Idea, to reflect outward on an ideal world which does not necessarily have a counterpart in reality. Conrad created a fictional world where every detail is real, credible and has a particular existence in reality. As Douglas Hewitt says, "the function of the symbolic structures of Conrad's works is to reinforce the durability of his created world and to direct our attention within it".¹¹ To approach the symbolic quality of Conrad's novels in the same way as one would approach the symbolism of the French Symbolist poets is, therefore, to confuse two different forms of symbolism.

Having established that Conrad deals in particular representations which suggest the general and ideal, thus avoiding a close and perhaps restrictive critical association with the French Symbolist poets, we must consider the theoretical nature of symbolism in more detail. D.W. Harding,

¹⁰ Jean-Aubry, I, 26.

¹¹ Douglas Hewitt, Conrad: A Reassessment (London : Bowes and Bowes, 1969), p. xii.

in his book Experience Into Words, differentiates between two varieties of concrete embodiment for which he chooses the terms "emblem" and "symbol":

The contrast I have in mind is, roughly speaking, between a representation that stands for something clearly definable [emblem] and one that stands for something of which the general nature is evident but the precise range and boundaries of meaning are not readily specified, perhaps not usefully specified [symbol].¹²

This is a useful distinction when it comes to looking closely at Conrad's symbolism, as it enables one to place in perspective the relatively simple associations of, say the little Russian's book on marine principles in Heart of Darkness, the falsified bottles of quinine in The Shadow Line and the ghostly gringos of Azuera in Nostromo against the much more complex associations of, for example, the rivers in Heart of Darkness and Lord Jim, the storms in Typhoon and The Nigger of the 'Narcissus', Stevie in The Secret Agent and the silver mine or old Giorgio in Nostromo. It will be noted that both "emblem" and "symbol" refer to language embodying a meaning other than the literal, surface meaning. Using Harding's distinction, therefore, a work can be said to operate on three levels: the literal, the emblematic and the symbolic.

Harding illustrates his theory with reference to Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner", suggesting that the force of the poem is partly due to this three-level effect: the direct narrative, "explicit emblems" such as the Albatross hung round the Mariner's neck, and symbols which, "besides being interesting in themselves are enriched by our impression that they have some further significance, though the nature of it may be difficult to indicate and its limits almost

¹² D.W. Harding, Experience Into Words (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1974), p. 74.

impossible to define".¹³ As examples of this latter he gives the moon, "with its curious changes of character", and the use of the wedding feast as a background to the narrative. Stressing that this "further significance" calls in the total collective experience of mankind, thus making it impossible to give finite interpretation to a symbol, Harding continues:

If the event he [the writer] uses is only an emblem both he and the reader will know pretty clearly what it means and what it does not mean. They can translate it. The meaning is detachable from the object or event that represents it. If it is in my sense a symbol we may neither of us, reader nor author, be confident in detaching a limited, translatable meaning, because we are not certain what aspects of the event [or object] and what associations of the words describing it can be ruled out as irrelevant.¹⁴

Conrad would agree with this: "a work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art, the more it acquires a symbolic character."¹⁵

I have deliberately refrained from discussing here other devices for conveying a meaning beyond the literal—parable, allegory, proverb, fable etc.—as their specific usage is only marginally relevant to Conrad's novels, if at all. The only term likely to cause confusion is "allegory" which has, on occasion, been described as a "sustained symbol". This is misleading. The meaning of an allegory is clear and definable and, given Harding's distinction above, could be described as a "sustained emblem", but to use the term "symbol"

¹³ Harding, p. 77.

¹⁴ Harding, p. 79.

¹⁵ Jean-Aubry, loc. cit.

in connection with allegory detracts both from the defined purpose of the allegorical statement and from the universality of the symbol. As D.H. Lawrence, whose writings, like Conrad's, are described as "symbolic", says:

You can't give a great symbol a 'meaning' any more than you can give a cat a 'meaning'. Symbols are organic units of consciousness with a life of their own, and you can never explain them away, because their value is dynamic, emotional, belonging to the sense-consciousness of the body and soul, and not simply mental. An allegorical image has a meaning. Mr Facing-both-ways has a meaning. But I defy you to lay your finger on the full meaning of Janus, who is a symbol.¹⁶

Having established, then, that a symbol is neither an emblem nor an allegory, that it is neither finite nor clearly definable, we can proceed to discuss not what it is but what it does, to consider the way in which a symbol operates. One of the more interesting and thought-provoking discussions of symbolic theory is that of Robert Browne. In an essay on literary signs, Browne gives a general definition of the literary-aesthetic symbol (as distinct from the conventional sign which is a symbol in linguistic terms) as involving "the presence of or reference to a natural or artificial object which exists in its own right as an object before it acts as a sign of something else".¹⁷ Within this definition he identifies three sorts of symbolism: metaphoric, synecdochic and metonymic. "Metaphoric" is used to describe the type of symbolism when the signans (vehicle) is a likeness, but not a literal copying, of the signatum (tenor). The example Browne uses to illustrate this is from William Faulkner's "That Evening Sun", where a ditch separates the homes of two

¹⁶ D.H. Lawrence, "The Dragon of the Apocalypse" (1930), in *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Anthony Beal (London: Heinemann, 1955), p. 157.

¹⁷ Robert M. Browne, "The Typology of Literary Signs", *College English*, 33, 1 (October 1971), 10.

families, one black and one white: "The material ditch is 'like' the non-material obstacles to communication posed by a racist social structure, like in that the two things have similar effects".¹⁸ While both the signans (ditch) and the signatum (racism) exist, one as a physical reality and one as a social reality, their connection or contiguity is only contingent. "There is no natural or causal connection between a road and the Puritan ethic, or between a ditch and racism, or between the jungle and the human heart. The likeness seems mysterious, dramatic, unexpected".¹⁹ There is some similarity between Browne's "metaphoric symbolism" and Harding's "emblem" but whereas an emblem has an easily defined meaning, the signatum of the metaphoric symbol is general and universal in nature, and the connection between signans and signatum neither necessary nor obvious. It is this quality of suggestion that encourages the reader not only to make the connection voluntarily but also to cast around for other subtle associations to explore beneath and beyond the literal surface of the story.

Browne refers to his second type of symbolism as "synecdochic", taking this from the fact that the image represents a part of a much larger whole. The contiguity between the signans and signatum in this case is both necessary and close: the microcosm that reflects the macrocosm. This symbolism is not restricted to works where the smaller society is a deliberate scale model of the larger, as in The Nigger of the 'Narcissus', but can also be used to describe a society where:

the characters and events are so marked with the same moral qualities that the larger society is seen to have the same characteristics. . . . these characteristics become attributed to the whole society. In turn, of course, the society may seem to represent

¹⁸ Browne, p. 10.

¹⁹ Browne, p. 12.

mankind in general, to have characteristics true of any possible human society.²⁰

Browne again cites Heart of Darkness as an example but the description is equally applicable to the society of Costaguana.

The term "metonymic" is used to describe the subtle and symbolic connection between, for example, the presence of wind and rain in a scene of great sadness; a symbolism derived from metonymy, the device where something is referred to not by its conventional name but by the name of something in close association with it (e.g. "bench" for a judge). The example of metonymic symbolism given by Browne is from Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" where Laura's hat takes on a symbolic character, representing firstly Laura's immaturity, then "the elegance and refinement of this civilized middle class way of life", and finally the "self-satisfied conventionality of middle class life which has insulated Laura from the experience of real and terrible beauty".²¹ Such symbolism has no direct similarity but it does have a close contiguity between signans and signatum, and an image, through repetition, may develop into a metonymic symbol. In Nostromo Captain Mitchell's watch is a good example of this.²² It is given to him by the O.S.N. Company's underwriters as a reward for saving a ship from fire, but in a few pages it is used as a signans for white (European) superiority, for fine and beautiful Western craftsmanship, for the greed and rapacity of revolutionary forces, for the petty thievery that is the basis of the barbaric Sotillo's revolutionary zeal and for the insulting patronage

²⁰ Browne, p. 13.

²¹ Browne, p. 15.

²² Joseph Conrad, Nostromo (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1963), p. 280. All further references to Nostromo are from this edition and will be noted within the text, thus: (N, p. 280).

of the temporary victor.

At the end of his essay Browne himself poses a number of questions on the appropriateness of some or any of these three categories to various literary works. He is unsure, for instance, whether "symbolism" is the right word at all for the French Symbolist poets and concludes that, "Certainly the stress on association, evocation, suggestion, magic and music points to metonymic symbolism rather than to other kinds".²³ As Browne's definition states emphatically that symbolism is an extension of a particular existence, his difficulties in placing the French Symbolists are understandable.

Despite this and other doubts, Browne's analysis provides a useful insight into the ways in which symbols can operate. No schema, however, should be taken as definitive and all analyses of types of symbol are only useful insofar as they keep before us possibilities of association. A work of art is unique. Artists may employ similar techniques and there may be a common quality that can be described as symbolic, but to analyze and categorize too closely destroys this very quality. The industrious application of theories of symbolism to a symbolic novel can only distract the reader's attention from the total work of art. It is a "literary proceeding" with which Conrad himself would have had no truck and, although the result may well be a greater understanding of the symbolic operation of language, it is unlikely to help the reader to "see". As Hewitt says of such criticism, "Usually in the process of relentless symbolisation one novel is replaced by another".²⁴ And I would suggest that the replacement is a great deal inferior.

²³ Browne, p. 16.

²⁴ Hewitt, p. xii.

Conrad is, however, by his own admission, a consciously symbolic writer. In his writings it is the wealth of association and suggestion that gives the language its symbolic power, and this power is firmly based in and interwoven with the landscape, the characters and the action: the symbolic and literal levels are interdependent. When reading a novel such as Nostromo, we should not forget the theory of symbolism. We should, as informed readers, keep in mind Coleridge's concept of infinite translucence, of which the essential Idea, the literal, the emblematic, the general, the universal, the metaphoric, the synecdochic, the metonymic, the archetypal and mythological and any other aspect of symbolism is part. It is both misleading and restrictive to consider the symbolic aspects of a novel in isolation from their narrative context, or to concentrate on the aesthetics of symbolism and ignore its operation, but by approaching the novelist's art with an understanding of his mode of perception, with an appreciation of some of the ways of looking, we may in fact see a great deal more.

II Chiefly a Refutation

. . . readers and writers might well join together in forming . . . a Society for²⁵
The Protection of Symbols from Critics.

Conrad worked hard at writing his novels and he demands some effort on the part of his reader and critic. Two things must always be kept in mind: everything in his writing has a purpose and nothing should be taken at face value. Everything in Conrad's novels is deliberate and is designed for a particular effect, and every statement is made in the light of a particular point of view which, given changes in the time, place and action, can vary even within the development of one character. Ideally, critical commentary should reflect this approach.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the limitations imposed by much of the critical comment currently available on a novel such as Nostromo. Emphasis on theoretical aesthetics detracts from the powerful reality of the human experience portrayed, symbol-chasing excludes an appreciation of the depth and extension of the total canvas and the following of a concentrated line of argument distorts the multidimensional and immediate quality of the narrative. The fault is not that the critics have nothing useful to say, but that they say it without qualification, without reflection and without an expressed awareness of the relativity, the ambiguity and the complexity of Conrad's work. Many writers of recent articles on Nostromo have also shown a disturbing tendency to extract aspects from the novel and to study them in isolation instead of directing the reader's attention to these same aspects as they exist within the text. Attacking other critics is, in many ways, an unprofitable exercise, but, given the prevalence of these trends at this point in time, I

²⁵ Harry Levin, Symbolism and Fiction (Charlottesville : University of Virginia Press, 1956), p. 13.

consider a firm and illustrated critique is necessary.

In choosing the commentaries discussed here, I have concentrated on articles that have appeared in Conradiana or have been published within the last ten years. My selection, though not rigorous, gives, I think, a fair sample of current critical comment on the symbolic aspects of Nostromo. Some of the critics discussed tend towards an over-theoretical interpretation; others err through restricting their reading to one facet or attempting to impose a series of finite correspondences on an infinite associational field. Some are simply bad critics; others appreciate the way in which the symbolism works but tend to oversimplify. Almost all take insufficient note of the relativity and ambiguity fundamental to the world of Nostromo. They are discussed in ascending order of merit according to their ability to appreciate the complexities of the symbolism in the novel and its close inter-relationship with the literal narrative.

In his study of Conrad's symbolism, Vincent Tartella takes as his cue Conrad's own statement on literary 'symbolism' (see p. 4 above) but his understanding of "symbol" is akin to Harding's "emblem" discussed in Chapter I and his approach can only be described as "symbol-chasing". His commentary consists of a selection of objects and incidents from the novel to which he assigns meanings on the basis of a one-to-one correspondence, relying heavily on a dictionary of symbols to justify these. For instance, his interpretation of the scene where Nostromo encourages Paquita to cut the buttons from his jacket (N, p. 117), reads thus:

Her standing on his foot signifies an unnatural and destructive submission of rational to irrational, of principle to instinct; and her using a knife to sever the buttons from his jacket signifies not simply symbolic castration but the complete loss of identity . . . that is to come, and the yielding up in his own mind the right to the 'good name' that is his special

'treasure'.²⁶

Surely Tartella has been carried away by his personal brand of psychology. While he is quite free to suggest these readings as possibilities—the passage obviously suggests this reading to Tartella—it is an extremely limited interpretation and causes one to lose immediately the dramatic and emotional appeal of the scene. The setting is a fiesta, a kaleidoscope of colour, noise and dust, guitarists and dancers mingling with horsemen and candy-sellers. Nostromo, the hero of the populace, and the source of employment on the wharves, is making a progression through the throngs. His current mistress publicly demands recognition by gift and Nostromo's refusal both humiliates Paquita and makes him appear an ungenerous lover. His flamboyant gesture in lifting her up to cut the silver buttons off his coat suggests a great many things: egotism, pride, compassion, showmanship, remorse, arrogance among them. As much as suggesting symbolic castration it also suggests Nostromo's passion for popularity and his total disregard, at this stage, for the material value of silver. If one looks at the scene as it is in the novel, one can appreciate the festival atmosphere and the emotional tensions, one can link the scene with the rest of the Costaguanan world and one can relate it to one's own experiences, where every reader will strike a different series of chords.

Tartella goes on to comment on the dubious nature of the mine, which he sees as symbolized by its name, "San Tomé". Equally relevant, if one wants to associate Doubting Thomas with the mine, is St. Thomas' subsequent career. He is reputed to have gone as a missionary to India and to have been martyred at Mylapur. Legend also has it that he was given a fortune to build a palace for an Indian king but instead spent the money

²⁶ Vincent P. Tartella, "Symbolism in Four Scenes in Nostromo", Conradiana, IV, 1 (1972), 64-65.

on the poor 'to build a palace in heaven' and is consequently the patron saint of masons and architects, and his symbol is the builders' square. His doubts, therefore, were replaced by an active belief and if the reader knows these further traditions he is also entitled to identify a symbolic association between them and the mine of that name in Nostromo. An association with the apostle is not, however, essential to an appreciation of the symbolic qualities of the mine. Other readers may well have totally different but equally valid associations, and it is irresponsible for any critic to offer his personal response as a definitive interpretation.

Tartella has Charles Gould, on his way to tell Emilia of the elder Gould's death, with "a pilgrim's staff in his hand".²⁷ The object is actually "a thick oaken cudgel" (N, p. 63), which may well suggest a pilgrim's staff to Tartella but may equally well suggest a number of other things, a weapon for example. Continuing his discussion of this scene in Italy, Tartella comments:

The silver mine will be the object of his devotion, and his creed the delusions that there is 'a . . . proper way' to deal with it and that he (arrogant youth) will 'know how' and thus avoid being 'corrupted' as his father had [sic].²⁸

This is a superficial analysis. Gould's devotion to the silver mine is not to the mine alone: it is, initially, to the idea that the mine can be put to a useful purpose, that it can be made to produce wealth and thus finance the development of an ideal society in Costaguana. Tied in with this are Gould's desires to compensate for the untimely death of his father and to prove his father wrong. In fact the means (the wealth

²⁷ Tartella, p. 65.

²⁸ Tartella, p. 65.

produced from the mine) becomes his end and the object of Gould's devotion thus changes as the novel progresses. Tartella also misses the irony. Of course Charles Gould "knows how". He has studied mining engineering in great detail, especially—note—"abandoned workings" (N, p. 61), and does indeed have the technical knowledge. Corruption, however, is a moral state and through no amount of technical knowledge can one avoid corruption.

Emilia is wearing "a white gown signifying the humane ideals she represents",²⁹ but Tartella forgets that Emilia condones all Gould's actions, and is therefore implicated in his guilt; all her humane works are financed by the silver of the mine, and at the end of the novel her hair is streaked with silver.

The parasol which is dropped signifies "ideal good fortune".³⁰ It may do so for Tartella, with his dictionary of symbols, and another reader may find this information an interesting extra dimension to his own response to the parasol, but it is not the only signification possible, and neither is it a particularly enlightening one. The 'dropped parasol is, first and foremost, a detail that gives colour and reality to an emotional scene, a detail that emphasizes Charles' careless action in sweeping Emilia off her feet, a rare glimpse of lack of restraint, of emotional response, in this taciturn character, and it brings the reader back to earth ("a dry and dusty ditch" (N, p. 64), in fact), as much as the necessity for its retrieval sobers Charles Gould. Whatever associations the reader gives to the parasol, they should at least relate to the parasol in the novel rather than

²⁹ Tartella, p. 65.

³⁰ Tartella, p. 66.

to an abstract parasol in a dictionary.

In his comments on the scene in which Decoud is left alone on the Great Isabel, and that in which Hirsch is brutalized by Sotillo, Tartella continues to select out aspects and match them up to a particular image taken from Tartella's own experience. His comments bear little relation to Conrad's writing and his understanding of the symbolic power of the language is limited to one facet only. While the facet he discusses may be interesting, to concentrate on it and it alone is limiting and to imply that this is the only possible interpretation is irresponsible. This is not the way in which Conrad's symbolism works.

Frances Rhome makes a similar sort of error in her essay, "Headgear as Symbol in Conrad's Novels", but from a different angle. Instead of picking out a series of "bits" from a novel, she has noted Conrad's frequent mention of hats and headgear and has looked at specific examples of these. For instance, of Conrad's dramatic conclusions, she notes: "at the crucial moment of cognition, the character is divested of any head covering".³¹ Obviously there are instances where a head covering is dispensed with; the ones that most readily spring to mind are Leggatt who lends his hat to his departing double in The Secret Sharer; Jim standing "with bared head"³² before Doramin; and Razumov, "a bedraggled, soaked man without a hat"³³ (this last being one Rhome does not note). We cannot, however, assume that any of these are moments of cognition. We are, for instance, never sure whether Jim's death is a total and humble realization of guilt or a final, supreme gesture of

³¹ Frances Dodson Rhome, "Headgear as Symbol in Conrad's Novels", Conradiana, II, 3 (1969-70), 181.

³² Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1949), p. 312.

³³ Joseph Conrad, Under Western Eyes (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1957), p. 305.

egotism. Rhome also says: "Bareheaded Nostromo meets Georgio's [sic] fire",³⁴ but I have been unable to locate any reference to Nostromo's lack of headcovering in this final scene.

Rhome's general thesis on clothing, is that, "Symbolically to Conrad, divestment of outer garments represents an exposure of the inner man, and changes in outer clothing reflect a changed attitude".³⁵ While this is a little sweeping and is open to challenge, it does suggest to the reader that the clothing, like everything else in Conrad's writing, is deliberately expressed and can have a meaning beyond the literal. Her specific comments on Nostromo are interesting in that they suggest meanings that can be assigned to the presence or absence of a hat, although these interpretations are limited by the hat or hatless head being considered in isolation from the scene in which it occurs. We know that there are recurring images in Nostromo and when, in reading the novel, we register that these images form a pattern it provides another facet to our appreciation of the whole. The hats in themselves mean nothing; it is the character who is or is not wearing the hat, the time and place and action, what is said and by whom and all other aspects of the total narrative that give the hat its relevance.

Although she concludes that Conrad's use of hats as a symbol does not fall into a neat pattern, in that he uses hat images differently at different stages in his writing career, it is Rhome's approach that is most open to criticism. This is best summed up in her own words:

A search of eleven stories for significant use of a hat motif reveals little mention of hats in the early stories, a gradual

³⁴ Rhome, p. 184.

³⁵ Rhome, p. 181.

increase in realistic use with symbolic suggestion during Conrad's middle period, to a final structuring of the hat within the action itself in the later novels.³⁶

As mentioned before, the value of the hat image is in the immediacy of the effects it creates within a given scene. Leggatt's hat floating freely on the sea is wonderfully dramatic and it becomes symbolic because the immediate effect is so powerful. A hat floating on water might mean anything in itself, e.g. a windy day, a drowned man. Conrad uses this hat to suggest a multitude of states: danger, catastrophe, fear, risk-taking, freedom, success, self-confidence (and possibly other things as well, including the popular psychological interpretations of "identity" and the "inner man"). In Jim's case a bared head can be seen as traditional for executions, whether the accused were guilty or not. With Razumov, a character of the first decade of this century when a well-dressed man would be hatted, the loss of his hat serves to dramatize his bedraggled state. It is difficult, therefore to see the collecting of hat references as serving any useful purpose. Headgear is not symbolic. It only acquires a symbolic quality when considered as an integral part of the scene in which it appears, as a part of the closely interwoven world within the novel. And to consider references to headgear in isolation could totally mislead the reader.

The interpretation offered by Terry Lane Kimble errs by trying to set Conrad's multidimensional world into a two-dimensional frame. His commentary on *Nostromo* is based on the view that the "conflict between man as brute and man as civilized being"³⁷ gives rise to the central action in the novel. He sees this conflict reflected in a grouping of thematic (imagistic)

³⁶ Rhome, p. 182.

³⁷ Terry Lane Kimble, "Conrad's *Nostromo* and the Imagery of Despair", Ph.D. thesis (University of the Pacific, 1974), p. 9.

content around the fundamental polarities of, on the one hand, barbarism and brutality and, on the other, civilization and aspiration. The barbarous aspects are illustrated, Kimble maintains, by images from the natural world: plants, animals, weather, primitive forms of human existence, colours green and black etc. The civilizing aspects are shown by images of domesticated plants and animals, shelter from the elements, manufactured goods, the colour white etc. As with any attempt to impose a formal pattern or structure on Conrad's art, contradictions immediately spring to mind. White, for instance, is worn by Emilia and adorns the leonine head of Giorgio, but it is also the colour of the primevally indifferent snows of Higuerota (N, p. 146) and the gleaming teeth of the barbaric Sotillo (N, p. 291). And at the end of the novel, Linda sees her sister as "this vile thing of white flesh and black deception" (N, p. 450). Black is the colour worn by both Linda and Teresa, both of whom are respected by all other characters in the book. Green and white together can be seen as signs of the "civilizing" influence of the mine: "white ponchos with a green stripe affected as holiday wear by the San Tomé miners. They had also adopted white hats with green cord and braid—articles of good quality which could be obtained in the storehouse of the administration for very little money" (N, p. 91). These are simple examples but will serve to point up the basic error in Kimble's thesis: his assumption that Conrad's world can be defined in terms of polarities, and his apparent obliviousness of the fact that the moral dualism within the novel extends to the very images, of the essential irony and ambivalence inherent in every detail of this novel, and of Conrad's work generally. Kimble sees "patterns of imagery which Conrad organizes according to the fundamental opposition of barbarism and civilization".³⁸ This is not so. Every image contains within itself both barbaric and civilizing aspects, a potentiality for both good

³⁸ Kimble, p. 10.

and evil, and to categorize these images is to distort totally the world of the novel. The images can no more be categorized than can the characters be classed as wholly "good" or wholly "bad".

Kimble discusses in some detail the decay of the Italian palazzo where Gould courts Emilia (N, pp. 61-63) as a symbol of "the futility of man's endeavours".³⁹ Although aware of Conrad's cyclical vision of history, Kimble sees it only as a downward spiral; conscious only of the decay and disregarding the renewal. He fails to note the immutability of the ocean, the gulf, the Campo and the mountains, the unchanging backdrop against which the cyclical social drama is enacted. He also ignores the concept of humanity in eternal flux which was prevalent throughout contemporary literature (e.g. Yeats, Joyce). This concept is illustrated in Nostromo as the human environment moves through chaos to Bento's dictatorship, to chaos, to the relative stability of the federal Ribierist régime, to the Monterist revolution, to the externally promoted, stable and materially progressive separationist republic to the dissatisfaction and Marxist rumblings Change is not necessarily futile; nor does Conrad intend us to think that it is. And although Kimble makes much of the decay of the Italian palazzo, he misses the moral virtue of its occupant which can be seen as a counter-point to the moral decay within the physical splendour of the Casa Gould later in the story.

Kimble goes on to discuss a number of incidents or passages in the novel to illustrate his argument that details can be categorized as "good" or "evil". He stresses his interpretation of the novel as proclaiming "the essential depravity of human nature and the ultimate futility of those tissue-like veneers which civilization offers as saving

³⁹ Kimble, p. 12.

agencies".⁴⁰ Certainly one can sense futility in the novel, but it is by no means a novel about futility—Monygham, for instance, finds something to believe in and thus regains his self-esteem—and neither is the world of Conrad's other novels nor his personal view of life suggestive of ultimate futility.

In his discussion of the means of communication, Kimble identifies the telegraph line, the railway, the shipping service as links between barbarism and civilization.

"Similarly, the lighter loaded with silver and manned by Nostromo and Decoud becomes the communication link with civilization which Nostromo decides to break by swimming ashore and transforming himself from a 'natural' man, honest and faithful (often referred to as Captain Fidanza), to a neobarbarian capable of dishonesty and deceit".⁴¹ This interpretation seems a little dubious, particularly given the factual error, in itself an indication of Kimble's failure to understand Conrad's irony. Nostromo is not, of course, referred to as "Captain Fidanza" until after his "transformation", i.e. after he has ceased to be faithful to his reputation.

Kimble does note the ambiguity inherent in the use of the centaur image in association with Nostromo—"The half of the horse with its half of the rider swung round outside the door" (N, p. 210)—with its combination of the intellectual and the emotional, the civilized and the bestial. This dualism is something Boyle misses when noting the "centaur" image in association with Charles Gould (see below p. 33). Neither critic, however, discusses the fact that both Gould and Nostromo are associated with a centaur image. Kimble also misses a similar use of parallel imagery when discussing Monygham. He describes Monygham, on his way to risk his life

⁴⁰ Kimble, p. 14.

⁴¹ Kimble, p. 20.

by deceiving Sotillo, and thus to expiate in part his early betrayal of his friends, as "birdlike in his feebleness before the barbaric side of his nature, as the bird is often prey to the snake".⁴² Conrad actually describes Monygham as: "hopping amongst the dark bushes like a tall bird with a broken wing" (N, p. 340), and what Kimble fails to note is that on the very next page Conrad's vulture: "hopped away in great, side-long, fluttering jumps" (N, p. 341). Monygham can thus also be seen as an emblem of impending death, which, for Sotillo, he was. And later in the novel there is a third associated "vulture" image as the pale photographer perches on a high stool overlooking Nostromo's deathbed (N, pp. 459-60). It is inextricable cross-associations such as these that give the novel much of its depth and complexity, and a critical discussion that ignores these aspects is of limited value.

Although in his chapter on setting, transportation and communication Kimble discusses the contradictions inherent in some aspects of each and seems aware that each image has the potentiality for both good and evil, he lapses into polarities again when discussing families, relationships and individuals. "Conrad", he says, "tends to present . . . consanguine family members in polarities of barbarism or civilization".⁴³ It is difficult to equate this narrowness of vision, which attempts to impose patterns on Conrad's characters, with other statements that suggest Kimble does appreciate the ambivalence of both the images and the characters within the novel. He sees the silver as "representative of human nature in all its enigmatic ways. . . . He [Conrad] sees man as neither absolutely good nor absolutely evil, but as a composite of these oppositions".⁴⁴ Kimble also states that: "Conrad's

⁴² Kimble, p. 31.

⁴³ Kimble, p. 138.

⁴⁴ Kimble, p. 74.

pervasive irony frequently establishes one point of view only to assert that the opposite- -or neither- -is true; for it is the cyclical or reciprocal quality of man's existence that he wishes to demonstrate by means of setting".⁴⁵ Given these latter comments, one wonders why Kimble wastes so much of the early part of his thesis expounding the view that the setting and characters are presented in polarities.

Kimble's conclusion is that at the end of the novel: "The very heavens themselves seem to negate even the dimmest of hopes for significant improvement; and this profound vision of the human condition Conrad manifests in an imagery of despair".⁴⁶ This is altogether too damning and negative. At the end of the book we are left with Linda Viola vowing eternal love for Gian' Battista against the setting of the gulf "overhung by a white cloud shining like a mass of solid silver" (N, p. 463). While this has suggestions of evil, the image also has suggestions of hope and, given the moral dualism and historical flux portrayed in the rest of the novel, to respond only in terms of the imagery of despair is to restrict an understanding of the totality and the multifaceted nature of the novel.

The next commentator to be discussed here is Harold Davis who, in his article "Shifting Rents in a Thick Fog: Point of View in the Novels of Joseph Conrad", concentrates on: "Conrad's typical pattern of viewing the subject from as many angles as possible".⁴⁷ This includes a consideration of techniques such as selective omniscience and the use of a narrator. In *Nostromo*, Davis considers the point of view is "dominantly external, with the author viewing the story from

⁴⁵ Kimble, p. 93.

⁴⁶ Kimble, p. 172.

⁴⁷ Harold E. Davis, "Shifting Rent in a Thick Fog: Point of View in the Novels of Joseph Conrad", *Conradiana*, II, 2 (1969-70), 27.

a wide variety of distances, from neutral omniscience to dramatic mode".⁴⁸

Instead of a few characters in an environment limited geographically and chronologically, Conrad uses a large cast of characters from all social levels, a whole country, and an entirely different concept of time. But in the huge structure Conrad rarely confuses his distance and focus, and he is able to maintain this distance without a narrator. He does so largely because he avoids extensive internal analysis, depends upon concrete rendering whenever possible, and carefully controls all the currents of the novel from a point outside of them. The point of view is sometimes multiple selective omniscience, but the material is presented scenically, not ruminated upon.⁴⁹

It can be seen, therefore, that the structure and mode of presentation of this novel is extremely complex. In the above quotation Davis is dealing only with the theory of Conrad's overall approach, but this structure includes the use of Mitchell as a rather shortsighted and biased commentator and Decoud who, in his letter to his sister, presents the cynic's view. Conrad also uses other characters within the novel to contrast with and comment on each other and to reflect values, events and attitudes. Point of view, then, is another important aspect when considering the complexities of Conrad's symbolism.

One critic who does seem to appreciate the dynamic quality, the inherent mutability within the world of Nostromo, is Wilfred Dowden. In his book, Joseph Conrad, The Imaged Style, Dowden gives an excellent general comment on Conrad's style emphasizing just this point:

. . . in his best novels, . . . he frequently used what may be called a "controlling" image,

⁴⁸ Davis, p. 31.

⁴⁹ Davis, p. 31.

that is, an image which both controls the plot and theme and reveals psychological aspects of character. It is to be expected, therefore, that one finds recurring images. While recognizing this fact, however, one should not assume that they are used always in the same manner, or that his symbols are constant. Thus darkness does ⁵⁰not always symbolize evil and light good.

His commentary on Nostromo, however, is less perceptive. He sees the silver as an image of "human corruptibility and political instability"⁵¹ but fails to note that the mine is not, in itself, a causal factor. Silver exists, mined or unmined. Obviously when moral corruption and wealth come into contact, the one feeds upon the other, but silver can also partake of the morally good and of the amoral, as in Emilia's good works (which are financed by the silver) and in Nostromo's adornments in the early part of the novel. And, whether one agrees with the philosophies of that government or not, it does fund the one period of stable government that Sulaco has known in recent history. Conrad meticulously illustrates the corruption and oppression created both by the exploitive materialism of the paternalistic oligarchy and the chaotic anarchy of the revolutionary forces. The silver mine itself is not corrupt; it all depends on who controls its wealth and what they do with it; on one's point of view.

Dowden takes Nostromo, whom he identifies closely with the silver, as the hero of the novel, and discusses him in symbolic terms, following through how and where he appears and touching on notable changes such as the alteration in Nostromo's attitude to silver from decoration to material asset. He does not, however, explore any other aspect of

⁵⁰ Wilfred S. Dowden, Joseph Conrad: The Imaged Style (Nashville : Vanderbilt U.P., 1970), p. 9.

⁵¹ Dowden, p. 94.

Nostromo; nor does he relate him to any other aspect of the novel. And, as is typical of critics who follow the "thematic-image" approach to criticism, Dowden forgets the actual and immediate qualities of the narrative. For instance, when making capital out of the scene between Nostromo and Sir John he makes a factual error, placing the campfire "at the silver mine" when it is in fact on a plateau at the top of a pass in the Cordillera. Not only does this sort of thing call into question the credibility of a critic, it also illustrates the limitations of this type of criticism: Dowden has ignored the elevation of the scene, the prospect of the exploiter and the exploited, of the man of trust and the man of expedience (as they appear at this stage of the novel), standing on a watershed surrounded by the beautiful, the powerful, the incorruptible, the immutable mountains.

As well as having an association with the silver in the novel, Nostromo is himself regarded as a material asset, to be lent out at whim. He is an Italian, a compatriot of both the innkeeper Giorgio and his family and of the railway workers who are permitted to drink in the bar reserved for the English engineers. He is a lover, a hero, a leader and (later) a thief. He thrives on social contact and yet Decoud, the one person he befriends (other than his own countrymen), is the indirect agent of his death. He is a sailor who finds his fame, his fortune, his corruption and his collapse on dry land. He is a foreign adventurer, an exploiter and an opportunist as much as any other European in Sulaco, but he has a genius to understand and to be loved by the populace. He refuses to fetch a priest to the dying Teresa and is himself refused absolution by Emilia. He is the saviour of Sulaco, but he is only John the Baptist. And he is and is not many other things beside.

Dowden does qualify his limited interpretation: "This is, to be sure, a microcosmic view of the novel and of

Nostromo",⁵² but still concludes that Nostromo "represents the catastrophe which results from the development of material interests. Nostromo's downfall is the theme of the novel writ small".⁵³ This may well be true, but it is very much a one-sided view and a view that idealizes the pre-capitalist era in Sulaco. Conrad himself was obviously well aware of the deficiencies of the "old days". What about other aspects of Nostromo, such as those suggested above? One should question also whether "material interests" is the only theme in the novel. What about, for instance, isolation, the fanaticism of extreme idealism, or moral ambiguity? If the reader accepts Dowden's comments on Nostromo as complete and definitive he will be myopic indeed.

Ted E. Boyle's comments on Nostromo are, like Dowden's, contained in a lengthy volume of criticism: Symbol and Meaning in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad. Boyle is less concerned with Conrad's aesthetics and concentrates on an analysis of the narrative in order to explore the texture of the writing and the function of the symbols, to examine "Conrad's use of image, symbol and myth", revealing "a pattern so rich and complex that no amount of analysis can ever exhaust its full meaning".⁵⁴ He approaches the symbolism in Conrad's writing as an artistic quality of each work as a whole, rather than a series of individually extractable symbols. He does, however, endeavour to impose an interpretative pattern on the symbolism and in so doing loses much of the relativity and the ambiguity inherent in Conrad's portrayal of an apparent moral stance.

In his commentary on Nostromo, Boyle looks at the novel

⁵² Dowden, p. 102.

⁵³ Dowden, p. 102.

⁵⁴ Ted E. Boyle, Symbol and Meaning in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad (The Hague : Mouton, 1965), p. 15.

from four angles: the mythic tone of the opening frame, Charles Gould as a knight-saviour, Decoud and Monygham as two aspects of nihilism and Nostromo as boatswain. Of the opening frame (i.e. the first chapter) he notes the capricious winds and weird clouds of the gulf and mentions the gringos of Azuera, relating the former to the underworld and the latter to the way in which "all of Sulaco is to some extent corrupted by the treasure of the San Tomé mine".⁵⁵ The underworld associations of the gulf are seen as symbolic of the later desperate journey of Nostromo and Decoud, each of whom is "fated to lose his soul on this dark body of water where man cannot even invoke the name of the devil".⁵⁶

It is necessary when reading Conrad, however, to keep the opposing view constantly in mind. Boyle neglects to touch on the physical aspects of the opening frame as representing the total indifference, the immutability and incorruptibility of nature contrasted with the flux of society and the corruptibility and mortality of mankind. Nor does he mention the fact that it was the utter blackness of the gulf that saved Decoud and Nostromo from certain death at the hands of Sotillo. This dark cloaking of the gulf also gave credence to Monygham's story of the hidden silver, thus distracting Sotillo for long enough to save both the town and the mine from certain destruction, the one by rapacious revolutionaries, the other by capitalist dynamite. Whatever our personal political beliefs, we must be aware that Conrad saw possibilities for good and evil in everything, silver mines included, and that he distrusted revolutions. This latter point is strongly made in his essay "Autocracy and War", written shortly after Nostromo, and we also have the evidence of a letter he wrote to Hugh Walpole on the subject of the Russian revolution of 1917: "What will come out of it? A

⁵⁵ Boyle, p. 157.

⁵⁶ Boyle, p. 157.

very subtle poison or some very rough-tested Elixir of Life? Or neither? . . . And at any rate moral destruction is unavoidable. Meantime I have been asked to join in public ecstasies of joy. I begged to be excused".⁵⁷

We see, then, that Boyle only presents one facet of the gulf when he views it as "a microcosmic hell".⁵⁸ He also misses the point that it is not the treasure of the Azuera that is morally reprehensible; it is man who assigns a material value to the treasure who is at fault. We do not even know that there is treasure on the Azuera; we are only told of the myth of two foreigners who lost their souls in the ill-considered pursuit of easily accessible material wealth.

Boyle's view of Gould as a knight-saviour is equally limited. He sees Gould as an idealist who "establishes himself as a sort of deity",⁵⁹ but who becomes corrupted "by the silver of the San Tomé mine and the political instability of Costaguana".⁶⁰ Gould does, however, bring economic and political stability to Costaguana. It is only his personal acquisition of power and wealth and his political orientation, the fact that despite being a third generation Costaguanero he can be identified as a foreign exploiter, that we object to. Had this same stability been established by a person who could be accepted as local, or had the wealth been distributed rather than directed, perhaps we would not be so condemnatory. We should note too that at the end of the novel the unrest evident among the mine workers who, it is suggested, may shortly revolt against the Gould domination, is also being manipulated by a foreigner.

⁵⁷ Jean-Aubry, II, 194.

⁵⁸ Boyle, p. 156.

⁵⁹ Boyle, p. 158.

⁶⁰ Boyle, p. 159.

Although he makes a great deal of Gould's appearance on horseback and his proximity to images of stone, Boyle makes only passing reference to the breakdown of the relationship between Gould and Emilia. He notes Gould's study but ignores the fact that the books are cased behind glass doors while the firearms are easily accessible. He quotes Gould as riding "like a centaur" (N, p. 52), but ignores any associations with the centaur of mythology. He remarks the association between Don Carlos Gould and the stone horseman, Charles IV, but fails to note the irony that the statue of Charles IV is later removed by Gould's associates as inappropriate. Boyle sees Gould's story in the novel as "an exemplification of Conrad's belief that material progress is incapable of securing the happiness of mankind".⁶¹ Neither, in Conrad's view, are revolution and anarchy capable of securing this happiness.

His sections on Decoud and Monygham, and on Nostromo, demonstrate this same tendency to present only half the story, to pull the warp from the novel without consideration of the weft. In his final section, "Symbolism in Closing Frame", Boyle makes some pertinent comments but again does not seem to grasp the complexities of his subject matter. For instance, he polarizes Linda and Giselle Viola: "One sister represents light and fidelity; the other, darkness and shame".⁶² This statement takes no account of the ambiguity which is inherent in each of these girls as much as in any of the characters, although perhaps not so clearly shown. Taken as a whole, however, Boyle's commentary shows a greater awareness than most of the possibilities for interpretation and of the richness of the symbolic associations in Nostromo.

⁶¹ Boyle, p. 167.

⁶² Boyle, p. 183.

In his essay, "The Form of Part III of Nostromo", G.W. Spence also demonstrates an awareness of the complexities of the novel, relating the symbolism to the thematic content, and to the action narrative, and thus bringing the criticism back into the text. His essay is designed as a reply to Guerard's oft-noted criticism of Nostromo as being at least two hundred pages too long, the "unnecessary" length coming in Part III. Spence's thesis is:

Rather, the Custom House scenes are not balanced by an adequate development of the historical action towards the end of Part III, after the victory of General Barrios' troops. . . . in what should be called Part IV, there is not a sufficient ordering of the theme in economic and political action—so that the conclusion is legitimate that Nostromo is about one hundred pages too short.⁶³

While I tend to agree with Spence here, and have always felt that Nostromo was "chopped off" at the end, it is his comments on the way in which imagination works in the novel that I wish to discuss here: "the role of the imagination in individual and social life".⁶⁴ As I have stated earlier, objects and incidents in the novel have a distinct relativity, their symbolic power depending on time, place and point of view. Spence sees this relativity as closely connected to the imagination that controls the point of view of the character concerned. Thus Monygham is seen to have idealized in his own imagination his concept of his own disgrace: "The emphasis has fallen not on the fact of his subjugation by Father Brown, but on the effect that this fact has on his imagination. He condemns himself, and is haunted by dreadful memories".⁶⁵ For Nostromo "the spiritual value lies in his

⁶³ G.W. Spence, "The Form of Part III of Nostromo", Conradiana, II, 3 (1969-70), 81.

⁶⁴ Spence, p. 82.

⁶⁵ Spence, p. 82.

conception of himself", and the vulture overlooking Nostromo's awakening at the end of his fourteen-hour sleep signifies "a death only in his imagination".⁶⁶ And, because he is passionately devoted to his activity with the mine, "Gould believes the mine is symbolic of justice".⁶⁷

Of the end of the novel, Spence concludes:

The reader is left to his conjectures. He is expected to judge the validity of Corbelen's and Monygham's prophecies on the basis of his own knowledge of the progress of capitalism, and not on the basis of any objective action-sequence in the novel.⁶⁸

Although he does not explore symbolism as such in any detail, Spence relates his commentary closely to the text and his ideas on the effect of the imagination and experience of both character and reader tie in well with the concept of relativity in symbolism. Thus the mine, for example, remains in the literal sense a silver mine, but its symbolic power changes depending on time and action in the narrative, on the experience and imagination of the reader and, when seen through the eyes of a character in the novel, the effect of that character's imagination on his own point of view. Again, nothing in the novel can be taken at face value; we have to consider not only who is saying what, but also the power of the speaker's imagination and the way in which it is influencing the statement.

A further useful insight into the complexities of the symbolic power in Conrad's novels is provided by Donald Yelton

⁶⁶ Spence, p. 82.

⁶⁷ Spence, p. 82.

⁶⁸ Spence, p. 85.

in his major work, Mimesis and Metaphor. Yelton's arguments are difficult to follow because of his overly academic and verbose style, but he sees Conrad's symbolism as basically Coleridgean, akin to the evocative art established by novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth century rather than to the art of the French Symbolists. Within his parade of learned polysyllables, the first few pages of which consist of accusations directed at Conrad for not providing posterity with a formal statement of his aesthetics, Yelton makes some most interesting comments on the breadth and depth of vision which gives Conrad's writing its symbolic quality. For instance, rather than extracting examples of symbolism from the text, he sees Conrad's fiction as "a product of the symbolic imagination, realizing its intrinsically novelistic vision through the medium of presented images, both objective and verbal".⁶⁹ It is therefore the symbolic imagination of the artist, rather than any symbolic power inherent in the words used, that gives Conrad's writing its complexity, its power, its depth and its beauty.

Yelton's concept of Conrad's art as "cinematic" is also one that appeals, and one that Conrad himself, given his comments in a letter to his agent, Eric Pinker, on the "extravagant lines of the imaginative literary art being based fundamentally on scenic motion, like a cinema; with this addition that for certain purposes the artist is a much more subtle and complicated machine than a camera",⁷⁰ would have approved. As Yelton says:

In the graphic, sometimes violent, intensity
of his visualization, in the frequent effect

⁶⁹ Donald C. Yelton, Mimesis and Metaphor: An Inquiry into the Genesis and Scope of Conrad's Symbolic Imagery (The Hague : Mouton, 1967), p. 26.

⁷⁰ Jean-Aubry, II, 302.

as of cinematic montage conveyed by what he [Conrad] called (in a letter to Richard Curle) his 'unconventional grouping and perspective', Conrad's fiction sometimes suggests the cinematic art⁷¹

The symbolism, then, should be approached as reality that is given infinite dimension and scope. It is not a series of correspondences, nor a chain of like images, nor yet an aesthetic theory outside a narrative; it is the artist's rendering of life, with all its angles, perspectives and changing lights, seen in every sort of focus and through every sort of lens.

Providing intelligent critical comment on Nostromo is no easy task. One must be thoroughly familiar with the setting and the action of the novel, with the characters and the main events. One must relate these aspects each to the other, judge who is saying what, and when and why, and continually scan the whole canvas for associational detail.

One must keep in mind aspects of literary tradition, myth and archetype and, above all one must be suspicious of appearances. Every comment and idea must be turned upside down and inside out, all possible interpretations explored in relation to their effect within the novel.

While all commentators, even within the most misleadingly restrictive interpretations, can provide hints for further symbolic association and add new depths and angles to the reader's appreciation of the novel, the most useful commentaries are open-ended. No one can hope to interpret Nostromo fully, to give a definitive analysis of the total work, since every reader comes to the book with a different set of experiences and associations, and a part of the magic of great

⁷¹ Yelton, p. 26.

literature is this very personal and infinite symbolic quality. The best critics, however, do not approach Nostromo with some literary theory or structural pattern into which they try to squeeze the novel; rather they come to the novel and relate what is there to what they know of literature and of the world. They do not dictate what is to be seen; they only suggest ways of looking.

III Some Symbolic Aspects in Nostromo

It is through art as a symbol that communication with a reader takes place, for it thus becomes a touchstone for the reader's creative interpretation of his own spiritual experience.⁷²

An appreciation of Conrad's work requires a consideration of both the literal and the symbolic and of the interdependence between these. As art is communication, and communication is a two-way function, it also requires a high level of intelligent participation from the reader. While critical comment provides useful indications of the complexities in Conrad's writing, critics can only direct attention to aspects within a work and comment on them as they appear in context, as focal points in a total work of art, dependent on both immediate detail and imaginative association.

Looking closely into a novel such as Nostromo, we are, of course, as informed readers, conscious of the historical background of the author and any reflections of this in his work. We know, for instance that Joseph Konrad Korzeniowski was born in Poland in 1857 and reared in political insecurity, that he spent some twenty years in the rich and rough life experiences of a merchant seaman and that, at the time of writing, he had settled in England with his English wife and young family. We know from his letters that he had visited South America (Venezuela) briefly and perhaps used this experience to give verisimilitude to his setting. We also know, from the research of Jocelyn Baines, that when writing Nostromo Conrad relied heavily for names and for topographical detail on George Frederick Masterman's Seven Eventful Years in Paraguay and Edward B. Eastwick's Venezuela.⁷³ We know from the Author's

⁷² Walter F. Wright (ed.), Joseph Conrad on Fiction, Regents Critics Series (Lincoln : University of Nebraska, 1964), pp. xii-xiii.

⁷³ Jocelyn Baines, Conrad: A Collection of Critical Essays, Ed. Marvin Mudrick (New Jersey : Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 86.

Note where the germ of the novel came, the idea that sparked the creation, and we know from Conrad's letters to friends some of the ideas he himself associated with the story. Above all, as Conrad readers, we are strongly conscious of both the reality of the author's own experience and the transmuting power of his imagination.

Nostromo was published in serial form from 29 January to 7 October 1904 and in his letters Conrad makes several references to this book which he later described as "my largest canvas".⁷⁴ In 1903, when still working on the early stages of the novel, he wrote to R.B. Cunningham Graham: "I am placing it in South America, in a Republic I call Costaguana. It is however concerned mostly with Italians".⁷⁵ Although the final shape suggests that Italians are not the dominant subject of the novel, one should keep in mind that the Violas, Nostromo and many of the skilled labourers in Sulaco are Italian and that Gould meets Emilia in Italy.

Writing to Cunningham Graham some eighteen months later, with the completed novel behind him, Conrad provides us with a clearer insight into his method of composition, stressing both the deliberation of the detail and the autonomy of his created characters:

I don't defend Nostromo himself. Fact is he does not take my fancy either. As to his conduct generally and with women in particular, I only wish to say that he is not a Spaniard or S. American. I tried to differentiate him even to the point of mounting him upon a mare, which I believe is not or was not the proper thing to do in Argentina; though in Chile there was never much of that nonsense. But truly N is nothing at all,—a fiction, embodied vanity of the sailor kind,—a romantic mouthpiece of the

⁷⁴ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), Author's Note, p. 8.

⁷⁵ Jean-Aubry, I, 315.

"people" which (I mean "the people") frequently experience the very feelings to which he gives utterance. I do not defend him as a creation.

Costaguana is meant for a S. American state in general; thence the mixture of customs and expressions. C'est voulu. I remembered but little and rejected nothing.⁷⁶

The Author's Note to Nostromo, written thirteen years after the completion of the novel, provides us with further useful information on the sorts of ideas that influenced Conrad's writing. Here Conrad points out contrasts such as those between: "Aristocracy and People, men and women, Latin and Anglo-Saxon, bandit and politician" (N, p. 11) and between Nostromo and Charles Gould: "two racially and socially contrasted men, both captured by the silver of the San Tomé Mine" (N, p. 12). Clearly contrast and comparison are important in Nostromo and no reader should disregard their thematic and symbolic significance. When reading the Author's Note, however, we also should not disregard the possibility that Conrad's own interpretation of his work, and his views on the writer's art, may have undergone changes in the intervening years, as had his writing ability. His Note, for instance, conveys a much more sentimental attitude to his characters, particularly to Antonia and Nostromo, and a much closer identification with their real-life associates than one would imagine from reading the novel. Indeed, Conrad's Prefaces (all of which were written in the latter years of his life and intended for inclusion in the publication of his Complete Works), frequently tend to oversimplify his work. His comments on the Revolutionists in Under Western Eyes (UWE, p. 8), for instance, are not born out by his depiction of, say, Sophia Antonovna in the novel.

⁷⁶ Jean-Aubry, I, 338.

An even later and much quoted comment on Nostromo is contained in a letter written to Ernst Bendz in 1923. In this, silver is given emphasis as the all-pervasive and central idea in the novel, and this interpretation has been favoured by the majority of critics since, often to the extent of ignoring other important ideas such as the contrasts of race and class.

I will take the liberty to point out that Nostromo has never been intended for the hero of the Tale of the Seaboard. Silver is the pivot of the moral and material events, affecting the lives of everybody in the tale. That this was my deliberate purpose there can be no doubt. I struck the first note of my intention in the unusual form which I gave to the title of the First Part, by calling it "The Silver of the Mine", and by telling the story of the enchanted treasure on Azuera, which, strictly speaking, has nothing to do with the rest of the novel. The word "silver" occurs almost at the very beginning of the story proper, and I took care to introduce it in the very last paragraph, which would perhaps have been better without the phrase which contains that key-word.⁷⁷

Conrad's disclaimer of Nostromo as a hero is, in itself, interesting. It is possible that the author was slightly embarrassed by his character, that he loved the epic, passionate side of the man and that it expressed something in Conrad's own nature. Although scenes such as the button-cutting episode (N, p. 117) appear grand-operettish, they work in context and successfully create a large and heroic atmosphere. Again, of course, the time lag between the writing of the novel and the writing of the Author's Note probably resulted in a change of viewpoint. Nostromo, therefore, should not be disregarded as a focal point in the novel.

⁷⁷ Jean-Aubry, II, 296.

Despite the obvious importance of the silver, Conrad would himself be the first to acknowledge that the aspects which he has emphasized in his own expressed views, the Italians, the contrasts of race and class, the predominance of the silver, by no means exhaust the ideas operating in Nostromo. Like the aspects highlighted by critics both good and bad, Conrad's own comments on Nostromo are indications of aspects worth noting, glimpses of the depths of meaning and symbolic suggestiveness the novel contains. Thus the author's life experiences and his letters can provide useful signposts into his works, and ones often ignored by the literary theorists.

We shall turn now to consider in detail three scenes from Nostromo. While not giving a schematic interpretation of the whole novel, I hope to be able to illustrate the multi-dimensional nature and symbolic quality of Conrad's writing, to suggest a more rewarding way of approaching his art than that demonstrated by the critics discussed in the previous chapter.

A good example of the reflections, echoes and inter-weavings that give Nostromo its symbolic power is the discussion between the English railway magnate, Sir John, and his engineer-in-chief concerning aspects of the building of a railway across the mountains and into Sulaco:

'Ah, yes! Gould. What sort of man is he?'

Sir John had heard much of Charles Gould in Sta Marta, and wanted to know more. The engineer-in-chief assured him that the administrator of the San Tomé silver mine had an immense influence over all these Spanish Dons. He had also one of the best houses in Sulaco, and the Gould hospitality was beyond all praise.

'They received me as if they had known me for years', he said. 'The little lady is kindness personified. I stayed with them for

a month. He helped me to organize the surveying parties. His practical ownership of the San Tomé silver mine gives him a special position. He seems to have the ear of every provincial authority apparently, and, as I said, he can wind all the hidalgos of the province round his little finger. If you follow his advice the difficulties will fall away, because he wants the railway. Of course, you must be careful in what you say. He's English, and besides he must be immensely wealthy. The Holroyd house is in with him in that mine, so you may imagine—'

He interrupted himself as, from before one of the little fires burning outside the low wall of the corral, arose the figure of a man wrapped in a poncho up to the neck (N. p. 47).

Close textual analysis reveals many interesting factors. Sir John asks what sort of man Gould is and is answered in terms of what he has. Charles is well-known in Sta Marta, the seat of the Costaguana government, and the scene of infinite corruption and political intrigue, including the endowment of the seemingly iniquitous mining Concession to Gould senior. Gould's influence is as administrator of the silver mine, that is, it is vested in his material power rather than any personal integrity, and his sphere is Spanish Dons, a name suggestive of colonial overlords and exploiters. The Goulds' house and life-style suggest they have given prime importance to their personal comfort despite their high ideals of social reform, and we know the famed hospitality is extended only to a select group of foreign developers and fellow colonists, the cream of the expatriate community. Emilia is "kindness personified", which suggests she lacks a real and independent existence, and she is also "always sorry for homesick people" (N, p. 50). She watches the daily routine of the army of servants in Casa Gould "like the lady of the medieval castle" (N, p. 68) which suggests she has romanticized the whole venture. There is a differentiation between practical and real ownership of the

mine, and the local influence is with Gould who is seen to be the owner rather than with Holroyd who has supplied the capital. This influence, based on a material asset, enables Gould to circumvent all difficulties, and we see him bulldozing local bureaucracy, being granted exemption from the normal restraints of the law and casually confiscating peasant lands. Presumably Gould can justify these actions and prefers not to hear the negative (honest?) view. Negotiators must be careful what they say because, it is implied, Gould is English—and the English are traditionally associated with fair play and social justice.

The figure who rises from beside the fire is, of course, Nostromo who has been hired to escort Sir John safely down the mountain. He is "one of us", as Captain Mitchell says. Certainly he is also a foreign adventurer but his ambitions are to enhance his personal reputation rather than his material wealth. He is also, as we know from Conrad's letter to Cunningham Graham quoted above, representative of the people; his presence here a brilliant contrast to the social indifference of the developers who are dependent on his practical skills in order to reach their destination safely.

The timing and setting of the scene are important. The building of the National Central Railway was contemplated only after Sulaco had begun to be of international economic value, when the mine had produced sufficient financial returns and the cultured dictatorship of Vincente Ribiera and his Blanco party had given a sufficiently stable political base to guarantee a worthwhile investment. But we already know that the Ribiera government is shortly to be ousted in a bloody revolution and we have yet to witness the early stages of the development of the mine. It is obvious that the chronology as such is not important, or rather that this shattered time scheme, creating an effect that is both

temporally and visually cinematic and temporally and politically chaotic, is a deliberate technique on the part of the artist. It is an effect that enables the reader to gain a far deeper appreciation of the state of constant flux and the cyclical nature of human historical existence than would be possible from a simple description of human mutability. It suggests a narration from casual recall and therefore gives an added credibility to the events described and allows for another point-of-view perspective. It hints of time and epic timelessness, of a simultaneity between specific existence and history, eternity and the fabulous. And, as Anthony Price suggests, it deprives the reader of a story line and demands a concentration on the thematic and symbolic rather than the literal:

It is possible, too, that Conrad hoped that the shuffling of time would enable him to avoid the persistent disadvantage of fiction that proceeds straight forwards: the awkward fact that each statement then means no more than it appears to say, on a literal and uncomplicated level, whereas shuffled time can permit different sections of the novel to reflect and intensify each other, by becoming freighted with all sorts of overtones and associations, ultimately gaining something like the intense concentration of poetry [sic].⁷⁸

The setting is at a surveyors' camp high in the mountains separating Sulaco from the rest of Costaguana, the range that has formed a natural barrier between Sulaco and the outside world, a barrier that the railway promises to render ineffective. The mountains are the sentinels here, immense, solid, unchanging and indifferent. Throughout the novel these qualities of the natural landscape are emphasized over and over again until the mountains, together with the waters of the

⁷⁸ Anthony Price, 'Chronological Looping' in Nostromo (Kuala Lumpur : Univ. of Malaya, 1973), p. 15.

Golfo Placido assume a symbolic power suggestive of the immutable and eternal as contrasted with the instability and mortality of man. The attitude of Sir John in these surroundings is therefore seen as sharply ironic: "For all the indifference of a man of affairs to nature, whose hostility can always be overcome by the resources of finance, he could not help being impressed by his surroundings" (N, p. 45).

Of the railway itself, however, it is the chairman who suggests altering the surveyed line "in deference to the prejudices of the Sulaco landowners" (N, p. 47), and the engineer who believes that "the obstinacy of men was the lesser obstacle" (N, p. 47). Both are, in the long run, intent on expediency, and neither questions the moral value of installing a railway; the adventure and the financial return are their major motivations. And, in fact, it is difficult to denigrate totally this development, despite the fact that a locomotive rolls out of sight "under a white trail of steam that seemed to vanish in the breathless, hysterically prolonged scream of warlike triumph" (N, p. 150). Though its establishment means an end to all the fiestas on the plain outside the town, the railway does provide fast and reliable access for all local people and their produce. Though its workers are unfairly exempted from surveillance by the local constabulary, it is a valuable source of employment. During the "three days of Sulaco" it is the railway communications that prevent Montero arriving in town unannounced and the railway that facilitates Nostromo's exit to Cayta. It is therefore instrumental in saving the town, but it can equally well be seen as an agent of destruction. It is a "progressive and patriotic undertaking" (N, p. 40) but it is also "that great Costaguana undertaking which is to put money into the pockets of Englishmen, Frenchmen, Americans, Germans and God knows who else" (N, p. 197). Teresa Viola's headstone was "subscribed for by the engine-drivers and the fitters of the railway workshops, in sign of their respect for the hero of Italian Unity" (N, p. 449) but the engineer-in-chief had "come

to look upon the Albergo d'Italia Una as a dependence of the railway" (N, p. 261). The railway, therefore, like the mountains and the gulf mentioned above, assumes symbolic significance in the novel through its powers of association, but its moral value is ambivalent; it has potential for both good and evil depending on how it is viewed and used, and by whom.

The silver mine I shall discuss shortly, but one can begin to see how specific images and literal meanings reflect out into the surrounding pages, into the novel as a whole, and thus attain symbolic power. Given the readers' personal experience these reflections will go beyond the world of the novel in directions suggested by private and individual association, but always we must return to the literal detail of the text as referrent. The symbolic power is nothing out of context.

The next passage we will consider takes place chronologically some eighteen months after the turning of the first sod for the railway, just prior to the riots marking Montero's military coup and Ribiera's downfall, and 'concerns an exchange between Charles Gould and his wife, Emilia.

'One could close one's eyes to the glare', said Mrs Gould. 'But, my dear Charley, it is impossible for me to close my eyes to our position; to this awful'

She raised her eyes and looked at her husband's face, from which all sign of sympathy or any other feeling had disappeared. 'Why don't you tell me something?' she almost wailed.

'I thought you had understood me perfectly from the first', Charles Gould said, slowly. 'I thought we had said all there was to say a long time ago. There is nothing to say now. There were things to be done. We have done them; we have gone on doing them.

There is no going back now. I don't suppose that, even from the first, there was really any possible way back. And, what's more, we can't even afford to stand still'.

'Ah, if one only knew how far you mean to go', said his wife, inwardly trembling, but in an almost playful tone.

'Any distance, any length, of course', was the answer, in a matter-of-fact tone, which caused Mrs Gould to make another effort to repress a shudder.

She stood up, smiling graciously and her little figure seemed to be diminished still more by the heavy mass of her hair and the long train of her gown.

'But always to success', she said, persuasively.

Charles Gould, enveloping her in the steely blue glance of his attentive eyes, answered without hesitation:

'Oh, there is no alternative'.

He put an immense assurance into his tone. As to the words, this was all that his conscience would allow him to say.

Mrs Gould's smile remained a shade too long upon her lips. She murmured:

'I will leave you: I've a slight headache. The heat, the dust, were indeed—I suppose you are going back to the mine before the morning?'

'At midnight', said Charles Gould. 'We are bringing down the silver tomorrow. Then I shall take three whole days off in town with you'.

'Ah, you are going to meet the escort. I shall be on the balcony at five o'clock to see you pass. Till then, goodbye'. (N, pp. 178-9).

Again an initial close reading of the text throws up some interesting aspects. We notice, for instance, Emilia's

deliberate use of the word "my". She, personally, has come to realize their total dependence on the silver mine, the totality of the power the administration of that mine involves and the social injustices that power represents. She has also realized the barrenness of their marriage, the total lack of communication between herself and Charles. An earlier interview between the husband and wife, not long after their arrival in Costaguana (N, pp. 70-71), stresses the central place an appreciation of each other's physical appearance has in their relationship, and now she once more approaches him with her eyes rather than her thoughts and feelings. We are not surprised, though, to note Charles' lack of feelings. He is, to a large extent, a stereotype of the industrialized Anglo Saxon and, like Gerald Crich in D.H. Lawrence's Women in Love, suffers hypertrophy of will. Emilia has previously asked her husband what he felt and received typical industrialist claptrap in reply: "The best of my feelings are in your keeping, my dear" (N, p. 71). And she does have the feelings he lacks. Her anguish now is to know something of her husband's personal plans, given that Montero has overthrown Ribiera and that Barrios, together with the Sulaco troops, has been despatched to Cayta: they are literally without protection and Charles will not share even his fears with her. Not only is the mine threatened, and Emilia's philanthropic works: their very lives are in danger.

Charles takes her query generally, as a query about their total activity—which it no doubt is in part. As with all of Gould's speeches, the whole tone and emphasis is that of the automaton, the man who has directed his will relentlessly on an object and who now attributes the automatism of his will to the outside world. For Charles, there never was any way back. He uses the pronoun "we", including Emilia in the guilt and the responsibility for the material development, an inclusion which is justified by an earlier conversation. When Charles had stated his objectives and had been emphatic that a man must work to some end "Mrs Gould relented" (N, p. 71). She

may well have had a romantic image of what those objectives and ends were, and even of the mine itself and its operation, the means by which Charles intended to achieve these objectives, but she nevertheless condoned and supported his actions.

Once he had committed himself to the mine and contracted himself to produce return on others' investments, he was morally bound to continue with the project. For a moment Mrs Gould refuses to admit the reality of this, but Charles states, quite matter-of-factly, that he will go any distance to achieve success. The success of the mine, by which he was to achieve so many socially desirable ends, has become an end in itself. Again Mrs Gould relents, and, with her statement about watching for the silver escort, comes into even closer complicity with her materialist husband. It is no wonder that her hair, now a heavy mass on top of her head, is, by the end of the novel, streaked with silver. Before we condemn her completely, however, we must remember that the silver mine is the only thing she now has that she can share with Charles, the one thing they have in common, and that she has turned her association with the mine to the social good. .

Two minor points worth noting are that the balcony from which Emilia watches the silver is the same one from which she, as lady of the house, surveys her own domestic empire funded by the silver, and that the three days to which Charles refers are to be three days of intense rioting. There is also, in the mention of the silver escort that thunders through the town, an echo of a military victory parade, of an epic quality that suggests Charles embodies in some way heroic impulses, a suggestion strengthened by descriptions of the way he rides his horse.

At this stage in the novel we know quite a lot about the two characters involved in this scene. We know that Emilia fell in love with a young mining engineer from a remote South

American state while holidaying in Italy, and agreed to accompany him to his childhood home. We know from comments quoted already that she had a romantic vision of her own involvement in Sulaco and that this has continued into her role as hostess at Casa Gould and doer of good works. She has, however, provided a stable and reflective influence in the expatriate community and, through this calm hospitality, has provided an image of purity that has given meaning to the life of the bitter and supremely cynical old English doctor. She has also been a loyal friend to Antonia and to the Violas, has given a pair of spectacles to the fanatical and atheistic old Giorgio to enable him to read his Bible, and has made an unselfish and public gesture to protect Giorgio's inn from confiscation by the railway developers.

This scene shows her for the first time reacting against total involvement in the material development of the mine. And this same evening she is to keep from her husband the news that Montero is advancing, in order that the load of silver may come down and be shipped away, its proceeds to be used towards a new secessionist republic. Of course this does not work as intended, but the republic is established, backed by Holroyd's missionary monies and enforced by American gunboat diplomacy. Emilia, however, at the end of the novel, comes to hate the very idea of the silver and to understand completely how little real meaning wealth has in the pursuit of personal happiness.

Charles we know first as an English schoolboy and an engineering student, fascinated by derelict mines and determined to prove his father wrong on the feasibility of operating the San Tomé mine. Unexpressive, perhaps even unfeeling, at the outset of the novel, and content with possessions including his wife, he becomes more and more taciturn and fanatically idealistic until at the end he has ceased to communicate as a human being. His whole world is geared to the idea that "The mine had been the cause of an

absurd moral disaster; its workings must be made a moral success" (N, p. 66), but, as mentioned earlier, he confuses means and ends and becomes a fabulously wealthy man of stone. The irony of the above statement is, of course, that he also confuses material success with moral success: the workings of the mine are a material success but, without doubt, a moral disaster. Again, however, Charles cannot be condemned entirely. Having commenced the development of the mine, borrowed funds and employed an army of workers, he realizes he has created a responsibility he cannot discard: "We have brought mankind into it, and we cannot turn our backs upon them to go and begin a new life elsewhere" (N, p. 180). And, no matter how much we may disagree with the politics, we have to admit that Sulaco at the end of the novel is a very much better and happier place than Sulaco at the beginning.

This passage also provides the reader with an opportunity to consider "the various uses a silver mine can be put to" (N, p. 56). Here it is the agent of destruction in a human relationship, and the source of fabulous material wealth. It is the metal worn by peasants as a decoration and as a uniform by the flamboyant Capataz de Cargadores. It is the metal of sacrificial offerings (N, p. 140) as much as it is the metal of profit. It is coveted by both "good" and "bad" bandits (Hernandez and Sotillo), and provides the funds for Holroyd's evangelism. It is endowed, by Emilia early in the time scheme of the novel, with a "justificative conception, as though it were not a mere fact, but something far-reaching and impalpable, like the true expression of an emotion or the emergence of a principle" (N, p. 99). Yet it inspires total corruption in mankind. It can finance a stable government and be the agent of total war. It is associated with culture and civility, as with Emilia's silver tea pot, and with brutality, as in Nostromo's long silver spurs. Immense power can result from its possession, but it can also form a prison: "It was as if the inspiration of their early years had left

her [Emilia's] heart to turn into a wall of silver bricks, erected between her and her husband. He seemed to dwell alone within a circumvallation of precious metal" (N, p. 190). It can stand as the "emblem of a common cause, the symbol of the supreme importance of material interests" (N, p. 219) or, as in Nostromo's case become a deadly disease. It rules the lives of the guilty and the innocent alike. As Frederick Karl says:

The San Tomé mine, then, has manifold possibilities which depend upon the point of view of the person involved; the mine gains new aspects each time it appears. In its psychological and political connotations, the mine suggests at least two sides of Conrad's belief in moral principle; it demonstrates that sustained moral principle can work toward bettering man while also containing, paradoxically, the seeds of its own destruction.⁷⁹

Conrad does not, then, assign a symbolic value to the silver mine, as many critics would have us believe. Rather he questions the symbolic values that can be assigned. In the long run it does not matter who, in the novel has or has not got the silver, everyone assigns a different value to it and the value is relative not only to the point of view involved but also to the time within the novel. The lighter of silver is, for a short time, of supreme value in the saving of a nation, but a few days later is of no value at all and is missed by no one. And in the end the silver is of the clouds: a natural phenomenon impervious to whatever values, symbolic or otherwise, man may assign to it.

There are many other aspects of this marital scene worthy of exploration as being of symbolic significance, for instance the setting, which includes Dona Emilia's sketch of

⁷⁹ Frederick Karl, A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad (New York : Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1960), p. 166.

the San Tomé valley in its natural state, but I should like to turn now to consider one last, short and apparently insignificant passage in order to demonstrate the pervasiveness of Conrad's symbolic power.

On his return from his next voyage, Captain Fidanza found the Violas settled in the light-keeper's cottage. His knowledge of Giorgio's idiosyncracies had not played him false. The Garibaldino had refused to entertain the idea of any companion whatever except his girls. And Captain Mitchell, anxious to please his poor Nostromo, with that felicity of inspiration which only true affection can give, had formally appointed Linda Viola as under-keeper of the Isabel's Light.

'The light is private property', he used to explain. 'It belongs to my company. I've the power to nominate whom I like, and Viola it shall be. It's about the only thing Nostromo—a man worth his weight in gold, mind you—has ever asked me to do for him' (N, p. 434).

We notice here that Nostromo is referred to as "Captain Fidanza", as he is known throughout the final section of the book. The irony is, of course, that it is in this section that he is not faithful and the name is therefore no more appropriate than was "Nostromo", the name the English used for the Italian sailor-adventurer. (Although "Nostromo" is generally assumed to be a corruption of the Italian for "our man", it is also the Italian word for "boatswain".)

Giorgio's idiosyncracies include his fanatical belief in the supremacy of Garibaldi, under whom he once served, hence the descriptive "Garibaldino", and his correlative belief in the suspect nature of all other men, with the exception of Nostromo (Gian' Battista) whom he regards as a son. Captain Mitchell, who for so many years regarded Nostromo as a chattel to be lent out at will, and has now discovered a true affection for the Italian boatswain/schooner

master, not only agrees to appoint Nostromo's old friend as lightkeeper but, in a felicitous mood, appoints Linda Viola as under-keeper. It is generally accepted, of course, that Nostromo will eventually marry Linda, in accordance with Teresa Viola's wishes. This, however, has nothing to do with Nostromo's wish to have the Violas appointed to man the Isabels' light, and provides another ironic example of the pompous but well-meaning Captain Mitchell being unwittingly off-target in his assessments.

This passage is rich in complex irony. The light is private property, but so is the silver it is, ironically, serving to conceal. And it is ironic that Mitchell should refer to Nostromo as "worth his weight in gold" when in fact the boatswain has a deal more than that in silver cached on the island.

Previous notable scenes with Nostromo and the Viola family have been on the day of the riots when Nostromo ensured their safety, and the day of Teresa's death when Nostromo refused to fetch a priest to hear the dying woman's confession. This last fact has bothered Nostromo for two reasons. He feels he has betrayed Teresa as he considers he himself has been betrayed—he never says by whom—and the dying woman exhorted him to look for material riches instead of intangible words. This he has done, inadvertently, by acquiring the silver, and we must realize that Nostromo retained the treasure because there were four ingots missing. He did not trust his own good name sufficiently to clear him of suspicion of theft and thus kept the boatload through fear that four ingots would be missed. He now has the riches Teresa wanted him to have, the riches that are to be the agent of his death and that of old Giorgio. It is ironic also, as a follow-on from this, that Emilia refuses to hear Nostromo's confession when he is on his deathbed.

Both Nostromo and Old Viola are Italians, both came to

Sulaco as opportunists and both demonstrate the ambivalence of character we have come to expect in Conrad. One would think that Giorgio, whose "white leonine head" and kindly hospitality feature frequently with positive associations, would be a character of virtue, but a close analysis of the old restaurateur shows few virtues. The ideal of liberty for which he has fought is never realized: there is, in fact, no indication of what Giorgio understands by liberty. It is a hollow term, bandied about as a justification for the brutality and carnage of a revolution. His love for his wife and family is very much second to his adoration of his long-deceased hero, Garibaldi, and the fanaticism which dictates that he live outside monarchist Italy leads to the early death of his wife who cannot take harsh climates.

Nostromo, too, is flawed, in an obvious sense through his theft of the silver, but the change is shown in many ways. In the early part of the book, when flamboyantly trustworthy, he flaunts both his incorruptible reputation and his powerful position as Capataz. He is arrogant, exciting and a flashy dresser, always wearing a quantity of silver accessories. Following his theft he becomes an isolate, except for his attendance at political meetings, and wears baggy suits made in the back streets of London. Whereas previously he was open and boisterous, now he has become taciturn and secretive, character traits also associated with Charles Gould. His changes of name and status also illustrate his ambivalence and the varying attitudes of other characters towards him. Just as the silver mine can be seen as relative, so can the characters, and Nostromo is a good example of this. There is another and more fundamental point worth considering on Nostromo, however. He is a thief in his own eyes only; only he knows he has access to the silver and only he is aware of its existence. Since no one else knows it is missing, his harsh assessment of himself as a thief is subjective and is associated with his earlier subjective assessment of his own

reputation as incorruptible. And he sacrifices his own happiness, his own chance for love, to a desire for riches, just as Giorgio sacrifices his marital happiness to his political fanaticism and Charles Gould sacrifices his relationship with Emilia, with humanity, for the sake of the silver mine.

This passage also raises the questions of the symbolic qualities of isolation and of light. Sulaco itself is isolated, a microcosmic world that reflects the macrocosmic, and therefore can be seen as a synecdochic symbol. Decoud, like many Conradian characters, finds he cannot exist in isolation, yet Nostromo isolates his closest friends on the Great Isabel in order to protect his secret treasure. And the lighthouse serves to conceal the treasure rather than to enlighten, a symbolic inversion of traditional association that further emphasizes the moral duality of Conrad's world, of our world.

Conrad's prose then is much more complex than is at first apparent. Each word, phrase, sentence has the power to call up associations both from within the world of the novel and from the world of the reader's experience. These symbolic associations are, however, firmly anchored to their referent within the text and cannot be independently extricated. Nor can they be linked with like associations independent of the surrounding text. To appreciate the symbolism in Conrad's Nostromo it is necessary to read the text closely and to exercise the imagination freely over the total canvas. That way, and that way only, will the reader appreciate the complexity, the power, the depth and the beauty that make Conrad's novels symbolic.

Conclusion

To know that you could read me is good news indeed,—for one writes only half the book: the other half is with the reader.⁸⁰

In reading Conrad we must remember that he was a man of action, very much a part of the real world, and that his writings are based on real experience.

In his early childhood, Conrad's family was exiled to Siberia where his mother died. The young boy spent several years closeted with a tubercular father who had been a poet and a political agitator and who, in his last years, spent his well moments translating Shakespeare into Polish. When his father died, Conrad returned to his mother's family in Poland until, at the age of seventeen he travelled to Marseilles to become an apprentice in the merchant marine. Some years and many adventures later, including gun-running for the Carlist cause, he joined the British merchant service, rapidly learning the English language and advancing to the status of master mariner. Much of this sea-faring period was spent on Eastern routes and it was during a short spell in London between voyages that Conrad began writing. Five years later he published his first novel, Almayer's Folly, the manuscript having survived a number of its author's adventures, including a steamer journey up the Congo.

Conrad married in his late thirties and spent the rest of his life living in a series of English country cottages, taking occasional trips to the Continent, usually with his frequently ailing family. His total occupation was writing, recollecting the reality of his own rich experience, refracting it through his artist's vision, and recording it in language powerfully impregnated with both the reality and the vision.

⁸⁰Conrad, quoted in Jean-Aubry, I, 208.

Conrad's father, Apollo Korzeniowski, had some academic training and was himself a poet and writer. One can assume that in those years of exile, when the two lived together in an isolated cottage in Russia, the father discussed literature with his son. Conrad certainly read a number of Shakespeare's plays in this period, probably from his father's translations. Beyond this, however, he appears to have had little formal training in the aesthetics of literature.

Early in his writing life Conrad developed close and supportive friendships with a number of other writers (e.g. Galsworthy, James, H.G. Wells) with whom he discussed the art of the novelist at length, and, during the period of his collaboration with Ford Madox Ford, the two worked with great dedication towards perfecting their artistic technique. Conrad's knowledge of literary theory was, then, strictly empirical: he was a writer who, as he wrote, sought ways to improve his writing skill, ways of making the reader "see".

As much as his subject matter is based on his real experiences as a man of the world, so are the techniques of his art based on his real experience as an artist. When we say, then, that he is a consciously symbolic writer we mean that he sought in his writing to attain, in his own words, "complexity, power, depth and beauty". Any agreement between the theorists' definitions of symbolism or between any aspects of Conrad's technique and defined literary theories is, therefore, more accidental than deliberate, and critics should keep this in mind when tempted to analyze novels such as Nostromo in theoretical terms.

As I hope I have demonstrated, Conrad's symbolism is an integral part of his imaginative use of language. It is a reflection, an association, a resonance, a power of suggestion which defies both definition and definitive explication. While critics have been aware of Conrad as a symbolic writer, they have tended to assume this to be a quality somehow outside his writing. This misconception is due in part to the

current critical tendency to overanalyze, to dismantle literature until it becomes a collection of words without the unifying imaginative power, the vision, the translucence which is the feature of symbolic literature. It is also due in part to the assumption that symbolism in the novelist's art is identical with the symbolic portrayal of an ideal world without reference to reality, the art of the French Symbolist poets. As Hewitt says:

the function of the symbolic structures of Conrad's works is to reinforce the durability of his created world and to direct our attention within it

In short, belief in the greatness of Conrad as a symbolic novelist is now orthodox. There is no longer any pressing need to draw attention to the patterns of his imagery or the symbolic resonances of his scenes. There probably is real need to emphasise how rooted in the literal world are those symbolic and metaphorical effects, to emphasise that they are so potent because they mediate a vision of life which is both complex and intense and, as we have had all too much opportunity to observe since his death, disturbingly prophetic.⁸¹

Nostromo is a novel portraying in symbolic terms the very ambivalence and the relativity of life, and any attempts to interpret it in any systematic or standardized manner is doomed to failure. It is the medium, not the technicalities, that is the message. The detailed texture of human experience, which Conrad is at such pains to convey, is the chief positive value. (It is also, incidentally, the value that in Nostromo the mine and the railroad, and man's involvement with these, tend, precisely, to destroy since they are powered by the will which leads to automatism and abstraction, the will displayed by Gould and, in the latter stages of the novel, by Nostromo.)

⁸¹ Hewitt, pp. xii-xiii.

"Symbolism", for Conrad, as his own comments indicate, is the capturing in full flavour and truthfulness the fleeting moment of experience, the reflection on a literal surface of an eternal translucence. That is why he is concerned with something much "larger" than the Symbolists and that is what he, through his art, wanted the reader to see.

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