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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  
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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.

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## 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<sup>1</sup> each other and all mankind to the visible world.

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup>

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

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

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## 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 it<sub>3</sub> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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

<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup>

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

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<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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

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<sup>6</sup> 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 in<sup>7</sup> 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

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<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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".<sup>10</sup> 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".<sup>11</sup> 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,

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-Aubry, I, 26.

<sup>11</sup> 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].<sup>12</sup>

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

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



impossible to define".<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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."<sup>15</sup>

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"

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<sup>13</sup> Harding, p. 77.

<sup>14</sup> Harding, p. 79.

<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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".<sup>17</sup> 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

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

<sup>17</sup> 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".<sup>18</sup> 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".<sup>19</sup> 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

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<sup>18</sup> Browne, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Browne, p. 12.

mankind in general, to have characteristics true of any possible human society.<sup>20</sup>

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".<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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

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<sup>20</sup> Browne, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Browne, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> 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".<sup>23</sup> 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".<sup>24</sup> And I would suggest that the replacement is a great deal inferior.

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<sup>23</sup> Browne, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

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