

The Politics of *Nostramo*

There is a certain grand simplicity about Joseph Conrad's *Nostramo* (1904). The characters are simple, their personal characteristics few and firmly defined. There are the clear, simple settings – the lighter in the empty gulf, the lighthouse on the island – and there is an emblematic simplicity of action – Ribiera's arrival on the mule, Hirsch's clinging to the anchor. It is partly an epic simplicity, associable with the recurrent epic epithets applied to the characters, and even with the opening *in media res*. But it is a simplicity, too, that free from the confusing accretion of detail claims for the novel a transferability from, or indeed a transcendence of, any particular geographical setting, facilitating the expansion of the 'tale of the seaboard', as it is subtitled, to that vision of the 'modern world in microcosm' registered by so many commentators. Ford Madox Ford called it 'a political parable' (90–1), Eloise Knapp Hay described it as 'a tightly organized political fable' (202). The implications of 'fable' and 'parable' are those that associate with the novel's spareness and simplicity of image and event, with the features that claim the ready transferability of the political themes beyond a limitedly specific South American setting. But there are implications also that what we might have is a confirmation of received ideas, the opposite of any open exploration.

This suggestion of the preconceived fable, of something pre-judged, is borne out by a consideration of the novel's structure. The shifts in chronology and narration are not such as to suggest the events are beyond anybody's comprehension, or that there are a number of different and equally valid interpretations of them; rather the structure helps to confirm the message of the fable. We hear first of the fated treasure seekers – and the theme of corruption by wealth is there as a moral at once. As soon as we move into the action, the first event we are shown is the failure and conclusion of Ribiera's regime. It is shown in defeat before we even see it begin: a defeat, not even an ironically shown inauguration of

the regime. And by further recapitulation and reference in the course of the novel we learn of Guzman Bento's rule preceding Ribiera's, and of Montero's rebellion against Ribiera. Ribiera's is just one regime doomed to collapse, and the first thing we see is the collapse. Irving Howe's argument in *Politics and the Novel* that *Nostromo* verifies Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution depends on a reconstruction of the 'actual' chronology. But it is a chronology deliberately disrupted to destroy any impression that one revolution leads forward to another, that there is any progression. In the novel as we read it, memories from one regime are intermixed with the present and future of others, so that any historic perspective is deliberately erased. The suggestion is that it doesn't matter; that there is no advance, only cyclic repetition.

The static, fable-like quality that the structure creates is supported by the characterization; each individual is used to represent a certain quality that can readily describe his or her role. So it is that Leavis could write in *The Great Tradition* of 'Emilia Gould, standing for personal relations and disinterested human sympathy' (212), 'Captain Mitchell represents the merchant service' (214), 'Fear (personified by the stowaway Hirsch)' (217). This suggests an analysis of the novel near to the terms of medieval allegory, and suggests certain limitations in this political novel's method. If characters are standing for and representing such sure, simple qualities, there can be no real complexity; there can be complexity only in the sense of complication – more characters standing for further qualities. The issue develops into one of what sort of picture of society would we expect from a novelist who is not concerned with individuals, who is using people to represent or personify concepts? He must be dealing less with people in society than with society as illustrated in certain abstracted characteristics. His mode is necessarily that of the fable.

Yet there is a certain sense in which *Nostromo* purports to be – or has been represented as being by critical consensus – a realistic novel. Its ultimate political judgements are taken to be validated by the documentary material of the realistic fiction that it presented. If, however, we argue that the novel is not realistic, that the characters are fable-representational, not realistic in the mode of bourgeois, psychological realism, then the political conclusion of the novel has to be encountered as a theory, a model, that has been presented in

fictional form – and open to discussion as to the validity or persuasiveness of it as a model. The conclusion isn't to be approached as a conclusion drawn from the evidence given. No evidence has been given in the sense of the characters' lives providing documentation; the characters are the counters employed to show Conrad's political model in action. A futuristic utopia or anti-utopia is obviously a fable, a model – even if drawn from projections of documentary data in the present. *Nostramo* is no less a model – even though its toying with the realistic mode implies that it is a meditation on actual experience, the summary of specific histories, specific psychologies. Conrad's reputation as exotic traveller provides an aura for *Nostramo* even before we begin reading: we open the novel with the concept of a much travelled, much experienced seaman thinker. But Conrad barely knew Central and South America. He could draw on the realities of Africa for *Heart of Darkness* – and the memories of those realities compete with his cosmic pessimism for the focus of the tale. With the milieu of *Nostramo* there are no remembered realities, no observed psychologies in such situations: it is pure projection; the cosmic pessimism has nothing competing with it.

What we notice first about the characters in *Nostramo* is their representing something – the quality they 'stand for.' Then we notice their emptiness – the one feature given, there is little else to them. And third we notice the lack of connexion of the characters with each other; they all exist in near-isolation. Features that the characters stand for are wearily reiterated. Mrs. Gould's function is almost to underline moral points about human contact – the tragedy of Charles through his failure to maintain contact with her, the salvation of Monygham by his devotion to her. And the values of the personal relations Mrs. Gould stands for are values of isolation, not social and political relationships but values consciously outside any society. What we have of Mrs. Gould is summarized in the last chapter.

With a measured swish of her long train, flashing jewels and the shimmer of silk, with her delicate head bowed as if under the weight of a mass of fair hair, in which the silver threads were lost, the 'first lady of Sulaco', as Captain Mitchell used to describe her, moved along the lighted corridor, wealthy beyond

great dreams of wealth, considered, loved, respected, honoured, and as solitary as any human being had ever been, perhaps, on this earth. (III.13;555)

Everything is there, of course – and everything is this little: wealth, a lot of hair, a slender neck, walking along the corridors, loneliness. And Mrs. Gould is evoked for the novel by these few images – and the not really pointed, or pointedly used, phrase from Captain Mitchell. In addition there is the silver imagery, brought in everywhere and here not making any point; though at this late stage in the novel the word silver cannot be used without seeming to claim some symbolic underlining. The reference to the most solitary person in the world is both unpersuasive and too merely assertive – assertive in that we do not see Mrs. Gould's loneliness; she reminds us of Gwendolen Harleth or Isabel Archer or Mrs. Transome – the characteristics of them are echoed, Mrs. Transome pacing the corridors through *Felix Holt*, Isabel's light figure dragging behind it a mass of drapery through *The Portrait of a Lady*. But they were shown, their empty lives given an imaginative body. With Mrs. Gould there is only this assertion that she is as solitary as any human being had ever been, with a qualifying 'perhaps'. And except for the flashback to her marriage proposal, and the regeneration of Monygham, there is little else to Mrs. Gould. And because there is so little, the rehabilitation of Monygham fails to convince; not because it is doubtful in principle that he could be so reclaimed but that because there is so little to Mrs. Gould, because we see so little of her, because her character is confined to the feature she 'represents', we are not convinced that she could cause such a change in Monygham. He must be saved by personal concern, and this requires some indication of personal qualities in the person who is to be the concerned one.

For a novel dealing with social and political complexities, Mrs. Gould's inadequacies are even more noticeable. The simplicity of her portrayal allows her to stand for her simple moral positives; but such moral simplicity is inadequate and often irrelevant to the complex world Conrad would seem to be portraying. She is, of course, intended to be isolated, and so is Monygham. What salvation they achieve is outside society. The fact that we see Mrs. Gould in no social relationships that would show her qualities as an

individual, weakens her part in the novel. But more than this, her separation from society needs some social explanation if she is to be a major figure in a novel dealing with modern society and politics. But Mrs. Gould's isolation is not unique. Antonia and Decoud are similarly isolated – as that scene in which they look together from the balcony to the street indicates.

Towards the plaza end of the street the glowing coals in the brazeros of the market women cooking their evening meal gleamed red along the edge of the pavement. A man appeared without a sound in the light of the street lamp, showing the inverted triangle of his bordered poncho, square on his shoulders hanging to a point below his knees. (II.5;185)

Arnold Kettle has argued that the people in the street 'are not merely picturesque (though they are that), they fill out involuntarily the social picture; they give a warmth and significance to the politics that Antonia and Decoud (all too abstractly) have been discussing' (II.74). But the social picture isn't filled out. What the episode illustrates are those faults of social awareness that Conrad sees in Decoud – the uninvolvement, the compartmentalizing, the distance: alienation. It's a fine image, the two on the balcony, of their social and emotional distance from the people. But Conrad omits any exploration of that distance, any explanation of the economic factors that pauperize the people and allow the two upper bourgeoisie on the balcony to live at ease. The elite are shown in their isolation, but the people are not shown at all except as colored extras. Their social consciousness, their sense of their place in the society and their activity in it are not shown, except from the distant viewpoint of the Antonias and Decouds. Similarly Jonah Raskin points out in *The Mythology of Imperialism* how 'no Africans, no Third World men or women, are major characters in *Heart of Darkness*. They are a moving force in history, they are a power, but they are not seen as specific individuals.' (158)

We see a lot of characters who are isolated, which shows clearly enough the alienation this milieu creates. But who are we shown actively involved with people in running the society? Despite the recurrent idea of isolation in Conrad, we do not have here any meaningful portrayal of man's alienation from society. There is no

society shown from which to be alienated. This may be a deliberate portrayal of the fragmentation of modern society, but it results in a failure to create any sense of a society. Hirsch may deliberately be presented as an outsider whom society will not accept – but the effect is lost by showing nothing to connect the insiders. We move, not through an interrelated society in *Nostromo* but from isolated group to group.

The question, then, is whether there can be in any sense an adequate public drama without seeing characters in their relationships with each other. Haven't the simplicities of archetypal and epic transferability, the representative characters of fable and parable, and the personal theme of isolation, severely restricted the possibilities of *Nostromo* as a political novel? *Nostromo*, as Conrad pointed out in a letter to Ernest Bendz, was never intended as the hero of the novel.

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 at the 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 keyword. (Jean-Aubry II;296)

The phrase at the end was certainly making the point – the horizon 'overhung by a big white cloud, shining like a mass of solid silver' (III.13;566). But this seems no worse than many other occasions when Conrad has taken care to introduce it. At the end of part I, *Nostromo* is seen on a silver grey horse, wearing

a grey sombrero with a silver cord and tassels. The bright colours of a Mexican serape twisted on the cantle, the enormous silver buttons on the embroidered leather jacket, the row of tiny silver buttons down the seam of his trousers, the snowy linen, a silk sash with embroidered ends, the silver plates on headstall

and saddle, proclaimed the unapproachable style of the famous Capataz de Cargadores. (I.8;125)

The purpose of the silver imagery here is obvious enough. It is making Nostromo less a persuasive, realistic character than some figure out of *The Faerie Queene*. But the quasi-allegoric manner fits unhappily with the political-naturalist aspects of the novel, and suggests again the illustrative, fable-nature of the design. And the over-insistence on the silver becomes damaging – so obviously ‘making a point’. Ultimately the symbolism undercuts those qualities that the action or characterization or theme might have possessed. Decoud’s suicide, for instance:

A victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the retribution meted out to intellectual audacity, the brilliant Don Martin Decoud, weighted by the bars of San Tome silver, disappeared without a trace, swallowed up in the immense indifference of things. His sleepless, crouching figure was gone from the side of the San Tome silver. (III.10;501)

‘Weighted by the bars of the San Tome silver’ is so determinedly extending the silver metaphorically; but into what it is extended is not clear. In what way was Decoud ‘weighted’ by the silver, except in the simple fact of using it as a weight to drown himself? Did the silver in any way corrupt him – by avarice or envy; was he corrupted by the capitalist mine; or nationalist plans to acquire the mine? There is no reason for the symbol here; either intellectual scepticism (so making him in seeing the absurdity of living choose not to live) or love (involving him in the political struggle because of Antonia) destroyed Decoud; not the silver. The symbol is making an unacceptable point – because the symbol, as Conrad said in that letter, had to be there as ‘affecting the lives of everybody in the tale.’ The redundancy of the symbolic reference in the Decoud episode is not an isolated instance:

Dr. Monygham had grown older, with his head steel-grey and the unchanged expression of his face, living on the inexhaustible treasure of his devotion drawn upon in the secret of his heart like a store of unlawful wealth. (III.11.504)

But the comparison with Nostromo, with whom that paragraph opens, is meaningless. Fidelity and loyalty to Mrs. Gould are here compared implicitly to Nostromo's devotion to his stolen silver; it's an interesting thought, but acts against everything else we are told about Monygham and Mrs. Gould in the novel. A couple of pages later we are told that the doctor's self-respect has returned. If so, how can his devotion be to something like 'unlawful' wealth? This even prevents a contrast with Nostromo – of lawful wealth bringing self-respect, stolen wealth bringing despair. But there is no contrast; both Nostromo's and Monygham's wealth is unlawful. The confusion seems to arise from Conrad's referring to the mine, silver and stolen treasure at every possible opportunity, to relate everyone to the silver, anyhow.

But more than this, the very nature of the silver image would seem such as to be unable to support any complexity of attitude or meaning. Silver is the real hero, says Eloise Knapp Hay, 'because what the silver stands for – material interests – have become the rationale of modern economics and politics. Conrad asks how it happened and what will happen next' (162). The conception of something 'standing for' something, in the simple way that silver is said to stand for material interests, would argue not only a predetermined thesis but a necessarily simple and even crude analysis. And with something like 'the rationale of modern economics and politics', something of that complexity, a blanket symbol like silver could never be adequate.

By choosing a silver mine and by using the silver of the mine as his central image, Conrad has obscured and confused the issue of imperialist capitalism. By established conventional exchange value, silver has become thought of as having an inherent value. A consequence of this in *Nostromo* is the blurring of the issue of capitalism, and imperialism and exploitation – the social-political-economic aspects – into the quite irrelevant theme of avarice or miserliness. But for Conrad, the avarice-miserliness theme is important, and it is present from the very beginning of the novel with the story of the gringos. The same thing occurs in *Our Mutual Friend* where at times Dickens seems to be dealing with exploiting employers, crooked racketeers, and the stock exchange, but where the action revolves around Boffin's becoming a miser. To bring miserliness in is to bring in a separate figure of moral

caricature, very distant from the issue of the exploitive system of human relations that is capitalism. Of course avarice is one motivation of Holroyd, and so might relate him to Nostromo and Sotillo; but the political point about Holroyd is less his avarice than his power as an investor and his consequent power over the people of Costaguana through the economic system of the mine. The treasure of the gringos is comparable to Nostromo's treasure. But the silver that corrupts Nostromo isn't the silver that causes the revolutions and that the people mine. The image is making factitious associations. Nostromo may ultimately be greedy, but individual greed is nothing like the inhumane exploitation that the greed of a capitalist who puts his treasure out to generate more treasure creates. Nostromo does not set up a huge system of labour compounds, depressed wages, inhumane controls on other people in order to get rich. The confusion over the silver is associated with the confusion over 'material interest'. It is not clear what Conrad means – if anything very specific – by the phrase. It is possible that he meant something as simple as Eloise Knapp Hay suggests, something that could be symbolized by the silver; certainly the phrase is associated with economics, business, etc. But the point is less that the phrase can represent anything meaningful about business, capitalism, politics, than that Conrad's characters are not sure what material interest means. Whose interest, what sort of materialism, are left undefined. 'Material interest' is a deliberate mystification. It is a formula that finally becomes deliberately meaningless – a surrender to ignorance, the desire at least to give a name to what is not understood. It becomes a statement of helplessness before inevitable unknown forces, to those who are unable or refuse to see the truth about the situation. To Conrad there isn't any truth anyway. It is all hopeless, all meaningless. 'Material interest' is the despairing catchcry of those who accept the capitalist status quo – because to have to think about it all and to do anything about it is too terrible.

An immense desolation, the dread of her own continued life, descended upon the first lady of Sulaco. With a prophetic vision she saw herself surviving alone the degradation of her young ideal life, of love, of work – all alone in the Treasure House of the World. The profound, blind, suffering expression of a

painful dream settled on her face with its closed eyes. In the indistinct voice of an unlucky sleeper, lying passive in the grip of a merciless nightmare, she stammered out aimlessly the words – ‘Material interest.’ (III.11;522)

The despair in continuing life is very similar to that other high bourgeois’s, Decoud’s. And in the similarity there is the suggestion not of any revelation or understanding, but rather of ‘aimlessly’ mouthing the uncomprehended phrase. She is ‘lying passive’. It is one of the many images of defeat before the political or social facts. It is a discovery only in the very limited sense of Mrs. Gould’s realizing something is wrong – and everyone realises that. Exactly what is wrong she does not discover, does not want to discover – the phrase ‘material interest’ in all its pessimistic and dissociative emptiness is ideal.

Arnold Kettle insists on a different interpretation. ‘This is the climax of Mrs. Gould’s moral discovery in the novel, a discovery from which Conrad never really dissociates himself.’ For Kettle

objectively it is clear that ‘material interest’ stands for imperialism. It is the whole process and consequence of imperialist exploitation, so richly and concretely and humanely illustrated throughout the length of the book, that Mrs. Gould is brought against It is the failure to recognise in its full theoretical and moral significance the process of imperialism that leads to the element of mistiness in *Nostramo*. (II.80)

It may be objectively clear to Kettle that ‘material interest’ stands for imperialism. But that is to see things more clearly than Conrad does; or more clearly than Conrad wants to see things. He does not want Marxist revelations; he prefers cosmic nihilism to that. Kettle implies that Conrad has given the evidence and failed only to draw his conclusions about imperialism or capitalism. But that sort of evidence is never given. *Nostramo* isn’t a realistic novel, it doesn’t consist of rich documentation from which a conclusion can be drawn; it illustrates a conclusion that believes in the transcendence of mere social detail, of the mere circumstances of social living; its cosmic nihilism has no need to be bothered with mere suffering; life *is* suffering.

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This is the belief of the European bourgeois intellectual, who manages to live without suffering. People in the mines never get to be intellectuals to express any different belief. Conrad is not interested in the sort of evidence that would suggest that the world could be changed, that it isn't the cosmos but capitalism that is wrong. It is just this capitalist exploitation that is not shown, that is omitted from the picture. If it were richly and concretely shown the book would be a considerably fuller political novel, and if it were there, then it might be possible to read 'imperialist capitalism' for 'material interest'. Instead, though, we have an omnipresent pessimism, the total scepticism that allows Conrad not to worry about the details, and that vagueness of 'material interest' suits the vagueness of the whole analysis. That the phrase 'material interest' is singular, might suggest that there is only one interest represented (Kettle's imperialism, perhaps). However the phrase is continually used in the plural elsewhere in the novel, suggesting a variety of human interests, though all material, involved in the situation. In the first edition of the novel (London, 1904) Mrs. Gould's despair is slightly differently worded, and the interest becomes interests:

In the indistinct voice of an unlucky sleeper, lying passive in the toils of a merciless nightmare, she stammered out aimlessly the words 'Material interests.' (1904 ed. p.443)

If capitalism and imperialism were being seriously examined we might expect something of the treatment they get in *Heart of Darkness*. But there is nothing in *Nostramo* to compare with the specific observation of capitalism at work in the third world that we find there.

Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.

They were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now – nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in

uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air and nearly as thin. (I;17)

Costaguana, it is possible, is different from this. But we are shown nothing – either good or evil – of this aspect of imperialist capitalism. And the implication is that we don't need to be shown in any detail, because in the political revolutions we see in *Nostromo*, economic and social conditions play no determining part. The specific details of any revolutionary action, the causes of any political movement are significantly absent. The silver, as Conrad pointed out, was there as 'affecting the lives of everybody in the tale'. Very clearly it affects Charles Gould's marriage, and very clearly it affects Nostromo. Nostromo is corrupted – though he was hardly incorruptible but, with no principle other than being a star, getting famous, well open to corruption. But his corruption is different from Gould's.

Any great wealth would have corrupted Nostromo, and it is a corruption due to the Biblical 'love of money is the root of all evil' (the gringo message), not to any political activity. And any obsessive occupation would have corrupted Gould to the extent of separating him from his wife, and this is a corruption due to his personality rather than to his political involvement. There is no necessary relationship between the two corruptions – merely the coincidental one that the great wealth is the product of the obsessive occupation. In that any obsessive occupation could have corrupted, dehumanised, Gould, the association of that corruption with the mine is an accidental association; his 'infidelity' to his wife is no different from Casaubon's drawing apart from Dorothea, in *Middlemarch* – it is simply a man with a central idea to his life withdrawing from human contacts. And that sort of obsessive involvement is not the prerogative of capitalism.

Yet it is suggested by association that the mine has some inherent quality that corrupts Gould. It might be mysterious – the gringo legend – or mundane.

The mine had corrupted his judgment by making him sick of bribing and intriguing merely to have his work left alone from day to day. (III.4;364–5)

The suggestion is that his exhaustion with dealing with the political affairs surrounding the mine, external to the mine, have led to his withdrawing from the world and from his wife. The mine itself, the system of relationships and economics within it, are not susceptible to political interpretation. The mine is 'his work' – something value free, and a moral positive in itself (work) – and Conrad seems to accept Gould's view of 'his work' here. The extent of Conrad's willingness to see the 'work' in political terms, is that 'work' involves doing deals with others who won't work. But work itself he does not see as open to political analysis of its structures, of its nature.

As a personal tragedy the collapse of the Gould's marriage is convincing; but if by the destruction of the marriage and human relationships any criticism is intended to the mine, it is a criticism that totally ignores the details of that mine's capitalist nature; unless we see the nature of the exploitative, alienated relationships Gould is involved in and has institutionalised at the mine, so that we can see how these are carried into his personal life, the charge that the mine has destroyed his marriage is without any substance. It becomes a deflection of concern from the essential to the peripheral and irrelevant – the 'personal' or 'emotional' detached from the pervasive dominant system of relationships Gould is involved in. Once again the connexion between the representative characters and the socio-economic world they live in is not explored. And what might at first have seemed to be a criticism of capitalism, is left as a wholly 'personal' event, confused by the blanket imagery with the political theme but never analytically related to it.

The essence of capitalism is in its system of human social and economic relationships. To say merely that is to indicate the inadequacy of Conrad's conception in *Nostramo*. Yet the gestures towards an analysis of capitalism are taken seriously, perhaps because of the Holroyd parts. Holroyd is suggestively well done. But the success in pointing to the shift in foreign capital coming into Costaguana – the U.S.A. now entering a previously U.K. dominated field – and his association of capital with a 'pure form of Christianity', does not mean that Conrad had in any major way understood or investigated capitalism. This, after all, is only one aspect of the financier's motives and confusions; but the analysis

never extends to the workings of and the social consequences of the capitalist industry. It is in the people's social and economic relationship with each other, with other classes, and with the mine, that the essence of capitalism resides and that reason for political activity might be found. Holroyd's motives are not the results, the consequences of a capitalist mode of production. But the little that we are told about the mine is significantly not clear enough for us to make any decision about it. The mine workers gain a degree of security, but they exist under a sort of military rule – protected by an armed body of serenos, and wearing uniforms. We are not told in what ways this organisation affected political feeling – whether the dehumanised, paramilitary social organisation of the workers led to revolution, or whether the mine workers were 'bought off' by comparatively higher wages than other workers and mystified into a support of the system, like the labor castes in *The Iron Heel*. Conrad resorts to a convenient ambiguity – preferring paradox, ambiguity, artistic, mystic transcendence, to presenting the specific materials for a political indictment.

Leavis (218) makes much of the parallelism in the phrase

'Has not the master of the mine any message to send to Hernandez, the master of the Campo?'

The truth of the comparison struck Charles Gould heavily. (III.3;360)

But what really is the point? Isn't it to suggest that both the workings of the mine and the banditry are alien, lawless, amoral, apolitical? And this conclusion would be borne out by the fact that the paramilitary capitalist mine isn't given the criticism or detailed attention that the political participants are. Gould's belief in the power of the mine as a force for stability seems to have spread through the novel in the same way as Decoud's scepticism and nihilism – the attitudes have gone beyond being positions held only by characters. There is a strong suggestion that as all the politicians are seen as unreliable, ineffective or wicked, something like the militaristic stability of the mine is a good thing. So Captain Mitchell remarks 'A great power, this, for good and evil sir. A great power' (III.10;186). And the same attitude is found in Mrs. Gould's reflections:

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There was something inherent in the necessities of successful action which carried with it the moral degradation of the idea. She saw the San Tome mountain hanging over the Campo, over the whole land, feared, hated, wealthy, more soulless than any tyrant, more pitiless and autocratic than the worst government, ready to crush innumerable lives in the expansion of its greatness. (III.11;521)

The implication is that the mine is worse than any tyrant or Government because it possesses a power superior to and separate from the political. Similarly the concept of the idea that is morally degraded in action carries the implication that the idea was originally apolitical, but became sullied in the practical political environment in which it had to exist, giving bribes to get on with the apolitical 'work.' And this is associable with the implied parallel of the mine and the bandit gang – a parallel that presents them as both outside the political and economic forces of the state, as both somehow transcending the political, social and economic.

But this is not so, of course. The idea of the mine, the structure of the mine, its manner of financing and its mode of operation, employment, is political. The wealth, the physical silver, has value only through social convention. The mine's capitalist structure of employment and investment, the social relationships that it imposes on the people, its position in the total economy, are basic determinants of any political feeling or action in Sulaco. And it is this that Eloise Knapp Hay fails to see when she claims that

In Gould's refusal to commit his mine to any politically responsible line, Conrad evidently means to demonstrate (and does so most credibly) the essential anarchy of capitalist societies in which politics is directed by business interests. (188–9)

But Conrad never shows us any lines that are politically responsible; the way Conrad presents it, all politicians are irresponsible; Gould is not criticized for failing to commit his mine to any of the politicians. Conrad is sympathetic to the ideology that says, politicians are corrupt, I will retain the mine myself. But of course, though Gould may think he is making a choice, with himself outside and above politics, the realities are quite different.

The mine in its organization, financing and structure is very much involved in the political scene, and dependent on and supporting a specific political ideology. The mine is already committed to a political line. Politics are the expression of business interests. Conrad however wants us to believe other than that. He wants us at one level to believe all politicians are corrupt and hopeless, and the good individual transcends them, like simple honest Gulliver towering above the political Lilliputians. At the same time he reaches that conclusion because he has an ideal conception of 'politics' by which 'politics as they are' is judged. It is only because he has residual illusions that he is critical of the political arena – illusions that there are men of independent, abstract morality, whose views are not determined by their economic interest.

Despising politicians, and yet holding an idealised vision of the political, Conrad has only one solution – an advocacy of political withdrawal, expressed in a stream of novels dealing with the political world. Still haunted by the ideal, still fascinated by politics, Conrad continually writes about politics in order to reject them. This doesn't get him very far in understanding what politics are; he doesn't want to be demystified, because in one sense he already knows. And so what we are given in *Nostramo* is less any modern analysis of politics and society than a fable whose moral is to suggest a disgusted withdrawal from political and social life. The only approach to fulfilment in the novel is that offered to Monygham by Mrs. Gould – and she is an 'outsider' from society, cut off from the political and social events (though in that very stance, of course, acting as an influential conservative force: not thinking, not really wanting to know about it, just being sad and withdrawn and hence going along with things as they are, not opposing them or deflecting them). The gringo legend clearly established the pervasive attitude of the corruption of wealth, but of course says nothing about the forces involved in capitalism or nationalism or imperialism. Simplified characters, because of their simplicity, can be treated as instruments of the attitude of disgust. Why, in a supposedly political novel, is there the episode of Sotillo looking for silver? How does this usefully illuminate a political novel of the twentieth-century?

Sotillo blind and deaf to everything, stuck on board his steamer

watching the dragging for silver, which he believed to be sunk at the bottom of the harbour. They say that for the last three days he was out of his mind, raving and foaming with disappointment at getting nothing, flying about the deck, and yelling curses at the boats with the drags, ordering them in, and then suddenly stamping his foot and crying out, 'And yet it is there! I see it! I see it' (III.10;484)

Political complexity, political action, political motives are reduced to the caricature of the miser figure. But if Conrad had dealt with more complex characters, with something other than fable figures, he could not have argued his case. His attitude towards politics is arguable only in the simplified characters and the simplicity of the events and setting he has used.

Christopher Caudwell captured the nature of Conrad's dilemma in *Romance and Realism*,

Conrad is alien to bourgeoisdom as materially manifested, but he is native to no other culture. As a result, in rejecting its more material manifestations – ethics, utilitarianism, and so forth – he is left with the upper parts of its ideology, its notions of honour, courage, and bourgeois chivalry. These are noble enough in their way, but they are limited tools for tackling the complexities and richness of human society. Hence Conrad as he develops becomes very tortuous and analytical and yet, in the last remove, very simple and unsubtle. His characters, as they grow more and more self-determined, become more and more unreal. His world, as it is closed to criticism and the author, strangely loses its colour and romance. The world, as 'a moral end in itself', becomes dematerialised.

We see this in *Nostramo*, the work Conrad valued most highly. The work an author values most highly is rarely his most artistically successful, but is always the most revealing of the author's aim and technique. In *Nostramo* Conrad attempts to create a complete civilisation, a whole town, based economically on the mines, which is self-determined and exists for itself. Yet such a world turns out to be the least colourful and least romantic of all Conrad's worlds. It marks the climax of Conrad's colourlessness. It is just another case of the phenomenon seen

in James, Tennyson, Tolstoi, Swinburne, and Arnold: the deterioration of the bourgeois revolutionary. This is a microcosm of the deterioration of bourgeois culture. In revolting against that culture and its values, the bourgeois strips himself of all values, because he remains still based on its foundations, whose connexion with the superstructure he has not seen.

And so there is that great emptiness at the heart of *Nostromo* remarked upon by commentator after commentator.

In *Nostromo* Conrad allows for no political motivation, for no belief in anything; unless it is a belief based on crudely formed attitudes, a nurturing on bad literature in a Parisian garret, or based on empty idealism, like Avellanos. For Conrad there couldn't be good political literature or valid, effective idealism. As for the other characters, Decoud's motive is love, not politics; Nostromo's personal fame; Gould's, justifying himself to his father, a desire of supra-political stability. Conrad presents their motives as unpolitical or depoliticized – which of course is understandable in a cast of aliens. They might well not understand or be concerned in the political pressures, since they are all aliens or Europhiles. But Conrad does not just leave it at that; the nationalist movements are dismissed as ridiculous or comic operatic or bestially cruel. He can see no other attitudes than those – and avarice – in political action. For him there is no reason for one rather than for another political movement.

Whatever *Nostromo* is, it is not, as Arnold Kettle claimed, a 'political novel in the widest sense, the sense in which Aristotle and Marx used the word politics' (II.72). Conrad in *Nostromo* seems not to be interested in any analysis of political motive or consequence or action. Any sort of socio-economic analysis and motive is absent; instead there is the moral fable, dealing with the corruptibility of man; political action is treated as just one of the many ways to corruption. Conrad expressed his attitude to politics in an essay on Anatole France, written just after *Nostromo* was completed: 'Political institutions, whether contrived by the wisdom of the few or the ignorance of the many, are incapable of securing the happiness of mankind' (33). It is an attitude that *Nostromo* illustrates rather than examines.