

CONRAD'S EXPERIMENT IN NON-ABSOLUTE GOSPEL: *NOSTROMO*

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THIS essay is a study of the philosophical issues in Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*. It is an attempt to demonstrate that in this novel, as in his other work, Conrad was torn between the poles of selflessness and selfishness. It is not an attempt to demonstrate a schematically fixed allegory. The novel is an allegorical experiment. Its theme is imperfectly conceptualized. No doubt Conrad intended an obscurity. But the premise here is that while the content of the novel is not always technically or thematically consistent and clear, it does project a confused philosophy that Conrad held throughout his artistic life.

The essay presents a step-by-step analysis of only some of the structural and thematic methods of the novel and explicates selections from the text as evidence for its conclusions. It defines a philosophical relativism in the novel. The issues and conclusions argued are controversial — if for no other reason than that the essay discusses fiction in terms of philosophical conceptions in an antiphilosophical age. One of the premises of modern art is that abandoning philosophy removes the need for rational meaning and form in art. As a result, "conceptual art" has come to mean anything from a simulated soup can to a simulated 1920s gangland wedding. And to question the morality of altruism or to contrast it with rational self-interest as a morality is to court intellectual shudders. As this essay suggests, however, Joseph Conrad's philosophical dilemma rests upon the dichotomy between these two. It is, at base, a dichotomy between body and mind.

Nostromo is what modern critics say fiction should be: relevant. It pits man, the protagonist, against his environment (that is to say, his existence). Its plot-idea: man

seeking tranquility. The issue of man's happiness is as relevant today as, say, the survival of a rare species of rhino. The essay will have achieved its purpose if it demonstrates these points.

WORLD WITHIN WORLD

Joseph Conrad's most ambitious novel is *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard* (1904). It ponders the struggles of imperialism in South America and the virtues of civilization, posed against those of the natural environment. It creates a detailed, microcosmic civilization, beginning in the first pages with a mythic, visual exhortation of the past, the "genesis" of this experiment in non-absolute gospel. In its first half, it relates the history of Sulaco (a fictional city on the west coast of South America), dealing primarily with the rise of Charles Gould's silver mine. It is a parable of eternal hope through attempted righteousness. The last section deals primarily with the more natural ironic Christ-figure, Nostromo, his rise and fall, death and transfiguration. Conrad's subject, however, is not the spirit of God, but the spirit of reality. Hope and illusion are eternal. The hope for Sulaco's time of peace, portrayed in Gould's story, is disillusioned, to be revived in Nostromo's story, only to be disillusioned again and revived again in the "resurrection" of Nostromo. Thus, as critics have demonstrated, Conrad gives us his view of modern civilization, continually contrasting beauty with symbols of dread, continually portending tragic endings from haunted beginnings.

As opposed to the biblical *Genesis*, which describes creation and tells of man's original sin, his disobedience and fall from serenity, the genesis of *Nostromo* describes how the native people of Sulaco inherit a myth regarding original knowledge of material reality. According to this myth, man cannot overcome his "fall" because it is the nature of the intelligent to have ambition and material desires. Man is doomed de facto by his awareness of reality. This is dramatized in the legend of the Azuera peninsula, situated across the gulf from Sulaco. The poor, "associating by an obscure instinct of consolation the ideas of evil and wealth,

will tell you that [Azuera] is deadly because of its forbidden treasure" (p.4).¹ The legend is about "Americano" sailors hunting treasure and camping on the peninsula with a Sulacon manservant and a mule. After their second night on the deadly spot they are never seen again. The manservant's wife paid for masses, and the beast was without sin, so the servant and the mule were "probably permitted" to die. But the gringos remain "spectral and alive" on Azuera, ghosts whose "souls cannot tear themselves away from their bodies mounting guard over the discovered treasure" (p. 5). They remain "rich and hungry and thirsty . . . heretics."

The legend is an ironic parallel to what Conrad referred to as "the absurd oriental fable from which Christianity starts."² In Conrad's interpretation of existence there is only original knowledge of right and wrong: sin is a relative, non-absolute concept. Thus the myth is treated ironically, pointing up its shortsightedness regarding good and evil. Failure or success in finding the treasure is not the issue. Rather, the issue concerns man's *moral* perceptiveness and, reduced to first principle, man's faculty of volition, his ability to change existence. *Any* contact with material wealth (value) is productive of evil, because man's limited perception prevents him from coming to terms morally with the world of reality. The myth, because of the irony, has a dual concept. It instructs as much about envy as about greed. The Azuera genesis-myth questions man's perceptiveness and volition and his ability to civilize his existence.

The novel demonstrates that in the Sulacon world, paradise as such probably never existed, except as an ideal, an illusion. It may, however, be restored or regained in the mind, by way of sacrifice, renunciation, or resurrection, but only in the memory of those who live after the departed. Immortality, like all other human values, is an earthly concept. In the last part of the novel the creative leader fails, and an idol turned thief dies but is resurrected by an act of sacrifice as a martyr of both good and evil.

On its highest level, the novel is a broad, obscure, and abstract allegory of a microcosmic world, as Robert Penn Warren, in his excellent introduction to the Modern Library

edition of *Nostromo*, defines it: "a little world that comes to us complete — as a microcosm, we may say, of the greater world and its history" (p. xxxv). Conrad's allegorical method was experimental. Starting with a single plot-idea based on a true incident — the theft by a seaman of a lighter of silver during a South American revolution — he combined the visual and metaphorical to create abstract theme and subthemes on several levels, within a concrete narrative.

The conceptual theme, man seeking tranquility, is stated as a keynote in the fourth sentence, where Sulaco is referred to as the "inviolable sanctuary." It is stated again in several variations throughout. Charles Gould, king or saintlike half of the dual hero, states the theme, quoting from the *History of Misrule* by his friend and statesman, Don José Avellanós: "Imperium in imperio" — meaning, in the broadest sense, world within world. On the political level, of course, the phrase supplies the idea of contention for power, or imperialism. But, conforming to the benevolent philosophy of Avellanós and Gould, it would mean the establishment of a nation *sanctuary*. It is the "Inviolable Temple" concept that Conrad defined in his 1905 essay "Autocracy and War," calling for a "true place of refuge" but predicting man would never obtain such a peaceful existence until some long-distant future.³

Conrad's concept of man's imperfect perceptual awareness ties into his theory of art, in which he states his intention of making us *see*.⁴ His method is to objectify reality through artistic invention and selection. His technique, supplying the reader with objective demonstration or "clues" from which to form his own concept or awareness of the event or character being portrayed, served to improve upon man's view of existence, a kind of literary ontology and metaphysics. But as many critics have correctly observed, a complete degree of certainty or perfection is never intended. The obscure and inexplicable is approached with only a measure of objectivity, man being measured in degrees of imperfection against his own ideals and against a mirror of existence. Each character fails to achieve security or reach a goal. Characters are disillusioned or destroyed or, in some cases, create new illusions. The plot dramatizes the failures

of individual men, of politics, government, faith, and dogma, and of cooperation among men. All men are in a state of relative subservience, "world within world," sustained by idealism and hope, doomed to repeated disillusionment.

GOSPEL IN IRONY

The allegory is integrated with the plot through an intricate structure of symbol, imagery, and metaphor. The narrative is punctuated by integrated stories, usually past events told in retrospect, which resemble parables but stress the ironic, as well as the moral. Several parables are ironic commentary on the idea of envy and greed. One of the most significant is the "paradise of snakes" story, which might be called a parable of a devil-inhabited paradise (pp. 116-19). It begins as Charles Gould⁵ listens to the sound of the silver ore in the shoots coming down the mountain from the San Tomé mine. Its growling thunder sounds like a storm to a dweller in a nearby village, but to Charles Gould it seems like a "proclamation" of his "audacious desire." It brings back to his mind the time he and his wife rode with Don P  p   to the mine site and saw the "jungle-growth solitude of the gorge." Don P  p   had turned to the gorge with "mock solemnity" and said, "Behold the very paradise of snakes, senora." The waterfall of the gorge was later dried up when the mine was developed, and the torrent of water was diverted into flumes to the turbines working the ore stamps below. Gould remembers how his wife watched the day-by-day progress of the mine, until the day when "the first spongy lump of silver yielded to the hazards of the world by the dark depths of the Gould Concession." Then Emilia

had laid her unmercenary hands, with an eagerness that made them tremble, upon the first silver ingot turned out still warm from the mould; and by her imaginative estimate of its power she endowed that lump of metal 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 emergency of a principle [p. 118].

As she held the silver, Don P  p   looked over her shoulder with a smile that, making longitudinal folds on his face, caused it to resemble a leathern mask with a benignantly diabolic expression [P. 119].

The corrupt and violent history of the mine, its misuse by one dictator after another, and the earlier Gould's death (p. 67: "It killed him.") all identify it as a place of evil, not paradise. The "growlings" and "thunder" that sound like storms to the villager personify a kind of curse; as in the Azuera myth. On the other hand, Charles Gould idealizes the sound into a proclamation of his real accomplishments. The word *audacious* implies the idea of disobedience. Thus Gould's mining in the jungle is made an ironic parallel with man's first disobedience in the biblical garden of Eden. Since Gould's philosophy is bound up with altruism, his self-endeavor becomes his disobedience. The parable is, in carrying out the novel's relativism, non-absolute in its dualization of earthly good and evil, of the hero in a dichotomous confusion of intelligence and superstition, illusion and reality.

The idealized sketch of the San Tom   done by Emilia before its opening contains the idea of the shared idealism of the Gould marriage, of regeneration and peace. The idea of the mine as an altruistic instrument is also contained in this ideal — Charles Gould's "capitalism" being, not capitalism, but a nearly explicit utilitarianism.⁶ Emilia is metaphorically the madonna of the mine holding the first silver in her "unmercenary hands." Altruism "endows" the metal with a "justificative concept" over and beyond the realm of "mere fact."

The true nature of silver — not good or bad, but neutral, in nature, to be used for good purpose or bad — disturbs false idealism. Conrad does not consider the value of silver in economic terms: that next to gold, silver is the most objective standard of value. (Despite the many interpretations of the novel's symbolism, this concept of silver is never mentioned by critics either.) The evil grows from the

mine's workings are personifications suggesting wrongdoing and a warning to any intruder upon the darkness of the mine. Darkness symbolizes the unknowable in Conrad's scheme of the universe. Silver, symbol of uncertain moral value in reality, is feared as myth or superstition (as in the fear of a devil-monster) or, on the other hand, is idealized into a good, a faith. The difficulty, the novel says, is in seeing reality or material elements *as they are* — neutral — since the power of morality and principle rests in the minds and actions of men.

An episode that follows might be called a "parable of the tax collector and a Robin Hood," a parable of theft. This is a story told in retrospect about Hernandez, a Robin Hood or Joaquin Murieta-type legendary bandit, who forms his band after having been cruelly conscripted into the army. In the episode he makes a fool out of a tax collector who thinks Hernandez will betray his band in return for government amnesty. Hernandez instead sets up an ambush for the troops who attempt to trap his men, causing the troops to flee for their lives. The parable asks the question: Who is the greater thief, the bandit or the government? In a realistic comment, Don P  p   states that a thief is a thief and that it would be well to protect property, particularly the silver, from all thieves, thus portending Nostromo's theft of the silver.

The incident of the boundary bridge is one of several that carry out the idea of sanctuary, of the "inviolable temple." This is the story of the silver moving out of the San Tom   "Eden," moving "into the land of thieves and sanguinary macaques" (pp. 125-26). Don P  p   calls it a "crossing." The convoy of silver is described moving through Sulaco "as if chased by the devil." He assures Mrs. Gould that none will enter the sanctuary that lies past the San Tom   bridge. He is particularly on guard against the "macaques" (or monkeys), as he calls the politicians from the Costaguana capital. In the idealistic view of the Goulds, the mine is a temple of faith in the future. It must not be violated and must be protected from envy and greed, from within and without the province. Despite their precautions, it is repeatedly a source and subject of force and violence.

Religious idealism in the novel is represented in its extreme by Teresa Viola and Father Corbelàn. In 1902 Conrad told Edward Garnett that he had "disliked the Christian religion, its doctrines, ceremonies and festivals," from the time he was fourteen.⁷ In 1914 he wrote that Christianity was distasteful to him. He spoke of its origins in "the absurd oriental fable." And, although he recognized that it can be "improving, softening, compassionate," it also brought "an infinity of anguish to innumerable souls . . . on this earth."⁸

Conrad uses several parables to portray the false ideals of religious dogma. There is a parablelike story about Father Corbelàn, which is parallel to the Cain-Abel story. It is a keystone parable demonstrating that a dichotomy of self and selflessness can lead to betrayal. Father Corbelàn's "fierceness" is described as "all black — threatening" (pp. 208, 218), an image like a raven. He glittered "exceedingly in his vestments" (p. 207), symbolizing his egoism. The parable explains the "whitespot of a scar on bluish shaven cheeks," the scar a result of "his apostolic zeal with a party of unconverted Indians" (p. 214). He rode like a savage himself, suggesting "something unlawful behind his priesthood," as he traveled the outlands and wilderness converting the Indians to the Ribierist cause. The scar, a mark of Cain, symbolized the betrayal of brotherhood. Corbelàn betrayed the Indians in converting them in a "selfish" or egoistic cause, while the unconverted Indians answered in kind with a swift blow to the cheek.

As man's moral certainty is shaken, his self-esteem is weakened and his ability to act rationally is impaired. The extreme of this condition is symbolized in the death of Señor Hirsch, the hide merchant, as he is tortured, suspended as on a cross, in the custom house. Hirsch, a weak man, betrays Nostromo by confessing everything at the first threat of force. Despite his quick confession, he is sacrificed (ironically, like Christ) when Dr. Monygham so angers Sotillo that the revolutionary continues to torture Hirsch to death. Monygham betrays Hirsch, who betrayed Nostromo. This circle of betrayal and self-deception is a complex and ironic Judas-pattern, demonstrating the complex cause-and-

effect moral confusion that arises out of inadequate moral principle. Moneybags betrays Nostromo by saying the silver is not lost but buried, an unconscious betrayal. But clearly Nostromo first betrayed himself by surrendering to temptation. He is tempted by Decoud and his sainted adopted mother, Teresa Viola. Teresa's temptation of Nostromo is a wrathful deathbed testament of evil (pp. 280-85). Ostensibly a zealously Christian woman, as she is dying she perversely seeks to convert Nostromo to evil by undermining his faith and trust in his fellow men and himself. She urges him to steal from his employer. She demands his services for herself. Nostromo refuses to risk his life for Teresa in a futile search for a priest to whom she can confess as she is dying, though he has risked his life for the "material interests" of others. At his refusal of this "supreme test" of her power over him, she taunts him with the idea of stealing the silver. Confident of the virtue of his body, he warns her against tampering with the weaker area, his soul. Considering the symbolic archetypes involved, Teresa's temptation of Nostromo is ironic — the tempting of an ironic Christ-figure (Nostromo, meaning "our lord") by a pained and angry "Mary" or "Magdalene" (her name reminding us of Saint Theresa).

Emilia Gould also plays the role of a temptress Eve, persuaded by Martin Decoud in the role of an intellectual serpent. Decoud approaches her with the idea of shipping a six months' working of silver out of Sulaco, so that it may be used for credit in arming the separatist forces. Emilia perceives that his plan should be a simple practical matter and asks him why he does not approach her husband. Arguing that Charles is too sentimental and idealistic, he asks her to persuade her husband to let the silver "come down" (the phrase symbolizing moral value). She agrees with "an almost imperceptible nod." (Characters in Conrad take their moral falls evasively, failing to understand the self-causations involved.) When Decoud leaves, Mrs. Gould's mind turns to her "fear" of the mine. She sees her husband's interest now as a "fetish." But she evades even this irrational bent of mind by turning to thoughts of the "poor" (p. 246). Hidden beneath her evasion, however, is

the decision to act in deceit. She agrees to give some of the silver to Decoud's "revolutionary" cause. Thus she secretly uses her husband's wealth against his better interest. Subconsciously she hopes to bring her husband back to their previous state of innocent, shared idealism. But she wants his reformation to be of her own design.

To Emilia, spirituality is the only "real" side of life, so her idea of prosperity is on the "the immaterial side" (p. 63). This view of "reality" is summed up in her watercolor sketch of the mine. She depicts it in its temporal Eden-like wilderness state, which afterwards exists only in her imagination and in the painting (p. 231). The flaw in the Goulds' shared idealism is not only their individual evasions but their misunderstanding of each other. Each assumes his or her ideal is seen the same way by the other. Assuming my goal is altruistic, each says, how can what I do be selfish?

Charles Gould's fall from self-esteem progresses as he retreats from spiritual or intangible concerns into the purely material or tangible concerns of the mine. He becomes more "inscrutable," subconsciously drifting into a renunciation of his ambitions. In the last scene in which we are shown his point of view (he is depicted only from his wife's point of view thereafter), he enters his home after a difficult interview with General Montrero. The remnants of the government of the Ribierists is collected in and around his house, a last-ditch sanctuary. He lowers his eyes, as they avoid looking at him. This is in contrast to earlier scenes when he had always been the center of their admiration. He had left Montrero, "passing his hand over his forehead as if to disperse the mists of an oppressive dream" (p. 451). As he passes the members of the Provincial Assembly he is "struck with a strange impotence in the toils of moral degradation He suffered from his fellowship in evil with them too much" (P. 452) Impotence, tied to the idea that Emilia later refers to Charles as the last of the Goulds, implies sexual impotence: he has given her silver to bear (to suffer or hold), but no heir.

Charles Gould is nearly, but only to a degree, a contrast to John Holroyd, the American banker-financier. In bribing governments and buying favors, both use deception instead

of free and open agreement and honest exchange, violating basic premises of capitalism. Holroyd is a "Great Personage," somewhat like Sir Ethelred in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, misusing power for the sake of power and, in this case, using silver in a deluded and ludicrous "Christian" crusade. Holroyd is "manifest destiny" personified, cooperating in the deification of theft by government force. Gould, on the other hand, is not a taker, but a creator. After the irrational "spoilation" of the San Tomé by government (pp. 57-58), Gould develops the mine into the fountainhead of the "Treasure House of the World" — an allegorical symbol outdoing, as a demonstration of an economic-political-philosophical concept, any "dream" of the organizers of the Great Exhibit of 1851 in the Crystal Palace in London (an example that Conrad criticized strongly in his essay "Autocracy and War").⁹

Many of the characters in the novel are in a state of inaction or frustration. Mrs. Gould's good works seem valueless to her in her growing frustration. Dr. Monygham, Teresa Viola, and Martin Decoud all succumb to the gulf of inaction. In their anxieties regarding the future they share a psychological neurotic view. Since nothing in the present seems right or successful, nothing in the future can be better, and will probably be worse. Thus both Monygham and Mrs. Gould anticipate the mine's becoming the cruelest tyrant of all, not because it has any supernatural or mystic power, as the Azuera legend in the minds of the superstitious, but because their minds have turned from reality and focused upon inner frustration and self-hatred. Yet it is not the silver that is, in reality, a tyrant, but the men in government who attempt to loot it by force or those who seek power through government to do the same.

Nostromo's fall upon the virgin sanctuary of the Isabels, his swim (symbolic, as in *Lord Jim*, of an immersion in the "destructive element," that is, reality, after his "fall"), his corruption, death, and resurrection, are allegorical and (ironically) parallel to the Christ story. The final events at the lighthouse conclude the theme of sanctuary, of "world within world." Linda is entrusted with the care of the light. Captain Mitchell calls the island "private property," and

Giorgio Viola is now "king of the Isabels," as Gould has been called "king of Sulaco." Viola is pictured as "heroic . . . all alone on the earth full of men" (p. 594). He will defend the island against all trespassers and thieves. Nostromo, secretly visiting Giselle and his cache of silver, is mistakenly shot by Viola, who calls Nostromo "thief." Old Giorgio fires "the first shot ever fired on the Great Isabel" (p. 617). Another temple, or part of a temple, has been violated; security is lost again, just as revolution has destroyed it on the mainland, the "world within world."

The scene in which Nostromo's memory is evoked in the light of the lighthouse by Linda, standing with her arms upraised (p. 631), is an obscure counterpart to the description, earlier in the novel, of a painting, given to the chapel of the mine by Mrs. Gould:

representing the Resurrection, the gray slab of the tombstone balanced on one corner, a figure soaring upward, long-limbed and livid, in an oval of pallid light, and a helmeted brown legionary smitten down, right across the bituminous foreground. "This picture, my children, *muy linda e maravillosa* . . ." [P. 114]

The evocation of the Spanish *linda*, the feminine form, points to the allegorical scene of Linda, all in black in the lighthouse, her figure itself assuming the attitude of the resurrected Christ, a rising spirit, as she calls the name of Nostromo. But there is another side to this resurrection scene. Nostromo had attended a speech given by a Marxist, "an indigent, sickly, somewhat hunchbacked little photographer, with a white face, and a magnanimous soul dyed crimson by a blood-thirsty hate of all capitalists, oppressors of two hemispheres" (p. 599). The Marxist, comparable to the agitator, Donkin, in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, his "soul dyed crimson by a blood-thirsty hate of all capitalists," is in the room where Nostromo lies dying after being shot by old Giorgio Viola. The Marxist is described as "the weird figure perched by his bedside," as Nostromo only glances at him with "enigmatic and mocking scorn." The image of the Marxist as a bird, perched by the bedside, evokes the idea of a vulture, and Nostromo seems his prey. Symbolic of a captured spirit or soul, the bird-image also

may be seen capturing or resurrecting Nostromo as a martyr in the spirit of hate or evil, as Linda evokes Nostromo's spirit in love or goodness. Either way, immortality is earth-bound.

The meaning of this concluding portion of the novel is as obscure as its plot is apparently overly simple. The obscurity arises partly from the complexity and abstractness of the allegory and symbols and partly because a great deal of the plot rests on two very minor and briefly involved characters, Ramirez (Giselle's suitor, for whom Nostromo is mistaken by Viola in the shooting) and the Marxist. The two are both called "vagabonds," which may indicate that they are part of the chance element in Conrad's scheme of causation. They lack the capacity to carry out climactic meaning, however.

THE DICHOTOMY OF BODY AND MIND

Conrad corrected an early critic who identified Nostromo as the hero of the novel, stating, rather, that silver "is the pivot of the moral and material events, affecting the lives of everybody in the tale."¹⁰ Two central characters carry the action and, as Claire Rosenfield points out, are integrated.¹¹ The two are a duo-hero. Gould's story and Nostromo's story overlap; each has its own "obscure beginning" and "unfathomable denouement."¹² Charles Gould's story represents courage and leadership in an ambitious search for peace and righteousness by controlling "material interests," rather than by obedience to God's commands as in the Old Testament. Nostromo's story shows man closer to nature, moving from a state of moral unconsciousness to an act of disobedience, death, and resurrection. Conrad sees promise as illusion (as the promise in both stories is disillusioned) and sinister foreshadowing in the repetition of error. Error pivots on the symbol of material interests: the inexorable value in reality — silver.

Gould and Nostromo, as duo-hero, depict the established virtues of the nineteenth century (Gould) integrated and fused into the fresh naiveté of the twentieth century (Nostromo). Gould epitomizes the man of intelligence, a man of the mind rather than of the body. The sacred and profane,

tangible and intangible, struggle in the characterization, but it is nevertheless a portrait with the motives and capacity for intelligent action. Gould dismisses myth, ignores religion, and is interested in facts, even those he cannot fully understand, those not completely tangible to him. He inspires confidence but says, "I don't know why I have; but it is a fact" (p. 80). Deluding himself about "what makes everything possible," he makes himself prey to the uses and misuses of his ability, as silver is used and misused. Both his ability and the silver, being intangible values, are illusory to him. He falls victim to his own errors, the errors of Holroyd, of his community, and of his wife. The instrument of his error is the instrument of his achievement — his mind. That fact, which he does not understand, makes whatever is possible, possible.

Nostromo, the contrasting part of the duo-hero, epitomizes a man of physical action of the body, not of the mind. Physically confident, he attempts to ignore intangibles. His limitations and values are integrated with his actions, his cold self-conceit, idealism, and imaginative pleasure in self (p. 461). Nostromo's heroism, his actions and behavior which make him an idol of the poor, is based largely on illusion, since until his "fall" his illusions allow him to act with both integrity and heroism. But when the whole man is put to the test, his ethical ignorance makes him vulnerable to self-betrayal; the illusion collapses, and with it the easy self-confidence. The character of Nostromo is also probably intended to represent the fraternal man of the people, the man of the sea, where purpose, direction, and ethics are unified in the imperative of the voyage. But on the seaboard where Nostromo arrives, like driftwood, by chance, the rights and wrongs are not determined — they are open to debate and dispute. The morality of altruism, which purportedly creates a bond and direction in self-sacrifice and service, sacrifices the individual's volition and self-interest. Nostromo cannot reconcile these conflicts; his "soul" — as he states it — is vulnerable. He says to Teresa, "Leave my soul alone . . . and I shall know how to take care of my body" (p. 284). Both kinds of men, Gould and Nostromo, are divided between body and mind in their conception of

themselves. They lack a fixed principle that will integrate their purpose, creating the whole man. Unlike the gringos of the Azuera legend, whose bodies are locked with their souls in eternal damnation, the Sulacon duo-hero is tormented in life by a separation of body and soul, the damnation of a relativistic existence, a hell on earth.

CONCLUSIONS ON A COVENANT OF EXISTENCE

Conrad did not believe that man could, morally or ethically, conquer either the material or immaterial world. A paraphrase of a biblical metaphor voiced by the engineer of the railroad at Sulaco is no longer physically valid: "We cannot move mountains" (p. 45). The phrase expresses Conrad's idea of causality and volition. The meaning in ethical terms is a revision of the religious meaning, which teaches that "faith can move mountains," meaning, in its extension, that faith can conquer giant evils. The engineer applies it to Gould's ability to influence men, which seems to him easier than tunneling through a mountain. But Conrad, in dramatizing that the problems of the novel rest in the mind of man, demonstrates that influencing or changing man is the more difficult problem. In the causality of existence, it is existence (symbolized in the silver) that triumphs over man, just as in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" it is the ivory of the jungle that triumphs over Kurtz. In each case it is a moral, philosophical collapse. Conrad's conception of man's relationship to existence, in comparative power, is reflected in a view that Mrs. Gould sees on her ride to the mine. She sees wooden ploughs, "small on a boundless expanse . . . as if attacking immunity itself" (p. 96). It is man's moral self-esteem that makes him feel small, Conrad demonstrates. Thus the world of value seems as the physical world did to the first man upon earth — boundless. To modern man it seems a *moral* darkness.

It is a struggle between the evasion of consciousness¹³ and the attempted "maturing of our consciousness"¹⁴ — the first step toward moral responsibility — that Nostromo dramatizes. It is the internal struggle, the "world within world" struggle of man's perceptiveness, a seeming state of

chaos, that makes Conrad's microcosm seem disordered, for he deliberately makes it so. There is no fixed, given morality. If there is a law of causality, it is yet to be revealed to life in Sulaco, for Conrad is predicating a time of universal skepticism. But each character struggles with his own particular devil. Each is an individual, with the multiplicity of virtues and vices, abilities and liabilities, that Conrad recognized as the diversity of life. It is the diversity that no government, no matter its power, can control humanely, as the Sulacon experience demonstrates.

It is man's ability to see in order to make the best choices that is Conrad's first concern. What are the principles, the ideal values? He saw relativism in everything: "Egoism is good, and altruism is good, and fidelity to nature would be best of all."¹⁵ And: "Abnegation and self-forgetfulness are not always right. . . . the balance should be held very even, lest some evil should be done when nothing but good is contemplated. . . ."¹⁶ The choice is between self-interest and self-sacrifice, egoism and altruism, self and the collective. This is where the dichotomy of body and mind originates. It is the dilemma of a relativistic existence. What is the value of an existence in which the highest moral condition is silence or death?

Nostromo was, typically, both a success and a failure for Conrad. There is an important technical problem that he did not solve, the problem of unity. Had he written only *Nostromo's* story, he would have had a very limited work. Placing the individual hero aside, he substituted the symbol of silver. This symbol, however, does not replace the coherence that a hero provides. Even a passive central character with a capacity for some volition provides more strength of organization than an inanimate, abstract symbol. Again, the problem of unity might have been solved with the more interesting character, Charles Gould, but this would have required solving a problem Conrad was unable to resolve. Even so, the novel is Charles Gould's story, because it is Gould who makes the strongest challenge to the central, pivotal element of silver as the symbol of value in reality. *Nostromo* merely reacts, choosing to become a thief, a choice unequal and peripheral to the main issue. Gould's

part as a creator-producer is in the cause; Nostromo's as a reactor is in the result. Yet both are victims. There is a villain that is unchallenged — corrupt government. Gould, although demonstrating his weakness in his subservience to government, is the strongest challenger to existence.

Gould is a materialist disarmed by the morality of antimaterialism. His story is the search for a moral world by means of *creating* the moral world. He is the one who faces the issue of sanctuary, of how man can protect himself morally, and he makes the effort to create a good result. In reality, he succeeds. In the non-absolute state of perpetual dissatisfaction in the novel, however, neither he nor the other characters see his success realistically. There is no objective success, not even relative success, because there is no objective judge. Just as Conrad acknowledges over and over in his writing the perceptual limitations he saw in art, he gives Gould a handicap, has Gould perceive what he falsely believes to be a power superior to his own to guide his actions, to overcome risk and chance. Gould looks for something superior in reality (though he does not specifically define this power) to provide him with faith in himself. The characterization demonstrates the collectivism endemic to the utilitarian. In the last scene he casts his eyes to the ground rather than look at his fellow Costaguanans, feeling a "fellowship in evil with them" (p. 452). Compromising with evil was his greatest error and the key to the failure to achieve his goal. He compares himself to a bandit. Failing to conquer evil, he lowers himself toward evil. His attitude is one of fearing disapproval from others, a higher collective judgment, rather than analyzing his relative failures. Had he realistically sought self-esteem, he might have discovered a more objective principle of self-interest, a necessary condition of reality. Seeking to demonstrate his ideal in a microcosm, a world within world, he failed to understand that first he had to find certainty in the first microcosm — the self. Moral principles that cooperatively serve men must of necessity first serve the moral requirements of individuals. Without self-confidence in moral principle — as Dr. Monygham says (p. 571), "a continuity of principle" — the deck is stacked and there can never be permanent peace and security.

But is honest error sufficient reason to feel degradation? Gould's worst transgression, as Conrad sees it, is his intention to use violence — the destructive power of dynamite — to destroy his own mine rather than allow looters to have it. What is immoral in that decision? Since he had cooperated with corrupt government in the first place, the likelihood of force eventually leading to force was part of his risk. The mine was his property by right. His father was destroyed by the property's being forced upon him. Gould did what no one else had been able to do before: develop and make prosperous something everyone desired but had been unable to achieve. His ability and the silver — both of rare and useful value — produced a state of prosperity. To produce "law, good faith, order and security" as well, he would have had to deal with intangibles and a realm of principles his philosophy denied. Conrad has Gould feel, in unearned moral failure, a degradation for associating with evil that rightly belongs with the evil itself, but not with its single, most virtuous foe.

Gould comes closer than anyone else to achieving an ideal in this novel. On balance, his ability, not the silver, is the highest "ideal value of things, events and people" in *Nostromo*. The novel is a profoundly disturbing experiment because it presents us with "gospel that counsels our very souls"¹⁷ and because of the brilliance with which Conrad solved "the most difficult technical obstacles."¹⁸ But it is not completely satisfying because of its irresolution, which, in this novel, Conrad allowed to overcome his art. Thus the novel is an imperfect conception. Avoiding a choice between altruism and self-interest denies the choice of purposeful moral positions, in art, as in life. A balance between the two brings the very results Conrad found in *Nostromo* "inexorable" and "inexplicable."

Taking a position would risk the true value of self. Conrad was struggling to find the principle that would provide clearer perception in order to see the conceptual value of man in existence. He was on the side of the creator, but he could not give him the principle to win. What of the possibilities of a single combination of the virtues of Gould and Nostromo — the unrealized integrated hero of body and

mind? Perhaps the reason that Conrad felt the novel was "not the thing" he tried for¹⁹ was that he underestimated the value of what is potentially one of his greatest characters. Why silence a creator and resurrect a thief? The enduring tragedy of *Nostromo*, the answer to this enigma, may have been locked in the author's underestimation of the value of Charles Gould's creator: the magnificent mind and ability of Joseph Conrad.

1. All quotations from *Nostromo* come from the Modern Library edition (New York, 1951).

2. Conrad to Richard Curle, July 14, 1923, *The Works of Joseph Conrad, Life and Letters*, ed. G. Jean-Aubry (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1928), 1:332-35.

3. "Autocracy and War," in *Notes on Life and Letters* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page, 1921), p. 107.

4. Preface to "Nigger of the Narcissus," in *A Conrad Argosy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1942), p. 32.

5. Conrad seems to have created or selected many of the names of characters and places in his works from historical, mythological, or religious sources. A few examples of the more important characters from *Nostromo*: *Charles Gould* (Carlos Gould, meaning gold man or good man), *Nostromo* (a contraction of the Spanish words *nuestro*, meaning our, and *amo*, meaning overseer, boss, or Lord — Teresa Viola calls the name *Nostromo* "no proper word"). *Emilia* (industrious), *Holroyd* (holy or royal king).

6. Utilitarianism is based on the idea of benevolence, or a "useful" form of altruism. Laissez faire capitalism separates economics and government and is based on the idea of free trade between individuals. It has never been practiced by a whole society. The idea of individual freedom, it should be noted, is not among those developed in *Nostromo*.

7. Conrad to Edward Garnett, December 22, 1902, in *Letters from Conrad, 1895-1924*, ed. Edward Garnett (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1928), pp. 68-69.

8. Conrad to Edward Garnett, February 23, 1944, in Garnett, pp. 79-80.

9. In Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*, p. 106.

10. Conrad to Ernst Bendz, March 7, 1923, in Jean-Aubry, 2:296.

11. Claire Rosenfield, *Paradise of Snakes, An Archetypal Analysis of Conrad's Political Novels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 44.

12. Conrad to Arthur Symons, August 29, 1908, in Jean-Aubry, 2:84.

13. Conrad to R.B. Cunninghame Graham, January 31, 1898, in Jean-Aubry, 1:225-26.

14. Conrad to H.G. Wells, Monday [1903], in Jean-Aubry, 1:323.

15. Conrad to R. B. Cunninghame Graham, January 31, 1898, in Jean-Aubry, 1:225-26.

16. Conrad to Miss Watson (fiancee of E. L. Sanderson), June 27, 1897, in Jean-Aubry, 1:205.
17. Conrad to John Galsworthy, 1908, in Jean-Aubry, 2:77-78.
18. J. H. Retinger, *Conrad and His Contemporaries* (New York: Roy [1942]), p. 107.
19. Conrad to John Galsworthy, September 1, 1904, in Jean-Aubry, 1:334.