1974

Conrad's "Nostromo" And The Imagery Of Despair

Terry Lane Kimble
University of the Pacific

CONRAD'S NOSTROMO AND THE IMAGERY OF DESPAIR

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Terry L. Kimble

May 1974

CONRAD'S NOSTROMO AND THE IMAGERY OF DESPAIR

Abstract of Dissertation

Terry L. Kimble

Conrad's significance as a major novelist having been well established by the present time, one may justly turn attention to a consideration of whether Nostromo, his masterpiece, deserves the paradoxical ranking critics generally accord it as a flawed and essentially inexplicable work of genius. Nostromo is the focus of the present study, which establishes by extensive analysis that Conrad employs a complex imagistic technique, manifesting thereby not only thematic content but also compositional method. Basic to this technique is the tendency to view a subject in terms of polarities, around which to cluster images bearing thematic meaning. These images assume primary significance when viewed, not in isolation, but from the larger perspective of the novel as an organic unity. Though the sheer bulk of Nostromo and its epic-like scope can easily pull the eye as well as the attention of the reader away from details of imagery to geographic sweep and grandeur, political intrigue, material pursuits, and revolution, significance lies in these details.

Creating a tremendous complexity of imagery through the simple process of dichotomizing human nature into its

barbarizing and civilizing aspects, Conrad presents the microcosmic world of the novel; and significant as other aspects of his art may be, they are nonetheless subordinated to this all-encompassing imagistic technique. The opening chapters of the novel present the central polarities of the human condition. To express the brutal or barbaric side of humanity, the author utilizes images of the natural world--plants and animals, natural forms described in architectural terms, weather of various types, the colors green and black, some condition resembling nakedness or undress, man in a primitive or pre-technological condition of existence, social disorder, and man whose operant principle is barbaric greed. To express that side of mankind which one may call civilizing or aspiring, the author employs images of domesticated plants and animals, man-made architectural forms, shelter (usually man-made) from natural elements, the color white, fabric or cloth of both simple and sophisticated kinds to indicate man's approximation to one polarity or the other, and man whose motivating principle is some kind of idealism, though this idealism may itself involve something of self-interest. Once aware of Conrad's dialectical patterning, the reader can readily determine the central theme of the novel.

Significantly, Conrad chooses social revolution as the vehicle for the idea of alternating states of barbarism and civilization; for within each state lie the seeds of its destruction. He thus reiterates in Nostromo one of his

major themes, that which proclaims the essential depravity of human nature and the ultimate futility of those tissue-like veneers which civilization offers as saving agencies. Only mankind's striving or idealizing prevents the cycle of barbarism and civilization from ending in the total darkness of despair.

Uniting the polarities of human nature in the complex central symbol of a silver mine, Conrad manifests humanity's seemingly progressive but truly cyclical march. Other dualisms figure prominently in the imagery: ones of setting; communication and transportation; and family groupings, either those created by blood or those formed by some interest.

Conrad's command of thematic imagery is perhaps his greatest contribution to the genre of the novel. Nostromo will doubtless remain a difficult work for most readers, a difficulty attributable in large measure to the complexity of its imagery of despair. As should be the case with all critical approaches, the present study seeks to illumine the work, thereby enabling the reader to return to it with greater appreciation and understanding. With Nostromo, the task is a rewarding, though demanding one.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1

CONRAD AS ALCHEMIST: IMAGERY INTO SYMBOL

Among the Victorian novelists Joseph Conrad assuredly ranks as one of the major fashioners of the twentieth-century novel form. Lord Jim, The Nigger of the Narcissus, and the novella Heart of Darkness are the stuff from which the contemporary novel is made. Yet after considerable critical evaluation Conrad's masterpiece, Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard, remains for many readers either a spoiled work or an enigma. Claire Rosenfield, for example, considers the novel a failure because it allegedly falls into two imperfectly integrated stories;[1] and no less a critic than F. R. Leavis, though praising it as one of the great novels of the language, concludes that "the reverberation of Nostromo has something hollow about it" and that "with the colour and life there is a suggestion of a certain emptiness."[2] Robert Penn Warren sums up the perplexity of the novel in his excellent essay on the work by stating:

---

[1]Claire Rosenfield, Paradise of Snakes: An Archetypal Analysis of Conrad's Political Novels (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[2]F. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (New York University Press, 1964), p. 200.

> I have tried to define my reading of Conrad's work in general and of Nostromo in particular. In these matters there is not, and should not be, an ultimate "reading," a final word and orthodoxy of interpretation. In so far as a work is vital, there will continuously be a development, an extrapolation of significance. But at any one moment each of us must take the risk of his sensibility and his logic in making a reading.[3]

Since Conrad's significance as a major novelist has been well established by the present time, one may justly turn his attention to a consideration of whether Nostromo deserves its paradoxical ranking as a flawed and essentially inexplicable work of genius.

The intention of the present study is to focus on Conrad's use of imagery in Nostromo and by extensive analysis to establish that imagery as the primary means by which the author manifests not only his thematic content but also his compositional method. In keeping with the broad humanistic tone of Warren's observations, the approach is not intended as the definitive word on the novel; the discussion of the artistry of Joseph Conrad is instead set forth in apposition rather than in opposition to other studies of imagery in Nostromo. Fundamental to Conrad's method of composition is his tendency to view his subject in terms of polarities, around which he clusters images bearing thematic meaning.

---

[3]Robert Penn Warren, "On Nostromo," in R. W. Stallman (ed.), The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium (Michigan State University Press, 1960), p. 226.

These images, though not of singular importance in isolation, in small clusters, or even in a single passage or chapter, assume primary significance when they are viewed from the larger perspective of the novel as an organic entity, all the parts of which in sum have a larger import than that each may possess individually or in small groupings or arrangements.

But the sheer bulk of Nostromo, with its slow and lengthy description, has undoubtedly been disconcerting to some critics. Albert Guerard, for example, asserts that

> Nostromo is in fact a great but radically defective novel, and its greatest defect is that it is at least two hundred pages too long. This is not a matter of generalized diffuseness. The two hundred or more pages in excess come in the last two hundred and sixty.[4]

He continues: "It is better to state frankly that the third part of Nostromo is for the most part good intelligent popular fiction on a quite different level from the first two parts."[5] In spite of such comments, Guerard yet maintains that Nostromo is unquestionably

---

[4]Albert Guerard, Conrad the Novelist (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 203. For the opposite opinion see Frederick Karl, A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1969), p. 178: "For all its wealth of incident and character, Nostromo is too short for its scope; its insufficiency of ending, which at first may seem like design, is in reality an aesthetic failure."

[5]Ibid., p. 204.

Conrad's greatest artistic achievement.[6] To such objections as Guerard's the present study proposes the more balanced view that Conrad offers in the first two parts of the novel his theme as found in the collective world of society and in the third part as manifested in individual man--that is, in Nostromo.

Besides the bulk, the epic-like scope of this novel in terms of time, place, and action can easily pull the eye as well as the attention of the reader away from its details to the geographic sweep and grandeur, political intrigue, material pursuits, and revolution. But as F. R. Leavis suggests, significance lies in the details:

> What doesn't seem to be a commonplace is the way in which the whole book forms a rich and subtle but highly organized pattern. Every detail, character and incident has its significant bearing on the themes and motives. Its magnificence ... addresses the senses, or the sensuous imagination; the pattern is one of moral significance.[7]

The reader who is lulled by the leisurely-paced

---

6 Ibid., p. 178. In the Author's Note to The Secret Agent, Conrad himself refers to the composition of Nostromo as "an intense creative effort on what I suppose will always remain my largest canvas." Vol. IX of the Collected Works, Memorial Edition (Doubleday, Page and Company, 1925), p. xix. All references to Conrad's works are to this edition.

7 Leavis, op. cit., p. 191. Cf. Stuart Sherman's comment in his introduction to The Secret Agent: "Conrad's power as an artist, Conrad's power as an interpreter of life, constantly depends upon his sense of dual powers in the universe--giant adversaries; the immense, implacable, purposeless power of nature pitted against the immense fortitude of the human heart and will" (Vol. IX, p. xiv).

description of the geography of Conrad's imaginary South American republic of Costaguana in the opening chapter of the novel and then hurled expectantly headlong into the frenetic description of social revolution in Chapter Two is rightfully impressed by the force of Conrad's presentation of civil turmoil. However, close attention to these beginning chapters indicates that the microcosmic world of the entire novel is expressed herein in an even more crystallized and encapsulated form. Chapter One announces the natural world as the backdrop against which all human activity must of necessity unfold. Though himself part of this natural world, man is depicted as a self-conscious being, as an alien, and in his unthinking existence as a brute. Sulaco, the capital of the Occidental Province of Costaguana, lies "in the solemn hush of the deep Golfo Placido as if within an enormous semi-circular and unroofed temple open to the ocean, with its walls of lofty mountains hung with the mourning draperies of cloud."[8] The natural world Conrad presents in the opening paragraph of the novel is described paradoxically in terms of architecture, nominally a product of civilized rather than of natural forces: "unroofed," "temple," and "walls" suggest a man-made form constructed

---

[8]Joseph Conrad, Nostromo, Vol. VIII, p. 3. All subsequent page references are to this edition, footnoted as Nostromo.

to give homage to an abiding power which man must acknowledge. "Mourning," Conrad will later demonstrate, does become Sulaco and Costaguana; and "draperies" is the first indication of another major thread of imagery, that of cloth or fabric in some form, guiding the reader through the labyrinth of human activity in Nostromo.

Further evidence of the power of natural forces occurs in the second paragraph of the opening chapter:

> On one side of this broad curve in the straight seaboard of the Republic of Costaguana, the last spur of the coast range forms an insignificant cape whose name is Punta Mala. From the middle of the gulf the point of the land is not visible at all; but the shoulder of a steep hill at the back can be made out faintly like a shadow on the sky.[9]

Punta Mala (in Spanish, Point of Evil), an ominous shadow, is Scylla to its then-described Charybdis; for on the other side of this curve of land is the peninsula of Azuera, "a wild chaos of sharp rocks and stony levels cut about by vertical ravines."[10] Another shadow is also cast on the gulf to complete the description of the natural world: the shadow of the towering mountain range, or Cordillera, above which "the white head of Higuerota rises majestically upon the blue."[11] As the day passes the zenith, clouds "swathe

---

[9] Nostromo, p. 3.

[10] Nostromo, p. 4.

[11] Nostromo, p. 6.

in sombre tatters"[12] these peaks. Self-conscious man enters the world of nature at his peril. Simple Indians in the area live in superstitious fear of unknown forces; a Negro fisherman and his wife exist in precarious truce with these forces; but men from the outside civilized world are vanquished by nature and their ghosts doomed to haunt the rocks of Azuera in their greed for treasure.

The world of the second chapter is the obverse of that of the first. Conrad introduces in the opening paragraph of this chapter architectural imagery of a man-made variety--a wooden jetty erected by the forces of civilization--to juxtapose with the natural "temple" of Chapter One. Self-conscious man seemingly holds sway in Sulaco:

> The variable airs sporting lightly with the vast semicircle of waters within the head of Azuera could not baffle the steam power of their excellent fleet. Year after year the black hulls of their ships had gone up and down the coast, in and out, past Azuera, past the Isabels, past Punta Mala--disregarding everything but the tyranny of time.[13]

"People declared" that under the care of the civilizing force of the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company, the O.S.N.,

---

[12] Ibid.

[13] Nostromo, p. 9.

"their lives and property were safer on the water than in their own houses on shore."[14]

The world of the self-conscious and civilized man, replete with steamships, railroads, and telegraphs, is harbored both literally and figuratively side by side with the world of ocean, mountains, and clouds. The two worlds interpenetrate. As man exists in the world of Chapter One, so natural forces enter into man's self-conscious experience of his existence. "The political atmosphere of the Republic was generally stormy in these days,"[15] writes Conrad, choosing an adjective describing natural phenomena to express his view of the social milieu; and barbaric man--in dialectical opposition to civilized man--has all but overrun Sulaco:

> We were infested, infested, overrun, sir, here at that time by ladrones and matreros, thieves and murderers from the whole province. On this occasion they had been flocking into Sulaco for a week past. They had scented the end, sir. Fifty per cent of that murdering mob were professional bandits from the campo, sir, but there wasn't one that hadn't heard of Nostromo.[16]

The "occasion" which the speaker, Captain Mitchell of the O.S.N., describes is the day when the forces of barbarism, of man reverting to a Hobbesian state of nature, rise up

---

[14] Nostromo, p. 10.

[15] Nostromo, p. 11.

[16] Nostromo, p. 13.

in social revolution against those of civilization. It is this upheaval, this conflict between man as brute and man as civilized being, that gives rise to the central action of Nostromo: the attempt by civilized representatives of mankind to save what they equate with progress and advancement--the silver ingots of the Gould Mining Concession--from the onslaught of representatives of barbarism.

Thus, the first two chapters of Nostromo establish the fundamental polarities of the human condition around which Conrad orders the thematic content. To express the brutal and barbaric side of humanity the author utilizes images from the natural world: plants and animals, natural forms of architecture (that is, he describes nature in architectural terms), weather of various types, the colors green and black, some condition resembling nakedness or undress, man in a primitive or pre-technological condition of existence, social disorder, and man whose operant principle is barbaric greed. To express that side of mankind which one may call civilizing or aspiring the author employs images such as domesticated plants and animals, man-made architectural forms, shelter (usually man-made architecture) from natural elements, the color white, fabric or cloth of both simple and sophisticated kinds to indicate man's approximation to one polarity or the other, man in a condition of technological development, social order, and man whose motivating

principle is some kind of idealism, though this idealism may itself involve something of self-interest. Chapters One and Two contain to some degree all of these patterns of imagery which Conrad organizes according to the fundamental opposition of barbarism and civilization.

Conrad, for example, consistently opposes the two forms of architecture in order to suggest man's existential polarities and their mutual failure to inform his life with meaning. In Part I, Chapter 4, Giorgio Viola, the old Italian expatriate who has befriended Nostromo, sits in front of his hotel:

> There were three doors in the front of the house, and each afternoon the Garibaldino would be seen at one or another of them with his big bush of white hair, his arms folded, his legs crossed, leaning back his leonine head against the lintel, and looking up the wooded slopes of the foothills at the snowy dome of Higuerota. The front of his house threw off a black long rectangle of shade, broadening slowly over the soft ox-cart track. Through the gaps, chopped out in the oleander hedges, the harbour branch railway, laid out temporarily on the level of the plain, curved away its shining parallel ribbons on a belt of scorched and withered grass within sixty yeards of the end of the house.[17]

Two broad categories of description are established here. The first involves images of civilized architecture: "doors," "house," "lintel." The second includes natural forms: "wooded slopes," "foothills," "snowy dome of Higuerota." The physical environment must give way before

---

[17] Nostromo, pp. 25-26.

the onslaught of civilizing forces (house, train, even the ox-cart track); and the primitive road itself is contrasted with the more progressive and promising "shining parallel ribbons." Plants bent to man's use ("oleander hedges") must give way to further progress; "ribbons" and "belt" suggest fabric or cloth; and a sort of nineteenth-century idealization called progress appears inevitable.

Describing the province of Sulaco in Chapter Five, Conrad writes:

> It had been lying for ages ensconced behind its natural barriers, repelling modern enterprise by the precipices of its mountain range, by its shallow harbour opening into the everlasting calms of a gulf full of clouds, by the benighted state of mind of the owners of its fertile territory--all these aristocratic old Spanish families . . . .[18]

Here men are associated by imagery of darkness ("benighted") with nature in a primitive state. These long-existent natural barriers--both human and topographical--are soon to be overcome by modern civilized man. The aristocrats find their interests to lie with progress and so align themselves; and the mining company and railroad prove nature to be conquerable. Conrad says of a railroad survey party:

> In the silence of the sleeping camp upon the moonlit plateau forming the top of the pass like the floor of a vast arena surrounded by the basalt

---

[18] Nostromo, p. 37.

> walls of precipices, two strolling figures in thick ulsters stood still . . . . All was still, till near by, behind a wall of a corral for the camp animals, built roughly of loose stones in the form of a circle, a pack mule stamped his forefoot and blew heavily twice.[19]

Here Conrad opposes two architectures: the natural "arena" and the man-made corral, both suggesting that the human condition is one of entrapment and feebleness.

Frequently, however, the author employs civilized architectural forms in the state of decay, returning to nature, to suggest the futility of man's endeavors. Such things as crumbling walls and ruined convents are to be discovered in Europe, significantly enough, as well as in Costaguana. Charles Gould, having learned of his father's death and of his inheritance of the silver mine, sets off to visit Emilia, whom he will ask to marry him. The setting is Italy:

> He had walked straight out of town with the news, straight out before him in the noonday sun on the white road, and his feet had brought him face to face with her in the hall of the ruined palazzo, a room magnificent and naked, with here and there a long strip of damask, black with damp and age, hanging down on a bare panel of wall. It was furnished with exactly one gilt armchair, with a broken back, and an octagon columnar stand bearing a heavy marble vase ornamented with sculptured masks and garlands of flowers, and cracked from top to bottom. Charles Gould was dusty with the white dust of the road lying on his boots, on his shoulders, on his cap with two peaks.[20]

The palazzo, a monument of and to the magnificence of

---

[19] Nostromo, p. 41. [20] Nostromo, p. 61.

civilized man, makes a slow progress of sorts in returning to the natural state from which its materials ultimately sprang. Cloth and furniture, other emblems of civilization, are deteriorating. This temple of man with its rags is starkly similar to the temple of nature with its "mourning draperies" and "sombre tatters" described in the novel's opening chapter. The marble (which, like silver, must be mined), with nature reduced to an artistic representation of garlands, appears destined also to return to the natural state. The worlds of nature and civilization are juxtaposed, neither fulfilling man's life.

Once aware of this dialectical patterning, the reader can readily determine the central theme of Nostromo, which occurs repeatedly in Conrad's works (in Heart of Darkness, for example): the potential for good and evil in human nature. This dualism the author expresses in other oppositions subsidiary to the central one of barbarism and civilization. The universal symbolism of light and dark, for example, Conrad utilizes for civilization and barbarism respectively.

The contest which Conrad depicts in Nostromo is not, however, a simple struggle between the good and evil sides of human nature, either as represented collectively by the inhabitants and society of Costaguana or individually by Nostromo. Indeed, Conrad consistently maintains a grim view and portrays the so-called progress of mankind from barbarism to civilization as part of an

on-going cyclical revolution of the wheel of existence, to which humanity is bound in Ixion-like fashion, rather than as any kind of linear advancement. Though he may ostensibly move from a barbaric condition to a more civilized one, man, Conrad suggests, is destined to move again--not forward, but toward a neobarbarism. Significantly, the novelist chooses social revolution as the vehicle for this idea of alternating states. Within either state lie the seeds of its destruction, just as each successive revolution and resultant government--disorder and order--of Sulaco and Costaguana furthers the cyclical change. Opening with a civil war in progress (the definition of such a war suggesting the opposing modes of man's experience), the novel ends with order only momentarily restored and already threatened by looming violence.

Conrad thus sounds in Nostromo one of his major themes, that which proclaims the essential depravity of human nature and the ultimate futility of those tissue-like veneers which civilization offers as saving agencies. The threads of imagery he creates to illustrate the theme are woven together to depict by the novel's conclusion a tapestry in which the darkness of barbarism all but engulfs the light of man's better nature. One is reminded of Kurtz's painting, which depicts a woman holding a torch, enfolded in draperies, and all but overwhelmed by the darkness surrounding her. In effect, this painting is

duplicated at the conclusion of Nostromo, where Conrad describes the lowering and enveloping night of Nostromo's death pierced only by the ray of light from the island lighthouse tended by Giorgio Viola's daughter Linda.[21] It is only mankind's striving or idealizing that prevents the cycle of barbarism and civilization from ending in the total darkness of despair.

As Robert Penn Warren observes of Nostromo:

> Conrad's scepticism is ultimately but a "reasonable" recognition of the fact that man is a natural creature who can rest on no revealed values and can look forward to neither individual immortality nor racial survival. But reason, in this sense, is the denial of life and energy, for against all reason man insists, as man, on creating and trying to live by certain values. These values are, to use Conrad's word, "illusions," but the last wisdom is for man to realize that though his values are illusions, the illusion is necessary, is infinitely precious, is the mark of his human achievement, and is, in the end, his only truth.[22]

He further states that "Each character lives by his necessary idealization, up the scale from the 'natural' man Nostromo, whose only idealization is that primitive one of his vanity, to Emilia Gould, who, more than any other, has purged the self and entered the human

---

[21] Cf. the language professor's comment in Under Western Eyes on the writing of Peter Ivanovitch, the political refugee: "'There are in his book whole pages of self-analysis whence emerges like a white figure from a dark confused sea the conviction of women's spiritual superiority . . . '" (Vol. XI, p. 121).

[22] Warren, op. cit., p. 218.

community."[23] In Lord Jim Marlow speaks of the protagonist's need for a truth or an illusion of truth by which to order his life; and in Heart of Darkness Marlow lies to Kurtz's intended bride in the belief that truth must sometimes be displaced by fidelity to an ideal. In Nostromo Emilia Gould, the wife of the mining tycoon, believes that Nostromo's reputation as incorruptible is of more value to those who live in awe of their idealization of him than is the truth of his having been as corruptible as other men. In each of these works Conrad expounds the view that some evidence of solidarity between one individual and another serves as a model in an otherwise nihilistic existence.

Conrad is a philosophical novelist in the fullest sense of the term:

> The philosophical novelist, or poet, is one for whom the documentation of the world is constantly striving to rise to the level of generalization about values, for whom the image strives to rise to symbol, for whom the urgency of experience, no matter how vividly or strongly experience may enchant, is the urgency to know the meaning of experience.[24]

He arranges his imagery to form two mainstreams flowing

---

[23] Ibid., p. 221.

[24] Ibid., p. 227. William Tindall in Forces in Modern British Literature (New York: Knopf, 1947) similarly thinks that Conrad's symbolist novels move mainly by means of image and pattern.

together ultimately into the complex symbolism of buried treasure--specifically, silver in its natural or unmined form before it is utilized by conscious man, as well as in its refined form after man has changed it for his purposes. Douglas Hewitt quotes a letter from Conrad to Ernst Bendz in which the author establishes silver as the real hero of the novel: "I will take the liberty to point out that Nostromo has never been intended for the hero of the Tale of the Seaboard. Silver is the pivot of the moral and material events, affecting the lives of everybody in the tale."[25] What has been overlooked or ignored in critical studies is the precise significance of the silver as the central exposition of the dualism inherent in human nature. The silver is not merely symbolic of "material interests" and man's cupidity. Wilfred Dowden comes closest to a precise understanding of the symbolic metal when he says that "The permeating image is silver about which are surrounding patterns of images involving clouds, darkness, artificial light, and bright, blinding sunlight. All of these support the theme of human corruptibility and political instability in the development of material interests."[26]

---

[25]Quoted in Conrad: A Reassessment (second edition; Chester Springs, Pennsylvania: Dufour Editions, 1969), p. 54.

[26]Wilfred Dowden, Joseph Conrad: The Imaged Style (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1970), p. 94.

But except for silver's value as a precious metal, Dowden does not suggest compelling reasons for its use as the novel's central symbol. However, Conrad's work is symbolic by natural extension of the implications of the narrative content and retains a consistent closeness to it.[27] The silver, lying underground, exists in a natural state from which it must be transformed into a refined and desired state, which then occasions rivalry and violence among various groups in Conrad's imaginary Costaguana. The novelist chooses an incorruptible metal for his symbol for the main reason that men have always chosen it: the irony of an unthinking, incorruptible object of nature providing the opportunity for a thinking reed to destroy itself through corruption. The history of the silver in the novel is illustrative of Conrad's theme of the depravity of human nature. Like silver, man's nature can be refined from the brute state into some civilized form; but like the treasure which Nostromo caches underground at the novel's conclusion, that nature is also destined to revert to its primitive condition. Uniting in the silver the opposing, natural and civilized images, Conrad alchemically transforms his own imagery into symbol manifesting humanity's seemingly progressive but truly cyclical march. A precious metal is

---

[27] Ian Watt holds the same view. See "Conrad Criticism and The Nigger of the Narcissus," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XII (March 1958), 257-283.

the perfect symbol for human nature and its potential. Like "the hidden treasures of the earth," humanity is "hovered over by the anxious spirits of good and evil."[28]

Other dualisms figure prominently in the imagery of Nostromo--ones of setting; communication and transportation; and family groupings, either those established by blood or those formed by some interest. Ultimately, these dualisms may be arranged according to the central opposition of barbarism and civilization; they are, however, of enough significance to merit separate mention. Conrad opposes land and water, Sulaco and Costaguana, Europe and South America, and coast and mountains. The first of each of these polarities indicates a state of some degree of civilization, the latter item a state of nature.

Concerning communication in the novel Edward Said has observed that Nostromo is a work deeply concerned with the anxiety of both keeping and leaving a personal record.[29] Martin Decoud, for example, an expatriate Costaguanan who has returned home, writes a letter to his sister in Paris out of a "desire to leave a correct impression" and Giorgio Viola leaves a record of honor and of Garibaldian ethics. However, Said examines only a small portion of the total

---

[28] Nostromo, p. 504.

[29] Edward Said, "Record and Reality," in Approaches to the Twentieth-Century Novel, ed. John Unterecker, (New York: Crowell, 1965).

communication forms. The silver again is the central symbol involving this communication; for characters concerned with the metal consider it a means of transforming their lives. There are other, less obvious communication forms used imagistically: the telegraph and its wires; the ships and the lighter; roads, trails, and paths; water and swimming; ropes and anchors; and so forth. The telegraph wires, for example, link together the railway survey camp in the forest, an outpost of progress,[30] with what is presumably civilization itself, Sulaco; and nature is thereby transformed into civilization. Similarly, the lighter loaded with silver and manned by Nostromo and Decoud becomes the communication link with civilization which Nostromo decides to break by swimming ashore and transforming himself from a "natural" man, honest and faithful (often referred to as Captain Fidanza), to a neobarbarian capable of dishonesty and deceit. Conrad's pervasive use of irony is obvious. The various roads men take in the novel may be city thoroughfares, rugged trails, or dusty paths; yet all suggest cyclical movement. Along with these kinds of communication forms should be included weapons, both primitive and sophisticated,

---

[30]Compare Conrad's short story "An Outpost of Progress" in which two representatives of progress manning an inland trading station in Africa find that the umbilical cord binding them to civilization is severed by their experiences. Kurtz in Heart of Darkness encounters the same severing of lines of communication.

as well as methods of transportation (carriages and carts, beasts of burden, and so forth).

The final group of images discussed in the present study is that of family grouping--by blood, marriage, friendship, or common interest--and family doubling (Doppelgänger). Conrad arranges his characters in real or substitute families as representatives of the family of man. Charles and Emilia Gould, for example, function as symbolic parents of Costaguanan independence and stability; their endeavors, however, die young. Additionally, they form a family alliance of materialism and idealism. Significantly, no children--either real or figurative--result from this union. Charles, the materialist, considers his mission to be that of bringing stability to the land (a variation of Kurtz's goal in Heart of Darkness); Emilia, the idealist, can only barely maintain her own integrity by the novel's end. Nostromo is adopted into the Viola family as a substitute for a deceased son, but he fails to bring happiness to either Teresa or Giorgio Viola. Indeed, so carefully has Conrad tied his theme to the imagery of family that Nostromo's death by Viola's hand is occasioned thematically by his preference for the daughter more closely associated with the forces of nature, Giselle, rather than for Linda, associated with idealism. The Viola family is also a Doppelgänger to the Gould family; whether fruitful or sterile, each ultimately

produces emptiness, in keeping with Conrad's thematic use of imagery to present baseness of human nature and the void of existence.

Chapter 2

NATURE METHODIZED, BUT NATURE STILL: IMAGES OF NATURE AND OF CIVILIZATION

Chief among the image patterns Conrad employs thematically are those concerning plants of various kinds, animals, colors, architectural forms, and threads or fabrics. He arranges these into the two broad categories of nature and civilization. One of the first patterns he establishes concerns plants. Conrad uses the flora of Costaguana, perhaps the essential part of the natural environment, to suggest the interpenetration of the natural world into the world of human endeavors and the condition to which these efforts may revert. The novelist describes Sulaco as a combination of these realms:

> The town of Sulaco itself--tops of walls, a great cupola, gleams of white miradors in a vast grove of orange trees--lies between the mountains and the plain, at some little distance from its harbour and out of the direct line of sight from the sea.[1]

The town itself, as the earliest image of civilized forces in the novel, rises within its walls above a form of

---

[1] Joseph Conrad, Nostromo, Collected Works, Memorial Edition, Vol. VIII (Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1925), p. 8. All subsequent references to Conrad's works are to this edition.

domesticated nature, bent to the will of man. Nature methodized in the guise of the silver mine also bestows benefits of a social nature on the inhabitants of Sulaco: "The authorities of Sulaco had learned that the San Tomé mine could make it worth their while to leave things and people alone. This was the nearest approach to the rule of common sense and justice Charles Gould felt it possible to secure at first."[2] The Gould home, ennobled by the benefits of man's control of the physical environment, displays large gardens:

> A triple row of old orange trees surrounded the whole. Barefooted, brown gardeners, in snowy white shirts and wide calzoneras, dotted the grounds, squatting over flowerbeds, passing between the trees, dragging slender india-rubber tubes across the gravel of the paths; and the fine jets of water crossed each other in graceful curves, sparkling in the sunshine with a slight pattering noise upon the bushes, and an effect of showered diamonds upon the grass.[3]

Conrad creates imagistically a picture of a well-tended Garden of Eden. Indeed, man has gained dominion and transformed an essentially hostile land.

Aspiring mankind may also transform nature by other artistic means than gardens. Describing San Tomé mountain housing the silver mine as a "blockhouse," Conrad surrounds it with uncultivated plants, a "very paradise of snakes."[4]

---

[2] Nostromo, p. 110. [3] Nostromo, p. 506.

[4] Nostromo, p. 105.

This paradise with its waterfall and greenery Emilia Gould transforms into art by means of a "water-colour sketch; she had made it hastily one day from a cleared patch in the bushes, sitting in the shade of a roof of straw erected for her on three rough poles."[5] Later, after Charles Gould has successfully dominated the environment, he gestures towards this sketch, now hanging in his home: "It is no longer a Paradise of snakes. We have brought mankind into it . . . ."[6] Then, during the height of the still later revolution, Gould again gazes at the sketch while contemplating a means of saving the mine from the forces Conrad equates with barbarism.[7]

The author emphasizes the shaping power of civilized artistry in transforming nature in two other instances. One is the garlands of flowers depicted on the cracked urn in the deteriorating Italian _palazzo_ of Emilia's aunt.[8] The other is a description of Emilia's houseplants:

> The long open gallery was in shadow, with its screen of plants in vases along the balustrade, holding out motionless blossoms . . . .[9]

---

[5] _Nostromo_, p. 106.

[6] _Nostromo_, p. 209. Adam Gillon in _The Eternal Solitary: A Study of Joseph Conrad_ (New York: Bookman Associates, 1960) states the truism that man's struggle against nature shows his worth to himself and to others. The discovery is not always to man's liking.

[7] _Nostromo_, p. 407. [8] _Nostromo_, p. 61.

[9] _Nostromo_, p. 175.

The motionlessness of cultivated plants, reminiscent of the stillness of the urn's garlands and the permanence of Emilia's sketch, presents the popular belief in mankind's ability to control nature not only by physical effort but also by artistic aspiration. This imagery points up man's movement away from his natural existence by emphasizing his dominating and transmogrifying the natural flora.

However, a degeneration from the civilized world can also occur; and again Conrad describes the movement in terms of plant imagery. The mining operation has indeed transformed the surrounding environment; but as a price for obtaining the silver, the adjacent waterfall has dried up and the luxuriant tree-ferns have died.[10] In the town of Sulaco itself wild flora appears again, suggesting the resurgence of the natural world; for "the grass-grown gate in the old town wall . . . was like a wall of matted jungle."[11] The gate, man's civilized construction, surrenders to the force of nature. Still later, Conrad describes Sulaco, now rendered to the forces of the revolutionaries, as though it had reverted to some natural existence. The groves of oranges are significantly missing in the description; instead, a forest appears:

---

[10] Nostromo, p. 106. [11] Nostromo, p. 125.

> And behind the pale long front of the Custom House, there appeared the extent of the town like a grove of thick timber on the plain with a gateway in front, and the cupolas, towers, and miradors rising above the trees, all dark, as if surrendered already to the night.[12]

By using plants imagistically Conrad is able to communicate to the reader, whose eye is on the carefully-arranged details, his thematic concept that humanity continuously walks the treadmill of barbarism and civilization. The cycle is endless; for the "timber" of the Sulaco barbarized by conquest is later hewn to become the woodblock pavement in a succeeding civilized phase.[13] And so, to remind the reader of the blank and abiding power of nature, Conrad locates high above the world of human endeavors the snow-capped peak of Higuerota.

Conrad's animal imagery reinforces the effect of his plant imagery, although it stresses the bestial side of humanity more than the civilized. Uniting these polarities in a centaur-like image, he writes:

> The low door of the cafe, wide open, was filled with the glare of a torch in which was visible half of a horse, switching its tail against the leg of a rider with a long iron spur strapped to the naked heel. . . . The half of the horse with its half of the rider swung round outside the door . . . .[14]

Importantly, one sees more of the bestial in this image than of the civilized. The description serves as a

---

[12] Nostromo, p. 414. [13] Nostromo, p. 554.

[14] Nostromo, pp. 249-250.

leitmotif for Conrad's use of animal imagery throughout the novel. Though a centaur is never again imaged or referred to, the author substitutes for the horse other animals, including domesticated ones, to serve as a constant reminder of the brute nature ever-present in man. The palazzo of Emilia's aunt shelters downstairs "the fowls, and even the cattle, together with the whole family of the tenant farmer."[15] Even though Emilia Gould's white carriage mules[16] and the ox-hides[17] of the hide-merchant, Hirsch, suggest a taming of the animal world for man's purposes, a reversion to savagery is indicated by Giorgio Viola's dog, who, "an irritable, shaggy brute, barked violently and whined plaintively in turns at the back, running in and out of his kennel as rage or fear prompted him"[18] during the attack of the rabble on the town.

But it is the undomesticated animal that most interests Conrad: savage dogs, snakes, insects, birds, and apes and monkeys. He alludes to ferocious dogs by references to their teeth. For example, the treacherous commandmant of the Esmeralda garrison, Sotillo, and his men have like dogs rebelled against their masters (in this case, the established government) and reverted to barbaric acts. An officer under Sotillo's command describes him as

---

[15] Nostromo, p. 60. [16] Nostromo, p. 481 and p. 505.

[17] Nostromo, p. 203. [18] Nostromo, p. 18.

a ferocious soldier, "'a man of many teeth.'"[19] When Sotillo tortures Hirsch to ascertain information regarding the silver Nostromo and Decoud have taken out of Sulaco, the hide-merchant, reduced to a tortured animal, displays an agonized mouth "full of teeth--comical."[20] And Nostromo, whom Conrad frequently identifies by reference to his white teeth, indicates his own passage beyond civilization into a neobarbarous state when, in anticipation of retaining the presumably lost treasure for himself, he states:

> After all these years, suddenly, here I find myself like one of these curs that bark outside the walls--without a kennel or a dry bone for my teeth.[21]

Such images of wild dogs show the eventual resurgence of savagery in man, but Conrad is even more insistent in depicting the basic animality of mankind.

Conrad uses extensive serpent imagery to underscore his point that Costaguana is a "paradise of snakes." In an image reminiscent of Blake's worm-and-rose metaphor, Conrad ironically tells of the telegraph's single wire as "a slender, vibrating feeler of that progress waiting outside for a moment of peace to enter and twine itself about the weary heart of the land."[22] Suggesting that the very concept of human progress may be animalistic--that is, that

---

[19] *Nostromo*, p. 444. [20] *Nostromo*, p. 447.

[21] *Nostromo*, p. 454. [22] *Nostromo*, p. 166.

progress may be unmindful of the basic bestiality of man--the author further comments on the telegraph as "the tape coiled its length upon the floor."[23] The barbaric Sotillo gives "venomous" glances;[24] and Nostromo, about to betray civilized power by keeping the silver for himself, speaks disdainfully of fidelity to Dr. Monygham with "hissing vehemence."[25]

Often man is described as a weak insect seeking to move from an existence too huge for his understanding to one he can comprehend. Nostromo's response to Decoud's question as to whether the lighter loaded with silver is making progress in their attempt to save the treasure from the revolutionaries is, "'Not so fast as a crawling beetle tangled in the grass.'"[26] Conrad describes the old mine superintendent, Don Pepe, as a "large beetle" with an "air of aimless, insect-like going to and fro"[27] only shortly before the man takes the initiative to attempt a rescue of the town from the revolutionaries. Additionally, insect imagery may ironically indicate the abiding strength of the bestial side of human nature; for example, when Nostromo enters the conquered Sulaco and is about to encounter the corpse of Hirsch, barbarized by torture, he finds "the

---

[23] Nostromo, p. 240. [24] Nostromo, p. 448.

[25] Nostromo, p. 459. [26] Nostromo, p. 263.

[27] Nostromo, p. 395.

shrilling of innumerable cicadas in the dry grass . . . positively deafening to his strained ears."[28] And when Don Juste, expediently changing sides to join the victorious Montero forces, proposes that Charles Gould also support the neobarbarians, "the convinced drone of his [Don Juste's] voice lost itself in the stillness of the house like the deep buzzing of some ponderous insect."[29]

Man in a Darwinian world may also be birdlike in his feebleness before the barbaric side of his nature, as the bird is often prey to the snake. Dr. Monygham, who walks with a limp because of torture undergone during the earlier government of the dictator Guzman Bento, just prior to his delivering himself into Sotillo's hands as part of a plan to save Sulaco from both Sotillo and Montero, is described as "hopping amongst the dark bushes like a tall bird with a broken wing."[30] To clarify his ironic stance that the nature of which mankind must be fearful is actually its own, Conrad more often employs the imagery of birds of prey. Pedrito Montero, brother of the revolutionary leader, demonstrates effectively both the

---

[28] *Nostromo*, p. 423. An excellent study of Conrad's animal imagery is found in Stanton de Voren's *Comedy and Form in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969). De Voren finds that animal imagery in Conrad's works generally indicates the dark forces by which man may be trapped.

[29] *Nostromo*, p. 367. [30] *Nostromo*, pp. 410-411.

civilized and savage strains. Though he may speak with "an unexpectedly cultivated voice," his eyes, "very glistening as if freshly painted on each side of his hooked nose, had a round, hopeless, birdlike stare when opened fully."[31] An even more striking use of bird imagery to present theme is apparent in Conrad's description of Nostromo as he lies exhausted on the beach after swimming ashore from the island of the Great Isabel, where he has left Decoud and the cached silver from the lighter. Nostromo, having only just awakened from a restorative sleep, is himself entering a period of transition from the role of faithful servant of civilization to the neo-barbarism of self-interest. Conrad indicates this change in imagery of a bird of prey:

> A rey-zamuro, appearing like a tiny black speck in the blue, stooped, circling prudently with a stealthiness of flight startling in a bird of that great size. The shadow of his pearly-white body, of his black-tipped wings, fell on the grass no more silently than he alighted himself on a hillock of rubbish within three yards of that man, lying as still as a corpse. The bird stretched his bare neck, craned his bald head, loathsome in the brilliance of varied colouring, with an air of voracious anxiety towards the promising stillness of that prostrate body. Then, sinking

---

[31] Nostromo, p. 404. Whether Conrad thought of I Corinthians, 13:1 ("If I should speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have charity, I have become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.") in composing this picture of Montero is probably impossible to ascertain. Nonetheless, in view of Conrad's theme that civilization is a meaningless veneer masking corruption, to be countered only by human solidarity or "charity," the similarity of thought is noteworthy.

> his head deeply into his soft plumage, he settled himself to wait. The first thing upon which Nostromo's eyes fell on waking was this patient watcher of death and corruption.[32]

Though Nostromo mutters to the vulture as it departs that he is not yet dead, the corruption of Nostromo's own character has already begun; he leaves this spot to enter the fallen Sulaco, where he himself becomes a "patient watcher for the signs of death and corruption," in himself and in others.

In some few instances Conrad employs imagery of a specific animal in an obvious but not extensive way. Pedrito Montero, for example, he describes as having an "ape-like faculty for imitating all the outward signs of refinement and distinction"[33] and as having carried his "felt hat in his hairy paws."[34] At the moment of Nostromo's death, another would-be revolutionary hoping to gain financial aid for his cause is described as "huddled up on the stool, shock-headed, wildly hairy, like a hunchbacked monkey."[35] Yet even in these few cases Conrad strongly suggests by bestial imagery that evolution is illusory; the

---

[32] *Nostromo*, p. 413. Conrad describes the odious Donkin in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* as resembling "a sick vulture with ruffled plumes" as he leads the crew's rebellion (Vol. III, p. 128).

[33] *Nostromo*, p. 386.

[34] *Nostromo*, p. 237. [35] *Nostromo*, p. 562.

ape lives within the man.

Man must construct protection from the environment, and his choice of shelter has always been an index to the complexity and civilization of his life. Whether cave or condominium, man's architectural forms are subjected to the power of the elements and the forces of decay as soon as he establishes them. It is therefore eminently logical that Conrad should utilize as a major image pattern in Nostromo the various shelters constructed by the inhabitants of Costaguana as a means of controlling to some degree their physical surroundings. By this means the novelist sets up a method by which to measure the advancement of mankind, the power of the natural world, and the inevitable alternation of civilized and barbaric modes of existence. In the opening chapter of the novel Conrad juxtaposes a description of the topography of the Golfo Placido, architecturally imaged as a temple,[36] with a long-view sketch of the seacoast town of Sulaco.[37] The basic opposition of nature and civilization here established in architectural terms is maintained throughout the novel. The reader is reminded of this opposition when he is thrust into the revolutionary world of Costaguana in the novel's second chapter.

Sulaco under attack from the revolutionary town

---

[36] Nostromo, p. 3. [37] Nostromo, p. 8.

rabble, the legitimate town authorities have refuged themselves in the Oceanic Steamship Navigation Company's offices, a "strong building near the shore end of the jetty, leaving the town to the mercies of the revolutionary rabble."[38] Outside the building the mob, which, "pouring out of the town, had spread itself all along the shore, howled and foamed at the foot of the building in front."[39] Conrad here clearly identifies the mob with elemental forces; both storm ("howled") and sea ("foamed") are aligned against the architectural forms of civilization.

Repulsed, the mob concentrates its assault on the Custom House,[40] a "dreary, unfinished-looking structure with many windows two hundred yards away from the O.S.N. Offices, and the only other building near the harbour."[41] Already identified as a civilizing agency, the O.S.N. under the guidance of Captain Mitchell attempts to protect its property: "That and the property of the railway were preserved by the European residents . . . ."[42] Also an architectural bastion of civilization is the small hotel kept by Giorgio Viola; but its servants have fled, "preferring

---

[38] Nostromo, p. 12. [39] Nostromo, p. 12.

[40] The Custom House is later rebuilt with a "sham air of a Greek temple, flat-roofed, with a colonnade" (p. 530). Compare the unroofed "temple" of nature, p. 3. Conrad's use of architecture to suggest the cyclical quality of man's experience is ubiquitous.

[41] Nostromo, p. 14. [42] Nostromo, p. 14.

to hide on the plain than trust themselves in the house."[43] By contrasting the imagery of architecture under attack by forces identified with the natural world with a similarly phrased image of civilization as conquering the world of natural forces,[44] Conrad strongly asserts imagistically that civilization at best holds tenuous dominion. Nostromo, himself an O.S.N. employee and associated with civilized powers in the first two parts of the novel, foreshadows his attempt to save the silver in rescuing the town, including Viola's hotel, from the onslaught of the town rabble:

> That part of the rabble he was pursuing seemed to think of making a stand under the house [Viola's]; a volley fired by his followers from behind an aloe hedge made the rascals fly. In a gap chopped out for the rails of the harbour branchline Nostromo appeared, mounted on his silver-grey mare.[45]

Nostromo in his appearance on the scene and in his description is reminiscent of a soldier-saint, a savior.

Later, when the town is threatened by the revolutionary Montero, Martin Decoud describes in a letter to his sister in Paris the Viola hotel:

> There is above the middle part of this house a sort of first floor with narrow openings like loopholes for windows, probably used in old times for the better defence against the savages, when the

---

[43] Nostromo, p. 18.

[44] Nostromo, p. 10: "People declared that under the Company's care their lives and property were safer on the water than in their own houses on shore."

[45] Nostromo, p. 22.

> persistent barbarism of our native continent did not wear the black coats of politicians, but went about yelling, half-naked, with bows and arrows in its hands.[46]

In this clearest of statements Conrad emphasizes his use of architectural images to suggest man's housing as a shelter from the forces of the natural world. But the sheltering protections of civilized man, however, do not always shield him from the storms. Emilia Gould watches the passage of her husband beyond civilization into a fanatic, neobarbaric concern for the mine:

> Mrs. Gould watched his abstraction with dread. It was a domestic and frightful phenomenon that darkened and chilled the house for her like a thunder-cloud passing over the sun.[47]

The greater strength of the natural world is often ironically imaged in architectural terms. Conrad sets forth the scene at a mountain surveying camp and the engineer-in-chief awaiting the arrival of the chairman of the railway company:

> For all the indifference of a man of affairs to nature, whose hostility can be overcome by the resources of finance, he could not help being impressed by his surroundings during his halt at the surveying camp established at the highest point his railway was to reach. He spent the night there, arriving just too late to see the last dying glow of sunlight upon the snowy flank of Higuerota. Pillared masses of black basalt framed like an open portal the portion of the white field lying aslant against the west.[48]

---

[46] Nostromo, p. 231. [47] Nostromo, p. 379.

[48] Nostromo, pp. 39-40.

The engineer-in-chief greets the chairman in a man-made architectural form grossly overshadowed by nature's grander constructions; man's is but a "stone hut like a cubical boulder, with no door or windows in its two openings."[49] Conrad displays ironically the progress of civilization (the railroad's construction) and its conquest of natural obstacles in terms of a reversion to primitive shelter, one of miniscule size and significance in comparison to the mountain setting.

Representing the civilized polarity of the architectural forms is the Gould house. Mrs. Gould keeps "her old Spanish house (one of the finest specimens in Sulaco) open for the dispensation of the small graces of existence."[50] The natural world penetrates even here, however:

> Rows of plants in pots, ranged on the balustrade between the pilasters of the arches, screened the corrédor with their leaves and flowers from the quadrangle below, whose paved space is the true hearthstone of a South American house, where the quiet hours of domestic life are marked by the shifting of light and shadow on the flagstones.[51]

Though nature here is controlled, ordered, and subdued, Conrad more frequently asserts his central opposition in imagery suggesting nature's superior strength:

---

[49] Nostromo, p. 40. [50] Nostromo, p. 46.

[51] Nostromo, p. 50.

> In contrast with the white glaring room the dimly lit corredor had a restful mysteriousness of a forest glade, suggested by the stems and the leaves of the plants ranged along the balustrade of the open side. In the streaks of light falling through the open doors of the reception-rooms, the blossoms, white and red and pale lilac, came out vivid with the brilliance of flowers in a stream of sunshine; and Mrs. Gould, passing on, had the vividness of a figure seen in the clear patches of sun that chequer the gloom of open glades in the woods.[52]

Signifying the bright promise of civilization, the Gould house harbors within its very walls its own destruction; for to Conrad, the contrary barbaric state, depicted in this passage as a floral omnipresence, is ready to assert itself. In keeping with his theme that the civilized side of humanity is feebler than the natural or barbaric, the novelist portrays man-made architectural form generally undergoing a process of decay. Emilia's aunt's palazzo serves as a master image in the novel for this process, duplicated in the "rubble and spiders of the sequestrated Dominican Convent"[53] in which Father Corbelán lives and in the "grass-grown gate in the old town wall that was like a wall of matted jungle."[54] Conrad evidences considerable interest in this wall:

> The squat turreted sides held up between them a mass of masonry with bunches of grass growing at the top, and a grey, heavily scrolled armorial shield of stone above the apex of the arch with the arms of Spain nearly smoothed out as if in readiness for some new

---

[52] Nostromo, pp. 209-210.

[53] Nostromo, p. 196. [54] Nostromo, p. 125.

device typical of the impending progress.[55]

With heavy irony Conrad indicates that as nature can erase the seeming progress of one culture, so it can do the same with the next. As nature can decay, in a sense, into civilization,[56] so civilization can decay into nature. He describes some of mankind as living in "weed-grown enclosures" in "black, lightless" huts "like cow-byres, like dog kennels."[57] Though Gould may be an architect of civilization in constructing villages at the mine, the inevitable result of his efforts is fated to be that befalling the Avellanos' house, "whose chipped pilasters, broken cornices, the whole degradation of dignity was hidden now by the gathering dusk of the street."[58] Holroyd, head of the San Francisco financial house, plans to convert Costaguanans to Protestantism by the endowment of churches.[59] Through the complex imagery of architecture,

---

[55] Nostromo, p. 173.

[56] Nostromo, p. 106. Compare the destructive effects of the mine on the waterfall and flora depicted in Emilia's water-color sketch.

[57] Nostromo, p. 95.

[58] Nostromo, p. 181. In Heart of Darkness Kurtz's station, an outpost of civilization, reverts to nature. Marlow describes it: "'A long decaying building on the summit was half buried in the high grass; the large holes in the peaked roof gaped black from afar; the jungle and the woods made a background'" (Vol. VI, p. 121).

[59] Nostromo, p. 71.

Conrad implies that Holroyd's aspirations will crumble as have the abandoned convents; for the civilized veneer of the Christian religion in its several forms is as easily worn away as gates and pilasters.

About the failure of progress Conrad is most clear:

> The material apparatus of perfected civilization which obliterates the individuality of old towns under the stereotyped conveniences of modern life had not intruded as yet; but over the worn-out antiquity of Sulaco, so characteristic with its stuccoed houses and barred windows, with the great yellowy-white walls of abandoned convents behind the rows of sombre green cypresses, that fact--very modern in its spirit--the San Tomé mine had already thrown its subtle influence.[60]

The Aristocratic Club of Sulaco is barely masking its decay:

> The two wings, shut up, crumbled behind the nailed doors, and what may be described as a grove of young orange trees grown in the unpaved patio concealed the utter ruin of the back part facing the gate.[61]

Also known as the Amarilla Club, the Aristocratic Club of Sulaco has been sacked and its members murdered on more than one occasion in the past; and so it is when Montero's troops take the town: "The Amarilla Club was full of festive ragamuffins. Their frowsy heads protruded from every window, and from within came drunken shouts, the thumping of feet, and the twanging of harps. Broken

---

[60] *Nostromo*, pp. 96-97. [61] *Nostromo*, p. 98.

bottles strewed the pavement below."[62] This description suggests that of Emilia's aunt's palazzo, its downstairs inhabited by animals. Thus Conrad links decaying and demolished forms of civilized architecture with the animals housed within man himself. The cracked urn of the palazzo is duplicated thematically in the ironic description of a "marble shaft commemorative of Separation, with angels of peace at the four corners, and bronze Justice holding an even balance, all gilt, at the top."[63] Designed by an Italian sculptor, it too will deteriorate. And as these kinds of civilized veneer mask the darker side of man, so Dr. Monygham's eyes are imaged in one instance "round and hard like clouded marbles, and as incapable of disclosing his sentiments."[64]

Two illustrations effectively sum up the extensive architectural imagery. One is a description of the Gould home on the evening Decoud proposes to Antonia Avellanos his plan for separating the province of Sulaco from the rest of Costaguana: "Only the sala of the Casa Gould flung out defiantly the blaze of its four windows, the bright appeal

---

[62] Nostromo, p. 407.

[63] Nostromo, p. 482.

[64] Nostromo, p. 506.

of light in the whole dumb obscurity of the street."[65] Conrad associates light with civilization, darkness and the color red (perhaps suggesting blood) with nature in its barbarism and bestiality: "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."[66]

The other illustration occurs near the end of the novel and focuses on the lighthouse built on the Great Isabel, where the Viola family now resides. Linda, the daughter whom the deceased Teresa Viola had always intended Nostromo to marry, tends the light; and the purpose of the edifice is metaphorical as well as literal. Not only does it serve to warn ships (associated early in the novel with civilizing forces) of the dangerous rocks (elements of nature), but it also serves as a guiding beacon of enlightenment to pierce the darkness of human experience. It is the kind of solidarity with another human being which Linda demonstrates that aids all mankind to keep faith, futile though it may prove, in some promise of moral

---

[65] Nostromo, p. 187. But the very image of civilized architecture may contain the barbaric. Cf. Jim Wait's cabin on the Narcissus: "The little place, repainted white, had, in the night, the brilliance of a silver shrine where a black idol, reclining stiffly under a blanket, blinked its weary eyes and received our homage" (Vol. III, p. 105).

[66] Nostromo, p. 185.

advancement. "'I shall never forget thee [Nostromo],'" cries Linda after learning of his death, even though she knows he preferred her sister, Giselle. "She stood silent and still, collecting her strength to throw all her fidelity, her pain, bewilderment, and despair into one great cry."[67] All of Conrad's architectural imagery culminates in the lighthouse image to express his belief that man's one ray of hope lies in assuming he is more perfectible than he truly is.

Conrad's major use of color imagery in Nostromo is that of light and dark, as it is in Heart of Darkness, whose very title indicates its universal implications. But correlated with these polarities are other colors--primarily green, red, and yellow--to remind the reader of the admixture of qualities found in the human spirit, as well as gray (including silver), which suggests the blending together of both polarities. Green, the color of nature, is mixed by the novelist with the idea of hope. Much of the physical description of Sulaco and Costaguana, assuredly, centers on the lushness of its foliage; but the reader must recall that this abundance is at base a "paradise of snakes." The colors red and yellow are connotatively related to black and white respectively in that red generally connotes blood and savagery while yellow

---

[67] Nostromo, p. 566.

connotes value (gold, for example, or the warmth of the sun).

In the flag which Conrad devises for the republic of Costaguana, he manifests most sharply the manner in which he employs the imagery of color. It is "an enormous national flag of Costaguana, diagonal red and yellow, with two green palm trees in the middle."[68] The savagery endemic to Costaguanan life, represented by the red diagonal, is countered by enfeebled attempts to establish some sort of civilized life, indicated by the weaker color, yellow; these colors and attributes of existence in the country meet in the green palms, suggesting that life here, regardless of civilized man's intentions, is inevitably dominated by his fundamental depravity. The plant image itself reinforces the implications of the colors.

Related to the savage connotations of the color red is the novelist's use of similar colors; for example, General Montero is described before his rebellion by the "coppery tint of his broad face, the blue-black of the moustaches under the curved beak."[69] Once again animal imagery reinforces that of color. Conrad describes the

---

[68] *Nostromo*, p. 121. Cf. the description in *Heart of Darkness* of the inland station accountant, who, though dressed entirely in white clothing, carries a green-lined parasol (Vol. VI, p. 67).

[69] *Nostromo*, p. 122.

Indian workers at the newly-opened mine, both they and the mine but a step away from savagery, by the "infinitely graduated shades of reddish-brown, of blackish-brown, of coppery-brown backs."[70] But except for its employment to suggest value or aspiration (the Amarilla Club, for example, is named after the Spanish word for yellow), it is white which in Conrad's imagery is the color of civilizing forces; and it occurs almost invariably in connection with the civilizing effect of wearing apparel.

Conrad employs thread or fabric in many forms as emblematic of humanity's desire to subdue its natural side. The copious descriptions of the costumes of characters closely allied with progress is typical. Charles Gould, for one, attempts to cover up the savage side of humanity:

> With his riding-breeches, leather leggings (an article of apparel never before seen in Costaguana), a Norfolk coat of grey flannel, and those great flaming moustaches, he suggested an officer of cavalry turned gentleman farmer. . . . But there was no denying that his fine-drawn, keen red face, and his whole, long-limbed, lank person had an air of breeding and distinction.[71]

He wears a "soft, grey sombrero, an article of national costume which combined unexpectedly well with his English get-up," carries a riding-whip, and wears dogskin gloves.[72] The red or savage side of his nature is indeed well

---

[70] Nostromo, p. 100.

[71] Nostromo, pp. 72-72. [72] Nostromo, p. 84.

camouflaged. The color gray suggests a blending together of the savage and civilized in Gould, yet significantly there is an absence in his descriptions of the color of true enlightenment, white. He is truly a savage warrior, in many respects a counterpart of the barbaric Montero, who ironically masquerades as a bearer of enlightenment. Similarly, the appearance of Gould's financial backer, Holroyd, offers but the semblance of true civilization: "He was a big-limbed, deliberate man, whose quiet burliness lent to an ample silk-faced frockcoat a superfine dignity. His hair was iron grey, his eyebrows were still black, and his massive profile was the profile of a Caesar's head on an old Roman coin."[73] "Big-limbed," "burliness," and "massive" imply a brute-like strength not commonly associated with a dignified appearance. Clothes do indeed make this man.

Conrad uses Emilia Gould as the character most clearly exemplifying true civilization; and he literally and figuratively clothes her in the lightness of white. Dr. Monygham idealizes her as "a little woman in a soft dress with a long train, with a head attractively over-weighted by a great mass of fair hair and the delicate preciousness of her inner worth, partaking of a gem and a flower, revealed in every attitude of her person."[74] She

---

[73] Nostromo, p. 76. [74] Nostromo, p. 431.

exhibits the finest combination of the best natural (flower and gem) and civilized (sophisticated apparel and fair hair) qualities.

In the character of Monygham, Conrad strengthens this identification:

> Behind him the immobility of Mrs. Gould added to the grace of her seated figure the charm of art, of an attitude caught and interpreted for ever. . . .[75]
>
> Mrs. Gould leaned back in the shade of the big trees planted in a circle. She leaned back with her eyes closed and her white hands lying on the arms of her seat. The half-light under the thick mass of leaves brought out the youthful prettiness of her face; made the clear, light fabrics and white lace of her dress appear luminous. Small and dainty, as if radiating a light of her own in the deep shade of the interlaced boughs, she resembled a good fairy, weary with a long career of well-doing, touched by the withering suspicion of the uselessness of her labours, the powerlessness of her magic.[76]

In the imagery of this passage Conrad clearly establishes Emilia Gould as an ideal. Her attempt to achieve spiritual solidarity with her husband unsuccessful, she nonetheless manifests in white colors and sophisticated fabric Conrad's belief that attempting to overcome individual isolation is the highest form of human endeavor.

As refinement of clothing, especially when linked with the color white, indicates some degree of civilization,

---

[75]Compare other works of art in the novel: the palazzo urn, Emilia's water-color, and the projected marble monument.

[76]Nostromo, p. 520.

so scarcity or simplicity of clothing indicates an approximation to barbarism. The Indian girls working in Viola's hotel, "with hair like flowing black manes, and dressed only in a shift and short petticoat," stare "dully from under the square-cut fringes on their foreheads."[77] The choice of "manes" to describe their hair conjures up for the careful reader the image of the centaur, of man as both unconscious beast and self-conscious man; but their trimmed hair and donned clothing posit a civilizing influence. The movement toward civilization is more strongly advanced when Conrad depicts the Indian troops departing to oppose Montero, the representative of barbarism:

> Those Indios, only caught the other day, had gone swinging past in double-quick time, like bersaglieri; they looked well fed, too, and had whole uniforms.[78]

Ironically, these Indians are plucked from their native savagery, transformed by their clothing into civilized men, and then sent off marching to oppose barbarism in a barbarous civil war.

---

[77] Nostromo, p. 24.

[78] Nostromo, p. 167. The natives aligned with the white men in Heart of Darkness adopt some sort of western attire; and Marlow equates civilized principles with clothing: "'Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags--rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want a deliberate belief'" (Vol. VI, p. 97.)

Nostromo himself directs the embarcation of troops to oppose Montero, "under the superintendence of Captain Mitchell, red-faced in the sun, conspicuous in a white waistcoat, representing the allied and anxious good-will of all the material interest of civilization. General Barrios, who commanded the troops, assured Don José on parting that in three weeks he would have Montero in a wooden cage drawn by three pairs of oxen ready for a tour through all the towns of the Republic."[79] Barrios, though he wears white trousers, represents the opposite of Mitchell, as his proposed treatment of Montero implies; Barrios "had assumed a disdain of military trapping, and had assumed an eccentric fashion of shabby old tunics, which had become like a second nature."[80] In both examples white clothing, suggesting the color of refined silver and the garments of culture, is joined to elements of savagery.

Conrad emphasizes the man's underlying barbarism by further attention to Barrios' apparel: "General Barrios, in a shabby blue tunic and white peg-top trousers falling upon strange red boots, kept his head uncovered and stooped slightly, propping himself up with a thick stick."[81] Conrad suggests that barbarism sustains Barrios rather than any civilizing apparel, though civilization's charging him

---

[79] Nostromo, p. 148.

[80] Nostromo, p. 162. [81] Nostromo, p. 160.

with a military responsibility gives him the semblance of refinement. The plight of mankind in the microcosm of Costaguana is expressed in the words of Martin Decoud: "'And we have sunk so low that when a man like you [Don José Avellanos, aligned with civilization], has awakened our conscience, a stupid barbarian of a Montero--Great Heavens! a Montero!--becomes a deadly danger, and an ignorant, boastful Indio, like Barrios, is our defender.'"[82]

A civilizing influence--in this case, that of the mine--appears in a passage concerning its workers:

> It had altered, too, the outward character of the crowds on feast days on the plaza before the open portal of the cathedral, by the number of white ponchos with a green stripe affected as holiday wear by the San Tomé miners. They had also adopted white hats with green cord and braid--articles of good quality, which could be obtained in the storehouse of the administration for very little money.[83]

In this passage Conrad draws together several of his major image patterns: clothing, the colors white and green, man-made architectural forms. Green connotes not

---

[82] Nostromo, p. 171. The crew of the Narcissus mistakenly allow Donkin to sway their feelings of loyalty to their superiors. Donkin significantly has come aboard, having lost his sea chest, in need of apparel. Borrowing from the other sailors, he struts "with assurance in clothes that were much too big for him as though he had tried to disguise himself" (Vol. III, p. 102).

[83] Nostromo, p. 97. Compare nature's portals, p. 40.

necessarily the idea of hope but more usually the savage world of nature.

Other kinds of thread than a woven form imply a movement towards or away from civilization. When Nostromo and Decoud are aboard the lighter in the gulf in their attempt to prevent the silver's falling into Montero's hands, Conrad uses the following description: "A sort of thinning of the darkness seemed to have taken place, and Decoud could see now the outline of his companion's face, and even the sail came out of the night like a square block of dense snow."[84] The white sail characterizing a ship in the service of civilization (even its designated type so defines it) is in sharp relief to the steamer commanded by the renegade Sotillo on which all lights have been extinguished, in keeping with the ironic reversion of this civilized ship to barbaric uses.[85] Nostromo wishes he had bound and gagged the stowaway Hirsch and thus prevented the hide-merchant, through use of threads associated with civilization for an uncivilized restraint, from accidentally betraying the lighter's location because of his animal-like fear.[86] It is, however, Nostromo who is the ultimate undoing of the lighter: "'I am going to lower the sail, and trust our escape to this black gulf.'"[87]

---

[84] Nostromo, p. 276. [85] Ibid.

[86] Nostromo, p. 283. [87] Nostromo, p. 279.

Discarding fabric--that is, the sail--and trusting to darkness ends with the ramming of the lighter by the darkened steamer.

Still other threads guide the reader through the novel. Decoud, waiting in despair on the island of the Great Isabel for Nostromo's return from Sulaco, thinks of his solitude as a "great void, and the silence of the gulf like a tense, thin cord to which he hung suspended by both hands, without fear, without surprise, without any sort of emotion whatever. Only towards the evening, in the comparative relief of coolness, he began to wish that this cord would snap. He imagined it snapping with a report as of a pistol . . . ." Decoud thinks that "In the daytime he could look at the silence like a still cord stretched to breaking-point, with his life, his vain life, suspended to it like a weight."[88] Conrad's solution for the illusionless, cynical Decoud is to have him pick up a belt on which hangs a revolver and, in despair over human isolation, commit suicide, thereby putting an end to the silence "like a dark, thin string."[89]

---

[88] Nostromo, p. 499.

[89] Nostromo, pp. 499-500. Conrad devises a similar fate for Razumov in Under Western Eyes, of whom the omniscient narrator says, "'No human being could bear a steady view of moral solitude without going mad.'" Razumov, by revealing himself to his enemies, commits an act equivalent to suicide. Vol. XI, p. 39. And in The Nigger of the Narcissus, Jim Wait lives "utterly alone in the impenetrable solitude of his fear" (Vol. III, p. 119).

Another kind of string or thread shows the use to which man may put his endeavors. At the barbaric pole is the rope ironically made of hide with which Sotillo tortures Hirsch, the hide-merchant,[90] and the rope which he places around Dr. Monygham's neck in preparing to hang him.[91] At the other extreme Captain Mitchell epitomizes the vanity that may accompany civilized life when, true to his garrulous spirit, he boasts of being able to "spin you a yarn for hours."[92] Conrad even suggests Nostromo's movement beyond civilization into neobarbarism by combining animal imagery and that of thread or fabric; Captain Mitchell speaks of Nostromo: "'He stared at the wall, sir, as if there had been a spider or something running around there. The loss of the silver preyed on his mind.'"[93] Nostromo's own nature spins the web in which he will be trapped.

The adoption of civilized values by the donning of clothing is apparent when the misanthropic Monygham

---

[90] Nostromo, p. 427.

[91] Nostromo, p. 484.

[92] Nostromo, p. 484.

[93] Nostromo, p. 488. Conrad also employs spinning and weaving as a narrative technique in Heart of Darkness, beginning with Marlow's narrative tale and expanding into a complex submerged metaphor of thread and fabric. The anonymous listener speaks of Marlow's "'propensity to spin yarns'" (Vol. VI, p. 48).

undergoes a metamorphosis. Early in the novel he is described as more barbaric than civilized, despite his medical education:

> His hair had turned grey, his hairless, seamed face was of a brick-dust colour; the large check pattern of his flannel shirt and his old stained Panama hat were an established defiance to the conventionalities of Sulaco. Had it not been for the immaculate cleanliness of his apparel he might have been taken for one of those shiftless Europeans that are a moral eyesore to the respectability of a foreign colony in almost every exotic part of the world. . . . The little white jacket was in reality a concession to Mrs. Gould's humanizing influence.[94]

His heroic role in the course of defeating Montero and Sotillo is motivated by his devotion to Emilia Gould, whom he later meets on her return from a holiday abroad bedecked in a black suit with a high white collar.[95] His character has not changed, however, as Captain Mitchell quickly points out; yet the civilizing influence of Emilia has finally clothed him in the veneer of respectability.

Conrad also demonstrates the movement of mankind towards barbarism by means of a character's clothing, especially its removal, and asserts the ultimate failure of any civilized veneer by indicating the deterioration of fabric, including its blackening. One of the clearest examples of the first use is the character of Father Corbelán, who has in times past sought to convert the

---

[94] *Nostromo*, p. 45. [95] *Nostromo*, p. 481.

"bloodthirsty savages" yet was himself reduced to riding "with the Indians for days, half naked, carrying a bullock-hide shield, and, no doubt, a long lance, too."[96] Clothing, either skins or clerical vestments, does not alter his character; for it is he who at the novel's conclusion threatens a return of barbarism by foretelling of future revolution. Another clear illustration is Gamacho, a turncoat politician, when he associates himself with barbarism by joining the cause of Montero. Conrad images the interior change--or, better, the loss of veneer--by the removal of clothing: "Every moment he had to wipe his steaming face with his bare fore-arm; he had flung off his coat, and had turned up the sleeves of his shirt high above the elbows; but he kept on his head the large crooked hat with white plumes."[97] It is only the semblance of civilization, the white plumes, that Gamacho cares for; his true barbarism is manifested by his undressed condition.

Conrad describes the rebels under Gamacho's command as "a torrent of rubbish, a mass of straw hats, ponchos, gun-barrels, with an enormous green and yellow flag flapping in their midst." They have handkerchiefs "knotted around their bare throats" and the "right sleeves of their cotton shirts had been cut off close to the shoulder for

---

[96] Nostromo, pp. 194-195. [97] Nostromo, p. 392.

greater freedom in throwing the lazo":[98]

> Emaciated greybeards rode by the side of lean dark youths, marked by all the hardships of campaigning, with strips of raw beef twined round the crowns of their hats, and huge iron spurs fastened to their naked heels. Those that in the passes of the mountain had lost their lances had provided themselves with the goads used by the Campo cattlemen: slender shafts of palm fully ten feet long, with a lot of loose rings jingling under the ironshod point.[99]

Most telling, perhaps, of the many images of barbarism in this passage is that of the "slender shafts of palm." Juxtaposition with the flapping Costaguana flag and its two palm trees suggests an ironic reversal of the injunction to beat swords into plowshares.

The ties that bind man to civilized life are always tenuous in Conrad's thinking. He utilizes several strands of imagery in the following description of Nostromo and Decoud's landing on the Great Isabel:

> The cargo-lighter, relieved of its precious burden, rocked feebly, half afloat, with her forefoot on the sand. A long rope stretched away like a black cotton thread across the strip of white beach to the grapnel Nostromo had carried ashore and hooked to the stem of a tree-like shrub in the very opening of the ravine.[100]

Images of weak thread or fabric, of white-turned-black, of sturdier flora, and of a mine ("ravine") excavated by natural forces in which to hide the silver blend together

---

[98] Nostromo, p. 384.

[99] Nostromo, pp. 384-385.

[100] Nostromo, p. 298.

to foreshadow Nostromo's decision to keep the treasure for himself. The movement of his thought is from the lighter and Decoud, both identified with civilization in this undertaking and left behind on the island, to a neo-barbarism of self-interest. He will mask his corruption in the eyes of all by donning the clothing of respectability and growing rich slowly.

The general condition of mankind as Conrad envisions it in the first two parts of Nostromo is caught magnificently in a single image which indicates not only the existential experience of the human race but also Nostromo's own transformation, as nominal protagonist of the novel, from a man motivated by a guiding ideal, even though it is but the vanity of his reputation, an "illusion," to a man whose operant principle is self-interest. Conrad employs the image as a transition from Monygham's plan to save Emilia (and, by extension, the civilization of which she is the ideal) to Nostromo, lying on the beach after swimming from the Great Isabel and imaged, though awake, as an "unconscious wild beast." The author describes the natural world: "The great mass of cloud filling the head of the gulf had long red smears amongst its convoluted folds of grey and black, as of a floating mantle stained with blood."[101] The experience of

---

[101] Nostromo, p. 411.

society is that the garments of civilization are forever destined to be marked with a return to savagery because of human nature, thinks Conrad. From this point in the novel, he demonstrates that the general experience of humanity, as represented by the microcosm of Costaguana, is also the experience of the individual. Conrad places upon his protagonist's shoulders the mantle of Everyman, and the clothing of respectability which Nostromo assumes later in the novel is as bloodstained as that which he is wearing when Giorgio Viola shoots him.

And like Everyman, Nostromo requires shriving; for he has betrayed his better nature in relinquishing the civilizing illusion of fidelity. Conrad continues the clothing metaphor. Nostromo, having refused to call a priest for the dying Teresa Viola,[102] and by this act foreshadowing his own passage beyond a civilized state to a barbaric one, requests that Emilia Gould, the epitome of humanity's better nature, visit him in his dying hour. She arrives in her best humanity, "cloaked and monastically hooded over her evening costume, this woman, full of endurance and compassion . . . ." Mrs. Gould, identified elsewhere with the Madonna,[103] her face "very white within the shadow of the hood, bent over him with an invincible

---

[102] Nostromo, p. 255.

[103] Compare Nostromo, p. 505 and p. 513.

and dreary sadness."[104] Nostromo confesses he knows of the silver, admits to himself the truth of his own nature, and dies feeling betrayed. Conrad leaves the reader to recognize that Costaguana and Nostromo are synonymous. It is Nostromo as Everyman who by his human nature betrays himself.

---

[104] Nostromo, p. 558.

Chapter 3

THE TREASURE HOUSE OF THE WORLD: THE SILVER MINE AS SYMBOL

The several image groupings in Nostromo merge ultimately in the massive symbol of the silver mine. Silver is the true protagonist of the novel, as Conrad himself indicates; and Nostromo, as titular hero, assumes his prominence only when the silver, which dominates Parts I and II of the novel, has again been cached underground and he partakes of its symbolism in functioning as its replacement. Complex in its presentation, the silver mine permeates the actions of all the major characters in the novel; and it is worthwhile, therefore, to review at this point the main avenues of thought on its symbolism.

Critical estimates of the role of the silver, many evolved from the literal use made of the mine by the inhabitants of Costaguana, vary considerably. Christopher Cooper, for example, whose purpose in Conrad and the Human Dilemma is "to trace the moral patterns that surround the material interests of the San Tome mine in terms of the conduct and attitudes of the characters,"[1] concludes that

---

[1](London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 108.

the significance of Nostromo's dying confession to Mrs. Gould is that "he has seen what has happened to himself. In being seduced by the silver he has yielded himself up, admittedly not without a struggle, to material interests."

> The second thing he realizes, and this is what completes his redemption in spiritual terms, is shown by his statement that he would have left the silver for the sake of Giselle. . . . Nostromo has seen that personal relationships are the most important things in life beyond the possession of a stable morality.[2]

Similarly finding the mine to be equivalent to "material interests" is John I. M. Stewart, who writes:

> Conrad's work has often a deceptive outwardness, and here it may be some time before we realize how powerfully the rich complexity of material is organized around the consideration of a single idea: the influence upon society and upon individuals of those "material interests" in which Charles Gould has pinned his faith.[3]

Douglas Hewitt can somehow argue that too much attention is given to the symbolic sense of Conrad's works and at the same time write that Nostromo "is one of the most complex and closely-constructed novels in the language. There are few books which, beside it, do not look--in the idiom of

---

[2]Ibid., p. 147.

[3]Eight Modern Writers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 204. Volume XII of The Oxford History of English Literature, eds. F. P. Wilson and Bonamy Dobrée.

Henry James--as though they were not 'written.'"[4] He concludes that Conrad's theme "is not revolution and physical action but the progress of 'material interests' and the corruption of the hearts of those who invoke them in their idealism."[5]

In The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad, Eloise Knapp Hay assumes a stance at variance with that of Cooper, Stewart, and Hewitt:

> Nostromo is the very opposite of a free and wandering tale, growing out of anecdote as oak from acorn. The novel is rather a tightly organized political fable, whose burden was fully preconceived in Conrad's mind, whose complex patterns, rich in suggestion--seem to illustrate rather than to explore the theme, as character explores theme in Lord Jim and Under Western Eyes.[6]

Although incisive in her observations, Hay fails to focus on the significance of the silver because of her insistence that the novel is essentially one of politics. She notes, for example, the merging of Nostromo and the silver symbolism:

> The silver is "the real hero"; therefore, Nostromo's secret life is a symbol for the silver. This intentional inversion of subject and object is what creates the novel's artificial manner as well as

---

[4] Conrad: A Reassessment (second edition; Chester Springs, Penn.: Dufour Editions, 1969), p. 46 and pp. xi-xii.

[5] Ibid., p. 68.

[6] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 202.

> matter. Nostromo's worth, like the value of the silver, is determined more by what people say about him than by his intrinsic qualities. Through Nostromo we learn the truth about the silver rather than the other way around.[7]

But for Hay the silver and Nostromo both are merely representative of political value attributed to them by society.

Much more to the point is Edward Said, who finds that "Readings of the novel that emphasize its purely political dimension weaken Nostromo's greatest impact."[8] Instead, he finds that "Nostromo contains a highly passionate, almost religious vision of life . . .":[9]

> To read Nostromo as if its intensely articulated surface were all there was to it (and, I hasten to add, the richly documented surface is designed to give the illusion of all the truth one needs to know) is to read a record very much like the ones created by different characters in the novel. This is another way of saying that Nostromo is masquerading as an ordinary political or historical novel. The real action, on the other hand, is psychological and concerns man's over-ambitious intention to create his own world because the world as he finds it is somehow intolerable: this action underlies the historical and political events in Nostromo. The horror occurs in the gradual, prolonged discovery that the world created by man is just as intolerable as the world he has attempted to

---

[7] Ibid.

[8] "Record and Reality," in Approaches to the Twentieth-Century Novel, ed. John Eugene Unterecker (New York: Crowell, 1965), p. 148. Also compare pp. 120-121, in which Said refutes the idea that the novel is one of "material interests."

[9] Ibid., p. 150.

> supersede. So vast a conclusion needs political and historical substantiation; hence Nostromo's bias for connecting individuals to history, and history to the cruel designs of life.[10]

Said notes that Nostromo is obsessed with "constant changes from one political status to the next, from one emotional mood to another, from one personal confrontation to another. The paradox is that all these bewildering changes occur for one unchanging reason: the silver."[11] With this observation Said comes closer than any of the critics cited above to an understanding of the symbolic function of the mine.

Other interpretations of its role are noteworthy. Frederick R. Karl comments that "One can well analyze Nostromo in terms of what the mine means to character and theme, and how it becomes a structural motif as it attains psychological and political significance";[12] and he attempts to do so primarily through study of the work's characters. Frederick J. Hoffman, concerning himself with metaphors of violence and death in Nostromo and with "the growing dominance of the abstractedly materialistic symbol

---

[10] Ibid., pp. 129-130.

[11] Ibid., p. 128.

[12] A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 156.

of the silver mine,"[13] shrewdly observes:

> The narrative becomes an elaborate speculative game of moral perspectives; its major effect is that of the physical resource and the words that are used to define human relationships to it.
>
> Conrad presents us with an intricate intellectual puzzle. In this country of vast topographical contrasts--mountains and plain and water located in an order grotesquely intimate--there is a natural resource, which can be left as it is, can remain unexploited. But the silver is after all a valuable metal, and it is difficult of access; it therefore needs technology, power, speed, efficiency to extract it, law and order to guard it and to guide its transport. The mine attracts to itself all of these, and an infinite number of variants of revolutionary and executive rhetoric and manners besides. Costaguana is an almost perfect symbol of the way in which nature and man both attract and need ideological definition.[14]

Yet in spite of the rich potential of Hoffman's statements about the mine, he apparently aligns himself as another who views it as a complex symbol of "material interests."

Wilfred Dowden in Joseph Conrad: The Imaged Style studies closely the novelist's use of the mine as supportive of "the theme of human corruptibility and political instability in the development of material interests."[15] Though another critic supporting the "material interests" interpretation, Dowden, like Hay, makes astute

---

[13] The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 40.

[14] Ibid., p. 61.

[15] (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1970), p. 94.

observations. For example, he notes that Nostromo is,

> after all, the titular hero (or anti-hero); and the catastrophe of the novel evolves around him, although it reaches outward to other characters as well. Nostromo may be taken in this sense as a symbol; by studying the efficacy of the silver on him, we may better understand its effect on the community as a whole. Obsessive concentration on silver results in catastrophe for the individual.[16]

Dowden fails, however, to recognize silver as symbolic of human nature, just as he fails to recognize Nostromo's substitution for the silver image in Part III. He says, "Nostromo also dominates the third part of the book, but again he is not presented in association with the silver image. He is either in the dark or appears in the glaring light of a golden sun; and it is in this part that his doubts give way to complete corruption."[17] Dowden does not make the necessary identification of the protagonist with the silver, now lying hidden underground. As the treasure lies in darkness, so Conrad presents its symbolic replacement largely in the imagery of darkness. Nostromo need not be associated with silver; he has become the silver. It is for this symbolic purpose that Conrad so carefully identifies both the silver and the protagonist as incorruptible.

Interpretations of the silver's symbolism thus fall

---

[16]Ibid., p. 101.

[17]Ibid., p. 97.

into two broad categories: those viewing it as indicative of "material interests," including politics, and those considering it in terms of moral perspectives and suspecting it of having still more pervasive significance. Such interpretations explain certain aspects of this multiphase symbol, but none focuses on Conrad's most insistent use of the mine. Perhaps one reason for the variety of approaches to its meaning lies in the quality of the thing it symbolizes: human nature itself, that evanescence which Nostromo concerns. In attempting to deal with man's nature, Conrad does not restrict himself solely to the employment of silver; indeed, among other metals used imagistically are gold, tin, brass, copper, and steel and iron. He uses these in a significant number of instances to establish an imagery of metal; and it is necessary to understand this imagery before discussing the specific silver symbolism, of which metal imagery forms a part.

In keeping with the central opposition of images of nature and of civilization, Conrad opposes the lightness in color of gold and tin, which he associates with civilization, to the darker colors of brass, copper, and iron, associated with barbarism. Steel, a refined form of iron, combines the color associations of both light and dark imagery; but it is usually connected imagistically with the darker qualities of iron. Gold--different from the other metals because, like silver, it is commonly designated a precious metal--usually indicates something of value adorning the human person and suggests thereby a

value system. General Montero, for example, is described as rising with "a jingle of steel scabbard and a ripple of glitter on his gold-embroidered breast."[18] Having adopted some of the accoutrements of civilized values (ornate clothing), he remains underneath but a barbarian; and his steel scabbard suggests that iron refined into steel is iron still. Elsewhere he is described by the "coppery tint of his broad face," by the "mass of gold on sleeves and breast," and by "boots with enormous spurs."[19] The contrast again is one of barbarism and civilization. "Coppery" suggests his true condition by the non-preciousness of the metal, by its approximation in hue more to darkness than to lightness, and by its usual reddish tones, established imagistically by Conrad as related to the savage side of man's nature.

Conrad depicts the military leader of the civilized forces of Sulaco, General Barrios, in similar fashion. The novelist indicates how lightly civilized values may be doffed by contrasting Barrios' pawned epaulettes and gold-laced uniforms with his usual shabby costume.[20] Other indications of gold's use to establish value are Paquita's

---

[18]Joseph Conrad, Nostromo, Collected Works, Memorial Edition, VIII (Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1925), p. 120. All subsequent references to Conrad's works are to this edition.

[19]Nostromo, p. 122. [20]Nostromo, p. 162.

desire for a gold-mounted rosary to hang around the neck of a statue of the Madonna, suggesting religion as a value system;[21] Decoud's "golden" beard, suggesting at this point in the novel his very scepticism as a value system;[22] and the "gold crown" for Giselle which Nostromo will purchase with the stolen silver, suggesting love as a value.[23] In his choice of family name for the mining tycoon, Conrad undoubtedly puns--and puns ironically, for the mine is a silver mine--on the similarity of the Gould name to the word gold. Associated with "material interests" as a value system, Gould says, "I pin my faith to material interests."[24] But his system also fails; for as Conrad states in the words of Dr. Monygham, such a system lacks the rectitude, continuity, and force found only in moral principle.[25]

Conrad associates the light color of tin with the force of civilization. The metal is present in the form of a water-tight match box on the lighter when Nostromo and Decoud attempt to save the silver. By the glare of a preserved match, Nostromo is able to read the compass and steer to the Great Isabel after the collision with the steamer.[26] Brass, however, by virtue of its darker color (and reddish tones), is connected with ideas of barbarism--

---

[21] Nostromo, p. 128. [22] Nostromo, p. 151 and p. 155.

[23] Nostromo, p. 540. [24] Nostromo, p. 84.

[25] Nostromo, p. 511. [26] Nostromo, pp. 294-295.

or at least with men not far removed from it. Contrasted, for example, with the tin match box on the lighter is the brass box housing the binnacle light on Sotillo's commandeered steamer. An officer under his command extinguishes the light and aligns himself and the steamer with barbarism by saying, "Am I a child to believe that a light in that brass box can show you where the harbour is?"[27]

Iron, however, is the metal Conrad utilizes in his imagery of metals as the primary designation of the barbaric side of human nature. He establishes early in the novel its association with physical nature by calling the coast of Costaguana "iron-bound"[28] and proceeds to unify the imagery with that of barbarism or savagery in describing the metal's frequent use to imprison. The Avellanos' house has "iron bars like a prison";[29] and men are often literally chained and barbarically treated.[30] Frequently it is the iron of spurs strapped to naked heels[31] which indicates man's close approximation to savagery. It may equally well be, however, that of spurs on men who passed beyond civilized life into neobarbarism; for example, Montero's troops lounge

---

[27] Nostromo, p. 289. The cannibals comprising Marlow's crew in Heart of Darkness are paid with pieces of brass wire, and the native woman who bemoans Kurtz's departure wears brass ornaments (Vol. VI, pp. 134-135).

[28] Nostromo, p. 9. [29] Nostromo, p. 179.

[30] Nostromo, p. 137, 371. [31] Nostromo, p. 249,385.

in a surrendered civic building, and "the clanking of sabres and spurs resounded all over the building."[32] Even the church bells sound the arrival of barbarism with Montero's entry into Sulaco: "In this furious flood of metallic uproar there was a power of suggesting images of strife and violence . . . ."[33]

For the civilized phase of life in Sulaco, Conrad utilizes iron imagery to remind the reader of the ever-present powers of the baser side of human nature which may overwhelm man at any time: the iron roofs of the railway company's buildings prior to the revolution[34] and the "lofty glass and iron roof of the Sulaco railway station" built subsequent to the revolution.[35] Iron may also be employed to signify a passage into neobarbarism by the use to which it is put or the implications of its regular use. Hirsch, the hide-merchant, first falls into the hands of the savage Sotillo when the former, clutching the steamer's anchor, is pulled off the rammed lighter.[36] Later, in an effort to ascertain the whereabouts of the silver, Sotillo barbarizes Hirsch by suspending him from a rope anchored to a staple in the wall.[37] Steel's manufacture as a refinement of iron adds more than a tinge of irony to

---

[32] *Nostromo*, p. 406. [33] *Nostromo*, pp. 381-382.

[34] *Nostromo*, p. 166. [35] *Nostromo*, p. 527.

[36] *Nostromo*, p. 293. [37] *Nostromo*, p. 427.

Conrad's use of this imagery. Whether the staple, for example, from which Hirsch hangs is steel or iron is not stated; but steel would be more appropriate, in keeping with the idea of a reversion from civilization to barbarism.

The most obvious examples of iron and steel to image the cyclical quality of man's experience are the multitudinous references to implements of destruction, such as guns, sabres, and knives. Montero's cavalry wears "iron spurs fastened to their naked heels" and carries palm lances shod with iron points. "They were armed with knives and revolvers."[38] Another illustration is Father Corbelán's "square-toed shoes with big steel buckles,"[39] which suggest that he has not been saved by his religious training; significantly, it is he who prophesies future revolution at the novel's conclusion.[40] Finally, Nostromo sinks the rammed lighter by counting on its iron ballast to complete the job begun by pulling the plug in its bottom. In this image Conrad deftly suggests that civilized man, identified with the lighter, may ultimately be destroyed by his baser nature; for "every lighter carried a little iron ballast--enough to make her go down when full

---

[38] Nostromo, pp. 384-385.

[39] Nostromo, p. 198.

[40] Nostromo, pp. 510-511.

of water."[41]

Although these other metals figure prominently in the novel's imagery, it is silver that Conrad utilizes as representative of human nature in all its enigmatic ways. In keeping with his use of light and dark imagery, the novelist employs silver as a blending together of these polarities into a grayness which he identifies with man's dual nature. He sees man as neither absolutely good nor absolutely evil, but as a composite of these oppositions. Even so, it is the baser side of human nature that asserts itself more strongly and the side to which man ultimately returns. Establishing the symbolic value of the silver early in the novel, Conrad traces in Part I, "The Silver of the Mine," the history of the Gould Mining Concession and shows its effects on the human beings of Costaguana. In Part II, "The Isabels," he depicts the attempt to rescue the silver from barbaric forces and its sequestration on the island. Thus, in roughly half of the novel Conrad concerns himself primarily with the symbolic value of the silver. He sets forth the condition in which Charles Gould inherits the mine from his father:

---

[41] Nostromo, p. 303. Cf. the language professor's description in Under Western Eyes of Peter Ivanovitch's escape, though still in chains, from imprisonment: "'It was as though there had been two human beings indissolubly joined in that enterprise. The civilized man, the enthusiast of advanced humanitarian ideals . . . and the stealthy, primeval savage . . .'" (Vol. XI, p. 122).

> The buildings has been burnt down, the mining plant had been destroyed, the mining population had disappeared from the neighbourhood years and years ago; the very road had vanished under the flood of tropical vegetation as effectually as if swallowed by the sea; and the main gallery had fallen in within a hundred yards from the entrance. It was no longer an abandoned mine; it was a wild, inaccessible, and rocky gorge of the Sierra, where vestiges of charred timber, some heaps of smashed bricks, and a few shapeless pieces of rusty iron could have been found under the matted mass of thorny creepers covering the ground.[42]

The cyclical quality of man's existence is self-evident. Nature, having been conquered for a while by the forces of civilization, rises up again and reclaims the land. Several major image patterns are present in the description: architectural, floral, and metallic. Like human nature, the silver mine has a barbaric (or natural) side and a refined, civilized side.

Charles Gould shows some understanding of this duality as it has existed in the past when he thinks that "The mine had been the cause of an absurd moral disaster; its working must be made a serious and moral success."[43] But instead of attaching the better side of his nature--that is, that reflecting the refined silver--to something of real and lasting human value, Gould says, "'What is wanted here is law, good faith, order, security. Anyone can declaim about these things, but I pin my faith to material interests. Only let the material interests get a

---

[42] _Nostromo_, p. 54. [43] _Nostromo_, p. 66.

firm footing, and they are bound to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist.'"[44] Conrad's comment on this kind of value system is manifest: "Charles Gould was competent because he had no illusions. The Gould Concession had to fight for life with such weapons as could be found at once in the mire of corruption that was so universal as almost to lose its significance."[45] Human nature, finding itself in a corrupt world, may seek any means, even a hollow one, of saving itself from its baser side.

The dualism of the mine is present in Conrad's description of its development: "Through good and evil report in the varying fortune of that struggle [the civil war] which Don José had characterized in the phrase, 'the fate of national honesty trembles in the balance,' the Gould Concession, 'Imperium in Imperio,' had gone on working . . . ."[46] Decoud characterizes Costaguana as a land plundered by Europeans: "'Now the whole land is like a treasure-house, and all these people are breaking into it, whilst we are cutting each other's throats.'"[47] A newspaper reporter for The Times finds Sulaco to be the "'Treasure House of the World,'" saved for civilization; and Conrad describes the disillusioned Emilia Gould:

---

[44] Nostromo, p. 84. [45] Nostromo, p. 85.

[46] Nostromo, p. 135. [47] Nostromo, p. 174.

"With a prophetic vision she saw herself surviving alone the degradation of her young ideal of life, of love, of work--all alone in the Treasure House of the World."[48]

Having established the silver mine as the most valuable thing in his microcosmic Costaguana, Conrad proceeds to strengthen its symbolic value as the duality of human nature. He does not, however, employ extensive description of the silver in its unmined state because, like the baser side of human nature, it is hidden darkly away from general view. But the bright promise of the silver, as of the better part of man's nature, serves as illustrative contrast when Conrad describes the fashioning of the first ingot of the mine. Appropriately, the author selects Emilia Gould to associate with this promise:

> On the occasion when the fires under the first set of retorts in their shed had glowed far into the night she did not retire to rest on the rough cadre set up for her in the as yet bare frame-house till she had seen the first spongy lump of silver yielded to the hazards of the world by the dark depths of the Gould Concession; she 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 emergence of a principle.[49]

The mine as a civilizing principle is apparent in Conrad's statement that ". . . the San Tomé mine was to become an

---

[48] Nostromo, p. 522. [49] Nostromo, p. 107.

institution, a rallying-point for everything in the province that needed order and stability to live. Security seemed to flow upon this land from the mountain-gorge."[50]

Still other uses of silver imagery to suggest the civilized side of human nature and of the mine include the Blanco name, meaning white and suggestive of refined silver, which the aristocrats aligned with the Gould Mining Concession give to their political party.[51] Wealthy ranchers visited in the _campo_ by the Goulds have "much silver on the trappings of their horses";[52] and even the poor Indians can buy at "Anzani's great emporium" a selection of "tiny silver arms, legs, heads, hearts (for ex-voto offerings)."[53] It is in Emilia Gould, however, that this influence reaches its apex. She has "grey eyes,"[54] suggestive of the duality of human nature; yet she is always linked with silver in its most refined and civilized form. Conrad's conception of the epitome of the civilized life she represents appears in the following:

> The stateliness of ancient days lingered between the four high, smooth walls, tinted a delicate primrose-colour; and Mrs. Gould, with her little head and shining coils of hair, sitting in a cloud of muslin and lace before a slender mahogany table, resembled a fairy posed lightly before dainty philtres dispensed out of vessels of silver and porcelain.[55]

---

[50] _Nostromo_, p. 110. [51] _Nostromo_, p. 34.

[52] _Nostromo_, p. 88. [53] _Nostromo_, p. 159.

[54] _Nostromo_, p. 46. [55] _Nostromo_, pp. 51-52.

The word coils, however, recalls to the reader Conrad's animal imagery, reminding him that the serpent lurks in this civilized state in the form of man's baser nature.

Refined silver as representative of man's civilized side can itself be corrupting when no moral principle girds up human endeavor: "Most of the Europeans in Sulaco were there, rallied round Charles Gould, as if the silver of the mine had been the emblem of a common cause, the symbol of the supreme importance of material interests."[56] Of this corruption Dr. Monygham says:

> "There is no peace and no rest in the development of material interests. They have their law, and their justice. But it is founded on expediency, and is inhuman; it is without rectitude, without the continuity and the force that can be found only in a moral principle. Mrs. Gould, the time approaches when all that the Gould Concession stands for shall weigh as heavily upon the people as the barbarism, cruelty, and misrule of a few years back."[57]

"Material interests," flying the false banners of civilizing forces, can ironically corrupt even Emilia Gould, who, though associated with silver in her capacity as arbiter of civilized values,[58] is corrupted by her own fears.[59] She is at novel's end "wealthy beyond great dreams of wealth, considered, loved, respected, honoured,

---

[56] Nostromo, p. 260.

[57] Nostromo, p. 511.

[58] Nostromo, p. 107. [59] Nostromo, p. 557.

and as solitary as any human being had ever been, perhaps, on this earth."[60]

Nostromo's association with the dualism of good and evil, of civilizing and barbaric powers inherent in the symbolism of the silver mine, is established smoothly in Part I. He rides a "silver-grey mare,"[61] both color and animal imagery reinforcing the idea of subjugating his baser nature; and the imagery of clothing as a civilizing agency blends with that of silver in the following description:

> When the carriage moved on he took off his hat again, 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 the 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 . . . .[62]

Part II links him directly with the silver ingots in his attempt with Decoud to save them from Montero. Physical descriptions of silver in his apparel and accoutrements are minimal in this section of the novel because the action itself forms the necessary identification. Additionally, Decoud, in the letter to his Parisian sister, associates Nostromo with silver as an agency of civilization by

---

[60] Nostromo, p. 555.

[61] Nostromo, p. 22. [62] Nostromo, p. 125.

describing the Capataz's attempt to rescue the overthrown president Ribiera from the town rabble at the onset of the revolution: "'Then he took out the silver whistle he is in the habit of using on the wharf (this man seems to disdain the use of any metal less precious than silver) and blew into it twice, evidently a preconcerted signal for his Cargadores. He ran out immediately, and they rallied around him.'"[63]

Given the nickname of "the Incorruptible" by Giorgio Viola,[64] Nostromo is further identified with the silver when, having been entrusted by civilized men with saving the treasure, he comments to Decoud as they return it to the earth on the Great Isabel:

> "And always remember, señor, before you open your lips for a confidence, that this treasure may be left safely here for hundreds of years. Time is on its side, señor. And silver is an incorruptible metal that can be trusted to keep its value for ever. . . . An incorruptible metal," he repeated, as if the idea had given him a profound pleasure.[65]

The return of the treasure to the earth, a symbolic return of the civilized ingot form to a barbaric state, foreshadows Nostromo's own dissociation from the world of civilized men and the movement into neobarbaric self-interest; and it sets up the central transition of the

---

[63] Nostromo, p. 225.

[64] Nostromo, p. 221. [65] Nostromo, pp. 299-300.

novel from concern with society to concern with individual man in the person of Nostromo. From this point on, he is not identified by silver associated in any way with his physical person; instead, it is the absence of the silver--that is, its having been returned underground--that becomes more pervasive than its presence. Its forces enter into Nostromo's being; and the moral choice of giving dominion to either the baser or more refined state of the metal, of his own nature, is his to make.

One of the few instances in Part II of Nostromo's wearing of silver is the heavy ring he wears at the bedside of the dying Teresa Viola.[66] Here again the element of moral choice--of the ambiguity of human nature--is present. In making the decision to deny Teresa's request for consolation of a priest, Nostromo belies the civilized promise of the bright color of the ring and foreshadows his much greater choice to allow the dark qualities of silver and of human nature to corrupt the Incorruptible Capataz.

Later, about to be confronted with this decision, Nostromo speaks with Dr. Monygham in Sulaco, now under the

---

[66] Nostromo, p. 252. The protagonist in Lord Jim also wears a silver ring, emblematic of his authority. Conrad describes it as a "'talisman that had opened for him [Jim] the door of fame, love and success within the wall of forests fringed with white foam, within the coast that under the western sun looks like the very stronghold of the night'" (Vol. IV, p. 415).

control of Montero and his barbarians. In heavy irony reminding the reader of both the silver and human nature, Conrad puts these words into Monygham's mouth: "'I say that you must be true to yourself, Capataz.'"[67] Monygham, of course, is thinking of Emilia Gould in his concern for the safety of the silver; but the irony lies in Nostromo's corrupting decision to keep the silver for himself. In the midst of Monygham's revelation of his plan to delay Sotillo by making him believe that the silver is not lost but buried nearby, the doctor asks Nostromo to delay revealing to the conquered forces of civilization news of the silver. Nostromo, manifesting the workings of his baser nature, physically assaults Monygham as though the latter were an agent of the devil: "'The priests say he is a tempter, do they not?'"[68] The die is cast for Nostromo's downfall.

Part III, "The Lighthouse," serves to show the workings of Nostromo's baser side, symbolized now by the buried treasure, on his better side. Unconscious of the dualism of human nature in the first two parts of the novel and largely identified with a kind of Rousseauian goodness, Nostromo, after his existential decision to put self-interest first, becomes corrupt partly because of ironically corrupting civilizing agencies--religion, law, politics, and so forth--themselves undergoing the

---

[67] Nostromo, p. 457. [68] Nostromo, p. 462.

perpetual cycle of corruption and regeneration. Strongly characterized in the novel as an ex-sailor, the protagonist ironically fails to steer between the extremes of his humanity. Conrad implies that this moral weakness is the general fault of humanity at large. At one extreme is Charles Gould, who, purporting to represent the civilizing impulse, instead sterilizes that impulse by depriving it of a moral principle whose infusion would give redeeming life. At the other extreme is a Montero or Sotillo, men whose motivating principle is not a moral one at all but self-aggrandizement. Such men make feeble pretense, if any at all, to humanitarian ideals, and, though ostensibly possessed of a civilized veneer, exhibit the savage and barbaric side of humanity which resides within every breast. Humanity, then, according to Conrad, bears within its bosom, as does the silver within the earth's bosom, the potential for destruction by means of oppositions, either of which can be carried to extreme; and though the aridity of a Charles Gould's extreme might appear preferable to that of a Montero or Sotillo, Conrad demonstrates explicitly through his imagery that the barbaric inevitably overwhelms the civilized. Carried to extreme, the savagery of the barbaric is inevitably stronger than the emasculation of the civilized.

Dorothy Van Ghent's identification of Nostromo with the destructive forces of nature and of his achievements

with the natural world[69] is only partially correct. His successes are, assuredly, those won by physical strength, those of a "natural" man; yet it is of paramount importance to recognize that such feats are demonstrated always within the context of service to civilization because of his informing concern for reputation. All of the references to Nostromo's accomplishments manifest his successful steering between the extremes of human nature. Though he dominates the barbaric side--his gray horse, his almost-uncontrollable stevedores, the town rabble--or outwits it in the form of a Montero or Sotillo, neither does he allow any empty shape of civilization, as Charles Gould would allow, to destroy him. He balances the two sides for the first two parts of the novel, and only when this sense of proportion is lost does he succumb to the inevitable power of the destructive forces of human nature. Once he loses the ideal conception of himself, his concern for his vanity, corruption begins.

Shaped by his vanity, these achievements are what give substance to Nostromo's life. In a revealing passage describing the isolation of Decoud as he waits alone on the Great Isabel, Conrad suggests that man can only survive the human condition by being at one with both sides of his

---

[69] "Introduction," Nostromo (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Rinehart Editions, 1961), pp. vii-xxv, passim.

nature:

> After three days of waiting for the sight of some human face, Decoud caught himself entertaining a doubt of his own individuality. It had merged into the world of cloud and water, of natural forces and forms of nature. In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part. Decoud lost all belief in the reality of his action past and to come.[70]

It is the balance between oppositions of human nature that makes life enjoyable for the Nostromo of Parts I and II. But, lacking the balance, his scepticism providing no solace, Decoud is led to the despair of suicide. In dispensing with the saving illusion of reputation which had formerly protected him, however, the Nostromo of Part III tilts the delicate balance in favor of the darker side. Illusionless, he is led to a destruction qualitatively no different from Decoud's.

Nostromo is Conrad's vanity of human wishes--in fact, one might well suspect this to be the reason for his making Nostromo's guiding principle that of vanity. The novelist, for example, distinguishes Gould from Decoud:

> The cruel futility of things stood unveiled in the levity and sufferings of that incorrigible people [of Costaguana]; the cruel futility of lives and of deaths thrown away in the vain endeavour to attain an enduring solution of the problem. Unlike Decoud, Charles Gould could not play lightly a part in a

---

[70] Nostromo, p. 497. Cf. Kurtz, of whom Marlow says, "Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint . . .'" (Vol. VI, p. 131); and Singleton in The Nigger of the Narcissus: "He steered with care" (Vol. III, p. 89).

> tragic farce. It was tragic enough for him in all conscience, but he could see no farcical element. He suffered too much under a conviction of irremediable folly. He was too severely practical and too idealistic to look upon its terrible humours with amusement, as Martin Decoud, the imaginative materialist, was able to do in the dry light of his scepticism.[71]

The bleak attitude of the novelist towards human nature is reiterated when Father Román, chaplain of the mine workers, muses:

> The working of the usual public institutions presented itself to him most distinctly as a series of calamities overtaking private individuals and flowing logically from each other through hate, revenge, folly, and rapacity, as though they had been part of a divine dispensation.[72]

As the fate of nations is that of individuals, so the story of human nature and of the silver mine is the destiny of Nostromo.

In a passage reminiscent of Thomas Hardy at his most pessimistic, Conrad writes of Monygham's marveling at Nostromo's survival of the lighter episode:

> He esteemed highly the intrepidity of that man, whom he valued but little, being disillusioned as to mankind in general, because of the particular instance in which his own manhood had failed [under torture by the dictator Guzman Bento]. Having had to encounter single-handed during his period of eclipse many physical dangers, he was well aware of the most dangerous element common to them all: of the crushing, paralysing sense of human littleness, which is what really defeats a man struggling with

---

[71] Nostromo, p. 364. [72] Nostromo, p. 399.

> natural forces, alone, far from the eyes of his fellows.[73]

The "natural" forces" with which man struggles, as do both Decoud and Nostromo, are but those residing within.

Some critics of Nostromo understandably find Conrad's attitude towards life objectionable. Hugh Kenner, for one, thinks Conrad manipulates his subject philosophically, thereby giving the novel a detached remoteness; and though the result is artistically great, the novel suffers from an excess of technique.[74] John Shand is less commendatory: "From an artistic point of view Conrad has come to puzzle too much about the profound complexities that lie behind the superficial actions and sayings of mankind, the thousand and one turns of fate that bring about a given situation. He has become too fond of gazing at the Sphinx in all its forms."[75] Thus Conrad is rewarded for his elaborately wrought study of human nature in Nostromo.

Others, however, are more appreciative of Conrad's "gazing at the Sphinx": Albert Cook states that the

---

[73] Nostromo, p. 433.

[74] "Conrad and Ford," Shenandoah, III (Summer 1952), 50-55.

[75] "Some Notes on Joseph Conrad," in The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium, ed. Stallman, pp. 17-18.

novelist's plots maneuver the protagonist through situations that require his recognition of a void at the center of existence.[76] And Adam Gillon in The Eternal Solitary: A Study of Joseph Conrad cites illusion as making life worthwhile for some of Conrad's characters and thus shielding them against the human condition of loneliness.[77] Gillon thinks that Conrad depicts fidelity as man's chief virtue; and Ian Watt agrees,[78] preferring the term commitment. Fidelity and commitment both imply, of course, a solidarity, a movement of one human being towards another; and Conrad himself makes clear in the preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus that solidarity informs life, both individual and societal, with significance. In Nostromo three women possess this virtue: Antonia Avellanos for the deceased Decoud, Emilia Gould for her emotionally dead husband, and Linda Viola for the supreme violator of the virtue, the dead Captain Fidanza.

---

[76] "Conrad's Void," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XII (March 1958), 326-330.

[77] (New York: Bookman Associates, 1960). But contrast Marlow's observation in Heart of Darkness: "'We live as we dream--alone . . .'" (Vol. VI, p. 82).

[78] "Joseph Conrad: Alienation and Commitment," The English Mind: Studies in the English Moralists Presented to Basil Willey, eds. Hugh Sykes Davies and George Watson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), pp. 257-278,

In discussing the works of Henry James, Geoffrey Hartman makes an observation applicable to Nostromo:

> If we respect the simplest themes and structural features of James's novels, we must describe his cogito as follows. In the beginning the mind is conscious of a plot or secret marriage of some kind. Eventually, the mind is conscious of itself--of its own complicity or secret marriage. Consciousness, in other words, is not at all free or disinterested. It is knowingly or unknowingly the result of a contract, as in Faust, of a conspiracy, as in the Fall, or of a covenant like the crucifixion. Such liasons dangereuses implicate us, make us historical, and create in us a new and powerful awareness. From this perspective each novel is seen to be a story that extracts from its hero and often from the storyteller himself a contractual quid pro quo. Consciousness must be paid for, and the usual wages are sacrifice and death. Thus whatever stands greatly against consciousness is drawn into a plot whose acquisitive and inquisitive purposes blend; the plot tests, until it destroys, the illusion that there is innocence or disinterestedness.[79]

The secret marriage existing in Conrad's Nostromo is that between the sides of his human nature; the protagonist is unconscious of this contract and knows only that it brings him adulation. By the conclusion of Part II, however, he has become cognizant that this marriage has not brought him else but praise; and once aware of this fact, he sets out to rectify the situation. The result is destruction.

Conrad finds most of the saving agencies offered by civilization to be shams. Decoud, in his modern scepticism

---

[79] Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 55.

lacking faith in anything,[80] dies from the very lack. His intellect fails to save him when confronted with human isolation: "Intellectually self-confident, he suffered from being deprived of the only weapon he could use with effect. No intelligence could penetrate the darkness of the Placid Gulf."[81] Don José Avellanos, like the ideas of democratic government with which he is associated, deteriorates physically and expires.[82] Father Corbelán has not been truly civilized by his religion; and the chaplain of the earlier dictator Guzman Bento had degenerated completely into barbarism.[83] Pulling together these ideas, Conrad writes: "The popular mind is incapable of scepticism; and that incapacity delivers their helpless strength to the wiles of swindlers and to the pitiless enthusiasms of leaders inspired by visions of a higher destiny."[84] The novelist's is a bleak view indeed!

Captain Mitchell speaks to an anonymous visitor in Sulaco after the revolution has ended and observes the "lights of San Tomé, that seemed suspended in the dark night between earth and heaven." "'A great power, this,'"

---

[80] Nostromo, pp. 197-198. [81] Nostromo, p. 275.

[82] Nostromo, p. 356. [83] Nostromo, pp. 371-372.

[84] Nostromo, p. 420. Cf. Razumov's statement in Under Western Eyes: "'Visionaries work everlasting evil on earth. Their Utopias inspire in the mass of mediocre minds a disgust of reality and a contempt for the secular logic of human development'" (Vol. XI, p. 95).

he says, "'for good and evil, sir. A great power.'"[85] In this statement Conrad crystallizes his view of human nature and the symbolism of the silver mine.

---

[85] Nostromo, p. 486.

Chapter 4

THE CIRCULAR PATH: IMAGES OF SETTING, TRANSPORTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Consistent with his general arrangement of images into those representative of barbaric or of civilized human nature, Conrad maintains a dichotomy within the natural setting of the novel's action. Chief among the examples of this opposition, it may be recalled, is the description in the novel's opening chapter; the Golfo Placido, the Isabels, and the mountain range are opposed to that of the town of Sulaco. Conrad further subdivides setting into polarities of land and water, coastal plain and mountain, Sulaco and Costaguana, and Old and New Worlds. In each pair of terms the first represents some state of civilization and the second some state of nature or barbarism. One must recall, however, that Conrad's pervasive irony frequently establishes one point of view only to assert that the opposite--or neither--is true; for it is the cyclical or reciprocal quality of man's existence that he wishes to demonstrate by means of setting.

This ironic manner is manifest in his association of the sea with civilizing forces. For example, he states that through the agency of the Oceanic Steam Navigation

Company the coastside inhabitants feel "their lives and property were safer on the water than in their own houses on shore."[1] In contrast, Conrad first describes the land as barbaric; for when the forces of civilization have sent Nostromo and Decoud to the safety of the sea in the silver-laden lighter, the Capataz says:

> "There is enough silver to make a whole province rich, let alone a seaboard pueblo inhabited by thieves and vagabonds. Señor, they would think that heaven itself sent these riches into their hands, and would cut our throats without hesitation. I would trust no fair words from the best man around the shores of this wild gulf."[2]

Giorgio Viola prefers the sea to the land as a grave for his dead wife:

> "I have buried many men on battlefields on this continent. The priests talk of consecrated ground! Bah! All the earth made by God is holy; but the sea, which knows nothing of kings and priests and tyrants, is the holiest of all, Doctor! I should like to bury her in the sea. No mummeries, candles, incense, no holy water mumbled over by priests. The spirit of liberty is upon the waters."[3]

The old Garibaldino ironically considers the sea more civilized than the land because the former is less touched by man's hand.

But this idea of water's purity is reversed in two

---

[1] Joseph Conrad, Nostromo, Collected Works, Memorial Edition, VIII (Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1925), p. 10. All subsequent references to Conrad's works are to this edition.

[2] Nostromo, p. 264. [3] Nostromo, p. 341.

specific instances involving a water filter. In the first instance, Decoud sits alone in his room, composing the letter to his sister. Conrad writes:

> After setting these words down for the benefit of his sister, Decoud lifted his head to listen. But there were no sounds, neither in the room nor in the house, except the drip of the water from the filter into the vast earthenware jar under the wooden stand.[4]

The second instance occurs after Teresa Viola's death and the entry of Montero's troops into Sulaco. Giorgio Viola now is the one who sits alone:

> He never heard the brazen roar of the bells in town. When it ceased the earthenware filter in the corner of the kitchen kept on its swift musical drip, drip into the great porous jar below.[5]

In both cases water must be purified through contact with a man-made product of earthen materials. Conrad reverses his former opposition; and water now appears to signify the barbaric and land (the filter itself) the purifying agent. This reversal parallels the earlier presence of the steamship company that civilizes savage waters.

Conrad similarly identifies water with the darker forces of nature in Nostromo's sinking of the lighter, the vessel associated with civilization in the attempt to save the silver:

> The gloomy, clouded dawn from behind the mountains showed him on the smooth waters the upper corner of

---

[4] Nostromo, p. 244. [5] Nostromo, pp. 467-468.

> the sail, a dark wet triangle of canvas waving slightly to and fro. He saw it vanish, as if jerked under, and then struck out for the shore.[6]

Metaphorically, the power of civilized mankind has been sunk and the influence of the steamship company countermanded by mankind itself in the person of Nostromo, who now begins the process of deterioration. The action, carried out on the sea, equates water with barbarism.

Conrad further requires his protagonist to pass through the watery element as he swims ashore, his immersion in the sea a metaphorical washing off of civilization. Awaking later on shore from his fourteen-hour sleep, Nostromo lacks a civilized veneer; for he

> arose full length from his lair in the long grass. He stood knee deep amongst the whispering undulations of the green blades with the lost air of a man just born into the world.[7]

He is animal-like, "a magnificent and unconscious wild beast" in his "lair." The color green and the flora itself are associated with the barbaric side of man's nature; and the grass is in its movement suggestive of the ocean's roll. It is on the land again that consciousness, or the civilizing power, returns to Nostromo as Everyman: "Then,

---

[6] Nostromo, pp. 303-304. In Lord Jim the protagonist and his fellow deserters sit in their boat, enshrouded in darkness, thinking that the Patna is sunk: "'You could have believed that every bit of dry land had gone to the bottom . . .'" (Vol. IV, p. 114).

[7] Nostromo, p. 411.

in the suddenly steadied glance fixed upon nothing from under a thoughtful frown, appeared the man."[8]

Further association of the sea with man's baser nature is evident in Conrad's description of the beach in this same passage: "The little wavelets seemed to be tossing tiny red sparks upon the sandy beaches. The glassy bands of water along the horizon gave out a fiery red glow, as if fire and water had been mingled together in the vast bed of the ocean."[9] Strengthening the identification of water with savagery is Conrad's use of red color imagery, throughout connected with barbarism. Significant opposition of land and water also occurs when, shortly after Nostromo's swim ashore, Decoud leaves the relative security offered on the Great Isabel to commit his despairing act of suicide in the midst of the black gulf waters: "Taking up the oars slowly, he pulled away from the cliff of the Great Isabel, that stood behind him warm with sunshine, as if with the heat of life, bathed in a rich light from head to foot as if in a radiance of hope and joy."[10] The reader must keep in mind that the Golfo

---

[8]Ibid. In Lord Jim Conrad also associates the sea with savagery. Marlow says, "'Trust a boat on the high seas to bring out the Irrational that lurks at the bottom of every thought, sentiment, sensation, emotion'" (Vol. IV, p. 121).

[9]Nostromo, p. 411.

[10]Ibid.

Placido with its impenetrable darkness is the focal point of the novel's geography; for as Royal Roussel points out, "The world of Costaguana is created only so that it may be imposed against the darkness of the Golfo Placido, the [omniscient] narrator's ties to this world are invoked only so that they can be dismissed as irrelevant."[11]

Yet the land is obviously not the bastion of civilized forces one might suppose, since the events taking place there are anything but civilized. Conrad telescopes the opposition of land and water, of civilized and barbaric forces, to concentrate on their co-existence in man's nature wherever he may be, especially on shore.[12] This telescoping is perhaps most pronounced in Conrad's transplanting man from his natural barbaric state, identified with water, to a more civilized one, identified with land. Nostromo, for example, frequently described as a Mediterranean sailor displaced to the shore, speaks of the ghosts of men doomed to look for treasure on Azuera: "'Doctor, did you ever hear of the miserable _gringos_ on Azuera, that cannot die? Ha! ha! Sailors like

---

[11] _The Metaphysics of Darkness: A Study in the Unity of Conrad's Fiction_ (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 112.

[12] Compare the Congo River in _Heart of Darkness_ as an extension of the sea into the interior of the land. Kurtz's hut, significantly enough, is located near the river's shore.

myself.'"[13] But because of the cyclical quality of human nature, this movement from barbaric to civilized, from sea to land, is fated to pass into neobarbarism. The ghosts wander the wastes of Azuera as they once wandered those of the sea. Similarly, his moral corruption complete, Nostromo returns to the sea as the captain of a coastal ship;[14] and, in the faithless act of deserting his betrothed, Linda, for Giselle, he is depicted as a man of the sea:

> Before leaving the harbour he had thrown off the store clothing of Captain Fidanza, for greater ease in the long pull out to the islands. He stood before her [Giselle] in the red sash and check shirt as he used to appear on the Company's wharf--a Mediterranean sailor come ashore to try his luck in Costaguana.[15]

The color red and the removal of clothing fortify here Conrad's imagistic identification of the sea with man's baser qualities.

Confounding the polar associations he establishes, however, Conrad shows that as the barbarism of the sea and the civilization of the shore are united in human nature, so sea and land coexist. When Nostromo, awakened from his long sleep, enters Sulaco, he goes to Viola's hotel: "In the impenetrable darkness his head swam with the illusion

---

[13] Nostromo, p. 460. Lord Jim is a similarly displaced sailor.

[14] Nostromo, p. 523.

[15] Nostromo, p. 537.

that the obscurity of the kitchen was as vast as the Placid Gulf, and that the floor dipped forward like a sinking lighter."[16] By such imagery Conrad pronounces that civilized mankind, like Decoud and Nostromo, must return to the dark sea of its nature. Whereas the jungle in Heart of Darkness is actively hostile to man, physical nature in Nostromo abides. In its placid (gulf) wisdom (Higuerota), it outwaits man.

Coastal plains and towering mountains function imagistically in a manner parallel to that of land and water. Although Ben Kimpel and T. C. Duncan Eaves demonstrate admirably that Conrad did not make either a detailed mental map of Costaguana or a chronological outline of Costaguanan history,[17] their convincing conclusions are not made as criticisms of the overall achievement of the novel. Conrad conceivably satisfies himself with a general geographical setting in order to establish more emphatically that the dialectical opposition of coastal plain and mountain, of land and sea, is his paramount concern, rather than particularities of locale. This does

---

[16] Nostromo, p. 466. In The Secret Agent, Conrad uses similar phrasing to describe Winnie Verloc's action after stabbing her husband. She leans on the sofa "because of the undulatory and swinging movement of the parlour, which for some time behaved as though it were at sea in a tempest" (Vol. IX, p. 263).

[17] "The Geography and History in Nostromo," Modern Philology, LVI (August 1958), 45-54.

not at all imply that Conrad does not employ detailed descriptions of given places; rather it is that such descriptions have significance as they relate either to plain and land or to mountain and sea imagery rather than to the larger geographical frame of his imaginary nation. Even Tony Tanner's note that Conrad employs a characteristic Victorian metaphor to describe the ideal and spiritual in terms of mountains and the unpleasant and physical in terms of depths[18] is at best slanted and inexact; the silver mine, for example, is located in the midst of the mountains, thereby involving a union of depths and heights which Tanner's position does not countenance.

Much closer to understanding Conrad's use of geography is Frederick R. Karl, who states in A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad that "The passages on the Gulf and 'The Isabels,' as well as the description of the Cordillera range and the 'white head of Higuerota [which] rises majestically upon the blue,' are an organic part of the novel; for nature is implacable, and its ruthlessness helps to define, like the silver, each character it touches."[19] Conrad posits, then, a geographical setting which, like the silver itself, has both a natural or

---

[18]"Mountains and Depths--An Approach to Nineteenth-Century Dualism," Review of English Literature, III (October 1962), 51-61.

[19](New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), p. 172.

essentially savage state and a refined or civilized existence. The mountain peak of Higuerota, symbolizing the abiding power of brute nature in the novel, only seems to possess a "cool purity" holding itself "aloof from a hot earth";[20] for that "purity" is no more desirable or ideal than is the original condition of the water which must be filtered for man's use. Whereas the mountains are lofty, brooding, and treacherous (for men die in their high passes), the coastal plain is fruitful and seemingly beneficent. The Sulaco Valley

> unrolled itself, with green young crops, plains, woodland, and gleams of water, park-like, from the blue vapour of the distant sierra to an immense quivering horizon of grass and sky, where big white clouds seemed to fall slowly into the darkness of their own shadows.[21]

The plain has been conquered; but the mountains resist change, the telegraph wire ending abruptly in the foothills.[22]

Conrad's ironic technique in establishing an imagery of setting, however, is to identify places with barbarism or civilization only to reverse the identification and then unite both to suggest the dualism of human nature. Illustratively, Conrad locates the silver mine in the mountains, thereby forcing his civilized characters to

---

[20] Nostromo, p. 26.

[21] Nostromo, p. 87. [22] Nostromo, p. 135.

depart from the plain to attempt a conquest of the barbaric natural state of the mountains. Their success, ironically, only furthers the cyclical movement of human nature; for, because of the wealth produced by conquered nature, the civilized plain reverts to savagery. As he does with the imagery of land and water, Conrad reverses the identification. The mountain mine now comes to represent the stabilizing force of civilization, the town and plain to represent degeneration. Then, drawing both geographical areas together, Conrad unites them:

> Looking out of the window, Decoud was met by a darkness so impenetrable that he could see neither the mountains nor the town, nor yet the buildings near the harbour; and there was not a sound, as if the tremendous obscurity of the Placid Gulf, spreading from the waters over the land, had made it dumb as well as blind.[23]

Images of sea and land, of mountain and plain, blend in this passage to indicate the darkness of the human condition. Finally, strengthening the identification of water and mountain with barbarism to image the defeat of land and plain, Conrad depicts the Monterist army "approaching Sulaco from the mountains, as well as from the sea."[24] Humanity is trapped between.

---

[23] *Nostromo*, p. 229.

[24] *Nostromo*, p. 307. Razumov in *Under Western Eyes* feels himself similarly trapped--in his case between the lawlessness of autocracy and that of revolution (Vol. XI, p. 77).

The entire novel, of course, in its plot of social revolution and civil war, illustrates the obvious association of Sulaco with civilization and Costaguana with barbarism. Decoud comments that "'the rest of Costaguana hangs like a millstone round our necks. The Occidental territory is large enough to make any man's country. Look at the mountains! Nature itself seems to cry to us "Separate!"'"[25] Commenting later on the government overthrown by Montero, the railroad engineer-in-chief links the nation with irrational nature when he says: "'Ribierism has failed, as everything merely rational fails in this country.'"[26] Nostromo calls Costaguana a "'country of evil'";[27] and even the name Conrad gives to the garrison commanded by the rebel Sotillo suggests the barbarism rampant outside Sulaco. Esmeralda means emerald, the green color imagery buttressing the association of Costaguana and savagery. He makes Sulaco, however, part of Costaguana, harboring within its own walls a savage rabble to illustrate the interpenetration of good and evil in the dualism of his geographical setting. Even though Sulaco finally succeeds in its separation from the rest of Costaguana, the defeated

---

[25] Nostromo, p. 184. In Heart of Darkness Kurtz opposes the authority of his company's representatives, planning in his own way to revolutionize life in the Congo.

[26] Nostromo, p. 315. [27] Nostromo, p. 437.

national forces gather strength on the other side of the mountains; and Father Corbelán threatens even more local civil disorder.

Although lingering dreams of a better life in the New World still inform the thoughts of such a man as Giorgio Viola, who lives a life composed of faithful reminiscence of his days with the patriot Garibaldi, most inhabitants of Conrad's Costaguana find their existential experience no different from that of men in the Old World. To express his belief that human nature is ever-ready to devolve to the barbaric and that civilization at best is but a feeble armor, Conrad opposes in Nostromo the Old World of Europe and the New World of Costaguana. Persons, actions, things, locales are described as they relate to one or both of these worlds. Initially, Conrad associates the Old World with civilization and the New World with barbarism. In this connection, it is significant to note that almost none of his central characters is Latin American. Charles Gould, though a native of the country, is the European-educated grandchild of English immigrants; and his wife, Dr. Monygham, Captain Mitchell, and Sir John are English also. The financier Holroyd is a North American; and Nostromo, as well as the Violas, is Italian. Decoud, though Costaguanan, has spent most of his life as an émigré in Europe. Of the major characters, only Don José and Antonia Avellanos are life-long inhabitants of their native country. Conrad, much in the manner of Henry

James, dislodges his characters from comfortable native surroundings in order to place them on the road of spiritual adventure and self-knowledge.

Aligned with the progressive forces of the Old World in the building of the railroad are "Italian and Basque workmen who rallied faithfully round their English chiefs"[28] during the revolt of the town rabble. "The Italian sailor whom all the Europeans in Sulaco, following Captain Mitchell's mispronunciation, were in the habit of calling Nostromo,"[29] maintains, on the other hand, a strict control over his New World workmen, "natives of the Republic" and "an outcast lot of very mixed blood, mainly negroes."[30] Dressed in his English riding clothes, Charles Gould is the essence of the Old World in his attempt to bring order and stability to Costaguana. He rides by a statue of the Spanish king Charles IV, erected by an earlier civilized age:

> . . . Don Carlos Gould, in his English riding clothes, looked . . . much more at home than the kingly cavalier reining in his steed on the pedestal above the sleeping leperos, with his marble arm raised towards the marble rim of a plumed hat.
>
> The weather-stained effigy of the mounted king, with its vague suggestion of a saluting gesture, seemed to present an inscrutable breast to the political changes which had robbed it of its very name; but neither did the other horseman, well known to the people, keen and alive on his well-

---

[28] Nostromo, p. 14. [29] Nostromo, p. 43.

[30] Nostromo, p. 14.

> shaped, slate-coloured beast with a white eye, wear his heart on the sleeve of his English coat.[31]

The imagery of clothing, color ("white"), and architecture or art work ("marble" and the statue itself recall the palazzo urn and Emilia's water-color sketch), combine with the Old World essence of both horsemen to suggest the impulse to civilization; yet "weather-stained" and "leperos" impose a reverse corrupting movement. Even "slate-coloured" recalls the ambiguity of the silver mine and of human nature. Though "no one could be more of a Costaguanero than Don Carlos Gould," he nonetheless looks more English "than anybody out of the hunting-field pictures in the numbers of Punch."[32]

The civilization of the Old World, however, is as easily discarded as it is assumed. Conrad writes that the coastal towns possess a "slight European veneer"[33] and that the torture inflicted by Guzman Bento on Dr. Monygham "did away with his Europeanism."[34] Pedrito Montero, brother of the military leader, "following the example of the Duc de Morny,"[35] means to enrich himself in the conquest of Sulaco.

What is equated with progress may itself be but a

---

[31] Nostromo, pp. 48-49. [32] Nostromo, p. 47.

[33] Nostromo, p. 88. [34] Nostromo, p. 375.

[35] Nostromo, p. 388.

refinement of the savage. Sulaco, for example, defends itself against Montero with "an improved model of a military rifle. It had been just discarded for something still more deadly by one of the great European powers."[36] Conrad puts the following cynical words into Decoud's mouth:

> "Of course, government in general, any government anywhere, is a thing of exquisite comicality to a discerning mind; but really we Spanish-Americans do overstep the bounds. . . . However, these Ribierists, of whom we hear so much just now, are really trying in their own comical way to make the country inhabitable . . . ."[37]

Decoud is the civilized man, the Paris boulevardier, acknowledging the barbaric side of his own nature when he says, "'I suppose I am more of a Costaguanero than I would have believed possible.'"[38] Yet he foolishly thinks of Europe as civilized when he ponders carrying off Antonia,

> away from the endlessness of civil strife, whose folly seemed even harder to bear than its ignominy. After one Montero there would be another, the lawlessness of a populace of all colours and races, barbarism, irremediable tyranny. As the great Liberator Bolívar had said in the bitterness of his spirit, "America is ungovernable."[39]

Since the New World is but the mirror image of the Old World, it is man himself, regardless of his location, who is beyond hope.

Essentially, Europe is no different from

---

[36] Nostromo, p. 149. [37] Nostromo, p. 152.

[38] Nostromo, p. 176. [39] Nostromo, p. 186.

Costaguana; both are interested in Sulaco only because of its prosperity. As the Montero brothers are men who have moved into neobarbarism, so Europe is but a collection of greedy nations. Europeans residing in Costaguana rally around Charles Gould because of the silver,[40] joining with the Englishman in his plan to rescue it through the agency of Nostromo; and Europeanized townspeople flee Montero on a road "like an English country lane."[41] In his own dealings with Montero, Sotillo feigns illness, "an expedient not unknown to European statesmen when they wish to delay a difficult negotiation."[42] Conrad contrasts the greed of South Americans and Europeans to the greater disparagement of the latter when Sotillo momentarily focuses his attention on possessing Captain Mitchell's gold watch:

> There is always something childish in the rapacity of the passionate, clear-minded. Southern races, wanting in the misty idealism of the Northerners, who at the smallest encouragement dream of nothing less than the conquest of the earth.[43]

Once the forces of barbarism under Sotillo and Montero are defeated, Conrad returns to the position of describing the Old World as more highly civilized than the

---

[40] Nostromo, p. 260.

[41] Nostromo, p. 359. Conrad similarly compares English roads to foreign ones in Heart of Darkness, Vol. VI, p. 70.

[42] Nostromo, p. 442. [43] Nostromo, p. 333.

New World. The Amarilla Club once more thrives with "sallow, little, nervous men, and fat, placid, swarthy men, and Europeans or North Americans of superior standing, whose faces looked very white amongst the majority of dark complexions and black, glistening eyes."[44] North Americans are grouped with Europeans by the whiteness of their skin, the color associated with civilization, and contrasted with the darker and more barbaric coloration of the South Americans. And though Captain Mitchell as narrator pronounces the rebuilt town plaza of Sulaco "'Twice the area of Trafalgar Square,'"[45] suggesting an intensity of progress unmatched by London itself, the undercurrent of barbarism ebbs and flows in both hemispheres.

Conrad draws together his geographic imagery to suggest man's despair over the never-ending alternation of states of existence in a description of a neorevolutionary photographer: "an indigent, sickly, somewhat hunchbacked little photographer, with a white face and a magnanimous soul dyed crimson by a bloodthirsty hate of all capitalists, oppressors of the two hemispheres."[46] As Royal Roussel points out in The Metaphysics of Darkness, the omniscient narrator in Nostromo is grounded "in a dual awareness of the surface and the darkness which is the

---

[44] Nostromo, p. 479 [45] Nostromo, p. 476.

[46] Nostromo, p. 528.

essence of Conradian detachment. In this sense, Nostromo is the culmination of Conrad's gradual movement toward detachment. In this novel the [omniscient] narrator's detachment is directed not against a lone representative of civilization, but against the structure of society itself."[47]

Edward Said's thesis in "Record and Reality"[48] that the characters in Nostromo exhibit an anxiety about keeping and leaving a personal record based on preoccupation with the past is a shrewd one. Mitchell's narrative record of events, Decoud's letter to his sister, Don Jose Avellanos' Fifty Years of Misrule, Charles Gould's silver mine, Holroyd's Protestant altruism, Sir John's railroad, and Viola's record of Garibaldian principles are all efforts by characters to transform reality into a personal vision. Yet the records which Said discusses do not nearly exhaust the means of communication, many non-verbal, which Conrad employs imagistically in Nostromo.

Though Albert Guerard says of the work in Conrad the Novelist, "The novel's mysteries are rarely those of communication between two men, or of one man's communication with himself,"[49] the critic wrongly overlooks

---

[47]Roussel, op. cit., p. 108.

[48]In Approaches to the Twentieth-Century Novel, ed. John Eugene Unterecker (New York: Crowell, 1965).

[49](Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966) p. 177.

or minimizes the fact that true communication is indeed a central problem for most of the major characters. Nevertheless, Guerard does appear to recognize the validity of what he denies when, in speaking of Conrad's fictional world in general, he observes: "If the fundamental human act is communication, so betrayal is the ultimate crime, to be dramatized again and again."[50]

Communication in many masks appears in the novel; and an awareness of Conrad's method enables the reader to comprehend more accurately the theme it serves to render more visible. Communication and transportation in the work intertwine to such an extent--indeed, are often knitted up with images of setting--that it is frequently difficult to identify a given expression as representative of one or the other. For present purposes, therefore, communication is defined broadly to include transportation, since the former subsumes the latter to indicate a movement; and this movement is, for Conrad, from one plane of existence to another.

The obvious civilizing force of modern forms of transportation is the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company fleet: "Their names, the names of all mythology, became the household words of a coast that had never been ruled by the gods of Olympus."[51] Costaguana retraces the path

---

[50]Ibid., p. 58. [51]Nostromo, p. 9.

once taken by the culture of ancient Greece. The silver-laden lighter, bearing civilization's treasure, similarly attempts to move man to a higher and better plane; but it is rammed by the steamer, ironically used by Sotillo for neobarbaric purposes.[52] Even the ship which Nostromo buys with his stolen silver[53] masks its owner's deceit by functioning ostensibly as the source of his new wealth.

Primitive paths and roads must give way before the approach of progress. The ox-cart path in front of the Viola hotel contrasts sharply with the harbor branch railway;[54] and natural forces in the form of horses are domesticated in the service of the railway, though their frenzied escape from the paddock during the revolt of the town rabble is a portent of further eruption of the savage.[55] In the interests of progress, Sir John, chairman of the railway board, journeys from London to "smooth the path for his railway."[56]

> The journey from London to Sta. Marta in mail boats and the special carriages of the Sta Marta coast-line (the only railway so far) had been tolerable--even pleasant--quite tolerable. But the trip over the mountains to Sulaco was another sort of experience, in an old diligencia over impassable roads skirting awful precipices.[57]

---

[52] *Nostromo*, p. 291.

[53] *Nostromo*, p. 523.

[54] *Nostromo*, p. 26.

[55] *Nostromo*. p. 27.

[56] *Nostromo*, p. 116.

[57] *Nostromo*, p. 35.

The coming of the railway is equated with the advance of civilized man. "Mrs. Gould had seen it all from the beginning: the clearing of the wilderness, the making of the road, the cutting of new paths up the cliff face of San Tomé."[58] Conrad, however, reminds the reader by contrasting "unshod horses" with "a few carriages"[59] that even within the small Sulacan world of the microcosmic Costaguana the primitive and civilized are juxtaposed. The new wood block pavement of Sulaco's streets[60] at the novel's conclusion merely refine the road for further barbaric feet. Even Charles Gould's foot on the path leading beyond civilization is suggested when Conrad describes the man as standing "outside the dim parallelogram of light falling on the road through the open door."[61]

Also an obvious indication of man's progress toward civilization is Conrad's frequent reference to telegraph and telephone wire or cable, related imagistically to his use of thread and cloth in the novel. The San Francisco building of the financier Holroyd is "an enormous pile of iron, glass, and blocks of stone at the corner of two streets, cobwebbed aloft by the radiation of telegraph wires";[62] and the "slender, vibrating feeler" of

---

[58] Nostromo, p. 106. [59] Nostromo, p. 184.

[60] Nostromo, p. 475. [61] Nostromo, p. 308.

[62] Nostromo, p. 80.

progress climbs throughout Costaguana.[63]

But since communication wire allows a two-way movement, Conrad utilizes the imagery to emphasize man's retrogression even moreso than his seeming progress. Thus, Conrad caustically writes of the bird caged in the Gould household that "Parrots are very human," and intimates that the wire attractively promising union may serve instead to imprison:

> "Viva Costaguana!" he shrieked, with intense self-assertion, and, instantly ruffling up his feathers, assumed an air of puffed up somnolence behind the glittering wires.[64]

News of the defeat of the civilized Ribiera by the barbaric Montero is cabled to Sulaco;[65] the fleeing president is lowered "at the end of a rope" out of the besieged O.S.N. offices and spirited away to safety on a company ship.[66] Local men are pressed into the army of Sulaco by being "lassoed on the road."[67] Suggesting man's degeneration by joining the imagery of flora to that of thread or cloth,

---

[63] Nostromo, p. 166.

[64] Nostromo, p. 82. The Professor in Under Western Eyes says, "'To a teacher of languages there comes a time when the world is but a place of many words and man appears a mere talking animal not much more wonderful than a parrot'" (Vol. XI, p. 3). And Wait in The Nigger of the Narcissus calls Donkin a "'screechin' poll-parrot." (Vol. III, p. 110).

[65] Nostromo, p. 212. [66] Nostromo, p. 12.

[67] Nostromo, p. 97.

Conrad writes that "a thread of vegetation winding between the blazing rock faces resembled a slender green cord" at the San Tomé mine.[68]

The chief encounter between civilized and neo-barbaric forms of communication and transportation occurs on the Placid Gulf between the lighter and the steamer. The latter's anchor "was low enough to hook itself into one of the wire shrouds of the lighter's mast."[69] By clinging to the anchor, Hirsch, the hide-merchant, is transferred from the civilized lighter to the neobarbaric steamer,[70] only to be later suspended from a rope, tortured to extract communication about the silver, and finally shot. A variant of communication imagery in the form of wire is Conrad's reference to chains or fetters such as those worn by Dr. Monygham during his imprisonment by Guzman Bento.[71]

Conrad frequently images progressive communication in terms of its breakdown. Sotillo, for example, begins his rebellion thus: "Suddenly one day all the letters from Sulaco by the overland courier were carried off by a file of soldiers from the post office to the Commandancia, without disguise, concealment, or apology";[72] and his

---

[68] Nostromo, p. 101. [69] Nostromo, p. 292.

[70] Nostromo, p. 429. [71] Nostromo, p. 374.

[72] Nostromo, p. 287.

"initial moves were the seizure of the cable telegraph office and the securing of the Government steamer lying in the narrow creek which is the harbour of Esmeralda."[73] The Costaguanan mail, however, has never been safe from government rifling; and civilized men must often return to such primitive communication as messages transmitted by muleteers in hollowed-out pack-saddles.[74]

Paper, itself emblematic of mankind's culture, is employed to image humanity's progress or retrogression, depending on the use, often ironic, to which it is put. Charles Gould's father, for example, has been forced to sign a document accepting the mining concession from a corrupt government,[75] a "paper which his father desired ardently to 'tear and fling into the faces' of presidents, members of judicature, and ministers of State."[76] Communication indicating deterioration is also evident when Conrad writes that the father, "well read in light literature," finds that the mine assumes "to his mind the form of the Old Man of the Sea fastened upon his shoulders";[77] and in the image Conrad ironically combines the barbarism associated with water and the possible reversion of man by reference to a civilized communication

---

[73] Nostromo, pp. 287-288.

[74] Nostromo, p. 94.

[75] Nostromo, p. 53.

[76] Nostromo, pp. 57-58.

[77] Nostromo, pp. 55-56.

form.

The town rabble liberates an imprisoned forger, who then proceeds to function as liaison between Sotillo and Pedrito Montero,[78] themselves but forged copies of civilized men. Conrad furthers the imagery of false documentation by causing Sotillo to feign illness to avoid confronting Montero.[79] "A long course of reading historical works"[80] has developed in Pedrito Montero an ironically barbaric desire for power; and though his brother, the militarist general, is only "able to spell out the print of newspapers,"[81] it is significantly the better-educated Pedrito who supplies "even the very text"[82] of the general's pronunciamiento initiating the civil war.

Paper may serve to create community, as does the "pack of greasy cards" uniting Don Pépé, the mine watchman, and Father Roman, the miners' chaplain;[83] or it may serve to destroy such community as the wadding of savage guns. Decoud writes to his Parisian sister of the civilized Don José Avellanos and his dream of democracy:

> "The deception is too great for a man of his age; and hasn't he seen the sheets of 'Fifty Years of Misrule,' which we have begun printing on the presses of the Porvenir, littering the Plaza, floating in the gutters, fired out as wads for trabucos loaded with

---

[78] Nostromo, p. 441. [79] Nostromo, pp. 442-443.

[80] Nostromo, pp. 403-404. [81] Nostromo, p. 119.

[82] Nostromo, p. 145. [83] Nostromo, p. 103.

handfuls of type, blown in the wind, trampled in the mud?"[84]

Conrad presents Decoud's anxiety about the human condition in the lengthy letter to Paris in much the same manner that he earlier presents the anxiety of Don José Avellanos' nephew, acting as agent of the mine, in his letters to his uncle regarding negotiations with the government preceding that of Ribiera.[85]

Civilized man may be forced to abase himself by communicating with the barbaric, as when Don Juste Lopez writes a capitulation to Pedrito Montero "to save the form at least of parliamentary institutions,"[86] an act occasioned more easily than the response of the well-intentioned but ineffectual Ribiera to the "open letter of appeal [from Avellanos] that decided the candidature of Don Vincente Ribiera for the Presidency."[87] A Monterist press promotes barbarism in the guise of civilization;[88] and the Porvenir, for which Decoud has written in the cause of Sulaco, is in its vandalized state surveyed with pleasure by Pedrito Montero.[89] Thus, when Conrad writes in the words of Captain Mitchell that the history of Nostromo's ride to Cayta to summon the army of Barrios

---

[84] Nostromo, p. 235.

[85] Nostromo, p. 111.

[86] Nostromo, p. 355.

[87] Nostromo, p. 141.

[88] Nostromo, pp. 145-146.

[89] Nostromo, p. 389.

"'would make a most exciting book,'"[90] the reader aware of the author's use of communication to suggest the deteriorationist as well as constructionist qualities of mankind is adequately prepared for the exposition of Nostromo's downfall.

The spoken word, equally as obvious as the written, forms a kind of aural imagery, usually quite distinct from actual dialogue and existing almost as an abstraction. There is, for example, a "good deal of eloquence of one sort or another produced in both Americas."[91] There are the "grandiloquent phrases"[92] of the government parties; the sound of "fine words"[93] uttered by and enslaving of Sotillo, who has talked himself into the command of the Esmeralda garrison";[94] and the exculpating phrase of Charles Gould to Emilia which exonerates his destructive progress: "'The best of my feelings are in your keeping, my dear.'"[95] In spite of the promise they usually embody, however, spoken words, even in the form of Teresa Viola's

---

[90] Nostromo, p. 482. [91] Nostromo, p. 83.

[92] Nostromo, p. 88. [93] Nostromo, p. 285.

[94] Nostromo, p. 286. [95] Nostromo, p. 72.

"pious invocations to all the saints in the calendar,"[96] fail to bring mankind to a permanent plane transcending brutishness.

Conrad expresses humanity's desire for a divine dispensation by presenting Giorgio Viola as an avid Bible-reader:

> . . . in his spare time he studied the thick volume. He carried it with him into battles. Now it was his only reading, and in order not to be deprived of it (the print was small), he had consented to accept the present of a pair of silver-mounted spectacles from Señora Emilia Gould . . . .[97]

Emilia, the paragon of civilization, enables Viola, the paragon of fidelity to principle, to attempt communication with a higher power by means of his better nature, symbolized in the silver spectacles.

Less obvious communication forms than either the written or spoken word are those of action and even of silence itself. In The Metaphysics of Darkness, Roussel states that "man's general sense of freedom and potentiality is symbolized for Conrad by our ability

---

[96] Nostromo, p. 16. Kurtz apparently symbolizes for Conrad the polar possibilities of communication. Marlow says that of all Kurtz's gifts "'the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words--the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness'" (Vol. VI, pp. 113-114).

[97] Nostromo, p. 30.

to move. The power of consciously directed movement seems to him the clearest proof of the reality of our freedom and, therefore, a necessary element in man's attempt to control the source of his existence."[98] During the town riot, Nostromo as a soldier of civilization somewhat barbarically communicates with the frightened Viola family:

> . . . the bang of a violent blow struck on the outside of the shutter. They could hear suddenly the snorting of a horse, the restive tramping of hoofs on the narrow, hard path in front of the house; the toe of a boot struck at the shutter again; a spur jingled at every blow . . . .[99]

Paquita, Nostromo's quondam girl friend, attempts unsuccessfully to communicate her love to the Capataz by throwing a red flower at his cheek;[100] and Nostromo's swim ashore from the Great Isabel[101] images Conrad's use of a communication form to buttress the opposition between land and water.

Silence itself, though a communication form, appropriately demonstrates the ultimate failure of all attempts to bridge the gap between human beings. True, Nostromo successfully dominates his workers by a blend of action and silence and is "too scornful in his temper ever to utter abuse, a tireless taskmaster, and the more to be

---

[98] Roussel, op. cit., p. 13. [99] Nostromo, p. 21.

[100] Nostromo, p. 127. [101] Nostromo, pp. 303-304.

feared because of his aloofness."[102] In a similar active silence Viola communes with the lithograph of Garibaldi. Even Charles Gould in his great silences is successful in expressing a "faith in the mine [which] was contagious, though it was not served by a great eloquence":[103] "his silences, backed by the power of speech, had as many shades of significance as uttered words in the way of assent, or doubt, of negation--even of simply comment."[104] But the Goulds are a "reticent couple";[105] and their silence clarions failure even in their marital dealings. The hide-merchant, Hirsch, flies from the town rabble, "his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth";[106] then, after torture and murder at the hands of Sotillo, his silent corpse, "in ghastly immobility, seemed intent on catching every word."[107]

As a civilized form of communication, art too (in the form of the palazzo urn, the statue of Charles IV and projected monument to replace it, and Emilia's water-color sketch) is ineffectually dumb as an agency of man's improvement. Art fails, just as neobarbaric forms of communication such as revolvers and sabres effectively mute the telegraph, disorganize the steamship service, and cut

---

[102] Nostromo, p. 15.
[103] Nostromo, p. 75.
[104] Nostromo, p. 203.
[105] Nostromo, pp. 67-68.
[106] Nostromo, p. 271.
[107] Nostromo, p. 430.

off Sulaco from the rest of the civilized world.[108]

Perhaps the most subtle communication form Conrad employs is that of smoke. Its grayness melds with the author's color imagery to underscore the combination of conflicting impulses in human nature. Man's hopes for betterment literally go up in smoke when fireworks with "only a puff of smoke in the bright sky"[109] are detonated to celebrate the early promise of the Ribiera government; but counterpointed with this sanguine smoke is the ominous "greyish haze of dust [which] hung thin and motionless against the sun" from the salute of a small iron cannon. Similarly great with promise but fraught with foreboding is the "white trail of steam [from a locomotive] that seemed to vanish in the breathless, hysterically prolonged scream of warlike triumph."[110] The "cloud of smoke" from the firing squads and that of burning houses[111] during Guzman Bento's regime unite imagistically the communication forms of weapons and smoke as an early reminder of man's oft-repeated progress into barbarism, even more strikingly captured in the symbol of the commandeered steamer, which smokes unseen and lightless in the black Placid Gulf.

Edward Said observes that "Conrad's presentation

---

[108] Nostromo, p. 324. [109] Nostromo, p. 121.

[110] Nostromo, pp. 171-172. [111] Nostromo, p. 138.

of life in Sulaco is always so convincing in its dramatic and social verisimilitude that one tends to forget that he is depicting a world based upon unreality."[112] The statement is an accurate one insofar as Said predicates it on the thesis that the characters in Nostromo mediate between actual reality and their records of it;[113] however, it is not applicable to Conrad's thematic argument in the novel. Albert Guerard in Conrad the Novelist is more convincing: "Conrad's Author's Note is a lovely arabesque in which real reality and fictional reality come closer and closer together; it is no little justified by the novel it introduces. For Costaguana exists."[114]

The author in his vision transforms reality as he perceives it into an expression that is itself a reality--his microcosmic world. Aware of the archetypal quality of his utterance, Conrad images his artistic communication in several instances as a fairy tale, that species of story whose embodied truth seeks to mask itself as illusion. As he says in the words of the chief engineer to Monygham: "'Upon my word, doctor, things seem to be worth nothing by what they are in themselves. I begin to believe that the

---

[112]Said, op. cit., p. 129.

[113]Ibid., p. 116.

[114]Guerard, op. cit., p. 178.

only solid thing about them is the spiritual value which everyone discovers in his own form of activity--.'"[115]

The tale of Dr. Monygham's captivity under Guzman Bento,[116] for example, is a communication to the reader of actual events filtered through the character's shaping mind. Conrad further comments in the words of the engineer: "'The tale of killing the goose with the golden eggs has not been evolved for nothing out of the wisdom of mankind.'"[117] This character speaks of Decoud's plan of separation as "'a comic fairy tale--and behold, it may come off; because it is true to the very spirit of the country.'" The engineer further ponders the epithet applied to Gould: "'Haven't they come to calling him "El Rey de Sulaco" in Sta. Marta? A nickname may be the best record of a success. That's what I call putting the face of a joke upon the body of a truth.'"[118]

The tortured Hirsch, embodiment of struggling mankind, puts on just such a face when he communicates the refusal of man to be crushed completely by his baser nature: "And as Sotillo, staying his raised hand, waited for him to speak, with the sudden flash of a grin and a

---

[115] Nostromo, p. 318. Heart of Darkness is told as a type of Oriental fable by a Buddha-like Marlow.

[116] Nostromo, pp. 310-312. [117] Nostromo, p. 315.

[118] Nostromo, pp. 315-316.

straining forward of the wrenched shoulders, he spat violently into his face."[119] Hirsch's corpse itself communicates this human strength; for "The light of the two candles burning before the perpendicular and breathless immobility of the late Señor Hirsch threw a gleam afar over land and water, like a signal in the night."[120]

The clearest indication of Conrad's archetypal version of the story of mankind occurs when the author states, in words echoing Chaucer's Pardoner:

> There is no credulity so eager and blind as the credulity of covetousness, which, in its universal extent, measures the moral misery and the intellectual destitution of mankind.[121]

It is in this regard that Conrad's novel assumes cosmic proportions. The problem universally experienced by mankind is that faced by Nostromo, who, alone aware of the existence of the buried treasure, confronts the "difficulty of converting it into a form in which it could become available."[122] Robert F. Haugh in Joseph Conrad: Discovery in Design conjectures that "Conrad must have had in mind for Nostromo a role something like that of James Wait [in The Nigger of the Narcissus]; in himself 'he is nothing,' but he is a Typhoid Mary of evil fortune, a moral

---

[119] Nostromo, p. 449. [120] Nostromo, p. 451.

[121] Nostromo, p. 450. [122] Nostromo, p. 523.

catalyst in a complex social fabric."[123] Though over-simplifying the role played by Conrad's nominal protagonist, Haugh too envisions the character somewhat as an embodiment of failed communication.

In spite of the feeble gleam of hope imaged by the ultimately heroic Hirsch, it is, after all, a mangled body of mankind which mocks its baser nature. Conrad is indeed despairing in his hope for humanity. The nameless traveler who listens, "like a tired child to a fairy tale,"[124] to the narration of Captain Mitchell learns that the civil war was ultimately brought to an end by an international naval demonstration: "The United States cruiser, Powhattan, was the first to salute the Occidental flag--white, with a wreath of green laurel in the middle encircling a yellow amarilla flower."[125] The steamship civilizing the waters at the opening of the novel, having reverted to savagery in the steamship commanded by Sotillo on the gulf, now becomes an ironically peacemaking warship. Man's cyclical experience is imaged further in the ship's very name; for past savagery has merely been updated. Even the floral and color imagery of the new Sulacan flag resembles that of the flag of barbaric Costaguana. Mankind's search for lasting

---

[123](Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), p. 149.

[124]Nostromo, pp. 486-487. [125]Nostromo, p. 487.

value and the attendant impulse toward civilization are forever imprisoned by its baser nature. As Nostromo himself thinks: "He was possessed too strongly by the sense of his own existence, a thing of infinite duration in its changes, to grasp the notion of finality. The earth goes on for ever."[126]

All forms of communication and transportation ultimately fail in Nostromo because Conrad views man as silently treading a circular path. Appropriately imaging humanity's experience in meteorological terms, he writes:

> The wasting edge of the cloud-bank always strives for, but seldom wins, the middle of the gulf. The sun--as the sailors say--is eating it up. Unless perchance a sombre thunder-head breaks away from the main body to career all over the gulf till it escapes into the offing beyond Azuera, where it bursts suddenly into flame and crashes like a sinister pirate-ship of the air, hove-to above the horizon, engaging the sea.[127]

---

[126] Nostromo, pp. 525-526.

[127] Nostromo, p. 6.

Chapter 5

THE FAMILY OF MAN: IMAGES OF REAL AND SUBSTITUTE FAMILIES

In a manner reminiscent of Bleak House and Little Dorrit, the characters in Nostromo show a marked interrelatedness. As individual human beings achieve their closest bonding within a family unit, so Conrad presents mankind as striving for a parallel solidarity within the family of man. Frederick R. Karl observes in A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad that "Through the use of character complements and doubles, Conrad tried to create a dimension that is beyond verbalization,"[1] and convincingly reveals an extensive pattern of such doubling in the novel.

While character doubling in itself lies outside the concerns of the present study, groupings and doublings of family groups are of interest. Karl's remarks are of utmost value in comprehending Conrad's complex design in Nostromo, but he fails to extend his attention to the larger family units which comprise a significant pattern of thematic imagery. Much of the general commentary by critics on doubling of individual characters may be applied

---

[1](New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), p. 160.

directly to families of various sorts. Albert Guerard, for example, finds that "The Conradian double occasionally serves only to clarify a hero's plight. But more often he exists both as an actual fleshly human being to be saved or betrayed, and as a shadowy projection of a hidden self, also to be saved or betrayed."[2] Both statements apply to the various families in Nostromo. In themselves such groupings clarify the plights of characters and maintain a significance of paramount interest to plot and theme; but, more importantly, they function on a more abstract level as indicators of the individual's betrayal of himself as well as of others.

Paul Wiley notes in Conrad's Measure of Man that

> Even though Conrad's drawing of character has been praised often enough, it has not, perhaps, been made sufficiently clear that with people like Lord Jim, Charles Gould, Flora de Barral [in Chance], Axel Heyst [in Victory] he revealed insights into peculiarities of modern temperament that seem beyond the powers of most of his contemporaries in the English novel with the exception of Henry James.[3]

Though Wiley's statement bespeaks a widely-held view, one may add the corollary that Conrad's insights extend beyond individual characterization; for, as Royal Roussel intimates in The Metaphysics of Darkness, the characters

---

[2]Conrad the Novelist (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 59.

[3](Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1954), p. 14.

often seek familial attachment or its substitute: "All Conrad's major characters are, in a fundamental sense, orphans." It is "this lack of an innate sense of a place in the world, of an identity, which is behind the restlessness which possesses characters as diverse as Razumov [in Under Western Eyes] and Gould."[4] The characters, thinks Roussel, seek outside themselves some source for their orphaned consciousness to conquer or one in which to ground themselves:

> Conrad is concerned with man's need to find a social or intersubjective ground for his self. The ideal of solidarity describes a world where such a ground is readily available and the same theme is implicit in [Lord] Jim's desire to belong to the brotherhood of the sea and in Razumov's confession to Natalia Haldin [in Under Western Eyes]. But in Conrad's world this search never takes place entirely on the human level. It always occurs within the context of the fundamental alienation of consciousness from its metaphysical source. Consequently, for most of his adventurers, the voyage is not directed toward the discovery of a human parent but toward the ultimate origin of consciousness itself.[5]

Roussel, however, does not indicate what Conrad himself makes abundantly clear. In Nostromo man's search for solidarity is imaged in terms of various family groups which serve as concrete means to present the ultimate search for metaphysical meaning in terms of the human

---

[4] The Metaphysics of Darkness: A Study in the Unity and Development of Conrad's Fiction (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 1.

[5] Ibid., p. 12.

family.

The novelist establishes several types of groupings. First, and most obvious, are those families created by consanguinuity or marital ties. In addition to this rather commonplace family pattern is the bonding created by romantic interest. Next, there are family units created by common interests or goals; and, finally, there is the human family, of which all others in the novel form cells of significance. To understand Conrad's characters and the themes they embody, one must comprehend the complex patterning of interpersonal relationships by which these characters attempt to give substance to their lives.

Early in the novel the reader learns that blood ties play a role of some importance. Charles Gould is educated from childhood in England and maintains familial attachment through letters from his father: "In the end, the growing youth attained to as close an intimacy with the San Tomé mine as the old man who wrote these plaintive and enraged letters on the other side of the sea." Disregarding his father's admonitions, "By the time he was twenty Charles Gould had, in his turn, fallen under the spell of the San Tomé mine. But it was another form of enchantment, more suitable to his youth, into whose magic formula there entered hope, vigour, and self-

confidence, instead of weary indignation and despair."[6] The desire for illusion strong in him, Gould plans to develop the concession against his deceased father's wishes. The failure of blood ties to create solidarity is suggested by Charles' geographical distance from his father and by the difference in attitude toward the mine. Charles says to Emilia upon his father's death: "'Just think of it--ten whole years away; the years I was growing up into a man. He could not know me. Do you think he could?'"[7]

This utterance serves as a touchstone for understanding all family groupings in Nostromo; for it reflects the fundamental desire for and failure of blood ties to effect true communication. "The closest approximation to a happy family in the early [1895-1912] Conrad is probably the Violas in Nostromo,"[8] says Thomas Moser in Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline; but even here there is failure. Linda and Giselle, linked by blood, betray one another in their mutual love for Nostromo. Aware of Linda's love for Nostromo and acceptance of his marriage offer, Giselle still is capable of betraying her sister

---

[6]Joseph Conrad, Nostromo, Collected Works, Memorial Edition, Vol. VIII (Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1925), pp. 58-59. All subsequent references to Conrad's works are to this edition.

[7]Nostromo, p. 73.

[8](Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1966), p. 109.

and accepting the Capataz's advances. The younger sister is identified with the darker forces of existence, primarily through floral imagery. For example, Nostromo speaks to Giselle, whose very name suggests death: "'Your hair like gold, and your eyes like violets, and your lips like the rose . . . .'"[9] She is "no more self-conscious than a flower," and "seemed to bask languidly in the warmth of a rosy flush." Yet Nostromo is instinctively aware that "She was a danger. A frightful danger."[10]

Linda, in contrast, "with her intense, passionately pale face, energetic, all fire and words, touched with gloom and scorn, a chip off the old block, true daughter of the austere republican, but with Teresa's voice, inspired him [Nostromo] with a deep-seated mistrust."[11] As tender of the lighthouse on the Great Isabel, Linda, whose name indicates comeliness, symbolizes the better side of human nature--the very side which Nostromo, having betrayed once in keeping the silver for himself, betrays again in deserting Linda for Giselle. The harmonious consanguinuity of the two sides of human nature represented by the two sisters is disrupted by the unlawful assertion of natural passion.

Antonia Avellanos, her father, and her uncle

---

[9] Nostromo, p. 585. [10] Ibid.

[11] Nostromo, p. 524.

compose another family related by blood. Like Linda Viola, Antonia is associated with man's higher nature:

> Whenever possible Antonia attended her father; her recognized devotion weakened the shocking effect of her scorn for the rigid conventions regulating the life of Spanish-American girlhood. And, in truth, she was no longer girlish. It was said that she often wrote State papers from her father's dictation and was allowed to read all the books in his library.[12]

Antonia is "like a sister to the Englishwoman [Emilia]";[13] and, observing the changes occurring in her own husband, Emilia "seemed to see the despair of the unfortunate Antonia"[14] when the latter hears of the apparent loss of Decoud on the rammed lighter.

The death of Antonia's aged father, Don José, during the Montero attack on Sulaco occasions his substitution by her maternal uncle, Father Corbelán, whose fiery nature is rooted in some undelineated form of social justice opposed to the Gould mine and in a concern for the return of confiscated Church property. Don José in his life-long faith in democracy doubles another faithful father figure, Giorgio Viola, whose democratic principles are those of Garibaldi; but the Avellanos family fails in the same manner as does the Viola family. As Giselle usurps Linda's rightful claim to Nostromo, so the death of

---

[12] Nostromo, p. 150.

[13] Nostromo, p. 285.

[14] Nostromo, p. 379.

Don José allows baser nature in the form of Father Corbelán to become ascendant over Antonia.

Related spiritually to Don José as the aged democrat's godson, Martin Decoud espouses a line of thought that is consistent throughout the novel as regards Conrad's treatment of male-female relationships: "Friendship was possible between brother and sister, meaning by friendship the frank unreserve, as before another human being, of thoughts and sensations; all the object-less and necessary sincerity of one's innermost life trying to react upon the profound sympathies of another existence."[15] Decoud, whose other blood relatives do not figure in the novel, feels that "no one could understand him so well as his sister [in Paris]. In the most sceptical heart there lurks at such moments, when the chances of existence are involved, a desire to leave a correct impression of the feelings ...."[16] He writes to his sister: "'I thought of your face, which from your infancy had the stamp of intelligence . . . ,'"[17] thereby associating her with the intelligent Antonia,[18] to whom he is romantically attracted. But the geographical distance between Costaguana and Paris, like that separating the Gould father and son earlier in the novel, indicates that the promised communication between

---

[15] Nostromo, p. 223. [16] Nostromo, p. 230.

[17] Nostromo, p. 234. [18] Nostromo, p. 140.

blood kin is tenuous at best; significantly, the reader learns of no correspondence reaching Decoud from France. Though the sister remains as a reminder of man's better nature, Decoud himself slips downward to his suicide.

The remaining blood families may be discussed briefly; for they figure less prominently in the novel and reiterate the idea of failure to achieve solidarity. The Montero brothers, the militarist and Pedrito, communicate effectively in their scheme to seize power; and though their revolt ultimately fails, they come close to achieving their aim. The militarist brother is presented as an illiterate[19] whose barbaric nature is matched by his corruptingly civilized brother. Even Pedrito's name suggests that his civilized nature has petrified into savagery. Whereas Conrad tends to present other consanguine family members in polarities of barbarism or civilization, he ironically portrays the Monteros as successfully achieving solidarity only through mutual corruption. Even in this instance, however, the relationship disintegrates; the militarist is assassinated shortly after the revolution fails and Pedrito flees once more to exile in Europe.[20]

Captain Mitchell and his married niece in Sussex form another family unit, seemingly minor but truly significant as a double to the Avellanos family. As Father

---

[19] Nostromo, p. 119. [20] Nostromo, p. 487.

Corbelán assumes a protective relationship to his niece, Antonia, so Mitchell plans to leave "quite a little fortune"[21] to his relative. An interesting reversal occurs in this example of family doubling. The celibate Corbelán, whose physical appearance suggests "something unlawful behind his priesthood"[22] and who threatens at the novel's conclusion a return to violence, assumes protection of the maiden Antonia. In contrast, the self-denying bachelor Mitchell, always associated with a naive civilization, assumes a kind of guardianship over his own niece, married to a clergyman and having "no end of children." Although figuring so marginally in the novel as to be almost inconsequential, the niece's marriage appears the only example of effective synthesis between the two sides of human nature. The clerical husband, as the aspiring or civilizing principle, and the fruitful niece, suggestive of a tempered animal nature, are bountiful and do indeed inherit a fortune. The Avellanos family, on the other hand, like the Goulds, fail to produce heirs. Emilia's widowed aunt and Nostromo's cruel uncle,[23] both residing in Italy, serve in their turn as means of establishing their respective niece and neophew as orphans, isolated from close family ties.

---

[21] Nostromo, pp. 475-476. [22] Nostromo, p. 194.

[23] Nostromo, p. 253.

The final family unit joined by blood is that of Costaguanan families in general, contrasted with the rabble and presented almost exclusively as representatives of man's civilized aspect. Living in fine homes, they are connected with images of clothing, the color white, land ("shore"), thread in the form of "leathern springs," and communication forms ("coaches," "to rock," and "to wave") in the following quotation describing the embarcation of Barrios' troops against Montero:

> The great family coaches drawn up along the shore of the harbour were made to rock on the high leathern springs by the enthusiasm of the señoras and the señoritas standing up to wave their lace handkerchiefs, as lighter after lighter packed full of troops left the end of the jetty.[24]

These same families, however, disintegrate when Montero approaches Sulaco. They flee from the town "into the darkness,"[25] reduced to such primitive transportation as their own feet or "a carreta, a long wooden box on two high wheels, with a door at the back swinging open."[26]

Marital bonds also fail to engender solidarity between individuals. In spite of Moser's belief, quoted earlier, that the Viola family approximates happiness in their relationship, a closer examination reveals that Giorgio and Teresa fail to achieve any more meaningful

---

[24] Nostromo, pp. 147-148. [25] Nostromo, p. 360.

[26] Nostromo, p. 359.

communication than do the Goulds, the chief example in the novel of a failed marriage. Conrad doubles these two couples to drive home his belief that marital love cannot overcome the individual's existential isolation. Giorgio's wooing of Teresa in their native Italy for only a short week between military campaigns[27] is matched by Gould's abrupt proposal to Emilia, also in Italy, while his mind is divided between his father's death and his own plans for the mining concession.[28] Both men soon transport their brides to the New World nation of Costaguana.

Emilia's widowed aunt, whose husband has died in the cause of Italian unity, dresses in nun-like robes and lives a life of mourning in her ruined palace.[29] Her marital experience parallels the daily mourning of Teresa Viola, who similarly wears black[30] and lives a life informed by religion.[31] Teresa's husband has figuratively died in the cause of Garibaldi, about whom he constantly daydreams. She pleads her cause eloquently when she cries to her husband: "'Leave Cavour alone and take care of yourself now we are lost in this country all alone with the two children, because you cannot live under a king.'"[32]

---

[27] Nostromo, p. 467. [28] Nostromo, p. 63.

[29] Nostromo, pp. 59-60. [30] Nostromo, p. 24.

[31] Nostromo, pp. 255-256. [32] Nostromo, pp. 24-25.

When Teresa dies, unhappy, Giorgio misses not her but her voice.[33]

The failure of these two marriages--that of Emilia's aunt and that of the Violas--foreshadows the ultimate end of the Gould marriage. Both the aunt's husband and Giorgio Viola isolate their marital partners in some manner because of attention to an ideal which is finally of no lasting significance. Charles Gould follows along the same path. Beginning the marriage hopefully, Emilia thinks that "no one could know her Charles--really know him for what he was but herself":[34] "These two young people remembered the life [of Gould's father] which had ended wretchedly just when their own lives had come together in that splendour of hopeful love, which to the most sensible minds appears like a triumph of good over all the evils of the earth."[35] But Conrad indicates that love is illusory when the long-orphaned Emilia and the recently-orphaned Charles consider rehabilitating the mine: "It had presented itself to them at the instant when the woman's instinct of devotion and the man's instinct of activity receive from the strongest of illusions their most powerful impulse."[36]

Although, once in Costaguana, Emilia's devotion

---

[33] Nostromo, p. 467. [34] Nostromo, p. 73.

[35] Nostromo, p. 74. [35] Ibid.

grows in intensity, Charles' concern for the mine begins to shut out his wife; for from his face "all sign of sympathy or any other feeling" soon disappears.[37] Royal Roussel notes this loss of humanity: "In Nostromo, the slow decay of idealism into irrationality is imaged as a process of petrifaction in which spirit is gradually materialized":[38]

> The destructive transformation of Charles Gould reveals that the whole idea of incarnation [of an ideal] is a trap. Lord Jim had failed because he had been prevented from ever completing this act, but Gould's defeat is a direct result of his initial period of success. Paradoxically, his very ability to inform matter with consciousness and to make the mine an expression of a spiritual principle only leaves his consciousness more susceptible to the darkness.[39]

Paul Wiley also comments that "The image of stone that appears frequently in Conrad work, apparently to represent life frozen through a decline in human feeling, applies to Gould in his association with the marble urn and the statue of the kingly rider."[40]

Frederick Karl prefers to view the Goulds as representatives of diametrically opposite positions:

> In his relation to the mine, Gould, despite his obvious materialistic interests, is an idealist, while his wife, on the contrary, is a realist. Her antimaterialistic humanity is opposed to Gould's philosophy of "I make use of what I see." Gould

---

[37] Nostromo, p. 207.

[38] Roussel, op. cit., p. 119.

[39] Ibid., p. 120

[40] Wiley, op. cit., p. 104.

> naively believed material interests themselves would eventually create stable conditions in which they could thrive, and that the result in time would be better justice for all. Psychologically, this belief is a necessity for him, for he would surely be nothing, would have no prop, without his idea. This eagerness for attachment--a typical nineteenth-century identification with progress of a sort--is his desire to assert what he considers best in himself and to strip away any encroaching uncertainties.[41]

From one standpoint, Karl's remarks are exact; yet from another, he mistakenly calls Emilia Gould a realist. It is preferable, perhaps, to regard her as an idealist also; she certainly has hoped for an ideal marriage and for non-materialistic benefits from the mine. The Goulds are differentiated in that whereas Charles idealizes material interests in the guise of the mine,[42] Emilia, striving for communion with another human being, idealizes Charles. She finds, however, that "It was as if the inspiration of their early years had left her heart to turn into a wall of silver-bricks, erected by the silent work of evil spirits, between her and her husband."[43]

In imagery of architecture and communication, the realistic omniscient narrator subtly indicates why Emilia, like everyone else, fails to achieve solidarity. Even as

---

[41] Karl, op. cit., p. 158.

[42] Nostromo, p. 214. In Lord Jim Jewel feels that Jim has been "'driven away from her by a dream'" (Vol. IV, p. 349).

[43] Nostromo, pp. 221-222.

the author's prime example of the truly civilized human being, she cannot succeed because of the simple fact that she has created an ideal, which, by definition, is unattainable: "Was it for this that her life had been robbed of all the intimate felicities of daily affection which her tenderness needed as the human body needs air to breathe?"[44] The paradoxical materialistic idealism of Charles and the impossible marital idealism of Emilia both serve as catalysts preventing their marriage from being a means of human solidarity.

Romantic love as a bonding agency fares no better than blood or marital ties. Paul Wiley notes in Conrad's Measure of Man that "the same sort of triangular relationship involving a paternal figure and two young lovers exists in Conrad's last complete novel as in his first."[45] The most noticeable of these romantic triangles is that secretive one involving Nostromo, Giselle and Giorgio Viola, ending in the death of Nostromo when Viola mistakes him for yet another suitor, Ramirez. But even within this romantic substitute for family exist two variations. First, there is the relationship between Nostromo and Linda, sanctioned by Giorgio. Then there is the triangle involving Giselle; the unwanted suitor, Ramirez; and two father figures, Viola and Nostromo himself.

---

[44] Nostromo, p. 512. [45] Wiley, op. cit., p. 193.

In the first triangle, Nostromo betrays Linda, associated with mankind's better nature and clearly estabished as a replacement for the deceased Teresa,[46] for Giselle, identified with man's lower nature, and dies as a result of his preference. In the second instance, Ramirez, who has replaced Nostromo as Capataz on the docks,[47] is opposed by two father figures[48] and is in the person of Nostromo symbolically killed by Viola.[49] From this point on, Ramirez disappears from the novel. In both triangles, the preference for one's lower nature leads to destruction.

Thomas Moser in Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline faults Conrad for writing in Nostromo "one of the worst love affairs of the early period [1895-1912], that between Nostromo and Giselle. Their story very nearly wrecks the last few chapters; the prose describing it falls far below the standard of the rest of the novel . . . . Their story ends in the usual way with the older relative trying, in this case successfully, to prevent consummation of the love."[50] The criticism is just in that Conrad's carefully planned design relating characters to polarities of human nature appears vague and ill-considered. Granted

---

[46] Nostromo, p. 529. [47] Nostromo, p. 515.

[48] Nostromo, p. 534. [49] Nostromo, pp. 553-554.

[50] Moser, op. cit., p. 87.

that Conrad is not at his best in dealing with romantic love, the novelist still fails to create a sufficiently strong patterning of relationships among the Viola girls, Nostromo, and Ramirez to maintain his established imagery. Even the slight allusion to a romance between Nostromo and Paquita[51] depicts the novelist's imagery in a stronger manner than does his treatment of the more significant entanglement of Nostromo with the Violas. Paquita attempts unsuccessfully to communicate with the Capataz by throwing a flower at him. Conrad uses imagery of flora, communication, color (red), thread (a string-like rosary), and metal (a gold comb) to associate Paquita with the lower, perhaps more realistic, side of human nature. She fails, however, to upset the equilibrium between the barbaric and civilized aspects of Nostromo's humanity, so carefully established in the novel's early chapters. But once more, romantic love leads to no solidarity between individuals.

Though Moser feels that "Conrad endangers his artistry again in Nostromo by creating another love trio: Decoud, Antonia, and her doting, somewhat ineffective father,"[52] this triangle much more strongly manifests the novelist's concept of romantic love than does that involving the Violas. Conrad writes, "It was part of what Decoud

---

[51] Nostromo, pp. 127-130. [52] Moser, op. cit., p. 89.

would have called his sane materialism that he did not believe in the possibility of friendship between man and woman."[53] The statement appears to be the author's own belief, for no relationship between man and woman in the novel enjoys a solidarity, excepting, possibly, the seemingly one-way communication between Decoud and his sister. The emigre's plan for Sulacan separation is however, motivated largely by love of Antonia;[54] though avowing that he has "only the supreme illusion of a lover,"[55] Decoud nevertheless lacks any sustaining idealism to save him from despair and suicide in the darkness of the gulf.

Antonia, echoing Kurtz's intended in Heart of Darkness and paralleling the experience of Emilia and Linda, is left to ponder the idealized but erroneous conception of a loved one. Mitchell speaks of her to his anonymous interlocutor:

> "The marble medallion in the wall, in the antique style, representing a veiled woman seated with her hands clasped loosely over her knees, commemorates that unfortunate young gentleman who sailed out with Nostromo on that fatal night, sir. See, 'To the memory of Martin Decoud, his betrothed Antonia Avellanos.' Frank, simple, noble. There you have that lady, sir, as she is. An exceptional woman. Those who thought she would give way to despair were mistaken, sir."[56]

---

[53] Nostromo, p. 223. [54] Nostromo, p. 215.

[55] Nostromo, p. 189. [56] Nostromo, p. 478.

Conrad relates marital and romantic love by their mutual failure when Emilia says to Giselle, grieving over Nostromo's death, "'Console yourself, child. Very soon he would have forgotten you for his treasure.'" To Giselle's reply that Nostromo loved her, Mrs. Gould severely responds, "'I have been loved, too.'"[57] Linda, like the other three women, also grieves for her loss, but in a significantly different manner. More than any of the others, Linda transforms her own desire for solidarity into an ideal symbolized both by Nostromo and by the lighthouse with its beacon in the darkness. "The genius" dominating the "dark gulf" of human existence in the concluding lines of the novel[58] is not that of the "magnificent Capataz de Cargadores" but of an anguished humanity seeking to overcome its isolation.

In addition to families created by blood, marriage vows, and romantic attachment, Conrad establishes in Nostromo many substitute families, united by bonds of common interest and involving major as well as minor characters. In Conrad the Novelist Albert Guerard writes;

> The major theme of idealization is developed through the central personages: the Goulds and Martin Decoud, Nostromo, Dr. Monygham. But the novel's overwhelming sense of created life and no small share of its human wisdom, its connaissance du coeur humain,

---

[57] Nostromo, p. 561. [58] Nostromo, p. 566.

> is conveyed by the vignettes of lesser characters, some of them exceedingly minor.[59]

Minor indeed are some of Conrad's substitute families; for example, Nostromo and his workmen, who function effectively as a highly organized family under the firm paternalism of the Capataz.[60]

Charles Gould functions as a more important father figure for the miners of the Gould Concession, drawing them together, building villages in which to house them,[61] supplying low-priced goods for their use,[62] and providing medical help and spiritual comfort.[63] In return for his paternal solicitude, the miners rescue Gould and Sulaco itself by marching against Montero in a surprise move.[64] Conrad also describes the mutual fidelity of the bandit Hernandez, whose own family has been murdered by soldiers years earlier, and his followers[65] in terms of a closely-knit family created by the exigencies of corrupt Costaguanan government; and the novelist redeems them into a civilized state by allowing Gould to enlist the group on

---

[59] Guerard, op. cit., p. 183.

[60] Nostromo, pp. 14-15 and pp. 95-96.

[61] Nostromo, p. 100. [62] Nostromo, p. 97.

[63] Nostromo, p. 102. [64] Nostromo, pp. 476-477.

[65] Nostromo, pp. 107-109 and pp. 357-361.

the side of the Sulacan separatists.[66] Even the Blanco aristocrats unite in their common interests to form an oligarchy, electing Ribiera as the titular head of their family.

These families, however, cannot maintain a close union. As Nostromo deserts his workmen to return to the sea, there to regard his vessel's crew "as if they had been spies,"[67] so the threat of a miners' rebellion is intimated in the harsh words of Father Corbelán.[68] Pardoned by the separatist government of Sulaco, Hernandez becomes the Minister of War, his followers organized into a legitimate force;[69] yet somehow he seems a broken man. And the oligarchs, "fleeing for life, with only the clothes on their backs"[70] before the onslaught of Montero, afterwards regroup their disintegrated forces to regain power. The Amarilla Club flourishes once more; and Mitchell says of it to the anonymous visitor: "'Real thing of the country. Men of the first families. The President of the Occidental Republic himself belongs to it, sir.'"[71] The reader need only recall the toppled Ribiera's fate and the earlier Minister of War, Montero, to recognize that the components for continuing the cycle of barbarism and

---

[66] Nostromo, p. 361. [67] Nostromo, p. 523.

[68] Nostromo, pp. 509-510. [69] Nostromo, p. 480.

[70] Nostromo, p. 361. [71] Nostromo, p. 474.

civilization are all present.

Two other characters figure importantly in the novel in terms of their adoption into substitute families. Nostromo's relation to the Viola family, on the level indicated above, is a romantic one; additionally, however, he functions as a kind of adopted child of the Violas. In this latter regard, Nostromo's situation is doubled to that of Dr. Monygham's relation to the Goulds. Conrad further strengthens the doubling by temporarily placing Monygham as a quasi-member of the Viola family. The Violas constantly refer to Nostromo as their son. During the town riot, they look to him for protection. Giorgio calls him his son[72] and comments: "'My son would have been just such a fine young man as you, Gian' Battista, if he had lived.'"[73] Teresa "in her heart had never given him up, as though, indeed, he had been her son";[74] and Nostromo says to her of a secret arrangement made years before: "'Husband to one and brother to the other, did you say?'"[75] Unable to find any true communication within the Viola family as an adopted member, however, Nostromo betrays Teresa by refusing to call a priest as she lies dying; deserts Linda, to whom he has

---

[72] Nostromo, pp. 469, 471, 530-531.

[73] Nostromo, p. 126. [74] Nostromo, p. 254.

[75] Nostromo, p. 257. Lord Jim finds himself with at least three substitute fathers: Stein, Cornelius, and Marlow himself.

offered marriage; refrains from expressing himself frankly to Giorgio; and turns sister against sister. Rather than overcoming his isolation by incorporating his orphaned state into this family, Nostromo instead manages to destroy what little solidarity exists within it.

Dr. Monygham, embittered about his own earlier failure in fidelity to comrades, another form of substitute family, and grown cynical about mankind, develops in the course of Nostromo a great admiration for Emilia Gould which becomes a deep and abiding love. First entering the Gould household as a kind of orphaned waif, still a broken man years after his torture under Guzman Bento, the doctor expresses eloquently his attitude toward mankind's lack of solidarity when he says of Nostromo: "'Really, it is most unreasonable to demand that a man should think of other people so much better than he is able to think of himself.'"[76] Through imagery of clothing and color (white), Conrad demonstrates Mrs. Gould's "humanizing influence."[77] The novelist causes Charles Gould to make Monygham the miners' physician, thus associating the doctor with the symbol of human nature, the mine itself. Having been reduced to neobarbarism by cruel torture in earlier years, Monygham now has the opportunity, particularly through contact with Emilia, to refine that baser nature into a

---

[76] Nostromo, pp. 44-45. [77] Nostromo, pp. 45-46.

civilized one. Indeed, Monygham's role in the novel consists mainly of a gradual removal of impurities.

Considerably older than Charles and Emilia, Monygham exists in his friendship with them as Conrad's familiar father figure interposed between two lovers. Growing in his love for Emilia, he observes with intense dislike the distance developing between the Goulds and gathers his suppressed emotions as a quiet anger concentrated against Charles.[78] Once he perceives Montero as a danger to Emilia, Monygham's admiration is transformed into idealized love:

> As the dangers thickened round the San Tomé mine this illusion [his love for Emilia] acquired force, permanency, and authority. It claimed him at last! This claim, exalted by a spiritual detachment from the usual sanctions of hope and reward, made Dr. Monygham's thinking, acting, individuality, extremely dangerous to himself and to others, all his scruples vanishing in the proud feeling that his devotion was the only thing that stood between an admirable woman and a frightful disaster.[79]

Yearning for a sense of solidarity with Emilia affects Monygham deeply: "The doctor's soul, withered and shrunk by the shame of a moral disgrace, became implacable in the expansion of its tenderness";[80] and thus he initiates his plan to save Emilia and the civilization she represents by deceiving Sotillo about the silver.

---

[78] Nostromo, p. 520. [79] Nostromo, p. 431.

[80] Ibid.

Conrad counterpoints Nostromo and Monygham. Whereas Nostromo, who lives for vain reputation, betrays it as well as the Violas, Dr. Monygham regains his self-respect by fidelity to his substitute family, utilizing for his own purposes the ill regard which most Sulacans have for him. He says to Emilia: "'Let me try to serve you to the whole extent of my evil reputation. I am off now to play my game of betrayal with Sotillo, and keep him off the town.'"[81] His personal reward for successfully fulfilling his plan is to be "asked to take up his quarters in the Gould house,"[82] thus cementing more firmly his closeness to Emilia. "With the utter absorption of a man to whom love comes late, not as the most splendid of illusions, but like an enlightening and priceless misfortune, the sight of that woman . . . suggested ideas of adoration, of kissing the hem of her robe."[83] But his residence in the Gould household is only as caretaker during their absence abroad; Emilia's sole love is for Charles, and the love felt by Monygham is not returned in kind. She regards him as a trusted and cherished friend;[84] however, as she can never have Charles completely to herself,[85] neither can Monygham achieve solidarity within

---

[81] Nostromo, p. 410. [82] Nostromo, p. 504.

[83] Nostromo, p. 513. [84] Nostromo, pp. 512-513.

[85] Nostromo, pp. 521-522.

this substitute family.

The two substitute families--Nostromo and the Violas and Monygham and the Goulds--are intertwined briefly but significantly during the eleven-month interval the Goulds are touring Europe and North America. Because the Viola family regards Emilia almost as highly as does Dr. Monygham for being their benefactress, he travels frequently to the lighthouse island to speak with them of her.[86] In one of those formidable shifts of time occurring buried in a sentence,[87] Conrad indicates that years have passed since the incident of the lighter: "'Our great Nostromo did not take much notice of the old man and the children for some years. It's true, too, that he was away on his coasting voyages certainly ten months out of the twelve,'" says Monygham.[88] The doctor operates flickeringly as a substitute for Nostromo, for Giselle appears to him during his visits to be flirting;[89] but he functions chiefly as a temporary replacement for Viola as father figure. By imagery of clothing[90] and by direct statement,[91]

---

[86] Nostromo, p. 513.

[87] Albert Guerard complains in Conrad the Novelist that "The literal chronology of Nostromo . . . is presumably irrecoverable" (p. 211). His observation is, unfortunately, correct.

[88] Nostromo, pp. 513-514.

[89] Nostromo, p. 513.

[90] Nostromo, p. 517.

[91] Nostromo, pp. 515-516.

Conrad indicates that the new Capataz of the longshoremen, Ramirez, is a double of Nostromo--but one who shows his true nature rather than conceals it. The novelist employs Monygham as a double to Giorgio Viola; for the doctor and Emilia decide to apprise Nostromo of Ramirez's interest in Giselle.[92] The doctor's fidelity to Emilia and the Violas helps set in motion the chain of betrayals culminating in Viola's mistaking Nostromo for Ramirez and firing the fatal shot.

Conrad establishes the imagery of real and substitute families to complicate his plot, certainly; but even more importantly, he demonstrates by their intertwining and doubling the necessary dependence of all men upon family in some form as representative of the family of man and, unfortunately, the ultimate failure to establish lasting bonds. Writing of this attitude in Conrad's Measure of Man, Paul Wiley states that in Nostromo, The Secret Agent, and Under Western Eyes "the death-oriented movement of chance proceeds without arrest from a moral barrier in society or a bond of love or sympathy between individuals."[93] His observation is just, but Wiley mistakes the human condition itself for greed when he adds that "avarice not only defeats the protagonists in the

---

[92] Nostromo, pp. 518-519.

[93] Wiley, op. cit., p. 98.

the novel [Nostromo] but also excludes love as a redeeming force."[94]

Focusing, however, on the treatment Conrad's characters accord one another in such works as An Outcast of the Islands, Lord Jim, and The Nigger of the Narcissus, Wiley makes an observation which applies exactly to Nostromo:

> When mind with its traditional values loses hold in a world no longer ruled by Providence, the result is not only self-betrayal for the individual but also betrayal of man by man. The barrier between organized society and barbarism then threatens to collapse.[95]

The entire novel is indeed a record of the loss of values.

Robert Haugh notes in Joseph Conrad: Discovery in Design that as Nostromo dies, "the vast pattern of betrayed fidelities has finished. It has moved in massive convulsions through a complex political state, whose moral lines of force permeate finally the intimate ethical being of sensitive and meaningful lives."[96] And Avrom Fleishman states in Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad that Nostromo "marks the

---

[94] Ibid., p. 99.

[95] Ibid., p. 32. Conrad writes in Lord Jim that "'the Dark Powers whose real terrors, always on the verge of triumph, are perpetually foiled by the steadfastness of men'" (Vol. IV, p. 121).

[96] (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), p. 163.

fulfillment of Conrad's political imagination: it represents the history of a society as a living organism."[97]

All of the inhabitants of Conrad's imaginary Costaguana form a microcosmic human family, and the novelist elects Charles and Emilia Gould as the nation's first parents. Unlike their prototypes, it is Charles rather than Emilia who commits a variation of the original sin. "Mrs. Gould had no silver mine to look after," so "she fed her woman's love for excitement on events whose significance was purified to her by the fire of her imaginative purpose."[98] Decoud says of the Goulds: "'Probably he thinks of nothing apart from his mine . . . . As to Mrs. Gould, she thinks of her schools, of her hospitals, of the mothers with the young babies, of every sick old man in the three villages.'"[99] Echoing Conrad's own characterization of women in Nostromo, Decoud says to Emilia that "'women, even our [Costaguanan] women, are idealists'";[100] and he writes of Emilia to his Parisian sister:

"A passion has crept into his [Gould's] cold and

---

[97](Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 161.

[98]Nostromo, p. 149. [99]Nostromo, p. 189.

[100]Nostromo, p. 216. Conrad writes in Lord Jim that "'It is only women who manage to put at times into their love an element just palpable enough to give one a fright--an extra-terrestrial touch'" (Vol. IV, p. 277).

> idealistic life. . . .
>
> . . . And he defers to her because he trusts her perhaps, but I fancy more rather as if he wished to make up for some subtle wrong, for that sentimental unfaithfulness which surrenders her happiness, her life, to the seduction of an idea. The little woman has discovered that he lives for the mine rather than for her. But let them be. To each his fate, shaped by passion or sentiment. . . . Don Carlos's mission is to preserve unstained the fair name of his mine; Mrs. Gould's mission is to save him from the effects of that cold and overmastering passion . . . .[101]

But love fails Emilia within her family as it does within the human family; at novel's end she is "as solitary as any human being had ever been, perhaps, on this earth."[102] The closest she comes to communion with another human being, even moreso than in her friendship with Dr. Monygham, occurs when she consoles the dying Nostromo. Conrad reverses the earlier death scene in which the Capataz refuses to comfort Teresa Viola, his substitute mother; and Emilia becomes a metaphorical mother of mankind, comforting Everyman.[103] Nostromo says to her: "'The world rests upon the poor, as old Giorgio says. You have been always good to the poor.'"[104] Her refusal to betray his confession

---

[101] Nostromo, p. 245. [102] Nostromo, p. 555.

[103] In "Conrad's Nostromo as Boatswain" (Modern Language Notes, LXXIV, April 1959, 303-306), Roger L. Cox cites the Italian nostromo as meaning boatswain, derived from the Spanish nostramo, nuestramo, meaning our master. It would appear that Conrad had in mind the Italian as indicative of Nostromo's employment and nationality and the Spanish as suggestive of the role of Everyman the character fulfills.

[104] Nostromo, p. 560.

about the stolen silver even to Dr. Monygham creates the one fleeting moment of true solidarity in the novel.

The family of man is imaged also in several other less important instances. On the lighter in the darkened gulf, for example, Nostromo is unable to kill, in a reversion to barbarism, the stowaway Hirsch once he sees Decoud giving the frightened man water to drink, "'as though he were [Decoud's] brother.'"[105] The townspeople fleeing Montero also present a portrait of humanity, in this case fleeing itself.[106] Having deserted both his substitute mother, Teresa, and a human brother, Decoud, for "this accursed treasure,"[107] Nostromo is an Adam--or perhaps better, a Cain--when, having swum ashore, he awakens from his long sleep "with the lost air of a man just born into the world."[108] Conrad underscores this association of Nostromo with Adam as a betrayer of the human family: "It may be said that Nostromo tasted the dust and ashes of the fruit of life into which he had bitten deeply in his hunger for praise."[109] Since Nostromo is "of the people,"[110] he is not only an Adam betraying mankind; he is also Everyman betraying himself.

---

[105] Nostromo, p. 284.

[106] Nostromo, pp. 355-362.

[107] Nostromo, p. 502.

[108] Nostromo, p. 411.

[109] Nostromo, p. 416.

[110] Nostromo, p. 454.

Paul Wiley believes in Conrad's Measure of Man with good reason that "in Nostromo overconfidence in human power and the neglect of personal bonds leads to individual disaster"[111] and that "The Doctor's love for Emily [sic] Gould, in whom sentiment and the wisdom of the heart take precedence over intellect . . . , manifests his belief that in sympathy alone can man expect help."[112] Phrasing Conrad's depiction of man's sense of family in a succinct manner, Moser writes in Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline:

> We must guard against being surprised, shocked or horrified at Conrad's negative attitude toward love. How could it be otherwise? Conrad sees man as lonely and morally isolated, harried by egoistic longings for power and peace, stumbling along a perilous path, his only hope benumbing labor or, in rare cases, a little self-knowledge. Conrad could not possibly reconcile so dark a view with a belief in the panacea of love, wife, home, and family.[113]

Conrad himself images this despair of the human family in describing Decoud's suicide: "But the truth was that he died from solitude, the enemy known but to few on this earth, and whom only the simplest of us are fit to withstand."[114]

---

[111]Wiley, op. cit., p. 107. [112]Ibid., p. 101.

[113]Moser, op. cit., p. 127.

[114]Nostromo, p. 496. Conrad phrases man's inability to communicate in similar terms in Lord Jim. Marlow thinks, "'It is as if loneliness were a hard and absolute condition of existence . . .'" (Vol. IV, p. 180).

Chapter 6

STARTING WITH IMAGES: CONCLUDING WITH THEME

In Joseph Conrad: The Imaged Style, Wilfred Dowden states that "in [Conrad's] best novels, as in those later works which exhibit skill in composition, he frequently used what may be called a 'controlling' image, that is, an image which both controls the plot and theme and reveals psychological aspects of character."[1] This controlling image in Nostromo is, of course, the silver mine in all its manifestations of human nature. Establishing a tremendous complexity of imagery through the simple process of dichotomizing human nature into its barbarizing and civilizing aspects, Conrad creates his microcosmic world.

Of Conrad's control of imagery, Frederick Karl observes in A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad:

> In matters of tone, a quality or condition in which carefully selected language and images suggest sub-surface rhythms, Conrad was an experienced practitioner from Almayer's Folly, his first novel. In that book, his reliance on figurative language and simile operated to give a tone beyond that of surface realism. The spirit of generalization was already at work. By tying images to a sense of

---

[1](Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1970), p. 9.

> recall, like Proust in his great work, Conrad was able to create a matrix of images and thus shape a work of considerable density. The image, with its reference to things in memory, becomes evocative, abundant, and charged with associational material.[2]

Karl's observation, very much to the point, should, however, come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Conrad's clearest exposition of aesthetic principles, the Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus.

Believing that art should "carry its justification in every line," the novelist writes:

> And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its lights, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential--their one illuminating and convincing quality--the very truth of their existence.[3]

The artist "descends within himself" to discover the "terms of his appeal." Most significant in terms of the present study is Conrad's statement that the artist's appeal "is made to our less obvious capacities: to that part of our

---

[2](New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 57. Dowden is qualified by Karl, who notes that "despite his continual psychological probing toward the center of his subject, Conrad as a novelist worked essentially from the outside" (p. 58). In this regard, Conrad and his greatest contemporary novelist in English, Henry James, themselves form a polarity of approach.

[3]Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus, Collected Works, Memorial Edition, Vol. III (Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1925). p. xv. All subsequent references to Conrad's works are to this edition.

nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities--like the vulnerable body within a steel armour."[4] These conditions of existence become the very action, a civil war, which informs Nostromo; and the ironist's double vision perceives a profound division between that which veneers the surface of mankind and that more significant self lying underneath.[5] Like Heart of Darkness--but tremendously more profound and far-reaching in its assertions--Nostromo is a record of man's humanity at war with itself.

The Preface sets forth Conrad's thematic interest as well as his compositional method. Aware of the dichotomy within human nature, the author believes his task "by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel--it is, before all, to make you see" [Conrad's emphasis]:

> 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

---

[4] Ibid., p. xvi.

[5] In Lord Jim Marlow speaks of "'some obscure and awful attribute of our nature which, I am afraid, is not so very far under the surface as we like to think'" (Vol. IV, p. 404). And in The Secret Agent, the Professor, a devoted anarchist, says: "Revolution, legality--counter moves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical" (Vol. IX, p. 69).

> that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate, which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world.[6]

Concern for the family of man is of primary interest to the novelist. Since art is mainly an appeal through the senses, "It is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words . . . ."[7] The carefully shaped imagery of the sentences of Nostromo do indeed ring with Conrad's vision.

Frederick Karl further states that

> In Nostromo, as in his other novels, it was not Conrad's ability to achieve new and original techniques that makes his work distinctive, but rather his resourcefulness in organizing and revamping the conventional matter of the novel. Most of all we find Conrad learning from himself, growing larger and more varied as he progressed in his craft.[8]

The supreme command of thematic imagery is perhaps his greatest contribution to the genre of the novel.

Conrad's treatment of the related problems of time and point of view, though the subject lies outside the

---

[6]Ibid., p. xviii.

[7]Ibid., p. xvii.

[8]Karl, op. cit., p. 153.

scope of the present study and has been admirably discussed elsewhere,[9] is a variation of the later center-and-circle approach which Geoffrey Hartman attributes to Georges Poulet in the title essay of Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970.[10] Conrad begins with concentration on a central time and then, maintaining that locus, moves around and back and forth in dizzying flashes to events in differing past and future times. This center-and-circle technique quite naturally involves shifting perspectives; and in this general regard, Paul Wiley goes as far as to assert: "Were it not for Conrad's skillful employment of varying points of view so as to prevent monotony in the line of the narrative, the operation of fate in counteracting the illusions of freedom and idealism in limited men would seem mechanical; for the heads of Gould, Decoud, and Nostromo fall almost in a fixed order."[11]

Albert Guerard attributes Conrad's merit in large measure to his effective handling of time to establish aesthetic distance:

> The interposed narrator or interposed reporting witness, the careful manipulations of chronology, the

---

[9]For example, in Frederick Karl's A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad, Douglas Hewitt's Conrad: A Reassessment and Albert Guerard's Conrad the Novelist.

[10](New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

[11]Conrad's Measure of Man (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1954), p. 106.

> vivid interruptive digressions, the sudden movements from the abstract to the concrete and back, the ebb and flow of a meditative wandering intellect, the constant narrowing and opening of the lens--all these are a means of controlling the author's or narrator's distance from his subject. But also (and doubtlessly fairly soon in Conrad's career) they became conscious and deliberate means of controlling the reader's responses, of manipulating his feelings. And this is what sets Conrad apart from any earlier English novelist: his creation of conflict in the reader, and his fine control of that conflict.[12]

As significant as point of view and time are in Nostromo, they are nevertheless subordinated to Conrad's all-encompassing imagistic technique; for images are his starting point.[13]

Commenting on Conrad's place among novelists in English, Paul Wiley declares in Conrad's Measure of Man: "Because his reputation stands secure, it is, therefore, no longer necessary to compose tributes to his achievement. The task remaining is that of a deeper comprehension of the exact nature of this achievement and of all the values that it has to yield."[14] As Thomas Moser states in Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline: "Few novelists using the

---

[12]Conrad the Novelist (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 59.

[13]Conrad writes in a letter to Cunningham-Graham" "I don't start with an abstract notion. I start with definite images . . . ." In G. Jean-Aubrey, Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters (Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1927), I, 268.

[14]Wiley, op. cit., p. 4.

English language can match Conrad in any single aspect of his art. None, it may be asserted, has ever been able to combine so successfully such moral and psychological awareness with so complicated and rich a technique."[15]

Conrad's ultimate conclusion regarding the humanity he depicts in Nostromo is a despairing one; for the force of man's barbaric nature is stronger than the defense made by his civilized side. Critics such as Paul Wiley may attempt to meliorate the novelist's despair: "His power to stimulate rather than to depress the reader springs . . . from a source untainted by despair. It derives ultimately from his fidelity to life and his resistance to death . . . ."[16] But the weight of critical judgment, however, disclaims the assertion. Edward Said, for example, believes that "Because Nostromo is, in the best or moral sense, a realistic novel, there is good reason for considering it to have made one of the most profoundly negative statements in the English novel."[17] In Conrad the Novelist, Guerard says that "the best work of Conrad

---

[15](Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1966), p. 49.

[16]Wiley, op. cit., p. 213.

[17]"Record and Reality," in Approaches to the Twentieth-Century Novel, ed. John Eugene Unterecker (New York: Crowell, 1965), p. 152.

is the work of a tragic pessimist."[18] Nostromo, he rightly believes, is a "deeply skeptical novel":[19] "The horizon offered by the book itself seems . . . Dr. Monygham's dark one."[20] The feeble glimmer of hope emanating from the lighthouse at the novel's conclusion,[21] the reader knows from Conrad's all-pervasive imagery, is but a flicker in the night of human experience. Conrad's power to stimulate the reader, like that of all tragic writers, derives ultimately from his ability to wring from the reader, willingly or unwillingly, an acknowledgment of the truth of the artistic vision.

Nostromo will doubtless remain a difficult novel for most readers--a difficulty attributable in large measure to the complexity of its imagery. The task undertaken in the present study has been to demonstrate that Conrad's compositional method in the work is primarily an imagistic one, establishing theme by the incremental

---

[18]Guerard, op. cit., p. 55. [19]Ibid., p. 190.

[20]Ibid., p. 198.

[21]Nostromo, p. 565. The omniscient narrator says of an even bleaker night at the conclusion of The Secret Agent: "Night, the inevitable reward of man's faithful labours on this earth, night had fallen on Mr. Verloc, the tried revolutionist . . ." (Vol. IX, pp. 287-288). And at the conclusion of Heart of Darkness Marlow bows his head "'before the faith that was in her [Kurtz's Intended], before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not save her--from which I could not even defend myself'" (Vol. VI, p. 159).

opposition of pictures of barbarism and civilization. As is the case with all critical approaches, the merit of this study lies in its illuminating the work and thereby enabling the reader to enlarge his appreciation and understanding. Concerning Nostromo, the task is a rewarding, though demanding, one. But as Albert Guerard advises: "The novel 'almost unreadable' in its richness and difficulty is preferable, after all, to the novel unreadable because crudely oversimple: A Nostromo, not to mention an Absalom, Absalom! or a Light in August, merely reminds us that some books must be read more strenuously than others."[22]

The novel's epigraph from King John (IV,ii,108), "So foul a sky clears not without a storm," apparently is meant to suggest that as a storm may cause a clearing in physical nature, so a profound revolution in society or a radical change in the individual is needful to effect a substantive improvement in man's world.[23] The epigraph, however, recalls to the reader's mind the red, black, and gray clouds staining the sky and marking the transition

---

[22] Guerard, op. cit., p. 210.

[23] Lord Jim finally atones for his betrayal on the Patna by going to face his death squarely at the conclusion of the novel. He does so under a sky that is "'blood-red, immense, streaming like an open vein'" (Vol. IV, p. 413). And in Under Western Eyes, Natalia Haldin hopes for a future "'when the light breaks on our dark sky at last'" (Vol. XI, p. 353).

between the societal and individual emphases of the novel,[24] as well as the dark sky of the novel's concluding lines. The very heavens themselves seem to negate even the dimmest of hopes for significant improvement; and this profound vision of the human condition Conrad manifests in an imagery of despair.

---

[24] Nostromo, p. 411.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allen, Walter. The English Novel: A Short Critical Study. London: Phoenix House, 1954.

Allott, Miriam. Novelists on the Novel. New York: Columbia University Press, 1959.

Aubry, G. Jean. Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters. Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1927. 2 vols.

Baines, Jocelyn. Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960.

Boyle, Ted. Symbol and Meaning in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad. London: Mouton and Company, 1965.

Burgess, O. N. "Joseph Conrad: The Old and the New Criticism," Australian Quarterly, XXIX, March 1967, pp. 85-92.

Conrad, Joseph. Collected Works, Memorial Edition. Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1925. 23 vols.

Cook, Albert. "Conrad's Void," Twentieth-Century Fiction, XII, March 1958, pp. 326-30.

Cooper, Christopher. Conrad and the Human Dilemma. London: Chatto and Windus, 1970.

Cox, Roger L. "Conrad's Nostromo as Boatswain, Modern Language Notes, LXXIV (April 1959), pp. 303-306.

Curle, Richard. Joseph Conrad and His Characters: A Study of Six Novels. Fair Lawn, New Jersey: Essential Books, 1958.

Daiches, David. The Present Age in British Literature. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958.

Dowden, Wilfred S. Joseph Conrad: The Imaged Style. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1970.

Fleishman, Avrom. Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967.

Friedman, Alan Howard. The Turn of the Novel. London: Oxford University Press, 1966.

Gillon, Adam. The Eternal Solitary: A Study of Joseph Conrad. New York: Bookman Associates, 1960

Guerard, Albert J. Conrad the Novelist. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966.

Guetti, James. The Limits of Metaphor: A Study of Melville, Conrad, and Faulkner. 1969.

Hartman, Geoffrey. Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970.

Haugh, Robert F. Joseph Conrad: Discovery in Design. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957.

Hay, Eloise Knapp. The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Study. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.

Hewitt, Douglas John. Conrad: A Reassessment, second edition. Chester Springs, Pennsylvania: Dufour Editions, 1969.

Hoffman, Frederick J. The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964.

Johnson, Bruce. Conrad's Models of Mind. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971.

Karl, Frederick R. A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969.

Kenner, Hugh. "Conrad and Ford," Shenandoah, III, Summer 1952, pp. 50-55.

Kettle, Arnold. "The Greatness of Joseph Conrad," Modern Quarterly, N.S. III, Summer 1948, pp. 63-81.

Kimpel, Ben and T. C. Duncan Eaves. "The Geography and History in Nostromo," Modern Philology, LVI, August 1958, pp. 45-54.

Kreisel, Henry. "Joseph Conrad and the Dilemma of the Uprooted Man," Tamarack Review, VII, Spring 1958, pp. 78-85.

Leavis, F. R. The Great Tradition. New York: New York University Press, 1964.

Lynskey, Winifred. "Conrad's Nostromo," Explicator, XIII, October 1954, Item 6.

McLauchlan, Luliet. Conrad: Nostromo. London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1969.

Meyer, Bernard C. Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967.

Morf, Gustav. The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad. Sampson Low: Marston and Company, 1930.

Moser, Thomas. Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957.

Rosenfield, Claire. Paradise of Snakes: An Archetypal Analysis of Conrad's Political Novels. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.

Roussel, Royal. The Metaphysics of Darkness: A Study in the Unity and Development of Conrad's Fiction. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971.

Said, Edward. "Record and Reality," in John Eugene Unterecker (ed.). Approaches to the Twentieth-Century Novel. New York: Crowell, 1965.

Shand, John. "Some Notes on Joseph Conrad," in R. W. Stallman (ed.). The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium. Michigan State University Press, 1960.

Smith, David R. "Nostromo and the Three Sisters," Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900 (Rice University), II, Autumn 1962.

Stallman, R. W. (ed.). The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium. Michigan State University Press, 1960.

Tillyard, E. M. W. "Conrad: Nostromo," The Epic Strain in the English Novel. New York: Essential Books, 1958.

Tindall, William York. Forces in Modern British Fiction. New York: Knopf, 1947.

Warren, Robert Penn. "On Nostromo," in R. W. Stallman (ed.). The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium. Michigan State University Press, 1960.

Watt, Ian. "Conrad Criticism and The Nigger of the Narcissus," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XII, March 1958.

Wellek, René and Austin Warren. Theory of Literature. New York: 1956.

Wiley, Paul L. Conrad's Measure of Man. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1954.

Wright, Walter F. Romance and Tragedy in Joseph Conrad. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1949.

Zabel, Morton. "Editor's Introduction" to The Portable Conrad. New York: Viking Press, 1947.