The Challenge of Bewilderment

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Chapter 4

The Ontology of Society in *Nostromo*

From Balzac and Stendhal to Dickens and Tolstoy, the political function of the novel is closely identified with realism. The classically realistic novel has political implications simply by virtue of its effort to portray the contemporary life of society. To depict a situation is already to go beyond it. The act of describing social norms temporarily suspends our practical involvement with them so that their deficiencies can be exposed and criticized. Representation is itself a political act because revealing a situation changes it, if ever so slightly, by opening up a potentially liberating distance between readers and their social entanglements—a distance they can choose to widen by acting on what they have learned.¹ The literary impressionists’ experiments with representation raise important political questions about the novel’s shift away from realism: As the novel becomes increasingly epistemological and hermeneutic in focus, what happens to its powers as a political instrument? Does the genre’s turn away from representation necessitate a decline in its social conscience?

James might seem to have less of a claim than Ford or Conrad to the title of a political novelist. Of James’s massive canon, only *The Princess*

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Casamassima and The Bostonians address explicitly political topics, and some critics doubt their value as social fictions. The case of James suggests, however, that the novel’s turn to semiotic self-consciousness transforms the genre’s political possibilities but need not eradicate them. A preoccupation with signs and interpretation would be apolitical if it neglected their status as social institutions or ignored their involvement in the problematics of power. But James’s novels have political significance precisely because they seek to cultivate an awareness of this status and this involvement.

Politics includes everything that has to do with power—its distribution and control, and struggles for its privileges. James’s fiction is deeply political because he is profoundly preoccupied with power. He leaves aside the depiction of broad social issues not to escape the political arena but to expose its epistemological and existential foundations. He locates these in the disequilibrium between self and other which makes possible conflicts of interest and struggles for ascendancy. James portrays the opacity of the other as a challenge and a threat—a challenge because to attain knowledge of the other’s inwardness is to gain power over the other, and therefore also a threat because the interpretive capacities hidden within another’s depths may be plotting to penetrate and appropriate one’s own secrets. In The Sacred Fount, for example, Machiavellian calculations of strategy and tactical advantage inform every stage of the narrator’s hermeneutic adventure inasmuch as his quest to disclose the secrets of others is part of a drive for ascendancy. James affirms his commitment to love over power in Strether’s solicitude for the wrongdoers who deceived and betrayed him, but The Ambassadors also portrays community as an ultimately utopian goal because the gap between selves makes conflict ever present and unavoidable. Ex-


3There are obvious and important parallels here to Sartre’s theory in Being and Nothingness that the look of the other announces a battle for power. For a study of these relations and a further examination of James’s politics, see Paul B. Armstrong, The Phenomenology of Henry James (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), pp. 136–205.
ploring the politics of experience, James exposes how the problem of power originates in the structure of the lived world.

James is interested in the relation between knowing and power not only with individuals but also on a larger social scale. Like many of his other international narratives, *The Ambassadors* shows that ways of understanding are social institutions. They are less recognizable, perhaps, than formally constituted organizations, but they are no less authoritative—probably more so, indeed, because their pervasive power for the most part passes without notice and therefore without criticism or challenge. Strether's history dramatizes how understanding varies with the codes that govern the exchange and deciphering of messages. James's novel suggests that within a community codes can be coercive. They enforce among its members a particular way of seeing, to the exclusion of other readings, as when Sarah Pocock refuses to acknowledge any indication that Chad has improved. Between communities, as Strether learns to his sorrow, conflicts over interpretation of the sort that pits Woollett and Paris against each other can lead to violent battles—political struggles for control over the meaning to be given to a state of affairs and for the allegiance of contested parties like Strether and Chad. Reexamining the traditional concerns of social fiction, James suggests that conventions are not only guides for conduct but also collective modes of understanding which can constrain the vision of their participants and inspire struggles for power. One of James's main subjects as a social novelist is the politics of interpretation.

There is less doubt about Conrad's claim to be considered a political novelist. But he too redefines the novel's social mission. Conrad joins James in cutting beneath traditional assumptions about conventions and institutions. Conrad questions the metaphysical foundations of social life. In *Nostromo*, the imaginary country of Costaguana is an attempt to provide an anatomy of the being of society. It serves as a kind of ontological model that allows Conrad to test and explore the social implications of contingency.

Conrad's politics are essentially contradictory because they reflect the opposition between his desire to overcome contingency and his recognition that it is ineradicable. Conrad is a political conservative in his belief in the need to preserve institutions in order to sustain the illusions of stability and community. But he is radical and even anarchistic in his skepticism about the justification any social constitution can claim. Conrad may hope for "the advent of Concord and Justice," but he can also write that "the
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efforts of mankind to work its own salvation present a sight of alarming comicality." He may seem revolutionary in his devastating critiques of imperialism and capitalism, but he has the doubts of a reactionary about the efficacy of revolutions and the motives of their advocates. His attack on autocracy suggests a democratic, egalitarian temperament, but his contempt for the complacency and gullibility of humankind shows little faith in the ability of the community to govern itself wisely.

It might seem justified to conclude, as one critic recently has, that all of these sides of Conrad "cannot add up to a fully coherent political rationale." But Conrad's contradictions reveal a distinctly comprehensible logic when we uncover the ontological dilemmas responsible for them. His seemingly inconsistent political attitudes express once again a fundamental metaphysical conflict between suspicion and faith—suspicion about the contingency of the codes and interpretations we live by, but faith in them nonetheless because we cannot do without them. Conrad demystifies the absolutist claims of any particular ideology, but his quest for affirmation often makes him sympathetic to those who show an unwavering commitment to a political ideal.

The disagreements dividing studies of Conrad's politics can be extreme. But these disputes are often attributable as well to his metaphysical contradictions. Eloise Knapp Hay is certainly right that "man is a political animal for Conrad as much as for Plato and Aristotle." The problem, however, is that political theorists have erected diametrically opposite philosophies on the postulate that we are social beings. It is not clear what kind of being this makes us, and Conrad's critics have varied so widely as to associate him with the conservative Burke and the revolutionary Rousseau. The Burke-Rousseau dispute deserves a little attention here because it exemplifies many of the difficulties of defining Conrad's politics.


Avrom Fleishman argues that Conrad's "awareness of the priority of the social unit to the individual self... places [him] squarely within the organicist tradition"—the "Burke tradition." Granting priority to society is not in itself, however, sufficient reason to align Conrad with the heritage of parliamentary conservatism. Hardly a descendant of Burke, for example, Marx also holds the community higher than the individual and argues that the self finds its fullest expression in social life. Conrad stands equally distant, I think, from both Marx and Burke. Unable to share Marx's faith that the abolition of economic inequities will make social harmony possible, Conrad fears that ineradicable differences must threaten any form of community. He regards the insistent longing of the self to overcome its limits as a potential source of violence regardless of the conditions of production, ownership, and exchange. Hence his claim: "Socialism must inevitably end in Caesarism." But this same wariness about the tendency of authority to expand and abuse its power prevents Conrad from sharing Burke's faith in parliamentary institutions and legal customs as guarantors of social peace and individual freedom. Conrad warns that absolutism is "inherent in every form of government" and that "every form of legality is bound to degenerate into oppression." Conrad may wish for a fully harmonious community, as both Marx and the organicists do, but he regards the intractable isolation of the self as more of an obstacle to concord than they do and more of a potential cause of antagonism.

The disparities between Conrad and Burke invited the rebuttal of Fleishman's argument which was not long in coming. Taking his authority from Conrad's national heritage, Zdzislaw Najder countered with the argument that Conrad was more progressive and egalitarian than the British...
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servative. He compares Conrad to Rousseau, an anathema to Burke but a philosopher influential among Polish revolutionaries of the generation of Conrad's parents. Conrad's politics are, according to Najder, a combination of traditional and progressive convictions which reenacts a basic opposition within the movement to restore Polish national independence. Just as Conrad favored the restoration of an older order and the preservation of traditional customs at the same time as he saw a need for radical social change, so (Najder continues) his homeland's freedom fighters desired to return to the past of their country's territorial integrity through revolutionary activity that allied them with radical movements in Europe.\(^\text{12}\)

Although I agree that Conrad's politics are contradictory, there are a couple of problems with Najder's attempt to explain their ruling oppositions by tracing them to their author's past. First of all, Fleishman correctly notes that "Polish critics have been able to maintain a wide variety of attitudes toward [Conrad] as a national author." And he too finds justification for his position in Conrad's experience as a Pole. For example, basing his argument on Najder's own research, Fleishman contends that Conrad was exposed to Burkean ideas through the conventions of Polish literary romanticism, which considered even the most exceptional individuals subsidiary to the group for whose welfare they were responsible.\(^\text{13}\) As typically happens, then, the move to backgrounds does not decide definitively between opposing possibilities of interpretation. It merely displaces the dispute and gives the combatants more material to fight about.

A further and perhaps more serious difficulty, however, is that the quest for origins—although sometimes potentially revealing—remains secondary to the question of how the author got beyond them. Conrad may have become unusually sensitive to politics because of the profound impact the trials of Poland had on his early life, but he would not be an artist of such great stature if he were only or even primarily a Polish national author. What matters is how he transformed his heritage by discovering within it a wider range of reference. And he did this by extracting its ontological implications. The conflict between the revolutionary nationalism of his idealistic father and the cautious pragmatism of his skeptical guardian confronted Conrad early in life with striking evidence of the antagonism between faith and suspicion. The partition and occupation of Poland may

\(^{12}\)See Najder, "Conrad and Rousseau," pp. 78, 88–89.
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have encouraged his awareness that social arrangements are provisional rather than natural—contingencies of history and not inevitable givens. The disputes between various parties in Poland about how to reunify the nation and how to distribute its land and wealth may have first made Conrad doubtful that social change could bring about a harmonious community. Conrad's Polish background would have given him ample opportunity to reflect about dilemmas concerning the being of society which reach far beyond his native land.

Because Conrad's concerns about society are ultimately metaphysical, he transforms the conventions of novelistic realism to make an approach to society which is more ontological than ontic.14 *Nostromo* is not so much a realistic representation of a given historical situation as a paradigm of political processes—a model through which Conrad explores the ontology of the social world. Conrad dramatizes Costaguana with considerable concrete particularity, so much so that *Nostromo* has been acclaimed for its revelations about the political dilemmas of Latin America. But the novel's ultimate ambition is not to offer general observations about the Caribbean. Although Costaguana may seem true to Latin American conditions, it is all the time not-real, purely imagined. It simultaneously invokes and refuses a claim to realism. But this paradoxical combination of particularity and unreality is precisely what a model entails. In this respect *Nostromo* differs slightly but importantly from *Middlemarch*, a novel to which it is frequently compared. Calling Eliot's realism "synecdochic," J. Hillis Miller notes that "in *Middlemarch* a fragment" of English society "is examined as a 'sample' of the larger whole of which it is a part."15 Costaguana is not a part that stands for the whole—a segment related by a syntagmatic chain to the totality to which it belongs. Rather, it is itself a whole society. It stands for the being of society as a paradigm that exemplifies its contradictions. This difference between Eliot's syntagmatic and Conrad's paradigmatic strate-

14I borrow the terms *ontic* and *ontological* from existential phenomenology, especially Heidegger (although philosophers as different as Roman Ingarden and Jean-Paul Sartre also use them). *Ontic* refers to the realm of particular entities, whereas *ontological* has to do with the Being of beings. The line between the ontic and the ontological is necessarily hard to draw, however, because (as Heidegger notes) "Being is always the Being of an entity." See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 28–35.


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gies of representation is a reflection of the novel's shift in emphasis from constructing realistic worlds to laying bare the principles of world construction.

The analysis that follows is an attempt to explicate the ontology of the social world Nostromo offers. In the first part I examine Costaguana as a paradigm of basic political processes. This analysis shows how Conrad's ambivalences about political struggles, social relations, and historical development reflect contradictions in their ontologies. I then turn to the question of ideology and locate its foundations in the problem of belief. Nostromo suggests that the inspiration for ideology is the basic human need to believe despite (or because of) the absence of indubitable values. The despair of ideology, however, is for Conrad the ultimate inability of any conviction to withstand demystification. But such doubts in turn reinforce his desire for a credible social program—or at least one that would not discredit its own vision by its self-contradictions.

The Model of Costaguana

The revolutionary situation in Costaguana casts into bold relief three of the basic dimensions of the social world—power, community, and change. These are the key components of politics, society, and history. The grabs for power by Montero and Sotillo as well as the many conflicts among the major interests in Sulaco raise first questions about politics: What gives rise to conflicts over power? Can its disruptive force be defeated and harnessed for constructive ends? The disturbance to the social order, the clash between the ambitions of the various parties, and the hope that a separate state might guarantee peace and justice—all of these bring to the foreground the question of whether and how a unified community might be molded out of a multiplicity of factions. Because Sulaco is a cauldron of actual and potential changes, history emerges as a living process. Questions about the workings of historical time acquire a special urgency: What are the causes and consequences of change? Is it determined, accidental, or subject to human will? In all of these ways, Costaguana is a special, extreme case with unusual revelatory value precisely because of its extremity.

The first step in the establishment of a society—and in the creation of Conrad's model—is the separation of culture from nature. The rendering of the immense darkness of the Placid Gulf in the opening chapter of the
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novel introduces nature as the mute, indifferent background to the doings of man: “Sky, land, and sea disappear together out of the world when the Placido—as the saying is—goes to sleep under its black poncho.” The primordial state of nature is, Nostrono suggests, a condition of absolute non-differentiation. By deploying a network of distinctions, society may seek to transform and control nature—but can never fully master it. At most, culture can invent myths, metaphors, or personifications (the gulf asleep under its poncho) that divide and structure linguistically what cannot be more effectively controlled. As the expansion of the mine transforms the plantation society and brings the railroad and the telegraph, the story of Costaguana’s development is the increasing establishment of differences to measure time and space, govern and chronicle resources, and distribute cultural features over the natural landscape.

Differences do exist in nature, of course, but Conrad’s novel suggests that they only take on positive significance when human purposes give them meaning—finding in them an inspiration for social projects, as when Decoud cries: “Look at the mountains! Nature itself seems to cry to us ‘Separate!’ ” (p. 184), or an obstacle to our plans, as in the complaint of the railway’s chief engineer: “We can’t move mountains!” (p. 41). Nature’s pregiven differentiating structures can be constituted in a variety of ways, and this multiplicity suggests that the meaning of the natural world is a matter of interpretation. We have here one of the novel’s first ontological contradictions. The paradox of nature in Nostrono is that it transcends humanity and defies assimilation but that it is also a social construct and a hermeneutic variable. Nature is simultaneously beyond the contingency of cultural variation and beholden to it for its meaning.

After portraying the appropriation of nature by culture, Nostrono shows culture becoming a new kind of nature. Consider, for example, the surprise and sorrow Mrs. Gould feels because “so much that seemed shocking, weird, and grotesque” in Costaguana is “accepted with no indignant com-


18In an atypical moment of oversimplification, Fredric Jameson misses this paradox when he calls Nostrono “a virtual textbook working-out of the structuralist dictum that all narrative enacts a passage from Nature to Culture” (The Political Unconscious [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981], p. 272). In Conrad’s novel, nature refuses to give way to culture even as, paradoxically, culture is the source of nature’s meaning.
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ment by people of intelligence, refinement, and character as something inherent in the nature of things" (pp. 165, 109). Brutality and oppression which seem absurd to Mrs. Gould are part of "nature" to the local residents—not political, social contingencies—inasmuch as they seem to defy the ability of the community to change them. Tyranny, torture, and corruption seem as much an inalienable feature of the landscape of Costaguana as the Placid Gulf or Mount Higuerota. This mystification upsets Mrs. Gould perhaps even more than the barbarity she sees all around her, because the illusion that injustice is natural reinforces the impotence of the oppressed. Only a transformation of customary consciousness or the perspective of a foreigner can unmask naturalization to disclose the arbitrariness of what it considers inevitable. Even the Gould Concession, a relatively recent development, is soon similarly cloaked in mystification: "It was traditional. It was known. It was said. It was credible. . . . It was natural" (pp. 402–3). This series of adjectives provides a neat summary of the factors that naturalize cultural institutions: prolonged duration, shared understanding, common belief, assimilation into daily discourse ("traditional" + "known" + "credible" + "said" = "natural"). Whether the phenomenon it masks is beneficial or baneful, however, naturalization is an illusion—most of all because it itself is a cultural process.

The central symbol in the novel exemplifies Conrad's contradictory understanding of the relation between culture and nature. Much of the mystery and fascination surrounding the silver of the San Tomé mine is due to the ambiguous position it occupies between the two realms. It is a natural resource, obviously, and its seeming inexhaustibility suggests not only potentially infinite power and wealth for the owner of the mine but also the boundless extension of nature beyond the limits of the human world. Its extraction is a highly organized cultural activity, however, and its value is social. Although the silver is called "incorruptible" because it seems to have an inherent purity and power that transcend Costaguana's political machinations, its worth ultimately derives from a convention—the agreement to consider certain metals precious because of their scarcity and to use them as a medium of exchange. Silver seems to carry its value deep within it, inalienable and everlasting, but what its possessor owns is the desire of others to have what he has. Conrad's novel portrays the value of the silver as paradoxically both naturally immanent and culturally contingent.

Although a product of nature, silver also has the status of a sign. Single itself, silver's capacity for representation is infinitely variable. The silver in
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*Nostromo* thus participates in Conrad’s reflections not only about contingency but also about monism and pluralism. When Mrs. Gould “laid her unmercenary hands, with an eagerness that made them tremble, upon the first silver ingot turned out still warm from the mould,” she feels “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” (p. 107). Mrs. Gould’s attitude owes much, of course, to her husband, for whom the silver means many things: a triumph where his father had failed, a proof of his competence, a defiance of the corruption and disorder in the surrounding land, a fulfillment of his pact with his backer Holroyd. To the reformers the silver stands for the possibility of progress, prosperity, peace, stability, and justice. To government officials it means a steady, guaranteed income of bribes. To the self-seeking leaders of insurrections it makes the mine a prime object of their quest for power. To the various foreign interests the silver is a guarantee that their investments will be safe. To Holroyd it stands for an opportunity to control a man and to extend the reach of his Protestant sect. Subject to an ever-expanding variety of interpretations, the silver is the origin of an open-ended series of meanings—but a particularly mysterious, fascinating origin because it seems to begin deep within the earth, in the bowels of nature.

Power

The many competing meanings the silver takes on are an indication that, in Conrad’s view, differentiation is not only potentially stabilizing but also potentially destabilizing. Differentiation is necessary for the creation, extension, and refinement of the structures that make up a society. But by interrupting the silent permanence of nature, differentiation also introduces change, multiplicity, and the arbitrariness of cultural conventions. The silver itself may be single and enduring, but its place in human purposes and interests is many and various. This instability can and of course does lead to conflict when meanings and goals clash to the exclusion of each other. The problem of power is thus inherent in the very constitution of culture as a differentiated entity. *Nostromo* suggests that the beginning of culture is also the beginning of politics.

The double-sidedness of differentiation—tool for organizing and managing the world, origin of conflict and battles for power—is one of *Nostromo*’s central political themes. It finds expression, for example, in the seemingly endless alternation in Costaguana between the establishment of
structures of power and their dissolution with the rise of a competing faction. The reformers who desire stability and justice want the benefits of differentiation without the disruptions and strife to which it can also lead. But Conrad doubts that these can be separated. Temporary alliances between groups with compatible interests seem possible, but the differences smoothed over or ignored by any alliance ultimately assert their force. As many readers have noticed, for example, the interests of the foreign elements no longer seem as conducive to the welfare of the native population at the end of the novel as they did at the outset. And, of course, some sets of interests are irremediably antagonistic. Decoud wonders why the rebellious Montero had not been "bought off," for example, but then realizes that the scoundrel "wanted the whole lot" (p. 183)—an assertion of radical self-interest which refuses compromise.

Parliamentary democracy may seek to adjudicate between competing needs and desires within an institutional structure and to regulate disagreements instead of allowing them to tear the social fabric apart. But the tumultuous history of Costaguana suggests that democracy is no stronger than the agreement of all participants to obey self-generated rules (or than their ability to enforce compliance). Conrad may be a democrat in his belief that parliamentary negotiation is the safest, fairest way to control and distribute power. but this conviction is menaced by the recognition that such negotiation is always vulnerable to autocratic claims. As much as those who aspire to make democracy work in Costaguana deserve admiration, their ultimate weakness is unmasked by Decoud's skepticism: "Empty speeches. . . . Hiding their fears behind imbecile hopes" (p. 238). *Nostromo* is both an endorsement and a demystification of democracy. And this contradiction is a reflection of a basic paradox of power and differentiation—namely, that although both are necessary to found and preserve a structure, this stabilizing function is constantly accompanied by the threat of an eruption of violence itself sparked by differences.

The anatomy of power in *Nostromo* suggests that disruptive assertions of the will are attributable to humanity's inherent condition of deficiency. Our inability to master our destiny or to achieve wholeness creates a volatile potential for demonstrations of power intended to conquer limits or remedy insufficiencies. This is the psychology of Gentleman Brown in *Lord Jim*. All of the tyrants in *Nostromo* similarly seize and abuse power to compensate for wounds to their narcissism. The earliest indication that Montero may plot an insurrection comes at the ceremony in Sulaco where he feels insulted and neglected: "why was it that nobody was looking at
him? he wondered to himself angrily" (p. 119). If Montero rebels to gain center stage, then Guzman Bento justifies his tyranny with an even more exaggerated sense of self-importance; indeed, the Almighty is "the only power [Bento] was at all disposed to recognize as above himself" (p. 139). Lacking God's perfection and self-confidence, however, Bento resorts to capricious assertions of will to convince himself of his ascendancy. A pettier tyrant, Sotillo is similarly an egotist, even if his vision is more limited (itself an ironic comment on his deficiencies—even his vanity is small-minded). Sotillo is depicted as "childish in [his] rapacity" because he "was fond of jewels, gold trinkets, of personal adornment" in contrast to "the misty idealism" of those "who at the smallest encouragement dream of nothing less than the conquest of the earth" (pp. 333–34).

Whether large or small in its ambitions, however, the kind of desire Conrad associates with a wanton will to power is a wish to enhance the prestige and dominion of the self in defiance of the constraints that signal humanity's finitude. This is an impossible, self-contradictory project, however. Everything a Sotillo acquires not only expands his powers but also points out their limits because something still exceeds his grasp. A desire to conquer the whole earth is the logical final stage for the voracious appetite of the will—or perhaps not the last, since possession even of the entire planet would still leave the tyrant's power incomplete.

Conrad clearly admires the constructive use of power—humanity's mastery of circumstances that seem to defy our resources (such as the whims of the sea), or the careful channeling of force which a job well done demands. On both counts Gould's achievement in transforming the mine from a "paradise of snakes" (p. 105) into a productive social structure gives him heroic stature. But Gould also seems increasingly demonic as his devotion to the mine becomes fanatical. His extremism shows the tendency of power to overreach itself. The two sides of Gould's character as both hero and demon reflect Conrad's sense of the contradiction between power's uses and its inherent inclination to abuse.

Gould is described at one point as "a just man and a powerful one" (p. 357). One of the questions Nostromo raises, however, is whether justice and power are compatible—whether a sense of equity and compassion can successfully curb power, or whether the force required to impose any legal standard must invariably undermine its pretensions. At the end of the novel, as has often been observed, the Sulacan elite who were originally aligned with justice against the tyranny of Costaguana's perpetual misrule are beginning to seem oppressive themselves. Nostromo suggests, further-
more, that justice is not a univocal category but a variable notion that can be construed in different ways. The justice of restitution which Father Corbelân seeks seems unjust, for example, to the owners of former church property. The justice of repaid debts which the foreign interests desire seems unfair to much of the native population. The justice Nostromo feels he never received seems amply paid to him in the opinion of his employers. And so on ad infinitum. Instead of providing an unequivocal norm to restrain the abuse of power, the idea of justice is an essentially contested category. It can itself spawn battles for ascendancy when competing interests struggle to make their interpretation of its meaning prevail. Demonstrating the importance of justice but at the same time demystifying its claims, Conrad once again adopts contradictory political attitudes for internally coherent reasons. He casts doubt on the utility and univocity of justice as a political norm precisely because of his awareness that power resists restraints like justice as much as it requires them.

The contradictions in Conrad's attitude toward power are echoed and reinforced by the many contradictions that pervade the novel's attitude toward its own narrative authority. As a narrative, Nostromo is both a stable and an unstable structure—as if Conrad were asserting his power as an author but at the same time withdrawing or contesting it. The result is to make power and authority into issues in the reader's relation with the text as much as they are in the story itself. Consider, for example, the novel's alternation between a limited first-person narrator and an omniscient third-person—an "I" whose authority derives from his acquaintance with those on the scene, and an anonymous vision that can see into Decoud's and Nostromo's minds when they are alone. The first-person's implicit acknowledgment of the limits of epistemological power contests the third-person's invocation of the prerogative to know all—but the third-person in turn questions the first-person's claim to superior authenticity by demonstrating that it is simply one narrative convention among others.

Power is similarly invoked only to be questioned within the first-person narrative itself. The "I" is an authoritative speaker, and not a Marlow whose reliability we must question or who doubts his own understanding of his story. But the very claim of privileged knowledge which this "I" makes in the preface becomes increasingly questionable as the novel proceeds and we learn that "my venerated friend, the late Don José Avellanos" and "his impartial and eloquent 'History of Fifty Years of Misrule' "—the narrator's "principal authority for the history of Costaguana" (p. xviii)—are nothing more than fictional creations. Instead of grounding the narrative, they turn
out to be imaginary constructs. Hardly a neutral observer, furthermore, Don José is indeed partial in his perspective because of his passionate patriotism. Here as before, Conrad employs a contradictory narrative strategy whereby he introduces a claim of authority only to call attention to its limits and cast doubts on its pretensions. This double movement suggests that an act of power is necessary to make meaning but that any assertion of ascendancy—even mastery over the elements of a story—is possibly suspect and vain. In the semantic realm as in the world of politics, Conrad acknowledges the usefulness of power to establish structures and pursue productive ends—at the same time as he warns against egotistical self-assertion and deceptive manipulation.

Community

Conrad's two-sided attitude toward power is closely linked to his contradictory views about community. *Nostromo* alternates between endorsing and demystifying the ideal of community—between advocating social oneness and demonstrating its impossibility. This is perhaps best illustrated by the novel's extensive exploration of the problem of mediation. For all of its struggles and strifes, Sulaco abounds in mediators—institutions like the church and the mine, or leaders like Gould, Don José, Nostromo, and even Mrs. Gould. The San Tomé mine is a paradigm of social mediation: "the emblem of a common cause," it "was to become an institution, a rallying point for everything... that needed order and stability to live" (pp. 260, 110). The mine demonstrates how a mediator provides an external point of focus onto which otherwise separate selves can project shared values, needs, or desires. But there are consequently as many different kinds of mediators as there are interests and convictions—spiritual mediators like the ever-recurring Madonna in blue robes, or material ones like the mine and the railway (demigods of capitalistic expansion). Mediators may embody such diverse values as self-sacrificing care (Mrs. Gould and her sister spirit the Madonna), peace through democracy (Don José), pragmatic welfare through economic power (Charles Gould), or heroic honor (Nostromo). Mediators may unify segments of society, then, but Conrad's social model suggests that many different, sometimes incompatible mediating structures may coexist in the same community. Mediation is consequently both an aid and an obstacle to social cohesion.

For these reasons, mediation does not eradicate a society's antagonisms and can even exacerbate them. The silver is the most powerful and pervasive
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mediator in the novel precisely because it can take on so many meanings. Inasmuch as these meanings frequently conflict, however, the silver's ability to inspire allegiances is equaled only by its capacity to spark violent dissension. Because mediation is a pluralistic social function that unifies a community at most provisionally and incompletely, there is no real contradiction between Sulaco's abundance of mediators and its history of conflict.

Although its aim is monistic, mediation in *Nostromo* is inherently pluralistic because it is based on belief. The potential diversity of belief knows no bounds. Gould and Nostromo are powerful mediators because both have an uncanny ability to inspire the confidence of others. "Charles Gould believed in the mine" and, "in his unshaken assurance, was absolutely convincing"; "his faith... was contagious, though it was not served by a great eloquence" (p. 75). The *capataz de cargadores* is similarly reticent and similarly able for that very reason to inspire others to believe in his limitless ability. With both of these silent mediators, their very opacity seems to enhance their receptivity as screens onto which others can project meanings. Reticence allows a mediator to acquire conflicting values. Nostromo is a romantic hero to the natives, for example, but the pragmatic capitalists regard him as a handy fellow for a tough job. Gould similarly acquires different, not precisely equivalent meanings for Sulaco's democratic reformers and the foreign investors. Although language might seem to provide a tool for advancing harmony by making mutual understanding possible, silence is a more effective means of establishing community in *Nostromo* because unity is better served by suppressing differences than by exchanging messages that would expose and increase them.

The opacity of the mediator suggests that differences remain between selves even when communal structures bring them together. There is the distance, first, between the mediator and the rest of the community. Gould's inscrutable anonymity isolates him from his closest allies and even, increasingly, from his wife. Second, there is also a residual distance between those who share the same mediator. Even when they value it similarly, their shared estimation of a common object does not eliminate the gaps between selves. Triangulation of this kind preserves the distances between its poles even as it unifies them as parts of one structure.

The limits of mediation in *Nostromo* call into question the dream of "organic community." The term "organic" implies that a unified com-

19Fleishman calls Conrad "unstinting in the hope" that different interests and beliefs
munity is somehow natural, justified by its own intrinsic harmony. But the many shifting modes of mediation in Nostromo portray community as an artificial creation. Even to the end of the novel, any alignment of members in a group is provisional and contingent, subject to sudden and violent change. No group is inherently justified, Conrad's novel suggests, because the beliefs and interests that unify it are always in competition or often uneasy cooperation with opposing but perhaps equally legitimate views.

Nostromo depicts community as an irreducibly plural, unharmonious entity, but it also suggests that the social dimension of our being is inescapable and fundamental. Charles Gould complains: "It was impossible to disentangle one's activity from its debasing contacts. A close-meshed net of crime and corruption lay upon the whole country" (pp. 360–61). Gould's feeling of contagion suggests in negative terms that the social world is all-encompassing. Although the mine is an enclave of peace and order in a world of tyranny and violence, even it is not immune from degrading, threatening involvements. Nostromo depicts a web of relations extending from Sulaco to San Francisco, Paris, Italy, and England—as if to suggest that the world of Costaguana belongs to an ever-widening social universe. To the extent that these connections are the product of imperial expansion, Nostromo demonstrates Marx's point that the march of capitalism paradoxically solidifies and extends our social being even as it proliferates areas of conflict—creating closer and wider ties throughout the world community even as it expands and exacerbates exploitation.

Experiences of absolute isolation are unusual, and they only reinforce for Conrad the importance of community. Left alone on the Great Isabel, Decoud "was oppressed by a bizarre sense of unreality affecting the very ground upon which he walked" (p. 302). The world is social to such a radical degree that "reality" exists only through the intersubjective recognition of objects. Things themselves become ephemeral to a single consciousness. Decoud's sense of his own identity slips as well because who we are for Conrad depends on the way others see us: "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" (p. 497). Decoud

"may complement each other in a unified whole—the organic community of the nation" (Conrad's Politics, p. 48). Fleishman is aware of Conrad's "ironic perception of the forces . . . that inhibit its realization" (p. ix). But his use of the word "organic" is nevertheless misleading.
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finds that the self loses substance when the gaze of others no longer objectifies it. Decoud's longing for another's "face" and "sight" emphasizes that one's identity is constituted by the regard of others and threatened by its absence. Deprived of a field of interpersonal differences against and within which to define himself, Decoud feels pulled into amorphous oneness with the natural world—a terrible rather than rejuvenating experience because this loss of self is pure destruction and not a reabsorption into a higher unity.

Conrad's sense that we discover and fulfill our being only in relations with others gives him an ideal vision of the possibilities of community. But this promise is countered by the many obstacles to social harmony which *Nostromo* portrays. These prompt the other side of Conrad to declare: "There is already as much fraternity as there can be—and that's very little and that very little is no good." Once again contradictory for good and compelling reasons, Conrad oscillates between affirming that we are social beings and doubting that we can be.

The experience of reading *Nostromo* reenacts many of the contradictions Conrad exemplifies in his model of community. In fitting together related elements scattered across the time of narration, across the perspectives of different characters, and across different locations where events unfold simultaneously, the novel's readers must emulate Conrad's own work of constructing an entire society. But they discover in the process that the social whole is an irreducible multiplicity. Only the reader has a perspective

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20 In this respect at least, Conrad stands opposed to the Romantic tradition. In an interesting and important book, David Thorburn argues that "Conrad was in fundamental ways a man of the nineteenth century, and his affinities with Wordsworth especially are even stronger and more decisive than his connection with, say Kafka and other prophets of our disorder" (*Conrad's Romanticism* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974], p. x). Conrad is closer to Kafka than to Wordsworth, however, in his skepticism about our ability to attain transcendence through immersion in the immanent world. Ian Watt has shown that Conrad takes over from the Romantics a sense of the special status of artistic truth and an emphasis on individual subjectivity (see *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979], pp. 78–88). But if Conrad inherits much from Romantic aesthetics and epistemology, his ontology contradicts theirs. He regards us as abandoned by Being and radically separated from its oneness, not always open to it through participation in the simple and immediate things of this world. Here again, Conrad is both conservative and radical, his sensibility both nineteenth century and modern.


22 Albert Guerard argues similarly that "the reader must collaborate not only in the writing of a novel, . . . but also in the writing of a country's history" (*Conrad the Novelist* [1958; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1970], p. 175).
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encompassing enough to achieve a wholistic vision of the novel's society—a total picture not accessible to any single participant or available at any given moment. But the reader's quest for consistency is blocked by the very multiplicity that sets it in motion and that it seeks to synthesize. This multiplicity refuses to coalesce to the extent that Sulaco has many histories and not a single "History." The implication of the blockage is that any social phenomenon is pluralistic—an incompletely unified collection of sometimes converging but always also conflicting interests, ambitions, and experiences.

To take one important example: Decoud's suicide, Dr. Monygham's desperate deception of Sotillo, and Nostromo's famous ride to Barrios are simultaneous events that are complexly interrelated. As the reader compares and contrasts the perspectives of these three characters at this moment in history, he or she should receive a sense of the relatedness of individual experiences through their participation in a social network. But the many divergences in what the moment means to this lonely skeptic, the disillusioned but noble doctor, and the betrayed *capataz* insist on the irreducible distinctness of their worlds. None of them understand or feel the moment in the same way. Their worlds are related but mutually opaque. The reader's challenge is to acknowledge the integrity and irreducibility of the many modes of vision which offer *Nostromo*’s universe while seeing through and across them at the same time to compose the community entire. The contradictory task of reading *Nostromo* is to do justice both to the multiplicity of society and to the links, overlaps, and parallels that join different perspectives together as participants in a shared history.

Conrad also suggests the contradictory multiplicity and oneness of society by manipulating what he leaves on the horizons of what he portrays. He experiments with narrative horizons to suggest that the being of a society paradoxically exists beyond the situation of its individual members even as it encompasses them and is always with them. Almost every action in the novel is haunted by an awareness that it in itself is subsidiary to a wider network of events and interests. Such pivotal events as Dr. Monygham's manipulation of Sotillo, Nostromo's ride to retrieve Barrios, or Hernandez's defense of Sulaco's refugees are only mentioned rather than portrayed. This narrative deflation of heroic historical moments emphasizes that no single occurrence is anything more than a part of the social whole. Captain Mitchell is mocked for "feeling more and more in the thick of history" when he is actually victim of "a strange ignorance of the real forces at work around him" (p. 136). With less of his pomposity, all of the
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characters in *Nostromo* share his situation. They too are always on the edge of history even when they occupy center stage.

Conrad occasionally dramatizes horizonality by focusing on the inner turmoil of an isolated consciousness at the very moment when a larger drama is unfolding elsewhere. On the day of Barrios's triumphant rescue of Sulaco, for example, we as readers remain with Nostromo on the Great Isabel as he ponders the empty dinghy, the missing silver, and the absence of Decoud. The triumph of the Separatist Revolution—the climax of Sulaco's history—is a gap left for us to fill (a blank ironically parallel to the absences that baffle Nostromo). This not only adds to the poignancy of Decoud's death and Nostromo's disillusionment; it also enacts dramatically that the fate of the community is horizonal to the story of any individual no matter how famous or powerful. Such a horizonal portrayal of events reflects the paradox that a community can be constituted differently from each of the perspectives that make it up even as it transcends them all. A society is both a variable plurality and a global totality because it is a shifting, horizonal construct.

Change

Battles over power and conflicts within the community are central to the course of history. It is not surprising, then, that the contradictions in Conrad's understanding of power and community are paralleled by contradictions in his interpretation of the causes and consequences of social change. Conrad describes himself as a determinist, but his political fictions deny that there is any inevitability to historical developments. He is an advocate of incisive human action, but he has no faith in the ability of the will to control the destiny of either the individual or the group. Both determinism and freedom are overruled in Conrad's universe by the abiding force of contingency—the ubiquitous contingency that also shows itself in the volatility of power and in the multiplicity that prevents social unity.

The temperament of the determinist dominates Conrad's well-known metaphor depicting human history as a demonic knitting-machine that refuses any alterations in its purpose or design. This image captures his conviction that humans are not essential to the world, but it is also misleading because it implies that the order of things is more necessary and less arbitrary than his fictions suggest. Conrad is too keenly appreciative of the ever-present possibility that some arbitrary chance will intervene for
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him to consider any course of events fated or guaranteed.\(^{23}\) The rebellion in Sulaco could have any one of several possible outcomes, for example. Which one will prevail depends on such contingencies as the amazing accident of the collision in the gulf and the equally incalculable actions of people, whether foolish or heroic. (Who could have predicted that Hirsch would seek refuge on the lighter, or that Dr. Monygham could hold Sotillo at bay for so long?)

Agency is as contradictory a matter for Conrad as fatality. Dr. Monygham's desperate game with Sotillo and Nostromo's ride for Barrios are instances where human will changes or directs the course of events. Chance prevails, however, even when the will succeeds. Good fortune alone saves Monygham from Sotillo's noose or a stray bullet during Barrios's attack, and any one of a number of unlucky occurrences could have halted Nostromo's miraculous ride. Many characters in the novel, both villains and heroes, could be described with these words, which summarize Sotillo's career: "Nothing he had planned had come to pass" (p. 440). Even the powerful Gould must make constant revisions in his designs to accommodate uncontrollable contingencies. Decoud's memorial in the cathedral credits his authorship of the separate Sulacan republic, but this is also ironic because very little happened as he intended. Human ambitions are always vulnerable in *Nostromo*—as they are throughout Conrad's canon—to the emergence of the unexpected, arbitrary chance.\(^{24}\)

Change is, for Conrad, an ineluctable fact of the human universe because it is a sign of the contingency of all of humanity's projects. But for that

\(^{23}\)In lines which determinist readings often overlook, however, Conrad is careful to describe the machine as purely contingent—and for that reason all the more absurd, since its determinism is arbitrary and unnecessary: "the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself; made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. *It is a tragic accident*—and it has happened." See *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham*, ed. C. T. Watts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 56; emphasis added. It is perhaps understandable that Conrad would suppress his belief in action and stress his sense of fatality when writing to someone with Graham's progressive views—as if the other side of the novelist's contradictory attitudes were asserting itself to correct the imbalance created by his friend's insistence on the opposing pole.

\(^{24}\)Edward W. Said is not quite accurate, however, when he argues that, for Conrad, "man is never the author, never the beginning, of what he does, no matter how willfully intended his program may be" (*Beginnings: Intention and Method* [New York: Basic Books, 1975], p. 133). Characters in *Nostromo* frequently inaugurate projects; some of which succeed, but whether and how they come to pass defies any individual's agency.
very reason, change is not finally subject to the laws of some determinism or to any general principles of human agency, since it would then become less arbitrary. Gould's career demonstrates that chance is more powerful than either determinism or free will. Although he believes that "the material interests . . . are bound to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist" (p. 84), he cannot simply rely on economic laws to create the social structure his enterprises demand. He must eventually take an active hand in political affairs. But then his intervention may fail and bring his ruin—there is no way of telling in advance how it will work out. Regardless of his economic might, the success or failure of his gamble in supporting Sulacan independence depends on a long chain of unpredictable factors. In *Nostromo* the relation between economic and cultural developments obeys no straightforward rules. Material progress is not inevitable, and its influence on the cultural situation is not necessarily either indomitable or beneficial.

Because he doubts that change can be either predicted or controlled, Conrad is ambivalent about both evolution and revolution as vehicles of social improvement. He claims that "the word Evolution . . . is precisely the expression of the highest intellectual hope," where "Revolution" is "a word of dread as much as of hope."25 And the narrator of *Under Western Eyes* argues that "in a real revolution the best characters do not come to the front. . . . Hopes grotesquely betrayed, ideals caricatured—that is the definition of revolutionary success."26 The revolutionary who presses Nostromo for money on his deathbed is in keeping with Conrad's prejudices: "small, frail, bloodthirsty, . . . shock-headed, wildly hairy, like a hunch-backed monkey" (p. 562). Despite this abusive caricature, however, Conrad's novel undercuts the hope of evolutionary change and instead portrays revolutionary action as a more effective route to social betterment. The evolutionary model fails disastrously and ingloriously with the collapse of the five-year transitional dictatorship of President Ribiera. The subsequent revolution of the Sulacan separatists produces peace and prosperity more quickly, completely, and securely than the gradualist scheme could have done.

Conrad may prefer evolutionary change, since gradual transitions from one state of the system to an only slightly different structure hold the play of chance to a minimum and maximize the likelihood that human control might prevail. Revolutionary change may worry him because it opens up

room for chance—increasing the uncertainty and unpredictability of events, and exacerbating the ever-present danger that contingency will thwart human designs. But some accidents can be happy—like the lucky but unexpected turn of events that gives rise to the scheme for a separate republic. And so, although Conrad is for the most part dubious about revolutions, he cannot disallow the possibility that radical social change might serve the common good.

The contradictions in Conrad's attitude toward change are recapitulated by paradoxes in the temporal structure of his novel. Conrad manipulates narrative time in Nostromo so as to transform the experience of reading into a kind of simulation of the vicissitudes of historical happening. As many readers have noted, the novel shifts forward and back in time so often and so abruptly that it is difficult to keep track of the narrative present or to maintain a clear idea of the novel's chronology. One effect of these time shifts is to convey a feeling of unpredictability. We never know when the narrative will change course or where it will go next. This uncertainty re-creates in the temporality of reading the unpredictability that is for Conrad an essential feature of historical time.

Paradoxically, however, the narrative is only able to jump around as freely as it does because the events it portrays are assumed to be fixed and past. They are synchronic, simultaneous with each other to the extent that they are all equally available to the scrutiny of the present in any order the narrator pleases. Synchrony makes it possible for Conrad to disrupt the time line of his story. In another turn of the screw, however, it thereby allows him to call attention to diachrony. To the extent that the novel's shifts seem unpredictable, the outcome and significance of the events it portrays still seem undecided and uncertain to the reader even though everything is already determined (the past cannot be changed, and we are even told early on that the separatist rebellion succeeds). The uncertainties at the level of the telling destabilize our sense of the event told. Nostromo consequently gives the reader more of a feeling that events are happening—still in flux, their ultimate meaning not yet settled—than it might if it obeyed the consecutive temporality of narrative coherence. Although step-by-step narration is diachronic because it is sequential, its relation of events operates according to the principle of the more or less progressive reduction of contingency. The goal is a final order where everything fits together. But if consecutive narration proceeds diachronically toward the goal of synchrony, Nostromo exploits synchrony to accentuate diachrony.

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Conrad's experiments with time in *Nostromo* also call attention to the horizonality of historical change. The novel frequently casts back in time in order to provide background from the past which is necessary to understand a current situation—as, for example, when a six-page history of Dr. Monygham's torture at the hands of Guzman Bento interrupts the account of events at the Casa Gould after Sotillo's arrival (see pp. 370-76). The pretense for this digression is to explain why the doctor limps, but of course it tells us much more, including the reasons for this cynical misanthrope's almost fanatical loyalty to Mrs. Gould. More broadly, we are also reminded of the heritage of tyranny, cruelty, and violence which Sulaco's reformers wish to overcome. On several levels, then, from the individual to the social context, this typical digression emphasizes how the past dwells in the present and provides its situation. Such a digression is a narrative demonstration of the horizonality of historical time—a dramatization of the presence of the past in the present (just as the future is present in potentia as well). The temporal shifts in *Nostromo* call the reader's attention to the horizonality of history by moving across the permeable boundaries of the narrative moment again and again in both directions, toward the retentional elements of the past and the protentional potentialities of the future. The permeability of the narrative present reenacts the retentional and protentional doubleness of the historical moment.

The narrative leaps across time not only diachronically but also synchronically, and these shifts suggest that the horizons of any moment are not only sequential but also simultaneous. As the narrative moves across several concurrent scenes of action—Decoud on the Great Isabel, Sotillo in the Custom House, Pedrito Montero's arrival, Don Pépé and Father Romàn at the mine, the Casa Gould, Old Giorgio in mourning at his café, and so on—the reader is given a sense of the copresence and multiplicity of historical happening. Each event has its own time, but all of them together paradoxically share the same time. The reader of *Nostromo* may occasionally feel that Conrad exceeds the limits of the ability of the necessarily sequential temporality of prose to portray simultaneity. But if we must strain to envision the coexistence of these many scenes, then our discomfort may also be evidence of how little accustomed we are in our everyday lives to paying attention to the range and complexity of the interlocking moments occupying the same time we do.

The time shifts in *Nostromo* also dramatize that historical meaning is a teleological process. From the baffling scene in Chapter 2 in which Señor Ribiera enters Sulaco on a lame mule that expires under him, the reader
should realize that this is a novel that will demand unusually strenuous anticipatory and retrospective connections. Ribiera’s ignominious arrival is the telos of many earlier happenings necessary to explain it, even as it endows them with their culminating significance. It is the answer to a question the reader does not yet have. By giving the answer first and only later filling in the question, Conrad calls attention to the extent to which the meaning of history is futural. Any particular moment in history attains its significance when the potentialities within it have been selected from and completed (and inasmuch as this process is never finished, its meaning always remains open to change). By making the reader wonder about what led up to a baffling event, *Nostromo* reverses the course of historical happening in order to emphasize how moments that come before achieve their meaning through moments that come after. The first presentation of the culminating moment makes little sense all by itself precisely because it is the final link that takes its meaning from and gives meaning to the chain of moments preceding it.

Although the meaning of any historical moment is teleological, Conrad does not believe history is necessarily progressive.\(^2\) The paradigm of Costaguana suggests that the same ontological conflicts and contradictions plague every social arrangement because they defy definitive resolution or lasting amelioration. The end of *Nostromo* is a distant repetition of earlier stages in the development of the San Tomé mine. This suggests that history is essentially cyclical, a perpetual repetition and return of intractable dilemmas in different forms. Like their predecessors many years before Gould’s father was given the mine, the workers may rise up against their foreign masters. And even though Sulaco has declared independence from Costaguana to create peace and stability for itself, its leaders are now plotting to annex the remainder of the country in yet another civil war. The balance of power is coming undone, both internally and externally. As always in Conrad’s fictional universe, power tends toward instability whenever it seems to have stabilized. The promise that peace could lead to communal harmony has been disappointed because the interests of various parties still clash (workers and owners, church and state, foreign investors and domestic circles). The quest for “Concord and Justice” seems not to lead toward a triumphant conclusion. Rather, it results in a series of displacements that approach their goal only to see it recede because the ontology of power and community makes its realization impossible.

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This is a bleak conservativism, but it also leads Conrad to make a radical critique of his contemporary social world. Conrad especially distrusts capitalism because it exacerbates political and social dilemmas that threaten any and all ways of organizing a community. As he explains: “democracy, which has elected to pin its faith to the supremacy of material interests, will have to fight their battles to the bitter end, on a mere pittance. . . . The true peace of the world. . . . will be built on less perishable foundations than those of material interests.”29 The instabilities inherent in the conflicts of the marketplace and in the pursuit of self-advantage make the seeming solidity of the material interests an ironically unsteady, insubstantial basis on which to build the social order. Expressing similar sentiments, Dr. Monygham calls for a society based on “the continuity and the force that can be found only in a moral principle” (p. 511). What would this principle be, however, and how could it justify itself? Although seemingly insubstantial, it might be said to draw strength from the allegiance it inspires. But then what beliefs would the entire community agree to in a world where there are so many incompatible perspectives, interests, and values? With these questions Conrad encounters the problem of ideology—the political expression of his metaphysical struggle to find absolutes worthy not only of his own unquestioning faith but also of the credence of all humankind.

The Conflict of Ideologies and Their Critique

Although the hope that convictions may be held in common is the basis for any prospect of social harmony, the model of Costaguana suggests that one of the primary obstacles to a unified community is the volatility of beliefs, their tendency to proliferate in a variety of incompatible creeds. Almost every one of Nostromo’s leading characters is identified by some deep-felt conviction (or the need for one). Even a partial survey of its cast makes clear how pervasive the problem of belief is in this novel: Gould’s fanatical allegiance to the mine, Don José Avellano’s passionate patriotism, Nostromo’s devotion to his reputation, Father Corbelàn’s crusade for the church, Holroyd’s faith in his manifest destiny, Decoud’s battles with cynicism, Mrs. Gould’s much-tried humanitarianism, Dr. Monygham’s disenchantment with everything except loyalty to Mrs. Gould. An impor-

A significant constraint on the proliferation of beliefs is that people seek to ratify their convictions by winning agreement from others—perhaps the best justification beliefs can claim in this contingent universe. For example, even though Gould's fanaticism eventually drives him apart from his wife, his faith in the San Tomé mine as a moral mission first seems to take on shape, force, and credibility when she embraces it as well. But the range of convictions that define the novel's cast suggests that ideological conflict is inevitable because people are destined to disagree about what to believe.

_No stro mo_ alternates between endorsing and demystifying the ideologies it portrays. This is illustrated, for example, by its treatment of patriotism, one of the quintessential forms of social faith. The most perfect patriot in _No stro mo_ is Don José Avellanos. In this ever-changing world, he believes "political doctrines" and regimes are contingencies: "They were perishable. They died. But the doctrine of political rectitude was immortal," as are (he thinks) his beliefs in "order, peace, progress" and "the establishment of national self-respect" (pp. 136–37). Don José's patriotism assumes that a kind of immortality may be available to us through our involvement with ideals whose absolute value makes them endure, even if only as unrealized goals to which selfless people will forever aspire. Even so material a matter as the national debt takes on ideal meaning to Don José because it stands for transcendent principles.

Conrad raises the hope of universal values, however, only to expose their deception. The text soon shifts from revealing the nobility of Don José's idealism to demystifying patriotism as a prejudice and a lie. Decoud complains that: "the word [patriotism] had no sense for cultured minds, to whom the narrowness of every belief is odious. . . . In connection with the everlasting troubles of this unhappy country it was hopelessly besmirched; it had been the cry of dark barbarism, the cloak of lawlessness, of crimes, of rapacity, of simple thieving" (pp. 186–87). Don José might at first seem immune to these criticisms, but even his transcendent patriotism is "narrow" inasmuch as it blinds him to the legitimacy of other convictions. The natives who oppose Don José's campaign to repay foreign creditors, for example, are themselves "patriotic" even though he considers

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them disloyal. The absolutist claims of any belief may disguise from the
faithful the status of their convictions as signs standing for a particular set
of values, and hardly the only ones that signs can display. Patriotism is a
highly variable counter that can represent many things, some less salutary
than others, but some equally worthy although irreconcilably opposed.
The notion of patriotism can even be used to lie, as Decoud insists—
further evidence that it is semiotic. All convictions can be made into
deceptions because they have the structure of “standing for” something.
Conrad may admire passionate idealists and wish he could affirm a creed
with their unquestioning ardent. But no ideology can escape his critique of
the contingency of human constructs.

The careers of the major characters in *Nostromo* provide a series of case
histories that dramatize Conrad's conflict between belief and doubt across
all of his major values. Gould's creed is based on mastery. Nostromo's
ideology is honor. Fidelity—Conrad's most important, most complicated,
and most conflicted value—requires a series of characters to work out its
implications: Decoud, Dr. Monygham, and Mrs. Gould. All of the various
ideologies in the novel provide a paradigmatic range of possible convictions
(or crises in faith) for Conrad to explore and criticize—a sample of unique
but typical modalities of belief which might coexist, however harmoni-
ously or uneasily, in a conceivable social world. In each case, the belief in
one of Conrad's absolutes (or the desperate pursuit of it in spite of misgiv-
ings) only reveals its inadequacies and its dangers. Each portrait undermines
as much as it advances the value Conrad would like to endorse.

Charles Gould is a seemingly strange combination of idealism and
pragmatism. According to the narrator, in Gould “the strictly practical
instinct was in profound discord with the almost mystical view he took of
his right” as administrator of the San Tomé mine (p. 402). Actually, though,
these contradictory aspects of his character are deeply consistent with each
other. His idealism is his faith in his mastery, an unquestioning belief in
the privileges and powers his competence gives him. Only initially does
this value seem the antithesis of self-deceptions. Pragmatic in outlook and
tough-minded in his calculations of strategy, the young “Charles Gould
was competent because he had no illusions” (p. 85). He is deluded, however,
in his very pretense of not having them. Even the competent completion
of a job requires an element of idealization because work demands the
posing of a goal—the projection of a hypothetical end that gives the
enterprise meaning, purpose, and direction. Decoud later complains that
Gould “has idealized the existence, the worth, the meaning of the San
Tomé mine" (p. 214). This idealization is an extreme extrapolation of the value a goal has as the imagined end of concrete endeavors.

There are dangers inherent in the dynamics of mastery, even when pursued with less ardor than Gould shows. His wife feels that the mine "had been an idea. She had watched it with misgivings turning into a fetish, and now the fetish had grown into a monstrous and crushing weight" (p. 221). An idea becomes a "fetish" when, as in the case of the mine, it takes on a life of its own, independent of the creators who are actually the source of its existence and value. *Nostromo* suggests, however, that fetishizing our own products is one of our deep-seated needs. For example, the Indians who work for the Gould Concession become "proud of, and attached to, the mine. It had secured their confidence and belief. They invested it with a protecting and invincible virtue as though it were a fetish made by their own hands, for they were ignorant, and in other respects did not differ appreciably from the rest of mankind which puts infinite trust in its own creations" (p. 398). Such confidence denies the fragility and impermanence of our constructs. Fetishization is a strategy for suppressing the world's insecurity by asserting the absolute power of values or institutions (the mine's "protecting and invincible virtue") which cannot justify this trust. The mine's deification is nothing more, however, than the result of the decision to believe in it. Instead of overcoming the absence of transcendence, fetishization consequently provides further evidence that it is lacking.

Another irony of such glorification is that it diminishes humanity's stature. This faith—like Gould's fetishism—is alienating rather than liberating because it subjugates people to something they themselves created. Hence Gould's transformation from heroic strength to the madness of obsession: "Charles Gould's fits of abstraction depicted the energetic concentration of a will haunted by a fixed idea. A man haunted by a fixed idea is insane" (p. 379). Gould's alienation by the mine is doubly debilitating.

31Howe compares Gould's mystification of the mine to the late Marx's notion of "commodity fetishism" *(Politics and the Novel*, p. 111). The early Marx's critique of idealism for projecting historical conditions into the heavens of absolute concepts suggests, however, that the process of fetishization is not solely a feature of capitalistic production and exchange. See Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), pp. 37–48. Both Marx and Conrad regard fetishization as alienating, but Conrad does not share Marx's faith that demystifying its illusion can be the prelude to human liberation. For Marx the disclosure that social praxis is the basis of the world's structure means that debilitating arrangements can be changed. For Conrad the same disclosure means that we can never find meanings and values that are not relative and transient.
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and doubly mystifying—not only because the “fixed idea” that paralyzes his will is his own creation, but also because the origin of his obsession is a dream of absolute competence. By showing how Gould’s quest for mastery ends in alienation, Conrad unmasks the danger of absolutizing a value he would like to affirm absolutely.

There are even greater dangers of mystification with such a romantic value as honor. Living primarily for glory and publicity, Nostromo fashions his identity around ideals central to honor: bravery, chivalry, and service. His vain preoccupation with his reputation, however, radicalizes and undercuts the ontological function of honor as a guarantor of the self. Equating his identity with his self-for-others, Nostromo seeks apotheosis through the ascendency the trust of others attributes to his persona. His relationship with Signora Teresa is for this reason especially maddening, inasmuch as she believes in his myth of omnipotence at the same time that she debunks the persona that is his source of power. “That is all he cares for. To be first somewhere—somehow—to be first with these English,” she complains. “They will be showing him to everybody. ‘This is our Nostromo!’” (p. 23). Because she resents others for depriving her and her family of Nostromo’s attention, she does not realize that the valuation of others is precisely what gives him his strength. Her jealous mockery maddens and mystifies him because it is contradictory in making light of his source of self-worth even as it claims that worth all for herself.

Although a social identity may be for Conrad more stable and lucid than an individual’s inwardness, Nostromo’s vanity and Signora Teresa’s jealousy suggest that a self based on honor has at least two inherent dangers. Nostromo’s cult of personality shows, first, that honor provides a deceptive guarantee of identity. Nostromo’s identity is not his own because it is his self-for-others. Hence his perplexity and paralysis when Signora Teresa refuses to regard him with the unquestioning respect on which his persona depends. The very procedure of public recognition which provides his apotheosis also disenfranchises him of self-determination. Second, even though chivalrous behavior might seem to reinforce the communal bond, Nostromo’s quest for ascendency shows that honor can be a cause of disruption. Nostromo builds his reputation at least in part by serving the public good, but the vanity of apotheosis is the antithesis of the modesty and restraint that coexistence in a community requires. Jealousy and antagonism are only to be expected when the basis of self-constitution is a desire for ascendency—jealousy in Signora Teresa’s case about who can possess the privileged object, although disputes over who can be it are of
course equally possible. Conrad challenges his belief in honor by demystifying its claims to serve the social good and guarantee the self.  

Conrad’s oscillation between suspicion and faith is similarly the basis of Decoud’s divided self. There are not two different Decouds, as some have argued—the detached skeptic versus the committed patriot and passionate lover. These are two sides of the same struggle—a conflict at the center of Decoud’s being between a will to believe and a disenchantment with the pretension and illusion of human values. Through Decoud, Conrad depicts not only the inherent weaknesses of irony but also the equally intrinsic deficiencies of any faith, even a commitment to fidelity.

Decoud’s irony might seem to give him a position of strength, but the superior stance of skepticism is a delusion. As Decoud discovers in his impotence on the lighter, the most absurd accident can still defeat his will: “To feel himself at the mercy of such an idiotic contingency,” for example, as discovery by Sotillo if Hirsch sneezes was, Decoud feels, “too exasperating to be looked upon with irony” (p. 284). Decoud’s irony is undermined by a basic contradiction. It grants him an aloof superiority by exposing the futility of all human projects. But his sense of ascendancy is thus itself an illusion, inasmuch as his exposure of humanity’s contingency does not exempt him from the inessentiality he disdains. The vulnerability of Decoud’s skepticism suggests that even a demystification of humanity’s littleness is victim of the helplessness it seeks to transcend. Skepticism is no more master of contingency than the beliefs it derides.

Decoud would like to enjoy the security of ironic detachment, but he himself fully understands its inadequacies. His story suggests that the ultimate implications of skepticism are solipsism and paralysis. Without a sustaining conviction, Decoud lacks any way of joining with others or

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32 Nostromo’s sense of betrayal has been described as the emergence of a proletarian’s self-consciousness about the oppression he has suffered (see Fleishman, Conrad’s Politics, p. 163). But the disappointed vanity of the capataz de cargadores is more a critique of honor as a social mode of self-constitution than a depiction of a worker’s resentment at the alienation of his labor. Like a factory worker, Nostromo may have nothing to sell but his labor power; but the power he seeks in return for his labor is not economic but egotistical—the personal ascendancy that the confidence of others bestows on him. He is disillusioned, not because he discovers that he had been working for less than his worth, but because the status he had received in exchange for his labor suddenly seems ephemeral: “The necessity of living concealed... made everything that had gone before for years appear vain and foolish, like a flattering dream come suddenly to an end” (p. 414). A self that was everything because of what others thought is nothing without them.

acting in the world except by reacting against those who do believe. His dilemma, however, is that the insufficiencies of any conviction are all too evident to his demystifying intelligence for him to embrace a sustaining faith. He is fond of disclaiming any serious commitment to the ideology of nationalism which he serves in his various revolutionary capacities. As he tells Antonia, "I have no patriotic illusions. I have only the supreme illusion of a lover" (p. 189). This self-mockery is a ploy that allows Decoud to have it both ways. He maintains his cynical aloofness even as he acts as if he had a creed.

But there is also a deeper truth in his coy disclaimer. Decoud's primary value is indeed not nationalism or democracy but love—and not so much his somewhat unconvincing passion for Antonia as his belief in love for its own sake. He desperately needs an attachment to another human being which can rescue him from the tendency of irony to isolate him from the world. The abstractness of his motivation may help explain the abstractness of his relation with Antonia; she herself matters less than what she stands for to him. It is no accident that his love for her begins when "she ventured to treat slightingly his pose of disabused wisdom. On one occasion, as though she had lost all patience, she flew out at him about the aimlessness of his life and the levity of his opinions .... This attack disconcerted him so greatly that he had faltered in his affection of amused superiority before that insignificant chit of a school-girl" (p. 155). Antonia's attack unsettles Decoud because it seems to recognize the insincerity of his aloofness and to reveal the insecurity his posturing hides. Without fully knowing what she is doing, she has touched the very center of his being, the self-for-himself whose dissatisfaction and longing he had disguised behind the facade of a smugly superior being-for-others. Because she reaches into his inner being, she also seems to provide a way out of the isolation in which this pose imprisons him—a route to others which is more important in itself than the patriotic ideology he adopts.

Decoud's need for others is the ultimate limit to his skepticism. Conrad's depiction of him argues that we are so inalienably social beings that no cynic—no matter how ruthless and self-consistent—can take irony to its extreme implication of total detachment.34 Why else, for example, does

34Although Decoud's skepticism tends to detach him from others, irony is not necessarily in itself an asocial attitude. For example, Thomas Mann suggests that an ironic stance can provide the artist with a way of continuing to participate in society despite feeling alienated from its customs and expectations. Decoud's tragedy is that he cannot find a socially productive mode of ironic vision and so falls victim to the potential for
Decoud defy exhaustion to write a long letter before leaving with the silver: "It occurred to him that no one could understand him so well as his sister. In the most skeptical heart there lurks at such moments, when the chances of existence are involved, a desire to leave a correct impression of the feelings, like a light by which the action may be seen when personality is gone, gone where no light of investigation can ever reach the truth which every death takes out of the world" (p. 230). The negation death brings is more powerful than the negations of irony. The prospect of death reveals the fundamental need to share his world with others which Antonia's attack also provoked—a need to reach across the walls that separate him from others instead of manipulating them to create a pose. Even a cynic's identity depends on the recognition and understanding of others. If Decoud fails to secure these, a false self will survive—as indeed it does, perhaps inevitably, in the myths about the author of the Sulacan Republic.

Decoud commits suicide because his quest to achieve community with others is defeated by absolute isolation. This defeat, however, only confirms the value of his search: "he died from solitude, the enemy known but to few on this earth, and whom only the simplest of us are fit to withstand. The brilliant Costaguanero of the boulevards had died from solitude and want of faith in himself and others" (p. 496). Decoud's tragedy is that his attempt to escape solipsism by immersing himself in a love affair and a social cause leads to an extended period of solitude which demonstrates the destructive force of the very isolation he had sought to overcome. Decoud's suicide suggests that fidelity is a compelling need, even as it questions whether this need can ever be fully satisfied.

Conrad's contradictory attitude toward fidelity—his belief in its promise coupled with his doubts about its efficacy—also governs his divided portraits of Dr. Monygham and Mrs. Gould. Dr. Monygham is simultaneously a demonstration of the virtue of loyalty and a demystification of the illusion that others are worthy of our faith or capable of returning it. This basic contradiction generates a variety of oppositions that divide the doctor's soul. For example, Dr. Monygham's doubts about humanity's capacity for reciprocity and devotion are a result not of skepticism but of idealism. They are a consequence of his desire for an uncompromising ethic of loyalty. His misanthropy is thus a humanism in disguise. He mistrusts solipsism implicit in the negation that defines the ironic attitude. Conrad himself discovers what Decoud needs by using irony as an aesthetic instrument—making it intersubjective by employing it for artistic communication and, in the process, taking an ironic attitude toward the perils and limitations of irony.
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others not because he feels superior to them but because he himself was once guilty of betrayal. His sardonic detachment from others reflects a commitment to fidelity which is too absolute to allow its own realization. All of these contradictions suggest that Conrad can only conquer his doubts with a backhanded affirmation that endorses a value by withholding faith in it. This contradictory strategy leaves the reader oscillating between revelation and suspicion, belief in the nobility of loyalty and skepticism about the inevitability of betrayal—opposing attitudes toward fidelity which Dr. Monygham’s humanistic misanthropy invokes without resolving.

Mrs. Gould might seem a more straightforward figure of care, but her simplicity is similarly a screen for contradictions. She is an equivocal representative of fidelity who defers as much of its promise as she displays. Abstractness and generality plague her sympathy throughout the novel. We hear Mrs. Gould bemoan the evils of Costaguana’s political instability; we listen to her compassion for the suffering; we sympathize with her because her love for her husband is not sufficiently returned. But we rarely see her concretely and actively exercising the compassion she stands for. Even when the wounded are treated in her house, she remains for the most part upstairs. She may save Old Giorgio’s tavern, install him in the lighthouse, or lend her carriage to the fleeing Avellanos, but all of these gestures are typically distant, not requiring her immediate involvement. They are marked by the detachment of philanthropy. The abstractness of her compassion makes her more a symbol of care than an example of it in action. Her characterization consequently suffers from stiffness and shallowness, as if she were merely an emblematic figure. Her elevated and distanced status makes her a fitting analogue to the Blue Madonna with whom she is frequently compared.35 Once again Conrad’s doubts about the efficacy of fidelity compel him to undermine his embodiment of its virtues. Mrs.

35 By contrast, Thomas C. Moser describes Mrs. Gould as Conrad’s one successful extended portrait of a woman who is “moderately complex” and who faces serious moral trials (see Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957], p. 88). Although she may indeed be more subtle and credible than most of Conrad’s women, she still lacks the fullness and life of James’s Isabel Archer or Ford’s Valentine Wannop—a vibrancy necessary to give a compelling concreteness to the value of care she is supposed to embody (a value whose complications these other women express more fully). R. A. Gekoski argues, somewhat oddly, that “it does not matter that Mrs. Gould’s virtue is fugitive and cloistered, for Nostromo may well lead us to doubt that anything more is possible” (Conrad: The Moral of the Novelist [London: Paul Elek, 1978], p. 198n). If nothing more fulfilling can be attained, then surely this does matter—to Mrs. Gould, to us as readers, and to Conrad.
Gould's compassionate pronouncements and philanthropic gestures affirm the value of fidelity, but the detachment of her sympathy makes one wonder whether care is a realizable virtue or an impossible ideal that can only be represented but not enacted.

The horrible irony of Mrs. Gould's history is that this representative of fidelity increasingly discovers the inevitability of isolation. In seeking communion she runs up against the walls that divide us. This is the same paradox that frustrates Decoud's battle with solipsism. The "first lady of Sulaco" is "wealthy beyond great dreams of wealth, considered, loved, respected, honoured," but she is also "as solitary as any human being had ever been, perhaps, on this earth" (p. 555). Mrs. Gould's inability to achieve community is only partly the result of her husband's failure to respond to her love. Her isolation is also more general. She does not develop warm, intimate friendships to compensate for her husband's desertion of her. This not only deepens the tragedy of their failed marriage even as it emphasizes the strength of her commitment to him; it also expresses Conrad's doubts about fidelity. By insisting on the disillusionment of his symbol of sympathy and care, Conrad asserts his belief in these values at the same time that he questions their promise. As with Dr. Monygham, so with Mrs. Gould, Nostromo affirms by simultaneously denying.

Nostromo is wary that any declaration of faith may harbor a mystification—a danger particularly marked, it would seem, with political pronouncements. Charles Gould complains: "The words one knows so well have a nightmarish meaning in this country. Liberty, democracy, patriotism, government—all of them have a flavour of folly and murder" (p. 408). A hermeneutics of unmasking is required to uncover the deceptions of political rhetoric—a hermeneutics that understands the meaning of any state of affairs as something other than what it pretends. But Nostromo depicts silence and disengagement as ineffective responses to the danger that affirmations may deceive. Despite "his fear of empty loquacity" (p. 368), for example, Gould must eventually make his voice heard in Sulacan politics, and Decoud must publish rhetorical exaggerations in order to pursue values he hopes will redeem him from despair. Suspicion alone is incomplete. It can unmask the lie in an affirmation or disclose the contingency of an absolute, but it cannot replace what it destroys. The insufficiency of suspicion returns us with new urgency to the need to discover an adequate mode of revelation.

These oscillations between suspicion and revelation, demystification and affirmation, leave the reader of Nostromo in a stalemate. But such is indeed
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our situation, Conrad fears, in a world where no belief can claim necessity. The suspicious movement of Conradian irony teaches the reader to unmask the pretenses and limitations of any creed. But Conrad's relentless quest for values—his almost strident affirmation of fidelity, honor, and mastery—insists nonetheless on the need to believe.

Conrad's mode of self-contradiction places him between two of the other great modern students of metaphysics, Heidegger and Derrida. For Heidegger, contradiction discloses Being even as it disguises it. The ontological difference paradoxically allows Being to shine in and through beings at the same time as the rift between it and them conceals it. Conrad's contradictions signify the absence of a ground, not its disguised presence. This might seem to align him with Derrida's demystification of the signifier's pretense of delivering a signified that it actually only defers. For Derrida, contradictions reveal the absence of logos—a lack that paradoxically makes meaning possible by permitting (even demanding) the supplementation of one signifier with a series of others. Conrad's contradictions may be the precondition for the creation of meaning in his fictional universe, his oscillations producing ever more signifiers that endlessly displace the goal he pursues. But Conrad would rather live in Heidegger's world even if he finds himself in Derrida's. Conrad's contradictions make it possible for him to mean, but they prevent him from speaking the truth he desires.

The argument is sometimes made that raising metaphysical questions is a way of avoiding political issues and social action. Although this charge may sometimes hold true, the differences between Conrad's, Heidegger's, and Derrida's ontologies also suggest that it is an oversimplification. Their different metaphysics lead to different political standpoints and to different assessments of revolutionary praxis.

Heidegger is perhaps the most vulnerable to such an accusation because he claims that "only a god can save us." That is, he regards all active intervention to change the world as a manifestation of the technological posture that, in its insistent drive to master everything, closes off Being instead of letting it be. Conrad is ambivalent about social change not


38Martin Heidegger, "'Only a God Can Save Us': The Spiegel Interview" (1966), in
because he prefers to dwell in the openness of Being but because his meditations on contingency disclose insuperable obstacles to achieving a stable, cohesive community and to controlling with certainty the course of any action. Derrida's ethic of semiotic affirmation—"the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming"—celebrates our liberty and power to create meaning. Conrad similarly regards the human world as a play of differences, but his monistic temperament finds in the instability of culture and meaning little reason for rejoicing. Derrida's giddy vision of unrestrained signification conflicts with Conrad's desire for solidarity and his fear of the disasters contingency can wreak. These three metaphysicians do not share a common political platform, and the seriousness of their disagreements suggests that ontology cannot simply be dismissed as a defense against social engagement. Conrad's attitude toward politics oscillates between hope and despair, but the reason for this inconclusiveness is not that he asks ontological questions about power, community, and change. It occurs, rather, because Conrad's questioning uncovers contradictions that defy resolution.

