Joseph Conrad

Lothe, Jakob, Hawthorn, Jeremy, Phelan, James

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Lothe, Jakob, et al.
The Ohio State University Press, 2008.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/27905.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27905
Joseph Conrad’s Nostromo is extremely complicated in its narrative organization. It offers narratologists great opportunities to demonstrate in detail the various kinds of narrative complexity employed by modernist authors such as Faulkner, Woolf, James, or Conrad himself. Just about every narrative device specialists in narrative form have identified is employed in one way or another: time shifts; analepsis; prolepsis; breaks in the narration; shifts in “focalization” from one character’s mind to another by way of the “omniscient” (or, as I should prefer to say, following Nicholas Royle, “telepathic”)

1. See Royle 2003, 256–76.

2. The best interpretation of Conrad’s work from a narratological perspective is Lothe 1989.

The chronological trajectory of Sulaco history can be pieced together from these indirections. The story begins in the middle and then shifts backward and forward in a way that the reader may find bewildering, as he or she wonders just where on a time scale a given episode is in relation to some other episode. It is as though all these
episodes were going on happening over and over, continually, in the capacious and atemporal mind of the narrator, like the endless succession of similar days and nights over the Golfo Placido in the setting of Nostromo. The story is presented in an almost cubist rendering, rather than by way of the impressionist technique Conrad is often said to have employed. I suggest that if the goal of Nostromo is to reconstruct the history of an imaginary Central American country, the formal complexity of the novel does more than implicitly claim that form is meaning, that is, that the complexity was necessary if Conrad was to tell at all the story he wanted to tell. Nostromo’s narrative complications also oppose what it suggests is false linear historical narration to another much more complex way to recover through narration “things as they really were.” I shall return at the end of this essay to the question of the social, political, and ethical “usefulness” of modernist narration of this sort.

Fredric Jameson’s slogan, “Always Historicize,” means that we should read modernist English literature, or any other literary work of any time, in its immediate historical context. He is no doubt right about that. Nevertheless, certain works of English literature from the beginning of the twentieth century have an uncanny resonance with the global situation today. Examples would be the exploitation of Africa by the Wilcox family in E. M. Forster’s Howards End, or the presentation of the effects of combat on Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway. Charles Gould and the American financier Holroyd, in Joseph Conrad’s Nostromo, are even better examples. Their collaboration is remarkably prophetic of the current course of American global economic aspirations as well as of the effects of these on local cultures and peoples around the world. I shall indicate some of those disquieting consonances later.

If Nostromo is a novel not so much about history as about alternative ways to narrate history, this means its goal is not to recover a single life story (as, say, Lord Jim does), but to recover the story of the ways a whole group of individuals were related, each in a different way, to their surrounding community as it evolved through time. Nostromo is a novel about an imagined community, a fictitious one based on Conrad’s reading about South American history.

A spectrum or continuum of different ways the individual may be related to others can be identified, going from smaller groups to larger. At the small end is my face-to-face encounter with my neighbor, with my beloved, or with a stranger, in love, friendship, hospitality, or hostility. A family, especially an extended family or a clan, is a larger group, in this case bound by ties of blood or marriage. A community is somewhat larger. A community is a group of people living in the same place who all know one another and who share the same cultural assumptions. They are not, however, necessarily related by blood
or marriage. A nation is larger still. Most commonly a nation is made of a large number of overlapping but to some degree dissonant communities. Largest of all is the worldwide conglomeration of all human beings living on the same planet and all more and more subject to the same global economic and cultural hegemony. At each of these levels the individual has a relation to others, different in each case and subject to different constraints and conventions. It is of course often, in a given case, difficult, if not impossible, to maintain a sharp boundary between the different-sized groups.

Each form of living together, or of what Heidegger called “Mitsein,” has been the object of vigorous theoretical investigation in recent years, for example, Lévinas’s focus on the face-to-face encounter of two persons, or Jacques Derrida’s similar focus in *The Politics of Friendship*, or work by Bataille, Blanchot, Nancy, Lingis, and others on the concept of community. In what I shall say about Conrad’s *Nostromo* I shall interrogate primarily the relation of the individual to the community, or lack of it, in this novel, in the context of an intervention by one stage of global capitalism.

It can certainly be said that the citizens of Sulaco, the province of Conrad’s imaginary Central American country of Costaguana, the setting for *Nostromo* (1904), form a community, at least in one sense of the word “community.” The inhabitants all live together in the same place. All share, more or less, the same moral and religious assumptions. Whether rich or poor, white, black, or native American, they have been subjected to the same ideological interpellations, the same propaganda, the same political speeches, proclamations, and arbitrary laws. Most of all, they share the same history, what Don José Avellanos calls, in the title of his never-to-be-published manuscript, “Fifty Years of Misrule” (though the narrator, magically and quite improbably, has read it and can cite from it [Conrad 1951, 157; henceforth identified by page number alone]). Though Sulaco is a community of suffering, as one revolution after another brings only more injustice and senseless bloodshed, nevertheless, it can be argued, it is a true community. It is small enough so that most people know one another. Don Pépé, who runs the mine, knows all of the workers by name. Almost all belong to a single religious faith, Catholic Christianity.

If the reader reconstructs the story from a distance, putting the broken pieces of narration back in chronological order, *Nostromo* appears as a tale of nation-building, the creation of one of those “imagined communities” Benedict Anderson describes in his book of that name. After fifty years of misrule by the central government of Costaguana in Santa Marta, Sulaco, through a series of seriocomic events and accidents, becomes a prosperous, modern, peaceful, independent state, the Occidental Republic of Sulaco. An example of the fortuitous “causes” of this historical change is the cynical plan for secession
devised by the skeptic Decoud shortly before his death. His plan is motivated not by political zeal or belief, but by his love for Antonia Avellanos. Nevertheless, Captain Mitchell, in his fatuous incomprehension, recounts the creation of the Republic of Sulaco as a connected story whose destined endpoint is the present-day prosperous nation. He recounts the sequence, in tedious detail, “in the more or less stereotyped relation of the ‘historical events’ which for the next few years was at the service of distinguished strangers visiting Sulaco” (529).

The pages following the citation just made give an example of Captain Mitchell’s version of Sulaco history. Captain Mitchell is the spokesperson for an exemplary “official history,” with its naïve conception of “historical events” as following one another in a comprehensible linear and causal succession. Conrad quite evidently disdains such history-writing. That false kind of history is represented, in one degree or another, by those source books on South American history, by Masterman, Eastlake, Cunninghame Graham, and others that Conrad had read. Though Nostromo is about the nation-building of an imaginary South American republic, not a real one, nevertheless it is, among other things, a paradigmatic example of an alternative mode of history-writing, much more difficult to bring off. Conrad implicitly claims that this counterhistory is much nearer to the truth of human history and much more able to convey to readers the way history “really happens.”

If the reader looks a little more closely at what the narrator says about Sulaco society, however, it begins to look less and less like a community of the traditional kind, that is, less and less like a community of those who have a lot in common, like those egalitarian rural English villages on the Welsh border Raymond Williams, in The Country and the City, so much admires, even though he resists idealizing them. For one thing, Sulaco “society” is made up of an extraordinary racial and ethnic mixture, product of its sanguinary history, as the narrator emphasizes from the beginning. The Spanish conquistadores enslaved the indigenes, the Native Americans. Wars of liberation from Spain led to wave after wave of military revolutions, one tyranny after another, with incredible bloodshed, cruelty, and injustice. Nevertheless, a large class of aristocratic hacienda-owning, cattle-ranching, pure-blooded Spanish people, “creoles,” remain. They are the core of the “Blanco” party. Black slaves were imported. Then a series of migrations from Europe, people coming either as workmen, political exiles, or as imperialist exploiters, brought English, French, Italians, even a few Germans and Jews. Sailors, like Nostromo, deserted from

merchant ships to add to the mix. Much intermarriage of course has occurred. Bits of three languages other than English exist in the novel: Spanish, French, and Italian. The narrator often uses Spanish names for occupations and ethnic identifications, as well as for place names like Cordillera, the name of the overshadowing mountain range. A good bit of the conversation in the novel must be imagined to be carried on not in the English the narrator gives, but in Spanish. Decoud and Antonia are native-born Costaguanans, but they have been educated in France. They talk to one another in French. Giorgio Viola, the old Garibaldino, and his family are Italian, as is Nostromo. They speak Italian to one another. This is signaled even in this English-language book by the way Nostromo addresses Viola as “Vecchio,” Italian for “old man.” Conrad does not specify what language the descendants of black slaves and the indigenes speak, but presumably some original languages persist beneath their Spanish. Charles Gould and all his family are English, though Gould was born in Costaguana and educated in England, as is the custom in that family. His wife is English, though her aunt has married an Italian aristocrat, and Charles Gould meets his future wife in Italy. The railroad workers are partly locals, “Indios,” but engineers from England run the operation, and some workmen are European.

Sulaco, I conclude, is a complex mixture of races, languages, and ethnic allegiances. Sulaco is not all that different in this from the United States, by the way, though we have had, so far, only one, successful, “democratic revolution,” ushering in government of the people, by the people, and for the people, with liberty and justice for all. I say those words with only a mild trace of irony, though the liberty, justice, and equality did not of course in 1776 extend to black slaves, or to Native Americans, or to women. My houses in Maine are on land taken from the Native Americans who had lived in the Penobscot Bay region for at least seven thousand years before the white man came and destroyed their culture in a few generations. “Liberty and justice for all” still has a hollow ring for many Americans, for example, the African American men and women who populate our prisons in such disproportionate numbers, or who swell the ranks of the unemployed.

The Sulaco noncommunity exists, moreover, like the United States one, as a complex layering of differing degrees of power, privilege, wealth, with the African Americans and Indios at the bottom, extending up through European working-class people, to the Creoles and the dominating quasi-foreigners like Charles Gould. Though the Gould family has been in Sulaco for generations, they are still considered Anglos, Inglesi. They are English in appearance, sensibility, mores, and language. The chief form of social mobility in Sulaco is through bribery, chicanery, or outright thievery, such as Nostromo’s theft of
the silver, or by way of becoming the leader of a military coup and ruling the country through force, as the indigene Montero momentarily does in Nostromo. It isn’t much of a community.

Martin Decoud at one point sums up succinctly the nature of the Sulaco noncommunity in a bitter speech to his idealistic patriotic beloved, Antonia Avellanos. He quotes the great “liberator” of South America, Simón Bolívar, something for which the “Author’s Note,” oddly enough, apologizes. I suppose that is because the citation is a parabasis suspending momentarily the dramatization of a purely imaginary Central American state with an intrusion from actual history. In the “Note” Conrad has been defending, ironically, the “accuracy” of his report of Sulaco history, based as it is on his reading of Avellanos’s “History of Fifty Years of Misrule.” The joke (almost a “postmodern” rather than “modernist” joke) is that Avellanos’s “History” is fictitious, along with the whole country of which it tells the story. No way exists to check the accuracy of Conrad’s account against any external referent, nor any way to check what the narrator says against what Avellanos says. This reminds Conrad that some actual historical references do exist in the novel, and that these are a discordance:

I have mastered them [the pages of Avellanos’s “History”] in not a few hours of earnest meditation, and I hope that my accuracy will be trusted. In justice to myself, and to allay the fears of prospective readers, I beg to point out that the few historical allusions are never dragged in for the sake of parading my unique erudition, but that each of them is closely related to actuality—either throwing a light on the nature of current events or affecting directly the fortunes of the people of whom I speak. (5)

“How actually”? “Current events”? The words must refer here to the pseudo-actuality of Costaguana history. One such parabasis-like intrusion is Decoud’s citation of Bolívar: “After one Montero there would be another,” the narrator reports, in free indirect discourse, Decoud as having said,

the lawlessness of a populace of all colors and races, barbarism, irredeemable tyranny. As the great liberator Bolívar had said in the bitterness of his spirit, “America is ungovernable. Those who worked for her independence have ploughed the sea.” He did not care, he declared boldly; he seized every opportunity to tell her [Antonia] that though she had managed to make a Blanco journalist of him, he was no patriot. First of all, the word had no sense for cultured minds, to whom the narrowness of every belief is odious; and secondly, 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. (206)

It should be remembered that though what the narrative voice reports
Decoud as having said agrees more or less with what the narrative voice itself
says, speaking on its own, nevertheless Decoud is explicitly presented as an “idle
boulevardier,” who only thinks he is truly Frenchified. His corrosive skepticism
leads ultimately to suicide. One might say that Decoud is a side of Conrad that
he wants to condemn and separate off from himself, leaving someone who
is at least earnestly committed to the endless hard work of the professional
writer who earns his daily bread by putting words on paper. Conrad’s letters
to Cunninghame Graham often express, it must be said, a skeptical pessimism
that is close to Decoud’s, as in one famous passage about the universe as a self-
generated, self-generating machine: “It knits us in and it knits us out. It has
knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair, and all the illusions—and
nothing matters” (Conrad 1969, 57). In any case, what Decoud says matches
closely what the narrator says about Sulaco’s deplorable history.

How did Sulaco come to be such a noncommunity, or, to give Jean-Luc
Nancy’s term a somewhat different meaning from his own, how did Sulaco
come to be an inoperative or “unworked” community, a communauté désou-
vivrée? Nancy’s book begins with the unqualified statement that “The grav-
est and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that possibly
involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer (by virtue of
some unknown decree or necessity, for we bear witness also to the exhaustion
of thinking through History), is the testimony of the dissolution, the disloca-
tion, or the conflagration of community” (Nancy 1991, 1). Nostromo, it might
be said, is a parabolic fable or allegory, a paradigmatic fiction, of the dissolution,
dislocation, or conflagration of community. Just how does this disaster
come about, according to Conrad? Who are the villains in this sad event? It
is an event that can no longer even be understood historically. Nancy’s view
of “thinking through History,” the reader will note, is quite different from
Jameson’s. The dislocation of community must be borne witness to as some-
thing that we, or rather I, have experienced even if we (I) cannot explain it: “I
have witnessed the conflagration of community. I testify that this is what has
happened. I give you my personal word for it.” The magically telepathic narra-
tive voice in Nostromo is such a witness.

No doubt, Conrad, quite plausibly, ascribes a lot of stupidity, knavery, lim-
itless greed, thievery, and wanton cruelty to his Costaguamanans. Someone had to
obey orders and torture Dr. Monygham or Don José Avellanos. Someone had
to do as they were told and string Señor Hirsch up to a rafter by his hands tied behind his back, just as someone has had to commit all the recent violence in Iraq, Rwanda, Kosovo, and elsewhere. We have seen a lot of examples of this human propensity for murder, rape, and sadistic cruelty all over the world in recent years. *Nostromo* provides a parabolic representation of this aspect of human history. These traits of human nature, organized in civil wars and revolutions, have certainly stood in the way of Sulaco, in Conrad’s fictitious history, becoming a community, to put it mildly.

Nevertheless, one needs to ask just what has made these deplorable aspects of “human nature,” aspects that always stand in the way of law, order, democracy, and civil society, especially active in Sulaco. The answer is twofold. First there was the murderous invasion of South America by the Spanish that killed many of the indigenous population and enslaved the rest, driving them to forced labor and destroying their culture. Mrs. Gould has a sharp eye for the present condition of the indigenous population. She sees them during her travels all over the country with her husband to get support for the new opening of the mine and to persuade the Indios to come as workmen for the mine:

Having acquired in southern Europe a knowledge of true peasantry, she was able to appreciate the great worth of the people. She saw the man under the silent, sad-eyed beast of burden. She saw them on the road carrying loads, lonely figures upon the plain, toiling under great straw hats, with their white clothing flapping about their limbs in the wind; she remembered the villages by some group of Indian women at the fountain impressed upon her memory, by the face of some young Indian girl with a melancholy and sensual profile, raising an earthenware vessel of cool water at the door of a dark hut with a wooden porch cumbered with great brown jars. (98)

This passage is a good example of that shift from a panoramic view to the specificities of an extreme close-up, in this case in a report of Mrs. Gould’s memory, as it diminishes from her general knowledge of “the great worth of the people” to that “earthenware vessel of cool water at the door of a dark hut with a wooden porch cumbered with great brown jars.” Conrad’s narrator observes that many bridges and road still remain in Sulaco as evidence of what slave labor by the Indios accomplished (99). Whole tribes, the narrator says, died in the effort to establish and work the silver mine. At several places the narrator describes the Native American remnant in their sullen reserve.

“For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Gal. 6:7). The consequences of the Spanish conquest still remain as the inaugural events in
that whole region. The effect of these events cannot be healed or atoned for even after hundreds of years. They still stand in the way of the formation of any genuine community, Christian or secular, in the usual sense of the word community. This “origin” was not a unified and unifying originating event, like the big bang that initiated our cosmos, from which Costaguanan history followed in a linear and teleological fashion toward some “far off divine event” of peace and justice for all. It was rather a moment of what Jean-Luc Nancy calls, in a play on the word, “dis-position.” The indigenous community, whatever it was like (and it will not do to idealize it too much; pre-Columbian history in South America was extremely bloody too), was disposed of by being displaced, posed or placed beside itself, unseated, dis-posed. This happened through the violent occupying presence of an alien culture bent on converting the savage heathens to Christianity and on enslaving them as workers in the Europeanizing of Sulaco.

This divisive violence at the origin, or origin as polemos, division, dis-position, also helps account for the way South American history, in what Conrad in A Personal Record calls this “imaginary (but true)” version of it (Conrad 1923, 98), is a long story of civil wars, tyrannies, and revolutions. Nor has this history come to an end. Twentieth-century events in Brazil, Argentina, Panama, Uruguay, Chile, or in Haiti bear witness to this. (A bloody rebellion against the Haitian government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, led by armed paramilitary forces and parts of the army, was taking place at the moment I first drafted this essay, on 10 February 2004. The Bush government, in typical United States interventionist fashion, put its support behind Aristide’s ouster. Never mind that he was the democratically elected president. The issue is the privatization of Haitian state-owned companies. The parallel with the central political event in Nostromo is striking.) These sad “true” histories are the background, or the assumed subsoil, of the “imaginary” story Conrad tells.

The next phase of Sulacan society the narrator records is the subsequent invasion of Europeans, in a second wave, after South American republics achieved independence. This was the invasion of global capitalism. It was already in full swing in Conrad’s day. Of course that invasion is still going on today. It is more often now transnational corporations, often, but not always, centered in the United States, rather than in Europe, that are doing the exploiting. Nostromo’s main action is a fable-like exemplum of the effects of Western imperialist economic exploitation. The novel can be read with benefit even today as an analysis of capitalist globalization. The novel circles around one signal event in such a history, the moment when foreign capital, what Conrad calls “material interests,” makes it possible to resist a threatened new local tyranny. This happens by way of a successful counterrevolution, and
the establishment of a new regime. The Occidental Republic of Sulaco will allow foreign exploitation, in this case the working of the San Tomé silver mine, to continue operating peacefully in a stable situation, a nation with law and order. The silver will flow steadily north to San Francisco to make rich investors constantly richer. This prosperity leaves the men who work the mine still earning peasants’ wages, though they now have a hospital, schools, better housing, relative security, and all the benefits that the Catholic Church can confer. Nevertheless, references to labor unrest, strikes, and the like are made toward the end of the novel. Conrad’s narrator gives a haunting picture of the mine workers at a moment of the changing of shifts:

The heads of gangs, distinguished by brass medals hanging on their bare breasts, marshaled their squads; and at last the mountain would swallow one-half of the silent crowd, while the other half would move off in long files down the zigzag paths leading to the bottom of the gorge. It was deep; and, far below a thread of vegetation winding between the blazing rock faces, resembled a slender green cord, in which three lumpy knots of banana patches, palm-leaf roofs, and shady trees marked the Village One, Village Two, Village Three, housing the miners of the Gould Concession. (111)

What is most terrifying about this process of exploitation is Conrad’s suggestion of its inevitability, at least in the eyes of the capitalist exploiters. It does not matter what are the motives of the agents of global capitalism, how idealistic, honest, or high-minded they are. They are co-opted in spite of themselves by a force larger than themselves. Charles Gould has inherited the Gould Concession from his father, who was destroyed by it, since, though he was not working the mine, constant levies were made on him by the central government in Santa Marta, until he was ruined financially and spiritually. “It has killed him,” says Charles Gould, when the news of his father’s death reaches him in England. He resolves to atone for that death by returning to Sulaco, raising capital on the way, and working the mine, just as, it might be argued, one of George W. Bush’s motives for the invasion of Iraq was a desire to make up for his father’s failure to “take out Saddam Hussein” and secure Iraqi oil for Western use.

Charles Gould was, as I have said, born in Sulaco. His sentimental and idealistic belief is that what he calls “material interests” will eventually bring

4. The text has “roots,” as does the Dent edition, but surely that is a misprint for “roofs.” “Palm-leaf roots” doesn’t make sense.
law and order to his unhappy homeland, since these will be necessary to the working of the mine. “What is wanted here,” he tells his wife,

is law, good faith, order, security. Anyone may declaim about these things, but I pin my faith on material interests. Only let the material interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist. That’s how your money-making is justified here in the face of lawlessness and disorder. It is justified because the security which it demands must be shared with an oppressed people. A better justice will come afterwards. That’s your ray of hope. (92–93)

That noble but naïve confidence finds its echoes in today’s neoconservative arguments for bringing democracy to Iraq by way of securing the smooth working of the oil industry there, our present-day form of “material interests.” The latter (oil exploitation) is bound to bring the former (Western-style capitalist democracy)—in good time—since oil exploitation requires law and order.

Actually Gould is, in spite of his English sentimental idealism and practical efficiency, no more than a tool of global capitalism. The latter is represented, as every reader of the novel will remember, by the sinister American businessman and entrepreneur from San Francisco, Holroyd. Holroyd funds the reopening of the San Tomé mine as a kind of personal hobby. It is one small feature of his global enterprise. That enterprise includes, as a significant detail, a commitment to building Protestant churches everywhere the influence of his company reaches. Or, rather, Holroyd funds not the mine, but Charles Gould. It is Gould he has bought, not the mine, out of his confidence in Gould’s integrity, courage, practicality, mine engineering know-how, and fanatical devotion to making the mine successful at all costs. Holroyd’s recompense is the steady flow of large amounts of silver north by steamer to San Francisco from the port of Sulaco.

Holroyd has a canny sense of the precariousness of the San Tomé enterprise. He is ready at a moment’s notice to withdraw funding if things go badly, for example, through a new revolution installing another tyrannical dictator who will take over the mine for his own enrichment. Nevertheless, Holroyd sees global capitalism as destined to conquer the world. He states this certainty in a chilling speech to Charles Gould. Gould does not care what Holroyd believes as long as he gets the money necessary to get the mine working. Holroyd’s speech is chilling because it is so prescient. A CEO of ADM, “Supermarket to the World,” or Bechtel, or Fluor, or Monsanto, or Texaco, or Halliburton, or Dick Cheney, for example, might make such a speech today,
at least in private, to confidantes or confederates. It is not insignificant that
Holroyd’s big office building of steel and glass is located in San Francisco, since
so many transnational corporations even today are located in California, if not
in Texas. Conrad foresaw the movement of global capitalism’s center westward
from Paris and London first to New York and then to Texas and California.
What Conrad did not foresee is that it would be oil and gas rather than silver
or other metals that would be the center of global capitalism. Nor did he fore-
see that the development and use of oil and gas would cause environmental
destruction and global warming that would sooner or later bring the whole
process of economic imperialism to a halt, if nuclear war does not finish us
all off before that.

Western-style industrialized and now digitized civilization, as it spreads all
over the world, requires oil and gas not just for automobiles and heating, but
for military might and explosives; for the airplanes that span the globe; for
plastics, metal, and paper manufacture; for producing fertilizers and pesticides
that grow the corn and soybeans that feed the cattle that make the beef that
feeds people, and now for the production of personal computers, television
sets, satellites, fiber optic cables, and all the rest of the paraphernalia of global
telecommunications and the mass media. Surprisingly, it takes two-thirds as
much energy to produce a PC as to produce an automobile, a large amount in
both cases. When the oil and gas are gone, in fifty years or less, we are going
to be in big trouble.

Holroyd, by the way, is a perfect United Statesian, that is, a mixture of
many races. He is also a splendid exemplar of religion’s connection to the
rise of capitalism, this “millionaire endower of churches on a scale befitting
the greatness of his native land” (84). “His hair was iron gray,” says the nar-
rator, “his eyebrows were still black, and his massive profile was the profile of
a Caesar’s head on an old Roman coin. But his parentage was German and
Scotch and English, with remote strains of Danish and French blood, giving
him the temperament of a Puritan and an insatiable imagination of conquest”
(84). Here is this insatiable capitalist’s prophetic account of the way United
States–based global capitalism is bound to take over the world:

Now what is Costaguana? It is the bottomless pit of ten per cent loans and
other fool investments. [The reader will remember the huge losses the
Bank of America and other banks incurred not long ago from bad South
American loans.] European capital has been flung into it with both hands
for years. Not ours, though. We in this country know just about enough
to keep in-doors when it rains. We can sit and watch. Of course, some day
we shall step in. We are bound to. But there’s no hurry. Time itself has got
to wait on the greatest country in the whole of God’s universe. We shall be giving the word for everything—industry, trade, law, journalism, art, politics, and religion, from Cape Horn clear over to Smith’s Sound, and beyond too, if anything worth taking hold of turns up at the North Pole. And then we shall have the leisure to take in hand the outlying islands and continents of the earth. We shall run the world’s business whether the world likes it or not. The world can’t help it—and neither can we, I guess. (85)

Holroyd makes this remarkable statement to Charles Gould, during the latter’s visit to Holroyd’s office in San Francisco to raise venture capital for the mine. The “great Holroyd building” is described as “an enormous pile of iron, glass, and blocks of stone at the corner of two streets, cobwebbed aloft by the radiation of telegraph wires” (89). That sounds pretty familiar, except that today such a building would have more glass and less visible iron and stone. The cobweb of telegraph wires would be replaced by invisible underground optic cables or by discrete satellite dishes. Nevertheless, Conrad’s circumstantial account of the determining role of the telegraph and of transoceanic cables in Sulaco’s affairs anticipates the role of global telecommunications today.

Gould’s reaction to Holroyd’s speech about the way the United States will take over the world is a slight disagreeable uneasiness caused by a sudden insight into the smallness, in a global perspective, of the silver mine that fills his whole life. Holroyd’s “intelligence was nourished on fact,” says the narrator, and, oddly, says his words were “meant to express his faith in destiny in words suitable to his intelligence, which was unskilled in the presentation of general ideas” (85). This commentary is odd, because Holroyd’s speech, it seems to me, expresses with great eloquence the “general idea” or ideological presuppositions of United States’ “exceptionalism,” its presumption that it is our destiny to achieve imperialist economic conquest of the world, with military help when necessary. Holroyd’s grandiose conceptions are not all that solidly nourished on fact. Charles Gould, on the other hand, “whose imagination had been permanently affected by the one great fact of the silver-mine, had no objection to this theory [Holroyd’s] of the world’s future. If it had seemed distasteful for a moment it was because the sudden statement of such vast eventualities dwarfed almost to nothingness the actual matter in hand. He and his plans and all the mineral wealth of the Occidental province appeared suddenly robbed of every vestige of magnitude” (85).

My own reaction to Holroyd’s speech is that chill or frisson I mentioned as a reaction to Conrad’s prescience. It is also the reflection that United States global economic imperialism may already be coming to an end, like all impe-
rialisms, as China is about to become the world’s largest economy, as Indian software displaces Silicon Valley, as United States jobs flee by the hundreds of thousands to worldwide “outsourcing” and manufacturing (a million jobs lost to China alone in the last few years), and as non-Americans like the Australian Rupert Murdoch are coming to dominate the worldwide cable and satellite media. The triumph of global capitalism means the eventual end of nation state imperialist hegemony. That includes the United States. We should make no mistake about that.

Somewhat paradoxically, one of the best ways to understand what is happening now in our time of globalization is to read this old novel by Conrad, written just a hundred years ago. That is one answer to the question of literature’s “usefulness” I posed at the beginning of this essay. The way military intervention by the United States is necessary to secure and support its worldwide economic imperialism is indicated in one small detail in Nostromo. The narrator notes that at the climax of the successful secession and establishment of the new Occidental Republic of Sulaco, a United States warship, the Powhatan (ironically named by Conrad for a Native American nation located in the eastern United States), stands by in the offing to make sure that the founding of the new Republic does not go amiss (544). This parallels the historical fact that when Panama, through United States conniving, split off from Colombia after Colombia refused to approve the Panama Canal, an American naval vessel, the Nashville, stood by to make sure the split really happened and the Colombians did not try to take Panama back.

It would be too long a tale here to tell the whole story of United States military and economic intervention, not to speak of covert action, in South America. Conrad’s Nostromo gives an admirable emblematic fictional example of it. Whether or not Conrad himself agreed unequivocally with Holroyd’s economic determinism is another question, just as it is questionable whether Conrad expresses without qualification his own radical skepticism in the Parisian dandy Decoud, “the man with no faith in anything except the truth of his own sensations,” as though he were a perfect “impressionist.” I think the answer is no in both cases.

The biographical evidence, for example, that provided succinctly by Cedric Watts, indicates that though Conrad learned a lot about South American history and topography from Eastlake, Masterman, and others, it was especially through his friendship and conversations with the Scottish socialist aristocrat R. B. Cunninghame Graham, descendent of Robert the Bruce, and through reading Graham’s writings, that Conrad achieved his understanding of, and attitude toward, the bad things Western imperialism over the centuries had done in South America.
I conclude that, as many distinguished previous critics, for example, Edward Said and Fredric Jameson, have noted, *Nostromo* is, among other things, an eloquent and persuasive indictment of the evils of military and economic imperialism exercised by first-world countries, especially the United States, against so-called third-world countries everywhere. The reader needs, however, to be on guard against confusing analogy with identity. I have used words like “allegory” or “parable” or “fable” or “consonance” or “uncanny resonance” to indicate that *Nostromo* is a commodious emblem of historical events, economic imperialism in this case. Such historical events have recurred from time to time in post-Renaissance world history. They always happen, however, in significantly different ways at different moments in history, as, for example, oil and gas have replaced silver as the preferred loot from third-world countries, or as new telecommunications, e-mail, cellphones, and the Internet have replaced the telegraph lines and undersea cables of Conrad’s day. The differences, we must always remember, are as important as the similarities. A parable is not a work of history. It is a realistic story that stands for something else in an indirect mode of reference. One might call each such literary work a reading of history. Literature, to express this in Conrad’s own terms, is a way of using language in a mode that is “imaginary (but true).”

The claim I am making is complex and problematic. I am sticking my neck out in making this claim. It is impossible to do justice to the complexity in question in a short paper. A parable is not the same mode of discourse as an allegory, nor is either the same as an emblem, or as a paradigm, or as a reading. Careful discriminations would need to be made to decide which is the best term for Conrad’s procedure of making an imaginary story “stand for” history in *Nostromo*. That little word “for” in “stand for” is crucial here, as is the word “of” in the phrases “parable of,” or “emblem of,” or “allegory of,” or “paradigmatic expression of,” or “reading of.” What displacement is involved in that “for”? What is the force of “of” in these different locutions? What different ligature or separation is affirmed in each case? The differences among these “ofs” might generate a virtually endless analysis of *Nostromo* in their light.

I have used a series of traditional words for Conrad’s displacement of “realist” narration to say something else. The multiplicity is meant to indicate the inadequacy of all of them. *Nostromo* is neither a parable, nor an emblem, nor an allegory, nor a paradigm, nor a reading. Each of these words is in one way or another inadequate or inappropriate. A parable, for example, is a short realistic story of everyday life that stands for some otherwise inexpressible spiritual truths. An example is Jesus’ parable of the sower, in Matthew 13:3–9. *Nostromo* is hardly like that. All the other words I have used can be disqualified in similar ways. Nevertheless, it is of the utmost importance not to read *Nostromo* as a straightforward piece of “historical fiction.” Historical realities
as Conrad knew them, primarily from reading, but also through conversations with Cunninghame Graham, not from direct experience, are used as the “raw material” for the creation of a fictive “world” that is “imaginary (but true).” Conrad’s own phrase is perhaps, after all, the best way to express the use of realist narrative techniques to create a place swarming with people and events that never existed anywhere on land or sea except within the covers of copies of *Nostromo*, and in Conrad’s imagination, of course. The magnificent opening description of the sequestered province of Sulaco, cut off from the outside world by the Golfo Placido and by the surrounding mountains, is one way this isolation of Sulaco’s imagined (non)community is expressed in *Nostromo*. The second part of Conrad’s phrase, “but true,” argues that the fictive events that take place in *Nostromo* correspond to the way things really happened in Central America at that stage of its history, that is, the moment of United States imperialist and global capitalist interventions. The words “but true” suggest a claim by Conrad that this transformation of historical fact into a complex modernist narrative form is better than any history book at indicating the way history actually happens. History happens, that is, in ways that are distressingly contingent. History is “caused” by peripheral factors such as Decoud’s love for Antonia Avellanos or Nostromo’s vanity. Conrad’s phrase, “imaginary (but true),” is, after all, echoing, with his own modernist twist, what Aristotle said in the *Poetics* about the way poetry is more philosophical than history because “[history] relates what has happened, [poetry] what may happen” (*Poetics*, 1451b; Aristotle 1951, 35). The “modernist twist” is the implicit claim that the narrative complexities and indirections I have been identifying get closer to “what has happened” than “official” histories. Aristotle would probably not have approved of those complexities, any more than Plato, in *The Republic*, approved of Homer’s “double diegesis” in pretending to narrate as Odysseus.

In spite of these complexities, the bottom line of what I am saying is that *Nostromo*’s indirect way of “standing for” the real South American history he knew from books and hearsay also means that, *mutatis mutandis*, it is also an indirect way of helping to understand what is going on in the United States and in the world today, in 2007.5 That understanding would then make possible, it

5. F. R. Leavis, in *The Great Tradition*, first published in 1946, makes a strikingly similar claim for the relevance of *Nostromo* to understanding the history of Leavis’s own time. Speaking of “Charles Gould’s quiet unyieldingness in the face of Pedrito’s threats and blandishments,” Leavis says this episode “reinforce[s] dramatically that pattern of political significance which has a major part in *Nostromo*—a book that was written, we remind ourselves in some wonder, noting the topicality of its themes, analysis, and illustrations, in the reign of Edward VII [1901–1910]” (Leavis 1962, 218). I owe this reference to Jeremy Hawthorn. I am no Leavisite, but am, nevertheless, always happy to find myself in agreement with Leavis. Leavis would no doubt have had little sympathy with my insistence on the way *Nostromo* is “parabolic,” that is, “imaginary (but true).”
might be, responsible action (for example by voting) as a way of responding to what is going on. This, I am aware, is an extravagant claim for the social, ethical, and political usefulness of literature.

I conclude also, finally, that *Nostromo* demonstrates, to my satisfaction at least, that all its notorious narrative complexities of fractured sequence, reversed temporality, and multiple viewpoints are not goods in themselves. Not telling a story by way of a single point of view and in straightforward chronological order can be justified only if, as is the case with *Nostromo*, such extravagant displacements or “dis-positions” are necessary to get the meaning across more successfully to the reader’s comprehensive understanding.
Works Cited


———. Nostromo. New York: Modern Library, 1951. All references to Nostromo are to this edition. I have used it because it reprints the first book version and has some passages Conrad later cut.


