In their foreword to a recent issue of *The Conradian* marking the centenary of *Nostromo*’s publication, Allan Simmons and J. H. Stape quote Conrad’s observation that the novel is mentioned “sometimes in connection with the word ‘failure’ and sometimes in conjunction with the word ‘astonishing’” (*A Personal Record*, 98), and note that “*Nostromo* is still oddly absent from the academy that ritually proclaims it ‘great’” (vi). Rather than rescue the novel from this ambivalence, I wish to consider the economy of writing which, I believe, is at the core of both its greatness and its failure.

*Nostromo* is a novel without a protagonist, a text which does not enable or invite sustained emotional engagement with any one of the characters. There is obviously much more to be said about this very fundamental frustration of a desire from which—I would suggest and hope—even sophisticated readers cannot exempt themselves, and which is only partly due to the jerky narrative movement among the various characters and the constant shifts of action in time and space. But in the meantime, in the absence of a protagonist, let me begin with a parrot.

This parrot, one of several representatives of the species who will make their appearance in the narrative, is green, “brilliant like an emerald,” and housed in a golden cage at the casa Gould. Obviously not content to serve for
mere decorative effect, it watches over the conversation between Emilia and Charles Gould with “an irritated eye,” and even makes an occasional comment of his own, screeching out ferociously “viva Costaguana!” before taking “refuge in immobility and silence” (69). At the end of the exchange—or rather a monologue—which follows the departure of the almighty Holroyd and marks Charles’s alliance with material interests, the couple stop near the cage:

The parrot, catching the sound of a word belonging to his vocabulary, was moved to interfere.

Parrots are very human.

“Viva Costaguana!” he shrieked, with intense self-assertion, and, instantly ruffling up his feathers, assumed an air of puffed-up somnolence behind the glittering wires. (82)

Parrots are very human. But humans, it seems, are somewhat parrot-like too, as we can hear if we join the guided tour of Sulaco offered by Captain Mitchell a few years later. Captain Mitchell, now the “Oceanic Steam Navigation (the O.S.N. of familiar speech) superintendent in Sulaco for the whole Costaguana section of the service,” also known as “Our excellent Señor Mitchell,” or simply as “Fussy Joe,” prides himself on his “profound knowledge of men and things in the country—cosas de Costaguana” (10–11). He is thus best qualified, at least in his own view, to relate the history of the new republic, in which he played his own role, to a succession of unnamed “privileged visitors” (an obvious echo of the privileged reader of *Lord Jim*), and offer an official version which frames the narrative of what-really-happened.

Mitchell’s guided tour is wonderfully generic, moving predictably along famous buildings, landmark spots, historical celebrities, and memorable dates, and peppered with the tag-phrases of an official historiography. Coming very near the end of the novel, it has the obvious effect of ironic juxtaposition, as the reader already knows at this point that the history of the separation was not exactly the work of a unified community, struggling for a common cause and led by wise statesmen and self-sacrificing heroes. What the reader does not yet know is the secret of Nostromo’s treasure and the story of Decoud’s suicide, which will follow Mitchell’s account and further undermine its credibility.

It is not just a question of Mitchell’s naiveté or obtuseness. That “closing of the cycle” which ends Captain Mitchell’s account (489) is as misleading as the framing structure itself: the end of his story is not the happy ending of bloodshed, revolution, and counterrevolution in Costaguana. Captain Mitchell will go home to England, comfortably obtuse and complacent, but the story of
material interests will go on, and yet another revolution—perhaps the revolution of the “annexation”—is already in the offing (509). The consolation of narrative framing, seductive as it is, is not available in *Nostromo*.

But Captain Mitchell, though openly ridiculed by the narrative for the “more or less stereotyped account,” the pomposity of his delivery, and his delusion of “being in the thick of things” (473), should not be so easily dismissed. Being only one of a series of historian figures, his version of “viva Costaguana!” is only marginally more parrotlike than that which is heard in the voice of the other writers, or, for that matter, the makers of history in the novel.

Don Jose Avellanos, the “Nestor of the Ricos” (148), venerable author of “Fifty Years of Misrule” (which, though never published, is claimed in Conrad’s “Author’s Note” to be the documentary origin of the narrative, and hence the source of its authority), is treated more charitably and respectfully than the misguided Captain Mitchell, but his blind patriotism and his love of rhetoric make him ineffectual and pathetically incompetent for dealing with anything which does not fit in with his historical vision: we find him at the casa Gould, seated comfortably in “a rocking-chair of the sort exported from the United States,” pontificating “upon the patriotic nature of the San Tóme mine for the simple pleasure of talking fluently” (51); we witness his oratorical efforts at the departure of General Barrios, where Emilia—clearly skeptical and apprehensive of his venture—surreptitiously attempts to give him the physical support he needs (140); we hear him relating to Decoud as the “defender of the country’s regeneration . . . expounder of the party’s political faith” (156), turning a deaf ear to the young man’s indictment of his compatriots. The vulnerability of the old body is far more real and persuasive than the eloquence of the voice.

The evident inadequacy of these historian-figures foregrounds the historical account of the Separationist Revolution, told by an apparently omniscient, unnamed, and disembodied narrator, an intriguing presence to which I will come back at the close of this essay. But for now, we should note that far from a straightforward juxtaposition of “truth” and “untruth,” the relation of historiography and history is triangulated through the introduction of another set of terms—fiction, myth, legend, and story. This invasion of what is ostensibly alien to the scientific project of history, is hardly news at the turn of the twenty-first century following the “constructivist turn” of the mid-1970s. Hayden White (1976, 1978) and Louis Mink (1978), to name the most notable proponents of this paradigm shift, have problematized the dual reference of “history” as both the event and its textual record—that identification which had served as the foundation of the Hegelian project and of Rank’s imperative to “tell it as it was.” Against the traditional self-positing of historiography as an
objective, scientific endeavor, White and Mink highlight its status as a textual, discursive artifice, a product of selection, emplotment, and rhetorical formulation. A third position, pitted against the extreme version of the constructivist view, which was taken by many as a wholesale subversion of the truth-claims of historiography, and the equally sweeping countermoves of historians who sought to reinstate the epistemic legitimacy of their practices, was offered in the philosophical projects of Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) and David Carr (1986), who conceive of narrative not only as the historiographer’s medium, but as part of the subject matter itself. Narrative, for both these philosophers, is fundamental to the way human agents construe their actions and lives—before, during, and after the events. The distinction between the experiential perception of the same events by the historical protagonists in real time and the subsequent narrative representation of events in a historical account is, thus, no more than a question of the specific historical context of the lived, or the narrated story. As we shall soon see, narrative self-perception is precisely what is at stake for many characters in Conrad’s novel.

But Nostromo is not a postmodernist novel.\(^1\) It does, as we have seen, highlight the gaps between discourse and event, and one can certainly point to some deconstructive effects (mostly confined to the Author’s Note),\(^2\) but it is, after all, an hour-by-hour account of what-really-happened during those few days of the Separationist Revolution, dappled throughout with the “effects of the real” as Barthes has called them—touches of local color and geography, familiar place names and historical allusions, Spanish phrases—convincing enough for readers who have tried to reconstruct the spatial layout of Costa-guana and the temporal chronology of the events.\(^3\) The differences between the various reconstructions are not as significant as that sense of authenticity which has prompted them in the first place. It seems, then, that the narrative conforms to the requirements of historicity—noted by J. Hillis Miller in “Narrative and History” (1974)—in a most traditionally scrupulous manner.

I would suggest that it is precisely this conformity to the discursive—and, more importantly, to the conceptual—parameters of historiography which makes the novel so problematic. To understand the dynamics of this fictional

1. Given the constructivist turn of the 1970s, the postmodernist context is, of course, highly seductive for a reading of Nostromo, as evidenced in the readings offered by Edward Said (1975); Pamela Demory (1993); and Christophe Robin (2002). Notwithstanding the fundamental divergence of my own approach, it seems to me that Robin’s essay offers a particularly illuminating and rich reading of the novel.

2. I have discussed these deconstructive effects at some length in Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper (1991), 67–85.

historiography, let us turn for a moment to the work of Michel de Certeau which revolves on the inextricability of historiography and history, of the writing and the making of history.

Historiography, for de Certeau, is a formative historical practice, which helps in the establishment of social cohesion; legitimizes the power of a contemporary regime; and answers the need of a community for a sense of origin, structure, and order. Historiography, he says, is “a discourse based on conjunction, which fights against all the disjunctions produced by competition, labor, time, and death” (1983, 205).

But this work of conjunction, essential for the cohesion of the social body (the sense of an “us” in Conradese), is effected by historiography through the assumption of a rupture with the past, a separation from what is other to a present state. In the case of European historiography it is a “writing that conquers. It will use the New World as if it were a blank, ‘savage’ page on which Western desire will be written. It will transform the space of the other / into a field of expansion for a system of production” (xxv–xxvi). But what is obviously the case with the colonized “other” also holds true for the past self of the social body—the writing of history is inaugurated by an act of differentiation between past and present, civilization and nature, the narrating subject and the narrated object. Historiography is, in fact, a “discourse of separation” (1975, 3). The underside of this historical practice is the suppression of alterity, which needs to be domesticated, buried, or forgotten in the effort of self-creation.

In the West, writes de Certeau, “the group (or the individual) is legitimized by what it excludes,” and historiography accomplishes this act of exclusion in that “what is perishable is its data; [and] progress is its motto. The one is the experience which the other must both compensate for and struggle against . . . it is a breakage everywhere reiterated in discourse, and that yet denies loss by appropriating to the present the privilege of recapitulating the past as a form of knowledge” (1975, 5; emphasis in original). As we can see, the gesture of separation, differentiation, and exclusion, which is the inaugural act of historiography, is conceptualized by de Certeau in psychoanalytic terms as an act of repression. What follows is, almost needless to say, the return of the repressed.

Historiography promotes a selection between what can be understood and

4. Unlike Jameson’s “political unconscious” which focuses on “all the things which Conrad preferred not to see” (and, in the case of Nostromo, the moral and ideological division of English-speaking or foreign characters from the Latino-American ones), and generates a quasi-structuralist interpretation of the novel (1981, 269–80), my own approach is inspired by de Certeau’s perspective which relates to the unconscious dynamics of both the making and the writing of history.
what must be forgotten in order to obtain the representation of a present intelligibility. But whatever this new understanding of the past holds to be irrelevant—shards created by the selection of materials, remainders left aside by an explication—come back, despite everything, on the edges of discourse or in its rifts and crannies: “resistances,” “survivals” or delays discreetly perturb the pretty order of a line of “progress” or a system of interpretation. These are lapses in the syntax constructed by the law of a place. Therein they symbolize a return of the repressed, that is, a return of what, at a given moment, has become unthinkable in order for a new identity to become thinkable. (1975, 4; original italics)

The narrative of Nostromo, which so clearly revolves on the “Separation” and the “Separationist revolution” as an inaugural event, is an exemplary historiography, the story of “the birth of a state,” its liberation from tyranny and lawlessness, and—most importantly—its accession to modernity.

The excluded other in this case is not only the past of Costaguana, ostensibly over and done with after the Separationist Revolution, but also, primarily, I believe, a different narrative conception which is relegated to the past and allowed to appear only in the margins of the historical narrative, as a piece of folklore, a mere exotic relic of otherness. The most visible form of this narrative conception is the mythical legend of the accursed treasure:

The peninsula of Azuera, a wild chaos of sharp rocks and stony levels cut about by vertical ravines . . . [is] utterly waterless . . . it has not soil enough—it is said—to grow a single blade of grass, as if it were blighted by a curse. The poor, associating by an obscure instinct of consolation the ideas of evil and wealth, will tell you that it is deadly because of its forbidden treasures. The common folk of the neighborhood, peons of the estancias, vaqueros of the seaboard plains, tame Indians coming miles to market with a bundle of sugar-cane or a basket of maize worth about threepence, are well aware that heaps of shining gold lie in the gloom of the deep precipices cleaving the stony levels of Azuera. Tradition has it that many adventurers of olden time had perished in the search. The story goes also that within men’s memory two wandering sailors—Americanos, perhaps, but gringos of some sort for certain—talked over a gambling, good-for-nothing mozo, and the three stole a donkey to carry for them a bundle of dry sticks, a water-skin, and provisions enough to last a few days. Thus accompanied, and with revolvers at their belts, they had started to chop their way with machetes through the thorny scrub on the neck of the peninsula. . . .

The sailors, the Indian, and the stolen burro were never seen again. As
to the mozo, a Sulaco man—his wife paid for some masses, and the poor four-footed beast, being without sin, had been probably permitted to die; but the two gringos, spectral and alive, are believed to be dwelling to this day amongst the rocks, under the fatal spell of their success. Their souls cannot tear themselves away from their bodies mounting guard over the discovered treasure. They are now rich and hungry and thirsty—a strange theory of tenacious gringo ghosts suffering in their starved and parched flesh of defiant heretics, where a Christian would have renounced and been released.

These, then, are the legendary inhabitants of Azuera guarding its forbidden wealth. (4–5)

This folktale bears all the markers of narrative distancing, repeated expressions, and phrases of disassociation—“the poor . . . will tell you; the common folk . . . are well aware”; “tradition has it”; “the story goes also”—relegating the legend to the status of mere folklore. The story is also literally marginalized, offered as part of the panoramic geography of the Occidental Republic which prefaces the narrative itself, and set outside the account of Costaguana history, which does not begin until the following chapter.

Against this folktale, told by ignorant people steeped in superstition, we are offered a “proper” historical narrative—“proper” in that it is founded on the discursive proprieties of Western rationality and establishes its property rights. It is the discourse of “facts,” of “material interests,” of “progress” and “modernity”: the construction of the National Railway is a “progressive and patriotic undertaking” (34); “The sparse row of telegraph poles . . . [is like] a slender, vibrating feeler of progress” (166). The San Tóme mine becomes, in the hands of the new regime, “an institution, a rallying point for everything in the province that needed order and stability to live” (110); the “fact—very modern in its spirit—of the San Tóme mine had already thrown its subtle influence” (96–97). It is, as Sir John, the Chairman of the Railway Company, perceives, the most important of those “reassuring facts” behind the ceremonies, the speeches, and the proclamations which inaugurate the new era (37–38).

The principal actor in this shift from legend to history is Charles Gould, whose claim to the title “el rey de Sulaco” is given legitimacy through the “familial, political, [and] moral genealogy” (de Certeau 1975, 6–8) provided by the historical narrative. Charles Gould has consciously chosen to defy his father’s wishes and take up the concession. For the father, “well-read in light literature” (like other Conradian characters), the mine took “the form of the Old Man of the Sea fastened upon his shoulders” (56). But the son—the maker of history—shuts off the myth, dismisses his father’s superstitions, and
expurgates the facts from the mist of legend: “[W]ith advancing wisdom, he managed to clear the plain truth of the business from the fantastic intrusions of the Old Man of the Sea, vampires, and ghouls, which had lent to his father’s correspondence the flavor of a gruesome Arabian Nights tale” (58).

The legend, however, creeps back into the making and the writing of history. In his role as a maker of history, Charles Gould, obsessed with “the tearing of the raw material of treasure from the earth” (60), will also turn the possession of the mine into a curse which will blight his own life. This is, to use de Certeau’s uncannily resonant phrase, the “tautology of legend” (1983, 84), as the folk story of the cursed gringos, the mozo, and the treasure of the Azuera resurfaces through the cracks in the historical narrative.

The most obvious instance of this return of the repressed is the case of Nostromo himself. Initially described as a legendary popular hero, picturesque on his silver-grey mare, Nostromo straddles both myth and history. Paradoxically, it is his legendary charisma—self-consciously enhanced by spectacular displays of bravura and generosity—this larger-than-life, epic quality, which turns him into one of the makers of the new age of Costaguana. He is thus a halfway figure, uneasily poised between legend and history. But the narrative ends with his unconditional surrender to the legend. From the moment of contact with the silver of the mine, Nostromo becomes its slave, taking on the role of the cursed Gringos on Azuera (526–27, 531).5

But the tautology of legend seems to assert itself in yet more insidious ways. The modern representations of change and progress turn out to be uncomfortably similar to those of the past. Against the supposed linearity of historical progression and its underlying teleology, the regime of legend and myth seems to engender a cyclical conception of human life. Neither Mitchell’s complacent historical summation, which ends with the establishment of the prosperous Occidental Republic, nor the narrator’s description of present-day Sulaco “with cable cars” “carriage roads,” and “a vast railway goods yard by the harbor, which has a quay-side, a long range of warehouses, and quite serious, organized labor troubles of its own” (95)—neither one of these claims of accomplishment can dispel the sense that the cycle of revolution and counter-revolution is not over.

By the end of the novel we are left with a set of superimpositions rather

5. See also pp. 460, 491, 529. We should note that the legendary curse which attaches to the silver is not confined to the mind of Nostromo himself who is, after all, a man of the people, and thus presumably susceptible to superstition. The narrative itself seems to take over the terms of the legend: following the description of Decoud’s suicide, Nostromo appears on the island, and “the spirit . . . the silver of San Tome was provided now with a faithful and lifelong slave” (501). No wonder then that even to Captain Mitchell he appears like “a haunting ghost” (487).
than oppositions: the figure of Gould, “el rey de Sulaco,” riding his horse along the Camino real, the old Spanish road, is superimposed on the ancient weather-stained equestrian statue of Charles IV (58–59); and Captain Mitchell’s comment on the removal of the statue which was “an anachronism” (482) sounds like an ominous prediction of what is to come. Gould’s optimistic sense of having “mastered the fates” through action (66), is echoed in the description of Nostromo, now known as Captain Fidanza bound for the Great Isabel “before all men’s eyes, with a sense of having mastered the fates” (530); the dead weight of the silver around the neck of Gould’s father is transformed into a “monstrous and crushing weight” around his wife’s neck (221); the clanking of wheels heard at the approach of the train, that vehicle of modernity, is replicated in the clanking of the invisible silver fetters which bind Nostromo to the treasure (546).

Myth, then, is not the opposite, but the suppressed underbelly of historiography and of history itself. These two discursive regimes converge in the paternal figure of the almighty Holroyd, the head of silver and steel interests, who “serves the progress of the world” (378). Looming large behind the scenes like the puppet master of the show, Holroyd is a later avatar of Kurtz, both in his status as the agglomerate creature of European civilization and in his insatiable omnivorous imperialism, but his political rhetoric is explicitly—and indeed uncomfortably—American (and even more uncomfortably contemporary):

“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.”

His intelligence was nourished on facts; and Charles Gould, whose imagination had been permanently affected by the one great fact of a silver mine, had no objection to this theory of the world’s future. (77)

It is in this suspension of time that history and myth most clearly intersect, as the silver, too, is perceived as immune to the ravages and corruption of time. An incongruous echo of Holroyd’s “time itself has got to wait” is heard

6. Holroyd’s “massive profile [is] the profile of a Caesar’s head on an old Roman coin”; “and his parentage is German and Scotch and English, with remote strains of Danish and French giving him the temperament of a Puritan and an insatiable imagination of conquest” (76).
in Nostromo’s assertion that “time is on our side, señor. And silver is an incorruptible metal that can be trusted to keep its value for ever . . . an incorruptible metal” (299–300). The mythicity—the desire of sameness, self-identity, and totality—is the real curse, or the nightmare of history. It is same desire, I believe, which accounts for the lack of emotional focus, and the absence of a protagonist in Nostromo.

The eponymous character himself, who makes a belated, if spectacular, entrance into the novel, initially seems to have no interiority at all, and his existence is predicated on being seen, paraded, trusted, and adored. With neither the space nor the need to exhaust the textual evidence for this mode of existence, which is laid on quite thick throughout the narrative, let me just point to a few illustrative passages, beginning with his introduction by Mitchell who modestly claims to be “a pretty good judge of character,” and then proceeds to tell the disembodied listener of this local legendary hero, a man, “absolutely above reproach, [who] became the terror of all the thieves in the town. . . . That’s what the force of character will do for you” (13).

True to his role as the “lordly Capataz de Cargadores, the indispensable man, the tried and trusty Nostromo, the Mediterranean sailor come ashore” (130), he takes on the heroic mission of saving the silver, in order—as he explains to the dying Teresa whose request for a priest he has just refused—to “keep on being what I am: every day alike” (253). This odd reply points to a sense of selfhood which is entirely embedded in and authored by a public narrative: “They shall learn I am just the man they take me for” (267). This sense of character as public property will later reverberate in Dr. Monygham’s exhortation: “you must be true to yourself” (457), which will come at the very moment when this local hero is about to betray his mission. But this shift of loyalties, presumably brought about by a breach in Nostromo’s public identity, is only the mythical flipside of the same historical currency: no longer in the service of the mine and its historical-political function—Nostromo is now the slave of the forbidden silver, totally identified with and subjected to its legendary curse. In both these phases he does remain true to himself, insofar as his sense of selfhood is entirely authored by public narratives.7

7. Two comments which might be relevant here: first of all, Nostromo identifies himself with the cursed treasure hunters on the Azuera long before he shifts his loyalties, referring to the silver cargo as “a greater treasure than the one which they say is guarded by ghosts and devils in Azuera” (255), and to the mission as “taking up a curse upon me” (259; see also 265). For him, too, the service of material interests, ostensibly on the side of history-making, is bound up with the mythical, repressed legend of the treasure. Second, Nostromo’s acts of charity, even when performed in private, are tinged with contempt for “those beggarly people accustomed to my generosity” (297; see also 247), rather than compassion, and are aimed primarily to promote his fame.
Writing to his sister about this local hero who has a “particular talent for being on the spot whenever there is something picturesque to be done” (224), Decoud explains: “Exceptional individualities always interest me, because they are true to the general formula expressing the moral state of humanity” (246). This is actually less paradoxical than it sounds. In the same way that Mitchell is like other historiographers only more so, Nostromo is an exaggerated but exemplary version of the species which I would call *homo historicus*, and his difference from other characters is a matter of degree.

Nostromo’s mode of being is shared by other characters in the novel, heroes and villains alike, who seem to author themselves through some sort of public, historical perception, each living up to or making use of his or her reputation: Dr. Monygham, who cannot exorcise his past, with “the dark passages of his history” (311) indelibly inscribed on his body, his hobbling gait and his damaged feet (347), is also “the slave of a ghost” (374). He, too, is trading on his (false) reputation as a man who had once betrayed his friends. In the depth of his personal abasement, his “conception of his disgrace,” this eminently loyal man has come to believe that his own usefulness consists in his “character” (409), and offers to serve the woman he loves “to the whole extent of [his] evil reputation” by playing the “game of betrayal” (410).

Antonia, too, is described by Captain Mitchell as “a historical woman,” a “character” (476). Indeed, in her few appearances in the novel, attending to her father, engaged in the drafting of state papers and proclamations, converting her poor lover into a patriot, or sending him off on his deathly mission without as much as a tear, she is seen—even through Decoud’s eyes—as a “Charlotte Corday” (which she takes as a compliment), “stately,” “lovely and statuesque,” but never a real creature of flesh and blood. 8

Charles Gould, too, is a “public character, subjectified by and subjected to his role as “el rey de Sulaco” (316), with an “almost mystic view of his right” (402). With her acute political senses, Antonia Avellanos quite rightly perceives this when she tells Gould: “It is your character that is the inexhaustible treasure which may save us all yet; your character, Carlos, not your wealth” (361). Indeed, it is his heritage as “the descendant of adventurers enlisted in

8. It is not only the exclusive focus on “the great cause” which makes the relationship inconceivable in terms of romance, but Antonia’s body language. Following Decoud’s passionate declaration of love (during which we are told that “she never looked at him”; “she turned her head a little”; “her hand closed firmly on her fan”), Antonia finally “opens her red lips for the first time, not unkindly” only to say that “men must be used as they are” (177). Even Conrad’s notorious limitations in handling love scenes cannot fully account for the coldness, the austerity, and the reticence of this character. Finally, she is seen at the very end of the novel accompanying her uncle, the fierce Bishop Corbelan on a visit to the casa Gould, trying to promote the idea of the annexation with her usual “earnest calm of invincible resolution” in the name of her dead lover (509).
a foreign legion, of men who had sought fortune in a revolutionary war, who had planned revolutions, who had believed in revolutions” (366), which will make it possible for him to harness the mine, by threatening to blow it up, into the service of those material interests in the name of the father, the almighty Holroyd, he has elected to serve.

The novel is an exemplary historiography, then, not only because it is so carefully crafted in terms of action, time, and place, but primarily because most of the characters themselves are blighted by the same desire diagnosed by de Certeau in the workings of historiography. It is a desire for sameness and absolute self-coherence through the exclusion of alterity. Most of the characters are incapable of breaking through their mythicized histories or historical myths, imprisoned within their own conceptions of themselves as “public characters,” static, insular, indeed nearly autistic in their encounters with others.9

In spite of the various focalizations offered in the narrative, the novel is not polyphonic in any Bakhtinian sense. “Poly-monologic” seems to be a little more apt. The human encounters in the novels are not only few and far between; they also, for the most part, involve characters who are cocooned in their own narratives and talking at cross purposes. This is particularly noticeable in the conversation between Nostromo and Dr. Monygham, where the former is desperate for a word which would “restore his personality to him” (434), and the latter is only interested in the “instrumentality” of the Capataz; or in the dialogues of Decoud and Nostromo, bound on their dangerous mission, risking their lives presumably for the same cause, but entirely at odds as far as their motives go. But, more poignantly, even encounters of characters who supposedly love each other—Charles and Emilia Gould, Antonia and Decoud, Nostromo and Giselle—where one party desperately reaches out to the other only to met with silence—do not involve that genuine intimacy.

Paradoxically, perhaps, this insularity of the “public characters” hollows out the historiographical desire of conjunction. The political history of the land, made as it is by conflicting interests and random coincidences, does not yield a sense of community either before or after the Separation.10 The name—or rather the title—“Nostromo” (our man) is thus problematic not

9. What is true for the heroic figures applies to the villains as well. They, too, live up to their public images within their own narrative contexts: Pedrito Montero “had been devouring the lighter sort of historical works in the French language.” Struck by the splendor of the brilliant court of the second Empire, he had “conceived the idea of an existence for himself.” This, we are told “was one of the immediate causes of the Monterist Revolution” (387); Sotillo brazens out the danger of being deserted by his troops “on the strength of his reputation with very fair success” (450). And even Captain Mitchell, refusing to let go of his gold chronometer with admirable tenacity (which borders on stupidity), insists “I am a public character, sir” (347).

only because the illustrious Capataz de Cargadores eventually betrays his mission, but because there is no first-person plural in the novel. There is no “us” in Sulaco.

Against the history made and written in the shadow of Holroyd, the Father, we have the two maternal figures, Teresa Viola and Doña Emilia Gould. Teresa Viola, Nostromo’s adoptive mother, is the only character who sees through him with extraordinary clarity. “He has not stopped very long with us. There is no praise from strangers to be got here,” Signora Teresa said tragically. “Avanti! Yes! That is all he cares for. To be first somewhere—somehow—to be first with these English. They will be showing him to everybody. ‘This is our Nostromo!’” She laughed ominously. “What a name! What is that? Nostromo? He would take a name that is properly no word from them.” (23). But she is a woman of no consequence, as “unreasonable,” her husband believes, as the rest of them, and so she remains all alone with her pain and her homesickness (25).

Emilia Gould is a much more powerful maternal counterforce, “highly gifted in the art of human intercourse” and “always sorry for homesick people” (46). Fully aware of the history of the mine—“worked in the early days mostly by means of lashes on the backs of slaves, its yield had been paid for in its own weight of human bones” and the corpses “thrown into its maw” (52), she is not concerned “with the erection or demolition of theories any more than with the defense of prejudices” and has “no random words” at her command (67). She is childless, but closely associated with the wooden figure of “a Madonna in blue robes with the crowned child sitting on her arm” (67, 206), which the almighty Holroyd, the endower of churches, clearly finds tawdry and cheap.

Unlike her husband, the champion of facts and material interests, Emilia sees “the man under the silent, sad-eyed beast of burden . . . ; 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” (88; see also 67).

But Emilia is disempowered. She does not speak out again after her initial and tentative expression of misgivings at the beginning of Gould’s partnership with Holroyd (67–71). The potential conflict with her husband is channeled by the narrative into the metaphor of the waterfall with its dark-green, lush fernery, dried up and supplanted by the San Tóme mine.

There was no mistaking the growling mutter of the mountain pouring its stream of treasure under the stamps; and it came to his heart with the peculiar force of a proclamation thundered forth over the land and the marvellousness of an accomplished fact fulfilling an audacious desire. . . . The waterfall existed no longer. The tree-ferns that had luxuriated in its
spray had died around the dried-up pool, and the high ravine was only a big trench half filled up with the refuse of excavations and tailings. The torrent, dammed up above, sent its water rushing along the open flumes of scooped tree trunks striding on trestle-legs to the turbines working the stamps on the lower plateau—the mesa grande of the San Tome mountain. Only the memory of the waterfall, with its amazing fernery, like a hanging garden above the rocks of the gorge, was preserved in Mrs. Gould’s water-color sketch. (106; see also 209)

The recurrent association of Emilia with water acts like an antidote to and a reminder of the curse of the treasure on the “utterly waterless” Peninsula of the Azuera, haunted by the two gringos, “spectral and alive,” who “are believed to be dwelling to this day amongst the rocks, under the fatal spell of their success . . . rich and hungry and thirsty” (5). By the end of the novel, however, the two maternal characters are entirely defeated. Teresa is dead, and Emilia’s life is blighted by the mythicity of history, not only in the obvious sense of her helplessness before those economic and political powers represented by her husband, but also—primarily, I think—in that her voice is no longer heard in the narrative itself. Perhaps, after all, she cannot break away from the narrative of history because she remains at home, exactly where she is supposed to be, attending to the needy with her “lieutenants,” the doctor and the priest (146), silently looking on from the margins of history, as mothers have always done.

Between these two sets of characters—the “public figures,” authored by the narrative of the father and the “maternal” figures, who are silenced and defeated, there is one character who presents the greatest difficulty. Martin Decoud, less deluded and more self-consciously complex than the “paternal” characters, and having more agency than the “maternal” ones, seems to be the only potential Conradian protagonist in this novel. Why, then, does Conrad have him commit suicide shortly after his introduction into the narrative?

The problem becomes even more pressing when we consider the narrative voice. The concept of the ‘omniscient narrator’ has recently been probed and problematized in theoretical discussion, and the case of Nostromo would certainly reinforce the call for a reconceptualization of the term.11 The narrative voice in the novel—that is, the teller of the “real” historical course of events—is apparently omniscient as it seems to have unlimited access to the various plotlines and events which make up the history of Costaguana and to the minds of the various characters as it moves between different focalizers. But throughout these movements, the voice remains relatively constant:

11. For a seminal discussion of this concept, see Jonathan Culler 2004, 22–34. There is, obviously, much more to be said about the narrator function in Nostromo, which is beyond the scope of the present discussion.
urbane, skeptical, modulated by irony, and often quite scathingly sarcastic. In fact, it is very much like the voice of Martin Decoud, whose observations of the other characters—when expressed in his own voice—are strikingly similar to those of the disembodied narrator.\footnote{Decoud’s perception of Charles Gould’s obsession with the mine as a form of marital infidelity—“a subtle wrong . . . that sentimental unfaithfulness which surrenders her happiness, her life, to the seduction of an idea. The little woman has discovered that he lives for the mine rather than for her” (244–45)—is echoed by the narrative voice which refers to that “subtle conjugal infidelity through which his wife was no longer the sole mistress of his thoughts” (366). Decoud’s jaded views of the mine, of Sulaco politics and history are similarly echoed by the narrative (see 16, 182, 199).}

This merging of Decoud’s voice and outlook with that of the narrator is particularly disturbing in the account of Decoud’s suicide. It sounds, in fact, as though it is Decoud himself who is telling of his own death, as though he commits a “double suicide,” both at the level of story and at the level of discourse.

The issue becomes even more problematic when we bear in mind the indications—far too many to ignore—of autobiographical elements which clearly relate Decoud to his author. Like Conrad, he is a writer who has chosen to live away from his native country and is slightly “frenchified” (152). He is, to use Bishop Corbelan’s scornful epithet “neither the son of his own country nor of any other” (198). Most significantly, perhaps, in his playful author’s note to this “most anxiously meditated of the longer novels,” Conrad makes repeated autobiographical allusions to “the beautiful Antonia,” moving between a fairly conventional metaphoric description of the writing as an extended visit to Sulaco, where Antonia is a fictional figure “modeled on” the author’s first love, and a literalization of the metaphor, which relates to Antonia as real person: “Of all the people who had seen with me the birth of the Occidental Republic, she is the only one who has kept in my memory the aspect of continued life”; “If anything could induce me to revisit Sulaco (I should hate to see all these changes) it would be Antonia” (xlvi). This playful equivocation should not blind us to the deep underlying anxiety. Fortunately for us, Conrad did not come to the same end as poor Martin Decoud. But having set up this character as a fictional counterpart only to have him commit suicide does raise some disturbing questions.

I would suggest that the answer to some of these questions may have to do with Conrad’s conception of language, which, unlike the legendary silver, is highly corruptible, particularly when stamped and molded by the discourse of politics, ideology, and historiography. Political violence, that “puerile and bloodthirsty game of murder . . . played with terrible earnestness by depraved children,” passes in Costaguana as “the saving of the country” (49). The mur-
derous tyrant is known as “The Citizen Saviour of the Country” (138) or “The supreme chief of democratic institutions” (140). His band of hooligans is “The Army of Pacification” (137). Montero overthrows the government “in the name of national honor” (145) and of “a justly incensed democracy” (190); and the Junta of Notables, the “Great Parliamentarians,” headed by Don Juste Lopez who, Mitchell tells us, is “a first-rate intellect” (478), is ready to welcome the change of regime for the sake of “Democratic aspirations” and “the inscrutable ways of human progress” (238). There is more, much more, of the same corrupt rhetoric, which is by no means the monopoly of the villains in the historical drama.

Martin Decoud, a writer in exile, is painfully aware of the corruptibility of language, and refuses to take part in the parrot-talk. His apparent alienation from his community and from the patriotic cause is not the indifference of a Parisian dandy, but an attempt to preserve his own voice, which is, quite literally in his case, a matter of life and death. He knows that “the noise outside the city wall is new, but the principle is old” (173); that this is “history, as that absurd sailor Mitchell is always saying” (172). He has no illusions about “our friends, the speculators” (175), nor any faith in the parrotlike slogans he churns out in the service of the great cause, that “deadly nonsense” which, he says, has already killed his self-respect and is, for him, “a sort of intellectual death” (180):

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. (186–87; see also 189, 191)

Decoud’s letter to his sister, written under the portrait of “The Faithful Hero” at the Albergo of United Italy, by a “man with no faith in anything except the truth of his own sensations,” is not a public or historical document. Decoud—laboring against that typically Conradian “impenetrable darkness” outside—feels “a desire to leave a correct impression of the feelings, like the light by which the action may be seen when personality is gone . . . the truth which every death takes out of the world” (229–30). It is the need, as Conrad has famously put it, to make us see.

Conrad was undoubtedly just as aware as our own contemporaries (or perhaps more so, given his own historical and biographical background) of human lives as thoroughly historicized, of human subjectivity as interpellated
by culture and ideology, of the idea that we are, in fact, “spoken by” language. These are by no means the discoveries of postmodernism. But this, I would argue, is precisely why literature matters. It matters because, as Lukacsz put it, it can say “and yet!” to life. Or to historiography, for that matter. And it is not through a willed, blind optimism that this fundamental challenge can be set, but only through a refusal to abdicate the prerogative of fiction which provides access to resistance, to alterity, to singularity, to all that is precious in human lives.

But *Nostromo* is not only a perfect fictional historiography—perfect in that it thematizes and enacts the failure of historiography. It is also an autobiographical novel, not in any historical or factual sense—facts, as we know, are thoroughly discredited in this text—but in the resonance of anxiety which underlies the economy of writing. In this sense, Conrad’s engagement with the writing of history is not only artistic or conceptual also deeply and painfully personal.

One possible answer to the troubling suicide of Martin Decoud—potential protagonist, narrator, and authorial counterpart—may suggest itself if we look once again at Conrad’s description of his parting with the original Antonia, just before he left his father’s land: “She was softened at the last as though she had suddenly perceived . . . that I was really going away for good, going very far away—even as far as Sulaco, lying unknown, hidden from our eyes in the darkness of the Placid Gulf” (xlvi). What we have here seems to be identical but is, in fact, diametrically opposite to Decoud’s farewell scene—Decoud goes away when he has finally been assimilated into the patriotic narrative, and taken on the role of the national hero, the “young apostle of the separation.” Conrad’s decision to leave Poland was, at least in retrospect, a movement in the opposite direction, a leaving behind of his father’s language and patriotic legacy. Decoud—whose skepticism is only skin-deep, caught between the inexorable movement of history and the indifferent silence of nature, cannot, after all, retain his own voice. But Conrad could, and did. Like other exilic writers, he was trying to awake from the nightmare of history. This, I believe, is why he had to let Decoud go.

If we need some consolation at the end of this magnificent novel which moves so uneasily between greatness and failure, we may find it in the thought that, Decoud’s “double suicide” does not, after all, make him more dead. However we formalize this odd strategy on Conrad’s part, it does, in a way, deconstruct the finality of the end. Decoud drowns, but his voice goes on to tell the tale in the words of his author who will transmute the silver back into a living waterfall, the deadly matter of his own history into the telling of fictional tales.
Works Cited


