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Nostromo is a highly complex and innovative novel which questions the concepts of mimesis, representation, and narrative. One of the major innovations made by Conrad in the novel concerns the treatment of time and temporality. By using our experience as readers of a confusing and at times confused narrative temporality, Conrad is able to question our own relation to time. This experience is narratological but also, and more deeply, existential and ontological. For as Paul Ricoeur puts it in Time and Narrative: “Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode” (1990, 52). Nostromo explores and questions the limits of representation: in Derridean fashion, it deconstructs time and temporality and seems to disrupt narrative frames and identities. This “eclipse of narrative,” however, does not lead to the “death of narrative”: in Nostromo the narrative retrieves the “trace” of an unsaid to bring it back to language, inscribing it within new narrative structures which reshape and renew our vision of the world. Thus, Nostromo, by opening new narrative potentialities, reaffirms the power of narrative and ultimately remains committed to the vision of a humanized temporality.
Fiction and History

_Nostromo_ is characterized by a strong referential anchorage, an inscription into real history, by the historicization of fiction through multiple historical references which intertwine the imaginary history of Sulaco and the real history of Latin America. The diegesis is replete with historically accurate references to the historical figures who shaped this continent, such as Charles IV, whose statue is in Sulaco, Napoleon III, and Sir Francis Drake. It also evokes the successive colonizations of Latin America by means of references to the Conquistadors, and the novel closely integrates the fictional characters with this historical background by comparing them to modern conquistadors. This intertwining of history and fiction is so tight that actual historical events have an impact on the course of fictional history as some fictional characters pattern their behavior on historical figures. For example, one of the actors of the Sulaco revolution, Pedrito Montero, a fictional character, has read some historical books on the French Second Empire and wants to reproduce the splendor of life at the court of Napoleon III. According to Roland Barthes, this intertwining of fiction and history serves to strengthen the anchorage of the literary text into reality since when historical characters are “mixed in with their fictional neighbors, mentioned as having simply been present at some social gathering, their modesty, like a lock between two levels of water, equalizes novel and history: they reinstate the novel as a family, and like ancestors who are contradictorily famous and absurd, they give the novel the glow of reality, not of glory: they are superlative effects of the real” (_S/Z_, 102).

Similarly, in the “Author’s Note,” the narrator playfully uses a metalepsis and poses as a historian to claim (in a tongue-in-cheek manner) that he went to Sulaco in order to gather information which enabled him to write the novel _Nostromo_: “as I’ve said before, my sojourn on the Continent of Latin America, famed for its hospitality, lasted for about two years” (xliii). He also pretends to have based his narrative on a historical book that Don José Avellanos, one of the figures of the novel, himself a historian, is supposed to have written: “My principal authority for the history of Costaguana is, of course, my venerated friend, the late Don José Avellanos, Minister to the Courts of England and Spain, etc., etc., in his impartial and eloquent ‘History of Fifty Years of Misrule’” (xliii). This is asserted in the “Author’s Note,” a textual space assumed to be outside the field of fiction, and the author thereby takes advantage of this position of authority to legitimize the historic validity of his claims.

1. We shall see further down that this metalepsis has deeper and more disquieting implications.
This historical anchorage, however, is played with in such a way that it ruins these “reality effects.” History is in turn subsumed within fiction, thus creating a tension between historical time and narrative temporality. This questions both the ability of history to be homogeneous, synthetic, and teleological, and of the plot to create concordance, which is, according to Ricoeur, the very function of the plot. A plot, Ricoeur explains, is based on a tension between concordance and discordance, a concordance that synthesizes the events into a meaningful plot and a discordance represented by the peripetia that threaten the principle of concordance and dismember the story line. *Nostromo*, with its emphasis on temporal and structural discordance, could thus be said to partake of the logic of the antinarrative.

From the point of view of time and temporality, a tension between history and fiction arises because even though there exist strong historical references which localize the narrative within human history, the story paradoxically erases many chronological markers. Chronology seems to become mad and is replaced by a spiraling structure as the same events recur several times in the course of the narrative. The present repeats the historical past as the Sulaco revolution is revealed as just one more crisis in the cycles of bloody revolutions that punctuate the history of Costaguana, while the conquest of the Anglo-Saxons repeats Caesar’s or the Conquistador’s own conquests. Likewise the present of the story is carried away by a narrative flux which seems to dissolve it, thus abolishing the linkage between past and future, a linkage that would create both temporal and causal continuity. Ribiera’s escape, for example, is treated both in the form of a prolepsis (chapter 2) and of an analepsis (chapter 20), and thus takes place outside the present of the story and thereby evades representation. Analyzing the treatment of Ribiera’s flight, Jameson comments: “[t]it would be more adequate to suggest that in that sense it never really happens at all, for the initial discursive reference to it—not as scene but as fact or background—dispenses Conrad from having to ‘render’ it in all its lived presence later on. This central event is therefore present/absent in the most classic Derridean fashion, present only in its initial absence, absent when it is supposed to be most intensely present” (272). Realism is destroyed by an irresistible process of derealization of historical reality. Comparing *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo*, Jameson adds:

the associational, aleatory movement of the text [of *Nostromo*] from detail to detail is no less intricate than in *Lord Jim*, and obeys, as we promised, the same fundamental principle of the slow analytic rotation around that central act about which we may fear that interrogated too closely, like the onion that was the symbol of being in the Upanishads, from which layer
upon layer was carefully removed, it will prove to bear nothingness at its heart. (271)

The reader is in turn caught in a narrative whirl and, like Decoud who “beheld the universe as a succession of incomprehensible images” (498), he or she is made to confront the unreadable. The text thus plays on the time of reading and blurs the psychological categories intuitively used by the reader to construct cross-references, textual cohesion, and meaning. Hence there is a tension between suggestion and erosion: the suggestion of a reality, chronologically and causally organized and safely situated in the History of the world, and the erosion of this very chronology which resists monolithic coherence, and, ultimately, remains undecidable as illustrated by the competing chronologies of Nostromo drawn up by various critics.

Conrad deepens this confusion between history and reality by blurring the epistemological frontier between fictional and historical narratives, thus implicitly casting doubt on the validity of historical discourse: “In Nostromo, Conrad comments on the problem of the relationship between history and the past, between the historical narrative and history, between, in effect, historiography as signifier and event as signified and, in doing so, critiques both the traditional nineteenth-century notion of history and the nineteenth-century realistic novel” (Demory, 317).

History as a discourse, as historiography, is also challenged by the device of metalepsis which is characterized by the shift between two levels of discourse, for example, the diegetic and extradiegetic levels. In his Author’s Note, Conrad gives an account of the genesis of his novel and then subverts his status of author by pretending that the various characters of the diegesis are flesh-and-blood characters he met in real life and whose testimony he gathered to document his narrative: “If anything could induce me to revisit Sulaco (I should hate to see all these changes), it would be Antonia. [ . . . ] That afternoon, when I came in, a shrinking yet defiant sinner, to say the final good-bye I received a hand-squeeze that made my heart leap and saw a tear that took my breath away” (xlvi–xlvii). Fictional characters are promoted to the rank of coauthor, as in the case of Captain Mitchell, a notoriously unreliable character, to whom is delegated the task of recounting the concluding events of the Sulaco revolution.

The effect of metalepses is, according to Genette, to blur the ontological distinction “between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells,” a transgression which has an uncanny effect: “The most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the
narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative” (236). In *Nostromo*, this blurring specifically concerns the borderline between historical and fictional discourses: this can be read as an early anticipation of modernist or even postmodernist suspicion of historical discourse, as the realization that history is, like fiction, a discourse, an ideological reorganization of events to make sense of the past. Hence the novel suggests that history is to some extent a linguistic construct that imposes a meaningful pattern on a succession of events. The characters’ historical discourses are revealed to be ideological structures that confer meaning, a meaning relative to the very interpretative criteria applied by the characters, to their conceptions and misconceptions.

Conrad’s awareness of literary codes, of the artificiality of art, of the literariness of literature is typical of literary modernism. *Nostromo* has an undeniable intertextual dimension; it refers, through this dialectic between fiction and reality, to the origin of the novel, in particular of the English novel. According to Ricoeur the English novel is originally realist as it presumes a congruence between words and world, fiction and reality. The novel appears as “a new genre, defined by the proposal to establish the most exact correspondence possible between the literary work and the reality it imitates” (1985, 12). This aesthetic is based on “the conviction [. . . ] that language could be purged of every figurative and decorative element and returned to its original vocation—the vocation, according to Locke, ‘to convey the knowledge of things’” (1985, 11). This was bound to have a deep impact on the underlying vision of art which was then supposed to reflect reality, to be an accurate copy of its model. From this perspective art had an undeniable ontological dimension inasmuch as it was laden with reality. What was true of the eighteenth century was also true of the nineteenth, which marked the culmination of the realist novel. Thus, when Conrad questions historical discourse through its fictionalization, he simultaneously reassesses the ontological criteria that underlie the historical narrative. He thereby lays the foundation of a narrative reflexivity that will soon be a defining criterion of modernism and postmodernism and that will contaminate all discourses, including historical discourses: “Instead of mimetically authoring a new world, *Nostromo* turns back to its beginning as a novel, to the fictional, illusory assumption of reality: in thus overturning the confident edifice that novels normally construct, *Nostromo* reveals itself to be no more than a record of novelistic self-reflection” (Said, 137).

2. Modernism is defined by Jeremy Hawthorn as “that art (not just literature) which sought to break with what had become the dominant and dominating conventions of nineteenth-century art and culture.” Rejecting the realist convention of verisimilitude, modernism is characterized by its metafictionality: “the modernist art-work is possessed, typically, of a self-reflexive element” (Hawthorn 1990, 212–13).
The Monument and the Trace

The tension between time and the untimely, between the historical and ontological reference on the one hand and the disruption caused by dechronologization and fictionalization on the other, is replicated on a diegetic level. *Nostromo* is to a large extent devoted to the description of a social and political revolution which ushers in the revolution of “material interests” while simultaneously inaugurating the time of chaos. Two temporalities stand thus in contrast: the time of the arche and the untimeliness of an-archy.

Although the beginning of *Nostromo* is organized around a shift from the mythical time of the incipit to the historical temporality of the following chapters, the historical discourses of the characters aim at turning history into a myth, at building an ideal temporality based on a master principle, silver, which also plays the role of a master signifier whose function is to engender master narratives. This is exemplified by Mitchell’s relation of the concluding events of the Sulaco revolution in chapter 13. The fact that it is only through his narration that we have access to these events emphasizes the narrative dimension of historical discourse and the constructedness of history. Mitchellian historiography organizes the events into an identifiable ideological structure by inscribing the temporality of the revolution within what Ricoeur calls monumental time.

Monumental time is the time of metadiscourses, a time of synthesis, the time of generation, the time of the Same. Modern times, the times of the Sulaco revolution, of the revolution of material interests, are characterized by a desire to erase the tragic past of tyranny and unrest. The statue of Charles IV, which is described by Mitchell as an “anachronism” and which is therefore untimely, must be replaced by another monument: “a marble shaft

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3. Our distinction between the monument and the trace indirectly refers to Nietzsche’s monumental, antiquarian, and critical views of History defined in his essay entitled “Untimely Meditation: On the Use and Disadvantage of History for Life.” For Nietzsche, monumental history lies in the belief “in the solidarity and continuity of the greatness of all ages and a protest against the passing away of generations and the transitoriness of things” (1997, 69). On the contrary, the critical method, to which the concept of trace is not unconnected, is a force of disruption of monumental history: “If he is to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past” (75).

4. We allude here to Lévinas’s philosophy in which the central notion of the Same refers to a totallizing system/ideology/philosophy, which is also totalitarian inasmuch as it is based on the negation of all form of otherness. Gould’s ideology of “material interests,” beyond its idealistic façade, is in fact an ideology of the Same, an imperial totallizing ideology which aims to resorb the alterity of Costaguana: “Everything is here, everything belongs to me; everything is caught up in advance with the primordial occupying of a site, everything is comprehended. The possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me, is the way of the same” (2001, 37–38).
commemorative of Separation, with angels of peace at the four corners, and bronze Justice holding an even balance, all gilt, on the top” (482). This statue, ornamented with angels of peace and a representation of justice, reconstructs history to posit it within a clear teleological, eschatological perspective. It also serves to turn history into a myth whose role is to obliterate the contingency of history in order to naturalize and legitimize it: “What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality . . . and what the myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality. . . . The world enters language as a dialectical relationship between activities, between human actions; it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences” (Barthes 1972, 142; emphasis in original). It is such a “harmonious display of essences” that Mitchell’s speech aims to construct as he shows his auditor round the Sulaco cathedral where the various icons commemorating the history of the Occidental Republic are visible:

“Here,” he would say, pointing to a niche in the wall of the dusky aisle, “you see the bust of Don Jose Avellanos, ‘Patriot and Statesman,’ as the inscription says, ‘Minister to Courts of England and Spain, etc., etc., died in the woods of Los Hatos worn out with his lifelong struggle for Right and Justice at the dawn of the New Era.’ . . . The marble medallion in the wall, in the antique style, representing a veiled woman seated with her hands clasped loosely over her knees, commemorates that unfortunate young gentleman who sailed out with Nostromo on that fatal night, sir.” (477–78)

Mitchell’s speech glorifies the major actors of the Sulaco revolution and inscribes history within a heroic, epic temporality. Through this cathedral, human history becomes monumental, it is sacralized and posited within a divine project, memory is turned into stone, marble, it is inscribed within the minerality of nature and resists the erosion of time, it unfolds in the shadow of religious metanarratives.

This monumental time coincides with the advent of a subject who emerges in a temporality that is understood and mastered: “Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him, the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity; the promise that one day the subject—in the form of historical consciousness—will once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find them in what might be called his abode” (Foucault 1982, 12). Constructing a temporality that is the abode of the subject, in which the subject can abide and beget himself
beyond finitude, such is the desire of the characters: “It concerns me to keep on being what I am: every day alike” (253), Nostromo declares. He wants to keep on being what he is, to persevere in his being, to perpetuate the heroic image of himself.

This monumental time embodied by the cathedral gives way to the temporality of the trace. The trace marks the emergence of an untimely time, “this instant that is not docile to time” (Derrida, 1994, xx). In Nostromo, the logic of history and of fiction comes up against an alogical time, a time “out of joint” which dismembers both history and narrative. It is the time of historical anarchy and of narrative hiatuses, ellipses, anachronies. What emerges from this time “out of joint” is a ghost: Nostromo is the story of a man turned ghost, specter, haunting, like the two sailors of the incipit, the Azuera, chained to the treasure of being. To take up Derrida’s pun in Specters of Marx, with Nostromo, the history of ontology turns into the story of hauntology.

The work of the trace can be observed when Nostromo comes back to the island where he had hidden the treasure:

The Capataz picked up the spade, and with the feel of the handle in his palm the desire of having a look at the horse-hide boxes of treasure came upon him suddenly. In a very few strokes he uncovered the edges and corners of several; then, clearing away more earth, became aware that one of them had been slashed with a knife.

He exclaimed at that discovery in a stifled voice, and dropped on his knees with a look of irrational apprehension over one shoulder, then over the other. The stiff hide had closed, and he hesitated before he pushed his hand through the long slit and felt the ingots inside. There they were. One, two, three. Yes, four gone. Taken away. Four ingots. But who? Decoud? Nobody else. And why? For what purpose? For what cursed fancy? Let him explain. Four ingots carried off in a boat, and—blood! (494–95)

The very moment Nostromo is going to lay hands on the treasure, he is caught up by a past which comes back and suspends his movement. For the hide-box that contained the treasure bears the mark of slashes, it has been slashed in its middle. This opening is the trace of the absent Other whose presence persists in the trace of his passage: the having-been emerges in the present in the form of a disruptive, asystemic principle: “a trace is distinguished from all the signs that get organized into systems, because it disarranges some ‘order.’ The trace is ‘this disarrangement expressing itself’” (Ricoeur 1988, 125).

One of the classical functions of narrative is to articulate a narrative identity, for, as Ricoeur puts it, our identities are “entangled in stories”(1984, 75).
Isn’t, then, the function of an antinarrative to question the concept of identity and to define an anti-identity, to think another self, or, as Ricoeur puts it “oneself as another”? Nostromo’s entanglement in stories is evidenced by the fact that in the first part of the novel, he is presented indirectly, through discursive references made by the characters, especially Mitchell who describes Nostromo as being “invaluable for our work—a perfectly incorruptible fellow” (127). Nostromo’s identity partakes of the same qualities as those of the treasure: like it, he is invaluable and incorruptible. The treasure is described by Nostromo as “an incorruptible metal that can be trusted to keep its value for ever” (300). It is the treasure of identity, of a stable, incorruptible identity based on the adequacy between being and language that Nostromo inherits from the discourse of the other.

But the island/I-land of the Isabels turns out to be the land of the fading of the subject to become the land of the specter. The ontological plenitude symbolized by the treasure is reversed as Nostromo experiences a radical loss and as presence suddenly turns into absence: “There they were. One, two, three. Yes, four gone. Taken away” (495). “There they were,” the ingots are there and we believe that Nostromo is counting them. But in fact he is counting the missing ingots: the treasure of being suddenly vanishes, the time of presence gives way to the untimely, the time of absence, of dispossession, of the Other who is always experienced as a thief.

On this island emerges a new consciousness, a modern consciousness: “The necessity of living concealed somehow, for God knows how long, which assailed him on his return to consciousness, made everything that had gone before for years appear vain and foolish, like a flattering dream come suddenly to an end” (414). Nostromo wakes up on “another stage,” the stage of the fading of being, where the “I think” is irremediably disconnected from the “I am,” sounding the death knell of the Cartesian subject. The experience of modernism is characterized, in Ricoeur’s words, by the birth of the “wounded cogito, a cogito which posits but does not possess itself, a cogito which understands its primordial truth only in and through the avowal of the inadequation, the illusion, the fakery of immediate consciousness” (2004, 238). It is such a wounded cogito that, with Nostromo, comes to language.

In this new consciousness is reflected the crisis of language that corrodes metanarratives, the metanarrative of the material interests: “Theft is always the theft of speech or text, of a trace” (Derrida 2001, 220). Nostromo experiences this ontological vacuity in and through language, a vacuity typical of the modernist crisis of language which Foucault described in these terms: “From within language experienced and traversed as language, in the play of its possibilities extended to their furthest point, what emerges is that man has ‘come
to an end; and that by reaching the summit of all possible speech, he arrives not at the very heart of himself but at the brink of that which limits him; in that region where death prowls, where thought is extinguished, where the promise of the origin interminably recedes” (Foucault 1994, 383). Nostromo’s crisis coincides with the experience of suspicion toward language, the awareness of the duplicity of words, for it is language itself that becomes the site of alterity: “Language always seems to be inhabited by the other, the elsewhere, the distant; it is hollowed by absence” (Foucault 1982, 111). The text weaves a tight metaphoric network which intertwines money and language: “Always thinking of yourself and taking your pay out in fine words from those who care nothing for you” (253), Teresa says to Nostromo. But fine words, and words in general are not to be trusted for the treasure of language is fake: the treasure becomes a malediction, a curse, as Nostromo puts it, it is “accursed.” The meaning of words cannot be taken for granted: language is ambivalent, it is a pharmakon, a remedy that turns to poison. Nostromo discovers that the discourse of the masters, the metadiscourse of the “material interests” is a discourse of forgers who put into circulation counterfeit money, fraudulent words and concepts whose value fluctuates unpredictably. “What’s in a name?” Nostromo may have asked as he discovers that words have as little value as the name he has been given, a name that is “no name either for man or beast” (232). Like Jim in Lord Jim, Nostromo is the victim of a joke, of an equivocal, plurivocal language which plays upon and bluffs him.

Nostromo’s suspicion towards language is the symptom of a wider suspicion towards all metanarratives and is a trace of what Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan calls the “anxiety of modernism” (185). Nostromo is deeply iconoclastic, in its form as well as its content, as it disarranges both the literary and ideological stage on which it emerged.

**Inchoate Narrative and the Human Experience of Time**

After this tragic discovery, Nostromo returns to society with regained lucidity, “as if sobered after a long bout of intoxication” (417). He has crossed his shadow-line, a crossing which is achieved in and through language. It is a similar shadow-line that Ricoeur invites us to cross:

The situation in which language today finds itself comprises this double possibility, this double solicitation and urgency: on the one hand, purify discourse of its excrescences, liquidate the idols, go from drunkenness to sobriety, realize our state of poverty once and for all; on the other hand,
use the most ‘nihilistic,’ destructive, iconoclastic movement so as to _let speak_ what once, what each time, was _said_, when meaning appeared anew, when meaning was at its fullest. . . . In our time we have not finished doing away with idols and we have barely begun to listen to symbols. It may be that this situation, in its apparent distress, is instructive: it may be that extreme iconoclasm belongs to the restoration of meaning. (1970, 27; emphasis in original)

Likewise, Ricoeur explains that suspicion is a mode of attestation: “Suspicion is also the path _toward_ and the crossing _within_ attestation. It haunts testimony, as false testimony haunts true testimony” (1992, 30). Does this mean that Nostromo’s antinarrativity can lead to a regained confidence in the power of narrative? For the very existence of antinarratives still testifies to the importance of narrative power in human culture: “[W]e have no idea of what a culture would be where no one any longer knew what it meant to narrate things,” Ricoeur says (1985, 28).

The anarchy of _Nostromo_, in terms of structure, language, meaning, and temporality, can be interpreted positively. The unsaying which is at work in _Nostromo_, which “unworks” the literary work, the silence of a novel that expresses itself in the mode of reticence and of restraint, the narrative gaps and structural discordances that undermine the narrative dynamics, may be interpreted as traces of what Ricoeur calls “an inchoate narrativity that constitutes a genuine demand for narrative.” Ricoeur exemplifies this notion of inchoate narrativity through psychoanalysis, which he defines as a “system of rules for retelling our life stories.” He adds that our personal life story proceeds “from untold and repressed stories in the direction of actual stories that the subject can take up and hold as constitutive of his personal identity” (1984, 74). In _Nostromo_, the narrative discordances are an inchoate narration, traces of an unsaid story waiting to be phrased/narrativized. These narrative and structural hiatuses are the originary site of a new voice about to tell an as yet untold story. For the disjunction/différence between the “I think” and the “I am” which is at the heart of Nostromo’s experience signals the time of loss, of dereliction, but simultaneously inaugurates the time of quest and inquest, of hermeneutics. Derrida’s différance can henceforth be thought of in the light of Lyotard’s definition of the différend: “The différend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence, which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases which are in principle possible” (13). The différend according to Lyotard is a paradoxical linguistic state between saying and unsaying, a silence which is a potentiality of sentences, a reservoir
of phrases, a negative sentence that invites further sentences. The inchoate narrativity of *Nostromo* is an attempt to probe beyond the phantasm of immediate consciousness, of the imperial subject, to give voice to the voiceless, to what is alogos, to what is denied the status of logos. The work of the novel *Nostromo* is precisely to listen to what “unworks” it and to bring Nostromo the ghost, the alogos back to language, in order to turn it into a story, to reinvent a new narrativity. Thus *Nostromo* is an apt illustration of the power of narrativity, which is, according to Ricoeur, to confer meaning on what is apparently meaningless: “By saving or sparing and compression, the narrator brings what is foreign to meaning (*sinnfremd*) into the sphere of meaning. Even when the narrative intends to render what is senseless (*sinnlos*), it places this in relation to the sphere of making sense (*Sinndeutung*)” (Ricoeur 1985, 80; emphasis in original). The trace of Nostromo’s crisis has been submerged, engulfed in the secrecy of the Gulf which retains its secret, the secret adventure of Nostromo and Decoud, the secret story of a ghost haunting the world of ontology. But this secret is disclosed by the authorial voice, by the work of writing which brings to language the traumatic experience of this ontological crisis erased by official historiography, by monumental time. This trace is at the heart of the story of Nostromo the ghost and is represented in the scarifications/ slashings/breachings of the narrative texture. Such is the process of unconcealment achieved by *Nostromo*.

Mitchell’s memorial founds a forgetful memory, it is an archive which regresses the anarchy of thought to oblivion. Referring to Mitchell’s speech in the Sulaco cathedral, Edward Said comments: “[T]he point is that propagandistic descriptions of monuments, as Nietzsche once observed, provide one with the most insufficient and inaccurate sort of history. And so goes the chronicle of Sulaco. It flourishes in its monumental prosperity, with its silver exports reaching every corner of the world, and excludes, in the manner described by Foucault, everything inimical to it. In Foucault’s terminology one can also say that Sulaco’s archives contain rarefied versions of its history” (1982, 120).

The story of Nostromo the ghost exists only under erasure, “sous rature,” as a palimpsest, an erased trace which disarranges the discourse of the masters. These blank pages of Sulaco’s archives are a symptom of fear, of the fact

5. In a perceptive analysis, Jeremy Hawthorn has shown how the subtle use of the pseudo-iterative in *Nostromo*, whose function is to impart a sense of repetition and historicity to events, is used in a subversive way that serves to deconstruct history and the novel’s historiographical discourses. A case in point is Mitchell’s narrative of the ‘historical events’ pertaining to the Sulaco revolution: “[W]hat Mitchell represents is a travesty or parody of history, a travesty that reduces history to something mechanical and stertyped, something unavailable to active human participation” (1998, 141).
that, in Foucault’s words, we are afraid “to conceive of the Other in the time of our own thought” (1982, 12). This Other is typified in the novel by Nostromo, who, after the loss of the treasure, is marked by alterity: “I could see he was another man,” Mitchell remarks. But this alterity is rejected at once and Nostromo’s failure is relegated to oblivion: “I begged him not to think any more about the silver” (488). The failure of Decoud and Nostromo’s plan is re-integrated within a meaningful structure by Mitchell’s narration and resorbed within a final victory: “Miss Avellanos burst into tears only when he told her how Decoud had happened to say that his plan would be a glorious success. . . . And there’s no doubt, sir, that it is. It is a success” (489). This success is built on an ellipsis, on a hiatus in a discourse which passes over the tragic moment. But simultaneously, this failure persists in Mitchell’s discourse in the form of a trace, of an unsaid which undermines his narration. In Mitchell’s naive account of the Sulaco revolution, the word “history” is a fetishistic symbol of a historiography which does not so much reveal as conceal: “Almost every event out of the usual daily course ‘marked an epoch’ for him [Mitchell] or else was ‘history,’” the narrator comments (112–13). This history, however, is but an expression of blindness, of someone “utterly in the dark, and imagining himself to be in the thick of things.” Confronted with the untimely, Mitchell’s discourse collapses: “[H]e would mutter—‘Ah, that! That, sir was a mistake’” (113). This mistake, this tragic event is phrased in an abortive narrative, it is not so much said as unsaid, muttered in a language in default, a language muted by the traumatic encounter with a ghost. The story of Nostromo the ghost, the story of an ontology turned hauntology is repressed by the ideology of material interests, a teleology incapable of thinking the trace of absence, of the absent ideal.

But the novel’s re-enunciation of this initial discourse, of the grandiose revolution, takes us beyond the curse that plagues Nostromo. This re-enunciation, this narrative repetition, opens new virtualities: “Repetition thus opens potentialities that went unnoticed, were aborted, or were repressed in the past. It opens up the past again in the direction of coming-towards” (Ricoeur 1988, 76). Storytelling is indeed a means of making history, of creating a new history. This idea is articulated, among others, by Fredric Jameson who argues that the only way to escape Historical Determinism is to narrativize history. Drawing on Jameson’s analysis, Hayden White explains that the power to narrate can have an impact on the course of history and can be interpreted as a historical causality called “narratological causality”:

This would be a mode of causality that consists in a seizing of a past by consciousness in such a way as to make of the present a fulfillment of the
former’s promise rather than merely an effect of some prior (mechanistic, expressive, or structural) cause. The seizure by consciousness of a past in such a way as to define the present as a fulfillment rather than as an effect is precisely what is represented in a narrativization of a sequence of historical events so as to reveal everything early in it as a prefiguration of a project to be realized in some future. Considered as a basis for a specific kind of human agency, narrativization sublimates necessity into a symbol of possible freedom. (149)

Hayden White points here to the praxic function of fiction, as the respective horizons of fiction and history fuse. For Ricoeur, language, though marked by closure and self-reflexivity, is ultimately “oriented beyond itself,” toward the world: “Language is for itself the order of the Same. The world is its Other. The attestation of this otherness arises from language’s reflexivity with regard to itself, whereby it knows itself as being in being in order to bear on being” (Time 1984, 78). In the world of the novel, language is made to “bear on being” when Montero’s historical readings influence the course of the history of Sulaco. In like manner, the fictional narrative Nostromo inserts itself within a historical reality and bears on the course of true history by unveiling the fundamental duplicity of colonial rhetoric and imperial discourses, and, more widely, of all ideologies that promise a brighter future and that lead, at best, to disenchantment and, at worst, to some of the most horrendous holocausts the history of the world has known. It is such disenchantment that Mrs. Gould foreshadows when, in a visionary, almost prophetic scene, the mine is compared to an atrocious god demanding human holocausts: “[S]he saw clearly the San Tome mine possessing, consuming, burning up the life of the last of the Costaguana Goulds; mastering the energetic spirit of the son as it had mastered the lamentable weakness of the father” (522). This anticipates Hannah Arendt’s own vision of imperialism as being one of the “three pillars of hell,” one of the origins of the totalitarianism that was to plague the twentieth century. The narrative Nostromo is an invitation to the reader to “see clearly,” in the manner of Mrs. Gould, for one of the functions of narrative is “to replace perplexity with lucidity” (Ricoeur 1984, 19). This redescription of the world through fiction produces what Ricoeur calls “an iconic augmentation,” leads to the apperception of meanings and realities as yet unrevealed: “[L]iterary works depict reality by augmenting it with meanings that themselves depend upon the virtues of abbreviation, saturation, and culmination, so strikingly illustrated by emplotment” (1984, 80). In this sense, fiction augments our understanding of history: “Fiction gives eyes to the horrified narrator. Eyes to see and to weep. The present state of literature on the Holocaust provides
ample proof of this” (1988, 188). In this respect, it is striking to note how much Conrad himself believed in fiction’s ability to convey historical truths, as if the ontological power of fiction exceeded that of historical discourse. In his famous essay “Henry James: An Appreciation,” he writes: “Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing. But it is also more than that; it stands on firmer ground, being based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena, whereas history is based on documents, and the reading of print and handwriting—on second-hand impression. Thus fiction is nearer truth” (1921, 20).

In like manner, Ricoeur explains that the very experience of anarchic temporality is a means of deepening our experience of time: “If it is true that the major tendency of modern theory of narrative—in historiography and the philosophy of history as well as in narratology—is to ‘dechronologize’ narrative, the struggle against the linear representation of time does not necessarily have as its sole outcome the turning of narrative into ‘logic,’ but rather may deepen its temporality. Chronology—or chronography—does not have just one contrary, the a-chronology of laws and models. Its true contrary is temporality itself” (1984, 30).

The play with time in Nostromo leads to the experience of an existential temporality, the temporality of the unforgettable. This unforgettable is commemorated as a time of mourning, for mourning is a matter of time and memory. Mourning is the conservation of the trace of absence, of the Absent. Such a mourning and commemoration is dramatized by Linda’s final words at the end of the novel, following Nostromo’s death: “‘It is I who loved you,’ she whispered, with a face as set and white as marble in the moonlight. ‘I! Only I! She will forget thee, killed miserably for her pretty face. I cannot understand. I cannot understand. But I shall never forget thee. Never!’” (566). Linda does not understand but refuses to forget: as such she inaugurates a new fidelity beyond the betrayal experienced by Nostromo, a fidelity to the event, to Nostromo’s heritage, and to his testimony. She resists the oblivious logic of the archive to transmit the trace of an unforgettable past. Through this commemoration she reappropriates what cannot be understood in order to phrase the unsayable. She brings back to language Nostromo the ghost, the alogos who died carrying with him the secret of his unlawful wealth. She invents a new mode of memory which resists the forgetfulness of the other characters, the memory of trauma. She retrieves the trace repressed by historiography, thus opening up a new space of memory. To the work of history, which is essentially “cannibalistic,” de Certeau opposes the work of “the mnemonic trace.” He claims that “any autonomous order”—and in his view historiography which is based “on a clean break between past and present” does create such an order—“is founded
upon what it eliminates; it produces a residue condemned to be forgotten.” But this “residue” comes back as otherness, as a trace that disrupts the present and the presence, it “resurfaces, it troubles, it turns the present’s feeling of being ‘at home’ into an illusion, it lurks—this ‘wild,’ this ‘ob-scene,’ this ‘filth,’ this ‘resistance’ of ‘superstition’—within the walls of the residence, and behind, the back of the owner (the ego), or over its objections, it inscribes there the law of the other” (3–4). It is this otherness that Linda harbors and transmits in her cry that rings aloud over the Gulf. It is this temporality of alterity that the narrator reconstructs and brings to being through narrative structures. Like Gulliver’s Travels, which is mentioned in the Author’s Preface, Nostromo debunks the naïve belief in a realism that could double and copy reality, and which is at the basis of a fetishistic vision of reality, of narrative and history. In Nostromo, Conrad reinstates through narrativity a truly human and humanized temporality that harbors the other, an other which ultimately resists the totalizing pretension of imperial time to open onto ethical time.
Works Cited


