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**JOSEPH CONRAD AND THE IDEOLOGY OF FICTION:
A STUDY OF FOUR WORKS**

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ABBREVIATIONS

Joseph Conrad's Fictional and Non-Fictional Works

HD	Conrad, Joseph. "Heart of Darkness". In <u>Youth. A Narrative and Two Other Stories</u> . London and Toronto. J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd: 1923
PR	Conrad, Joseph. <u>A Personal Record</u> . London and Toronto. J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd: 1923
N	Conrad, Joseph. <u>Nostromo</u> . London and Toronto. J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd: 1923
TSA	Conrad, Joseph. <u>The Secret Agent. A Simple Tale</u> . Edited by Bruce Harkness and S.W. Reid. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1990
UWE	Conrad, Joseph. <u>Under Western Eyes</u> . London and Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd: 1923
AW	Conrad, Joseph. "Autocracy and War". London: 1919 [Private Circulation Copy: British Library, London]

The Letters of Joseph Conrad

CL (1-5)	<u>The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad Volumes 1-5</u> . Edited by Frederick Karl and Laurence Davies: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1983-1996
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Secondary Material

TPU	Fredric Jameson. <u>The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act</u>
NTIC	Hawthorn, Jeremy. <u>Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment</u>
JCLFSC	Hawthorn, Jeremy. <u>Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness</u>
PDP	Bakhtin, M.M. <u>Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics</u>
RHW	Bakhtin, M.M. <u>Rabelais and his World</u>
MEW	<u>Marx/Engels Collected Works</u>

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues the priority of politics in the interpretation of Conrad's fiction. It does so by establishing a critical dialogue with, and around, Fredric Jameson's Marxist classic, The Political Unconscious (1981).

Jameson's proposition that Conrad's fiction is to be understood as a "Political Unconscious" – that is, that Conrad's works produce political meanings in the same way that Freud suggested thwarted human instincts produce neuroses or psychopathologies – is put to the test here. This dissertation seeks to extend the application of Jameson's hypothesis into some of the areas of Conrad's *oeuvre* that Jameson himself did not treat, or treated only briefly.

In accordance with this aim, the working method adopted here is based on a suggestion in the theoretical sections of The Political Unconscious for a model of rigorous interpretation and analysis of literary texts that are bearers of messages from the Political Unconscious. This model proposes to parse the rhythm of the hermeneutic act into three distinct but complementary horizons: first, an outline of the social, political and historical context relevant to the text under consideration; second, an exposition and decoding of the mode of literary utterance as a system of ideological concealment and containment of class antagonisms; and third, consideration of the text's *image* against the backdrop of history conceived in the broadest sense as a succession, overlay or inter-fusion of different modes of production.

Within this hermeneutic framework, the thesis offers interpretations of one novella, "Heart of Darkness", and three novels, Nostromo, The Secret Agent, and Under Western Eyes. These texts were produced between 1899 and 1911. They thus afford an opportunity to trace the developments and mutations in Conrad's aesthetic practice and political thinking over a quite extended continuum of time, in some detail.

The argument that this dissertation develops is that Conrad's fictional practice moves from an initial reliance on the romance, in "Heart of Darkness", towards an embrace of more open and expressive ironic modes evident in the later novels, Nostromo, The

Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes. While this shift seems to be conscious and willed, romance paradigms are never entirely discarded in this process. Yet, as the stylistic paradigm of Conrad's narrative strategy gradually shifts away from the subjective limitations of the romance mode, towards a looser and more inclusively encyclopaedic mode, his narratives betray a marked tendency to assimilate and critically confront left wing ideology and revolutionary themes. The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes, both of which seek to capture, and question, complex issues connected with the dynamics of revolutionary politics in different European contexts, emerge out of the paradigm shift that Conrad meticulously engineers vis-à-vis the self-reflexively ironic romantic handling of the African material in "Heart of Darkness". This conclusion – of a willed, self-sustained and integrated development of an ideology of form in Conrad – somewhat modifies the Jamesonian notion that Conrad's fiction is political, in an essentially passive sense, by dint of some kind force of implacable necessity operating within it (Jameson himself ironically dismisses The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes as counter-revolutionary propaganda).

INTRODUCTION

It has been the fate of the writings of Joseph Conrad that they have tended to be appropriated before they have been understood. Recently, they have been claimed as examples of romanticism, classical realism, early modernism, late modernism, postmodernism, schizophrenic writing, surrealism, and so on, and so forth. Over thirty years ago, Fredric Jameson argued that part of what makes Conrad's fiction unusual in the modern canon is its unclassifiability, or, to put it another way, its capacity to expose the epistemological limitations of contemporary critical practise and literary theory. "The discontinuities objectively present in Conrad's narratives," writes Jameson, "have, as with few other modern writers, projected a variety of competing and incommensurable interpretive options".¹ What Jameson suggests is that none of the assortment of literary tags and designations that have been foisted on Conrad's work is completely devoid of explanatory power; but none are quite able to perform the intellectual task that they set out to do, either (otherwise one hermeneutic model would eventually outstrip and absorb all the others).

What all of this means is that the scholar embarking on an investigation of the fiction of Joseph Conrad confronts a very considerable and bewilderingly various body of criticism, interpretation and commentary. He also faces an ensemble of academic discourses that often contain hidden assumptions (even "intellectual agendas") serving a purpose that is, sadly, more connected with the internal functioning of a now globally integrated university sector, and less that of illuminating the writings of Conrad in a strictly objective fashion.

But what is interesting, given Jameson's thesis about Conrad's work noted above, is that the critical output and scholarly activity associated with this writer over the past three decades shows no sign of abating, and indeed has continued to grow prodigiously. The articles, books, anthologies and journals on Conrad keep being churned out, year after year; the academic seminars, international conferences and symposia now run according to annual or bi-annual rotations. Conrad's life and work has become the raw material for a kind of global intellectual industry – in one sense, a sign of the modernist vitality and relevance of Conrad; in another, ironic

confirmation, perhaps, of Jameson's notion of Conrad's work as a Political Unconscious demanding constant therapeutic attention.

It should be stressed that the immense current critical interest in and around Conrad's work proffers overdue recognition to a writer of genius. It is worth recalling (though it seems almost impossible to imagine now) that, for most of his life, Conrad could not even attract enough readers to make his work professionally sustainable. Yet, at the same time, it should be noted that critical recognition of a writer's greatness, pushed beyond a certain point, becomes difficult to distinguish from a kind modern version of hagiography, or intellectual charlatanism disguised as homage-making, neither of which advances the cause of attempting to read Conrad's fiction in an honest and intelligent fashion. Nevertheless, it is also true that such fetishistic attitudes receive plenty of subliminal support from the agencies in charge of a contemporary consumerist culture that needs to perpetuate them, and therefore it can only be hoped that, if they are not entirely absent here, then they have at least been kept to a bearable minimum.

This dissertation proposes that the fiction of Conrad becomes most truthful when it is viewed historically, rather than according to the pre-selected and self-perpetuating paradigms of formalist literary theory. Accordingly, the method adopted in the following chapters involves: a) a description of the political context out of which the text concerned springs; b) an interpretation of the text as a social, dialogic utterance; and c) an attempt to conceptualise the ideological significance of this dialogic utterance in relation to a history that encompasses the progressive transformation of society's most basic means of constituting itself – namely, the mode of production. Complementing this, the various chapters are linked so that they form an evolving narrative discussion of the main forms, themes and concepts embedded in the texts themselves.

Literary criticism, like any other human activity, does not take place in a historical vacuum. It will therefore be helpful to provide a brief narrative of the literary-critical tradition in which this dissertation critically locates itself.

F.R. Leavis

The figure responsible for producing the most influential reading of the fiction of Conrad in the twentieth century is, without question, the English critic F.R. Leavis. In The Great Tradition (1948), Leavis juxtaposes analyses of Conrad's fiction with chapters on the works of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Henry James, in an evolving analysis of nineteenth- and early twentieth- century fiction that continually lays emphasis on "Life", "Experience" and "Organic Community" as the constitutive immanent forces of this tradition. Marxists have often criticized Leavis' post-War intellectual project on the grounds that it is moralizing and petit bourgeois in character.² In fact, in Leavis' version of the national literary tradition, a robust critique of the (capitalist) present is continually implied. In Leavis' codification of the literary "tradition" of the nineteenth century English novel, the works of Jane Austen, Henry James, George Eliot, Charles Dickens (to an extent), and Joseph Conrad are offered as valuably preserving "organic" communal values, particularly crucial in an epoch that was experiencing the alienating assaults of industrial capitalism for the first time.

In The Great Tradition, Leavis writes that Conrad is "unquestionably a constitutive part of the tradition, belonging in the full sense".³ However, the emphatic tone in which this assertion is made conceals an underlying insecurity in Leavis' mobilization of Conrad as a great practitioner of the English novel. For, what Leavis' certainty passes over is that Conrad, who was actually a Pole by birth, learned to speak and write in the English language only at a relatively late age. And while it is true that he settled in England and worked there for most of his adult life, it is disputable whether he ever "felt" English, or whether he at any stage saw himself as "constitutive" of any particular native "tradition". Indeed, if one reads Conrad's correspondence, one gains the opposite impression: many of England's writers, Jane Austen among them, left him frankly mystified.

What is less debatable, on the other hand, is that few readers and critics in Conrad's own lifetime in England (with the exception of a small circle of initiates) recognized him as the quality writer that Leavis in The Great Tradition celebrates as bearing comparison with Shakespeare and Dickens. Again, one need only glance over the

letters of Conrad to gain some insight into the writer's long and sometimes agonized struggle to make his voice heard (and saleable) in the country in which he lived and worked.

Thus, Leavis' incorporation of Conrad into a specifically English literary tradition "selects out" historical facts that uncomfortably point to the Pole's actual marginalization and alienation from the dominant national culture. To the extent that this is so, the case of Conrad must be sharply distinguished from that of the other non-national figure that Leavis imports into his "great tradition" – namely, the North American writer, Henry James.

Like Conrad, James was an expatriate intellectual who selected England as his base for a professional career. However, this is where the resemblances end. Unlike Conrad, James was never exclusively, or even particularly, dependent on the literary culture of his country of adoption (the parochialism of which he was, in fact, privately dismissive and disdainful). Also, James, as the member of a prestigiously intellectual (and highly industrious) North American East Coast family, had "inherited" links with a wide network of writers, artists, critics, publishers and thinkers: both in the States and Continental Europe. Throughout his career, James inhabited, and retained close connections with, cosmopolitan literary and intellectual milieus in London, Paris and New York.

Conrad, an orphan from an early age, a former sea captain, and a more or less permanent exile from his native Poland, enjoyed few of the social and intellectual advantages in the Anglo-Franco-American worlds of letters that James could boast (famously, James actually petitioned Edmund Gosse in order to help Conrad obtain a literary grant in the early, cash-strapped phase of his career). Conrad had to rely heavily on the labours of his pen to acquire the favour of the native literary culture, and had also to battle to overcome its ingrained xenophobic distrust of "foreigners". For much of his career, Conrad's mode of access to literary circles in England was restricted to friendships with early readers and admirers of his work (among whom were Ford Madox Ford, Edward Garnett, Robert Cunninghame Graham, and John Galsworthy). Writing therefore sustained (and even then only very gradually and fitfully) Conrad's internal articulation with the dominant literary culture in England,

the latter did not themselves provide the enabling conditions for the former (as was to a certain extent the case with James).

Thus, the inclusion of the polyglot litterateur Henry James into the “great tradition” imparts a cosmopolitan aesthetic *élan* to the English novel, whilst the addition of Conrad the lonely ex-sailor and Pole threatens to internationalise it in another, more problematic, direction. If the cosmopolitan, but ultimately safely Anglo-Saxon, aesthete James protectively inoculates Leavisite “organic” nationalistic nostalgia from other more dangerously “political” foreign toxins, then the “other” international figure of Conrad, that son of a Polish revolutionary patriot, and one-time gun runner for the Carlists, who somehow wanders into English letters after a spell in the merchant navy, precisely threatens to disturb it. It is partly this underlying tension between Conrad as a really existing historical figure and the nostalgic parochialism coded into Leavisian ideology that gives Leavis’ chapters on Conrad’s fiction in The Great Tradition their particular force and urgency (and, it should be added, does much to resurrect Conrad’s prestige for a new audience of readers and scholars).

Viewed from this angle, Leavis’ mobilization of Conrad in The Great Tradition inadvertently threatens to deconstruct the parochial and essentially moralistic conception of the significance of the modern English novel on which it is based. Leavis’ critical elevation of Conrad as an exemplar of a powerfully charged national past can in this sense be seen, in spite of itself as it were, as generating a space for an investigation of this writer using terms that would necessarily challenge the idea that the English novel is supportive of a hegemonic ideological framework of an organic and harmoniously integrated Englishness.

Raymond Williams

This was not quite what happened. Part of the reason for this may have had to do with the fact that Leavis’ success in defining the cultural and political agenda of English literary criticism in the era immediately after World War Two was not decisively challenged or contested by figures within the English intelligentsia (indeed, this was a condition of its success). As Tom Nairn notes, “though Leavis’s guiding notion was that the ideal ‘organic community’ of England had perished [...] he could only preach

that idea at all to an actually (if tacitly) existing organic culture – an intellectual class whose pulse would respond to the exaltations of Life and Community”.⁴

In order to gain some insight into this process, it may be helpful to examine the work of the left-wing British cultural critic, Raymond Williams.

Williams was probably the most powerful and productive British Marxist literary critic to emerge from the Leavisian Cambridge milieu of literary criticism. In The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence (1970), Williams attempts what might be termed a Marxist rewriting of Leavis’ The Great Tradition. The obvious Marxist counter-move to Leavis, one would have thought, would have been to contest his construction of a national literary tradition both internally (by drawing attention to the limitations and contradictions inherent in his mobilization of non-national figures like James and Conrad) and externally, by insisting on the merits other nineteenth century writers that his literary map neglects or marginalizes. In sum, it would have been expected that Williams would attack Leavis’ Great Tradition at the point where it would seem to be intellectually most vulnerable – namely, its reliance on an ideologically and selectively supported notion of a *national tradition*.

But The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence does not challenge the Leavisite framework of “a tradition” as such. By locating its discussion of Conrad’s fiction within a sequence of English writers extending from Dickens to D.H. Lawrence, Williams’ text not only recapitulates, but also actually extends and reinforces the spurious Leavisite image of Conrad as a vertical inheritor, and purveyor, of a spiritual-national *Geist*.

Typically, Williams approaches the fiction of Conrad by circling hesitatingly around it. Here is a representative example:

Isolation and struggle. Man against Fate. These have been the common terms of descriptions of Conrad. And of course they are relevant. The novels raise those issues. But I want to look at the phrases and the ideas behind them – turn them round and look at them – because I am far from sure that in the end with Conrad they help; at least in their simple rhetorical forms. There is isolation of course.⁵

In this passage, Williams oscillates uneasily between a Leavis-like imperative mode ("isolation and struggle. Man against fate", etc) and an uneasy impressionistic and confessional register ("I want to look", "I am far from sure"). What this points to is a degree of ambivalent uncertainty underlying Williams' handling of Conrad.

Instead of raising questions about the historical grounds upon which Leavis bases his inclusion of the deracinated Eastern European Conrad into a national tradition that celebrates a lost rural past on a highly selective basis, then, Williams tacitly endorses the underlying terms of Leavisian organic-communitarian ideology. His assertion (in the passage above) of the inadequacy of metaphysical or philosophical approaches to the fiction of Conrad partly reflects a Marxian distaste for "bourgeois" sophistry in literary criticism, but it also precisely underscores the way in which his own critical discourse is confined within a Leavisite paradigm of empiricist criticism that privileges the (humanely) concrete over (lifelessly) abstract and theoretical.

By a sort of default, then, Williams's readings of Conrad end up confirming Leavis's ahistorical celebration of him as one of the "masters" of English fiction (all the more powerfully by appearing to dissent from it). In Williams' interpretation, Leavisite humanism "supplying ineffably concrete answers to all the deeper questions" (as Nairn ironically puts it) is politely dressed as a Marxist demurral, rather than being challenged in order to clear the way for a much more challenging kind of historical positioning and analytical exploration of it, partly, and, one would have thought, decisively, via the example provided by the life and fiction of Joseph Conrad. It is worthy of note, for example, that Williams' prose, generally guarded in the sections dealing with ambitious and political works such as Nostromo, The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes, is at its most animated when discussing Conrad's "maritime" romances (Lord Jim and The Nigger of the "Narcissus" in particular). This reflects a Williamsean tendency to downgrade Conrad as a Master-Mariner-turned-writer, a tacit reduction of a complex Conradian style to simplistic Imperial "sea tales" (Conrad as a "Kipling of the South Seas" and so forth) that actually regressively precedes Leavis' rehabilitation of him as a serious literary artist in The Great Tradition.

"The ship in Conrad," writes Williams, "has this special quality which was no longer available to most novelists. It is a knowable community of a transparent kind".⁶ The

suggestion that the ship in Conrad is an image of “a knowable community” (for this, read: England’s “organic” past) not only mimics Leavisite nostalgia for a “lost” England, but also focuses its potential for offering ideological consolation on a most unlikely fictional locus. For, if ships in Conrad are “transparent” and “knowable” communities in one sense, they are, more materially, floating versions of an ideology associated with Imperialist exploitation. In Lord Jim (1900), Jim’s tragic inability to construct a new personal and social identity after the Patna incident speaks to the punitive reach of England’s arachnid networks of socio-economic power and influence. In this, it is Jim’s moral honesty (not a “character flaw”) that costs him. By confessing his weakness on the Patna (by “jumping”), Jim unforgivably contravenes the code of professional secrecy inscribed in the behaviour of an elite Imperialist maritime officer corps. Jim’s naïve determination to speak the truth about his role in the Patna incident simply cannot escape punishment in a socio-political context where knowledge must be put in service of the noble aim of gaining maximum benefit from global trade.

Williams’ intellectual career more or less spans the post-war period of global decolonization that led to the dismantling of Britain’s formal world Empire. A good time in history, one might have thought, for a British Marxist literary critic well positioned to understand this process to mount a serious investigation into the fiction of Conrad, who along with Rudyard Kipling is surely *the* novelist of Empire in “the tradition”. Seen in this light, Williams’ insistence on seeing the ship in Conrad as a simulacrum of a more or less mystical “lost England” rather than as the vector of mercantile exploitation legitimized by a uniquely predatory state-system suggests little more than an evasion of the actual social, political and historical structures woven into Conrad’s work.

Eloise Knapp Hay

Meanwhile, in North American academic circles at this time, the criticism of Conrad’s fiction was going in the opposite direction, becoming increasingly politicized. The unease generated in American intellectual circles by the hysteria-inducing anti-communist crusade of McCarthy gave the critique of Conrad an unmistakably political edge from the outset.

Irving Howe's important essay on Conrad in Politics and the Novel (1957) emerged in a decade of particularly intense anti-communist paranoia in the USA. This essay's perception of Conrad as an intelligent and erudite interpreter of the global politics of his time places it as one of the most energetically acute left-wing commentaries on Conrad's work. Neither Leavis nor Williams deal with the politics in Conrad's fiction with anything like the resolution and precision that Howe brings to it.

At the same time, there is an insistence, in Howe's essay, on an underlying tendentious conservative bias in Conrad. Howe argues that Conrad's fiction engages with the politics that is contemporary with it in spite of itself, rather than in a spirit of wholehearted commitment. "By some curious paradox of his creative life," writes Howe, Conrad "repeatedly abandoned his established subjects and turned, with a visible shudder of distaste, to the world of London anarchists, Russian Emigrés, Latin revolutionaries".⁷ Howe's implied idea here of Conrad as a patrician *mittleuropean* sophisticate essentially out of touch with his times, but compelled, by curious inner forces, occasionally to engage with the base metal of contemporary social and political issues may perhaps be decoded as a disguised reference to his own embattled situation as a liberal intellectual in right-wing, McCarthyite America.

In the 1960s, two American critics, Avrom Fleishman and Eloise Knapp Hay, produce critical studies of Conrad that seek to locate the writer and his fiction in political terms. Eloise Knapp Hay's The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad (1963) remains among the most balanced and insightful arguments about the politics of Conrad's fiction. Hay writes "Conrad's political vision is [...] contemporary because he experienced more of the political tensions and realities of his period and could interpret them more clearly than any other novelist in the last hundred years".⁸ For her, Conrad's novels convey a sense of a world breaking up, a tragic vision of the Western world undergoing a crisis of social, psychic and moral disintegration at all levels. "A sense of impending disaster, probably founded in childhood memories, seems to have been ingrained in Conrad's temperament," writes Hay.⁹ Conrad's novels, in these terms, operate, rather like Franz Kafka's, under the curse of implacable political necessity. "Nearly all [Conrad's] principal characters fall into situations where their personal action or thought is challenged by public forces with which they are incompatible".¹⁰

Unlike Leavis and Williams, Hay attempts to anchor her readings of the fiction of Conrad in relation to a trans-national, European intellectual milieu rather than with a parochially and vertically English one. It is to be noted, however, that there is nothing particularly “radical” about Hay’s interpretation of Conrad (which is broadly speaking liberal humanist). While dismissive of the notion of the “arch-conservatism” of Conrad (perhaps a gesture of disapproval directed at Howe), Hay also suggests that Conrad is not part of the intellectual genealogy of Marx and Engels; she aligns Conrad’s fiction with German Idealist thought represented by Hegel and Nietzsche.¹¹ Hay’s assertion that Conrad’s “unique contribution to the English political novel was his response to a political imperative which was at the same time strange to English-speaking readers and universal in the modern world” restores a sense of a schism between Conrad and a Leavisian “national tradition” while at the same time making his work available on a less partisan and parochially confined level of critical discourse.¹²

Moreover, by drawing her readers’ attention to the Polish antecedents of Conrad, Hay necessarily calls into question the basic intellectual foundations of the Leavisite “great tradition” idea.¹³ More recently, Polish critics and scholars like Zdzislaw Najder and Andrzej Busza have done work that has further expanded the cultural field in which Conrad’s fiction must now be viewed and understood. Significantly, Gustav Morf’s The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad (1930), one of the earliest attempts to locate the meaning of Conrad’s fiction in the author’s Polish background, is also one of the first attempts to account for its ideology in terms of an over-arching psycho-political argument.

Hay’s account, then, releases Conrad’s fiction from the claustral realms of an essentialist humanistic “Englishness” to which Leavis (consciously) and Williams (subconsciously) had confined it. Usefully, too, the readings of Conrad’s texts she offers are preceded and framed by various historical, political and intellectual contexts she adduces in order to account for the internal articulation of politics that takes place in these texts. However, the precise significance of the connection between these adduced contexts and the exegeses that follow are not always made clear.

As an illustration of this, it may be helpful to focus on Hay's chapter on "Heart of Darkness" here briefly. Hay begins by sketching out a context of late nineteenth century Imperial politics in England – in itself, a perfectly acceptable move for an analyst of the politics of Conrad's fiction to make. Much of this prefatory detail, including correspondence from Conrad, is not without interest and relevance in regard to "Heart of Darkness". But as a totality, this context-setting discussion seems to fall short of providing deep insight into the text. Part of the problem is the lack of systematic rigour in Hay's approach. Her political context is actually a confection of historical fact, ideology and biography. Piece-meal in character, it fails to nail down the specific economic and political dynamics underpinning the colonial relationship between Africa and Europe in the late nineteenth century. It also does not adequately distinguish between different aspects of the West's colonial drive into Africa at this time. Quite why detail she provides about events in British-controlled nineteenth century Southern Africa (the Jameson Raid and the Anglo-Boer war) should be of relevance to a novella set in Central West African Congo, under the aegis of a Belgian monarch, is never adequately clarified or substantiated. In sum, ultimately Hay's chapter on "Heart of Darkness" conveys the sense of a series of disjunctions between historical context and the ideological significance of Conrad's fiction

Historical and political context is supposed to illuminate the inner meaning of Conrad's fiction in Hay's account, but because the latter is presented unsystematically, and without any really deep sense of the historical and political forces at work in Conrad's era, one is left with the impression that it is there to decorate and embellish the former rather than to provide a strong empirical and theoretical basis for an over-arching argument about it. In this sense, the passive-reflective model of history/literature that Hay employs to illustrate the importance of politics in Conrad's work seems to work against the apparent intention of her own text. What Hay offers is an interpretation of Conrad's fiction *plus* detail about the historical and political scene contemporary with it; it does not convincingly demonstrate it in terms of a dialectical connection between the two.

Paradoxically, Hay's piece-meal empiricist style of literary-political analysis exemplifies the basic weakness that Mulhern senses at the heart of the Leavisian critical enterprise – namely, the absence of a coherent grasp of *narrative*.¹⁴ The

strength of Hay's criticism lies in its intuitive moral sensitivity to the texture of language and ideas in Conrad's fiction, but her insights into the texts do not come across as being a part of a sustained, integrated vision of the ideological significance of Conrad's *oeuvre*. What one misses from Hay's account of Conrad, finally, is some sense of the way that his narratives move beyond their local social and political contexts to gesture, in a spirit of solidarity, as well as foreboding, towards the world's future (the present-time of the critic). Hay's sense of Conrad as a cosmopolitan modernist with relevant things to say about the contemporary world continually competes with her perception of a fundamental political pessimism at work in his fiction. With the benefit of hindsight, it is hard not to see the latter, rather than the former, as being the real basis of her embrace of Conrad as a political writer.

Avrom Fleishman

In Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad (1967), Avrom Fleishman acknowledges Hay's work as a precedent for his own, but argues that whereas hers fails to debunk the notion that Conrad's fiction supports a conservative or "Tory" political viewpoint, his, on the other hand, will restore a sense of balance to the analysis of Conrad as a political writer. "The standard impression of [Conrad] as an irascible anti-revolutionist, lifelong Polish nationalist, and skeptical Tory," writes Fleishman, "is allowed to stand" in Hay's critical assessment of the politics of Conrad's fiction.¹⁵ Fleishman claims to have a "fresh approach" to Conrad, one which focuses on what he calls "the growth in depth and flexibility of his thought on the leading ideologies of his time, his winning free of prejudices with which he began, and his achievement of a grand vision of social community – maintained with an ironic perception of the forces on the present political scene that inhibit its realization".¹⁶ In short, Fleishman correctly identifies as the weakness of Hay's assessment of Conrad its failure to provide a credible and sustainable narrative bridge between the raw matter of history and politics, on the one hand, and the sophisticated ideology embedded in the fiction on the other.

However, Fleishman's positive evaluation of Conrad's fiction as "a grand vision of social community" is backward looking rather than progressive. It effectively reinscribes it with those ideological values Hay sought to release it from. While Hay

proposed a critical revaluation of Conrad as being something other than an exemplar of a Leavisian "Great Tradition", and as being shaped, rather, by a range of Polish, French, German and British aesthetic, intellectual and political influences, Fleishman, in contrast, suggests that the writer should be situated in a unitary philosophical tradition of "organicism".¹⁷ What Fleishman's "organicism" represents is, of course, another version of Leavisite nostalgia, a displaced elegiac sense of Conrad as the uncrowned poet of a "lost community" of a long-perished England. Fleishman mobilizes Conrad as a writer whose "ironic perception of the forces on the present political scene" help to lessen any anxieties that the reader and critic might feel about American politics in the 1960s, a decade in which the Vietnam War and the Cuban missile crisis began to send out discomfiting truths about the possible significances and implications of American neo-imperialism.

Thus, Fleishman's apparent attempt to recover a Conrad as a writer of fiction transcending the narrowing distinctions of present-day ideology (left versus right, conservative versus revolutionary, etc.) conceals his own ideological appropriation of these texts. This is, precisely, a version, suitably updated and reconstructed, of the old Victorian, Arnoldian notion of "great literature" as that which serves the purposes once reserved for religious instruction.¹⁸ With Fleishman, then, a supposedly "neutralist" liberal project of mobilizing Conrad as a writer "neither 'conservative' nor 'liberal'", and liberated from the ideological dogmas of an America in the grip of Cold War paranoia, moves towards a self-generated impasse.¹⁹

This impasse then forces into view certain ideological tensions and ruptures embedded in Fleishman's approach. Particularly uneasy, both in tone and substance, is Fleishman's handling of Conrad's Polish background in the first chapter of his text. "The widely accepted account of Conrad's national origins [...] cannot be maintained," asserts Fleishman, early on.²⁰ This false account has been "fostered by his Polish critics" not adequately qualified for the task (it should be noted that this assertion seems curiously to overlook the contribution of the North American Hay).²¹ Apparently, Poles are not to be trusted with their own language and history! This is because, Fleishman writes, on "matters of Polish history [...] Poles are strongly partisan".²² According to Fleishman, then, the ideal solution to the whole vexed question of the influence of Poland on Conrad's fiction would be to hand it over to a

well-qualified (and, naturally, non-Polish) “expert”. Fleishman writes somewhat defensively that “the definitive account of Conrad’s Polish origins remains to be written by a critic of English literature who can read Polish”.²³

In conclusion, the political analysis of Conrad undertaken by the North Americans Hay and Fleishman in the sixties eventually founders on its own inner lack of a guiding historical and political perspective. The forceful and coherent sense of Conrad as a political writer, signalled in Howe’s short essay in the fifties, has to wait until Fredric Jameson in the early eighties gives it its decisive American (and Marxist) fulfilment. Before considering Jameson’s great achievement, however, it will be helpful to consider the brief but telling contribution of another Marxist (one of Jameson’s favourite critics as it happens) to Conrad criticism – Georg Lukács.

Georg Lukács

Georg Lukács, the Hungarian Marxist, would appear to have more credentials than most for locating Conrad’s fiction historically and politically. As an East European intellectual, Lukács would have had some understanding of the cultural and political milieu that helped to shape the mind and outlook of Conrad (more so, at least than Conrad’s legion of Western critics). As an enormously erudite scholar of both West- and East-European philosophical and literary traditions, he was also admirably equipped to provide a reading of Conrad’s fiction informed by a heterodox and precise understanding of the various intellectual and political currents that nourished it. Yet, in spite of all this, Lukács offers a critical treatment of Conrad’s fiction that is both cursory and dismissive.

Georg Lukács views the “self-sufficient quality” of Conrad’s work as a vindication of the aesthetic canons of nineteenth century realism, but deplores the absence of “a truthful description of the life of his age”.²⁴ For Lukács, Conrad is a novelist who inherits the great intentions of classical realism (represented by Dickens, Balzac, Tolstoy), but his putative firm opposition to socialism atomises his narrative apparatus into a series of subjective sketches and rococo exercises in psychological analysis. What Lukács misses in Conrad’s work is an image of contemporary society as a *totality*. “Conrad’s heroes are confronted with exclusively personal, moral conflicts,”

writes Lukács, adding, “these conflicts might have attained a wider significance; but such a generalization is excluded by the method of narration”.²⁵ Thus, Conrad, disconnected from, and ideologically hostile to, the great social problems and issues of his time is “really a short story writer rather than a novelist”.²⁶ Even the three hundred page long Lord Jim is, according to Lukács, “essentially a long short story”.²⁷

Yet in charging Conrad with failing to provide a totalizing narrative discourse of society Lukács is in danger of misreading (or worse, ignoring) the historical context out of which those narratives emerge. As a Polish exile living and working for most of his life in England, Conrad precisely lacked, in his own personal experience, a concretized stabilizing sense of “society”. If Conrad’s fiction does not, as Lukács suggests, provide a “comprehensive” vision of the whole gamut of forces at work in modern society (and this in itself is, as shall be suggested below, open to question) this can hardly be surprising. At the same time, one is not sure that the fact that this lack of a totalizing vision in Conrad’s fiction makes it any “better” or “worse” as fiction per sé. Lukács’ insistence on the concept of totality as the sole and supreme arbiter of literary value is problematic, and perhaps points to a certain nostalgic and backward-looking ideological allegiance in his own practice as a literary critic and thinking about aesthetic matters, and particularly modernism.

Certainly, Lukács’ whole approach to modernism as a movement, to a large degree a trans-national phenomenon, and the product of deracinated minds (Joyce, Eliot, Pound), is famously negative and dismissive. Fredric Jameson argues that what is at the back of Lukács’ intense distaste for modernism is an idealistic conception of *the epic* as the master narrative of Western European cultural discourse. “All of Lukács’ analyses of the novel depend on what is a kind of literary nostalgia, on the notion of a golden age or lost Utopia of narration in Greek epic,” writes Jameson in Marxism and Form (1971).²⁸ In this sense, the Lukácsian characterization of Conrad as a mere writer of short stories seems rather misplaced, given the fact that the latter is the author of a novel as wide-ranging, in its inclusion of the political forces of the modern world, as Nostromo. From this point of view, Lukács’ dismissal of Conrad as a minor modern novelist may be designed to conceal from view the notion that the epic is more capable of being modernized and made to fit with contemporary social

conditions than his “literary nostalgia” is prepared to allow (for more on this, see Chapter Two of this dissertation).

Displaced from secure forms of national identity and communal allegiance, Conrad evolves a unique story-telling method shaped by, and around, the need to capture, and give a contemporary aesthetic form to, the trans-national dynamics of a rapidly changing global social and political landscape in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth- centuries. A closer inspection reveals that Lukács’ remark that there is no totalizing ambition in Conrad is in fact difficult to reconcile with the empirical evidence the texts themselves provide. For example, the four texts under consideration here (a grouping that is itself selective) have as their settings three of the world’s continents: Africa (“Heart of Darkness”), South America (Nostromo), and Europe (The Secret Agent, and Under Western Eyes). If one were to add to this list the early Malay fiction (Lord Jim, An Outcast of the Islands, Almayer’s Folly), all of which are set in Asia, then the geo-political arena that Conrad’s work inhabits and evokes must be pushed even further outwards.

So, contrary to what Lukács thinks, Conrad’s fiction actually encompasses and compresses within itself more of the actually existing contemporary socio-political world than Dickens’, confined to London and its environs, or Balzac’s, did. Indeed, one might say of Conrad’s *oeuvre* that it is nothing if it is not thorough, inclusive and encyclopaedic in its modernist ambition and scope.

Fredric Jameson

But, then, Raymond Williams’ rather cool and distanced handling of Conrad and Lukács’ summary criticism of him as a minor novelist and / or inflated writer of short stories simply reflect the general truth that the significance of Conrad’s fiction has largely been subject to marginalization and neglect by twentieth century Marxist literary criticism. Furnishing a notable exception to this general rule is the North American Marxist Frederic Jameson’s The Political Unconscious (1981). Jameson’s text provides what is undoubtedly the most powerful and thought-provoking Marxist analysis of Conrad’s fiction yet to emerge.

The Political Unconscious seeks to locate and debate the political relevance of Conrad's work in the context of a Marxist debate about "postmodernity". In this sense, Jameson identifies Conrad's importance as a formative figure in the dominant aesthetic movement(s) in contemporary Western culture, something that few other Marxist critics have been prepared to concede.

In order to understand the analysis of Conrad's fiction in The Political Unconscious, it is important to grasp the inner meaning of the critique of postmodernity that Jameson has spent much of his career articulating and developing. In an early essay entitled "Reflections in Conclusion" (1977), Jameson highlights the chief problematic of postmodernity as "the aesthetic conflict between realism and modernism whose navigation and renegotiation is still unavoidable for us today".²⁹ Underlying this aesthetic conflict is a definite shift in the mode of production. "Realism and modernism must be seen as specific and determinate historical expressions of the type of socio-economic structures to which they correspond, namely capitalism and consumer capitalism," continues Jameson.³⁰ In fact, modernism is somehow located on the fault-line between capitalism and consumer capitalism, for Jameson implies that it is only when postmodernism is uncontested that consumer capitalism will achieve its full-blown expression.

It is clearly Jameson's intention to contest the whole concept of the postmodern. In The Political Unconscious, Jameson not only weaves conceptual strands drawn from a wide range of contemporary thinkers into a series of incisive critical analyses of the fiction of Balzac, Gissing and Conrad, but he also proposes a startling notion of Marxism as a world-historical story-telling system. "Only Marxism," writes Jameson, "can give us an adequate account of the essential *mystery* of the cultural past, which, like Tiresias drinking the blood, is momentarily returned to life and warmth and allowed once more to speak, and to deliver its long-forgotten message in surroundings utterly alien to it".³¹ Perry Anderson argues that The Political Unconscious is "the most eloquent and express claim for Marxism as a grand narrative ever made".³²

For Jameson, the chief characteristic of the psychic landscape of the postmodern is collective amnesia, its consumerist-inducing "hysterical sublime"; and Marxism as a system provides the sobering access to the vanishing worlds of the past that

contemporary culture erodes. Jameson writes that the events of the past “can recover their original urgency for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story; only if, in however disguised and symbolic a form, they are seen as sharing a single fundamental theme – for Marxism, the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity”.³³

Certain liberal critics have raised objections to Jameson’s The Political Unconscious on the grounds that its approach to literary texts is based on a conception of culture and history that it is too absolute and unyielding. Jacques Berthoud, for instance, argues that “by identifying consciousness with ideology, Jameson renders himself completely incapable of acknowledging [Conrad] as offering [...] a responsible interpretation of the world”.³⁴ However, Berthoud’s objection to what he perceives to be Jameson’s dogmatic Marxist approach to Conrad only begins to become interesting, for the purposes of this dissertation, once its basic underlying premise is reversed. Only then does it become clear that one of the criticisms that might be levelled against The Political Unconscious is that it turns Marxism, traditionally a method of critically understanding society as being determined by a set of contradictory material forces for the purposes of acting to change it, into an over-arching theoretical system for *interpreting* that society. The Political Unconscious might thus be said to conceptually inflate Marxism into a *mere* “theory of culture” or a system of interpretation that must take its place among a host of other hermeneutic pretenders on the postmodern scene (Structuralism, Poststructuralism, etc).

“I happen to feel,” writes Jameson in the Preface,

that no interpretation can be effectively disqualified on its own terms by a simple enumeration of inaccuracies or omissions, or by a list of unanswered questions. Interpretation is not an isolated act, but takes place within a Homeric battlefield, on which a host of interpretative options are either openly or implicitly in conflict.³⁵

For Jameson, however, Marxism is *the* master-narrative of Western culture, and therefore it must not be shy of fighting its corner “within a Homeric battlefield” of different interpretative possibilities, particularly in an ideological context perceived to be attempting to steamroll “genuine” history and culture into consumer-induced

oblivion. Yet the very power and urgency with which Jameson makes a case for Marxism as a grand system of interpretation encompassing everything renders him vulnerable to the charge that the Hegelian universalism of The Political Unconscious depoliticizes the classic historic mandates laid down by the founders of Marxism (in Marx's terms, the purpose of intellection being not to interpret, but to change, the world).

However, such the graceful sinuosity of Jameson's prose, and the impassioned erudition that he brings to bear on his readings both of the literary texts of modernism and contemporary literary theory, that it is hard to make any charge of intellectual elitism stick. Marxism should be grateful to have such an Olympian mind and fine writer on its books.

Nevertheless, Jameson's perception of the universal nature of the denaturing consumer capitalist drives underpinning an all-enveloping and claustrophobic postmodern culture is open to question. Such is the intellectual grandeur of The Political Unconscious that one cannot help feeling that in order for it be completely viable as a Marxist theory it requires a more substantive preceding socio-economic analysis of the capitalist present than it gets. What may be true, culturally and politically, for a North America in the grip of advanced consumer capitalism may not necessarily hold for other parts of the globe. The spread of capitalism was (and is) an uneven rather than a globally uniform process. Globalization is feasible at the economic and technological level, but faces greater obstacles in language and cultural production. These facts weaken the case that Jameson makes regarding the contemporary omnipotence of consumer capitalism and its associated ideology: the postmodern. As Anderson notes, a "substantial objection to Jameson's case for a global dominance of the postmodern comes [...] from the lack of full capitalist modernization itself in so many areas of what was once the Third World".³⁶

The lacunae in the Jamesonian theory of the postmodern are reflected in rather hesitant close readings of Conrad's texts. For all Jameson's occasional magisterial insight, his interpretations of Conrad's texts seem on the whole rather cool and carefully detached. It is almost as if Jameson senses his whole theory of the Political Unconscious historically anticipated, so to speak, in Conrad's fiction, and, under these

conditions, some aspects of his writing about it manifest the classic Freudian symptoms of resistance and disavowal.

At certain points, Jameson argues that Conrad's novels demonstrate the workings of Nietzschean hyper-aesthetic distaste (the word he uses is "*ressentiment*") for the modern. This is what Jameson calls the "impressionism" of Conrad's fiction, the "Utopian vocation of Conrad's style" manifest as an "aestheticizing strategy" that "virtually remakes its objects, refracting them through the totalizing medium of a single sense".³⁷

Thus, Jameson's reading of Conrad appears, at first glance, to locate him as an early modernist. As he writes: "Conrad may be best situated historically if we understand his practice of style as a literary and textual equivalent of the impressionist strategy in painting (hence his kinship with the greatest of all literary impressionists, Proust)".³⁸ Although the impressionist strategy "is only one of those structurally available to the modernists", continues Jameson, it is nevertheless "the dominant one for classical modernism".³⁹

In these terms, Conrad's "impressionist" fiction is positioned by Jameson as a conservatively defensive response to the inexorable decay of classic nineteenth century models of realist fiction (the structure of *The Political Unconscious* reflects and reinforces this idea by juxtaposing Conrad's fiction with two chapters analysing the achievements of the less problematically realist fictions of Balzac and Gissing). As Anderson writes, modernism, in Jameson's view, is essentially backward looking, drawing "its purpose and energies from the persistence of what was not yet modern, the legacy of a still pre-industrial world".⁴⁰ If this is the case, then Jameson's reading of Conrad recalls that of Lukács' in the way that it tacitly measures and judges the quality of his work, negatively, against the achievements of the realists. This implicit Jamesonian bias towards realism would appear to contradict the spirit of the earlier statement calling for historical objectivity in relation to any attempt to mediate between modernism and realism ("realism and modernism must be seen as specific and determinate historical expressions of the type of socio-economic structures to which they correspond").

Perhaps sensing this internal contradiction, Jameson seems to pause at one point in his analysis to consider an alternative view of Conrad that qualifies his own overall interpretation of him as an impressionist modernist. "A case could be made for reading Conrad," Jameson writes, "not as an early modernist, but as an anticipation of that later and quite different thing we have come to call variously textuality, *écriture*, post-modernism, or schizophrenic writing".⁴¹ This view of Conrad as a postmodernist *avant la lettre* suggests a writer who, far from retreating into a shell of impressionist purity in a bid to escape from the mediocre torments of an emergent consumer capitalism, consciously confronts that mode of production by transmuting its characteristic languages and discourses into forms of parody and pastiche. However, while Jameson does highlight the importance of a submerged language of pastiche in Lord Jim in particular, the main pressure of his analysis of Conrad is slanted towards viewing him as an inheritor of a Flaubertian intense realism and "will to style". Thus, the perception of Conrad as a critical and self-conscious anticipator of postmodernism remains provisional and is not firmly anchored in Jameson's analysis as a whole.

But if Jameson's basic perspective on Conrad's modernism is a historical one (in that he implicitly sees his fiction as "coming out of" nineteenth century realism), it is striking that his actual analyses of the texts show little inclination to adduce the kinds of social, political and technological contexts that might make them, from a Marxist point of view, intelligible as ideological formations. This is made all the more puzzling by the fact that Jameson himself adumbrates a theory of interpretation in an earlier section of The Political Unconscious, which, nominally at least, emphasizes the need to place literary utterances in an interlocking system of historico-political contexts (the "three horizons" of a truly Marxist interpretation, see below). Having laboured to construct this model of interpretation in the early part of The Political Unconscious it is strange that Jameson sometimes seems less than enthusiastic about rigorously apply it to his own readings of Conrad's work.

Method

Jameson constructs a model for interpreting the modernist texts of Balzac, Gissing and Conrad based on three successive interlocking interpretative horizons comprising a) political history, b) class struggle and c) the mode of production. These three

horizons or frameworks “mark a widening out of the sense of the social ground of the text”. Jameson enumerates these horizons in the following way:

First, of political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time; then of society, in the now already less diachronic sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes; and, ultimately, of history conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production and succession and destiny of the various human social formations, from prehistoric life to whatever future history has in store for us.⁴²

In the first phase of interpretation, then, the “dead matter” of history is laid down, the raw material which serves to launch the text into that sphere in which its dialectical interplay with the social begins to become visible. In the second phase, the horizon opens out to include the whole social order, and the text is “dialectically transformed [...] reconstituted in the form of the great collective and class discourses of which the text is little more than an individual *parole* or utterance”.⁴³ Within this horizon, says Jameson, in a modification of Bakhtin, class discourse is “essentially *dialogical* in its structure”.⁴⁴ In the final horizon, what is essentially at issue is what Jameson refers to as “the *ideology of form*”, or the “coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production”.⁴⁵

Jameson, of course, does not himself deploy this tri-partite method at the level of his reading of *individual* texts. For Jameson, the three horizons constitute a series of phases in the whole grand narrative by which he seeks to capture the *Geist* of modernism as such. However, there seems to me to be no reason why the Jamesonian horizons should not, with the due alteration of detail and emphasis that this requires, be used as a method to interpret individual texts as well. One might argue that, had Jameson himself adopted the three phases or horizons more rigorously in his reading of Conrad, he might not have produced the rather abstract and unhistorical readings of Lord Jim and Nostromo that he does. Also, Jameson’s model of the three horizons seems to me to be an interesting Marxist fulfilment of the methodologically less self-conscious attempts on the part of Hay and Fleishman to offer historicized readings of Conrad cited earlier in the Introduction – and this may be taken as a further warrant of its validity and usefulness. In the final chapter of this dissertation, the Jamesonian method is subsumed into Conrad’s own aesthetic practice by virtue of the inclusion, in

the First Horizon of the chapter on Under Western Eyes, an extended reading of Conrad's great essay on pre-revolutionary Russia, "Autocracy and War". The implication of this move should, by this point, be clear: that, far from being an uncritical and passive instrument of a "Political Unconscious", Conrad actually learns to speak to his readers in increasingly cunning and conscious ways about the history and the politics that his writing embodies.

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CHAPTER ONE – ‘HEART OF DARKNESS’

First Horizon: The Political Context

The historians Roland Oliver and J.D. Fage note that, before 1870, “only a small proportion of the African continent was under European rule”, but that two decades later, “European governments were claiming sovereignty over all but six of some forty political units into which they had then divided the continent”.¹ King Leopold II of Belgium’s annexation of the Congo in the 1880s was one of the factors that helped precipitate what is now referred to as the “Scramble for Africa”, a process that culminated in the dominant European powers gathering at the Berlin Conference of 1885 to divide up a vast African continent among themselves, drawing elegant straight lines across complicated and shifting tribal territorial boundaries. The map that came out of the Conference tragically reduced roughly two thousand polities to approximately forty countries that bore little or no resemblance to the historic boundaries of political influence on the continent.

The Berlin Conference divided up Africa among European powers in order to satisfy the geo-political ambitions of England, Germany and France (that is, to prevent them from engaging in messy wars over it). Leopold II sold the idea of the Congo Free State to the Conference as a zone for “Free Trade” in which the last vestiges of the slave trade were to be eradicated. In reality, Leopold II cunningly used the mutual mistrust of the big colonial powers in order to position himself as the sole economic beneficiary of the Congo. The Congo Free State existed to line the monarchical pockets of Leopold II. What started life on paper as an “ethical” colonial enterprise was to become, in practice, one of the most extraordinary episodes of self-aggrandizement and autocratic organized plunder in modern history.²

In The King Incorporated: Leopold the Second and the Congo (1963), Neal Ascherson argues that the annexation of the Congo by a cash-hungry European monarch effectively inverted the trend of history. By conquering an African territory, Leopold II essentially reversed the victory of the middle class over their kings, thereby marking the resumption of an anachronistic Absolutist project in a context of colonization abroad.

So morally graceless was Leopold II's colonial enterprise in the Congo that only the most ardent Victorian apologists for Imperialism were prepared to defend it. On the other hand, its horrors prompted some notable voices to protest: Roger Casement and Mark Twain among them. Conrad knew Casement personally, having first met him while he was in the Congo. Famously, of course, Conrad was a direct observer of Leopold's Congo before he became an author of it in "Heart of Darkness".³ He was later to refer to the "criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness" he witnessed in the Congo (CL 2, 139).

In "Heart of Darkness", Marlow describes Africa, with a mixture of horror and fascination, as a cultural nothingness, a "blank space" on the map of the world. In fact, the Congo was part of a central African region with a rich history pre-dating Europe's colonial penetration of it. The Congo River Basin was (and is) an area immensely well endowed with natural and mineral resources, and was the site of a range of powerful, sophisticated African States. Flourishing Confederacies such as the Luba, Kongo, Lunda, Bolio and Tio (to mention only a few) had been established in the Congo zone for centuries prior to the advent of Leopold and his death squads.⁴

The historical event that primarily contributed to the undermining of these indigenous State-systems to the point where they were unable to resist external penetration and conquest was the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (spanning a roughly four hundred year period, 1500-1900). Mercenary trade in African labour indirectly created the super-profits that were subsequently to generate a massive global capitalist take-off in the West, but it also laid waste to the social, economic and moral fabric of the African continent, the consequences of which still haunt it to this day. With the official closure of the slave trade frontier in 1807 (when Britain, the main slave trader, banned it), ivory became the West's favoured commodity export from the Congo region. By early 1880, the annual value of ivory trade for London in this area was about three million pounds.⁵

Prior to the advent of Leopold II's colonial regime, trade on the Congo River was in the hands of independent African traders and agents. The heart of the Congo River trade was the market at Stanley Pool, the furthest up-river point that Conrad reached while serving out his contract as a ship's captain for the sinister-sounding "Société

Belge Pour Le Commerce du Haut-Congo". Stanley Pool was a crucial transit point where transportation toward the coast was blocked by a long stretch of Congo rapids. The lower part of the Congo River trade was over-land and was conducted around small ports. Prior to the creation of the Free State of Congo, there was an absence of centralized political control in this area. As the historians of Africa, Phillip Curtin, Leonard Thompson and Jan Vansina note, in their collaborative account, African History (1978), "here [...] the traditional authorities became 'big men' through their dominance over trade".⁶ When colonialism wiped out these traditional authorities, it created a political vacuum in which the uncontrolled genocidal despotism of a Kurtz could easily be envisaged.

Trade on the lower stretches of the Congo tended to be anarchic in character in contrast to the relative stability and calm of the market at Stanley Pool, largely controlled by Tio middlemen. At Stanley Pool, a mature economy had developed around trade, transportation and fishing by the time Leopold II's regime was in place. As Curtin et al write, the "financial structure of exchange was extremely complex, with several currencies in simultaneous use. [...] They were mainly some metal bar or rod, [...] after 1870 [...] brass rods from Europe".⁷ One of the most destructive consequences of Leopold's rule was that it damaged the complex economic and ecological balances in the Congo region. Leopold II's rule effectively turned a self-sustaining economy into a primary-producing branch of a regal-export business in which most meaningful trade and wealth flowed outwards rather than being circulated internally where the people themselves might have been able to benefit from it. This unspoken history of colonial rape is the void into which Marlow drops casually disparaging remarks about the economically meaningless "pieces of brass wire" that have been supplied to his African crew as salary (HD, 104). Marlow's irony glosses over the fact that these pieces of brass wire are actually surviving relics of a once working local economy devastated by colonial super-exploitation.

The Ngala, Tio, Ntomba, Bobangi, and Loi tribes traded in settlements such as Bolobo, Likuba, Bonga, and Irebu throughout the nineteenth century. Curtin et al write that trade in this area helped to foster a process of inter-culturation. There was a common pidgin language, Lingala, and the beginnings of a common culture in the area. "The traders, in short, had created a single culture over a huge area in Equatorial

Africa [...] first in the towns along the river, then spreading inland as well”.⁸ Colonial penetration, because overwhelmingly centred on the needs of commerce, intensified this process of inter-culturation (and presumably class struggle).

Leopold’s aim in the Congo, though, was not to develop a viable trading partnership with its leaders, but to plunder its economic resources as rapidly as possible. Thus, the exploitation of the Congo took place amid unbelievable scenes of mercenary greed and colonial violence. Ascherson refers to Leopold’s Congo as among “the most atrocious and criminal regimes in history”.⁹ The historian Victor Kiernan compares the scale of atrocities committed under the Belgian colonial regime as being on a par with the Nazi holocaust of the Jews in the Second World War.¹⁰

It seems almost inconceivable that atrocities on this scale would not have met with some form of mass resistance. However, it must be remembered that, at the time that Leopold II’s ragtag collection of plutocratic agents arrived in the Congo to “do business” with it, its people were mostly not particularly unified politically or ethnically (partly due to the decentralized organization of indigenous sub-Saharan African States, and partly a negative legacy of the Slave Trade). Also, in Leopold’s militarised administration, they faced an adversary that was both superior to it technologically, and amorally intent on mercenary gain. These factors presumably hampered the possibility of large-scale communal mobilization against a brutal foreign incursion. Nevertheless, as Adam Hoschschild *King Leopold’s Ghost* (1998) shows, Leopold’s colonial subjects did not simply acquiesce to colonial rule.

Another factor to consider is that the history of Leopold II’s Congo to date has largely been written by literate Europeans rather than by the non-literate Africans who lived through it. Given this, it is certainly not impossible that colonial bias simply censored out events reflecting poorly on the military superiority of the Belgians. “Heart of Darkness” guiltily indicates the likelihood that Leopold II’s agents will find it difficult to resist the temptation to censor an abject historical record in the Congo. At the end of the novella, Marlow recounts how he is careful to remove the scrawled confession of genocide from Kurtz’s Report before he hands it over to a Brussels journalist for public circulation.¹¹

Second Horizon: Dialogic Utterance

Given a current literary critical tendency to tout “Heart of Darkness” as modernist tour-de-force and / or iconic text of postmodernism ¹², it is chastening to recall Conrad’s own more modest assessment of his novella as “experience [...] but it is experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case” (HD, xi).

To bring this experiential aspect of “Heart of Darkness” to the fore, it will be helpful to place the novella in its genre. This is essentially a historicizing act, for, as Fredric Jameson writes, genre “allows the coordination of immanent formal analysis of the individual text with the twin diachronic perspective of the history of forms and the evolution of social life”. ¹³

Though “Heart of Darkness” is now widely seen as a narrative that intersects with a variety of contemporary and archaic genres simultaneously, it is also true that several critics have argued that the master-genre of “Heart of Darkness” is the romance. ¹⁴ One of the stylistic features that this genre has retained since its early medieval genesis is the use of narrative frames (and frame-narrators) to mediate a miraculous, bawdy or semi-legendary thematic content (Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales (1387-1394) provides the most celebrated medieval example of this device). In “Heart of Darkness”, the deliberately contemporary and “realistic” frame within which Marlow’s account of his journey to the Congo is held (the group of friends on board the *Nellie* on the Thames) invites the reader to view its content not as fantasy material, but, on the contrary, as historically specific experience (that is, as “experience [...] pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case”).

In The Political Unconscious, Fredric Jameson argues that romance emerged as a genuine contender to an increasingly exhausted realist paradigm in the late nineteenth century:

It is in the context of the gradual reification of realism in late capitalism that romance once again comes to be felt as the place of narrative heterogeneity and of freedom from that reality principle

which a now oppressive realistic representation is now the hostage. Romance now again seems to offer the possibility of sensing other historical rhythms.¹⁵

According to Jameson, the strength of romance rests on the historical persistence within it of a “positional notion of good and evil”. He further suggests that this ethical sub-structure, which critically contests (rather than attempts to “copy”), contemporary reality, is preindividual and communal in origin, stemming from a medieval social context in which “the raw materials of magic and otherness” were still available to romance poets and their audiences.

Jameson writes that romance in its modern form grew out of an essentially Western Judeo-Christian worldview incubated in the “shelter of local fortresses” during the dark days of the Carolignian period as the *chanson de geste*, and then, from the twelfth century onwards, expanded as a “codified ideology” by a post-Carolignian feudal nobility “conscious of itself as a universal class or ‘subject of history’”.¹⁶ Jameson also says that the form really started to develop when it began to “explore substitute codes and raw materials” to fill the vacuum created by the “increasingly secularized and rationalized world” that succeeded feudalism in Western Europe.¹⁷

Jameson argues that there are parallels between the operations of the inner ideology of romance, which he characterizes as “a wish-fulfilment or Utopian fantasy which aims at the transfiguration of the world of everyday life in such a way as to restore the conditions of some lost Eden” and the Marxian theory of history.¹⁸ Romance and Marxism both envision the transmutation of a debased world, the former by acts of magic and divine intervention, and the latter by the agency of revolution.

In sum, romance is not just as a body of aesthetic operations, but is also an epistemology that historically embodies, and is therefore receptive to, what Jameson refers to as “other historical rhythms”. Romance has for this reason become peculiarly relevant in an era of “High Capitalism” in which – in the West, at least – history and culture are seen as being subject to a kind of homogenized processing.¹⁹

In “Heart of Darkness”, Conrad offers the “positional notion of good and evil” as an immediate moral contrast between the warm atmosphere of comradeship and mutual

respect among the former sailors on board the *Nellie*, and the chilly presence of a “monstrous” London, most advanced capitalist city in the world at that point, in the background. This ethical contrast between the concrete social bonds formed by seafaring, and a potential collective alienation figured in London, frames the story-telling performance that Marlow then goes on to provide.

In terms of a strict romance logic, Marlow’s account of his African experience functions to strengthen the “good” pole in this positional ethical contrast (that is, the act of story telling reinforces the bond of comradeship between the ex-sailors on board the *Nellie*). However, the epistemological terms that are generated by the enforcement of this rule of romance (that good must overcome evil) prove to be extremely ambiguous.

In an essay entitled “Marxism and Ideology: Joseph Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness’” (1987), Steve Smith argues that “Heart of Darkness” demonstrates the epistemological limitations of a late nineteenth century English colonial mind-set. For Smith, the account that Marlow offers of his Congo experience discloses an “inability to think historically” evident in “a tendency to regard the material world not as an ongoing product of human activity [...] but as merely a modulation of timeless structures, of a pre-given pattern”.²⁰ Marlow is an unreliable narrator because he lacks “any effective grasp of the real (primarily economic) conditions” in Africa.²¹

Smith makes an important point about “Heart of Darkness” that links with the remarks offered here about romance as a system for registering “other historical rhythms”. “The text does not *reflect* reality,” he writes, “rather we can trace the effects of that reality in what is *not* reflected; in what the text cannot say”.²² It is not that history is absent in “Heart of Darkness”; on the contrary, history is exactly manifest in the desire to evade it.

What this suggests is that the “experience” that Conrad refers to as the basis of “Heart of Darkness” becomes locatable once the paradox is accepted that the only thing that is not romantic about the novella is Marlow himself. The story Marlow tells has a moral intention, but the reader can only apprehend this once he accepts that the storyteller himself is not moral. Marlow, as Smith notes, is not a “good” dialogic

messenger; rather, his utterance, driven by a terrified perception of a range of “hearts of darkness”, is imbued with classic Freudian lapses, recurrent moments of concealment, evasion, and disavowal. Marlow’s sonorous voice, ringing out into the night air of the Thames, provides the friends on the *Nellie* with a mode of access to “other historical rhythms”, to the real (and dream) worlds of Africa. But its means of conveying these historical rhythms is deception.

To illustrate this, here is an early scene in which Marlow describes his encounter with two female secretaries at the offices of the Company in Brussels:

In the outer room the two women knitted feverishly. People were arriving, and the younger one was walking back and forth introducing them. The old one sat on her chair. Her flat cloth slippers were propped up on a foot-warmer, and a cat reposed on her lap. She wore a starched white affair on her head, had a wart on her cheek, and silver-rimmed spectacles hung on the tip of her nose. She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me. Two youths with foolish and cheery countenances were being piloted over, and she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. *Ave! Old knitter of black wool. Morturi te salutant.* Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again – not half, by a long way. (HD, 56-7)

There is, quite clearly, a masculine confidence about Marlow’s language here. The image of the Brussels secretaries is designed to foreshadow the ghastly, furtive nature of the whole Congo mission upon which Marlow is about to embark.

At the same time, it is hard not to find something slightly unseemly about the showy self-regarding nature of Marlow’s satire here, given the knowledge of the kinds of abuses that his subsequent account lays bare. His use of a Virgilian metaphor, which offers the secretaries as versions of the Fates, is surely not as funny as Marlow’s tone suggests it should be. The reader is uneasily aware that this image encloses the moral criticism of the Congo enterprise conveyed in a prestigious epic typology that presumably also functions to ideologically recuperate Western Europe’s historic mission to colonize the non-Western world in a “sophisticated” and “literary” allusive language.²³ This image seems to anticipatorily detract from the “unspeakable” horrors

that Marlow's account will suggestively depict later on. It also functions to degrade the notion of women-that-work. In sum, a highly wrought aesthetic subtext not only deconstructs a surface language of semi-political satire, but also confesses Marlow's overpowering need to reconstruct the Western Imperial "idea" in more favourable terms than the reality of the modern Congo experience will allow.²⁴

If the account of the dreary Brussels secretaries is brilliantly, though equivocally, satirical, the later account of the African woman who is reputed to be Kurtz's mistress (or concubine) is the opposite – very awkward and uncertain:

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (HD, 135-6)

Not much classical erudition here. Indeed, so gushingly romantic is some of Marlow's language at this point that one has almost to pinch oneself to remind oneself that he is not attempting a poor parody of Rider Haggard. But, precisely because Marlow's language here touches unexpected heights of "bad" baroque intensity it must be paid attention to as a potential site of genuine historical production (in Smith's terms: the reader must detect a suppressed history in the *effects* of what Marlow is saying at this point). Marlow's impoverished sub-Haggard romantic style here is, in other words, a deliberate ruse, part of an attempt to distract his listeners / readers from a political content that can no longer be unproblematically smuggled away from view by dint of invocations of Virgil and the prestige and historic depth of the Imperial idea in the Western literary canon.

Kurtz's African woman has Marlow's prose shaking at the knees. Perhaps this is because the African woman is not actually as straightforwardly a "victim" of Leopold

II's grubby operation as, say, the cannibal crew that Marlow (mostly) describes with demeaning parodic ease. These colonial subjects present less of a challenge to Marlow's satiric displacements because they are under his personal authority on the boat he runs on behalf of Leopold II (this enables him sentimentally to appropriate them as loyal and / or good-for-nothing "natives" without affecting his "moral" critique of the Congo operation one way or the other). The African woman, on the other hand, as landlubber, woman, and (above all) possible sexual partner of the awful but ineluctably fascinating Kurtz, is altogether a baffling mystery to Marlow.

Judging by the hyperbolic nature of his prose at this point, Marlow seems to be confused by the fact that Kurtz's African woman, striding down the River Congo, behaves with such purpose and confidence in an outdoor, day-lit environment. The other women in his account tend to inhabit those safe and murky indoor realms that Victorian culture thought appropriate for the "fair" but also "weaker" sex (even if some of them, like the "excellent" Brussels Aunt, are beginning, within those domestic confines, to display a disquietingly unladylike interest in newspapers and politics). The fact that the African woman is seemingly at ease (and even commanding) in a public, collective context appears to make her an enigma to a Marlow that insists that women "live in a world of their own" and are "out of touch with the truth" (HD, 21).

Perhaps it is Marlow that it is "out of touch with the truth". While the division of labour in traditional African societies mostly relegated women to menial roles, they nonetheless played a surprisingly prominent role in the first phase of organized collective resistance to European colonial rule. Nzinga of Angola (c. 1581-1663), Nongqawuse of the Xhosas in the nineteenth century, and Dona Beatrice of the Congo were among a number of charismatic millenarian female leaders in the early stages of anti-colonial struggle in Africa.

It will be argued below that there are close parallels between this account of Kurtz's African woman in "Heart of Darkness" and extant accounts of the prophetess figure in early Kongo history known as Dona Beatrice. These links will make it possible to locate the highly problematic account of the African woman as an example of a

history that the text cannot speak directly (Smith) or (in Jameson's terms) a mode of access to history's cross-rhythms.

A Makongo aristocrat, Dona Beatrice (c.1682-1706), whose non-Occidental name was Kimpa Vita, was the founder of the "Anthonian Heresy" in the early seventeenth century. This was a millenarian, proto-nationalist mass movement, based on an ideology of anti-colonial resistance that fused traditional African and Christian beliefs. Anthonianism arose at the beginning of the seventeenth century to fill the political vacuum that had been left by the Kongo crisis, the latter having been created by, on the one hand, the internal fractures of the State, and, on the other, by the effects of trade wars between Portugal and Holland.

Beatrice challenged the hegemony of Portuguese Christian missionary groups on many levels. She argued that St. Anthony had appeared to her in a dream as one of her brothers; she challenged the Madonna cult by claiming to have fallen pregnant while still a virgin; and she proposed a revisionist version of the Final Judgement in which an African Christ would appear to lead his oppressed brothers and sisters to earthly peace and salvation. In addition to all of this, she advocated that Christianity should be modified in order to permit polygamy.

Beatrice was arrested by the Portuguese and eventually burned at the stake for heresy in 1706. However, "her discourse was not only driven against the Portuguese missionaries, but also against witchery and its fetishist and traditional practice".²⁵ At the same time, the Anthonian cult generated around Beatrice in some ways anticipated the anti-colonial ideologies of the late nineteenth- and twentieth centuries. As David Sweetman writes, "the central part of her beliefs would be described today as *negritude* or black consciousness, the value of African experience".²⁶

A Portuguese priest called Laurent de Lucques befriended Beatrice shortly before she died, leaving a fairly detailed account of this remarkable figure. Some aspects of his description bear resemblances to Marlow's account of Kurtz's African woman in "Heart of Darkness". A brief extract from du Lucques' account will be offered here, and this will then be compared with the account of the African woman that Conrad provides in his text:

The young woman was about twenty-two years old. She was rather slender and fine-featured. Externally, she appeared very devout. She spoke with gravity and seemed to weigh each word. She foretold the future and predicted, among other things, that the day of Judgement was near.²⁷

In "Heart of Darkness", Marlow's remark that there is "something ominous and stately in [Kurtz's African woman's] deliberate progress" down the river bank in full view of the whites echoes the deliberateness which de Lucques observes in Beatrice's utterance, the "gravity" with which she "seemed to weigh each word" In Beatrice, this earnestness is connected with a millenarian certainty: that "the day of Judgement was near" and that white colonial rule in the Kongo will one day come to an end. Similarly, in "Heart of Darkness", Kurtz's African woman's deliberate progress down the river (and towards the awe-struck whites) culminates in an apocalyptic gesture: "suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them rigid above her head, as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky" (HD, 136). Such is the power of this display, that, in Marlow's recounting of it, nature itself seems to quiver in harmonious millenarian response to Kurtz's African woman's pointed yearning for a sense of space and freedom that the constrictions of earthly life under Kurtz's despotic rule preclude ("the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around the river, gathering the steamer in a shadowy embrace" (HD, 136)).

Additional similarities between du Lucques' account of Beatrice and Marlow's description of Kurtz's African woman may also be discerned. For instance, du Lucques' account of Beatrice stresses her steady resolution and quiet courage in the face of white colonial authority. Perhaps the somewhat martial and war-like iconography attributed to the dress mode of Kurtz's African woman (her hair "done in the shape of a helmet" and her "brass leggings to the knee") signify an awareness of the personal courage and resolution of the woman that Marlow is able to articulate only in an oblique, imagistic fashion. Also, the hyperbole of the innumerable "charms, gifts of witch-men" with which Kurtz's African woman is garlanded may perhaps be decoded as a parody of those symbols of African traditionalist fetishism that are so often used in white racist iconography to illustrate the heathen backwardness of the African races. This could link her, again obliquely, with the radical anti-traditionalist African Christianity of a figure such as Dona Beatrice. Such a reading might be seen as receiving additional support from the fact that the African fetish symbols are

ironically juxtaposed with the fetish symbol of godless colonial-capitalism, the explicit physical burden of the ivory ("the value of several elephant tusks") that weighs Kurtz's woman down.

Kurtz's African woman is also described in a language that links her, metaphorically, with the majestic River Congo itself, one of the orchestrating symbols of his whole account of Africa as ominous threat in "Heart of Darkness". In Marlow's description of his departure from Kurtz's Inner Station, he recounts the company boat progressing slowly down the river with a sick and dying Kurtz on board. Kurtz's African woman is then reported as running, in unstately fashion, towards the edge of the stream to shout out something that neither Marlow nor, apparently, Kurtz are able to understand (though the latter is perhaps simply too ill, at this stage, to respond). On one level, this recounting of a failed attempt at cross-racial dialogue at the river's edge merely reconfirms the trite romantic image of Kurtz's African woman as an attractive but not-to-be-trusted Other. But at the same time this racist trope is relegated to relative insignificance by the fact the crowd of Africans assembled to see Kurtz leave the station does appear to understand what is merely garbled nonsense to the narrator, and, more worryingly still, seems galvanized into powerful collective anger by it – "that wild mob took up the shout in a roaring chorus of articulated, rapid, breathless utterance" (HD, 151).

This episode suggests Kurtz's African woman, not simply as a biological enigma, but as an exponent of an emergently articulate collective "voice" with a potential to unify the exploited Africans along the main artery of colonial trade, the river. A sense of Kurtz's woman as a potent political voice surfaces again in the retelling of the visit to Kurtz's Belgian fiancée, the Intended, which marks the end of Marlow's story of Africa. The penitential atmosphere that Marlow generates around this final encounter with the mournful, cultivated figure of the Intended partly functions to smother his memory of the mysterious vibrancy of Kurtz's African woman, but it cannot entirely obviate a suggestion of her residual power in the image of her "stretching brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness" (HD, 160). This semi-hallucinatory image of Kurtz's woman as a kind of figure embodying all the mysterious threats that have accreted around the river reduces the Intended's role to that of a passive recipient of Marlow's guilty lies.

This final scene provides an ironic spectacle of Marlow desperately attempting to reconstitute the romance code as a viable narrative ideology. The attempt to construct a positional contrast between Kurtz's African woman (bad) and the chaste West European fiancée, the Intended (good), is clearly designed to resurrect a morally absolutist framework which Marlow's preceding account of his own ambivalent relationship with Africa and Kurtz has done much to erode. In one sense, this act of reconstitution is successful: Marlow provisionally affirms the Intended's rights over the memory of Kurtz by telling her a lie about Kurtz's final words and keeping the monstrous truth about his experience of Africa from her. Yet, at the same time, this lie undermines the whole notion of Africa and Imperialism as romance and thus also throws doubt, radically, on the viability of the whole romantic enterprise of keeping the awful truth about Kurtz and Africa at bay.

This, then, is the psycho-political charge that the image of Kurtz's African woman carries by the end of the novella. Through the course of Marlow's account, the image of Kurtz's African woman gathers layers of threatening political and psychological implications (both for Marlow, and, by implication, his auditors). By the end of the text, she does not simply evoke ancient white fears and secret desires about "dark women", she is also connected with a political possibility that is threatening to European colonial order and its discourses.

As noted above, the imagery associated with the African woman is sometimes tacitly linked with the River Congo in Marlow's story of Africa. Historically, the River Congo was the main artery of trade, and thus colonial exploitation, in this region. As was noted in the First Horizon of this chapter, the River Congo was also a key locus of inter-culturation, mercantile dynamism and class struggle in Central West Africa. Given such a situation, the possibility that a viable anti-colonialist ideology (such as Beatrice's radical interpretation of Christianity) might succeed in overcoming the ethnic divisions and bringing together and harnessing the collective energies of the various disconnected exploited tribes and groups along the river presumably represented a danger to the authority of white colonial rule at the time. In Marlow's account of Kurtz's African woman (which, as I have argued, resonates suggestively with accounts of the actual existing historical figure of Dona Beatrice) there is a dramatic fictional evidence of this historic threat. The African-woman-as-threat in

Marlow's account can be decoded in terms of the danger that the dissemination of a viable millenarian discourse (such as had occurred in the seventeenth century with Dona Beatrice) might represent to the stability and continuity of the European political presence in this region of Africa.

The specific sense of threat that Kurtz's African woman represents can be broadened into a sense of the way that the text acknowledges threats to the authority of colonial language generally. As Marlow's account of his journey to Kurtz progresses, it confesses an increasingly uneasy awareness of its inability to make sense of arcane and protean human *paroles* threatening to invade his (colonial) language and distort its functionality. Marlow's romantic evocations of the eerie stillness and silent depths of the sublime African river are continually punctuated by enervating hints that the sounds of human life that emanate from the forests fringing the river's edge may not be decipherable to visitors who come bearing guns, steam-boats and acquisitive intentions. By the time Marlow recounts an attack on the boat that he is commandeering, what might, in a Haggard-type paradigm, have been a jolly skirmish with skittish, but ultimately conquerable, natives turns out to be an anxious and fearful meditation on the nature of human communication. The menace represented by Africans insolent enough to consider confronting the Good Ship Colonialism with militant intentions backed by a capacity for organized violence is offered as a metaphor of the colonial mind's failure to incorporate and apprehend the discordant music of a culture thrown back on its last resources by a brutal invading force. In Marlow's words, the attack is accompanied by "a muffled rattle, a cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation, soared slowly in the opaque air. [...] A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears" (HD, 101-2).

Marlow recounts his attempts to silence this awful discordant language with the shrill peremptory music of colonial command. "With one hand I felt above my head for the line of the steam-whistle, and jerked out screech after screech hurriedly" (HD, 112). The shrill blasts of the boat's steam whistle (metonym of the industrial-technological power of colonial Europe) scatter the invading force, but Marlow's account remains aware that this thin noise provides no more than a backing note to the enigmatic and vibrant music of African collective might, the complex "savage discord" welling up around capital's penetration of the dark continent.

Marlow's account continually privileges Kurtz as a great speaker of the language so as to push the discordant melody of African pain and anger, emerging from the River's hinterlands, towards the margins of his account. "The man presented himself as a voice" (HD, 113); "Kurtz had been essentially a great musician," (HD, 153). Marlow never gets around to actually admitting that there may be a functional connection between these "savage discords" and the savage behaviour of the likes of Kurtz towards Africans, but there is perhaps an implication of such an insight in the progressive decay of his own *parole* as it becomes more fixated with the notion of Kurtz as a masterly talker. "I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but discoursing" (HD, 113); "I was cut to the quick at the idea of having lost the inestimable privilege of listening to the gifted Kurtz" (HD, 114). "And I heard – him – it – this voice – other voices – all of them were so little more than voices" (HD, 115).

At the same time, Marlow's account does edge towards a more doubt-laden, ambivalent and polyphonic style. For instance, the account of a chance discovery of a sea manual in a clearing near the river's edge becomes an occasion for a re-imagining of an alternative African narrative.

This book is characterized by its doubleness, its fluid indefinition. It is written in English, yet it is found in a Belgian colony, and belongs to a poor Russian who resembles a harlequin (his carnivalesque appearance a condensation of Marlow's language's unconscious desire to emulate a more open and polyphonic style). There is a refreshing simplicity about the book, "a singleness of intention, a honest concern for the right way of going to work", yet it is also "dreary" and even "repulsive" in its pedantic thoroughness (HD, 99). It is a very solid book about a solid subject, but it is literally falling to pieces, its covers "stitched afresh with white cotton thread" (HD, 99). The book also contains indecipherable pencilled notes in the margins (they are perhaps in Russian or perhaps in cipher, Marlow is not sure), and these opaque annotations subversively parody the practical clarity of the main text.

Writing of this moment in the text, Homi Bhaba characterizes the manual as an "insignia of colonial authority" that tries to keep a postcolonial hybridity at bay.²⁸ The account of the discovery of the manual is, according to Bhaba, a construction of

postcolonial “in-betweenness”, configured both in the ambiguous nature of the book and the situation in which it is found – the riverbank, a hybrid point of connection between the fluidity of the river and the hardness of the land. For Bhaba, postcolonial possibilities emerge at an “interstitial space” where “the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the other* properly alienates our expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics”.²⁹

The owner of this book of in-betweenness is, as Marlow discovers, a strange youthful Russian figure, apparently a disciple of the terrible Kurtz. There is thus an in-betweenness (and a specifically *European* in-betweenness) about the one who reads the book, not just the book itself. In this sense, the epiphany of the book in the African bush both anticipates the great book about Russia that is still to come, Under Western Eyes, with its dark carnivalesque undercurrents; and stands as an example of what Edward Said calls the eruption into presence of a potential postcolonial reality in Conrad’s texts (see below).

In sum, because the story of Kurtz discloses the nature of the colonial relationship between Africa and Europe at its most nakedly horrific, Marlow’s enunciation of it becomes, *willy nilly*, a yearning for something that does not overtly undermine his romantic-idealist assumptions about the rightness of the whole European colonial mission in Africa. For this reason, his story ends up, if not emulating, then at least glancing wistfully side-ways at, the polyphonic “savage discords” it also knows it must hold at arm’s length.³⁰ Eloise Knapp Hay remarks, “when Marlow chooses the nightmare dominated by Kurtz in preference to the nightmare of the inferior traders, he gravitates to the pole of his own values”.³¹ In fact, it may be more accurate to say that when Marlow chooses the nightmare dominated by Kurtz, he unconsciously chooses a language-world he secretly wishes would displace his own.³²

Third Horizon: Ideology of Form

Africa has for many centuries been viewed by a rational-minded Western Europe as a romantically fascinating place of darkness, evil and pestilence. In Shakespeare’s Othello, the hero entertains Desdemona with lurid tales about his homeland: “of the

cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi, and the men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders".³³

Famously, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe argues that "Heart of Darkness" confirms this age-old Eurocentric image of Africa. Conrad, he writes, "projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality".³⁴ For Achebe, Conrad is a "bloody racist" and a "purveyor of comforting myths" about Africa and Africans.³⁵

Patrick Brantlinger and Cedric Watts, *inter alia*, have since questioned Achebe's interpretation of "Heart of Darkness" as a racist text.³⁶ Yet surely these nervous defences of "Heart of Darkness" merely repeat and therefore confirm the defensive colonial superiority that characterizes the ideological surface of Marlow's story. In responding to "Heart of Darkness", Achebe necessarily writes as an African confronting a (canonical) European language. As such, he cannot but be conscious of confronting a colonizing tongue, an historic instrument of power and control, at its most sophisticated and "literary". Brantlinger and Watts' failure to recognize this underlying dynamic in Achebe's piece seems not so much churlish, as insensitive to the deep-lying issues of race and identity that the language of the text brings to the fore.

Achebe's article on "Heart of Darkness" is part of a wider process whereby readers and critics from the erstwhile outlying hinterlands of a global Imperialist system (what is today known as the "Third World") begin to "write back" to Conrad's novels, often in terms of their own experience of European colonialism. Not all readers have been as sternly critical in their judgement of Conrad's writings as Achebe is of "Heart of Darkness". For example, Benita Parry argues that Conrad's writings reveal "the disjunctions between high-sounding rhetoric and sordid ambitions [...] of a civilization dedicated to global [...] hegemony".³⁷ Similarly, Edward Said, while not seeking to deny the importance of Achebe's critical awareness of Conrad's writing as a locus of racially demeaning discourse, also views Conrad as a figure sensitive to issues of national and racial difference. "Conrad [...] had an extraordinarily persistent

residual sense of his own exilic marginality,” writes Said, “never the [...] fully acculturated Englishman [he] preserved an ironic distance in each of his works”.³⁸

Reflecting its author’s “exilic marginality”, Conrad’s fiction embodies the contradictions of the colonial world in an unsettlingly fractured and ambivalent language. This is especially true of “Heart of Darkness”, writes Said. “By accentuating the discrepancy between the official ‘idea’ of empire and the remarkably disorienting actuality, Marlow unsettles the reader’s sense not only of the very idea of empire but of something more basic, reality itself”.³⁹ Thus, “Heart of Darkness” exposes Western Imperialism as a system that has “monopolized the entire system of representation”.⁴⁰ Yet, in order to establish a cultural monopoly, it is necessary to first acknowledge, and self-incorporate as a repressed antithesis, that which is being monopolized. Said is, in this sense, quite right to note that “Heart of Darkness” “encourages us to sense if not the actuality, then the potential of a reality that has remained inaccessible to imperialism and which in the post colonial world has erupted into presence”.⁴¹

Said’s analysis situates “Heart of Darkness” as a text that dialogically addresses world culture *because*, rather than (as Brantlinger and Watts imply) in spite of the fact that, it is imbued with a heteroglossia of European supremacy and racism. It is precisely for the reason that Marlow is unconditionally convinced that, as a speaker of the English language, he is naturally superior to speakers of other languages, that his voice exposes the depth of his culture’s unconscious dependence on irrational racial myths and supremacist ideologies. If this is true, then its corollary must also be accepted: namely, that the process whereby Marlow conjures into ghostly existence the languages, histories and cultural forms of those societies he deems to be inferior to his own must be both unavoidable and highly risky to the colonial ego. As Paul Armstrong argues, the reason that critics have had such difficulty in deciding where “Heart of Darkness” stands in the whole political debate about colonialism is that its inner structure embodies both sides of the argument. Armstrong writes: “The novella has received such divergent responses, I think, because its enactment of the dilemmas entailed in understanding cultural otherness is inherently double and strategically ambiguous”.⁴²

At the same time, the strategic ambiguities embedded in the language of "Heart of Darkness" must ultimately be related back to a motivating political context. "Heart of Darkness" belongs to the late nineteenth century, a time when Europe formally conquered the whole of Africa even though it presented little overt military, economic or political threat to its industrialized might. Europe has since displayed almost no interest in attempting to establish a viable industrial economy on the African continent (there are a few notable exceptions to this rule). This is in spite of the fact that Africa, with its great rivers, long straight coastlines, broad open plains and abundant mineral resources, is actually more geographically congenial to large-scale capitalist production than many parts of Europe where it was developed. Leopold's regime in the Congo encapsulates the whole modern European attitude to Africa: as a site of smash-and-grab economics. Given this entrenched historico-political aspect of Afro-European relations, it is possible to locate the late nineteenth century image of Africa as a "heart of darkness" as a mythic mechanism for reinforcing Europe's age-old desire to keep Africa at a distance: maintaining its romantic-gothic "mystery" served to perpetuate its technical stagnation and economic under-development.

Yet perhaps Achebe's analysis of "Heart of Darkness" as an image of Africa as an "antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization" is also in danger of missing the point about the ideology of racism in the text.⁴³ For, as the Second Horizon of this chapter tried to demonstrate, the dialogism of the novella actually turns inside out the ideology of the romance mode, historic form of Europe's sense of Africa as ineffable Other. Marlow's romantic determination to keep faith with a childhood fantasy of Africa as one of the unexplored and uncharted regions of the human imagination is finally reduced to a phoney fiction uttered in a middle class apartment in Brussels. Nothing, it would seem, could be more ironically devastating towards the romance (and the ideology of colonial conquest of which it is supportive) than that.

But in fact the romance continues to emit its ideological messages even (or perhaps especially) when it has been the recipient of stern ideological blows. That said, these messages are unavoidably distorted and reconfigured in the process of this discrediting. The romance system in "Heart of Darkness" functions as a deeply ironic exposure of the way that the colonial West's embrace of industrial capitalism promoted, and was inextricably linked with, an incurable romantic *Weltschmerz*, an

unappeasable yearning for the drama, movement and colour perceived to be still vivid and alive in the societies of Africa. Such a romantic meaning would seem to confess a multitude of historic sins, and it is perhaps worth recalling that the West's whole capitalist take-off began in Africa with the super-profits reaped from the enormously destructive event of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

At any rate, it is on these historically specific terms that Marlow's impressionistic story telling style – its romantic intensity – can be grasped, in Jamesonian fashion, as an authentic “socially symbolic act” in its own right.⁴⁴ The striking visual symbols of African social reality that Marlow's story makes available to auditors and readers are in this sense comprehensible as Flaubertian attempts to recover a sense of sensory immediacy and enchantment in relation to an object-world that a capitalist West was intent on treating as sheer matter to package and merchandize. The symbolic evocation of the huge and languid River Congo, the images of upturned railway carriages in the wilderness, the macabre spectacles such as the skulls on the poles around Kurtz's house, the French ship arbitrarily firing missiles towards the shore: indeed, the whole richly suggestive mosaic of images for which “Heart of Darkness” is justly famous may in this sense be apprehended as a desperate attempt to signify Africa, as a potential site of value, via a visual *overdetermination* of textual material associated with it. Notably, these are images of capitalist-industrial waste that are turned into impressionist-aesthetic condensations, a process precisely confirming the terms of the West's refusal to engage with Africa as a viable economic entity. This “pastoral” determination of Africa via a pseudo “aesthetic” of sheer visuality conceals a dynamic deeply embedded in the modern Western psyche – a European “heart of darkness”.⁴⁵

What all of this helps to underline is that, if the text is the product of the synthesis of two distinct modes of production (European industrialism, African communal-agrarianism), the version that readers unconsciously tend to focus on is the one that, as they understand it, helps to reflect the primacy of their own (even if takes the form of an embattled rear-guard action against post-colonial readings of the text, as in the case of Brantlinger et al). To this extent, Achebe's analysis is a chastening reminder to the Western reader that he has no monopoly over the meaning of the text. Achebe is right when he suggests that whenever Marlow attempts to signify African social

experience, his discourse clearly shows, in its tendency to erupt into outright bombast and melodrama, the pressures of colonial guilt and anxiety welling up within it. As Benita Parry suggests, Conrad's text maps "the landscape of the Imperial mind".⁴⁶ Yet, also, it is precisely these moments of declamatory aridity in the text that should alert us to what Said refers to as "the potential of a reality that has remained inaccessible to imperialism and which in the post colonial world has erupted into presence". Listening carefully, one can hear, beneath Marlow's curtly dismissive descriptions of "native society", the clamour of other voices, the muffled heteroglossia of other stories and histories, pressing through the resistant, crusty colonial surface of the prose.

In Nostromo, Conrad's next major piece of writing, romantic perspectives are less obtrusive and dominant (though not absent), and, conversely, polyphony and heteroglossia push more persistently towards the foreground of the narrative. It is as if Conrad, after "Heart of Darkness" and Lord Jim seems to lose some interest in the romance mode; or, at least, insofar as he retains a predilection for working within its paradigm, he clearly attempts to fuse it with other more experimental, and more open novelistic forms. Part of this has to do with the fact that Conrad's next three major works move away from the exotic "global peripheries" (the Malay archipelago, Africa) that have formed the spatial and ideological terrain of most of his fiction hitherto to allow him to begin his slow, insistent spiralling in on Europe that culminates in the political masterpieces of The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes.

"Heart of Darkness" suggests its loss in faith in the romance by offering an ending that seems almost to express its depletion of ideological resources and descriptive energy. Marlow's story-telling act literally runs out of language, it fades back into the darkness of the Thames night which formed the atmospheric setting of its beginning. The suggestion contained in this gradual fade-out is that the unresolved inner dynamics of a story about Africa ending bathetically on a private boat on the Thames will one day have to be faced by Western culture outside the secluded realms of story-telling and fiction: that is, in history. As Benita Parry suggests, "it is finally by denying [Africans] the faculty of 'human' speech that Marlow delineates his cognition of the real and unbridgeable gulf" within his own descriptive language".⁴⁷ Marlow's tormented inability to locate an authentic inner voice of Africa in his story

of the Congo dramatizes an Imperial mind being overpowered by a history of shame in connection with the continent. The deathbed cry of Kurtz – “the horror! The horror!” – has been interpreted by some critics as a philosophical leit motif. In fact, it bespeaks little more than the West’s sad, impotent desire to be delivered from a terrifying political legacy that it itself has created.

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CHAPTER TWO - NOSTROMO

First Horizon: Political Context

Nostromo evokes a South American region, which, as the historian Eric Hobsbawm notes, is “a laboratory of historical change, mostly different from what might have been expected, a continent made to undermine conventional truths”.¹

The New World was conquered by Europe’s first Absolutist power, Spain. The union in 1469 of two feudal provinces, Isabella I’s Castille and Ferdinand II’s Aragon, created the political synthesis that inaugurated this phase of colonial expansion. Militarily, the precondition of the conquest of the Americas was Spain’s elimination of the threat posed to Christian Europe by the Moorish and Islamic societies that had been a harassing presence on its Southern fringe for a century and more. Isabella’s Confessor, Cisneros, distinguished himself in the military campaigns against the infidel Turks and Moslems.

Thus, the phase of history at the end of the fifteenth century, in which Europe had already started to move outwards to explore the West African coastline for new trade routes to the East, also propelled Spain across the Atlantic Ocean. In this, economic motives were never wholly absent, but they were always justified and, for a period, even superseded, by a medieval discourse of religious salvation.

The Spanish Empire was unlike the British Empire that replaced it insofar as it took seriously its explicit mission to save souls from the heathen religions. Spain’s successful removal of the heathen threat of the Moors provided it with the moral impetus for the founding of a New World in the Americas. In fact, Isabella’s Castilian State had directly confronted Moorish Grenada until 1492, the date which marks the discovery of the Americas by Columbus and the take-off of Spain’s whole Imperialist project.

The historian Richard Morse has highlighted the ambivalent nature of Spain’s ideology of colonial conquest, which, as he notes, was both medievalist and Renaissance-inspired, simultaneously Thomistic and Machiavellian, in its cast. As

Morse writes "Spanish conquistadors, colonizers and catechizers [...] carried with them to American shores this dual heritage".² The relatively open, undefined character of Spain's conquest ideology enabled the Hispanic Empire to adapt to an American political geography that was itself vast and diverse. Morse notes that the "heterogeneous Spanish American realm was for three centuries relatively free from civil strife and separatist outbreaks".³

It was only when the Cortes voted to reduce Spanish America from vice-regal to colonial status in the early nineteenth century that the Hispanic Empire in the Americas began to crumble. This disintegration had dramatic and far-reaching results. As Morse argues, once the whole hierarchical Thomistic principle of Spanish colonial government was disestablished in 1809 "Spanish America's centrifugal separation was for the first time unleashed".⁴

The rupture with the hitherto dominant "Thomist" pole of the Spanish colonial ideology released the repressed energies associated with the hitherto dormant "Machiavellian" pole.

The anti-colonial Latin American independence movements that emerged in the early part of the nineteenth century were largely successful in overthrowing Hispanic rule, but only at the cost of fomenting a continent-wide political instability and mercenary violence. As Morse writes, the breakdown of Hispanic colonial institutions created a political void in Latin America: "Only the somewhat arbitrary boundaries of colonial administration defined the new nations territorially. Only virulent sectionalism could define them operatively. The Church, once coterminous with the State, had become the intruding handmaiden of a hostile sovereign power".⁵

The figure of the *caudillo*, that personalist, charismatic Latin American "strong man" leader, stepped into the void created by the withdrawal of formal Spanish control in the nineteenth century. Only a handful of South Americans intellectuals and political figures in the nineteenth century thought that a constitutionalist path of development was possible for postcolonial South American states – Rivadavia of Argentina was one – and these were, as Morse remarks, "swept away before winds of personalism".⁶ Over the years, *caudillismo* (basically a form of strong-arm dictatorship) was to prove

a persistent – and some would argue effective – political solution to the problem of endemic social instability in post-colonial South America. The names of Quiroja, Artigas, Rosas, Pancho Villa, Bolívar, and Santa Cruz furnish no more than a partial and incomplete list of successful South American *caudillos* in the post-Hispanic phase of Latin American history.

The dynamics that produced the “strong man” of South American politics were not far removed from those that produced bandits.⁷ *Caudillismo* in South American politics presupposed an impoverished and illiterate peasant majority that could be manipulated from above. So, for that matter, had Spanish colonial rule.

The key to the rise of *caudillos* was a political geography congenial to their operation. The vast empty *llanos*, or inland plains, and the harsh, anti-human South American mountain ranges made sovereign, constitutional political control over large areas very difficult. The continent’s geography seemed almost to encourage a post-colonial politics of separatist dictatorship, based around capturing and holding onto small coastal enclaves often separated from the mainland by rugged mountain ranges. (This is precisely what *Nostromo* dramatizes. The novel’s tracing of the formation of the Occidental Republic of Sulaco reflects a classic political paradigm of post-colonial Latin American society.) However, the early political manifestations of *caudillismo* were by no means undifferentiated. There was the Bolivarian version of it as a federation of South American states, the constitutionalism of Mexico’s Juárez, the quasi-theocracy of Ecuador’s García Moreno, and so on.

With intensifying neo-colonial exploitation of South America’s mineral wealth in the late nineteenth century (the main beneficiaries were the British and the USA), the role of the *caudillo* underwent a significant shift.⁸ The rise in direct foreign investment in South America forced *caudillismo* to become less rigidly dependent on *force majeure* and personalist charisma as the key instruments for maintaining political authority. These remained important factors of *caudillo* rule; but the influx of industrial capital in search of gold and silver also made the ability to claim, or reject, the material backing of the wealthy *gringo* nations to the north more decisive insignias of political power.

For example, in Argentina, the influx of foreign capital, combined with a large permanent immigrant population, led to the creation of a political system that in many respects approximated a Western democratic liberal one. Its legislators passed a Western bourgeois constitution in 1853, and it developed – in its cities, at least – a standard of social life resembling that of Western Europe and the USA. However, Argentina's highly diluted version of *caudillismo* was the exception rather than the rule of Latin American politics, and was anyway largely an accidental outcome of its having an unusually sizeable “white” – that is, non-Indian, and non-ex-African – urban population. When the accession of the demagogic Péron ended its liberal-democratic honeymoon in the twentieth century, normal-style Latin American politics resumed its hold over Argentina.

At the other end of the spectrum, neo-colonial capital's intensified interest in Latin America in the nineteenth century prompted some South American national leaders to mobilize indigenous populations against re-colonization, frequently portrayed as a second, and more insidious, phase of foreign interventionism and Imperial conquest. The ideological content of this form of revolutionary anti-colonialism is termed “neo-traditionalist”. It was “neo-traditionalist” because it was designed to incorporate within itself the template of the original Hispanic colonial ideology in order more fully to oppose its latter-day Anglo-Saxon variant. As Morse writes, in this scenario, “a personalist leader emerges but goes on successfully to create a system that is faithful to ‘original principles’ and has Thomist implications”.⁹ Mexico's revolutionary constitution of 1917, which provided specific legal and political guarantees for all Mexican social classes under the umbrella of an autocratic presidency, stands as an example of this paradoxical fusion of conservative and revolutionary elements in a form of *caudillismo*. Under the rule of Venustiano Carranza (1859-1920), for instance, the political framework of the old Hispanic Empire was successfully reincarnated, though decked out in a distinctly modern garb of revolutionary anti-colonialism.

The classic dilemma facing Latin American countries involves the negotiation of a political route between a structural and inherited neo-colonial relation with Western Europe and the USA, on the one hand, and the needs and demands of an enormous and ethnically heterogeneous population, on the other. As the industrial West –

particularly South and Central America's near-neighbour, the United States – grew more powerful in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, Latin American countries felt increasingly pressurised to import its technologies, ideas and skills as the blueprints of its own future. But to do so was also to, at best, ignore, and, at worst, denigrate, the rich and complex cultural heritage of a Latin American populace comprising an amalgam of Amerindians, Creoles, Negroes, mestizos, immigrant Italians, Portuguese, Irish and the like.

Yet the fact that Latin America's particular cultural situation was, in certain respects, radically distinct from the colonial nations that sought to exploit it for its own ends made the whole enterprise of importing the latter's technical expertise and modes of thought problematical from the outset, too. As Morse argues, "in a strictly technological sense the particular juxtapositions of ancient and modern in Spanish America are quite beyond the experience of the capitalist countries".¹⁰

Crucially, the whole future of the Latin American region tends largely to hinge on the attitudes of the leaders of the originally colonial (after the turn-of-the-century, increasingly neo-colonial) nations towards it. Unfortunately, the myopia and prejudice of most Western governments towards what it has characteristically perceived as backward "banana republics" has kept this region from moving forward in a decisive way. In this, the Western colonial nations have lost as much as Latin America itself. Victor Kiernan notes that the Western nations might have learned something about twentieth century Fascism had it taken the nineteenth century *caudillos* of Latin America more seriously. Fascist dictatorship was born in Latin America in the 1800s and was successfully reincarnated in the regimes of Hitler, Franco and Mussolini a hundred or so years later.¹¹

Morse writes that "the fact that Spanish America is by tradition accustomed and by economic necessity forced to rely heavily on official planning, intervention and protection has on occasion led its statesmen to a 'total view'".¹² Such "total views" varied in their emphases, but tended, on the whole, to reject the West, with its models of economic efficiency, while leaning towards the preservation of social values that were, or were perceived to be, indigenous and unique. Morse suggests that there is in Spanish America a residual "sense of commonality [...] deriving in large part from its

Catholicity [...] and from its agrarian, Negro and Indian heritage. Native to this commonality is an ethic upon which the hyper-rationalist logos of the industrial world seems able to make only limited and conditional encroachments”.¹³

Notoriously, Joseph Conrad's direct contacts with South America were very limited. Norman Sherry points out that the account of South American life in Nostromo primarily draws on a range of texts – including works by George Frederick Masterman, Frederick Benton Williams, and his friend Robert Cunninghame Graham.¹⁴ Sherry also notes parallels between Nostromo and a friend of Conrad's, the Corsican Dominic Cervoni, padrone of a boat called *Tremolino* and first mate of *Saint Antoine*. Conrad had worked with Cervoni from 1874 to 1878. In the “Author's Note” to Nostromo, Conrad states that the main character's temperament and behaviour is to a certain extent modelled on Cervoni, with his “half-bitter fidelity, his half-ironic devotion” (AN, xii).

This friendship between Conrad and Cervoni occurred in a specific political context. Around about 1877, Conrad and Cervoni were part of a failed expedition on the *Tremolino* to smuggle guns to revolutionary pro-royalist Carlist forces inside Spain. There is a reference to this event in Conrad's nervously laconic statement that he and Cervoni had been “engaged together in a rather absurd adventure” (N, AN, xii). He discusses this “absurd adventure” at greater length in the non-fictional The Mirror of the Sea (1906), and, obliquely, in the fictional The Arrow of Gold (1919).

Perhaps aware of this history, the great modern Columbian novelist Gabriel Garcia Márquez has Conrad step into his novel Love in the Time of Cholera (1985) as a rather shady cosmopolitan arms-dealer:

It said that during one of the many civil wars of last century, Lorenzo Daza had been the intermediary between the government of the Liberal President Aquileo Parra and Joseph T.K. Korzeniowski, a native of Poland and a member of the crew of the merchant ship *Saint Antoine*, sailing under the French flag, who had spent several months here trying to conclude a complicated arms deal. Korzeniowski, who later became famous as Joseph Conrad, made contact somehow with Lorenzo Daza, who bought the shipment of arms from him on behalf of the government, with his credentials and his receipts in order and the purchase price in gold.¹⁵

Part of the mischief of this passage is that it punctures the whole mystique of Conrad as a sea-faring adventurer (a mystique that it must be said Conrad himself did something to promote). Márquez offers the Pole as an opportunistic businessman, pure and simple: Conrad as simply one of a number of fortune-seeking gringos who made their way into South American history by virtue of their desire to make money out of a continent's love-affair with guns and violence. But at the same time, if this passage deflates the myth of Conrad the uncalculating maritime adventurer, on one level, it creates another myth of Conrad on a second level. For, Conrad, by walking into the charged, surreal "magical realist" world of Gabriel Garcia Márquez's fiction, is precisely localized, or perhaps one should say, Latin Americanized – by being fictionalised, he *arrives* as an authentic figure of South American cultural memory.

Second Horizon: Dialogic Utterance

In Nostromo, the Anglo-Hispanic figure of Charles Gould Junior is largely responsible for conceiving the idea of the rehabilitation of the San Tomé mine after the untimely death of his father. Conrad, seeking to emphasize the relative absence of a coherent indigenous bourgeoisie in Costaguana, makes the mine-manager of the silver mine an old aristocratic, rather than a modern bourgeois figure. Gould is the last representative of a rather fabulous Anglo-Hispanic aristocratic lineage historically connected to Costaguana's post-colonial elite (Gould Junior's grandfather had been a general under Bolívar, one of his uncles a former President of Sulaco).

Gould's power in the novel, as an agent of neo-colonial capital, thus symbolically underlines a peculiarly Latin American post-colonial problematic: the anachronistic tenacity of its feudal elite, and the relative absence of an independent and articulate indigenous bourgeoisie. Though Gould has deliberately put himself through a modern, bourgeois scientific training (as a mine engineer in England and Germany), and though his utterance suggests him as a fully paid up ideologue of liberal capitalism, Conrad repeatedly highlights the fact that this character's instincts remain incorrigibly patrician and anti-modernist ("incorrigible" is actually a word that his wife Emilia uses, playfully, but with unconscious ironic precision, to describe him at one point).

Gould's verbal commitment to making a success of the San Tomé mine is decked out rather glibly in the standard "liberal" justification of free-market capitalism:

What is wanted here is law, good faith, order, security. Any one can declaim about these things, but I pin my faith to material interests. Only let the material interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist. (N, 84)

Underlying Gould's apparently apolitical, transparent expression of faith in a capitalistic credo, opaque and narrowing political motives are continually shown to be at work. As M. Asaduddin writes, by appearing to pursue "a policy of neutrality" in relation to Costaguanan politics, Gould is able to develop the San Tomé mine as an "'imperium in imperio', an autonomous multi-national organization".¹⁶

Very early on it becomes clear that part of the reason that Gould is eager to rehabilitate the mine is that he desires post-humously to restore the public reputation of his ruined aristocratic father, Charles Gould, Senior. A patrician determination to regain lost personal prestige and restore the honour of a family name are thus shown to be the specific psycho-political content underlying Gould's putatively disinterested commitment to San Tomé mine as an agency of modernity and social order.

The novel makes it clear that Gould's efforts to create an environment conducive to the San Tomé mine, via cold-blooded manipulation of Costaguanan officials, far from implying a faith in the universal ordering power of "material interests", ties the mine into a pact of complicity with precisely a semi-feudal Latin American politics of private interests, institutionalised bribery and rampant cronyism which he earlier claimed it would efface. Enmeshed in a complex local network of bureaucratic corruption and cynical self-interest, the mine inevitably becomes the focus of competing political agendas within the dominant social class. While the novel suggests that the attack on the Ribierists by the Montero brothers has as its prize the San Tomé mine, the Monterist insurgency is, in itself, merely a political expression of the age-old factional divisions within the elite – it does not mark a decisive new phase of class struggle associated with the productive power of the mine. Decoud will later successfully attempt to give the dominant class' response to the Monterist insurgency

a more substantive political content with his strategic formulation of a plan for separatist revolution.

Ironically, then, the success of the San Tomé mine brings to the political class in Costaguana not Westernised order, but good old fashioned Latin American sectarian anarchy. In a sense this was the unspoken subtext of Gould's capitalistic resolve in the first place: namely, to make the mine an instrument of revenge against the class that had earlier wielded it against the feckless businessman father. However, in unleashing this centrifugal political dynamic in Costaguana, Gould finds he must make the mine coexist with it. As the novel progresses, Gould's devotion to the mine increasingly converges with a politics resembling naked force and a *caudillo* style banditry. The brokering of a deal with the rural bandit Hernandez mid-way through the narrative (N, 361-2) creates an unlikely alliance between an apparently unflinching defender of free-market capitalism and a Latin American local strong man ostensibly committed to attacking private property for the benefit of his poor rural constituency. In fact, this bizarre axis comes about due to Gould's need to protect the mine from the possibility that the Monterist local militias might expand their field of operation (Hernandez is later rewarded for his loyalty to the San Tomé mine with a sinecure in the Sulaco Republic). The narrator's suggestion that Gould and Hernandez come to an agreement as "equals before the lawlessness of the land" (N, 360) attempts to draw a veil over the fact that the mine-owner needs the bandit more than the bandit needs the mine-owner at this point. "Material interests" is here shown to be the unspoken consort of the very anarchic South American politics it is supposed to eradicate.

Again and again the novel suggests that Gould does not see the San Tomé mine as a rational economic enterprise. Instead, he views the mine, in romantic and aristocratic terms, as an extension of his own will, and as a kind of personal fiefdom.

By the end of the novel, Emilia Gould anxiously regrets the San Tomé mine "possessing, consuming, burning up" her husband, the "last of the Costaguana Goulds" (N, 522). However, the pathos here is for Emilia, not for Gould. What Emilia finally comes to recognize is that Gould is married to his mine more completely than he is to her. Childless, unloved and lonely, she must face up to the fact that she is one more of this aristocrat mine-owner's "material interests".

In fact, of course, the San Tomé mine is not the autonomous fiefdom of Gould's romantic imagination, and is shown to be dependent on Holroyd's capital. It is a further irony that this money comes from that *locus classicus* of bourgeois modernity: the United States of America. The flow of investment capital from the ageing eccentric American millionaire Holroyd is the *sine qua non* of the success of the San Tomé mine, not the vigorous will power of the aristocratic anachronism Gould. As Nicolas Visser observes, Holroyd's money runs the political plot of *Nostromo*, it "purchases a counter-revolution for the Ribierist party... [and]... helps to install a petty-dictator with a five-year reign of absolutely arbitrary dictatorial power".¹⁷ Yet for Holroyd the sponsorship of the mine is a hobby, a bored millionaire's harmless caprice. Holroyd himself enters into the events of the narrative only peripherally. His marginality is a sign of the depersonalising power of neo-colonial monopoly capital, and of the absence of a bourgeois class in Costaguana. Holroyd lets his money do the talking in Costaguana: for the text, he *is* the neo-Imperial power of American money, his heavy profile tellingly likened at one point to a "Caesar's head on an old Roman coin" (N, 76).

The novel therefore suggests that the ultimately determining factor in the existence of the San Tomé mine is not the revenging aristocratic energy of Charles Gould, nor even the sweat of the miners, but the financial muscle of the bourgeois American banker Holroyd. Indeed, in the long perspective of the narrative, the boundless range and power of the Californian's dollars spells trouble for the semi-feudal rural elite to which Gould belongs.

The success of the San Tomé mine widens the socio-economic gap between Costaguana's tiny moneyed elite and an enormous impoverished labouring population. This widening of the gulf between a numerically insecure expropriating class and a growing pool of hired labour is partly manifest in terms of a semi-voluntary process of *embourgeoisment* within the local elite. In its anxiety to create a political buffer between itself and an increasingly industrialized Costaguana labour stratum, the dominant class pushes forward a cunning journalist, the Creole, Martin Decoud, as one of the decisive shapers of its political future. Decoud is equipped with a perspective to understand Costaguanan politics. As Christopher GoGwilt somewhat

cryptically notes, Decoud becomes “the character best suited to appreciating the irony of the novel’s political plotting”.¹⁸

While journalism is a classic *bourgeois* occupation, Decoud is actually, by origin, an aristocratic Creole (the paper he works for supports the Blanco aristocratic faction). However, the fact that he has lived most of his life outside Costaguana, in Paris, makes him an alien in his own highly parochial native country. More importantly perhaps, Decoud, a figure of mixed ethnicity, is barred entry into the inner circles of elite Costaguana power by the tacit operation of a system of racist discrimination dating back to the Thomist phase of Hispanic colonialism (“Don Carlos” Gould, by contrast, owes much of his prestige in the Costaguanan context to his saliently Occidental physical characteristics, his white skin and his red hair in particular). While Decoud’s background, intelligence and foreign education would seem, on the face of it, admirably to equip him for a position in the Costaguanan political class, his racial antecedents, and perhaps his long absence from his native land, prevent him from gaining direct membership within the Costaguanan or Sulacan elite.

Throughout the novel, Decoud is shown using “second ladies”, women like Emilia and Antonia, as levers to influence the political discourse of Costaguana. As Aaron Fogel writes, “the most unusual thing about Decoud is his approach to women through ideological insistence”.¹⁹ This “ideological insistence” stems from the structural constraints limiting his personal political role. Decoud is compelled to use secondary support networks as his primary mode of access to a circle of power defined by hereditary considerations.

It is, then, something of a paradox that Decoud is enlisted as a political modernizer by a social class with which he has precarious, and even hostile, connections. His scorn for the elite that spurns him on racial and emotional grounds does not prevent him from acting on its behalf. The narrator attempts to explain this contradiction by portraying him as a kind of brilliant *deraciné* failure, an affected Parisian-corrupted dilettante and “idle boulevardier”. In fact it is a residual sentimental attachment to Costaguana, traceable to an adolescent separation from his native land, and directly expressed in a delayed love for Antonia, that accounts for this outsider’s entry into its politics.

In an attempt to move forward an elite political agenda reduced to a numbed paralysis by Gould's psychologically particularist determination to preserve the San Tomé mine from the Monterist "rabble" at all costs, Decoud proposes a means of saving the mine via a separatist revolution, organized from above, and intended to isolate the relatively tranquil coastal enclave from a typically volatile mainland political culture.

Significantly, Decoud's separatist strategy is based on the assumption that Sulaco's unique geography will provide a congenial setting for a viable industrial economy in the region. "We have the greatest riches, the greatest fertility, the purest blood in our great families, the most laborious population", he tells Antonia at one point, "look at the mountains! Nature itself seems to cry to us 'Separate'!" (N, 184). The opening paragraphs of the novel seem to anticipate Decoud's position, providing a description of the meteorological and geographical features of Sulaco – its winds, its high mountain range, and its natural harbour difficult of access – as factors that served to protect it from the political and economic excesses that blight an unstable inland zone of Costaguana (N, 3).

Decoud's intervention is ultimately successful, but his lonely suicide in a boat just off the Great Isabel prefigures the conflicted inner political dynamic of the separatist State he helps to bring into being. In helping to form the Separatist Republic of Sulaco, the "Treasure House of the World" and future client state of North American influence and power, the aristocratic Creole effectively signs his own death warrant as a social being in the land of his birth.

There is something unmistakably deranged about Decoud's final act. The self-administered pistol shot that ends his life implies an aristocratic desire for a clean, honourable exit. But the decision to load his body with silver bars so that it sinks to the ocean floor without a trace suggests the opposite: namely, a sense of his death as the expression of a humiliating defeat by the power (the weight) of the gringos' silver.

The absence of these silver bars then makes it difficult for Nostromo to return them to their mainland owners and in a sense forces him to make the disastrous error of stealing the silver. This detail may be taken as a suggestion that Decoud's unrepentant soul, corrupted by colonial-capitalism, lives on beyond his death, and goes on to invade the psyche of the main character, and putative saviour of the Sulaco Republic.

Perhaps, in this sense, the elaborately staged suicide of Decoud in the boat off the Great Isabel is to be decoded as being as emptily baroque as *Nostromo*, and the Occidental Republic of Sulaco, with its tourist coffee shops and its American bars, later seem to become. Or, alternatively, perhaps, the complexity of Decoud's suicide message is the gesture of a passionately embittered outsider, a kind of final ironic warning to the class whose apartheid tactics have excluded him from its ranks.

For, while it is true that Gould and his political minions embrace Decoud's separatist plan not on the basis that it is a method of modernizing a South American polity, but, rather, because they see it as a conservative "strategy of containment" that will preserve the San Tomé mine in the hands of an old elite, the truth is that its successful prosecution proves to be a political Sword of Damocles hanging over the Costaguanan political class. As will be argued below, if separatist revolution triumphantly displaces the scourge of the Montero brothers from Costaguana, it also succeeds in internalising the virus of industrial capitalism within the Costaguanan body politic.

Prior to separation, areas around Sulaco (and not simply in Sulaco itself) act as feeder recruitment zones for labour for the San Tomé mine (in the early part of the novel the Goulds engage in a recruitment drive for workers, taking them into the vast rural hinterlands and *llanos* around Sulaco). In post-separatist Sulaco, many of these feeder zones presumably fall outside the boundaries of the fledgling nation-state; yet continue to be exploited by the multi-national syndicate of class forces that control the San Tomé mine. In such a situation, the short-term measure to repulse the Montero brothers will inevitably produce endemic class struggle and continued political crisis in the long-term.

Thus the separatist revolution effectively heads off a parochial intra-elite struggle for power (the Monterist insurgency) by creating a structured regional division of socio-economic interests that threatens to turn the next serious political conflict into an all-out class war. The end of the novel offers the Republic of Sulaco as an enviable haven of South American stability, but if this is so it is only because it is a secondary colonial power, increasingly prosperous and influential at the expense of the gradual economic deprivation and proletarianization of Costaguana as a whole.

The effect of Decoud's separatist strategy, then, is to "liberate" Sulaco to create its own political institutions, and, economically, to strengthen Costaguana's structural dependence on North American neo-colonial capital, and to reconfigure the class forces in control of the San Tomé mine as being themselves neo-colonial. Captain Mitchell's monologue about the new Occidental Republic of Sulaco, in the last third of the novel – which is complete with references to an "American bar" which "New Yorkers mostly frequent" (N, 479), and a local coffee bean consumer-branded with revolutionary separatist "values" (N, 479) – reflects a local elite submission to a politics which tacitly accepts, if it does not exactly celebrate, the arrival of American consumerism in the once bucolic coastal enclave. An unspoken irony of Mitchell's travelogue is that the novel has positioned him from the outset as an archetypally *British* figure, and so his embrace of this racy modern Sulaco of American bars and tourist sites comes over as being as ideologically confused as the fledgling nation itself is. Mitchell, as Diane Elam notes, "grinds the sordid tale of imperialism and bloody revolution into a script that would seem suitable for today's television miniseries market".²⁰

However, the very fact that Sulaco has undergone some sort of a revolution (albeit one with a conservative purpose) inevitably throws up new social actors and political forces. In the closing scenes of *Nostromo*, the dialogic energy of the Sulaco elite is focused on the question of how their country should move on into the future. The British-Hispanic settler figure of Dr. Monygham argues, pessimistically, that "there is no peace and no rest in the development of material interests. They have their law and their justice. But it is founded on expediency, and is inhuman; it is without rectitude, without the continuity and the force that can be found only in a moral principle" (N, 511).

This gloomy prognosis is by no means the only viewpoint on political change in the region that the novel offers, though (Monygham is notably a psychic casualty of an earlier political regime). Antonia Avellanos, daughter of the diplomat Don Avellanos and former love-object of Martin Decoud, argues for the reunification of Sulaco and Costaguana as the moral-political fulfilment of Decoud's strategic plan for the region. "How can we abandon those who have been our countrymen only a few years ago, who *are* our countrymen now?" Antonia asks, "how can we remain blind, and deaf

without pity to the cruel wrongs suffered by our brothers?’” (N, 509). Her viewpoint and voice draw emotional resonance from the fact that she has lost a father and a lover to the separatist struggle. For Antonia, a genuine political identity for Sulaco is impossible without it first reconciling itself to a history of suffering and struggle that includes the people of Costaguana - a history in which the bonds of ethnicity and parochial allegiance have precisely lost their force.

Monygham counters Antonia’s position by asserting the primacy of neo-colonial interests in Sulaco: meaningful transformation in the republic will be impossible without the consent of “the foreigners,” he says (N, 510). To this, the figure of Father Corbèlan replies “let them beware, then, lest the people, prevented from their aspirations, should rise and claim their share of the wealth and their share of the power” (N, 510). Corbèlan is not indulging in idle speculation, either. Monygham notes that both Antonia and Corbèlan may be planning to challenge America’s neo-colonial control by “conspiring with the refugees from Sta. Marta” to bring about the re-fusion of Sulaco and Costaguana (N, 510).

So, to sum up, Decoud’s secessionist plan for Sulaco creates an epistemological space in Costaguana’s deadlocked political narrative, making available a new set of conceptual orientations and institutional possibilities. Decoud’s plan provides a kind of loosely articulated political “plot”, a new set of possible directions for his South American homeland to take. It reorients Costaguana more decisively towards North American capital interests and in the process open up the chance for native Latin American figures to march onto the stage of their own history.

Perhaps surprisingly, the key social symbol in *Nostromo* is the Casa Gould, and not the San Tomé silver mine, which, in spite of its enormous importance as a “motor of history” and fulcrum of the narrative action, is, in physical terms, no more than a marginal and glimpsed detail in the densely populated landscape of the novel. To the extent that this is the case, Conrad’s main interest is evidently focused on the complexities residing in the “superstructural” levels of colonial society in Latin America. By contrast, the deep structural shifts in economic and productive relations at the “base” of Costaguanan society are not so much elided in *Nostromo* as they are

consistently refracted through the representation of changing patterns of ideological domination and submission originating from “above”.

In the sense that this is so, too, Nostromo can be read as a kind of polemical riposte to Emile Zola’s great novel, Germinal (1885), a text where the daily concerns of the mine and its labourers form the essential matrix of the reader’s sympathy, while the property owning class controlling the coal mine is by and large viewed as a grotesquely inhuman collection of social agents whose sole purpose is to extract surplus from its exploited workers. Part of what Nostromo does is to show that Zola’s novel, for all its sharpness as a moral protest against the inhumanity of capitalism, is unable to offer a very broad view of the role that class struggle plays in history.

Germinal, by allowing the mine to dominate its vision to the extent that it does, represents the bourgeoisie from a distance and in caricature form, and so precisely simplifies and occludes the complex issues of the politics of modern class struggle that the narrative of Nostromo provides. Hence, in Germinal, the miners’ strike that is the consuming centre of the narrative ends, predictably, in the defeat of labour, and the triumph of French bourgeois capital. Meanwhile the novel, in its final pages, turns into a kind of compensatory rhetorical display (complete with emotive appeals to a proletarian version of Darwinist science) that seeks to conceal the fact that this pessimistic ideological conclusion was inscribed in the narrative structure from the very beginning.

The Casa Gould, with its subtle blend of grandeur and domesticity, and its fusion of big public baroque central spaces offset by discreet private enclosures, seems to offer an unproblematic symbolic projection of the ideological self-confidence of the elite clique that comes to gather around the economic banner of the San Tomé silver mine. However, the Casa Gould also brings into focus an existential contradiction at the core of the dominant class in Costaguana. While the mansion is a physical reminder of the early glories of aristocratic Hispanic conquest in South America, it increasingly becomes, under Gould Junior’s ownership, a space where a multi-national bourgeois class, drawn to Costaguana by the profitability of the San Tomé silver mine, comes to do business. There is thus a continual tension between the house as a sumptuous symbolic relic of Costaguana’s feudal Hispanic past and a social present in which the

hierarchies and protocols it memorialises are effectively being liquidated by an influx of plebeian foreign adventurers and interlopers.

The centrality of the Casa Gould as an image of the inner structure of the dominant class in Costaguana and as a material site of its continued ideological reproduction is most effectively challenged from within however. This occurs in the scene, mid-way through the novel, in which Decoud corners Emilia Gould in an attempt to persuade her to get her husband to accept that the separatist project is the only course open to the San Tomé mine. This scene effectively subverts the economy of social control that the Casa Gould projects and embodies on a number of levels. It brings together a young Creole journalist and a middle-aged European woman in private; it stages a discussion between these two figures about the woman's husband in his absence; it is intensely political, yet takes place in a room set back from the house's primary locus of public discourse, the main *sala*. As such, the conversation between Decoud and Emilia, pivotal in the production of an alternative political narrative for Costaguana, precisely issues a challenge to the structure of conservative feudal ideology inscribed in Casa Gould as a form of material display.

As the novel moves on from this point, the Casa Gould, having been the dominating, stabilizing centre of narrative production, recedes gradually into the background, a process that simultaneously allows for the emergence of a more varied, and rapidly alternating, range of story-telling epicentres. By the end of the novel, the Casa Gould has become a haunting memory hole for the class whose power it once celebrated, and a spiritual prison for its most adoring (and adored) subject, Emilia Gould.

What moves into the void created by this displacement of the symbolic centrality of Casa Gould is not, as one might have expected, the Casa Viola: the place that, as GoGwilt puts it, "foregrounds a European political dynamic" of a more robust and populist type.²¹ Rather, it is the Great Isabel – the bleak depopulated island, part of a neglected archipelago outside and at an angle to the Sulaco harbour. In the last section of the novel, the Great Isabel becomes the site at which the various strands of the narrative converge and dialogically interact in a strange deranged dance.

The economic success of the San Tomé mine brings Sulaco into a wider social and political arena, changing it radically from the politically tranquil, semi-feudal coastal enclave sketched in the opening pages of the novel, to the Latin American industrial powerhouse and "Treasure House of the World" of the novel's end. In this process of transformation, the old Sulaco elite, essentially feudal, rural and Hispanic in origin and style is also shown to undergo a radical mutation.

Gould, Mitchell, and Monygham emerge from the successful repulsion of the Monterists with their physical health and social privileges essentially intact and to a certain extent strengthened. Indeed, the figure of Mitchell is actually clearly energized by the disintegration of the old upper class in which he has previously been accorded the dubious status as tolerated British eccentric. Significantly, those characters in the Casa Gould clique that preserve the privileges associated with their old social positions in spite of the Monterist attack and the subsequent separatist revolution are united by the fact that they are of Anglo-Saxon origin.

Conversely, the most notable Casa Gould casualties of the political struggle to save the San Tomé mine from the Monterists, Don Avellanos and Martin Decoud, are of Latino or Latino-European origin. This is partly offset by the fact that modern Latino figures like Antonia Avellanos and the proto liberation theologian Father Corbelán, hitherto confined to, at best, subsidiary roles in the formation and circulation of public discourse in Costaguana, step forward with increased resolve and confidence at the end of the novel (though they remain marginal in terms of the political institutions of Sulaco).

What this restructuring of the dominant class bloc involves is a placement of Anglo-Saxon characters into "background" positions of technocratic and scientific management (Gould), and (like Monygham) secret surveillance, intrigue and backstairs diplomacy. Looming over all of them like a kind of secularized deity is the Puritan God, Holroyd, the Californian corporate capitalist with his endless dollars able to pull on the invisible threads of world history.

The overall impression the reader has of the Casa Gould elite at the end of the novel is that it has been grievously weakened by the separatist revolution. The reader is

conscious of a class suffering from an absence of internal articulation and ideological coherence, a social formation whose inner fragility memorably summed up in Emilia Gould's stammering private acknowledgement of the power that "material interests" has exerted over her existence.

It is in this political context (the context of a politically vulnerable and perhaps enfeebled neo-colonial elite) that the notion of decolonising South America becomes meaningful, and it is this aspect of *Nostromo* that will be focused on below.

Early on in the novel, the novel sets up an analogy between an imposing equestrian statue of the Spanish Monarch Charles IV, and the figure of Charles Gould, often seen riding past it:

The big equestrian statue of Charles IV at the entrance of the Alameda, towering white against the trees, was only known to the folk from the country and to the beggars of the town that slept on the steps around the pedestal, as the Horse of Stone. The other Carlos, turning off to the left with a rapid clatter of hoofs on the disjointed pavement – Don Carlos Gould, in his English clothes, looked as incongruous, but much more at home than the kingly cavalier...(N, 48)

This image of Gould as a historical repetition of Charles IV sets up a playful, but also potentially suffocating, imaginative parallel. Is Gould, the King of Sulaco a petrified neo-Imperialist? Is he no more than an updated European colonial demagogue in South America destined to spread paralysis and despair on account of his conviction of natural-born superiority?

Also, the ironic detail about the "sleeping leperos" using the statue as shelter suggests the presence of a history linked with, but also running at cross-purposes to, the Charles IV/ Charles Gould analogy. The beggars that garland the statue of Charles IV are signifiers of a history unacknowledged by the politico-aesthetic value projected by a statue designed to glorify West European Imperialist continuity. Yet it is precisely on the labour and suffering of the South American poor that the superstructural ideals that the statue celebrates have been erected.

What, therefore, the stultifying historical analogy between Charles Gould and Charles IV suggests is that the history of Costaguana only becomes dynamic once it is

broadened to include all those that contributed to its making. It is important to note that while the main focus in Nostromo is on the (largely tragic) vicissitudes of the upper strata of Costaguanan society, it also provides a vision of Costaguanan social reality that comically registers the socially excluded elements within it.

Fredric Jameson and Edward Said argue that the pivotal episode in the novel is the fateful expedition to save the silver from the Monteros undertaken by Nostromo and Decoud. The fact that the mission is thrown off course by the discovery of the co-presence on the boat of a third figure – the German Jewish trader Hirsch – ironically (indeed, somewhat farcically) suggests that the course of a revolutionary mission to chart a new future for Sulaco must expect to meet with unexpected deviations.

Hirsch is significant as an allegorical figure of the “absentee bourgeoisie” in Costaguanan politics. He is a minor businessman; a petit bourgeois “small man” struggling to find a niche in a Costaguana monopolistically controlled by the Imperium of the San Tomé silver mine.

Good colonial bourgeois that he is, Hirsch hastily elects to depart from the politically charged lighter carrying Decoud, Nostromo and the cargo of silver. However, in the open and fluid context of a revolution, acts that might otherwise be applauded as intelligently self-interested have a way of turning out to be fatal errors of judgement. Surrounded by the enormous darkness and silence of the Golfo Placido, Hirsch’s panicked decision not to stay on the boat with Nostromo and Decoud and the silver opens him up to the cruel vagaries of counter-revolutionary politics criss-crossing Costaguanan nationhood at this point. Captured and then tortured by Colonel Sotillo (himself soon to become one of history’s losers), Hirsch’s desperate plight then symbolically underscores the dangers inherent in any bourgeois failure to oppose authoritarian South American regimes. Hirsch brings his own personal suffering to an end by self-destructively spitting in Sotillo’s face, an act that illustrates both the dangerously inept nature of the political consciousness of his class, and its potential for overcoming its own limits and making a revolutionary contribution to a post-colonial Latin American nationhood (by spitting in Sotillo’s face Hirsch defiantly reclaims his humanity even as he signs his own death warrant). Amilcar Cabral (1966) notes that, in the Third World context, “national liberation exists only when the

national productive forces have been completely freed from every kind of foreign domination” and, in order to achieve this, the petit-bourgeoisie “must be capable of committing suicide as a class in order to be reborn as revolutionary workers”.²²

GoGwilt suggests of the Hirsch torture scene that “in this exemplary moment of torture, Hirsch’s lost perspective – cancelled in both its potential religious and its potential economic meanings – emerges as the significance of Conrad’s attempt to grasp the total destiny of the ‘people’ of Costaguana”.²³

Aaron Fogel argues that “*Nostromo* is a novel about an inquisitorial society” and that “the inquisitorial, sadistic forced dialogue scenes in the novel seek to unfold, lay bare, and radically question the structure of civilized, literary and Socratic irony”.²³ He might have added that this dialogic questioning of “civilized, literary and Socratic irony” generates a narrative discourse that is increasingly open, polyphonic and hybrid.

If Hirsch’s position in the novel symbolically marks the possibility of bourgeois involvement in the revolution, then, more prosaically, his chance presence on the boat carrying the cargo of silver diverts the expedition to another place – the island known as the “Great Isabel”. This island – site of the theft of the silver and of Decoud’s death – symbolically offers Costaguanan modernity as a revisiting and renegotiation of the traumatic psychic landscapes of a colonial Spanish American past: *Great Isabel* offering a pun on (Queen) *Isabella*, founding figure of the Spanish Imperial drive into the Americas (see above, the First Horizon of this chapter).

Great Isabel is one of three islands, in the same way that Hirsch, as ironic sign of the revolutionary process, is one of three people on board the lighter. By the end of the novel, Great Isabel, ostensibly a shabby and forgotten topographical relic of a bygone colonial era, becomes a spatial metaphor of an emergent dislocated modern Costaguanan consciousness. It is the secret locus of the symbolically charged silver of the expedition; it is the place where Decoud tragically succeeds in ultimately liquidating a colonized self, and it is where, finally, Nostromo’s tragic fixation with young Giselle Viola culminates in an extraordinary denouement of intra-European violence and despair.

Towards the end of the novel, Giorgio Viola and his daughters are relocated from their mainland Albergo to look after the lighthouse on the Great Isabel. In political terms, this move symbolically suggests that the dormant Garibaldi-type populism embodied in Viola's cynicism about and detachment from Costaguanan public affairs must be put to the test by being brought into direct contact with the obdurate and messy facts of modern South American social realities. The elitist (and indeed racist) conservatism underlying Viola's apparently heroically austere contempt for modern Costaguanan politics is ironically annotated in the fact that the main reading matter of this so-called republican radical is the classic colonial instrument of ideological control, the Christian Bible, the text of which, moreover, is brought into focus by a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles, gift of the mistress of the San Tomé mine, Emilia Gould.

This conjuncture between the Great Isabel (locus of an emergent Costaguanan modernity) and the Viola family (image of Costaguana's colonial seclusion) brings together two socio-political extremes, and in part explains the increasingly dislocated and surrealistic narrative texture of the latter phases of Nostromo.

Many readers and critics have complained about the "melodramatic" nature of the last part of Nostromo. Albert Guerard, for instance, writes that he finds Part Three to be "simple romantic narrative" after the complex political ironies of the early part of the novel.²⁵ Avrom Fleishman, also an admirer of the first two parts of Nostromo, likewise struggles to appreciate the "intolerably melodramatic conclusion" of the novel.²⁶ Not all critics are as dissatisfied with the ending as Guerard and Fleishman, though. Robert Hampson suggests that the novel's primary focus is psychoanalytical (rather than political) and that therefore "melodrama" merely reflects Nostromo's affective situation at the end of the novel, demonstrating that the hero has paid a "psychological price" for stealing the silver.²⁷

In fact the "melodrama" of Nostromo is not detachable from the novel's political vision, but is, on the contrary, a corollary of its determination to explore the different extremes of Costaguanan society. The scenes that have been targeted by critics as being particularly turgid and melodramatic are the romance scenes involving Nostromo and Giselle towards the end of the text. In these scenes, the burgeoning

love between a middle-aged Nostromo and a coltish Giselle is certainly handled with a degree of “awkwardness” by Conrad, but if he fails to make this “romance” believable, then this is directly attributable to the broader context of revolutionary politics in Sulaco against and within which this unlikely alliance is staged. Nostromo, at this point, is the disenchanted (and increasingly militant) heroic co-founder of the new Sulaco Republic while Giselle is the over-protected younger daughter of Old Viola, jealous official custodian of the whole republican-populist legacy in Sulaco. By courting Giselle, Nostromo is symbolically both courting disaster (as his later death proves) and attempting to unlock the secret complicity between Viola’s latent Garibaldi-style populism and the Casa Gould elite’s tenacious hold on power in the Sulaco Republic.

In a Freudian-feminist interpretation of the stolen silver as a symbol of forbidden sexuality, Helen Fink Rieselbach argues that Nostromo courts Giselle because “he hopes Giselle’s love will free him from enslavement to the treasure”.²⁸ This interpretation overlooks the political symbolism inscribed in Nostromo’s desire for Giselle, and Rieselbach’s later suggestion that “the domestic and political spheres seem imperfectly meshed in the love story that ends *Nostromo*” partly reflects a frustration at being unable to nail down the “meaning” of the intricate ironic interplay between political and psychological dimensions in the last pages of *Nostromo*.²⁹

It is certainly true that Conrad signifies the Nostromo-Giselle relationship via a cloying and overblown discourse of romance (melodramatically lush terms like “dreamy” and “languid” recurrently announce Giselle’s presence in the text). However, Giselle is not simply offered as an extension of Nostromo’s wounded chauvinism – a stereotypical Latin “female temptress” or *femme fatale* to be conquered and tamed by the hero’s masculine energy of revolt. For, Giselle is desirable to Nostromo primarily because she is structurally inaccessible to him. As the youngest daughter of the “father figure” Viola (and of the dead “slighted mother” Teresa), and as the sister of Linda, to whom Nostromo is semi-officially betrothed, Giselle represents, for Nostromo, the forbidden fruit of revolutionary politics and familial sexuality. Both virginally innocent and erotically adventurousness, simultaneously boundlessly receptive and morally fickle, Giselle’s immature personality seemingly concentrates in itself all the contradictions of Sulaco’s

revolutionary newness that Nostromo has actively helped to shape. In contrast, the “legitimate” love object, the deep-voiced and physically less enticing Linda Viola, recapitulates the conservative maternal qualities of the mother figure, Teresa. Linda, with her “adult” code of matrimonial commitment and monogamous loyalty, more clearly belongs to what Benita Parry refers to as the text’s typology of “secular saints”.³⁰ Linda is a figure that looks backwards, towards the hero’s guilty past. Giselle, with her seductive combination of vulnerability and combativeness, marks an emergent modern consciousness of uncertainty and excitement in the post-separatist world of Sulaco that Nostromo, exhausted by the trials of Sulaco’s birth, finds himself, perhaps not surprisingly, unable to resist.

Most critics interpret the trajectory of Nostromo’s development, from the simple, macho working class auxiliary of the Casa Gould bloc at the beginning of the narrative to the wealthy but guilt-ridden hero of post-secessionist Sulaco at the end as a working through of a tragic paradigm about class in modern colonial society. Fleishman argues “the pattern [of *Nostromo*] is a tragic one [...] because it is founded on contradictions within the hero and his class, rather than on circumstances”.³¹ Gareth Jenkins is in broad agreement with this assessment when he writes, from a more clearly Marxist-leaning perspective, that:

The tragedy consists not in Nostromo’s being a victim but in the impossibility of his being anything other than a victim. Nostromo has to be corrupt, has to be denied the capacity, as a representative of the “people”, of ever providing the modern proletariat with an identity that would give it the right to recreate and lead society in its terms.³²

The Marxist Kiernan Ryan goes further than Jenkins by suggesting that Nostromo is also excluded by the representational apparatus of the narrative itself – a working class tragic hero in search of an author, as it were. “Nostromo always seems *about* to endorse the novel’s title and snatch up the reins of the narrative,” writes Ryan, “but he remains doomed to its verges by Conrad’s uncompromising recognition of his real objective status as a blind tool of the ruling classes”.³³ When Nostromo’s identity finally comes into strong focus, it only underlines his social exclusion the more effectively, for it occurs at the very end of the novel, “as the mere postscript of a history callously indifferent to him”.³⁴

In sum, Jenkins, Fleishman and Ryan argue that Nostromo is offered as an emblematic figure of a tragically inevitable exclusion and marginalization of the working class from genuine political power under capitalist conditions. It will be argued below that a sensitive reading of the representation of the biography of Nostromo actually discloses a series of ruptures between the narrator's strategy to codify the hero as an image of *inexorable* working class political failure (this aspect of the text receives endorsement from Jenkins *et al*) and an underlying ambivalently comic logic both disclosing the extent of his corruption by the silver and ironically celebrating his escape from the position of servile hireling of the Casa Gould elite. As a prelude to this, however, it will be helpful to clarify the definition of working class agency in the classic Marxian texts.

In The Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848), Marx and Engels argue that class struggle is the motor of all history. The rise of capitalism is unthinkable without the displacement of a technically stagnant feudal class by a dynamic bourgeoisie, but, by the same token, the bourgeoisie's political ascendancy is impossible without the suppression of the working class on whose labour capitalism is erected. As capitalism progresses, the bourgeoisie requires ever-increasing combinations of labouring people to sustain the momentum of its ascendancy, a process which also precisely threatens that ascendancy at its very foundations. The only way to resolve this insuperable contradiction of bourgeois political rule (which is the contradiction inscribed in the core of the capitalist mode of production) is revolution, defined by Marx and Engels as the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the organized forces of the international working class. Once the bourgeoisie is cleared out of the way, the road is open to the institution of classless society:

The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of modern industry, therefore, cuts under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers.³⁵

Proletarian revolutionary insurrection is systemically inevitable given the incapacity of the bourgeois class to move capitalism on beyond the stage of its own rule over it,

argue Marx and Engels. Furthermore, a revolution driven by the workers is the only conceivable route along which capitalism can mutate into an integrated and sustainable world system. The reason that the working class will overthrow the bourgeoisie is that it is the only class that capitalism has so far produced that has the social stamina to do so. "Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class," they write, "the other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of modern industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product".³⁶

Thus the classic text of Marx and Engels does not imply that the role of the working class in world history is "tragic" or doomed to failure; on the contrary, the working class is viewed as the "special and essential product" of capitalism that is accordingly cast as the "grave-digger" of the bourgeoisie.

How can this classical Marxist concept of working class agency be transferred to the Costaguana of *Nostromo*? Part of the problem here is that *Nostromo* does not confront a coherent manufacturing bourgeoisie in the classical sense. Rather, the ruling class he physically confronts is an admixture of quasi-feudal, retainer, semi-militaristic, and petit bourgeois elements largely controlled from a distance by American and British bourgeois capital. This hybrid neo-colonial Latin American social formation has made its working class in its own image. To put it another way, the deformations in the social personality of *Nostromo* betray the impurities of the class forces ranged against him.

Yet, in other respects, the development of Costaguana under the aegis of the San Tomé mine otherwise conforms to the classical dialectic of class struggle outlined in the *Manifesto*. As the productive power of the San Tomé mine increases, so the numbers of those who use their physical power to produce these riches also rises. With this comes a heightened mood of nervousness in the dominant social class. The early prolepsis to "quite serious, organized labour troubles" in store for Sulaco is relatively nonchalant in tone compared to the paranoiac allusions later on to the threat posed by "socialistic Italians, with their secret societies, camorras, and such-like" (N, 95, 478). The San Tomé miners' march on Sulaco, marshalled by the superb Father Román, is in a sense the key "founding event" of the Occidental Republic

because without it the Monterists would probably have taken over the mine. The omission of this dramatic episode from the narrative texture of *Nostromo* ironically bespeaks the ideological paralysis of the Casa Gould bloc when confronted by the spectre of being displaced by its "grave-diggers".

It is against the background of an intensifying class struggle in Costaguana that the transformation of Nostromo from a relatively pliant working class auxiliary of the Casa Gould clique to its dislocated and embittered antagonist must be viewed. The pivotal episode in this transformation is, of course, the dramatic theft of the silver on the Grand Isabel.

Irving Howe correctly suggests that Nostromo is politically radicalised by the act of taking the silver. "As he staggers under the weight of his secret and the loneliness which is its price," writes Howe, "[Nostromo] develops what he never knew or needed: a political awareness".³⁷ As a result of this theft, Nostromo necessarily shifts the burden of his history, characterized by a physical and mental bondage to the Casa Gould power structure. Earlier, Nostromo's unquestioning and indeed proud acceptance of Mitchell's pet-name of "Nostromo", translating as "our man", was the most obvious marker of the way in which his sense of self and being-in-the-world had been colonized by a comprador class.³⁸

The link between the radicalization of Nostromo and the novel's registration of the developing collective consciousness of lower class Costaguana is positive, concrete and dialectical, rather than, as Jenkins, Ryan et al suggest, passively illustrative and statically allegorical. Howe and GoGwilt rightly suggest that the text also provides a perspective that enables the reader to conceptualise the development of Nostromo beyond the purely allegorical and the tragic horizons that are most obviously on offer. Nostromo's biography, writes Howe, "anticipates those forms of consciousness that will soon work their way through the masses, his estrangement represents the dawning realization of distinct class interests and sharpening class antagonisms".³⁹ Christopher GoGwilt similarly argues for the primacy of the concrete political significance of Nostromo's development: "Nostromo's political awakening emphasizes the logic of increasing dispersal and dissolution of those 'millions of families' under the conditions of capitalist exploitation".⁴⁰

Nostromo in the latter stages of the text increasingly eludes allegory, a process that reflects the fact that his progressively sharpening militancy, emotional desperation and angry class-consciousness cannot be contained in, or by, the narrator's limited vocabulary for registering lower class experience. To avoid creating a stark ideological rupture between text and hero, the narrator must subtly attempt to distance himself from the class-biased allegories and racial stereotypes that he earlier used to signify his presence. As, during the course of the narrative, Nostromo's personal experience of the politics of Costaguana deepens, he becomes, for the narrator, something other than the early image of a picturesque (but pliable) macho working class Italian. In this transformation, the narrator finds himself presiding over a character undergoing a radical process of psychological decolonization. Jean Franco is thus quite wrong when he argues that, in *Nostromo*, "Conrad could not envisage a viable Third World ideology", for the fact is that, by keeping faith with Nostromo, he must.⁴¹

In the early sections of the novel, Nostromo, with his showy silver-accented gaucho costume, and his proletarian bravado, is described with ironic gusto as a kind of typifying social datum of Costaguana's European immigrant lower class strata. The narrator depicts Nostromo in the early pages as a kind of interesting throwback, a quaint European anachronism, in a Third World backwater.

After the formation of the Republic, however, Conrad has Nostromo discard the silver-buttoned costume (and the romantic image) as the insignias of a lower class status and the physical reminders of an early history of mental colonization. In place of the silver-hued attire of the proletarian hireling, Nostromo dons the more muted and anglophile tweed jacket and trousers of the colonial gentleman. As a result of this sartorial shift, there is a sense in which the novel is forced to clothe him anew and re-think the static allegorical language it was earlier able to less problematically use to signify the central character.

To illustrate this process, consider the following brief description of Nostromo's post-separatist sartorial image as a "brown tweed suit, made by Jews in the slums of London, and sold by the clothing department of the Compania Anzani" (N, 527). The abstract and convoluted nature of the syntax here is symptomatic of the verbal

paralysis that seems to steal over the descriptive language in the latter stages of Nostromo. Unable any longer to capture Nostromo in a neat allegorical formula without contradicting his actual experience and history, the language of the narrator lapses into an uninflected accumulation of adjectives and noun-phrases. The effect of this is to create a sense of indecision and disorientation in the narrative system.⁴²

Nostromo's discarding of the gaudy over-stated silver-fringed accoutrements of his early self thus marks a sartorial-political rejection of the Casa Gould bloc, living off the proceeds of the silver mine. By the same token, the central character's adoption of the self-effacing dress code of an English gentry class (the tweed jacket produced by exploited Jews in the East End of London) brings into public view and parodically contests the sartorial forms of a globally dominant colonial social group. The novel, in electing to keep dialogic faith with its central character, finds itself forced follow suit.

It does so with a mixture of stiff unease and outright hysteria. A gathering narratorial disquiet about the central figure finds outlet in the jerky spray of allusions to his links with clandestine revolutionary group operating in and around Sulaco in the aftermath of the separatist revolution (N, 528). It is also evident in its hurried nervous allusions to the political meetings Nostromo attends. These meetings are co-attended by dubious international revolutionaries, one of which is described, with a spasm of melodramatic alarm, as "an indigent, sickly, somewhat hunchbacked little photographer, with a white face and a magnanimous soul dyed crimson by a bloodthirsty hate of all capitalists, oppressors of two hemispheres" (N, 528)

There is also a continual whine of nervous anxiety around what exactly it is that Nostromo is doing with the silver in the post-separatist phase. Consider the following cluster of teeth-clenched references: "He had found means of disposing of the silver bars in distant ports," "his absences from Sulaco were long" (N, 525). "Captain Fidanza was seen in the streets of Sulaco attending to his business, as usual, that trip," "as usual, he allowed it to get about that he had made a great profit on his cargo," "Captain Fidanza was *seen*" (N, 527). The strained, watchful tone of the language here problematizes the proposition that the ship is carrying anything as politically innocent as "a cargo of fish" because "Lent was approaching" (N, 527).

But if it is not a pious “cargo of fish” that Nostromo exchanges for silver, then what are we to think it is exactly? What is this elusive “business”? Though there is no direct textual proof for it, the novel’s tantalizing lack of specificity on this point may invite us to speculate whether Nostromo’s “business” may, among other things, be part of some existing system of exchanging silver for weapons along the South American coast. This in turn might locate him in a broader radical enterprise seeking to turn capital illegally appropriated from the Casa Gould set into instruments designed to remove that class by armed force. This would partly help to make sense of the narrator’s sense of alarm about Nostromo’s apparent links with radical and revolutionary cadres in the post-secessionist period. Norman Sherry writes that fishing vessels were often used as a cover for smuggling and gunrunning operations in nineteenth century Latin American revolutionary circles.⁴³ Nostromo’s boat is given as a trading boat, rather than a boat used for fishing, but the historical parallel remains suggestive and intriguing. As noted earlier, Conrad, in his sea-faring days, himself took part in an attempted gunrunning operation for revolutionary pro-royalist Spanish Carlists, sometime in 1877. Moreover, he undertook this venture with Cervoni, the acknowledged real-life model for Nostromo (see First Horizon of this chapter).

Finally, it is thus perhaps no accident that Nostromo’s final moments are attended to not by the morally exonerating figure of a Catholic priest, but by the figure of the revolutionary photographer grotesquely demanding to know where the rest of the silver is, so that the rich may be, in his words, “fought with their own weapons,” (N, 562).

Towards the end of the novel there is a brief account of Nostromo’s trip to a small outlying town of Rincon in which a meeting with a widow and orphans of a *Cargador* killed in the defence of the San Tomé mine. This is an account of Nostromo revisiting the scene of his own class history in changed circumstances (he is now the heroic saviour of Sulaco, a public figure of note, and dressed as a tweed-jacketed *rico*). What is interesting about this short episode is that the narrator’s tone deliberately aims to make Nostromo’s encounter with the widow seem what it is not: namely, distant, unfeeling and manipulative. For instance, at one point, the narrator notes, in a tone layered with sarcasm, that Nostromo “consented to sit down and drink a glass of lemonade” with the widow (N, 527). A few sentences on, it is observed that Nostromo

“did not listen” to the widow’s prolonged lament, and that he seems impervious to her “torrent of words” (N, 528).

Yet, it is clear that Nostromo is actually more sensitive to the economic plight of the widow, bereft of a provider (“he left some money with her as usual” (N, 528)) than the narrator’s sneering tone gives him credit for. Nostromo’s gesture of leaving money with the widow also symbolically recognizes that the prosperity of the present (which he in a sense represents) owes a debt to a history of working class struggle and sacrifice in Sulaco. Nor is Nostromo simply attempting to buy off his own class history here: there is money, too, to support the widow’s children, between whom and himself there seems to have grown a bond of affectionate respect, testifying to earlier visits and contacts (“the orphaned children, growing up and well-schooled, calling him uncle, clamoured for his blessing. He gave that too” (N, 528)). In sum, the account of the visit to Rincon, stripped of its carping tone that accompanies it, discloses an image of Nostromo conscious of, and answerable to, his own class and its history of struggle.

Nostromo dies because he is shot and killed by Giorgio Viola on the Great Isabel. In political terms, this “tragic” act must be recoded as one that protects the class that controls the Republic of Sulaco from Nostromo’s anger towards it, which has, by the end of the novel, taken revolutionary form (it is significant that he is shot as he is taking some of the silver bars from a hiding place on the island). Ironically, Viola stands for an old tradition of radical republicanism in the novel and is also the orphan Nostromo’s emotional “father figure”. Some critics have seen Viola’s killing of Nostromo as an Oedipal punishment of a surrogate son found guilty of transgressing the political and sexual authority of a symbolic father by opting for Giselle rather than the maternally sanctioned Linda. In fact, the shooting both affirms and overturns an Oedipal paradigm, for, by violently killing Nostromo, Viola precisely acknowledges that he no longer has authority over him, an act that therefore offers, as Catherine Rising suggests, “dramatic evidence of the son’s victory over the father”.⁴⁴

If Nostromo’s death is tragic, then, it is in the sense that it shocks the reader into recognizing the punitive consequences that lie in wait for working class agents that decide to desert their posts as faithful hirelings of the rich. Nostromo’s tragedy is that

his situation in the Costaguanan context is inseparable from a personal consciousness of subjugation, so his alienation from the dominant social formation, in the latter stages of the novel, his “freedom”, cannot be experienced as anything other than personal danger. This danger finds disconcertingly comic expression in the welter of contingent and contradictory detail that surrounds the killing of Nostromo. Giorgio Viola shoots Nostromo because he assumes (correctly) that he is secretly courting his youngest daughter; yet he thinks (wrongly) that his gunshot will protect Giselle from a proletarian local called Ramirez. The shooting on the Great Isabel therefore retrospectively captures and consolidates the *social complexity and ambivalence* of Nostromo’s biography as a citizen of Costaguana, while also throwing into critical relief the way in which the moribund brand of radical populism emblematically associated with Viola has failed to rise to the challenge of harnessing the energy of revolt unleashed in the central figure’s inner awakening.

At the same time, the novel can hardly neglect conceding that the murder of Nostromo is an inescapably wasteful and shocking event. Linda’s final cry of agony, ringing out across the Golfo Placido, provides the most empathetic and moving register of the violent pointlessness of Nostromo’s death, though this epitaph is austere relegated to the novel’s final paragraph.

Third Horizon: Ideology of Form

The approach to Nostromo taken here has involved questioning and contesting the social and political criteria invisibly underlying the utterances of an “omniscient” narrator. In this, this thesis has followed the sceptical example of Edward Said and others who argue that, underlying the seemingly sedate public account of Costaguanan life in Nostromo, complex social and psychological pressures are at work. “The real action” of the novel, writes Said, “is psychological and concerns man’s overambitious intention to author his own world because the world he finds is somehow intolerable: this action underlies the historical and political events in the novel”.⁴⁵

In The Political Unconscious, Fredric Jameson argues that Conrad’s strategic decision to withdraw from Nostromo Marlow and the romantic “story-telling

infrastructure” of his two previous texts (“Heart of Darkness” and Lord Jim) liberates the novel from confinement to the subjective processes of visual observation and report (what Jameson calls “impressionism”). So, whereas in Conrad’s earlier “maritime” fiction the “impressionist” style emerges out of the use of the sea as an intermediate and ambivalent ideological terrain (both Nature and history, at once zone of fantasy and place of work), in Nostromo the sea is “the term limit which spells the end and the fulfilment of Conrad’s impressionism and opens up the chance to register history itself”.⁴⁶ The telluric quality of Nostromo is, as Jameson sees it, primarily displayed in the fictional construct of Costaguana itself, “an indeterminate background of [...] Latin American substance”.⁴⁷

Conrad, Jameson suggests, sub-divides Costaguana into two ideologically polarized groups, one of which is organized around the palatial Casa Gould, the other loosely clustered around the populist-nationalist locus of Albergo d’Italia Una owned by the Garibaldino figure of Viola. This political binary “correspond[s] to the two great forces of nineteenth-century history – industrial capitalism, expanding into its imperialist stage, and ‘popular’ (that is, in the strictest sense, neither peasant nor proletarian) revolution of the classic 1848 type”.⁴⁸

This is not to suggest that Jameson sees Nostromo as an unproblematic historical novel of the nineteenth century type. Rather, Nostromo is viewed as a novel that simultaneously is, and is not, historical. Nostromo is a “great historical novel” that “finally achieves its end by unravelling its own means of expression, ‘rendering’ History by its thoroughgoing demonstration of the impossibility of narrating this unthinkable dimension of collective reality”.⁴⁹ The novel in these terms is a kind of postmodern puzzle that invites the reader to look beyond its narrative surface so as to pay extra attention to the rapidly vanishing historical content that it somehow magically rescues from a homogenizing monopoly capitalism.

In this nuanced reading of Nostromo as a kind of deliberate restoration of social experiences and histories that might otherwise be lost in the social trauma of the West’s colonial expansion, Jameson takes the Marxist reading of the text beyond the kind of agonized question that the Canadian Marxist Nicolas Visser poses:

How do we account for the fact that this at times fiercely reactionary novel by a writer who declares repeatedly his unalterable opposition to revolution nevertheless shows the causes of revolutionary struggle in Costaguana to be, in the final analysis, the callous exploitation of a province and later country by an entrenched oligarchy in the service of foreign capital?⁵⁰

The only basis on which Visser's question can continue to be thought of as having any validity is the persistence of an erroneous conflation of the narrator's utterances with "political opinions" loosely ascribed to the historical figure of Joseph Conrad. Visser's inability to get beyond a perception of the ideological content of Nostromo as sheer paradox discloses the limits of his historical perspective. Jameson's analysis transcends this kind of hand-wringing Marxist approach by connecting Nostromo with that specific historical moment in the development of capitalist society that the text embraces. This was the moment, at the end of the nineteenth- and the beginning of the twentieth- centuries, when industrial capitalism begins to spread out from the "core" zones of Western Europe where it has reached a degree of maturity to incorporate the non-industrialized peripheral zones that comprise the rest of the world. "Conrad understands capitalism as transcendence," he argues, "the conventional rhetoric that links capitalism with the bringing of order – incidentally a very old argument for capitalism – goes hand in hand with the sense that it is not a natural growth in countries like Sulaco".⁵¹

At the same time, Jameson's interpretation of Nostromo as a self-deconstructing historical novel may need to be fine-tuned even further. For, given the fact that Imperialism involved a radical, sometimes even violent, clash and collision not just between two modes of production, but also between competing cultural concepts, forms of representation, and systems of exchange, the question as to what does and does not deserve to be isolated and described as "history" in the first instance is of significance. In any culture, the construction of "history" (the particular means by which it processes its collective memory) always assumes a *particular* modality of representation, preservation and exchange (one that explicitly or tacitly suppresses other modalities). And, of course, in the case of the industrialized West, the medium within which history and memory has officially been produced and preserved is overwhelmingly that of *written narrative*. In the sense that Nostromo as a written narrative itself *willy nilly* conforms to (and upholds) this (Western) model of historical

representation, any attempt to accord historical status to objects or experiences within it runs the risk of becoming a Captain Mitchell-like process of selectively affirming whatever the industrial West does as inherently worthy of notice and implicitly endorsing the whole process of colonialism and neo-colonialism from the vantage point of the West's particular interests.

Conrad himself described Nostromo as a *sui generis* form, a "vast contrivance" as he describes it in a letter to Andre Gidé (CL 5, 76). Many readers and critics agree. Stylistically Nostromo is felt to be too hybrid to be confined to a single genre (even if it is for the deconstructive purposes of then illustrating its inability to conform to itself within the parameters that the genre prescribes). Critics with commitments and orientations as ideologically varied as Edward Said, Daine Elam and Bruce Henricksen have argued the need for readers of Nostromo to welcome and celebrate, as a sign of postmodern potency, the eclectic variety of motifs, symbols, myths and stories that the novel contains without seeking to limit the novel to a particular stylistic paradigm. For Henricksen, the temporal complexity inscribed in the novel's narrative structure "problematizes the relationship between time and narration as it interweaves geohistory, mythic and folkloric time, political history, and personal or human time".⁵² Diane Elam converges with Henricksen in her suggestion that that the multiple time-shifts, analapses and prolepses of Nostromo are designed ironically to demonstrate the bankruptcy of teleological thought itself, exposing a "modernist history" that "does not correspond to itself".⁵³ Nostromo must thus be grasped as a "post-modern romance" insofar as its "crumpling of the astral time-sheet" exposes the fact that "the historical event [...] must be understood through the rhetoric of romance".⁵⁴ Finally, Ken Ireland rightly notes, "complexity of anachrony is the key factor in Nostromo".⁵⁵

Recent work by the Italian Marxist critic Franco Moretti may provide a way to think about the eclectic open-ended form of Nostromo without thereby completely surrendering materialist critical perspectives to a poetics of postmodernity. In Modern Epic (1998) Moretti suggests that such was the pace of change in the late nineteenth century that its classic bourgeois literary form, the Novel, a narrative-device largely shaped by the pressure to signify and discuss social experience in historicizing ways within nation-bound horizons, was radically displaced by changing global conditions.

Part of this process of displacement involved the resumption, in prose, of the previously poetic, epic mode as having renewed semiotic potential and political range in an era of increasing cultural relativism. According to Moretti, the epic undergoes a kind of renaissance in modernism because it is seen as capable of capturing the range and non-unitary complexity of the West's experience as it comes into contact with cultures in other parts of the world:

On the one hand, the novel: which invents a new language. On the other, the epic: which produces a *new interpretation of the old language*. In the former case, we have the compactness of a world in which everyone speaks the same language, and lives in the same period. In the latter case, we have the specific *historicity* of a universe in which fossils from different epochs coexist with creatures from worlds to come.⁵⁶

In Moretti's modern epic, the world is not described in a language embodying the perspective of a single (Western capitalistic) mode of production; rather, it affords a position from which the world can be seen as heterogeneous, provisional and incommensurate with itself. A spacious and flexible modern epic generates an aesthetic idiom able to convey the temporal disconnectedness of the new "World System", whereas the nineteenth century novel, restricted by a monological paradigm foregrounding temporal, social and political *unity*, does not. Modern epic, in these terms, becomes an improvised form attuned to the dynamics of the "highest" stage of world capitalism conceived as an enormous Homeric clash of cultures, stories, and systems of representation and kinship. "In this huge symbolic stratification," Moretti concludes, "there is no trace of that great novelistic invention which is the present: the brief span of time – a year, a youth, a generation – that contains within itself an entire generation. The present does not exist in epics".⁵⁷

With its monumental narrative range and scale, its mazy, digressive story-telling style, and its recurrent use of mythicizing conventions and motifs, *Nostromo* would seem to evoke obvious comparisons with the epic. It may be significant, in this regard, that Moretti ends his analysis of the epic with a chapter on the work of the South American master, Gabriel Garcia Márquez. By so doing, he ends up suggesting the possibility of a unique inner affinity between modern South American society and an aesthetic idiom of the baroque. As Salman Rushdie (1991) argues, the surrealist

universes of Márquez are not “magical” in some never-never land sense, but in the sense that they are embodiments of a genuine historical and political consciousness.⁵⁸

Given this, it seems curious that not only have few critics to date tried to make a positive case for Nostromo as an epic, but also that some have seen it as the *opposite* of an epic. Victor J. Emmet argues that Nostromo is an “anti-epic” that “undercuts the metaphysic of the imperialist, capitalist stage and the very idea of real heroism”.⁵⁹ In Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper (1990) Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan suggests, from a quite different ideological perspective, that Conrad’s text deconstructs the “communal” and integrating mode of epic because “the very absence of an identifiable collective subject or community is the subject of the novel”.⁶⁰

Yet, if Moretti is correct, then it is possible to see the epic as being an essential modality of modernism rather than (as Emmet and Erdinast-Vulcan suggest) a “reactionary” component of it that a writer like Conrad had to overcome in order to become a “real” modernist. In Moretti’s terms, modernism cannot be fully crystallized as a historically intelligible phenomenon until this process whereby epic models were grafted onto the form of the modern novel is properly investigated and understood (a list of such works might include, for starters, Joyce’s Ulysses, Eliot’s The Wasteland, Melville’s Moby Dick and Thomas Mann’s The Magic Mountain). The famously negative stance towards modernism of the Marxist Georg Lukács (on whose theory of the epic Erdinast-Vulcan partly bases her analysis of Conrad) may in this sense be accounted for in terms of the resurgence of an epic ambition within it that he felt had to be anterior to its historical development. In The Theory of the Novel (1920), Lukács defines the novel as the antithesis, in spirit, of the great epic, “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God”.⁶¹ Without a positive feel for epic as a dynamic and developing genre it is hard to see how it is possible to appreciate what many of the classical texts of modernism are trying to do, so clearly are these works articulated within and against epic precedents and models.

What makes the notion of classifying Nostromo as a kind of modern version of the ancient form of the epic so attractive is that the latter belongs decisively to an era that precedes the hegemony of literacy in the West. Athenian Greece codified an aesthetics of the epic as an organic unity, and in so doing imposed the symmetry-

seeking thought-patterns of a literate mind-set on a form that was originally collaborative, digressive and disorderly in its nature. As a result of a gradual tidying up of The Iliad and The Odyssey by Aristotle, Plato and Socrates, the classical epic came to be viewed as the exclusive achievement of a single individual (Homer), and the whole legacy of improvised oral performance out of which it had emerged centuries earlier was suppressed.⁶²

Yet, as Isidore Okpekwu has shown in his study The Epic in Africa (1979), epic remains a vital and flourishing oral form in cultures that have not yet been fully penetrated by the rational agendas of a literate West that needs to *write* its memory in order to feel it fully possesses it. The inner structure of the still-living form of the epic in sub-Saharan Africa in no way resembles the formidable aesthetic system of symmetry and architectural unity outlined by Aristotle in Poetics.⁶³ Rather, the African epic is a “song”, a “narrative collage of affective moments and moods”, and a permanently changing and digressive narrative shaped by “the mood of the moment” and the “psychological union of the poet and his audience”.⁶⁴

The structure of the oral epic is largely built up out of *formulae*, a store of different combinations of nouns and epithets (for example, “fleet-footed Achilles”, “all-seeing Zeus”, etc.), which enable the epic poet to vary his language while also adapting his story-telling rhythm so that it will always fit into memory-assisting metrically regular lines. Likewise, the main compositional unit of the epic is *the episode* rather than the larger sweep of history against which the episode acquires its fullest significance, for the simple reason that the oral poet must think of narrating in an incremental fashion, one event at a time. “The epic poet concentrates on one episode at a time; the tale is conceived of in units”.⁶⁵

Nostromo is often either criticized (by orthodox formalists) or, alternatively, iconoclastically celebrated (by devotees of postmodernity) for *inter alia* its digressiveness, stuttering episodic narrative structure, and its tendency to lapse into uninflected paratactic and formulaic language, especially in relation to its heroes and anti-heroes (e.g. Charles Gould, Don Carlos, El Rey du Sulaco, Senor Administrator, etc.). However, once these narrative eccentricities are grasped not as symptoms of an authorial awkwardness, but as signposts of an underlying resurgent epic emphasis on

writing as music, song and *aurality*, they become the basis for a genuine historical perception of the novel as a “socially symbolic act”. For viewed as a modernist recoding of the ancient oral form of the epic, the “difficult” and “clumsy” aspects of Nostromo become fully intelligible as elements of a narrative whose overall purpose is to challenge the epistemological hegemony of the rational, industrial West at the very point at which its own dependence on that hegemony would seem to be at its most ineluctable: namely, writing and script.

Nowhere is Conrad’s modernist epic recoding of the (outwardly romantic or “exotic”) texture of the narrative of Nostromo more strikingly evident than in the apparently throw-away moment early on when the narrator refers to “two wandering sailors – Americanos, perhaps, but gringos of some sort for certain” that go in search of hidden treasure in the Azuera Peninsula only to fall prey to an old South American curse associating “by an obscure instinct of consolation the ideas of evil and wealth” (N, 4). What is notable about this digression into local oral folklore is that it is not conveyed ironically or condescendingly, as it might be in a narrative that might wish to use such a detour as a round-about way of underlining the superior pragmatism and tolerance of the narrator’s (universal) point of view. Rather, the anecdote of the treasure-hunting gringos is told with grim Lévi-Strauss-like earnestness, as a local myth that must be seen as a language that genuinely competes with the rational regime of written discourse of which the narrator is the custodian:

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 ghost would have renounced and been released. (N, 5)

This story of the gringos on the Azuera is important because it sets out to solve the contradictions of Imperialist capitalism within a folkloric, popular (and implicitly oral) frame of reference that is non-Western and non-bourgeois in origin (of course, the moment it enters the narrative it becomes something else). The novel’s subsequent reworking of the folkloric motif of the unrepentant glory-hunting gringos into various levels of its attempt to produce a coherent history of Costaguana (whereby the

faithless money-fixated gringos come to be seen as allegorical forerunners or ghostly “versions” of Emilia and Charles Gould, and / or of Nostromo and Decoud) suggests not so much a moralizing or aestheticizing appropriation of a quaint oral tradition (though it is partly that), but, more strikingly, a feverish desire to convert the oral into the textual that amounts to an open display of the latter’s obsessional dependence on the former. Jeremy Hawthorn captures the free-floating, dislocated nature of the resultant narrative process when he writes that it is “not so much god-like as ghost-like, less a detached and all-seeing perspective looking down on its characters, backwards and forwards in time, altering in identity from personified to non-personified narrator”.⁶⁶

In the previous chapter, it was argued that the contradictions embedded in “Heart of Darkness” make sense only once they are decoded and reorganized in terms of the unspoken *Weltschmerz* of an urban colonial culture destined, by the curse of history placed upon it, continually to drift away from the generative realms of community and Nature. To reach this conclusion, it was necessary to read Marlow’s romance allegorically and against itself, as it were. In *Nostromo*, there is no Marlow-figure, or, to put it another way, no legitimized romantic-subjective-impressionist focus for the production of narrative. In this novel, therefore, history expresses itself directly, unallegorically and visibly as a generous baroque complexity of *form*. This form bears the traces of an emergent global capitalist culture characterized by a contradictory dynamic: on the one hand, a massive centralization of economies and technologies; on the other hand, a centrifugal dispersal and coexistence of diverse cultural modes of seeing and representation.

In his next novel, *The Secret Agent*, Conrad offers what he describes, with ironic self-deprecation, as a “simple tale” of the nineteenth century. In the process, he moves away from what is sometimes condescendingly referred to as the “periphery” of the world system (Latin America), and towards its so-called “centre” (London). This move follows on logically from the successful creation in *Nostromo* of a quasi-epic modernist form receptive to the globalizing dynamic of Late Capitalism. No country played a greater role in shaping the landscape of the nineteenth century world than England; no city was more central to the development of a global capitalist culture than London, claustrophobic locus of *The Secret Agent*.

At the same time, this marked shift of focus from Third World periphery to capitalistic centre in The Secret Agent is accompanied by a noticeable darkening of the subject matter. Conrad's "simple tale" of London is a grisly account of the way in which a big modern city grotesquely distorts social relations and consciousness. Yet, too, the narrowing of the human and moral focus that happens in The Secret Agent becomes the pretext for a kind of ironic excess, a celebration of the possibilities of novelistic form in modern culture.

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CHAPTER THREE – THE SECRET AGENT

First Horizon: Political Context

Set in London in 1886, The Secret Agent offers a sharply ironic vision of England.¹ In the dedication to H.G. Wells that prefaces the novel, Conrad characterizes it as a “simple tale of the nineteenth century”.

England in the nineteenth century was a congenial setting for “simple tales”. Such was the colossal success of England as an industrial power at this time that even minds as robust as Marx and Engels succumbed to occasional fantasies about the role the nation might perform as a catalyst for a world revolution. As Eric Hobsbawm writes, “their hopes of European revolution depended to a great extent on the changes in the most advanced capitalist country, and the only one with a conscious movement of the proletariat on a mass scale”.²

Here is a letter written by Marx to Meyer and Vogt on April 9, 1870:

England, as the metropolis of world capital, as the country which has hitherto ruled the world market, is for the time being the most important country for working-class revolution; moreover, it is the only country in which the material conditions for this revolution have developed to a certain degree of maturity. Hence the most important task of the International is to accelerate the social revolution in England.³

It is a neat thesis, but history has not so far been kind to it. Twentieth century Marxists have treated Marx’s early predictions about revolution in England with caution (it is fair to say that Marx himself later modified his view). Gareth Stedman Jones argues that Marx’s perception of the revolutionary potency of the English working class erroneously assumed that its classic enemy, the manufacturing bourgeoisie, was actually in control of the English State, a simplification of the actual state of affairs. Jones notes “the inadequacies in [Marx’s] attempt to construct a materialist theory of the state and his consequent inability to match up the abstract stateless citizenship of the proletariat with the actual behaviour of working-class members of a concrete nation state”.⁴

In fact, as Stedman Jones suggests, the English State was remarkable for the high degree of persistence within it of patrician and landed elite interests. In other words, England, the vibrant hub of nineteenth century capitalism, was blessed (or cursed, depending on one's political perspective) with a State the historic structures of which militated against the political expression of a "classical" manufacturing bourgeoisie. This is what Marx's analysis of the unique nature of English working class revolutionary potential misses out – the fact that the English working class confronted an essentially inefficient English State comprising anachronistic mercantile and feudal elements and oriented towards survival at all costs rather than a politically self-confident manufacturing bourgeoisie intent on pressing forward with a world-capitalist agenda.

As Arno J. Mayer suggests, "the monarchy and the landed elite tamed the industrialization of England without succumbing to it":

There was no movement to remove the crown, the royal court, the House of Lords, and the ascriptive public service nobility. Despite the decline of agriculture and despite insular security, which vitiated the need for a strong military caste, the landed classes managed to perpetuate this "archaic" political order and culture.⁵

The formation of the modern English State bypassed the revolutionary developments that engulfed most of the rest of Western Europe in the nineteenth century. Yet, paradoxically, its retention of pre-modern elements was precisely due to its early global mercantile-capitalist success in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This success, partly a product of the gentry's early conversion of itself into a commercial class, furnished it with a uniquely powerful and extensive economic and military base that (along with England's geographical insularity) enabled it to avoid developing a bourgeois nationalism based around a response to the French Revolution as most of Europe's other countries had been forced to.

As Tom Nairn argues, modern English nationalism is an enigma: both backward-looking, especially in its retention of servile institutions such as the monarchy, and

progressive in the sense that its whole *modus operandi* is based around a rational survival strategy in a modern capitalist context:

Regal-popular nationalism was unusual in eschewing both the ethnic and popular motifs of 19th century popular mobilization. It had to replace these by a less doctrinaire and formal illusion of equality, which could only come from familial community: a cultivated sense of moral oneness derived from other sources than radical individualism or vulgar populism.⁶

The success with which this “crown ideology” was implanted in modern England partly hinged on the State system’s ability to contain and defuse the politically modernizing social forces associated with a successful form of manufacturing capitalist production. This “strategy of containment” was achieved by a kind of feat of politico- geographical engineering, a socio-economic zoning of England whereby the nation’s dominant manufacturing centres (and the democratizing dialectic of class struggle connected with them) became concentrated in the midland and northern areas of the country, while the southern areas remained a haven for mercantile finance capital (centred on The City of London) and large-scale agriculture.

In this “North-South” division of England, London became the unequivocal centre of the modern nation’s ideological production of itself. Nairn notes of modern England, “the special kind of dominance exerted by its Capital or heartland area, and the peculiar social priority accorded to personal speech (spoken accent) over the written, the formal and the ‘bureaucratic’”.⁷ He adds that the “neo-caste structure of the elite which made it such an imitable model was based on the triumph of fashionable London over provincial diversity”.⁸

In The Secret Agent, London is offered as a claustrophobic locus of bovine political complacency and intra-class violence presided over by a ponderous grandee Home Secretary Sir Ethelred (modelled on the historical figure of Sir William Harcourt) whose repeated refrain of “be lucid, please” parodies a system of governance that justifies its own immobility by privileging speaking “properly” over acting appropriately, and giving priority to patrician style over pragmatic substance. The text parodically confronts the ludicrous ineptness of this political class in a narrative that presides over the metaphorical implosion of an urban nuclear family (the Verlocs of

Soho), a staged, somewhat cruel, decimation of the most basic reproductive unit of “the nation” of which the likes of Ethelred are the supposed custodians. The two murders and a suicide that lead to the tragic demise of the Verlocs mockingly rewrite the semiotics of a top-down, myopic modern English nationalism as the pulverization of a plebeian London family-unit, symbolic reference-point of a governing class project to justify the continuance of its rule by tacit and explicit appeals to a collective nostrum of “moral oneness”.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the mid-century manufacturing ascendancy of England had begun to wane, marking the start of a phase of chronic industrial decline that was to last well into the twentieth century. The period of the onset of English manufacturing capitalism’s long slow decline was also marked by a new wave of militant energy from below. Writing about the growth of workers’ political militancy in the unions located in the East End of London in the late 1880s, Engels seemed guardedly optimistic:

What I consider far more important than this momentary fashion among bourgeois circles of affecting a mild dilution of Socialism, and even more than the actual progress Socialism has made in England generally [...] is the revival of the East End of London. That immense haunt of misery is no longer the stagnant pool it was six years ago. It has shaken off its torpid despair, has returned to life, and has become the home of what is called ‘new unionism’, that is to say, of the great mass of ‘unskilled’ workers. This organization may to a great extent adopt the form of the old unions of ‘skilled’ workers but is essentially different in character.⁹

In response to this upsurge in working class radicalism, the English socialist movement began to regroup in the early 1880s.

The Socialist League was formed in London in 1883. The League was the forerunner of the present-day British Labour Party. Though Engels favoured the principle that led to the formation of the League (that is, the creation of a party committed to the furtherance of working class political interests in England), he was largely critical of its methods (note the phrase about the “momentary fashion among bourgeois circles of affecting a mild dilution of Socialism” in the quotation cited above). Engels judged that the English leadership of the League (it included “amateur” figures such as

William Morris and Dr. Aveling) lacked the theoretical background and tactical acumen to lead a social revolution in England.

The League fell into disarray after Bloody Sunday, a peaceful protest that ended bloodily when police attacked protesters in the centre of London in 1887. "The League is passing through a crisis," Engels wrote at the time, "[William] Morris has fallen headlong over the phrase 'revolution' and become a victim of the anarchists".¹⁰ A month later, Engels was describing the League leader William Morris, in a letter to Laura Lafargue, as a "settled sentimental socialist".¹¹

Bloody Sunday split the League into a reformist wing and an ultra-radical faction. The latter was made up largely of anarchists. The leading exponent of anarchism in England in the late 1880s was the charismatic Russian aristocratic political exile, Prince Kropotkin. As the historian E.P. Thompson writes in his biography of William Morris, "to the Leftists thirsting for the revolution, Kropotkin's was a name to conjure with – Scientist and Adventurer, 'Apostle of Revolutionary Socialism'".¹²

The "reformist" faction of the League advocated a gradualist approach to challenging social inequality in England, a careful commitment to modifying existing State structures. This explicitly non-revolutionary stance is the most enduring strand of the socialist legacy in official English politics today (the Labour Party, which dates back to 1894, has retained this accommodationist emphasis throughout its existence as the "official" voice of the English left).

The criticism often levelled at the official modern English left is that it is too close to the elite power structure that it purports to oppose. Predicated on the idea of advancing working class interests without fundamentally changing the structure of the State in England, it arguably allowed itself to be incorporated and neutered by a conservative grandee governing class only too eager to pander to its every reformist wish so long as it continued promising to leave the existing legal and political defences of private property essentially intact.

As Nairn suggests, the English ruling class had, since the seventeenth century at least, evolved a system of co-opting dissenting elements in order to retain its insular

privileges and consolidate its global power, and a well-meaning but theoretically and tactically weak English socialist movement was easily incorporated into its programme of political survival. "From 1688 up to the middle of the 18th century [was] the founding period in which England's patrician Revolution was consolidated and rendered 'British' by the assimilation of the Scottish State in 1707," Nairn writes, and "what that process created was a pre-democratic class State distinct from both the Absolute Monarchies still dominating Europe and (later) from the lower-class, more emphatically *bourgeois* and nationalist regimes aimed at by revolutionaries in the spirit of 1776, 1789 and 1848".¹³

What of Joseph Conrad's specific links with the English left? Fleishman is correct in his assertion that Conrad generally mixed with a left-wing milieu comprising "Shaw, Wells and other politically committed writers".¹⁴ Conrad was in fact acquainted with a wider range of prominent left-wing writers and intellectuals operating in England than Fleishman's brief list allows for (it included *inter alia*, H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Roger Casement, Bertrand Russell, and Robert Cunninghame Graham). Indeed, with Cunninghame Graham – a key figure in the early history of modern English socialism, actually one of those wounded by the police at the Bloody Sunday riot – Conrad enjoyed perhaps his longest and deepest personal friendship. Some of the correspondence with Cunninghame Graham strongly hints at a shared sardonic perspective on the gradualist ambitions of the English Left. In a letter to Cunninghame Graham dated February 16, 1905, Conrad offers an extended parody of Fabian technocratic optimism. "The stodgy sun of the future – our early Victorian future – lingers on the horizon, but all the same it will rise – it will indeed – to throw its sanitary light upon a dull world of perfected municipalities and W.C.s *sens peur et sans reproche*. The grave of individual temperaments is being dug by GBS [George Bernard Shaw] and HGW [H.G. Wells] with hopeful industry" (CL, 3, 217).

Also, if Conrad had fairly extensive links with the left via his connections with other artists and writers in England, there was nothing exceptional about this at the time. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm writes, in an important essay entitled "Socialism and the Avant-Garde 1880-1914" (1998), the links between modernism, labour movements, and organized left-wing politics remained strong in Europe up until the end of the First World War. "Until the end of the century," writes Hobsbawm, "a good deal of

common ground existed between the cultural avant-gardes and the arts admired by discriminating minorities on the one hand, and the increasingly Marxist-influenced social democracy on the other".¹⁵

As Hobsbawm notes, in England in the 1880s and 1890s, writers like William Morris, George Bernard Shaw, and Walter Crane were influenced by Marxist ideas and, as a consequence, drawn into direct socialist activity. Furthermore, figures of the late nineteenth century sexual revolution, such as Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter, while not necessarily Marxist in their outlook, operated in the same milieu. Even the foppish wit Oscar Wilde wrote a book on the subject of socialism.

In the life and career of William Morris, an integrated connection between Marxism as an ideology, and cultural production as a practice, in England is strikingly evident. Morris is the subject of a major biography by the English left-wing historian, E.P. Thompson, one of the few authoritative sources for the inter-relationships between aesthetics and politics at this crucial conjuncture in English history. Morris, as Hobsbawm notes, made "a powerful theoretical as well as an outstanding practical contribution to the social transformation of the arts".¹⁶

Conrad appears not to have been directly acquainted with Morris. However, he was clearly interested in him as a cultural figure. In a letter to Garnett dated 23 December 1897, Conrad writes "I wait anxiously for the Morris book. I've an idea of him. He was an artist and a man of art. The gybes about Wardour St I've seen and they seem contemptible" (CL, 1, 428-9).

Of course, The Secret Agent is based on a historically precise event in the history of the English left: the failed anarchist terrorist strike on London (the Greenwich Bomb Outrage of 1894). According to Hobsbawm, the connection between anarchism and avant-garde art in England strengthened in the first decade of the twentieth century (whereas in the 1880s and 1890s writers and artists had tended to read Marx before Nietzsche or Bakunin).¹⁷ Whether Conrad had any direct links with anarchist circles in England is open to question. Ian Watt writes that, even though the picture of the English left wing milieu that emerges from the pages of The Secret Agent is "slightly fanciful and [...] very selective", it is nonetheless "initiated" rather than naïve.¹⁸

Norman Sherry suggests that Conrad's knowledge of the Greenwich Bomb Outrage came from various texts, on the one hand, and from the anecdotes of Ford Madox Ford, on the other.¹⁹

In a letter to Methuen in November 1906, Conrad suggests that The Secret Agent was "based on the inside knowledge of a certain event in the history of active anarchism" (CL, 3, 371). However, in a letter to his friend John Galsworthy he denies that The Secret Agent has any real connection with anarchism as a political philosophy. "The whole thing is superficial and it is but a tale," he protests, "I had no idea to consider Anarchism politically or to treat it in its philosophical aspect: as a manifestation of human nature in its discontent and imbecility" (CL, 3, 354).

If Conrad's relations with organized anarchism remain obscure, what is clearer is that Conrad maintained an active dialogue with writers in England who were part of the "official" left for a number of years. The relationship with Cunninghame Graham has already been cited as an important link with the English left. In addition, Conrad knew the playwright George Bernard Shaw and the writer H.G. Wells, both members of the London-based left-wing Fabian Society. Founded in 1884, the Fabian Society joined the Labour Party in 1900, where it played a background role in the formation of party ideology for a number of years. It was not a mass-based political party, but a coterie of writers, amateur reformers and intellectuals (the Webbs, Ramsay MacDonald, Bernard Shaw and others). The Society was committed to evolutionary rather than revolutionary change, and to the gradual modification of capitalism, as opposed to any kind of classical Marxist tactic of working class appropriation of the means of production.²⁰

With Wells (1866-1946), Conrad (and indeed his family) enjoyed an extended and intermittently very warm friendship. For a number of years, Wells and Conrad lived close to each other in Kent, and there were frequent visits, both for social and intellectual purposes. Of course, first and foremost, Conrad and Wells were professional colleagues. Conrad admired Wells' science fiction, and was also grateful to him for writing the first really perceptive review of one of his early works of fiction (before they actually met and became friends). Wells, born in Bromley, Kent, of

lower-middle class origins, clearly appreciated the affectionate attention of an experienced, cosmopolitan figure like Conrad.

Significantly, The Secret Agent is dedicated to H.G. Wells, published at about the time that his association with the Fabian Society came to a stormy end. In later years, Wells argued that what prompted him to leave the Fabians was his contempt for their amateurism:

I envisaged that reconditioned Fabian Society as becoming, by means of vigorous propaganda, mainly carried on by young people, the directive element of a reorganized socialist party. We should attack the coming generation at the high school, technical college and university stage, and the organization would quicken into a constructive social stratum.²¹

Few would make a serious claim for Wells as a revolutionary intellectual; certainly Leon Trotsky was extremely dismissive of his contribution to Marxist culture.²² Nevertheless, there is a sense in which Wells' account of his falling out with the Fabians highlights a key lacuna in the whole history of English left wing politics – namely, the absence of a genuine revolutionary vanguard organization.

However, there is a possibility that Wells himself may have shared some of the snobbish and elitist attitudes he criticized the Fabian Society for thirty years after he left the organization. In a letter to Wells dated September 1903, Conrad accuses Wells of using his writing to “establish a sort of select circle to which you address yourself leaving the rest of the world outside the pale” (CL, 2, 63). Conrad seems to have detected an arriviste need to posture and declaim in some of Wells' thinking. “Why should you preach to people already convinced,” he asks Wells, exasperatedly, in another letter, “that sort of thing leads only to a sort of high priesthood in a clique and it should be left to people who seek simply the satisfaction of their vanity” (CL, 2, 66). A letter to Wells written in October 1903 coolly suggests that beneath the angry protesting energy of his prose lurks something “strangely conservative” he cannot quite put his finger on (CL, 2, 66).

By the time The Secret Agent was published, Conrad's friendship with Wells appears to have cooled substantially. The tone of the letters to Wells from the period 1904-

1907 is distant and reserved in comparison with the earlier correspondence. Wells later writes his own tendentious account of his relations with Conrad in Experiment in Autobiography (1934), a work that offers a sketch of Conrad as a chilly foreign aesthete lacking in the kind of scientific education that might have commanded his respect and admiration.²³

One of Conrad's last letters to Wells is a request to dedicate The Secret Agent to him. The lay-out and the wording of the dedication gives it something of the appearance of the inscription on a tombstone – perhaps a suggestion that the novel is offered to Wells as a suitable epitaph to their relationship. Whether Wells was conscious of this or not, he accepted the honour of the dedication, for it appears in the text in the same form that Conrad's letter proposes.

At any rate, the dedication to Wells, and the correspondence that pre-dates it, provides a strong anecdotal basis for arguing that The Secret Agent emerges out of a critical dialogue with the English left.

Second Horizon: Dialogic Utterance

The Secret Agent is generally viewed as a counter-revolutionary account of the late nineteenth century English left. This view has been immeasurably strengthened by the fact that some important left-wing critics have been prepared to echo it. Even Fredric Jameson, responsible for the most important sustained Marxist analysis of Conrad's work to date, magisterially waves the novel away as a "counter-revolutionary tract".²⁴

Indeed, it is one of the most puzzling aspects of the whole Marxist critique of Conrad that it has tended to evade serious discussion of The Secret Agent. This omission is doubly curious because the novel would seem on the face of it a crucially important locus for a materialist, politically defined, discussion of modern aesthetics in English fiction. As a novel that deliberately reconstructs a historical episode in organized revolutionary militancy in England, and as a novel set in the nineteenth century global headquarters of capitalism, London, Marxist literary criticism would seem almost obliged to mount a serious and in-depth analysis of The Secret Agent.

There are two important exceptions to this lacuna in Marxist literary criticism: the work done on the novel by Terry Eagleton and Jeremy Hawthorn. These will be considered below.

Terry Eagleton's "Form, Ideology and The Secret Agent" (1983) provides a rigorous materialist analysis of the various forms and aesthetic structures that constitute Conrad's novel. Eagleton examines the text as "an object of scientific literary study" following through on his own proposition that it is to be understood as "a peculiarly paradigmatic example of the complex relations between forms and ideologies, formal elements and ideological sub-ensembles, aesthetic devices and codified perceptions".²⁵ What interests Eagleton about The Secret Agent is the evidence it provides of a semiotic complexity apparently detached from any real historico-political point of focus. The novel is a "compound of spy-thriller, Dickensian 'imaginative realism', 'metaphysical' meditation and [...] naturalism" that somehow floats free of any decisively constricting formal (and, by implication, political) frame of reference.²⁶ For Eagleton, Conrad's novel lacks an organizing epistemological "centre"; a fact inversely demonstrated by the profusion of "derealized" narrative codes that constitute it, a celebration of semiotic relativism that effectively cancels out the absolutist "revolutionary dreams of anarchism".²⁷

However, for all the intellectual sophistication of Eagleton's Marxist analysis of The Secret Agent as a modernist text, it suffers from not being adequately supplemented and balanced by a more definite perspective on the actual political history that precedes and is constitutive of it. This absence is no mere oversight on the part of Eagleton. From the outset he states that he has no interest in the "explicitly 'political' dimension of the novel".²⁸ Moreover, it is significant that his few references to the concrete political milieu underlying the text are confined to anarchism: there is almost no mention made of Marxism as such.

So, while Eagleton insightfully decodes the ideological implications of a range of motifs and discourses in The Secret Agent, his account of the novel is problematized by a seeming reluctance to pose the historical question regarding *why* Joseph Conrad should write a fictional account of revolutionary activities in late nineteenth century London in the first place. Eagleton's own suggestion that Conrad's émigré

conservative distaste for revolutionary politics informs the ideology of The Secret Agent actually makes the absence of such a question in his analysis all the more conspicuous. If the novel is, as asserted, a sardonic counter-revolutionary gesture, then surely its very semiotic richness becomes a kind of epistemological “gift” to that which it is (supposedly) opposed to? What is missing from Eagleton’s essay is a connected narrative that links the insights into the text’s production of ideology with a detailed and accurate account of the political context out of which the text emerged.

Jeremy Hawthorn’s first text on the fiction of Conrad, Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness (1979), devotes a whole chapter to The Secret Agent, in the process redressing an imbalance in the Marxist analysis of Conrad’s fiction. In contrast to Eagleton, who disavows any interest in the “political dimension” of the novel from the outset, and is concerned primarily with abstract questions of literary theory, Hawthorn views The Secret Agent from a broader historical perspective.

For Hawthorn, the novel demonstrates the morally corrosive nature of modern capitalist society. “The world of The Secret Agent is a world of ‘private individuals’ who have the appearance of self-sufficiency and independence, but who are related to one another in all sorts of concealed but crucial ways”.²⁹ In this fictional world, sinister forces tend to rule because “secrecy and agency belong to each other, and constitute together an interlocking unity which is part of the basic structure of society”.³⁰ In Hawthorn’s terms, The Secret Agent is a vision of modern England in which capitalism (or “reification”) is seen to be tragically reducing social existence of individuals to a dreary private “self-sufficiency” punctuated by seemingly arbitrary (but probably secretly self-perpetuating) violent acts of terrorist protest. In this view he finds support from Graham Holderness who argues that The Secret Agent is a “comprehensive vision of a corrupt society, involving the institutions of marriage and private property, police and parliament, city and state, [that] comes strikingly close to the vision of an anarchist”.³¹

However, while Hawthorn’s interpretation of Conrad’s novel as a bleakly critical document of modern London links can be linked with Marxism insofar as the latter is narrowly conceived as a *moral* protest against capitalist society, it is less easy to square with the notion of Marxism as revolutionary ideology. It is perhaps significant,

therefore, that, for Hawthorne, the representatives of revolutionary ideology in The Secret Agent are no better, morally, than the very social order they say they want to overthrow. The London revolutionaries “are in effect treated as *symptomatic* of the society in which they are resident, rather than as worrying *exceptions* to its norms”.³²

At the same time, Hawthorne’s perception of Conrad’s pessimistic assessment of revolutionary practice is carefully qualified by the account of the Professor as a potentially positive revolutionary agent. About the latter Hawthorne writes that he is an exception among the revolutionary characters, as he is “not treated ironically” and is “worthy of respect because of his sincerity”.³³ The Professor is different from the novel’s other revolutionary characters because he is prepared to stand up in public for an idea: “to struggle *openly* for an *idea* is to link private and public, to attempt to unite that which is subjectively human with that which is objectively human”.³⁴ Yet, Hawthorne’s language suggests the Professor as a punctilious moralist rather than the terrorist fanatic that Conrad repeatedly shows him to be. As such, it ignores the novel’s explicit signposting of elements of pathological obsession underlying the Professor’s revolutionary schismatic position of wanting to explode London and make it anew.

Hawthorne’s first analysis therefore lays claim to The Secret Agent as a moral critique of capitalism. In so doing, it displaces the novel from any “hard” version of Marxism as a revolutionary theory of modern society. Perhaps conscious of this, Hawthorne’s second work on Conrad’s fiction seems resolved to offer a more strongly focused Marxist account. In Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment (1990), Hawthorne organizes his analysis of Conrad’s fiction by placing it under three broad thematic categories (“Narrative and Ideology”, “The Critique of Imperialism” and “The Uses of the Imagination”), each of which is then divided into three sub-themes. Within these divisions, there are sometimes still more divisions into various topics. The analytical terminology (e.g. “class and society”, “race and class”, etc) suggests a fairly strong Marxist orientation.

Yet, to move from the first text on Conrad, written in the late 1970s, to the second, published in 1990, is to get some sense of Hawthorne’s growing detachment from The Secret Agent. By a curious paradox this detachment from The Secret Agent in

particular seems to be coextensive with a strengthening Marxist emphasis in relation to Conrad's fiction as a whole.

Of the nine chapters in Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment, only one focuses exclusively on The Secret Agent. In this chapter, moreover, the novel is one of three Conrad texts that Hawthorn scrutinises (the other two are The Nigger of the "Narcissus" and The Rescue). Hence, while Hawthorn's second text appears to be more emphatically and self-confidently Marxist in its presentation of Conrad's work as an object for critical study (especially when it is compared to his first text) the result of this tightening of analytical procedure around Marxist ideas is, oddly, to squeeze The Secret Agent away from the centre of the text's critical discussion of Conrad.

The key critical concept of Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment is "Free Indirect Discourse" (FID), a system that Hawthorn sees as central to Conrad's narrative production, whereby narrative viewpoint and character viewpoint are deliberately and creatively mixed up. Interestingly, the idea of FID appears to have first occurred to Hawthorn in the earlier Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness in the chapter on The Secret Agent.³⁵ In Hawthorn's early text on Conrad, therefore, the notion of FID ("free indirect speech" in its first incarnation) is confined to a local insight about a single Conrad text. In the second study, however, "free indirect speech" is reborn as "Free Indirect Discourse", where it becomes the organizing formal and ideological concept of Conrad's whole fictional enterprise.³⁶

It may be significant that The Secret Agent, marginalized in the transition from the first to the second text on Conrad, on one level, seems to be the occasion of a major conceptual shift in Hawthorn's whole approach to the study of ideology in Conrad's fiction on another.

Robert Cunninghame Graham was one of the first left-wing readers of The Secret Agent to question the political implications of its satire. Conrad's response to this was as follows:

I am glad that you like the *S.Agent*. Vous comprenez bien that the story was written without malice. It had some importance for me as a new departure in *genre* and as a sustained effort in ironical treatment of a melodramatic subject – which was my technical intention....
But I don't think that I've been satirizing the revolutionary world. All these people are not revolutionaries – they are shams (CL, 3, 491)

This letter has been quoted at length to show that, as far as Conrad was concerned, the whole question of the treatment of revolutionary politics in The Secret Agent was tied in with an issue of novelistic form. "I don't think I've been satirizing the revolutionary world," Conrad writes. The novel is an "ironical treatment" of a "melodramatic subject", and it has "some importance for me as a new departure in *genre*". These comments on style and technique are not designed to deflect Cunninghame Graham's irritation. On the contrary, they are attempts to explain the deep motivations (both formal and political) underlying the surface satire of The Secret Agent.

Chapter three of The Secret Agent stages a cluster of dialogues between various members of a London underground revolutionary organization called the "Red Committee". These characters are assembled at the shop-cum-house-cum-propaganda outlet owned by the double agent Verloc in Brett Street, Soho. (The location of Verloc's shop in *Soho* suggests an historically authentic political geography of London. Soho was the place where Karl Marx stayed for much of the time that he was a resident of the city.)

The centre of dialogic energy in this early scene is the character called Michaelis. Seraphic and child-like, with a voice devoid of "all fire, all animation" (TSA, 39), Michaelis offers, on the face of it, an unlikely dialogic locus for the production of Marxist discourse.³⁷ Here is an example of his style of utterance:

History is dominated and determined by the tool and the production – by the force of economic conditions. Capitalism has made socialism, and the laws made by capitalism for the protection of property are responsible for anarchism. No one can tell what form the social organization may take in the future. Then why indulge in prophetic fantasies? (TSA, 37)

This is a fundamentally *public* mode of utterance (oratory) transposed into a private and indeed secretive context. To this extent, there is a fairly obvious (and, as suggested above, historically accurate) satire against English Marxism as a form of preaching-to-the-converted intellectual elitism at work here. The condescending and tired tone of Michaelis, redolent of an Anglican vicar on a holiday break, certainly contains within itself such a critique.

But within this satirical attack on Marxist language as quasi-ecumenical dogma, there are other subtler counter-conservative forms of irony at work. In the late nineteenth century, the image of the Marxist propagated by the capitalist press was (as it to a certain extent still is) of the starveling proletarian revolutionary firebrand, the emaciated and, importantly, sinisterly *silent* incendiary type. Over-weight, garrulous, melancholy, and soft-spoken, Michaelis is thus something like a satirical overturning of a whole cultural apparatus for satirically demonizing “the Marxist”. Part of what makes Michaelis amusing as a Marxist, that is, is that he is so unlike the popular bourgeois stereotype of “the Marxist”. What Michaelis makes possible is not only a satirical view of Marxism, but also a satirical view of this satirical view.

To complement and consolidate this self-reflexive political satire, Conrad offers Karl Yundt (the phonetic resemblance to “Karl Marx” is mischievous) as a character that seems on the face of it to reproduce the paradigm of the Marxist-as-terrorist-threat. With goatee, “a faint black grimace” and an “extraordinary expression of underhand malevolence”, Yundt might at first glance be taken as an image of the revolutionary akin to that which regularly appeared in the cartoons of bourgeois periodicals and papers of the period (TSA, 38). However, what makes the senile, raving Yundt amusing (if that is the word) is that he is *nothing but* a cartoon. Yundt is an image of the power of (bourgeois) anti-Marxist caricatures to distort reality to their own ends. Thus, Yundt actually does not fall within the compass of the novel’s satirical register: there *is* something very sinister about him (and it has nothing directly to do with Marxism). As he utters crimson threats (putatively against the despised “bourgeois order”) his insignia of revolutionary belonging, his goatee, hangs “limply” on his chin; his gesticulation resembles the “effort of a moribund murderer summoning all his remaining strength for a remaining stab” (TSA, 38).

Michaelis, then, is offered as an object of satire because he is a Marxist that thinks he has important things to say, but lacks the confidence, or the intellectual training, to make them seem so to his listeners. Yundt, on the other hand, is an image of the anti-Marxist for whom ideological commitment is a cover for other pathological obsessions, and who speaks about revolutionary violence with an “enunciation [that] would have been almost totally unintelligible to a stranger” (TSA, 38).

So, what seems at first glance an anti-Marxist and/or anti-anarchist satire may be seen, on closer inspection, as a subtle and discriminating ironic register of the ways in which different modes of enunciation give life to (or take life away from) political concepts. In other words, the satire directed against the whole London left-wing culture in The Secret Agent is functional in relation to language rather than political ideology as such. The toothless and despicable Yundt enunciates, for private reasons of his own, the hopeless in-bred language of elitist Marxist coteries and cliques “totally unintelligible” to the uninitiated, while Michaelis, for all the hesitancy of his enunciation and handling of ideas, at least admirably struggles to give shape to a coherent idea of a social future for England. Moreover, as both Hawthorn and Eagleton note, the reason that the novel asks its reader to take the figure of the Professor more seriously than the other sad and pathetic left-wing figures that populate the novel, is that, with a bomb strapped to his body, he clearly recognizes that there is a point at which politics is about actions rather than words

For Michaelis, too, politics is not simply reducible to utterance. The running references to Michaelis as a “ticket-of-leave apostle” and domesticated “martyr” partly mock the hagiographic earnestness of committee-meeting Marxist language, they also position him, potentially more positively, as a figure with first-hand experience of the vindictiveness of the English State. Unlike the indolent and/or sinister Red Committee comrades, Michaelis has spent a considerable portion of his adult life in prison for a politically inspired “crime”, and has therefore done time for his ideological beliefs. Michaelis’ Marxist honesty derives partly from the fact that a coercive English justice system has shaken up his “world picture” and forced him to renegotiate the world on different terms (his ideological conviction therefore has a concrete social basis).

Moreover, it is a measure of the personal sense of shock and urgency that lies behind the laboured mode of enunciation of Michaelis that he actually gains a non-Marxist audience for his ideas while his comrades, confined to in-bred ghettos of London Marxist coterie, do not. Michaelis' success in the Lady Patroness' West End salon illustrates the fact that a wider metropolitan audience may learn to sympathize with Marxism when its concepts are removed from the hermetically sealed realms of academic polemic and committee-room dialectical argument. In this respect Michaelis clearly operates in the tradition of Marx and Engels who argued that the only true test of political ideas resided in their capacity to *change* (rather than merely "interpret") the world. In the early scene in the shop in Brett Street, Michaelis refers to the need to undertake "the education of the masters of the world" (TSA, 43).

Superficially, Conrad offers this unlikely alliance between a working class ex-convict radical and a high-society lady of fashion seemingly impervious to anything but her own social standing satirically, a thrust against an accommodationist English left. Perhaps it is partly that (a version of Engels' scathing remarks about the "momentary fashion among bourgeois circles of affecting a mild dilution of Socialism"). Yet the entry of Michaelis into this milieu of urban privilege also locates him in a strategically useful position to win important converts to the cause of the workers' revolution. Viewed from this angle, Michaelis' apparently ludicrous connection with an urban salon culture can be seen as representing an emergent political possibility in London – a successful Marxist invasion of the social networks and verbal circuits of one of the world's most powerful and influential social classes.

At the same time, the fact that the working class radical Michaelis gains access at all to this world presupposes the emergence of a self-destructive ideological dynamic within it. This is how the novel represents the Lady Patroness' justification of her embrace of Michaelis:

She was not an exploiting capitalist herself, she was, as it were, above the play of economic conditions. And she had a great capacity of pity for the more obvious forms of common human miseries, precisely because she was such a complete stranger to them that she had to translate her conception into terms of mental suffering before she could grasp the notion of their cruelty (TSA, 85: 6)

The extreme, almost perverse, sentimentality of the Lady Patroness' attitude to the working class Michaelis must imply, at some level, the disintegration of the ideological cement that had held her class together for a century or more. Faced with an incipiently powerful labour movement challenging its power from within (as Engels' remarks about the "new unionism" in the East End cited above indicate), and the prospects of increased competition for its economic interests abroad from the neo-Imperial States of U.S.A. and Germany, the late nineteenth century London moneyed elite, insulated from political care for so long by the dividends of Empire, and now being squeezed from two sides at once, was, suggests The Secret Agent, beginning to show signs of panic.

In fact, this mood is shown to afflict not just a privileged urban class, but also the whole English Establishment (the powerful interlocking social and economic interests at the centre of English State power). The State's whole approach to solving the hideous terrorist "crime" at the centre of the novel, the Greenwich Park explosion, hinges not on broad policy issues (e.g. public safety, national sovereignty) but on a concern as absurdly trivial as that of respecting the delicate inter-personal dynamics at work in Assistant Commissioner of Police's wife's afternoon bridge group. Crucially, the need to preserve the Lady Patroness' honour is identical, in this instance, with the need to exonerate her "adopted son", the Marxist Michaelis, from blame for the Greenwich Park debacle (he might otherwise have been a convenient scape-goat). If the plot of the novel is read this way, then Michaelis' positioning of himself at the centre of a corrupt and increasingly demoralized urban class seems like sensible politics.

So the Lady Patroness-Michaelis axis is not simply to be interpreted as a satirical thrust against an accommodationist Marxism, but rather, and more especially, an ironic commentary on a class whose internal contradictions seemed to be forcing it to become an accomplice of the agent of a practical philosophy that precisely forecasts its violent demise.

Just as a brief aside, Sherry suggests that the character of Michaelis is based on the Fenian radical, Michael Davitt. While it is not my intention to contradict this insight, it might be added that Michaelis also bears certain resemblances to the real-life figure

of William Morris. First, there is an immediate phonetic similarity evident in their names (Michaelis, Morris). Second, Michaelis is depicted as a slow thinker and a clumsy speaker. As leader of the Socialist League, Morris was often criticized for his poor grasp of Marxist theory, though the nobility of his intentions were never in doubt (see Engels remarks about Morris as a “sentimental socialist”, cited above). It may also be significant that Michaelis is consistently associated with bourgeois domestic interiors in the novel (Brett Street, the West End salon, the Kent retreat). In the same era, the Marxist-convert William Morris produced furniture and domestic household goods adorned with simple depictions of nature and the countryside that conquered the interior spaces of an urban bourgeoisie both in Britain and, later, throughout Europe. Thus, this secret link between Michaelis and Morris might represent the possibility of a convergence between Marxist ideology and cultural production that Conrad was keen to investigate and explore in his novel. This indeed may be one of the buried secret codes of The Secret Agent.

As a dramatized figure, Michaelis plays no direct part in the narrative after two early cameo appearances in Brett Street and in the West End salon. Conrad’s decision strategically to withdraw him from the increasingly sordid moral texture of the narrative may in itself be interpreted as a gesture of sympathy towards his dialogic viewpoint. But while Michaelis vanishes from the foreground of the narrative’s drama, his soft bulky figure looms large in its background. By the end of the novel Michaelis is, according to the Professor, holed up in a cottage somewhere in the Kent countryside, on a rigorous diet, writing a book about ““a world planned out like an immense and nice hospital, with gardens and flowers, in which the strong are to devote themselves to the nursing of the weak”” (TSA, 225).

While this final acerbic account of Michaelis is characteristic of the Professor’s generally sardonic perspective on the London revolutionaries, it seems, in other respects, somewhat partial and incomplete. Specifically, the account the Professor offers of the book that Michaelis is writing is internally contradictory. Initially he refers to it as a “biography”, but his later description of it seems to imply that it is a meditative or philosophical work (““the idea of the world planned out like an immense and nice hospital””). Moreover, these two generic classifications both contradict an earlier, and seemingly more precise, account of the book (from the

police) as an “*Autobiography of a Prisoner*, which was to be like a book of Revelation in the history of mankind” (TSA, 96).

The Professor’s account, at the end of the novel, of the book that Michaelis is writing is thus sufficiently unstable to invite the reader to engage in conjecture about the kind of book he might *actually* be writing. Given that physical imprisonment has had a profound and radicalising psychological effect on Michaelis (the novel is clear about this), one might speculate that the book is, as the police seem to think, about this period of his life (the very act of writing, holed up in a isolated bucolic cottage on a minimal diet, seems ironically to simulate the material conditions of enforced confinement). Also, given that Michaelis is confessedly a Marxist, it may make sense to see him writing a book recounting his experience as a prisoner of the English State, perhaps with a view to exposing its inner workings and subverting, with words, a symbolically important site of ruling class interests. After all, too, the prison memoir is a genre classically associated with the intellectual milieu of the left in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (the works of Gramsci, Solzhenitsyn, and Albie Sachs are among the more obvious examples).

(Life and art seem to overlap here. By the end of The Secret Agent, Michaelis is probably writing a book about prison in a friend’s cottage in Kent. Joseph Conrad, as he wrote this, would himself have been holed up in a cottage in Kent – a place, moreover, with the title “Pent Farm”, the name itself a pun on the notion of confinement and imprisonment.)

Michaelis is, as has been suggested, consistently offered by Conrad in terms of satire, but the novel also takes seriously his proposition of the need to educate the “masters of the world” by keeping open the possibility that he may, at some point, use the material advantages turned over to him by an ideologically disoriented metropolitan elite genuinely to advance the cause of revolutionary change in England. In the previous chapter, it was argued that the novel Nostromo raises the possibility that its central character uses the corrupting store of silver he has appropriated from the ruling class in the fictional Latin American state of Sulaco to help fund a revolutionary war against the class that controls the means of producing the silver. In The Secret Agent, one needs only to amend the symbolic exchange system to suit

“local conditions” (i.e. substitute English words for South American silver), and perhaps the salon socialist figure of Michaelis may be taken to represent the possibility of performing a similar tables-turning political act in London, the heart of the world capitalist system in the nineteenth century.

But if Marxist-Michaelism is one dialogic centre for the production of political discourse in the novel, it is far from being the only one. Ossipon-anarchism provides another.

In contrast to Michaelis, Ossipon speaks the truncated, aggressive debating-point language of committee meetings and night-classes in workingmen’s clubs. Part of the function Ossipon performs, then, is to make available a fast, sharp aphoristic discourse of politics that contrasts with the rather dogged dialectics of Marxist-Michaelism (in fact, the true dialogic agent of this aphoristic mode of utterance in the novel is Ossipon’s drinking partner, the bitingly ironic Professor).

Ossipon’s anarchist position on revolutionary agency also contrasts with Michaelis’ Marxist sense of revolutionary struggle as a difficult and uneven process of contesting ruling class power on its own ground. Whereas the key word in Michaelis’ lexicon of revolutionary theory is “patience”, Ossipon foregrounds the “emotional readiness of the masses” as the key agency of meaningful political change. Also, whereas Michaelis labours to arrive at an essentially *personal* conception of the best way to oppose capitalism effectively, Ossipon believes that his notion of revolution has the full backing and authority of a value-free objective science. “I am speaking now to you scientifically – scientifically –” he proclaims in front of Michaelis at one point (TSA, 47).

But though Ossipon adopts a language of fiery revolutionary impatience, Conrad’s underlying suggestion is that this figure does little, in practical terms, to back up his verbal commitments with concrete actions. A miasma of Yundt-like impotence hovers over his self-confident utterances. The narrative’s allusions to his labour – the lectures, medical pamphlets, and propaganda efforts on behalf of the Red Committee – function primarily to intensify the irony that attaches to his dogmatic utterance. The narrative tactic of elaborately naming Ossipon via his public achievements and

activities subtly suggests that his reputation is based on rather narrow criteria: the sycophantic acclaim prevalent in self-serving revolutionary cadres. Ironically, this satirical use of a language of adoration is not dissimilar to the tactic Conrad used to indicate the “cult of personality” that grows up around Charles Gould Junior’s management of the silver mine in Nostromo – in that novel, the mock-epic garlanding of character with flattering soubriquets operates as ironic confirmation of the reach of the mine’s corruptive power.

Also, the so-called science that Ossipon thinks guarantees the authority of his radical convictions is questionable. In the early scene in Brett Street, Ossipon withdraws from the dialogic arena dominated by Michaelis – an action that perhaps reflects an attitude of intellectual retreat – to enunciate the principles of this so-called science. Ossipon cites the childish scrawls of the simple-minded and inarticulate Stevie Verloc as examples of “degeneracy”. ““Typical of this sort of degeneracy,”” announces Ossipon, ““that’s what he may be called scientifically. Very good type, too, altogether, of that sort of degenerate. It’s enough to glance at the lobes of his ears. If you read Lombroso...”” (TSA, 40, 41).

In its spirit and style, the so-called science of Cesare Lombroso belongs very much to the last decades of nineteenth century Europe.³⁸ Max Nordau, whose work, Degeneration (1892) Conrad was familiar with through his acquaintance with Cunninghame Graham, was a self-confessed devotee of Lombroso. In a letter to Robert Cunninghame Graham’s mother, A.E. Bontine, Conrad refers to a “Max Nordau autograph” belonging to Cunninghame Graham, asking if he may keep it. He also makes reference to Nordau, in a language of enthusiasm that is distinctly double-edged: “He is a Doctor and a Teacher – no doubt about it. But for all that he is wondrous kind” (CL, 1, 121). (Notably Conrad’s reference to Nordau as a “Doctor and a Teacher” replicates the language used to describe the Lombroso-disciple Ossipon in The Secret Agent.)

The link between the psuedo-science of Lombroso and left-wing ideology requires explanation. On the face of it, it seems bizarre. For whereas the science enunciated by Lombroso seeks to view society according to “objective” or “value-free” criteria, Marxist science is based on a historicizing dialectical practice oriented towards

bringing about political change. (In fact, Lombrosan science is not actually objective either. The concept of “degeneracy” implies a pre-existent idea of what constitutes non-degeneracy or “normality”.) Also, Lombrosan science sketches a social landscape animated by primordial agencies rather than seeking to understand social behaviour as a determinate reflection of a material situation, i.e. the mode of production.

Lombrosan science assumes a reified model of social reality even as it seeks to characterize it as a battleground for competing biological forces.

Lombroso's essential argument about crime is that it is the product of genetics rather than social or economic forces. Criminals, he suggests, may belong to any socio-economic group (though he generally focuses on those who are poor) and may be identified by their physical features – shape of skulls, noses, ears, and so on. Around this core Darwinist argument, Lombroso (perhaps seeking to impart scientific “dignity” to his essentially outlandish theories) lightly sketches in other, more clearly environmental, mechanisms by which to model the individual's propensity to commit criminal acts. For instance, he contends that, while crime is essentially determined by genetics, it is more likely to occur in “a dense population” like a city.³⁹ He also argues that countries with a hot climate are more susceptible to crime, a fact, he says, that explains why Italy has an endemic problem with criminals and a cooler Anglo-Saxon country like Britain does not.⁴⁰

A theoretical and practical ground on which a conjuncture between Lombrosan science and revolutionary Marxist or anarchist theory might be envisaged would be that of an ultra-leftist or anarchist emphasis on the essential *vitality* of the (usually working class) criminal, in comparison to the sterility of the legal-bourgeois-capitalist order ranged in opposition to him. From this angle, anarchist or extreme left wing thinking might mobilize Lombroso as part of a tactic of celebrating “the criminal” as an icon of anti-capitalist subversive energy. Lombroso actually lists “the revolutionary” as one of his “degenerate” criminal types (along with prostitutes, writers, and so forth).

By characterizing the working class Stevie Verloc as a Lombrosan “degenerate”, then, Ossipon may mean to suggest that the young Verloc is a figure somehow magically endowed with Promethean revolutionary energy. In this sense, the Lombrosan

formula that Ossipon applies to Stevie reflects a tendency (from which even Marx and Engels were not entirely exempt) to sentimentalise the working class as the uniquely well-qualified agents of revolution and therefore of mankind's salvation.

However, the novel shows that Stevie, as a late nineteenth century working class male Londoner, does not "transcend" his class experience, but, rather, bears the physical and psychological scars of a uniquely rigid and coercive social system. Almost completely inarticulate, Stevie is existentially branded by an upper class obsession with correct pronunciation and "speaking well". Franco Moretti notes that in "status societies" (of which late nineteenth century London was certainly one), there is a fierce "heteroglossia" at work, "all sorts of local and professional jargons, of almost sumptuary distinctions and nuances, of expressive idiosyncracies and arcana of communication".⁴¹ Unable to make his voice heard above the din of London's heteroglossia (the jargon-spouting Left-wing caste that gathers at Brett Street strangely displays the worst aspects of this status-obsession), Stevie is structurally unable to look after himself, let alone perform a heroic revolutionary task on behalf of suffering humanity. Moreover, his "idiocy" is not so much a sign of a lower class non-conformism and "animal spirits" that the revolutionary left must tap into, as it is probably a product of the squalid living conditions and a woefully inept system of public training for the poor in nineteenth century London. Indeed, far from being the outlaw-degenerate Ossipon implies he is, Stevie's tendency unquestioningly and dumbly to trust adults that show the remotest interest in him suggest that he has been utterly conditioned and "socially programmed" not to disturb (and thus to reinforce) the interlocking social, economic and political interests that constitute modern London at a hegemonic level.

The above may explain Stevie's willingness to help carry the bomb destined for the Greenwich Observatory. In this, Stevie's pathetic desire to win the favour of his brother-in-law and surrogate father, the double agent Verloc, is the main enabling circumstance, not any quasi-Darwinian Lombrosan predisposition to carry out violent crimes. Actually, Verloc takes advantage of Stevie's desire to please him to get him to perform a task the dangers of which the latter cannot be aware, and it is worth noting that it is Ossipon's use of the term "degenerate" in the early scene in Brett Street that first sets him thinking about using his brother-in-law to carry the bomb. The fact that

Stevie “accidentally” blows himself up and dies in a hideous fashion serves merely to underline the brutal nature of the class system that has shaped (and distorted) his life. Having taken from Stevie most of what makes a person “human”, the English class system ends up violently taking his biological life as well.

However, The Secret Agent is not simply, or even primarily, a novel about the tragic death of Stevie Verloc. His abysmal death in Greenwich Park takes place in the background of the narrative. When Stevie appears in the narrative foreground, he is generally seen from the outside, through the eyes of other characters. The novel seems to lack a reliable register for rendering Stevie’s “innocence” from within. What the novel is interested in, on the other hand, are the public and private consequences of the manipulation of his working class “innocence” by political agents (Vladimir, Verloc). Its main focus is on the perceptual capacity (or incapacity) of other characters to make Stevie’s fragmented psyche, the dismembered narrative of his brutalized inner life, coherent and whole.

Ossipon’s psuedo-academic use of Lombroso in the early scene in Brett Street takes on more complex psycho-political nuances when, later in the novel, the Verloc household in Brett Street becomes the site of the killing of Verloc by his wife, and Stevie’s sister, Winnie. Ossipon is first on the scene after the murder. Contemplating with horror the murderess Winnie he finds that the Lombrosan language he earlier glibly applied to Stevie in the Brett Street house suddenly starts to obey the jerky, dislocating rhythms of an obsessional thought pattern. “He was scientific, and he gazed scientifically at that woman, the sister of a degenerate, a degenerate himself – of a murdering type. He gazed at her, and invoked Lombroso, as an Italian peasant recommends himself to his favourite saint” (TSA, 222). It is not just that Ossipon is no longer in control of the Lombrosan vocabulary; it now very clearly controls *him*.

In an article written in 1993, Rebecca Stott sensitively examines the importance of the idea of Winnie Verloc as a degenerate in The Secret Agent. Stott’s article is one of only a relatively small number of critical accounts of The Secret Agent that takes Conrad at his own word by viewing Winnie Verloc’s story as the key to the meaning of the novel as a whole (Conrad asserts in the Author’s Note that the novel is “the story of Winnie Verloc [...] complete from the days of her childhood to the end” (7)).

Stott argues that, though a Lombrosan language of degeneracy is applied to Winnie Verloc, it is also ultimately shown not to square with the image that the reader is left of her. While Winnie's recognition of Verloc's treachery turns her into an "atavistic mother", and a "cavernous origin", she gradually moves into a realm of psychic withdrawal and indefiniteness after the murder.⁴² As the novel moves towards closure, Stott argues, Winnie gradually dissolves before the reader's eyes: "the text begins to dissolve her contours, merging her with blackness, dressing her in black, naming her a 'free woman' and associating her with the primaeval darkness and engulfing space of London itself".⁴³

Stott's sense of Winnie merging with the "engulfing space of London itself" implies that, if this character is to be considered a "degenerate", then so too must be her home-city, London. Stott's piece demonstrates an awareness of the way that Conrad deliberately positions Winnie as a "typical" figure of London from the very beginning of the novel. Winnie is "typical" in *The Secret Agent* in the non-Lukácsian and historically precise sense that she is clearly offered as a representative member of the class of working people that, in the late nineteenth century, formed the *majority* of the city's population.

At any rate, the novel's unusually comprehensive account of Winnie's personal story would seem to offer her as a positive possibility of social progression in London (the novel is mostly very discreet about its characters' life-stories). Moving from servant-work for her mother in Belgravia to a situation as wife of the salaried Verloc, with a house and shop in Soho, Winnie's biography embodies the notion of "plebeian" social mobility and self-improvement within the boundaries of the capitalist city, London.

Viewed from a slightly different angle, Winnie's situation in the Brett Street house symbolically annotates the *embourgeoisment* of England's working class, that process whereby the world's first really mature industrial proletariat was incorporated into what has proven to be one of the world's most enduring and malleable class systems. Winnie's chilling silences, her "unfathomable reserve", suggests, from this point of view, the adoption of an imposed standard of domestic gentility, an imitated model of lady-like demureness seeking to shrug off the vestiges of a sordid working class past in order to become Mrs. Verloc of Brett Street, Soho. "Winnie is such a great creation

because for most of the novel she appears to be an icon of the ideal Victorian spouse – ‘the angel in the house’ – her unquestioningly obedient attitude to the patriarchal order summarized in her repeated credo that ‘life doesn’t stand much looking into’”.⁴⁴

Yet, presumably, Winnie’s embrace of a genteel model of behaviour partly has to do with her awareness of the way that the London working class was being subject, in part by so-called intellectuals like Ossipon, to unforgiving Lombroso-like scrutiny, as potential criminals, degenerates and deviants.⁴⁵ Ironically, Winnie is acquiescent in her attitude towards English canons of respectability and “speaking properly” (in Winnie’s case, this means hardly speaking at all) partly because her husband’s left-wing colleagues make her feel guiltily anxious about her own plebeian background.

Ironically, Winnie’s determination to emulate canons of English gentility ultimately brings disaster to the whole Verloc family. Having placed her trust in bourgeois marriage under the protective care of Verloc she then becomes morally complicit in the terrible death of her younger brother when her husband makes the appalling error of trying to use him in Vladimir’s bomb plan. However, to argue that Winnie is offered as a version of Hardy’s Tess, a working class “victim” of a middle class marriage would be too simplistic. Conrad clearly shows that, even if Winnie’s public self in Brett Street is a carefully observed study of genteel reticence, she nevertheless takes a strongly marked sense of class pride into her marriage with Verloc. Winnie’s insistence, against Verloc’s wishes, on retaining the presence of Stevie and her mother in the Brett Street house is, in itself, a signifier of the tenacity of this class history (the fact that Winnie’s mother takes the decision to leave the house, mid-way through the novel, underlines the idea of the perhaps somewhat exaggerated importance of personal independence in Winnie’s social heritage).

In The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (1884) Engels argues, “the first class opposition in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male”.⁴⁶ Winnie’s capacity to exert influence and control in the marriage with Verloc centres on her ability to retain a degree of sexual independence in the Brett Street residence. (At one point in the novel Winnie’s mother asks Winnie whether she worries that Verloc might get “tired” of

seeing Stevie around the house, and Winnie's response is to assert her sexual pride in tones of proletarian militancy: "'he'll have to get tired of me first'" (TSA, 35)). This partly helps to explain why she has no children in the novel (Marx: "the first division of labour is that between man and woman for the propagation of children"⁴⁷). The latter also helps to account for her exaggerated maternal feelings towards her younger brother, a "transference mechanism" that perhaps gives credence to her tragic willingness to trust Verloc as paternal protector of Stevie.⁴⁸

This, then, is the potential for serious class conflict underlying the Verloc marriage for much of the novel. It erupts into a violent class struggle when Winnie learns that her middle class husband has killed her brother. Significantly, Verloc's clumsily ill-timed attempt to improve her mood by attempting to assert his matrimonial right over her body becomes the trigger for her to kill him (TSA, 196-7). "When she cracks, she becomes an extraordinarily powerful avenger, a literal embodiment of Nemesis or Furies, of the very values of respectable gentility she seemed to epitomize. In this way, she is directly and viscerally the novel's true 'secret agent'".⁴⁹ Winnie's murder of Verloc is both a crime of passion and a violent protest at the historic abuse of her class (symbolized in Verloc's manipulation of Stevie's helplessness and her transferred maternal instincts). As Alex Houen writes, "Winnie becomes a 'double-agent' through an *immanent* transmission of social forces".⁵⁰

The remarkable, atrocious chapter eleven, which stages Winnie's murder of Verloc, is the Political Unconscious of the novel as a whole. It is "the story's cold unmoving centre [...] the dead eye that counters the noise and confusion of the bourgeois city that acts as its margin".⁵¹ Irony in this scene is so intense and unremitting that it becomes at once a weapon of satire and a form of enchantment or rapture, a way of foregrounding, but also transcending, the dynamic of class struggle at work in the Verloc marriage. The ultimate moment of satire/rapture occurs at the exact point of Verloc's murder when Winnie takes on her brother's physical features to become a living enactment of the kind of Lombrosan left-wing jargon that has helped form her husband's means of livelihood. The murder is an "explosion of language and narrative itself", the most concentrated expression of the subversive irony that runs through the whole book. "The act of murder is described with the languid ease of slow-motion film shot. Both appalling and erotic, this progression gradually circles in on the

unsuspecting Verloc who is described as contemplating, with mild curiosity, his wife bringing down her uplifted arm and planting a knife in his chest, exactly as if he were watching his own murder projected onto a screen".⁵²

The style of chapter eleven thus appears to embody and vindicate a "socially symbolic" plebeian assault on the forces of the status quo in nineteenth century London. This act of aggression is expressed as Winnie's atrocious murder of Verloc, as a plebeian challenging, and destruction, of an incompetent husband, and traitor of the revolution.

However, back in the real world, beyond the domestic chaos of the Verloc residence in Brett Street, the most sedately powerful and tenacious ruling class that capitalism has yet produced remains in control. After Winnie recovers from the shock of the murder, she is right to fear what English society will have in store for one of her class now that she has so savagely flouted the sacrosanct gentility of patriarchal bourgeois marriage:

Mrs Verloc, though not a well-informed woman, had a sufficient knowledge of the institutions of her country to know that the gallows are no longer erected romantically on the banks of dismal rivers or wind-swept headlands [...] The newspapers never gave any details except one, but that one with some affectation was always there at the end of a meagre report. Mrs Verloc remembered its nature. It came with a cruel burning pain into her head, as if the words 'The drop given was fourteen feet' had been scratched on her brain with a hot needle. 'The drop given was fourteen feet.' (TSA, 201)

This passage suggests a late nineteenth century England that demeans a working-class woman's self-worth to the point where she can reduce her sense of her own worth to a glib pseudo-scientific exactitude: "the drop given was fourteen feet". Winnie takes her own life to spare herself the ignominy of a precisely calibrated method of execution performed before the eyes of an unforgiving and brutalized urban crowd. In so doing, she administers the system's justice on herself, sure sign that Winnie Verloc, formerly of Belgravia, has been forced to play by someone else's rules right up until the end.

Third Horizon: Ideology of Form

In this final section, it will be argued that the ideology of form in The Secret Agent ironically imitates the inner spirit of nineteenth century London that it is its fictional locus. Like the city itself, the novel is shapeless, various, cosmopolitan, grim, violent, and shamelessly inauthentic. The novel celebrates the city's ontological inauthenticity in the only idiom appropriate to that condition: namely, parody. At the same time, the parodic intention that informs the deep structures of The Secret Agent provides a profound moral and political critique of its own subject. The novel belongs to a period of cultural history in the West when the artistic method of parody was used and viewed as a weapon against false consciousness and moral ignorance, rather than, as in our present-day postmodernist mind-fog, as an ephemeral mode of entertainment and play detached from any serious underlying intention.

In 1898 H.G. Wells' science fiction fantasy, War of the Worlds invited its readers to imagine the possibility of a London reduced to denatured post-social rubble by biologically and technologically superior beings from outer space. A decade earlier, Richard Jefferies offered a remarkable dystopic futuristic vision of London in After London (1885). Finally, in 1897, ten years prior to the publication of Conrad's novel, Bram Stoker's novel Dracula asked its readers to fantasize about an invasion of bourgeois London by an East European aristocrat using attractive middle class English girls as his unwitting agents.

As Rebecca Stott suggests, the story of Winnie Verloc's catastrophe in The Secret Agent finds its narrative synthesis in an image of a London in irreversible socio-political arrest. Winnie Verloc's tragedy mirrors the decline of nineteenth century England, the historic centre of capitalism's global dynamic.

London was the centre of the world's financial, banking and insurance institutions (The City) in the nineteenth century, and continued to flourish in this role even after England's manufacturing ascendancy was overtaken by more efficient industrial nations.

It was no accident that Karl Marx made London his home while he was in England. By doing so he was able to undertake the enormous intellectual labour of Capital. As he laconically put it, “London is a convenient vantage point for the observation of bourgeois society”.⁵³

Within English society, London was the agent and focal point of a massive process of centralization, then as now, flattening and absorbing the diverse, independent cultures of provincial towns and cities and imposing a uniform cultural standard of “Englishness” with the help of a powerful publishing industry and mass-circulation daily national newspapers.

In this process, working class and middle class women played a pivotal role as the agents of a new, nation-conquering metropolitan “fashion” (pronunciation, taste, etiquette, etc). As Michael Curtin writes:

Those who wanted to learn aristocratic manners perceived the task not as a craven capitulation to a class enemy but as a worthy emulation of high standards. Aristocratic manners did not appear to contradict economic success but rather to crown it with a diadem of high culture. Etiquette-books were indeed an authentic creation of middle-class civilization: a civilization, however, that expressed some of its deepest and truest urges in the emulation of its class antagonists.⁵⁴

In The Secret Agent, Conrad offers a heroine who is, for much of the novel, a model of lady-like London reserve and seeming epitome of the new metropolitan value of etiquette-emulation. Winnie Verloc’s prim refusal to credit the cosmopolitan, elite-hating left-wing dialogues that circulate in her Brett Street home – her pert assurance that “life is not worth looking into” – suggests her role as a semi-heroic upholder of “English” anti-intellectualist “values” of reticence and tact in the face of a foreign discursive onslaught. In this sense, the upper class figure of the Lady Patroness is the mirror opposite of Winnie Verloc that confirms the systemic *class* basis of the etiquette-emulation process in late nineteenth century culture – the former’s embrace of the foreign “impolite” and unpronounceable language of Marxist-Michaelism is precisely designed to muddy the waters of an aristocratic idiolect of style in order to keep the lower orders and the likes of Winnie at bay.

Winnie's role as agent of the ideology of etiquette is shown to break down radically in chapter eleven, when, under the pressure of a personal crisis and politics, she steps out of this class-imposed role to become a spectacularly unlady-like killer and indeed, as the slayer of the turn-coat spy Verloc, precisely an unconscious agent of revolutionary justice. In this sense, Winnie metamorphoses from being a brainwashed product of the English class system to being a "secret agent" (ironically by killing a secret agent) of revolutionary possibility.

Of course, the novel is sceptical about the notion of Winnie as a conscious revolutionary agent, as the unremitting ironic mode of chapter eleven partly attests. To reinforce this scepticism, the novel also has the revolution, in the lumbering shape of the London anarchist Ossipon, arrive in Brett Street immediately after the murder scene to ensure that she is safely ushered towards a quiet suicide that protects the left's inept and perhaps corrupt international cadres and networks from being exposed to potentially embarrassing public scrutiny in the aftermath of the bomb debacle in Greenwich Park. In this, Ossipon unwittingly performs the dirty work of the English State, which would presumably be none too eager to have its tolerance of revolutionary groups in London openly discussed either.

However, if Winnie herself is not revolutionary, then her *story*, her amazing transition from taciturn etiquette-emulating subliminal ideologue of Englishness to husband-killer and unconscious avenging agent of the revolutionary left, implies a social context in which revolutionary forces appear to be structural and in-built. Her story is, in this sense, offered as a story of *London*, of a city in constant revolutionary crisis, the bourgeois metropolis in which as Engels noted, more than thirty years earlier, "the social war, the war of each against all, is [...] openly declared".⁵⁵

If The Secret Agent offers a powerful image of London as the site where class struggle is most nakedly visible and as it were structural, and where, accordingly, a potential for revolutionary global schism is also on view, it is not without precedents in English fiction. One of these will be examined below.

In Charles Dickens' Our Mutual Friend (1864), London is offered as a place of social decay and systemic violence. In this apocalyptic vision of the city, human corruption

is seen as so deep-rooted in the London body politic that human violence and murder permeate every pore of the narrative's dialogic texture. The buoyantly cheeky comic accent that celebrates plebeian heteroglossia and provides relief (and at times, deflects attention) from the powerful evocation of social evil in London in the earlier fiction of Dickens is in this, his last completed published work, turned into something much darker and colder by the unremittingly sombre nature of the thematic material it assembles. Dickens' vision of London in Our Mutual Friend is organized around the dominating image of a River Thames choked with anonymous corpses, faceless casualties of a society from which efficient communal values of mutual care and support are in the process of being extinguished by the self-interest-promoting forces of an unregulated capitalist money economy. This macabre image of the Thames and its ghastly contents provide the continuous thread that binds together, and harnesses, to an extent, the myriad stories and anecdotes of which Our Mutual Friend is composed. In this novel, Dickens seems to be arguing against his own tendency to sentimentalise the poor. The corpses in the river also offer a means of survival for the poorer London dwellers: Gaffer Hexam and his daughter Lizzie fish these identityless cadavers out of the Thames to claim monetary rewards from the London police. In this relationship between working class father and daughter, a possibly "authentic" gleam of human mutuality is seen to survive in the shadowy Hobbsean world of London, but it is significant that, in the romance sub-plot that attempts to bring Lizzie and the cynical lawyer Eugene Wrayburn together, the possibility of transferring this residual social value upwards into the more corrupt regions of the English class system as a regenerative force is shown to be fraught with obstacles.

Our Mutual Friend horrified Henry James, otherwise an admirer of Dickens' fiction.⁵⁶ Conrad probably disagreed with James on this score, for The Secret Agent carries persistent echoes of Our Mutual Friend. In the novel's fictional orchestration of London there is an almost continuous playful referencing of the English capital as a late-Dickensian post-romantic necropolis. The city is described in the "Author's Note" with sly melodramatic irony as "an enormous town", "a monstrous town", "a cruel devourer of the world's light", a "place indifferent to heaven's frowns and smiles".

Charles Dickens was the world's first truly *modern* urban writer (in the sense that England was the first society to undergo the kind of comprehensive urbanization and centralization associated with modern capitalist development). Saturated with the heteroglossia of a society undergoing a seismic process of transmutation, Dickens' novels offer a poetic image of London as a verbal palimpsest that has great force and range.

However, somewhere in Dickens' imaginative response to England's transition from a status-based to a class-based society, his novelistic vision seems to have become conflated with residually "conservative" factors in the very process that it describes. What holds Dickens' fiction together as a *classical* narrative unity is not so much dialectic of class conflict as it is an idealistic pre-class conception of collective agency as "the people". Comparing Dickens' novels with Balzac's Paris-based novels, Moretti argues that, in the former, the city is not so much a *centre* – a spatial, social and political crystallization of the monopolistic tendencies of capital – but an elaborately imagined set of distances and organized diversities – as Moretti puts it, "an archipelago of autonomous 'villages'".⁵⁷ Thus, Dickens offers a vision of London in which an essentially pre-modern conception of social organization anachronistically persists. "Whereas Balzac's characters *change* class (if they are very strong and very lucky)," writes Moretti, "Dickens' seem rather to *transcend* it, landing in an enchanted realm where all relationships are ethical ones".⁵⁸

Moretti's account of Dickens omits to mention that Our Mutual Friend stands witness to Dickens' belated but heroic effort to exorcize this romantic inheritance in a splendid baroque portrait of Victorian London that only "works" as a narrative if the reader accepts the morbid notion of the economies of death associated with the city's historic artery of trade, the Thames. However, the essential point Moretti makes here holds true (indeed, the apparent sense of moral desperation underlying Our Mutual Friend might be interpreted as the strongest proof of this).

Forty years after the publication of Our Mutual Friend, the cosmopolitan Conrad saw a London that was both similar to and different from Dickens'. Above all, perhaps, Conrad must have understood the significance of the image of the River Thames in Our Mutual Friend. As a foreigner with work experience on England's ships overseas,

Conrad would surely have recognized the deep reason behind Dickens' intense and conflicted imaginative concentration on the Thames in the last completed novel of his career. For the river, as he knew, was precisely the historic economic artery through which, from the seventeenth century onwards, a successful English mercantile class had managed to establish a position of early global dominance in the modern era that was to find outward expression in a large, informally organized Empire and was to be exercised internally in the creation of a state able to rule with unique mixture of subtle "moderation" and naked ferocity. In "Heart of Darkness", Conrad has his frame narrator say that only those with connections with England's maritime culture are able to "evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames", summoning up the classic figures of predatory English colonial-mercantile exploitation, Drake and Franklin, as exemplars of this spirit and "great knights-errant of the sea" (HD, 2).

The Thames, then, was the economic aorta through which England's riches derived from overseas trading contacts and networks were funnelled back home so as to enable a partly feudal dominant class to sustain itself at home politically in a century in which the rest of Europe was convulsed by the French Revolution and the popular revolutions "from below" it gave rise to. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the political power of an anachronistic English ruling class found its most direct modern physical expression in an interlocking ensemble of financial institutions located in London known as The City. The latter contributed to domestic industrial decline and continued to direct much of the world's commerce (and the politics associated with it) by a kind of political equivalent of remote control.

The Secret Agent moves the mordant social vision of Our Mutual Friend onto a new level in its imaginative recreation of London as a site of an actual international political imbroglio: the so-called Greenwich Bomb Outrage. The extraordinary plan, conceived by Vladimir (a diplomatic representative of Europe's other *ancien régime* Russia) to undermine the left's cause by simulating a terrorist strike against the Greenwich Observatory projects a post-apocalyptic and post-Dickensian image of London. In this image, the world's political events are seen as being subject to an increasingly paranoid direction and management by secretive trans-national class forces headquartered in the city. This fictionalised account of a historically specific

event in the active history of anarchism parodies and modernizes the melodramatic necropolis of Our Mutual Friend. The Secret Agent offers London not so much as a Dickensian metaphysical devourer, as a forcing-house of a counter-revolutionary programme in which, as Christopher GoGwilt writes, "the distinction between genuine and sham political acts becomes eclipsed in a bewildering game of simulated political gestures".⁵⁹

It is no accident that the target of Vladimir's counter-revolutionary bomb plan is the Greenwich Meridian, for Greenwich Mean Time was crucial to the attempt to institute capitalism as a functioning global system. In Roy Porter's words, "The nineteenth century acknowledged London as the centre of things; the creation in 1884 of the Greenwich Meridian, marked as a brass rail inlaid in concrete, crowned as the prime meridian – zero degrees longitude – whence all continents spread out east and west".⁶⁰ To imagine a present-day world without a standard system of time would be to envision long distance transportation systems unable to function in a co-ordinated fashion, and industries reliant upon supplies from remote parts of the world reduced to chronic inefficiency. The whole modern trend of capitalism, towards multi-national trade in which the factors of production are increasingly spatially dispersed, would not have been possible without the institution, in London, of a coherent world system of time. Vladimir's idea of a bomb strike on the Greenwich Observatory is therefore an attack on the idea of a viable and functioning capitalist world-system at its most sensitive spatial and symbolic point – namely, the prime meridian, zero degrees longitude.

Vladimir's Greenwich Bomb plan, then, is counter-revolutionary in the precise sense that its proposed simulated attack on world capitalism pre-emptively displaces the idea of a world revolution. Marx and Engels consistently argued that an effective and lasting revolution would be possible only when capitalism was properly and comprehensively implanted at a global level. The seemingly deranged logic of Vladimir's bomb plan has as its cold, cynical intention the displacement of the idea of a worker-led revolution from the West's global political agenda (not surprisingly, for in late nineteenth century Russia such a revolution seemed more likely than almost anywhere else).

Put another way, The Secret Agent can perhaps best be viewed as a satire on the paranoia of an emergent righteous right in late nineteenth century Europe. Vladimir's idea of blowing up time actually appropriates a left-wing concept. In "Theses on the Philosophy of History", the German Marxist Walter Benjamin recalls a beautiful moment in the Paris revolution when revolutionaries spontaneously began to fire on the city's clocks:

The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action. In the July revolution an incident occurred which showed this consciousness still alive. On the first fighting it turned out the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris.⁶¹

Implicit in this perverse act of shooting at the clocks in Paris is, as Benjamin was aware, the perception that time is a property that "they" (that is, the *ancien régime*) use to subjugate and control "us", the masses. By shooting the city's clocks the Jacobins were asserting their liberty from this control and symbolically making the "continuum of history explode".

It is thus possible to say with more precision and assurance that Vladimir's counter-revolutionary London plot in The Secret Agent appropriates and repackages a notion that is actually revolutionary in origin – to blow up time. To this extent, one of the central "socially symbolic" narrative acts of The Secret Agent indicts the cunning and ferocity of the right (Vladimir), and the confused passivity of the left (Verloc) as equal accomplices in the political paralysis of late nineteenth century England. At the same time, the text is politically conscious that the counter-revolutionary militant right will be victorious only on the condition the left fails to draw on the potency of its moral and ideological legacy in the tactical struggle against its political foe. The very fact that Vladimir's idea of simulating an attack on time imitates Benjamin's Paris revolutionaries' who really did dream of exploding time by firing on the city's clocks a hundred years earlier is, in itself, proof of the superior richness of the left's political heritage. Also, the fact that the Greenwich plan is not properly executed in The Secret Agent (its failure attributable to the fact that the left, in the shabby, shifty form of Verloc, is not competent to perform the task that Vladimir sets it) suggests the moral and spiritual poverty of the right's counter-revolutionary programme.

"I have no doubt," writes Conrad in the "Author's Note", "that there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist" (8). What explodes time in The Secret Agent is not a counter-revolutionary political programme, not the botched Vladimir-inspired counter-revolutionary tactic of detonating the Greenwich Observatory, but, in fact, the imaginative act that constitutes the novel itself.

The genre that The Secret Agent most clearly references, and ironically transgresses, is, of course, the detective thriller. This form rose to prominence with the inception of the Sherlock Holmes cycle of stories, written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930). It is surely no accident that the historical moment of the Greenwich Bomb Outrage and The Secret Agent almost neatly coincides with the year the first Holmes story was published (A Study in Scarlet (1887)). The tremendous success of the detective thriller form (and its associate forms, the spy thriller, the espionage thriller) significantly helped to form a global mass audience for English fiction.

In The Country and the City (1973), Raymond Williams argues that Conan Doyle's novels create a post-Victorian myth of London as romantically lurid, labyrinthine and fascinating at precisely a time when the city was being modernized, zoned and cleaned-up. Certainly, in the late nineteenth century, the great unclean behemoth of Victorian London was increasingly subject to Edwardian scientific reformist zeal and optimism (in Conrad's parody, being turned into "a dull world of perfected municipalities and *W.C.s sens peur et sans reproche*").

However, the terms of Williams' point can easily be reversed and still make sense. For, if many of the detective thrillers of Conan Doyle deliberately reinvent an anachronistic Dickensian ambience of London as the setting for their crimes, they also seem every bit as much complicit in a modernizing, reformist and pseudo-scientific attitude towards the city in the narrative solutions they devise to solve those crimes. As Williams himself notes, the key structural device in the detective thriller is the "master sleuth", a character figured, in Conan Doyle's work, in the person of Sherlock Holmes:

Indeed the urban detective, prefigured in a minor way in Dickens and Wilkie Collins, now begins to emerge as a significant and ratifying figure: the man who can penetrate the intricacies of the streets. The opaque complexity of modern city life is represented by crime; the explorer of society is reduced to the discoverer of single causes, the isolable agent, and above all his means, his technique.⁶²

As Williams writes, the ideological purpose of the detective thriller is to reduce crime (in Lombroso-type fashion) to “single causes” and “the isolable agent” (and therefore to obviate more systemic and nuanced approaches to social problems that Marxism suggests). In so doing, the narrative structure of the detective thriller proposes a whole argument about time in the city.

All detective thrillers implicitly postulate a model of time as a linear flow, a swift, clean, regressive return to the precise moment when the crime originated, to the very second when the chaos and distress it caused “started”; so that the solution of the crime really only confirms (or actually re-confirms) the everyday, “normal” temporal order of the city. The detective thriller thus became (and is) an enormously effective semiotic system for insulating its readers from the temporal discontinuity – the contingency, menace and violence – of the modern city (a fact which perhaps explains its global success).

However, the problem inscribed in the form of the detective thriller is that time is not in fact as homogenous as it proposes it is. *When* is “the very second” the crime originated? Is it really possible that the malicious intent that produces a crime can be pinpointed *in time*? Detective thriller writers “solve” this particularly tricky aspect of crime by constructing a story-telling process that simulates the idea of time as an ordered, coherent and utterly predictable social medium. The Sherlock Holmes cycle comprises a whole host of different crimes, springing from diverse motives, and perpetrated by criminals drawn from a variety of social backgrounds. But the more bothersome the reader of the detective novel finds all this contingency surrounding crime, the more reassured he is by the fact that Holmes is always there, is always the same brilliant and measured man, and, most importantly, always defeats the criminal by getting to the roots of his malfaisance. If crime in the detective novel is anarchically diverse, and to a certain extent outside time, then the apparatus of the law

(symbolically configured in the relation between Holmes and Watson) is reassuringly punctual, efficient, and, above all, almost always right.

In The Secret Agent, the temporal regularity and serial predictability inscribed in the detective novel form is deconstructed from within. Throughout the novel, sentence production, scene presentation, and narrative development are jerky, free and inconsistent. There is also kind of digressive loquacity about The Secret Agent that is profoundly at odds with the laconic rectitude that characterizes the inner spirit of the classical detective novel.

Above all, The Secret Agent lacks the Holmes figure, the master detective, who should hold together a narrative ideology of temporal continuity that has provided such a powerful legitimisation of the capitalist status quo since Conan Doyle codified the form. The Assistant Commissioner is a detective, it is true (and the junior figure of Inspector Heat might be seen as a version of Watson). But he is a career policeman, and his lack of gentlemanly amateur credentials disqualifies him for the role of master detective from the outset (the implication being that great detectives are one-offs; born rather than made). As if to emphasise this fact, Conrad lets his Assistant Commissioner off the leash mid-way through the narrative, watching him wander away from the competitive pressures of his Westminster office job to do a spot of Holmes-like amateur sleuthing in Darkest Soho. He enjoys this encounter with sleazy nighttime London, but, then again, this (like the imagery that accompanies it) only underlines the fact that this bit of off-duty detective work is little more than a kind of harmless sport for a stressed-out London bureaucrat ("his descent into the street was like the descent into a slimy aquarium from which the water had been drained off" (TSA, 116)). The Assistant Commissioner's sportive sortie into Soho does not really seem to be about police work; and indeed suggests criminal investigation to a form of semi-institutionalized voyeurism.

In Writing London: The Trace of the Urban Text from Blake to Dickens (1998), Julian Wolfreys explores the relationship between writing and London in nineteenth century literature.⁶³ Wolfreys shows that in much of this literature, the idea of knowing the city is associated with the idea of walking its streets, a process that involves a kind of subliminal imbibing of its sights and its heteroglossia. To know

London properly is, according to its nineteenth century authors and poets, not to use its (usually unreliable) modes of transport, but, rather, to undertake exploratory walks – to circulate – within it. In the texts of Wordsworth, Blake and Dickens the motif of the London walk is recurrently associated with a concept of epiphany, and the idea of a deep and meaningful “truth” being revealed beneath the city’s debased commercial appearance.

Holmes, too, is a manic walker of London’s streets; and, like all Londoner’s walkers, he perambulates briskly, having no time to waste. By contrast, the Assistant Commissioner’s languid and mazy walk around the fleshpots of Soho, mid-way through the text, becomes a semi-official rapprochement with the forces of contingency, secrecy and criminality at work in the city. If there is an epiphany to be had here, it is the one that Conrad forces into the awareness of the reader of the murky zones of complicity around an increasingly impotent and isolated English state, on the one hand, and institutionalised global crime, on the other.

The ideological outlook projected by the detective thriller form is not exactly complacent, but it is consistently and rigidly anti-ironic. At the start of each detective novel, the reader does not know the identity of the criminal or what his motives are; only the author (and the criminal) are in possession of these facts. The reader is thus positioned ironically vis-à-vis the crime, the criminal and the author, and it is up to him to slip the noose of irony by getting, with as much as coolness and haste as he can muster, to the part where the criminal and his motives are revealed with stunning finality (or if he is very clever and lucky, anticipating these before they are disclosed). When the crime is solved, the criminal is led away to serve his time, and the detective narrative’s system of irony is cancelled. The reader and author can sleep well in their respective beds that night.

Some readers and critics of The Secret Agent have complained about what they perceive to be Conrad’s over-use of ironic emphasis in the novel. Underlying this complaint is the perception that irony must, in order to be irony, propose, or suggest, at least, a counter-value that confirms and underwrites the ironic classification it undertakes. In The Secret Agent, this task seems impossible, for no one and nothing escapes the weight of the narrator’s sardonic glare in this text. No ideological standard

by which to measure the significance of the production of irony seems to be presented by the terms that the novel itself offers.

The answer to this conundrum is that irony in The Secret Agent constructs a profoundly subversive perspective on the world: as such, it is answerable only to itself. Irony is both an instrument of dialectical criticism and a mode of rapture in the novel. The figure that best captures and concentrates the joyously ambivalent subversive energy of irony is the Professor, the character that hates London, likens its crowds to swarms of locusts, and wants to blow it up. But the Professor is also the figure that wishes to explode it in order that it (and the world) may be made anew. The Professor's pragmatically apocalyptic and calmly absolutist outlook is akin to the dualistic and iconoclastic inner spirit of the novel's radical irony.

Frank Kermode writes that the mind of the Professor is the reader's access to a genuinely revolutionary *Geist* that celebrates death and destruction, and, to the extent that it does this, looks forward to the creation of a post-apocalyptic London. The Professor is "prepared to blow away [...] the man-made order or master-narrative of London, its chosen centre".⁶⁴ Through the eyes of the Professor, the reader sees that "the totality of London (or of the world) is not necessarily a beautiful or admirable totality; the heart of the world is dark, Whitehall is a mere ditch running through its darkness; yet a totality it is".⁶⁵ Yet, at the same time, the Professor makes it possible to see the inner darkness of the city with unselfpitying clarity, and to understand that "fragmentariness is also of [London's] essence; it is a whole made up of a million randomnesses".⁶⁶

For Kermode, The Secret Agent offers London as a site of carnivalesque monstrosity, "as full of flashing discontinuities, irrational intrusions, bewildering fragments, absurd juxtapositions".⁶⁷ Conrad's London, writes Kermode, is "as carnivalized as Dostoyevsky's St. Petersburg [...] at once uproarious and quiet, trotting and flowing, wide and narrow".⁶⁸

The Secret Agent may in this sense be thought of confronting and interrogating the historic structures of old London town (unofficial headquarters of a grimly determined conservative counter-revolution) with a pre-modern *Geist* stemming from

the archaic, subversive energies welling up from the medieval carnival square. The novel, like the carnival, and like the city at the centre of its fictional vision, is thus violent, pitiless, insolent, arcane and polyphonic. Bakhtin suggests that at the heart of carnival is not so much satirical irony (in the final analysis, a conservative assertion of a single standard of value) as a radical receptiveness to *ambivalence*, an ingrained acceptance of the doubleness, or duality, of all things. As a carnivalized text, The Secret Agent is imbued and layered with surreal images of ambivalence – violence-as-pleasure, pleasure-as-violence, loving curses, cursed loves, bodies that grow, bodies that explode (in carnival imagery, grotesque bodies, particularly obscenely fat one's, symbolize both pregnancy and death, both loss and renewal).

Conrad's novel therefore suggests that London is a carnivalesque "dance of death", and the revolutionary modern city *par excellence*, in an open, discursive form that captures and ironically celebrates its demonic energy of crisis and renewal. As Kermode writes:

Conrad holds the world together not by an artefact, compact but explosive, not a bomb but a book – single, yet compounded of opposites, contradictions and false concords: so that a world blown to pieces, to be looked at awry and in no other way, may rightly be seen, for a moment, rich in correspondence, a momentary *civitas*. Carnival is licensed and temporary disorder, but the order from which it is a vocation is no longer that of a world or a society, to be restored by a change in the seasons or in the liturgical calendar. It is not to be restored except in the perceived order of a book.⁶⁹

The Secret Agent is a book in which a carnivalesque "licensed and temporary disorder" is laid before the reader's eyes. This said, the *tone* in which it treats contemporary politics is limited by its parodic frame (the English spy-thriller format), and, as such, frequently comes across as indirect, embarrassed and facetious. In his next novel, Under Western Eyes (1911) Conrad seeks to get round this obstacle by juxtaposing his sense of the political crisis of the West, evoked, in rather sideways fashion, in The Secret Agent, with an actually existing revolutionary process in pre-1917 Russia. In this way, he manages to create a fusion of political and fictional rhythms of thought and feeling that devastatingly configures the ideological paralysis of Western Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER FOUR – UNDER WESTERN EYES

First Horizon: Political Context

Tsarist Russia's ill-advised decision to go to war with Japan in 1904 was largely shaped by its need to stave off the internal spectre of revolution. Its loss in 1905 only hastened the death throes of this, Europe's last-surviving Absolutist State.

Given Conrad's own tragic links with Russian autocracy, it would have been surprising had the author not viewed the imminent demise of the Moscow regime with some degree of personal satisfaction. Some of Under Western Eyes' readers have detected the presence of an ancestral Polish animus towards Russia in the novel. Conrad himself insisted that he never allowed his personal sentiments about Russia to colour his writing. A sentence in the Author's Note to Under Western Eyes sternly rebuts the notion of anti-Russian bias. "I had never been called before," writes Conrad, "to a greater effort of detachment – detachment from all passions, prejudices and even from personal memories". Elsewhere, in a letter to Edward Garnett, Conrad defends his novel against the charge of Polish anti-Russianism in more pithy language: "if hatred there were ... [towards Russia]", he wrote, "it would be too big a thing to put in a 6/ novel" (CL, 3 490).

In 1905, Conrad wrote a major essay on Russia entitled "Autocracy and War". GoGwilt is not alone in discerning a "stridently anti-Russian rhetoric" in the essay.¹ The primary premise in "Autocracy and War" is that the military defeat of Russia by Japan demonstrates its tottering political fragility at the beginning of the twentieth century. In a sentence in which a tone of relief is almost palpable, Conrad writes that the "Russia of our fathers [...] has vanished" (AW, 20). However, a vacuum has succeeded it: there is "as yet not a new Russia to replace it" (AW, 20).

Russia is also an enigma. So steeped in social and political backwardness is it that it tends to frustrate rational inquiry itself. "Autocracy and War" continually resorts to demonic metaphors to crystallize, for its Western readers, an anachronistic and barbarous social reality controlled by a Tsarist State. Russia is "a fantasy of a

madman's brains [...] a figure in a nightmare" (AW, 21), a "phantom" (AW, 27), a "grave" (AW, 37), "inhuman", and a "curse from Heaven" (AW, 34) As Alex Houen remarks "within the essay itself, the vacuum that is Russia is never quite exorcised".²

It is interesting to juxtapose some of V.I. Lenin's remarks regarding Russia, made after the 1917 Revolution, with the general position of "Autocracy and War". "Before the February-March revolution of 1917," notes Lenin, "state power in Russia was in the hands of one class, namely, the feudal landed nobility, headed by Nicholas Romanov".³ Like Lenin, Conrad views Russia primarily in terms of its anachronistically autocratic character. Absolutist monarchy was succeeded by modernizing bourgeois institutions in the West, but in Russia "autocracy succeeded to nothing; it had no historical past, and it cannot hope for a historical future" (AW, 33). Russian despotism is a historical puzzle, it "has been utterly un-European [...] and neither has it been Asiatic in its nature", it is "outside the stream of progress" (AW, 33).

"Autocracy and War" cites Bismarck's famous statement about Russia (*"la Russie, c'est le néant"*) in order to dispute it. To view Russia as a blank space is to view it ahistorically. "She is not Néant," Conrad insists, "she is and has been simply the negation of everything worth living for [...] she is a yawning chasm between East and West" (AW, 39). To the eyes and ears of the twenty first century, this may seem like paranoid over-emphasis. In fact, Russian autocracy in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries was notoriously repressive, both at home and abroad. As the historian Anderson writes, from Nicholas I onwards, Russia became the "high executioner of monarchist reaction abroad".⁴

Tsarist ferocity (rather than a Bismarckian absence of history) drags "the national temperament into the apathy of a hopeless fatalism" (AW, 35). The intelligentsia in Russia lacks freedoms to criticise and create that the West has learned to take for granted. "Some of the best intellects of Russia," writes Conrad, "after struggling in vain against the spell, end by throwing themselves at the feet of that hopeless despotism as a giddy man leaps into an abyss" (AW, 36). For this reason, Russia has nothing to contribute to debates "touching the future of humanity" because the "secret of that imperium [...] has been the extirpation of every intellectual hope" (AW, 37).

"Autocracy and War" argues that a central, unavoidable political consequence flows from the anachronistic survival of a fanatically defensive Absolutist autocracy in twentieth century Russia namely, that its immediate future will be violent and bloody. Revolution of some kind seems inevitable because "there can be no evolution out of the grave" (AW, 37). "It is impossible to initiate any sort of reform upon a phase of blind absolutism," writes Conrad, "and in Russia there has never been anything else to which the faintest tradition could, after ages of error, go back to a parting of the ways" (AW, 31).

Revolution would be preferable because it might serve to function as "a short cut in the rational development of national needs in response to the growth of world-wide ideals" (AW, 41). Once again, this is a prescient insight. Anderson notes that in the First World War, Russia "was literally 'out of its element' in a direct confrontation between industrial imperialist states".⁵ One of the main political factors that pushed the Holy Russian Empire towards and over the precipice of revolution was to be its inability to keep pace with the military development of the bourgeois Western nations (though it belatedly made an effort to do so).

But "Autocracy and War" is also conscious that if Russia is to have any chance of decisively toppling a coercive and outdated political regime, then the bourgeois nations of Western Europe will have to lend a hand. No revolution can survive for long in political isolation. On this score, Conrad is clearly sceptical. "*Il n'y a plus d'Europe*," he notes bitterly, "there is only an armed and trading continent, the home of slowly maturing economical contests for life and death, and of loudly proclaimed world-wide ambitions" (AW, 61). Prosperity and political exhaustion has eroded the internal revolutionary dynamic in Europe. It now orients its vision aggressively and colonialistically outwards. "Democracy, which has elected to pin its faith to the supremacy of material interests, will have to fight their battles to the bitter end," he writes (AW, 52). Partly mesmerized by its success, bourgeois Europe admits no other logic than its own capacity for militaristic dominance: "never before in history has the right of war been more fully admitted" (AW, 53).

Echoing Clausewitz's famous cynical formula of war as "the continuation of politics by other means", Conrad is essentially pessimistic about Russia's chances. With the

gradual weakening of the Tsarist regime, Germany will seek to exploit Russian impotence for its own political ends. The German Empire, Conrad writes, has made the "phantom" Russia its "accomplice" before (at Poland's expense), and will not hesitate to do so in the future (AW, 27).

Such, then, are the basic lineaments of the overall case that "Autocracy and War" makes regarding Russia and its political situation at the beginning of the twentieth century. A passionate analysis of the Russian situation, it is a document of considerable prescience and cogency.

Does it have any weaknesses? In retrospect, the main weakness of "Autocracy and War" seems to be an overly pessimistic assessment of the prospects of a successful revolution in Russia. At times, Conrad's acute perception of the obstacles facing a viable revolution spills over into a melodramatic vocabulary of over-compensation, as in the following period ("In whatever form of upheaval autocratic Russia is to find her end," writes Conrad at one point, "it can never be a revolution fruitful of moral consequences to mankind [...] it cannot be anything else but a rising of slaves" (AW, 42)).

History has proved Conrad's scepticism about revolution to be misplaced, for a successful revolution did occur in Russia in 1917. Moreover, the Bolshevik revolutionary regime that displaced Tsarist autocracy survived for close to seventy years. For all its faults, the Bolshevik Party successfully held together an enormous and complex country, against considerable odds, for longer than anyone can have dreamed possible when it took over power in October 1917.

The manifest achievements of twentieth century Bolshevik communism in Russia, then, serve to refute the profound scepticism about the prospects of revolution in Russia that is the underlying message of "Autocracy and War". How is this to be explained? At times, Conrad's doubts about revolution in Russia seems to imply a hyper-rational inflation of the "backward" thesis that manifests itself as a kind of rhetorical stretching of those areas of his analysis where one might have expected a greater adduction of supporting empirical data, or at any rate a more balanced sense of Russia's political possibilities at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Similarly, Conrad's sense that "the oppressive degeneration of legality" in Russia may preclude a successful national revolution is perhaps an exaggeration of autocracy's decadence (AW, 41). In fact, of course, as Conrad would have known, Russian history is replete with examples of Absolutist legality, from the measures instituted by Peter the Great to incorporate a service nobility, to Alexander II's emancipation of the serfs in 1861.

But perhaps the most conspicuous lacuna in "Autocracy and War" is its lack of descriptive specific detail regarding revolutionary politics inside and outside Russia. From at least the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, significant and active revolutionary groupings had emerged as a serious and committed threat to autocracy's survival. These groupings ranged from populist terrorist organizations like "The People's Will" and "The Black Repartition", to "The Russian Social Revolutionary Party", to the communist Bolsheviks, to the liberal-democratic Mensheviks.⁶ Many of these revolutionary organizations operated both inside and outside Russia, and the Tsarist secret police continually sought to sabotage their plans and activities. (In the semi-insane zeal with which Vladimir in The Secret Agent, self-appointed moral guardian of Russian interests abroad, seeks to infiltrate and control revolutionary anarchist circles in London it is possible to read the depth of counter-revolutionary hysteria that had gripped the embattled Tsarist State in the last decades of the nineteenth century.)

This dimension of the Russian political situation – the active, conscious struggle against autocracy – does not emerge from the pages of "Autocracy and War". Apart from one passing reference to the way in which German militarism might exploit Russian "Socialists" (AW, 30), the essay evades mention of the extent and depth of revolutionary activity in and around early twentieth century Russia. In the absence of concrete supporting detail of this type, the concept of a successful revolutionary development in Russia, to be sure, enjoys little practical or theoretical foundation. Vague references to the revolutionary aspirations of the Russian people – personified at one point as "stamping its shadowy feet upon the gravestone of autocracy" (AW, 17) – do not disguise this central aporia in Conrad's analysis.

However, this lacuna becomes less noticeable when one juxtaposes “Autocracy and War” with the fictional creation of pre-1917 Russia in Under Western Eyes. The latter vividly demonstrates the range and intensity of revolutionary ferment inside and outside early twentieth century Russia that the former appears to elide. In this sense, it is important to see the essay and the novel as complementing, rather than contradicting, each other, and to grasp that the fiction and the non-fiction together provide a rich and enduring historical image of a society at a point of cataclysmic transition.

Second Horizon: Dialogic Utterance

Thomas Mann, in an early essay on The Secret Agent, argues that Conrad’s writing is afflicted by an anti-Russian bias. Mann notes that while The Secret Agent is set in Imperialist England, its plot dynamics hinge on the calculated irrationality of a plan formulated by the Russian bureaucrat Vladimir. For Mann, the novel’s ideology therefore stages a fundamental “conflict between [...] British and [...] Russian political ideology”. Conrad’s novel about England is essentially a surrogate for Conrad’s anti-Russianism: “Polish Russophobia is here expressing itself in British”.⁷

Mann’s argument about the “Russophobia” of The Secret Agent has found echoes in some critics’ responses to Under Western Eyes. Even admirers of Conrad’s presentation of Russian psychology and politics in the novel tend to temper their enthusiasm with expressions of unease about the lurking irrationalism they perceive in the authorial stance. For example, Avrom Fleishman, while impressed by the complex psychology of Under Western Eyes, nevertheless finds a “strain of racism” in Conrad’s implied stance towards Russians.⁸ Eloise Knapp Hay broadly concurs with this, although, in general, her sense is that Under Western Eyes is a “tribute to [...] the common humanity and capacity for suffering of the Russian people”.⁹

Conversely, some critics argue that there is an element of racial bias in the novel without necessarily feeling that it is directed towards Russians. For instance, Christopher GoGwilt argues that Under Western Eyes is essentially pro-Eastern and anti-Western in its outlook. GoGwilt suggests that the novel “reproduces a peculiarly Russian idea of the West” and is best understood as a drama of “a politics the

‘Westerner’ has overlooked”.¹⁰ Notably, even Hay herself notes a potential language of anti-Westernism in Under Western Eyes when she remarks that “Conrad to some extent imaginatively revitalizes an early antagonism to the non-Slavic peoples” in his use of pan-Slavic tropes drawn from the Polish writer Adam Mickiewicz.¹¹

Literary criticism’s indecision about the supposed racial bias in Under Western Eyes is sometimes linked with a more general ambivalence towards its politics. Generally, the liberal or left-wing view of Under Western Eyes is that it is an anti-Russian novel in which the author’s inherited dislike of Russia is overdetermined by his distaste for revolution. Irving Howe, for example, argues that the English narrator in Under Western Eyes is a thinly disguised fictional spokesman for Conrad’s own racial and political phobias. “The narrator is not simply an awkward intrusion,” writes Howe, “he signifies a wish on Conrad’s part to dissociate himself from his own imagination. The pontifical teacher gratifies Conrad’s need to be aligned with the orderly West, to be insulated from all that Russia implies”.¹²

Terry Eagleton echoes Howe’s point when he argues that Under Western Eyes is, for a novel set in the period immediately preceding 1917, imbued with “anti-revolutionary bias” and is “not formally concerned with political conflict” at all (though these two assertions seem to be in uneasy tension with each other).¹³ In common with some of the novel’s liberal critics, Eagleton questions the political implications of the mobilization of the teacher of languages as a “neutral” observer and interpreter of both Razumov’s journal and the Russian exile scene in Geneva. Eagleton sees this deployment as a disingenuous and counter-revolutionary narrative tactic, concealing Conrad’s anti-Russian, anti-revolutionary and pro-Western bias beneath a spurious “neutrality”. “The foreign reality is not ultimately allowed to undermine the Western attitudes of the narrator,” writes Eagleton, while adding that the decision to make the narrator an Englishman also demonstrates “a refusal to allow English experience to be effectively questioned”.¹⁴

Jeremy Hawthorn neatly sidesteps the questions that vex Howe and Eagleton when he argues that Under Western Eyes merits the critical attention of Marxists and non-Marxists alike as a text that both embodies and questions the whole ideology of writing. In his early study of Conrad, Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-

Consciousness, Hawthorne suggests that Under Western Eyes contains various “signifying practices” (writing, speech, non-verbal communication) that both constitute and occlude its content.¹⁵ For Hawthorne, judgements on the politics of Under Western Eyes will not be reliable unless they are first of all based upon a critically discriminating analysis of its many allusions to the ways in which human “language” gets composed and decomposed. “Throughout Under Western Eyes,” he writes, “physical appearance, gesture, posture and other forms of bodily communication are obsessively detailed” with a view to bringing to the reader’s notice the partiality of all acts of communication (of which, by implication, the novel is one).¹⁶ Hawthorne argues that Conrad’s novel is an ironic testimony to human beings’ basic need for language, an illustration of the fact that, as he puts it, “one cannot not communicate”.¹⁷

But if *all* language in Conrad’s fiction is defined by its necessity and partiality, then this is also to evade the question as to whether Under Western Eyes may be regarded as a politically and / or racially tendentious text. One of the consequences of Hawthorne’s success in displacing the whole debate about the alleged cultural bias in Under Western Eyes by drawing attention to the importance of modes of narrative production in the formation of its ideology is to distance and perhaps diminish the narrative tropes embodying *historical and political* complexity (tropes that critics like Fleishman, Eagleton, Hay and GoGwilt regard as the most significant and involving aspect of the novel). By insisting that the political themes of Under Western Eyes be viewed through the prism of the postmodern self-reflexive strategies by which Conrad conveys them, Hawthorne’s interpretation of the text edges itself away from the obduracy of empirical socio-political fact. For Hawthorne, the purpose of Conrad’s fiction is not so much to make the reader view Russian and West European politics in a new or striking light, it is the more limited aim of reminding him of the “the fictional nature of what he is reading”.¹⁸

What is missing from Hawthorne’s account of Under Western Eyes is a coherent historical model that might help to explain the *motivations* that lie behind the text’s postmodern strategies. In the absence of this, it is difficult to see how Hawthorne’s insights into the numerous instances of postmodern textuality in the novel might be translated into a substantive commentary on the specific socio-political situation with

which it engages. In this respect, Helen Fink Rieselbach offers, from a Freudian perspective, a more incisive assessment of the politics of Under Western Eyes than does the Marxist Hawthorn. Rieselbach argues that the “novel sees politics as the domain of the self-deluded and personal relationships as inherently dangerous and invariably founded on misunderstanding”.¹⁹ Assuming that a comprehensive *unconscious* anxiety about Russia and its politics is at work in the author Conrad, Rieselbach is able to connect his uneasy handling of revolutionary politics in Under Western Eyes with his production of a submerged vocabulary of sexual unease. “The novel’s view of human relationships, and especially sexual relationships” is, like its view of Russian politics, essentially doomed and pessimistic, suggests Rieselbach, and its central figure Razumov “finds any hint of sexuality profoundly disquieting,” a malaise that “the novelist seems to share”.²⁰

Ruth Nadelhaft and Maureen Fries corroborate this perception of Conrad’s handling of Russian politics as being a cover for a defensive language of (male) sexual disgust in Under Western Eyes. Both critics praise the novel for what they regard as its progressive portrayal of the courage and resourcefulness of female figures like Sophia Antonovna actively involved in a political struggle against social injustice. Nadelhaft writes that Under Western Eyes “is one of the few novels in which Conrad focuses directly upon the phenomenon of ‘feminism’” and “allows the reader to come to some understanding of what kind of feminist analysis illuminates human experience”.²¹ Fries, likewise, argues that the novel not only critically exposes the buried misogyny of the charismatic revolutionary leader Peter Ivanovitch, but also offers positive images of women characters engaged in the public and political task of revolution. For Fries, the women characters in Under Western Eyes are the “industrial, mental, political, social and sexual equals of men”.²² Even Terry Eagleton, in a generally sceptical account of the novel, concedes that one of its strengths lies in its portrayal of powerful female figures. “It is the women anarchists – Tekla, Nathalie, Sophia – who are admired,” writes Eagleton, “for what they symbolize are essentially qualities of ‘being’; the men who wish to realize those qualities in action are frauds or freaks”.²³

Alex Houen offers an interpretation of Under Western Eyes as a novel that creatively combines politics, writing and sexual difference. For Houen, the novel reveals that politics, writing and gender are cultural constructs that mirror and reinforce each

other. All three, he postulates, function to illuminate and partially embody a process of ceaseless flux and transformation. Fastening on the account that Tekla provides of her oppressive experience as the secretary of Peter Ivanovitch, Houen argues that this moment in the novel indicates the way in which a language of politics is predicated on the suppression of sexual difference, and that this itself becomes a source of the violent tension upon which revolutionary energy feeds. The “dictated division of speech and writing also structures a sexual difference. The supposed purity of writing is based on an enforced suppression of Otherness which becomes a form of violence in itself”.²⁴ Writing, like politics, and like gender difference, is systemically incapable of specifying itself as meaning contained in fixed signs and therefore manifests itself as conflict, violence and schism.

Houen’s poststructuralist reading of Under Western Eyes helps to get round the problem that plays around the edges of Hawthorn’s reading – namely, how to model a connection between the vocabularies of “the body” and Otherness with the more clearly political and historical dimensions of the fiction. For Houen, there is simply no need to make a significant distinction between writing and politics, and, accordingly, no necessity to make the kinds of discriminations between the novel’s language and subject, discourse and plot that preoccupy Hawthorn. Houen’s conceptual conflation of writing and politics as two symptoms of the same epistemological condition of insufficiency and failure appears to create a space for making a relatively full and direct assessment of the political content of Under Western Eyes while retaining a strong degree of critical receptiveness towards the foregrounding of modes of description in the novel and its various registers of nuance and irony.

To a certain extent, this is what happens in Houen’s analysis. He uncovers and discusses illuminating historical detail about the relations between revolutionary politics and feminism in late nineteenth century Russia, linking it with the text, and at the same time suggesting instructive comparative links with other literary texts of the time. However, while Houen’s teasing out of the relationship between revolutionary politics and feminism both in Russian history and in Under Western Eyes is of some interest, his overall reading disappointingly confines its sense of the political content of the novel to this single theme. Houen fails to make a convincing connection between the political theme he isolates for discussion, and the interpretation of the

overall narrative of which it is a part (the adduction of historical detail relating to feminism and terrorism is in fact wedged into a section in which Houen appears to deal specifically with The Secret Agent, not Under Western Eyes).²⁵

Ironically, one of the more illuminating and interesting analyses of the political implications of Under Western Eyes comes from the pen of a critic who is not particularly political in his orientation, Frank Kermode. For Kermode, Under Western Eyes is essentially a novel about the ways in which knowledge is produced – about how novelists manage issues of “interpretation” and “secrets”. Kermode’s reading of the novel is an eloquent protest about the way that certain critics have sought to “sterilize” and “to purge secrets from the text”.²⁶ Like Hawthorn, Kermode finds an “abnormal interest” in “the acts and arts of writing” in Under Western Eyes.²⁷ However, Kermode also notes the way that the “novel moves out of writing into speech”.²⁸ In this sense, he appears to feel that the text is a dialogic act that ultimately affirms the resilience and vitality of human communication (rather than highlighting its coercive nature, as Hawthorn suggests).

Kermode finds in Under Western Eyes a novel that raises more questions than it answers. It is, he suggests, a novel in which complexity of utterance and narrative structure parodically resists the pedantic demands of its readers. Under Western Eyes “in a sense [...] hates its readers”.²⁹ For Kermode, the many instances of gaudy and unidiomatic writing in the novel parody the stolid, workaday assumptions and prejudices of the hated readers. The competing images in the text, and its obsessive patterning of particular words and concepts, are to be appreciated on their own terms, first of all. What these patterns might “mean” in some ultimate sense is not without importance, but they are to be investigated with delicate sensitivity and open-minded scepticism rather than dogmatic insistence. Their meaning inheres in the mystery that attaches to their complexity, and so there should be no attempt to simply explain away the complexity. This is because the images, concepts and words “have no direct relation to [...] the plot [...] but form associations of their own, inconsequential, secret invitations to interpretation rather than appeals to a consensus”.³⁰ These elaborate languages “inhabit a world in which relationships [...] remain occult or of questionable shape”.³¹

Kermode's analysis of Under Western Eyes is not animated by any particular literary-critical ideological agenda. But his essay on the text is, nevertheless, a complex and self-conscious critical act, an erudite reflection both on a novel and on the nature of critical inquiry itself. Most importantly, Kermode's essay stands out from others because of what the self-reflexive awareness that underlies his overall approach allows him to see.

What Kermode sees is that Conrad in Under Western Eyes uses the Russian subject as a pretext for a deep and troubling investigation into the collective mind of the West. As Kermode puts it, "we may think of Conrad as painfully finding out in the writing of Under Western Eyes what the novel was; he did so by writing it, black on white, as if it were Russia, and by meditating on ideas, phantoms and devils".³² In the sense that Kermode is wittily alert to these "phantoms and devils", his reading of Under Western Eyes converges with GoGwilt's perception of the novel as "a politics the 'Westerner' has overlooked".

Kermode's proposition about the plot structure of Under Western Eyes will be broadly accepted here. Kermode argues that the novel functions as a "double" plot, a bifurcated narrative formation inscribing, at the level of reading and interpretation, the various gulfs of cultural experience and knowledge that exist between East and West, between the Russia and the Switzerland of the English narrator's account. On one plane of the plot there is what Kermode refers to as "a relatively clean, well-lighted plot" evoking a world with "no horizons [...] obvious in an obvious light [...] suitable for citizens of a tedious democracy".³³ This is a plot that is a sort of simulacrum of Switzerland, the novel as emblem of a hygienic, prosperous, politically settled and serene West. On the second plane of the plot, a world is offered that is defined by its secretive, obsessive, closed character, a world that is "misty, full of phantoms," like the unfathomable despotic Russia that emerges from the pages of "Autocracy and War".³⁴

These two plots of the novel seem, in these terms, to be radically different, incompatible, and in ceaseless tension with each other. Yet, precisely because the two plots occupy the same frame of the novel, held together by the English teacher of languages, the plots *cannot* be incommensurable, *must* collide, intersect and

intertwine, to form a common ideological form. The novel, by the very fact of its existence, proposes that there is a dialogic point of contact between East and West, between Russia and Switzerland, between revolution and the status quo.

By and large, readers of Under Western Eyes seem to have felt that, if the novel does contain two quite distinct plots, then it is the Western plot that enjoys, either tacitly or clearly, priority over the Eastern one. It will be argued, below, that a close reading of the narrative of Under Western Eyes reveals an occluded Eastern plot that continually casts a sombre shadow over the sober well-lit Western plot that dominates the novel's foreground. With Razumov's Geneva confession, at the climax of the novel, the repressed Eastern plot finally erupts into the Western plot in a narrative episode that ambivalently celebrates betrayal, violence and despair as a culturally shared legacy of capitalist modernization and revolution. In this sense it will be suggested that Under Western Eyes problematizes the entrenched Western notion of Russia as socially, politically and culturally separate from Western Europe, and proposes that both must be situated within a linked historical dynamic.

Furthermore, it will be argued that the narrator, the Genevan teacher of languages, should not be seen as functioning, as Eagleton suggests, as a kind of simple-minded apologist for Western cultural values of decency and democracy. Rather the suggestion that will be advanced below is that the teacher of languages oversees, and struggles to manage as narrative, a process whereby his own discourse, as interpellated subject of Western capitalism, is invaded, subverted and, finally, potentially re-energized, by Razumov, Russia and the revolution; whereby his rationalist assumptions are brought into question by the arcane energies (both destructive and life-replenishing) of a culture at a radically different stage of historical development from his own. The overall argument of this chapter will therefore be that the aim of Under Western Eyes is to position Russia "under Western eyes", as a sort of ineluctable cultural double: a distorted mirror image of its own modernity and bastard-child of its own historical imagination.

Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan argues that Under Western Eyes, like many of Conrad's works, is replete with images of doubles.³⁵ Centrally, Razumov's double is the revolutionary terrorist, Victor Haldin. The Razumov-Haldin double becomes the

charged ideational centre of the text's psychological-political drama. It is the focal point for a whole series of thematic conflicts in the text: revolutionary vs. spy, disaffected aristocrat vs. poor student, and brother vs. lover. Around this central idea of the double, a whole host of shadowy doubles, or potential doubles, constantly come into focus and fade out, crystallize and decompose. (Razumov is also a double of the narrator, the English teacher of languages. Like the narrator, Razumov is a writer, an observer, a sort of foreign tourist, and a potential lover of Natalia.)

Secondly, the novel's sense of place is offered as double, bifurcated. The overarching Russia / Switzerland double has already been noted, but Geneva, too, functions as St. Petersburg's antithesis, a clean, affluent Western simulacrum of the ghastly Russian city of poverty, clandestine politics and betrayal. Perhaps the Geneva / St. Petersburg binary could be seen as a splitting and inversion of notions held in uneasy tension in the carnival city London of The Secret Agent. In that city, we will recall, the Russian, Vladimir, is an ideologue of an embattled politics of "international administration"; while somewhere in the shadows, threatening to undermine this nascent postmodern politics of administration, lurks the Professor with his bomb.

The material culture of Geneva and St. Petersburg of Under Western Eyes replicates and amplifies the contrast between these two locations. So, for instance, the Chateau Borel, base of the Geneva-based Russian revolutionaries, weirdly emits beneath its phoney romantic façade muffled echoes of that byzantine network of apartments and offices of St. Petersburg through which Razumov is hustled in the opening passages of the novel. The material differences between the Eastern city of St. Petersburg and the Western city of Geneva are obvious enough. But the novel continually insists on unsettling similarities and overlaps between the structures and geometries in these otherwise disparate urban spaces.

As character and place in the novel are frequently double, so are some of its main dramatic situations. Razumov's confession to Natalia (with the narrator in attendance) is duplicated by his subsequent confession to the revolutionary exiles in the Laspara residence; Razumov's writing of his journal of confession is doubled by the narrator's account of that journal; Tekla's decision to look after Razumov after he has been

deafened and cast out from the Laspara residence mirrors and repeats her previous experience of looking after a comrade who confessed under torture; and so on.

Doubleness is also evident in the texture of Under Western Eyes' language. Certain words, formulas, and phrases are constantly being doubled, are continually offered as forms of overlapping and repetition. Frank Kermode discovers over sixty references to eyes and seeing in the novel, as well as at least twenty four occasions on which the following phrases are used: "black on white", "ink on paper", "snow and darkness", "light in dark rooms", "ink on paper" (these phrases and ideas also usually contain two objects or ideas: they are themselves doubles).³⁶

Doubleness saturates the dialogue of the novel's characters too, particularly Razumov's. After the betrayal of Haldin, Razumov's *parole* becomes increasingly ambiguous, ambivalent and cryptic. Layered with unconscious irony and double-entendres, the enunciation of the central protagonist comes to stand for a sense of the ambivalent nature of human communication itself. Rieselbach observes that Razumov is constantly dealing "dangerously in double-meanings and in irony" in Geneva.³⁷ Terence Cave also remarks that Razumov "again and again [...] says more than he ought" after the betrayal; though, in contrast to Rieselbach, he argues that this is part of a creative, if tragic, process: the "repetition of his error [...] always occurs in a covert form until Razumov finds himself engaged in a dialogue of desire".³⁸

Stephen Bernstein argues that the insistent sense of the doubleness of language in Under Western Eyes connects it with the relativistic values of textuality and postmodernism. "Not only is there no divine soul, no *logos* behind the universe of the novel," notes Bernstein, "but the only systematic force which might inform it is textuality, the total subsumption of events and people by those 'great foes of reality', words".³⁹

A cultural tradition in Western Europe in which the concept of the double is highly relevant is the tradition of carnival. It is worth recalling here that, in Chapter Three of this thesis, it was argued that the radically dualistic vision of carnival becomes an important element of the ideology of form in The Secret Agent.

For M.M. Bakhtin, carnival – seen as the expression of a pre-class popular consciousness in Europe – is imbued with the idea of the double, and of witty and incongruous confluences. Up until the end of the middle ages, Bakhtin writes, carnival led a relatively free and open-air existence in Europe. Though antithetical in spirit to a solemn medieval ecclesiastic social order, carnival was granted, on feast days and holy days, a structured, but also genuinely unfettered, freedom – a “period of misrule”, played out in the village squares, the urban concourses, and the market-places of Europe. Bakhtin’s account of carnival, both in Rabelais and His World (1968) and Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics (1984) movingly conveys the sense of the concrete, sensuously felt, utopian social freedom that was transmitted to spectators and participants (who are pretty much one and the same thing in Bakhtin’s image of carnival) by this popular form of expression in a time of feudal repression and tyranny.

For Bakhtin, then, carnival is more than just an aesthetic form, in the modern sense; it is a socially symbolic space in medieval European culture in which a “new mode of interrelationship between individuals” is worked out via a language of profanity, and a tone of ambivalent laughter. In carnival, writes Bakhtin, “life is drawn out of its usual rut” and “all distance between people is suspended”.⁴⁰ In carnival, “everyone is an active participant, everyone communes”.⁴¹ “Carnivalistic life [...] is to some extent ‘life turned inside out’”.⁴² Turning inside outside out the caste-divisions of medieval Europe, carnival performed what Fredric Jameson terms a “socially symbolic act”: it replenished the people’s faith in themselves as actors in the social landscape that framed and defined them.

Bakhtin’s account of carnival distinguishes its pre-modern sense of a socially symbolic space, a “period of misrule”, from its (on the whole, historically later) literary manifestations and embodiments in books and plays. “Carnival [...] is not of course a literary phenomenon,” he writes, “it is a *syncretic pageantry* of a ritualistic sort,” yet it is “amenable to a certain transposition into a language of artistic images”.⁴³

As carnival declines as a public, communal form in Europe, it finds, by a miracle of transference, a kind of after-life in the novel. “From the second half of the seventeenth

century on, carnival almost completely ceases to be a direct source of carnivalization,” writes Bakhtin, as it “almost loses touch with communal performance”.⁴⁴ The reduction of carnival’s “specific weight in the life of the people” means that its characteristic tropes and motifs become susceptible to cultural capture from elsewhere.⁴⁵ The novel (as the most secular of the modern artistic genres) then moves into the space once filled by carnival. The novel becomes saturated with the robust humour and irreverent spirit that was once the preserve of the carnival. The utilitarian and pragmatic spirit of capitalism and the “Age of Reason” thus hounds a populist carnival *Geist* out of the public squares and market places of Europe, and into the spaces between the covers of the novels of Sorel, Scarron, Rabelais, Cervantes, and Dostoyevsky.

For Bakhtin, Fyodor Dostoevsky is (along with Rabelais) the key European novelist in the development of carnival as a literary form. As he puts it, “in Dostoyevsky’s work [...] the carnivalistic tradition is reborn in a new way: it takes on its own meaning, combines with other artistic elements, furthers its own particular artistic goals”.⁴⁶ Dostoyevsky’s novels sustain and develop the inner idea of carnival – the primacy of the social – in a world that is increasingly being drained of movement, interest, and colour by the utilitarian and individuating thrusts of industrial capitalism. For Bakhtin, Dostoyevsky’s work is significant because it is animated by an intense abhorrence of capitalism. “The major emotional thrust of all Dostoyevsky’s work,” he writes, “is the struggle against the *reification* of man, of human relations, of all human values under the condition of capitalism”.⁴⁷

While Bakhtin sees Dostoyevsky as an avatar of the polyphonic and intensely social values of carnival, it is important to stress that this does not mean he views him as a fantasist. Dostoyevsky, argues Bakhtin, extends the life span of the carnival by being a “realist in a higher sense” whose aim is to “with utter realism [...] find the man in man”.⁴⁸ For Bakhtin, there is no contradiction between the carnival *Weltanschauung* and the philosophical mandates of social realism in prose fiction:

The special sort of moral torture that Dostoyevsky inflicts upon his heroes, in order to force out of them that ultimate word of a self-consciousness pushed to its extreme limits, permits him to take all that is merely material, merely an object, all that is fixed and unchanging, all that is external

and neutral in the representation of a person, and dissolve it in the realm of the hero's self-consciousness and self-utterance.⁴⁹

The self-consciousness of the typical hero in Dostoyevsky's fiction is the key to the primacy of polyphonic values within it. As Bakhtin puts it, "self-consciousness, as the artistic dominant in the construction of the hero's image, is by itself sufficient to break down the monologic unity of the world".⁵⁰

What is important about Dostoyevsky's presentation of the hero in his fiction is the generous view of society that it assumes, argues Bakhtin. The hero in Dostoyevsky is given the authority to challenge the fixed lexical order of society by being ceded the "last word" regarding his own identity. The hero "knows that he has the *final word*, and he seeks at whatever cost to retain for himself this final word about himself".⁵¹ By giving the hero the last word about himself, Dostoyevsky's fiction invariably becomes a system that parodies and mocks the dominant monologic verbal order in which the hero operates. In so doing, it implies that the social dialogic order is always open, provisional and incomplete. In this it resembles "carnivalistic laughter" that "is directed towards something higher – towards a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders".⁵²

The argument that will be advanced below is that Under Western Eyes actively articulates with, and against, Dostoyevskian models of polyphonic social realism. In particular, it will be suggested that the tragically afflicted figure of Razumov occupies the position of the self-conscious hero in Dostoyevsky's fiction (his name is a deliberate echo of Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment). It will be argued, finally, that Conrad's novel, by conspicuously *not* ceding the "last word" about Razumov to Razumov (the reader's final image of him is extremely indirect and mediated), does not cancel the dialogic potency inscribed in the Dostoyevskian motif of the self-conscious hero, but actually foregrounds the coercive socio-political mechanisms that preserve monological authority and keep polyphony at bay.

Howe writes that Dostoyevsky was one of the main influences on Conrad, his gloomy vision of the world "immediately and profoundly accessible" to the Polish-born writer.⁵³ The early scenes of Under Western Eyes set in St. Petersburg clearly

summon up the precedent of Dostoyevsky, for this metropolis is as integral to the social vision of Dostoyevsky's fiction as London is to the novels of Dickens.

However, the St. Petersburg of Under Western Eyes is not the Dostoyevskian urban landscape of potential epiphanies, continually waiting for Dionysian possibilities to erupt into life.

Rather, the St. Petersburg of Under Western Eyes is a grim, frozen, and anti-human landscape, distorted and rendered socially grotesque by a State system determined to preserve social inequalities. Unlike Dostoyevsky, then, Conrad offers St. Petersburg, with studied naturalism, as a largely static world in which a numbing legacy of autocracy has produced a city in which abject poverty and insolent luxury are juxtaposed.

The different ends of the Russian city's socio-economic spectrum are offered as polarized and mutually incommensurable spaces. What keeps these urban spaces apart is also the political glue that holds them together: namely, the despotic State. The only way that Conrad's Russian city can be made whole again is through a politics of revolutionary violence.

In Crime and Punishment (1866), on the other hand, the human textures of St. Petersburg are not as clearly implicated by the State. Porfiry (a mixture of bureaucrat and intellectual, governmental and civil) attempts to win the trust of a morally corrupt Raskolnikov by appealing to the latter's residual respect for Mother Russia:

"One word, Rodion Romanovitch; as to the rest, it's in God's hands, but as a matter of form there are some questions I shall have to ask you ... so we shall meet again, shan't we?" And Porfiry stood still with a smile.

'Shan't we?' he added again."⁵⁴

In Under Western Eyes, the Russian State is a system of authority that seeks to preserve itself: it does not treat those it deems to be criminals morally. Mikulin of Under Western Eyes (the equivalent of Porfiry in Crime and Punishment) is a chillingly impersonal ideologue of Tsarist counter-insurrectionary determination, intelligent only in his utter submission to the *realpolitik* logic of autocracy. Aaron

Fogel correctly points out that Conrad's novel is unlike Crime and Punishment in the sense that it "denies that there is any grand dialectic between the worldly and the unworldly, and insists that there is only one world, as a plural forced dialogic, which includes everyone".⁵⁵ The political background to this "plural forced dialogic" is, of course, the ideological panic created by the imminence of revolution in Russia.

For, viewed from another angle, Under Western Eyes demonstrates, by an ironic force of implication, the disturbing power of organized revolutionary politics in pre-1917 Russia. The incompatible socio-economic poles of Conrad's St. Petersburg explosively come into contact when the revolutionary assassin Victor Haldin crashes in on Razumov, at the beginning of the novel. Superficially, this scene offers an encounter between two figures from the same social world, as Haldin and Razumov are both university students. However, in another sense their meeting is a transgression of the caste-like lines of the Russian class system. Haldin belongs to a wealthy family, domiciled in the prosperous West; and he also has personal and hereditary links with the Russian revolutionary movement – a dangerous social position, in one respect, but also one of some prestige (partly because of its connection with a mystique of masculine violence). Razumov, by contrast, has almost no links either with the revolutionary leadership circles or the Russian Establishment, (to underline this fact, he is the orphan bastard son of Prince K-, a low grade noble in the State apparatus).

This class difference between Razumov and Victor Haldin is an important, and often underestimated, causal factor in the former's eventual decision to betray the latter to the Tsarist secret police. To explore this aspect of the novel more fully, it will be necessary to turn to a detailed examination of the scenes leading up to Razumov's betrayal of Haldin.

After crashing in on his student apartment, Haldin persuades Razumov to contact Ziemianitch, the sleigh-driver tasked with transporting the revolutionary from St. Petersburg to a place beyond the reach of the city's police apparatus. In appearing to consent to this, Razumov implicitly aligns himself with Haldin and his act of revolutionary subversion. However, instead of carrying out Haldin's request Razumov beats Ziemianitch senseless, before proceeding to inform on Haldin.

The apparent decision of Razumov to side with the despotic Russian State rather than Haldin and the revolution thus hinges, dramatically and emotionally, on this curious encounter with Ziemianitch. What is so important about this minor figure (who scarcely figures in the narrative as a dramatic character all)? Fogel argues that Ziemianitch, in his alcoholic stupor, is “allegorical of the Russian peasant’s historical stasis”.⁵⁶ Razumov finds the sleigh-driver in a St. Petersburg slum, “an enormous slum, a hive of human vermin, a monumental abode of misery towering on the verge of starvation and despair” (UWE, 28) where he is in an alcohol-induced sleep in “a long cavernous place like a neglected subterranean byre” (UWE, 29). Razumov beats Ziemianitch primarily because the latter’s drunkenness increases the danger that he might be detected by the secret police (he wants to get Haldin out of his lodgings as quickly as possible).

In objective terms, Ziemianitch also represents a danger to the cause of the revolution, a possible obstacle to getting Haldin out of St Petersburg to the safety of the West. For the revolutionary Haldin, though, he is a kind of peasant-hero, a “bright spirit! A hardy soul!” (UWE, 18). Razumov, urban and displaced from the Russian ruling class from birth, sees a quite different Ziemianitch. For him, the peasant is a comatose obstacle to his own progress. The account of the actual beating of Ziemianitch conveys not simply a sense of Razumov’s anger, but also a kind of stern purpose that almost amounts to rapture:

He looked round wildly, seized the handle of a broken stable-fork and, rushing forward, struck at the prostrate body with inarticulate cries. After a time his cries ceased, and the rain of blows fell in the stillness and shadows of the cellar-like stable. Razumov belaboured Ziemianitch with an insatiable fury, in great volleys of sounding thwacks. Except for the violent movements of Razumov nothing stirred, neither the beaten man nor the spoke-like shadows on the walls. And only the sound of blows was heard. It was a weird scene. (UWE, 30)

What I would like to highlight about this passage is that the narrator deliberately refrains from offering a specific explanatory code for Razumov’s beating of Ziemianitch. The use of light and darkness, as in a kind of shadow-play, the weird immobility of the victim, and the statement that “only the sound of the blows was heard”, cumulatively point to the conclusion that this violent outburst *is an act for which there are no words*. Of course, in implying this, the narrator is actually

advancing an interpretation, albeit a negative one. However, to accept this gloss is to submit to a rather condescendingly external view of Razumov as an inexplicable, and possibly cynical and violent Russian, at this critical juncture. To try to make Razumov's act of beating Ziemianitch intelligible and articulate on less partial terms than the narrator's explanation allows for, it will be helpful to make a short detour into cultural theory.

The fact that the narrator declines to interpret the beating of Ziemianitch in social and psychological terms should not deter the critic from seeking such interpretations.

Bakhtin, in his book Rabelais and His World, makes reference, at one point, to the numerous instances of acts involving violent beatings in the carnival tradition. The symbolism underlying these "thrashings", according to Bakhtin, was that "the king" needs reviving or waking up.⁵⁷

Bakhtin argues that the carnival motif of the *deserved* violent thrashing is part of a rich folkloric discourse relating to metamorphosis and rapturous collective abandon. In the ritualised carnival beatings, the figure representing "the king" is at first a clown in disguise, but, once the beating gets underway, the disguise is abandoned so that the king becomes "merely" a clown. So the more "the king" is beaten, the more he "wakes up", and the more, as a clown "once more" he comes to resemble a typical participant of the carnival (the more he is assimilated, that is, to "the people"). The utopian symbolism coded into the "gay thrashing" is that social authority, as embodied in the figure of the clown disguised as a king, must "die a historic death", must, in other words, become imbued with the crude, insolent and (ultimately) ambivalent spirit of the medieval collective.⁵⁸

Viewed from this perspective, the beating of Ziemianitch can be interpreted as an ecstatic celebration of "the people". Ziemianitch, drunk and asleep in a deplorable slum, represents a corrupted version of the Russian collective. By beating him, Razumov is demanding that he (that is the Russian peasantry) "wake up", arise from his (its) slumber of apathy and helplessness.

If this interpretation is accepted, then so too must be the text's intense ironic ambivalence towards the Russian revolution. At the moment of betraying the

revolution (by beating Ziemianitch, Razumov effectively denies Haldin the possibility of safe passage out of St. Petersburg), Razumov is, paradoxically, at his most revolutionary. Curiously, then, Razumov's betrayal of the revolution is offered in a cultural discourse that can be interpreted as signifying his unconscious ecstatic embrace of change and oneness with the Russian masses.

On a moral-naturalistic level, Razumov becomes an accomplice of the State and an enemy of the revolution by punishing Ziemianitch and then reporting Haldin's presence in his room to the police. His subsequent course in the novel must in these terms be read as one of guilt and ultimate redemption. There is nothing inherently wrong with advancing such a reading; but to confine oneself to an understanding of the novel mediated by this moral-naturalistic code is to make it immensely difficult to account for the recurrent, almost rhapsodic, production of motifs of violence, both physical and psychological, associated with the hero's development throughout the subsequent narrative. The most notable "gay thrashing", after all, is the one that is doled out to Razumov at the end of the novel by the jolly-sinister figure of Nikita, image of the revolution as nemesis. The second "gay thrashing" leaves Razumov deaf. The motif of deafness links back with the deliberate suspension of psychological interpretation in the representation of Razumov's beating of Ziemianitch as soundless. There, the image of the silence that cocoons this act of violence may be seen retrospectively to imply that Razumov is metaphorically deaf to the forces that impel him to act in the way he does. In this sense, Nikita's ecstatic-violent act (the deafening blows) may be seen as both retributive and restorative. They are both tokens of the revolution's revenge for the betrayal of Haldin (and siding with the Tsarist State), and emblems of a less precisely located wish *to give meaning* to the initial beating of Ziemianitch, to infuse the act without substance with a definite content, and to give it a status as a socially symbolic act layered with ambivalently populist overtones.

Immediately after beating Ziemianitch, Razumov engages in an interesting mental debate with himself about the semantic significance of the act. "Betray," he muses, is "a great word," but how can a single word, however great, capture the complexity of motive involved in the beating? How can the word answer the question, "what is betrayal?" (UWE, 37).

If not betrayal, then what? Perhaps, as suggested above, a subconscious embrace of development and change, a new and painful lesson, for an alienated Russian subject, of re-connecting with "the people". After beating Ziemianitch, Razumov returns to the streets of St. Petersburg, his mind teeming with complex emotions. At this stage he is not certain about what to do with Haldin. His indecision is mirrored in a physical act. "Razumov stamped his foot – and under the soft carpet of snow felt the hard ground of Russia, inanimate, cold, inert, like a sullen and tragic mother hiding her face under a winding-sheet" (UWE, 32). The image of the earth as a "sullen and tragic mother" may be a submerged allusion to Razumov's own mother, the "archpriest's pretty daughter" he has never met (UWE, 6). Razumov's stamping gesture may in this sense be taken as implying a need to make contact with a more authentic Russian self, via the inert earth, the unknown mother, and a renegotiation of a corrupt history of which he is ineluctably a part.

At the same time, the image of Russia as a "tragic mother" has other echoes in the novel. Most obviously, there is Mrs Haldin, the mother whose life Razumov ruins by his betrayal of her son. But also, a number of the Russian revolutionaries that Razumov will later encounter in Geneva are women (though not necessarily mothers), most of them carrying a history of pain that partly explains their commitment to a politics of violent change. Finally, there is Razumov's nemesis, Nikita. Nikita's huge stomach suggests pregnancy, and his high-pitched voice implies an indeterminate gender identity underlying his propensity for violence. Bakhtin suggests that images of pregnancy and fatness abound in the carnival tradition. In the carnival, "death itself is pregnant and gives birth," writes Bakhtin, and "the mother's womb giving birth becomes a grave".⁵⁹ The bloated squeaky voiced Nikita therefore provides a carnivalized image of "the pregnant death" of a revolutionary future for Russia.

Shortly after stamping on the obdurate Russian earth, he has a remarkably intense vision of a transfigured St. Petersburg:

Under a sumptuous immensity of the sky, the snow covered the endless forests, the frozen rivers, the plains of an immense country, obliterating the landmarks, the accidents of the ground, levelling everything under its uniform whiteness, like a monstrous blank page awaiting the record of an inconceivable history (UWE, 33).

This is a rhapsodic vision of the endlessness of Russia, an image of “the nation” that draws its authority, as an image, from that which is outside the Russian city. Not that is an image that endorses the notion of *the land* as the locus of true Russian identity, for the earth is precisely frozen-over, indistinguishable, in Razumov’s vision. The image of the snow-covered Russian land as a “monstrous blank page awaiting the record of an inconceivable history” resonates with the earlier motif of the wordless beating of Ziemianitch (that potentially revolutionary act for which there is as yet no language). Just as the grotesque nature of the beating was made to seem mystically hallowed by the eerie wordlessness that appeared to accompany it, so Razumov’s access to an authentic idea of Russia is here shown to be concealed beneath the muffling weight of a “monstrous” inherited history of silence (partly this is the silence that surrounds Razumov’s own origins).

As the novel is to make clear, it will be down to Razumov, Russia’s disinherited son, to “write” that alternative Russia. By his actions, more than by his words, Razumov will find himself involved in making the ominous silence of Russia’s monstrous past more articulate to himself. Part of what this involves is his seeing realities that lie beyond the visual range offered by the self-deluding rhetoric of revolutionaries like Haldin.

Shortly after Razumov’s epiphany of Russia as a “monstrous blank page”, he experiences a second, more clearly hallucinatory, vision of Haldin prostrate before him on the ground. In allegorical terms, this hallucination implies the central character’s perception of the history-making pretensions of the gentleman-revolutionary figure of Haldin. The image of Haldin lying in a martyr-like pose on the snowed-over city streets implies the Revolution’s desire to inscribe itself on the “blank page” of Russian history.

Razumov’s response to this is to deliberately step over this image of “Haldin” lying across his path in the snow. Looking back at the phantom he thinks he has delicately avoided, Razumov sees that the snow, the “blank sheet” of history, reveals something quite different to what he had imagined:

With a stern face, without a check and gazing far beyond the vision, he walked on, experiencing nothing but a slight tightening of the chest. After passing he turned his head for a glance, and saw only the unbroken track of his footsteps over the place where the breast of the phantom had been lying (UWE, 37).

All that is visible to Razumov now is the unbroken track of his own footsteps in the snow. He now sees that he has stepped *onto* the phantom, Haldin (the image of Russian autocracy as a “phantom” recurs in “Autocracy and War”).

Why is this act of walking over the phantom of Haldin accorded such significance in the novel? Razumov alludes to it again and again, often in dialogic contexts in which it seems inexplicable. In a psychological sense, the act might suggest Razumov’s unconscious determination to betray Haldin to the police (not to let him “get in his way”, as it were). In a socio-political sense, it might be seen as implying the central figure’s conservative revulsion at the prospect of revolution (his autocracy-fearing wish to wipe it from the record of Russian history). At the same time, this curious act of stepping on “Haldin”, like the gay thrashing of Ziemianitch, and like the stamping of the foot, can perhaps be most persuasively explained in terms of a broader imagery of carnival that gestures outwards towards the novel’s wider and more inclusive social and historical textures.

For, Razumov’s deliberate defacement of the image of Haldin is suggestive of a carnival concept that Bakhtin calls “degradation”. “Degradation,” writes Bakhtin, “means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow and kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better”.⁶⁰ In this sense, the degradation of the image on the snow indicates Razumov’s ambivalent desire to revive the revolutionary ambition for Russia that is corruptly embodied in the dialogic viewpoint and ideological outlook of the gentleman-terrorist Haldin. Razumov only realizes what he has done *after* he looks back at his footsteps in the snow. His revolutionary consciousness is only evident as an effect of his actions (as a “delayed decoding” in Ian Watt’s terms), and perhaps is to be seen as drawing a measure of authenticity from this fact.

In sum, then, Razumov degrades Ziemianitch with a thrashing, only to himself succumb to an act of degradation by Nikita, who thrashes his eardrums so that they can no longer function. In between these twin images of degradation, a third: Razumov's defilement of the phantom Haldin on the St Petersburg snow. Razumov walks over the image of a phantom of Haldin in the St. Petersburg snow, betrays him to the police, and is haunted by it (both the phantom and the betrayal) for the rest of the novel.

Razumov's betrayal of revolution is thus paradoxically laden with revolutionary possibility. This perhaps helps to explain the strange and often remarked upon self-destructive gaucheness of the hero in the Genevan sections of the novel. Natalia, the English teacher of languages, and the Genevan revolutionaries are continually expressing puzzlement about his tense, peculiar demeanour, and his passionate reserve. The Russian revolutionary exiles in Geneva desperately want to fete him as a friend of Haldin, and as a hero of the revolutionary cause, but his sullen attitude of withdrawal and irony seems to warn against it. The reader also finds Razumov's whole posture in these Genevan scenes curious because it precisely draws attention to him as a sort of misfit in this milieu and therefore both endangers his safety and militates against him carrying out his role as an *agent provocateur* as effectively as he otherwise might.

It would be simplistic to suggest that the unease of Razumov in the Geneva sections of the novel is nothing more than an expression of guilt over the betrayal of Haldin. This is part of the reason, to be sure; but just as important is the enormous, and virtually uncontrollable, distaste he experiences for the Russian exile revolutionary cadre. The novel shows that, if Razumov is uneasy and reserved in these Genevan scenes, it is partly because he is intensely sceptical about the motives of the Russian revolutionary exile leadership. This reaction often threatens to cancel his self-preserving need for reserve and secrecy, as in his numerous bitter outbursts in his conversations with Ivanovitch and Antonovna. In the end it is part of the reason that he confesses in the Laspara Residence: to show the revolutionaries what real courage and commitment are.

This structure of feeling goes back to the politico-psychological alchemy brewed up in the encounter with Haldin and Ziemianitch in St. Petersburg. Part of what was arresting about this encounter for Razumov was that it was accompanied by the surfacing of an intense sense of alienation from the Russian class system. As a result of this experience he finds that both the comatose commoner Ziemianitch and the ebullient gentleman-idealist Haldin repel him.

Shortly after his betrayal of Haldin, Razumov utters his disdain for the aristocratic amateurism of the revolutionary:

‘What have I to look back to but that national past from which you gentlemen want to wrench away your future? Am I to let my intelligence, my aspirations towards a better lot, be robbed of the only thing it has to go upon at the will of violent enthusiasts?’ (UWE, 61).

The reader knows already that Razumov has betrayed Haldin, and this imparts to his words, which might otherwise be interpreted as undergraduate debating club jargon, extra emotional depth and resonance. The language that Razumov uses in this scene often seems to be on the verge of appropriating the kind of revolutionary Marxist rhetoric that Haldin might use. “I am content in fitting myself to be a worker,” he exclaims at one point (UWE, 61). The point of this is to not to compete with Haldin on rhetorical grounds, but, rather, the opposite – to show him that real politics inhere in creative human actions, and to suggest to him that his allegiance to violent acts and the revolution is somehow a form of upper class ideological self-delusion.

What is interesting about this is that the novel seems, in its broader treatment of the Russian revolutionaries in Geneva, to, in some respects, share Razumov’s assessment of Haldin’s revolutionary commitment as a displaced manifestation of upper class self-delusion and self-hatred. Madame de S- and Peter Ivanovitch are both originally from Russian aristocratic backgrounds. In both cases, a revolutionary-charismatic impulse is linked with a deep lying socio-psychological complex of disavowal and self-hatred. Ivanovitch is notionally committed to uplifting the Russian masses, but the testimony of Tekla at the Chateau Borel discloses a residually cold and cruel attitude to lower class women that belies this idealistic exterior. Madame de S- makes no bones about the fact that she views revolution as a means of furthering a personal

vendetta against the Russian aristocracy. Her revolutionary commitment is subordinate to an embittered aristocratic disdain for the existing Russian power structure from which his family has been displaced.

Under Western Eyes offers many of the Genevan revolutionaries as grotesque and ghastly figures from a kind of carnival. Peter Ivanovitch has “one of those bearded Russian faces without shape, a mere appearance of flesh and hair with not a single feature having any sort of character. His eyes being hidden by the dark glasses there was an utter absence of expression” (TSA, 120). Madame de S- has a “death’s-head smile”, a “skeleton hand”, and is a “painted, shiny-eyed harridan” (UWE, 219). Nikita is enormously fat and has a high-pitched voice. And so on.

The cumulative effect of this carnivalization of the upper levels of the Russian revolutionary exile group does is not simply to trivialize or dismiss it as a kind of second-rate circus act (though this is part of the intention), but also to convey a sense of its chillingly impressive capacity to undertake and manage acts of political violence. Ivanovitch and company are in this respect offered as carnival doubles of the handsome, romantic and eloquent terrorist Haldin. The revolution’s potential for rational violence is proven in a very direct fashion when Nikita and his thugs mete out an impromptu justice on Razumov at the end of the novel.

Paradoxically, Under Western Eyes shows that the Geneva-based Russian revolutionaries mean business by parodying them as earnest freaks. Revolution is not a pretty matter; and it requires an Ivanovitch and a Madame de S- to successfully perform its tasks. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that alongside these cartoon images of Russian revolutionaries, Conrad offers a range of more positive alternative human images of the Russian revolution as being the product of creative, reforming impulses. Sophia Antonovna in particular suggests a notion of revolutionary commitment as personal courage, dedication and steadfastness. Moreover, the novel tries, via Razumov’s relationship with Natalia Haldin, to develop a way of connecting the imperatives of revolutionary struggle with the more complicated values of human love and trust. The fact that this relationship is impossible without complete dishonesty on Razumov’s part from the start suggests the size of the obstacles to be overcome before any bridge between revolution and

genuine trans-individual harmony is to be built. At the same time, the failure of this relationship offers useful moral lessons that both characters may learn from. By the end of the novel Natalia may have learned that the revolution that her brother fought for involves harsh human truths (she moves to Russia after Razumov's confession). Razumov, though probably about to die, may have learned that no post-revolutionary society is possible without the courage that can only come from love.

Under Western Eyes seeks to offer a broad, comprehensive vision of the personalities and social types engaged in the revolutionary formation of a post-Tsarist Russia. As Conrad observes in the Author's Note, Under Western Eyes is essentially about trying to find a vocabulary for the state of mind of a whole culture, a collective consciousness, "the psychology of Russia itself" (AN, vii). In this task, Conrad finds that *comedy* (as a form that is open, democratically inclusive and broadly optimistic, rather than tragedy, which is closed and individual-centred) is the preferred stylistic idiom in which to capture a complex modernizing Russian social dynamic. The novel therefore persistently offers the Russian revolutionaries via parody, as figures from carnival. By contrast, the figures that represent the Russian State, functionaries like General T- and Mikulin, are presented as empty puppets, utterly devoid of humour and contingency. As the cold-blooded exponents of a uniquely coercive power structure, they fall outside the novel's dominant accent of parody and carnival fun.

In a more complex way, Razumov, who, after all, is, like Mikulin and General T-, a representative of the Tsarist government for most of the novel, also falls outside the novel's shaping comic-parodic accent. Part of the reason that Razumov is such an awkward presence for much of the novel is that as a Tsarist agent whose inner psychology is nevertheless in a continual state of revolutionary agitation, he continually seems to hover on threshold of its comic-parodic frame without ever quite cohering with its main aims. It is only when he confesses his role as a comic double (both Tsarist spy and "authentic" Russian revolutionary) to the Russian exiles in the Laspara residence that Razumov finally merges with both the carnivalized values of the exiles and the submerged carnivalized ideology of the narrative. The potential for a tragic *gravitas* in this climatic confession scene is rapidly reduced to bathos by the series of comic humiliations and reversals that accompany and follow it. Deafened by the "paunchy" and "monstrous" Nikita, summarily ejected into the streets of a stormy

Geneva, and then run over by a passing tramcar, Razumov becomes not so much a tragic figure of pity and terror, as a kind of macabre circus act, a focal point of increasingly contingent energies. His fall from grace is horrible, violent, and sudden - not at all tragic.

As noted earlier, the scene of the deafening of Razumov by Nikita and his thugs also repeats (or doubles) the motif of the gay thrashing Razumov meted out to Ziemianitch. The latter is at this point dead, his suicide having turned him into a possibly tragic victim of the first gay thrashing. In that sense, the deafening of Razumov may be offered as the paradigm of a peculiar kind of St Petersburg comic revenge performed in a context of Genevan affluence. Or, if one prefers, it may represent the stirrings of a carnivalized version of history, driven by revolutionary forces (which includes Ivanovitch and the rest). The novel, in this sense, seems to suggest that, if the causes of Russian events seem opaque when placed "under Western eyes", a more careful look may disclose the stirrings of complex energies. For the Western reader to see the logic of history the novel gestures to, it is necessary to see through the partial and unreliable eyes of others. At the most obvious level, this means learning to distrust the exiled eyes of the middle-aged English narrator. But it also perhaps means the more demanding task of learning to look through eyes that are emerging out of the gloom of Russian Absolutism: perhaps Ivanovitch's, inscrutable behind smoked glasses; or those of Ziemianitch, obscured by the darkness in the "hive of human vermin". As Christopher GoGwilt argues, the perspective that may ultimately prevail in Under Western Eyes is as much that of Russia's view of the West as the obverse.

Third Horizon: Ideology of Form

In this final horizon of interpretation, Under Western Eyes will be examined in relation to a historical context that encompasses broader shifts in social and economic patterns in European society than have hitherto been considered.

It has been argued above that Conrad's novel, while appearing to offer a Western vision of Russia, actually ends up turning this around, so that the "real" subject of Under Western Eyes becomes the West itself – and particularly the West's *mode of*

seeing. Curiously, the Marxist critic Terry Eagleton discerns an exaggerated respect for the West in Conrad's thinking in Under Western Eyes. "Whereas in other of his novels [sic] there is a genuine dialectic between [civilized thought and alien experience], so that alien experience is allowed radically to question civilized structures which in turn gain fresh validation from the encounter, no such dialectic is really present here".⁶¹ Eagleton continues: "the foreign reality of Russia is not ultimately allowed to undermine the Western attitudes of the narrator".⁶² What Eagleton regards as the novel's evasion of its own central theme he sees as being a product of the author's uncritical attitude towards the West and England in particular. There is, he suggests, "a refusal to allow English experience to be effectively questioned".⁶³

It has been argued here that the dominant image of the West that emerges from the pages of Under Western Eyes is far from uncritical. Geneva, with its empty streets, its deserted, spotless cafes and hotels projects a sense of the West's blinkered prosperity and its fear of the social. The Western city in Conrad's novel is offered as a locus of an emerging world of rampant commercialism and individualism, its public sterility and lifelessness eerily doubling and complementing the dark repressive purlieu of the antique rampart of absolutism in Europe, St. Petersburg. What is decisive here is that Conrad chooses as the primary observer and narrator of the Swiss city a *Westerner* disdainful of the bourgeois mediocrity underlying the tranquil stability of Geneva. The implication of this narrative tactic is that Geneva has an inner vacuity even to the Westerners to whom it belongs (of course, the teacher of languages is an Englishman living in exile, but as such he is precisely a typical figure of the West).

Also, the narrator's preoccupation with Razumov's account of his personal agony, coupled with the teacher's increasing interest in, and focus on, the complex social dynamics of the Russian political exiles ensconced in the suburbs of Geneva, functions as an implicit criticism of the lifelessness of the city's dominant prevailing ethos too, even if (and perhaps even especially because) these interests become, for him, an often humiliating drama of ignorance and misunderstanding. Many of the Russians whom the narrator writes about are themselves very critical of the bourgeois smugness and social stasis evident in early twentieth century Geneva (even if they benefit from the political neutrality of Switzerland as well). Razumov is particularly

explicit about his hatred of the mood of bovine tranquillity he finds in safe, stable Switzerland. Thus, Geneva, as an early twentieth century locus of an emerging form of capitalism based around an increasingly depoliticised individualism and organized self-contentment, comes under intense critical scrutiny from two sides simultaneously – externally from the Russian exiles, and internally from the English narrator.

So, part of what Under Western Eyes does is to offer a sense, via the English teacher of language's account of a denatured and amnesiac Geneva, of an emerging pattern of social relations in Western Europe based around a significant historical shift in the capitalist mode of production at the beginning of the twentieth century. This shift in the mode of production towards what Eric Mandel terms "Late Capitalism" is seen as part of a general reorientation of public life in advanced capitalist economies away from historical mission and towards *private desire*, manifest as individualist patterns of consumption, image valorization, organized leisure activities, and so forth.

In this sense, the novel may be seen as *anticipating* historical forces that Ernest Mandel and others have described as belonging to an "advanced" or "late" phase of the capitalist mode of production in Western nations. Frederic Jameson argues that the dominant aesthetic style of this phase of capitalist development is "postmodernism". It is important to remember here that Jameson (as opposed to other interpreters of the postmodern, such as Lyotard and Habermas) views postmodernity historically as "the cultural signal of a new stage in the history of the regnant mode of production".⁶⁴ The postmodern style, argues Jameson, reflects and gives form to a historical situation in which "capitalism has ablated nature, and consequently culture has virtually become coextensive with the economy itself".⁶⁵ Since the chief characteristic of the psychic landscape of postmodernism is its loss of any active sense of history – of history as cataclysm or transfiguration – "it is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place".⁶⁶ The dominant style of the postmodernist era, suggests Jameson, is *pastiche*, for him, a kind of imitative parody without the satirical impulse. Because in the late capitalist phase, the economy tends to absorb everything, Jameson argues that capitalist culture must reflect this in a dominant stylistic emphasis that tends to offer a pastiche of the styles of the past (a "hysterical" image of history's self-absorption).

If the classical postmodern style is pastiche, then perhaps Under Western Eyes is best described as a postmodernist text. For, the essential device built into the structure of the novel would appear to imply that it functions as a form of imitative pastiche. The English teacher's account of Razumov's journal is precisely an attempt to recreate the social, political and psychic torments of a Russia struggling to throw off the vestiges of a feudal past, partly by transposing them to the West in the second half of the novel. It thus might profitably be characterized as a postmodern pastiche.

To view Under Western Eyes as postmodern in this sense is to situate it as something other than that which the more conventionally "literary" and, in political terms, passive, postmodern readings of the text have subjected it to.⁶⁷ The pastiche mode of Under Western Eyes precisely enables its Western readers to become critical of the way that they, as Westerners (that is interpellated subjects of capitalism), reflexively engage in acts of perception that detach and reduce the experiences of others to dead styles or scripts. Mostly the focus of these acts of perception is on a Russia on the verge of a cataclysmic historical experience, but when the narrator turns the West's dehistoricizing focus on the West itself, the masochistic edge of self-criticism is palpable. Any sense that the teacher of languages offers a simple Western-apologist perspective, will struggle to account for the cool distanced tone – almost amounting to disgust – of the following brief description of Geneva:

There was a quantity of tables and chairs displayed between the restaurant chalet and the bandstand, a whole raft of painted deals spread out under the trees. In the very middle of it I observed a solitary Swiss couple, whose fate was made secure from the cradle to the grave by the perfected mechanism of democratic institutions in a republic that could almost be held in the palm of one's hand. The man, colourlessly uncouth, was drinking beer out of a glittering glass; the woman, rustic and placid, leaning back in the rough chair, gazed idly around. (UWE, 175)

What is notable about this impression is the way it projects Geneva in terms of a lack that it registers in the very seams of its own descriptive banality. With its vacuously contented Western consumers at its the centre as images of a culture "whose fate was made secure from the cradle to the grave", the language itself seems to crave for something more, something unavailable in the sensorily denuded social data this scene projects.

In Under Western Eyes, then, hysterical images of the collective amnesia of a postmodernist world consort uneasily with a kind of wistful side-look at a culture in which political passions remain vigorously alive. The novel offers a perspective from which to remember the hidden aspects of an age in the West, which has, as Jameson suggests, “forgotten how to think historically”. One of the crucial hidden aspects here is, of course, the West’s ambivalent feeling about political revolution itself, the nagging anxiety it feels that its failure to develop a classless society via the collective agency of its oppressed classes may come back to haunt it one day. It is Natalia Haldin (sister of a revolutionary, but notably not one of the novel’s professional revolutionaries) that reminds the English teacher (and the reader) of the importance of revolution:

‘I tell you what,’ said Miss Haldin, after a moment of reflection. ‘I believe you hate revolution; you fancy it is not quite honest. You belong to a people which has made a bargain with fate and wouldn’t like to be rude to it. But we have made no bargain. It was never offered to us – so much liberty for so much hard cash. You shrink from the idea of revolutionary action for those you think well of as if it were something – how shall I say it – not quite decent.’

I bowed my head. (UWE, 134)

The narrator bows before the power of this analysis. Viewed from this admonitory perspective, Under Western Eyes is a powerful satirical image of Western capitalism’s refusal to function as a progressive historic entity in the world. In this sense, it is necessarily also a novel that laments the death of genuine political passion in the West.

The text projects an image of a West that instinctively sees trans-individual issues of society and politics as chimeras or fantasies fit only for a certain kind of literature. “To us Europeans of the West,” remarks the narrator at one point, “all ideas of political plots and conspiracies seem childish, crude inventions for the theatre or a novel” (UWE, 94). The metaphor suggests the reduction of politics and violence to literary art – a disturbingly recurrent motif in a novel that is itself replete with images of violence and politics.

But Conrad’s novel also offers an image of postmodernist West that actively contests its universal forgetting of history and its reduction of politics to entertainment. For

instance, Under Western Eyes is saturated with motifs that link *writing* with a politics of force and violence. Peter Ivanovitch uses writing as a means of packaging his revolutionary life history as a semi-grotesque and semi-heroic escape from Tsarist autocracy. There is a sense, in this, of Ivanovitch exploiting the West's image of Russia as a kind of primitive semi-civilized hinterland of Europe to serve his celebrity and egomania. His writing can in this sense be read as a pastiche of himself as a Russian subject (a pastiche impulse mirrored in the narrator's caricatures). But at the same time Ivanovitch's writing is not devoid of a larger political intention – his books also promote a complex amalgam of revolutionary Russian nationalism and a more all-embracing feminism. Tekla, his female amanuensis, also shows that Ivanovitch tends to become violently impatient when he dictates his books to her. His impatience is perhaps to be decoded as a sign of his inner revolutionary potency, a force that expresses itself in and through writing. Similarly, the propagandist Laspara uses writing and editorial skills in a calculated bid to inflame the complex collective passions of the Russian masses.

Crucially, the reader's access to Razumov's anguish is filtered, and selectively altered by the English teacher's account of the confessional journal that the Russian writes. The primary story-telling device of the novel exemplifies and embodies a trans-individual process of dialogic collaboration, of intense writing and rewriting, at different levels, of complex public and personal experience, viewed against a backdrop of political danger. This, the novel's deepest image of writing, may be seen as offering a counter-symbol to the notion that politics belongs to a domain of "childish" literature.

In Under Western Eyes, the characters that communicate effectively, or learn to do so, tend to be non-Westerners. Jeremy Hawthorn notes such a change in the central figure: "Razumov changes from an individual who engages little in conversation – and then half-heartedly – and who writes highly abstract academic essays, to one who writes secretly to himself and others and engages in deliberately misleading conversations, but who ends up 'talking well' and apparently writing little".⁶⁸ But Razumov is a Russian, and his communicativeness is partly a function of his return to the Russian motherland at the end (and of his imminent demise). Alongside Razumov's agonizing process of learning to become an honest communicator with

others, the reader sees the talkative teacher of languages moving in a complementarily opposite direction: towards the recognition, in the final moments of the novel, of his own failure to communicate, to a kind of embarrassed sense of his own dialogic insufficiency.

So, the novel certainly does not seem overly optimistic that the capitalist West will learn to speak to the world and listen to its plural conversations. The final page of the narrative seems to press towards excluding the West altogether in its apparent focus on questions of the future of Russia. Moreover, this end is quite deliberately offered as a throwaway moment, a false closure. As such, the narrator's apparent confusion and bewilderment in the novel's closing moments seems to imply that the West has simply lost the ability to chart the direction that it will take.

What the novel does strongly, even rather angrily, suggest is that the West's developing propensity to distrust, and displace, genuine acts of writing and reading. The novel suggests that, in the West's emergent postmodern culture, genuine writing (writing that comes from a genuine impulse to communicate human truths) will necessarily face the possibility that it will be misunderstood and marginalized. This, after all, was the dominant experience of Conrad's writing life. This sense of the insecurity of the act of writing is continually held before the reader in the halting, awkward and irritatingly apologetic tone of the English narrator, continually attempting to stifle all his decent instincts in his self-conscious attempt to write honestly and thoroughly about the passionate, complex plots and sub-plots of Russian revolution and counter-revolutionary reaction. At the same time, and for the same reason, writing that is "genuine" in this human and affective sense will become critical of the culture that resists the creative impulse that lies behind genuine writing. In this sense, the novel argues that genuine writing becomes political, by its very nature.

The image in Under Western Eyes of Razumov writing out his journal in the shadow of a statue of Rousseau in Geneva suggests a conception of writing that seems to merge, insensibly, into a debate about modern European politics. This image of a Russian police spy writing under the statue of one of the great theorists of Western liberal democracy has complex, overlapping nuances. One meaning the image

suggests is that writing may be one of the few ways to keep alive a Western tradition (embodied in the work of Rousseau) of open political discourse and democratic self-criticism. Such a commitment might seem to be made all the more pressing by a Western Europe that seems to be headed in the opposite direction. Perhaps, in this sense, the glimpsed image of Razumov beneath the Rousseau statue suggests a revitalizing form of writing that a culture committed to little more than getting its citizens to drink beer out of a glittering glass may at some point come to need. To this extent, the image could be taken as a cautious qualification of the novel's dominant accent of pessimism about the political future of Western culture.

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CONCLUSION

It has been argued here that Conrad's fiction is saturated with politics. I have followed a line of interpretation that assumes that Conrad's fiction "political" in the powerful sense that it is constituted as what Fredric Jameson calls a "Political Unconscious"; it manifests itself as a body of work riddled with history's wondrous hidden store of ideological messages, messages that critics must learn to decode and decipher almost as if they were a new and foreign language.

This dissertation has also proposed that there is a stylistic break in Conrad's fiction between the early romance piece of "Heart of Darkness" and the structurally more hybrid, experimental and open narrative formations of Nostromo, The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes.

In "Heart of Darkness", a romantically structured view of Africa as distanced, remote and "exotic" is turned inside out by an increasingly obsessional account, by the chief narrator, Marlow, of a brutal colonial character called Kurtz. The emergence of an unconscious fascination with violence and evil in the *parole* of the main storyteller succeeds only in recoding his romance of Africa as an over-arching metaphor of colonial guilt. As Paul Armstrong puts it, "like Kurtz, Marlow is a voice, to be listened to rather than talked with".¹ The self-discrediting of romance transforms "Heart of Darkness" into an extended meditation on the cynicism and world-weariness of a metropolitan colonial culture which produces this paradoxical and seemingly incurable yearning for a consciousness available in the very parts of the world it affects to view with superior disdain. The self-doubt of the form at the core of "Heart of Darkness" also makes room for the registration and inclusion, at the level of subtext and innuendo, of the "savage discords" of an African culture no longer perceived as glamorous, nefarious, and unknowable, but as practically attempting to find a public language to negotiate the kinds of seismic social and political shifts associated with adjusting to a conquering alien presence.

In Nostromo, the decomposition of a romantically constructed narrative viewpoint of non-European society is taken a step further, and conceived along more ambitious lines. Depriving itself of the "private" story-telling infrastructure that the narrator

figure of Marlow provides for "Heart of Darkness", the narrative action of Nostromo problematizes the truth-bearing capacity of the monological utterances of an omniscient narrator explicitly attempting to operate at a point "above" or "beyond" the realm defined by his own production of social discourse. In Nostromo, the dialectic of history, class struggle, configured in and through the various ideological agendas and dialogic programmes of its South American "men of action" (Gould, Decoud and Nostromo), recurrently places in question the narrator's interventions. This deconstruction of the narrator's self-exemption from the historical process he describes is most dramatically signalled by the eventual bifurcation of the Latin American national exotic he oversees into two distinct countries – Costaguana and the Occidental Republic of Sulaco. This fracturing of an Anglo colonial vision of South America, moreover, is shown to be the result of class struggle and anti-colonial politics rather than the result any form of internal or moral self-displacement (which is what occurs in "Heart of Darkness"). By dramatizing, in fictional form, the centrality of class struggle in the West's formation of a discourse of South American society, Nostromo also charts a new modernist direction in terms of an open, encyclopaedic and "epic" orientation. In Conrad's next two great novels, this modernist epic style comes into its own as a flexible narrative strategy in its own right.

In The Secret Agent, Conrad constructs a narrative form that is both universal in its ambition, and playful and parodic in tone. Though The Secret Agent is unrelentingly bleak in terms of its thematic content, its light hovering over a variety modes and dialogic forms suggests a novel that has finally managed to shrug off the cloying and dead-weight inheritance of a monological romance form. Within The Secret Agent many different styles and languages constantly collide, interact and jostle for attention. It is a form that both celebrates dialogic variety and contests the idea that a single style or mode has an unquestioned hegemony over the countless others that help constitute its modernist paradigm of a relativistic world. As such, it proposes a model of the modernist novel as being open, polysemic, urban, popular, and of course political (The Secret Agent is, in part, a parody of the spy thriller form).

Conrad builds on the formal achievements of The Secret Agent in his next novel, Under Western Eyes. As with The Secret Agent, Under Western Eyes is political,

urban (it spans two major cities) and richly ambivalent in its tone and mode. Also, while both novels also seem, in terms of their selection of characters and incidents, superficially to share an implied viewpoint on the world that is tragic and pessimistic, Under Western Eyes, like The Secret Agent, is in fact at its core a comic work. To be sure, the novel traces the progressive moral breakdown and ultimate self-destruction of its central character, the student-turned-*agent provocateur* Razumov. In this sense the novel's selection of a guiding idea by which to develop a fictional language capable of summing up the letter and spirit of modern Russia is undeniably tragic. However, as is suggested in Chapter Four, what is remarkable about Under Western Eyes is the way that Conrad deliberately mobilizes, via his pre-selection of the Geneva-based English teacher of languages as narrator, a narrative perspective of Western middle-aged sterility and self-criticism that precisely functions to undermine the possibility of the novel retaining a consistent hold over a tragic register. This deliberate displacement of a tragic paradigm of modern politics via the English narrator then creates a space in the narrative that allows various comic and demotic vocabularies and images to circulate around, and give shape to, the representation of the key act of Razumov's betrayal of Haldin to the Tsarist police, and the hero's subsequent confession of this deed before the Russian revolutionary exile group based in Geneva. These comic discourses, rooted in a tradition of carnival, reflect the novel's desire to provide a creatively analytical sense of the bleak socio-political themes it assembles for view: principally, a Russia seemingly headed for the abyss of a disastrous revolutionary future; and a globally pioneering West European bourgeoisie become apathetic and apolitical and seemingly content to renounce its role as a shaper of the world's destiny as a means of holding onto its relatively privileged position as a controller and distributor of its material resources.

Yet, for all this, there seems to be some stubbornly unavoidable sense in which the Political Unconscious of Conrad's fiction gets confused with the sub-historical question of who exactly Joseph Conrad, a.k.a. Konrad Korzeniowski, was, and what the particular combination of circumstances were that enabled this Polish aristocrat turned sea captain to become one of the major modern exponents of the English

novel. Such a question is not really a historical one, however, and Conradian scholarship's virtual fixation with Conrad as a figure of biography may be properly appreciated as a socially symbolic act that seeks to erase the whole burden of making sense of the fiction in terms of the broader historical *milieu* that helped produce it. While this biographical paradigm may have its own self-sustaining dynamic, it may be helpful to remember that the historical subject Joseph Conrad is dead and buried and no longer available for interviews, and that any number of biographical resurrections of him will not get anyone any nearer to grasping what his fiction is really about.

If the criticism of Conrad's writings is to remain a living and evolving discipline, then, it must continue to deal with Conrad in terms of the complex task of attempting to understand the forces that produced the texts he wrote. By way of conclusion, therefore, I would like to consider a few of the images that Conrad has left of his own life (in particular his relations with his craft and his father) in A Personal Record.

Throughout his professional life, Conrad seems to have been unable fully to account to himself why he decided to become a writer of fiction in English (he was fluent in French and conversant in its literature before he acquired a command of the English language). In a passage in A Personal Record, Conrad recounts an episode in which he stole a look at the manuscripts on his father's desk, was caught by Apollo, who thereupon ordered him to read out loud a passage from his Polish translation of Shakespeare's The Two Gentlemen of Verona:

That afternoon, instead of going out to play in the large yard which we shared with our landlord, I had lingered in the room in which my father generally wrote. What emboldened me to clamber into his chair I am sure I don't know, but a couple of hours afterwards he discovered me kneeling in it with my elbows on the table and my head in both hands over the MS. of the loose pages. I was greatly confused, expecting to get into trouble. He stood in the doorway looking at me in surprise, but the only thing he said after a moment of silence was:

'Read the passage aloud.' (APR, 73)

This recollection of a shared moment between Apollo, deeply implicated in both literature and revolutionary politics at this point in his life, and a curious young son who simply wants to make some connection with what is important to his father,

becomes a kind of bridge that helps to explain the sources of literary influence in Conrad's own career. Conrad reads the manuscript aloud partly as a punishment for having had the temerity to encroach on his father's private workspace. At the same time, though, the injunction to read the manuscript aloud functions as a special act of sharing and communication between father and son – an invitation to the son to speak the language of the father in the father's presence.

Except that it is more complicated than that still. For the language of the father is also, at some level, a derived language, a translated language; it is not simply Apollo's own words that Conrad is commanded to utter. The language that Conrad reads aloud is both the language of the father, and the language of Shakespeare translated into a language that is not Shakespeare's (Apollo's Polish rendition of The Two Gentlemen of Verona). The text from which Conrad reads is unstable, double – it is both the language of Shakespeare (emblematically, The English Language) and a translated (Polish) language that is part of that romantic-nationalist project that his father dedicated his life to. The doubleness of the language of the father is even embodied in the title of the Shakespeare play that he reads out loud – the *two* gentlemen of Verona.

There is perhaps an element of adult rationalization at work in the recounting of this episode. This rationalization would run as follows: Conrad, in having become a master of the English language (the language that Shakespeare helped to shape), has not dishonoured, but, rather, extended and enriched the tradition (embodied in the work and example of the patriot father) of connecting Poland with a wider European culture. In this sense, there was no betrayal of Poland, nor any abandonment of family honour, in the decision to make a career as a novelist in England. In having become a novelist in a language not Polish, Conrad lived out a nationalist mandate just as his father had before him, only in a different way, and in altered circumstances. As Conrad puts it, by passing his father's Shakespeare test, he earned "the right to some latitude in his relations with [Apollo's] writing table" (APR, 74).

Apollo died when Conrad was twelve years old, on the verge of puberty. Fifty years later, he recalls his father's funeral:

What I saw with my own eyes was the public funeral, the cleared streets, the hushed crowds; but I understood perfectly well that this was a manifestation of the national spirit seizing a worthy occasion. That bareheaded mass of workpeople, youths of the University, women at the windows, schoolboys on the pavement, could have known nothing positive about him except the fame of his fidelity to the one guiding emotion in their hearts. I had nothing but that knowledge myself, and this great silent demonstration seemed to me the most natural tribute in the world – not to the man but the Idea (APR, 7)

This description seems to offer the death of the father as a solemn salute to Polish nationhood. Yet, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that surely the twelve year old Conrad would have experienced his father's funeral in a much more confused way than the adult writer seems prepared to concede here. Or perhaps it *is* unreasonable to assume this. Whatever the case, there is a poignancy almost terrible in Conrad's description of himself as a kind of bystander at his father's funeral, just one more face in the a massed crowd of Poles that knew nothing about Apollo "except the fame of his fidelity to the one guiding emotion of their hearts". Finally, then, this moving image of Apollo's funeral procession suggests a writer whose work is political in the sense that he conceived of his deepest and most intimate experiences and memories as being inextricable from the collective story of his time.

ENDNOTES

Introduction

- ¹ Fredric Jameson, TPU, 208
- ² As Tom Nairn argues, Leavis conceived literary criticism "as a priestly calling rather like commentary on the Constitution – exalted tutelage of the national-community soul, the very 'essence of civilization saved from vulgar 'ologies and 'isms this soul found more human nourishment in a kind of imaginative-moral culture – fantasy educatively modelled to the society's needs and supplying ineffably concrete answers to all the deeper questions" (1990), 273
- ³ F.R. Leavis (1972), 29
- ⁴ Nairn, 274
- ⁵ Raymond Williams, The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence (1970), 140
- ⁶ Williams (1970), 142
- ⁷ Irving Howe, Politics and the Novel (1957), 76
- ⁸ Eloise Knapp Hay, The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad (1963), 3
- ⁹ Hay, 11
- ¹⁰ Hay, 17
- ¹¹ Hay, 22, 26
- ¹² Hay, 80
- ¹³ Hay, 31-80
- ¹⁴ In The Moment of Scrutiny (1978) Francis Mulhern writes that "all wider differences aside, it can still be said that the greatest weakness of Leavisian criticism" lies in its inability fully to comprehend the centrality of narrative (41)
- ¹⁵ Avrom Fleishman, Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad (1967), ix
- ¹⁶ Fleishman, ix
- ¹⁷ Fleishman, 56
- ¹⁸ In The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848-1932 (1983), C. Baldick writes of the Arnoldian concept of literature that: "If it could fill the gap vacated by religion, literature could offer its own principles of internal consistency, completeness and regularity of form as a shaping and governing principle for all the conscious and unconscious affairs of society. The order of the one and the order of the other would fall into an "organic" continuity, a harmonious, rounded and self-complete development of civilization under the guardianship of literary criticism", 229
- ¹⁹ Fleishman, viii
- ²⁰ Fleishman, 3
- ²¹ Fleishman, 3
- ²² Fleishman, 3
- ²³ Fleishman, 3
- ²⁴ Georg Lukács, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism (1963), 71
- ²⁵ Lukács, 71
- ²⁶ Lukács, 71
- ²⁷ Lukács, 71
- ²⁸ Fredric Jameson, Marxism and Form (1971), 179
- ²⁹ Fredric Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion" (1977), 196
- ³⁰ Fredric Jameson, "The Ideology of the Text" (1976), 234
- ³¹ Jameson, TPU, 3
- ³² Perry Anderson, The Origins of Postmodernity (1998), 55

- ³³ Jameson, TPU, 3
³⁴ J.A. Berthoud, "Narrative and Ideology: A Critique of Fredric Jameson's The Political Unconscious" (1985), 113
³⁵ Jameson, TPU, xiii
³⁶ Anderson, 120
³⁷ Jameson, TPU, 219, 218
³⁸ Jameson, TPU, 213
³⁹ Jameson, TPU, 213
⁴⁰ Anderson, 55
⁴¹ Jameson, TPU, 207
⁴² Jameson, TPU, 60
⁴³ Jameson, TPU, 61
⁴⁴ Jameson, TPU, 69
⁴⁵ Jameson, TPU, 63

Chapter One - "Heart of Darkness"

- ¹ Roland Oliver and J.D. Fage, A Short History of Africa (1988), 158, 160
² See Neal Ascherson, The King Incorporated: Leopold the Second and the Congo (1999), 85-128, 159-204, and Adam Hoschschild, King Leopold's Ghost (1998), 21-115
³ There are, of course, innumerable accounts of this visit in the many biographies of Conrad that are currently available. One of the most concise descriptions is to be found in Ross C. Murfin (ed), Joseph Conrad "Heart of Darkness" (1996), 3-16. There is a brief account of the meeting between Conrad and Casement, too, 10-11
⁴ The classic account of pre-colonial States in the Central-West African region is Jan Vansina's Kingdoms of the Savannah (1966). See also Isaria Kimambo, "The Rise of the Congolese state systems" in T O. Ranger (ed), Aspects of Central African History, (1968)
⁵ Phillip Curtin, Steven Feierman, Leonard Thompson, Jan Vansina (eds), African History (1978), 424
⁶ Curtin *et al*, 425
⁷ Curtin *et al*, 426
⁸ Curtin *et al*, 428
⁹ Ascherson, 10
¹⁰ Victor Kiernan, The Lords of Human Kind (1969), 236
¹¹ See Sven Lindqvist, "Exterminate all the Brutes": One Man's Odyssey in the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of the European Genocide (1997)
¹² To claim that a text is rich, complex, arcane, and allusive (all claims that are often, and rightly, made about "Heart of Darkness") is, implicitly, to assert that other texts like it (and that necessarily means, at some level, texts that are historically contiguous with it) are not as rich, complex, arcane or allusive. The problem arises when critics, happy to revel in the polysemic text for its own sake (this "for its own sake" can take many doctrinal or semi-doctrinal forms), seem unable or unwilling to move beyond a stage of comparative evaluation to mobilize the text for the purposes of genuine dialectical insight into, and debate about, modern society and culture. Thus, for instance, Robert Burden's fashionably postmodernist interpretation, in Heart of Darkness (1991), of "Heart of Darkness" as a "mosaic of other texts; not [...] plagiarized writing, but [...] intertextuality" simply smuggles the initial terms under

which the text's schismatic difference was perceived into a new "literary" consensus about it (13).

¹³ Jameson, TPU, 105

¹⁴ In The Art of Failure: Conrad's Fiction (1986), Suresh Raval writes that "the novel [...] reworks the constitutive features of allegory and the traditional art of storytelling [but] the novel's importance is in its disclosing the ideal of affirmation to be an almost aberrant expectation dear to the genre of romance", 19

Charles Schug, in a book exploring the way in which the romance informed the development of modern literature, The Romantic Genesis of the Modern Novel (1979) notes that "it is striking [...] how closely Conrad's most characteristic works resemble [...] the great Romantic lyric", x

In Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism (1990), Mark A. Wollaeger sees "Heart of Darkness" as a specialized form of the romance: namely, the Gothic. "The Gothicism of Marlow's path towards Kurtz culminates in paired scenes of melodrama: the climactic encounter with Kurtz and the interview with the Intended", 57

Howard Felperin offers perhaps the most convoluted defence of the significance of romance in Conrad's novella. "When Marlow finally meets Kurtz's lady, that presiding figure of his romantic questing, the scene is far from one of unmitigated irony. Irony is itself ironized in order to maintain the spell of romance" ("Romance and Romanticism", Critical Inquiry 6 (1980), 704)

¹⁵ Jameson, TPU, 91

¹⁶ Jameson, TPU, 118

¹⁷ Jameson, TPU, 131

¹⁸ Jameson, TPU, 96-7

¹⁹ For a different perspective on the role of romance in modernism, see Nicolas Daly, Modernism, Romance and the Fin De Siècle: Popular Fiction in British Culture: 1880-1914 (2000)

²⁰ Steve Smith, "Marxism and Ideology: Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'" (1987), 191

²¹ Smith, 190

²² Smith, 192

²³ At one level, the presence of the two secretaries appears to be controlled by a Virgilian metaphor: Sibyl in Virgil's Aeneid that guards the door of darkness into which Aeneas is about to descend. Marlow's Latin citation ("*Morturi te salutant*") has at least two cross-references. One of these is the pledge of fidelity given to the Emperor by the manly gladiators of Ancient Rome before they proceeded to slaughter each other in the coliseum for the delectation of a Roman urban class. The second cross-reference is to Maupassant's story "L'Epave", where the narrator uses this Latin phrase.

For a detailed discussion of this particular passage in "Heart of Darkness", see Lillian Felder, "Marlow's Descent into Hell", Nineteenth Century Fiction 9.4 (March 1955), 280-92. See also Ian Watt's interpretation in Joseph Conrad and the Nineteenth Century, (1979), 109-193

²⁴ This passage could easily be cited to confirm Nina Pelikan Straus' feminist judgement that "the peculiar density and inaccessibility of 'Heart of Darkness' may be the result of its extremely masculine historical referentiality, its insistence on a male circle of readers" ("The Exclusion of the Intended from the Secret Sharing in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" Novel: A Forum on Fiction 20 (1987): 123-37). There are many feminist readings of "Heart of Darkness". Some of the best are: Ruth

- Nadelhaft, Joseph Conrad (1991), 45-6; Elaine Showalter, Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin De Siècle (1991), 94-104; Bette London, "Reading Race and Gender in Conrad's Dark Continent" Criticism 31 (1989): 235-52
- ²⁵ Forbes Global Magazine (April 1, 2002) <<http://www.winne.com/congo/bf10.html>>
- ²⁶ David Sweetman (1987), 52
- ²⁷ Quoted in Sweetman, 51
- ²⁸ Homi Bhaba, "Signs Taken for Wonders" (1986), 167
- ²⁹ Homi Bhaba, The Location of Culture (1994), 25
- ³⁰ For an account of Kurtz's story as a variation on the popular Imperialist ideological theme of the white who has "gone native", see John W. Griffith, Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma of the 'Bewildered Traveller' (1995), 125-152; see also Ian Watt, Conrad in the Nineteenth Century (1979), 144. Griffith writes, "seen [in the light of Victorian theories of criminality] men such as Kurtz could be viewed as not evil but only displaced, their talents wasted in the present age", 175
- ³¹ Hay, 67
- ³² For a classic Freudian analysis of "Heart of Darkness" see Frederick Crews' chapter "Conrad's Uneasiness – and Ours" in Out of My System: Psychoanalysis, Ideology, and Critical Method (1975)
- ³³ William Shakespeare, Othello (1968), 67
- ³⁴ Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa" (1977), 783
- ³⁵ Achebe, 788, 784
- ³⁶ Patrick Brantlinger, "'Heart of Darkness': Anti-Imperialism, Racism or Impressionism?" in Ross C. Murfin (ed), Case Study of Joseph Conrad 'Heart of Darkness' (1996), 277-98. Cedric Watts, "'A Bloody Racist': About Achebe's View of Conrad" Yearbook of English Studies 13 (1983), 196-209. See also Hunt Hawkins, "The Issue of Racism in 'Heart of Darkness'," The Conradiana 14.3 (1982), 163-71
- ³⁷ Benita Parry (1983), 33
- ³⁸ Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism (1994), 27
- ³⁹ Said, 33
- ⁴⁰ Said, 27
- ⁴¹ Edward Said, "Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World" (1986), 54
- ⁴² Paul Armstrong, "'Heart of Darkness' and the Epistemology of Cultural Differences" (1990), 22
- ⁴³ In Writers and Politics (1981) the Kenyan novelist Ngugi w'a Thiongo offers a more politically aware perspective on Conrad's writing. "The African writer and Joseph Conrad share the same world and that is why Conrad's world is so familiar. Both have lived in a world dominated by Imperialism", 76-7
- ⁴⁴ Patrick Brantlinger misinterprets Jameson by suggesting a strong inner distinction in his view of romance and impressionism where none exists in fact (287)
- ⁴⁵ See Werner Gillon, A Short History of African Art (1984), 278-309
- ⁴⁶ Benita Parry, Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers (1983), 21
- ⁴⁷ Parry, 35

Chapter Two - Nostromo

- ¹ Eric Hobsbawm, Interesting Times (2002), 376.
- ² Richard M. Morse, "Political Theory and the Caudillo" (1965), 55
- ³ Morse, 58
- ⁴ Morse, 58

- ⁵ Morse, 59
- ⁶ Morse, 59
- ⁷ As Eric Hobsbawm writes in Bandits (1972) "the crucial fact about the bandit's social situation is its ambiguity. He is an outsider and a rebel, a poor man who refuses to accept the normal roles of poverty, and establishes his freedom by means of the only resources within reach of the poor, strength, bravery, cunning and determination", 87
- ⁸ Tulio Halperín Doughi, "Economy and Society" (1987), 1-48
- ⁹ Morse, 64
- ¹⁰ Morse, 67
- ¹¹ Victor Kiernan, The Lords of Humankind (1969), 318
- ¹² Morse, 67
- ¹³ Morse, 68
- ¹⁴ See Norman Sherry, Conrad's Western World (1971), 149-165. Sherry believes that Giorgio Viola is modelled on a character in Cunninghame Graham's collection Thirteen Stories (1900). He also thinks that the original for Martin Decoud may be the "Carlos Decoud" that appears in Masterman's Seven Eventful Years in Paraguay, and that the character of Charles Gould may have been based partly on Conrad's friend Cunninghame Graham.
- ¹⁵ Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Love in the Time of Cholera (1985), 320
- ¹⁶ M. Asaduddin, Joseph Conrad Between Culture and Politics (1994), 88
- ¹⁷ Nicolas Visser, "Crowds and Politics in Nostromo" (1990), 10
- ¹⁸ Christopher GoGwilt, Joseph Conrad and the Invention of the West (1995), 209
- ¹⁹ Aaron Fogel, Coercion to Speak: Conrad's Poetics of Dialogue (1985), 124
- ²⁰ Diane Elam, Romancing the Postmodern (1992), 89
- ²¹ GoGwilt, 200
- ²² Amilcar Cabral, "The Weapon of Theory" (1980), 117, 123
- ²³ GoGwilt, 196
- ²³ Fogel, 136, 131
- ²⁵ Albert Guerard, Conrad the Novelist (1958), 210
- ²⁶ Fleishman, 175
- ²⁷ Robert Hampson, Joseph Conrad: Betrayal and Identity (1992), 151
- ²⁸ Helen Fink Rieselbach, Conrad's Rebels: the Psychology of Revolution in the Novels from Nostromo to Victory (1985), 33
- ²⁹ Rieselbach, 35. For a politically consistent feminist interpretation of Nostromo, see Karen Klein, "The Feminine Predicament in Nostromo" (1983), 101-16
- ³⁰ Benita Parry (1983), 107
- ³¹ Fleishman, 164
- ³² Gareth Jenkins, "Conrad's Nostromo and History" (1977), 176
- ³³ Kiernan Ryan, "Revelation and Repression in Conrad's Nostromo" (1982), 76
- ³⁴ Ryan, 76
- ³⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" (1973), 79
- ³⁶ Marx and Engels, 77
- ³⁷ Howe, 108
- ³⁸ In an essay entitled "Nostromo: Conrad's Man of No Parentage" (1994), Josiane Paccaud-Huguet writes: "That his prestige is his fortune is literally rendered by the fact that he allows himself to be paid in fine words. The latter seem to function as a mere coinage establishing a one-to-one relationship between the name and the corresponding reality, i.e. the individuality – it is perhaps not irrelevant to underscore here the latin etymology of the word which means 'indivision'. What Nostromo

blinds himself to, with the complicity of those who use his person, is the nature of words and symbols severed from the world of reference, circulating within a system in which they will take changing values according to the context", 67

³⁹ Howe, 108

⁴⁰ GoGwilt, 207

⁴¹ Jean Franco, "The Limits of the Liberal Imagination: One Hundred Years of Solitude and Nostromo" (1990), 208

⁴² Jim Reilly, in his study of nineteenth century fiction, Shadowtime: History and Representation in Hardy, Conrad and George Eliot (1993) argues that Nostromo is made up of such moments of paralysis as examples of "capitalist fiction's descriptive deadlock and delivery of a reified image of a reified world", 153

⁴³ Sherry, 153

⁴⁴ Catherine Rising, Darkness at Heart (1990), 96

⁴⁵ Edward Said, Beginnings: Intention and Method (1975), 118

⁴⁶ Jameson, TPU, 231

⁴⁷ Jameson, TPU, 259

⁴⁸ Jameson, TPU, 262

⁴⁹ Jameson, TPU, 268

⁵⁰ Visser, 2

⁵¹ Jameson, TPU, 264

⁵² Bruce Henricksen, Nomadic Voices: Conrad and the Subject of Narrative (1992), 136

⁵³ Elam, 84

⁵⁴ Elam, 95

⁵⁵ Ken Ireland, "Sudden Holes in Time and Space" (2002), 35

⁵⁶ Franco Moretti, Modern Epic (1998), 88. See also M.W. Bloomfield. "Episodic Motivation and Marvels in Epic and Romance" (1960)

⁵⁷ Moretti, ME, 88

⁵⁸ In an essay collected in Imaginary Homelands (1991), Rushdie writes: "*El realismo magical*, magical realism, at least as practised by Márquez is a development out of Surrealism that expresses a genuine 'Third World' consciousness. It deals with what Naipaul has called 'half-made' societies, in which the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new, in which public corruptions and private anguishes are somehow more garish and extreme than they ever get in the so-called 'North', where centuries of wealth and power have formed thick layers over the surface of what's really going on", 301-2

⁵⁹ Victor J. Emmet, "The Aesthetics of Anti-Imperialism: Ironical Distortions of the Virgilian Epic Mode in Conrad's Nostromo" (1972), 46

⁶⁰ Erdinast-Vulcan, Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper (1990), 81

⁶¹ Georg Lukács, The Theory of the Novel (1971), 88

⁶² See G.S. Kirk, Myth: Its Meaning and Functions (1970)

⁶³ "Besides, it is necessary that the parts of the plot be put together in such a manner that, if any one part is transposed or removed, the whole will be disorganized and disjointed" (Poetics, 145/a)

⁶⁴ Isidore Okpekw, The Epic in Africa (1979), 16

⁶⁵ Okpekw, 217-8

⁶⁶ Said, "Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative" (1990), 185

⁶⁷ Hawthorn, NTIC, 35

Chapter Three - The Secret Agent

¹ Avrom Fleishman suggests that Conrad's meticulous and detailed references to time in the plot of The Secret Agent make it possible to identify the chronology of the novel's events with precision: the Spring of 1886, 205

² Eric Hobsbawm, "Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement" in Revolutionaries (1999), 113

³ For the full text see Marx and Engels Selected Correspondence (1975), 220-4

⁴ Gareth Stedman Jones, "Some Notes on Karl Marx and the English Labour Movement" (1984), 135

⁵ Arno J. Mayer, The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War (1981), 10-11

⁶ Nairn, 190

⁷ Nairn, 194

⁸ Nairn, 194

⁹ Friedrich Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England (1987), 42

¹⁰ MEW 47, 468

¹¹ MEW 47, 482

¹² E.P. Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary (1955), 505-6

¹³ Nairn, 154

¹⁴ Fleishman, 31

¹⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz (1998), 133

¹⁶ Hobsbawm (1998), 134

¹⁷ Hobsbawm (1998), 134

¹⁸ Ian Watt, Essays on Conrad (2000), 122

¹⁹ Norman Sherry, 228-47

²⁰ The Encyclopaedia of Marxism tersely notes that the Fabian Society "supported the idea that the transition from capitalism to socialism could be brought about by means of minor and gradual reforms" (<http://www.marxists.org/glossary/frame.htm>)

²¹ H.G. Wells, Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (1934), 660

²² Trotsky wrote the following fierce account of Wells' Outline of History:

"Conscience prevents me from saying I read it through, for an acquaintance with two or three chapters was quite sufficient to induce me to desist from a further waste of time. Imagine and absolute absence of method, of historical perspective, of understanding of the mutual dependence of the various phases of social life; in general of any kind of scientific discipline; and then imagine the "historian" burdened with these accomplishments, with the carefree mind of a Sunday pedestrian, strolling aimlessly and awkwardly through a few thousand years of history, and then you have Wells' book, which is to replace the Marxian school" (Leon Trotsky on Britain, "The Fabian 'Theory' of Socialism," (1973), n. 79-80)

²³ H.G. Wells, 615-23

²⁴ Jameson, TPU, 258

²⁵ Terry Eagleton, Against the Grain (1983), 23-4

²⁶ Eagleton (1983), 24

²⁷ Eagleton, (1983), 24

²⁸ Eagleton, (1983), 23

²⁹ Jeremy Hawthorn, JCLFSC, 77

³⁰ Hawthorn, JCLFSC, 78

- ³¹ Graham Holderness, "Anarchism and Fiction" in H. Gustav Klaus (ed), The Rise of Socialist Fiction 1880-1914 (1987), 134
- ³² Hawthorn, JCLFSC, 82
- ³³ Hawthorn, JCLFSC, 78,83
- ³⁴ Hawthorn, JCLFSC, 82
- ³⁵ Jeremy Hawthorn, NTIC, 80
- ³⁶ "A study of the role of FID in Conrad's fiction leads us straight into the moral consequences of these works"; "a failure to be alert to Conrad's use of FID can lead to serious misunderstandings" (Hawthorn, NTIC, 4)
- ³⁷ See Norman Sherry's suggestion that the character Michaelis is based on the real-life figure of Michael Davitt, a Fenian arrested in 1870 and released in 1877, then, after a spell, re-arrested in 1881. After this second arrest there was a public outcry. 105 members of parliament signed a petition asking for Dravitt to be exonerated from "all personal hardships" in prison, (267)
- ³⁸ For more on degeneracy, see Robert Hampson, "If you read Lombroso": Conrad and Criminal Anthropology," in Mario Curelli (ed) The Ugo Mursia Memorial Lectures (1988), 317-35; Joseph Bock, Joseph Conrad and Psychological Medicine (2002)
- ³⁹ Cesare Lombroso, Crime: Its Causes and Remedies (1911), xxxiv
- ⁴⁰ Lombroso, xxxvi
- ⁴¹ Franco Moretti, The Way of the World (1987), 194-5
- ⁴² Rebecca Stott, "The Woman in Black: Race and Gender in The Secret Agent" (1993), 50
- ⁴³ Stott, 52
- ⁴⁴ Mark Eyeington, "The Subversiveness of The Secret Agent" (2004), 124
- ⁴⁵ See Hugh Epstein, "A Pier-Glass in the Cavern: London in The Secret Agent" in Gene M. Moore (ed) Conrad's Cities: Essays for Hans van Marle (1992), 175-96
- ⁴⁶ Friedrich Engels (1985), 96
- ⁴⁷ Karl Marx, The German Ideology (1970), 51
- ⁴⁸ This perhaps puts it too strongly. Elsewhere I have noted: "What also lies behind Winnie's extraordinary defence of Stevie is an unspoken, but profound, awareness that, under capitalism, brothers and sons – Stevie is in a sense both – keep being taken away from the family to be killed in the name of social order" (2004), 122
- ⁴⁹ Eyeington, 125
- ⁵⁰ Alex Houen, Terrorism and Modern Literature from Joseph Conrad to Cairan Carson (2002), 74
- ⁵¹ Eyeington, 125
- ⁵² Eyeington, 126
- ⁵³ MEW 29, 265
- ⁵⁴ Michael Curtin, "A Question of Manners: Status and Gender in Etiquette and Courtesy" (1985), 143
- ⁵⁵ Engels, The Condition of the English Working Class, 69
- ⁵⁶ Henry James, "The Limitations of Dickens" (1956), 433-40
- ⁵⁷ Franco Moretti, Atlas of the European Novel: 1800-1900, (1998), 130
- ⁵⁸ Moretti, Atlas of the European Novel, 131
- ⁵⁹ GoGwilt, 178
- ⁶⁰ Roy Porter, London: A Social History (1996), 85
- ⁶¹ Walter Benjamin, Illuminations (1973), 253
- ⁶² Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (1985), 227

⁶³ In Writing London: the Trace of the Urban Text from Blake to Dickens (1998), Julian Wolfreys offers a stylish deconstructionist-eye view of London. In his words, "the act of writing the city is an act of realizing and decentring and dispersal of the subject. In the face of such a disfiguring figure as London, the subject cannot but lose face in the city", 114

⁶⁴ Frank Kermode, History and Value: the Clarendon Lectures and Northcliffe Lectures (1989), 136

⁶⁵ Kermode, 137

⁶⁶ Kermode, 137

⁶⁷ Kermode, 135

⁶⁸ Kermode, 137

⁶⁹ Kermode, 135

Chapter Four - Under Western Eyes

¹ GoGwilt, 27

² Houen, 67

³ V.I. Lenin, Collected Works, Volume 24 (1978), 44

⁴ Perry Anderson, Lineages of the Absolutist State (1974), 347

⁵ Anderson, 359

⁶ See Teodor Shanin, Late Marx and the Russian Road (1983), 40-75

⁷ Thomas Mann, "Joseph Conrad's The Secret Agent" (1973), 102

⁸ Fleishman, 222

⁹ Hay, 312

¹⁰ GoGwilt, 153, 169

¹¹ Hay, 300-1. Hay notes the link between the characterization of Russia as a "monstrous blank page awaiting the record of an inconceivable history" in Under Western Eyes and the messianic writings of Adam Mickiewicz.

¹² Howe, 89

¹³ Terry Eagleton, Exiles and Émigrés, (1970), 23, 25

¹⁴ Eagleton, 31, 32

¹⁵ Jeremy Hawthorn, NTIC, 103

¹⁶ Hawthorn, NTIC, 240

¹⁷ Hawthorn, 245. Hawthorn's interest, in his second text, on the dynamics of conversation and dialogue in Conrad seems to converge with Aaron Fogel. In Coercion to Speak: Conrad's Poetics of Dialogue, Fogel argues, "Conrad for his own tragic and political purposes often undoes the conversational idea of speech in the [...] English novel. His work instead invites a cumulative contemplation of disproportional and coercive dialogue scenes", (7)

¹⁸ Hawthorn, JCLFSC, 122

¹⁹ Rieselbach, 85

²⁰ Rieselbach, 85

²¹ Ruth Nadelhaft, Joseph Conrad (1991), 103

²² Maureen Fries, "Feminism and Anti-Feminism in Under Western Eyes" (1973), 34

²³ Eagleton, EE, 30

²⁴ Houen, 84

²⁵ The absorbing discussion of the connections between terrorism and the education of women in late nineteenth century Russia is on page 60 of Houen's text, unaccountably displaced from the section which deals specifically with Under Western Eyes (66-92)

²⁶ Frank Kermode, Essays in Fiction 1971-82 (1985), 140

- ²⁷ Kermode, 140
²⁸ Kermode, 145
²⁹ Kermode, 144
³⁰ Kermode, 144
³¹ Kermode, 144
³² Kermode, 144
³³ Kermode, 144, 145
³⁴ Kermode, 144
³⁵ Erdinast-Vulcan, 116, 121-6
³⁶ Kermode, 150
³⁷ Rieselbach, 74
³⁸ Terence Cave, Recognitions: A Study in Poetics (1988), 484
³⁹ Stephen Bernstein, "Conrad and Postmodernism: Under Western Eyes" (1995), 46
⁴⁰ M.M. Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics, (1984), 122, 123
⁴¹ Bakhtin, PDP, 122
⁴² Bakhtin, PDP, 122
⁴³ Bakhtin, PDP, 122
⁴⁴ Bakhtin, PDP, 130, 131
⁴⁵ Bakhtin, PDP, 130
⁴⁶ Bakhtin, PDP, 159
⁴⁷ Bakhtin, PDP, 62
⁴⁸ Bakhtin, PDP, 60
⁴⁹ Bakhtin, PDP, 54
⁵⁰ Bakhtin, PDP, 51
⁵¹ Bakhtin, PDP, 53
⁵² Bakhtin, PDP, 127
⁵³ Howe, 77
⁵⁴ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Crime and Punishment (1981), 319
⁵⁵ Fogel, 210
⁵⁶ Fogel, 181
⁵⁷ M.M. Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, (1968), 197
⁵⁸ Bakhtin, RHW, 197
⁵⁹ Bakhtin, PDP, 164
⁶⁰ Bakhtin, RHW, 21
⁶¹ Eagleton, 31
⁶² Eagleton, 31
⁶³ Eagleton, 32
⁶⁴ Anderson, The Origins of Postmodernity, 55
⁶⁵ Anderson, 55
⁶⁶ Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991), ix
⁶⁷ See Bernstein, 31-56
⁶⁸ Hawthorn, JCLFSC, 103

Conclusion

- ¹ Armstrong, 39

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