

PLOT AND POINT OF VIEW IN CONRAD'S NOSTROMO

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ABSTRACT

Joseph Conrad's Nostromo is extremely complex in materials, methods, and attitudes towards life, and so is open to a number of approaches and interpretations. This paper, which is the result of an effort to see the novel as a self-contained literary form, is based on the judgment that, although the book has strong strains of realism and romance, it is essentially ironic both in its form and in the view of life which it embodies, as the terms "irony" and "ironic" are used by Northrop Frye in his Anatomy of Criticism. The paper undertakes to demonstrate some of the uses of plot and point of view in giving form to an ironic view of life. The study considers the form for its own sake as an artistic composition as well as its function in embodying an attitude towards life, insofar as these two aspects of form can be usefully separated. Certain lines in the plot-structure are traced throughout the book, but most of the paper consists of the analysis of a number of selected scenic passages considered as independent structures. This analysis is concerned with the function of the scenes as episodes in the plot, the technical methods covered by the concept of point of view and their effects, and the total effect of the scene.

The paper deals primarily with the five characters: Mrs. Gould, Charles Gould, Nostromo, Decoud, and Dr. Monygham. It considers each of them as a protagonist in a line

of the complex plot, and considers the treatment of each one in relation to the control of distance by means of the techniques of point of view. Mrs. Gould, whose story contains strains of both romance and irony, struggles to maintain her belief in the private values of love and compassion and in the traditional public values of integrity and reason. Each of the four men is engaged in a struggle to achieve or maintain a sense of his own value. The paper interprets this struggle in terms of the formation and transformation of identity in relation to symbols of authority, both private symbols such as parental figures and public symbols such as social class and country. The essential irony of the plot lies in two factors. The symbols of authority are either inadequate or corrupt, and the sense of one's own identity is an illusion, a belief with no objective basis. It is a psychic necessity, but it leads to self-deception and is frequently destructive. Nostromo's story, which combines strains of satire and romance, leads to a resolution full of ironic qualifications, but suggesting the triumph of the romantic egoist who rejects all symbols of authority.

The handling of point of view is extremely flexible both in its use of implicated narrators and observers and in the variety of relationships between the impersonal narrator and his material. The fluidity in the handling of point of view has an aesthetic value and is also functional in presenting an ironic view of life. The use of implicated nar-

rators emphasizes the discrepancies resulting from the insurmountable limitations of man's knowledge either of himself or of other people, and suggests that there is no ultimate truth within which these discrepancies may be reconciled. The control of distance also has ironic implications. The paper analyzes some of the technical factors in the control of distance, and finds that there is no really sustained attitude towards any of the chief male characters. The effects range from satire to tragic irony. The shifting distance is functional in creating an image of a world in which unequivocal judgments are impossible and in which, as Conrad said, "The comic and the tragic jostle each other at every step."

Nostromo is an example on a vast scale of literature in the ironic mode, defined by Frye as "an attempt to give form to the shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealized life." The working out of the complex plot and the remarkable fluidity in the handling of point of view dramatize these ambiguities and complexities but they do so in a way which helps to create artistic order from the materials of chaos.

CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction	1
Chapter I Part One: The Silver of the Mine.....	13
Chapter II Part Two: The Isabels.....	44
Chapter III Part Three: The Lighthouse.....	79
Chapter IV Conclusion.....	125
Bibliography.....	140

INTRODUCTION

"We are craftsmen as well as seers, labouring in the flesh as well as in the spirit," Conrad reminded his fellow writer John Galsworthy.¹ The choices made by the craftsman labouring in the flesh create the book experienced by the reader. As Mark Schorer puts it, "Technique is the only means [the writer] has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and finally of evaluating it."² That Nostromo shows Conrad at the height of his power as seer is due partly to the fact that he is also at the height of his power as craftsman. The structure of the plot and the complex treatment of point of view are two of the methods which give form to the vision of Conrad the seer.

When Conrad late in life was asked which of his books he thought were the best, he said, "Nostromo and The Secret Agent because in those I accumulated the most difficult technical obstacles and I overcame them most successfully."³

¹ G. Jean-Aubry, Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1927), II, 79. Subsequent references to this work are included in the text designated LL.

² Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," Hudson Review, I (Spring 1948), 67-87, as reprinted in Forms of Modern Fiction, ed. William Van O'Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), p. 9.

³ Joseph H. Retinger, Conrad and His Contemporaries, (New York: Roy, [1943]), p. 107.

The technical obstacles which he accumulated in Nostromo were certainly formidable. Conrad attempted to deal with an enormous amount of material, "at least twenty lives... informed with passion, possessed of convictions, involved in great affairs,"⁴ to present these lives and their great affairs in the shifting lights required by his complex view of reality, and to give to the whole a coherent and artistic shape. In organizing the very complex materials of his novel, he chose to deny himself the obvious structural controls of chronology, a stable point of view, and a clearly defined protagonist. While carrying out the enterprise he was not at all sure of his success. He wrote to H.G. Wells, for example: "I, my dear Wells, am absolutely out of my mind with the worry and apprehension of my work. I go on as one would cycle over a precipice along a 14 inch plank. If I falter I am lost." (LL I, 311) He confided to David Meldrum, "I fear this thing will turn out a very great trash!"⁵ That he did succeed is in part a tribute to his skill in using a great number of methods, both conventional and experimental.

⁴ A Personal Record (Kent Edition; Garden City: Doubleday, Page, and Company, 1926), p. 102. Subsequent references to Conrad's works are included in the text. Unless otherwise noted, the references are to this edition.

⁵ Letters to William Blackwood and David S. Meldrum, ed. William Blackburn (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1958), p. 178.

The complexity of Conrad's methods and of the vision of life which they embody may be explained partly by the transitional character of his period and partly by the demands of his own temperament. He belonged to a time of rapid change, both in the general intellectual climate and in the related field of the theory and practice of the novel. While traditional ways of thinking continued to exert their influence, new ways were also having their effect. Examined historically, Conrad's work may be seen as having affinities with both the Victorian era and the twentieth century.

Conrad's own temperament, both as an artist and as a man, was very complex. As a writer, he was driven by three loyalties, sometimes in conflict: to the "visible world" and to the psychological reality of individual human beings; to his own imagination, which led him towards romance and melodrama, and towards poetic methods of rendering experience; and to art as a self-contained discipline. The contrary claims of fact and imagination are partly reconciled in a characteristic kind of irony, by which the romantic and melodramatic elements are undercut and the realistic elements are made bigger than life. Conrad's view of the world was likewise complex; both his philosophical view of reality, determined by his own emotional adjustment and by his time, and his views of society and politics involved conflicting elements, joined but not transcended by a radical irony.

Although no single approach can attempt to account for everything in Nostromo, the concept of irony, both in a broad sense and in some of its more specific applications, is relevant to much of the work. Conrad once lightly remarked in a letter, "What a good title for a play,--a serious comedy in five acts: The Incurable. Almost any phase of life could be treated under that title" (LL I, 240). Looked at from one angle, Nostromo is that serious comedy. Robert Penn Warren, emphasizing the tragic elements implicit in irony, describes Nostromo as an image of a world in which "man is precariously balanced in his humanity between the black inward abyss of himself and the black outward abyss of nature."⁶ The ironic view of life contains both the comic and the tragic in a sometimes uneasy fellowship.

Northrop Frye defines literature in the ironic mode as an attempt "to give form to the shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealized life."⁷ The definition suggests two aspects of literature, the form itself, and the vision of life embodied by the form. This paper is concerned with plot and point of view both as elements in the work seen as a self-contained composition and as ways of expressing a vision of life.

⁶ Robert Penn Warren, "Introduction," Nostromo (New York: Modern Library, 1951), p. xxxiv.

⁷ Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 223.

Nostromo takes its underlying shape from a fairly traditional plot structure, involving time-sequence, causality, conflict, recognition, and resolution. The forward movement, however, is somewhat obscured by the "chronological looping" of the first third of the novel and by the manipulation of point of view in the latter part. It is also obscured by the extreme complexity of the plot, which prevents the reader from concentrating his attention on a single line of action. There is no central character, in the ordinary sense of a protagonist about whose welfare the reader is expected to be chiefly concerned. There are several characters who work out their destinies, interacting both with one another and with the changing society, itself a dynamic force in the story. Nostromo, Gould, Mrs. Gould, Decoud, and finally Dr. Monygham are each at some time brought close enough to the reader to be viewed as the protagonist in a plot line. They reveal one another as observers and analogues, and they act for and against one another in the action. Because of the proportions and methods of treatment, however, it is not possible to say that one of them exists only for the sake of another in relation either to the over-all theme of the book or to the plot. Edward Crankshaw describes the plot of Nostromo as "counterpoint," and defines it thus: "Nothing in the book must be treated for its own sake, yet every character is real, every episode actual, and each thread self-supporting, real

and not symbolic."⁸

In a complex plot we expect to find some kind of thematic relationship among the stories. In Nostromo the stories are related to one another in a number of ways, so that several different thematic approaches are possible. Kenneth Burke, in a somewhat different context, suggests an approach to literature through what he calls the formation and transformation of identity in relation to symbols of authority, both private ones such as parental figures and public ones such as social class and country.⁹ The approach is useful in discussing a political novel like Nostromo, in which public and private concerns are inextricably combined.

Conrad's own relationships with his father and uncle and with his country have received a good deal of attention. From Gustav Morf in The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad, 1930, to Eloise Hay in The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad, 1963, critics have emphasized in various ways the crucial importance of Conrad's feeling for Poland as a factor in his fiction, and have seen in Nostromo many autobiographical elements. The biographical facts and the evidence in Conrad's writing, both fiction and non-fiction, indicate a highly ambivalent attitude towards the symbols of authority in his life. We are primarily concerned here, however, with

⁸ Joseph Conrad: Some Aspects of the Art of the Novel (London: John Lane, the Bodley Head, 1936), p. 179.

⁹ Attitudes Towards History (2nd ed., rev.; Los Altos, Calif.: Hermes Publications, 1959), pp. 209-211, et. passim.

the forces directing the characters within Nostromo, not with what Nostromo did for Conrad as a symbolic enactment of the transformation of identity. For these characters the influence of father-figures and the emotional power of patriotism interact in complex ways with the urges of the ego. The history of Costaguana, within which the characters move, presents a related pattern of domination and rebellion.

In the development of the plot there is a great deal of physical action, sometimes approaching melodrama, but the real crises are mental ones, involving each man's conception of himself. Nostromo and Charles Gould throughout the book, Decoud in Part II, and Dr. Monygham in a different way in Part III may be seen as involved in a struggle to achieve or to maintain a sense of their own value, a struggle which involves complex relationships with elements outside themselves. Mrs. Gould, who is important both in the structure and in the thematic pattern, does not take the same sort of action as the male characters, but she also makes a significant choice and follows it to its psychic consequences. Although the plot structure is basically traditional, the novel illustrates Morton Dauwen Zabel's generalization that what "distinguishes Conrad's contribution to modern fictional method is his imposition of the processes of psychological experience, notably the experience of recognition, on the

structure of the plot."¹⁰

The fundamental irony of the world of Nostromo lies in two elements of the plot. First, all the symbols of authority are either inadequate or corrupt; the human beings who interest Conrad cannot avoid alienation, which Burke defines as "that state of affairs wherein a man no longer 'owns' his world because, for one reason or another, it seems basically unreasonable."¹¹ Secondly, a sense of personal identity is an illusion, in Conrad's sense of the word; that is, it is a private conviction with no objective basis. It no longer has the support of a metaphysical framework in which man can see himself as having an intrinsic value, and it is contrary to the findings of science and reason. Nevertheless, however illusory and irrational this sense of personal identity may be, it continues to be an urgent psychic necessity. Without it man becomes nothing. He suffers "alienation" in a somewhat different and more recent sense of the word than Burke's, the self-alienation or self-estrangement resulting from the destruction of "that ideal conception of one's own personality every man sets up for himself secretly" ("The Secret Sharer," Twixt Land and Sea, p. 94).

If the plot structure gives Nostromo its basic shape, the treatment of point of view is a very important element

¹⁰ Morton Dauwen Zabel, Craft and Character: Text, Method, and Vocation in Modern Fiction (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), p. 159.

¹¹ Op. cit., p. 216. The italics are Burke's.

in the texture of the novel as the reader experiences it. Like the plot structure, the handling of point of view is based upon traditional practice, modified in accordance with the complexity of the author's intention. Most of the narrative is conducted by an impersonal omniscient narrator, distinguished from his predecessors by his freedom in shifting his post of observation in space and time and his distance from the story which he is presenting. Upon this relatively traditional omniscience are imposed the newer techniques of impressionism, including the use of personal narrators and reflectors of several kinds, as well as the more radical departure from tradition which Ford Madox Ford calls "chronological looping." The result is that the stories are seen from a great many angles of vision. What Conrad said of his work many years later is true of Nostromo: "It is fluid, depending on grouping (sequence) which shifts, and on the changing lights giving varied effects of perspective" (LL II, 317). The fluidity contributes to the novel's formal beauty, but, more important, it is an essential part of the work seen as an image of "the shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealized life."

Because of the complexity of the novel, even an approach based on some of the choices of the "craftsman laboring in the flesh" presents difficulties. This paper attacks the problem in two ways. It attempts to trace some of the lines running through the book, and it also examines some of the

scenes as independent structures. The three main sections of the paper follow the divisions of the book. Each section makes some general observations about the plot and the handling of point of view in the corresponding Part of the book, and then considers some scenic passages in the Part, in the order in which they occur. The first section deals chiefly with the Goulds and Nostromo, the second with Decoud and Nostromo, and the third with Dr. Monygham and Nostromo. This arrangement reflects in a highly simplified way the underlying plot structure of the book.

The lines followed through the book are the separate stories of the chief characters. The length-wise plot analysis interprets the stories in terms of illusion and identity, and applies when it seems relevant the pattern of the formation and transformation of identity in relation to symbols of authority. The general analysis of point of view is particularly concerned with the control of distance in relation to each of the characters.¹²

Part One offers some particular difficulties because it exhibits more spatialization than the rest of the book. Therefore the section of the paper dealing with that Part begins with a fairly general discussion of the use of point of view within the Part, and then turns to a

¹² The discussion of distance throughout the paper is indebted to Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961).

consideration of the particular characters and the methods by which they are defined. The other two sections confine themselves more exclusively to the characters who are of particular interest in the corresponding Part.

In the discussion of specific passages, the scenes are considered primarily as independent structures, but there is also an attempt to see their function in the work as a whole. Different passages are analyzed in somewhat different ways within the general concepts of plot and point of view. Most but not all of the passages present psychic experiences which are episodes in the plot. The analysis of point of view includes comments on the methods of rendering these psychic experiences, on the author's relationship to his material, which includes the control of sympathy, and on the implications of multiple narration.

Although the paper does not set out to be an archetypal analysis, the discussion of some of the passages refers to the conventional imagery and mythos of irony as these are discussed in Frye's Anatomy of Criticism. The archetypal approach is used when it seems pertinent to a discussion of the methods of rendering or commenting on the experience of a character, and when it helps to explain something about the development of the plot, particularly that of Nostromo in Part Three. Sometimes the archetypal approach is used briefly, even when it can hardly be explicitly related to plot or point of view, because it helps to explain the total ironic coloring of the scene in which

the characters act, and the effect of the scene upon the readers.

The terms "irony" and "ironic" are used throughout the paper to refer to various aspects of an inclusive concept which has its sources in Haakon Chevalier's The Ironic Temper; Anatole France and His Times¹³ and in Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism. Chevalier's work is useful in placing Conrad in historical context, and is enlightening about some of the concerns of Nostromo. Frye defines the terms "irony" and "ironic" in a number of slightly different ways, according to the particular critical approach which he is discussing. Several of the definitions and the observations arising from them have a bearing on the use of plot and point of view in Nostromo, and are used as they become applicable throughout the paper.

CHAPTER I

PART ONE: THE SILVER OF THE MINE

Although Nostromo begins in medias res with a view of the riots, which are part of the main action of the book, most of Part One and the first three chapters of Part Two can be seen as the exposition of the novel. This section of the book establishes the characters in their private lives and in their relationship to society, and brings them to the main action, the revolution, which shows "the secret purposes of their heart revealed in the bitter necessities of the time" (Author's Note, p.xv). The method of this section is a very elaborate form of distributed exposition.

Conrad controls an enormous amount of material by methods that inescapably suggest the art of the cinema in their fluidity and visual precision, and in the great variety of distances and of angles of vision which they provide. Edward Crankshaw, whose early book is still very valuable to those interested in the aesthetics of Conrad's work, points out the similarity between Nostromo, finished in 1904, and the work years later of the great Russian theorists of the film, Eisenstein and Pudovkin. Crankshaw particularly emphasizes the use of montage, "which obviates monotony, heightens suspense, and shows a given subject from various angles of vision, which strengthens the film by enriching its texture, which affords freely the brilliant delight of

contrast and which brings into the space of a few moments of time a significant juxtaposition of aspects and scenes."¹ Conrad wrote to Eric Pinker in 1923 about a talk which he was preparing to give in New York; it was to be based on "the (apparently extravagant) lines of the imaginative literary art based fundamentally on scenic motion, like a cinema; with this addition that for certain purposes the artist is a much more subtle and complicated machine than a camera, and with a wider range, if in the visual effects less precise." (LL II, 302)

The usefulness of the comparison is limited, as Conrad points out. The author, "a much more subtle and complicated machine than a camera, and with a wider range," has at his command all the possibilities covered by the general concept of point of view, many of which are not available to the film-maker. These possibilities include a great variety of narrative methods and of relationships between the author and his material, and Conrad uses most of them in Nostromo.

The narrative is handled more fully by the omniscient author in the first third of the book than it is in the latter part, but even in omniscient narration the author is "subtle and complicated." There are many variations between the extremes of "telling" and "showing," and many shifts in distance between author and subject. The voice of the omniscient author, even in outright telling, sometimes varies in tone from its usual objectivity to undisguised sympathy

¹ Joseph Conrad, p. 180.

or comic satire. The physical distance of the author likewise shifts; he moves frequently from great panoramic views of Sulaco to close-up views of single characters and analysis of their minds.

In addition to the "Official Author," as Ford calls him, there are personal observers and narrators of many sorts. Some of them are anonymous characters picked out of a crowd to make a single speech, in order to provide an effect of actuality and to remind us that history exists only for individuals. Some of them, developed more or less fully as characters, serve chiefly to fill out the picture of the country and to give a personal view of a situation or a main character. We have, for example, the contrasting views of Charles Gould given by Sir John, the chairman of the railway board, and by the government official who is the center of consciousness in the little scene in Chapter 7, which shows Gould in one of his acts of "stooping for his weapons." Captain Mitchell, whom E.M.W. Tillyard calls "one of the great comic characters in fiction,"² is a narrator-agent of considerable importance. He has an effect on the action, and he also tells part of the story. Emilia Gould acts as a third-person center of consciousness, whose personality helps to color the things which she sees. The early development of the mine, for example, appears in a favorable light because several of the events are refracted

² The Epic Strain in the English Novel (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), p. 137.

through her youthful optimism.³

The major dislocations of Part One are shifts in time rather than in point of view. The two kinds of shifts are of course related; they both provide a new angle of vision for seeing a person or situation. The shifts in time also provide the juxtaposition of past, present, and future, with ironic effect. Captain Mitchell, the first implicated narrator to appear, illustrates both kinds of shift. He functions in the fictional present as an actor, but more notably as an observer whose point of view provides a good deal of comic irony. As an established narrator, however, he is removed in time from the situation described, so that the narrative is colored both by his particular consciousness and by the distancing effect of reminiscence. In one somewhat awkward shift at the beginning of Chapter 8, the author himself momentarily becomes a personal narrator, accounting for the sources of his information and looking back from a specific future time.

All the shifts have the kind of results which Crankshaw attributes to the use of montage. Most of these results are relevant to the concept of irony, in the senses in which Frye discusses it, both those related to the form of the work and those related to the vision of life which the work embodies. Frye says, "The ironic as such...seems to be simply the attitude of the poet as such, the dis-

³ The technical terms in the discussion are in general taken from Booth, op.cit. (above, Note 12), esp. pp.149-165.

passionate construction of a literary form, with all assertive elements, implied or expressed, eliminated."⁴ Although this statement does not cover everything in Conrad's attitude, it includes an important part of it. Crankshaw's emphasis on the aesthetic results of Conrad's "montage" is a valuable one. Conrad was a deliberate and conscious artist, and the handling of point of view contributes to the form of Nostromo by "enriching its texture" and affording "the brilliant delight of contrast."

Crankshaw's last point is that montage "brings into the space of a few moments of time a significant juxtaposition of aspects and scenes." This kind of juxtaposition is inherently ironic in form, because it reduces the assertive elements. Frye sees the author of ironic literature as assuming the role of eiron, who "deprecates himself and like Socrates pretends to know nothing, even that he is ironic."⁵ This statement does not completely describe the function of the author in Nostromo, who sometimes departs from strict neutrality, but it does suggest an important element in the handling of point of view. The method is also ironic in the view of the world which it suggests. It emphasizes the "shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealized life," because it highlights discrepancies of several kinds: discrepancies between a character's view of himself and his real motives, between his own

⁴ Anatomy of Criticism, p. 40.

⁵ Ibid.

view and other people's views (which may also be conflicting), between what people think they are doing and what they are actually doing, between hopes and their fulfilment. Furthermore, it suggests that there is no ultimate truth within which these discrepancies may be reconciled.

The most important characters of Part One, Charles and Emilia Gould, are slow to emerge from all the complexities. They are finally established in Chapter 6, about a third of the way through Part One, and dominate the rest of the Part.

The relationship between the Goulds is one of the most important threads of the book. In it we see "the woman's instinct of devotion and the man's instinct of activity" (p.74) as ultimately irreconcilable. They have made their decisive choice years before the loosely established fictional present of most of Part One, and the novel dramatizes the consequences of this choice.

Mrs. Gould throughout the book, like Decoud in Part Two and Dr. Monygham in Part Three, is valuable as an observer and also as an important character in her own right. As a character, she is not merely an innocent victim. She makes an initial choice, and her plot-line is the working out of the results of this choice and of the successive choices which it entails. Her illusions are of a different sort from those of the main characters, because she does not have to prove to herself her own identity, and, although she is

responsible in part for her own fate, the original choice is made to seem more admirable because it is less egoistic. The disillusionment which follows is a comment less on the nature of her illusion than on the nature of the world; that is, she is, in Frye's phrase, "poetically innocent." Conrad seems to see her as the heroine of romantic tragedy, which Frye defines as the tragedy of innocence, in the sense of inexperience.⁶

The strain of romance in the treatment of Mrs. Gould appears in the imagery which is associated with her. She is several times likened to a fairy, as Tillyard remarks.⁷ Claire Rosenfield points out that she is frequently presented in association with archetypal images of romance, for example, the Christian "good fairy," the Virgin Mary.⁸ Perhaps there is some archetypal value in the white mules which are associated with all her public appearances. Frye tells us that one of the favorite animals of romance is the ass, a symbol of humility and submissiveness. Mrs. Gould is also presented as a medieval queen, and as the traditional Lady Bountiful, succoring the poor and distressed.

⁶ Ibid., p. 220.

⁷ Op.cit., p. 134.

⁸ "An Archetypal Analysis of Conrad's *Nostromo*," Texas Studies in Language and Literature, III (January, 1962), pp. 516-517.

Frye sees in the archetypal imagery and mythos or narrative structure of the ironic mode a parody of the conventions of the mode of romance. In Conrad's work it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish between the two modes. With Mrs. Gould the irony seems to lie in the situation in which she plays her role. For example, when we see her presented as the medieval queen looking down from the balcony, we may be reminded of the cries of the Mont-erists: "Down with Feudalism!" And when Mitchell points her out, driving by in her carriage with the white mules, as "the first lady of Sulaco," we know that his remark is a tribute not only to her qualities of character but also to her position as the wife of the richest and most powerful man in the province.

That the irony is not intended to be reductive, however, is indicated by the method by which she is presented. She is first shown in a short scene in Chapter 5, the first part of the Juno scene, and there are some other brief impressions, but on the whole she is defined by direct authorial comment to a much greater degree than is Charles Gould. For her more than for any of the other characters, the voice of the author, untrue to Ford's dictum, does let signs of preference "pierce through the surface of his novel."⁹ This kind of commentary, a limited form of the old-fashioned block characterization, may not necessarily

⁹ Ford Madox Ford, "Techniques," Southern Review, I (July 1935), 33.

have a didactic intention. Irving Howe is right in saying that Conrad is not preaching that the world would necessarily be better if left in the "unmercenary hands" of Mrs. Gould.¹⁰ The commentary may be merely an economical means of accomplishing what Wayne C. Booth calls "the definition of the dramatic object." If we feel that Mrs. Gould is not entirely satisfactory, it may be because the "showing" does not adequately support the "telling."

The treatment of Mrs. Gould, intended to heighten the pathos of her own tragedy, also establishes her as a valuable observer and reflector. She is a representative not only of the private virtues of human loyalty and affection but also of the traditional English standards of law and public morality, guided by intelligence. Although her values prove to be ineffective in the anarchistic world of Costaguana politics and material interests, the author does not repudiate the values. Her observations of people and affairs can generally be taken as reflecting one essential side of the author's view of things in "this world where no explanation is final" (A Personal Record, p.35).

Charles Gould's plot-line is much more closely related to the problem of personal identity than is Emilia Gould's. It also illustrates more fully what Ford means by "justifi-

¹⁰ Irving Howe, Politics and the Novel (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), p. 110.

cation." Professing to speak for Conrad as well as himself, Ford says:

Before everything a story must convey a sense of inevitability: that which happens in it must seem to be the only thing that could have happened... the only action that character could have taken. It must be inevitable, because of his character, because of his ancestry, because of past illness or on account of the gradual coming together of the thousand small circumstances by which Destiny, who is inscrutable and august, will push us into one certain predicament.¹¹

Gould's story requires the establishment of his grandfather, his uncle, and his father, with their values as these are shown in their relationship with Costaguana. They are all symbols of authority which Gould must take into account in working out his own identity. There are, in addition, the English elements in his background and character, representing an old and stable civilization apparently far removed from the chaotic violence of Costaguana.

Gould's relationship to his father is clearly ambivalent. He must simultaneously avenge him and defeat him; he must defy his father's prohibition, and succeed on the very spot on which his father failed, by conquering Costaguana with its own weapons and so improving the society of his native land. The silver mine thus becomes for him a symbol of his own identity. In his conscious mind he sees it as a means of expressing his devotion both to his father and to his country, but that its real appeal is on the unconscious level is shown by the fascination it holds

¹¹

Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance (London: Duckworth, 1924), pp.204-205.

for him.

Like his father he comes under the spell of the mine. The main point is not the unholy fascination of the mine as an external force drawing people to it, but the individual reaction to it as a symbol of something else. Eloise Hay finds that the evil in Nostromo exists in a purely exterior form, symbolized by the silver.¹² This view certainly shows one side of the case, but it overlooks the problems of the individuals--their own tormented struggles to find a way of seeing themselves in relationship to parents and country, from which they are necessarily alienated, but without which they cannot exist. The silver obviously has an important archetypal value, as the traditional treasure which may be blessing or bane. The story would not be the same if the Costaguana government had forced upon Gould's father, a guano island, for example, as the name Conrad chose for his country might suggest. We have only to think of the guano island in Lord Jim. But it is not chiefly the irresistible lure of the treasure nor the evil inherent in "material interests" which settles Gould's fate; it is the fact that he, with his English uprightness of character, must come to some kind of terms with his father and with the corruption of Costaguana, a situation complicated by the fact that in order to realize his dream he must traffic with the forces

¹² Eloise Knapp Hay, The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Study (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 183.

of economic imperialism threatening his country's independence.

The impressionist methods of presenting character are used much more fully for Charles Gould than for his wife. The method corresponds roughly to that prescribed by Ford on the grounds of verisimilitude: "You must first get the character in with a strong impression and then work backwards and forwards over his past."¹³ Ford means that the reader should be given a strong impression of the character as he appears in the present. The author should first show the character in a revealing action, not make a general statement about the kind of person he is. In Gould's case, the author does not give the reader this strong impression until after he has shown the impression made by Gould on various characters in the novel; and the comments of observers continue to cast a variety of lights on Gould even after the "Official Author" has taken up the story. Among these observers, Sir John and the government official have already been mentioned, and there are many others. Observers who are important in the development of sympathy for Charles Gould are Don José and especially Emilia Gould. Chapter 6, in which Gould is first fully presented, gives us the first strong impression, and the rest of Part One works backward and forward over Gould's past. Chapter 6 and the ones following it are conducted

largely by the impersonal narrator, and the important shifts in point of view are those in the distance between the author and his subject, and the related shifts from narrative to scene.

The first fully developed scene in which Charles Gould appears does not come until nearly the middle of Chapter 6, more than halfway through Part One. This scene shows Charles and Emilia Gould not in the loosely fictional present of most of Part One, but in a much earlier period of their lives. Because of the complicated interweaving of past, present, and future in Part One, it is difficult to detach a single scene for examination. As Henry James says in a discussion of Conrad's Chance, the passage of dialogue has value because "it has flowered from the soil prepared and sheds back its richness into the field of cultivation."¹⁴ Therefore we shall try to establish the context before looking more closely at the specific dramatic passage. Throughout Chapter 6, a very long chapter in which established scenes occupy only a few pages, the treatment of Gould presents an interesting study in the methods of creating sympathy for a particular human being, without departure from apparent authorial detachment, and with a recognition of the ironic qualifications of any choice.

¹⁴ Henry James, "The Younger Generation," The Times Literary Supplement, April 3, 1914, p. 158.

Most of the chapter is an impersonal narrative account of the history of the Goulds in Costaguana, of the mine (going back to the time when it was worked by slaves under the early Spaniards, and the later time when English managers were murdered by native workers inspired by nationalist demagogues), of Gould's father in relation to the mine, and of Charles Gould from the age of fourteen until the time perhaps twelve years later when he has the mine ready to go into operation. The first presentation, however, "the strong impression," is a picture of Gould in the present, that is, in the main time of Part One, a period of unstable equilibrium a year and a half before the revolution, when his dream has apparently been fulfilled, and he is "El Rey de Sulaco." He is explicitly associated with the equestrian statue of a Spanish emperor, Charles IV; in the achievement of his dream he also has become something of a man of stone. The Costaguanan and English elements in his character and appearance are emphasized, and his first words, provoked by his wife's "appalled indignation" at the public affairs of Costaguana are, "My dear, you seem to forget that I was born here" (p.49). This first description of Charles Gould in the present time gives no insight into his motives, and is entirely detached in tone.

The narrative then moves into the past to deal with Gould's father in relation to the mine. The author's voice takes on a tone of distinct comic satire, towards both

the government and the elder Gould's mounting hysteria, which leads to what is later described as an "absurd moral disaster." The tone is set by a little comic scene showing the French mistress of a government official refusing to accept a bribe for influence that she cannot exert. This is the Costaguana of Decoud's "Quelle farce!" As the author moves from the father to the son, however, the tone changes. The account of Charles' boyhood, as under the influence of his father's letters he too gradually comes under the spell of the mine, is sympathetic in effect. The account of his courtship also increases sympathy, because of its emphasis on youth and love. The distance between the author and his subject, which has been gradually decreasing, is finally almost eliminated as the narrative shifts into a fully-developed scene.¹⁵

The scene dramatizes the critical point in Gould's life, his decision, with Emilia's support, to take over the San Tomé mine, in spite of his father's prohibitions. The rest of the book is for the Goulds the working out of the results of this choice. The omniscient author is present, explaining and commenting, but on the whole the effect is purely dramatic. The scene succeeds remarkably well in creating sympathy for the two young people while simultaneously suggesting reservations as to their choice. The enthusiasm and vigor of youth with its unlimited dreams

¹⁵ This scene is discussed by Paul Wiley, Conrad's Measure of Man (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1954), p. 102.

are set against the ruined palazzo of Emilia's aunt, a widow who lives a "still, whispering existence" mourning her husband, a middle-aged impoverished Italian marquis, who had died for the independence and unity of his country, "for that very cause of which old Georgio Viola was a drifting relic" (p. 60), and against the pathos of the death of the father, who, in the judgment of his son, had not grappled with the situation in the right way.

Gould's decision is clearly irrational; its obsessive nature and its outcome are presented in Gould's compulsive staring at what is almost the sole furnishing of the bare, magnificent hall: "a heavy marble vase ornamented with sculptured masks and garlands of flowers, and cracked from top to bottom" (p.61). The outcome of the relationship is foreshadowed in the author's comment, after a laudatory description of Emilia: "But now he was actually not looking at her at all; and his expression was tense and irrational, as is natural in a man who elects to stare at nothing past a young girl's head" (p.63). But Charles presents his conscious view of himself, relating himself to his uncle, Henry Gould, who has replaced Charles' father as a symbol of authority for the young man:

"Uncle Harry was no adventurer. In Costaguana we Goulds are no adventurers. He was of the country, and he loved it, but he remained essentially an Englishman in his ideas....He simply stood up for social order out of pure love for rational liberty and from his hate of oppression....He went to work in his own way because it seemed right, just as I feel I must lay hold of that mine" (p.64).

This statement becomes an important structural point in re-

lation to Gould's final self-recognition in Part Three (p. 365).

Although Charles Gould is the centre of the scene, Emilia also makes a decisive choice. The scene gives the impression of omniscience limited to the presentation of Gould's mind, but the author moves away from him to report briefly what is going on inside Emilia.

She had never before given him such a fascinating vision of herself. All the eagerness of youth for a strange life, for great distances, for a future in which there was an air of adventure, of combat--a subtle thought of redress and conquest, had filled her with an intense excitement, which she returned to the giver with a more open and exquisite display of tenderness. (p.65)

There is no other comment, but we see that Emilia too is a romantic, one of the romantics described by the narrator of Victory as "tingeing the world to the hue of [their] temperament" (p.51).

The scene with Emilia is followed by an authorial account of Gould's feelings:

It hurt Charles Gould to feel that never more, by no effort of will, would he be able to think of his father in the same way he used to think of him when the poor man was alive. His breathing image was no longer in his power. This consideration, closely affecting his own identity, filled his breast with a mournful desire for action.(pp.65,66)

This passage is immediately followed by a generalized comment by the author:

In this his instinct was unerring. Action is consolatory. It is the enemy of thought and the friend of flattering illusions. Only in the conduct of our action can we find the sense of mastery over the Fates.(p.66)

Does this passage express ironic condemnation of Gould? It sounds as if it were so intended, but we are reminded of it

when we come to the account of Decoud's last days, in which the author, whether by intention or not, uses almost the same words, with an opposite application, to explain Decoud's suicide (p.497). We see it then not as a condemnation of Charles Gould, but as an expression of Conrad's view of the place of man in the world, in which only the irrational illusion of selfhood distinguishes him from the meaningless universe.

We have already been shown something of the outcome of the decision dramatized in this scene. We have seen Gould as "El Rey de Sulaco," associated with the equestrian statue. However, the "justification" achieved by the full account of Charles' boyhood makes the choice seem natural and almost inevitable. This kind of dramatic irony, by which the reader, aware of the consequences of the hero's choice, is made to sympathize with the hero as he makes the choice, gives something of the effect of classic tragedy.

Most of the rest of Chapter 6 consists of another scene (pp. 67-85). It presents an event a year after the Goulds' marriage and several years before the time of the first part of the chapter, in which Charles Gould has been shown as the King of Sulaco. It is a dramatization of a stage in the Goulds' relationship as it has been affected by the mine. The outcome has already been shown in the author's statement early in the chapter that Gould declined to discuss public affairs.

The episode pointing out the inability of the three businessmen from San Francisco to see into Mrs. Gould's heart is a brief prelude to the scene proper. Captain Mitchell, quite unaware of the irony of his remarks, utters his unintentionally comic refrain: "This marks an epoch." The description of the patio affects the scene to follow by setting up another set of values against those of the religion of iron and steel. Mrs. Gould is the queen of the castle, a romantic heroine. The actual present scene begins as she walks among brilliant flowers to Gould's bare, white-walled room. The parrot shrieking "Viva Costaguana!" supplies a comment on the Holroyd scene, and will appear again. Gould is fastening on his spurs, which are a constant symbol, reminding us always of his driving ambition, and also of his frequent appearance as a horseman with its somewhat ironic suggestion of knighthood.¹⁶ The objects in the room are carefully chosen to represent the history of the Goulds in Costaguana. Henry Gould's cavalry sabre is an important symbol for Charles; he equates it in his mind with his use of the mine for the good of Costaguana. The water color sketch of the San Tomé mountain has a growing symbolic value, related as it is to the time when the Goulds are still inspired by the hopes of their illusion, and by love, which is the greatest illusion of all.

Most of the scene is in dialogue, with occasional glimpses into the minds of each of the characters. If we

¹⁶ Wiley, op.cit., p. 101.

consider the scene as a conflict, with Mrs. Gould as the protagonist, we can see her engaged in a struggle to maintain her belief in the mine as a power for good, and in "that splendour of hopeful love, which to the most sensible mind appears like a triumph of good over all the evils of the earth" (p.74). The antagonists are the figure of Holroyd, whose character she accurately assesses, and from whom Charles can only partially dissociate himself, and Charles himself. But Mrs. Gould does not recognize her second antagonist; the author, with the kind of irony that omniscience permits, says that she thinks that no one can really know her Charles but herself.

The total effect of the scene is profoundly affected by the long excursus in the middle, which is a shift in time back to a scene a year earlier in Holroyd's office in San Francisco, when Holroyd makes the decision to support Gould's enterprise. In this scene within a scene Holroyd is developed with a good deal of fullness; even his parentage and the comments of his employees are relevant. In comparison with Holroyd's satanic ambitions, Gould's project, which in essence is both personal and patriotic, seems modest indeed. Mrs. Gould has already remarked that Holroyd is a partner with God in the religion of iron and steel (but his doctors have insisted, with veiled menaces, on his taking a long holiday). He becomes another figure in the pattern of invasion and conquest running through the book, a twentieth century conquistador..

Probably the main achievement of the scene for the book as a whole is the presentation of Charles Gould. This is one of the very few scenes in the book in which he openly discusses his own motives. His growing taciturnity, forced upon him by the conditions which oppose him and by the complexity of his motivation, has been prefigured in the association with the equestrian statue. In the present scene, before silence has become a fixed attitude, he makes a very plausible defence of his action, and one which the book never actually refutes. He convinces his wife, so that she emerges from the scene feeling successful. The point of their divergence should perhaps have been made clear to her by the little passage of dialogue in which she remarks on the "terrible sadness" of the view of Gould's father about Costaguana, and Gould replies, "It exasperated him to be robbed," but it is not until much later that she really recognizes the situation. That Gould's real motivation is the defence of his own identity, associated with his father, is clear. The chapter ends with a brief inside view, reported by the author. It shows a partial recognition by Charles Gould of the consequences of his choice: "He was prepared to stoop for his weapons," in connection with Holroyd. "He felt that the worthiness of his life was bound up with success. There was no going back" (p. 85).

The proposal scene and this later one present in successive stages those qualities in Gould later summed up by

Decoud: "He could not believe his own motives if he did not make them first a part of some fairy tale" (p.215). The sympathy for Gould created by these scenes and by the narration make Decoud's judgment in Part Two seem a limited view of a complex situation. Nevertheless, Decoud speaks with enough authority to set Gould at a considerable distance. The treatment of Gould, like that of the other men, is a manifestation of Conrad's irony, which is frequently shown in the shifting distance between the author and his main characters. The trait is perhaps partly a reflection of Conrad's time. Chevalier says that the late nineteenth century was particularly conducive to the ironic temper because men were still very much aware of the values of the past, although they consciously rejected the metaphysical framework which they considered to be the support of those values. Their irony depended upon a "complex interplay of concepts and beliefs casting ambiguous shadows over human affairs."¹⁷ Chevalier, writing in 1932, felt that the complex attitude of Conrad's generation had fallen into disrepute. But we find Albert J. Guerard rightly saying nearly thirty years later: "Some of Conrad's greatest novels benefit from ambivalence, from the subtle oscillations of condemning judgment and identifying creative sympathy."¹⁸ These "subtle oscillations" are part of the presentation of the experience of living in a world

¹⁷ The Ironic Temper, p. 6.

¹⁸ Conrad the Novelist (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 98.

where, as Marlow says of Lord Jim, "Nobody, nobody is good enough," and yet, as Conrad himself says, "Even in a contest with the Immortal Gods, a man must render an account of his conduct." (Notes on Life and Letters, p. 338) The treatment of Gould in Part One may also remind us of another comment which Marlow makes about Jim: "The thing is that in virtue of his feeling he mattered."

This scene in Gould's room is re-enacted with a different ending in Part Two (pp.207-209). In that scene, which is presented chiefly from Mrs. Gould's point of view, the division between the Goulds resulting from Charles' irrevocable commitment to the mine is shown at a later stage. Unlike the present scene it leads to a moment of recognition for Mrs. Gould (pp.221-222), the pathos of which is heightened by echoes of this earlier scene. Both scenes prepare for her final recognition near the end of the book (pp.520-522).

The final scene of Part One (pp.123-131) takes place on a specific day a year and a half before the riots. It develops from the last part of the scene presenting the banquet on the Juno in celebration of the beginning of "that patriotic and progressive undertaking," the building of the railway. The fiesta scene, ending Part One, is entirely objective, without overt authorial comment or internal analysis. It has no plot relevance and shows no dramatic progression. Guerard says, "This scene turns out, as we look back, to have little relevance to the rest of

the book; we would know Nostromo's vanity without it." ¹⁹
 The scene however, has an important aesthetic value.
 Conrad once said, "I have a theatrical imagination." ²⁰
 This large-scale, close-up visual scene, which Hewitt calls
 the most "operatic" scene of the book, ²¹ exists partly for
 its own sake, as pure spectacle appropriate for the ending
 of Part One, to be deflated in a way typical of Nostromo
 by the return to the ironic voice of the narrator and the
 time shift on the last page.

The scene has another and perhaps more important
 aesthetic effect in bringing together in a single scene
 many motifs of the book. Everything in the scene is re-
 lated to what has gone before and to what comes later.
 The setting is the plain between the harbour and the town,
 with Viola's inn a central point, the same as that used
 for the scene presented in chapters 3 and 4. In that
 scene, a year and a half later in time but presented
 earlier, the people are an angry mob, rioting across the
 bare, dusty plain, cut by railway tracks. What relates
 this cheerful fiesta scene in Chapter 8 to the riot is the
 little progression d'effet in the recurrent image of the

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 213.

²⁰ Letters from Joseph Conrad, 1895-1924, ed. Edward Garnett
 (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1928), p. 230.

²¹ Douglas Hewitt, Joseph Conrad: A Reassessment
 (Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes 1952), p. 50.

dance hall music, which rises to the frenzied roar of the gombo drums.

Gould remarks, "All this piece of land belongs now to the railway. There will be no more popular festivals here." This is a reminder both of the changes being brought about in this isolated province and of the riot already presented but still in the future. In the passage with Viola, Mrs. Gould appears in her role of good fairy, whose magic, which will later be powerless, is still able to work against the encroachment of material interests into individual lives. The theme of national liberty and of ideals betrayed is brought to mind by the discussion of the name of the inn. Mrs. Gould's speaking to Viola "in Italian, of course" brings back the Goulds' courtship, with all its complex emotional and thematic associations. The silver buttons and the silver-grey mare of Nostromo's public identity are an ironic foreshadowing of the time when the hidden silver will be the essential part of his secret identity.

The most important part of the scene is the presentation of Nostromo, observed directly for the first time in a present scene. Before we look more closely at this direct presentation, it might be well to consider Nostromo somewhat more generally, and to see what Part One has already established about him. Conrad pointed out many years later that Nostromo was never intended to be the hero of the tale. (LL II,296) It seems probable, however, that it

was really Nostromo's story which Conrad set out to tell when he began the book. He tells us in the Author's Note about the engendering episode, the anecdote of the stealing of the silver. A few months after beginning the novel he said in a letter to Cunninghame Graham that the novel was "concerned mostly with Italians" (LL I, 315). The story of the Italians is thoroughly established at the beginning of the book, but then it almost disappears in what Conrad called "the ever-enlarging vistas opening before me as I progressed deeper in my knowledge of the country" (p. x).

Just what Conrad consciously intended in the treatment of Nostromo is not entirely clear, either in the book or in published statements. He says in the Author's Note that his imagination began working when it dawned upon him "that the purloiner of the treasure...could be even a man of character, an actor and possibly a victim in the changing scenes of a revolution" (p. ix). Shortly after the publication of the novel, however, he wrote a letter to Cunninghame Graham:

I don't defend Nostromo himself. Fact is he does not take my fancy either....But truly Nostromo is nothing at all--a fiction, embodied vanity of the sailor kind--a romantic mouthpiece of the 'people'....I do not defend him as a creation. (LL I, 338)

In the Author's Note he makes a much more serious statement of Nostromo's function as a man of the people. The comment which seems to come closest to summing up his attitude towards Nostromo, however, is his reference to Dominic Cervoni:

Mainly Nostromo is what he is because I received the inspiration for him in my early days from a Mediterranean sailor....Dominic, the padrone of the Tremolino, might under given circumstances have been a Nostromo. At any rate Dominic would have understood the younger man perfectly--if scornfully.(p.xii)

In the Mirror of the Sea and The Arrow of Gold, Dominic is for Conrad a symbol of romantic adventure. It is not clear exactly how much scorn Conrad intended in the total treatment of Nostromo; the use of point of view, however, is not designed to make the reader take him very seriously for most of the book. He is first presented as "an invaluable fellow" in the retrospective narrative of Captain Mitchell, who is immediately defined by the author as a comically limited observer. "We never make mistakes" are his first words. He gives us a brief account of Nostromo's history and his heroic behavior on behalf of the Ribierists. Mitchell's "ownership" of Nostromo is established. Then there is a brief view of Nostromo through the eyes of the cargadores.

[They] were an outcast lot of very mixed blood, mainly Negroes....There was not one of them that had not, at some time or other, looked with terror at Nostromo's revolver poked very close at his face, or been otherwise daunted by Nostromo's resolution. He was "much of a man," their capataz was, they said. (p. 15)

In the first fully developed scene of the book, that of the Violas in Chapters 3 and 4, Nostromo is heard outside the inn, but does not appear. We hear about him chiefly from Teresa Viola "who has been like a mother to him." In spite of the tension of the scene, she is treated in a somewhat comic vein. She alternately moans, "Oh! Gian'

Battista! Why art thou not here?" ("She was not then invoking the saint himself, but calling upon Nostromo, whose patron he was," the author remarks,) and hysterically denounces him as a traitor running "at the heels of his English" (p.19). Nostromo's heroic exploits during the riot, in which he saves the lives of all three of his parental figures, Mitchell, Teresa, and Viola, are somewhat reduced by the manner of their presentation. Later in Part One, although earlier in time, he makes a brief and unexpected physical appearance. In the little scene at the survey camp at the summit of the pass (Chapter 5) he suddenly rises up in the darkness, and is revealed in the light of a match. The momentary effect is something like that of the incarnation of a god, but the engineer, explaining him to Sir John, the chairman of the railway board, realistically sums him up from the point of view of the "material interests":

That's our camp master...a most useful fellow, lent me by Captain Mitchell of the O.S.N. Company....He seems to know how to rule all these muleteers and peons....He promised me to take care of your person all the way down as if you were his father. (p.43)

In Chapter 8, at the end of Part One, Nostromo makes two extended appearances, seen without the refracting influence of a personal observer. Although the chapter deals chiefly with the mine and its effects, it begins and ends with Nostromo. The two views show him acting out the

role scornfully ascribed to him in Part Two by Decoud, who in spite of himself recognizes as a requirement of the hero a sense of responsibility towards society: "The heroes of the world have been feared and admired. What more could he want?" The passage at the beginning of the chapter presents not a specific occasion, but a recurrent action. It shows Nostromo on the morning after feast days, routing out the cargadores from their hovels, "like cow-byres, like dog-kennels," with physical force and a revolver. The last part of the chapter, the well-established scene which we were considering above, shows him as the hero of the crowd at the fiesta.

As the focus in the fiesta scene shifts from the Goulds to Nostromo, we see him in a dialogue with Viola, which shows his real position. The old man wants him for a son, but Nostromo has looked after "the old Englishman who has enough money to pay for a railway...as if he had been my own father," and he has guarded "that other Englishman's heap of silver...as though it had been my own"(p.125).

He makes a triumphal procession through the town, loftily spurns a humble petitioner, and as the music reaches a climax makes a great public appearance. Frye says that in the high mimetic mode we find a characteristic "emphasis on cynosure or centripetal gaze,"²² and here we see Nostromo presented, with some irony, as the center of a throng of admirers. Throughout the scene he appears as a public hero,

²² Op.cit., p. 153.

but the effect is that of the mock-heroic. The scene is not really a burlesque; in substance it is realistic enough. Although the whole passage appears to be an example of "showing" by means of dialogue and apparently impersonal narration without authorial comment, there are several devices for reducing Nostromo to the mock-heroic: the detailed description of his magnificent attire, the repeated use of impressive adjectives attached to "capataz de cargadores," and references to "Captain Mitchell's right-hand man." The whole little scene with Paquita, including the reactions of the crowd, is comic.

By the end of Part One, Charles Gould has been developed into a figure approaching tragic irony. For Nostromo, however, the ironic tone has a suggestion of satire. The difference in effect is of course due partly to the structure of the book. Whereas Gould's plot is well advanced by the end of Part One, Nostromo's has only begun. The elements which will enter into his conflict have been suggested by the various points of view from which he has been presented, but until the final paragraph of Part One there is no indication of an approaching psychic crisis. In addition to the structural factor, however, the handling of point of view has created different effects for the two men. One of the fundamental ironies of the book, the discrepancy between one's own image of himself and other people's views, is established for both men by the manipulation of point of view. For Gould, however, we are soon given a sympathetic inside

view of his image of himself. For Nostromo, Part One gives us no such view; we infer the inner image from external views. Throughout Part One the distance between Nostromo and the reader is maintained partly by the use of observers and partly by the tone of the author in impersonal narration. Even at the end of the Part, the approach of Nostromo's crisis is announced in the retrospective narration of the comic Mitchell. Booth remarks, "Many modern 'tragedies' are so little tragic because the hero is too distant from the reader at the beginning for us to care that he is...even further at the end."²³ The comment is to some extent applicable to the treatment of Nostromo.

²³ "Distance and Point of View: An Essay in Classification," Essays in Criticism, XI (1961), 71.

CHAPTER II

PART TWO: THE ISABELS

Part Two is dominated by Martin Decoud, who appears without any preparation and becomes both a protagonist in his own plot-line and an important narrator and commentator. An analysis of Decoud both as actor and as observer presents some difficulties. Gustav Morf, who perhaps over-simplifies the working of the creative imagination, sees Conrad presenting in Decoud an imaginative vision of himself as he might have been if he had returned to Poland.¹ Guerard, who has a more sophisticated view of the psychology of composition, points out the discrepancies between what Decoud is shown as actually doing and what the author in one way or another tells us about him; the authorial commentary, implied or explicit, is almost always condemnatory. Guerard suggests that the condemnation is directed

at a personage who is not fully in the book or not in it at all; a Decoud -self conceived but not dramatized. To put matters bluntly: Conrad may be condemning Decoud for a withdrawal and skepticism more radical than Decoud ever shows; which are, in fact, Conrad's own.²

Irving Howe remarks: "If in Captain Mitchell Conrad gently scratched at one of his occasional masks, in Decoud he violently tore at one of his major attitudes."³

¹ Gustav Morf, The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co., [1930]), pp.127-148.

² Conrad the Novelist, p. 199.

³ Politics and the Novel, p. 112.

Conrad himself can be discussed in terms of the ironic temper of his time, but he consciously rejects in Decoud the attitude of the ironist, which Chevalier describes in words that might be taken from the author's statements about Decoud, or from Decoud's words about himself.

The ironist will act, but with perfect lucidity, without illusions as to the validity of his actions. He will be virtuous, but without believing in virtue.... He is actuated in what he does by a profound egoism. He reacts to the promptings of his own instincts and desires and as little as possible to external pressure. His very devotions will have their source in impulses to private gratification.⁴

This attitude is the appropriate response to the ironist's essential "perception of an inevitable incongruity in the nature of things,"⁵ which leads him to see the world as chaos.

There are no principles. There are only facts and illusions, which amount to about the same thing. Since the world is a chaos, any doctrine or system, for all its virtues, must necessarily be false. And wisdom lies not in the ordering of knowledge but in the cultivation of breadth of vision and of diversity of points of view.⁶

Decoud consciously adopts the attitude of the ironist. The author explicitly condemns the pose, and it leads to Decoud's suicide. This same attitude, however, is expressed time after time in Conrad's letters, and is implicitly reflected in the handling of point of view in much of Nostromo.

This attitude is only part of Conrad's view of things; it is matched by his perhaps desperate allegiance to fidelity

⁴ The Ironic Temper, p. 180.

⁵ Ibid., p. 186.

⁶ Ibid., p. 184.

and human solidarity. It is therefore not surprising to find the author condemning an attitude which he sees as rationally defensible but emotionally untenable. What is perhaps surprising is the fact that Decoud, dismissed by the Author's Note as "a trifler" (p.xiii), and explicitly condemned by the impersonal narrator for his scepticism and raillery, is the most vividly realized character in the book, and expresses his observations with such vigor that we can hardly avoid taking him as the author's spokesman. There is in the treatment of Decoud something more than the deliberate ambivalence praised by Guerard: "the subtle oscillations of condemning judgment and identifying creative sympathy."

The causes for some of the difficulties in the character of Decoud and in the author's attitude towards him lie somewhere in the complexity of Conrad's whole adjustment to life, perhaps especially in his ambivalent feelings towards Poland.⁷ He could renounce neither "the national sentiment" nor "l'égoïsme." (LL I, 269) We may think of Decoud when Conrad tells us in the Author's Note that he tried to write "with as cool a hand as was possible in the heat and clash of my own conflicting emotions" (p.xi).

It is not necessary to resort to biography, however, to explain what is apparent in the text. A great deal of

⁷ The point is discussed by several writers. See especially Jocelyn Baines, Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1959), pp.313-314.

the ambiguity in Decoud's character is clearly intentional. He is explicitly presented as a divided man. "He had pushed the habit of universal raillery to a point where it blinded him to the genuine impulses of his own nature" (p.153). It is possible to see his plot-line, like the others, in terms of the formation of identity in relation to symbols of authority. For much of his life, Martin Decoud, the renegade Costaguanero, has lived in Paris, "an only son, spoiled by his adoring family" (p.155), with his sister "ruling the father and mother in the first-floor apartments of a very fine Parisian house" (p.223). But he has a godfather, Don José Avellanos, who is a genuine patriot, although for him also the author has a touch of irony. Don José's surrogate, Antonia, has years before permanently impressed Decoud ("like a ridiculous fatality," he tells himself) by flying out at him about the aimlessness of his life and the levity of his opinions. At the request of Don José and Antonia he finds himself committed to Costaguana, and says, "Why need a man be thanked for returning to his native land?" His action is a working out of the conflict between the two identities, that of the "adopted son of Western Europe," characterized by French rationalism and scepticism, and a "Frenchified--but most un-French--cosmopolitanism" (p.152), and that of the Costaguanero, who believes that his country is totally corrupt and yet cannot undo the fact of his nationality. Eloise Hay says that in Decoud Conrad has created "a monster--a man who professes scorn for his country

yet remains on the scene to take a part in its development."⁸
 But such a man is hardly a monster; the divided personality may be difficult to represent convincingly, but it is certainly not untrue to life.

It is true that neither Decoud nor the author seems very sure whether Decoud's passion for Antonia is an expression of his anti-patriotic side, which would be appropriate for the ironist in Chevalier's description, or an elaborate disguise for his patriotism. He seems to work out an uneasy solution; with one side of himself standing by to scoff, he can then permit the other side to give way to his commitment to Antonia, which includes his commitment to his country. "He soothed himself by saying that he was not a patriot but a lover" (p.176).

The use of point of view in the definition of Decoud's character is quite different from that in the case of either Gould or Nostromo. Decoud appears without any preliminary glimpses through the eyes of other characters. The author gives an external description of Decoud on a specific occasion, as he stands by Mrs. Gould's carriage during the embarkation of Barrios' soldiers to fight the Monterists. The description emphasizes his French clothes and his physical characteristics, typical of a fair Spanish Creole. Then the author moves back into Decoud's past, to give a narrative account of his youth in Paris and his return to Costaguana, and so comes back to the embarkation scene.

⁸ The Political Novels, p. 197.

This treatment is simply "harking back to make up." There is no suggestion of dramatic irony, as there is with Gould, because the first presentation of Decoud has no particular significance, and the subsequent narrative is very rapid.

The account of Decoud's life is an example of block characterization. The author explicitly condemns Decoud's attitude, although what he says about Costaguana is actually only a more cynical and unfeeling statement of what has already been shown in the book. The author attempts by the use of dialogue and the sister's point of view to actualize Decoud's sudden and apparently uncharacteristic concern with Costaguana affairs and his decision to return. There is, however, no interior view and no real attempt to establish sympathy. Ford says that Conrad "was never satisfied that he had really and sufficiently got his character in--he was never convinced that he had convinced the reader."⁹ The block characterization of Decoud in Paris, "in danger of remaining a sort of nondescript dilettante all his life"(p.153), does not sufficiently get him in, and the narrative account of his transformation from the "idle boulevardier" to the editor of the Porvenir is too swift to convince the reader. Perhaps we are justified in assuming on the basis of this cursory introduction of Decoud that Conrad did not intend him to have the importance which he later acquires.

After the rapid filling in of Decoud's background in Chapter 3, the action proper of the book may be said to begin.

⁹ Joseph Conrad, p. 206

The presentation of Decoud becomes almost entirely dramatic, with very little authorial commentary. Chapter 4 is important as a rendering of Decoud's state of mind. The chapter is on the whole presented dramatically; it is a good example of "showing," not "telling." It also exhibits some dramatic progression, resulting in a change of situation for the characters involved, especially for Decoud.¹⁰

The setting and the pattern of movement for the scene are like those of the scene at the end of Part One, a year and a half earlier, as Mrs. Gould's carriage moves from the wharf across the plain to Viola's inn. That occasion was the gay fiesta, with the crowd in holiday mood, and the Ribierists rejoicing at the coming of the railway, that "patriotic and progressive undertaking" (p.34). The first use of the plain as setting came in the very early chapters of the book, in the first account of the riots, which in chronological time have not yet occurred. The imagery at the beginning of this scene presents the crowd as a shapeless living mass between the soldiers and the aristocrats, quiescent but possibly threatening.

The scene consists of a series of little episodes in which the weaknesses of the Ribierist party are exposed, not by enemies but by friends. Decoud is inevitably committed by his birth and upbringing to the social class represented by the blancos, who may offer the single faint hope for the

¹⁰ This scene is discussed at length by Hewitt, pp. 51-54.

regeneration of Costaguana; but the ironies and self-deception involved in their position are clearly revealed. In order to maintain sympathy for the people, while revealing the weaknesses of the party to which they are committed, the author uses Mrs. Gould as the center of consciousness. He also emphasizes the visible signs of emotion and the frailty of Don José, who carries with him the sympathy engendered by the account in Chapter 1 (pp.137-140) of his suffering under the demonic Guzman Bento.

The first encounter of the Gould party is with General Barrios. His drunkenness is revealed by the remarks of bystanders, and his boastfulness by his comic threats against General Montero, who has been presented earlier as a "weird and inscrutable portent." He offers a comic parody of Avellanós' eloquence: "Work! Grow rich!... as Don José wishes us, we shall grow rich, one and all, like so many Englishmen, because it is money that saves a country" (p.164); it expresses an irony which cuts two ways. The author digresses from the present scene to give a long analysis of Barrios, in which he is made somewhat ridiculous but by no means unsympathetic. The account, which is lively and interesting in itself, fills out the picture of Costaguana society, and suggests a number of parallels and contrasts with other characters on both sides of the struggle. It also has a bearing on the development of Decoud; although Barrios, as dramatized in the present scene, is an example of the Ribierists' "stooping for their weapons," the authorial analysis makes us aware of the limitations of

Decoud when he later refers to Barrios with great scorn as a "boastful ignorant indio."

The second encounter is with Giorgio Viola, addressed by Decoud as "Garibaldino." He is associated as usual with the name of his inn, the Albergo d'Italia Una, and with the snowy peak of Higuerota. His remark about the Ribierist soldiers, "those indios only caught the other day," is another appearance of a motif used several times throughout the book. In a little open clash Decoud forces Viola to make his judgment of the situation explicit, condemning both the leaders and the followers. The next episode, the conversation with young Scarfe, puts into the simplest terms the attitude of "the foreign investors," who support the Ribierist government from pure self-interest.

Although Mrs. Gould is the emotional center of most of the scene, the interest gradually shifts to Decoud. The scene dramatizes the conflict between his intellectual repudiation of his country and his emotional involvement with it. There is no authorial comment or inside view; his emotions are revealed chiefly by his speech, first in the little dialogue in which he forces Viola to utter his condemnation of the Ribierists, then in his ironic remark to Scarfe and his equivocal praise of his godfather Don José, and finally in an eloquent and passionate outburst, made at the risk of offending Antonia. He condemns both the character of the Costaguanans themselves and the invasion of the country by foreign investors like "the bold buccaneers

who tried to get the wealth of our Spanish fathers three hundred years ago." (The figure of Ignacio, the coachman, may be intended as a reminder of the Indians, who were there long before the Spanish; there have been many explicit references to the enslavement of the Indians.)

The tone of Decoud's speech here can be set against that of his Paris description of Costaguana affairs given in the preceding chapter:

Imagine an atmosphere of opera bouffe in which all the comic business of stage statesmen, brigands, etc. etc., all their farcical stealing, intriguing, and stabbing is done in dead earnest. It is screamingly funny,,,No man of ordinary intelligence can take part in the intrigues of une farce macabre (p.152).

Decoud's speech, which begins in Chapter 4 and is picked up again in Chapter 5, has its value as comment, from a new point of view, on Costaguana affairs and economic imperialism, but it is more important as an action, representing a stage in the development of Decoud's intolerable alienation.

At the end of the chapter, all the elements of the situation are embodied in a single complex image, impressing itself upon the consciousness of Decoud. The people, the military spectacle, the dusty plain, the old Spanish gateway of the city, the church bells, the carriage, are all caught in a single timeless moment as the empty freight train shrieks across the plain. The whistle of the locomotive is "the breathless, hysterically prolonged scream of warlike triumph," and as the train stops, "a series of hard, battering shocks, mingled with the clanking of chain

couplings, made a tumult of blows and shaken fetters under the vault of the gate" (p.172). All the elements in the passage are realistic; they are skilfully drawn together to give in a single picture the history of Sulaco. But the impression is that made upon Decoud; instead of an analysis of his thoughts we have an objective analogy of his emotional state as he sits without a sound in the carriage under the old gateway:

And it was all like a fleeting vision, the shrieking ghost of a railway engine fleeing across the frame of the archway, behind the startled movement of the people streaming back from a military spectacle with silent footsteps on the dust of the road. (p.172)

The experience rendered here is a momentary dissociation from reality, a symptom of Decoud's divided personality. It is the first of several such experiences culminating in his suicide; these earlier suggestions increase the probability of his final act, which, examined out of context, is not very convincing.

In Chapter 5, which continues in time from Chapter 4, Decoud is definitely established as the center of a much longer passage. In the scene in the Goulds' sala in Chapter 5 there is some relatively abstract discussion of political ideas, but it would be a mistake to look for the kind of coherent argument that we might expect in a "novel of ideas." Antonia, who is not really developed into a character in her own right, seems to have two functions: to serve as an object of Decoud's love, and to offer a consistent defence of the virtue of patriotism. Decoud,

however, is much less coherent, because he is far more complex both in his emotions and in his intellectual attitudes, and because he has undergone an experience which has shaken his conception of himself. Although some of his speeches seem designed to show him as a typical sceptic, many of them are perhaps better seen as the rendering of an individual experience. In the dramatic development of the scene, he moves away from the exasperated patriotism aroused by the scene in Chapter 4, and eventually works out a relationship with Antonia which seems to permit him to resume his old view of himself.

The scene is very long and full, being played, as it were, on three stages simultaneously. In the great sala are gathered all the supporters of the status quo, enjoying a burst of renewed confidence because of the departure of Barrios' soldiers, equipped with the rifles which Decoud has brought, to put down the threatening Monterists. This background scene is active and interesting in itself, but the main action goes on between Decoud and Antonia in the alcove of the window apart from the crowded sala. Another movement goes on outside, as people of all classes pass by and evening turns to darkness. The whole scene is a remarkable presentation of ideas, emotions, concrete images, and dramatic movement.

Except for a narrative digression about Father Corbelàn and a few brief shifts to give the opinions of the blanco ladies about Antonia, the scene is almost entirely dramatic,

in the sense that there is very little authorial intrusion and a fairly sustained effort to render, not report. The method is in general that of limited omniscience, with the thoughts of only Decoud revealed by the author. Decoud is both actor and observer. The two functions are not readily separable, because what he observes is part of his own emotional experience.

There is little explicit authorial comment to direct the reader's judgment of Decoud, and what little there is tends to be reductive. Nevertheless, the scene results in a good deal of sympathy for Decoud, which can be partly explained in terms of point of view as it applies to the treatment of Decoud both as actor and observer. Even with such a deliberate artist as Conrad, it seems improbable that the choice of methods of presenting character is determined entirely by the requirements of plot, pattern, or total effect. The methods are also a reflection, whether conscious or not, of the author's own attitude towards the character and what he represents. In this scene Conrad chooses to show Decoud through the method of limited omniscience, which is generally a way of producing sympathy for the character whose mind is revealed. That it may produce not sympathy but quite the opposite effect is shown several times in the book, for example, in a passage in which Charles Gould is shown through the eyes of an unnamed government official(pp. 90-92); but in such cases the author is clearly present setting up the irony against the character.

In the sala scene the author seldom interposes himself between the reader and Decoud, and the glimpses into his mind are presented with very little irony. The following passage, which is a part of an account of Decoud's thoughts as he is alone at the beginning of the scene, is an example:

Martin Decoud was angry with himself. All he saw and heard going on around him exasperated the preconceived views of his European civilization. To contemplate revolutions from the distance of the Parisian boulevards was quite another matter. Here on the spot it was not possible to dismiss their tragic comedy with the expression, "Quelle farce!"

The reality of the political action, such as it was, seemed closer, and acquired poignancy by Antonia's belief in the cause. Its crudeness hurt his feelings. He was surprised at his own sensitiveness.

"I suppose I am more of a Costaguanero than I would have believed possible," he thought to himself. (p.176)

The effect of such passages is to encourage the reader to identify himself with Decoud and his view of things.

The passage quoted is one of the longest of the inside views. Most of the action between Decoud and Antonia consists of dialogue, with only occasional brief glimpses into Decoud's thoughts. Decoud's speeches are actions revealing his own experience, but they are also observations which, by their reliability or lack of it, reveal his character. The arrangement of the scene tends to validate his judgments. For example, he says: "What is a conviction? A particular view of our personal advantage either practical or emotional. No one is a patriot for nothing" (p.189). Within the sala members of the provincial assembly denounce Montero, "that evil madman," and rejoice at the departure of Barrios. "It was a boastful tumult, the hopefulness inspired by the event

of the day breaking out amongst those caballeros of the campo thinking of their herds, of their lands, of the safety of their families. Everything was at stake"(p.190).

That passage is a fairly explicit validation of Decoud's judgment. Others are more subtle. Antonia, both a patriot and a realist, says, "You never see the aim. Men must be used as they are" (p.177). A little later Decoud picks up the point.

"Did you say I lost sight of the aim? I have only one aim in the world." [To win Antonia]

She made an almost imperceptible negative movement of her head, still staring across the street at the Avellanos house, grey, marked with decay, and with iron bars like a prison. (p.179)

Decoud's rejection of her aim gains support from the imagery, which may remind us of Conrad's own feeling towards Poland, "la fidélité à une cause absolument perdue, idée sans avenir" (LL I, 269).

Decoud's ironic tone towards himself is a means of winning sympathy. The irony is in the situation; he only points it out, in speeches that are sometimes brilliantly comic. Decoud the ironist, committed to the situation in spite of himself, reserves the right to jeer at his own part in the "tragic comedy." The reader can sympathize with his attitude, whether it is expressed in the sober realization underlying his bantering lament to Antonia about the danger into which he has been brought by "inciting poor ignorant fools to kill and to die" (p.181), or in the comic caricature of his great shout of "Gran'Bestia!" (p.191)

Decoud is an ironist partly because he, unlike the un-ironic people in the sala, has a fleeting awareness of the possibility of something better.

"Some reason, you understand, I mean some sense, may creep into thinking; some glimpse of truth. I mean some effective truth, for which there is no room in politics or journalism....If you do me the kindness to think a little you will see that I spoke like a patriot." (p. 177)

This speech, which occurs early in the scene, has its effect in developing sympathy, but it does not represent a sustained attitude. Another passage, which comes several pages later, shows him in a more typical way. It begins with Decoud's desire to take Antonia to Europe, "away from the endlessness of civil strife, whose folly seemed even harder to bear than its ignominy," and moves to his general position:

After one Montero there would be another, the lawlessness of a populace of all colours and races, barbarism, irremediable tyranny. As the Great Liberator Bolivar had said in the bitterness of his spirit, "America is ungovernable. Those who worked for her independence have ploughed the sea." He did not care, he declared boldly; he seized every opportunity to tell her that though she had managed to make a Blanco journalist of him, he was no patriot. First of all, the word had no sense for cultured minds, to whom the narrowness of every belief is odious; and secondly, in connection with the everlasting troubles of this unhappy country it was hopelessly besmirched; it had been the cry of dark barbarism, the cloak of lawlessness, of crimes, of rapacity, of simple thieving.

He was surprised at the warmth of his own utterance. (p. 187)

In this passage, which consists of speech rendered more or less accurately into indirect discourse, we see Decoud as the "Costaguanero of the boulevards." In his speech he displays his pose of easy irony ("cultured minds to whom

the narrowness of every belief is odious"), for which there is no attempt to win sympathy, but he also reveals himself as a Costaguanero distressed by his country. The little inside view following the speech confirms the revelation and wins sympathy for him not as a commentator but as a human being.

Later in the scene we have Decoud not as observer but as observed. Father Corbelàn makes some very forthright comments to Decoud. He calls him a perfect heathen.

"You believe neither in stick nor stone....A miracle could not convert you."

"I certainly do not believe in miracles," said Decoud quietly. Father Corbelàn shrugged his high, broad shoulders doubtfully.

"A sort of Frenchman--godless--a materialist," he pronounced slowly, as if weighing the terms of a careful analysis. "Neither the son of his own country nor of any other," he continued, thoughtfully.

"Scarcely human, in fact," Decoud commented under his breath, his head at rest against the wall, his eyes gazing up at the ceiling.

"The victim of this faithless age," Father Corbelàn resumed in a deep but subdued voice. (p.198)

It is difficult to say whether Decoud is lowered or raised by the denunciation of Father Corbelàn, who is certainly a severely limited observer, but who speaks at least part of the truth. The passage seems designed to lead towards an increase in the distance between the author and Decoud at the end of the scene. Decoud again becomes an observer, this time of Father Corbelàn, but in this passage the author is also present, commenting on Decoud. He calls him "the voice of the party, or rather its mouthpiece, the 'son Decoud' from Paris, turned journalist for the sake of Antonia's eyes." Decoud's judgment of Father Corbelàn has

up to a point been validated by what has gone before, but the author tells us:

Martin Decoud, the dilettante in life, imagined himself to derive an artistic pleasure from watching the picturesque extreme of wrong-headedness into which an honest, almost sacred conviction may drive a man.... He enjoyed the bitter flavour of that example with the zest of the connoisseur in the art of his choice. Those two men got on well together, as if each had felt respectively that a masterful conviction, as well as utter scepticism, may lead a man very far on the bypaths of political action. (p.200)

The author's comments may be designed "to define the dramatic object," but Decoud has already been defined in a way which makes the comment inadequate.

The author does not establish for Decoud the kind of dramatic irony which suggests the element of tragedy in the story of Charles Gould. But as Conrad said in a letter about "The End of the Tether," "As to me I depend upon the reader looking back upon my story as a whole."¹¹ The reader looking back upon the story (or rereading it, since looking back upon Nostromo as a whole is impossible) recognizes the tragic irony of Decoud's comments in the sala scene. In terms of Frye's classification he is then seen as one kind of alazon figure, the obsessed philosopher whose view of life is inadequate to encompass the whole of life, acting not a comic role, as Mitchell does, but a tragic one. The reader recognizes a clear ironic foreshadowing of disaster in a casual remark: "No occupation is

¹¹ Letters to Blackwood and Meldrum, p. 170. Italics Conrad's.

serious, not even when a bullet through the heart is the penalty of failure" (p.177), or in the author's summary of Decoud's thoughts about honest conviction, as exemplified in Father Corbelàn.

"It is like madness. It must be--because it's self-destructive," Decoud had said to himself often. It seemed to him that every conviction, as soon as it became effective, turned into that form of dementia the gods send upon those they wish to destroy. (p.200)

The real irony is that in "the shifting complexities and ambiguities of unidealized life" neither conviction nor scepticism will serve. In the book it is the people with convictions who survive and the sceptic Decoud who is self-destructive, but it is Decoud who most engages the author's imagination.

The use of Decoud as observer in the sala scene prepares for Chapter 7, in which the omniscient author appears to abdicate his narrative function and Decoud becomes a first-person narrator and observer. His letter, some twenty-five pages long, represents the novel's most extensive use of a personal narrator. The author is present at times, but does not interfere with Decoud's narrative of past events. The passage illustrates the practical advantage of the old letter convention, which makes possible the inclusion of a substantial amount of narrative summary without the sacrifice of a personal focus. This use of Decoud is partly a device for obtaining economy and variety. He provides a relatively lucid account of events, some of which have not been presented previously and some of which have been presented in a fragment-

ary fashion. The omniscient author might have done the same thing in his own voice, but Conrad probably felt that the lively personal voice of Decoud would provide a welcome change of tone.

The method also contributes to the effect of immediacy, as we can see by comparing the treatment of the riot here with that in the two previous accounts at the beginning of the book. The first of these earlier accounts is given in the retrospective narrative of Captain Mitchell, and is distanced by the ironic treatment of the narrator and by the passage of time. The second account is presented by the omniscient author, with Giorgio Viola as the center of consciousness. It is put at a distance by the emotional remoteness of Viola and by the author's post of observation: "The movements of the animated scene were like the passages of a violent game played upon the plain by dwarfs mounted and on foot, yelling with tiny throats, under the mountain that seemed a colossal embodiment of silence" (p.27).

With Decoud we are brought into the action, and see it through the eyes of a participant. This shifting of distance in the treatment of the riots, which is part of the aesthetic pattern of the book, is functional in giving shape to the "tragic comedy." It is analogous to Decoud's own movement from detached amusement to life-and-death involvement. The immediacy of Decoud's first-person narration is important in creating this effect. The narration also

brings us close to Decoud himself, as well as to the action which he recounts. It has something of the effect of a prolonged inside view, and so increases sympathy.

Decoud is an observer and commentator as well as a narrator, and so the question of his reliability arises. Are we to take his judgments of the Goulds and Nostromo as those of the author? We should notice that the letter is not an isolated document. The author is present, making an occasional comment. He begins with a reference to "what Decoud would have called his sane materialism." Later he shows him beside the picture of Garibaldi. "The highly coloured lithograph of the faithful hero seemed to look dimly, in the light of one candle, at the man with no faith in anything except the truth of his own sensations" (p.229). How much irony is directed against Decoud as he unconsciously reveals himself in his judgments, and how much is directed against Gould as Decoud reveals things about him which Gould does not know? Certainly there is a considerable difference in tone between what Decoud says about Gould and what the author in his own voice tells us.¹² And yet, as Dr. Monygham says later, "This Decoud, I see, is a persuasive young beggar" (p. 317). The lively intelligence of Decoud's comments and the sympathy generated by the inside view help to persuade the reader to accept his judgments. Eloise Hay is probably right in suggesting that the tragedy of the

¹² Compare, for example, the author's statement, p.142, and Decoud's, p.239.

Goulds is vitiated by Decoud more than Conrad intended.¹³

If, however, we look at the matter in a slightly different way, we can see that Conrad needs a sceptical observer not just to expose the self-deceptions of the characters observed but to reveal something about the nature of human existence. At a certain abstract level the book is an argument without conclusion about the nature of illusion, that is, of the individual's beliefs about himself in relation to the world, his "sentiment of existence," as Conrad says in the Author's Note to Lord Jim. The sceptic's voice takes one side of the argument, the side that insists on the illusoriness and self-deception of this "sentiment of existence"; the author, on the other side, devotes himself to rendering the experience of human beings for whom this illusion is the most urgent necessity of life.

Decoud is important not only as a personal narrator and as the voice of the sceptic but also as an actor. The passage, considered as part of Decoud's action, depends partly upon his self-revelation in the letter and partly upon the situation in which the letter is being written, with the omniscient author setting the scene and making occasional comments. The writing of the letter is in itself a symbolic action, not simply a narrative device, a useful convention in fact somewhat improbable under the circumstances. The author comments on Decoud's motives with a generalization:

¹³ Op.cit., p.186

In the most sceptical heart there lurks at such moments, when the chances of existence are involved, a desire to leave a correct impression of the feelings, like a light by which the action may be seen when personality is gone, gone where no light of investigation can ever reach the truth which every death takes out of the world. (p. 230)

The setting of the action is important. The effect seems to be to emphasize the division within Decoud. His account in the letter of his thundering denunciation of the frightened Ribierists, his own impassioned defence of his plan of action, and his love of Antonia are in sharp contrast to the images of darkness, loneliness, and death in his surroundings and to the action of the Violas going on in the background. The situation culminates in the final words of his letter and what follows it:

"And I, the only other with them the Violas don't know whether to count myself with the living or with the dead....The whole thing, the house, the dark night, the silent children in this dim room, my very presence here--all this is life, must be life, since it is so much like a dream."

With the writing of the last line there came to Decoud a moment of sudden and complete oblivion. He swayed over the table as if struck by a bullet.
(p.249)

Once more we have a preparation for the final dissolution of Decoud's personality and his suicide. The contents of the letter, however, and the act of writing the letter represents a contrary impulse, the impulse towards self-preservation and life.

Following Decoud's letter, nearly halfway through the book, there is a short scene giving the first close view of Nostromo. The relationship between Nostromo and Teresa,

shown first early in the book, now becomes an important factor in the transformation of Nostromo's identity. The scene is dramatic in the sense that it presents a conflict which results in a change of condition for Nostromo. It shows an early stage in the destruction of his established role, a process already suggested in Decoud's narrative, and introduces elements important in determining the role which he will later assume.

The scene is also dramatic in the sense that the change is presented more by showing than telling. Although the method of omniscience is used, there is not very much direct authorial analysis of Nostromo. Instead, the scene begins with a picture of him on the stairway, goes on to reproduce his speech, and ends with another picture of him as he leaves. At the beginning he goes up the narrow staircase, brightly lighted from the sickroom above. There is a physical description of the magnificent capataz de cargadores in his check shirt, like "a Mediterranean sailor just come ashore from some wine or fruit-laden felucca." "The capataz had a red sash wound many times round his waist, and a heavy silver ring on the forefinger of the hand he raised to give a twist to his moustache" (p.252). He says to Teresa, "It concerns me to keep on being what I am: every day alike" (p.253), and he continues to defend himself against her attacks. At the end of the scene, however, after he has refused to get a priest because he must save the silver, Teresa makes her ominous prophecy: "Your

folly shall betray you into poverty, misery, starvation. The very leperos shall laugh at you--the great Capataz." The scene concludes:

Nostromo stood for a time as if struck dumb. She never looked at him. A self-confident, mirthless smile passed quickly from his lips, and then he backed away. His disregarded figure sank down beyond the doorway. He descended the stair backwards, with the usual sense of having been somehow baffled by this woman's disparagement of this reputation he had obtained and desired to keep. (p.257)

Although there are some brief glimpses into Nostromo's mind, Teresa is generally the center of consciousness. The scene is interrupted by a digression which gives us some facts of Nostromo's background, restricted to what Teresa has known and felt about him. It is not an attempt to dramatize her consciousness, but a history of her feelings about the relationship, which are interpreted by the author. It brings us close enough to Teresa, however, to arouse sympathy for her. The total effect of this scene is quite different from that of the earlier scene, which presented the same relationship in a comic way. The fact that Teresa is dying gives this scene a tragic aspect, but perhaps not less important is the fact that we have something of an inside view of a suffering human being.

In spite of the increased sympathy for Teresa, however, the digression also prepares the reader to accept with some sympathy Nostromo's defence of himself when he gives his own side of the story. Teresa is a much less damaging observer than Decoud, because she is much more distinctly differentiated from the author, and her observations are clearly

limited by her own needs. Although there is no comment, she is revealed as being something besides the voice of practical common sense, correctly pointing out to Nostromo the misconceptions on which his life is based. She is also a Terrible Mother figure who would devour him, and from whom he must escape to preserve his identity. Her view is contrasted with that of old Giorgio. "'A man ought not to be tame,' he used to tell her, quoting the Spanish proverb in defence of the splendid Capataz" (p.254). Nostromo later quotes him: "A good name, Giorgio says, is a treasure, Padrona" (p.257).

Shortly afterwards in time (sixty pages later in the book) Dr. Monygham makes a speech which throws a new light on the whole relationship:

"You know," went on the doctor hesitantly, "women are so very unaccountable in every position, and at all times of life, that I thought sometimes she was in a way--don't you see?--in love with him--the CapatazI may have given a wrong name to some strong sentiment for him on her part, to an unreasonable and simple attitude a woman is apt to take up emotionally towards a man....[And of Giorgio] a remarkable chap enough. A rugged and dreamy character, living in the republicanism of his young days as if in a cloud. He has encouraged much of the Capataz's unfounded nonsense--the high-strung, exalted old beggar!" (pp.319-320)

Within the scene, however, the main function of the handling of point of view is not so much to show the discrepancy between one's own view of himself and other people's views as to heighten the intensity of Nostromo's emotional position and to make more credible the outcome of his story.

The end of Part Two, including half of Chapter 7 and all of Chapter 8, makes a single continuous scene, interrupted only by the account of Hirsch's activities, given to explain his presence in the lighter, and the flashback about Sotillo. This very long scene occurs precisely in the middle of the book, and is central not only in position but in the emotional effect of the whole novel. It serves some realistic and structural purposes, but it is given a position of prominence far beyond that required either by the plot or by the demands of simple psychological realism. The external action is that of an adventure story, but the effect is that of a dream, the anxiety-dream or symbolic expression of Angst, a recognition of the ironic fact that "existence itself is tragic....Every new birth provokes the return of an avenging death."¹⁴

The passage has many elements which obviously have some other value than a literal one. The becalmed boat is a common symbol not only in Conrad but elsewhere in literature. The total darkness, one of the most widespread of archetypal images, has been defined in the first chapter of Nostromo. The blackness of the Gulf, we are told, is proverbial among seamen. "The eye of God himself--they add with grim profanity--could not find out what work a man's hand is doing in there; and you would be free to call the devil to your aid with impunity if even his malice were not defeated by such a blind darkness" (p.7). The steamer is the demonic leviathan

¹⁴ Frye, op.cit., p.213.

discussed by Frye. Hirsch, dragged out of the dark hole under the halfdeck, given water to drink by Decoud in a communion rite, carried off screaming into the darkness, is perhaps a ritual scapegoat; he certainly has an imaginative value beyond his literal function. Decoud is abandoned alone on the island, an archetypal symbol of isolation, and Nostromo, sinking the lighter, plunges into the sea in a symbolic suicide, a casting off of his old self. The silver takes on mythical values suggested only slightly in connection with the mine as a public force. The whole episode becomes the archetypal "night sea journey," a traditional initiation ritual or ordeal of the hero.

All the symbolic and ritual patterns contribute to the dream, but what gives the whole action its peculiar ironic coloring is the element of incongruity. The Hirsch story is a grotesque mixture of comedy and horror, coming to a ludicrous conclusion within the scene. Decoud, like his later fellow-sceptic Axel Heyst, says, "Nobody can find us now"; but the steamer bears down through the darkness on the little lighter as if directed by destiny, while aboard it there is a demonstration of unprincipled human idiocy presented in terms of complete farce.

Part of the dream-like effect of the scene is due to the slow tempo, which is related to the use of point of view. The variations in tempo throughout the book are part of the artistic pattern, as well as a means of controlling the emphasis on the various parts. The scene in the lighter devotes some forty pages to a period of perhaps seven hours,

in contrast to the narrative passage at the beginning of Chapter 2 of Part Two, in which the events of a year and a half are disposed of in two pages. The "slow-down" is achieved partly by imagistic details, which suggest immobility, but there are other devices. One of these is to give Nostromo a number of long speeches in direct discourse, which requires much more reading time in relation to the amount of information conveyed than does summary. There is not much direct speech by Decoud, but his thoughts and states of mind are presented with an effect of minute-by-minute experience.

Another device is the use of what Ford calls "purposed longueurs," ¹⁵the digressions about Hirsch and Sotillo. As Decoud and Nostromo wait in the lighter for the steamer to pass, there is an abrupt switch to Sotillo, and a four-page account of his recent activities. This account, given by the omniscient author in a completely changed tone, consists partly of rapid summary, but it stops for passages of character analysis and for little static pictures. Then there is the little scene aboard the steamer. The effect is that when the narration returns to Decoud and Nostromo they seem to have been waiting for a very long time.

Although the lighter episode with its sequel on the island is a physical adventure, the chief stress is on the rendering of the emotional states of Decoud and Nostromo.

¹⁵ Joseph Conrad, p. 183.

The method is in general that of limited omniscience, with Decoud as the center of consciousness. He is both an actor and a third-person observer and narrator. Nostromo is presented chiefly by means of external speech and action and by Decoud's thoughts. The limitation of point of view to Decoud's thoughts is in itself a method of characterization, emphasizing the intellectual, introspective part of Decoud's nature as opposed to the active and unreflective Nostromo, shaken out of his usual self-possession. Restricting the point of view to that of an unsympathetic observer tends to reduce Nostromo, in spite of the fact that the omniscient author occasionally indicates the inadequacy of Decoud's judgments by explicit comments, such as "complacent superiority" and "incorrigible scepticism."

What we see dramatized objectively and interpreted more or less accurately by Decoud is the psychic crisis of Nostromo as he is forced to realize that his image of himself has been wrong. Two previous blows to his self-esteem have been dramatized just before this episode, in the scene with Teresa and in his brief encounter with the jeering doctor. The lighter scene is the culmination of his emotional upheaval as he realizes that he has misinterpreted his role; it is not that of the hero but that of the faithful giant, the wonderful servant who has just the abilities that his master needs ("a folktale commonplace").¹⁶ His reaction is a desperate resolution to carry out the mission at any cost,

¹⁶ Frye, op.cit., p. 197.

so that he can become a legendary hero among the people who do appreciate the magnitude of the exploit. To fail would be an utter disaster; it would make him nothing in his own eyes. This crisis is indicated partly by his unusual loquacity. There are many speeches, both in direct discourse and in summary, in which he reveals himself, and which are themselves significant symptoms. The author comments:

The usual characteristic quietness of the man was gone. It was not equal to the situation as he conceived it. Something deeper, something unsuspected by everyone, had come to the surface. (p.282)

He is trying to express feelings not clear even to himself, and he sees things not in clear analytical terms but in highly colored mythical terms.

Because Decoud is the center of consciousness, the methods of presenting his emotional states are different from those used for Nostromo. Decoud's mind is exposed almost continuously, by several different methods. The distinction between "telling" and "showing" applies to interior action as well as to visible action. There are a good many passages which are predominantly "telling" or narrative; that is, the omniscient author tends to summarize and explain the character's feelings, with or without comment. The account of Decoud's feeling of dissociation from reality near the beginning of the scene (p.262) is clearly of this kind. Decoud's feelings are described in the author's words, not his own, but there is no authorial comment. In other narrative passages, of which the following is an example, there is explicit comment and analysis.

The Capataz, extending his hand, put out the candle suddenly. It was to Decoud as if his companion had destroyed, by a single touch, the world of affairs, of loves, of revolution, where his complacent superiority analyzed fearlessly all motives and all passions, including his own.

He gasped a little. Decoud was affected by the novelty of his position. Intellectually self-confident, he suffered from being deprived of the only weapon he could use with effect. No intelligence could penetrate the darkness of the Placid Gulf. (p. 275)

The author's comments have the effect of changing the distance; they make the reader step back and judge Decoud.

The complete withdrawal of the author from the rendering of mental states, the extreme of "showing" rather than "telling", is accomplished by the stream-of-consciousness technique, which is not found in Conrad's work. There is, however, a passage in this scene which approaches it. As the steamer stops close to the lighter, "Decoud stood as if paralyzed; only his thoughts were wildly active"(p.277). There follows a series of pictures which flash through Decoud's mind, recollections of recent events in the development of the plan for separation. They are accompanied by brief descriptions of Decoud's present feelings, which rise to a pitch of furious anger against Charles Gould. The passage concludes, "Better perish a thousand times than owe your preservation to such people, he exclaimed mentally." Although the passage is in third-person past-tense narrative, it gives the impression of dramatizing Decoud's mental state without apparent authorial management, and is probably as close to stream-of-consciousness as anything in Conrad.

The passage has another function as well; Decoud is revealing his present mental state and is also serving as a third-person narrator. The passage provides some new factual information about past events, and also gives another view of a situation already discussed in Decoud's first-person narrative in the letter to his sister. In this case, the impressionist method gives us views of a situation not by two different people but by one person in two emotional states. The contrast in emotional tone between the letter, written with conscious organization, and this passage, which shows not organized thoughts but mental images and feelings, helps to reveal something of the divided nature of Decoud; it also heightens the effect of this dramatization of his feelings, and so increases reader sympathy for Decoud.

Another method of revealing Decoud's internal processes is the use of objective equivalents for his feeling. The darkness and stillness of the gulf, for example, are both the cause of his state of mind and a metaphor for it. Sometimes the relationship is explicitly analyzed, as it is in the passage about the candle quoted above. Sometimes the relationship is implicit; at the end of the scene, for example, Decoud, left alone on the island, calls out to Nostromo, whose voice replies confidently "out of the black wastes of sky and sea around the islet." "A slight swishing rustle showed that Nostromo was setting sail. It filled all at once with a sound as of a single loud drum tap. Decoud

went back to the ravine" (p.302). The sound is the culmination, so to speak, of the black wastes; it is the equivalent of his feeling of complete isolation and the accompanying loss of identity.

The chapter, and Part Two, end not with Decoud but with Nostromo. Decoud becomes "the man on the island," apparently abandoned by his creator to a "bizarre sense of unreality affecting the very ground upon which he walked" (p.302). The final page and a half show Nostromo alone, with no refracting observer. The passage consists of simple, straightforward narrative about Nostromo's actions and thoughts, with very little sign of the author's presence. The absence of irony, coupled with the fact that Nostromo has now regained his self-composure, helps to increase his stature enough to give some weight to the ending of the Part.

There is no attempt in the narrative to account for anything going on in Nostromo below the level of his conscious thoughts, which deal with practical affairs. There is, however, a suggestion in the image of the flat rock of Hermosa with the sea washing over its edges. There is a much more obvious symbolic value in the final lines, which show Nostromo casting off his old identity. He has knocked out the plug in the bottom of the lighter, and as he feels the water rising about his legs he leaps on to the taffrail.

There, upright and motionless, in his shirt and trousers only, he stood waiting. When he had felt her settle he sprung far away with a mighty splash.

At once he turned his head. The gloomy, clouded dawn from behind the mountains showed him on the smooth waters the upper corner of the sail, a dark wet triangle of canvas waving slightly to and fro. He saw it vanish, as if jerked under, and then struck out for the shore. (p.304)

CHAPTER III

PART THREE: THE LIGHTHOUSE

Over a third of Nostromo is devoted to a single period of twenty-four hours, beginning as the lighter leaves the wharf, in Chapter 7, Part Two, and ending as Nostromo returns to the inn the following midnight, in Chapter 9, Part Three. As the story leaves Decoud and Nostromo at the end of Part Two and returns to Sulaco, Dr. Monygham replaces Decoud as an important agent-observer. He sets out on a course of action which significantly alters the outcome of events for himself, for Sulaco, and for Nostromo; and he also reveals other characters and makes judgments, which may or may not be those of the author.

The beginning of Dr. Monygham's plot has occurred long before the fictional present of the novel. His sense of identity, the essential illusion of his own worth, has been destroyed. His limping gait, the result of his ankles having been broken during the torture by which he was eventually overcome, is a constant symbol of a psychological state. When his conception of himself as an English officer and a gentleman was shattered, he made "an ideal conception of his disgrace." Father Beron, the sadist to whom he finally succumbed in a betrayal of his friends, became his symbol of authority. The conditions of his release "seemed to bind him indissolubly to the land of Costaguana like an awful procedure of naturalization" (p.375). Dr. Monygham now is "the slave of a ghost" (p.374). The land

of Costaguana, as represented by Guzman Bento and Father Beron, is clearly domonic; Dr. Monygham has been initiated into hell, and when he returns to civilization after years of wandering in the twilight of the forest, he considers that his "outcast soul" is unfit to associate with people who know nothing of such depths, either in themselves or in the world. The common people think him a bit of a sorcerer, and find in him something uncanny; even the sophisticated Decoud refers to him lightly as "that sinister doctor in a check shirt" (p. 189). Mrs. Gould, who, as Don Pépé says, has been given by God "the power to look into the very breasts of people" (p.109), sees that the doctor has a good heart, whatever his "ideal conception" of himself, and she undertakes to tame him with kindness.

Nostromo, the man who has never failed, either in his own eyes or anyone else's, is to Dr. Monygham a reminder of his own inadequacy and disgrace; hence he attacks Nostromo in Viola's inn before the lighter scene. But the revolution, which puts Decoud, Gould, and Nostromo into situations which destroy their sense of their own value, gives Dr. Monygham an opportunity to save himself. When he sees the chance to redeem himself in his own eyes, by using his reputation for betrayal to save Mrs. Gould, who has become a new object of worship, he becomes a serious threat to Nostromo. He is successful in his ordeal, but his identity is still not entirely secure, although he no longer dreams of Father Beron; and at the end of the book

we see him, in one of the complex ironies that characterize the novel, defeated by Nostromo.

Dr. Monygham, who is the villain (or one of them) in Nostromo's plot, finally becomes a sympathetic protagonist in his own action, partly because of the manipulation of point of view. Unlike Decoud, who appears without preparation and takes over the central place in Part Two, Dr. Monygham is shown first early in Part One, and is occasionally brought into sight as a minor background figure until he is needed for further development in Part Three. The treatment of Dr. Monygham shows a moderate application of Ford's dictum:

The novel more or less gradually, more or less deviously lets you into the secrets of the characters of the men with whom it deals. Then, having got them in, it sets them finally to work....Some...will take almost the whole book to really get their characters in and will then dispose of the "action" with a chapter, a line, or even a word--or two.¹

Dr. Monygham first appears in an authorial description, chiefly external (pp.44-45). The passage seems at first reading to be included only as a transition from Nostromo to Mrs. Gould, and it is given a comic cast by the point of view of the young ladies of Sulaco; but it contains almost all the elements of his character developed throughout the book. It also hints at his function as an anti-Nostromo, both as a character whose qualities are opposite to those of Nostromo, and as an antagonist to Nostromo in the plot development. Until almost the end of Part Two, he is seen

¹ Joseph Conrad, pp. 179-180.

only through the eyes of casual and unsympathetic observers. He has the advantage, however, of being associated with Mrs. Gould, and of being shown briefly in his professional capacity. When he appears directly in the little encounter with Nostromo, there is no inside view or authorial comment. When he is finally presented at length in Chapter 1 of Part Three, the view is much closer, but it is colored by the feelings of the engineer. There is a fairly long authorial account of his past, perhaps as it might have been known by hearsay to the engineer. He reveals himself in his speeches, however, as an observer to be reckoned with. In the scenes in the custom house, he is seen through the eyes first of Mitchell and then of Sotillo; in both cases sympathy is aroused for the doctor by the contrast between him and his observers, although the reader is given no insight into the nature of the action on which he is now launched.

Finally, in Chapter 4, in which Gould is really the center of interest, the background of Dr. Monygham is thoroughly presented in six pages of narrative and analysis. The passage moves back and forth between a description of his present-time habitual memories and dreams and a narrative account of the horrors he endured in prison. The author is plainly in control, even stopping for a little essay on the subject of cruelty in man's history and maintaining a faint note of irony; but the passage, vivid in detail and compassionate in tone, gives the effect of an

inside view deeper and more prolonged than that given for any other character in the book, and so establishes Dr. Monygham as a character deserving sympathy, if not complete respect.

Dr. Monygham as an observer is in part a replacement for the sceptical voice of Decoud. His scepticism, however, is not merely "a pose of disabused intelligence," as the author says of Decoud, but a response to a devastating reality. He can see deeper into people because of his own suffering, and because his work as a doctor requires him to consider them as individuals. Nevertheless, he is by no means a purely disinterested observer; his own emotional needs are much too strong, and his "ideal conception of his own disgrace" distorts his judgment.

Chapter 1 of Part Three is the most extreme example in the book of the use of characters for interpretation. After an introductory paragraph by the author, containing some quiet irony linking foreign interference and material progress, the whole chapter is a continuous scene, interrupted by a digression about Dr. Monygham's past as it is known to the Europeans of Sulaco. The scene has no function in the plot. It is an interlude, a quiet passage coming after the high tension at the end of Part Two, and giving Part Three a point from which to rise. It shows a new method of narration and commentary, bringing together two observers to recount events, analyze other characters, and comment on Costaguana affairs and on life. The engineer-in-chief has

appeared before in brief glimpses at the Goulds', laughing and competent. Tillyard points out that the real preparation for his appearance in this scene is made early in the book, in Chapter 5 of Part One. There, in a fully-developed short scene, quite out of the narrative line of the book, the engineer is presented with Sir John at the railway survey camp at the summit of the pass through the mountains. The earlier scene, probably intended primarily to give a new angle of vision for seeing Costaguana and to provide an impressionistic introduction for the Goulds, also establishes the chief engineer as a reliable observer. As Tillyard remarks, the engineer, unlike Sir John, "had listened to the 'inaudible strain sung by the sunset'."²

The scene in Part Three carries on in Viola's inn from a point not long after Nostromo has gone to the wharf, leaving Dr. Monygham at the inn. As was the case during Decoud's letter writing, there are occasional reminders of the private tragedy going on upstairs, where Mrs. Viola lies dying, attended by her husband. Dr. Monygham is joined by the engineer and Gould, returning from the loading of the silver. The relationship of each of them to the public situation of Costaguana is made clear. The author says of the engineer: "Sulaco, for him, was a railway station, a terminus, workshops, a great accumulation of stores. As against the mob the railway defended its property, but politically the railway was neutral" (p.309).

² The Epic Strain in the English Novel, p. 144.

Later the engineer says, "I think the railway has done pretty well by its friends, without compromising itself hopelessly. Now the parties must be left to themselves" (p. 309).

"Costaguana for the Costaguaneros," interjected the doctor, sardonically. "It is a fine country, and they have raised a fine crop of hates, vengeance, murder, and rapine--those sons of the country."

"Well, I am one of them," Charles Gould's voice sounded, calmly, "and I must be going on to see to my own crop of troubles." (p. 310)

After Gould leaves, the point of view is restricted to that of the engineer; his thoughts are summarized. The view of Dr. Monygham is apparently external; the nature of his thoughts is to be inferred from his actions, manner of speaking, physical description, and an occasional associated image.

The engineer acts as the chief narrator. Part of his practical narrative function is to give the first really lucid account in the book of the political developments and of Decoud's plan, although as commentator he says, "Everything merely rational fails in this country," and says of Decoud's plan, "It sounds like a comic fairy tale--and behold, it may come off, because it is true to the very spirit of the country" (p. 315).

The remark about Decoud's plan as "a comic fairy tale" illustrates a kind of irony made possible by this use of observers. The whole long, highly-charged lighter scene preceding this chapter has rendered the desperate emotional involvement of Nostromo with the silver project; simultan-

eously in the scene in the inn the engineer remarks:
 "As a man, don't you know, Gould, Decoud, and myself judged that it didn't matter in the least who went. Any boatman would have done just as well. Pray, what could a thief do with such a lot of ingots?" (p.320). The irony of the discrepancy between Nostromo's view of himself and the engineer's view is given an extra little twist by the ironic foreshadowing in the engineer's rhetorical question.

When the Doctor speaks of Nostromo's "confounded nonsense", the engineer says, "I found the Capataz always a very shrewd and sensible fellow, absolutely fearless, and remarkably useful. A perfect handy man" (p.320). This is the "betrayal" which we have seen Nostromo dimly recognizing.

Dr. Monygham, not yet launched on his own enterprise, recognizes much more clearly than the engineer the existence of Nostromo as an imaginative human being, and analyzes his relationship with Teresa, which is important in Nostromo's action; but when the doctor undertakes the quest for his own illusion of identity, Nostromo becomes only an object to be used.

Almost the whole scene is in dialogue, but it is not dramatic in the sense of presenting a conflict resulting in a change of condition for a character involved in it. Although there is a great deal of disagreement, with the two men taking radically different positions on all the subjects discussed, which include most of the characters

and issues in the book, there is no real meeting of minds, and hence no progression. Guerard selects this chapter to illustrate the "amateurish and clumsy" shifting of point of view which is evidence of the general deterioration of the latter part of the book. He makes a specific analysis of the first part of the chapter, and finds ten shifts within five pages, with no reason except inadvertence or convenience to explain them.³ His criticism seems both to exaggerate the actual shifting and to insist too much on the importance of strictly limited omniscience, which is in fact not typical of Conrad's methods in third-person narration. The weaknesses, if they are such, do not lie in the specific matter of point of view, in a limited sense; they lie rather in the somewhat obvious presence of what Robert Liddell calls "summary badly disguised as scene,"⁴ and in the fact that the scene, apart from the summary, is essentially static. If we expect it to lead to some conclusive statement which we can take as the author's, we shall be disappointed.

Although the scene has no great dramatic interest, it is very interesting as comment, inconclusive though it may be. The critical interchange in regard to the book as a whole is probably the passage which follows the engineer's

³ Conrad the Novelist, pp. 207-208.

⁴ Robert Liddell, Some Principles of Fiction (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1953), p. 55.

apparently accurate analysis of Gould and Holroyd. He concludes:

"Upon my word, doctor, things seem to be worth nothing by what they are in themselves. I begin to believe that the only solid thing about them is the spiritual activity which everyone discovers in his own form of activity--"

"Bah!" interrupted the doctor, without stopping for an instant the idle swinging movement of his legs. "Self-flattery. Food for the vanity which makes the world go round." (p.318)

The chapter is clearly not an illustration of Ford's prescription of the method to be used by an author with a "yearning to amend the human race."

You must invent, justify, and set going in your novel a character who can convincingly express your views. If you are a gentleman you will also invent, justify, and set going characters to express views opposite to those you hold.⁵

The function of the scene seems to be to present two tenable but opposed interpretations, with no guidance by the author as to which, if either, is the correct one. The engineer is not Captain Mitchell; there is no suggestion of deflating irony in his treatment. The interpolated account of Dr. Monygham's past does little to establish him as an author's spokesman, but he is accredited by his sympathy for Mrs. Viola and by his confession of his own limitations. He says to the engineer:

"I put no spiritual value into my desires, or my opinions, or my actions. They have not enough vastness to give me room for self-flattery. Look, for instance, I should certainly have liked to ease the last moments of that poor woman [Mrs. Viola]. And I can't. It's impossible. Have you met the impossible

5 Joseph Conrad, p. 209.

face to face--or have you, the Napoleon of railways, no such word in your dictionary?" (p.318)

The engineer, as Tillyard points out, has never known failure. We may notice his "well-shaped legs in cycling stockings" (p.310) in contrast to the doctor's crippled ankles. The engineer makes no direct reply to the doctor's question. "'Is she bound to have a very bad time of it?' asked the chief engineer, with humane concern."

The final meaning of the scene emerging from the impressionist use of point of view seems to be the impossibility of certainty, the continual frustration of what Conrad calls in a different connection "the desire for finality, for which our hearts yearn with a longing greater than the longing for the loaves and fishes of this earth" (Notes on Life and Letters, p. 18).

Nostromo's struggle is the major concern of the last hundred pages of the book. Because so many other actions intervene between the various presentations of Nostromo, and because in the two longest presentations (the lighter scene and the custom house scene) the interest is divided between Nostromo and another character, one tends to feel that Nostromo is almost immediately corrupted by his first contact with the silver, which occurs in Chapter 7 of Part Two. In fact, however, Conrad takes considerable pains to develop the long and agonizing struggle as Nostromo works out his plot, briefly summarized in Mitchell's cliché at the end of Part One "...and to my mind he has never been

the same man since." The transformation from Nostromo to Captain Fidanza (with, as Conrad says in the Note, "the knowledge of his moral ruin locked up in his breast") involves a succession of crises. The first of these has already been presented at the end of Part Two, as Nostromo sinks the lighter and plunges into the sea to begin his long swim to shore. This symbolic suicide indicates in Burke's terms the casting off of his old self, the Nostromo of the blancos, and is the beginning of a radical transformation of identity.

After a hundred pages filled with the activities of the people in Sulaco, of whom Nostromo is no longer a part, he reappears at the end of Chapter 7, Part Three, as he awakens from a long sleep. The whole death-rebirth analogy is made explicit in the last paragraph of Chapter 7 and the first paragraphs of Chapter 8. Conrad devotes all of Chapter 8 and most of Chapter 9, nearly a quarter of Part Three, to the first series of psychic experiences in Nostromo's efforts to find a new identity to replace the one defined by his association with Mitchell and the blancos, which he has repudiated, and his related position as "capataz de cargadores," which events have made impossible. These chapters are the first sustained direct presentation of Nostromo's consciousness, without the refracting lens of an observer.

The first ten pages deal in detail with Nostromo's mental state as he is alone, first as he awakes in the ruined fort and tries to orient himself in his new relationship to the world as the sun goes down, and then as he returns in

the dark to the custom house. The passage could be considered scenic, insofar as it is a specific limited occasion, and involves some dramatic progression, but on the whole it gives the effect more of "telling" than of "showing." Features of the landscape are occasionally used as objective correlates of Nostromo's emotions, but the connection is usually made explicit. Nostromo, for example, looks across the harbor at the town of Sulaco.

[He saw] the cupolas, towers, and miradors rising above the trees, all dark, as if surrendered already to the night. The thought that it was no longer open to him to ride through the streets, recognized by everyone, great and little, as he used to do every evening on his way to play monte in the posada of the Mexican Domingo; or to sit in the place of honour, listening to songs and looking at dances, made it appear to him as a town that had no existence. (pp.414-415)

There is evidence of an effort to imagine and report Nostromo's mental processes seriously, but there is too much distance between the author and his subject for the development of real sympathy. One reason is that Nostromo, although highly imaginative, is inarticulate, and the author feels called upon to elucidate Nostromo's feelings in his own highly articulate style. This passage is an extreme example:

The renowned Capataz [an obvious verbal irony], his elbows on his knees and a fist dug into each cheek, laughed with self-derision, as he spat with disgust, straight out before him into the night. The confused and intimate impressions of universal dissolution which beset a subjective nature at any strong check to its ruling passion had a bitterness approaching that of death itself. (p.417)

The second sentence contains a generalization which implies a criticism of Nostromo, but on the whole the sentence seems

to be intended not as comment but as an explanation of what Nostromo feels. However, it clearly sets up a barrier between the character and the reader.

Another reason is that Nostromo, his customary role as public hero made impossible, now begins to see himself in a new romantic role. The world takes on an ominous, mythical color, which he expresses in romantic clichés. Conrad was perhaps seriously trying to imagine what such a man as Nostromo might think in such a situation, but the effect is that of parody. The author explicitly dissociates himself from Nostromo's new view of the world. It is a result of superstition, which is a characteristic of "the popular mind." The whole account of Nostromo's new interpretation of his place in the world is a mixture of narrative and comment. The following passage, for example, shows the relationship of the author to his subject. Nostromo thinks of Teresa.

He wondered whether she was dead in her anger with him or still alive. As if in answer to this thought, half of remorse and half of hope, with a soft flutter and oblique flight, a big owl, whose appalling cry: "Ya-acabo! Ya-acabo! --it is finished; it is finished" --announces calamity and death in the popular belief, drifted vaguely like a large dark ball across his path. In the downfall of all the realities that made his force, he was affected by the superstition, and shuddered slightly. Signora Teresa must have died, then. It could mean nothing else. The cry of the ill-omened bird, the first sound he was to hear on his return, was a fitting welcome for his betrayed individuality. The unseen powers which he had offended by refusing to bring a priest to a dying woman were lifting up their voice against him. She was dead. With admirable and human consistency he referred everything to himself. (pp.418-419)

We can hardly feel that while Conrad was writing this account of Nostromo's psychic crisis, he actually thought of him as "nothing at all," as he said later;⁶ but on the whole there is not much evidence of an intention either to give him the stature or to develop the sympathy necessary for a real tragic effect.

The version which we have in the standard editions, however, shows more of such an intention than the earlier versions.⁷ The passage dealing with Nostromo after his awakening was revised between the first American edition, which is the text of the Modern Library edition, and the Collected edition, which has been followed by most subsequent editions. After the first edition Conrad removed two full pages of analysis and comment near the beginning of Chapter 8. The deleted pages give an account of the origins of Nostromo's vanity, relating it to his position as boatswain:

The capataz of the cargadores had been a good man on board ship. He had been a good foremast hand and a first-rate boatswain. From the conditions of sea-life that sort of excellence brings no prize but an exaggerated consciousness of one's value and the confidence of one's superiors.⁸

⁶ See above, p. 38.

⁷ The changes are discussed by Hay, p. 181 n., and by Roger L. Cox, "Conrad's Nostromo as Boatswain," MLN LXXIV (April 1959), 303-306.

⁸ Modern Library edition, p. 460.

The original passage contains a little flashback, comic in tone, about the grief and exasperation of the captain from whose ship *Nostromo* deserted upon his arrival in Sulaco, followed by an account of the development of his vanity in Sulaco, for which both Mitchell and Viola are blamed in unflattering terms. The whole passage is full of undisguised comment, tolerant but reductive, in which the author explicitly validates Decoud's judgments of *Nostromo*. In addition to this long excision Conrad made one or two other small changes reducing the emphasis on *Nostromo*'s naive simplicity. For example, in the standard edition there is this sentence: "The word [betrayed] had fixed itself tenaciously in his intelligence" (p. 419). In the first edition the final word is "unintelligence." Conrad also removed a fairly long digression about the two ships which *Nostromo* sees in the harbor, and the possibility of his escaping from Sulaco in one of them.

The changes result in a closer and more continuous account of *Nostromo*'s mental processes, with an increased intensity and seriousness, and a greater emphasis on his isolation. But the story is still in the ironic mode, in which, according to one of Frye's classifications, the hero is "inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity....This is still true when the reader feels that he is or might be in the same situation."⁹

⁹ Anatomy of Criticism, p. 140.

This first inside view of the solitary Nostromo differs somewhat from the second, the account at the end of Chapter 10 of his return to the Great Isabel, which will be discussed later.

After his lonely wanderings, Nostromo goes into the custom house. He and Dr. Monygham, each pursuing his separate course, literally run into each other in the dark, as the lighter and Sotillo's steamer had done the night before. One is reminded of Mitchell's explanation of the change in Nostromo: "That was no mistake. It was a fatality" (p.131). The question of the place of chance in the determination of human affairs arises; is what happens the working out of the inescapable consequences of human action for which the individual is responsible, or is it "a fatality"? It is a question which the book never answers.

The long struggle between Nostromo and the doctor goes on for nearly forty pages, interrupted by a flashback of some ten pages about Sotillo's activities of the day, to explain the presence of Hirsch's body. For Nostromo the scene brings the confirmation of his feeling of having gone out of existence. If Dr. Monygham had been able to show a real human interest in him, it would have "restored to him his personality--the only thing lost in that desperate affair. But the doctor, engrossed by a desperate adventure of his own, was terrible in the pursuit of his idea" (p.434). Dr. Monygham's engrossment confirms Nostromo's repudiation of the blancos and completes the destruction of his hero role.

There is thus a good deal of irony in Nostromo's saving the blancos by the most heroic feat of his career. Dr. Monygham, urging upon Nostromo the Barrios scheme, provides a means for him to carry out Teresa's dying command, by an action requiring the abandonment of Decoud and leading to Nostromo's possession of the treasure.

What Conrad had in mind in the development of Nostromo can probably be explained by his discussion of the development of Captain Whalley. George Blackwood's remark that "the story ["The End of the Tether"] is not fairly begun yet" prompted Conrad to a lengthy defence of his aims and methods.¹⁰ "I am long in my development," he wrote, "What of that?" In another letter, which has been mentioned earlier, he explained more fully "the long development" of "The End of the Tether." The early episodes are steps in the deterioration of Whalley's character, "signs of that fate we carry within us. A character like Whalley's cannot cease to be frank with impunity." But Whalley's actions have some justification in the external circumstances, so that pathos is established. Here is Conrad's summary of the development:

I indicate the progress of the shaking the character receives, and make it possible thus to by and by present the man as concealing blindness...and concealing the criminal wrecking of his ship, by his suicide. And always there is just that shadow, ghost of justification which should secure the sympathy of the reader.

I want to give you an idea how the figure works. Upon the episodes, after all, the effect of reality depends and as to me I depend upon the reader looking back upon the story as a whole.¹¹

¹⁰ Letters to Blackburn and Meldrum, p. 155.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 169.

For Nostromo the custom house scene is one more step in the progress of the shaking of the character, and Dr. Monygham's action provides the justification--probably more than just a shadow. "The signs of that fate we carry within us" have been indicated by the irony which he has received in previous scenes, a more deflating irony than is ever directed at Captain Whalley; but in the custom house episode there is a definite effort to win for him the sympathy of the reader.

The sympathy, however, is somewhat divided. Nostromo's is not the only story being told. The point of view, therefore, is that of complete authorial omniscience, with the author free to enter the minds of both men and to comment on their characters. The result is technically somewhat awkward, according to post-Jamesian standards. The continual shifting back and forth is confusing, and the reader cannot comfortably identify himself with either character. Within the general structure and intention of the novel, however, the method is clearly functional. The scene is the intersection of two lines in the counterpointed plot, of the stories of two men in both of whom we are expected to take an interest. The two characters, each working out his own problem, come into conflict. The goal of each man is by its very nature private. They can communicate with each other in the most fragmentary fashion, only insofar as it suits their individual purposes. The omniscient author, therefore, must reveal to the reader what each char-

acter must conceal from the other and even from himself, and provide explanation of motives which the characters themselves hardly understand. The use of point of view is related to the total meaning of the book; it dramatizes both the lack of self-recognition and the necessary isolation of each man as he seeks to find his place in the world and in his own eyes.

Guerard feels that Conrad's imagination became trapped in the custom house, and that his "imaginative concern with the death of Hirsch is obsessive, even sadistic."¹² It is certainly true that Conrad departs from the relatively sober although imaginative realism that has characterized most of the earlier parts of the book. Both the setting of the fictional present and the flashback about Sotillo and Hirsch serve realistic purposes, but they also contribute strongly to the atmosphere of the whole section.

Most of the long encounter between Dr. Monygham and Nostromo takes place in the dark, abandoned custom house. The setting is carefully developed, partly as a means of rendering Nostromo's experience of being displaced from the world, and partly as a symbolic representation of one view of man's attempt to create the world according to his own desire. "Ironic literature begins in realism and tends toward myth, its mythical patterns being as a rule more suggestive of the demonic than the apocalyptic," Frye tells us.¹³ The vast, bare, unfinished custom house with the

¹² Op.cit., p. 207 n.

¹³ Anatomy of Criticism, p. 140.

smouldering stairway and the drifting scraps of paper is an example, of Frye's archetypal demonic imagery; that is, of imagery traditionally used in the presentation of "the world that desire totally rejects," where buildings are "images of perverted or wasted work" and "society is held together by a kind of molecular tension of egos."¹⁴ The astonishing and dreadful apparition of Hirsch, which stands to Nostromo for his condition of being "nothing," is also part of this demonic vision.

The body of Hirsch as Nostromo sees it hanging "disregarded, forgotten, like a terrible example of neglect" (p.435) suggests, like many other things in the book, alternative interpretations. For Dr. Monygham, engrossed in his own plan, the inexplicable death of Hirsch is "part of the general atrocity of things." But for Nostromo, who by his sympathy for Hirsch's terror and suffering reveals himself in this particular episode as more humane than the doctor, Dr. Monygham has some moral responsibility for the fate of Hirsch. Nostromo says, "I am not such a fool as when I started. I have learned one thing since, and that is that you are a dangerous man" (p. 438). His observation is partly motivated by his feeling that the doctor is a devil tempting him to his own ruin; but, like Mitchell's "fatality" and the lure of the silver, it raises the question of man's control of his own destiny, a question which Nos-

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 147.

tromo, "giving form to the shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealized existence," cannot answer.

The first ten pages of Chapter 9, interrupting the lengthy scene between Nostromo and the doctor, present a flashback of the activities of Sotillo throughout the day, to explain to the reader the presence of Hirsch's body, which remains for the doctor and Nostromo a "gruesome enigma." This passage belongs in time with the concurrent actions of the day presented earlier in Part Three, but is included within Nostromo's story to add a particular effect. It treats Sotillo in terms of pure farce, including the ridiculous scene of the envoy of Fuentes and the joke (borrowed from Cunninghame Graham, Conrad acknowledges) about the "men of many teeth"; but the farce gradually takes on the aspect of complete nightmare, and the joke has a monstrous echo in the description of Hirsch's screaming mouth.

Conrad always publicly disclaimed any intention of deliberately shocking his readers; for example, in the Author's Note to The Secret Agent he says: "The thought of elaborating mere ugliness in order to shock, or even simply to surprise my readers by a change of front, has never entered my head" (p. viii). Probably he was quite sincere in his statement. The shock is included because it is part of his imaginative vision of the world. The whole Sotillo-Hirsch story is the work of what Beach calls Conrad's "grotesque imagination,

[which] fills his pages with monsters and vermin".¹⁵ It presents a symbolic representation not only of "modern frightfulness," but also of a view of something going on in man far below the conscious level.

We recall Robert Penn Warren's definition of Nos-tromo as an image of a world in which "man is precariously balanced between the black inward abyss of himself and the black outward abyss of nature." That earlier highly colored and symbolic scene, showing the lighter in the Gulf, helps to define "the black outward abyss of nature." The custom house scene with its interpolated story suggests the "black inward abyss" of man himself.

A remarkable departure from ordinary narrative method comes in the first half of Chapter 10, in which there is an abrupt shift in time and point of view. The shift does not come as a complete surprise; it has been prepared for by Mitchell's narrative early in Chapter 2, and again in Chapter 3 by a momentary shift in the author's post of observation in the course of an ordinary narrative summary: "In that letter Decoud's idea of the new Occidental state (whose flourishing and stable condition is a matter of common knowledge now) was for the first time made public" (p. 354). Chapter 10 deals with the immediate outcome of the revolution, events which occur some days after those

¹⁵ Joseph Warren Beach, The Twentieth-Century Novel: Studies in Technique (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1932), p. 339.

in the first nine chapters of Part Three, and which are the climax of the physical action of the book. Instead of being dramatized, however, these events are disposed of in the retrospective narration of Mitchell. In Mitchell's earlier reminiscences the time at which he speaks is not really established; the shift is made to give an effect of distance to the narration. Here, however, the time is well established, although the passage presents a habitual scene, not a single specific occasion. The effect of the long passage is due to the handling of both time and point of view. Most of the passage is in direct discourse by Mitchell, but the author is always present, recounting the movements of Mitchell and his "privileged captive," and commenting on Mitchell, who is "penetrated by the sense of the historical importance of men, events and buildings" (p.475), but not on Mitchell's stories and observations. The passage involves four sets of factors in juxtaposition: the conditions at the time at which Mitchell is speaking, when all the Ribierists seem to have achieved their ambitions and all the Monterists have been punished, and the Occidental Republic is the "treasure-house of the world"; the events of the revolution, with all the characters who were left in Chapter 9 at a peak of tension now disposed of in a few words by the comic Mitchell; the character of Mitchell and his bewildered listener; the omniscient author, who is continually deflating Mitchell. The result is a complex

irony, comic in effect but powerful enough that the passage colors the whole book as much as the entirely different lighter scene. The major ironies, insofar as they have a specific target, are directed against the Ribierists and the material interests in general.

This surprising shift in time and point of view recalls what Conrad said of his methods in Youth: "Out of the material of a boys' story I've made Youth by the force of the idea expressed in accordance with a strict conception of my method."¹⁶ The book is a story not of physical adventures but of psychic ones. The real crises, worthy of being dramatized, are emotional experiences, like the self-recognition of Charles Gould which runs through the earlier chapters of Part Three.

Some of the reasons for the shift are related to the form of the book. Conrad has enough material for several novels. Some of it must be radically foreshortened in the interests of "the one harmonious conception" which he sought. A full-scale rendering of all or even of several of the events economically summarized by Mitchell would have necessitated a length and intensity of treatment which would have basically altered the pattern of the whole book. Another consideration in the management of point of view and distance is the author's feeling for the rhythm of the composition. The comic voice of Mitchell is one of the recurrent elements in the pattern. It breaks off the long-

¹⁶ Letters to Blackwood and Meldrum, p. 154.

sustained intensity of Nostromo's dark night with a return to daylight, in accordance with what Conrad once spoke of as "my own theory of relief from gloom to ampleness" (LL II, 260).

Booth comments on one function of the kind of irony obtained by the use of an unreliable narrator. "The technique enables us to skirt the thrilling regions of melodrama without embarrassment. Breathing the heady airs of irony, we can ignore how close we have come to gothic fantasy."¹⁷ Nostromo's legendary ride, Charles Gould before a firing-squad being rescued by the miners, Dr. Monygham with a noose around his neck, saved by the nick-of-time arrival of Barrios, the pure "gothic fantasy" of the death of Sotillo and the major--all these things certainly approach the thrilling regions of melodrama. One is not surprised that Conrad backed off.

The backing off is in itself ironic, in the sense in which Frye uses the word when he speaks of the author's attitude to his work as an interest in "the dispassionate construction of a literary form." We have been concerned in this paper with the methods chosen by Conrad to "produce certain definite effects upon the emotions of his readers" (Last Essays, p. 132), effects which include sympathy for the character portrayed. But in Nostromo he seldom attempts to create the kind of sympathy produced in the reader by a prolonged identification with a single character. The

¹⁷ A Rhetoric of Fiction, p. 307.

abrupt shift in distance shows the ironic perception that there is always another way of looking at things, and it also shows the ironic detachment which can sacrifice ordinary human interest to the demands of the pattern and the organization of the whole book.

The second prolonged inside view of Nostromo alone is given in the account of his return to the Great Isabel to find Decoud gone and the four silver ingots missing. This scene immediately follows Mitchell's retrospective account of Nostromo's magnificent exploit which saved Sulaco from the Monterists, and of his visit to Mitchell after his return from the Great Isabel. Mitchell's account of his interview with Nostromo is full of minor ironies, or of what are seen after the representation of the Great Isabel episode to have been ironies, but the effect is to increase sympathy. Captain Mitchell, however comic and obtuse he may be, is on the whole a man of correct feelings, as far as his limited imagination allows, and his account of the outward signs of distress in Nostromo is useful in preparation for the Great Isabel scene.

Immediately after the prolonged shift in time and point of view in Mitchell's narration, the action returns to the main fictional present. Nostromo, rejecting Barrios, plunges into the gulf a second time, in preparation for taking on his new identity, founded on his possession of the silver.

In the presentation of this final stage in Nostromo's transformation of identity, the relationship between the author and his subject is not quite the same as that in the earlier presentation of Nostromo alone (Chapter 8), which was discussed above. In this second account there is much less comment, and the author takes much less care to dissociate himself from Nostromo's romantic view of the world. There is certainly some distance, shown, for example, in the paragraph presenting Nostromo, the incorrigible romantic egoist, as he assumes in his own eyes the role of the romantic outlaw, who has sold his soul to the devil:

He knew the part he had played himself. First a woman, then a man, abandoned each in their last extremity, for the sake of this accursed treasure, It was paid for by a soul lost and by a vanished life. The blank stillness of awe was succeeded by a gust of immense pride. There was no one in the world but Gian'Battista Fidanza, Capataz de Cargadores, the incorruptible and faithful Nostromo, to pay such a price. (p.502)

The passage is clearly assigned to Nostromo. But some of the external descriptions of Nostromo, which are obviously the author's, have something of the same romantic tone. "He sat down on the soft earth, unresisting, as if he had been chained to the treasure, his drawn-up legs clasped in his hands with an air of hopeless submission, like a slave set on guard" (p. 495).

Parts of the account are frankly mythic; for example, "the spirits of good and evil that hover about a forbidden treasure understood well that the silver of San Tomé was provided now with a faithful and lifelong slave" (p.501).

The mythic strain in this scene is of course not an entirely new element. It has been clearly prefigured in the first chapter of the novel, in the legend of the gringo ghosts. As early as Chapter 7 of Part Two, in the scenes with Teresa and Dr. Monygham, Nostromo begins to associate himself with the legend, and to feel the fatal attraction of the silver. The Great Isabel scene differs from the earlier ones chiefly in the apparently slight shift by which the author also begins to associate Nostromo with the legend and the ill-omened silver.

This new way of seeing Nostromo results in certain weaknesses. The point of this comment is not to suggest that the loss of distance, as compared to earlier passages, is in itself a fault. The shifting distance which is characteristic of the book, and which is to some extent a function of the handling of the point of view, is part of the ironic vision of a world in which final judgments are impossible, but the individual, in virtue of his feelings, matters--if only to himself. And certainly the point is not to suggest that Conrad should have produced a novel of documentary realism. But the reliance on myth and symbol seems to have led to, or have resulted from, a relaxation of Conrad's faithfulness to the individual truth of a specific character, and of his determination to make us "see." The scene presenting Nostromo's decision to "grow rich very slowly" is interrupted by a movement back in time to give an account of the last days of Decoud. This

interpolation points up the weakness of the Nostromo story. The extraordinary imaginative vigor of the narration about Decoud, presenting by a kind of poetic shorthand in a few pages what seem like all Decoud's feelings for eleven days, makes the account of Nostromo's ordeal seem shadowy indeed.

Another difficulty, perhaps more obviously related to point of view, arises from the mythic treatment of the silver. This treatment seems to run counter to the author's comment. An important link between the Nostromo story and the interpolated Decoud story is the reference to the spirits that guard the treasure. This link belies the author's direct explanation of the disintegration of Decoud's identity and his disappearance without a trace "in the immense indifference of things" (p.501). "The brilliant Costaguanero of the boulevards had died from solitude and want of faith in himself and others" (p. 496). Nostromo and Decoud are also linked by a pair of deliberately parallel authorial comments, which have nothing to do with the treasure, but which, taken together, sound like a statement of the dilemma particularly apparent to men of the ironic temper discussed by Chevalier. Decoud is "a victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the retribution meted out to intellectual audacity," and Nostromo is "a victim of the disenchanting vanity which is the reward of audacious action" (p. 501).

That Decoud dies "weighted by the bars of San Tomé silver" has realistic significance only as a factor in Nostromo's plot, not as a reflection of anything in Decoud's own life.

What actually links the two men is the experience of isolation and of seeing the world crumble as their conception of themselves in the world crumbles. Perhaps at some obscure archetypal level far below that of explicit comment, and in a highly ironic application, the silver ingots are associated with this experience. Because of their shape and material, the ingots may suggest a Jungian mandala symbol, representing psychic wholeness, which is "the treasure hard to attain." Conrad's conscious intention, however, was probably to make the silver "the pivot of all the events, moral and material, affecting the lives of everybody in the tale," (LL II, 296), perhaps for artistic reasons rather than didactic ones; and he carried out this intention in spite of the fact that it involved apparent contradiction of his own duly constituted spokesman, the impersonal narrator.

The slight but significant shift in the treatment of Nostromo, noticeable in the Great Isabel scene, continues in the last three chapters of the book, which show the working out of the results of Nostromo's decision to "grow rich very slowly." The ending of the book has been castigated by more than one critic, chiefly because of the love-affair between Nostromo and Giselle, which fails to meet two of Conrad's own requirements: "justification" or "inevitability," and "actuality." These final chapters, although they still occupy only about a tenth of the book, were significantly expanded after the serial publication of the novel.

Frederick R. Karl, who points out this fact, draws from it the conclusion that the brevity of the last part was not "part of a formal plan in which insufficient development was aesthetically necessary" as an ironic comment on the earlier part; "its insufficiency of ending, which at first may seem like design, is in reality an aesthetic failure."¹⁸ It is undoubtedly true that the final chapters seem somewhat thin in comparison with the great richness of most of the book, but they are certainly not without interest, and must be given further consideration.

Most of Chapter 11 is a continuous scene, which departs from present time as Dr. Monygham acts as narrator in regard to Nostromo and the Violas. The present action of the chapter culminates in Mrs. Gould's final recognition scene. The setting is the Goulds' beautiful secluded garden, carefully nurtured by servants, where nature is subdued to man's desire. Gardens are an archetypal image of romance, in which dreams come true. But into this garden come Antonia and Father Corbelàn, bringing the disturbing clash of disorder and revolution inseparable from patriotism in Costa-guana, and Dr. Monygham, functioning here as the "plain dealer" who insists upon telling hateful truths. In the action we recognize a suggestion of the outlines of the mythos of irony, a parody of the mythos of romance, as we see

¹⁸ A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad (New York: Noonday Press, 1960), p. 178.

the innocent heroine in her sheltered garden experiencing a devastating recognition of the failure of dreams, and almost overcome by a sense of isolation and despair. The author makes the comparison explicit: "Small and dainty, as if radiating a light of her own in the deep shade of the interlaced boughs, she resembled a good fairy, weary with a long career of well-doing, touched by the withering suspicion of the uselessness of her labours, the powerlessness of her magic" (p. 520).

Although Mrs. Gould is the person chiefly affected by the action, Dr. Monygham is the center of consciousness for most of the chapter. The scene consists largely of dialogue, direct or summarized, but there is some authorial analysis of the doctor's feelings. In the first part of the chapter there is a good deal of comic satire in the analysis of his feelings and the account of his actions. This, for example, is the account of his preparations to meet the Goulds:

He packed up his modest trunk with speed, with fury, with enthusiasm, and saw it carried out past the old porter at the gate of the Casa Gould with delight, with intoxication; then, as the hour approached, sitting alone in the great landau behind the white mules, a little sideways, his drawn-in face positively venomous with the effort of self-control, and holding a pair of new gloves in his left hand, he drove to the harbour. (p. 505)

Another passage a few pages later, discussing Dr. Monygham's attire, has a touch of the same comic tone. For all the main characters clothing is important not only in establishing the visual image but also in revealing character,

and for Dr. Monygham and Nostromo changes in clothing are associated with changes in identity. This is the author's comment on Dr. Monygham's post-revolutionary elegance:

The doctor's self-respect marked inwardly by the almost complete disappearance from his dreams of Father Beron, appeared visibly in what, by contrast with former carelessness, seemed an immoderate cult of personal appearance. Carried out within severe limits of form and colour, and in perpetual freshness, this change of apparel gave to Dr. Monygham an air at the same time professional and festive; while his gait and the unchanged crabbed character of his face acquired from it a startling force of incongruity. (p. 508)

Although the tone suggests amusement, the mention of Father Beron recalls the passage, discussed above, which describes Dr. Monygham's torture and imprisonment, and the account of his release, in which clothing plays an important part. Dr. Monygham is comic only on the surface.

Later, the author makes an unequivocal statement about him.

The doctor, with his back to Mrs. Gould, contemplated a flower bed away in the sunshine. People believed him scornful and soured. The truth of his nature consisted in his capacity for passion and in the sensitiveness of his temperament. What he lacked was the polished callousness of men of the world, the callousness from which springs an easy tolerance for oneself and others, the tolerance wide as poles asunder from true sympathy and human compassion. This want of callousness accounted for his sardonic turn of mind and his biting speeches. (p. 520)

Booth uses this passage to illustrate the value of reliable commentary:

Where are the dramatic devices that could economically give us the picture which Conrad, violating the principles which Ford attributes to him, gives us...this picture of the doctor, including as it does details that no one, not even the subject himself, could know?No reader could ever infer such an intricate judgment from the actions and speech of a man who has

deceived everyone around him. Yet the judgment springs from and is adequately supported by what is shown. The telling has here revealed to us an almost inaccessible but indispensable part of the dramatic object itself.¹⁹

This explicit direction of the reader's attitude towards Dr. Monygham is useful in validating him as an author's spokesman in the often-quoted passage about material interests and the anarchistic tyranny to which they lead, although the comment comes several pages after that speech. Looked at from the angle of this paper, however, the comment is of more value in establishing the complex irony in the contrast between Dr. Monygham and Nostromo, an irony which depends partly on the pathos of Dr. Monygham's defeat.

For a large part of the chapter, Dr. Monygham functions as a narrator-observer rather than an actor. He gives an outsider's account of Nostromo's activities since the establishment of the Occidental Republic. In spite of the "temperamental enmity" between the two men, already established, Dr. Monygham's view of Nostromo does not seem to be much distorted by his own personality. Dr. Monygham, unlike some of the other implicated narrators, does not entirely take over the narrative function; the events which he describes are recounted again by the omniscient author in Chapter 12.

The dialogue between Mrs. Gould and Dr. Monygham in Chapter 11, in which he gives his view of Nostromo's story, is a little awkward, because it seems unmotivated. Although it is really more probable than Decoud's letter to his sister,

¹⁹ A Rhetoric, p. 189.

it lacks the immediacy and the symbolic significance that make Decoud's letter more than a device to break up the narration and give a particular limited view of events.

The dialogue, however, has some practical values, in addition to that of simple variety given by the change of voice and point of view. Having two different accounts of the same series of events gives some effect of complexity, and perhaps helps to disguise the lack of substance in the second account. Another advantage is that, because Dr. Monygham's account gives the framework of the external events of Nostromo's life, the author can in the second account concentrate more exclusively on the inner events. He can at least attempt in Chapter 12 the prolonged inside view which Booth discusses as a means of developing sympathy.

Another point might be made about Dr. Monygham's story of the encounter between Linda and Ramirez, which seems to be designed to prepare for the ending of the book. If the final pages are to suggest the element of tragedy in Linda's story, it is necessary that she have stature of some kind. Dr. Monygham's eye-witness account is a tribute to the magnitude of her feelings, and so helps to prepare for the ending.

Perhaps Conrad also had in mind what Booth calls "that much abused old-fashioned beauty" of suspense.²⁰ Beach points out that the manipulation of point of view by serious

²⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

writers like James and Conrad was an application of techniques developed by the romancers in an effort to make implausible events convincing, and by the writers of "police tales" in the interests of mystery and suspense. James and Conrad used the techniques to establish psychological realism and to explore the mysteries of personality.²¹ But because of the relative thinness of the last part of the book, Dr. Monygham's dialogue seems to be partly a device for creating suspense on a fairly simple level.

The suspense element is obvious on a first reading. A second reading reveals the irony embodied in the method. Even on a first reading one is aware of a certain kind of dramatic irony: the reader knows the secret, which Dr. Monygham will never know, of Nostromo's decision to grow rich slowly, and of Dr. Monygham's unconscious part in that decision. The irony is heightened when the reader is aware that Dr. Monygham, not knowing of the corruption of the incorruptible capataz, is ignorant in the precise area where knowledge would give him most satisfaction.

A more important irony, apparent on a second reading, lies in the discrepancy between Nostromo's public and private lives. Dr. Monygham, in spite of his suspicions, can see only the public role, or roles: Captain Fidanza, at once a prosperous shipowner and the great man among the secret societies conspiring to reunite Costaguana and per-

²¹ Op. cit., pp.205-206.

haps to raise the country with the new cry of "the wealth for the people." But actually Nostromo is now playing three heroic roles: the public role as folk-hero, renowned throughout the land, scattering largesse with his old magnificent carelessness; the private role, with only himself as applauding audience, of the romantic satanic hero who stands outside society and who defies the fate which has singled him out as victim; and finally, and less convincingly, the role of the great romantic lover, which in itself involves duplicity.

In spite of the obvious ironies involved, the reluctant admiration of Dr. Monygham's narration seems even on a second reading to be not so much a demonstration of the deceptiveness of appearances as a tribute to Nostromo's practical success and his self-possession, an effect which heightens the pathos of the ruin which these very qualities enable him to conceal. Another contribution to the sympathetic effect concerns Mrs. Gould. Dr. Monygham speaks of what Nostromo has done for Ramirez. (The Nostromo-Ramirez relationship, we might note in passing, is another little ironic figure in the father-son pattern, as well as an evidence of Nostromo's power.) Dr. Monygham says, "And thus Mr. Ramirez, from a starving waif, becomes a man and the capataz of the Sulaco cargadores." "'Thanks to Nostromo,' said Mrs. Gould with warm approval" (p. 515). Mrs. Gould's approval, although it may be mistaken in details, is a means of winning sympathy. The comment here helps to prepare for the hospital scene in the last chapter,

in which the use of Mrs. Gould as reflector gives the effect of compassion needed to create sympathy, without the loss of authorial detachment.

The last chapter culminates in what Guerard calls "a fine grand-opera effect and the last crescendo sentence."²² It is interesting to compare two other comments on the final pages, both by very sympathetic critics. After quoting several passages to illustrate the poor quality of the writing in the last two chapters, especially in the love-passages, Tillyard says:

As a last example of inferior quality, I take the famous ending. It will not bear examination. Conrad asserts that Linda's cry of undying fidelity "was another of Nostromo's triumphs, the greatest, the most enviable, the most sinister of all." Can he really believe that? Was it a triumph at all for Nostromo to have won the heart of a not especially attractive, extremely possessive girl, deprived of all eligible male society, who had been nurtured on the idea of his being a hero from a very early age? And the "conquests of treasure and love", the words which end the book, cost Nostromo small effort, compared with a dozen of his other feats; they simply do not merit the supremely prominent place they are given.²³

R. P. Warren, on the other hand, sees in the last episode a mythical value, as part of a work in which Conrad attempted to create "a great, massive, multiphase symbol that would render his total vision of the world." He sees Linda's wild, faithful cry as a fable: "the passionate cry in the night that is a kind of triumph in the face of the

²² Op.cit., p.204.

²³ Op.cit., p.156.

immense indifference of things."²⁴ The two critics are not talking about precisely the same thing; Tillyard objects to the author's comment rather than to the action. It is clear, however, that the whole thing does not have the meaning for him that it does for Warren.

The archetypal approach seems to have some relevance in explaining the episodes and its effect. It is possible to see in the shape of the last chapter the outlines of the mythos of irony, a parody of the mythos of romance. The events represent the final struggle, ending in the death of the hero.²⁵ The ironies are obvious. The hero is Nostromo the thief, shot when he is "caught unawares by old Giorgio while stealing across the open towards the ravine to get some more silver" (p. 554). The real struggle comes later, Nostromo's unsuccessful struggle, witnessed by Mrs. Gould, to escape from the spell of his "miserable subjection" to the silver. The enemy is his father-figure, the upright Garibaldino, who kills son Gian'Battista because of a mistake which is due to "a touch of senile vanity" (p. 548). The hero dies, attended by "the pale photographer, small, frail, bloodthirsty, the hater of capitalists...huddled up on the stool, shock-headed, wildly hairy, like a hunchbacked monkey" (p. 562). The enemy dies alone about the same time, looking "from on

24 Nostromo, Modern Library ed., p. xxxv.

25 Frve, op.cit., p. 187.

high" through his glasses at the print of his old Bible, never knowing what he has done.

The hero is exalted by Linda Viola, to whom he is officially betrothed because Viola's mistake and his own fear have confounded his plan to cope with the threat of the lighthouse. This is an exaltation as ironic in its way as that of Decoud by Antonia in the Goulds' garden. (p. 509). To Nostromo alive, Linda's "undying passion" has stood for an odious threat. Like her mother in her possessive love, she would destroy his identity by swallowing him; for example, she called him Battistino "exactly with her mother's intonation. A gloom as of the grave covered Nostromo's heart" (p. 532). Like her father in her uprightness of character, Linda, the keeper of the light, would destroy Nostromo's secret identity based on the silver.

These observations do nothing either to account for such things as the pathos of Viola's death, or to show the ending as part of the moral pattern of the whole. They do, however, help to account for Conrad's choice of events and for the lack of realism. Although the events are melodramatic, they have a kind of inevitability due not to the logic of the individual plot of Nostromo nor to the motivation of realistic characters, but to the working out of the archetypal mythos of romance, in a context which fits it, as Frye says, "in unexpected ways."²⁶

²⁶ Ibid., p. 223.

If we attempt to explain the events of the final chapter in terms of Burke's suggestion about identity and symbols of authority, we can see that when Nostromo tries to form a new private identity in which father-figures have no place, he dies in the attempt. But the inadequate father-figures--and there are no others--fare no better. Mitchell, the spokesman for material progress, who of course is never a father-figure to be taken seriously by the reader, and whom Nostromo has rejected by the end of Part Two, has been withdrawn from the scene without dignity. Viola, the old Garibaldino, dies--a figure with some nobility and pathos but quite out of touch with reality. We see something of the same pattern elsewhere. Decoud dies, but so does Don José. Charles Gould undergoes symbolic castration, in the sterility, both physical and emotional, of his marriage, and in his recognition of his bondage. But his father, dead before the action begins, is treated with scant respect by the author. In the Nostromo story, however, there is another stage. The son without a father or a country, the romantic egoist, is finally exalted, however great the ironic qualifications of the exaltation.

Whatever the reasons for the novelist's choice of episodes, he still has to create what Conrad calls "the proper atmosphere of actuality" (Within the Tides, viii). The handling of point of view in the development of Linda works towards this end. If the final episode is to succeed

on anything but a completely unrealistic level, we must feel some pity for Linda as a living, suffering human being. The final chapter makes an attempt, perhaps too late, to achieve this effect. Linda has been briefly presented in an external view several times in Parts One and Two, as a fourteen-year-old girl at the time of the revolution. She is part of a recurrent picture which includes Signora Viola and the two girls, always contrasted, and always in some relationship with Nostromo. In Chapter 11 of Part Three we have Dr. Monygham's account of her despair. In Chapter 12 she is seen chiefly through the eyes of Nostromo, whose attitude towards her has been mentioned. Finally she becomes the central figure of a large part of Chapter 13. In the first part of the chapter there is an account of her side of the Nostromo affair, with an approach to a real inside view (p. 549). It can hardly be said that Linda is really "got in" as a human being, although she certainly makes more impression than Giselle; but the inside view early in the chapter has some value in creating sympathy, and giving some effect of individual human tragedy to the ending.

When the narrative returns at the end of the chapter to pick up the story of events on the island, the author adopts a somewhat different relationship to his material. There is a little glimpse into Viola's physical sensations and into Linda's feelings about him, both insights helping

to increase the pathos of Viola's death; but on the whole the author describes and narrates from a point of view outside the characters. The death of Viola, like the death of Nostromo, is presented by an entirely exterior view, but in Viola's case there is no human observer. The shifting in the author's post of observation emphasizes the element of isolation. It is also a formal device to withdraw the reader from identification with the characters and to throw the emphasis on the ending as a spectacle.

The ending of the book recalls the endings of Parts One and Two; all three function both as a way of giving shape to the novel and as an expression of the author's view of his material. Both Parts One and Two end with a bigger-than-life-size picture of Nostromo in a heroic posture. The first, which shows Nostromo in his public role as folk-hero, has a distinct touch of the mock-heroic. The second shows him alone at dawn in the Golfo Placido, in a significant event in his private life. The tone is neutral, and the picture, standing alone, has a weight suggesting tragedy. The "fine grand-opera flourish" at the end of the book combines the two effects.

We should notice, however, that the final action is not entirely a spectacle to be viewed by the reader. As Conrad reminds us in his discussion of Nostromo in a Personal Record(p. 100), there is an observer--Dr. Monygham, who has just expressed human pity for Linda. He is included

no doubt partly for the sake of "actuality," and partly for the sake of irony. The last paragraph begins: "Dr. Monygham, pulling round in the police galley, heard the name pass over his head. It was another of Nostromo's triumphs, the greatest, the most enviable, the most sinister of all." Tillyard asks, "Can Conrad really think this?" Is this the author's opinion, or is it perhaps Dr. Monygham's? In either case we may wonder just what Conrad intends us to understand by the word "sinister." The effect, however, seems to be not so much to stress Dr. Monygham's defeat, which he has already admitted (p. 561), as to heighten Nostromo's triumph. The "last crescendo sentence" is clearly the author's.

In that true cry of undying passion that seemed to ring aloud from Punta Mala to Azuera and away to the bright line of the horizon, overhung by a big white cloud shining like a mass of solid silver, the genius of the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores dominated the dark gulf containing his conquests of treasure and love. (p. 566)

The effect of the sentence obviously depends on the sound rather than the literal sense, and it is not clear how far it is intended as a serious final judgment. Although Conrad once admitted that the sentence might have been better without the word "silver," he thought well enough of the whole paragraph to quote much of it in his discussion of Nostromo in A Personal Record, not, however, without a suggestion of ironic intention in regard to Nostromo. The last paragraph, and the ending as a whole, show the dual vision of the ironic eye, expressed in terms of Conrad's

"theatrical imagination"; but the final effect is that of the triumph of Nostromo, "the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores," who, in spite of all the ironic qualifications, approaches the heroic in his fierce defence of his own romantic ego.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

A consideration of the plot-lines and the handling of point of view in Nostromo of course cannot begin to do justice to Conrad's attempt "to create a great, massive, multiphase symbol that would render his total vision of the world, his sense of individual destiny, his sense of man's place in nature, his sense of history and society."¹ The approach of this paper has little to say about some of the most admirable things in the book, the concreteness of the rendering of what Garnett called "the great mirage of Nostromo,"² or the novel's remarkable success in giving a sense of historical and social process, and of individuals interacting with society. This success is due largely to the richness of the creation of secondary and minor characters and to the complex treatment of time, which has been considered only as an aspect of point of view.

The approach taken here concerns itself very little with the relationship of the novel to objective reality, a relationship shown in a limited sense by Conrad's extraordinary achievement in carrying out his "ambition to render

¹ Warren, Modern Library ed., p.xxvii.

² Conrad's Prefaces to His Works, with an introductory essay by Edward Garnett (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1937), p. 20.

the spirit of an epoch in South America,"³ and in an extended sense by the creation in Nostromo of a microcosm of the western world. And the approach makes little attempt to find a coherent didactic pattern on any level. The "pattern of moral significances"⁴ which Leavis finds is certainly a strong element in the novel, but Ian Watt is right in saying that Conrad in his novels "does not bridge the gap from 'is' to 'ought'."⁵ The control of distance, which has been considered as an aspect of point of view, obviously has normative implications, but these implications do not lead to any conclusions likely to be helpful in a practical way.

For a novel of the scope and complexity of Nostromo, a full discussion even of plot and point of view is impossible. This paper has been chiefly concerned with seeing how the technical methods are used in relationship to the concept of irony. The plot has been examined in terms of the function of individual identity in an absurd society, or, put in a somewhat more specific way, the formation of identity in relationship to symbols of authority,

³ Richard Curle, The Last Twelve Years of Joseph Conrad, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1928), p. 85.

⁴ F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), p. 190.

⁵ "Story and Idea in Conrad's The Shadow-Line," in Modern British Fiction, ed. Mark Schorer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 134.

both private and public. There are many other possible ways of examining the theme, but this limited approach seems to cover many of the important concerns of the interwoven stories. The theme as it is worked out in Nostromo is essentially ironic. The novel presents two forces, both of which are presented with many ironic qualifications, engaged in a struggle which can have no outcome. Society is real and inescapable, but it is absurd in its failure to fill human desire. Individuality, "the ball and chain of selfhood,"⁶ as Conrad once called it, is likewise inescapable, but it is illusory and deceptive, and frequently destructive.

Arnold Kettle sees as "disastrously wrong" the tendency in criticism of Conrad "to associate him with the twentieth-century cult of isolation and despair, to make of him--so to speak--a sort of archetypal 'displaced person' with all the implications that such a status involves." This critical tendency does slight the fact, stressed by Kettle, that Conrad, "though his characters have an 'inwardness' in something of the way of Dostoievsky's or James' people, is yet concerned essentially with the real, material world."⁷ But it is in the density and the complex-

⁶ Letters of Joseph Conrad to Marguerite Poradowska, trans. and ed. John A. Gee and Paul J. Sturm (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), p. 72.

⁷ An Introduction to the English Novel, 2 vols. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, Harper and Brothers, 1960), II, 68.

ity of interests of the book as a whole that this concern is shown. The plot structure, examined by itself, is plainly seen to dramatize in the lives of its central characters the plight of the "displaced person"--displaced from the meaningless universe, from an unreasonable society, even from a community of two, and finally perhaps from himself. And yet, by the final irony, he goes on, always mistaken, often ridiculous, sometimes self-destructive, because "each man must have some temperamental sense by which to discover himself."⁸

A conventional plot, like that of Nostromo, must work itself out to a conclusion, however ambiguous its implications. In Nostromo society goes on unchanged, and individuals recognize the failure of their dreams or die, but the working out of the plot shows Conrad the ironist as in the end a romantic, "a belated and somber Romantic," as Wylie Sypher calls him.⁹ Everything is deeply qualified by irony, but finally it is Nostromo, the preposterous romantic egoist, avenging himself secretly against a society which has not valued him, whose name "dominates the dark gulf."

The concept of point of view has been given an interpretation broad enough to cover narrative method in general

⁸ Nostromo, Modern Library edition, p. 461. The sentence occurs in a passage deleted before the publication of the standard editions.

⁹ Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 60.

and to include the author's relationship to his material and the control of the reader's sympathy. Multiple narration and a shifting post of observation are by their nature ironic, as we have seen in Nostromo. The methods are used to direct irony against the characters in the book by revealing a variety of discrepancies between the actual situation and the characters' apprehension of it. They are also used to embody an ironic view of life, which sees the incongruity of man's longing for final truth in the face of what Camus calls "the unreasonable silence of the world,"¹⁰ and which sees the self as having no reality apart from the experience of the individual, who by his nature incongruously refuses to believe that he is "nothing, less than a shadow, more insignificant than a drop of water in the ocean, more fleeting than the illusion of a dream" (LL I, 215).

The use of point of view as a means of controlling sympathy is related to irony in other ways. Both implicated narrators and the author speaking in his own voice affect the distance and direct the reader's sympathy, determining whether the effect of any one character's story is chiefly that of reductive irony, or satire, or that of tragic irony. The total effect, whether satiric as in the case of Mitchell or tragic as in the case of Mrs. Gould, is the result

¹⁰ Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950), p. 29.

of a sustained attitude on the part of the author, so that the reader feels some certainty about the degree of sympathy which he is expected to feel. A slightly different aspect of irony is apparent when the author frequently shifts his attitude towards a character. In Nostromo there is no really sustained attitude towards any of the main characters except Mrs. Gould, whose part in the ironic pattern is different from that of the others. With Gould we approach the degree of sympathy required to give the effect of tragic irony, but it is impossible to overlook the large element of satire in his treatment. The shifting of the distance in the development of all the chief male characters, and of some of the minor ones like Don José, is not simply evidence of lack of control or uncertainty of tone. There may very well be some failure of execution in the treatment of Decoud, who perhaps wins more sympathy than was actually intended, and also in the treatment of Nostromo, who can hardly recover from the early satiric treatment to become the kind of tragic hero which the reader might prefer him to be, whatever Conrad may have intended. On the whole, however, the shifting distance is a deliberate and characteristic method, an essential part of the total irony of the "tragic comedy."

The method is disconcerting to a reader looking for ethical truths, but it is functional in presenting a world in which both subjective experience, however illusory, and

objective value-judgments, however insecure their basis, are facts. Chevalier in his discussion of the ironic temper makes a comment relevant to the shifting distance of Nostromo:

A generation that worships gods in which it no longer believes reveals a complex state of mind, an uncertain, subtle, intricate set of values. The ideals of goodness and wisdom and beauty had once been pursued for definite ends, which were related to the enjoyment and enhancement of life, both on earth and hereafter. The aging nineteenth century still pursued those ideals, while it argued over their meaning and purpose. It had lost, or thought it had lost, the old beliefs, but continued to live in accordance with the rules which those beliefs had generated. 11

Mrs. Gould, whose development provides an exception to the general method of shifting distance, is unequivocally established by direct authorial comment as an admirable character, tragically mistaken. Her part in the ironic pattern is to represent "the ideals of goodness and wisdom and beauty" of which Chevalier speaks, ideals still cherished by the author although their metaphysical frame of reference has been abandoned and their relevance to real life is in question. Opposed to her are the unequivocally bad people like Sotillo, presented as comic or grotesque. The chief male characters, in varying degrees, appear sometimes comic, sometimes tragic, in what Conrad calls "the changing lights giving varied effects of perspective." As Conrad says in a letter, "In human affairs the comic and the tragic jostle

each other at every step" (LL II, 217).

Chevalier's comments about the ironic temper in the age of Anatole France apply to much of Conrad's attitude towards life, especially as it is revealed in letters and non-fiction, and sometimes in the author's generalizations in the novels. Chevalier's comments are also relevant to the use of plot and point of view when they are considered as isolated elements. In the reader's experience, however, plot and point of view are part of a total effect. Chevalier's comments are inadequate to explain the effect of many of the scenes, which are colored by the dreams of "ce puissant rêveur" (A Personal Record, p.111), a description to which Conrad objected but which nevertheless has a large measure of truth. Conrad was influenced not only by contemporary French philosophical scepticism and literary theory and practice but also by the work of Dickens and Dostoevsky, and at a much deeper level by the Polish romanticism, both literary and political, of his childhood, and by the extraordinary conditions of his life.

Nostromo, like Conrad's other work, reflects the literary and philosophical beliefs which he expressed in an early letter, written in reply to a request for his opinion of a novel.

It speaks of life--but it has no more life than a catalogue. Everything in it is quite true and even obtrusively possible, but not a single episode, event, thought, word; not a single pang of joy or sorrow is inevitable....Everything is possible--but the note of truth is not in the possibility of things but in their

inevitableness. Inevitableness is the only certitude; it is the very essence of life--as it is of dreams. A picture of life is saved from failure by the merciless vividness of detail. Like a dream it must be startling, undeniable, absurd, and appalling. Like a dream it may be ludicrous or tragic and like a dream pitiless and inevitable; a thing monstrous or sweet from which you cannot escape. Our captivity within the incomprehensible logic of accident is the only fact of the universe. From that reality flows deception and inspiration, error and faith, egoism and sacrifice, love and hate. That truth fearlessly faced becomes an austere and trusted friend, a companion of victory or a giver of peace, while our struggles to escape from it--either through drink, or philanthropy, through a theory or through disbelief--make the comedy and drama of life. To produce a work of art a man must either know or feel that truth--even without knowing it. It must be the basis of every artistic endeavour. ¹²

The whole letter is interesting as an expression of an important part of Conrad's view of life and art. The point of particular interest here, however, is the comparison of the effect of fiction to that of a dream. Conrad is clearly not speaking of the dream of romance, although we may see elements of the dream of romance, qualified in a strangely ironic way, in the stories of Mrs. Gould and Nostromo. He means the kind of dream which makes Frye speak of the tendency toward demonic mythical patterns in the ironic mode. In Nostromo the long scenes in the lighter and the custom house, with their interpolated scenes, are examples of a picture of life which is like a dream, "startling, undeniable, absurd, and appalling."

The effect is due to the strength of Conrad's imagination, which presents mythic patterns with a "merciless vividness of detail" appropriate to the realistic situation

¹² Letter to T. Fisher Unwin, August 22, 1896. Facsimile in Hay, p. 77.

but not controlled by it, as we see in these night-time scenes. This imagination usually saves him from the sometimes facile and self-indulgent irony described by Chevalier, and suggests a sense of the void surrounding man and within him more familiar to us in the era of existentialist and absurdist writers than to Anatole France's generation.

Literature is ironic, as Frye defines it, not only because of the author's attitude to the world but also because of his attitude towards his work. "The ironic as such...seems to be simply the attitude of the poet as such, the dispassionate construction of a literary form, with all assertive elements implied or expressed, eliminated." Frye's definition calls attention to Conrad's interest in the novel as a work of art. The view of the novel as a self-contained artistic whole, which Conrad, under French influence, helped to foster in England, reflects the attitude of detachment which Chevalier tells us is the ironist's typical response to his perception of the incongruities of life. There are many other interests in Conrad's work besides the aesthetic one, but Ford is probably right when he says that he and Conrad saw "the Novel as a work of Art, capable of possessing a Form even as Sonnets or Sonatas possess Forms--that idea had only existed since 1850, and in the France of Flaubert."¹³

¹³ From Thus to Revisit, as reprinted in Discussions of the Novel, ed. Roger Sale (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1960), p. 53.

In Nostromo the plot structure and the handling of point of view are associated with a certain quality of abstractness that may well be called ironic in the sense used by Frye to describe the artist's interest in the "dispassionate construction of a literary form." This abstract quality is not a result of the author's making abstract philosophical generalizations nor is it due to a failure in concrete presentation. The practical causes probably lie in the nature of Conrad's sources, a few brief far-off memories and a number of travel books,¹⁴ which "provided the raw materials from which he built the edifice." There is none of the direct and precise rendering of experience that we find, for example, in The Nigger of the "Narcissus" or Typhoon, which implies a belief that the actual experience of individual human living is of value in itself. Nor is there the kind of transmuted actual experience, becoming symbolic and almost surrealist, that we see in the London of The Secret Agent. Conrad's powerful visual imagination creates a world with great solidity of specification, but everything exists for the sake of "the anxiously meditated end." Conrad describes something of the effect of the book when he speaks of his "two years' period of intense absorption in the task of writing that remote novel, 'Nostromo' with its far off Latin-American atmosphere...an intense creative

¹⁴ Baines, p. 297. He discussed the sources at some length, pp. 295-297, as does Hay, pp. 168-172.

effort on what I suppose will always remain my largest canvas" (The Secret Agent, p. ix).

The size of the canvas is in itself a factor in the remoteness of the novel. The scope and complexity of the work, in the number of characters, interests, and attitudes involved, impose a certain kind of distance, and the methods used to bring order out of the great wealth of material tend to throw the emphasis on the pattern of the composition. The complexity of the plot necessitates some abstraction. The characters who in Lord Jim would be analogues and observers take on in Nostromo an independent existence and work out their own plots at length, and there is no Marlow or Jim to provide a center. In order to "encompass all this in one harmonious conception" (Notes on Life and Letters, p. 7), as Conrad desires, he has to sacrifice something of another desire, to produce "human beings who will bleed to a prick."¹⁵ The characters are in a sense simplified.¹⁶ They undergo significant changes in the course of the book, but each of them is presented in terms of a small cluster of personality traits related to the central situation. Although each of them works out his own plot and involves the reader in his story, they are subordinated to the total pattern, both artistic and thematic,

¹⁵ Letters to Blackwood and Meldrum, p. 156.

¹⁶ Leavis, who praises Nostromo for its "rich and subtle but highly organized pattern," makes a similar point, but he seems to think it a weakness of the book that we cannot say what Conrad himself endorses.

insofar as these can be separated. The term "counter-point," as Crankshaw uses it, is derived from music. The analogy suggests the interest in abstract form which to some extent characterizes the structure and the total effect of the novel.

Like the counterpointed plot, the complex treatment of point of view contributes to the somewhat abstract effect of the book. Although most of the scenes have a good deal of "felt life," the reader is never allowed to identify himself for long with any of the characters, but is continually drawn away from what James calls "the case exposed" and brought back to the arrangement of the whole. This arrangement, like that of the plot, can be seen as related both to theme and to artistic pattern. Conrad seems to view the treatment of point of view in the second light in the best known of his infrequent comments on the subject.

The thought for effects is there all the same (often at the cost of mere directness of narrative), and can be detected in my unconventional grouping and perspective, which are purely temperamental and wherein almost all my "art" consists. This I suspect, has been the difficulty the critics felt in classifying it as romantic or realistic. Whereas, as a matter of fact, it is fluid, depending on grouping (sequence) which shifts, and on the changing lights giving varied effects of perspective. (LL II, 317)

The context indicates that Conrad is considering his work not as an expression of a view of life but as a self-contained artistic composition. All the shifts in narrative method and distance, which give Nostromo its remarkable fluidity, are parts of the formal beauty of the work. Once

a reader has found a way through what Beach mistakenly called "the well-nigh trackless forest"¹⁷ of Nostromo, he discovers in the pattern of the "unconventional grouping and perspective" an aesthetic pleasure which seems to have value in itself. Hewitt reminds us that Conrad's methods characterize his worst novels as well as his best, and certainly method has little importance apart from the worth of the material to which it is applied. In Nostromo, where the methods are used to give form to material of weight and significance, they provide a different kind of value from that which results from a prolonged identification with a single character or a single way of looking at the world.

The counterpointed plot and the treatment of point of view are important elements in making Nostromo the kind of novel it is. For all its relevance to objective reality, it is not an imitation of actual life, but, as Garnett called it, a great mirage, a world of its own, shaped and patterned by its creator, who said "I...have never sought in the written word anything else but a form of the Beautiful" (A Personal Record, p.xix). Nostromo does not offer us a consoling view of life, but it does offer the kind of satisfaction provided by what Burke calls the creation of "a frame of 'cosmos'" in "the areas of 'chaos'."¹⁸ The ironic vision offers us a world that

17 The Twentieth-Century Novel, p. 365.

18 Attitudes Toward History, p. 182.

desire rejects, a world in which, as Conrad says in an essay about Anatole France, "men are born in ignorance as in the house of an enemy," and in which "the evils are many and the remedies are few,...there is no universal panacea,...fatality is invincible,...there is an implacable menace of death in the triumph of the humanitarian idea" (Notes on Life and Letters, pp.33,38).

And yet, as Conrad also says:

There is nothing more profitable in the world for a man's soul than certain pleasures. A good book is a good action. It has more than the force of a good example. And if the moralist will say that it has less merit--let him....An author is not a monk. Yet a man who puts forth the secret of his imagination to the world accomplishes, as it were, a religious rite. (LL II, 89)

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