

## “This Town of Cowards and Talkers”: Communications of Community in Joseph Conrad’s *Nostramo*

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About half a century ago, F. R. Leavis, though appreciating *Nostramo*(1904) as “one of the great novels of the language”(Leavis.210), was puzzled by what he sensed as the lack of any reliable moral centre. He observed that almost all characters in the novel were, throughout the course of the plot, somehow displaced from the positions they had initially wished to take. The baffling absence of a unifying single consciousness ensued as a result. “All [Conrad’s] readers must”, Leavis therefore asserted, “have noticed how recurrent and important the theme of isolation is in his work”(Leavis.221). Even today, this remark still holds some truth for the works of Joseph Conrad. But strangely enough, Leavis neither fully explained the significance of the state of “isolation” nor dared to deepen his insight by exploring what conditioned this “isolation” in concrete. We might perhaps also start this argument, following Ian Watt, by replacing “the theme of isolation” with that of “alienation”. By this term, G. W. F. Hegel tries to describe the moderns’ inward feeling of estrangement, the existence of ineradicably wide rift between subjective, seemingly’ authentic ‘I’ and the objectified surface of the self in society, ‘me’. In Marx’s materialist explanation, human beings socially ‘realize’ themselves only through activities and labours, but in a society in which the commodity and market relation is dominant, individuals no longer control their own labour and thus “feel alienated from [their] work, and therefore from society and from [themselves]”(Watt.2.6).

But as Watt himself soon admits, Conrad, as a novelist from the turn of the century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, cannot be easily assimilated into the loose categories of ‘Hegelian’ or ‘Marxist’. In his novel, the embodied World-Spirit never marches triumphantly: marginalized dissidents hardly work efficiently enough to change the status quo in spite of their critical spirit against existing orders.<sup>(1)</sup> Their impassioned rhetoric increasingly seems mere insincerity, and what they can attain only is to exhibit their fruitless inertia, as in *The Secret Agent*(1907). At the worst, individuals, once relegated from social communication, undergo the dissolution of the self and end by committing suicide as Martin Decoud does in *Nostramo*. Thus, it seems premature, at least for this paper on *Nostramo*, to counter the overpowering sense of “alienation” with the act of redemptive “commitment”, despite Watt’s claim that the biographical Conrad finally chose to commit himself to “human solidarity”(Watt.2.17). Here, we cannot sidestep the questions as to *how* and *why* actually the characters in the novel try, or are allowed, to address themselves to something that is imagined to be worth addressing. Nor should we easily presuppose the autonomous motivation implied in the notion of “commitment”. For the autonomy and independence of any action is, I shall argue, the very thing that the novel calls into severe question.

In *Nostramo*, Conrad corrosively deconstructs the distinction between voluntary participation in reformative action and forced subjection to the process of exploitation. As Benita Parry concisely expresses, the text is a “chronicle of a society in transition from old colonialism to new

imperialism”(Parry.99). After the War of Independence from the Spanish colonial rule and the dark history of internecine struggles for power, what gives Costaguana a temporary peace and the potential to flourish is the resumed operation of the San Tome mine. Ironically, that is also the introduction of foreign powers (mainly England and the United States) taking the form of capital investment in the mine. This can appear as undoubtedly patriotic for José Avellanós, or as a treacherous cheating by deceptive foreigners to some called “Monterists”. The prime agent of the change, Charles Gould, does not disavow, despite his father’s last prohibition, the inheritance of the forced “Sulaco Concession”, maintaining his conviction that the abandoned mine is actually profitable. His over-emphasized “English” outlook and taciturnity help to convince others of the worth of his venture. By her genuine talent for hospitality, Emilia Gould manages to acquire some sort of ideological consent from such cautious personalities as Giorgio Viola, Dr Monygham, Decoud and even Nostromo. The text initially presents the co-operation of Charles and Emilia as an ideal combination of “the woman’s instinct of devotion and the man’s instinct of activity”(N.92) to execute the moral rehabilitation of the country through the economic venture. Up to the end of the novel, however, the married life of Charles and Emilia turns out to be barren, as the prosperity of the mine after the Monterist outrage appears, in her alienated vision, to be “hanging over the Campo, over the whole land, feared, hated, wealthy; more soulless than any tyrant, more pitiless and autocratic than the worst Government”(N.431).

In the process, we should notice the restless undermining of the supposed autonomy of the entire project. At first sight, Charles Gould cannot be accused of the lack of will or conscious intent in his activities. But the text tells, “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. For [Charles’] action, the mine was obviously the only field”(N.86). He is shown to be driven to action by bitter sorrow at his father’s absurd death rather than driving himself. It is only a consolatory illusion of autonomy, “the sense of mastery” which screens the actual sordidness of his subjection to the unruly Fates. Indeed, after convincing American plutocrats of the profitability of the silver mine, he momentarily muses that “[t]here is no going back” as if the proceedings were not his own. His vague remark to Emilia, “[a] man must work to some end”(N.90), sounds as if he were not sure of it.

Charles’ dislocated sense of subjectivity, with the vastness of the entire project that seems unstoppable once set in motion, somehow echoes Holroyd’s arrogant secular teleology:

“...Time itself has got to wait on the greatest country in the whole of God’s Universe. We shall be giving the word for everything: industry, trade, law, journalism, art, politics, and religion, from Cape Horn clear over to Smith’s Sound, and beyond, too, if anything worth taking holds of turns up at the North Pole. And then we shall have the leisure to take in hand the outlying island and continents of the earth. We shall run the world’s business whether the world likes it or not. The World can’t help it — and neither can we, I guess”(N.94-5).

Their freedom of action is soon subsumed under the design of pre-ordained closure whose totality is invisible, despite certain differences between the two; while Charles Gould confesses to repressed anxiety about his involvement in matters which may exceed his control, Holroyd rhetorically submerges his own responsible position in the commercial imperialism of which he

is certainly conscious. In part, we could take Charles' well-known phrase of "material interests" as a dispute against this mystified materialism. He declares,

"...What is wanted here is law, good faith, order, security. Anyone can declaim about these things, but I pit my faith to *material interests*. Only let the material interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist. That's how your money-making is justified here in the face of lawlessness and disorder. It is justified because the security which it demands must be shared with an oppressed people. A better justice will come after..."(N.100.my emphasis).

He means to assert a *Realpolitik* idea of order to rectify the corrupt history of the land, simultaneously pretending not to care "whether [Holroyd's] talk is the voice of destiny or simply a bit of clap-trap eloquence"(N.99) and trying to dismiss it only as a wayward fantasy.

Still, what Charles invokes here is merely the familiar principle of "the long tradition of [English] economic liberalism"(Delany.216). It believes in the autonomous, stabilizing power of capital expanding overseas without any help of the state military institutions. This conventional speculation, which Paul Delany traces back to Adam Smith's political economy and later Cobdenite liberalism, is soon revealed to be irrelevant confronting the realities in Costaguana. Facing the threat of the Monterists, Emilia Gould cannot but bemoan the fact that the survival of Charles' enterprise has to rely on the military success of the General Barrios, whom she thinks "absurd"(N.162) and Decoud calls, with more accentuated contempt, "an ignorant, boastful *indio*"(N.166). The perverse rhetoric of "material interests" is not something free from coercion, but a material process which necessarily demands, even if in its transitional phase, the existence of "*cholo*" soldiers who are "suddenly lassoed on the road by a recruiting party of lanceros — a method of voluntary enlistment looked upon as almost legal in the Republic"(N.109).

Only some pages before the passage on "material interests" I have quoted above, Charles is said to have another kind of interest in his mind; "Mines had acquired for [Charles] a *dramatic interest*. He studied their peculiarities from a personal point of view, too, as one would study the varied characters of men"(N.81.my emphasis). The public cause of "material interests" actually hides, behind it, his personal "dramatic interest" which generates a strangely anthropomorphic view of the inanimate mines. The case is somehow countered, again, by Holroyd's fanciful attitude towards Charles himself. "[Holroyd] was not running a great enterprise [in Costaguana]; no mere railway board or individual corporation. He was running a man"(N.98) as if only handling a toy. Note the careless parataxis of material institutions such as railway and other kinds of enterprises with "a man". It blurts out a heady instrumentalization of a human being whose importance is only in 'its' function, which is a curious reverse of the material enterprises secretly personified in Charles' view. What occurs here is a confusing criss-crossing of the material and the human in dramatized visions of a society, in relation to which a few persons may imagine themselves sometimes as omnipotent directors and at other times powerless spectators.

This puzzling combination of fanciful anthropomorphism and severe instrumentalization testifies to the Janus-faced nature of the process of modernization, or the steady, if interrupted, expansion of "the material apparatus of perfected civilization"(N.109) such as railway, steamships, cable cars, carriage roads and telegram cables. Before, the Occidental Province of

Costaguana "had been lying for ages ensconced behind its natural barriers, repelling modern enterprise by the precipices of its mountain range, by its shallow harbour opening into the everlasting calms of a gulf full of clouds"(N.64). Now, the space-conquering modern technologies make it possible to spread those means of material communication beyond such obstacles. In consequence, "Sulaco seemed on the point of being invaded by all the world"(N.150). Such a process might be felt 'humanly' in so far as it diminishes those natural ('inhuman') surroundings and guarantees 'security' and 'convenience' for people. But at the same time, those means do not exist as solid barriers against something external, but gradually permeate through, and then underlie, the modern conditions of human lives.

The difficulty is, I would argue, in the strange situation where people are somehow instrumentalized by those material instruments conditioning their own lives instead of being made freer than ever. Certainly there appears to be a less clear-cut, visible distinction between the oppressors and the oppressed in modernizing society than in the insane tyranny of the late Guzman Bento, which still remains in the scars on the bodies and memories of José Avellanos and Dr Monygham. 'Indian' miners in the villages near the silver mine are "growing fiercely attached to their position of privileged safety"(N.120). But Don Pepe's paternalising gaze towards the miners already appears ominously classificatory, while Father Rom's proselytising activity unwittingly degrades them to the position of "ignorant sinners"(N.114). The most "dramatic" moment comes when the miners willingly makes themselves a military force to repel the Monterist "mob" and to save the life of Charles Gould. The event resolves the perennial shortage in military force at one stroke, simultaneously making senseless the irony of the phrase 'voluntary enlistment' which has actually designated the forced conscription. Or perhaps the irony is, in fact, even deeper than in the previous cases. For their action is, as a consequence, the 'voluntary' participation finally led to the entrapped subordination to the dominance of the San Tome Mine.

So far, we have seen the plot of *Nostromo* mainly in the light of the complex of the material and dramatic interests practically realizing themselves as the expanding net of material communication. In such a modernizing process of Costaguana, people are not sharply oppressed as far as appearances are concerned, but rather ensnared, then entrapped into the realm of material communication. There, any autonomous motivation, presupposed to be independent of external affect, is gradually cancelled out, as the fundamental shift in social conditions not only makes living 'safe' and 'convenient', but also drastically influences, or more, crucially *fixates* the identities of the agents of the transition. What Kiernan Ryan designates as the universal process of "coagulative impulsion"(Ryan.53) irresistibly trammels the separate intentions of "the King of Sulaco"(N.145) as well as those of subordinate miners.

Whether we call these individuals' relation to the fearful material totality "isolation" or "alienation", we cannot miss the persistence of assimilative communal interests gradually enmeshing any oppositional actions or motivations. Once inadvertently implicated into the cause of the aristocratic Spanish descendants, Decoud is compelled to replace the hollow patriotism of "the adopted child of Western Europe"(N.155) with the unnaturally exaggerated "supreme illusion of a lover"(N.179) in order to justify his active leading of the separatist scheme. But his solitary suicide in the Great Isabel suggests that his attachment to Antonia Avellanos might be a

mere self-deceiving make-believe that hides his unmotivated existence in the turmoil of Costaguana. In the case of *Nostromo*, we can observe that his stealing of the silver is rather incidentally induced by the accidental convergence of several conditions than actively motivated. If the silver had been sunk rather than providentially saved, if *Nostromo* had confided the survival of Decoud to Dr Monygham instead of doubting his trustworthiness, and if Decoud had not taken three silver ingots to use as the sinker of his corpse into the sea, the humiliating degradation of the "man of people" (N.261) might not have happened. Again, what appear their independent performances are soon revealed to be only dependent responses to conditions which somehow threaten their original intentions.

Nevertheless, it would be overhasty to attribute the cause of the entire affairs totally to the treacherous working of interests that are simultaneously material and dramatic, or the undermining effect of expanding material communication. In the poetics of Joseph Conrad's narrative, scenes of 'communication' become the central problematic in the yet wider thematic field of 'community'. The intricate net of material communication should be understood as only one of several communicative forms, even if it begins to change its status from the 'emergent' to the 'dominant' to use Raymond Williams' terms (Williams.121-8). It would be absurd to suppose the communal realm empty of any communications where material communication freely prevails without any resistance. To seek for alternative modes of communication, whether 'oppositional' or 'residual' in the Conradian vision of 'community', here I shall briefly suspend our focus on *Nostromo* and take a short backward detour to some precedent works; namely, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900).

Trying to situate Conrad's literary attempt within the historical transformation of the idea of 'community', William Deresiewicz draws a rough sketch of the mutation from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his account, a typically 19<sup>th</sup> century notion of 'community' was that of a tradition-oriented organic 'community' which appealed to both the conservative and radical social critique against accelerated industrialization and the emerging modern mass 'society'. As such thought on 'community' was a reactive defence against modernization, it constituted a sharp dichotomy with the vision of anomalous mass 'society' which was imagined as devoid of any internal communal ties. From around the turn of the century, however, rapid disillusionment set in, as "the classical sociologist [such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim] had no illusions about what was really possible in the world of industrial capitalism". The dichotomy between 'community' and 'society' broke, and there emerged the idea of 'community' not necessarily connected to the vision of traditional organic lives, but as "a flee-floating affective quality identifiable within any action or relationships" (Deresiewicz.73) or even simply a given structural framework in which social transactions reproduce themselves. Deresiewicz argues that Conrad's *Lord Jim* can claim its position in such a liminal moment of transition when the idealizing, though diminishing, nostalgia for supposed organic 'community' and the sober, detached understanding of the modern framework of 'community' awkwardly coexisted, provoking many ambiguities and confusions.

In *Lord Jim*, the eponymous hero Jim starts his restless journey by leaving his father's narrow parish in an English countryside. Such a secluded 'community' soon recedes into the realm of tenuous memory and the object of his momentary yearning, and Jim's subsequent painful passage from the professional community of the sailing ship, through the heterogeneous colonial ports, to the fantasized back regions of the 'uncivilized' others has an effect of a

decentring parallel which deprives any 'community' of their singularity. Such a 'romantic' trajectory of "Lord Jim" is framed by the setting of Marlow's narrative. The initial omnipotent narrator soon devolves its task of narration on Marlow through evoking a circle of "swapping yarns"(LJ.43) on a veranda at the end of chapter 4. That circle is also broken after considerable lapse of time at the start of chapter 36 because of the discontinuation of his still incomplete narrative. And the vicissitudes of "Lord Jim" are only disclosed to a solitary, if "privileged", reader of Marlow's handwriting in his quiet room under the "light of his shaded reading-lamp" "in the highest flat of a lofty building" (LJ.292). Such a shift of narrative settings includes numerous other occasions of narrating and listening in it as in the structure of Chinese boxes.

While Jim's story is the succession of expulsion, self-exile and momentary affiliation to the ideal community which ends in the final retributive ruin, at the level of narrative framework the text again and again tries to restore the disturbed sense of communal understanding through Marlow's attempts at *verbal* communication. His search for mutual empathy might seem rather 'nostalgic'. Indeed, the scene of Marlow's circle is often associated, by such critics as Edward Said and Peter Brooks, with the vision of a traditional narrative community which Walter Benjamin evoked in his "The Storyteller"(Brooks.246.Said.100). According to Benjamin, people in the passing "archaic" community (such as peasants, seamen and artisans) used to narrate their stories to each other. That convention of exchanging their experiences and mutually recognizing their utilities, that is, the art of "storytelling", had a deep connection with the process of reproducing communal ties through endless transactions(Benjamin.84-5). Joseph Conrad understood this form of intimate companionship to be specifically 'English' in one of his early short stories, "Youth"(1898), in that such a narrative community had the common experiences in sea as its strong bond:

[Marlow's storytelling in his circle has] occurred nowhere but in England, where men and sea interpenetrate, so to speak... [Between Marlow and his audience] there was the strong bond of the sea, and also the fellowship of the craft, which no amount of enthusiasm for yachting, cruising, and so on can give, since one is only the amusement of life and the other is life itself(HD.93).

Whether such an "English" scene was actually possible or simply a non-existent fantasy, the affective tone of the passage seems enough to scaffold an immediate, secure space of verbal communication 'about' an exotic colonial sea, thus simultaneously constructing a limited realm of "us" and an outside field of excluded others.

But at the same time, we should also notice the fictional nature of this setting, as the scene is also inside the novelistic description as well as the contents of Marlow's narration; and Joseph Conrad as an actual author was seldom guaranteed such a 'solid' foothold at least until the first commercial success with *Chance*(1914). In an episode in *The Mirror of the Sea*(1906), which is contemporary with *Nostromo*, Conrad describes himself in his solitary study distant from the memory of working at the sea: "even as I, too, having turned my back upon the sea, am bearing those few pages in the twilight, with the hope of finding in an inland valley the silent welcome of some patient listener"(MS.183). The attempt at verbal communication may miserably fail unless it succeeds in finding "some patient listener".<sup>(2)</sup> Doubtless such an anxiety was distressing, given that Conrad was not a native speaker of English and always tried hard to attain a proper level of

intelligibility in signification, as he once questioned, to his first reader, whether his novel was “clear”(PR17). For Joseph Conrad, even the means and grounds of verbal communication are in no way self-evident, they are mediated rather than immediate. From here germinates a self-reflexive awareness on the mediating status of the verbal texture and narrative forms, which results in highly admirable literary virtuoso act of shuffled perspectives and temporal disjunctions. It would not be going too far to say that Conrad’s recognition of the verbal as irremovable mediator corresponds to the disillusioned perception on the distancing effect of the modern communal framework.

Another tension revealed in earlier writing is that between narrative contents and narrative framework, or more particularly, the tensional interaction shown in *Heart of Darkness*, between Kurtz and Marlow. At one point in his storytelling, Marlow remembers the voice of Kurtz uttered to the African tribe while lying on stretcher:

I saw him open his mouth wide — it gave him a weird voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him. A deep voice reached me faintly. He must have been shouting. He fell back suddenly. The stretcher shook as the bearers staggered forward again, and almost at the same time I noticed that the crowd of savages was vanishing without any perceptible movement of retreat, as if the forest that had ejected these beings so suddenly had drawn them in again as the breath is drawn in a long aspiration(*HD.224*).

The eeriness Marlow senses in his voice is strengthened by the precedent information that Kurtz had been a great speaker. Marlow had been tempted to talk with him, but what he actually hears is nothing more than an inarticulate voice whose vibration has the grotesque power of galvanizing “the crowd of savages”. It is at this moment that the moderate empathy of articulate speech is abruptly threatened by the charismatic allure of an inarticulate voice, which anticipates the undesirable dissolution of the narrative community.

Apart from the ambiguous border of “us” shown in *Lord Jim* and Conrad’s biographical anxiety about verbal communication, what the narrative community defends itself against would be this dangerous fascination of the charismatic order. Michael Levenson invokes Max Weber’s theory of charismatic authority in his reading of *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>(9)</sup> “A tale that begins with bureaucratic folly [of imperialism] imagines”, Levenson argues, “a ghostly alternative in tribal violence, and in carrying through that insight, it imagines where social life passes into the life of the instincts”(Levenson.50). Filled with the exceptional individual force of charisma, Kurtz is presented as the antithesis to the inert colonial institutions. His power of charismatic communication re-organizes the tribal community into an intensely cohesive communion, by whose violence he satisfies his own bloody lust for the fetishized ivory. As Weber formulates, “[c]harismatic domination means a rejection of all ties to any external order in favor of the exclusive glorification of the genuine mentality of the prophet and hero. Hence, its attitude is revolutionary and transvalues everything; it makes a sovereign break with all traditional or rational norms”(Weber.24). In so far as it breaks through the inextricable impasse of ineffectual imperialism (for better or worse), Kurtz’s violence may appear momentarily compelling for Marlow. But what remains afterwards is a bitter disgust at the deadly intemperance.

The vision of charismatic community in Joseph Conrad’s texts is, we should notice, *not*

something archaic (or “residual”) found outside the reach of Western culture. Both in the case of Kurtz in deep Africa and that of Jim at “Patusan” in South-East Asia, what has happened is doomed combination between the alienated colonists and native communities unbalanced by the invading Western imperial economy. Although the focalisation on the charismatic figures tends to assume the peripheral existence of the natives, we ought not to miss the fact that charismatic domination gains power only on the basis of “the crowd of savages”, of which description certainly reveals Conrad’s trite racism. But Marlow confronted such an uncanny collective anonymity also after returning to Europe (in a city, supposedly Brussels), if not loaded with the same violence: “I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams”(HD.242). The crowd is seen to be devoid of any external framework or internal bond, driven only by their blind voracious impulses. The European crowd, the very figuration of metropolitan disarray, can be argued to be a ghostly double of the ‘savage’ tribe in Congo. Then, there might be an ambivalent fear of the rising of a charismatic figure who would unify the disorderly crowd into violent cohesion, as Gustave Le Bon, the notorious founder of ‘crowd psychology’, once asserted that the modern crowd could not manage itself without the authoritative lead of a singular ‘great’ figure in his *Psychologie de foules*(1896).

Here we can understand the defensive tactics of Marlow’s act of storytelling in its most crucial (though implicit) function. In Africa, the encounter with Kurtz had a dangerous fascination for Marlow and there occurred a dynamic interaction between the two. But as Douglas Kerr argues, through narrating Kurtz as its object, Marlow *tries to* re-organize the interaction into a stable schema between the narrator and the narrated, simultaneously fabricating an interdictory boundary between ‘civilization’ and ‘savagery’(Kerr.22-4). In a sense, the narrative community manages to control the representability of the charismatic community through making itself a frame of the other. But the attempt at verbal communication is itself rather fragile and moreover, illusory. If the storytelling is somehow discontinued, or simply if the audience no longer share enough “interests” to endure hearing so long a time, the seemingly enduring circle may break up at any moment, as in *Lord Jim*. What we can observe Conrad does in *Nostramo* is, I shall argue, the fullest exposure of such fragility of verbal communication confronting the dire threat of the charismatic.

The detour by way of some precedent texts will serve to illustrate the textual tension at work in the unfolding process of *Nostramo*. The text almost compulsively complicates its chronological ordering through numerous anachronies.<sup>(4)</sup> Although complex temporality is generally acknowledged as a distinctive feature of stylistic experiment in the novel as a genre, I would argue that the case is better understood in comparison to geographical dislocation caused by the earthquake-like shock of political antagonism. It is not by chance that one of the biggest temporal disjunctions happens at the very points where the panoramic non-personal narration suddenly (but momentarily) slips into the first-person voices of Captain Mitchell and Martin Decoud, respectively in Part One, chapter 2 and Part Two, chapter 7. In respective ways, both are telling the story of the same riot in Sulaco after the provocation of Montero’s rebellion against the government. Confronting the sudden violent uprising of “the rascally mob”(N.45),



both Mitchell and Decoud try to counter the menacing crowd by scaffolding a narrative space and taking a personal distance from it.

After all, their attempts can be thought of as Marlow-like emphatic verbal resorting to the narrative community, which may secure themselves (either physically or psychologically) from the threatening disorder materialized in the figure of "scum". In fact, the crisis-ridden nature of defensive storytelling is more pronounced in the cases of Mitchell and Decoud than that of Marlow. To an anonymous traveller, Captain Mitchell says, "[the Sulaco aristocrats]...had to run like rabbits, sir. I ran like a rabbit myself. Certain forms of death are — er — distasteful to a — a — er respectable man. They would have pounded me to death, too. A crazy mob, sir, does not discriminate"(N.46). Mitchell, although a defective narrator, is able vividly to describe the felt danger of the "crazy mob". But the very fact that he is able to *recollect* the threat before a hearer reveals that he is actually already secure from it. In contrast, Decoud's handwriting is much more appealing in its extremity. With an acute sense of loneliness, he addresses his writing to his sister in distant Paris, situating himself in the momentary calm of the still continuing riot at the Viola's inn, "Albergo d'Italia Una"(N.130). Awaiting the desperate departure for the voyage with silver, Decoud tries to cure his strange solitude in the midst of the menacing 'mob' through "the intimacy of that intercourse"(N.210) with his close sister.

In these cases, we may witness the complete collapse of a narrative community through their futile attempts at emphatic verbal communication. There is no longer the self-evident intimacy presupposed among co-working seamen for either Mitchell or Decoud. Although Mitchell is certainly guaranteed his physical security in the social order settled after the Monterist rebellion, he is miserably isolated both in his retirement and his lack of family. Lacking any fixed position, his clumsy storytelling is vainly diffused into the anonymous void of globalising industrial capitalism instead of creating a sense of shared empathy. Decoud's address to his sister should be understood together with his reluctant journalistic activities. As he tells Antonia, his official job is only "inciting poor ignorant fools to kill and to die"(N.173) through the mechanically mediated voice of the *Pouvenir*. Disgusted at his self-made deception to the public, it is no wonder that he can confess his innermost feelings only to his closest blood relative. The bitter irony is in the possibility that his handwriting could not reach his sister because of the political turmoil which temporarily separates Costaguana from the rest of the world. Pitifully, Decoud could not for the life of him cross the temporal border across which Mitchell easily passes in his maladroitness recollection.

Once irreparably wrenched off from the narrative community, the voices are either inflated into wayward declamations, or degraded into inconsequential chattering. "To read *Nostramo* is...", Aaron Fogel suggests, "to have our idea of the 'field' of dialogue, in both politics and aesthetics, forcibly changed, and to move out of a world of parliamentary dialogue into one of general filibuster". While the parliamentary ideal formally expects final harmony to come no matter how aggressively discussions may heat up, a disturbing oratory, of a type called "filibuster" "appears because parliamentary form collapses under the weight of imperialist and colonial disproportions"(Fogel.100). Coercive social communications, structurally inherent in the disproportions of imperialism, reflexively induce one-way, disharmonious assertions of fierce orators who do not at all care about consensus building. Certainly in Costaguana, which is insolubly entangled in the uneven history of colonization, there are countless scenes of perverse oratory, to the extent that the "English" reserve of Charles Gould appears exceptional and

precious. As Charles keenly remarks, “There’s a good deal of eloquence of one sort or another produced in both Americas. The air of the New World seems favourable to the art of declamations”(N.99). By saying so, he ironically puts Holroyd and Avellanos together in “the art of declamations” despite their crucial contradiction in respective creeds.

The disdain for the vacuous chattering in “the Provincial Assembly”(N.180) is harboured by Martin Decoud, who himself is a practitioner of disproportionate oratory. Threatened by the nearing military attack, the Sulaco aristocrats form a council at the Casa Gould to talk endlessly over the possible procedure of respectable surrender. Replying to Antonia’s question as to what they are doing at the council, Decoud sardonically replies, “Empty speeches... Hiding their fears behind imbecile hopes. They are all great Parliamentarians there — on the English model, as you know”(N.214). The fact that Decoud calls such a group of inept talkers “the English model” may suggest the extent of Joseph Conrad’s irony against his own once idealized vision of the “English” community. In the text, the parliamentary form of discussions is everywhere represented as contemptuous with its reality hollowed out. In order to ensure “the preservation of life and property”(N.213), Don Juste Lopez, the leading figure in the Assembly, tries to contrive the survival of the parliamentary form under the rule of Montero by sending a deputation which is at the same time a surreptitious sign of surrender. But Charles coldly refuses Lopez’s request to join in the deputation and denies the backing of Gould Concession to them. “The feeling of pity for those men, pitting all their trust into words of some sort, while murder and rapine stalked over the land, had betrayed him into what seemed empty loquacity”(N.313). Here we should also take notice of Nostromo’s acerbic insulting words to Sulaco, “this town of cowards and talkers”(N.386), which obliquely suggests his ominous dissatisfaction at the imperfection of verbal communication.

If the system of representation works only to preserve the *vested* material interests of the “padres” who are small in number, and if it leaves the majority of the “people” silenced without any reliable representative, there might appear, as in a relapse of a virulent fit, some disingenuous agitators who desire the status of charisma by integrating the returning voices of excluded “people”. The bygone example of Guzman Bento is actually still a haunting memory. The political program of Pedrito Montero is revealed to be a poor imitation following an inconsistent jumble of French historical writings in his head. In his interview with Charles Gould,

[Pedrito Montero] declared suddenly that the highest expression of democracy was Caesarism: the imperial rule based upon the direct popular vote. Caesarism was conservative. It was strong. It recognized the legitimate needs of democracy which requires order, titles, and distinctions. They would be showered upon deserving men. Caesarism was peace. It was progressive. It secured the prosperity of a country.... Look at what the Second Empire had done in France. It was a regime which delighted to honour men of Don Carlos’s stamp. The Second Empire fell, but that was because its chief was devoid of that military genius which has raised General Montero to the pinnacle of fame and glory(N.342).

A regime “conservative” and “progressive” at one time is obviously a nonsensical paradox, but the reference to Louis Napoleon uncannily evokes the ghostly ‘original’ of Napoleon Bonaparte, who was the representative figure of charisma throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>(5)</sup> The Montero

brothers are actually only the third simulacra of the historic emperor. We might hear a distant echo of Kurtz's voice in the eloquence of Gamacho. "And Señor Gamacho's oration, delectable to popular ears, went on in the heat and glare of the Plaza like the uncouth howlings of an inferior sort of devil cast into a white-hot furnace"(N.332). But again, he is only one of the minor characters whose wretched vicissitudes are outside the textual interest.

Then we might ask, is there any presence of charismatic dominion that is worthy of serious consideration? It is possible that the abundance of apparently negative demagogues in *Nostromo* may blind us to the actual quality of the charismatic. The charismatic leader must possess authority, charm and (potential for) violent negation on conventional social values. And above all thing in Joseph Conrad's works, the figure is inclined to be innately *ambivalent* in its textual evaluation, somehow simultaneously fascinating and threatening, refreshing and horrifying. In considering these qualities, we cannot avoid designating the eponymous figure, Nostromo, as a crucially ambivalent charismatic hero at the very centre of the text.

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 'mush of a man', their Catapaz was, they said, too scornful in his temper ever to utter abuse, a tireless taskmaster, and the more to be feared because of his aloofness. And behold! there he was that day, at their head, condescending to make jocular remarks to this man or the other(N.47).

This is Nostromo leading a racially hybrid group of workers consist of Italians, Basques, "Negros" and native Americans to defend the property of O. S. N. Company during the Monterist rebellion. "Such leadership was", certainly as the text says, "inspiriting"(N.47). Remarkably, he creates unity from diversity not by uttering any verbal order but by embodying a singular compelling mentality in himself. Nostromo is a character essentially seen (or shown) rather than spoken to.

From his affiliation with Giorgio Viola, who is a convicted worshipper of Garibaldi, we might expect Nostromo to be a remote heir of the cause of miscarried Italian Republicanism. Given Viola's obstinate adherence to the word "people", Nostromo's status as "a Man of People" may appear to confirm such a reading. According to Fredric Jameson, Giorgio Viola's idolization of Garibaldi signifies "the nationalist-populist" ideology, and thus "clearly opens up a basic space for the political mediation of this novel". In this version of the ideological textual space, Gould's ideology of industrial capitalism and Viola's popular nationalism constitute a sharp tension which Joseph Conrad could not develop fully because of his insufficiency. Jameson claims, "the association of this supreme political value with the Nostromo motif of the body, vanity, pride, strength, individual action, suggests ...that populism is for Conrad the term for an immanence — some virtual identity of *Leben* and *Wesen*, of contingency and meaning — which is to that degree inaccessible to his own narrative machinery"(Jameson.274).

However, it would be slightly simplistic to suppose that the connection between Viola and Nostromo is self-evident. For what is troubling is the fact that Nostromo is essentially blank in his ideological aspect despite the fact that in this overtly political novel, while the sporadic insertion of some 'romanticizing' episodes (especially marked in the final ready-made story of tragic love) is an attempt to establish Nostromo as the unquestionable protagonist. The text

seems deliberately to unhinge Nostromo from “the nationalist-populist” ideology of idolized Garibaldi. When Sir John, the English railway manager, buys the portside plain to construct a railway station in Sulaco, it turns out that Viola’s inn, “Albergo d’Italia Una” can secure its survival only under the patronage of Emilia Gould. On the other hand, as Charles Gould says solemnly, “All this piece of land belongs now to the Railway Company. There will be no more popular feast held here”(N.130). This means that Nostromo loses the spectacular stage of the feast where his personal prestige has been communally recognized and approved in showy exhibition, at the very moment when Viola’s “Italia Una” contrives its continuance through the good offices of the prime capitalist. Nostromo neither cares about Viola’s political ideal nor is fully conscious of what he is actually deprived by the permeating net of material communication.

If we are to persist in the parallel with Garibaldi, we had better refer to the mention of the figure in Gustave Le Bon’s *Psychologie de foules*. In his argument on the general characteristic of “the crowd leaders”, Le Bon roughly divides the types into two. “The one includes the men who are energetic and possess, but only intermittently, much strength of will, the other the men, far rarer than the preceding, whose strength of will is enduring”. While the latter type is represented by such figures as St. Paul, Mahomet, Columbus, Napoleon and others, Le Bon nominates Garibaldi as the example of the former, ephemeral type of the strong will; “a talentless but energetic adventurer who succeeded with a handful of men in laying hands on the ancient kingdom of Naples, defended though it was by a disciplined army”(Le Bon.121). Although Norman Sherry did not include this book in his list of the possible sources of the Garibaldino in his *Conrad’s Western World*(Sherry.147-161), I would argue that the passage by Le Bon might induce Conrad to characterize Nostromo as representing a defective charisma which is *not* enduring. As Giuseppe Garibaldi finally handed over his power to Cavour, the king of a unified Italy, the charismatic prestige of Nostromo cannot last long enough to negate the assimilative material interests, and to construct a wholly different, visionary community of “the people”. He is doomed to be instrumentalized as an exceptionally competent errand, successively by Mitchell, Father Corbelán, Teresa Viola, Gould and Dr Monygham, strikingly without any particular message of his own.

Then, we might ask, how does the novel with such a protagonist convey its final message to us? Possibly, I would answer, by subjecting him to die. In this novel, the insufficiency of verbal communication is fully exposed, while the treacherously assimilative working of material communication is hostilely drawn. The violent risings of the quasi-charismas are too inappropriate to be invested with thorough approval. The imperfect, transitory authority of Garibaldi is posthumously made eternal only in the gaze of Giorgio Viola. “An immortal hero!”, Viola muses, “This was your liberty; it gave you not only life, but immortality as well”(N.52). The irony is too clear to be missed; for Garibaldi is given his “immortality” in the small decrepit lithograph only after his actual death, on the continent where his worshipper obstinately grudges rebels the justificatory name of “the people”. Death makes some characters *fixed, literally dead* signifiers susceptible of any interpretative appropriation, such as in the case of Decoud. After the end of the Monterist rebellion, Antonia Avellanos asserts that annexing the rest of Sulaco to the Occidental Republic is the only remedy to be taken, saying, “I am convinced...that this was from the first poor Martin’s intention”(N.422), which is not actually the case. Decoud’s death is made a mythical, founding sacrifice of the community. Communication with a living person may have inevitable reciprocity, but the dead sign is free to be read into as she pleases. In other words, the

responsibility is entirely on the side of readers.<sup>(6)</sup>

In his last will and testament, the father of Charles Gould bitterly writes as follows: "God looked wrathfully at these countries, or else He would let some ray of hope fall through a rift in the appalling darkness of intrigues, bloodshed, and crime that hung of the Queen of Continents"(N.100). It seems that the words are ironically, materially realized in the form of the lighthouse that sheds "some ray" over "the appalling darkness" of the Placid Gulf, which retrospectively makes senseless the deadly adventure of Decoud and Nostromo. The space of adventures materially eliminated, Nostromo suffers his humiliating death in the Island whose lighthouse is symbolic of the cause of "liberty", and is rendered a dead (however eternal) signifier suggesting anything. On the one hand, the text implies that the photographer, attending Nostromo's deathbed, may appropriate the sign to his own political cause. On the other, whether Linda Viola reads Nostromo rightly is not inscribed in the text. How extra-textual readers should, on our own responsibility, interpret the dead sign of Nostromo is a question Joseph Conrad tactfully communicates to us without any definite suggestion, after the illusion of reciprocal communication is thoroughly broken by this vision of the disorderly community.

#### Notes

- (1) But Jim Reilly reminds us that Conrad's last, uncompleted novel, *Suspense* (1925) has the Napoleonic war as its setting (Reilly.2). Also see chapter II and III of *A Personal Record* (1912), in which Conrad recollects a story concerning his granduncle, who was a worshipper of Napoleon (PR.26-67).
- (2) Anthea Trodd claims that 'the search for audience' was a common preoccupation for the Edwardian novelists (Trodd.10-14). Particularly on Conrad, Trodd argues as follows: "in a 1905 essay on Henry James, a writer with a notably limited readership, Conrad suggested that the artist's pursuit of his meaning long outlasts his audience's willingness to listen. He envisages a Last Day when the artist will continue to tell stories but 'I doubt the heroism of the hearers'" (Trodd.23). Here we can see it as adumbrating the modernists' anxiety about their readership, which increasingly worsens as their stylistic experiment develops.
- (3) We should notice that Levenson is actually preceded by Fredric Jameson in his application of Weber's concept of 'charisma' in reading Conrad's works. But Jameson's theory of the 'vanishing mediator' is, I suggest, rather less sensitive to the crucial ambivalence charismatic characters retain in the texts of Joseph Conrad. See Jameson. 249-50.
- (4) A useful chronology of the events in Costaguana is available in Watt.1.XI- XIV.
- (5) Christopher Gogwilt argues that *Nostromo* is in "close engagement with that classic study of counterrevolution, Karl Marx's 'The Eighteen Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte'" (Gogwilt.192).
- (6) The case is virtually opposite to that of *Heart of Darkness* discussed by Peter Brooks. "Marlow's structuring of his own *fabula* as *sjuzet* has attached itself to Kurtz's *fabula*, and can find its significant outcome only in finding Kurtz's *sjuzet*" (Brooks.247). Marlow depends on Kurtz in the summing-up of his narration. But the fact that Kurtz's deathbed scene is imperfect and far from satisfactory subjects Marlow to endless retelling of the story, seeking for the moment of proper ending.

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