Myth and the Limits of History in *Nostromo*

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In the *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx claims that the historical speed of modernity outstrips myth of its relevance in the epoch of bourgeois capitalism: 'What chance has Vulcan against Roberts & Co., Jupiter against the lightning rod and Hermes against the Credit Mobilier?'[1] By suggesting that myth is an outdated art form, Marx is tapping into, as well as solidifying, the nineteenth-century disavowal of myth as a primitive pseudo-science.[2] This approach would see history as the unwilling sibling of the prodigal counter-discourse of myth. Such a binary has exhibited a lasting influence on prominent twentieth-century studies of mythology. Although less strident, Paul Ricoeur intuitively picks up on this dichotomy when he stresses the temporal distinctions between myth and history. '[M]yth is a narrative of origins, taking place in a primordial time, a time other than that of everyday reality,' whereas history is 'a narrative of recent events, extending progressively to include events that are further in the past but are, nonetheless, situated in human time.'[3]

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[1] In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism (Second Edition)*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, et al (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), p.661.

[2] This view was most forcefully offered by E.B. Tylor in *Primitive Culture* (New York: Harper, 1958).

[3] 'Myth and History,' in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1987), p.273.

Conrad's 1904 novel *Nostromo* reacts against both of the approaches proffered by Marx and Ricoeur.[4] This article responds to two ongoing and interrelated debates in critical scholarship on *Nostromo* that have failed to achieve a middle-ground. The first concerns the status of history in Conrad's novel, which investigates the modernist claim of attempting to evacuate history from art. In 1984, Marianne Dekoven briefly used *Nostromo* as an instance of modernist fiction that unsuccessfully 'suppressed' history, revealing a Freudian sense of the weight of historical process in those writers whom had a 'disgust with history, for writing about it at all.' Framing his work within Conrad's own flight from his revolutionary Polish forebears, William Deresiewicz closed an article in 2008 with the assertion that 'freedom from history' was the 'characteristic desire' of Conrad's early twentieth-century fiction, including *Nostromo*. The second debate regards the hierarchical categorisation of myth as subservient to history, which Conrad scholars see as animating the Polish émigré's mid-career works. Andrew Roberts, in 1987, wrote of *Nostromo*'s construction of myth and history as two mutually exclusive discourses. Most recently, in 2015 Seamus O'Malley fiercely contended that, 'For all of Conrad's suspicion of historiography, the text implies that only narrative history can rescue meaning and value from obfuscating myth'.[5] What these two groupings of critics fail to realise is that they are engaged in the *same* debate: it is Conrad's formalist experimentation with myth that functions as a structuring principle in *Nostromo*.[6] The novel reacts to the burden of history on modernist writing

[4] Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard. (1904)*, edited by Jacques Berthoud & Mara Kalnins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.63. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text.

[5] In order, see Marianne Dekoven, 'History as Suppressed Referent in Modernist Fiction,' *ELH* 51:1 (1984), p.137; William Deresiewicz, 'Conrad and History' *Raritan* 28:2 (2008), p.49; Andrew Roberts, '*Nostromo* and History: Remarkable Individuality and Historical Inevitability' *The Conradian* 12:1 (1987), p.10; Seamus O'Malley, *Making History New: Modernism and Historical Narrative* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.56.

[6] Interestingly, a reading of *Nostromo* that foregrounds the presence of myth in the novel has been done before. In her chapter, 'An Archetypal Analysis of Conrad's *Nostromo*', Claire Rosenfield details the quest motif at the heart of the novel, the problematic status of Nostromo as a mythic hero, as well as the depiction of the San Tomé mine as a fallen Eden. Published in 1966, when Northrop Frye's brand of archetypal criticism reached its peak, Rosenfield's piece is content-based, casting a wide net on the mythic tropes of *Nostromo*. Though informative, it does not (due to its time period) incorporate a narratological interpretation of mythopoeia in Conrad's novel, the focus of the present article. Rosenfield's essay is collected in *Myth and Literature: Contemporary Theory and Practice*, edited by John B.

not with an anti-historical or ahistorical stance, as Dekoven and Deresiewicz assert, but with a nuanced mythological discourse that inhabits history, thus collapsing Roberts' and O'Malley's dichotomy.

Nostromo undertakes a mythologisation of history as it simultaneously thwarts any strict separation between mythical and historical time. Such interactions between myth and history in the novel point towards what Claude Lévi-Strauss enticingly calls the 'intermediary level' of their discursive interaction.[7] For my current purposes, I define myth as both a narrative method employed by Conrad, and a socially-embedded phenomenon which allows the collective voice of the people in *Nostromo* to interpret and codify the historical unravelling of Costaguana. Drawing attention to Conrad's nuanced understanding of mythopoeia, I track the residual overlap of pre-modern myth in *Nostromo* as it obfuscates the neat temporal segmentations of modernity—divisions of hours, days, months, and years. *Nostromo* represents the comingling of an oral tradition of myth, thought of as timeless, and associated with preliterate, superstitious cultures, with the practice of written history in Western societies, the domain of the scientific and the learned. Citing a letter written by Conrad, Mario Curreli writes that myth for the author was used as a way of 'controlling the disorder of modern life.'[8] Deploying narratology as a theoretical framework, I investigate the potential of myth as a discursive strategy, weaving its way into *Nostromo*'s fictional history of Costaguana. It must be noted here that the setting of Costaguana is a 'cartographical composite' of Columbia, Venezuela, and Mexico;[9] likewise, its broad treatment of revolutionary politics is an amalgamation of nineteenth-century Latin American histories. As Jacques Berthoud notes, Costaguana is 'the prototype of a Spanish

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Vickery (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp.315-34.
Likewise, more recently, Yael Levin analyses the interrelation of oral storytelling (including myth) and written history in the novel. Using Derrida's concept of 'hauntology', Levin contrasts these competing modes in *Nostromo* as different forms of presence and absence, yet is not sufficiently formalist to take into account how myth functions in Conrad's text as a discursive method. See Chapter 3, 'A Spectral Temporality: The History of *Nostromo* as Perpetual Return,' in *Tracing the Aesthetic Principle in Conrad's Novels* (New York: Palgrave, 2008).

[7] *Myth and Meaning* (London & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p.40.

[8] 'Conrad and Myth,' in *Conrad's Art: An Interpretation and Evaluation*, edited by R.N. Sarkar (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2008), p.134.

[9] Robert G. Hampson, 'Spatial Stories: Conrad and Iain Sinclair' *The Conradian* Vol. 31, No. 1 (2006), p.62.

American state at the end of the nineteenth century',[10] an ideal location for Conrad to fictionally tease out the complicated relationship between historical particularity and mythical generality, as well as the link between fictional histories and the fictions of history.

The narrator of *Nostromo* uses the mythopoeic voice of oral narrative in the presentation of the history of Costaguana, though the narrator's scope and incredible range of information is built upon an ostensible paradox. At times, the narrator maintains a veneer of distance from the main characters reminiscent of a Flaubertian narrator, remaining above and apart to ironise their actions and intentions. However, many of the narrator's anecdotes, descriptions, and metaphors are rooted in local superstition and folk wisdom that suggests a dependence on the common people, the 'mestizos' and 'cholos' at the fringes of the text.[11] The narrator draws upon the well of cultural knowledge of Costaguana's inhabitants to situate the Latin American republic within the lineage of a premodern mythopoeic consciousness. As Mario Curreli writes, Conrad often draws upon the fact that 'in preliterate cultures myth is transmitted orally over generations,' as the collection of hearsay, whisperings, and rumours.[12]

This is particularly the case in Part First, 'The Silver of the Mine.' The following set of five examples of oral communication are by no means exhaustive, yet illustrate a general pattern in the narratorial method of the novel. 'The wasting edge of the cloud-bank always strives for, but seldom wins, the middle of the gulf. The sun—*as the sailors say*—is eating it up' (7); 'Sky, land, and seas disappear together out of the world when the Plácido—*as the saying is*—goes to sleep under its black poncho' (7); 'whether true or not, *it was generally believed* in the town that the Garibaldino [Giorgio Viola] had some money buried' (15); '*extraordinary stories were told of his [Hernandez's] powers*' (81); '*What was currently whispered was this*—that the San Tomé administration had, in part, at least,

[10] 'The Modernization of Sulaco', in Gene M. Moore (ed.), *Conrad's Cities* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992), quoted in Hampson, 'Spatial Stories', p.62.
[11] The *Oxford English Dictionary* categorises a 'cholo' as 'an Indian of Latin America,' whereas a 'mestizo' is given as 'a person of mixed European (esp. Spanish or Portuguese) and non-European parentage; spec. (originally) a man with a Spanish father and an American Indian mother; (later) a person of mixed American Spanish and American Indian descent.'
[12] 'Leitmotifs from Coleridge and Wagner in *Nostromo* and Beyond' *The Conradian* Vol. 29, No. 2 (2004), p.101.

financed the last revolution' (87).[13] Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan contends that such 'qualifying interjections' allow the reader and the narrator to 'dissociate' from the primitive 'fictions of the local inhabitants.'[14] Her argument is that the vein of historicism in the novel will extirpate the fallibility of such myths from the history of Costaguana. Yet often, as in the cases of Viola's stash of money hidden from the revolutionary mob, and Charles Gould's instalment of the Ribierist dictatorship, the narrator goes on—without explicitly stating it as such—to verify that such rumours are indeed true. Hearsay is substantiated; the word of the people takes on the validity of fact. This is why the narrator's incorporation of provincial rumours and folk wisdom does not take on the function of a disdainful or arrogant detachment from the public voice. The narrator is a part of, as opposed to apart from, the iterations of the public voice in *Nostromo*.[15] Local myths clarify the history that the narrator presents, rather than rendering it fictitious.

Interestingly, the novel often mimics these manifestations of the public voice in its presentation and development of Costaguana's central characters (Charles Gould, Mrs. Emilia Gould, Dr. Monygham). This is particularly the case for the titular character, Nostromo, the 'Capataz de Cargadores', a longshoreman whose local influence and intrepidity is used by political loyalists (the 'Blancos') to guard capitalist interests in Costaguana. For instance, we hear of the daringly brave exploits of Nostromo not in descriptive paragraphs that concisely summarise the history of the Genoese sailor, but in a manner that gestures to the oral nature of information that circulates in the novel. The initial narrative section detailing Nostromo's rescue of local autocrats in Sulaco, the capital of Costaguana, alternates between paragraphs using third-person indirect discourse and the direct speech of Captain Mitchell, the English Superintendent of the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company. Noticeably, the tone of these segments is nearly identical: even in the former instance we are presented with the

[13] All italics from these five quotes have been added.

[14] *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.72.

[15] Although it falls outside the scope of this article, it would be an interesting project to compare the use of oral narrative in Conrad's earlier works, such as *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, with *Nostromo*'s later construction of a mythopoeic consciousness shaped by verbal discourse. *Nostromo* is tantalisingly subtitled '*A Tale of the Seaboard*', though it shares comparatively little with the orality of Conrad's previous 'sea yarns', which utilise the mythmaking, narratorial figure of Marlow.

conversational voice of the absurd old captain. In third-person indirect discourse, we read of the escape from the revolutionary mob during the novel's initial political instability: '*Providentially*, Nostromo—invaluable fellow . . . a fellow in a thousand,' while Captain Mitchell's communication with unknown others three short paragraphs later runs thus, ''Under *providence* we owed our preservation to my Capataz . . . a man absolutely above reproach'' (11-12; italics added). Towards the end of Part First, even this use of the word 'invaluable' is subtly redirected—or more accurately, returned—to Captain Mitchell, who in conversation again speaks of Nostromo as 'invaluable for our work—a perfectly incorruptible fellow' (94).

We hear of Nostromo yet we never, at least initially, see his exploits; his is a presence made infinitely stronger, or at least more alluring, by the character's paradoxical absence. Hence the Signora Teresa's lament that her surrogate son, Nostromo, has not yet arrived to save the Violas from the rampage of the mob (16). Helen Funk Rieselbach is correct to note that Nostromo's peripheral representation in the text is coordinate with his 'almost mythic stature' that appears to make him 'larger than life.'[16] Nostromo, as the sum total of what others think of him, a hollow construction of public opinion, enters the narrative by way of the eyes of others. Hence his shadowy appearance at the edge of the Campo, noticed by Sir John and the chief engineer (34), and his materialisation near the Casa Gould, as perceived by Decoud and Antonia (134). Notably, in both instances, Nostromo is spotted from above—those who manipulate his abilities look down at the Capataz literally as well as figuratively.

It should be mentioned that there is a temporal dimension to this narrative strategy, as well. Nostromo's peripheral appearance, and his representation by way of the public voice, highlights the fact that the novel does not stop for his sake, even though he bears its title. There is no softening analepsis to sketch out Nostromo's personal history. The Capataz is continually in the process of becoming, not a subject so much as one who is subjected to the needs of the community that constructs him. Interestingly however, the narrative halts at places to delineate some of its minor characters. Indeed, this is precisely the case with Viola, the bastion of Italian republicanism. In the midst of the riot that temporarily ousts the Ribierists from power, the narrator stops almost entirely to present the reader with the

[16] *Conrad's Rebels: The Psychology of Revolution in the Novels from Nostromo to Victory* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), p.12.

past of the old Garibaldino. That is, during one of *Nostromo*'s few 'action' set-pieces, the narrator indulges in the novel's longest analepses (in story-time, not discourse-time), encompassing forty years of Viola's history. In 'The Discourse of History,' Roland Barthes calls this narrative technique 'zigzag history.' The logic of this formal method could be described rather crudely as two steps forward, one step back. This 'confrontation with historical time,' as Barthes terms it, and the historian's willingness to backtrack and 'explore this time,' however, should not be read as indicative of a hierarchical scale of character importance, as Viola is a minor player in the novel.[17] It is, rather, a means for Conrad to chart his characters' differing relations to, and investments in, the past.

A preliminary question: *why* does history slow down for Viola, but not for Nostromo? A reasonable response is that Conrad is seeking to play off Viola's diehard allegiance to the political ideal of republicanism against what the Garibaldino (and the narrator) view as the deplorable ruffianism of the mob. Drawing upon the idea of the 'chronological looping method' in Conrad's fiction, Ian Watt writes that the effect is to draw out 'certain continuities of theme or the illumination of character which arise from the immediate juxtaposition in the narrative sequence of episodes which were not in real life temporally contiguous.'[18] In this instance, however, Conrad is highlighting a discontinuity as opposed to a continuity. As Viola muses, the mob 'were not a people striving for justice, but thieves . . . [they] did not know the meaning of the word "liberty"' (17). The use of the chronological looping method therefore depicts Viola's estrangement from current political activity in Costaguana by firmly anchoring him to an increasingly outdated past.

As for Nostromo, he cannot be connected with the past because he is a prey to the whims of the current ruling powers, that is, to the blowing winds of an increasingly chaotic history. I also suspect that Conrad is linking Nostromo's presence with a deconstruction of the cultural tropes of both the 'rags to riches' fable, otherwise known as the iconic Western myth of the 'self-made man.' Such narrative arcs run counter-intuitively to the novel's critique of Western capitalism as well as Western liberalism: history is never bent to the force of an individual will. Nostromo is a *composite product* of the public voice whose mythical status fulfils the communal need for a hero.

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[17] *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p.129.
[18] Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.37.

As Signora Viola scathingly comments after the riots that begin the novel, 'They will be showing him to everybody. "This is our Nostromo"' (19). Conrad consequently eschews a biographical account of Nostromo, as he is careful not to give the Capataz any kind of mastery over his destiny. Any historically situated sketch of Nostromo would lend itself to a sense of personal agency for the Capataz that Conrad wishes to remain illusory; Nostromo's mythic status thus comes at the price of a personal past.

Concomitant with this denial of Nostromo's past, the novel grimly determines a future for the Italian shipmate in a manner correlating to mythopoeic suggestion rather than historical fact. This is borne out in Part Three, Chapter X, where Captain Mitchell gives his inflated account of the history of Sulaco to a 'privileged passenger' from the O.S.N (341). Captain Mitchell relates that Nostromo's should be the first name etched into the base of the newly-designed 'marble shaft commemorative of Separation' (346). This process of remembering whereby society literally and figuratively sets in stone the narrative of its prime movers is heavily ironised by Conrad. Although *subject to* the caprices of the Sulacan oligarchs prior to the secession of the Occidental Republic, the construction of the marble shaft solidifies Nostromo's prized position as the *subject of* communal adoration. He is the collective subject of the people. Yet the reader must simultaneously juxtapose this with the real-life degradation of Nostromo as he pilfers more and more of the smuggled silver from the Great Isabel, ostensibly lost while escaping from the Monterists. Nostromo comes to reenact the novel's opening mythical tale of the gringos of Azuera, whose souls are chained to the riches they eternally crave. That is, the beginnings of a personal history for Nostromo that are outside of and unbeknownst to the wider public—and which sharply diverges from the image they have constructed of him—regresses into myth.

Captain Mitchell's account leads to further questions: What are his sources of information? In what sense is it biased? Can it be substantiated against the mimetic presentation of events in the novel that he describes so pompously? This last question is the most problematic, because the action for which Nostromo is to be principally remembered—the heroic ride to Cayta to retrieve the army of Barrios and thus save the Blanco oligarchs—is elided by Conrad in the discursive presentation of the novel.[19] There is the

[19] Ludwig Schnauder notes that the novel also purposefully avoids representing other 'macro-level events,' such as the defeat of the Monterists or the miners' march on Sulaco. 'Free Will and Determinism in *Nostromo*,' *The Conradian* Vol. 29, No. 2 (2004), p.68.

foretaste of what such a dangerous mission would entail, 'a ten days' ride at least . . . [requiring] a man of courage and resolution, who would avoid arrest or murder' (272). This is followed by Captain Mitchell's post-analysis of the deed, including Nostromo's surreptitious escape via ship, then the journey of 'four hundred miles' via horseback, and the qualities needed for its success, most of all 'courage, fidelity, [and] intelligence' (346). In other words, the reader has the tantalising foretaste of the mission, and then an elaborate retrospection of the deed, but not the ride to Cayta itself. The event is psychically blotted out from *Nostromo*.

Seamus O'Malley correctly views Conrad's use of such elisions in *Nostromo* not as a shy move away from the raw matter of history, but as a modernist exploration of the discursive possibilities by which history can be represented. For O'Malley, a 'decoupling of events from history,' does not necessarily presume the modernist author's 'anti-historical' stance.[20] Yet O'Malley's intense focus on the formal strategies by which Conrad manifests the historical event does not answer a crucial question, namely, that of how the event will be inferentially constructed in the minds of those in Costaguana, and what ideological assumptions inform the conclusions they make of the ride to Cayta. (In the novel, this task falls to Monygham and Captain Mitchell, respectively.) As Mieke Bal has noted, by reducing story-time to zero, the ellipsis lays bare the burden of proof craved by the reader. To retrieve or recreate the ellipsis's missing contents, the reader must rely on deductive reasoning that is anchored to the practice of 'realistic reading.'[21] Although it is not my intent to argue for *Nostromo*'s anti-realist status, the novel's invocation of mythopoeic narrative—as through the focus on the oral nature of gossip, hearsay, and rumours—calls into question the extent to which the reader can logically reconfigure the missing episode. As mentioned previously, *Nostromo* often retrospectively substantiates the seemingly uncorroborated whispers of the people. Yet ironically, though the ride to Cayta occurs *after* the Capataz's realisation that he has been betrayed by those he serves—a deconstruction, as it were, of the myth that is Nostromo—the only way for the reader to clarify the events of the ellipsis is to fall back upon the mythic capabilities of the novel's hero. The hermetic sealing off of history-as-event via ellipsis from *Nostromo* ensures that any retrospective narration of the trip to Cayta, such as Captain Mitchell's account, is left is with little choice but to resort to myth to colour the textual gap.

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[20] *Making History New*, p.21.
[21] *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative (Third Edition)* (Toronto, Buffalo & London: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p.101.

At the moment in which *Nostromo* deflates Captain Mitchell's credibility as the 'unofficial historian' of Costaguana,[22] it correspondingly pushes towards the permanence of his verbal pronunciations in constructing, indeed solidifying, the mythic nature of the events he narrates. This is achieved by formal means that highlight Conrad's mischievous narrative construction of Chapter X, where Captain Mitchell provides a whistle-stop tour of the Occidental Republic for the unnamed passenger. This one-sided conversation is presented almost entirely with the authority of reported speech, suggesting the singularity of the event. It is replete with Captain Mitchell's idiosyncratic summations of people and events, the conversation's paratactic jerkiness further pointing towards the episode's historical specificity: 'we'll lunch at the Amarilla. Interest you, I fancy. Real thing of the country. Men of the first families . . . Fine old bishop with a broken nose in the patio. Remarkable piece of statuary, I believe' (341). Indeed, two separate chronological accounts of *Nostromo* categorise this event as occurring in 1897, six years after the end of the civil war, suggesting a critical consensus on the conversation's isolation in time, so to speak.[23]

Yet this critical consensus is belied by the narrator's dependence, or perhaps more accurately, willing utilisation, of the habitual past aspect, a flexible aspect of English grammar. Through the use of the auxiliary verb 'would,' Conrad implies that the episode is far from unique. Indeed, conversations like it have occurred over and over again, so Mitchell's reported speech becomes *generally indicative* of a diachronic phenomenon, as opposed to a synchronic representation of a unique event. The following examples are taken from Chapter X: 'And it *would* be into the Harbour Office that he *would* lead some privileged passenger'; 'And Captain Mitchell, seating himself at his desk, *would* keep on talking hospitably'; '"Here," he *would* say, pointing to a niche in the wall of the dusky aisle, "you see the bust of Done José Avellanos"'; 'And the lunch *would* begin'; 'Captain Mitchell *would* lay back in his chair' (341, 343, 344, italics added throughout). This use of iterative narrative—where what has occurred x times is narrated once—gives a sort of condensation or synthesisation of

[22] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper*, p.74.
[23] See Ian Watt (ed.), *Joseph Conrad, Nostromo* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), xxv; also, *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard*, edited by Jacques Berthoud & Mara Kalnins, p.431.

events that ironically reduces the singularity of the history Captain Mitchell describes.[24]

The iterative mode allows Captain Mitchell to situate the varied events of the Occidental Republic's separation from Costaguana into a biased 'history from above', centred on the individual heroism of political elites. Captain Mitchell obfuscates the events in question more than he clarifies them. In this sense, his narrative is symbolic of the dual meaning of the word 'history', as it demonstrates the process whereby the raw material and subject-matter of the past is transmuted into a discursive form which smoothes over the idiosyncrasies and discrepancies of the events and people it narrates. After Captain Mitchell's narration, the listening passenger is unsurprisingly 'annihilated mentally by a sudden surfeit of sights, sounds, names, facts, and complicated information imperfectly apprehended, would listen like a tired child to *a fairy tale*' (349; italics added). The surreality of the narrative is bolstered by the narrator's pun on the phrase 'imperfectly apprehended,' as it can easily apply to both Captain Mitchell and the passenger—that is, the teller and the told. Captain Mitchell's role as tour guide is one that rests on a relentless adherence to routine, so much so that the narrator quips that the 'programme' is akin to a 'law of Nature' (345). We have then in this chapter an *oral* history of Costaguana that continuously, indeed endlessly, circulates throughout Sulaco.

Yet to be fully appreciated, Captain Mitchell's oral history must be juxtaposed with the intratextual *written* book in *Nostromo*, Don José Avellanos's *Fifty Years of Misrule*, which is literally as well as symbolically annihilated during the battle for Sulaco. With a Dickensian flourish of detail that verges on hyperbole, Avellanos's text is found by Decoud 'littering the Plaza, floating in the gutters, fired out as wads for trabucos loaded with handfuls of type, blown in the wind, [and] trampled in the mud' (170-71). In an essay from 1904 titled 'Henry James, An Appreciation,' Conrad described the practice of writing history with evident displeasure, noting the discourse's dryness and inability to operate without an overarching *telos*.[25] The date of Conrad's essay is important. Remembering that *Nostromo* was also published in 1904, we can then reasonably assert that at this time Conrad was confronting the limits of history as a discourse of knowledge unchallenged in telling the story of nations, colonialism, and the circulation

[24] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, translated by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca & New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp.116-17.
[25] In *Notes on Life and Letters*, edited by J.H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.19.

of capital. *Nostromo*'s mythopoeic dimension and achronological structure represent two (often overlapping) means of confronting the shortcomings of written history: on the one hand, a reach back into premodern forms of storytelling, and on the other hand a proto-modernist experiment with form that frustrates linear narrative.

It must be conceded that the novel does at times complicatedly jostle with the suggestion that history-as-event may overtake myth or strip myth of its relevancy (see the aforementioned quote from Marx's *Grundrisse*), as when Nostromo tells Signora Viola that he cannot secure a priest for her in the Padrona's dying moments. '"I am needed to save the silver of the mine. Do you hear? A greater treasure than the one in which they say is guarded by ghosts and devils on Azuera. It is true"' (184-185).[26] Erdinast-Vulcan argues that *Nostromo* plays upon the transferential capacity of myth in the novel, opining that the mythic conception of the Capataz himself is shifted onto the 'fabricated myth of material interests.'[27] Although I agree with her basic contention, I would qualify Erdinast-Vulcan's approach by pointing out how Nostromo's entrancement by the fetishistic capacity of the silver can only take place *in relational terms* to the mythic scope of the Azuera treasure, as in the example I have just cited. Ironically, this relational aspect signifies Nostromo's deeper investment in the myth of the silver, suggesting the durability or reproducibility of myth when confronted by historical reality. Nostromo can only make sense of the historic significance of the action that awaits him by viewing it through the lens of mythopoeia; history is tied to myth even in its attempt to break from it.

By stating that the treasure is 'greater' than that of the Azuera's, Conrad plays on the indeterminacy and thus the mystical allure of the treasure—any conversion of the silver into a specific monetary amount would reduce the mysterious appeal surrounding the object. The episode is largely symbolic

[26] Interestingly, there are discursive as well as thematic parallels between the Azuera myth and Nostromo's elided journey to Cayta. In the Azuera myth, two gringos go missing in the search for magnificent riches, Conrad drawing upon the story of El Dorado and the Spanish conquistadores. Their disappearance is missing from the textual discourse of *Nostromo*. Indeed, the myth is a product of the episode's elliptical mystery. The common people rationalise the Azuera enigma into myth as a didactic tale of the link between riches and spiritual poverty. Myth is history *sans* primary sources, without an eyewitness account. Myth is the interpretative schema that smoothes over the gaps of history.

[27] *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.80.

of Lévi-Strauss's understanding of the bricoleur, where the component elements of myths shift over time—due to a finite amount of materials—yet maintain foundational security. Nostromo's destructive enchainment to the silver bolsters the myth he refers to, as opposed to historical reality superseding the 'primitive' nature of the Azuera story. In the excerpt I have just cited, this is underpinned by the textual space between the last two sentences. Nostromo's defensive posture ('It is true') implies the indignation and scorn of the Padrona that is perhaps stronger for being discursively suppressed from the text. Fittingly, as the novel's most superstitious character, Signora Viola converts the pejorative sense of that word into a knowledge of the power of myth to influence the actions of people who believe they are actively shaping history. For the Padrona, Nostromo's desire to smuggle the silver of the San Tomé mine out of Sulaco—'"the most desperate affair I was ever engaged on in my whole life"' (185)—replicates the logic of the original Azuera myth rather than providing a historical check on its lasting import.

Nostromo's seeming reproduction of the Azuera myth brings to the fore issues of character agency and the extent to which events in the novel are historically determined. Determinism does not so much nullify any traditional relationship between cause and effect as reduce them to props in an unremitting, relentless chain of events. Conversations regarding the importance of determinism in *Nostromo* (and to Conrad's sense of history) are linked to the novel's depiction of events as inextricably tied to the 'material interests' flowing from the San Tomé mine.[28] This Marxist-style argument of economic determinism in *Nostromo*, however, does not pick up on the power of myth and mythical time to shape the novel's *discursive presentation* of events.

Another of the reasons the novel's characters (particularly Nostromo) have so much difficulty positioning themselves within history is because the text largely abandons 'objective' linguistic markers to denote time: 'In the year 1885 . . .'; 'At 8.45am . . .'; 'On the first day of February . . .'; and so on. *Nostromo* disavows mechanical clock-time and the Gregorian calendar, also known as the Western calendar.[29] This suggests an approach to marking

[28] See Schnauder, 'Free Will and Determinism in *Nostromo*'.

[29] In an article titled 'Joseph Conrad's 'Sudden Holes' in Time: The Epistemology of Temporality,' John G. Peters uses a vast array of the author's oeuvre (though barely touching upon *Nostromo*) to argue that Conrad rejects the notion of mechanical clock-time altogether, instead insisting upon his

time that, although similar to these methods in that it is socially constructed for humanity's convenience, rails against not just the 'speed of modernity,' but modernity itself. Conrad's approach in the novel is to delineate time through a variety of methods that often baffle the (presumably Western) reader.

In saying this, it is not to be denied that Conrad, although sparingly, invokes broad historical eras and historical figures (who featured prominently in the history of Latin America) to help the reader locate the contextual background upon which the fictional Costaguana draws. Yet all of these, such as the opening sentence's immense evocation, 'In the time of Spanish rule' (5), and the references to Garibaldi, Bolivar, and Juarez (25, 37, 118), all signify events and people that prefigure, or set the scene, for the drama we are about to witness.[30] Much like its links between myth and history, the novel's temporal markers are purposefully vague, ill-defined and, most of all, *functionally relational*. They can only be understood in relation to, or in comparison with, another time, yet this latter time is paradoxically also void of the specifics (dates, times, years) required to make sense of the initial time mentioned by Conrad. So, we have 'in the time of the tyrant Guzmán Bento' (39), 'for three generations' (63), 'the dawn of a new era' (103), 'on feast days' (73), and 'as compared with the epoch of civil wars' (86).

The first of these examples, variously stated in *Nostromo* as 'Guzmán Bento of cruel memory' (37), or 'Guzmán Bento of fearful memory' (86) is particularly useful to explicate. John H. Arnold helpfully highlights modernity's clinical adherence to the numerical division of time, in contrast to the pre-modern practice of defining eras by the people who figured most prominently within them ('During Queen Elizabeth's rule . . .'), or the particular shade of feeling which characterised a period ('The Black Death'). Arnold notes, 'Thinking in 'centuries' as opposed to, say, 'kings' reigns' has only been common in the last two hundred years or so.'[31] There is the residual echo of such a method in the various utterances regarding the rule

characters' subjective experience of temporality. *Studies in the Novel* Vol. 32, No. 4 (2000), pp.420-441.

[30] I am indebted to Richard Niland for pointing out *Nostromo*'s mention of the nineteenth-century Mexican President, Benito Juarez. 'The Political Novels' in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, edited by J.H. Stape (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.34.

[31] *History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.101.

of Guzmán Bento. As *Nostromo* is predominantly set in the late nineteenth-century, it may seem reasonable to pinpoint a certain temporal backwardness in Costaguana's lingering practice of marking time via 'kings' reigns.' Yet, Conrad is careful to note that in his fictional South American nation '[t]he material apparatus of perfected civilisation . . . had not intruded as yet' (73). This tongue-in-cheek euphemism for the peculiar pros and cons of capitalist enterprise as it enters Costaguana's market-style economy highlights that, if anything, the nation is in a transitional stage *between* the pre-modern and the modern.

Given his role as a despot, it is unsurprising that this framework for conceptualising time is inextricable from the particular *mentalité* that the reign of Bento evoked in the people, one of persecution, and terror. It highlights by comparison the cold detachment of Western modernity's clock-time, where an historical period is simply bracketed between two points on the scale of time. I would further suggest that the pre-modern approach to time in *Nostromo* can be usefully connected to the mythic fabric of the novel, where the past seeps into and distorts the presents.[32] Of Bento, the narrator notes that he 'reached his apotheosis in the popular legend of a sanguinary land-haunting spectre whose body had been carried off by the devil in person from the brick mausoleum in the nave of the Church of Assumption' (37). Here, Conrad skillfully plays upon and inverts one of the major doctrines of Catholic theology. While the earthborn Mary ascends to Heaven to assume immortality, Bento descends to earth via 'the devil' as a 'land-haunting spectre.'[33] Like the gringos of the Azuera myth, Bento achieves eternal life 'within men's memor[ies]' by performing a didactic or moralising function for the people of Costaguana (6). The present time constructs itself against the 'iron tyranny' (86) of Bento, while ironically the history of his barbaric reign is transmuted into myth, signifying its perpetuity in the cultural landscape, or *mentalité*, of Costaguana.

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[32] The line '[I]n the time of Guzmán Bento' resonates with the fairy tale method of beginning a story that occurs at an indefinite historical moment: 'There once was a prince . . .'; 'Once upon a time'; and so on. *Nostromo* also picks up on this approach by universalising the thematic lessons of traditional fairy-tales and myths.

[33] This ability of Bento's to inhabit two differing spheres simultaneously—the earthly and the other-worldly—is played upon by Conrad in another biblical allusion. Bento's official title as the 'Citizen Saviour' (265) of Costaguana link to the Christian practice of referring to Jesus Christ as 'Our Saviour,' someone in this world but not of it.

Nostromo deploys myths that will not stay primitive, will not disappear into the dim recesses of the past, but instead actively inhabit and haunt the present. Writing on the back of the vein of historicism from the nineteenth-century which rejected myth, Conrad's artistic achievement was to cast myth and history simultaneously into the arena of narrative representation. Myth obstructs modernity's adherence to mechanical clock-time, and the illusion of history marching swiftly forth towards progress. Most of all, myth for Conrad is a discursive strategy, reaped from the past yet alive in the present, that gnaws at the singularity of the historical moment.

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