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The Moral Structure in Joseph Conrad's Nostromo

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THE MORAL STRUCTURE IN

JOSEPH CONRAD'S NOSTROMO

(TITLE)

BY

LOURDINE WEBB

THESIS

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THE MORAL STRUCTURE IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S NOSTROMO

E. M. Forster has said of Joseph Conrad: "What is so elusive about him is that he is always promising to make some general philosophic statement about the universe, and then refraining with a gruff disclaimer....Is there not also a central obscurity, something noble, heroic, beautiful, inspiring half-a-dozen great books, but obscure, obscure?... These essays do suggest that he is misty in the middle as well as at the edges, that the secret casket of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel; and that we needn't try to write him down philosophically, because there is, in this direction, nothing to write. No creed, in fact."¹ Nevertheless, a philosophic statement can be discerned in the carefully designed moral structure that makes possible the stability, consistency, and unity of conclusion inherent in Conrad's political novel Nostromo. There is a creed, a subtle and profoundly sensitive creed, which in a deceptively fragile and elusive manner creates an aesthetically valid portrayal of the essence of human fulfillment. This essence

¹As quoted by F. R. Leavis in The Great Tradition, pp. 211-12.

can be perceived through a careful study of the attitude underlying Conrad's complex, but not unfathomable, presentation of experiences in the novel. By means of his choice of experiences the author presents a creed, a philosophical statement, based on the conviction that only through complete realization and exploitation of the human potential, that is, of both the rational and emotional components of our nature, can moral perspective and control be achieved. Conrad is saying that if either component gains ascendancy or becomes misdirected, fulfillment cannot be realized, and destruction, literal or figurative, is inevitable. This conclusion can be derived from an evaluation of the experiences and fates of the five major characters: Nostromo, Decoud, Charles Gould, his wife Emilia, and Dr. Monygham. The order in which these characters are listed is not accidental, for Conrad is explicit in the roles played by Nostromo and Decoud; he is subtle in those played by Charles and Emilia Gould; he is obscure in that played by Dr. Monygham.

Since Nostromo himself is representative of common and easily understood human experience, the attitude expressed through him is the one most easily analyzed and can serve as a relatively simple formula for the interpretation of the problems presented through the other major characters.

Nostromo is the incorruptible one. This epithet is so

frequently applied throughout the novel that the certainty of his corruptibility is established early in the chain of events; there is a foreshadowing inherent in this repetitiveness that virtually eliminates suspense in regard to the character. Because of the naiveté which generates his incorruptibility, a naiveté born of an ingenuous understanding of human nature, eventual disillusionment is foreordained and is realized at the conclusion of the daring attempt to save the silver.

"To be well spoken of. Si, señor."² These are the words spoken to Decoud by Nostromo, the words which summarize the Italian's conception of values. The admiration of others, and indeed, an audience, are essential to the simple Nostromo in his eagerness to gain approval. This characteristic is portrayed in a lively scene early in the book when the capataz is approached by Morenita, a professed love, whom he mortifies in full view of a crowd for the sole purpose of displaying his powers. Morenita pleads with Nostromo for some outward sign of love on a particular fiesta day. The capataz, arrogantly astride his horse, speaks condescendingly to the girl in an overt effort to impress the onlookers. Finally, he inflames her to a threat on his life, whereupon he boldly hands her a knife, saying that she may cut the silver buttons off his coat for her memento. His actions are greeted by great applause

²Joseph Conrad, Nostromo, p. 223.

and shouts of laughter from the crowd which shares the haughty indifference of Nostromo to the sensitivities of the humiliated Morenita;

This same characteristic is responsible later for Nostromo's willingness to undertake the dangerous mission to hide the silver taken from the mine. Again, he speaks to Decoud, saying: "I suppose, Don Martin,...that the Señor Administrador of San Tomé will reward me some day if I save his silver?" Decoud responds: "...it could not be otherwise, surely." Nostromo walks on, muttering to himself. "Si, si, without doubt - without doubt; and look you, Señor Martin, what it is to be well spoken of! There is not another man that could have been even thought of for such a thing. I shall get something great for it some day."³

This exchange is related by Decoud to his sister in a letter explaining the revolutionary situation in Sulaco. It clarifies the motivation which finally brings the Genoese sailor to his disillusioned comprehension of the realities of existence which comes upon the completion of that futile mission. The overwhelming fact that the Italian's apparent failure to accomplish his mission is dismissed as negligible, and the dangers which he had faced are minimized, results in his disillusionment. His *raison d'être* collapses and his resignation

³Ibid., p. 224.

to this disillusionment and to the comprehension of these realities of existence is finally manifested in his capitulation to the corruption imposed by the seductiveness of material gain, for it is only after this lack of recognition that Nostromo succumbs to temptation and decides to keep the silver for himself. The limitation presented by Conrad in this chain of events is that imposed exteriorly on the unfortunate being who is guided primarily by his emotional response to his fellow men - a response which ignores the rational analysis necessary to a realistic view of the value and consistency of public opinion. Finally this inability to establish equilibrium between the emotional and the rational leads to Nostromo's death, for it is during a secretive and imprudent attempt to retrieve some of the hidden silver that Nostromo is shot by Giorgio. Because of the importance the captain placed on recognition by others, this death is ironic in the fact that it is the result of mistaken identity. For a man to whom identification by others is all-consuming, this fatal loss of identity approaches the tragic. In the fate of this character, then, Conrad establishes the inadequacy inherent in the absorption in only one component of the human potential, in this case the emotional.

Don Martin Decoud, on the other hand, invites his fate through an almost complete preoccupation with the rational.

Certainly Decoud experiences an emotional involvement with Antonia Avellanos, but this is not profound enough to sustain him in isolation. His inability to feel, rather than think, results in a suicide generated by a long-established habit of introspection. In describing Decoud's collapse Conrad writes:

Solitude...takes possession of the mind, and drives forth the thought into the exile of utter unbelief....Decoud caught himself entertaining a doubt of his own individuality...lost all belief in the reality of his action past and to come....He resolved not to give himself up hopelessly to those people in Sulaco, who had beset him unreal and terrible, like gibbering and obscene spectres. He saw himself struggling feebly in their midst, and Antonia, gigantic and lovely like an allegorical statue, looking on with scornful eyes at his weakness....He had recognized no other virtue than intelligence, and had erected passions into duties.⁴

It is apparent in this description that Decoud's refusal to recognize the sustaining power of emotion provides the insurmountable obstacle in the struggle for survival. Even Antonia, to whom he claimed complete devotion in his letter to his sister, appears as a statue, an object representing rejection and isolation. This unfortunate man's incapacity to recognize the permanence and value of emotional commitment prohibits the faith in others and in ideals that would have provided the balance necessary to cope with his condition. His failure

⁴Ibid., p. 425.

to exploit his full potential is defined clearly by Conrad's description of Decoud as a dilettante who had "...pushed the habit of universal raillery to a point where it blinded him to the genuine impulses of his own nature."⁵ Adopting this character's tone and attitude, Conrad continues: "To be suddenly selected for the executive member of the patriotic small-arms committee of Sulaco seemed to him the height of the unexpected, one of those fantastic moves of which only his 'dear countrymen' were capable."⁶ So it is that Decoud, in his superficial response to life, is unable to experience profoundly either human or social involvement. It is this refusal to recognize the emotional demands of his nature which leads finally to his suicide. He, like Nostromo, meets his fate because of his inability to establish the balance necessary to the full realization of his human potential. Thus, Conrad denies the possibility of moral integrity based solely on the rationalism that is uniquely man's in the natural world.

Charles Gould's condition, while similar to Decoud's emotionally, presents yet another aspect of the utilization of human endowments. While he is motivated by both the rational and the emotional, these are misdirected, and as a result, both he and his wife are unfulfilled, but he remains

⁵Ibid., p. 148.

⁶Ibid., p. 148.

unaware of this.

In speaking to Emilia, Charles explains:

What is wanted here is law, good faith, order, security. Any one can declaim about these things, but I pin my faith to material interest. 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 afterwards. That's your ray of hope.⁷

In this speech Charles Gould displays both the rational and emotional faculties of man. He has analyzed the effects of materialism in an intellectual attempt to justify his dedication to the mine, and has simultaneously expressed an emotional commitment to the people of Sulaco and a hope for a better future. In what, then, lies his limitation? Why does Charles Gould's fate fail to satisfy Conrad's moral requirements? It is because Don Carlos has chosen an object and an abstraction for his dedication. The object is the mine; the abstraction is the people. The mine, by its nature, is incapable of conduct and is outside the realm of consideration in moral evaluation. The people, as Charles speaks of them, are an idea, an intangible, existing mass, without reality as individuals. He reacts to them, not as suffering, loving, desiring persons, but as a component of society which

⁷Ibid., p. 94.

must be acknowledged for the sake of security and stability in the social order. Consequently, while this man becomes both rationally and emotionally involved in his commitment, his obtuse conception of relationships prevents the fulfillment of his potential. It is because of this insensitivity that Charles remains unaware of the immorality inherent in his contribution to the disintegration of his marital relationship. In his inability to recognize the rational and emotional obligations and satisfactions which accompany personal relationships, Charles remains unfulfilled, replacing the genuineness of human affinity with the artificiality of a social ideal. It is perhaps in this character that Conrad makes his most tragic presentation of human limitations. Both Nostromo and Decoud finally recognize their shortcomings, but Charles remains unaware to the end of the basic immorality of his conduct.

The author conveys this condition in a simple incident toward the end of the novel. A servant approaches Emilia Gould, saying: "A telephone came through from the office of the mine. The master remains to sleep at the mountain tonight." The moments following this announcement are silent ones. Then Conrad writes: "Mrs. Gould's face became set and rigid for a second, as if to receive, without flinch-

ing, a great wave of loneliness that swept over her head."⁸

In Conrad's view Don Carlos lacks moral integrity because of his insensitivity to personal obligation. His fate, while not physically fatal, as in the case of Nostromo and Decoud, is spiritually fatal, a fatality which is intensified by Charles' lack of recognition.

Emilia Gould is the one most affected by her husband's shortcomings, but it is also this fact of her existence which permits her to achieve the completeness necessary to Conrad's moral requirements. She emerges both as a rationally and emotionally complete individual who retains her balanced sense of values and lives with honor and self-respect.

The establishment of Mrs. Gould's integrity appears early in the novel when Conrad speaks of her as being "too intelligently sympathetic" not to share in her husband's view of the importance of the mine. The phrase "intelligently sympathetic" might be passed over lightly at this point, but it is recalled at the end when the completeness of Emilia's being is entirely revealed. When the author first brings the young and inexperienced Emilia to Costaguana as the bride of Charles Gould, her integrity is suggested and is, in the ensuing events, subtly and consistently developed. When first she travels over the land with her husband, she sees

⁸Ibid., p. 443.

the inhabitants as individuals, sees them as lonely figures, remembers the melancholy face of a young Indian girl, and "appreciates the great worth of these people."⁹ She comes near to the soul of the land because of her sympathy for and knowledge of true peasantry. At one time she presents old Giorgio with eye glasses in order to make his existence more enjoyable, and she is "highly gifted in the art of human intercourse, which consists in delicate shades of self-forgetfulness and in the suggestion of universal comprehension."¹⁰ At the same time, this lady, although "even the most legitimate touch of materialism"¹¹ was wanting in her character, is capable of a rational understanding and tolerance for her husband's dedication to the mine.

A complete appreciation of her integrity is finally evoked in the climactic incidents surrounding Nostromo's death. It is with amazement and reluctance that she receives the message that Nostromo is asking for her. But in spite of her aversion for any knowledge of the lost silver, she goes to the dying man, stands by the side of his bed "full of endurance and compassion,"¹² and listens to his dying

⁹Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 63.

¹¹Ibid., p. 87.

¹²Ibid., p. 473.

words. The capataz recognizes that Emilia is the only one equipped to receive the knowledge of the silver and to deal with this knowledge with wisdom. His faith in her is affirmed when she chooses to allow the information to die with the possessor.

Nostromo asks:

'Señora, shall I tell you where the treasure is? To you alone...Shining! Incorruptible!'
A pained, involuntary reluctance lingered in his tone, in his eyes, plain to the woman with the genius of sympathetic intuition....
'No, capataz,' she said. 'No one misses it now. Let it be lost forever.'
After hearing these words Nostromo closed his eyes, uttered no word, made no movement.¹³

Thus, the final decision is made by Emilia, who utilizes both the reasonable faculty for evaluating the effects of the silver and the emotional faculty for solving the dilemma of a dying man.

But it is in the long series of events preceding this climactic scene that Emilia has achieved this capacity. Conrad, in spite of his chronological wanderings, has gradually developed the divergencies accompanying both Emilia's outer and inner status. While the outer is manifested in the withdrawal of Charles from his wife in favor of the mine - which is described as a mistress more dreaded by Mrs. Gould than another woman - and the consequent disintegration of their

¹³Ibid., p. 475.

marital relationship, the inner is shown in the growing ability to accept her condition and to live honorably with her fate. Conrad describes Emilia at the end of the novel as being loved, respected, and honored by the people of Sulaco, an accomplishment achieved by none of the other characters.

Dr. Monygham also, in spite of his appearance to the citizens of Sulaco as a despicable character, finally achieves the integrity which Conrad sees as necessary to moral survival. It is through this character that the author portrays his familiar moral triad: the betrayal, the atonements, and the redemption. Before the events of revolution take place in Sulaco, Dr. Monygham has already been subjected to the inhumanities which accompany political upheaval. In the time when the tyrannical Guzman Bento had been Perpetual President of Costaguana, the doctor had been taken prisoner and subjected to unspeakable tortures for the purpose of eliciting information regarding Bento's enemies. It is at this time that Monygham encounters Conrad's first component of the triad to human fulfillment - the betrayal. As a result of the tortures, the doctor does betray his associates and for many years after pays for his actions, primarily in the agonizing loss of self-respect, but also in the loss of acceptance by the community. He is seen as a shuffling,

stealthy creature, moving furtively through the streets of Sulaco as if in a continual state of apology for the effrontery of his very existence. It is during this long and agonizing period that the doctor endures the second component of Conrad's triad - the atonement. It is not until the Goulds come to Sulaco that the opportunity to complete the synthesis is offered to the unfortunate creature, and it is solely from the fertility of Emilia's intelligent sympathy that this opportunity is born. To those about him, even after his acceptance by the Goulds, Dr. Monygham appears as a cynic, a man soured on all human motivations, a man averse to all human intercourse. However, Conrad reveals the doctor's tacit devotion to Emilia Gould, a devotion which revitalizes the emotional capacity in him which had for so long lain dormant. It is this devotion, then, which inspires the doctor to commit the constructive act which restores his self-respect, achieves his redemption, and completes the triangular pattern imposed by the author. Without the faith in him revealed by Emilia, Monygham would have lacked the will and the desire to conceive and carry out the plan for saving Sulaco. It is this faith which enabled him to present his plan with enough cunning and confidence to Nostromo that the Italian, in spite of his own disillusionment, agrees to undertake the dangerous journey to solicit the aid of Barrios.

It is important to note here that it is especially the confidence, the antithesis of all that had formerly engulfed Monygham, that enables him to accomplish this feat. This confidence in himself results from the revitalization of that necessary half of his human potential, faith in the value of emotional commitment that arises from his devotion to Mrs. Gould. It is true that in contrast to the integrity achieved by Emilia, which comes entirely from within herself, Monygham's fulfillment relies upon the strength of another; nevertheless, this fulfillment is achieved and the doctor appears finally as one of the two characters who fit into Conrad's moral structure, for he utilizes not only his intellectual capacity to view the world and its values realistically, but also his emotional capacity to act unselfishly for the betterment of the community. If his redemptive act had been conceived and committed in order to achieve the recognition and gratitude of Emilia Gould, the integrity would not have been realized. But this was not the case; therefore, his motivation is sincerely altruistic, untainted by a concern for acknowledgment by others.

It is essentially in these five major characters that Joseph Conrad's moral philosophy is developed. In the characters of Antonia Avellanosa and Giorgio Viola assumptions could be made which would possibly lead to their joining

company with Emilia and Dr. Monygham. But these would be only assumptions. Antonia appears at the end as self-sufficient and honored by the citizens of Sulaco, but we have only Conrad's word for this. Antonia, as a character, is not developed in depth and fails to inspire other than indifference, or at the most, impatience, in the reader. Throughout the depictions of her relationship with Decoud and of the ordeal arising from her father's death, her actions are stilted and wooden. Thus, while the probability exists that the author intended for her to represent fulfillment, he was unsuccessful in conveying his conception to the reader. Giorgio also appears to possess the integrity necessary to Conrad's plan, but again, there is only the author's overt statement to suggest this. Giorgio is described as a man motivated by excitement, adventure, and warfare, but also by principle. Conrad writes: "There was in old Giorgio an energy of feeling, a personal quality of conviction...."¹⁴ The old Garibaldino exploits both the emotional and rational components of his nature, although this cannot be deduced from a presentation of his thoughts, feelings, or actions. In fact, reaction to this character is somewhat confused because of the contradiction arising from Conrad's expressed attitude toward him in contrast with the inexplicable de-

¹⁴Ibid., p. 52.

tachment displayed by the Italian towards his final destructive act, the killing of Nostromo. These, and other peripheral characters, are not sufficiently developed for assured analysis, and this was perhaps intentional on the part of the author. The major role played by the mine, or material interests, also could be considered in an analysis of the moral philosophy developed by Conrad, but in view of the original premise, the mine, in itself, is incapable of moral evaluation because of its nature. Therefore, to maintain consistency of approach, the fates of the five major characters offer the only pertinent criteria for the perception and understanding of Joseph Conrad's philosophical statement.

However, to conclude at this point would be unsatisfactory in regard to the author's ultimate conclusion. The fates of Nostromo and Decoud are almost self-explanatory in relation to their failures as complete and moral individuals. Death is final, and each of these characters meets his death as the direct result of his incompleteness. There is no argument here, and Conrad is explicit in his attitude. The fate of Charles Gould is more complex. While he appears to be a successful man, wealthy, respected, and honored by his community and associates, his deficiency is more subtly developed and demands a more profound grasp of moral obligations than

is commonly perceived. Here, Conrad is exploring the obscure crannies of morality rather than the obvious flaws to which blame is commonly attributed. The fates of these three characters are, in the first two cases, literally, and in the second, figuratively, fatal. Charles Gould, in spite of his intelligence and accomplishments, resides in the shadowy realm of the unaware, oblivious to the enlightenment envisioned by Conrad. There is possible, then, no fulfillment; there is only existence if integrity is not achieved.

But what is the conclusion drawn when integrity is achieved? The fates of Emilia Gould and Dr. Monygham are also depressing. Emilia is described as being "as solitary as any human being had ever been, perhaps, on this earth,"¹⁵ and tells Giselle, after Nostromo's death, in a severe tone, "I have been loved too,"¹⁶ speaking in the past tense. Dr. Monygham, also, is seen as a solitary individual - one whose life is bereft of any apparent reward or symbols of satisfaction. He continues to the end to see himself as inferior in the eyes of Emilia, the only one who has given meaning to his life. Are these conditions then meant to indicate that life is futile regardless of response? Conrad would seem to be saying this to the insensitive reader who fails to comprehend the fragility and elusiveness of creed previously

¹⁵Ibid., p. 471.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 476.

mentioned. But in actuality, a charge of futility evaporates when exposed to the atmosphere of fulfillment so carefully constructed by the author. Emilia is lonely, certainly, but by utilizing both her emotional and rational potentials she has enabled herself to accept her condition realistically and to live with it honorably while continuing to respond to the emotional needs within herself and in those around her. Dr. Monygham also achieves this plateau of existence. Although he is denied the possibility of ever acquiring Emilia for his own, his long ordeal and the ultimate regaining of his self-respect enable him also to appreciate the goal of human existence with the satisfaction of one who possesses the knowledge of life and its purpose. There is a serenity in both of these characters which seems to deny the charge of cynicism so often directed at Joseph Conrad's attitude - a charge which arises from stock response to values. According to Conrad, complete contentment is not necessarily the goal of mankind; to experience life completely and still retain the strength to accept it is. This is not cynicism; rather, it is an insistence on the ultimate value of moral integrity, an achievement which is not expected to provide happiness or enjoyment. It does provide fulfillment and knowledge of one's potential and gives substance to the routine of living.

Conrad's creed, then, does not concern itself with the superficial satisfactions of life, and for this reason may seem obscure and elusive. It does concern itself with the inner depths of being whose intangible qualities can only be felt and not expressed. Nostromo, Decoud, and Charles Gould do not plumb these inner depths; Emilia and Dr. Monygham do. Through the fates of these five characters, then, Conrad presents a consistent philosophic statement whose obscurity is overshadowed by its power.

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