WILDERNESS AND HISTORY LOOPS: JOSEPH CONRAD'S NOSTROMO

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Abstract: Nostromo is presented as a circular novel, telling the repetitive history of a land oscillating between union and secession under the transcorporeal influence of silver, which affects the lives of all the characters in the book and the destiny of the country, becoming the main hero of a novel whose plot evinces material interests transforming an isolated country into a colony of globalizing capitalism. Nature is sacrificed for mining and commerce, but the mine and its silver have a destructive influence of obsession, war, and repetitive disaster on the cornucopian people who deal with it.

Keywords: material interest, silver, heterotopia, genocide, ecocide

In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said remarks among the features of the modernist imperial fiction "the circularity of structure" (Said 189). This trait is discernible in the vast fresco of Empire which Conrad creates in *Nostromo*. In a simplifying view, the novel could be summarized as a mesh of anti-cornucopian stories, connected by the common theme of lithosphere determining a country's looping history. In *Conrad the Novelist* (1958), Albert Guerard concludes that in *Nostromo* "the chronological dislocations and distortions of emphasis may reflect a theory of history as repetitive yet inconsecutive, devoid of reason, refusing to make sense" (Guerard 214). In *Joseph Conrad: Some Aspects of the Art of the Novel* (1936) Edward Crankshaw sums up *Nostromo* as "the passions of men short-sighted in good and evil" (Crankshaw 179), a theme which can involve nature's abuse.

The Sulaco republic is a heterotopia located in the fictitious peninsula of Azuera, identified by Robert Hampson in "Conrad's Heterotopic Fiction: Composite Maps, Superimposed Sites, and Impossible Spaces" (2005) as Panama or, according to Watts, as a collage of American states (Watts 418). Gould's mine is the Potosi silver mine in Peru. The first sentence of *Nostromo* is noted as a punctual beginning by Arnold Kettle in his *Introduction to the English Novel* (1951) as dealing with "government and trade" (Kettle 67).

> In the time of Spanish rule, and for many years afterwards, the town of Sulaco - the luxuriant beauty of the orange gardens bears witness to its antiquity - had never been commercially anything more important than a coasting port with a fairly large trade in ox-hides and indigo. (*N* 17)

The ecocritically significant economic details of second nature which these lines refer to are few: the orange gardens (as farming), the ox-hides (as cattle breeding) and indigo - a traditional dye obtained from the flora (as local industry). The land is briefly characterized by drought, "blighted by a curse" (*N* 17) of rain stolen by the sea around, by lack of vegetation - not "a single blade of grass," barren and "deadly because of its forbidden treasures" (17) of the lithosphere. Folk legends associating "the idea of evil and wealth" (17) are replete with dual attraction and fear of treasures, seen as malefic temptations of the environment. Keeper of silver, the "inviolable sanctuary" (17) of Sulaco is guarded from external contacts by the Cordillera's wilderness "unroofed temple open to the ocean, with its walls of lofty mountains

hung with the mourning draperies of cloud" (17). Lithosphere, hydrosphere and atmosphere cooperate to make the country a safe treasure house, where cornucopian mining and trade are sins, economic isolation is preferred, and oral culture is dominated by the superstition of the treasure-hunting *gringos* punished to remain in the liminal state of life-in-death, which obsesses the eponymous hero throughout the novel. Religion, superstition and oral mythology concur to console the poor and desire for the earth's assets is unadvised. Folklore has also legends about the silver of the San Tomé mine: "The ore shoots would begin to rattle. The great clattering, shuffling, noise, gathering speed and weight, would be caught up by the walls of the gorge, and sent up upon the plain in a growl of thunder" (*N* 97), as the vitalist vibrant matter of the sleepless mountain heard at night. J. A. Bernstein sees here a pantheistic interpretation of the mine (Bernstein 2018:205).

The waterfall used for its own destruction is comparable to the genocide of the Indians, transformed into miner-slaves, "whole tribes"(*N* 55) having perished in the mine under the whips. In Jay Parker's image, the mine is an idol or a monstrous god requesting human sacrifice, the genocide of the Other race (Parker 241). The storied matter of the San Tomé silver mine narrates the plunder of the underground and the revenge of wilderness, as the history of ill luck brought by the mine to its owners and miners. Because of the primitive methods of extraction, the genocidal mine is unprofitable, in spite of the owners' efforts, so it manages iteratively to be abandoned and gain its peace as retrieved wilderness. When it is exploited by British masters, a revolution kills them, too. After a decree of confiscation and a counter-revolution, the mine is closed again. Being allotted to Gould Sr. as the payment for the state's debts to him, the injustice of the huge taxes enforced on him for the unexploited mine ownership kills him.The third to exploit it is his son, Charles, who retaliates his father's failure by a successful mining venture, transforming wilderness into a labour camp (a heterotopia of deviation), and seemingly succeeding in making the silver mine the best business of Sulaco, however, at the price of sacrificing the environment and the Sulacan people. Unwelcomed by the abused wilderness, human cornucopia fails at every attempt with the San Tomé mine.

> Mrs. Gould knew the history of the San Tomé mine. Worked in the early days mostly by means of lashes on backs of slaves, its yield had been paid for in its own weight of human bones. Whole tribes of Indians perished in the exploitation; and then the mine was abandoned, since with this primitive method it had ceased to make a profitable return, no matter how many corpses were thrown into its maw. (*N* 55)

The crime against the environment is not forgiven by sentient agentive wilderness. Emilia's nostalgia of the luxuriating flora accompanies Conrad's disgust at the pollution - "the big trench half filled with the refuse of the excavations and tailings" (*N* 98) expressing his ecological position against environment devastation, succinctly evoking Garrard's "Pollution" trope. Mrs. Gould would like to turn time back and bring to life the fernery and waterfall, but Charles tells her that the past is irretrievable, the place is no longer what it used to be at the time of the painting. The novel connects stories of wilderness's punishment of those who deal with a forbidden treasure, bringing ill-luck because Gaia retaliates on her plunderers.

In "Guardian of the Treasure: *Nostromo*" (1975), Dorothy Van Ghent interprets the novel as a tale about *mana* (23). She sees Charles as the knight who comes to a waste land to save it, avenges his father by winning the wager with nature lost by the latter, gains the treasure and should bring prosperity to Sulaco, but neither he nor the other characters enjoy a happy ending. Endemic poverty and cyclical war continue to plague the blighted land, agentive matter retaliates the destroyed wilderness. The fisher king who saves the country from drought becomes rich but barren. Van Ghent notes that the *mana* archetype is a

character test bringing reward or tragedy (1975: 25). Outer wilderness punishes humans with inner wilderness-of-the-mind, driving mad anyone connected to the silver: Gould, Nostromo, Decoud, Sotillo, Montero.

The tragic history of the warring country doomed by the mine's presence has happened before and is going to recur on a Lucretian spiral. The revolution - counter-revolution and separatism - unionism cycles are a looping history pattern in a country without any history or chronicle, which loses its only manuscript on the national past, because of wind (nature) and war (society). Transcorporeal silver and its abstract formula, the hyperobject of "material interests," weave a mesh perverting all Sulacans. The mining and railway construction mean the intrusion into wilderness of "foreigners who dug the earth, blasted the rocks, drove the engines" for "the progressive and patriotic undertaking" (*N* 40), an obvious irony. Sulaco falls prey to cornucopian Empire. "Patriotism and capitalism feed and feed off one another in the history of Costaguana" (Parker 241).The British would drill through the basalt Higuerota if it were possible, but they "can't move mountains" (46), so they ruin the farms at the mountain foot acting as the masters of the country, wounding the earth, seizing the Sulacans' farms through Charles Gould as a tool of Empire who gives up his nationalism for material interests and allows the foreign powers to appropriate the country as a colony.

Don Pepe, Gould's manager, organizes the three miner villages like labour camps in a heterotopia of deviation. He maintains military discipline reifying the miners into an army of robots: while a shift is "swallowed" by the animistic mine's maw the other is pushed off, in automata squads, and the once lush wilderness is reduced to palm-trees demarcations between the numbered labour camps. Whenever Conrad makes a depersonalized collective portrait of the Indian miners (*Nostromo*), the Londoners ("Karain"), the blacks (*Heart of Darkness*), the Chinese ("Typhoon"), the Muslims (*Lord Jim*), they are undistinguishable individuals in a mute or jabbering hydra. Mrs. Gould admits her inability to tell one miner from another, attributing their physiognomies to a common "mould of suffering" (*N* 93).

In a letter to Ernst Bendz, the author of a study on this novel, Conrad writes: "I will take the liberty to point out that Nostromo has never been intended for the hero of the *Tale of the Seaboard*. Silver is the pivot of the moral and material events, affecting the lives of everybody in the tale" (*CL*, II, 296). Despite its title, this anti-imperialistic novel does not have a key hero, but nineteen characters, most of whom anti-heroes, entangled by the actual agentive hero, *The Silver of the Mine* - the eponymous title of the first part, in the mesh of an anti-cornucopian dystopia of individual tragedies triggered by the silver actant and watched indifferently by an evil first nature mirrored by the second nature of civilization: "Tyranny, torture and corruption seem as much an inalienable feature of the landscape of Costaguana as the Placid Gulf or Mount Higuerota" (Armstrong 157). By the darkness of the Placid Gulf, nature is a colluder to crime, and by the San Tomé mountain it is a source of corruption through silver, which means different things to various characters, creates an obsession to some of them and determines all their destinies. The three men connected to the ingots transport end up in madness as porous victims of transcorporeal silver: one is killed by his addiction to silver, another by solitude in nature, the third one is alienated by the mine and his Concession is doomed to go to Empire.

The pair of characters in class opposition consists of the capitalist owner and the factotum proletarian mostly paid with praise words. Charles Gould is a case of obsession, with no feeling for the environment or the labour force, who approaches his business professionally, overexerts himself into premature aging, inverts his life values to keep "the flow of treasure [...] from the re-opened scar in the flank of the mountain" (*N*132) unstopped. He commodifies all the humans from the Indians to his wife, lets "material interests" have the upper hand over consideration for nature and makes Sulaco the colony of Empire, separating

it from the unprofitable rest of Costaguana. Gould idealistically trusts "material interests" to bring progress: "Only let the material interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist" (*N* 81).

His idea turns "into a fetish [...] a wall of silver-bricks, erected by the silent work of evil spirits, between [Mrs. Gould] and her husband. He seemed to dwell alone within a circumvallation of precious metal" (190), porous, both a master and a slave to the silver. Starting from a cornucopian demonstration, the mine becomes his fixed idea and cynical war strategy. Emilia Gould is afraid that "a man haunted by a fixed idea is insane" (315). His judgement being "insidiously corrupted" (302) by wilderness-of-the-mind, he becomes an oxymoronic imperialist-anarchist who is ready to blow up a mountain and half a country "if need be" (303). Camelia Raghinaru remarks in Gould "the spirit of a buccaneer and the lawlessness of the indomitable bandit Hernandez" (2015:143), his anarchist double. He is to the mine what the bandit is to the Campo, "equals before the lawlessness of the land" (*N* 300).

The ruined wilderness takes revenge by driving him barren. The mine's ingots are the Goulds' still-born only offspring; like Gould, the Avellanos and the Corbeláns are the last in their lineage, belonging to an endangered species. There are no heirs in this country punished by ruined wilderness. Ironically, Mrs. Gould, a childless midwife to the anthropomorphic silver ingots of the mine, endows these ersatz babies with "a justificative conception"(*N* 99) for the sacrifice of wilderness and of private happiness, receiving the first ingot in her "unmercenary hands," "like the emergence of a principle" (*N* 99) but Charles's chimerical, erroneous belief is that nature's commodification can be highly lucrative without payment by human tragedy. Although Emilia is queenlike saluted by the soldiers' convoy passing under her balcony, slavishly carrying the silver to the port, to Empire (*N* 105), she is their tantamount, a slave to her husband's mine. In an eco-feministic approach shared with Sherry Ortney (1974), feminine wilderness is destroyed by the military androcentric mine (Nadelhaft 1991:6). Indeed, we see the feminine retrieved wilderness repeatedly reemerging and the masculine androcentric mine cyclically destroying it. It is an ecofeminist war of sexes, isomorphic to the war between cornucopia and nature.

Charles's passion for the mine seduces tycoon Holroyd into investing in his risky business, giving him a party and an elected president; also, his threat of destruction dissuades Montero, his revolutionary opponent, from reaching his goal - the mine. Charles imagines that he handles Holroyd as a naïve tool, not realizing that it is Holroyd who makes him his puppet. The novel forecasts Sulaco being swallowed by Empire and continuing its civil war looping cycles indefinitely, and the Sulacan people's future of suffering under the foreign powers now building the infra-structure. As Stephen Land states in "Four Views of the Hero" (1987), Gould's story sounds "Wagnerian," as it does not end with the novel (Land 82).

Nostromo, the proletarian, starts as an incorruptible Persona, "the terror of all the thieves in the town" (*N* 24). He has a Shadow face - a frustrated unpaid worker who expresses eco-Marxist hatred for the "*hombres finos*" (406), who keep the people "as they kept dogs, to fight and hunt" (342). Taking charge of the treasure, he is given a "deadly disease" (222). On the fatal night when his lighter is broken by Sotillo's steamer, actant silver seduces him into making him a thief. Since it makes no difference whether the ingots cargo is saved or sunk, he decides to hide it. Nostromo finds the solution for class antagonism in stealth, finding his theft justified: society shares his guilt and the silver is not needed, so he equates eco-Marxism with an outlaw's thinking: "the rich lived on wealth stolen from the people" (443), and he takes "nothing that was not lost to them already by their folly and their betrayal" (443). But stealing the silver transport, he porously comes under its insidious evil spell and agentive retaliation.

Nostromo is osmotically marked by silver throughout the novel: his horse is silvery, Giselle's double Morenita publicly claims Nostromo's silver buttons, making him cut them off. Losing his silver buttons to the gipsy is symbolic of Nostromo's future: the earth steals his silver and has him pay with his life. Linda's cry closes the novel at his death under a sky covered by an ominous cloud "shining like a mass of solid silver" (*N* 463). Once perverted, he enters a vicious circle: he looks "fixedly at his fingers, as if surprised they had no stain on his skin" (429).The dead-in-life *gringos*' legend obsesses him to such a point that he identifies with them (*N* 431). To him, the corrupting treasure has "the smell of earth, of damp foliage" (444), of rot in nature, evoking death. The vibrant treasure "fastens upon [his] mind. He will pray and blaspheme and still persevere, and will curse the day he ever heard of it" (379) confessing his bondage to the "incorruptible" silver (458) and his contradictory feelings to it. As "the moral and sensible touchstone of the novel" (Nadelhaft 128), "the flame" round whom all "the other characters gather to warm their hands" (Penn Warren "Introduction" to *Nostromo* xii), Emilia consoles Giselle at Nostromo's death telling her that he would have left her for his treasure, a stronger lure than love (*N* 459). Animistic silver goes back to the earth as predestined to stay there where it belongs and the last line of the novel recalls Nostromo's two great conquests: "of treasure and of love" (463) in this precise order of importance for a man with the double bind of two masters.

In spite of the war, the mine, a state within a state, continues its oxymoronic evil-bringing profit-making work:

> Don José Avellanos would mutter '*Imperium in imperio*, Emilia, my soul,' with an air of profound self-satisfaction which, somehow, in a curious way, seemed to contain a queer admixture of bodily discomfort" (*N* 102).

In this reader trap, Avellanos both vocally praises the mine and physically telltales his hidden dissatisfaction with Empire's mine causing destruction and looming separatism, which he cannot approve. Decoud, the fiancé of Don Avellanos's daughter, is a Parisian journalist who lacks nationalism, but, to win Antonia, concedes to be a half-country patriot: "Look at the mountains! Nature itself seems to cry to us 'Separate!'" (*N*160). "When Father Corbelán calls Decoud 'neither the son of his own country nor of any other', he designates Conrad's own predicament" (Baines 310), thus Decoud's destiny is comparable to Conrad's fate and Costaguana becomes a parable for Poland, her history being comparable to Poland's predicament (310).

As Benita Parry notes, the main conflict of the novel is "one of law against anomie" (Parry 112). Chaos is civil war, but we see the law and the order without justice of "material interests" like Monygham, who warns Mrs Gould that "material interests will not let you jeopardize their development for the mere idea of pity and justice" (*N* 418) and the San Tomé mountain will be "ready to crush innumerable lives" (*N* 427). Monygham and Emilia are the only people in the novel who foresee the future of Sulaco lucidly. The prophecy on the "deadly fate of the treasure seekers" is fulfilled, as noted by Eloise Hay Knapp in *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad* (1963). Emilia Gould's "prophetic vision" is "the moral degradation of the ideal" (*N* 428) that once seemingly redeemed mining. At the end of the novel we can see her waking nightmare as the maimed San Tomé mountain turned into the mine revengefully hanging "over the whole land, feared, hated, wealthy; more soulless than any tyrant, more pitiless and autocratic than the worst Government, " (*N* 428) killing the people and the environment, and she concludes: "Material interest" (428).

Wilderness's retaliation on Sulaco's cornucopia is the country's doom as the accomplishment of the *gringos*' warning legend, transforming the transcorporeal power of

concrete silver into an abstract, general, inevitable one, related to the human species' inner wilderness revealed by capitalistic Empire - the eco-Marxist "material interests."

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