

**MIRRORS AND MONEY:
CONSTRUCTING
AND DE-CONSTRUCTING REVOLUTION
IN MARIANO AZUELA'S *LOS DE ABAJO*
AND JOSEPH CONRAD'S *NOSTROMO***

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“Those who have served the cause of the revolution have ploughed the sea”
Simón Bolívar

Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo* (*The Underdogs*) and Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* are two early fictional accounts of Latin American revolutions. Although Azuela's account is that of an insider (having participated in the Mexican revolution) and Conrad's is that of an outsider (never having participated in a revolution), each comes to similar conclusions concerning revolution and revolutionary ideals. As has been commonly recognized, both Azuela and Conrad come to criticize the idea of revolution as it appears in their novels. What is significant, however, and what has been much less commonly recognized, is not so much Azuela's and Conrad's final conclusions regarding revolution than the narrative means by which each arrives at his critique of revolution. Both *Los de abajo* and *Nostromo* present revolutionary causes that profess the overthrow of an oppressive regime and the establishment of a benevolent government in its place. In each case, though, the narrative eventually undermines revolutionary ideals. Both Azuela and Conrad construct the narrative of a Latin American revolution, but at the same time each undercuts that same account by revealing the revolutionaries' goal to be material gain rather than humanitarian ideals and by revealing the revolutionary governments to be essentially the same as those they seek to overthrow. These larger issues of revolutionary failure appear in the context of the narratives themselves, as both Azuela and Conrad employ narrative techniques that emphasize and uncover the ideological concerns that arise in the novels. The narrative methodology in each novel mirrors the revolutionary movement, although the novels move in opposite directions: Azuela's narrative moves from clarity to confusion, while Conrad's narrative moves

from confusion to clarity. By moving between narratives of order and disorder, both authors reveal the barrenness and chaos of the revolution, as even the narrative methodology itself mirrors the ideas these novels investigate.

I

In undermining revolutionary ideals, Azuela's *Los de abajo* focuses on three issues: character development, ideological development, and narrative development – and their interrelationship. Azuela's character development in particular damages revolutionary ideals. Initially, he presents favorable portraits of the revolutionaries. The *federales* who come to Demetrio Macías's house at the beginning of the novel are crass, cruel, and duplicitous: killing Macías's dog, intending to rape his wife, and finally setting fire to his home.¹ Shortly thereafter, when the *federales* leave two of Macías's men hanged from a tree (13), we feel sympathy for the revolutionaries and antipathy toward the *federales*. This antipathy increases when the *federales* later exhibit similar brutality toward the civilians they encounter as well (14, 15, 26). Furthermore, Macías and his men are, as the novel's title suggests, *los de abajo* (those from below), a part of society oppressed for generations. As the narrative progresses, though, this sympathetic picture of the revolutionaries gradually slips away as they generally show themselves to be little more than ruffians and opportunists. The first hint of their real character comes in their joy at killing the *federales* (10–2), which of course may be mitigated since they are fighting an enemy. Similarly, when Luis Cervantes tries to join the revolutionary cause, Macías's men abuse him and consider killing him immediately (16–7). Even this incident may seem reasonable because Luis comes to them as a federalist deserter and could be a spy. In contrast, other incidents are less ambiguous and reveal the true nature of so many of the revolutionaries as well as the emptiness of their motivation.

Although Macías's men appear sympathetic at first because they are society's downtrodden, as the novel develops, they continually demonstrate their corruption: “[T]hey were returning as happily as they had marched off to war a few days earlier, looting each town, each hacienda, each hamlet, and even the most wretched huts they found in their path” (52), and this behavior continues throughout the remainder of the novel (67–9, 91). Macías's men can also be brutal at times. Seymour Menton refers to “the lack of ideals and the brutality of the revolutionaries.”² *El güero* Margarito shows himself to be perhaps the worst of the lot. When Pancracio asks him why he shows up

¹ Mariano Azuela. *The Underdogs*. Trans. Frederick H. Fornoff, critical edn. Pittsburgh, Penn.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992, pp. 5–8. Hereafter, all quotations from *Los de abajo* will be taken from this edition and will be followed by their page numbers in parenthesis.

² Seymour Menton. “In Search of a Nation: The Twentieth-Century Spanish American Novel.” *Hispania*, 38.4 (December 1955), p. 433.

one day with a prisoner in tow, he replies, "Because I've never seen up close the look a guy gets when you tighten a noose around his neck" (86). He eventually kills the man (somewhat accidentally) by beating him with a sword and then laughs, "And just when I'd trained him not to eat!" (91). The men's brutality, though, is not just directed against their enemies but even against innocent civilians, as when Pancraccio kills the church sacristan: "[I]t had been all his [the sacristan's] own fault!... What kind of dope goes around wearing trousers, a jacket, and a little cap? No way Pancraccio's going to tolerate some dandy crossing his path!" (84). Several other revolutionaries boast of similar excesses. One says, "Back there in Torreón, I killed a woman who wouldn't sell me a plate of enchiladas" (66). Another responds, "I killed a shopkeeper in the town of Parral because when he gave me change, two of the bills had Huerta's picture on them" (66), while a third claims, "Hey, in Chihuahua I killed a dude because every time I went in to this place to have lunch, he was always sitting at the same table at the same time of day" (66). Nor are these isolated incidents; at one point, the revolutionaries force a civilian to guide them through a town occupied by the *federales* despite his pleas to be allowed to return home; he dies during the ensuing battle (43–4). Elsewhere, Margarito makes various townspeople "dance a jig" (96, 98) as he shoots at their feet. He also puts a glass of tequila on a boy's head and then shoots it off, but on the second attempt "he shoots off an ear instead of the glass. And doubling over with laughter, he says to the boy: 'Here, kid, take these bills. It's not serious! You can fix yourself up with a little arnica and some whiskey'" (97). By the novel's close, Macías's men show themselves to be corrupt, cruel, and lacking any revolutionary ideals.

Macías and Cervantes are the novel's protagonists. Although there are significant differences between the two characters, they share a common significance in Macías representing the revolution's military leadership and Cervantes representing its intellectual leadership in the novel.³ They represent important aspects of the revolutionary effort. Like Macías's men, both Macías and Cervantes initially appear in a favorable light, but, like the other characters, as the novel unfolds, each shows himself to be corrupt and brutal. Forced to send away his family and seeing his house burned, Macías initially evokes sympathy, but later actions soon undermine such feelings. John Rutherford argues, "Demetrio Macías himself, far from attempting to impose any discipline or order on his followers, indulges more than most of them in licentiousness,"⁴ but Rutherford is too categorical in his criticism. Santiago Daydí is closer to the mark: "Even though he does not really reach the level of cruelty and wickedness of his enemies and many of his fellow revolutionaries, [. . .] [i]n the process of the Revolution he has been tainted

³ Walter M. Langford argues that Cervantes "entrenches himself as Demetrio's 'brain truster' and idea man", *The Mexican Novel Comes of Age*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971, p. 22.

⁴ John Rutherford. *Mexican Society during the Revolution: A Literary Approach*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, p. 200. José Vázquez Amara also judges Macías harshly, seeing him as "cold" and "cruel". *The Contemporary Latin American Narrative*. New York: Las Americas, 1970, p. 20.

by the negative hues of human nature.”⁵ Macías begins basically as a good man, and, even though he does not become wholly reprehensible, he is clearly corrupted by his contact with the revolution and quickly becomes a much less positive figure than he was at the beginning of the novel. He carouses, fights “for the sheer pleasure of it” (33), steals a gold watch (68), disrupts the towns through which he leads his troops, and when told after a night of carousing that “an old prostitute had a bullet in her navel, and two of [his] new recruits had holes in their heads,” he “shrugged his shoulders and said: ‘Too bad!... Well, let’s get them buried’” (51). Late in the novel, Macías even rejects his family to return to the conflict (116). These actions severely damage the sympathetic light in which Macías appears at the novel’s outset.

Cervantes also appears in a positive light at first. He says that he believes in the revolution (22, 35–6, 49), and he runs a risk in joining the revolutionaries, telling them, “I’m a revolutionary, too. The *federales* recruited me and assigned me to the ranks; but in the scrape the day before yesterday I managed to desert, and I’ve come all this way on foot, looking for you” (16). He appears even more sympathetic when the revolutionaries mistreat him (22). Cervantes soon reveals himself to be wholly reprehensible, however, and, unlike Macías, Cervantes is corrupt even before his contact with the revolutionaries. Cervantes reveals himself most blatantly in his advice to Camila: “Don’t be silly!... Look, he [Macías] really likes you; you’ll never have another chance like this. Don’t pass it up. Silly, Demetrio’s going to end up a general, he’ll be rich... Lots of horses, rings and bracelets, fancy dresses, elegant homes, and loads of money to spend... Just imagine what it will be like to be at his side!” (38). Cervantes shows himself to be both materialistic and cruel. Camila has been kind and loving to him, and yet Cervantes suggests that she sell herself to Macías. Cervantes does not even realize his insensitivity but instead assumes he is proposing a fair exchange of services. Later, he continues to demonstrate his corruption and cruelty by pocketing a jewel box during a looting spree

⁵ Santiago Daydí. “Drinking: A Narrative Structural Pattern in Mariano Azuela’s *Los de abajo*,” *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 27.1 (1980), p. 62. Elsewhere, though, Daydí argues that Macías “is defending his rights and those of his people; he has no other way of defending himself from injustice. As it is, Demetrio Macías appears as an innocent victim of oppression” (“Characterization in *Los de abajo*,” *American Hispanist* 2.2 [October 1976], p. 11). Similarly, John S. Brushwood suggests that “the reader’s sympathy toward Macías is basic from the start of the novel, and concern for him is active throughout the book” (*The Spanish American Novel: A Twentieth-Century Survey*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1975, p. 21). Seymour Menton goes even further, arguing that Macías “doesn’t enjoy killing. [...] Even the one prize that falls to him and which he keeps, the watch that chimes on the hour, in no way cheapens him. [...] Nor is Demetrio a womanizer like his companions. He doesn’t accept Margarito’s invitation to visit the red-light district, and he behaves honorably with Camila, whom he truly loves. Considering the revolutionary circumstances, this act of marital infidelity does not stain his character” (“Epic Textures of *Los de abajo*.” [In:] *The Underdogs*. Trans. Frederick H. Fornoff, p. 149). Clearly, Macías is not as negative a character as most of the others in the novel; he does refuse Margarito’s offer (98) as well as Cervantes’s offer of a sack of gold (81), but Macías does in fact enjoy killing (12, 33), and to gloss over the stolen watch, his affair with Camila, and other questionable acts and comments is, it seems to me, to let him off too easily.

(67), burning down Don Mónico's house (79), stealing a sack of gold (80), offering to bring Camila to Macías in exchange for a gold watch (81), deceiving Camila into thinking that *he* has come back for her (82), and preparing to throw a widower out of a room when he complains that the revolutionaries stole his corn (92). Although he can articulate revolutionary ideals, Cervantes fails in any practical application of such ideals.

During the course of the novel, as the revolutionaries show themselves to be essentially ruffians and opportunists, the movement similarly shows itself not to be a struggle for justice and equality for the people but rather an excuse to pillage and terrorize. In this way, *Los de abajo* reveals the corruption of the revolutionary cause in the corruption of its adherents. Macías and Cervantes are particularly important in this effect because of their positions as military and ideological representatives of the cause. If Macías and Cervantes represent the revolution and yet fail in their character, conviction, and motivation, then by implication the justification of the revolution must fail as well.

Richard Young and Calvin Griffin voice a common interpretation that the revolution and revolutionaries gradually degenerate during the course of the novel.⁶ Although this degeneration is true of Macías, he appears to be the exception rather than the rule. Consequently, this parallel between the state of both the revolution's participants and its ideology takes on even greater significance, when it becomes apparent that most of the rest of Macías's men *do not* gradually degenerate; instead, their movement from sympathetic characters to unsympathetic characters is really only an illusion; that is, upon close scrutiny, the picture of these characters later in *Los de abajo* is not much different from what they have actually been throughout. For example, Macías remarks, "Anastasio came along with me, after he killed somebody" (34), and Venancio says, "Sure, Quail. One thing I do remember is that the only reason you're with us is because you stole a watch and some cheap rings." To which Quail responds, "You're the one to talk!... You had to beat it out of your village because you poisoned your girlfriend" (27). Cervantes's gradual degeneration is also an illusion. Early in the novel, he tells the revolutionaries, "My name is Luis Cervantes. I'm a medical student and also a journalist. Because I spoke out in favor of the revolutionaries, they came after me, caught me and stuck me in a barracks" (17). Later, though, Solís exposes Cervantes as a fraud when he says to him, "But frankly, I really need for you to explain something to me before... I can't understand how a reporter for *El País* during Madero's presidency,

⁶ For example, Young argues, "The triumphant, upward movement of the Revolution ends at that point [the end of part one], and the heroism of the *guerrilleros* degenerates initially to their anarchical conduct described in the second part and then, through death and defeat at the end of the novel, to the total dissipation of all possibility of realizing the goals for which the struggle had been undertaken" ("Narrative Structure in Two Novels by Mariano Azuela: *Los caciques* and *Los de abajo*." *Revista canadiense de estudios hispánicos*, 2.2 [Winter 1978], p. 174). Griffin remarks that "Part II, then, is increasingly pessimistic, and the gradual process of degeneration which it portrays serves again to convey Azuela's thesis that the Revolution has been betrayed" ("The Structure of *Los de abajo*." *Revista canadiense de estudios hispánicos*, 6.1 [Autumn 1981], p. 30). Similarly, Rutherford argues that "the Revolution is presented as a process of inexorable decline" (101).

the guy who wrote such scathing articles in *El Regional*, the guy who referred to us so frequently with the epithet of ‘bandits,’ could suddenly have joined our ranks” (50). Solís’s remark destroys all that Cervantes has claimed, and although Cervantes responds, “The truth of the matter is, they’ve got me convinced” (50), the facts do not support his rebuttal. Instead, Cervantes’s ideology from the start seems to be nothing more than opportunism; shortly after meeting the revolutionaries, he thinks, “So, whether they were revolutionaries or bandits or whatever you chose to call them, they were going to overthrow the government; tomorrow belonged to them; so you had to be on their side” (24). And when the fortunes of Macías’s men begin to reverse, Cervantes abandons the cause (carrying off booty acquired along the way). Thus, in the end, what seems to have been a gradual descent from positive to negative in so many of these characters is just mistaken first impressions. Rather, they are largely ruffians from the start – not ideologically motivated revolutionaries. As a result, neither does the revolutionary movement that these men embody gradually degenerate but is instead lacking ideological motivation from its outset. In this way, Azuela undermines the revolutionary cause both in its inception and in its evolution, by showing it to be corrupt in its origins and subsequently corrupting those good men like Macías who join the cause.

In addition to the character development, the revolution’s ideals are further undermined at their very core by the revolutionaries’ confusion over their reasons for fighting. Their motives seem clear at first, even if they cannot fully articulate them. As the novel develops, though, their motivational confusion becomes more and more apparent, so much so that it becomes unclear why the revolutionaries opposed the *federales* in the first place. As a result of their oppression at the hands of the *federales* and their sympathetic appearance early in the novel, the revolutionaries seem to have the basis for ideological reasons for their cause. But, as noted earlier, most of them actually joined because they were running from the law (27, 33, 34). Later, their ranks swell with a great influx of criminals, whom Macías actually seeks out to join their cause (36); before long, Macías’s troops seem to consist almost entirely of a collection of mercenaries and thieves: “‘The thing is, I went ahead and collected my own salary, including back pay,’ said Quail, exhibiting the watches and gold rings he had taken from the priest’s house” (85). Manteca agrees, “For this, anyone would be happy to go to war” (85). The looting is what he is “risking his hide for” (85). Similarly, La Pintada admonishes the revolutionaries to plunder, concluding, “Otherwise, what was the revolution for?” (67). Even Macías says of his men’s looting, “That’s the only pleasure they have left after offering their bellies up for target practice” (67). Gerhard Herbst notes that “Azuela does not attribute any revolutionary ideals of social reform to the guerrillas. [. . .] Social idealism was rare; the main purpose [for fighting] was to acquire *avances* or booty.”⁷ This confusion surrounding the revolutionaries’ motiva-

⁷ Gerhard R. Herbst. *Mexican Society as Seen by Mariano Azuela*. New York: Abra Ediciones, 1977, p. 65. Rutherford agrees, “[T]he motivation of these guerrillas never had anything directly to do with revolutionary ideals of social reform. The Revolution is never, for these revolutionaries, a way of

tion increases as the narrative progresses; the revolutionaries begin doing more looting than fighting, until finally complete disorder reigns. The revolutionaries' wanton destruction manifests this disorder and further symbolizes the chaos of the revolution. This destruction initially occurs during their looting sprees as they search for plunder. But even more than the disorderly looting, the useless destruction of objects carries the image of revolutionary chaos:

Quail, for twenty-five centavos, had the pleasure of taking it [a typewriter] in his hands and flinging it with all his might against the stones, where it broke apart noisily. That was like a signal: all the men who were carrying heavy or unwieldy objects began to get rid of them, smashing them against the rocks. Items made of glass and porcelain, thick mirrors, brass candlesticks, exquisite statuettes, Chinese vases – all the useless things taken as spoils during the march – were smashed to pieces along the road. (52; see also 67–9)

John S. Brushwood remarks, “Azuela relates the incident of the typewriter as if it were a daily occurrence,”⁸ and Griffin notes that “Azuela concentrates upon the gratuitous destruction of beautiful objects”⁹ during one of the looting scenes (67–9), as does Jefferson Rea Spell.¹⁰ This same kind of senseless destruction appears again later: “And throwing his [Margarito’s] arms over the shoulders of his friends, he has them carry him to the red-light district, marking his passage through town by spraying bullets left and right, splintering doors and walls and smashing street lights” (98). These incidents of destruction substantiate Floyd Merrill’s view that “Demetrio and his small band destroy without attempting to rebuild.”¹¹ In the end, these images of wanton destruction become real as the last pictures we have of Macías’s troops are scenes of chaos, so that by the end of the novel even the motivation of booty seems to have disappeared – as their motives become completely enigmatic.

changing society, but rather an enticing release from society into anarchy” (199) and “the main goal soon becomes the acquisition of booty” (200). Similarly, Jefferson Rea Spell comments that none of Macías’s men “was stirred by any patriotic motive” (*Contemporary Spanish-American Fiction*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944, p. 87). See also Boyd Carter’s comment regarding a revolution with “ideals aground on the indefiniteness of goals, personal interest put ahead of duty and responsibility” (“The Mexican Novel at Mid-Century,” *Prairie Schooner* 28.2 [Summer 1954], pp. 143–4). Jorge Ruffinelli takes a somewhat more conciliatory tone, suggesting that “on the one hand, it shows the popular struggles, including the tribulations, contradictions, and sorrows of the poorest people oppressed by a fierce *caciquismo* that was to be replaced by a bourgeoisie no less wicked. On the other hand, it also tells how the ‘barbarism’ of the people made the victory of true class consciousness impossible, whatever its chances might have been otherwise” (“From Unknown Work to Literary Classic.” *The Underdogs*. Trans. Frederick H. Fornoff, p. 161).

⁸ John S. Brushwood. *Mexico in Its Novel: A Nation’s Search for Identity*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966, p. 181.

⁹ Griffin, p. 28.

¹⁰ Spell, p. 83.

¹¹ Floyd Merrill. “*Los de abajo*, *La feria*, and the Notion of Space-Time Categories in the Narrative Text.” *Hispanófila* 27.1 (September 1983), p. 83; see also Rutherford, p. 201.

More telling, though, is the ideological conflict of interest that emerges. Initially, *Los de abajo* emphasizes the ideals of the revolution. Cervantes remarks, “I wanted to join the sacred cause of the downtrodden” (22) and later offers a toast: “[T]o the triumph of our cause, which is the sublime triumph of justice; may we soon see the realization of the ideals of redemption of this noble and longsuffering land of ours, and may those who have nourished the land with their own blood reap the fruits which are theirs by right” (49; see also 35–6). But a conflict arises as early as Cervantes’s first ideological statement: “The revolution is for the poor, the ignorant, those who’ve been slaves all their lives, poor wretches who don’t even know that if they’re poor it’s because the rich convert their tears and sweat and blood into gold” (22). Gold is at the heart of this statement (and so many others Cervantes makes), and he implies that gold is at the heart of the revolution as well. Cervantes’s focus on materialism rather than idealism is even more clear in his advice to Macías:

[D]o you think it’s fair to deprive your wife and children of the fortune divine Providence is ready to place in your hands? Is it right to abandon your country at this solemn hour when she’s going to need every bit of abnegation from her children, the poor, who can save her, keep her from falling once again into the hands of her eternal oppressors and executioners, the *caciques*?... You mustn’t forget what’s most sacred to a man in this world: his family and his country! (35; see also 80)

Perhaps no other passage so exhibits the essence of the revolutionary ideals in *Los de abajo*. Cervantes invokes the gods of heroism, patriotism, family, and religion in the cause of the revolution – but he also juxtaposes those ideals against gold, and thus the idealism of the revolution evaporates in this conflict of interest.

Still more important is the revolutionaries’ confusion concerning ideology itself. Max Parra remarks that Macías “is not moved to revolutionary action by political credos, about which he is almost completely ignorant,”¹² as Macías himself says to Cervantes, “So tell me, what cause is it we’re defending?” (17). Later, he remarks, “The truth is, I don’t understand politics” (96; see also 102). Similarly, Valderrama says, “Villa!... Obregón?... Carranza?... X... Y... Z! What do I care?... I love the revolution the same way I love a volcano that’s erupting! The volcano because it’s a volcano; the revolution because it’s the revolution!” (109). Even Cervantes at one point queries, “[W]hy should we stick around?... What cause are we defending now?” (81). A later conversation sums up the confusion:

“But what I can’t get through my head,” observed Anastasio Montañés, “is why we have to go on fighting... didn’t we defeat the Federation? Neither the general nor Venancio answered. [. . .] Anastasio, perplexed and stubborn, made the same observation to other groups of soldiers, who laughed at his naïveté. Because if you’ve got a rifle in your hands

¹² Max Parra. *Writing Pancho Villa’s Revolution: Rebels in the Literary Imagination of Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005, p. 26.

and plenty of shells in your cartridge belt, surely it's for the purpose of fighting. Against whom? For whom? That had never mattered to anyone! (106)

These overt comments only echo what the novel implies throughout: the revolutionaries not only cannot articulate what the revolution means, they do not even recognize its ideals when they hear them. Cervantes continually preaches revolutionary doctrine that no one understands.¹³ Finally, when Macías's wife asks him why he keeps fighting, he throws a stone into the canyon and says, "Look at that stone, how it never stops" (116; see also 51). In the end, no reasons for fighting exist, and, worse, the revolution, which should be a movement toward greater humanity and hope for future generations, reveals itself instead to be a movement away from such possibilities. Macías himself exemplifies this phenomenon – first symbolically then literally. At one point, Macías cannot even remember what his son looks like (89), graphically representing the ineffectuality of the revolution for progeny. Macías's homecoming further supports this fact: "[Macías] reached out his arms and tried to hug him [his son]; but the little boy, very frightened, took refuge in his mother's skirts. 'It's your father, son!... It's your father!' The boy buried his head in the folds of her skirt, still afraid" (115). This incident closes the door on the relationship between the future generation and the present revolution. Just after this encounter, Macías's wife begs him to stop fighting, but he will not (116). Both Macías and the revolution choose death rather than life as they spurn future generations.

Only Solís truly understands the revolution, but his understanding is a bleak one. As J. Patrick Duffey suggests, "Alberto Solís views the Revolution as a struggle for certain abstract ideals,"¹⁴ but in fact seeing no ideals behind the actions of his fellow revolutionaries, he grows disillusioned and remarks, "I expected a field of flowers at the end of the road... and I found a swamp" (50). He goes on to say that everything has become poisoned, "Enthusiasm, hopes, ideals, joys... nothing!" (50). Brushwood suggests that "the men of ideas have little or no revolutionary effect in Azuela's novel,"¹⁵ and Herbst notes, "Few idealists fought for the cause of the revolution, and even fewer survived it."¹⁶ The fate of Solís substantiates such claims, as he prophesies,

¹³ In fact, Brushwood suggests that one of Cervantes's functions "is to indicate that Macías and his men don't have the slightest idea what they are fighting for" (*The Spanish American Novel*, p. 22). See also Joseph Sommers. *After the Storm: Landmarks of the Modern Mexican Novel*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968, p. 8.

¹⁴ J. Patrick Duffey. "A War of Words: Orality and Literacy in Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo*." *Romance Notes* 38.2 (Winter 1998), p. 175.

¹⁵ Brushwood. *The Spanish American Novel*, p. 22.

¹⁶ Herbst, p. 62. Similarly, Sommers argues that "the thrust of the Revolution is uninfluenced by meaningful ideas or intellectual leadership, direct or indirect" (15), while Angel Rama notes that Azuela delineates three types of revolutionary intellectuals in the novel: the "intellectual opportunist (Cervantes), [...] the disillusioned idealist (Solís)," and the intellectual madman (Valderrama) (*The Lettered City*. Trans. and ed. John Charles Chasteen. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996, pp. 124–5).

A pity that what's coming next won't be so beautiful. We won't have long to wait. Just until there are no more combatants, until the only gunfire you hear is that coming from the mobs indulging themselves in the pleasures of pillaging; until the psychology of our race shines forth in resplendent clarity, like a drop of water, condensed in two words: *rob* and *kill*.... How frustrating it would be if we who've come to offer all our enthusiasm, our very lives to overthrow a murderous tyrant, turned out to be the architects of a pedestal enormous enough to hold a couple of hundred thousand monsters of the same species!... A people without ideals, a land of tyrants!... All that blood shed in vain! (58; emphasis is Azuela's)

Solis makes this remark at the height of the revolution's military success and moments before his own senseless death (59). In juxtaposing the two, Azuela graphically demonstrates that the revolution proceeds without sense and without revolutionary ideals. As the novel continues, Solís's prophesy is borne out as it presages the motivational turmoil, conflicts of interest, and ideological confusion revealed throughout the remainder of the novel, where revolutionary ideals are undercut at every turn.

Even more than character and ideological development, though, the most significant means by which Azuela undermines revolutionary ideals is through his narrative methodology. In this way, form and content mirror one another. This melding of form and content appears in two ways. First, the structure of *Los de abajo* is perhaps universally acknowledged at least to appear chaotic.¹⁷ Its looseness, seeming aimlessness, and generally chaotic atmosphere both mirror and reinforce the chaos and confusion of the

¹⁷ There has been a good deal of debate about the structure of the novel, more particularly concerning just how chaotic the structure actually is. For instance, Luis Leal argues, "The organization of the material, however, does not follow a pre-arranged scheme. The novel, like the revolution itself, like the men that make up the rebel forces, has no definite plan. [...] Azuela made use of this apparently chaotic form, which in the end turned out to be the most appropriate for the subject developed" (*Mariano Azuela*. New York: Twayne, 1971, p. 58; see also p. 110). Ronald Paul Redman concurs, "The structure has been described as chaotic, which suits it very well to the theme of revolution" ("Political Alienation in the Novels of Mariano Azuela." Ph.D. Diss., University of Southern California, 1974, p. 235). So also does Lydia D. Hazera: "The apparently chaotic composition reflects the disorderly nature of the revolution and the aimless, futile quality of the fighting and its leaders" ("The Making of Two Guerrilla Generals in Azuela's *The Underdogs* and Traven's Jungle Novels." [In:] *B. Traven: Life and Work*. Ed. Ernst Schürer and Philip Jenkins. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 348). Sommers, however, disagrees, "[T]he episodes which comprise the sequence of events are clearly linked together by an overall sense of novelistic structure" (7). Young and Menton argue similarly. Young asserts that "far from being unconcerned with it, structure is the very essence of Azuela's work, a fact which is clearly demonstrable through a consideration of the various mechanisms employed to give meaning to the work as an integrated whole rather than a series of fragments" (173). And Menton concludes, "In the case of *Los de abajo*, we have an excellent work whose structure and style are extremely well suited to the chaotic ambience of the revolution, but to infer that the book is no more than a series of scenes loosely strung together, that it is not a well-structured novel, and that it follows no premeditated plan are errors" ("Epic Textures in *Los de abajo*," p. 154). Griffin agrees as well arguing: "Accordingly, he [Azuela] preserves the *illusion* of the disordered, fragmentary, and therefore 'truthful' and unembellished 'slice of life', yet, in order to convey a coherent message in an aesthetically satisfying work, he is obliged to order and structure the novel – albeit surreptitiously" (p. 38; emphasis is Griffin's; see also pp. 30, 36).

revolution itself. I would argue, however, that although the narrative seems to begin clearly and then become increasingly more confused, this movement is only true in part because what initially appears to be a degeneration from orderly to disorderly is (as was true of the character and ideological development) really just two forms of disorder. Early in the novel, the narrative moves from one scene to the next, hinting at connections between them, but later the men's wandering from scene to scene and place to place demonstrates that the seeming clarity and direction implied earlier is illusory.

Form and content also merge in the mirroring of revolutionaries and *federales* that occurs throughout the novel. This mirroring is so effective because it homogenizes what at first appear to be heterogeneous revolutionary and federalist causes. To capture this effect, the mirroring functions both literally and figuratively. Figuratively, the book opens with the *federales* burning Macías's house. The burning house is mirrored later in the book when Macías burns the house of a *federal*. (The house is actually owned by the *cacique* responsible for burning Macías's house.) Similarly, the first battle in the novel occurs in the Juchipila canyon where the revolutionaries ambush the *federales*, while the last battle occurs in that same canyon where the *federales* ambush the revolutionaries – as these two scenes reflect back on each other. Mirroring takes place elsewhere as well. For instance, Macías leaves his family at both the beginning and the end of *Los de abajo*, but the first time he leaves because of the *federales*, while the second time he leaves because of the revolutionaries. This figurative mirroring then suggests parallels between the revolutionaries and *federales* and blurs the boundaries between them.

The literal mirroring in the novel, however, even more effectively blurs boundaries because it *literally* homogenizes revolutionaries and *federales*. Early in the novel, for example, the people dread the *federales*' coming because they wreak havoc on their homes (15, 26). In contrast, "they'd ring the bells for [the revolutionaries] and the people would come out to greet [them] with music and flags and they'd shout 'Long live —!' and even shoot off fireworks" (113–4). By the end of the novel, though, the people run away from whoever enters their towns, whether they be revolutionaries or *federales* because both forces now terrorize the people with their looting, pillaging, and carousing. Macías notes, "They don't like us anymore." Quail responds, "Sure, because now we're coming back as losers, defeated and ripped to shreds!" But Macías dismisses Quail's explanation: "No, that's not the reason [. . .] they can't stand the other guys either" (113). By the end of *Los de abajo*, the people who once welcomed the revolutionaries now shun them because they neither act nor appear to be different from the *federales*. The most representative and significant image of literal mirroring, though, occurs at the end of the novel when Macías's men comprise both *federales* and revolutionaries; as a result, *federales* and revolutionaries become indistinguishable from one another. In this phenomenon, the cause of the revolutionaries reveals itself to be the same as that of the *federales*.

This mirroring is yet further emphasized by a cyclicity that appears in the novel, particularly since the novel in effect begins and ends at the same geographical location

(Juchipila canyon) and with Macías and his men appearing as *Los de abajo* at the end of the novel just as they were at the beginning. No real change has occurred in the novel. The revolution in a sense defeated the *federales* but itself is now the object of yet another revolution (which was a part of the earlier revolutionary forces). The revolution becomes a revolution against the revolution. Brushwood argues that “revolution is the opposite of a static condition created by a repressive society,”¹⁸ but in fact the revolution *is* a static condition in *Los de abajo*. The mirroring and cyclicity present a static rather than a dynamic condition since no substantive difference exists among the competing forces. The chaos and confusion that occurs as one revolutionary faction revolts against another results – as do the other images of mirroring – in the homogenizing of all parties involved such that each is essentially indistinguishable from the others. The revolution therefore represents futility in that it accomplishes nothing. Azuela most poignantly demonstrates this futility in the senseless death of Solís, the one true revolutionary idealist in the novel (59) and, moments before, in his bleak recognition of the nature of the revolution: “And he thought that he’d discovered a symbol of the revolution in those clouds of smoke and in those clouds of dust rising together so fraternally, embracing, merging together and then vanishing into nothingness” (58). Like the clouds of smoke and dust, the revolution ultimately dissolves into nothingness. In their corruption, cruelty, and lack of ideals, the revolutionaries and *federales* mirror each other and become in essence the same entity – both figuratively and literally – and thus the whole idea of revolution simply evaporates.

II

As in *Los de abajo*, Conrad’s *Nostramo* de-constructs revolution in various ways. Characters and the meaning of the revolution play a prominent role in this process, but Conrad emphasizes narrative discourse more extensively and includes the function of the San Tomé silver in undermining the revolution.

Although Conrad’s characters play an important role in deflating the concept of revolution in *Nostramo*, unlike Azuela, Conrad’s emphasis is not so strongly on character development in relation to revolutionary ideals, nor does he focus on characters representing either the revolutionary or the federalist causes. In fact, most of the main characters are far removed from the actual idea of revolution. Whereas Azuela presents characters engaged in a revolution, both for and against it, Conrad presents characters who have faith neither in the revolution nor in the federal government. Instead, most of the characters in *Nostramo* enter the conflict either to protect or advance their own interests – and not at all for ideological reasons. Charles Gould, for instance, seeks

¹⁸ Brushwood. *The Spanish American Novel*, p. 21.

economic free enterprise.¹⁹ Father Corbelàn wants to restore church property and prominence (188–9). Nostromo wishes to maintain his stature among the people (432). The railway's chief engineer is interested in protecting railway property (308). Sotillo sees the revolution as a means to wealth and personal safety (287). Montero seeks wealth and power (387). And Decoud wants to advance his relationship with Antonia (216). *Nostromo* has no real voice of the revolution, and because most of Conrad's characters defend an ideological basis neither for the revolution nor for the federal government, emphasis then shifts onto the *absence* of ideology in the revolution.

Conrad in fact undercuts revolutionary ideology by juxtaposing true revolutionary rhetoric with false revolutionary propaganda. For example, "'We wanted nothing, we suffered for the love of all humanity!' he [Giorgio Viola] cried out furiously" (32). This is the most impassioned revolutionary statement in the novel, but Viola is not one of the revolutionaries. Rather, he speaks of a revolution many years before and many miles away. Helen Funk Rieselbach remarks that Viola is "a faintly ridiculous figure,"²⁰ but Conrad himself refers to Viola as "the Idealist of the old, humanitarian revolutions" (xi), and the narrator notes that he "had been one of the immortal and invincible band of liberators who had made the mercenaries of tyranny fly like chaff before a hurricane, 'un uragano terribile'" (25). Viola "had lived amongst men who had declaimed about liberty, suffered for liberty, died for liberty" (29). Eloise Knapp Hay agrees, arguing, "Men like Garibaldi and Viola thus took arms only for ideas, never for material gain,"²¹ and Jean Franco remarks that Viola "is the pure revolutionary, one whose abstract ideal is undiluted by practice."²² Unlike Viola's fierce humanitarianism and impassioned ideology, only corrupt motivations and facile propaganda issue from the revolutionaries. The Monteros call upon "a justly incensed democracy" (190), for instance, urging them "to rise with their knives in their hands and put an end once for all to the Blancos, to these Gothic remnants, to these sinister mummies, these impotent paralytics, who plotted with foreigners for the surrender of the lands and the slavery of the people" (158). But Conrad reveals that Pedrito Montero "had been struck by the splendour of a brilliant court, and had conceived the idea of an existence for himself where, like the Duc de Morny, he would associate the command of every pleasure

¹⁹ Joseph Conrad. *Nostromo*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1928, p. 245. Hereafter, all quotations from *Nostromo* will be taken from this edition and will be followed by their page numbers in parenthesis.

²⁰ Helen Funk Rieselbach. *Conrad's Rebels: The Psychology of Revolution in the Novels from Nostromo to Victory*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1985, p. 14.

²¹ Eloise Knapp Hay. "Nostromo." [In:] *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*. Ed. J.H. Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 91. Elsewhere, Hay notes that "Conrad differentiates between unjustified and justified revolutions" ("*Nostromo* and the Ideologies of Revolution." *L'Époque Conradienne* 18 [1992], p. 27), and clearly Conrad concurs with Viola's ideas.

²² Jean Franco. "The Limits of the Liberal Imagination: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Nostromo*." [In:] *Joseph Conrad: Third World Perspectives*. Ed. Robert D. Hamner. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1990, p. 207.

with the conduct of political affairs and enjoy power supremely in every way” (387). In their revolutionary effort, Pedrito spurs his brother toward *these* goals – not those asserted in their propaganda. The rank and file revolutionaries are no different. Decoud recounts, “We had an awful riot – a sudden outbreak of the populace, which was not suppressed till late to-day. Its object, no doubt, was loot” (224); he continues, “[T]he mob, disappointed in their hopes of loot, made a stand in the narrow streets to the cries of ‘Viva la Libertad! Down with Feudalism!’ (I wonder what they imagine feudalism to be?) ‘Down with the Goths and Paralytics!’” (227). The mob’s propagandistic slogans clash with their true motives for rebellion, and their words carry no more idealism than do those of the Goulds’ parrot who shrieks, “Viva Costaguana!” (69, 82).

As was true of Solís in *Los de abajo*, Don José Avellanos is a voice of humanitarian government who dreams of a better Costaguana. His work “History of Fifty Years of Misrule,” which is never published (x), outlines his dream for Costaguana’s “peace, prosperity, and [. . .] ‘an honourable place in the comity of civilized nations’” (140). Like Solís, though, Avellanos’s dreams cannot withstand the assault of the revolution’s corruption, and in the end his ideas have little if any effect on the outcome of the conflict. Decoud remarks of him during the fighting: “Whatever happens, he will not survive. The deception is too great for a man of his age; and hasn’t he seen the sheets of ‘Fifty Years of Misrule,’ which we have begun printing on the presses of the *Porvenir*, littering the Plaza, floating in the gutters, fired out as wads for trabucos loaded with handfuls of type, blown in the wind, trampled in the mud? I have seen pages floating upon the very waters of the harbour” (235). As does Solís, Avellanos perishes before the end of the conflict, and like Solís’s ideas, which (as do the dust and smoke of the battle) vanish “into nothingness” (Azuela, 58), Avellanos’s ideas litter the plaza, float in gutters, and are trampled into the mud.

Charles Gould bitterly summarizes the relationship between the revolutionaries’ words and deeds: “The words one knows so well have a nightmarish meaning in this country. Liberty, democracy, patriotism, government – all of them have a flavour of folly and murder” (408). Words, which if spoken by Viola would have signaled the overthrow of oppression, signal mere “folly and murder” when spoken by the revolutionaries. The revolutionaries clearly do not hold to Viola’s ideals, and Viola himself thinks, “These were not a people striving for justice, but thieves” (20). He “had an immense scorn for this outbreak of scoundrels and leperos, who did not know the meaning of the word ‘liberty’” (20–1; see also 14). Fredric Jameson remarks that “from the point of view of the plot and its organizational necessities, the story of old Viola is strictly superfluous,”²³ but Viola, in fact, plays a crucial role in the novel because the contrast between the idealism of Viola’s motives and the materialism of the Monterists’ undermines the Monteros’ stated ideals since they are not at all

²³ Fredric Jameson. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981, p. 273.

concerned with “the love of all humanity” (32) but rather with the silver of the mine, and consequently can only succeed in fragmenting the people’s loyalty.

This fragmentation is of prime importance. Like *Los de abajo*, disorder and confusion appear throughout *Nostramo* and are typically linked to the disorder of the revolution. This disorder and confusion damages revolutionary ideals because it exposes the directionlessness of the revolutionaries and the doubtfulness of their motives. The most straightforward representation of chaos is the revolution itself. The Monterists are revolting against the rule of the Ribierists (who are themselves the result of a previous revolution). Part way through the war, powerful residents of Sulaco stage a counter-revolution to secede the Occidental Province from the rest of Costaguana. The Monterists then overthrow the Ribierists, while the Sulacans overthrow the Monterists. In both revolutions, much confusion occurs. During the Monterist revolution, the main army defeats the federal government of Costaguana, while in Sulaco a mob takes to the streets, a small band of the Monterist army (led by Pedrito Montero) straggles over the mountains, and Sotillo’s garrison steams into the harbor. However, the mob is rebuffed, Sotillo’s garrison fails to come to Pedrito’s aid, and finally Pedrito’s troops are defeated by Barrios and the separatist forces. As a result of the disorder among the Monterist supporters in Sulaco, the separatists successfully defeat them. (The Monterist revolution in Costaguana is also defeated shortly thereafter by yet another revolution.) In its own way, the Sulaco secession is equally confused. Hastily conceived and attempted, it succeeds largely because of luck, geographical isolation, and disorganization among the Monterist supporters.

The disorder of the revolution, though, is not just a product of its organizational confusion and tenuous alliances. Instead, the confusion of the revolution is also tied to the senseless brutality of this and so many other revolutions in Costaguana’s history. When Emilia Gould first arrives in Costaguana, she would visit neighbors and

hear stories of political outrage; friends, relatives, ruined, imprisoned, killed in the battles of senseless civil wars, barbarously executed in ferocious proscriptions, as though the government of the country had been a struggle of lust between bands of absurd devils let loose upon the land with sabres and uniforms and grandiloquent phrases. And on all the lips she found a weary desire for peace, the dread of officialdom with its nightmarish parody of administration without law, without security, and without justice. (88; see also 49, 165)

This assessment of Costaguana’s political history is also true of the Monterist revolution. Decoud refers to a time in the past “when the persistent barbarism of our native continent did not wear the black coats of politicians, but went about yelling, half-naked, with bows and arrows in its hands” (231). Decoud sees no real difference between the savages of the past and those of the present, and the narrator refers to “the cruel futility of lives and of deaths thrown away in the vain endeavour to attain an enduring solution of the problem” (364). Consequently, the confusion of the revolution in *Nostramo* is less an organizational confusion than a moral confusion, one that ultimately reveals the corruption, brutality, and emptiness of revolutionary ideals.

Like *Los de abajo*, disorder and confusion also appear in Conrad's narrative method, as form and content intertwine, but unlike *Los de abajo*, which gives the appearance of moving from order to disorder, *Nostromo* moves from disorder to order. During the first part of the novel, characters and events appear and disappear from one chapter to the next seemingly with no relational tie. Ultimately, the fragmented narrative keeps the reader from the revolution. In the very account of the revolution is the means for undermining it. The reader cannot follow the account because the narrative sequence of events is at odds with their chronological sequence. Conrad relates events whose importance sometimes cannot be known without knowing other events that he does not chronicle until later. Time becomes so disjointed that it becomes impossible to know what occurs when until much of the way through the novel. Conrad in essence refrains from narrating the revolution in the very act of recounting it.

Albert J. Guerard suggests, "It could be argued, again, that the chronological dislocations and distortions of emphasis may reflect a theory of history as repetitive yet inconsecutive, devoid of reason, refusing to make sense."²⁴ Similarly, Pamela H. Demory argues that "the intended function of the chronological discontinuity of the novel [is] to force us into awareness of the chaotic nature of history as it happens."²⁵ H.M. Daleski concurs: "Carrying his confusion with him, the reader would seem to be forced, rather, to experience a sense of the general disorder that characterizes the revolutionary times Conrad is depicting."²⁶ In this way, the fragmented narrative represents the chaos of the revolution. The narrative disorder persists through a large part of the novel and then melts into seeming clarity, which some commentators see as a fault.²⁷ Such assessments, however, miss the mark, for the overt disorder in the first part of *Nostromo* becomes covert in the last part. Conrad shows that the disorder does not simply result from fragmented narration but rather is a consequence of the revolution itself. Without the narrative clarity in the latter part of the novel, the disorder of the revolution could appear to result primarily from Conrad's narrative technique. With greater narrative clarity, the inherent disorder of the revolution becomes clear, and what seems to be a movement from disorder to order is in fact merely two different representations of disorder. In the earlier part of the novel, the confusion comes from not knowing what is happening; in the latter part, it comes from not knowing why it is happening. In other words, the initial confusion is over the nature of the events, while the later confusion is over the meaning of those events.

As in *Los de abajo*, form and content also merge in the mirroring of revolutionaries and *federales* in *Nostromo*. In fact, the mirroring of the revolutionary and federal

²⁴ Albert J. Guerard. *Conrad the Novelist*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958, p. 215.

²⁵ Pamela H. Demory. "Nostromo: Making History." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 35.3 (Fall 1993), p. 321.

²⁶ H.M. Daleski. *Joseph Conrad: The Way of Dispossession*. London: Faber and Faber, 1977, p. 116.

²⁷ See for example Guerard, pp. 204–5, 216.

governments is even more apparent in *Nostromo* than it is in *Los de abajo*. This mirroring occurs in the revolution's similarity to previous revolutions and in its relationship to the silver of the mine, and both literal and figurative mirroring appear in *Nostromo* as they do in *Los de abajo*. The end result of this mirroring undercuts revolutionary ideals by homogenizing the revolutionaries and *federales*.

Literal mirroring appears primarily in the changing of allegiances that permeate the novel. The Monteros, Sotillo, Don Juste Lopez, Decoud, Gould, Avellanos, and others are all Ribierists at some point during the Ribierist rule. The Monteros then revolt against Ribiera, and once they defeat him, Sotillo goes over to the Monterists. Lopez does likewise, referring to the "acceptance of accomplished facts" (367). Gould, Decoud, and Avellanos then reject both Ribiera and Montero and initiate their own counter-revolution, which, once successful, Lopez then supports. This changing of allegiances makes it difficult to distinguish one participant from another and demonstrates that the various characters simply act out of self interest; hence, all participants are both revolutionary and *federal* at some time in the novel, and since all (except Avellanos) are also motivated by self-interest, this literal mirroring homogenizes the various players in this political game.

Figurative mirroring, on the other hand, occurs primarily through the cyclicity of the revolution and the role of the silver. The present revolution finds itself in the midst of a history of revolutions, and Conrad implies that all of these revolutions are basically the same; the participants change, but the motives and governments remain essentially unchanged. Christopher GoGwilt refers to *Nostromo*'s "political history as a perpetual cycle of mimicry."²⁸ And Gareth Jenkins remarks, "We have in Part One a miniature version of what the book as a whole, in a series of circular movements, brings out: that the future does not move away from the past but is doomed to repeat it. No real progress is possible; a change is merely an illusion that masks a fundamental reality of disorder."²⁹ The most poignant image of this mirroring is Decoud's death. Thinking that the revolution has succeeded and that his counter-revolution has failed, he kills himself (500–1). Ironically, the counter-revolution does in fact succeed, and this incident symbolizes the indistinguishability between the revolution, the counter-revolution, and the existing government (itself a former revolution). As a result, Decoud's death embodies all of the confusion of the revolution and the illusory changes it purports to bring.

The most pervasive, significant, and powerful image of figurative mirroring, though, is the silver of the mine. Demory argues, "The silver, in one way or another, motivates most of the action in the novel,"³⁰ and Conrad himself remarks, "Silver is the pivot

²⁸ Christopher GoGwilt. *The Invention of the West: Joseph Conrad and the Double-Mapping of Europe and Empire*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 203.

²⁹ Gareth Jenkins. "Conrad's *Nostromo* and History." *Literature & History* No. 6 (Autumn 1977). p. 149. Similarly, Hay argues that "Conrad's point is that the new politics in Latin America are merely the old in modern dress, and his accent is on plunder" (*The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Study with a New Preface*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, pp. 169–70).

³⁰ Demory, p. 323.

of the moral and material events, affecting the lives of everybody in the tale.”³¹ More than this, the silver is the great homogenizing agent in *Nostramo*. So many of the people, events, and phenomena mirror one another in the common denominator of the silver. In addition to its other features, the revolution mirrors the federal government because both are based on the silver of the mine: “What was currently whispered was this – that the San Tomé Administration had, in part, at least, financed the last revolution, which had brought into a five-year dictatorship Don Vincente Ribiera” (117; see also 110–1). The Ribierist government then was originally a revolution based upon the silver of the mine, and therefore, despite the temporary peace it provides, in its origins it differs little from its predecessors or its successors. As Hay remarks, “[A]ny question of legitimacy [of government] has been obliterated long before the novel opens.”³² Always in *Nostramo* revolution is an opportunity for plunder:

In the contests that broke out at the end of his [Guzman Bento’s] rule [. . .] there was more fatuous imbecility, plenty of cruelty and suffering still, but much less of the old-time fierce and blindly ferocious political fanaticism. It was all more vile, more base, more contemptible, and infinitely more manageable in the very outspoken cynicism of motives. It was more clearly a brazen-faced scramble for a constantly diminishing quantity of booty; since all enterprise had been stupidly killed in the land. (115–6)

This wholly damning statement echoes throughout the novel and reverberates when the new revolution begins because it indicates the state of affairs and the lack of ideals in any of the revolutions.

What was implied in *Los de abajo*, that the heart of the revolution is simply plunder, is fully articulated in *Nostramo*. The revolutionaries covet the silver of the mine (as does seemingly almost everyone else in the novel), and they go to great lengths and extreme cruelty to try to find out where even one load is hidden (as evidenced by Sotillo’s treatment of Hirsch). But, more important, the silver actually causes the revolution itself; it is both the catalyst and the goal for the revolutionaries. Their primary reason for overthrowing the existing government of Costaguana is to wrest the San Tomé mine from the Goulds. Even the Sulaco counter-revolution, which on the surface seems so different from previous revolutions, in fact differs relatively little from its predecessors. Dr. Monygham comments, “[T]he time approaches when all that the Gould Concession stands for shall weigh as heavily upon the people as the barbarism, cruelty, and misrule of a few years back” (511). His statement is prophetic for both the populace in general as well as for the individuals in particular. Jenkins agrees with Monygham and argues that “however many revolutions there are and no matter how well intentioned the actors are there can be no real change for the better. Even the secessionist revolution, conducted without barbarity or stupidity

³¹ Letter to Ernst P. Bendz dated March 7, 1923; see *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Ed. Laurence Davies and Gene M. Moore. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, Vol. 8, p. 37.

³² Hay. “*Nostramo*,” p. 85.

(the characteristic of most previous revolutions) does not really alter matters, for it will end up as repressive and exploitative as any previous régime.”³³ Similarly, Irving Howe suggests that at the end of the novel “society appears resurgent and confident, but of community, of that which makes men human, nothing remains,”³⁴ and Hay makes perhaps the most categorical condemnation, referring to “economic demands which are more inhuman and arbitrary than any human despot of the past.”³⁵ Despite Captain Mitchell’s optimistic assessment of the counter-revolution as “a glorious success” (489),³⁶ then, the outlook for the future of Sulaco is ominous with the quickly spreading labor unrest and particularly with the spiritual desolation that the silver imposes upon so many of the characters.

Conrad only subtly points to the significance of the labor unrest, but it is a crucial indicator of whether the Sulaco revolution has broken the cycle of political upheaval or has simply become one more manifestation of that cycle. Father Corbelán warns, “Let them [the government leaders] beware, then, lest the people, prevented from their aspirations, should rise and claim their share of the wealth and their share of the power” (510). The labor situation is particularly problematic because many of the characters do not seem to take it seriously. Mitchell says, “The Democratic party in opposition rests mostly, I am sorry to say, on these socialistic Italians, sir, with their secret societies, camorras, and such-like” (478), and Basilio says to Monygham, “There is some trouble with the workmen [at the mine] to be feared, it appears. A shameless people without reason and decency. And idle, señor. Idle” (555). Monygham, however, recognizes the import of the labor unrest and asks Emilia Gould, “Do you think that now the mine would march upon the town to save their Señor Administrador?” (511). The mine workers were instrumental in bringing about the Sulaco secession and in

³³ Jenkins, p. 157. Guerard concurs, “The horizon offered by the book itself seems to me, simply, Dr. Monygham’s dark one” (198). Similarly, Dougald McMillan remarks, “If we believe that either the popular revolution or imperialist expansion will change Costaguana, we do so in the face of vast evidence to the contrary” (“*Nostramo: The Theology of Revolution.*” [In:] *The Classic British Novel*. Ed. Howard M. Harper, Jr. and Charles Edge. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972, p. 179).

³⁴ Irving Howe. *Politics and the Novel*. New York: Horizon Books, 1957, p. 113.

³⁵ Hay. *Political Novels of Joseph Conrad*, p. 163; see also p. 170. Similarly, John A. McClure argues, “Far from liberating the people from tyranny, then, the advent of foreign capitalists has enslaved them to an inhuman system and an inhuman set of values” (*Kipling and Conrad: The Colonial Fiction*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 161). Robert Penn Warren and E.M.W. Tillyard disagree with such assessments. Warren writes, “There has been a civil war, but the forces of ‘progress’ – i.e., the San Tomé mine and the capitalistic order – have won. And we must admit that the society at the end of the book is preferable to that at the beginning” (“Introduction.” [In:] Joseph Conrad. *Nostramo*. New York: Modern Library, 1951, p. xxix). And Tillyard remarks that “though there is much in *Nostramo* that is frightening and on the face of it pessimistic, the net effect of its politics and its morals is strangely exhilarating” (*The Epic Strain in the English Novel*. Fair Lawn, NJ: Essential Books, 1958, p. 166).

³⁶ Ernest Bevan, Jr. comments, “Conrad implies that the historian, like Mitchell, too often attributes an order and romantic flair to events which are chaotic” (“*Nostramo: The Permanence of the Past.*” *Conradiana*, 10.1 [1978], p. 65).

preserving Charles Gould's life when they marched upon the Monterist supporters, and Monygham's question demonstrates just how much the workers' attitude has changed. Emilia also recognizes the severity of the situation and laments, "Will there be never any peace? Will there be no rest? [. . .] Is it this we have worked for, then?" (511–2). But Monygham and Emilia are essentially powerless to rectify the situation, and all indicators point to an unrest that will only grow greater in the future because the silver is the ultimate source of the labor unrest.

Significant as the labor unrest is, the more devastating effect of the Sulaco revolution is the physical and spiritual desolation that results. The physical death and destruction present in *Los de abajo* is also present in *Nostromo*, but to a lesser degree. The spiritual destruction that the characters experience, however, is almost universal. In a withering appraisal, Emilia "saw the San Tomé mountain hanging over the Campo, over the whole land, feared, hated, wealthy; more soulless than any tyrant, more pitiless and autocratic than the worst Government; ready to crush innumerable lives in the expansion of its greatness" (521). The silver destroys all who touch it, disinterested as to whether they be good or bad – revolutionaries or *federales*.

The silver most damagingly affects Gould and Nostromo. Charles Gould begins his work on the mine idealistically, believing that its success can provide economic and political peace in Costaguana: "What is wanted here is law, good faith, order, security. Anyone can declaim about these things, but I pin 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 they alone can continue to exist" (84). John A. McClure, however, notes, "But while Gould's dedication to material interests is based in part on genuine social concern and reflection, it leads ineluctably to the exclusion of such concern and reflection from his subsequent decision-making."³⁷ Before he realizes it, the "mine had got hold of Charles Gould with a grip as deadly as ever it had laid upon his father" (400) and "had insidiously corrupted his judgment" (364). Benita Parry refers to this paradox between the ideal and the real as the "disgrace of honourable aspirations tied to predatory purposes."³⁸ Eventually, Gould's sole focus becomes the mine, and its most deadening effect is that it stands between him and his wife (239). Decoud notes that Emilia "has discovered that he [Gould] lives for the mine rather than for her" (245). Later, she despairs that she "would never have him to herself. Never; not for one short hour altogether to herself" (521–2). In many ways, Gould is a political and financial success. He has established the San Tomé mine, "the Treasure House of the World" (480, 489), and made it a success. In so doing, he has brought economic stability to the region, improved the infrastructure, and provided extensive employment opportunities. He has also been instrumental in bringing a kind of peace

³⁷ McClure, p. 157.

³⁸ Benita Parry. "Narrating Imperialism: *Nostromo's* Dystopia." [In:] *Cultural Readings of Imperialism: Edward Said and the Gravity of History*. Ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, Benita Parry, and Judith Squires. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997, p. 240.

and political stability to the Occidental Province that had not existed before. It would seem that Gould has succeeded in all of his hopes, but he pays a high price for his success. During his ascension to the role of “El Rey de Sulaco” (218), he has become cold, calculating, and almost inhumanly obsessed with the mine.

Nostromo’s spiritual desolation is no less complete. Before he becomes involved with the silver shipment, he is at peace with himself. He has the respect and admiration of his superiors and of his people. He is “invaluable [. . .] a perfectly incorruptible fellow” (127), the one man who can be entrusted with difficult tasks and accomplish them successfully. Once he becomes involved with the silver, though, his peace disappears. He continually complains to Decoud (and later to Monygham) about the desperate nature of their attempt to save the silver from the Monterists (259, 264, 265, 268), and once Nostromo steals the silver, not only his peace of mind but all of his other admirable qualities disappear as well: “Nostromo had lost his peace; the genuineness of all his qualities was destroyed. He felt it himself, and often cursed the silver of San Tomé” (523). Before long, Nostromo becomes as obsessed with the silver as Gould:

He could never shake off the treasure. His audacity, greater than that of other men, had welded that vein of silver into his life. And the feeling of fearful and ardent subjection, the feeling of his slavery – so irremediable and profound that often, in his thoughts, he compared himself to the legendary Gringos, neither dead nor alive, bound down to their conquest of unlawful wealth on Azuera – weighed heavily on the independent Captain Fidanza. (526–7; see also 531, 533, 554)

Nostromo becomes the silver’s “faithful and lifelong slave” (501). He feels “the weight as of chains upon his limbs” (539) and hears “the clanking of his fetters – his silver fetters” (546). Even in the extremity of death, he laments, “The silver has killed me. It has held me. It holds me yet” (559). As was true of Gould, Nostromo would also seem to be a great success. Without his desperate voyage to save the silver and his reckless ride to Cayta to bring back Barrios, the secessionist counter-revolution almost certainly would have failed. Afterwards, he is a legend and a hero, and his reputation continues to increase as his trading business becomes successful. But, again like Gould, Nostromo pays a terrible price for wedding himself to the silver, and in speaking of Nostromo, Emilia Gould passes harsh judgment upon both Nostromo and Gould when, upon Nostromo’s death, she says to Giselle, “Console yourself, child. Very soon he would have forgotten you for his treasure” (561). Both men have sold their souls for silver.

Although the spiritual desolation resulting from the silver is most evident in Gould and Nostromo, the silver affects the other characters as well. Emilia Gould, for example, is more a victim of its effects through her husband’s actions than she is an active participant (although they did enter into the mine’s original development jointly). Decoud records that Gould “has his mine in his head; and his wife had nothing in her head but his precious person, which he has bound up with the Gould Concession and tied to that little woman’s neck” (239). Contrary to what they assumed would happen,

the success of the mine has not brought perpetual peace to the region, and on a personal plane, it has blighted her marriage:

The fate of the San Tomé mine was lying heavy upon her heart. It was a long time now since she had begun to fear it. It had been an idea. She had watched it with misgivings turning into a fetish, and now the fetish had grown into a monstrous and crushing weight. It was as if the inspiration of their early years had left her heart to turn into a wall of silver-bricks, erected by the silent work of evil spirits, between her and her husband. (221–2)

The mine has caused an emotional barrenness between them. Emilia thinks, “A terrible success for the last of the Goulds. The last! She hoped for a long, long time, that perhaps – But no! There would be no more. An immense desolation, the dread of her own continued life, descended upon the first lady of Sulaco” (522), and it becomes clear that the separation between the couple is complete.³⁹ Emilia comes to hate “the mere mention of that silver” (557), and while Gould seems to be oblivious to the silver’s effects, Emilia recognizes them all too well and despairs at the emotional desert her life has become.

At the same time, Gould’s father, Decoud, Hirsch, the revolutionaries, the mine workers, the politicians – all who come in contact with the silver – are destroyed in one way or another. When Decoud tries to save the silver, he is left isolated on the Great Isabel, and the solitude causes him to behold “the universe as a succession of incomprehensible images” (498). He despairs so much that he eventually believes “in nothing” (500), and his life becomes a senseless void. Either consciously or unconsciously, he recognizes the role of the silver in his fate and falls into the water – weighed down by four bars of silver (500–1). The mine physically kills Gould’s father (61) and long before that destroys his peace of mind and obsesses him with its curse (57). Hirsch dies as well after coming into contact with the silver, but before he dies he has become a quivering mass of terror, nearly insane with fear. Sotillo and Pedrito are also affected by the silver. Greed clouds their judgment and actions, leading to their unrestrained brutality and ultimate defeat. Even the laborers of the mine are affected; their lives at the end of *Nostromo* are now lives of unrest and desire for wealth as they strive for a larger slice of the silver pie. In the end, all of the death and destruction, both physical and spiritual, result from the silver of the mine – as Emilia bitterly asks, “Isn’t there enough treasure [...] to make everybody in the world miserable?” (557).

Daniel R. Schwarz notes that in *Nostromo* “Conrad indicts political activity as both suspect in its causes and pernicious in its effects.”⁴⁰ Because the heart of the revolution, counter-revolution, and federal government is silver, they mirror one another such that

³⁹ Jeremy Hawthorn notes, though, that Emilia’s “idealism contributes indirectly to the destruction of their relationship” (*Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment*. London: Edward Arnold, 1992, p. 216).

⁴⁰ Daniel R. Schwarz. “Conrad’s Quarrel with Politics in *Nostromo*.” *College English* 59.5 (September 1997), pp. 555–6.

distinctions among them dissolve before the magnitude of the mine. Idealism becomes impossible for any of them, for Monygham concludes, “[T]he material interests will not let you jeopardize their development for a mere idea of pity and justice” (509). Any revolutionary ideals that do appear in *Nostromo* amount to nothing because they are idle propaganda, overwhelmed by revolutionary corruption, conflicted by their connection to the silver, or discarded like the pages of Avellanos’s “History of Fifty Years of Misrule” that lie scattered in the streets of Sulaco (235). In this way, the undermining of revolutionary ideals becomes absolute.

Although born many years apart and half way around the world from one another, Mariano Azuela’s and Joseph Conrad’s conclusions concerning the nature of revolution differ little from one another. Each personally experienced the disillusionment of revolutions – Azuela through his active participation in the Mexican revolution and Conrad through the plight of his family and compatriots as they fought against Russian rule in Poland. Each writer sought to represent his disillusionment through the medium of fiction, which allowed them the opportunity to construct fictional accounts of revolutions, and, by means of narratives of disorder, also allowed them to reflect the chaos and confusion of revolution. By reflecting this disorder in their narrative methodology, Azuela and Conrad reveal the all-encompassing effect of their disillusionment, as the revolution permeates even to the core of these tales – the very narrative methodology itself.

Los de abajo and *Nostromo* both pronounce the revolution to be futile because the revolutionaries are no different from the *federales*. Consequently, a mirroring occurs that causes all of the leaders and governments to appear the same – like the unchanged face of a ploughed sea. In *Los de abajo*, this effect arises because the corruption and cruelty of the revolutionaries is the same as that of the *federales* and even more literally because the revolutionary forces at the end of the novel are comprised as much of *federales* as they are of revolutionaries. In *Nostromo*, this mirroring occurs through the cyclicity of revolutions and the fact that the revolutionary and federal governments have at their heart the silver of the mine. In their mirroring, the revolutions in *Los de abajo* and *Nostromo* cease to exist because they cease to be unique, becoming mere replicas of their predecessors. Revolutionary rhetoric and ideals – altruism, compassion, humanitarianism, utopianism – evaporate. The rhetoric and idealism mean nothing because the revolution falls prey to two mortal blows: the ends justifying the means and material interests having privilege over ethics. The revolution, therefore, is a beautiful lie – an ideal that is in fact no ideal at all. In the end, we are left with two novels that construct revolutions only to de-construct them in the same action. Ultimately, in *Los de abajo* and *Nostromo*, the revolution is neither order nor disorder but rather nothing at all.