

## CONRAD IN THE TIME OF GLOBALIZATION: A LATIN AMERICAN *NOSTROMO*?

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Over the past fifteen years, the category of “globalization” has come to dominate all others as the framing concept for analyses of politics, economics and culture at every level. It is in that new academic context that this essay examines some of the conditions and possibilities that now obtain for political readings of Conrad.<sup>1</sup> Taking *Nostramo* as a test case, it will attempt to “estrangle” the various constructions of the “Conrad” we know as a great English or even European author and replace them with the idea that it is now timely also to read Conrad’s acclaimed masterpiece as a classic of Latin American fiction. This “taxonomical” modification proposes that *Nostramo* is an important foundation text for the study of Latin American political and cultural history and challenges the judgment that the novel is somehow inauthentic in comparison with the literary products that come from the soil of Latin America itself (the “Third World” speaking in its own voice, as it were). This starting claim (which is really an hypothesis) might seem either absurd or offensive. Yet such a proposal is more or less what actually happened in the case of *Heart of Darkness* in Africa. While not entirely free from taints of Eurocentrism, in practice the novella has become the most widely studied literary text in Africa. The Kenyan novelist, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, for example, declared that no African writer “had created so ironic, apt, and powerful an image” of the moral failure of European colonization as Conrad did with the skulls on poles facing Kurtz’ house.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> That is, I intend now to regard certain key categories in my *Postcolonial Conrad: Paradoxes of Empire*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005, not so much as superseded as subsumed into those wider horizons indicated by “globalization.” That particularly applies to the emphases indicated by both “Empire” and “Postcolonial.”

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Robert Kimbrough, ed. *Joseph Conrad: Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition, third edition. New York and London: Norton, 1988, 285.

This essay represents a sketch for what would be a much wider project. That would involve – *inter alia* – revisiting the displaced antecedents of what has become “globalization theory.” For that reason it will take as a starting point earlier sociological attempts to revise classical theories of (European) imperialism that began in the heady times around May ’68 and emanated both from Paris (scene of the intellectual war on colonialism) and Latin America (where revolutionary hope became academicized as that revisionist Marxist development known as “world systems theory”). Prompted by the theme of this particular Conrad conference, it is also timely to rethink some of our own particular methodologies as literary analysts. One aim of such self-examination is to ask what it is that literary studies can offer an enquiry that has hitherto been conducted mainly by sociologists. In the period known as the “generation of ’68,” it seemed relatively unproblematic to imagine a Conrad hard-wired to that real world of colonial conquest and occupation which provided the content for so many of his fictions. But the “theory wars” left little to literary studies that would remain unproblematic. In these now more eclectic times, for example, we might wonder what relevance the once influential “reader-response” school of literary interpretation might have to offer to criticism today. Its once scandalous claim that literary works are mere constructs that depend on the creative activity of the reader as well as the author in producing their construction has now simply become a truism. But by linking that question to the place of literature in analyses of imperialism, I wish to retrieve the older apolitical reader-reception theory for new political purposes. At the same time, an even less expected revival will provide the sharp critical edge for specifying the true object of such literary-political enquiry. This paper will explore the repressed conjuncture of that mid-twentieth-century continental theory (*Rezeptionsaesthetik*) and the British Arnoldian/Leavisian tradition of criticism that dominated the new subject of “English” (at least in England and its colonies) for so long. The purpose of this exercise is to demonstrate how “Conrad’s politics” can only be grasped by means of a hermeneutics that never forgets the peculiar nature of literary works.

## FROM IMPERIALISM TO GLOBALIZATION

In Conrad’s own time, European imperialism was a hotly debated subject even in his adopted homeland, with its “little Englanders” and a fading of belief in the “civilizing mission” as moral justification for what seemed like simple greed. This golden age of the British Empire soon became a period of its crisis, above all in the pan-European economic crisis that culminated in the “Great War” and the subsequent realignment of the nations. From a longer view, the two great (European and Western) wars of the twentieth century can be seen as struggles for hegemony between the rapidly industrializing Germany and USA, from which the latter emerged as triumphant. I want to use this crude summary simply to frame one of the major discursive

changes that came over those (mostly left-orientated) debates about the European colonial empires between the time of Conrad and the 1960s. That was the displacement of older left-liberal analyses of imperialism (e.g. J.A. Hobson) and Marxist ones by the work of “world systems” analysts (e.g. Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein, André Gunder Frank).<sup>3</sup>

In *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900), Conrad anticipated those world system analysts who saw the “geometry of imperialism” as a division between a metropolitan centre and colonial periphery, moving along an axis (or different axes) that defined those other binary oppositions that mark colonial discourse and relations. In the terms of anti-colonial thinkers and activists of this phase of history, between c. 1945 and c. 1965 (e.g. Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon),<sup>4</sup> the initial act of colonialist violence – both material and epistemic – that brought the European empires into being at the same time yoked the colonizer to the colonized in an ineluctable structure of reciprocal bondage. That nexus would only be broken by the violent defeat and ejection of the colonizers. Conrad’s two remarkable turn-of-century novels anticipated that later crisis; the “epistemological break” in his thinking and writing that they represent included as part of its analysis an understanding of the “geometric” structure of that system, later to be theorized by the world systems analysts. “All Europe had contributed to the making of Kurtz:” this significant comment shows not only an awareness of the wider imperial system but also the admission that those red parts of the map of Empire where “some good work” was done are deeply linked to the atrocious world of Kurtz. This narrative of one of Marlow’s “inconclusive experiences” stretches in a direct line from its imperial centre to the extreme periphery where the Congo ends – and back again, as far as London itself.<sup>5</sup>

*Lord Jim* also employs a centre/periphery model, as poor Jim’s journey takes him forever eastward and further and further away from home (the parsonage where he grew up and whose values he transgressed)<sup>6</sup> even to the ends of the earth, beyond the civilized world and into deepest Borneo; there Jim tries to redeem his early failure by achieving what the ideology of Empire demanded: to bring peace, prosperity and

<sup>3</sup> For a useful summary of this “moment” in the development of Marxist analysis of imperialism, see Anthony Brewer. *Marxist Theories of Imperialism: A Critical Survey*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, 131 ff.

<sup>4</sup> For some of the central texts of this movement, see Jean-Paul Sartre. *Colonialism and Neocolonialism* [French publication 1964]. New edition transl. A. Haddour, S. Brewer and T. McWilliams. London and New York: Routledge, 2001; Albert Memmi. *The Coloniser and the Colonised* [French publication, 1965]. Transl. H. Greenfield, Boston: Beacon Press, 1991; Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks* [French publication 1967]. Republished with a foreword by Homi Bhabha, London: Grove Press, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Conrad. *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether*. London: Dent, first published 1902, Collected Edition, 1946–1955, 117, 55, 51. (All further quotations from Conrad’s works are taken from the Collected Edition, and indicated only by page numbers).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Conrad in terms of home, see Rosemary Marangoly George. *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction*. London, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996; see especially chapter 3, “The Great English Tradition: Joseph Conrad Writes Home,” 65–100.

order to the “natives,” “out there.” It might even be worth noting that Conrad’s last great colonial novel, *Victory* (1915), also implies the centre/periphery axis to delimit its seedy, clapped out colonial world. Its difference is that the centre is now seen absolutely from the perspective of the periphery – its Europe is a vague, cold and gloomy place, “back there,” marked by scenes of dying (Morrison, the elder Heyst). Like Gandhi and others who travelled the world and thus experienced imperialism from a range of perspectives and experiences, Conrad’s life experiences enabled him above all to understand particular local phenomena as belonging to a system – a world system, indeed, in the making.

From the 1970s on, the trajectory of world systems analysis led it to question the centre/periphery model (or, to loosely adapt Giovanni Arrighi’s term, “geometry of imperialism”).<sup>7</sup> Western Marxism had encountered its own moments of crisis well before 1989: for the (Marxist) world systems analysts, for example, the fratricidal wars in Indo-China, that involved France, America, Vietnam, Cambodia, and China, had destroyed for ever any hope that international communism might exert a controlling authority even over its own “sphere,” thus necessitating a radical revision of their analysis of the progress of capitalism.<sup>8</sup> The former centre/periphery division already overlapped with the binary division of the globe that followed Yalta, which set the agenda for the internecine relationships of the so-called “Cold War;” following the Bandung Conference of 1965, which announced the coming out of the “Third World,” things became more complicated. After 1989 and the collapse of the “Second World,” the First/Third World division made no linguistic or political sense; then followed a succession of equally contradictory and anachronistic divisions (East/West, North/South, developed/underdeveloped, Free World/ the Other, along with countless rhetorical variants or “anomalies” such as “failed states,” “rogue states,” old Europe/New Europe and the rest). The futility of such exercises ended with a consensus that “globalization” was the only category that could contain such contradictions. With this new framework of knowledge in mind, I now want to return to that second “epistemological break” in Conrad’s understanding of the (embryonic) world capitalist system: the extraordinary development that took place between the moment of *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* (1899–1900) on the one hand and *Nostramo* (1904) on the other.

If the first two of these intensely experimental works of fiction can be seen as marking a kind of epistemological break not only from Conrad’s earlier novels but also from fundamental tenets of nineteenth-century European realism itself, then the

<sup>7</sup> Giovanni Arrighi. *The Geometry of Imperialism*. Transl. P. Camiller. London: New Left Books, 1978; Verso edition, 1983.

<sup>8</sup> For an account of the aftermath of the (American) “Vietnam War,” see Grant Evans and Kelvin Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War: Indochina since the Fall of Saigon*. London: Verso, 1984; for an early attempt by one “world systems analyst” to come to terms with those fratricidal wars as well as the catastrophe of Kampuchea, see Samir Amin. *Imperialism and Unequal Development*. Hassocks, England: Harvester Press, 1977.

third one, his masterpiece *Nostramo* (1904), represents an even more significant break. At the simplest level, for inspiration both experiential and emotional for this new novel, Conrad returned to the period immediately after he had left his native Poland and was still in his teenage years. That reminds us that he was a European before he was an Englishman and that his first sea voyages were not along an imperial centre/periphery axis at all but one that stretched from southern Europe to the New World of the Americas. The world of *Nostramo* shares little with those latter-day colonies where Europe extended its domain to the remaining non-capitalist areas of the globe. The history of Latin America presented something radically different: in terms of the broad and asymmetrical global politics dominated by Europe, Latin America can best be seen as part of the shared history of the Americas and in other ways a special case of “unequal development.” As a set of nations already in formation in the nineteenth century, the Latin American countries had already had their wars of liberation – their “Liberator” from Spanish rule, and fighter for a pan-Latin America to match its Northern brother, Simón Bolívar, had died over fifty years before. Latin America was thus already “post-colonial,” even though Bolívar’s efforts might appear to have ushered in nothing better than what Conrad’s Don José Avellanós’ gloomily called “Fifty Years of Misrule.” In contradistinction to those paradigm colonial worlds defined so trenchantly by Memmi and Fanon, the populations of Conrad’s Costaguana (as of its real Latin American counterparts) do not divide easily into European colonizers (or even “settlers”) and a native, colonized “populace:” as a result of the destruction wrought by the Spanish and Portuguese invasions, the indigenous inhabitants had long since forfeited their collective identity and thus claims to autochthony. There remained instead crucial class differentials, dominated by the Creole oligarchy whose moment of political hope (the Ribierist revolution) forms the central and ephemeral political action of *Nostramo*. Its post-colonial, neo-colonialist world looks back to its longer colonial past and forward to Holroyd’s yet to be realized, mythic vision of a Pax Americana. This perspective opens up possibilities of reader reception that appear to allow for a seemingly endless process of partial revelations.

### **A VISIONARY *NOSTROMO***

In his Author’s Note for *Nostramo*, Conrad tells how the drive to embark on the Herculean task of writing it took the form of a vision. The project gathered momentum, he tells us, when he began to muse on potential complexities and paradoxes in the story of the man who would be the novel’s eponymous hero:

It was only when it dawned upon me that the purloiner of the treasure need not necessarily be a confirmed rogue, that he could be even a man of character, an actor and possibly a victim in the changing scenes of a revolution, it was only then that I had the first vision of a twilight

country which was to become the province of Sulaco, with its high shadowy Sierra and its misty Campo for mute witnesses of events flowing from the passions of men short-sighted in good and evil (xvii).

Understanding *Nostramo's* "visionary" character requires seriously negotiating Conrad's imagined community of Costaguana as nothing less than a synthesis of Latin America itself, past, present and future. Sometimes, its generalities have been castigated for perpetuating caricatures and stereotypes of what Fredric Jameson (echoing Hegel) called the Latin American "substance:" familiar half-truths about its people, its politics, or its fateful history.<sup>9</sup> But Conrad invariably attributes such characterizations to particular actors in the political drama the novel narrates. The challenge to the constructive reader who is anxious to state accurately the novel's politics must begin with an understanding that there is a crucial gap between its "long-sighted" narrator and its "short-sighted" characters. That is particularly difficult when those characters are by no means just shortsighted, any more than they are evil, but rather well-intentioned and keenly intelligent. Hedged around by whatever ironies, Martin Decoud for example remains one of the rare portraits in fiction of an impressive (though flawed) intellectual.

The first misty vision that Conrad had of his Sulaco, however, is not the kind of "vision" this essay is concerned about. Nor is it about those prophetic visions that have been regularly attributed to Conrad at this centenary moment of some of his chief works. Contemporary sounding happenings in the novels – such as the endless chain of atrocities in the colonies perpetrated by the "West," the presence in the novels of suicide bombers and seemingly arbitrary acts of terrorism, or even Charles Gould's Saddam Hussein-like gesture of planning to blow up his mine and thus thwart his enemies' desires and "material interests" – are an insufficient basis for establishing a claim for Conrad's political relevance for our latest "new world order."

What is truly "visionary" in *Nostramo* is not discerned in terms of coincidental details, however striking these are. Rather, the more penetrating Conradian vision derives from the novel's perspective in relation to history. As Christopher GoGwilt has persuasively argued, that perspective corresponds with Karl Marx's concept of the *longue durée* of history.<sup>10</sup> The meaning of that suggestive phrase is vividly evoked by a story about the great Chinese leader, Chou En-lai: once when Chou was asked what he considered to be the political significance of the French Revolution, he is said to have paused a moment and then replied: "It is too early to say." Without wanting to measure Latin American history against the long reaches of Chinese time, the perspective that reply opens up has some bearing on Conrad's epic story. If asked, for example, what the novel reveals about the political significance of the Bolivarian revolution that took place some fifty years before the central action of *Nostramo*, the

<sup>9</sup> Fredric Jameson. *The Political Unconscious*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1981, 269.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher GoGwilt. *The Invention of the West: Joseph Conrad and the Double-Mapping of Europe and Empire*. Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1995, 190–219.

answer then (and I suspect now) would have to be: “It is too early to say.” Whatever will be the “final” answer to that question, the politics that corresponds to the *longue durée* is different in kind from the lazy and conservative habit of regarding the history of Latin America (or anywhere else) as merely a matter of endless repetition of the same; grasping that difference is the first step for constructing a framework in which to develop a precise political understanding of the world of *Nostramo*. If that leads to a claim for the novel’s political vision being “prophetic,” its prophesy derives neither from Conrad’s acceptance of clichés nor some uncanny ability to foretell the future (no mortal can do that) but a Teiresias- or Cassandra-like capacity to see history as a synchronic vision of past, present and future, each implicated in the others, and without rigid chronological delimitations of where the relevant past started or where the future might end. Of course, this closely echoes the terms of Emilia Gould’s more personal application of a similar principle to her own life:

It had come into her mind that for life to be large and full, it must contain the care of the past and of the future in every passing moment of the present. Our daily work must be done to the glory of the dead, and for the good of those who come after. (520–521)

The fact that – in keeping with her feeling of intense loneliness and isolation – her tone is wistful and elegiac does not simply negate the power of that vision or the universality of its application.

Our own present reflects these greater crises. I have posited that the collapse of the Soviet Union (among other seismic changes circa 1989) signalled a radical change in the ways we construct our understanding of how the world works. It is certainly true that the disappearance of the “Second World” almost at a stroke renders the term “Third World,” whatever might have been its other shortcomings, anachronistic. So the phasing out the triadic division of the world that was inaugurated at the Bandung Conference of 1965 is one of the many side effects of the world-historical changes of 1989.<sup>11</sup> Such recognitions also portend an endpoint to that other powerful period marker, the postcolonial, and all that the concept implies in terms of the relationships of past history. When is the right moment to declare that the postcolonial has had its day?

I have said that “globalization” has rapidly moved from being simply the latest buzz word to label our own times to become the most inclusive category for their serious analysis as a totality – whether in the academy, the world of business or among politicians of every persuasion. Since 1989, the periodization of contemporary history has come to employ the term as the most meaningful one for understanding every aspect of the contemporary world, thus enacting a process of Hegelian *Aufhebung* by simultaneously incorporating and transcending its avatars. As if to underscore this event, at the turn of the millennium, two Marxists, Michael Hardt and

<sup>11</sup> For an elaboration of the argument that we are now firmly in a new “period” whose analysis requires a radical departure from the guiding assumptions of the period 1945–1989, see Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*. London and New York: Verso, 2004.

Antonio Negri, published a controversial book entitled *Empire* (2000).<sup>12</sup> The authors announced that what they called “Empire” was in the process of rendering obsolete the old “imperial” order. The phase of history dominated by modernism and the quest for modernity, whose trajectory had begun with the Enlightenment and whose centres lay in the nation states of the West, was being profoundly transformed into a new era marked by post-modern culture and the diminution in significance of the nation states. Such transformations ushered in a world controlled by wall-to-wall internationalist arrangements, economic, political and cultural. Emanating from the Left and appearing at a time of increasing anxiety about the global future, *Empire*’s utopian vision created a storm.<sup>13</sup>

### POLITICIZING THE RESPONSIVE READER

The scale of the geopolitics involved in such analyses, which aim to measure nothing less than the whole “globe,” can seem to distance and diminish the importance of a comparatively “innocent” practice such as studying literary texts – especially the classics of the past. But if this raises anxieties about the relevance of literary studies in contemporary political and sociological debates, it is worth remembering that modern literary criticism has always had to face such dilemmas of purpose, terminology, and practices. At least in the Anglophone world, a state of crisis can even seem to be the *raison d’être* of the hybrid discipline best known as “English.” One of the oldest of these was over the question of whether politics should even enter into literary discourse – except insofar as the theme of politics may have constituted literary content; another grew from the fact that the new discipline of “English” was marked by an inherited reluctance to engage with theory, so much so that perhaps the biggest crisis it faced in the twentieth century was the “turn to Theory” itself.

Writing in 1864, Matthew Arnold declared that the main skill and goal of the literary critic was “to see the object as in itself it really is.”<sup>14</sup> He asserted that the task of the good critic was to gaze reverentially but with careful discrimination at the bright stars of the literary firmament and propagate their beneficent influence. This in itself was a worthy enough goal, but because it rested uncritically on the ruling Cartesian belief of the separation of the (knowing) subject from the (known) object of analysis and thus advocated as the “function of criticism” a project of Cartesian hagiography, Arnold helped position criticism in England as an activity that was protected against the demand to understand and explain its philosophical underpinnings. Right down to

<sup>12</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2000; first paperback edition, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> For a robust collection of critical essays about *Empire*, see Gopal Balakrishnan, ed. *Debating Empire*. London and New York: Verso, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Arnold. *Essays in Criticism*. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1906; new edition, 1964, 9.



the 1960s, University “English” maintained its resistance to theory – in contrast with literary and sociological studies on the Continent.

Occasional cracks appeared in the wall. Even from within the influential *Scrutiny* group, F.R. Leavis himself once tentatively put forward the idea of a “third realm” that represented a break from the Cartesian structure of knowledge. This was a space where critical exchange takes place about the meaning and especially the value of a particular text:

It is in the study of literature, the literature of one’s own language in the first place, that one comes to recognize the nature and priority of the third realm (as, unphilosophically, no doubt, I call it, talking with my pupils), the realm of that which is neither merely private and personal nor public in the sense that it can be brought into the laboratory and pointed to. You cannot point to the poem; it is “there” only in the re-creative response of individual minds to the black marks on the page. But – a necessary faith – it is something in which minds can meet.<sup>15</sup>

Leavis thus saw this “realm” as existing outside both the literary text and the attentive reading collective that brought it to life (as it were). In his self-confessed un-theorized way, he saw that the activity of literary criticism was different in kind from other academic pursuits, and even alien to the binary divide of the Enlightenment sciences between the (knowing) “subject” of scientific enquiry and its objects of study (the known).<sup>16</sup> However much English gave every appearance of fitting only uncomfortably into an institution dedicated to the field of knowledge, Leavis insisted that its activities should be both rigorous and vital. The theoretical support he invoked included the work of fellow “Scrutineers,” D.W. Harding and I.A. Richards, academics from non-literary disciplines who worked with *Scrutiny* in its early days.<sup>17</sup>

Harding, a psychologist, made a number of impressive interventions that went to the strange and special nature of poetic language, as opposed to other uses that employed language mainly as a means of communication. In a passage that Leavis was fond of quoting, whose ostensible object for analysis was the poetry of Isaac Rosenberg, Harding describes the “poetic-creative” (i.e. literary) use of language in this way:

<sup>15</sup> F.R. Leavis. *Nor Shall My Sword: Discourses on Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1972, 62.

<sup>16</sup> In some of his later writings, Leavis took a passing interest in certain philosophers whose epistemological enquiries appeared to match some of his own “unphilosophical” insights. See, for example, Marjorie Greene. *The Knower and the Known*. Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 1966. This is one of many instances where some of Leavis’ most compelling insights were prevented from their full development by literary criticism’s resolute resistance to theory.

<sup>17</sup> Richards’ major contribution in the early days of both *Scrutiny* and Leavis’ pedagogic mission at Cambridge was the “invention” of “practical criticism,” whose intent was to provide a methodology for rigorous reading that took heed of the special nature of literary language, and whose broad aim was to raise the activity of interpreting and evaluating texts above the level of mere good taste.

Usually when we speak of finding words to express a thought we seem to mean that we have the thought rather close to formulation and use it to measure the adequacy of any possible phrasing that occurs to us, treating words as servants of the idea. "Clothing a thought in language," whatever it means psychologically, seems a fair metaphorical description of much speaking and writing. Of Rosenberg's work it would be misleading. He – like many poets in some degree, one supposes – brought language to bear on the incipient thought at an earlier stage of its development. Instead of the emerging idea being racked slightly so as to fit a more familiar approximation of itself, and words found for that, Rosenberg let it manipulate words almost from the beginning, often without insisting on the controls of logic and intelligibility.<sup>18</sup>

Harding's concept of a peculiarly "poetic-creative" use of language shares common ground with the hermeneutic practices of the continental "reader reception" school, developed by Wolfgang Iser, Hans Jauss and others, just as Leavis' underdeveloped idea of the "third realm" also shares some ground with the reader response school.

Iser makes explicit the activity of the reader in bringing into being the literary work, and distinguishes carefully between the literary *text* that the writer produces and the literary *work*:

...the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic, and the aesthetic: the artistic refers to the text as created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. From this polarity it follows that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie half-way between the two [...] the text only takes on life when it is realized...<sup>19</sup>

The coming together of text and reader can be grasped readily enough as a dynamic and open-ended process. Unlike some of his followers, Iser further stresses that the reader should not be imagined as inert, completely objective or without pre-suppositions; likewise, the literary work that is brought into being by the "reader" (whether individual or collective) is laid open to the contingencies of history, or "the moment." Just as it is constructed by the activity of the reader, it is at once seen to be open to debate and difference – to history, no less. That generates what Slavoj Žižek – from a different perspective and relying on Hans Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics<sup>20</sup> – refers to as an "interpretative chain," in which he claims there resides more meaning than in some supposed "original" reading. Iser extends this account of the character of the literary work – as the product of a dynamic and dialectical process always in formation – to make the claim that in its very nature it will only ever maintain a virtual reality: indeterminate, undecidable and unstable. This recognition – even with its contemporary cybernetic overtones – will not be shocking to Conrad schol-

<sup>18</sup> D.W. Harding. *Experience into Words*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1963, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Wolfgang Iser. "The reading process: a phenomenological approach." David Lodge ed. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. London–New York: Longman, 212.

<sup>20</sup> Slavoj Žižek. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London–New York: Verso, 1989, 214.

Žižek's own hermeneutic "tool-box" marks him as one of the most daring borrowers and adaptors of a range of methodologies for his own purposes that nevertheless respect their own proper integrity.

ars: of all the great novelists, Conrad's fictions are seen almost quintessentially as "indeterminate," sometimes infuriatingly so, in that they have frustrated and alienated his more political readers – or simply those who demand definiteness of one kind or another. These neutral sounding propositions become more contentious when their implications are pushed into the realm of politics or ethics, or fields that are concerned with subjectivity. Both Iser's hermeneutics and Leavis' desire to endow literature and criticism with a special character that distinguishes them from more ratiocinative discourses indicate that Conrad's politics – that is, the complex politics embodied in his great works of Western colonialism – is not a matter of some wholly formed and consistent attitude or set of beliefs that he fed holus-bolus into his fictions (or that "lie behind them," so to speak).

The alternative position for political interpretation that I wish to explore also disclaims the possibility of isomorphism, whereby the critic translates the literary text into a discourse that reflects the meaning of or is homologous with the literary text. It posits instead a rigorous exchange between the triple dynamisms of text, reader and literary work they engender, each component in the process maintaining its own autonomous identity and separate history, and each strand consequently subject to further change through processes of re-reading.

It might seem that this insistence on a kind of Arnoldian or Leavisian "rigour" (with stern implications of the possibility of incorrect readings), rather than advocating a more free-flowing discourse that uses whatever it can lay hold of to generate creatively important political analyses and arguments, is pedantic. But I intend its implications to be mainly political. To take one possible application of this approach: the famous/notorious intervention of Chinua Achebe, in which he named Conrad as a racist, depends on a crucial misreading on Achebe's part (viz. he takes Conrad's supposed attitudes to Africans as identical with those of his second narrator, Marlow). But if that "error" generated a long and productive debate in which much was learnt about the nature of Conrad's text, literary representation in general and the cultural production of racist attitudes, and resulted in Conrad's coming to the attention of an important new readership, then how was that original misreading such a bad thing? As I have said, its importance is of a political kind, and not simply a matter (say) of doing justice to Conrad (although Conrad still attracts the racist label). But the greater political damage was that Achebe's admirable 1975 call to reject racist discourse by the closing decades of the twentieth century had fed the neo-conservative appropriation of "political correctness:" the anti-political correctness of one moment was subsequently used to repress critical debate and – in the name of a return to freedom of expression – encouraged a resurgence of racist discourse.

Such distortions necessitate a re-thinking of Edward Said's fertile concept of "travelling theory," which also relates to the question of a text's or a concept's "iter-

ability,” or capacity to accrue new meanings over time.<sup>21</sup> To begin that process, I want briefly to track a similar process in connection with a small textual detail in *Nostramo*, not because it has become a matter of high contention but rather because it has not. I offer this “close reading,” then, as an instance of what can easily be lost when careful attention to the textuality of literary writing lapses. It is about just three little words in the novel: “...ploughing the sea.”

The late Edward Said was one of Conrad’s greatest admirers. He was drawn more than once, however, to this phrase which he found distressing: he interpreted it as evidence of Conrad’s tendency to disparage non-European people, especially in contexts where they are in close association with Europeans or their descendants. In this his criticism of Conrad’s colonialist politics is close to Achebe’s. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said criticizes *Nostramo* for “embod[ying] the same paternalistic arrogance of imperialism that it mocks in characters like Gould and Holroyd.”<sup>22</sup> He elaborates his objection to Conrad’s attitude over a number of pages, mainly directed at the prejudicial idea that native Latin Americans have no culture of their own, and are incapable of governing themselves or even of responding to governance of any kind. But this rests on a subtle but crucial misreading of the novel. Said attributes to Conrad himself a *bon mot* of the legendary liberationist, Simón Bolívar: “governing them, [Conrad] says, quoting Bolívar, is like ploughing the sea.”<sup>23</sup> Taking the remark to characterize Conrad’s general attitude towards non-European peoples, Said here mis-remembers the passage he had cited more carefully some twenty years earlier in one of his most searching essays on Conrad, in *Beginnings* (1975):

The heritage of South America is, “as the great liberator Bolivar had said in the bitterness of his spirit ... [that] ‘America is ungovernable. Those who worked for her independence have ploughed the sea’.”<sup>24</sup>

Said is not alone in attributing Bolívar’s utterance to Conrad. But it is not the narrator but that latter-day Bolívar, Martin Decoud, who here quotes the “Liberator.” His reflection follows an intense argument with his patriotic lover Antonia Avellanos, whose strict and passionate refusal of Decoud’s scepticism drives him to try to win her hand by assuming an idealistic plan to redeem Costaguana’s “Fifty years of Misrule.” What he shares with Bolívar is bitter despair, although his plan itself has almost opposite goals from those of the Liberator: the latter dreamed of a united America while Decoud’s means of saving the best government that the Creole oligarchy in *Nostramo* could represent was through “occidental” separatism. In his own despair and corrosive scepticism he recalls and empathizes with Bolívar’s despairing

<sup>21</sup> Edward Said. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983, 226.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1993, xx.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, xviii.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Said. *Beginnings: Intentions and Method*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1975, 111; Conrad. *Nostramo*, 186.

last days and the bitter reflection on his life's work that likens it to the Sisyphean task of "ploughing the sea." That is, the remark is presented rhetorically and dramatically and its exact political meaning is to be found not in the sentiment of the utterance itself but in the textual context. Like the (rather benign) racism that colours Marlow's narrative in *Heart of Darkness*, its presence in the text reveals the limitations and potential harmfulness of the character's language rather than simply and uncritically averring a general attitude of the times. In *Heart of Darkness* the text renders racist discourse subject to its analysis of colonial relationships precisely because Conrad lets it lace Marlow's narrative, colouring the tone and vocabulary of the narrator himself; at the same time, by such means it carefully negotiates the problem of how to incorporate the racy idiom of actors in the drama without compromising or disfiguring its political vision. Within this argument, it is clear that a more politically correct language would both produce distortions of artistic integrity and seriously limit political insight. Something similar happens with Conrad's presentation of Decoud's reversion to Bolívar's reported utterance during his despairing last days.

This, I think, is a clear example of misreading (understandable as it is) where readers construct meaning out of their own predisposition and presuppositions and thereby miss the important insight this passage contains. Said's argument derives equally from his landmark analysis of the discourse of orientalism and his life-long commitment to the plight of the Palestinian people and all others who have suffered from both colonial domination and western disdain. His "error," therefore, is not a matter of failing to see that Conrad is really "on his side" – though if it is a matter of sides then I believe that Conrad is closer to Said's than the latter seems to think.

This brief analysis does not exhaust the political implications of the remote and fleeting presence of Bolívar in the novel. That further meaning emerges when we enquire what perspective is opened up when the despairing Decoud – at a pivotal moment of his own political journey – virtually *identifies* with "the Liberator." What threatens Decoud is an overwhelming feeling of futility:

After one Montero there would be another, the lawlessness of a population of all colours and races, barbarism, irremediable tyranny. As the great Liberator Bolivar had said in the bitterness of his spirit, "America is ungovernable. Those who have worked for her independence have ploughed the sea." (186)

Fredric Jameson has shown how *Nostramo*'s narrative is organized around the central action of the lighter's night escape with the silver, thus drawing its most powerful story from popular adventure fiction.<sup>25</sup> That action both masks and stands for the greater one that tells the story of how capitalism came to be embedded in Latin America, a process that cannot be observed through the details of a single event but only takes place over time and is only discernible from a perspective that encompasses its long pre-capitalist past and the altered contours of its new condition that

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<sup>25</sup> *The Political Unconscious*, 272.

stretches into a distant future. Within the novel's tighter focus, its "central" narrative might be seen to begin with the early stages of the Ribierist revolution and end with the creation of Decoud's Occidental Republic. That beginning, however, looks backward through the terror of Guzman Bento's dictatorship to the moment of liberation from Spanish rule of which Bolívar's name has become legendary to an even mistier past enshrined in folk lore and typified by the suggestive story of the ghosts of the gringos that haunt the Isabels; its closure sees the bitter-sweet celebration of Decoud's dream, the cynical spiritual descendant of Bolívar who is himself now monumentalized in the form of a statue. Conrad's historical past, that is, traces a trajectory with no clear-cut origin and including along the way the horrors of colonialism and its various aftermaths, the false dawn of independence followed by "Fifty Years of [neo-colonial] Misrule" down to a present that is born along on the rhetoric of civilization. But this "civilization" is nothing more than the one represented by the Creole oligarchy that benefited most from colonialism and is now funded by international capital and driven by Western know-how and desire for profit. The novel's pessimistic end portends further developments of that world-view of the North American Holroyd and the dissolving of British power into that conglomerate known as "the West."

This narrative brings us to the champions of a pan-Latin American nation of our own time: Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, and most recently Hugo Chávez. In that other America their images are as denigrated as was Bolívar's in his time – and all three claim "the Liberator" as their inspiration. Western propaganda would probably relate these left-wing nationalists to some of *Nostramo's* less salubrious "revolutionaries" (e.g. the Monteros, or Sotillo) and thus sustain the misapplication of "ploughing the sea" sketched above. But quite different historical lines of force are discovered when attention is directed to that other revered and much-discussed revolutionary in the novel: Giuseppe Garibaldi, who is represented by his devoted follower, the veteran Giorgio Viola, and still present as a picture on the wall of the Casa Viola (later called "L'Albergo d'Italia Una"). In Jameson's words, "Conrad never went further politically than in his sympathetic portrayal of the nationalist-populist ideal" represented by Garibaldi (or indeed, we might recall, his own father).<sup>26</sup>

Bolívar, Che and Chávez recently came together in an interview the Venezuelan leader, Chávez, did with Aleida, the daughter of Che. In that interview, published as *Chávez, Venezuela and the New Latin America* (2005), Chávez elaborates how his broad political objective is to exorcize what he calls "Bolívar's curse" by completing his project; Chavez' self-proclaimed, Bolivarian goal is to transform the Cuba/Venezuela axis into a greater Columbia and Pan-Latin American Republic. Chávez looks back to Bolívar's last days and asks: "how did they come to expel Bolívar from this country, from Venezuela?" "By 'they'," he goes on to say:

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, 274.

I don't mean the Spanish; it was in fact the Venezuelan oligarchy that expelled him. That same oligarchy murdered Marshal Sucre when he was only 25 years old. They expelled Bolívar's wife, Manuela Sáenz, they expelled Simón Rodríguez and all the other Bolivarians, and made themselves lords of the land. It was then that Bolívar said: "I have ploughed the sea."<sup>27</sup>

The testimony of this particular Latin American reader, who also sees himself as playing a part in a great story, helps clarify a number of details that bear on my attempt to understand the political insights of Conrad's most complex colonial (or, more precisely, "postcolonial") novel. Firstly, the expression of futility in the metaphor of "ploughing the sea," far from revealing a contempt on the author's part for "the common people," is consistent with his respect for the populism of Garibaldi. If that is partly seen as a past ideal, it continues into the novel's present as an unresolved concern for "the people" as against the "material interests" of the *hombres finos* – the dominant Creole descendants of the Spanish conquerors – not only manifested by both the old Garibaldino but also taken up by Nostromo himself. It issues in those stirrings of political *ressentiment* expressed in the dying stages of the novel. The second point is that Bolívar's utterance does not simply describe a hopeless task, but registers the weight of history that must be overcome to achieve a lasting liberation: that reading allows for a more open-ended interpretation of *Nostramo*'s narrative closure than the blunt counter-revolutionary hostility to idealism often attributed to Conrad. Finally, exposing the text of the novel to an intensive scrutiny within the framework of two hundred years of historical development redefines it as an extraordinary feat both of intellectual research, creative construction and meditation on political revolution. The novel records with precision and power the tragedy of a whole class: the Creole oligarchy who regarded the patrimony of Spanish colonization and its demise as belonging solely to themselves.

The painful moment that links Decoud with Bolívar does not recall the passionate Liberator who envisioned a united Latin American continent to rival its Northern brother but the bitter and despairing dying man who tragically saw his life's work as a failure. Neither history nor the Conrad of *Nostramo* endorses that judgment. In the time of the French Revolution, "the Liberator" of Spain's American colonies lived and embodied an antinomy; but Conrad also links him with that other liberator, who is honoured by both: that is, of course, Garibaldi. Don José Avellanos' "Fifty Years of Misrule" presents a lugubrious backdrop to the action dramatized in *Nostramo*; when, in a somewhat different spirit, one of Conrad's many Latin American admirers and spiritual heirs, Gabriel García Márquez, contemplated Latin American history, he had the advantage of even longer time spans: his most famous book narrates the story of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). His later novel, *The General in his Labyrinth* (1989), again tells the story of the Liberator's grim last weeks, and, yes, again reproduces his unforgettable utterance about "ploughing the sea." For some further coinci-

<sup>27</sup> Chávez, *Venezuela and the New Latin America: An Interview with Hugo Chávez by Aleida Guevara*. Melbourne and New York: Ocean Press, 2005, 9.

dences, however, I will conclude with García Márquez' brief memorial to Bolívar's soul mate and partner, Manuela, who shared his dream and life's work:

...in his will he left Manuela a sum equal to the dowry she had brought to the marriage, but she never received it. Three memorable visitors consoled her abandonment: the tutor Simón Rodríguez, with whom she shared the ashes of glory, the Italian patriot Giuseppe Garibaldi, who was returning from the struggle against the dictatorship of Rosas in Argentina, and the novelist Herman Melville, who was wandering the oceans of the world gathering information for *Moby-Dick*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Gabriel García Márquez. *The General in his Labyrinth* [1989]. Transl. London: Jonathan Cape, 1990, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991, 261.