

Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that political issues related to nation, revolution, and independence have engaged Conrad's intellectual energy throughout his career. Coming from a Polish family whose major members have committed themselves to its nationalist movement, he develops his political ideals based on this experience and expatiates on them, in a rather forcible manner, in lots of his non-fictional writings. However, when dealing with these issues in a fictional context, Conrad usually becomes not so outspoken and his stance is notoriously ambivalent and inconclusive; the fictional narrative may implicitly challenge the ideals he otherwise advocates unreservedly and even contradict its own political logic. *Nostramo*, maybe Conrad's sole novel in which the three issues are treated in a correlated fashion, also demonstrates this crux in one's evaluation of his ideas. With its major theme about the formation of an imaginary state through a revolution in South America, the novel represents the process with a structurally loose, chronologically confusing narrative; it lacks a sense of grandeur and certainty due to the common type of "national history"—such sense as usually permeates Conrad's non-fictional writings about nationalist issues. In face of this contradiction and the ensuing ambiguity in the novelist's attitude, we have to negotiate through the two kinds of discourse to reconsider the issues as they are raised in *Nostramo*--such as the nature and function of community, the process and even the strategy of its formation, as well as the possibility and model of representing its history.

Conrad has seldom put into question the necessity of forming social bonding among originally isolated individuals for them to survive and develop. However, he does not conceive of this bonding in terms of classical Liberal tradition; that is, for him, it is impossible for a community to exist and make sense by basing itself on a kind of contractual relationship among a group of supposedly rational individuals who strive for their own selfish interests. The kind of community Conrad has in mind promises a psychologically deeper and existentially more meaningful involvement among its members. Like minute parts of an organic being, people organize themselves into an undivided unity; within it their unanimous efforts achieve its development, which in turn guarantees their self-fulfillment. For Conrad, this ideal community, whose principles Avrom Fleishman traces back to the philosophical tradition of organicism, produces a peculiar sense of commitment among its members in order to assure their survival in a mythical way (51-77). In the Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* a novel dealing with the interaction among the crew in a ship, Conrad's favorite symbol for human community, he explains the essence of the commitment as "the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts ... which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn" (viii). When the community takes the shape of a country, this sense of fellowship assumes an abstract existence usually called "national spirit" or "will," which serves as an emotional

mainstay for humankind to survive the meaningless contingencies of the universe inimical to our psychological being:

In this ceaseless rush of shadows and shades, that, [are] like the fantastic forms of clouds cast darkly upon the waters on a windy day ... , we must turn to the national spirit, which ... can alone give us the feeling of an enduring existence and of an invincible power against the fates. (194)

This use of natural imagery of sea and cloud to represent the intolerable existential void of the universe is quite relevant to *Nostromo*, in which two major characters suffers spiritual crises when they are removed from the context of social interaction and confronted by the indifferent natural world.

The novel opens with a bleak description of the geography around the coast town Sulaco, where its perpetual gloom or even total darkness embodies the emptiness of any kind of significance in our universe. As the narrator claims, when night descends upon the Gulf Placid, "the eye of God Himself ... could not find out what work a man's hand is doing there; and you would be free to call the devil ... if even his malice were not defeated by such a blind darkness" (*Nostromo* 7). In face of this blankness of time and space beyond good and evil, human subject reveals its hollowness and porousness which it cannot be conscious of if it is penetrated and suffused with meanings and emotions generated by various kinds of interactions in a community. Floating out with Nostromo in the lighter at night, Decoud experiences an existential draining away of his being when "the enormous stillness, without light or sound, seemed to affect his senses like a powerful drug"; he lapses into a spiritual numbness because "the change from the agitation, the passions and the dangers ... was so complete that it would have resembled death" (*Nostromo* 262). When arousing himself from this dissipation of self-identity, he has "the strangest sensation of his soul having just returned into his body from the circumambient darkness" (*Nostromo* 262). Therefore, the absolute blankness of the universe does not really promise the individuals who face it a nirvana-like peace of mind; it in fact poses a threat to their subjectivities which can remain secure, paradoxically, only when immersed in the seemingly annoying bustle of the human community. The sense of collectivity, fostered in a group of people engaged in ceaseless activities, establishes a sustaining ground against the existential void which they may otherwise be sucked in. Although this collective sense seems so impalpable and illusive, it is substantial and "real" enough to support the identities.

Both Nostromo's unexpected outburst of revolt against the Europeans and Decoud's enigmatic suicide can be understood in terms of the psychological function community and social bonding have in sustaining subjectivities. Nostromo, as this mispronounced nickname *nostro uomo* (our man) suggests, has his social ego mostly formed in the interaction with the Sulacan community; his activities are "in complete harmony with his vanity" and aim at