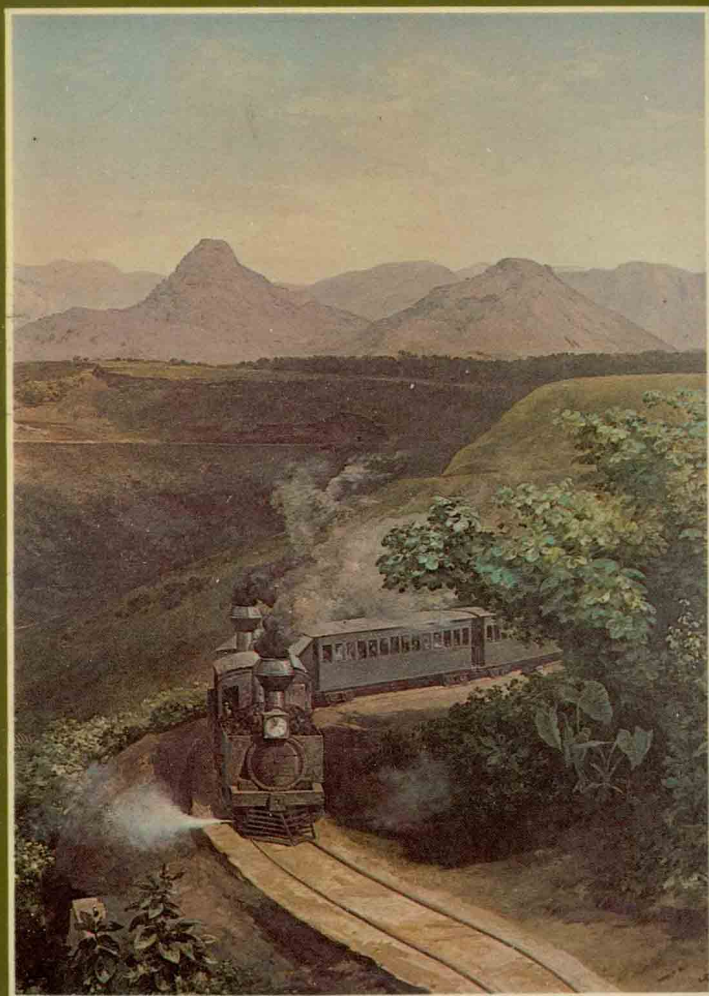


THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

JOSEPH CONRAD

NOSTROMO



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Nostromo

A Tale of the Seaboard



Edited with an introduction by

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INTRODUCTION

1

ON 12 December 1902 shortly after his forty-fifth birthday, Conrad lamented: 'I doubt if greatness can be attained now in imaginative prosework. When it comes it will be in a new form; in a form for which we are not ripe yet.'¹ Two weeks later, beset as ever by debts, depression, and gout, haunted by the sense that 'there was nothing in the world to write about', Conrad began *Nostromo*, hoping it would prove a 'silly and saleable' novella of some 35–40,000 words which would take only a month to write and would make a quick profit of £150.² Twenty months and 189,000 words later, he finished *Nostromo*, one of the finest 'imaginative proseworks' in the language; and one whose 'new form'—characterized by dazzling shifts of chronology and perspective—continues to puzzle and to enchant his readers.

Such high claims for *Nostromo*'s greatness demand willy-nilly a threefold demonstration: firstly, that the novel's massive tensile design reflects and embodies the solicitude, humanity, and profundity of Conrad's vision of mankind's affairs—and therefore of the artist's task—and responds to and encompasses the sheer scope and variety of his created world; secondly, that his intricate narrative tactics are neither wilful nor adventitious, but rather spring from his determination to effect a strong grasp upon our sensibilities by directly inviting us to collaborate with the processes of his fiction making. To appreciate the sheer *enterprise* of the novel will lay the groundwork for my third concern, which is a sympathetic

¹ G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters I* (London, Heinemann, 1927), p. 308. Henceforward LLI or LLII.

² Quoted by Fred R. Karl, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux), p. 540. Henceforward TL.

reappraisal of the novel's most criticized aspect, namely Nostromo's role and fate.

The most compelling and succinct of Conrad's many statements about the interdependence of the artist's and of mankind's concerns is contained in a letter he wrote to the *New York Times* on 2 August 1901:³

The only legitimate basis of creative work lies in the courageous recognition of all irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascinating, so dangerous, so full of hope. They exist! And this is the only fundamental truth of fiction. Its recognition must be critical in its nature, inasmuch that in its character it may be joyous; it may be sad; it may be angry with revolt or submissive in resignation . . . whatever light he (the writer) flashes on it, the fundamental truth remains; and it is only in its verve that the barren struggle of contradictions assumes the dignity of moral strife—going on ceaselessly to a mysterious end. . .

All Conrad's major fictions present and analyse such oppositions: solidarity and isolation, moral corruption and redemption, 'treasure and love' (566), individual heroism and human contingency, fidelity and betrayal, and a commitment to basic truths aligned with a recognition of their actual relativity. His recognition of the 'ceaseless . . . struggle of contradictions' springs from an inclusive vision of man's fate; and because for Conrad, as for Flaubert, 'the *whole* of the truth lies in the presentation', his vision sponsors a search for the correlative form.⁴ During the writing of *Nostromo* Conrad admonished H. G. Wells for his 'exclusiveness' of intellect and feeling, because his 'sincerity' was served 'at the expense of truth'. With his aims in *Nostromo* clearly in mind, Conrad argues that the creative artist must cast 'a wide, a generous net, where there would be room for everybody; where indeed every sort of a fish would be welcome, appreciated and made use of'.⁵

³ *TL*, p. 460.

⁴ *LLI*, p. 280.

⁵ *LLI*, p. 328.

Nostromo is in all respects the widest and most generous net he ever designed. We watch in wonder as he magisterially describes the topography, climate, and sustaining superstitions of Costaguana before he presents, through the activities, conflicts, and perspectives of a host of characters and pressure groups, its domestic, political, economic and cultural history over a period of some fifty years. The novel is both an analysis and a prophecy of the issues and conflicts which have dominated Third World countries. It examines the attempt to graft Western capitalist enterprise, cultural norms, and political institutions, upon the stock of a peasant, superstitious, economically underdeveloped country, recently emerging out of Spanish colonial rule, and governed by a series of 'pronunciamientos' which have rendered the country chronically unstable.

The bond and main source of the political, economic, and cultural conflicts in Costaguana is, of course, the silver, which Conrad describes as 'the pivot of the moral and material events, affecting the lives of everyone in the tale'.⁶ The mine provides the 'generous net' which enables Conrad to appreciate and use 'every sort of fish' and to canvass (seemingly) every conceivable perspective and position: whether the cravenness and greed of a Sotillo, or 'the confidence and belief' of the native miners; the pusillanimity of a Hirsch, or the genial bravery of General Barrios; the vanity and folly of a Pedrito Montero, or the 'luck' of young Scarfe; whether the varieties of idealism embodied and explored in Giorgio Viola, Nostromo, the Goulds, Holroyd, Antonia, Don José Avellanós and Father Corbelán, or the varieties of scepticism in Decoud, Monygham, and Father Roman.

The 'incorruptible' treasure as in folklore tests the corruptible characters of men and nations. It is, as Captain

⁶ *LLII*, p. 296.

Mitchell remarks with unconscious wisdom, 'a great force for good and evil', requiring for its successful operation the conflicting passions, beliefs, appetites and activities of men. As both the chief power in Costaguana and the novel's central metaphor the silver works as the nexus of 'a struggle of contradictions' which work thematically and formally. Thus the mine inspires in Gould (and Don José Avellanos and the Ribierists) a vision of reconciliation of 'law, good faith, order, security' which will replace 'lawlessness and disorder', because the security 'material interests' demand if they are to be established 'must be shared with oppressed people' (84). The credulous and outraged populace, however, loathe the foreigners who develop Costaguana, and readily support the Monterists who lead 'a military revolt in the name of national honour' (145). For Gould 'a better justice will come afterwards', but for his wife 'the wealthy and enterprising men' who backed the mine 'don't seem to have understood anything they have seen here' (70). 'The Treasure House of the World' underpins the economic, political, and military feasibility of the Occidental Republic's separation from Costaguana. Yet, as we realize, the very success of the development of material interests breeds a hybrid opposition (common throughout Latin America today), of socialists, trade unionists, the Catholic Church and refugees from previous revolutions. All groups in their different ways are set at odds by the status of the mine as an 'imperio in imperium' and by the Manifest Destiny of United States imperialism so confidently predicted by Holroyd: 'We shall be giving the word for everything: industry, trade, law, journalism, art, politics and religion' (77). 'The popular Archbishop of Sulaco', a convinced nationalist and brave defender of the Catholic faith, speaks for an 'antagonism' which will never be reconciled when he warns: 'beware . . . lest the people, prevented from their aspirations, should rise and

claim their share of the wealth and their share of the power' (510). Dr Monygham accepts the Archbishop's militant prophecy but is far less sanguine as to the results because:

'There is no peace . . . in the development of material interests. They have their law and their justice. But it is founded on expediency, and is inhuman; . . . the 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)

What is the reader to make of such widely different responses to the silver and such opposing estimates of its political and social power? If you believe Dr Monygham you will agree with Albert Guerard Jr, that 'the conflicts induced by capitalist exploitation outweigh the benefits accrued'.⁷ Yet the forces of progress have won; and as Robert Penn Warren claims 'we must admit that the society at the end of the book is preferable to that of the beginning'.⁸ One could easily draw on the novel to support the views of either of these two fine representative critics. On the one hand we can turn to Mrs Gould's heartbroken recognition: 'There was something inherent in the necessities of successful action which carried with it the moral degradation of the idea' (521) and we can effortlessly point to the ironies of success in *Nostromo*. For example Don José advocates federalism yet gives his blessing to separation, and Mrs Gould initially shares her husband's vision of the efficacy of material interests, yet 'in the grip of a merciless nightmare', when she stammers out 'Material interests', she reminds us of *Heart of Darkness* and Kurtz's 'The horror! The horror!' On the other hand the

⁷ A. J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 198.

⁸ Robert Penn Warren, "'The Great Mirage': Conrad and *Nostromo*", *Selected Essays* (New York, Random House, 1958), p. 50.

narrator assures us that Sulaco after secession grows 'rich swiftly' and 'experiences a second youth, like a new life'; and Captain Mitchell blandly assures us, as we participate in his tour of a modern and prosperous Sulaco, that 'a New Era' has dawned (477) and that Decoud's vision of secession is 'a glorious success' (489).

As such quick forays into the novel demonstrate, Conrad's 'fundamental truth' invites and sustains opposing views which are 'irreconcilable'. The reader is obliged to *criticize* all the characters' viewpoints: no one position provides a stable point of reference from which the others can be judged. Rather we chart an abundance of recognitions which play off each other, ranging from, say, the 'opera bouffe' of Decoud; the measureless pity of Antonia who exclaims, unforgettably, 'Forgive us our misery' (361); the sardonic appraisal of human behaviour by Dr Monygham; the open-eyed resignation of Mrs Gould and 'the angry revolt' of Nostromo. The mine is to *Nostromo* what the ivory is to *Heart of Darkness* or Chancery to *Bleak House* or the whale to *Moby Dick* or the law to *The Castle*: as all the characters respond to its power and fall under its influence, as they use and interpret it, they wittingly or unwittingly disclose their deepest needs and purposes whether spiritual, emotional, material or political.

2

Range of character, breadth of canvas and mighty themes do not guarantee mighty books. *Nostromo* is a great novel because Conrad's political intelligence and prescience are (as he remarked in a late letter which reviewed his whole career) inseparable from 'my unconventional grouping and perspective . . . wherein all my "art" consists . . . It is fluid depending on grouping (sequence), which shifts,

and on the changing lights giving varied effects of perspective'.⁹

Because Conrad's 'illuminating imagination'¹⁰ permeates and controls every aspect of *Nostromo* it is possible to examine his handling of any one of his motifs (such as Higuerota, Mrs Gould's water-colour, or the portrait of Garibaldi), or any one of his minor characters, or any single time shift or switch of perspective, in order to demonstrate that his obliquities of narration are considered 'and revealing. Several years ago a student challenged such a contention by pointing to Conrad's 'perverse' presentation of Don Vincente Ribiera whose puzzling appearances in the first two-fifths of the novel seem deliberately designed to ensure that our initial relation to the narrative is analogous to that of Captain Mitchell's 'privileged passenger' who is 'stunned . . . mentally by a sudden surfeit of sights, sounds, names, facts and complicated information imperfectly apprehended' (486-7).

I have therefore deliberately chosen to analyse Conrad's presentation of Ribiera as a representative case to demonstrate the novel's wonderful fusion of form and vision. For the sake of brevity my account treats only five of Ribiera's fleeting appearances in the novel and leaves extensive cross-reference to the reader.¹¹ Five of our seven encounters with him are interwoven variations upon two opposing images: his ignominious flight on the mule which persuades Decoud to push his plan for the secession of the Occidental Republic from the rest of Costaguana (the main action of the novel), and his appearance eighteen months before his flight when, as President of Costaguana, he

⁹ *LLII*, p. 317.

¹⁰ Edward Garnett, ed., *Letters from Joseph Conrad 1895-1924* (Indianapolis, Hobbs-Merrill, 1928), p. 172.

¹¹ The omitted appearances are his fifth (144-5) and his seventh (244-6).

oversees 'the turning of the first sod of the Sulaco National Railway' (35). On the first occasion his fate is tied to Nostromo who rescues him from the revolutionary mob (11-13, 129-31, 224-6), on the second Ribiera is the native embodiment of the hopes for the development of 'material interests' in Costaguana (34-9, 116-20).

Our first view of Ribiera is filtered through the complacent voice of 'Fussy Joe', Captain Mitchell, who manifests an Anglo-Saxon, Tory disdain for Latin American revolutionary politics:

Poor Señor Ribiera . . . had come pelting eighty miles over the mountain tracks after the lost battle of Socorro, in the hope of out-distancing the fatal news—which, of course, he could not manage to do on a lame mule. The animal, moreover, expired under him at the end of the Alameda, where the military band plays sometimes in the evenings between the revolutions. 'Sir,' Captain Mitchell would pursue . . . 'the ill-timed end of that mule attracted attention to the unfortunate rider.' (11)

Mitchell's voice is heard through a blend of direct speech and of a free indirect style. This tactic enables Conrad to write as if from *within* the prejudices and idiom of the character ('rascally mob', 'worst kind of nigger', 'thieves and murderers') and, simultaneously, allows him to place the plain voice of the character, because we are constantly aware that the voice of the author (to continue the figure) provides counterpoint and descant. He intrudes nuances and tones of which the character is unaware. Thus Mitchell's portentous gravity (unconsciously) records a moment of high farce: only the dying mule draws the attention of the deserters to the Dictator they have served and now execrate. (Mitchell is crucial to the design of *Nostromo* because he allows Conrad to release a mass of exposition economically. Both his claims to a 'profound knowledge of men and things in the country' (11) and his belief that history and narrative constitute a linear succession of

public events and spectacular human deeds are systematically subverted by Conrad.)

We next meet Ribiera twenty pages later, and eighteen months before his defeat, when as President of Costaguana he celebrates the 'Progressive and patriotic undertaking' of the National Sulaco Railway (34). We now view him through the massively assured vision of Sir John Smith, the English railway magnate: 'After all he was their own creature—that Don Vincente. He was the embodied triumph of the best elements in the State. These were facts . . . ' (38). Conrad's radical disjunction of chronology critically places Sir John's urbane belief in such 'facts'. We register, as he *cannot*, the distinctly uncertain relationship between faith and action; particularly when 'the best elements of the state' are involved.

The third mention of Ribiera occurs sixty pages on and relates to the same moment: this time, however, it is filtered through the sympathetic consciousness of Mrs Gould. Chapter 8 begins with a typically deadpan, two-pronged prolepsis (anticipating the political situation at the very end of the novel) which assures us that 'material interests' finally triumphed in Sulaco and also sponsored 'quite serious, organised labour troubles' (95); and thus confirms our sense of the contradictions inherent in material success. Mrs Gould listens to Ribiera's hopes for 'a period of peace and material prosperity' for their unhappy country. She observes 'the short body obese to the point of infirmity' and thinks 'that this man of delicate and melancholy mind, physically almost a cripple, coming out of his retirement into a dangerous strife at the call of his fellows, had the right to speak with the authority of his self-sacrifice . . . this first civilian Chief of the State Costaguana' (119). Mrs Gould's kind assessment of Ribiera realigns some of our impressions and reinforces others. On the one hand we are persuaded to admire Ribiera's fidelity and his earned authority (as opposed to the assumed

superiority of Mitchell and the presumptive authority of Sir John); and on the other Conrad cannily releases details ('obese to the point of infirmity') which invite our pity for Ribiera's suffering *and* re-echo the note of farce, as we understand why the poor mule limped and finally expired.

Our fourth encounter with Ribiera at the close of Part I involves a double switch of viewpoint and chronology. Nostromo's splendid public tableau with the Morenita occurs on the same day as the inauguration of the railway, and the former is described omnisciently before we move to Captain Mitchell's thoughts about the latter as another 'historic occasion' (130). Conrad then uses Captain Mitchell both to review Ribiera's downfall and, via a dramatic prolepsis (entirely characteristic of the novel's procedures), to carry us to the end of the novel—to learn that Nostromo becomes involved in 'a fatality' and 'has never been the same man since' (131). Conrad's sensational shifts whet our curiosity and baffle us by releasing information we cannot, yet, understand; and they demonstrate that Mitchell's belief that men *make* 'history' is extremely debatable in a world where human fortunes are so unpredictable.

Ribiera's sixth brief mention is in the context of Decoud's Parisian life before he learns of the former's downfall:

Of his own country he used to say to his French associates:—Imagine an atmosphere of opera-bouffe in which all the comic business . . . is done in dead earnest . . . No man of ordinary intelligence can take part in the intrigues of *une farce macabre* . . .

And he would explain with railing verve what Don Vincente Ribiera stood for—a mournful little man oppressed by his own good intentions . . . (152-3)

The novel is not short of moments of macabre farce and 'railing verve' as the suspended corpse of Hirsch, and Conrad's lampoon of Sotillo and Gamacho, testify: but Mrs

Gould's assessment of Ribiera's 'dead earnest' commitment and activity (and we might add those of Gould, Don José, Father Corbelàn and Antonia) ensures that we recognize that Decoud's sardonic appraisal of the value of political and human activity is self-indulgent and partial. Decoud in fact soon changes his mind. He is confronted in Costaguana by 'the absolute change of atmosphere': 'He was moved in spite of himself by that note of passion and sorrow unknown on the more refined stage of European politics' (156). Decoud's unawareness, hitherto, of this note, which has been part of the reader's experience throughout the narrative, allows us, immediately, to *criticize* his cynicism.

Conrad's presentation of Ribiera is astonishingly economical and iridescent. As fugitive and President he is a minor figure who flits through a mere twenty-five pages of narrative—as opposed to (say) the forty pages Conrad devotes to Decoud and Nostromo in the lighter, or the thirty leisurely pages which chart the conversation between Nostromo and Dr Monygham in the empty Custom House. Conrad's presentation, however, enables us to appreciate both the 'irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life' and the 'unconventional grouping and perspective . . . wherein all my "art" consists'.

Ford Madox Ford said that he and Conrad 'agreed that the one quality that gave interest to Art was the quality of surprise'.¹² We should not confuse 'surprise' with either the 'twists' of an O. Henry short story or with the clever revelations of a detective story, or again with the strange and exciting adventures of a romance: as we have seen, we learn about Ribiera's sorry fate before we encounter the events that gave rise to it. Furthermore Conrad deliberately resists the 'surprises' associated with grand climaxes when, in Part III, Chapter 10, we are transported some

¹² F. M. Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (London, Duckworth, 1924), p. 189.

ten years ahead, and potentially exciting 'historical events', such as Don P  p   marching on the town at the head of the mineworkers and Dr Monygham's last minute reprieve from hanging, have become 'the more or less stereotyped relation' (473) of an old man's gossip. Rather, as we have seen, Conrad's 'surprise' is produced by a series of juxtapositions and contrasts which involve subtle shifts of voice, viewpoint, and time, often within the same paragraph, deliberately subjecting the reader to a vertiginous process which simultaneously shakes our perceptions, disrupts our attempts to construct a stable linear narrative, and ensures, as Conrad desires, that 'the reader collaborates with the author'.¹³ Our collaboration is necessary if we are to reconstruct the history of Costaguana; but more importantly our constant state of surprise means that we are obliged both to strive to understand, and to re-enact the fate of his characters caught in 'the bitter necessities of the time'. Like all of us his characters need to believe that their activities generate meaning and pattern in a world where time and materials are shaped by men. As we struggle to trace, and are made to feel, the conflicting pressures, needs, forces and motives which constitute any single event, and which ensure the breakdown of any stable relationship between word and experience, idea and actions, ends and means, so we are persuaded to undergo all 'the irreconcilable antagonisms' which render (say) Nostromo 'angry with revolt' and which 'insidiously' corrupt Gould's judgement. To collaborate with Conrad, therefore, is actively to engage with the 'truth' of the author's own restless 'verve'. He pursues an ironic method, which generates, and springs from, a dual perspective of pity and scorn. He recognizes that 'the irreconcilable antagonisms' he confronts and negotiates in his art render any stabilizing

¹³ *LLI*, p. 304.

reconciliation or perspective impossible: impossible no matter how deeply he craves them, and no matter how passionately his characters believe in them.

3

To concentrate on Nostromo's role and fate is to recognize that Conrad's overriding preoccupation, as in all his major fictions, is with personal identity—phrased memorably by Stein in *Lord Jim* as the issue of 'how to be!' In the world of Costaguana, as in his native Poland, the London of *The Secret Agent* and the Russia of *Under Western Eyes*, 'the psychology of individuals even in the most extreme instances, reflects the general effects of the fears and hopes of the time'.¹⁴ As Conrad tells us in his 'Author's Note' the issue of personal identity demands an examination of the relationship between 'the secret purposes' of his characters' 'hearts revealed in the bitter necessities' of Costaguana (xliv). *Nostromo* is a remarkable complex of personal stories which explores how the characters seek to relate their self conceptions to the competing claims of 'treasure and love'. Thus the stories of the Goulds, Decoud, Dr Monygham and Nostromo, in their different ways, illustrate a split between private being and public role.

Nostromo, unlike the other major figures, does not possess a 'secret' life, a private identity, until he is reborn into the world of consciousness on Azuera (414). Before this moment his *raison d'être* is vanity and prestige. A man of pure action, Nostromo to Decoud's amazement 'does not seem to make any difference between speaking and thinking' (246). He is incapable of distinguishing between his self and the world. It is therefore fitting that until he tastes 'the dust and ashes of the fruit of life' (416)

¹⁴ 'Autoocracy and War' (1905), *Notes on Life and Letters* (London, Dent, 1921), p. 113.

we only view him (unlike the major figures, but like Ribiera) *externally* through the narrator's description of his actions and gestures; through a series of ascriptions—'the lordly Capataz de Cargadores, the indispensable man, the tried and trusty Nostromo, the Mediterranean sailor' (130)—and through the viewpoints of the various characters and groups who comment on his activity.

The conflicting viewpoints on Nostromo, as with Ribiera, alert us to the ambiguous political implications of his status. He is oblivious to Mrs Viola's taunts that his personal prestige is actually based upon 'a silly name' given 'in exchange for your soul and body' (256). Appropriately, on Azuera Nostromo rehearses the public ascriptions and activities, 'the facts', which hitherto have constituted his selfhood, and thinks they constitute a *political* consciousness of 'his betrayed individuality'. Deprived however of 'certain simple realities such as . . . the adulation of men', and unable to recognize that 'men' will be 'used as they are' (177), Nostromo truly represents 'the popular mind' because he superstitiously resorts to rudimentary notions of 'power, punishment, pardon' (420). Thus he understands his decision to 'grow rich very slowly' (503) as a political act of 'revenge' upon the rich and as a dark 'bargain' with the fates. The former we realize is a self-deception because the 'facts' of his political account subserve his wounded vanity; the latter involves the false premise that his pride and courage will enable him 'to pay' the price of 'a soul lost' (Mrs Viola) and 'a vanished life' (Decoud). The terrible consequences of his primitive, vain decisions are charted in the last three chapters of the novel.

4

Few readers have been prepared to defend the ending of *Nostromo*, the reactions of two of Conrad's closest friends