

**Violence and the limits of modern liberalism: the political novels of  
Joseph Conrad**

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds  
School of English

May, 2016

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank Graham Huggan for his mentorship throughout the process of writing this thesis. Thanks are also due to The Joseph Conrad Society (UK), both for financial support in attending conferences and for numerous suggestions that have improved this work; I am particularly grateful to Keith Carabine for his advice and encouragement.

I would also like to acknowledge my gratitude to Matei Candea, who helped plant the seed for this work many years ago. Also I have greatly appreciated the friendship and advice of Amaleena Damlé, Alys Mostyn, and Kasia Mika. Likewise, for the love and support of numerous other friends and family—particularly Doug, Margaret, Deb, and Leigh—and above all my father and mother, David and Sook Su, thank you.

Lastly, to Donna—you made this possible. For that and everything else, my deepest love and gratitude.



## Abstract

Conrad wrote in his political essay, 'Autocracy and War,' of the inevitable degradation of political ideals in the cut and thrust of actual politics. This thesis proposes that Conrad's political novels are fundamentally engaged with modern liberalism. It places Conrad's political novels in conversation with modern liberal political theory, arguing that close attention to aesthetic concerns is illuminating of the latter's limits. Violence is abhorred by modern liberalism as a fundamental limit on liberty, yet Conrad's writing posits violence as ubiquitous in modern liberal politics. Freedom itself is presented in his work as a form of violence; additionally, core liberal concerns—conversation, the public/private split, autonomy, the individual self—are implicated in different forms of violence that tend to perpetuate an unequal status quo. In Conrad's writing, these all appear as limits on freedom, thus modern liberalism is represented as a negotiation of competing forms of violence.

However, Conrad's self-contradictory writing both undermines and unexpectedly affirms modern liberalism, at least in part. These critiques emerge not from conceptual analysis, but rather from close attention to issues of literary form: in particular, Conrad's modernist aesthetic, dialogic narrative, and complex use of genre. In terms of the latter, both romance and burlesque infiltrate realist fiction, bringing with them a range of contradictory politics. Via these generic interactions, Conrad finds the origins of modern liberalism in an archaic politics based in elite feudal values that were historically involved in the regulation of violence. This archaic value system is degraded by the democratic impulse of burlesque. Conrad is unable to commit wholeheartedly to either archaic feudalism or modern liberalism, and elitism and democracy appear as two further limits to the latter. Against the grain, perhaps, it is the very debasement of feudal mores by populism that enables modern liberalism's partial recuperation in Conrad's work.



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## Abbreviations

Where there is ambiguity, references to my primary texts as well as to Conrad's letters throughout this dissertation will take the following abbreviations. Otherwise they take the form of a page reference.

<i>NotN</i>	<i>The Nigger of the Narcissus</i>
<i>HoD</i>	<i>Heart of Darkness</i>
<i>LJ</i>	<i>Lord Jim, A Tale</i>
<i>N</i>	<i>Nostramo</i>
<i>SA</i>	<i>The Secret Agent</i>
<i>UWE</i>	<i>Under Western Eyes</i>
<i>NoLL</i>	<i>Notes on Life and Letters</i>
<i>CL</i>	<i>The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad</i>

References are to the following editions (in order of original publication):

Conrad, J. 1921. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus.'* London: William Heinemann.

Conrad, J. 1990. *Heart of Darkness and other tales.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Conrad, J. 2012. *Lord Jim, A Tale.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Conrad, J. 1947. *Nostramo.* London: J. M. Dent & Son.

Conrad, J. 2004. *The Secret Agent.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Conrad, J. 2013. *Under Western Eyes.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Conrad, J. 1925. *Notes on Life and Letters.* Edinburgh: John Grant.

Davies, L., et al. eds. 1983–2008. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad.* 9 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Finally, references to the *Oxford English Dictionary* will be prefaced with the initials, *OED*.



## Introduction

*[I]t is the bitter fate of any idea to lose its royal form and power, to lose its 'virtue' the moment it descends from its solitary throne to work its will among the people. It is a king whose destiny is never to know the obedience of his subjects except at the cost of degradation.*

'Autocracy and War'—Joseph Conrad

### *Reading Conrad, reading liberalism*

By no stretch of the imagination was Conrad a liberal. Yet as I aim to show in this thesis, his political novels—in form, subject, and idea—are characteristic of a range of modern liberal ideas. That Conrad's writing might somehow be construed as liberal when he himself was obviously not is a controversial, perhaps contradictory, claim to make. But the dialogue I want to establish here between Conrad's political writing and modern liberal political theory reveals that his celebrated capacity for self-contradiction is also a liberal quality. I will argue in what follows that the most sustained modern liberal self-contradiction Conrad's political novels expose is modern liberalism's relationship with violence. In theory, liberalism rejects violence as a political method, though in practice liberal states may feel obliged to use it in order to achieve their political aims. However, this is not where the key contradiction lies. Rather, Conrad's political novels suggest again and again that the limits liberalism conceives of in order to exclude violence are themselves forms of violence, and that liberty—a key liberal ideal—is inextricable from violence. The spectre of violence similarly haunts some of the other commonly acknowledged modern liberal preoccupations that Conrad's political novels engage with: conversation and dialogue, communal and individual identity, the possibility of self-actualisation, the relations between public and private life. These concepts all involve the creation or traversal of limits both within and between given political communities, while they are also crucial in the definition of the limits of politics itself. Liberals police the boundaries of the private realm that liberalism aims to protect: an axiom that Conrad's political novels explore, but also one that generates considerable conflict. My principal claim in this thesis is that Conrad's political novels engage, whether directly or indirectly, with some of the competing concerns that are embedded in modern liberalism,

and that in so doing they demonstrate both their violent implications and their significance to the self-contradictoriness of liberalism itself.

There are two things this thesis is not. First, it is not a Marxist reading of Conrad, whatever its preoccupation with internal contradictions. Conrad's writing is too suspicious of grand narratives, too fundamentally antirealist to sustain such readings. My work does have some methodological affinity to Marxist literary criticism, but whereas the Marxist tradition—very broadly conceived—deploys Marxist theory as a way into reading literature, this thesis is better seen as a contribution to liberal theory even if, especially given the extent of its critique of modern liberalism, it is highly debatable whether it can be seen as a piece of liberal literary criticism itself. Second, it is not a biographical study of Conrad's political relationship with liberalism. This is not to undermine the validity and importance of such criticism. Indeed this thesis, amongst other things, implies that further study of Conrad's attitudes to liberalism would be fruitful. Such a study, however, would have to rely on very different methods to those being used here. For example, it would likely be less able to engage in a broad range of modern liberal theory, spanning foundational work by the likes of John Stuart Mill to developments after Conrad's death in the work of twentieth-century thinkers like Richard Rorty and John Rawls. Staging a conversation—not always a well tempered one, and one that is almost inevitably inconsistent in its outcomes—between Conrad and this broad body of political theory is this thesis's primary goal.

Another, less contentious claim I will make here is that Conrad is a novelist and thinker fundamentally concerned with political ideas. His writing compulsively examines the degradation of ideas 'among the people' (*NoLL*, p.86): that is, his is a project that repeatedly exposes fallen political ideals in the realm of actual politics. Amongst his writings, there is a core body of political novels that particularly concern themselves with the ideal of liberty, namely—in chronological order (not that this will be followed in the thesis)—*Lord Jim* (1900), *Nostramo* (1904), *The Secret Agent* (1907), and *Under Western Eyes* (1911). All of Conrad's novels tend to undermine received binaries, and the political opposition between Liberal and Conservative that defined British politics for most of his life is no exception. Yet while turn-of-the-century British parliamentary politics no doubt informed them, his more ostensibly political texts are less concerned with the workings of this milieu than with the paradoxes of its self-justification, paradoxes contained in such

grand-sounding terms as tradition, progress, empire, freedom.<sup>1</sup> Novels, of course, are rarely only concerned with grand canvases, and Conrad's are no different. As I will show, the life of the individual looms large, even if individual lives are frequently dwarfed in Conrad's political novels by the gargantuan forces of the state.

This raises a second, characteristically liberal, concern in Conrad's political fiction: the boundary between public and private, and the perceived need to resist social and political interference in individual life. Political interference is of concern to liberalism as a whole, whereas 'social tyranny' is a specific concern for modern liberalism in, for example, the tradition of J. S. Mill ([1859] 2003, p.76). Mill's modern liberalism was ascendant in the first decade of twentieth-century Britain, also the period of Conrad's major political writing. Though Conrad was hardly a liberal himself, his writing was contemporary to the growth of modern liberalism as a force in English politics, and it was shaped by the ideological shifts such growth entailed. (It is curious that Conrad's life and subsequently his reputation as a novelist seem to track with modern liberalism—he was born two years before *On Liberty* was published, and his reputation blossomed in the early twentieth-century and declined in the 1970s and 1980s.) For Mill, as I will discuss in more detail later, liberal politics is designed to protect individual idiosyncrasy from the pressures of social conformity. The attendant possibilities of autonomy and authenticity are key problems in Conrad's writing, and are expressed in his political novels as the struggle of his characters to chart their own course amidst the overwhelming tides of society and history.

Conrad also engages philosophically with liberalism's catch-cry, 'liberty.' The four novels I will examine in this thesis are animated to the point of obsession with the concept, and the two words 'liberty' and 'freedom' are found more often in them than anywhere else in Conrad's writing before the First World War.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, these novels suggest that liberty and violence are inextricably intertwined—a particular problem in relation to political theory, which at least from Thomas Hobbes onwards defines liberty in relation to the absence of physical force. Furthermore, the liberal tradition tends to regard even the threat of harm as a limit to liberty, blurring the boundary between potential and

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<sup>1</sup> Though freedom and liberty can and perhaps should be distinguished from one another, I follow the contemporary political thinkers Alan Ryan and Quentin Skinner in regarding them as conceptually interchangeable for the purposes of discussing liberalism in my work.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix for details on Conrad's use of words relating to liberty and freedom. This data suggests a conceptual interest in this subject that becomes significant in *Lord Jim* and is then maintained until the end of Conrad's career. It peaks dramatically, however, in the novels considered in this thesis.

instantiated violence. I will suggest in what follows that Conrad's political novels gesture towards a genealogy of liberty that highlights the concept's roots in feudal and pre-feudal traditions enmeshed with the regulation of violence. These ostensibly pre-modern traditions point to a foundational violence in modern liberalism that threatens to resurface, not only in the political realm, but also with devastating consequences in social and individual spaces. Conrad also historicises liberty in relation to liberal revolutions and other struggles to gain or preserve freedom, connecting these struggles and the ideals they claim to stand for to the interests of social elites.

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Liberalism has historically tended to place violence outside its limits. On the one hand, it purports to restrict coercive state violence, while on the other it directs violence outward, towards those groups it deems insufficiently liberal. It goes without saying that Conrad's broader views on violence were not liberal; similarly, his work strongly suggests that freedom and violence are nearly always entwined: firstly because liberation, whether from feudalism, monarchy, or formal enslavement, has usually been accompanied by violent struggle; and secondly because liberalism, particularly when blended with imperialism (Mehta 1999; Gopal 2013), has historically been associated with conquest as much as emancipation. Arising from its overriding sense that force is opposed to freedom, liberalism maintains a core anxiety as regards the legitimisation (or indeed legitimacy) of state violence. Conrad renders this anxiety ironic, not least because these opposites can become so intertwined in his work that they are nearly indistinguishable. His political novels in particular point to a genealogy of liberty that always reveals violence, and follow a logic of freedom that always ends in destruction. This is because limits and limitations, with both of these being maintained by force, are a condition of existence for Conrad. Modern liberalism, far from being unaware of this issue, has addressed it head on by limiting liberty with a parallel concern for justice, particularly social justice. The extent to which the state can limit freedom is a central question for liberalism (and political conversation as a whole) today, and Conrad's political thought offers insight into this important facet. Yet Conrad's ironic vision does not easily map onto a critique of liberalism from either end of the political spectrum. He blends an apparently conservative sense of decline, suggested for example in his notion of the degradation of the idea, with an eye for historicisation that flirts with Marxism. Conversely, he is uneasy with populism, but equally with elitism. This

results in a political analysis in his work that is not readily assigned to the Right or Left, and is equally suspicious of each side's partisan announcements. Similarly, Conrad is aware that there is no ideal past to which we can return or authentic present to preserve, while he is profoundly conscious that historical narrative depends upon contestable assumptions.

The numerous historical allusions in his work remind us, nonetheless, that liberty has not always been as it is today, and that the traces of past freedoms threaten to resurface in present visions. He writes in his 1905 essay 'Autocracy and War' about the inevitable degradation of the idea, with specific reference to the two central concerns of modern liberalism, freedom and justice (*NoLL*, p.86; see also chapter epigraph). Liberty is one of these ideas, and it is so significant to Conrad that he traces it across four weighty novels. This is not to suggest that liberty is the sole concern of these works—they are characteristically polyphonic texts—but rather to argue that Conrad's sense of contingency, political and otherwise, means that his work typically charts a complex terrain of aesthetic, political, historical, and philosophical considerations. These considerations, however, far from being separable from Conrad's broader political philosophy, and its treatment of freedom in particular, effectively create the theoretical complexity of these works. Conrad's sustained critique of freedom has received no scholarly attention, and there has been no study to date that reads these four novels in dialogue with liberal political theory. The thesis addresses this absence. It argues that Conrad's political novels engage deeply with liberty, and in so doing explore the limits of modern liberalism, locating the pressure points at which freedom turns into its opposite. In this respect, my work resembles a recent (2012) study by John Marx, *Geopolitics and the Anglophone Novel*, which combines political theory and the close reading of literature. There is a clear distinction, however, between Marx's work and my own: for his focus, unlike mine, is on 'interdisciplinary debate about governance' (2012, p.1), focusing on 'liberalism [as] an administrative protocol' (2012, pp.17–18), and making a case for fiction's power to imagine 'social reorganization' (2012, p.18) as a contribution to political science.

I have no intention in this thesis to elide the aesthetic qualities and innovations of Conrad's novels in the service of political theory. Nor will I repeat worn-out explorations of the political novel as an examination of the impact of the political realm on the novel's world of individual psychology, though this relationship is a central component of the four selected works. Private interests, personal idiosyncrasies, domestic dramas—all of these invade the political sphere, shaping its institutions in manifold and unpredictable ways and speeding these institutions' decay and rupture. But equally crucial in Conrad's political fiction is how

the exploration of political contradictions relates to *form*: narrative technique, genre, irony, and self-conscious dialogism are all integral in Conrad's novels to the engagement with political ideals. This thesis will foreground the fictional nature of these texts, yet it will also emphasise how for Conrad, writing fiction enables a paradoxical commitment to a sceptical stance that foregrounds the role of illusion in our construction of the world. His political novels work through the consequences of this vision for our political thinking.

Fiction has long been read as a vehicle for political and social ideas, but Conrad's writing suggests ways that fiction as a vehicle for political thought is in a sense more truthful, more honest in its *performance* of thinking than political theory in the philosophical tradition. Douglas Kerr writes in relation to Conrad that theory 'tends to lag behind creative work, and it could be argued that the theory revolution of the twentieth century was a belated attempt to rise to the challenge of the great Modernist writers' (Kerr 2014, p.45). In some sense, political theory mirrors literary theory in this regard, though perhaps this is only because Conrad's work is so malleable. As Laurence Davies writes, a critic who 'wants to claim Conrad for some favorite stance or cause will easily find the necessary evidence,' then adds pointedly that assigning 'Conrad purely to one mode reduces him; he ironizes morality and moralizes irony [...] as if to recognize that we do not live in a steady frame of mind. No one mode exists autonomously, no one mode cancels the others out' (2005, p.230). This is true, but it should not prevent us from reading against the grain. As this thesis will show, there is something in Conrad's combination of sceptical irony, political ambivalence, and human commitment that also enriches its objects of critical scrutiny.

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Sustained interest in Conrad's political writing under the rubric of the political has recently received renewed critical interest. Richard Ruppel's *A Political Genealogy of Joseph Conrad* (2015), which claims to be the first book devoted exclusively to Conrad's politics since the 1960s, is part of an emerging strand of Conrad criticism focusing on contingency as a guiding principle.<sup>3</sup> Ruppel argues that previous readings of Conrad's political fiction were limited by attempts to fix a view of his politics in relation to his Polish background, with most of these attempts 'outing' him as a Burkean conservative (2015, pp.1–4). Ruppel himself is preceded in this by Jeremy Hawthorn in *Joseph Conrad, Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment* (1990), and Hawthorn's position is extended in turn by Paul B.

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<sup>3</sup> See also Parker, 2014.

Armstrong in *Play and the Politics of Reading* (2005). Hawthorn finds a kind of Keatsian ‘*negative capability*’ in Conrad (1990, p.xii, original emphasis), and positions him as a conservative whose artistic failures arise when his views are explicit in his writing (1990, pp.69–70). Terry Eagleton agrees with this sense of contradiction in Conrad’s politics, but attaches it specifically to the tension between the conservatism of a Polish gentleman and Conrad’s experiences of ‘dissent, exile and illegality,’ which contributed to an ‘individualism of the exile’ (2005, p.233). Armstrong extends this idea to suggest that Conrad’s presentation of contradictory perspectives is ‘an incitement to future audiences to engage problems that Conrad refused to contain in the past. The notorious ambiguities of Conrad’s political novels are not instances of confusion but strategies for speaking across historical distance’ (2005, pp.74–75). Armstrong uses this argument as a basis to open still another possibility, that of reading Conrad through the lens of liberal postmodernist Richard Rorty’s thinking on irony. For Armstrong, Conrad is an ironist in a distinctly Rortyan vein, but he is no liberal because he cannot muster sufficient hope that human suffering will diminish (2005, p.86). Rorty’s definition of liberals is rather narrow and evasive, however, and Armstrong flirts with taking it at its word.

Ruppel’s broad suggestion that politics in Conrad has been neglected is deceptive. It is more the case that politics has achieved a near ubiquity of presence and has consequently lost the spotlight. Nevertheless, the critical consensus solidifies around a picture of Conrad as disclosing a contradictory politics. This consensus is reflected in another area that has in some ways proved definitive of Conrad. Postcolonial engagements with his work always touch politics, but through the lens of imperialism. Sustained examinations such as Benita Parry’s *Conrad and Imperialism*, alongside Edward Said’s various engagements with Conrad over the course of his career, refract a broad sense of political contradiction through Conrad’s specific relationship to imperialism. According to this view, Conrad is both a critic and a stanchion of imperialism (Parry 1983, p.2; Said 1994, p.xx). In this field, however, a sense of Conrad’s contradictory politics cannot be cast as the critical consensus, but is rather a median position in a wide and at times controversial debate whose poles can be characterized by Chinua Achebe’s notorious assertion of Conrad’s ‘bloody racism’ (1977, p.788), and Hunt Hawkins’s opposing sense of Conrad as a critic of imperialism on the grounds that it ‘disrupted indigenous cultures’ (1979, p.294).

This thesis—to repeat—is not concerned with biographical investigation of Conrad’s politics. Instead, and contrary to Ruppel who suggests—as observed by Mark Conroy on

the back cover of the book—that Conrad was ‘never really a political philosopher,’ I want to put Conrad in a conversation of political philosophy that allows non-liberals such as Thomas Hobbes to contribute to liberal political theory. Hobbes’s authoritarianism disqualifies him from membership of the liberal club, but his thinking is foundational for liberal political theory, in particular his sense of liberty as freedom from interference (Skinner 2008a). Conrad also speaks to liberalism from without, and, like Hobbes, contributes to liberal theory whilst also identifying its shortfalls. This is not to brand Conrad a political theorist, but rather to affirm that literature, in its explorations and innovations of form, can contribute to political theory above and beyond the role liberal humanists might give it in making good liberals. In this spirit, Conrad’s political novels are examples of literature that is particularly good at political critique of a philosophical and theoretical kind. Nor do I have any desire to reduce literature to some kind of vague political philosophy; rather I want to add to the range of what the literary in a broad sense can achieve. I also want to suggest that this kind of fiction provides a vehicle for theoretical critique that engages with formal issues of knowledge and representation that trouble theoretical writing—for decidedly political reasons. Philosophers such as Jacques Derrida have famously attempted formal innovations in their own work in an attempt to address this problematic, and in so doing have sacrificed clarity and accessibility. This thesis offers a political-theoretical reading of fiction as an alternative strategy. It is motivated by the hope that explicit reflection on the aesthetic alongside the political, and in particular a close consideration of the four selected novels’ self-conscious awareness of issues of representation and the troubled limits of fiction and reality, will mitigate the politics of academic style and other calcifications of power without giving up on clarity as an aspiration.

Unlike Ruppel’s work, this thesis does not claim to be a genealogy, but rather seeks to trace Conrad’s deep interest in the genealogy of liberalism. Moreover, it evokes this, not in Ruppel’s sense of expressing a hope ‘to reveal and, as far as possible, account for the discontinuities, the ruptures, in Conrad’s political thought’ (2015, p.7), but rather as a way of suggesting that Conrad’s political novels gesture towards a genealogy closer to the kind practised by Quentin Skinner in ‘A Genealogy of the Modern State’ (2008b). As Skinner writes, ‘When we trace the genealogy of a concept, we uncover the different ways in which it may have been used in earlier times. We thereby equip ourselves with a means of reflecting critically on how it is currently understood’ (2008b, p.325). For Skinner, as genealogy unfolds, ‘what it reveals is the contingent and contestable character of the

concept, the impossibility of showing that it has any essence or natural boundaries' (2008b, p.326). Conrad's political novels, in pointing to past versions of liberty, similarly highlight its 'contingent and contestable character.' Beyond this contingency, however, Conrad suggests that liberty is a defiance of boundaries, whether natural or not, that creates profound conceptual difficulties for modern liberalism in particular. This, I will argue, places particular emphasis on an individual's project of self-actualisation, which is also a project of definition: that is, of the drawing of boundaries.

This tension emerges with particular force in *The Secret Agent*, in which freedom is linked to destruction and individual identity depends on repressive social structures. At times, Conrad's interest in genealogy takes the form of a kind of historicisation, for example in *Nostramo's* exploration of the historical context of the Italian Risorgimento, which saw liberal ideals compromised so as to promote nationalism and elite interests. Another form of historicisation that occurs in some of Conrad's novels connects liberalism to imperialism, resonating with Uday Singh Mehta's analysis in *Liberalism and Empire* (1999) or Domenico Losurdo's sense of liberalism's entanglement with slavery in *Liberalism: a Counter-history* (2011). But Conrad's genealogy usually emerges through *literary* techniques: for example, his use of character and genre in *Lord Jim* to connect ideas of freedom to feudal modes. Likewise, *Under Western Eyes* engages literary techniques of representation and dialogism to evoke competing modes of liberty while also focusing attention on the potential totalitarianism of the idea of freedom—on the way in which, when taken as a single fundamental axiom, liberty necessarily undoes itself, revealing in the process the illiberality at liberalism's core.

What makes Conrad's engagement with liberty an engagement with modern liberalism as a political philosophy, rather than—say—a critique of existential autonomy, is his attention to the political implications of freedom. This grows out of the political milieu of his novels, but also more philosophically, out of an engagement with ideas of dialogue. Dialogue or conversation is a key liberal solution to problems that arise from an individualistic political theory in which members of particular political communities differ in their views of the world and the good. Dialogue is commonly presented as a non-violent means to accommodate or resolve differences between political agents. I will show that this tension between dialogue and violence, which is everywhere present in Conrad's work, is another limit of modern liberalism.

*Liberalism: a politics of competing visions*

Before long, any conversation about liberalism will arrive at the question of whether it is a single political philosophy. As Alan Ryan puts it, ‘are we dealing with liberalism or with liberalisms?’ (2012, p.21). Yet both liberals like Ryan (2012, p.23) and critics of liberalism such as Losurdo (2011, p.1) are able to settle on a clear description: that liberalism is that mode of politics and thought that is primarily concerned with individual freedom. It seems hard, though, to get much further than this. Liberalism’s inherent pluralism means that its apparent unity of ideals is invariably exploded. It soon becomes divided by competing visions of freedom, most famously Isaiah Berlin’s conceptualisation of positive and negative liberty in ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ ([1958] 2002). Another source of liberal dissent is the relative weight granted to liberalism’s parallel concerns: individual autonomy, social and personal progress, the sanctity of private property, and liberty’s somewhat neglected revolutionary partners, equality and fraternity (the last of these reconceptualised as solidarity in the work of more recent thinkers such as Rorty). I would justify my claim that Conrad’s political novels are an engagement with *liberalism* rather than just the concept of *liberty* on the grounds that he dramatises not only the internal contradictions of freedom, but also the ways in which different liberal concerns interact and interfere with each other. These differences frame the categorisation of varieties of liberalism. This thesis will distinguish between four modes: *republicanism*, *modern liberalism*, *classical liberalism*, and *libertarianism*. There is something both arbitrary and incomplete about any taxonomy, but these distinctions do describe key fault lines in liberal political theory. In particular, as Skinner observes in his lecture ‘A Genealogy of Liberty,’ the first three are conceptually incompatible (2008a). Ryan helpfully considers these distinctions through a series of oppositions, to which I will now turn.

For Ryan, classical as opposed to modern liberalism prioritises private property as the mechanism to guarantee freedom, encouraging ‘limited government, the maintenance of the rule of law, the avoidance of arbitrary and discretionary power, the sanctity of private property and freely made contracts, and the responsibility of individuals for their own fates’ (2012, p.24). On the other hand, ‘Modern liberalism is exemplified by John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, with its appeal to “man as a progressive being” and its romantic appeal to an individuality that should be allowed to develop itself in all its “manifold diversity.”’ Modern liberalism also aims ‘to emancipate individuals from the fear of hunger, unemployment, ill health, and a miserable old age,’ and thereby undermines the sanctity of private property

and freedom of contract that are prized in classical liberalism (2012, p.25). Republicanism, for Ryan, is distinct again in that it foregrounds not the liberty of the individual, but the collective freedom of a particular class or nation, and is generally blind to the potential for oppression within that group (2012, p.12).

‘Libertarian’ is a term with a similarly contested and mutating history. It can refer to socialist or capitalist modes, is generally opposed to the state, and tends to be more comfortable with private property than anarchism (though not always). For my purposes in this thesis, the adjective ‘libertarian’ will be used in a limited sense to register a concern—primarily or sometimes exclusively—with liberty. Although libertarianism can be seen as a logical extension of classical liberal principles—and is thus particularly susceptible to Conrad’s exposure of the autocracy of the ideal—it is distinct from other forms of liberalism in its attitude towards the state, regarding government as ‘a largely (and for so-called anarcho-capitalists, a wholly) unnecessary evil’ (Ryan 2012, p.26). It is clear from Ryan’s description that libertarianism has something in common with anarchism; I will later mirror this blurring of boundaries in relation to *The Secret Agent* (see Chapter Two), whose representation of anarchism I will read as an examination of an extreme politics of freedom that limits but also infiltrates more restrained liberalisms. Anarchism is not generally included in the liberal pantheon because it is revolutionary, and often sits comfortably with violence. The elision of revolution from the liberal arsenal, however, is a kind of double amnesia. It overlooks liberalism’s own history of revolutions, in both the Americas and Europe; and it likewise ignores the support, characteristic of US foreign policy throughout the twentieth century and on into the twenty-first, of revolutions in other states in order to further domestic interests.

Remembering its various connections to revolution opens the way for Conrad’s exposure of a final mode of liberalism. This is liberal fanaticism, an unreflexive commitment to freedom that is close in some ways to libertarianism and anarchism. Like both, it pushes the logic of freedom to its extreme limits, and, like anarchism, it is frequently a revolutionary creed—certainly it is willing to use violence to achieve its ends. But liberal fanaticism does not reflect anarchism’s opposition to government. This comes under most direct scrutiny in *Under Western Eyes* (see Chapter One), where liberal fanaticism becomes a kind of totalitarianism, but it also features in *Nostramo* (see Chapter Four), where it is associated with a religious zeal born in fraternal and filial affiliations forged through revolutionary combat and political strife.

Liberalism fractures along two further fault lines. The first of these is in the distinction between liberalism as a political philosophy and as affiliation to political parties that identify themselves as ‘Liberal.’ The radical departure from liberalism as a political philosophy that Liberal political groups enact is satirised in *Nostramo*, where the leaders of the Liberal party serially exploit liberation rhetoric in order to garner popular support for a coup motivated by greed and desire for power. Likewise, in *Under Western Eyes*, there are numerous kinds of liberal shams, ranging from hypocrites to liberal totalitarians, to spies. The second fault line consists of those conceptual and historical paradoxes that pertain to liberalism and liberty. Losurdo, for example, describes an historical ‘dialectic of emancipation and dis-emancipation’ (2011, p.344), where liberalism depends upon various forms of slavery to sustain itself. *Nostramo* represents this economy forcefully in its examination of both the historical relations of slavery and a capitalist world order imbricated with liberal history, but *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* both also engage with a different form of dis-emancipation: the dependence of women not only on men, but also on the very structures that limit them. Similarly, Uday Singh Mehta’s trenchant analysis of liberal imperialism resonates with critiques that emerge forcefully in both *Lord Jim* (see Chapter Three) and *Nostramo*. Most of all, though, Conrad’s novels expose the further contradictions within liberalism that arise when it becomes implicated in histories of *violence*.

### ***Current forms: modern liberalism and neoliberalism***

Though this thesis is concerned with various forms of liberalism, and with exploring the historicisation in Conrad’s political novels of the politics and philosophy of liberalism, its focus in terms of political philosophy ultimately rests on liberalism *today*. There is thus a final division that needs considering: that between modern liberalism and *neoliberalism*. There is a trend in current (especially Marxist) thought to regard neoliberalism as the dominant political and economic mode of our times. I want to challenge this view, which risks ceding the field to those whose interests neoliberalism appears best fit to serve. Making neoliberalism our society’s ideology potentially actualises the very hegemony such critique aims to expose; in addition, Conrad’s political novels challenge the methods of historical periodisation that place neoliberalism as having superseded modern liberalism as the latest manifestation of liberal politics.

Much recent scholarly attention has been devoted to neoliberalism, and to neoliberalism and the novel in particular. Neoliberalism appears to be no less broad a term than its parent, liberalism (Gilbert 2013, p.7), but its critics seem to agree that it bears several key features. David Harvey, for example, defines it as ‘a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade’ (2005, p.2). Meanwhile, a recent special edition of *Textual Practice*—‘Neoliberalism and the Novel’—similarly regards it as ‘an economic dogma and political rationale that holds that free markets and competition will produce the best outcomes for the most people’ (Johansen & Karl 2015, p.203). These definitions suggest that neoliberalism is more concerned with the freedom of markets than with that of individuals; that it is concerned with ‘radical individualism’ as ‘self-proprietorship’ (*ibid.*). The consequence of this is a paradoxical ‘dialectic of emancipation and dis-emancipation’ (Losurdo 2011, p.344) in which individuals become master and slave to themselves. Harvey, in particular, regards us as living in a neoliberal epoch, which began in the late 1970s or early 1980s (2005, p.1), superseding the ‘embedded liberalism’ (2005, p.11) that preceded it, and which in terms of its economic and political practice maps exactly onto what Ryan calls ‘modern liberalism.’

This reduction to economic practice (and politics defined predominantly as political economy) points, however, to a sense that neoliberalism is not a political *philosophy* at all. There is no doubt that it is a political project, and one which seems to be achieving the ‘restoration of class power’ to social and economic elites (Harvey 2005, p.16), whether or not this is intentional. Ryan goes further than I do when he implies that neoliberalism is not really liberalism. For him, liberalism is anti-capitalist:

[It is a] seeming paradox that late twentieth-century conservatives are often characterized as “neoliberals.” The contemporary defense of property rights is not, as it was two centuries ago, the defense of landed property against commercial and industrial capital, but the defense of nineteenth-century laissez-faire and the property rights of commercial and industrial capital against modern reformers (2012, p.34).

Ryan appears to agree with Harvey that neoliberalism is a restoration of capitalist class power in the face of modern liberal reforms. Where they differ is in the way Harvey cedes the field of liberal theory by a privileging of economics that ironically mirrors neoliberalism’s own (given Harvey’s Marxism, perhaps an unsurprising move). This enables him to claim the near-total dominance of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005, p.78). For Ryan, however, modern

liberalism makes sense primarily as an *ethics*: in contrast to ‘the suggestion that liberalism should confine its attention to political institutions, liberalism is best understood as a theory of the good life for individuals that is linked to a theory of the social, economic, and political arrangements within which they may lead that life’ (2012, p.35).

This last formulation goes some way towards undoing the distinction I am trying to build between neoliberalism and liberalism—until we acknowledge how the good is defined or measured in these two competing modes. In neoliberalism, success is determined according to economic metrics, primarily measures of economic growth. In Ryan’s liberal ethic, however, the ‘essence is that individuals are self-creating, that no single good defines successful self-creation, and that taking responsibility for one’s own life and making of it what one can is itself part of the good life’ (*ibid.*). Thus, neoliberalism is only liberalism insofar as it has transformed two liberal axioms. Firstly, it has moved from a liberal ethic of plural goods to a capitalist ethic of abstract value; and, secondly, it has transformed a liberal ethic of self-creation and responsibility into an ethic of self-proprietty that also entails a kind of self-enslavement. This is the kind of transformation undergone by the protagonist of *Nostramo* (see Chapter Four) when he stops valuing himself in relation to his communal reputation and the plurality of virtues that it represents, and instead defines his value in relation to a treasure trove of silver.

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The key feature of modern liberalism is its basis on the ethical stance of individual self-realisation according to diverse visions of the good. This liberal diversity is not completely neutral: it is after all underpinned by *liberal* values and thus excludes visions of the good based on enslavement of various forms, but also the abolition of private property and inequalities of different kinds. A second feature of modern liberalism, specifically, is its demonstrated commitment to promoting freedom by opposing systemic inequality—those differences created by circumstances such as wealth and class. Thirdly, a quality implicit in modern liberalism is *conversationalism*. (Ryan does not explicate this, but it is central to his ‘conversational’ method (2012, pp.2–6).) A dialogic method features in John Rawls’s liberalism. His sense of ‘the fact of reasonable pluralism’—the longstanding coexistence of incompatible (but ‘reasonable’) beliefs in modern democratic society (2005, p.36)—depends on ideas of conversation and dialogue to achieve or approximate non-coercive ‘overlapping consensus’ (2005, p.165). Though most contemporary political philosophers would probably contest the status of Rawls as a modern liberal, I take him as one for two

reasons. The first is the well known ‘difference principle,’ whereby inequalities are only permissible in a society if their existence leads to the greatest benefit for society’s most disadvantaged (1999, p.266). As for the second, recent scholarship such as Robert S. Taylor’s *Reconstructing Rawls* suggests that for Rawls, ‘self-realization trumps mere consumption’ (2011, p.177), shifting him further into the modern liberal camp. Rawls’s political liberalism aims at an ideal where ‘society is effectively regulated by the most reasonable conception and citizens are in wide and general reflective equilibrium about this’ (Rawls 2005, p.xlviii). If ‘reflective equilibrium’ is the ‘process of mutual adjustment of principles and considered judgments’ (Rawls 1999, p.18n), this process will be maintained through a kind of dialogue. Likewise, for J. S. Mill, ‘free and equal discussion’ is the mechanism of human improvement (2003, p.81), even if it is presented in dubious fashion as a capacity also used to measure human capability for self-improvement: peoples deemed by Mill incapable of ‘dialogue’ are justifiably dominated by peoples who are capable. For Mill, ‘Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end’ (*ibid.*). Liberal conversationalism is most explicitly explored in Richard Rorty’s postmodern liberalism, which pragmatically makes a dialogic process the basis of our political institutions, ethics, epistemology (1989, pp.52, 67, 84), and projects of self-creation (1991, pp.148–53). Rorty also acknowledges the limits of conversation: the boundaries of our communities are defined by conversational compatibility (2010b, p.235), beyond which bare tolerance within a framework of Rawlsian procedural liberalism is an admirable sufficiency (1986, pp.532–33).

Thus, Rorty’s ‘postmodern’ sense of liberal conversationalism is the explicit working through of an implicit foundation of modern liberalism as a whole. It is implicit not because it is not discussed, but because it is not announced as a cornerstone until Rorty; as I have already suggested above, it is at the heart of the ‘procedure’ by which modern liberalism aims to achieve its goals. A key part of my engagement with Conrad in this thesis will be to examine how his works inflect this dialogism, both in their examination of ideas of conversation and also narratologically, in their own dialogic practice. This analysis will come to the fore in my first chapter, on *Under Western Eyes*. This novel tests the limits of conversationalism by engaging with forms of force—often violent force—that on the one hand contain narrative polyphony, and on the other compel political dialogue even when one party refuses to converse.

*Competing visions of ideology: Liberal versus Marxist theories*

Ideology can be reduced in caricature to a binary between broadly Liberal and Marxist definitions. In the former, ideology is a coherent programme or rationale for political action. It is explicit, idealistic, totalitarian, unworkable, and associated with resistance movements and revolutionary creeds such as Marxism. For the latter, ideology is contradictory, partly hidden, functions to maintain power, and in the world today is largely synonymous with large 'L' Liberalism and its purported twin, large 'C' Capitalism. Caricature notwithstanding, this captures a problem for the discussion of ideology in so far as both poles of the concept are useful but opposite. They are also signs of political affiliation and of certain ways of thinking about politics and the world. It is perhaps better to avoid using them altogether, but in criticism of the political novel this is impossible, since at the very least the terms must be accounted for when used by others. Furthermore, Conrad's critique of liberalism has much in common with ideology critique, from both sides of the political spectrum. It turns liberal criticism of ideology back upon itself by highlighting how liberalisms that regard themselves as 'un-ideological' coalesce idealistically around concepts of freedom, which ironically can turn liberty into its opposite. Yet in a move akin to Marxist ideology critique, Conrad also finds that liberalism is torn apart by hidden contradictions within the fabric of those ideals, which themselves also serve to stabilize or reconfigure existing relations of power. As demonstrated in 'Autocracy and War,' Conrad shares with Marx a sense of the importance of historical analysis in political work, but he lacks Marx's confidence in our ability to draw solid conclusions from this:

That the position of a State in reference to the moral methods of its development can be seen only historically, is true. Perhaps mankind has not lived long enough for a comprehensive view of any particular case. Perhaps no one will ever live long enough; and perhaps this earth shared out amongst our clashing ambitions by the anxious arrangements of statesmen will come to an end before we attain the felicity of greeting with unanimous applause the perfect fruition of a great State. It is even possible that we are destined for another sort of bliss altogether: that sort which consists in being perpetually duped by false appearances. But whatever political illusion the future may hold out to our fear or our admiration, there will be none, it is safe to say, which in the magnitude of anti-humanitarian effect will equal that phantom now driven out of the world by a thunder of thousands of guns (*NoLL*, pp.91–92).

Subsequent history has provided many challenges to this final assertion, but there is much else here that resonates with Marxist approaches and the notion of ideology in particular. Indeed, Conrad's phrase 'political illusion' is an excellent gloss for the term. I will not

however be adopting Conrad's phrase wholesale here. Instead, I propose 'political idealism,' and more specifically 'liberal idealism,' as a suitable phrase to describe what liberals generally refer to when they use the term 'ideology,' that is an apparently coherent political system or set of principles. On the other hand, Conrad's broad sense of the fictional status of political beliefs and, in particular, his acute awareness of the ubiquity of illusion, mirrors much of what Marxist understandings of ideology have to offer—a possible future of perpetual duping. A Conradian sense of ideology might entail sets of illusions, heterogeneously embodied in the selves, artefacts, institutions, documents and actions that preserve existing power relations. In short, it would agree with Althusser's sense of the 'material existence' of ideology (1984, pp.39–43). Yet if ideology can be seen in binary terms, Conrad performs a contrasting form of doubling upon it in which it is partially (if ironically) recuperated. For alongside Conrad's sense of destructive idealism and political illusion is an equally crucial notion of 'saving illusion.' In Conrad's work, ideological categories such as values and communal identity enable us to go on living and are potentially redemptive. Thus, the binary between liberal and Marxist definitions of ideology, reflected in the ideas of political idealism and illusion respectively, is complicated by a third set of illusions which on the one hand save us from (self-) destruction, and on the other potentially redeem those who bear them. One of the aims of this thesis is to map these coordinates in order to reflect on the ways in which Conrad explores the dynamic between illusion, idealism, and redemption in liberalism. While it is clear that for Conrad the field of this exploration will always be illusory, it is nevertheless navigated between explicit and implicit values, and principles for political action; between idealism and realism in political praxis; and finally between destruction and redemption for both communities and individuals.

The partial nature of this recuperation (in both senses of the word) must be emphasised. This is firstly because Conrad's writing is not without its own affiliations and values, both implicit and explicit. And secondly it is because his fiction is always an exploration of the limits of saving illusions, the points at which they tip over into destruction or degradation. This leads to some typically Conradian questions: who is 'us?' Who must suffer so that we can be saved? What happens when the very illusions that saved us decay or are corrupted? How might our redemption contain the seeds of future destruction? For Conrad, these are not only, or even primarily, political questions; they are personal and social anxieties that revolve around individuals and the communities in

which they live. In his political novels, these questions play out in a series of political milieux. As soon becomes apparent in reading Conrad, the separation of the political from the social and the individual is a problem in itself. It is a problem for liberalism too, which as I have said aims to separate these realms out precisely because it fears the power of politics, because it is acutely aware of how public is *not* separated from private and, by corollary, how social life limits individual freedom. And it is finally a methodological problem, for the same reasons: for the boundaries between political institutions, society, and the individual as categories are themselves fundamental illusions, though the extent to which they are 'socially necessary' or 'saving' is debatable.

### *Reflections on the political novel*

If definitions of liberalism are contradictory, another problem of categorisation arises in relation to genre. What is the political novel? How do *Under Western Eyes*, *The Secret Agent*, *Lord Jim*, and *Nostramo* fit into that genre? As with the notion of ideology, my solution to this problem will be, in part, an evasion. Although I agree with John Frow that genre exists as part of a wider system of reading and interpretation by which we understand and shape the world (2015, pp.10, 12), I do not intend to chart where Conrad's work fits into the historical evolution of the political novel. This reluctance derives from Conrad's own use of genre. Contemporary genre theory, including Frow's, emphasises the complexity of genre and dismantles clear taxonomic distinctions: genre is not a description of mutually exclusive categories like biological species, and texts do not exemplify so much as translate genre or genres (2015, p.17). Conrad, however, takes the intermingling of genres to its limits. All four political novels I examine in this thesis are satires and tragedies. They traverse literary and non-literary forms, deploying black comedy, burlesque, farce, romance, epic, adventure, realism, melodrama, Bildungsroman, historical fiction, spy and detective fiction, as well as drawing on various non-fictional genres, including autobiographical, journalistic, and epistolary forms. Conrad confounds the taxonomic urge in genre criticism. In particular, I want to show how Conrad uses hybrid genre ironically to evoke conflicting traditions and communities. For example, as argued by Katherine Isobel Baxter, romance is a central feature of Conrad's novels (2010), but in *Lord Jim* I find it a presence evocative of a particular chivalric model of liberty that both historicises and critiques modern liberal ideals (see Chapter Three). *Lord Jim* then goes beyond this by mingling romance and burlesque to capture the blending of elitist

with democratic values that is part of modern liberalism. Genre carries ideological freight, and it makes sense that a writer who doubles and ironises ideology would render genre complex almost to the point of absurdity. Conrad's engagement with genre is often ironic because though it fuses these genres, using one to undercut the other, such a process itself implies a hierarchy. Thus in *Lord Jim*, burlesque can only be effective in the ironisation of romance if it is defined as a degraded genre.

Some account of the political novel as a genre is still necessary to provide a sense of what it, alongside all the other genres, might signify. If romance can be linked to feudalism, what ideological freight does the political novel carry? While I will argue that these texts are 'political novels' because they enable a critique of political theory, this is by no means the only way in which works can engage with the genre of political fiction, nor the only way in which the works examined here can be regarded as political novels. Rather, I would call for an extension of our understanding of Conrad's political imagination and the possibilities of political fiction. Though my reading of the political novel here is different from the norm, it remains necessary to acknowledge the history of this genre and its criticism, not least because I want to argue that the political novel is particularly hard to define at the moment, which is at one and the same time a moment of renewal in critical interest in the political novel as a genre. Since the 1990s there has been a gradually building interest that has only gathered momentum since the turn of the millennium. Recent studies tend towards defining the formal characteristics of the political novel rather than engaging with the broader scope that has characterised most other recent engagement with the politics of fiction. Critics almost invariably begin with either one or both of two landmark studies of the genre, Morris E. Spear's *The Political Novel: Its Development in England and America* (1924), and Irving Howe's *Politics and the Novel* (1957), but work on the area was scant enough to enable Christopher Harvie in 1991 to write that 'surveys of political fiction – though they exist – are episodic and, with only a couple of exceptions, lightweight. Effectively they boil down to the monograph by Spear, Watson's essay of 1973, and a lengthy piece by Roy Foster, written in 1981' (1991, p.5). Though Harvie's scathing assessment of a 'lightweight' body of studies perhaps indicates his own critical biases more clearly than it elucidates the quality of work

in the area, that he can make this claim at all is indicative of the former neglect that the genre has endured.<sup>4</sup>

This renewal of interest is in part a response to and reaction against the politicisation of literary studies. Although the idea, as Thomas Mann wrote in 1924, that ‘Everything is Politics’ ([1924] 1999, p.514) significantly pre-dates poststructuralism or deconstruction, this view represents a potent caricature of an aspect of these two more recent approaches. Recent criticism of the political novel has been concerned to acknowledge the ways in which the broader workings of power inflect a more distinctly political field or fortify the boundaries of ‘the political’ to defend it against ubiquity. Caren Irr exemplifies this when she writes, ‘Although any literary work may be said to be political at an unconscious level, contemporary [geopolitical] novels are explicitly political in their subject matter. Politically charged characters, settings, conflicts, and styles of narration comprise the foreground of the narrative as well as the background’ (2013, p.3). John Whalen-Bridge states the concern explicitly when he writes, ‘Since the vogue of New Criticism, critics have attempted to deny that politics is an impurity by arguing that all aspects of literature—its aesthetic components, psychological presuppositions, sociology, and so on—are inherently political’ (1998, p.17). Both Irr and Whalen-Bridge point to two different senses of the political. The wider of these two senses emphasises the ways in which private rituals, actions, and even bodies are inscribed with the workings of power. The second sense aims to distinguish between these workings and a public political realm, even if it also acknowledges the ways in which this public realm interpenetrates both individual and social private spaces.

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<sup>4</sup> John Whalen-Bridge provides a more comprehensive review of the literature in *Political Fiction and the American Self* (1998, pp.19–34). Studies not dealt with by Whalen-Bridge, however, or that have been written since include George Watson’s *The English Ideology* (1973), Robert Boyers’s *Atrocity and Amnesia: The Political Novel since 1945* (1985), Christopher Harvie’s *The Centre of Things: Political Fiction in Britain from Disraeli to the Present* (1991), Anthony Hutchinson’s *Writing the Republic: Liberalism and Morality in American Political Fiction* (2007), Stuart A. Scheingold’s *The Political Novel: Re-Imagining the Twentieth Century* (2010), Deáglan Ó Donghaile’s *Blasted Literature: Victorian Political Fiction and the Shock of Modernism* (2011), and Caren Irr’s *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), as well as two edited collections of essays: *Redefining the Political Novel: American Women Writers, 1797-1901* (Harris, ed. 1995), and *Democracy’s Literature: Politics and Fiction in America* (Deneen & Romance, eds. 2005). A survey of titles quickly reveals the lines along which these works tend to run: a combination of genre criticism and the examination of national literatures, and in particular the literature of the US. Indeed, several of these titles are highly suggestive of the cultural imperialism eliding the United States with the global that is present in a number of these texts. In addition to these, Eloise Knapp Hay’s seminal study of Conrad, *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad* (1963), is of course highly relevant to this study and to those interested in political fiction in general.

When Whalen-Bridge alludes to the denigration of the political in literature, the sense that ‘politics is an impurity,’ he is engaging a view of literature as belonging to the social realm, or perhaps more exclusively to the realm of a certain class of society that values something idiosyncratically ‘literary’ about certain kinds of text. He is tapping into a caricatured form of liberal humanism connected to a vision of an educated elite and playing upon a variety of tropes, including new criticism, modernist literary elitism, and some notions of classical literary education. From this perspective, the impurity of politics debases literature, transforming it into ‘genre fiction’ and thus bringing it closer to popular forms. Arguments regarding the relative quality of political fiction (and genre fiction), far from steering clear of politics, merely obfuscate their own involvement. Yet these arguments appear within political fiction itself, for example in the hierarchy implicitly suggested by Howe between realist and other forms of political novel, which replicates the wider divide between ‘genre’ and ‘realist’ fiction as a whole. Reading these debates in relation to Conrad’s work undermines the attempt to build walls of quality around genres and modes in fiction. As is well documented, Conrad’s work constantly traverses the limit between high and low art, between popular and elite forms, highlighting the ways in which these boundaries are porous. By troubling the wider distinctions between reality and fiction that inform old-fashioned literary debates on genre and quality, his work suggests that debates between realism and other modes map onto wider epistemological and political discussions where fictions constantly impact upon reality, undercutting broad distinctions between the real and the imaginary. Furthermore, Conrad’s hybrid forms mobilise contradictions between genres and modes to underscore their critique of liberalism. Comedy and tragedy, realism and romance, pulp forms such as the spy and detective novel as well as the ribaldry of burlesque and farce, all of these interact in Conrad’s fiction to trouble the boundaries between high and low art, and between elite and democratic discourses. If politics can be seen as a debasement of ‘literature,’ Conrad turns generic debasement into a structuring principle of his political fiction.

These issues compound rather than solve the problem of defining Conrad’s political novels. The most common solution amongst critics of political fiction is to examine a sub-category; this enables the creation of a reasonably specific definition, which can be placed in relation to a sketch of the genre as a whole. Thus Irr proposes a new sub-genre, the ‘geopolitical novel’; Scheingold looks at the ‘novel of political alienation’; Speare, Watson and Harvie focus on the ‘parliamentary novel’; while Ó Donghaile is interested in novels about terrorism, specifically on the relationship between modernist aesthetics and terrorist

shock. Michael Wilding is explicit about his desire to be inclusive of non-realist political fiction, but restricts his study to work that combines ‘radicalism of form as well as content’ (1980, p.19). Occupying the middle ground, Howe and Whalen-Bridge limit their studies in different ways. Whalen-Bridge focuses on the American tradition of political fiction, defining it in relation to a sense of politics as impurity and working to reinforce clear distinctions between the political and the aesthetic (distinctions he feels have been eroded by late twentieth-century criticism).

There are more and less acceptable ways to limit the political. Reducing political fiction to the parliamentary novel is a mistake: to do this performs a kind of politics that, for example, makes Benjamin Disraeli the central figure in the genre in Harvie (1991), sidelining not only Conrad, but also other important figures such as George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. The parliamentary novel also disenfranchises a long tradition of political satire into which all four of these writers fall. This tradition is as old as the novel genre itself: from satire of books of chivalry in Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1605) to Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1729) and Henry Fielding’s *The Life and Death of Jonathan Wild, the Great* (1743). Orwell listed Swift and Fielding amongst his main influences (1998, p.148); he also claimed to ‘regard Conrad as one of the best writers of this century, and—supposing that one can count him as an English writer—one of the very few true novelists that England possesses.’ Orwell adds that Conrad had ‘a sort of grown-upness and political understanding which would have been almost impossible to a native English writer at that time’ (1968, p.489). Of these critics, Howe is the least enthusiastic about defining the genre:

Labels, categories, definitions—particularly with regard to so loose and baggy a monster as the novel—do not here concern me very much. Whether a novel may be called a political or a psychological novel—and it is seldom anything more than a matter of convenience—seems rather trivial beside the question, why does a particular critic, bringing to bear his own accumulation of experience, propose to use one or the other of these labels? (1957, pp.15–16).

Though Howe does go on to provide a definition of sorts, which I will examine in due course, his suggestion that with politics and the novel it is more a matter of priority in reading, or indeed a mode of reading that renders fiction political, paves the way for critics such as Jameson, but also Said, to develop engagements with political fiction that evade ensnarement in the troubled boundaries of the political novel as a genre. This enables them, in turn, to elucidate the relationship between the broader politics of fiction (in particular the ways in which literary questions of genre and representation have profound political

force) and novels whose subject is politics. It should be noted that Conrad's writing figures forcefully in the work of both critics.

Alongside (or instead of) a focus on generic classification, Speare and Howe suggest that political novels deal with conceptual concerns. As Howe writes, 'Having cast more than enough scepticism on the impulse to assign literary labels, I want now [...] to suggest the way I shall here use the "political novel." By a political novel I mean a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting' (1957, p.17). Speare likewise prioritises ideas:

What is a Political Novel? It is a work of prose fiction which leans rather to 'ideas' than to 'emotions'; which deals rather with the machinery of law-making or with a theory about public conduct than with the merits of any given piece of legislation; and where the main purpose of the writer is party propaganda, public reform, or exposition of the lives of the personages who maintain government, or of the forces which constitute government (1924, p.ix).

Speare's distinction between 'ideas' and 'emotions,' though undermined (and quite rightly) by his scare quotes, is a useful starting point for considering how I want to read the political novel in my work. Like Howe, I am primarily interested in the outcomes of regarding Conrad's political novels through a particular lens, but I also want to make a case that these works, because they possess certain features, render this method of reading especially productive. Howe's notion of the political novel is not that far from Speare's in that it identifies the same two poles between which the political novel is suspended, but unlike Speare, whose definition has a particular leaning—towards 'ideas'—Howe suggests that the political novel is defined precisely by the tension between the two poles:

The political novel—I have in mind its 'ideal' form—is peculiarly a work of internal tensions. To be a novel at all, it must contain the usual representation of human behaviour and feeling; yet it must also absorb into its stream of movement the hard and perhaps insoluble pellets of modern ideology. The novel deals with moral sentiments, with passions and emotions; it tries, above all, to capture the quality of concrete experience. Ideology, however, is abstract, as it must be, and therefore likely to be recalcitrant whenever an attempt is made to incorporate it into the novel's stream of sensuous impression. The conflict is inescapable: the novel tries to confront experience in its immediacy and closeness, while ideology is by its nature general and inclusive. Yet it is precisely from this conflict that the political novel gains its interest and takes on the aura of high drama (1957, p.20).

The tension Howe perceives between 'human behaviour and feeling' and 'ideology' parallels Speare's sense of 'emotions' and 'ideas,' with both regarding the former as distinctly the domain of the novel in general. There is a risk in linking 'ideals,' 'ideology,' and 'ideas,' yet in

Conrad a connection can be traced between these three concepts. Conrad's political novels are novels of 'ideas' in so far as they explore philosophical terrain, touching particularly on epistemological concerns and ideas of identity and agency. They critique political ideals, liberty in particular, reserving some of their most savage criticism for those whose political ideals have ossified into 'insoluble pellets' of ideological dogma. Needless to say, Howe's sense of ideology is of the liberal variety—what I have labelled 'political idealism' in the previous section. Furthermore, Howe (along with Speare) defines the political novel through a relation between the substance of the novel, which is more concrete and emotional, and abstract conceptual matrices. I do not want myself to propose a dichotomy between ideas and emotions, nor do I want to suggest that the realm of politics is limited to ideas, especially when Conrad's novels are acutely aware of the central role that emotion plays in political action. These dichotomies can too easily slip into rather dubious, potentially gendered binaries—emotion/reason, private/public—that play into patriarchal discourses in which liberalism is far from innocent. However, I do want to follow Howe and Speare in suggesting that the political novel has something to contribute to philosophical speculation on political ideas and ideals, but rather than oppose this to its emotional content, I want to reflect on the relationship between its aesthetic and political considerations, partly because consideration of the aesthetic necessarily engages with questions of affect that can complicate and enrich a more conceptually oriented political philosophy.

In using the thinking of these two critics as a starting point, but also focusing on how they and the wider critical discussion of the political novel falls short when reading Conrad, I am following Eloise Knapp Hay, whose 1963 *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad* remains the most comprehensive survey of the relation between Conrad's politics and his fiction to date. Hay writes in direct reference to Speare and Howe: 'If we consider two of the most readable books written in recent years on the subject of the political novel, we discover that no category has been made to accommodate Conrad' (1963, p.13). She sums up the core of Conrad's contribution to political thought by explaining that 'Conrad's characters and incidents, with rare exceptions, recurrently open a double perspective into their private and public significance. For this reason, even such novels as *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* *Lord Jim*, and *The Secret Sharer* [according to Hay, Conrad's least political works] bear the impress of the politically engaged Conrad' (1963, p.13). (Later she will add, 'For Conrad particularly, every individual life contains the elements of commitment and withdrawal that characterize the political dilemma' (1963, p.15).) Clearly, I disagree with Hay's sense that *Lord Jim* does

not stand amongst Conrad's political novels; the third chapter of this thesis will extend the argument that it is key to understanding the engagement in Conrad's work with liberalism, in particular by enabling a crucial historicisation of the concept of liberty. But beyond this, it is notable that the distinction between public and private underpinning Hay's definition of politics is built on liberal foundations. As Quentin Skinner suggests, the need to protect private life from invasion by public interference is axiomatic of most liberal theory (2008a; see also above). If Hay's definition of politics is liberal, she finds Conrad's political views of a different, albeit not completely distinct, kind. As she asks, 'Why is a Polish émigré like an English Tory?' (1963, p.11), but she then goes on to assert that 'Conrad's political thought is less like arch-conservatism than it is like the lunatic fringe of Polish liberalism' (1963, p.26). This sense of Conrad opens up the possibility of my investigation of his political fiction, but also marks a key point of departure. Hay is interested primarily in relations between Conrad's biography and his writing, but for me Conrad's 'lunatic fringe of Polish liberalism' is an impulse which explains an engagement in his writing with ideas of liberalism and liberty that extend far beyond his contemporaneity, and that allow a fruitful conversation with a modern liberalism that was in the ascendant in England while Conrad wrote his political works.

It is perhaps no surprise that Conrad's writing has figured more in the kind of criticism that is open in its engagement rather than in analyses oriented around biography or the political novel as a narrowly defined genre. In particular, wide-ranging studies such as Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* and Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* maintain a sense of the interweaving of culture and politics while also devoting significant attention to Conrad's works. (It should be acknowledged that Jameson, though he does not refer to Conrad's 'political novels,'<sup>5</sup> is certainly interested in broader questions of genre as well as in the political novel itself.) As for Said, Conrad's work is a touchstone to which he constantly returns: 'his exile, the overtones of his writing, its accents, its slippages, his sense of being in and out of language, being in and out of worlds, his skepticism, his radical uncertainty, the sense that you always feel that something terribly important is going on [...] a tremendous crisis happening but you can't tell what it is—has just gripped me more than any other writer has' (2000, p.421). Said's own summary of his interest touches on the political issues that animate his interaction with Conrad—'exile,' 'being in and out of

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<sup>5</sup> In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson only uses the term 'political novels' once—in reference to Conrad's *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* in contrast to the object of his full study, *Lord Jim*, which is by implication not a 'political novel.' Clearly, I will be challenging this classification in my work.

worlds,' 'skepticism'—but he does not mention explicitly his examination of Conrad's representations of imperialism, which have dominated critical appraisals of Conrad's politics since Chinua Achebe labelled him a 'bloody racist' (1977, p.788). Said, like other critics less unfavourable to Conrad—for example Benita Parry in *Conrad and Imperialism* (1983) and to a lesser extent Patrick Brantlinger in *Rule of Darkness* (1988)—finds an ambivalence in the double-edged irony of his representations of imperialism (1994, pp.20–35). This controversy highlights the ways in which postcolonial readings of Conrad have focused more on the politics of his work than on their contribution to political philosophy. However, examinations in this critical tradition are important to the latter project because of the ways in which imperialism is interwoven with other political issues in Conrad's work and, as I will argue in this thesis, with liberalism in particular, both historically and conceptually.

As I have been suggesting in the above, to think about the political novel is itself problematic. A key issue arises from one of several potential misunderstandings that such a designation can reinforce. In designating certain novels 'political,' we risk effacing the political work that apparently 'non-political' novels do. As Caren Irr observes, apparently 'non-political' fiction frequently does political work that reinforces the (liberal or neoliberal) status-quo (2013, pp.6–7). If the 'non-political' novel might thus perform an opposite view of ideology, tacitly reinforcing dominant politics, perhaps the 'political' novel explicitly critiques either dominant or alternative political idealisms. It might do this by highlighting ways in which the everyday or mundane is shot through with the workings of public power, or by examining the political realm of governments, states, and other political bodies such as multinational corporations and non-governmental organisations.

In any case, though she does not study Conrad, Irr provides a definition of her object of study, the geopolitical novel, which describes Conrad's political novels admirably:

[It] actively reorganizes existing literary forms. More than a hundred writers have twisted and stretched conventional versions of the political novel, testing its durability as they encourage new mutations [...] Politically charged characters, settings, conflicts, and styles of narration comprise the foreground of the narrative as well as the background of the geopolitical novel. This fiction directly addresses questions of collective identity and power, appropriate means of collective action, and the struggle to articulate ideas and goals that orient action. It makes a political problem fundamental to the story [...] They rarely provide dogmatically clear solutions to their problems—preferring the exploration of narrative dilemmas to the making of propagandistic speeches. Nonetheless, the twenty-first-century geopolitical novel edifies contemporary readers in several senses. It shatters isolationist myths, updates national narratives, provides points of access for global identifications, and, perhaps most important, allows reflection on the emerging subjects of consensus (for better or for worse) in the United States (2013, pp.3–4).

In their making ‘a political problem fundamental to the story,’ all four novels examined in this thesis fit this description. Each of these texts mobilises multiple political problems in concert; they are geopolitical novels *avant la lettre*. What Irr’s formulation suggests is that this kind of fiction explores the same terrain as political theory. In Conrad’s oeuvre, *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Under Western Eyes* all engage with political problems of a distinctively liberal nature. As I will show, they engage with a range of key liberal problems—individualism, the boundaries of self and community and the limitations these present to freedom, relations to the public realm and the legitimacy of state power—building towards a critique of the limits and contradictions of liberty and an examination of its relationship with violence.

I find the way in which Irr defines ‘the geopolitical novel’ as a genre localised ‘in the United States’<sup>6</sup> deeply problematic, but this seems more a problem with the ways in which Irr is trying to limit her corpus than a problem with her broader definition. There is a more pressing duplicity here—both in the sense of being double and of concealing something, though not necessarily deliberately—which I would suggest is a key problematic for the political novel as a whole. That these novels critique politics does not stop them from doing the same kind of political work that ‘non-political’ novels also do. They may be overtly political but still covertly reinforce political norms, even if they are norms of resistance, critique, and debate. Furthermore, the non-ideological stance of Irr’s geopolitical novels—their tendency not to provide ‘dogmatically clear solutions’—is not the same as the absence of ideology, and arguably reproduces a different version of the ‘liberal sensitivity’ in late twentieth and early twenty-first century US (non-geopolitical) fiction that Irr decries (2013, p.6). A rejection of dogmatic solutions and ‘reflection on the emerging subjects of consensus (for better or worse)’ is exactly the terrain of the kind of modern liberalism that I examine in this thesis. Typically, however, Conrad takes things to extremes, and in Conrad’s political novels specifically, the ‘reorganisation of literary forms’ entails a form of generic crisis: generic categories collide and combine, subjecting political distinctions to ruinous force. The boundary between public and private in Conrad is one such space in which political effect is violently contested, but also a space in which comic and tragic affect, as well as high and low art, clash and blend. Crisis is a defining feature of both Conrad’s politics and aesthetics.

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Irr does not limit her categorisation to novelists who live in the USA; rather the prime determinant is ‘an explicit effort to address a North American audience.’ For a full discussion of her rationale see Irr, 2013, p.11.

### *Liberalism and mythic violence*

If crisis defines the political in Conrad, its outcome is always violence. Violence erupts at the climax of all four novels examined in this thesis and, in various forms, it defines their trajectories from start to finish. Useful liberal theorisation of violence is thin on the ground; Hannah Arendt's understanding of violence probably comes closest: 'Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance' (1970, p.55). Of course, to claim Arendt for the pantheon of liberal thought is problematic, but her understanding of violence has distinctly liberal overtones, particularly in conceiving power as embodied in the will of the people and as holding the potential to exclude violence (1970, pp.41–44). Conrad's ability to make opposites equivalent is pertinent here, as is the observation that if Arendt describes a liberal view of violence, then Conrad is not liberal in this respect. He is closer to the non-partisan consensus that Arendt aims to challenge, 'to the effect that violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power' (1970, p.35).

Typically Conrad takes this view to extremes, and in this respect his writing resonates with the work of Arendt's associate and influence, Walter Benjamin, who argues that the public sphere is founded in violence, which then becomes fixed in the structures and hierarchies that define social life. Benjamin moves here in the opposite direction to Arendt, implying not that violence is the most extreme form of power, but that *all power is violence*. Conrad also anticipates Benjamin's sense of the continual cycles of decay that attend social structures and the decadence of parliamentary institutions, because they forget the violence of their origins and clothe their use of force in a rhetoric of conversation and compromise ([1921] 2007, p.288). Finally, and also like Conrad, Benjamin displays an affection in the 'Critique of Violence' for fellowship, although this kind of communal relationship is alternately celebrated and complicated in Conrad's oeuvre. It makes sense, then, to think through in detail the implications of Benjamin's famous essay for Conrad's writing. Paul Wake (2007) has examined the four Marlow narratives, 'Youth' (1902), *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim*, and *Chance* (1914) in relation to Benjamin's equally well-known essay 'The Storyteller,' making the case for an affinity between the two. I want to argue here—as elsewhere in this thesis—that Benjamin's theorisation of violence resonates with Conrad's own implicit understandings, and that both men present a vision of violence as bearing a particular relationship to freedom *per se*.

At first glance, Benjamin's revolutionism seems to have little in common with Conrad's withering critique of revolutionaries in *Under Western Eyes*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Nostramo*. Yet as Conrad wrote to R. B. Cunninghame Graham about *The Secret Agent*, 'these people are not revolutionaries—they are shams' (CL3, p.491), a statement equally applicable to most would-be revolutionaries in his writing. Conrad avoids considering 'real' revolution in his work, preferring to depict the ways in which 'revolutionism' uses a political rhetoric of radical change to mask the politics of self-interest. It is significant that of these three novels, only *Nostramo* depicts any actual regime change, and even in this work, the motivations for these revolutions are at worst self-serving, at best bound in knots of imperialism and class interest. Where Benjamin and Conrad differ significantly is in the degree to which they allow themselves hope for genuine change. Though they both hope, Conrad does not go beyond expressing this very occasionally, and in the most general terms. Furthermore, his hopeful vision for human solidarity (Watt 2000, p.17) does not contain much revolutionary content, though arguably it depends upon a kind of epistemological and ontological revolution, captured in the much-quoted summary of Conrad's own artistic vision: 'by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see!*' (*NotN*, p.x, original emphasis). In a typical self-refutation, however, Conrad goes on to detail how much more there is to this vision:

To snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life, is only the beginning of the task. The task approached in tenderness and faith is to hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes and in the light of a sincere mood. It is to show its vibration, its colour, its form; and through its movement, its form, and its colour, reveal the substance of its truth—disclose its inspiring secret: the stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment. In a single-minded attempt of that kind, if one be deserving and fortunate, one may perchance attain to such clearness of sincerity that at last the presented vision of regret or pity, of terror or mirth, shall awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate—which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world (*NotN*, pp.x–xi).

It might be wise to doubt Conrad's sincerity here, or at least the extent to which this vision is sustained through an oeuvre characterised more by irony, alienation, and degradation than by solidarity. Furthermore, how Conrad's work relentlessly *questions* even those notions that he appears to hold most dear is central to my argument. But what is especially germane is the way that, even at his most optimistic, Conrad's vision is shot through with the kinds of violence that are also to be found in Benjamin's thought. After all, it is through

the ‘power’ of the written word that Conrad here desires to ‘make’ us engage in his vision for solidarity, a solidarity which though desirable is a limit on our freedom as well as our individuality, a binding which should feel ‘unavoidable.’ The artistic moment itself is theorised as a barely contained force; as so much ‘stress and passion’ that push against the ties of solidarity as much as against the limits of the artistic object that can barely contain them. The tension between Conrad’s irony and his professed desire for sincerity is paradigmatic of this stress.

Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’ is self-contradictory, no doubt, as an implied counterpart to Conrad’s expression of his artistic vision. Yet Benjamin’s understanding of foundational violence and its relation to power and society helps make better sense of the apparent contradiction in Conrad between irony and sincerity, alienation and solidarity. Throughout this thesis I will use the term ‘violence’ in the sense of the German, ‘Gewalt,’ that Benjamin uses in the original German publication, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*. In English, the idea of violence is sometimes limited to notions of physical harm, and extensions of the term to include systemic and other forms of violence can invite accusations that violence is being done to the term ‘violence’ itself. Broader understandings of the term are often archaic or appear metaphorical, and its etymology seems to reinforce this prejudice: the classical Latin, ‘violentia,’ for instance, suggests a kind of force that is unreasonable, aggressive, overwhelming. No such issue exists for the term ‘Gewalt,’ which alludes to ideas of force and violence, but also to power, control and—as Jacques Derrida observes in his reading of Benjamin’s essay—legitimate forms of authority (2002, p.262) that register the power of the executive, legislature, and judiciary respectively, or even divine power, as in ‘höhere Gewalt’ (act of God). The potential in English to suppress these implications does political work of the kind that Benjamin directly addresses. For example, the claim, which Benjamin regards as a sign of decadence, that parliament is non-violent seems far more plausible in English. Benjamin wrote that to forget or conceal the force inherent in the parliamentary system is a sign of its decline (2007, p.288), and to do so is far easier when language itself exerts pressure in that direction.

‘Critique of Violence’ has been read in radically different ways, with Benjamin’s concept of ‘divine violence’ prompting divergent readings. On the one hand, Werner Hamacher finds Benjamin suggesting that ‘divine violence’ is ‘language as pure means (and thereby as pure violence)’ (1991, p.1145), a ‘pure, and thus nonviolent, noninstrumental violence’ (1991, p.1138); while on the other, Slavoj Žižek writes, ‘When those outside the structured

social field strike “blindly”, demanding and enacting immediate justice/vengeance, this is divine violence’ (2008b, p.202). Derrida takes divine violence to be a problem rendered even more troubling when juxtaposed with Hamacher’s rhetoric of purity: ‘*When one thinks of the gas chambers and the cremation ovens, [Benjamin’s] allusion to an extermination that would be expiatory because bloodless must cause one to shudder. One is terrified at the idea of an interpretation that would make of the holocaust an expiation and an indecipherable signature of the just and violent anger of God*’ (2002, p.298, original emphasis). It is testimony to the radical ambiguity of this essay that this one concept can point in three radically different directions: namely divine violence as a kind of undoing of violence into non-violence; as the oppressed striking out against society; and in the twentieth century’s definitive image of the political violence of the state.

Rather than delve deeper into the complexities and ambiguities of the ‘Critique,’ this thesis will focus on one of Benjamin’s two main kinds of violence: ‘If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them’ (2007, p.297). I intend to show how Conrad’s political novels find our society and institutions shot through with *mythic* violence. The sense I take depends on Benjamin’s definition of law, which includes not simply legal systems but social hierarchies and distributions of power: ‘Lawmaking is power making, and, to that extent, an immediate manifestation of violence. Justice is the principle of all divine end making, power the principle of all mythical lawmaking’ (2007, p.295). Benjamin suggests a binary between law and justice: the former solidifies hierarchies of power that are unjust by definition, whereas justice is the ending of those structures, the shattering of socially established limits and boundaries. For Benjamin, society is founded through violence. ‘Lawmaking,’ ‘Rechtsetzung’ in the German, captures both a sense of the establishment of a legal system and also the rights that might underpin such a system.

To gain a clearer sense of what this entails, the ‘Critique’ provides an example of mythic or lawmaking violence that suggests its character as a foundational violence that establishes unequal relations: ‘the task of “peace” after all the wars of the mythical age [that] is the primal phenomenon of all lawmaking violence’ (2007, p.295). For Benjamin:

[W]e see most clearly that power, more than the most extravagant gain in property, is what is guaranteed by all lawmaking violence. Where frontiers are decided the adversary is not simply annihilated; indeed, he is accorded rights even when the victor’s superiority in power is complete. And these are, in a demonically ambiguous way, “equal” rights: for both parties to the treaty it is the same line that may not be crossed (2007, pp.295–96).

Yet this equality is the equality ‘to which Anatole France refers satirically when he says, “Poor and rich are equally forbidden to spend the night under the bridges”’ (2007, p.296). So Benjamin’s mythic violence is a violence of ‘equality’ before the law that not only cements power relations, but deepens their inequality through apparently equal rights, as the equal law against vagrants worsens the situation of vagrants, the codification of law makes the contestation of power illegitimate, etc. I aim to examine this sense of foundational violence in more depth in the first chapter of this thesis, on *Under Western Eyes*, which I suggest implicates social contract theory in the tradition of Jean Jacques Rousseau with just such violence.

Mythic violence will be taken broadly as a foundational violence that establishes social hierarchy and inequality. Its mythic quality will also be emphasised because, though not made explicit in Benjamin’s work, I take it to be a metaphorically polytheistic form of violence in contrast to monotheistic divine violence. By this, I want to gesture towards the ways in which foundational violence in Conrad serves different ends, often concurrently. Thus, though Benjamin focuses on an idea of a foundational violence which decays until it is overthrown by a competing violence that establishes a new law (2007, pp.283–84), I would suggest that mythic violence, like the classical sources Benjamin uses to describe it, involves multiple, often competing deities—in Conrad, Capitalism and Imperialism particularly—which sometimes act in concert and sometimes in conflict, but whose ends are never entirely the same.

For Benjamin, power is mythic violence and always illegitimate. In contrast, divine violence is legitimate—‘sovereign’ and just—but is also inescapably ambiguous (2007, p.300). Conversely, Arendt’s distinction between power and violence walls them off them in order to assert that power can derive legitimacy from consensus, whereas violence is always illegitimate (1970, p.55). This thesis will demonstrate that Conrad’s critique of modern liberalism depends upon a sense of violence that is closer to Benjamin’s than Arendt’s. For Conrad, manifest power is always already illegitimate. As quoted in the epigraph to this thesis: *‘It is a king whose destiny is never to know the obedience of his subjects except at the cost of degradation’* (NoLL, p.86, my emphasis).

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Competition is a concept that keeps cropping up in this Introduction, with modern liberalism preferring conversation as means of negotiating such potential for conflict.

Chapter One, on *Under Western Eyes*, examines how Conrad scrutinises the liberal notion of conversation in this particular work. It argues that far from emerging as the interaction of free and equal interlocutors, conversation is governed by social norms that serve the status quo and limit freedom. In particular, conversation is bounded by inclusions and exclusions that I will read through Benjamin's sense of mythic violence as an expression of liberalism's mythic origins. Far from cultivating freedom in a modern sense, I suggest that *Under Western Eyes* connects these conversations to historical negotiations of the liberties of feudal elites. Furthermore, if dialogue requires multiple participants, *Under Western Eyes* generates conceptual exchange through an aesthetic of doublings: conversation and violence, East and West, liberalism and autocracy. Central amongst its many twins is the parallel concern with vision and hearing, which I argue is complicated through a kind of narrative concussion, which like a blow to the head causes double vision, echoes and disorientation.

Chapter Two explores the connection between secrets and privacy in *The Secret Agent*, with particular attention to their relevance to the public/private split that is key to modern liberalism. Continuing its examination of doublings, the chapter considers how *The Secret Agent* collapses distinctions between anarchism/liberalism and policing/terrorism. It shows how these political binaries invade the private life of the individual, but also how public life is governed by the private concerns of social elites. It further argues that Conrad's modernist concerns about textuality are mapped, via a metaphor of reading, onto concerns regarding the traversal of political and social boundaries. *The Secret Agent* implicates reading in the formation of an illusory liberal subject—a kind of mythic violence—while also suggesting that social and political power always reincorporate the anarchic individual into a controlling narrative. Moreover, reading enables terroristic control where individual freedom is always curtailed because, no matter how radical or destructive, it can be assimilated into the status quo.

As explained above, *Lord Jim* sits least comfortably under the mantle of political novel, yet Chapter Three argues that it is crucial to understanding Conrad's engagement with liberal politics. Its generic combinations—of realism, romance, and burlesque—combine with modernist textuality to expose the violent origins of liberalism. Like *Under Western Eyes*, much revolves around ideas of inclusion and exclusion—what it means to be 'one of us'—but what *Lord Jim* suggests is that for liberalism this 'us' is shaped by the resurgence of feudal mores in a colonial context. The chapter argues that *Lord Jim* explores the specific chivalric value of *franchise*—the appearance of noble virtue—as a key determinant of

inclusion. Though *franchise* is what draws Marlow, the novel's narrator, to Jim, its protagonist, I argue that it also permits entry for the pirate Gentleman Brown. Yet the root of *Lord Jim's* tragic conclusion is not Brown. Rather I argue that it emerges from Jim's will to autonomy—another key to modern liberalism—to the ruin of the political establishment he wants to build. Progressive liberal ideals are implicated in violence and banditry, linked to imperialism in the novel's present, but firmly rooted in chivalric values from the past.

The final chapter analyses *Nostramo's* even deeper critical engagement with individual self-actualisation. It argues that *Nostramo* is a broad political canvas that manages nevertheless to capture the violent impact of politics on individual lives. Liberty, far from being a progressive ideal, emerges as tied historically and mythically to violent elites, but also as being fostered in visceral 'carnage.' This provides an alternative image of a liberal 'fraternity' born not out of humanistic solidarity but out of violence. It also displays a parallel examination of capitalism as a modern 'weapon' of liberty, suggesting that it too feeds on visceral violence, perhaps achieving a more orderly society but one that is nevertheless destructive for individual selves. In so doing, the novel portrays the disintegration of a range of political ideas and ideals, especially liberty and revolution, but it also shows the ways in which modern liberal notions of liberty, which depend on self-actualisation, engender a paradoxical logic of self-destruction.

Modern liberalism is a recurrent concern in Conrad's political novels that is exposed as being conceptually and historically entangled with violence. This is achieved through Conrad's representation of political circumstances—the formation of nations and communities, espionage and policing, terrorism, colonialism—but also and more incisively through the interaction of these representations with Conrad's modernist aesthetics. Genre, textuality, irony, allegory, and symbolism all combine in Conrad's political novels to evoke and critique political ideals and ideology. As such, his work stands as a clear example of the contribution that fiction and its criticism can make to liberal political theory, both of yesteryear and of today.

## 1. Doubling and conversation: *Under Western Eyes*

### *Introduction*

*Under Western Eyes* displays an obsessive concern with doubles and pairings. Characters, events, places, and ideologies are all made to resemble one another. As part of this process, opposites are made alike and twins become *doppelgängers*. A central component of the novel's aesthetic and thematic doublings is a parallel examination of motifs of sight and sound. On the one hand, the novel considers what it means for narrative and the events it depicts to be 'under Western eyes'; on the other, it is concerned with the workings of dialogue—both speech and silence—with ramifications for modern liberalism, which itself privileges ideas of conversation. 'East' and 'West' is another key pairing: apparent opposites that are ironically brought together in spite of purported incompatibility. 'East' and 'West' are connected in *Under Western Eyes* to autocracy and liberalism respectively, which are likewise both opposed to and overlaid with one another. Yet these relations are positioned within a wider logic of double vision and echoes: rather than simply representing twinned ideas or opposing binaries, *Under Western Eyes* presents unstable images and overlapping resonances where multiple pairs shift, repeat, and intersect to create a complex and bewildering scene.

In this chapter, I will elucidate the connections between these ironic doublings and modern liberalism by drawing on postmodern liberal philosopher Richard Rorty and his explication of a liberal conversationalism. By focusing particularly on Rorty's sense of the limits of conversation, which are also the limits of community or 'ethnos,' I will relate this to the doubling of 'East' and 'West' in Conrad's novel. Liberal conversationalism and violence, which are opposed to one another in liberal theory, are like other opposites in *Under Western Eyes* brought together and transformed into doubles of each other. Together, these form the parameters of modern liberal politics. This suggests that liberalism's origins lie in a Benjaminian mythic violence, but also that the liberal logic of conversation contains 'subjective' and 'symbolic' forms of violence, as conceptualised by Slavoj Žižek (2008b, pp.1–8).

Western liberalism is defined in *Under Western Eyes* in terms of bargain and compromise, especially through the conversation of two characters: the narrator, an unnamed teacher of languages, and his student, Natalia Haldin. Their conversation historicises Western

liberalism, implicating it in violence and power relations that position its origins not in reasoned debate premised on ideas of liberty, but in political manoeuvre and elite interest. It also defines liberalism geographically as well as historically, linking it broadly to Western Europe, but also more specifically to England. Yet *Under Western Eyes* both asserts and undermines national identities and Englishness in particular. By corollary, it highlights an historical sense of distinction between liberalism in Britain and on the Continent, focused throughout the nineteenth century by British horror at the excesses of the French Revolution. Yet it also suggests that foundational mythic violence is at the heart of all these political forms: the ‘bargain with fate,’ which in *Under Western Eyes* characterises British liberalism, has a history as bloody as more recent Continental revolutions.

### **Under Western Eyes and political doubling**

*Under Western Eyes*, like so much of Conrad’s oeuvre, responds well to reading through the lens of doubles and doubling. Frank Kermode reads *dédoublement* as part of its narrative negotiation of ‘sequence’ and ‘secrets’ (1980, p.101). For Penn R. Szittyá, ‘the characteristic feature of its construction is doubleness or duplication’ (1981, p.818); likewise Allan Simmons suggests, ‘Everything in the novel is double-edged’ (2006, p.144). As Yael Levin writes: ‘Razumov is a double of the English teacher, not only in mind and manners, but also in love [who] effectively and significantly repeats Razumov’s betrayal’ (2008, p.87). Jeremy Hawthorn has written about the internal and intertextual doublings of *Under Western Eyes*, and in particular its relation to what he calls ‘The Literature of the Double,’ a gothic genre of uncanny twins and *doppelgängers* (2011). Meanwhile for Robert Hampson, ‘dialogue or conflict between [...] different interpretative frames relates to another form of doubling’ (2012, p.225).

These various conceptions of doubling are all significant in relation to modern liberalism. As I will go on to argue, *dédoublement* suggests a continuous and disorienting duplication that reflects the fragmentation and doubling of different politics of freedom that, though theoretically distinct from modern liberalism, in reality shift and blend in the *mêlée* of political action. In this chapter, I want to connect Kermode’s sense of *dédoublement* to Paul de Man’s definition of irony, highlighting the double-edged nature of ironic critique. The *doppelgänger* appears throughout the chapter, both as a figure representing the illiberal twin of liberalism and as a symbol of repressed violence within modern liberalism itself. I also want to relate the notion of doubled interpretative frames to the conflicting ways in which

the novel can be read as well as to a broader sense of the novel's audience as doubled within the novel by a community of Western liberal readers who, rather than encourage liberty and freedom, exert a limiting force of propriety upon the novel's narrator and come to represent the 'social tyranny' feared by J. S. Mill (2003, p.76).

Sight and sound have symbolic force in *Under Western Eyes*, and their impact simulates the visual and aural disorientation of a blow to the head. Yet as with double vision and echoes, this effect does not produce an image of two distinct entities or the discrete repetition of sound; rather, double vision is an illusion where we see two images of one object, and echoes repeat and overlap. Neither of these is a stable perception; instead, each relates to an experience where image or sound shifts continuously, at times distinct but more often than not overlaid. If we experience double vision of a crowded field—and *Under Western Eyes* is nothing if not conceptually crowded—then identities begin vertiginously to multiply. In particular, competing visions of liberty are forced to overlap so that it becomes difficult to distinguish oligarchs from democrats, and liberalism from autocracy.

From the outset, *Under Western Eyes* highlights that its first-person narrative is double-voiced, ironically signalling Conrad's presence as author by disclaiming the very qualities that are necessary to create a novel. Beginning with an absurd single-sentence paragraph, the teacher's obtuse, meandering syntax, along with his attempt to distance himself from both Razumov and his own narrative, introduces the novel's structure and tone:

To begin with I wish to disclaim the possession of those high gifts of imagination and expression which would have enabled my pen to create for the reader the personality of the man who called himself after the Russian custom, Cyril son of Isidor – Kirylo Sidorovitch – Razumov (p.11).

Conrad thus highlights the doubled nature of this narrative, deploying a first-person narrator who conceals his voice in the text, but also ironising this narrator as a fictional device. The teacher's disclaimer functions simultaneously as Conrad's claim to the very 'high gifts of imagination and expression' that allow him to create not only Razumov, but also the narrator, *aka* the teacher of languages, himself. Two paragraphs later, when the teacher asserts that 'readers of these pages will be able to detect in the story the marks of documentary evidence' (*ibid.*), we are already made aware that Conrad is playing a narrative game with us as well, because he has not just created his own double in the teacher, but has doubled us too in the fictional 'readers' the narrator addresses. As I will show later, this is a crucial move, not least because the teacher and his fictional readership are supposedly

liberals. Moreover, Conrad has effectively redoubled his own narrative: the ‘documentary evidence’ to which he refers is Razumov’s own journal, which remains throughout the novel a shadowy *Ur-text* to which we are never granted direct access.

These various acts of doubling can be features of any first-person narrative, but the way in which the novel draws attention to them from the outset is unusual. More specifically, Conrad’s arch insinuation of his own skill as a novelist through his narrator’s explicit denial of those very capacities is an audacious assertion of the ironic power of words to contain their opposites. When the teacher of languages subsequently tells us that his imaginative gifts ‘have been smothered out of existence a long time ago under a wilderness of words,’ and that words ‘as is well known are the great foes of reality’ (*ibid.*), we are forewarned that we are entering a language game in which the relationship between words, fiction, and reality will be played to the hilt. Though the teacher seems to be offering us the rules for the game—that words cannot be trusted—we already know at this point that standing behind him is Conrad. If the narrator’s claim to lack imagination is, as a point of fact, inverted in relation to Conrad, the narrative holds the potential that *all* its statements about the world effectively contain their inverse forms. Words may not be the enemies of reality at all: they are slippery and potentially paradoxical, to be sure, but no more so than reality itself.

After this double opening, the narrative is arranged in such a way that double reading becomes a structural necessity: *Under Western Eyes* is a novel that demands to be read twice. Razumov is the illegitimate son of Prince K—, a Russian senator, though his parentage is initially concealed from the reader. Instead, the teacher relates a snippet of gossip: ‘Mr Razumov was supposed to be the son of an Arch-priest,’ or perhaps ‘an Arch-priest’s pretty daughter’ (p.13). The teacher is playing the ‘documentary evidence’ mentioned at the start of the novel against gossip: hearsay is granted priority in the question of Razumov’s paternity, pointing to key questions of authority and legitimacy that echo throughout the text. As I will demonstrate shortly, the order in which ‘facts’ are revealed is crucial, and this early example is a foreshadowing of a much more significant reordering of information. The teacher’s editorial decisions are particularly prominent examples of his reworking of Razumov’s journal, which, along with other instances of the integration of outside sources into his narrative, raises questions regarding his own authority and the legitimacy of the liberties he takes with his subjects in the text.

The teacher goes on to tell the story of Razumov's unwilling entanglement in Russia's political violence. Because he has the dubious gift of 'inspiring confidence,' Razumov is chosen as a confidant by Victor Haldin, a fellow student who has assassinated a prominent Russian statesman (p.44). Razumov agrees to help Haldin, arranging him to be spirited away. He fails to do this, however, because the man who is supposed to help Haldin escape, Ziemianitch, has drunk himself into a stupor. Panic-stricken, Razumov decides to turn Haldin over to the authorities, calling upon his father who takes him to General T— to make arrangements for Haldin's capture. Razumov hopes that his betrayal will allow him to continue his life unmolested by the state; but his plan backfires and, after a short interval, he is summoned for an interview with an official, Councillor Mikulin, where it becomes apparent that the state has not finished with Razumov.

Mikulin possesses an ironic conversational tic: he 'uttered a series of broken sentences. Instead of finishing them he glanced down his beard. It was a deliberate curtailment which somehow made the phrases more impressive' (p.74). Mikulin is a serial abuser of aposiopesis. His omissions double the narrator's own, anticipating the novel's central moment of ellipsis which occurs at the end of this episode, when the interview appears to conclude with Razumov professing a desire to be left to 'retire – simply to retire,' at which point Mikulin asks, 'Where to?' (p.82). We are allowed to believe that the interview concludes here: Mikulin's aposiopesis has prepared us for an abrupt end to the conversation, dulling us to its improbability. This inconclusive end seems to fit with Mikulin's patterns of speech, and we are encouraged to read Part Second as the answer to his question: Razumov has retired to Geneva. The curtailment of his interview with Mikulin appears to be a stylistic flourish where redundant speech is replaced by the action it foretells. This is far from the case, but we must wait until Part Fourth for the game-changing conclusion to this conversation.

Part Second begins by introducing Victor Haldin's sister, Natalia, who is also the teacher's student. This section details the origins of the teacher's acquaintance with Natalia, her discovery of her brother's fate, and her coming to know Razumov. It also introduces the denizens of the Château Borel, Peter Ivanovitch, his abused secretary Tekla, and Madame de S—. Part Third deals with Razumov's gradual acceptance into the revolutionary community, with Razumov constantly afraid that someone will discover his betrayal of Haldin. It comprises a number of fraught conversations where, because we are already aware of the betrayal, we can perceive the double meaning in Razumov's dialogue, which

alludes to his true feelings but is always misinterpreted by his interlocutors. The section ends with Razumov securely a member of the community.

It is only in the final section of Part Fourth that it is revealed that Razumov's conversation with Mikulin did not end with his departure. Instead we learn that he has been recruited by Mikulin to infiltrate the revolutionary community in Geneva, and we also realise that Razumov's ambiguity in Part Third has ensnared us as well. The dialogues we read as double-edged because Razumov conceals his betrayal of Haldin are redoubled by the revelation he is a spy. We too have been duped by Razumov's duplicitous allusion. Yet Razumov falls in love with Natalia Haldin, and, wracked by guilt, confesses his betrayal to her and then to the other Russians. He is deafened by the assassin, Nikita Necator (ironically also a double-agent in Mikulin's employ), and ultimately returns to Russia, where his confession once safe from all suspicion has made him a muse to the revolutionaries.

The teacher's choice to withhold the information that Razumov is a spy has a number of key effects. As Hampson observes, while reading Part Second and Part Third, 'we feel "privileged" because we know (as the revolutionaries do not) that Razumov has betrayed Haldin, and we enjoy the ironies that this knowledge produces' (2012, p.224). But this feeling is inverted when our own ignorance is revealed, and the irony rebounds doubly upon us as readers. This duplicity leads Kermode to call the novel 'benignly disingenuous from the preface on,' before immediately asking: 'or is it benign; in a sense it hates its readers' (1980, p.95). Kermode's self-questioning captures the doubleness and self-doubt of the novel's ironic mode, and also points to a key question regarding the narrator: is he benign and incompetent, or is he masquerading? Where does the intention to deceive the reader lie? Is the teacher a 'diabolical narrator,' as Kermode suggests, or should we focus on Conrad as a 'cunning artificer,' as Hampson and Carabine contend? These questions matter because the answers change crucial aspects of our reading. Clearly, any response we choose allows Conrad his artifice, but if the narrator is a dupe rather than a perpetrator of deception, we must read his character very differently, and in particular his relationship with his Western liberal readership. My argument is that its double vision enables *Under Western Eyes* to sustain *both* of these readings, and as I will now show, both Conrad's narrator and his Western liberal readers emerge as dupes and perpetrators at the same time.

If Kermode's representation of the narrator's diabolical nature is dramatically overstated, his postulation of *dédoublement* remains useful in describing the general effect of *Under Western Eyes*. If we relate this effect to Paul de Man's understanding of irony as *dédoublement*, it describes the processes of repeated duplication I am ascribing here to double vision and echo. For de Man, irony is not a single doubling but a process of repeated self-alienation, a doubling which doubles itself back on itself repeatedly (1983, pp.212–16). De Man's theory, however, describes the doubling effect of irony on a single identity, whereas in *Under Western Eyes* this process applies to a complex combination of community, political ideology, and individual identity whereby numerous doubles are refracted, repeated, and overlaid, to dizzying ironic effect. *Dédoublement* gives rise to a range of critiques that are relevant to modern liberalism. In *Under Western Eyes*, it also produces a synaesthetic effect, stemming from its overlapping concerns with vision and hearing (itself doubled by the startling synaesthetic figure of the 'cord of silence' I will analyse in Chapter Four, which represents the paradox that the politics of liberty is also a form of entrapment). This synaesthesia reinforces the interaction of different notions of dialogue linked to the acts of spoken conversation and reading, respectively. This in turn enables a connection to be made between the representation of spoken dialogue in *Under Western Eyes* and various forms of dialogue that are crucial to modern liberal theory, which is self-consciously conversational in a number of ways.

In order to unpack the relevance for modern liberalism of these complex and elusive relations, I want to begin by focusing on the relations between two sets of doubles in the novel: the aforementioned construction of 'East' and 'West,' and the political distinction between liberalism and autocracy. At the same time, this will establish my case that narrative form and political content both nuance and amplify their respective implications. Jacques Berthoud makes a clear case for the relation of these pairs in *Under Western Eyes*. He analyses the novel's identification between the West and liberalism, and the parallel connection between Russia and autocracy. Berthoud connects these identifications to epistemological concerns, arguing that autocracy erases the community upon which rationality necessarily depends. For him, rationality is a commitment to a shared system of language exchange (1978, p.165). Consequently, the contrasting political scenes of autocratic Russia and the democratic West generate radically different subjectivities. Western liberal values are embodied in the teacher of languages, who for Berthoud is 'a liberal democrat' (1978, p.161) who represents 'the power of rationality' (1978, p.163). When I go on to examine the novel

later in relation to Rortyan conversationalism, I will argue liberalism is based on a logic of shared values—Rorty calls this ‘ethnocentrism’—that resonates with Berthoud’s sense of a communal rationality. What is significant at this point in my argument is the opposition Berthoud establishes between this communal rationality and a mystical Russian cynicism. The Russians in *Under Western Eyes* are blighted by this paradoxical quality, claims Berthoud, because they ‘cannot escape what the narrator calls “the shadow of autocracy”’ (1978, p.166). Berthoud then expands upon the distinction between autocracy and liberal society in a manner that blurs the boundary between reality and fiction:

In a relatively open and civilized society, judgements and thoughts are given reality through acts of individual judging and thinking. Under an autocracy, however, they tend to cease to be part of daily life, harden into separate identities, and get erected into ‘ideals’ – that is, become increasingly remote from material realities. Thus the ideal becomes emptier, the physical more brutal. Russian neurosis is in fact a kind of schizophrenia in which the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘material’, collapsing apart, spin off into separate orbits. (1978, p.167)

Berthoud somewhat idealises ‘open and civilized society,’ underplaying the friction that hinders or distorts the realisation of ‘acts of individual judging and thinking’ beyond their mere conceptualisation. What is crucial, though, is the hollowing out of ideals, more specifically the ideal of liberty that is embodied by Ivanovitch. Berthoud turns Ivanovitch’s ‘schizophrenia’ into ‘a test-case of [...] national malaise’ (1978, p.166), exposing him as a liberal revolutionary whose hypocritical idealism is diagnosed as a symptom of autocracy. Ivanovitch is the opposite of the teacher, his cynical idealism in every respect the antithesis of the narrator’s practical humanism. ‘The two men,’ he says, ‘are natural opponents, and in the narrative their opposition takes the form of a contest for the possession of Natalia Haldin’s soul’ (1978, p.168). Berthoud’s analysis of the symptom is astute, even if his identification of the root cause of Ivanovitch’s political ‘schizophrenia’ is incomplete. Likewise, Berthoud’s general sense of the opposition between Ivanovitch and the narrator holds, although the logic of doubling in *Under Western Eyes* results in this seeming distinction being undermined. For, as the novel suggests, it is not simply autocracy that causes a schizophrenic division in Ivanovitch, but also the internal contradictions in liberty itself.

Ivanovitch’s ‘schizophrenia’ is evidenced in the contradiction between his liberal, feminist ideals and his brutal, cynical exploitation of women. But though these elements appear to be contradictory, his savagery is explicitly related to freedom. This savagery germinates during his escape from Russia, but manifests in the novel primarily through his exploitative

relations with women. Hoping to win funds for his cause, he associates with the eccentric Russian aristocrat, Madame de S—, but more disquietingly he abuses his amanuensis, Tekla, forcing her to sit without moving for hours, facing a wall, so that her movements and appearance, even her gaze, do not distract him from his philosophising (p.118). As Berthoud observes, his ideals are ‘increasingly remote from material reality.’ The teacher’s retelling of Ivanovitch’s discovery of his feminist ideals suggests a doubling more profound than simple hypocrisy:

His temper grew savage as the days went by and he was glad to discover that there was so much of a brute in him. He had nothing else to put his trust in. For it was as though there had been two human beings indissolubly joined in that enterprise. The civilised man, the enthusiast of advanced humanitarian ideals thirsting for the triumph of spiritual love and political liberty; and the stealthy primeval savage, pitilessly cunning in the preservation of his freedom from day to day, like a tracked wild beast (p.99).

Not only does Ivanovitch become divided into ‘two human beings,’ one ‘civilised’ and the other ‘savage’; this doubling also hinges upon conflicting versions of political liberty and freedom. On one side lie ‘advanced humanitarian ideals,’ on the other actual freedom, preserved by ‘pitiless cunning.’ This doubling of liberty, between idealised (often impotent) political and philosophical conceptions and violent, visceral reality is repeated throughout Conrad’s political novels: for example in the ‘sham’ revolutionaries in *The Secret Agent* and the anarchistic self-destructions enacted by Winnie Verloc and Stevie (Chapter Two); in the idealistic liberal imperialism of Lord Jim versus the rapacious love of liberty embodied by the pirate Gentleman Brown (Chapter Three); and in *Nostromo*’s counterpointing of Giorgio Viola’s religious passion for republicanism with his personal history of violent struggle (Chapter Four). Ivanovitch, however, is made into a caricature of the noble savage erroneously associated with the political writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, under whose statue Razumov writes his report to Mikulin.

I will consider the importance of Rousseau’s appearance in *Under Western Eyes* in more detail later in this chapter; suffice to say here that it connects the Russian Ivanovitch to the Western liberal tradition. He becomes an inverted double of the noble savage: externally civilised, apparently humane and progressive, yet in reality brutal and retrograde. According to this double vision—political liberty versus savage freedom—liberalism begins to shift, becoming increasingly indistinct; and through the further connection between the noble savage and liberal political theory, Ivanovitch’s spiritualism, which to Berthoud represents an idealism and mysticism that are products of autocracy, is indexed to Western liberal

thought. This is one of many points in *Under Western Eyes* at which the false binary between 'East' and 'West' breaks down. We cannot simply blame autocracy for Ivanovitch's ideological failings: the West is also profoundly implicated in the degradation of liberal ideals he represents.

In particular, Ivanovitch's escape, during which he discovers 'woman's spiritual superiority' (*ibid.*), also witnesses the surfacing of his 'savage' nature. Though later suppressed, this violence re-emerges in his relationship with Tekla, who, forbidden to move, comes to resemble Walter Benjamin's representation of Niobe. For Benjamin, Niobe's story is iconic of mythic violence: Niobe is turned to stone, and remains 'as a boundary stone on the frontier between men and gods' (2007, p.295). Niobe symbolically marks the establishment of power: she is both 'a manifestation of [the gods'] existence' (2007, p.294) and, consecrated as a statue, stands as a figure of power's enduring expression. This 'boundary stone' is duplicated by the statue of Rousseau, whose social contract is exposed in *Under Western Eyes* as a theorisation of an older mythic violence. Yet for Tekla, immobilisation is a literal effect of the violence of patriarchy, perpetuated in her relations with Ivanovitch even while he develops his *magnum opus* on female liberation.

This is relevant to Natalia and Mrs Haldin as well, who powerfully resonate with Benjamin's Niobe-inspired critique of mythic violence and patriarchy as significant limits to liberalism. In the case of Ivanovitch, his ideals prove powerless to challenge his destructive relations with women. His brutal sexism is a savage reality that goes side by side with his progressive ideology. However, Ivanovitch does not represent the perversion of liberal ideals under autocracy, as Berthoud suggests. The subordination of women is not restricted to totalitarian regimes, nor does Ivanovitch abuse Tekla because his subjectivity has been shaped by autocracy; rather, he is characterised as a visionary with decidedly limited vision. He wears 'dark glasses' that act as both mask (p.160) and blinkers (p.251); and if autocracy leads subjects to 'spiritualise' (p.172) their way to totalitarian idealism, there is nothing spiritual or idealistic about the egocentrism that blinds Ivanovitch to the suffering he inflicts.

If Ivanovitch demonstrates contemptible double standards, the revolutionaries in *Under Western Eyes* are represented as similarly hypocritical and duplicitous. As Conrad writes in a letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham about the anarchists in *The Secret Agent*, 'I don't think that I've been satirizing the revolutionary world. All these people are not revolutionaries—they are shams' (CL3, p.491; see also Chapter Two). In *Under Western*

*Eyes*, there are most certainly sham revolutionaries: Razumov himself is one; Nikita Necator, the assassin and double agent, another. Neither character has much interest in the realisation of revolution; instead both act out their roles in order to achieve their individual goals as spies.

Still other 'revolutionary' characters in the novel are implicated in different forms of masquerade. Via the character of Madame de S—, in particular, revolution is presented as an instrument deployed by a self-serving international aristocracy. The movement to overthrow the Tsar in *Under Western Eyes* is not driven by characters with identical motives, and because this grand-scale Revolution is not realised in the novel, it fragments into myriad theoretical 'revolutions' whose particulars depend upon the characters concerned. In Marxist terms, de S—'s regime change would not qualify as a revolution, but simply as the transfer of power within a single class. Despite her wealth—'She has millions,' Razumov surmises (p.168)—Madame de S— is fixated with revenge upon those who have taken from her, descending into embarrassing outbursts that need to be halted by her associates. As she tells Razumov on their first meeting: 'I have been shamefully robbed, positively ruined [...] the principal robber was an exalted and almost a sacrosanct person – a Grand Duke in fact. Do you understand, Mr Razumov? A Grand Duke. . . . No! You have no idea what thieves those people are!' (*ibid.*). That Madame de S— finds the 'Grand Duke' to be 'almost a sacrosanct person' points to her elitist values; popular uprising for her is simply a mechanism to settle personal scores.

Characters such as Peter Ivanovitch and Sophia Antonovna are more complex, yet they also share Madame de S—'s instrumentalisation of the very people she seeks to liberate. If Ivanovitch appears to desire a revolution that gives power to the people, like Madame de S— – his revolutionary ideals are compromised by his elite status, and even more by his egotism and hypocrisy. There is a clear sense in *Under Western Eyes* of a vast, suffering population in Russia in desperate need of relief: 'the proletariat [...] the utterly hopeless [...] the people who have nowhere to go and nothing to look forward to in this life' (p.120). Yet this sympathetic account comes not from the key revolutionaries, but from Tekla, another victim. By contrast, for Ivanovitch and Madame de S—, the people are important as a means, not an end in themselves. Madame de S— explains that for the revolution to succeed they need to make 'discontent effective and universal.' This suggests their hope for a mass uprising, which would place the oppressed themselves on the front line in the struggle for freedom. When Razumov observes, 'hunger will do that,' Ivanovitch replies,

‘Yes. I know. Our people are starving in heaps. But you can’t make famine universal. And it is not despair that we want to create. There is no moral support to be got out of that. It is indignation . . .’ (p.172). Ivanovitch is not interested in the wellbeing of the people, but in what can be extracted from them. If making ‘famine universal’ would be an effective means of promoting revolution, Ivanovitch would consider it, but the ‘despair’ starvation would create is undesirable because it would enervate rather than motivate political action.

This distance between these would-be ‘revolutionaries’ and the people is emphasised by an absurd evocation of Marie Antoinette, which counterpoints the hunger of the people against acts of opulent consumption that create the impression they are feeding off the suffering masses. Razumov’s reference to hunger and Ivanovitch’s cynical response combine with the ghoulish countenance of Madame de S— to sinister effect. Tantamount to a ‘galvanised corpse’ (p.168), her emaciated appearance suggests undeath:

The Egeria of the “Russian Mazzini” produced at first view a strong effect by the deathlike immobility of an obviously painted face [...] He was being received graciously with a smile which made him think of a grinning skull [...] This ancient painted mummy with unfathomable eyes [...] From time to time Mme de S— extended a claw like hand glittering with costly rings towards the paper of cakes, took up one and devoured it, displaying her big false teeth ghoulishly. Meantime she talked in a hoarse tone of the political situation in the Balkans (pp.167–69).

In the passage above, Madame de S— is portrayed as an undead version of Marie Antoinette, sitting and eating cake in her Château as she discusses ‘the political situation in the Balkans.’ Antoinette’s ‘let them eat cake’ is iconic of elite disconnection from the needs of the people, and its evocation here signifies the revolutionaries’ reprehensible detachment from the circumstances of the revolution and the wider population it intends to serve. Moreover, her ghoulish mien suggests that de S— is feeding not only on cake, but also on the people themselves. This glance at the French Revolution has a gothic resonance, indirectly referencing a statement by Jacques Mallet du Pan, a Genevan like Rousseau, whose ‘la révolution dévore ses enfans’ (1793, p.63) has become an adage. For Peter Ivanovitch, similarly, the people are ‘children’ (p.161). The juxtaposition of images of cannibalistic feeding, elite disconnection, and a starving population combines to create a disturbing vision. The revolutionaries of the Château Borel thus appear, not as the leaders of a popular Russian uprising, but as egocentric predators who have more in common with European aristocracy than the people they feed upon.

This connection between Russian and European elites goes beyond the consumption of cake. Earlier in the narrative, the teacher explicitly makes the Château Borel the double of another residence with famous connections to the First French Empire that followed:

The Château Borel [...] had its fame in our day like the residence of that other dangerous and exiled woman Mme de Staël in the Napoleonic era. Only the Napoleonic despotism, the booted heir of the Revolution, which counted that intellectual woman for an enemy worthy to be watched, was something quite unlike the autocracy in mystic vestments, engendered by the slavery of a Tartar conquest (p.114).

Like so many of the doubles in *Under Western Eyes*, initial resemblance is soon inverted, not only because Madame de S— is no ‘intellectual’ de Stäel, but also owing to historical differences with the regime she opposes. If de Stäel was an opponent of ‘Napoleonic despotism,’ which grew out of a revolution seeking liberty, equality, and brotherhood, de S— is the product of ‘the slavery of a Tartar conquest.’ This ironic comparison, however, twists back upon itself, since the two regimes are despotism and autocracy alike. Napoleon’s regime may have had its origins in the French Revolution, but it was also a return, with its iconography recalling the standards of the Roman Empire: the French Imperial Eagle, instantiated by Napoleon days after his coronation, and also twinned and multiplied by the double-headed eagle of the Russian Empire.

These doublings are similarly captured in a shared language. Madame de S— is a caricature, a gothic grotesque who sits in the shadows screaming ‘*Voleurs! Voleurs!*’ (p.169, original emphasis). She also notes Razumov’s ability to speak French with approval, signalling the cosmopolitan fluidity of aristocratic relations that has also permitted her to relocate with such ease to Geneva. Ironically, at the end of the novel it is revealed that Madame de S— leaves nothing to Ivanovitch or the revolution: ‘She died without making a will. A lot of nephews and nieces came down from Petersburg, like a flock of vultures, and fought for her money among themselves. All beastly *Kammerherrns* and maids of honour – abominable court-flunkeys’ (pp.288-89). Despite the revolutionists’ best efforts, her wealth stays within this closed circle of aristocrats—her ‘nephews and nieces’ (note *nepos*, the root of nepotism, means nephew: see also Chapter Two)—who thanks to the deliberate Westernisation of the Russian nobility initiated by Peter the Great were culturally closer to the aristocracies of the rest of Europe than to the people of Russia. The revolutionaries thus inherit nothing from Madame de S—, whose wealth returns to its origins, repeating the circular movement of power described after the French Revolution. We are reminded that for the wealthy, it is not the borders between ‘East’ and ‘West’ that are the crucial limit, but

rather boundaries of kinship and background. Furthermore, nationality is less important than membership of the aristocratic circle, as evidenced by Napoleon himself, who was christened *Napoleone di Buonaparte*, was from a noble family of Tuscan origin, and whose father was Corsica's representative to the court of Louis XVI. Like Madame de S—, Napoleon adopted a French nomenclature that both concealed his origins and highlighted the fluidity of aristocratic national identity.

If Madame de S— is a Russian Francophile and Peter Ivanovitch is a Russian whose politics and behaviour represent transnational liberal ideals, Ivanovitch is also mirrored in the figure of the narrator himself. Both characters circle around Natalia Haldin like vultures, and the narrator also reflects a *rapprochement* of 'East' and 'West' that contradicts their apparent opposition. Christiane Bimberg provides a detailed examination of how *Under Western Eyes* undermines the dichotomy between Russian and European. For Bimberg, the narrator's function is 'to provide an objective and detached Western perspective on events and people' (2010, p.43). He thus sets up oppositions between 'Europe' and 'Russia,' 'East' and 'West,' but these are either undermined or proved inadequate. Bimberg argues that the narrator reveals these distinctions to be false; thus, despite his constant assertion of English identity, and the alien nature of Russians, Bimberg makes the radical proposition that he is in fact a 'former Russian [...] with an Anglophone identity gained somewhere else' whose double-identity mirrors Conrad's own (2010, p.47). For Bimberg, the teacher suppresses his Russian ties, and tries to assert an exclusively European identity. Eventually, however, he realises the inadequacy of the very oppositions he has established, losing his 'Western' detachment and becoming emotionally entangled with, but remaining impotent to help, the Russians to whom he has become attached (2010, p.48). Consequently, 'Conrad cannot be accused of being biased or random. He achieves a certain objectivity and balance by juxtaposition and multiperspectivity [...] This results in relativism and pluralism' (2010, p.41).

The processes of self-effacement and denials of hybridity that Bimberg suggests are central to the narrator's identity have a dubious character. There is a cultural imperialism at work here, of which the teacher appears to both victim and perpetrator. Yet 'objectivity,' 'balance,' and 'pluralism' are themselves biases that have played a key part in the development not just of liberal ideals, but also of liberal imperialism. For Uday Mehta, writing on historical liberal justifications of imperialism in *Liberalism and Empire*, empire was justified through a paternalistic logic: the colonised did not qualify for democracy

because they were both childlike and superstitious (1999, p.31). Furthermore, for liberal imperialists such as J. S. Mill, 'the political and imperial gaze is never really surprised by the stranger, for he or she is always recognized as that familiar, though deformed, double of which liberalism has spoken in the cold and corseted language of kinship' (1999, p.33). Mehta's view of liberal imperialism seems to describe relations between 'East' and 'West' more closely than Bimberg's. The teacher deploys both strategies. He suggests that Russians are childish in their plotting and paranoia: 'To us Europeans of the West, all idea of political plots and conspiracies seem childish, crude, inventions for the theatre or a novel' (p.90); and he insists on Russian mysticism, writing that the 'propensity of lifting every problem from the plane of the understandable by means of some sort of mystic expression is very Russian' (p.86). His desire to protect Natalia Haldin is also paternalistic, even if it stems from a romantic emotional attachment.

Bimberg concludes, on the other hand, that Conrad's privileged hybridity, his 'special position,' enables him to offer 'a true intercultural psychology [...] which paves the way for a deepened intercultural understanding [...]. Western discourse about Russia does indeed reach a new quality through Conrad's presentations' (2010, p.67). If Bimberg is reading against the grain, or at least proposing a distinction between what the narrator writes explicitly and the implicit force of his secret identity, critics have nevertheless read this as a sign that for the narrator, the Russians in *Under Western Eyes* are 'unintelligible' (Berthoud 1978, p.163; Simmons 2006, p.144). Bimberg overstates the extent of the novel's achievement in bridging cultural divides, depending as it does upon a detailed close reading of clues that even the majority of professional critics have missed. Additionally, it is significant that Conrad's hybrid identity depends on an aristocratic mobility similar to that of Madame de S—. Son of a Polish revolutionary from a noble family, Conrad's second language was French, and his move West was begun in France.

Bimberg's broad sense that the narrator's protestations of incomprehension conceal a more nuanced sense of intercultural similarity is sound, yet far from elevating the non-European by suggesting that liberal and rational values are not limited to the West, *Under Western Eyes* performs the opposite manoeuvre. To use Mehta's phrase, Conrad's novel suggests that the West is more like its 'deformed double' than it might like to think: autocracy and irrationalism are not as alien to Western liberalism as they first appear. The association of Russians with autocracy and revolutionism, and the opposing connection of

the West with liberalism and reason, is undermined via a series of doublings that highlight hybrid identities and aristocratic mobility.

The most obvious of these is the shadow of the French Revolution, which hovers over the hypothetical ‘revolutions’ of the Russian exiles. This cast not only appears over the figure of Madame de S—, but is also made evident in the teacher’s explicitly anti-revolutionary sentiments. These are expressed as a warning by the teacher to Natalia Haldin, whom he wishes to protect from the appetites of revolution:

The scrupulous and the just, the noble, humane and devoted natures; the unselfish and the intelligent may begin a movement – but it passes away from them. They are not the leaders of a revolution. They are its victims – the victims of disgust, of disenchantment – often of remorse. Hopes grotesquely betrayed, ideals caricatured – that is the definition of revolutionary success (p.108).

For the teacher, it is not so much the children of revolution as revolution’s ideological fathers who become its victims. Revolution results in the caricature of the high ideals from which it stems—a typically Conradian evocation of the degradation of the ideal as it becomes reality. Rousseau is one such father—his statue features prominently in the novel—whose thought was arguably ‘betrayed’ and ‘caricatured’ by the French Revolution, and The Terror in particular, to which Mallet du Pan refers in his critique. Mallet du Pan’s ‘enfants,’ however, consist of those groups, especially those identifying themselves as ‘the people,’ whose uprising would enable the revolution, but whose continuing hold on power was inimical to the formation of a new state. His analysis suggests that the various conflicting interests that necessarily come together to overthrow the existing social order will eventually come into actual violent conflict with one another, and that those who wish to bring about the transition to a new order must destroy the revolutionary children they bring forth. These conflicts of interest are certainly present amongst the revolutionaries in *Under Western Eyes*, and in one sense the politics of the novel reveals itself in the way in which these characters exploit and manipulate one another for their own ends. But the narrator’s critique of revolution concentrates more narrowly on revolutionary ideals and the idealists who bear them, of whom Rousseau is emblematic, as I will discuss in more detail below.

Rousseau’s statue is a testimony to the philosophical origins of the French Revolution, but probably the foremost revolutionary idealist in *Under Western Eyes* is Natalia Haldin. Miss Haldin is best described in terms of what I called in my Introduction a liberal fanatic. Her politics turns freedom on its head, espousing an idealistic desire for freedom that is autocratic in its singularity of vision. Her statement, ‘I would take liberty from any hand as

a hungry man would snatch a piece of bread,' forms the novel's epigraph. This counterpoints the cake-eating of Madame de S—, reinforcing the resonances with the apocryphal tale of Marie Antoinette's ignorance of the typical French diet. Natalia Haldin's is the first word on liberty in the novel, but even if she introduces the concept, her hunger for freedom is distinctly illiberal. If we read her cry for liberty in context in the novel, we can find an omission (there is another I will discuss later) from the epigraph that changes its implications dramatically: 'I would take liberty from any hand as a hungry man would snatch at a piece of bread. The true progress must begin after' (p.108). Natalia's real aim is 'true progress'; liberty is a precondition for this progress, but as we discover when her grand vision is revealed in her final words to the teacher at the end of the novel, there is not much space for freedom contained within it:

I must own to you that I shall never give up looking forward to the day when all discord shall be silenced. Try to imagine its dawn. The tempest of blows and of execrations is over. All is still: the new sun is rising, and the weary men united at last, taking count in their conscience of the ended contest, feel saddened by their victory because so many ideas have perished for the triumph of one. So many beliefs have abandoned them without support. They feel alone on the earth and gather close together. Yes, there must be many bitter hours! But at last the anguish of hearts shall be extinguished in love (p.285).

Natalia's creed is emblematic of the synaesthetic combination of visual and aural elements that is central to *Under Western Eyes*: she is 'looking forward to the day when all discord is silenced.' She fills the emptiness of her soundless future with an image: 'Try to imagine its dawn.' The singularity of this vision is in stark contrast to what might be described as the discord of reasonable pluralism, or even the double vision that characterises the novel as a whole. Its quiet is the silence of the grave, because ideas 'have perished for the triumph of one.' The phrase 'discord is silenced' is ironically itself an echo, recalling Decoud's 'cord of silence' in *Nostramo*. Natalia's fatal vision of freedom reflects the suicidal logic I discuss in Chapter Four on *Nostramo*; it also reinforces the importance of suicide in *Lord Jim* (Chapter Three). For Natalia, however, this is the end—both the purpose and the extermination—of freedom, which becomes an instrument that aims at self-destruction. Natalia Haldin's politics is but one example of a fanatical devotion to liberty that recurs throughout Conrad's work.

Freedom is twinned with self-destruction in all of Conrad's political novels. In *The Secret Agent* (Chapter Two), Winnie Verloc achieves a radical freedom that both ironises the sham anarchism of that novel's overtly political characters and ultimately leads to her self-

destruction; Gentleman Brown in *Lord Jim* (Chapter Three) represents another desperate drive for liberty that is the twisted double of Jim's ultimately suicidal drive for self-actualisation; and likewise two characters in *Nostramo* (Chapter Four) demonstrate the destructive side to freedom: Giorgio Viola worships a liberty mired in histories of violence ('fed on scenes of carnage' [*N*, p.29]) while Don Martin Decoud pursues a logic of freedom that ends with him taking his own life.

Yet liberty is never an isolated value: various forms of fraternity, nationalism, and other affiliations drive all of these characters. Love is foremost among these as a diversion of the search for freedom along the path to self-destruction. Natalia's politics of love, Winnie Verloc's love for her brother Stevie, and Martin Decoud's romantic love are all clear examples here, but the parallel egotisms of Brown and Jim are also twisted forms of self-love, repeated later in the protagonist of *Nostramo* whose own egotism both drives and confounds his failed quest for autonomy. It would be wrong to suggest that these different forms of love are the same, but what they all share is that they are outside the political realm. Love might be considered the *opposite* of politics, but in Natalia Haldin's vision it comes closer to being the *end* of politics. If dissent no longer exists, then politics ceases with it. Miss Haldin's politics seeks to annihilate itself: the 'true progress [that] must begin after' is an Armageddon presided over by love. Natalia's politics, such as they are, are defined by 'the tempest of blows and execrations' that emerges from the version of liberty she craves. Liberty, in this view, is the necessary precondition for an apocalyptic violence that ultimately destroys all freedom.

It is not only freedom that perishes in Natalia's political vision: the 'tempest of blows and execrations' is not without potentially mortal consequences for people or, as I will suggest, peoples (see also Chapter Three). In another elision, when Natalia describes her political creed she glosses over the death to which her vision of liberty leads: in Razumov's formulation, 'Liberty in whose name crimes are committed' (p.45). The teacher seems more aware of these implications than Natalia herself, framing her words with a nostalgic commentary:

And on this last word of her wisdom, a word so sweet, so bitter, so cruel sometimes, I said good bye to Natalia Haldin. It is hard to think I shall never look any more into the trustful eyes of that girl wedded to the invincible belief in the advent of loving concord springing like a heavenly flower from the soil of men's earth soaked in blood, torn by struggles, watered with tears (p.285).

The teacher is explicitly aware of both the religious nature of Natalia's politics and the bloody extermination out of which the 'heavenly flower' must grow. His portrayal of Natalia's views, however, renders them absurd, highlighting the implausibility of 'loving concord' as the result of such violence. The teacher also unwittingly recalls another of Conrad's narrators, Charlie Marlow, who in *Lord Jim* bids narrative farewell to Jim in similar terms: 'He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct' (*LJ*, p.313). As I discuss at length in Chapter Three, Jim's ideal is chivalric and egocentric, but it is also expressive of a self-destruction that I want to connect to liberalism specifically: one which is also a feature of Natalia's politics. In addition, Marlow's obsession with Jim, which mirrors the teacher's attraction to Natalia, grows out of a sense of shared communal values.

In previously published work, I have suggested that this relation can be thought of in terms of a specifically liberal sense of ethnos, defined in relation to conversational compatibility (Parker, forthcoming). This Rortyan reading of *Lord Jim* exposes Natalia's politics as genocidal: she wishes to exterminate those communities that do not share her values. Furthermore, Natalia's hypothetical ethnos is limited not by compatibility, which suggests a degree of complementary difference, but rather by the reproduction of a single value without variation. This politics evokes a profoundly different modernity, one defined by mechanical repetition and inhuman logic: the modernity of the gas chamber. This is the most troubling elision in Miss Haldin's politics, which emerges as a sinister *doppelgänger* to modern liberalism, a malign double compelled to perpetrate violence against its original. Here we can intuit the dark side of modernity: a politics of unrestraint; a wholly different kind of freedom that is both committed to progress and opposed to modern liberalism; a perverse inversion of individualism in which the emphasis on 'men united' and 'the triumph of one' is a refutation of division that aims forcefully to make an individual of humanity itself.

In this politics of unrestraint is writ large the self-destructive logic of freedom in general: a self-destructive politics of freedom that is repeated in various forms throughout Conrad's political novels, but is set up in *Under Western Eyes* against what the teacher calls a 'mere liberalism of outlook.' If Natalia's philosophy advocates a genocidal modern liberty, then the teacher defines Western liberalism in understated terms that frame 'Englishness' in terms of mildness, coolness, or frigidity, implications distinctly favourable when compared to Natalia's passionate but also ironically extinguished ideals:

Poor Mrs Haldin! I confess she frightened me a little. She was one of these natures, rare enough, luckily, in which one can not help being interested, because they provoke both terror and pity [...] It is strange to think that, I won't say liberty, but the mere liberalism of outlook which for us is a matter of words, of ambitions, of votes (and if of feeling at all, then of the sort of feeling which leaves our deepest affections untouched) may be for other beings very much like ourselves and living under the same sky a heavy trial of fortitude, a matter of tears and anguish and blood (p.243).

The problems and limits of the liberal community come to the fore in *Lord Jim*, which makes the question of who we can and cannot count as 'one of us' central to its narrative (see Chapter Three). Here, however, the English teacher appears to ignore the problem: there is no sense that 'us' is a troubled category, nor any question as to whether the 'mere liberalism of outlook' we supposedly share might be more than a 'matter of words, of ambitions, of votes.' What the teacher is doing here is placing a boundary around his readers that he then fortifies throughout his narrative. He defines the novel's audience as those to whom the violence of 'tears and anguish and blood' is foreign. Elsewhere, after he has shown the Haldins a newspaper communicating the death of Victor, he writes:

The Western readers, for whom this story is written, will understand what I mean. It was, if I may say so, the want of experience. Death is a remorseless spoliator. The anguish of irreparable loss is familiar to us all. There is no life so lonely as to be safe against that experience. But the grief I had brought to these two ladies had gruesome associations. It had the associations of bombs and gallows – a lurid, Russian colouring (p.92).

Violent death—'the associations of bombs and gallows'—is unfamiliar to the teacher and his audience, whom he constructs as sharing an understanding that is ironically rooted in incomprehension. I will return later to the treatment of 'understanding' in *Under Western Eyes*, linking it to Rortyan notions of community and conversation, and the dynamics of exclusion they entail. The teacher's definition of liberal community also points to an adjunct community that is excluded: the community for whom 'mere liberalism of outlook' is 'a matter of tears and anguish and blood.' On one level this reads like a definition of liberal interventionism: both communities share this 'liberalism of outlook,' but the latter must fight for it; meanwhile those who exist outside the liberal frame altogether are by implication *not* 'beings very much like ourselves.' There is more here than meets the eye, but what is relevant is twofold: first the distinction that the teacher makes between 'liberty' and 'liberalism,' and second a split within liberalism itself. If Natalia Haldin is desperate for 'liberty' that too easily transforms into autocratic idealism,

another community exists that simply desires ‘mere liberalism,’ but for which even this less extreme desire boils down to violence.

The teacher’s syntax also suggests that though the violence of autocracy may be alien to his readers, there are different forms of violence embedded within liberal politics, which encourages us to equate ‘words,’ ‘ambitions,’ and ‘votes’ with ‘tears,’ ‘anguish,’ and ‘blood.’ Robert Hampson cites Slavoj Žižek’s definition of three kinds of violence to describe how *Under Western Eyes* sets up terrorist acts of ‘subjective violence’ against ‘the systemic violence of tsarist absolutism’ (2012, p.207). As Hampson notes, Žižek divides violence into three kinds: ‘subjective violence,’ ‘systemic violence,’ and ‘symbolic violence.’ ‘Subjective violence’ is performed by a ‘clearly identifiable agent.’ ‘Systemic violence,’ for its part, is related to the explicit and implicit coerciveness of ‘our economic and political systems,’ but embodied in their ‘often catastrophic consequences.’ Finally, ‘symbolic violence’ is ‘embodied in language,’ relating partly to ‘cases of incitement and of the relations of social domination’; but there is ‘a more fundamental form of violence still that pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning’ (2008b, pp.1–2).

The parallelism set up by the teacher between the ‘matter of words, of ambitions, of votes’ and the ‘matter of tears and anguish and blood’ suggests that, in addition to the clear manifestations of subjective violence in the latter trio, these matters can all be forms of systemic violence, opening the further, seemingly counterintuitive possibility that conversational rationality underpins them both. Furthermore, the teacher’s assertion at the beginning of the novel that ‘words are the great foes of reality’ points to a kind of symbolic violence that is a specific feature of language. Conversational rationality, which is predominantly a form concerned with language exchange, may thus also potentially double as violence: systemic violence because it underpins liberal institutions and societies, the political words, actions, and votes to which I referred earlier; and symbolic violence because it produces a ‘certain universe of meaning,’ whether through ‘social tyranny’ or elite intervention.

This violence is both critiqued and itself perpetrated by the language teacher. We are encouraged by the teacher’s definition to think oppositionally, with the parliamentary politics ‘of words, of ambitions, of votes’ being ranged against the politics of violent oppression, ‘of tears and anguish and blood.’ This is what Žižek means by the ‘imposition of a certain universe of meaning.’ Yet what is at stake in both of these is ‘the mere liberalism of outlook,’ which the teacher implies is taken for granted in the West. He maps this

opposition onto a geopolitical division between ‘East’ and ‘West,’ ‘Russia’ and ‘Europe’; and just as these cultural boundaries are undermined in the novel, so too does its narrator implicitly undermine the distinction between parliamentary politics and violence. The teacher’s own words return to haunt him, creating ramifications that refuse the clear distinctions he is attempting to make between ‘East’ and ‘West,’ ‘politics’ and ‘violence.’

To put this differently: the teacher uses the symbolic violence of words in an attempt to force reality into compartments, but those words themselves resist, even rebel against, his control. The syntactical parallelism of his formulation works against the very distinctions he wants to make, highlighting that the difference between words and violence is a matter of circumstance, not outlook. Furthermore, by telling us explicitly that ‘words are the great foes of reality,’ the teacher enables his own words to do violence to the false reality of political and cultural difference that he uses language to construct. His cynical attitude towards language comes back to haunt him whenever he tries to communicate the distinctions between ‘East’ and ‘West.’ This suggests ironically that words are foes to reality because we can use them to misrepresent the world, and because those same words always seem to slip away from us. It is also through words that reality becomes immanent to us, often unconsciously. Words are a key mechanism by which physical reality—but also social realities, including ‘prevailing opinion and feeling’—imprint themselves upon us; they are simultaneous mechanisms of power and resistance as well as signs of the ways in which a definitive understanding of the world always evades our grasp.

Structurally there is a similarity between Natalia’s retrograde vision and the teacher’s ‘mere liberalism’: they both make liberty subservient to another value or values. This common instrumentalisation of liberty challenges the distinction between the two political visions, whether they are construed as liberal or illiberal. Neither takes liberty as more fundamental, so if we accept the teacher’s ‘mere liberalism of outlook’ as a valid form of liberalism, but want to disallow Natalia’s autocracy of the ideal, we must rely on a concept other than liberty to do this. On whichever side of the divide we place it, Natalia’s politics begins to mark a limit where liberalism becomes illiberal, the point at which ‘our deepest affections’ overwhelm the bounds of tolerance. In addition to the structural similarity between Miss Haldin’s views and ‘mere liberalism of outlook,’ the further possibility exists that her views themselves represent something intolerable to liberalism. Natalie Haldin presents a familiar problem for pluralistic liberalism—how to engage with liberation struggles that reject diversity. As I will discuss in later chapters, she is thus similar to Jim in

another way (see Chapter Three). For Marlow, Jim registers a challenge to a communal identity that destabilises both his sense of self and his accepted values. Natalia fulfils a similar role in relation to the moderate ‘mere liberalism’ that the teacher associates with ‘Western,’ particularly ‘English,’ politics.

Let me elaborate. The teacher describes a modern political liberalism that is recognisably pluralistic, pointing to Rawls’s political liberalism and Mill’s liberalism of idiosyncratic self-realisation (see Introduction); yet he also points out the violence with which such freedom may need to be won. This demonstrates a sense of the uneven distribution of liberty across the globe, ‘under the same sky,’ but this synchronous view both contrasts with and complements a historical sense of violence. The teacher asserts to Natalia the high price that had been paid in the past for Western freedom, which at the same time brings ‘mere liberalism’ a step closer to Natalia’s own terrifying politics. Having discovered in an English newspaper her brother’s implication in the assassination of a prominent Russian politician, ‘Mr de P—, the President of the notorious Repressive Commission’ (p.14), Natalia’s mother, Mrs Haldin, and the teacher have a conversation on the differing political circumstances of their homelands, which Natalia herself interrupts:

She laid her hand on the newspaper and took it away again. I said:

“We too have had tragic times in our history.”

“A long time ago. A very long time ago.”

“Yes.”

“There are nations that have made their bargain with fate,” said Miss Haldin, who had approached us. “We need not envy them.”

“Why this scorn?” I asked gently. “It may be that our bargain was not a very lofty one. But the terms men and nations obtain from Fate are hallowed by the price.” (p.93).

The teacher’s ‘mere liberalism of outlook’ has also been paid for with ‘tears and anguish and blood,’ even if that blood was spilt generations ago. If this ‘bargain with fate’ is a tragic one, Mrs Haldin is also a figure of ‘terror and pity’ (p.243), prompting the teacher’s reflection on the unequal distribution of liberalism throughout the world. She is made into an icon of catharsis that ironically doubles the absence of ‘deeper affections’ from Western (especially English) liberal sentiment.

Conrad’s classical allusions also connect the liberal ‘bargain with fate’ with Walter Benjamin’s sense of mythic violence. As previously mentioned, Benjamin encapsulates mythic violence in the tragic story of Niobe. There are numerous versions of the myth, but what these all share is Niobe’s hubristic transgression against the goddess Leto and the destructive fate that results from this. Niobe boasts that she is greater than the goddess,

particularly because she has more children. In revenge, Leto's children, Apollo and Artemis, kill Niobe's; and Niobe herself turns to stone. (In some versions, Zeus turns Niobe to stone to relieve her sorrow while in others she is transfigured by grief itself.) Zeus's entry into the tale signals a patriarchal violence I will explore more fully in relation to *The Secret Agent* (see Chapter Two). Central to Niobe's metamorphosis, however, is that the transformation does not stop her from weeping. Natalia Haldin and her mother, like Tekla, metaphorically share characteristics with Niobe. Mrs Haldin is a tragic figure of 'terror and pity,' and both she and her daughter become statues at various points in the novel. When Natalia is describing a moment of particular emotional agitation in her mother, she evokes the image of stone to describe her paradoxically calm exterior: 'And all this in her quiet voice, with that poor wasted face as calm as a stone' (p.246). Likewise, when Razumov reveals to Natalia that he knows a story about her brother's betrayer, 'She seemed turned into stone' (p.268); and in the section of Razumov's journal where he addresses his confession to Natalia, he imagines her as a statue (p.274).

These images of petrification, as in the story of Niobe, signify not so much the absence of emotion as its unbearable excess. But for Benjamin, the story of Niobe is significant above all because of its engagement with fate: 'Niobe's arrogance calls down fate upon itself not because her arrogance offends against the law but because it challenges fate—to a fight in which fate must triumph' (2007, p.294). To understand Benjamin's interpretation of fate (*Schicksal*), it is important to recognise its more limited implications in German. In Anna Wierzbicka's analysis of key philosophical concepts across languages, *Schicksal* foregrounds implications of supernatural, arbitrary inevitability but lacks the English term's connotations of judgement, particularly by human agencies: it would make little sense to use *Schicksal* to translate a phrase like 'the prisoner's fate' (1992, p.81). Benjamin is especially concerned with a relation between 'fate' and 'law' (*Recht*). For him, fate is an extra-human agency bound up not in the outcome of legal judgements, but in the very foundations of the law:

For if violence, violence crowned by fate, is the origin of law, then it may be readily supposed that where the highest violence, that over life and death, occurs in the legal system, the origins of law jut manifestly and fearsomely into existence. In agreement with this is the fact that the death penalty in primitive legal systems is imposed even for such crimes as offenses against property, to which it seems quite out of "proportion." Its purpose is not to punish the infringement of law but to establish new law. For in the exercise of violence over life and death more than in any other legal act, law reaffirms itself. But in this very violence something rotten in law is revealed, above all to a finer sensibility, because the latter knows itself to be infinitely remote from conditions in

which fate might imperiously have shown itself in such a sentence. Reason must, however, attempt to approach such conditions all the more resolutely, if it is to bring to a conclusion its critique of both lawmaking and law-preserving violence (2007, p.286).

If we read Benjamin's critique into the characterisation of the liberal 'bargain with fate' in *Under Western Eyes*, what emerges is a sense of foundational violence that is consistent with the novel's own sense of degraded revolution. The teacher speaks of England's own 'tragic times'—struggles against autocracy that can be traced through key moments of English political history, such as the establishment of *Magna Carta* and the series of revolutions that accompanied the development of the British parliamentary system. *Magna Carta* can be read in turn as animating the conversation between the teacher and Natalia Haldin. Natalia describes the 'bargain with fate' as 'so much liberty for so much hard cash' (p.108). This is rather cryptic, but it begins to make sense when read alongside the fact that *Magna Carta*—not so much a single document as a series of charters—was repeatedly revised to grant greater liberties to English nobles in return for increases in taxation. Its 1225 version was ratified by Henry III in return for the approval of a tax by the council of barons to fund the defence of Henry's French territories; while the 1297 version, which remains statute today, was likewise issued by Edward I in return for a new tax. *Magna Carta* thus represents a kind of false origin: it is less the formal birth of political liberty, more the site of a continuous renegotiation of political liberties—not one binding document, but a series of revisions and rewritings that would contest the relationship between the monarch and the political community over time.

These revisions emerged from violence: either from the monarch's need to raise taxes in order to defend his kingdom, or in relation to more fundamental changes that occurred as a result of the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution, culminating in the recognition of the sovereignty of Parliament (via the Coronation Oath Act of 1688). Furthermore, much like Benjamin's interpretation of the death penalty, these revisions were both *reaffirmations* of the law instantiated by *Magna Carta* and *degenerations* of that law, transforming the original document, a coercion of the monarch by his barons, into a document more favourable to the king. This diluted version of the original was then doubly degraded as the constitution of the political community became increasingly divorced from its aristocratic early constitution, until it reached a broadly democratic base in modern times. Thus, *Magna Carta's* status as a foundational document tends to obscure the more important political work to which it contributed; having established the principle that

government should be limited by law, as defined by the political community, it set an example for future debates in which the critical issue was not necessarily the *nature* of political liberties, but rather who *qualified* for membership of the political community and ‘who was entitled to represent it’ (Holt *et al.* 2015, p.334).

In sum, *Magna Carta* represents an example of mythic violence because it fixes a boundary in law. This mythic sensibility posits a point of origin that grants authenticity to contemporary structures by eliding the contingent histories of political struggle whose motives and means were often dubious by the modern standards they are taken to underpin. What this history tells us is that two key limits have endured—namely the boundary between the sovereign and the body politic, and the limitation of the sovereign by a law defined by the community—and that when political change has occurred, it has always been marked by those boundaries. The original foundational violence that fixed these distinctions continues to delimit political thought today, in spite of the revolutions and seismic political shifts that have happened in the intervening centuries.

This process is central to Benjamin’s sense of mythic violence: to return to his example, it is crucial that Niobe is not destroyed by the gods, but is instead left behind, ‘more guilty than before through the death of the children, both as an eternally mute bearer of guilt and as a boundary stone on the frontier between men and gods’ (2007, p.295). Niobe thus stands as the marker of a communal limit, separating the wider community from sovereign power in the form of the gods. These anthropomorphic gods represent mankind as well as ruling over it, just as the sovereign monarch represents the body politic in the modern era of representative democracy. Thus, the mythic violence symbolised in *Magna Carta* and the ‘bargain with fate’ is the establishment of a law that divides the sovereign from the community he represents in order to make him accountable to it. This movement ironically places him above that community by law, where before the monarch’s position was secure through a combination of custom and subjective violence. The visceral violence of civil war is sublated into systemic legal violence; and where the monarch’s position had previously been underwritten by brute strength, it now becomes legitimated by a document representing communal consensus. This legal structure subsequently becomes a site for struggle, and while the constitution of both sovereign and community shifts, with monarchs replaced or supplemented by parliamentary institutions, the relation is fixed in law.

That this scenario is envisaged as stretching back a ‘very long time ago’ reflects *Under Western Eyes*’ aura of myth or fable, while the notion of a ‘bargain with fate’ collapses a

*longue durée* of ‘tragic times’ into a synchronous event, solidifying its mythic aspect. Mirroring popular narratives of *Magna Carta* as a single point of origin for modern liberties, the teacher’s ‘mere liberalism of outlook’ can thus be read as depending upon a foundational mythic violence. At the time Conrad was writing, and for much of the century beforehand, this ‘mere liberalism’ had definitively been ‘a matter of words, of ambitions, of votes.’ Though the Coronation Oath Act marked a key shift in sovereignty from monarch to parliament, the ‘matter of votes’ was a debate that only saw enfranchisement move beyond property owners (the vast minority) with the Reform Act of 1832. Though the teacher trivialises it, this debate was central to the liberal projects of enfranchisement that ran through the nineteenth century and beyond, and became prominent all over again in 1911 in relation to women’s suffrage. The ‘matter of votes,’ I am trying to suggest here, is nothing less than the contestation of a political space first established by *Magna Carta*, the imaginary point of origin I have set for the mythic ‘bargain with fate.’ Enfranchisement was, and remains, a central issue regarding the distribution of political power within democratic nations; and the debate on who is included in the political community goes on, repeating and reproducing the violence fixed historically within liberal institutions.

I have dwelt on this debate here because I see it as forming the fundamental backdrop to *Under Western Eyes*, which constructs competing views of liberty and liberalism that are matters of *communal membership* mapped onto the division between Europe and Russia. The main mechanism for this construction is the unnamed narrator, the teacher of languages, who represents ‘the East’ as a place of autocracy, mysticism, and libertarian revolutionism, all of which combine to burden Russians with weary cynicism. Conversely, ‘the West’ is associated with pragmatism, reason, tolerant liberalism, and an equally tired democracy. The novel persistently undermines these boundaries, subverting clear distinctions between nationalities, particularly by way of the narrator himself, who—to the careful reader—lets slip his ambiguous identity (Bimberg 2010, pp.46–48). This blurring of the limits of national identity parallels the marriage of liberalism to autocracy, highlighting liberalism’s own troubling pasts of terroristic revolution and mythic foundational violence. It also couples modern liberal progress with visions of modernity that anticipate the totalitarian and genocidal horrors of the twentieth century, entwined as these are with double-edged scientific progress that has given rise to new forms of freedom and violence alike.

*Fruit from the tree of liberty: ethnos and conversation*

This chapter has so far engaged the preoccupation with *sight* in *Under Western Eyes* in order to analyse a presentation of liberalism that overlays it with illiberal political visions and echoes of autocracy, highlighting both mythic violence and the violence of ‘progress.’ It remains to examine the novel’s further fixation on *sound*, more specifically dialogue, thereby drawing a connection with the liberal idealisation of conversation. To pursue this, I will need to consider Rorty’s thinking about ‘fruitful conversation’ as a basis for liberal thought, relating this to what Aaron Fogel calls ‘forced dialogue’ in the novel, which he opposes to idealised conversation between free and equal interlocutors. My main argument here is that Conrad’s novel goes some way towards displaying a Rortyan sense of liberal conversation; but rather than fully validating this mode, it follows the same logic of ‘deformed doubles’ I have previously discussed. Through this logic, conversation is exposed in *Under Western Eyes* as a mechanism of bondage. I will relate this specifically to J. S. Mill’s notion of ‘social tyranny’ (2003, p.76), a concept at the very centre of what Mill’s modern liberalism contests.

Reading against the grain is a central component of my argument from here on. More particularly, I want to read against dominant views of the narrator as either a ‘diabolical [...] father of lies’ (Kermode) or a mask for Conrad the ‘cunning artificer.’ Instead, I will read him as both victim and perpetrator of ‘social tyranny’ in accordance with a vision of ‘Western’ culture that congratulates itself on its achievement of political liberty but is characterised by concern with propriety and decency. The teacher of languages is complicit in constructing this monolithic liberal ‘West’ and in denigrating ‘non-Western’ culture, but in so doing also engages in an act of self-erasure. There is much more at stake in this than the definition of liberal community; for in a narrative full of aposiopesis, silence, and elision, there is also an overarching silence of repression and unfulfilment because the teacher cannot express his indecorous feelings for Natalia Haldin. In *Under Western Eyes*, conversation is that sort of dialogue where adherence to rules of propriety and good form are paramount, whatever the ‘social tyranny’ of their context. This suggests in turn that far from being free from force, conversation follows the same logic of symbolic and systemic violence that is perpetuated in the liberal ‘bargain with fate.’

As previously explained (see Introduction), conversation and dialogue are fundamental to liberal logic, but are perhaps most explicit as an epistemological drive in the postmodern liberal theory of Richard Rorty. Rorty’s idea of conversation operates on a number of

different levels. His basic idea is that ‘all that matters for liberal politics is the widely shared conviction that [...] we shall call “true” or “good” whatever is the outcome of free discussion – that if we take care of political freedom, truth and goodness will take care of themselves’ (1989, p.84). Rorty is not asserting that this conviction is widely shared, but rather that it needs to be. This is accompanied by a parallel notion of ‘conversational philosophy,’ which roughly corresponds to Continental philosophy. Conversational philosophers, Rorty says, ‘are sufficiently historicist as to think of themselves as taking part in a conversation rather than as practicing a quasi-scientific discipline’ (Rorty 2010a, p.200). Lastly, conversation cathects to identity, culture, and community: both because ‘one’s *ethnos* [...] comprises those who share enough of one’s beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible’ (2010b, p.235), and because individual identity is itself conversational. Referring to Freud, Rorty asserts that our unconscious is a ‘conversational partner’ with ‘one or more well-articulated systems of beliefs and desires [...] internally consistent as the normal adult’s conscious beliefs and desires’ (1991, p.149). Here as elsewhere, Rorty stretches the notion of conversation to its limit, enlarging it to include a view of the self, epistemological and ethical practice, and communal identity—and making it a process fundamental to liberal politics. But as already argued (Introduction), the metaphor of conversation underpins liberal thought *per se*, not just Rorty’s own particular version of it. More specifically, Rorty’s sense of the historicist nature of conversational philosophy is reflected in contemporary liberal theorists such as Quentin Skinner and Alan Ryan. Skinner especially is inspired directly by those whom Rorty might call ‘conversational’ philosophers, such as Nietzsche, Weber, and Foucault (Lane 2012, p.74), while Ryan himself uses the metaphor of conversation to describe his engagement with J. S. Mill and other liberal thinkers (2012, pp.2–6).

Conversation is heavily ironised throughout *Under Western Eyes*, which highlights the many ways in which it can be subverted by power and self-interest. Rorty has this base covered, however, when he makes conversation dependent upon ‘free discussion [and] political freedom.’ He never assumes that self-interest will be absent from these discussions, but believes that directing attention towards the improvement of already existing political institutions is more important than theoretical refinements (1989, p.65). Yet what are the consequences for this view if, as *Under Western Eyes* suggests, conversation is inextricable from coercion? Should conversation be structured by the very violence liberalism purportedly opposes, and what limits does this place on its potential as a guiding metaphor?

If modern liberal theorists from Mill onwards find the idea of conversation attractive, they have also been concerned with self-realisation, as both Skinner and Ryan suggest (Skinner 2008a; Ryan 2012, p.25). For Mill, this is seen in relation to the actualisation of our natures, whereas for Rorty, who does not believe that we have individual essences, self-realisation is an ongoing process of self-redescription (1989, p.80). This latter trajectory shares a sense that the individual self is idiosyncratic and that society should not limit people's private sense of themselves. Rorty differs from Mill, however, in that he prefers to gloss over society's power to impact upon this process. Mill, on the other hand, expresses the problem in stark terms:

But reflecting persons perceived that when society is itself the tyrant [...] its means of tyrannizing are not restricted to the acts which it may do by the hands of its political functionaries. Society can and does execute its own mandates: and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right, or any mandates at all in things with which it ought not to meddle, *it practises a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression* [...] enslaving the soul itself. Protection, therefore, against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough: there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling [...] There is a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence: and to find that limit, and maintain it against encroachment, is as indispensable to a good condition of human affairs, as protection against political despotism (2003, p.76, my emphasis).

My primary interests here are to show how what Mill terms the 'soul,' which is potentially enslaved by 'social tyranny,' is related to Rorty's sense of a conversational unconscious, and to see how this emerges from the broader patterns of conversation in *Under Western Eyes*. In these terms, 'social tyranny' can transform the unconscious from a partner in 'free discussion' to an oppressive force. Rorty's sense of the self allows society, or perhaps better a range of societal norms, to inhabit the unconscious, but what Mill fears is that these inhabitants will dominate their host or even erase what is distinctive or idiosyncratic in an individual's potential. In *Under Western Eyes*, conversation is deployed to show how speech and silence blend, merging explicit with suppressed or repressed meanings and feelings. This is done against a backdrop of political vision so as to produce a penetrating examination of the violence that modern liberalism attempts to limit, but which continues to work within the structures and logics that are integral to its form.

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As Aaron Fogel argues, the relationship between dialogue and coercion is both a central thematic concern and a structuring device in the novel. For Fogel, *Under Western Eyes* is

Conrad's 'Anti-Conversational Novel'—the 'idea of dialogue that emerges [in the novel] is nonconversational' (1985, p.180); and if for Fogel conversation is an idealisation of middle- and upper-class social and communicative practice as a dialogue between free and equal interlocutors, (1985, pp.7–16), exemplified in 'the conversational idea of speech in the high English novel,' this is precisely the paradigm that 'for his own tragic and political purposes [Conrad] undoes' (1985, p.7). In *Under Western Eyes*, Fogel contends, Conrad subverts conversation by demonstrating how, 'In Razumov's life the conversational, the rhetorical, and the dramatic appear as illusory expressive surfaces of a constant reality of forced participation. The dialogue plot is that he is forced to talk with everyone he meets but is simultaneously prevented from conversing or arguing freely with anyone' (1985, p.180). The 'major question' is 'sympathy versus force as the main cohesive principle in dialogue,' and Conrad 'belongs roughly with those novelists [...] who emphasize the action of coercion to speak over the various kinds of "sympathy" in the social coherence of dialogue' (1985, p.13). The connection between this dialogical focus and liberal thought is touched on but not developed by Fogel. He explicitly cites Rorty's thought as an example of 'dialogical idealism' (1985, p.221)—and with justification, for Rorty is explicitly utopian in some of his descriptions (see, for example: 1989, p.189). A form of sympathy is central to Rorty's thought since he defines liberals as 'the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do,' and his 'Liberal ironists are people who [...] hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease' (1989, p.xv).

Notwithstanding, I want to challenge Fogel's opposition between conversation and forced dialogue by suggesting that far from being *opposed* to it, conversation is exposed in *Under Western Eyes* as an *integral subset* of forced dialogue, which is itself a manifestation of the violence of language as a whole. Fogel suggests that Part First of the novel involves 'juxtaposition of the varieties of forced dialogue [...]. The rest of the novel develops the same theme.' These varieties include 'many different kinds of coercion to speak—rational philosophical, theocratic-totalitarian, and mundane-practical' (1985, p.182). I now want to add 'liberal-conversational' to this list, and to examine some of the ways in which polite conversation is bound in conventions and practices that serve to perpetuate sedimented power while also working forcefully in specific dialogues.

This does not make conversation identical to other forms of forced dialogues in the novel, and particularly those involving autocracy are distinct in important ways. It is crucial here to analyse some of the key conversations Fogel largely ignores, focusing as he does on

the forced dialogues involving Razumov. It is also worth examining some of the conversations in *Under Western Eyes* that are engaged voluntarily, which Fogel similarly neglects, preferring to seek refuge in the generalisation that, ‘The power of the “many conversations” in Part Second and Third comes less from their specific ideological content than from the various ways in which Razumov is forced to hear it all out and to let other speak while remaining as silent as possible’ (*ibid.*). This is a fair description of Part Third, but is entirely incorrect in relation to Part Second, not least because Razumov does not participate in the vast majority of that section’s conversations. Over three quarters of Part Second is devoted to dialogues between the narrator and Natalia Haldin, one of which involves her report to the teacher of her visit to Château Borel. This conversation includes the introduction to Peter Ivanovitch that contains the passages I analysed earlier in this chapter, and whose ideological content is crucial to the novel’s engagement with liberalism. It is only at the end of the Château Borel episode that Razumov appears, whereupon he engages in a brief conversation with Natalia then has a longer talk with the narrator that brings the section to a close. Furthermore, the conversations in Part Second, whether they involve Razumov or not, are markedly different: for a start, they are only tangentially related to the novel’s spy plot, and they also have far lower stakes than those between Russians elsewhere, which changes their implications significantly.

The most important difference is that these conversations are voluntary. There can be no fatal consequences of non-participation because they primarily involve the teacher, who has no involvement in either state oppression or revolutionary action. This is not to suggest that there is no compulsion driving them: after all, it is these conversations’ demonstration of alternative modes of coercion that allows Part Second to extend the ramifications of forced dialogue beyond the limits of autocracy’s shadow. The subjects and circumstances of these conversations demonstrate their contrast to Fogel’s portrayal of dialogue in the novel. For example, the first conversation takes the form of an interview that is a mirror opposite of Mikulin’s immediately preceding interview with Razumov. Fogel describes Mikulin’s dialogue as a ‘job interview [...] which for all its inquisitorial mystique is primarily a mode of hiring’ (1985, p.182); but even if it is, it is a distinctly coercive mode, with his concluding question ‘Where to?’ (p.82) highlighting Razumov’s lack of choice in the matter.

By contrast, the teacher’s interview is more familiar. A friend suggests to him that he should visit the Haldins: ‘a very kindly meant business suggestion.’ The contrast with Razumov’s ‘interview’ is amplified by the dramatically different power relations that are

embedded within it: 'Mrs Haldin received me very kindly. Her bad French, of which she was smilingly conscious, did away with the formality of the first interview' (p.84). Though the Haldins are in the position of power, the field is levelled by the teacher's expert status. Likewise, there are a number of pressures on both sides that motivate the conversation. For the teacher, such conversations are his living, but at the same time there is no indication that his situation is so dire that he must take any work he can get. Likewise, the Haldins are subject to social pressures, for example the need to assimilate to 'Western culture,' and the parallel pressure to conform to an image of an educated, Westernised Russian elite. Mrs Haldin's 'bad French' points to the family's precarious status in both of these areas.

Other compulsions are at work in the teacher's relationship with Natalia Haldin. After four months, the business arrangement is ended but they continue their relationship as friends: 'We became excellent friends in the course of our reading. It was very pleasant. Without fear of provoking a smile I shall confess that I became very much attached to that young girl' (p.85). The teacher's confession suggests that his 'attachment' is a euphemism for his romantic attraction to Natalia (though there is no indication that she reciprocates). The compulsions of love and desire are themselves limited by social factors. Though the teacher may not fear 'provoking a smile,' he is also aware that his confession will most likely do so. This potential amusement is the soft side of the social disapprobation that limits his romantic ambitions.

The contrast between these 'soft' limits and the mechanisms of autocracy are explored as the section proceeds. The conversation moves into a different context as it becomes dominated first by anxiety—the Haldins have not heard from Victor—then grief when they discover he has been executed for the assassination of de P—. After this, Natalia is visited by Peter Ivanovitch and becomes embroiled in the world of Château Borel, where she finally meets Razumov. Natalia's early encounters with the revolutionaries reveal the hypocrisy and double standards I have already discussed above. It is the final conversation in Part Second that most clearly establishes conversation both as an expression of social compatibility and as constrained by rules of propriety and decorum. The teacher repeatedly states that he struggles to understand the Russians:

That propensity of lifting every problem from the plane of the understandable by means of some sort of mystic expression is very Russian. I knew [Natalia] well enough to have discovered her scorn for all the practical forms of political liberty known to the Western world. I suppose one must be a Russian to understand Russian simplicity, a terrible corroding simplicity in which mystic phrases clothe a naive and hopeless cynicism (p.86).

The teacher's ethnocentrism is far more dubious than Rorty's provocative (also problematic) stance, but his racist conception points to a thesis about the formation of political identity. For the teacher, it is their political circumstances that create this incomprehensible cynicism: as he writes, 'Whenever two Russians come together the shadow of autocracy is with them, tinging their thoughts, their views, their most intimate feelings, their private life, their public utterances – haunting the secret of their silences' (p.88). If the teacher portrays Russians and their politics as incomprehensible, it is because he cannot penetrate 'the shadow of autocracy,' hinting at a failure of empathy on his part.

It appears that the teacher is suggesting that Russia and the West cannot converse, lacking the common values required to make conversation fruitful. This patronising incomprehension is undermined on two fronts. As already argued, the teacher's identity and ethnicity are not as clear-cut as he might like, opening the possibility that his incomprehension is a pose he strikes in order to affiliate himself with an imagined community of Westerners to whom his narrative is addressed. This, to repeat, is a community of readers who 'understand' one another because they share a liberal outlook and an accompanying incomprehension of violence. Whether or not we accept Bimberg's reading, however, *Under Western Eyes* engages with the idea of understanding in a number of ways that have serious implications for the teacher's hypothesis as well as for conversation at large. As Suresh Raval writes on understanding in Conrad:

Conrad's fiction, then, dramatizes those moments of experience which sometimes force his main characters, sometimes his narrators, and always his readers, to ask whether they can be trusted to understand what has been brought to their critical attention. It deals with issues in the context of a historical–political–social world in which understanding is a problem, our knowledge of ourselves and the world is questionable, and our language inadequate to grasp the experience which makes up our cultural and spiritual life (1986, p.2).

Raval captures some of the broad problems of understanding in Conrad, but in *Under Western Eyes* it is not only 'experience' that acts as a channel of force, but certain versions of understanding itself. Like the novel as a whole, which contains no fewer than one hundred and thirty-six uses of 'understand' and its cognates, the three-way conversation between Razumov, Natalia, and the teacher in Part Second plays upon different kinds of understanding. While she is discussing Razumov with the teacher, Natalia tells him that she has informed Razumov she frequents this location daily at a specific time, and that though some days have passed he still has not arrived. As she is about to leave, she catches sight of

Razumov and exclaims, 'Here he comes!' whereupon the teacher continues, 'I understood that she must mean Mr Razumov' (p.140), suggesting that there are ways in which he can understand Natalia in spite of what he writes about Russians. Once Razumov arrives, they begin a conversation whose key details we understand despite the fact that it continues for over a page where only fragments of the dialogue are reported, and in which Razumov's speech is only intimated through the narrator's reports of Miss Haldin's responses. We know that Razumov has offered apologies for not trying to meet Miss Haldin sooner because Miss Haldin responds, 'Don't excuse yourself – I understand' (p.141). Miss Haldin has no idea why Razumov had not come previously, though we might surmise his reticence stems from his guilt at betraying her brother. Yet when Miss Haldin says 'I understand,' we are dealing with a different kind of understanding in any case: one that expresses a sympathy at Razumov's circumstances and communicates to him that whatever the reason for his tardiness, Natalia is not offended. Understanding here is a kind of social lubricant, designed to reduce awkward friction and allow conversation to proceed unimpeded.

The next exchange of understandings emphasises these different modes. After she informs him that she must leave, Natalia says: 'Thank you once more for – for understanding me' (ibid). Razumov's bemused answer is the first time his dialogue is presented directly, as he responds: 'What is there to thank me for? Understand you? . . . How did I understand you? . . . You had better know that I understand nothing. I was aware that you wanted to see me in this garden' (p.142). Razumov's bewildered repetition of the word plays up his linguistic discomfort, as if he were speaking a non-native language. This focuses our attention on a language game, though what Razumov does not understand is less a matter of language than social graces: Natalia again is referring to a social understanding—she is asking indirectly for forgiveness for her hasty departure—whereas Razumov thinks she is referring to comprehension. The situation is absurd: Razumov fails to comprehend a use of the word 'understand' that does not relate to comprehension at all, but rather points to its opposite. Natalia's request that he 'understand' her is based upon the fact that she is unwilling to explain her departure. Her request is that he pardon her for *not* taking the time to explain to him why she is leaving.

This game reflects back in turn on the teacher's ethnocentrism. Razumov does not grasp Miss Haldin's meaning because he is not part of her language community. They are both Russians, but Natalia is a member of a cosmopolitan elite whose etiquette is beyond Razumov's experience despite his parentage. Razumov takes Miss Haldin literally, as if he is

speaking a language in which he lacks fluency, both in relation to her expression of gratitude—‘What is there to thank me for?’ he asks—and in her use of the notion of ‘understanding.’ There is no reason to assume that the conversation takes place in English, since all three characters speak Russian and French and the teacher translates all such conversations (for example, his interview with Mrs Haldin); but regardless of the language used, linguistic expression is acting here to represent familiarity with social practices. This challenges the teacher’s assertions, both that Russians are incomprehensible and that they share a unique understanding with one another. (On this occasion, it is Razumov who is excluded, and by social class not nationality.)

Similarly, after Natalia leaves the narrator achieves an understanding of Natalia’s intentions based on neither class nor nationality, but friendship: ‘It flashed upon me that in leaving us together Miss Haldin had an intention – that something was entrusted to me, since, by a mere accident I had been found at hand’ (p.143). We are not explicitly told what Natalia’s intention is, but left to attempt to glean it from the preceding and subsequent dialogue:

“If Mother” – the girl had turned suddenly to me – “were to wake up in my absence (so much longer than usual) she would perhaps question me. She seems to miss me more, you know, of late. She would want to know what delayed me – and, you see, it would be painful for me to dissemble before her.”

I understood the point very well. For the same reason she checked what seemed to be on Mr Razumov’s part a movement to accompany her.

“No! No! I go alone, but meet me here as soon as possible.” Then to me in a lower significant tone:

“Mother may be sitting at the window at this moment looking down the street. She must not know anything of Mr Razumov’s presence here till – till something is arranged.” She paused before she added a little louder but still speaking to me, “Mr Razumov does not quite understand my difficulty but you know what it is.” (pp.142–143).

It is remarkable that the teacher understands at all: Natalia studiously avoids explicating her motivations. She may gesture at them (not wanting to be questioned, the pain of dissembling), but she leaves the potential subject of either unspoken. The narrator’s sense of propriety is such that even in his narrative, he preserves this delicacy: he ‘understood the point very well,’ but studiously refuses to get to it. The English teacher knows Mrs Haldin’s psychological state is fragile in the wake of the news of her son’s death, and concludes that Natalia wishes to conceal Razumov’s arrival from her at least until she can prepare for its impact. It is telling that Natalia uses the definite word ‘know’ to describe the narrator’s apprehension of the situation. The (English) teacher has no difficulty ‘understanding’

(Russian) Natalia at this point, a fact of which she too is aware. Ironically, it is a fellow Russian, Razumov, who ‘does not quite understand.’

I have analysed this exchange at length because it engages with ideas of conversational compatibility defined in relation to social understandings. This is the epitome of Rortyan *ethnos*—Razumov is unable to participate in this conversation because he does not share the values, the politeness, of his interlocutors. But what is also highlighted is that conversational compatibility depends on a range of social practices, of ‘understandings’ that, when shared, smooth the flow of conversation, including non-literal uses of language itself. This use of language aims to conceal and avoid uncomfortable circumstances that might otherwise render conversation difficult: it is arguably conversation in its least violent form. Yet it is also an exclusive form of dialogue that requires initiation into its codes and proprieties, which themselves originate in forms of power and act to channel and contain potential force. Furthermore, the exchange at the end of Part Second begs the question as to the purpose of propriety. Though avoiding difficult subjects is a strategy to reduce social discomfort, this is clearly not its effect for Razumov. Although she is telling him the truth, that Mrs Haldin might be unduly upset by the unexpected appearance of her dead son’s associate, the manner in which Natalia conducts herself, that is through a combination of veiled statements and whispered asides to her friend, is hardly conducive to his comfort. Far from it, such subterfuge serves to cement Razumov’s position as an outsider and to exclude him from ‘understanding’ the situation. The codes of conversational etiquette are secret, both because Razumov is unaware of the social practice and kept in the dark about the conversation’s specific content.

If one form of ‘social tyranny’ is practised in conversational codes, another is demonstrated in the teacher’s own secret desires. Propriety demands not only concealing difficult truths, but also repressing feelings. Though he never expresses it to her, the teacher’s romantic attachment to Miss Haldin is the driving force in his action, both because she has asked for his assistance and because he sees in Razumov a potential competitor for Natalia’s attention: as he writes, ‘Let him smile who likes but I was only too ready to stay near Natalia Haldin, and I am not ashamed to say that it was no smiling matter to me’ (p.141). The teacher is acutely aware that his feelings potentially make him absurd; that there is a mismatch between his age and his sentiments that is only enhanced by his inability to articulate his feelings. It is propriety itself that puts him in this position, effecting a regression upon him: his behaviour is that of a tongue-tied youth who lingers in

the presence of the object of his affection but dare not express what he feels. This makes him petty, and once Natalia has left, his opening gambit is to patronise Razumov, picking up on Natalia's closing statement: "No," I said gravely if with a smile, "you cannot be expected to understand." (p.143).

This is mainly meant as an assertion of the teacher's familiarity with Natalia over and against Razumov's unfamiliarity, but the teacher's smile immediately recalls the potential smirks of the audience, bringing his absurdity once again to the fore. Razumov responds by showing that he has begun to understand this language game, even if he refuses to play entirely by the rules: 'But haven't you heard just now? I was thanked by that young lady for understanding so well' (p.144). Here, Razumov seems to have grasped the fact that 'understanding' entails not only comprehension, but also the ability to converse allusively and indirectly. The teacher does not know whether to take offence, and is unsettled by Razumov's retort:

This new sort of uneasiness, which he seemed to be forcing upon me, I attempted to put down by assuming a conversational, easy familiarity.

"That extremely charming and essentially admirable young girl (I am – as you see – old enough to be frank in my expressions) was referring to her own feelings. Surely you must have understood that much?"

He made such a brusque movement that he even tottered a little.

"Must understand this! Not expected to understand that. I may have other things to do. And the girl is charming and admirable. Well – and if she is! I suppose I can see that for myself."

This sally would have been insulting if his voice had not been practically extinct, dried up in his throat; and the rustling effort of his speech too painful to give real offence (p.144).

The teacher has chosen his weapons: a 'conversational, easy familiarity' with which he intends to 'put down' the unease he feels at Razumov's aggression. In another sense, however, he is putting Razumov down in a kind of conversational mercy killing that places Razumov metaphorically on the verge of death: 'his voice' is 'practically extinct,' and the 'rustling effort of his speech [is] too painful.' He is hardly diabolical, as Kermode would have it, but neither is he benign. In this conflict, playful though it is, understanding itself becomes both a weapon and a limit, a means of demarcating boundaries of affiliation and affection that are also territorial claims.

The reason for this verbal sparring is indicated in the parenthetical comment to the reader that again captures the conflict between the teacher's affection for Natalia and his sense of probity. If he is being 'frank in his expression,' because he is 'old enough' to acknowledge that she is both physically and temperamentally attractive, he is anything but frank in

expressing the feelings these qualities provoke. The ironies multiply because though he is old enough to describe Natalia's attractiveness to Razumov, he cannot be frank with Natalia herself. The clinching irony arises because it is possibly the teacher himself who alerts Razumov to Natalia's allure: 'And the girl is charming and amiable [...] I suppose I can see that for my self' reads as a dawning awareness of an attraction. It may well be that the teacher's possessive and petty behaviour is at the origin of Razumov's love for Natalia, and if it is not the actual cause of the emotion, it is certainly the trigger that alerts Razumov to her as a potential object of love. Razumov's love for Natalia in turn becomes the reason for his catastrophic confession, and the subsequent detonation of his eardrums by Nikita. This weak if nonetheless discernible connection between propriety, repression, and explosive violence is worked through more clearly in *The Secret Agent*, but what is still evident here is that conversation is far more than an exchange between free and equal agents, acting as both a proxy for direct competition and a limit on what can be expressed. The conversation between the teacher and Razumov is a diversion of aggression into allusive play that delays violence, only to have it amplified in the shattering final scenes of the novel where, his hearing torn from him, Razumov almost too cruelly becomes a revolutionary muse who 'talks well' (p.287) but cannot listen, being quite literally stone deaf.

Use of force in this and other similar conversations in the novel is not simply a metaphor. When Razumov asks 'the meaning of all this,' the teacher replies: 'The object, you mean, of this conversation, which I admit I have forced on you in a measure' (p.145). The force at play here is admittedly very different from the fear that drives Razumov's dialogues elsewhere, and which re-enters later when the teacher mentions Victor Haldin; but it still seems significant that the teacher sees conversation as being a matter of 'measure,' that is of degree as well as type. This holds as much for degrees and types of force itself as for their equivalents in forced dialogue, with both of these being subject to the social circumstances and political conditions within which they are found. Under conditions of autocracy, force takes suitably extreme forms (exile, torture, death), whereas in polite liberal society it is expressed through systemic forms of exclusion that operate on the social level as well as via political institutions. Still, as the conversation between the teacher and Razumov suggests, these apparently incompatible kinds of force are not mutually exclusive: even in its most decorous conversational forms, force can initiate unpredictable chains of reaction that explode into subjective violence, with devastating results.

Let me return one last time to Fogel's argument that the 'idea of dialogue that emerges [in *Under Western Eyes*] is nonconversational' (1985, p.180). I can only agree up to a point: there clearly *is* conversation in the novel. But far from being non-violent, conversation expresses violence by other means: violence in conversation is always implicit and repressed, whereas what Fogel calls 'forced dialogue' can be accompanied by overt threat or actual violence. The force which accompanies non-conversational dialogue in *Under Western Eyes* is not repressed: Mikulin and the revolutionaries do not need to explicate it because under autocracy it is a given. Conversation is different because violence, though present, is unspoken and unconscious. This unspoken violence is the unconscious threat of 'social tyranny,' which for Mill is so dangerous because it is internalised by the individual, 'enslaving the soul itself.' In Rortyan terms, we might think of this violence as a 'conversational partner.'

It should be clear by now that there are several negative implications to the conversational metaphor in *Under Western Eyes*, and indeed in Conrad's other major political novels. Razumov's conversation with the teacher is 'fruitful' in a number of ways, but the fruit is poisonous. It begins Razumov's relationship with Natalia, highlights her attractiveness, and starts Razumov down the path to doomed love and the eventual mutilation by deafening that undoes his already limited ability to converse. This conversation contrasts with other forced dialogues in *Under Western Eyes* because it is not undermined by autocracy; rather, it is more a case of 'free' and 'frank' discussion being constrained by conversational 'politeness' that temporarily contains or limits the force it is nonetheless unable to defuse or deny. This 'polite' form of conversation is relevant to modern liberalism because it both explicitly engages with and implicitly criticises Rortyan notions of community and conversational compatibility, showing how conversation is dialogue limited by the 'social tyranny' at its core. A key part of this core is the mythic violence of the liberal 'bargain with fate' that I discuss earlier, and the unending negotiation of membership of and exclusion from the liberal community it entails. Rather than avoiding violence, conversation of this kind transforms, delays, and magnifies it, with potentially explosive consequences. In this context, the teacher's liberal audiences do not 'understand' violence not because it is alien to them, but because it is repressed. Far from being the opposite of forced dialogue, conversation emerges as its double; and this *doppelgänger* logic, which is ubiquitous in Conrad's novels, can be read as expressing the violent, repressed urges of the civilised self. Forced dialogue, as represented in *Under Western Eyes*, thus operates as the violent underbelly of liberal conversation, which is 'a conversational partner' as rational and coherent as liberal conversationalism itself.

*Conclusion: liberty and silence*

If the unspoken is a sign of repressed violence in *Under Western Eyes*, there is one further form of elision which invites very different possibilities. As I have suggested above, ellipsis and aposiopesis are rife in the novel; but there is a crucial example that both opens the text and establishes liberty as its central imperative. To wit, Conrad indicates liberty is his core concern by placing a statement from the middle of the novel as its epigraph. It is an unsettling move that at once asserts the novel's extra-textual relevance and underscores its fictional status:

*“I would take liberty from any hand as a hungry  
man would snatch a piece of bread.” . . .*

MISS HALDIN

(p.1, original emphasis)

*Under Western Eyes* is not unique in its fictional epigraph, but even within this rather specialised genre, this is an unusual case, consisting as it does not of a quotation from a fictional text referred to or read within the novel, but of a snatch of conversation between the narrator and a central character in the text. Furthermore, the epigraph draws attention to its dubious status in numerous ways. First consider its breach of style. ‘Miss Haldin’ departs from the typical form of quotation that might cite ‘N. Haldin,’ thereby rendering the epigraph paradoxically informal by mismatching registers and genres. ‘Miss Haldin’ is a formal means of address, particularly in the context of the kind of conversation between acquaintances from which the quotation is drawn. Yet this departure from convention also marks the epigraph as a failure: one that highlights rather than conceals its own fictionality. The epigraph undermines the authority granted by its privileged positioning, an authority further undercut by the ellipsis contained within it, which indicates something missing but is curiously placed outside of the quotation marks. Quotation as a practice is predicated on omission and abbreviation, of course, but in this particular instance it is not so much that some element of Natalia Haldin’s thoughts on liberty is omitted (though there is something of hers elided too); rather, the punctuation gestures to something *extraneous* to these thoughts. Is this another perspective, another possible view on liberty? In other words, from the novel’s title page we are invited to look for something *beyond* Natalia’s version of liberty,

and are granted the freedom to speculate on a potentially endless, because indeterminate, set of views that may be radically different from her own.

Meanwhile there is another question of authority that remains unresolved: to what text does the epigraph belong? Does its position outside the primary narrative exempt it from the incorporation of Natalia Haldin's voice into the English teacher's text? The mysteries compound when we acknowledge, as do Jeremy Hawthorn and Keith Carabine in the Notes to the Cambridge Edition (p.601), that this is actually a *misquotation* of Natalia Haldin, who in the novel itself says to the English teacher, 'I would take liberty from any hand as a hungry man would snatch *at* a piece of bread' (p.108, my emphasis). More particularly, the epigraph turns a simile that describes an inconclusive attempt to take sustenance by force or guile into a successfully completed action. We might ask to which version the misquotation belongs, but this is rhetorical as there is no original against which to check it. The narrative itself is a reconstruction, purporting to blend the English teacher's recollections with his translation of Razumov's journal. The 'misquotation' in the epigraph raises the possibility that the English teacher is misremembering, whether deliberately or not; and it also casts doubts on the author's command of his own material, whether that author is the English teacher or, hiding characteristically behind him, Conrad himself. Ironically, the epigraph omits Natalia Haldin's first name, which is itself a subject of contention insofar as even Conrad's manuscript could not decide whether it was spelt 'Natalie,' 'Nathalie,' or 'Natalia.' Unity of nomenclature in this case was an editorial decision of Conrad's (p.355), with profoundly ironic implications for a character who, as well as snatching liberty, asserts she 'shall never give up looking forward to the day when all discord shall be silenced' (p.285).

To see this in a different light, *Under Western Eyes* is a text in which ideals and idealisations transform into their opposites, but also one in which critique can transform into recuperation. This is the opposite side of the logic that has been applied throughout this chapter. For if various kinds of freedom are transformed in *Under Western Eyes* into violence, then conversely, all these kinds of violence can potentially be converted into liberty. Conrad's work may seem the most infertile of grounds for the reclamation of liberal revolutionism, and *Under Western Eyes* the least likely text out of which revolutionism might eventually grow. To read it as such in any straightforward way would surely be a mistake; yet if *Under Western Eyes* is a text that subjects the politics of freedom, and modern liberal complacency in particular, to withering irony, it is also typically Conradian in

warning us against itself. As Sophia Antonovna, who ‘was much more representative than the great Peter Ivanovitch. Stripped of rhetoric, mysticism and theories she was the true spirit of destructive revolution’ (p.201), cautions: ‘Leave off railing [...] Remember, Razumov, that women, children and revolutionists hate irony which is the negation of all saving instincts, of all faith, of all devotion, of all action’ (p.214). However, it is not just revolutionaries who hate irony, but liberalism’s victims: women, children, and others immobilised by its sedimentations of power or infantilised by its paternalistic actions. Sophia Antonovna herself cannot evade Conrad’s all-encompassing irony in so far as the spiritual and the mystical are also ironised in *Under Western Eyes*, making her designation as ‘the true spirit of destructive revolution’ at best inaccurate and at worst absurd. At the same time, she highlights the negative effects of ironic critique and implies its weakness; for against the might of autocracy and the extremes of subjective violence, torture, and oppression it brings with it, irony has precious little force.

Under these circumstances, as I have been arguing here, freedom and subjective violence may coalesce, constituting a ‘deformed double’ that modern liberalism gives every impression of doing its best to sidestep. As the teacher of languages writes, *Under Western Eyes* ‘is a Russian story for Western ears which, as I have observed already, are not attuned to certain tones of cynicism and cruelty of moral negation – and even of moral distress – already *silenced* at our end of Europe’ (p.129, my emphasis). These ‘tones’ resonate with the ‘discord’ silenced in Natalia Haldin’s vision of progress, but what follows is not the ‘triumph of one’ idea alone. There are many different forms of silence in this novel: the silence of death or deafening; the silence of the unspoken or the unconscious; the silence of the implied or the incomplete; even the silence that invites its own negation and is in turn an invitation for another to speak. Conrad’s quotation of Natalia in his epigraph effectively repurposes her vision; it uses ellipsis to ask a question, not to curtail the freedom of dissent but to enable it. Yet in quoting Natalia Haldin, Conrad also places her autocratic vision of liberty front and centre: it reminds us that liberty may also involve the freedom to do terrible things, and that ellipsis can be an omission or evasion, a shorthand for duplicities that continue indefinitely, mirroring a history of liberty that denies or at least suppresses less salutary interpretations of its key actions and events. In short, liberty emerges from *Under Western Eyes* in an ongoing process of *dédoublement*, which is also an invitation to good or ill that cannot be limited by standards of consistency or morality, because to do so would be to transform it into its opposite. Liberal freedom wants in effect to be an ellipsis:

an absence of force that evades conclusive definition. Yet like ellipsis itself, this means that liberalism is given what shape and definition it has by the substance it opposes; it is both the enlightening opposite and the dark double of the coercive violence it seeks to displace.

## 2. Policing, reading, and terror: *The Secret Agent*

### *Introduction*

In *Under Western Eyes*, liberalism presents itself elliptically, as an absent force that is nonetheless defined by the very violence it opposes. In *The Secret Agent*, liberalism is more spectral still—the word ‘liberal’ is conspicuous by its absence—yet the novel is still deeply concerned with freedom, and as in *Under Western Eyes* it is England that stands for a brand of liberal tolerance which is contrasted to European (also Russian) political creeds, methods, and ends. Though it might seem initially in *The Secret Agent* as if the politics of freedom is embodied in anarchism not liberalism, the novel’s political incendiaries are revolutionary ‘shams’ who feed parasitically off the political status quo instead of challenging it. In this chapter, I will show how this violence is explored through twinned doubles—namely liberalism versus anarchism, and policing versus terrorism—but how these categories contradict themselves more than they do their apparent opposites. For example, liberalism ends up being set up *against* freedom, while anarchy is anathema to the novel’s anarchists; likewise, police and terrorists become complicit in one another’s games. As I will go on to show, these characters—anarchists and the public servants who purportedly oppose them—are sustained by different forms of systemic violence. The boundary liberalism aims to protect and police between public and private effectively perpetuates this violence. *The Secret Agent* reveals conflicting versions of public and private but also exposes the ways in which the distinction itself is exploited and undermined by power. Far from protecting the private individual from political interference, the public/private split is a bulwark that defends the power of the social elite from public scrutiny and enables their agents to act in secret on their behalf. Other boundaries, whether they relate to wealth and class, self and other, or to gender, disability, and nationality, intersect or overlay the limit between public and private, creating webs of systemic violence that both stifle individual freedom and preserve the status quo. *The Secret Agent* suggests that liberal institutions do not *prevent* violence, but rather *direct* it away from the social elite that holds power.

I will also argue that *reading* is a key metaphor in *The Secret Agent*. In particular, it represents transfer across the boundaries that divide people from one another. Reading

connects notions of interpretation and exegesis, but also of policing, surveillance, and the workings of social power. Successes and failures of reading are central to the advancement and destruction of various characters, yet the ways in which liberal society enables and shapes these readings is more important to its preservation than the intentional actions of its own gatekeepers and guardians. Reading also emerges as a mechanism of terroristic policing. Terrorism as ‘propaganda by deed’ (for a history of the concept, see Laqueur 2011, p.49) is both directly interpreted and mediated through newspapers that are literally read, but in *The Secret Agent* it is not a strategy for resisting state power. It is a technique for the manipulation of the reading public by agents of the state. Furthermore, if state terrorism is shown to be part of the conscious workings of autocracy, terror in *The Secret Agent* operates most destructively in the policing and curtailment of Winnie Verloc’s freedom, as I will explain more fully below.

### *Liberalism as absent presence*

Liberalism may not explicitly be mentioned in *The Secret Agent*, but it is recognisable in the novel’s institutional, particularly parliamentary, backdrop. Combined with the novel’s clear concern with notions of freedom and liberty, it is fair to say that *The Secret Agent* engages liberalism *per se* as well as critiquing the broader field of English parliamentary democracy. In the second chapter of the novel, for example, England’s specifically liberal credentials are established when Adolf Verloc, the eponymous secret agent, is summoned to the Russian Embassy, where a new First Secretary, Mr Vladimir, is determined to shake up the anarchist community. In advance of an international conference, where European powers will discuss ‘the suppression of political crime,’ Vladimir wishes Verloc to carry out a terrorist attack to motivate the British government to abandon its moderate approach. The England of *The Secret Agent* is a haven for revolutionaries seeking asylum, and the Russian government wants to change this. For Mr Vladimir, this tolerance of political dissent is abhorrent, but significantly it is seen as stemming from a distinctly liberal sensibility: ‘England lags. This country is absurd with its sentimental regard for individual liberty’ (p.22).

Furthermore, *The Secret Agent* engages with key components of the liberal conceptual apparatus. Deaglán Ó Donghaile deploys a liquid metaphor to describe the aesthetic function of anarchism in the novel’s critique of England’s liberal political institutions:

Anarchism also offers the modernist writer an unlimited literary scope because, unlike the neatly packaged popular fictions that end with the containment of anarchism, the

fluid political morality of *The Secret Agent*, held together by endless interlocking intrigues, seeps into every corner of twentieth-century politics and culture. Its pervasive secrecy infiltrates and confuses any sense that we might have of the oppositional ideologies of government and revolution, of legitimacy and corruption, as the reader comes to realise that in this ‘simple tale’, moral anarchy is what characterises the political practice of the state and its agents (2011, p.128).

Ó Donghaile captures the function of an aesthetic of anarchy in *The Secret Agent* as a sign of the traversal of limits that contrasts markedly with the sham anarchism of the novel’s revolutionaries. It is unclear whether he is referring to the ‘pervasive secrecy’ of Conrad’s novel, or of ‘twentieth-century politics and culture’ more generally, pointing to the potential for allegorical reading that—as I will discuss later—*The Secret Agent* both invites and frustrates. Yet in addition to the ‘ideologies of government and revolution, of legitimacy and corruption,’ the novel engages a distinctly ideological opposition at the heart of the liberal project: between public and private life. In effect, the novel mounts a critique of liberalism by representing some of the ways in which public affairs destructively invade private life while being themselves determined by the private concerns of elites. In parallel with this erosion of the limit between public and private is a blurring of the boundary between the social and the political that sees purportedly social issues of class and gender take political centre stage. Because these concerns form a strand running through my argument in this chapter, I will restrict myself here to a brief analysis in order to demonstrate one kind of engagement with this issue that *The Secret Agent* stages throughout.

The etymon ‘public’ occurs thirty-five times in the novel, although five of these occurrences take the form either of ‘publican’ or ‘public-house.’ The ‘public’ realm, as a transparent space or place that is out in the open, is represented only six times. The vast majority of other uses take their sense of ‘the public’ as the collective body that comprises the English people, with four remaining uses taking the form of the word ‘publication.’ This last sense points to something striking regarding the majority of uses insofar as they all relate to the public as an audience involved in acts of interpretation, particularly of judging, which I will connect to the idea of reading as key metaphor over the course of this chapter. Lastly, the notion of ‘public opinion’ is crucial to the novel’s plot and various sub-plots, for all sides in its political conflict are explicitly interested in the manipulation of public perception for personal and political ends.

Unsurprisingly for a spy novel, *The Secret Agent* is skewed towards concealed actions, but the framing of these in relation to the liberal distinction between public and private is telling. The word ‘private’ appears forty-four times, but rather than describing an

individual space protected from the interference of the state, it frequently acts as a synonym for secret, concealed, or secluded; only on one occasion does it refer to private property or ownership, during an absurd tirade by the anarchist demagogue and purported terrorist Karl Yundt. Often the word is used to describe a higher official's office, their 'private room,' signifying bureaucratic privilege and hierarchy within the state apparatus. Most significantly, it commonly describes public officers acting outside of official channels in the pursuit of their work; a key example here, which captures the central dynamic of both public and private in *The Secret Agent*, occurs when two police officers are discussing Mr Verloc. Having discovered his connection to a bombing, Chief Inspector Heat, who has been using Verloc as an unofficial informant, is forced to reveal his existence to his superior, the Assistant Commissioner:

“Did any of my predecessors have any knowledge of what you have told me now?” asked the Assistant Commissioner [...]

“No, sir; certainly not. What would have been the object? That sort of man could never be produced publicly to any good purpose. It was sufficient for me to know who he was, and to make use of him in a way that could be used publicly.”

“And do you think that sort of private knowledge consistent with the official position you occupy?”

“Perfectly, sir. I think it's quite proper. I will take the liberty to tell you, sir, that it makes me what I am—and I am looked upon as a man who knows his work. It's a private affair of my own. A personal friend of mine in the French police gave me the hint that the fellow was an Embassy spy. Private friendship, private information, private use of it—that's how I look upon it.” (p.94).

Though Inspector's Heat's use of 'publicly' is amongst those relatively rare instances in the novel when 'public' does suggest 'in the open,' it nevertheless carries the implications of audience and judgement to which I have already referred, because in this context to produce Mr Verloc 'publicly' means to use him as a witness in court. Furthermore, in referring to public 'production' of Verloc, Heat is describing what he intends *not* to do: by 'private,' Heat means 'secret.' This points to a gap in the novel between the procedures that English political institutions permit and the secret practices that actually sustain them, but it also gestures towards the public as the audience of a carefully managed drama played out in the courts and in the press. Public space is vanishingly small and highly compromised, appearing only in allusions to the courts and in an equally vague sense of 'public opinion' mediated by the press. This latter organ does not emerge well from the novel, for although the press is seen as determining public opinion (p.84), it is fickle (p.90), and the news it actually presents is superficial and unsubstantiated (p.53, p.225). The press, in short, does

not so much constitute a public space as a gossip conduit, feeding readers ‘wares from the gutter’ (p.59) and ‘newspaper gup’ (p.53), though, as I will go on to argue, it also functions in more sinister ways.

In contrast, Inspector Heat’s private connections and secret knowledge function as a sign of his competence. ‘Private’ in this example always carries the sense of ‘secret,’ but it also oscillates between ‘personal’ and ‘unofficial’—off the record. In particular, Heat’s closing statement, ‘Private friendship, private information, private use of it,’ equivocates between these senses, pointing to a general exploitation of the porous boundaries between public and private that *The Secret Agent* represents. His repetition suggests a logic of justification that is patently false; his secret connection to a spy and double agent, like his concealment of his sources from colleagues and the wider system of justice he serves, is hardly justified by the fact that the origins of this connection purportedly lie in a personal friendship. Even this ‘personal’ friendship is dubious—given that they are both policemen, Heat’s association with his French ‘friend’ is hardly likely to have begun in circumstances completely unconnected with his professional life. It is clearly a professional association, perhaps cemented by personal friendship, and one characterised by the sharing of professional favours. It is one kind of unofficial network that, by its very nature, makes a mockery of the liberal public/private split. As I will show later, the elite institutions of upper-class society and family are two other such networks. That liberalism itself is the unspoken target of this critique is suggested by Heat’s taking ‘the liberty.’ It is an in-joke at liberalism’s expense, and ironically targets a modern liberal variety of freedom: ‘it makes me what I am,’ he says, transforming his dubious ‘private’ associations into an aspect of his self-actualisation (see also Chapter Four).

In the above example, the workings of political institutions emerge as duplicitous. The public/private split describes not the protection of the private individual from state interference, but a kind of masquerade in which the public faces of institutions are deceptions designed to create the appearance of conformity with official structures and legislation. The private reality is one where agents of the state circumvent or subvert procedure, in Heat’s case for the furtherance of his own career. In a liberal society, a great deal of political and legislative procedure is intended to protect the individual and society from state power, but what is suggested here is that these safeguards are merely performances that conceal the actual workings of the state from ‘the public.’ Additionally, those ‘private’ institutions, such as the press, through which liberalism intends to hold the

state to account are remarkably ineffective in achieving this aim, pandering controversy aimed at the lowest common denominator whilst failing to discover the real issues that might cause friction to the smooth workings of state power. Liberalism is thus an absent presence in *The Secret Agent* not just because it is an unspoken subject of the novel, but also because, as my analysis suggests, the freedom it aims to protect is absent even as liberal institutions determine individual life. The basic aims of liberalism remain unfulfilled and its accompanying structures and procedures are all undone, even by those who claim to serve liberalism's institutional ends.

In short, the liberal distinction between public and private in *The Secret Agent*, far from protecting individual freedom from 'social tyranny' (J. S. Mill's term), defends the status quo. More specifically, the novel gestures towards some of the ways in which this distinction serves to perpetuate class and gender roles that effectively limit individual agency, lending strength to a systemic violence that delays and eventually magnifies subjective violence rather than containing it, as is also the case in *Under Western Eyes* (see previous chapter). As I will now go on to show, *The Secret Agent* develops this line of thinking by representing specific forms of violence, in particular those relating to patriarchy and class, acting to channel subjective violence in ways which, though devastating for individuals, are not harmful to either the elite or the political system as a whole.

### *Social tyranny: the secret agency of class*

If the structural importance of liberalism is indicated in Mr Verloc's interview with Mr Vladimir, the differentiating significance of social class is declared in the same episode. According to Mr Vladimir, the 'imbecile bourgeoisie of this country make themselves accomplices of the very people whose aim is to drive them out of their houses to starve in ditches. And they have the political power still, if they only had the sense to use it for their preservation' (p.22). Thus, in addition to focusing our attention on English liberalism Mr Vladimir announces class conflict as a central concern of the text, even if he is not in tune with the novel's later depictions of sublimated class conflict, which directs violence down the social ladder. Moreover, Mr Vladimir is both wrong and right about the English middle classes in the novel. As the novel progresses we see that they do wield political power to preserve the status quo and maintain their own position of relative comfort. England may lag—but not in the sense that Mr Vladimir intends. The Russian diplomat wants to provoke an outrage that will garner support for 'international action for the suppression of

political crime' (*ibid.*), but whereas, for Vladimir, England is backward in its power to deal with political dissent, *The Secret Agent* reveals the very opposite. England has no need to make progress in this particular area because it has long possessed a social and political system that is effective in stifling potential threats.

England's class structure is portrayed as a core component of this system. Mr Verloc proclaims himself one of 'the million' (p.18), and though he appears to Mr Vladimir 'uncommonly like a master plumber' (p.20), as a shopkeeper he is decidedly *petit bourgeois* masquerading as one of the workers, his two primary motivations being indolence and the accompanying desire to prevent social change:

Mr Verloc was going westward through a town without shadows in an atmosphere of powdered old gold. There were red, coppery gleams on the roofs of houses, on the corners of walls, on the panels of carriages, on the very coats of the horses, and on the broad back of Mr Verloc's overcoat, where they produced a dull effect of rustiness. But Mr Verloc was not in the least conscious of having got rusty. He surveyed through the park railings the evidences of the town's opulence and luxury with an approving eye. All these people had to be protected [...] the whole social order favourable to their hygienic idleness had to be protected against the shallow enviousness of unhygienic labour. It had to—and Mr Verloc would have rubbed his hands with satisfaction had he not been constitutionally averse from every superfluous exertion (pp.9–10).

Mr Verloc is a kind of 'master plumber,' protecting the 'hygienic idleness' of the elite against the 'shallow enviousness of unhygienic labour.' Yet Verloc himself is a caricature of indolence, 'constitutionally averse from every superfluous exertion.' 'Undemonstrative and burly in a fat-pig style' (p.10), he is lazy even in his lust—his courting of his wife is conducted via breakfast in bed, where on being served by her, his 'heavy-lidded eyes rolled sideways amorously and languidly, the bedclothes were pulled up to his chin, and his dark smooth moustache covered his thick lips capable of much honeyed banter' (p.5). It is clear that Mr Verloc is part of the same cycle of indolence that the narrator ascribes to the wealthy inhabitants of Hyde Park Corner (and later to the terrorists who oppose them), albeit the decadent 'coppery gleams' that wash his surroundings in 'old gold' produce in him 'a dull effect of rustiness.' The neutral copper light seems elevated when it strikes the trappings of wealth and power, suggesting that Mr Verloc's bourgeois identity is a degradation of aristocratic identity. In turn the light reflects on some of the ways in which the English middle classes at the time had adopted aristocratic values, transforming 'nobility' into 'gentlemanly' conduct, which tempered martial chivalric norms with propriety and decency, and substituting these forms of 'social tyranny' for the direct threat

of violence manifest in feudal hierarchies (see also Chapter Three). In such times, it appears, both the wealthy and the middle-class Verloc share the characteristic of 'idleness' in opposition to the interests of 'unhygienic labour.' The novel, however, rarely shows us the world of labour: its anarchists are just as lazy as Mr Verloc, leading parasitic existences, usually at the expense of women (p.39).

There are in fact only two members of the working class with whom we spend any time in the novel: the first is the cab driver who takes Verloc's wife, Winnie, and her dependent mother and mentally subnormal brother, Stevie, to South London. This driver is a caricature of misfortune, 'maimed' (p.114) and apparently insensitive to the suffering he inflicts on the even more unfortunate nag that pulls his cab. He ignores Stevie's request that he not whip the horse, 'not because his soul was cruel and his heart evil, but because he had to earn his fare' (p.116), and he later justifies his actions to Stevie on account of his poverty and need to feed his family (p.122). This unprepossessing representative of the working classes effectively passes his suffering on to his horse, which occupies a position of even less power than its master. This episode is connected to the wider politics of the novel by a peculiar description of the cab itself:

The cab rattled, jingled, jolted; in fact, the last was quite extraordinary. By its disproportionate violence and magnitude it obliterated every sensation of onward movement; and the effect was of being shaken in a stationary apparatus like a mediæval device for the punishment of crime, or some very new-fangled invention for the cure of a sluggish liver (p.120).

Here, the cab becomes a feudal apparatus of social control, suggesting in its 'disproportionate violence,' which prevents 'onward movement' or progress, a systemic violence that preserves the social inequality at its core. Labour functions here a means of control and punishment simultaneously, while scientific progress in the form of 'some new-fangled invention for the cure of a sluggish liver' reminds us of the novel's second representative of the working class, the suggestively named Mrs Neale, whose alcoholism is an internalisation of violence and social control. Mrs Neale is Winnie's cleaner, who begs money from Stevie ostensibly to feed her 'little 'uns,' but which is actually spent on 'ardent spirits' (p.136). Winnie is well aware of this practice, but neither she nor the novel judges Mrs Neale, who, like Winnie herself, suffers cruelly under patriarchy, being the victim 'of her marriage with a debauched joiner [and] oppressed by the needs of many infant children' (p.132).

This systemic violence seems to turn the destructiveness of the working classes in upon themselves so that they end up magnifying their own suffering or, as with the driver and

his horse, directing it into channels that do not trouble the establishment. A straightforward allegorical reading of this is problematic, however. In describing the cab, the narrator states that the ‘conveyance awaiting them would have illustrated the proverb that “truth can be more cruel than caricature,” if such a proverb existed’ (p.114), thereby entangling the description in an inescapable web of irony. The depiction of the cab, as of its driver and, later, Mrs Neale, unmistakably belongs to the realm of caricature. But these are sympathetic rather than cruel caricatures that point to uncomfortable truths about society. Perhaps the narrator is suggesting that the novel points towards a reality even more cruel than his depiction, but only ‘if such a proverb existed,’ implying that it does not. If, as Martin Seymour-Smith suggests, *The Secret Agent* is suffused with caricature (1984, pp.12, 16), the narrative becomes implicated in this irony. Seymour-Smith suggests that Winnie and Adolf Verloc, Stevie and the Assistant Commissioner are exempted from this, but this is not the case. We may be invited to agree that reality is indeed more cruel than the shocking scenes we witness in the novel, but the narrator himself partially withdraws from the assertion, and—as usual in Conrad—it would be wrong to discount irony as an integral part of the voice of the narrative. Still, it would be equally wrong to conclude that, even if the novel’s representations of society and politics are knowingly inaccurate or incomplete, they do *not* point to a cruel reality outside its pages: the novel thus manages, like so many of Conrad’s fictions, to be both ironic *and* allegorical in its intent.

If the working classes are caricatured in *The Secret Agent*, there is a wide range of satire in the novel that works to uncover different levels of cruel reality. To cite two of the more obvious examples, the processes of Parliament, if referred to obliquely, are made ridiculous throughout the novel, while the press is routinely manipulated and in turn guides the wider public down a series of diversions and dead ends. The ‘real’ politics of *The Secret Agent* seems to reside instead in its individual power plays, elaborate games of institutional prestige and manipulation by a small number of actors behind the scenes. This oligarchic network of affiliation and advancement is exemplified in the relationship between Sir Ethelred, a Secretary of State, and his private secretary, the ludicrously named Toodles:

The numerous family and the wide connections of the youthful-looking Private Secretary cherished for him the hope of an austere and exalted destiny. Meantime the social sphere he adorned in his hours of idleness chose to pet him under the above nickname. And Sir Ethelred, hearing it on the lips of his wife and girls every day (mostly at breakfast-time), had conferred upon it the dignity of unsmiling adoption (p.105).

Toodles' 'numerous family' and 'wide connections' gain him access to the corridors of power. The adoption by Sir Ethelred of a pet name makes the Houses of Parliament an extension of the breakfast rooms of the social elite, while the 'hope of an austere and exalted destiny' for this 'young private secretary (unpaid)' (p.99) suggests that government is an occupation for those who have little financial need of employment. Toodles as caricature exposes the cruel reality of nepotism, which favours those with elite connections and excludes those without from power and advancement in all walks of life. Indeed, nepotism is in its origins a familial relation, deriving from the Latin, *nepos*, meaning grandson, descendant and, later, nephew, but popularised to describe the preferential treatment given to illegitimate sons of Popes. I will return to family as a social entity associated with patriarchy later in this chapter, but with further regard to elite nepotism I now want to show how in *The Secret Agent*, family involves a relation of degrees of inclusion and exclusion, similar but not identical to the ethnocentrism I previously discussed in Chapter One.

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Largely absent from *The Secret Agent* is a communal space where people come together to perform a public life. There are two possible exceptions to this. First is the Verloc family home, which hosts various small gatherings of anarchists, but at the same time it is a decidedly and deliberately *private* place where public affairs are discussed in secret, with the final consequence being that it is exploded by the bomb that Stevie lets off in Greenwich Park. The second 'public' place is the drawing room of the 'great lady patroness of Michaelis' (p.163), who 'amused her age by attracting within her ken through the power of her great, almost historical, social prestige everything that rose above the dead level of mankind, lawfully or unlawfully, by position, wit, audacity, fortune or misfortune. Royal Highnesses, artists, men of science, young statesmen, and charlatans of all ages and conditions' (p.77). This is probably the closest the novel comes to a communal or public arena where people can interact, but entry to this space is determined by a kind of meritocracy where the main criterion is the potential to amuse this particular member of the aristocracy. So, while access to public interaction may not always be determined by social class, it is frequently mediated by aristocratic power.

The drawing room is a distinctly stratified space in which the lady patroness receives her most interesting guests in 'semi-privacy within the faded blue silk and gilt frame screen, making a cosy nook for a couch and a few arm-chairs in the great drawing-room, with its

hum of voices and the groups of people seated or standing' (p.78). Even this space is semi-private and fragmented, with the majority of guests merely acting as spectators watching the diversions of the moment in their orbit around the great lady:

Her drawing-room was probably the only place in the wide world where an Assistant Commissioner of the Police could meet a convict liberated on a ticket-of-leave on other than professional and official ground. Who had brought Michaelis there one afternoon the Assistant Commissioner did not remember very well (*ibid.*).

Aristocratic privilege transcends professional and legal boundaries, exceeding the limits of liberal institutions. It is in this way that the anarchist Michaelis gains the valuable support of a senior police officer without even being aware of it. This kind of nepotism is shown to have a decisive impact on the development of events in *The Secret Agent*. The great lady's influence on the Assistant Commissioner, which also operates without her conscious interference, determines the progression of the tale; and this leads, in turn, to his determination to find something behind his subordinate's suspicion of Michaelis, and ultimately to his discovery of Adolf Verloc. Furthermore, the dynamic which emerges between the Assistant Commissioner and his subordinate, Inspector Heat, is part of the reason why Winnie Verloc discovers Stevie's death, by overhearing Verloc and Heat discussing it after the Assistant Commissioner has already interrogated the spy. Mrs Verloc's involvement and decisive closing of the tale is, as I will show later, crucial to the novel's critique of liberalism. As well as transcending the boundaries of profession and institution, Michaelis and the great lady are temperamentally similar:

A certain simplicity of thought is common to serene souls at both ends of the social scale. The great lady was simple in her own way. His views and beliefs had nothing in them to shock or startle her, since she judged them from the standpoint of her lofty position. Indeed, her sympathies were easily accessible to a man of that sort. She was not an exploiting capitalist herself; she was, as it were, above the play of economic conditions. And she had a great capacity of pity for the more obvious forms of common human miseries, precisely because she was such a complete stranger to them [...] She had come to believe almost his theory of the future, since it was not repugnant to her prejudices. She disliked the new element of plutocracy in the social compound, and industrialism as a method of human development appeared to her singularly repulsive in its mechanical and unfeeling character (pp. 79–82).

Being 'above the play of economic conditions,' the great lady dislikes 'the new element of plutocracy in the social compound.' This is not because she herself lacks wealth of course, but because wealth as the sole criterion for power introduces a greater degree of social mobility than exists in a system based on tradition and family heritage, substituting the power of

patronage with the less subjective metric of profit. Yet, like Michaelis, she is disconnected from reality; they both share ‘serene souls,’ and one element of reality she ignores is the history of wealth buying access to title, a history which stretches back generations. Again like Michaelis, she regards wealth and social position as unconnected: the former is an economic matter, the latter the province of the ‘moral’ and ‘social values’ (p.82).

Meanwhile the lady is herself being ‘read’ by the Assistant Commissioner—“If the fellow is laid hold of again,” he thought, “she will never forgive me” (p.83)—and though his assessment that she will look unfavourably on the implication of Michaelis in the crime turns out to be correct, the details of her feelings and opinions remain obscure (pp.163-64). This absence of detail is ironically mirrored by the other representative of the ruling classes, Sir Ethelred, to whom the Assistant Commissioner goes for permission to carry out his unconventional investigation. Sir Ethelred has an absurd aversion to details, which he and the Assistant Commissioner reiterate to comic effect (pp.100-04, 162) until the latter uses this tic to avoid disclosure of the awkward issues of departmental politics between himself and Inspector Heat (p.103), thereby parlaying Sir Ethelred into approving his intentions. In this way, another democratically appointed politician comes to be manipulated by the hidden hand of aristocratic favour and nepotism, thus making it abundantly clear (as I mentioned earlier) that Parliament itself is not immune from these practices. Indeed, institutional public spaces such as Parliament seem among the least accessible places in the novel. Always off stage, they are reserved for skirmishes between the political parties rather than public affairs (for example, an obscure fisheries bill which is mentioned at various points in the novel suggests that Parliament has more interest in the pet projects of individual ministers than in the concerns of the wider public). This public is an abstract entity, much like Conrad’s audience, a theoretical readership waiting to interpret events that are inevitably and unreliably mediated by the press.

Liberal society in *The Secret Agent* is thus divided into a number of separate social spheres whose ‘privacy’ is protected by the class-bound principles of inclusion and exclusion, and whose further protection by the state apparatus guarantees a certain measure of ‘public’ life. Yet even in this latter case, far from encouraging internal openness, individuals are encouraged to operate ‘privately.’ This is partly to conceal inappropriate connections from the public, as is the case with Inspector Heat’s private relationship with Mr Verloc, or as a kind of deliberate policy of ignorance, as in Sir Ethelred’s rejection of detail. These public/private splits, far from involving the separation of state from individuals to protect

the latter from interference, function instead to safeguard the state apparatus, allowing the private interests of the upper classes to direct the flow of politics both with and without the conscious involvement of the elite. *The Secret Agent* represents the murky world of politics as built upon these different structures of containment, which makes putatively 'liberal England' a society that is capable of limiting attacks on the status quo far more effectively than outsiders like Mr Vladimir understand.

*Freedom, revolution, and the police*

If *The Secret Agent* is essentially a novel about anarchism, how does this fit into its representation of a society divided and bound in various structures of containment? What possibilities for liberty or revolution exist within these limits? Ironically, the novel depicts freedom in its extreme form, as a breaker of the *limits* of form, an instigator of destruction for individuals that nevertheless fails to trouble the suffocating inertia of English society at large. Anarchism, for its part, has two sides. On the one hand, the Professor and Karl Yundt advocate terrorism. Yundt dreams 'of a band of men absolute in their resolve to discard all scruples in the choice of means, strong enough to give themselves frankly the name of destroyers [...] No pity for anything on earth, including themselves, and death enlisted for good and all in the service of humanity' (p.32), whilst the Professor thinks only of his 'perfect detonator' (p.51). In contrast, the anarchists Michaelis and Ossipon are more intellectual and less violent in their views. Michaelis believes the 'future is certain as the past—slavery, feudalism, individualism, collectivism. This is the statement of a law, not an empty prophecy' (p.37); while Ossipon, 'nicknamed the Doctor, ex-medical student without a degree' (p.34), is a devotee of Lombroso and phrenology.

As one might expect, the portrayal of anarchism in *The Secret Agent* has a complex relation to revolutionary politics (see also previous chapter). It is clear that the anarchist characters of the novel are figures of satire: Michaelis, the obese utopian philosopher; Karl Yundt, condemned by his fellow terrorist the Professor as 'a posturing shadow' (p.51); the Professor himself, who we are left with in the novel's closing lines 'like a pest in the street full of men' (p.227); and Comrade Ossipon, who supports himself by exploiting vulnerable and gullible women, and ultimately betrays Winnie Verloc who consequently kills herself. It is also important to note that the novel's portrayal of anarchists demonstrates a subtle understanding of revolutionaries. This awareness exists both in the fine distinctions Conrad draws between the various so-called anarchist positions of his

characters, but also in his ability to communicate simultaneously a sense of the hair-splitting which can bedevil assertions of heterogeneity.

Conrad's anarchists are sketched from various models: Michaelis takes the thought of Petyr Kropotkin, the appearance of Mikhail Bakunin, and the biography of Fenians Edward O'Meagher Condon and Michael Davitt; while Karl Yundt bears similarities to Bakunin and another anarchist, Johann Most. The narrator's own position on revolutionaries seems clear:

The majority of revolutionists are the enemies of discipline and fatigue mostly. There are natures too, to whose sense of justice the price exacted looms up monstrously enormous, odious, oppressive, worrying, humiliating, extortionate, intolerable. Those are the fanatics. The remaining portion of social rebels is accounted for by vanity, the mother of all noble and vile illusions, the companion of poets, reformers, charlatans, prophets, and incendiaries (p.39).

The dominant note in the novel is that the anarchists are lazy: apart from this blanket statement by the narrator, we hear this from a number of perspectives, including Inspector Heat (p.133) and Adolf Verloc himself (p.54). The narrator's analysis is perhaps the most reliable of these in so far as it is the most sophisticated. He allows for two further categories of revolutionary: those who maintain a sense of injustice at society, and those who are considered fanatics, social rebels who are to be condemned for their vanity. However, even in the first case perceived injustice is often fraudulent. For the narrator, there are no good revolutionaries: just shirkers, fanatics and self-deceivers. Conrad himself echoes this when he writes about the anarchists of *The Secret Agent* in an October 7, 1907 letter to Robert Cunninghame Graham: 'All these people are not revolutionaries—they are shams' (CL3, p.491). Yet in this same letter Conrad defends himself against the accusation that the novel satirises revolutionaries. Perhaps the key term is 'social rebels' (that is nonconformists), which the narrator connects to various other agents of change, including reformers and prophets. However, by lumping these together with charlatans, he suggests a degree of fraudulence is present in all of them, supporting the view of *The Secret Agent* as a reactionary text (see for example, Howe 1957, pp.82, 97–98; Swingewood 1975, p.134). Still, by including poets in this grouping, the narrator begins to undermine himself, for it is difficult to see how the imposture of poets is substantially different to that of novelists. Moreover, the final member of this group, the incendiary, injects a further note of ambiguity. Does 'incendiary' refer to literal or metaphorical inflammation—to terrorism or demagoguery? The latter seems to fit better with the other members of the group, whereas

the former resonates with the novel's plot, but is ironic because the only actual incendiary of this sort in *The Secret Agent* is Stevie, who immolates himself by accident as a result of manipulation by Adolf Verloc. It is also hard to see how Stevie is motivated by vanity (though easy enough to see the vanity in Verloc and the other anarchists).

The Professor, on the other hand, is described as the 'perfect anarchist' (p.61), though in the context of *The Secret Agent* this is a distinctly double-edged compliment. Feared by the police and other anarchists alike, he styles himself as a living bomb that cannot be captured by the authorities because he will simply explode himself. His professed willingness to die at any moment makes him 'a force [...] frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable—and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world' (p.227). He is, alongside Stevie, a candidate for the label of anarchist fanatic:

To destroy public faith in legality was the imperfect formula of his pedantic fanaticism; but the subconscious conviction that the framework of an established social order cannot be effectually shattered except by some form of collective or individual violence was precise and correct. He was a moral agent—that was settled in his mind. By exercising his agency with ruthless defiance he procured for himself the appearances of power and personal prestige (pp.60–61).

The narrator agrees with the Professor that violence is necessary to social revolution, but whereas this notion is explicit in the narrative, for the Professor it remains a 'subconscious' motivation behind his 'imperfect' desire to undermine the notion of 'legality.' The ambiguity behind the phrase 'an established social order' is telling. The use of the indefinite article allows the social order to be atomised, broken down into fragments but at the same time rendered impregnable. Indeed, there is no successful attack on the social order in *The Secret Agent*, though in Winnie Verloc's murder of her husband, an element of it—the institution of marriage—is attacked, but also hardly scratched. Rather, the social order that is overturned in the novel is the specific one of the Verloc family, along with the individual order of Winnie Verloc's life. There are two clear acts of 'collective or individual violence' which precipitate this: Stevie's death and then the killing of Adolf Verloc, but there is also the figurative violence which is done to the order of Verloc's life and routine by Mr Vladimir, the First Secretary of the Russian Ambassador, when he forces him to transform from double agent to *agent provocateur*.

For all his subconscious insight and clarity of conviction, the Professor is entirely self-refuting. On one level, his willingness to commit suicide 'by exercising his agency with ruthless defiance' prefigures the individualistic suicides I will discuss later in relation to *Lord*

*Jim* and *Nostramo*, which refute and affirm the self simultaneously (see Chapters Three and Four). But on another, he is exposed as deeply hypocritical and self-deluding. Critics such as Jacques Berthoud and Terry Eagleton have seen the Professor as being distinct from the other anarchists in the novel. For Berthoud, the Professor understands the paradox that in trying to justify themselves, the other anarchists are compromised by the system they want to overthrow: 'since justification can only exist in terms of the established norms: any rationalized policy of destruction has already surrendered to what it is trying to destroy' (1996, p.114). Eagleton similarly sees the Professor as 'yearning for a revolutionary act which would be utterly unblemished. As such, it would need to be untainted by the interests and desires which drive on the other revolutionaries' (2005a, p.122). Though Eagleton's ambiguous phrasing allows for the possibility that the Professor will not attain this desire, he does not follow up on this implication. It is clear that the Professor is working within the same framework of established norms that he claims to want to overthrow. To be 'a moral agent' is to work within a system of norms, and to be motivated by desire for 'power and personal prestige' is to work in relation to other human beings. The Professor is very far from the solipsistic free agent he claims to be; instead, his refusal to justify his actions and his disdain for his fellow revolutionaries simply conceal his deep insecurity and drive for acclaim. Of all the novel's revolutionaries, the Professor has the clearest need to be significant; alongside this, his greatest fear and hatred is for the multitude whose inertness terrifies him, but whose recognition he craves:

He was in a long, straight street, peopled by a mere fraction of an immense multitude; but all round him, on and on, even to the limits of the horizon hidden by the enormous piles of bricks, he felt the mass of mankind mighty in its numbers. They swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like ants, thoughtless like a natural force, pushing on blind and orderly and absorbed, impervious to sentiment, to logic, to terror too perhaps.

That was the form of doubt he feared most. Impervious to fear! Often while walking abroad, when he happened also to come out of himself, he had such moments of dreadful and sane mistrust of mankind. What if nothing could move them? Such moments come to all men whose ambition aims at a direct grasp upon humanity—to artists, politicians, thinkers, reformers, or saints. A despicable emotional state this, against which solitude fortifies a superior character; and with severe exultation the Professor thought of the refuge of his room, with its padlocked cupboard, lost in a wilderness of poor houses, the hermitage of the perfect anarchist (p.61).

If anarchism is the extreme political mode of freedom, its 'perfect' expression is the figure of the hermit. The irony that the Professor's greatest fear is that mankind might be 'impervious to fear' does not descend into simple contradiction because it is not individuals who are fearless but the 'mass of mankind mighty in numbers.' This mass is also

‘thoughtless like a natural force,’ which not only refers to the impervious inertia of society at large, but also to the unconscious power of (high) society that is exercised through the salon of the ‘lady patroness.’ The Professor fears, in sum, that his hubristic sense of individual power is an illusion—and within the hermetic world of *The Secret Agent* he is right to be afraid, not just because individual agency is created by social forces, but also because even the most violent individual acts of rebellion can be contained. The Professor’s retreat into solitude is thus a rational retreat into a space where he can more easily imagine that he maintains a grasp on the world. What is most troubling in this particular passage is the way in which the narrator’s voice becomes enmeshed with the Professor’s, until it becomes difficult to distinguish the interior monologue of one from the omniscient commentary of the other. As an artist ‘whose ambition aims at a direct grasp upon humanity,’ the narrator is bound to implicate himself in the Professor’s fear. But as a brand of solipsist who creates his own fictional reality, the narrator is in fact remarkably close to the Professor; as he ventriloquises the Professor’s thoughts and feelings, his own voice is infiltrated. It is unclear, for example, who regards this fear as ‘a despicable emotional state.’ The sentiment seems more appropriate to the Professor, and when we read that ‘solitude fortifies a superior character,’ we seem to hear the Professor more than the narrator, whose final assessment of his creation leaps out at us in the novel’s final sentences:

And the incorruptible Professor walked too, averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind. He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable—and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men (p.227).

The dichotomy established at the end between the men in the street and the ‘pest’ in their midst highlights the Professor’s insignificance, but it also offers a provisional answer to the previous passage. For it is not the multitude but the Professor himself, the isolated terrorist, that ultimately takes on subhuman status. Though he is ‘deadly,’ his brand of terror is ‘frail, insignificant, shabby, and miserable.’ He is a failure because his terrorist performance has no audience: ‘Nobody looked at him.’ Whether the ‘mass of mankind mighty in its numbers’ really is ‘impervious to fear’ becomes irrelevant when the terrorist becomes completely anonymous. Moreover, by the end of the novel the Greenwich bomb is all but forgotten: ‘The sound of exploding bombs was lost in their immensity of passive grains without an echo. For instance, this Verloc affair. Who thought of it now?’ (p.224).

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Revolution and anarchism are not the only objects of Conrad's ironic glance: the liberal institutions they oppose are subjected to similar scrutiny. Beyond this, however, the text begins to implicate itself in the terrorist act. Poets and incendiaries are social rebels motivated by vanity. This alleged vanity, 'the mother of all noble and vile illusions' (p.39), is a particularly interesting element of the condemnation. A few pages earlier, the narrator describes how the terrorist demagogue, Karl Yundt, exploits 'all the hopeful and noble illusions of righteous anger, pity, and revolt' (p.36), and later in the novel we are told of the super-sleuth Assistant Commissioner: 'No man engaged in a work he does not like can preserve many saving illusions about himself. The distaste, the absence of glamour, extend from the occupation to the personality. It is only when our appointed activities seem by a lucky accident to obey the particular earnestness of our temperament that we can taste the comfort of complete self-deception' (p.83). This cynical insight is presented immediately after the Assistant Commissioner concludes that he must protect the anarchist Michaelis or else lose the favour of his powerful patroness, signalling again the covert role of oligarchic elites in liberal power plays. Illusions take on a complex ironic status, being potentially both 'noble and vile,' the products of 'vanity' but also 'saving.' It is a 'lucky accident' to be able to engage in 'complete self-deception' of the kind both Winnie and Adolf Verloc appear to have in relation to their marriage. Furthermore, the 'saving' illusion, when we take into account the development of the Assistant Commissioner throughout the novel, becomes complex. The initial implication is that he maintains few such illusions: 'he did not like his work at home'—essentially a desk job—since his 'real abilities, which were mainly of an administrative order, were combined with an adventurous disposition' (p.83). Yet we are also told he is 'a born detective' (p.87), contradicting the suggestion that his talent lies in administration, and once he ventures out to investigate Verloc, he succumbs to both the vanity and the pleasure of his craft:

He felt light-hearted, as though he had been ambushed all alone in a jungle many thousands of miles away from departmental desks and official inkstands. This joyousness and dispersion of thought before a task of some importance seems to prove that this world of ours is not such a very serious affair after all. For the Assistant Commissioner was not constitutionally inclined to levity (p.110).

Although the Assistant Commissioner is clearly exhilarated by the chase, his response is also bizarrely inappropriate: to be 'light-hearted' in the face of an isolated jungle ambush is

strange, suggesting an unburdening of care in the face of mortal danger. There is both a primal violence and a sign of conquest lurking beneath the ‘joyousness and dispersion of thought,’ as well as a dose of imperialism, if we remember the reference to the jungle is also a reference to the his history as a colonial policeman. (There is something of Stein from *Lord Jim* in the Assistant Commissioner’s adventurous past in the colonies—see Chapter Three.) Yet there is also an underlying sense that his identity is being dissolved. The limits that define him are under pressure from a ‘levity’ that contradicts his constitution. At this point in the novel, he occupies a liminal space in a number of ways:

Meantime the Assistant Commissioner was already giving his order to a waiter in a little Italian restaurant round the corner—one of those traps for the hungry, long and narrow, baited with a perspective or mirrors and white napery; without air, but with an atmosphere of their own—an atmosphere of fraudulent cookery mocking an abject mankind in the most pressing of its miserable necessities. In this immoral atmosphere the Assistant Commissioner, reflecting on his enterprise, seemed to lose some more of his identity. He had a sense of loneliness, of evil freedom. It was rather pleasant. When, after paying for his short meal, he stood up and waited for his change, he saw himself in the sheet of glass, and was struck by his foreign appearance. He contemplated his own image with a melancholy and inquisitive gaze, then by sudden inspiration raised the collar of his jacket. This arrangement appeared to him commendable, and he completed it by giving an upward twist to the ends of his black moustache (pp.108–09).

This liminal state is highlighted by his ‘foreign appearance.’ He has just finished dining in a ‘denationalised’ (p.109) Italian restaurant, which is at once a symbol of fraud and hybridity: ‘the patrons of the place had lost in their frequentation of fraudulent cookery all their national and private characteristics. And this was strange, since the Italian restaurant is such a peculiarly British institution’ (*ibid.*). But as with the Assistant Commissioner himself, there is something British about the Italian restaurant, suggesting that in its multiculturalism, Britain has somehow made the foreign a part of its own identity (see also Chapter Four). This play with notions of hybridity and authenticity is twinned by Conrad’s familiar recourse to equivocal notions of reflection and mirroring. The Italian restaurant uses ‘mirrors’ as bait to lure in customers, but we soon find the Assistant Commissioner ‘reflecting on his enterprise’ and in the process ‘losing some of his identity.’ Psychoanalysis tells us that mirrors are involved in securing our identity (Lacan 1968), however, and this resonates with the way in which this passage intertwines authenticity and hybridity. When the Assistant Commissioner catches sight of his own reflection in the glass and realises how un-British he looks, we are presented with the further possibility that he is seeing himself in the window onto the street—another liminal object separating him from the foggy,

Dickensian London to which he is about to return. We are thus offered a space that is both highly segmented and duplicated. Caught in this myriad of competing reflections, identity itself begins inexorably to dissolve. As well as symbolising duplication, the mirror evokes vanity and, with it, illusions. In losing his sense of himself, the Assistant Commissioner is also succumbing to an enthusiastic vanity, registered both in his pleasure at his own 'commendable' appearance and in his reconstruction of the various 'saving illusions' that come with taking pleasure in his own work. Redemption through work is a recurring motif in Conrad, and its resonance is hardly more ironic than in *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlow states: 'I don't like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work,—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and can never tell what it really means' (*HoD*, p.175). Marlow's dislike of work and his paradoxical sense of redemption through a process of solipsistic self-discovery 'in the work' itself is ironically doubled by the Assistant Commissioner's contrasting pleasure and loss of identity. Similarly, the 'reality' that Marlow discovers is transformed into a suitably duplicitous manifestation of vanity and saving illusion at the same time.

Meanwhile, there are two further figures lurking in the mirror in the Italian restaurant. The first is evoked in two other descriptions of the Assistant Commissioner: first, of his 'long, meagre face with the accentuated features of an energetic Don Quixote' (p.85), and then 'looking like the vision of a cool, reflective Don Quixote' (p.108). Apart from suggesting that the Assistant Commissioner is fabricating a life of illusions, Don Quixote himself is doubled—into 'energetic' and 'cool, reflective' versions. But Don Quixote is also doubled by Conrad himself, whose shares the 'long face' and moustache with an 'upwards twist' with both the Assistant Commissioner and the Don Quixote of the famous 1863 engravings by Gustav Doré. Conrad, after all, is another consummate shaper of illusions whose work creates the ersatz reality in which he finds a kind of self: Conrad the writer of English novels, *alter ego* of Josef Konrad Korzeniowski.

Although the suspicion remains that the Assistant Commissioner may be doing little more than tilting at windmills, Conrad's own adoption of a Quixotic appearance can be seen paradoxically as validating self-deceit: reality itself is alienating, and it is only by maintaining 'saving illusions' that life can be fulfilled. It seems particularly appropriate given the obvious resonances between *The Secret Agent* and *Heart of Darkness* that the Assistant Commissioner should himself be nostalgic for his early career in 'a tropical colony'

(p.74), and that Conrad should choose to signal this explicitly through his reference to the jungle at this point in the text. In the earlier novella, Marlow muses that London too 'has been one of the dark places of the earth' (*HoD*, p.138), and *The Secret Agent* bleakly suggests that not all of this darkness has lifted. Marlow, however, is not the only solipsist in *Heart of Darkness*: Kurtz also withdraws into his own disconnected world of work. Through Kurtz, the questionable relations of power that exist between Marlow and the Congolese natives and other Africans are taken to extreme levels. In *Heart of Darkness*, the landscape becomes a metaphor for these processes:

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were— No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman (*HoD*, p.186).

Exploitation and domination erupt through the geography of liberal enlightened thought that had originally motivated Kurtz, and their aftershocks, which permeate *The Secret Agent*, remind us that they are not erased by liberal democracy, but remain submerged beneath the tectonic plates of liberal institutions and British culture.

Conrad's personal 'saving illusion' is also implicated in the corruption that exists beneath the liberal institutions of *The Secret Agent*. As suggested above, the Assistant Commissioner is cast as a Quixotic knight errant, but one motivated primarily by social advancement and the desire for marital ease to solve the case of the bombing with minimum inconvenience to the 'lady patroness of Michaelis [...] one of the most influential and distinguished connections of the Assistant Commissioner's wife' (p.77). Though Michaelis is innocent of any connection to the crime, Inspector Heat, who is directly responsible for the case, wishes to implicate him in it in order to manage public opinion (p.84). His superior is no more motivated by an unalloyed desire for the truth, but is concerned with the opinion of the powerful and influential rather than the public. Thus, in *The Secret Agent* those chivalric and gentlemanly codes that might otherwise support Conrad's personal illusions are exposed as supporting the networks of power and influence that exist behind liberal institutions, penetrating to the heart of individual identity itself.

Individual autonomy is the Assistant Commissioner's 'saving illusion,' alongside a sense that it is he who is doing the policing. As D. A. Miller writes in *The Novel and the Police*, policing is a 'less visible, less visibly violent mode of "social control"' that operates in the private and domestic sphere on which the very identity of the liberal subject depends (1988, pp.viii–ix). For Miller, the nineteenth-century novel is itself an instrument of this policing. In its failure to 'produce a stable subject in a stable world,' the novel forms 'by means of that very "failure"—a subject habituated to psychic displacements, evacuations, reinvestments, in a social order whose totalizing power circulates all the more easily for being pulverized' (1988, p.xiii). Miller's shimmering prose, adapted to the nineteenth-century world of *The Secret Agent*, describes the Assistant Commissioner extremely well, and Conrad's novel, which in its opening dedication to H. G. Wells is called 'a simple tale of the XIX century,' appears to conform to Miller's depiction of literature. The Assistant Commissioner's sense of autonomy his pleasurable freedom emerges from exactly the kind of evacuation of the self that Miller describes in relation to David Copperfield's reading:

To the last, the experience of the novel provides David's subjectivity with a secret refuge: a free, liberalizing space in which he comes into his own, a critical space in which he takes his distance from the world's carceral oppressions. Yet if, more than anything else, this secret refuge is responsible for forming David into the liberal subject, this is paradoxically because, in a sense, *he is not there*. Certainly, as Miss Murdstone might well have complained, David hides behind his books—but as Clara might have fondly observed, he loses himself in them as well (1988, p.215, original emphasis).

In the hall of mirrors that is the Italian restaurant, the Assistant Commissioner, like David, occupies a space that reflects and produces his identity, many times over, but in so doing, dissolves it. His pleasurable sense of freedom arises from his loss of identity, this paradoxical doubling and destruction of himself, becoming crucially a function not just of his illusions but of a disguise. As he looks into the mirror, he improves this subterfuge by turning up his collar and twisting up his moustache, transforming himself in the process into a double of his Quixotic creator, none other than Conrad. David Miller, in his analysis of *David Copperfield*, dwells on the doubling of himself he experienced on reading Dickens's novel, and his prose in the quotation above capitalises on this doubling to imply the impact of the novel as a disciplinary instrument which forms subjectivity even as it offers an escape from the reader's self: 'David' here is both Copperfield and Miller, and the account of a subjectivity that both hides behind and loses itself in books is both the protagonist of

Dickens's heavily autobiographical novel and also a description of the critic whose professional and personal identity is enmeshed with the novels about which he reads and writes. Miller makes much of his own secret 'seduction' by *David Copperfield*—a secret because he both reveals its existence and conceals its details (1988, p.194)—before asserting that the secret itself is essential to the formation of individual identity:

In a world where the explicit exposure of the subject would manifest how thoroughly he has been inscribed within a socially given totality, secrecy would be the spiritual exercise by which the subject is allowed to conceive of himself as a resistance: a friction in the smooth functioning of the social order, a margin to which its far-reaching discourse does not reach. Secrecy would thus be the subjective practice in which the oppositions of private/public, inside/outside, subject/object are established, and the sanctity of their first term kept inviolate. And the phenomenon of the "open secret" does not, as one might think, bring about the collapse of these binarisms and their ideological effects, but rather attests to their fantasmatic recovery (1988, p.207).

Miller is describing a secret agency that takes the form of an illusion exactly akin to the Assistant Commissioner's illusory autonomy, although rather than constituting an identity that exists in friction with 'social order,' the Assistant Commissioner's identity and actions repurpose secrecy and the 'friction' of his individuality towards eradicating resistance within the social machine. Furthermore, as this chapter argues, *The Secret Agent*, exposes modes of policing very close to Miller's conception of the nineteenth-century novel. Yet at the same time Conrad's engagement with the nineteenth century is ironic to a fault, and *The Secret Agent*, published in the first decade of the twentieth century, does not quite fit Miller's analysis because the 'totalizing power' of social order, rather than providing the invisible, 'pulverized' context that the novel's readers inhabit, is also the subject of the novel itself. The power of the 'lady patroness' is 'pulverized' just as Miller describes: it is implicit, and operates through a kind of reading. The Assistant Commissioner may read clues to solve crimes, but more crucial to the preservation of 'social order' is his reading of the implicit desires of his 'lady patroness.' Her drawing room is a 'frictionless' social and political space both owing to its norms of polite decorum and the smoothness of her implicit assertion of power via the Assistant Commissioner's anticipation of her needs. This exegesis falls into the context of a heightened awareness, itself implicit throughout *The Secret Agent*, of the significance of reading and interpreting, as exemplified in my earlier discussion of the manipulation of the press.

Yet what happens to literature, and to the reading of literature, after a nineteenth century in which the 'habituations' Miller discusses have already happened? Does this 'open secret' at the heart of *The Secret Agent* merely attest to the 'fantasmatic recovery' of 'binarisms and

their ideological effects' in spite of the novel's critique and deconstruction of the same? What is the effect of texts being read that are all too aware of this alienating process, and that in turn produce self-alienation on the part of the reader? The *Secret Agent* poses this paradigmatically modern question, but does not answer it: the readers it represents are still trapped in the nineteenth century (although the novel's own readers are not). What it does offer, though, is the suggestion that processes of individual self-alienation bring with them a kind of liberty: when he loses a little 'more of his identity,' in the Italian restaurant, the Assistant Commissioner 'had a sense of loneliness, of evil freedom. It was rather pleasant.' He is in disguise after all, and his loss of identity brings freedom because, at this moment, he is partially released from the role the social order requires him to fill. The ultimate logic of this 'evil freedom' is explored more fully in Chapter Four of this thesis, where I examine the three-way relationship between loss of identity, freedom, and suicide, but here the Assistant Commissioner is free, even if that freedom is temporary and partial. The Assistant Commissioner's professional liberty—particularly his free choice to intervene in the case to protect Michaelis—depends upon his ability to act in accordance with his patron's wishes without her explicit instruction. This is a key form of secret agency, secret because it depends upon implicit power and the Commissioner's secret actions in response: the lady patroness need never know of the threat to Michaelis because her wishes are met without her awareness of them. Her agency becomes secret even to herself.

Miller's book is preoccupied with secrets, surveillance and policing along lines that closely parallel the concerns of Conrad's novel, and it is in the two books' twinned concerns with reading that a potential answer to the questions in the previous paragraph emerges. Miller suggests that reading a novel enacts a kind of disciplinary surveillance *par excellence* whilst also reinforcing an illusion of our own freedom from such surveillance. He conceives a private space of reading that is fed by representations within the material we read of the very violence from which we are freed by this privacy—surveillance and arbitrary power in various forms. As Miller writes, it 'is built into the structure of the Novel that every reader must realize the definitive fantasy of the liberal subject, who imagines himself free from the surveillance that he nonetheless sees operating everywhere around him' (1988, p.162). For Miller, reading novels conditions readers to a reality of constant surveillance in which they are perpetrators of surveillance, but through empathic identification with the characters come to understand and accept themselves as victims also. *The Secret Agent* constitutes readers such as the Assistant Commissioner or the wider 'public' in just this way, ironically

granting them a power within the text that is subverted both by their position as the objects of our readings and, as Miller argues, by making us aware of the possibility of our own surveillance and its necessity to our identity. But there is another variety of reading as surveillance in *The Secret Agent*: the Assistant Commissioner's reading of his patroness. This is a reading that, whilst it subjects the lady patroness to a supervisory power, also asserts her power in that same relationship: her status grants her an unconscious agency that operates through her inferiors' attempts to read her, to anticipate her wishes and gain or maintain favour. This vision challenges the plausibility of liberal public/private distinctions, suggesting the penetration of private worlds by policing. It also shows the dependence of forms of privacy or secrecy upon the very kinds of scrutiny they purportedly exclude, and the dramatically different impacts such scrutiny has for those with and without social status.

### *Liberal Patriarchy*

The Assistant Commissioner's ease of movement between nominally 'private' and 'public' domains offers a further reminder in *The Secret Agent* that the limits between these two domains are repeatedly punctured. The two domains are nevertheless gendered spaces. As noted above, the domain in which the lady patroness presides is ostensibly a private space into which she invites public considerations for her own edification, whereas Sir Ethelred operates in the public space of parliament, and the private influence of 'his wife and girls' and wider family extends the 'numerous family and the wide connections' (p.105) of his private secretary. Furthermore, the Assistant Commissioner's patroness is subjected to a form of male gaze; regardless of its effect, her power is exercised through a man. While it is evident that class privilege is a major factor here, it is equally clear that it is far easier for men to move between public and private spaces, and the disadvantaged position of women is apparent in the requirement that their influence be mediated by male actors such as Sir Ethelred and the Assistant Commissioner.

Conrad insisted in a letter of 1923 that *The Secret Agent* was originally 'the history of Winnie Verloc' (CL8, p.165), and in his 1920 Author's Note he describes writing it as tantamount to 'telling Winnie Verloc's story to its anarchistic end of utter desolation, madness, and despair' (p.233). Robert Hampson describes *The Outcast of the Islands* in terms equally applicable to *The Secret Agent* as 'a discourse of sexuality that is marked by the woman's will-to-power, intimations of male sexual anxiety, and the association of love with death and decay' (1992, p.26). Yet the novel ends, not with the actualisation of Winnie's will-to-power, but

with its containment by Ossipon, the serial exploiter of women. Winnie may indeed be the character in the novel who comes closest to the anarchic heart of ‘desolation, madness, and despair,’ but in so doing she is a tragic character crushed by the limits of a political and social system that restricts the spaces in which women act. In this and numerous other ways, *The Secret Agent* engages deeply with the paternalism and patriarchy of liberal culture.

Winnie adopts a variety of roles in the novel. She takes responsibility for the care of both her physically disabled mother and her mentally disabled brother, while she acts as a homemaker and sexual object for her husband, Adolf Verloc. The former roles, however, essentially provide a motivation for the latter ones: her marriage to Verloc is a convenience to provide the security necessary for her family, although he mistakenly believes himself to be ‘loved for his own sake’ (p.185). Additionally, though she has feelings of filial loyalty towards her mother, her primary focus is on her brother, towards whom she is portrayed as having a sublimated maternal instinct of all-consuming proportions—‘Winnie found an object of quasi-maternal affection in her brother’ (p.6)—cast as having grown out of a childhood of paternal abuse:

It was a life of single purpose and of a noble unity of inspiration, like those rare lives that have left their mark on the thoughts and feelings of mankind. But the visions of Mrs Verloc lacked nobility and magnificence. She saw herself putting the boy to bed [...] she had the vision of the blows intercepted (often with her own head), of a door held desperately shut against a man’s rage (not for very long) [...] And all these scenes of violence came and went accompanied by the unrefined noise of deep vociferations proceeding from a man wounded in his paternal pride (p.178).

This violence, however, is not simply that of an evil man, but part of a wider pattern of systemic violence. Winnie’s abusive father’s ‘humiliation at having such a very peculiar boy for a son manifested itself by a propensity to brutal treatment; for he was a person of fine sensibilities, and his sufferings as a man and a father were perfectly genuine’ (p.29). The tone of sarcasm created by the connection between ‘brutal treatment’ and ‘fine sensibilities’ does not overwhelm his ‘perfectly genuine’ suffering, although it manages to convey a note of condemnation. But the factors underlying this domestic violence are deeply cultural, arising from an emotion that exists in relation to communal values, namely a sense of shame.

Winnie Verloc’s life, with its ‘single purpose and noble unity of vision,’ follows the pattern of tragic drama, and at this point in the novel she is like a degraded Antigone, oppressed by patriarchy and preparing to sacrifice everything for love of her dead brother. When she first discovers Stevie’s death and its cause, she is transformed into an actor on the tragic stage:

The palms of her hands were pressed convulsively to her face, with the tips of the fingers contracted against her forehead, as though the skin had been a mask which she was ready to tear off violently. The perfect immobility of her pose expressed the agitation of rage and despair, all the potential violence of tragic passions, better than any shallow display of shrieks, with the beating of a distracted head against the walls, could have done (p.156).

Here, Winnie's face becomes a tragic mask, emphasising her resemblance to Antigone and, later, a warped version of *The Bacchae's* Agave. Her facial immobility is reiterated five times before the mask drops, after which she is described as 'sorrow with a veiled face' (p.171), and later, her 'lips, composed in their usual form, preserved a statuesque immobility like the rest of her face' (p.180). Her inscrutability momentarily falters—a 'faint flush coloured Mrs Verloc's ghastly and motionless face' (p.183)—but she still dresses to go out, and again her veil makes her 'like a masked and mysterious visitor of impenetrable intentions' (p.188). Finally, when Mr Verloc attempts to expose her by dragging the veil off, he unmasks 'a still, unreadable face, against which his nervous exasperation was shattered like a glass bubble flung against a rock' (*ibid.*). Ironically, Winnie is dehumanised by her grief, either transformed into an abstraction, 'sorrow,' or a statue, or some kind of ghastly emanation of the undead. Nonetheless she is never completely inhuman; instead she is placed in a liminal space, becoming the embodiment of an emotion, a deathly representation of a human, or a personified transgression of the boundary between life and death itself. She becomes the very image of the stranger, 'a masked and mysterious visitor of impenetrable intentions,' like Dionysus in *The Bacchae*. Alternatively, she is another image of female immobilisation—a Niobe constrained by mythic violence (see Chapter One). Finally unveiled by Mr Verloc, she remains essentially *unreadable*, signalling that she has become remote not only from her husband, but also us as readers of the text. Winnie's inaccessibility culminates as a result of her having achieved an extreme form of freedom:

Mrs Verloc was a free woman. She had thrown open the window of the bedroom either with the intention of screaming Murder! Help! or of throwing herself out. For she did not exactly know what use to make of her freedom. Her personality seemed to have been torn into two pieces, whose mental operations did not adjust themselves very well to each other (p.186).

The apparently unequivocal statement, 'Mrs Verloc was a free woman,' is anything but simple in its implications, and over subsequent pages Conrad repeatedly puts it to the test. Initially, he indicates that Stevie's death has released Winnie from her maternal responsibility towards him as well as her conjugal responsibility towards Mr Verloc, but it is

then implied that she has also achieved a paradoxical existential freedom of paralysis, torn as she is between her desire to die and to bring about justice for Stevie's death. Part of this freedom involves the contemplation of suicide, which is a shattering of the absolute limits of embodiment and the individual limits of self (see also Chapters Three and Four). This particular freedom, however, exists only in the space of possibility that is created by indecision: Winnie's personality must be 'torn into two pieces,' and her agency suspended, for it to be achieved. Her freedom does not last, and we are chillingly told that her 'instinct of self-preservation recoiled from the depth of the fall' (p.187). She chooses instead to run away, and the subsequent reiteration of 'she was a free woman' becomes ironic: she 'had dressed herself thoroughly, down to the tying of a black veil over her face' (*ibid.*). In adopting the traditional garb of mourning, Winnie seems bound by convention. But the veil is ironic because she subverts its significance, its richness of meaning, using it to render herself inaccessible, and it is doubly ironic because its attitude of mourning, while appropriate to her brother's death, also anticipates her husband's. When he attempts to unmask her by forcibly removing the veil (p.188), she is declared 'unreadable.' If Winnie has stepped momentarily outside of the limits of power that define her as a woman and wife, she has become inaccessible to reading, and within this, the policing, surveillance, and imposition of social order discussed above. Yet Winnie's agency is characterised by very different kinds of secrecy to the Assistant Commissioner and his lady patroness:

In sincerity of feeling and openness of statement, these words went far beyond anything that had ever been said in this home, kept up on the wages of a secret industry eked out by the sale of more or less secret wares: the poor expedients devised by a mediocre mankind for preserving an imperfect society from the dangers of moral and physical corruption, both secret too or their kind (p.189).

If 'the dangers of moral and physical corruption' are social secrets, they are warded off by 'secret industry' and 'secret wares.' Yet the secrets to which the narrator ambiguously refers are sexual and familial in nature, for the industry and wares being exchanged are part of Winnie's 'contract with existence' (p.185), her sacrifice of romantic passion for stability and a husband who will support her and her family. So Winnie's 'secret wares' are herself, implying that her 'secret industry' is a form of prostitution. How this protects society from 'moral and physical corruption' is unclear, but the generalisation of Winnie's 'industry' into 'the poor expedients devised by a mediocre mankind for preserving an imperfect society' almost certainly means that it must be something beyond Winnie's particular circumstances. These 'poor expedients' refer perhaps to the moral and personal compromises Winnie has made—the sacrifice of

personal fulfilment for the preservation of those to whom we are socially tied—as much as the unpleasant sexual compromises, the private rather than public prostitution with which she has supported her family in a society that severely limits the ability of women to be independent. In this sense, these expedients point to a kind of enforced anti-individualism that secretly supports liberal society, thereby revealing the illiberal paradox that society, which hopes to base political life on individual liberty, is supported by practices and structures that deny certain individuals independence and freedom alike.

This paradox, however, is more than simply a contradiction which threatens individual autonomy, since the limits which constrain Winnie's ability to shape her own narrative are also the terms in which that narrative can be constructed:

There must have been something imperfect in Mrs Verloc's sentiment of regained freedom. Instead of taking the way of the door she leaned back, with her shoulders against the tablet of the mantelpiece, as a wayfarer rests against a fence. A tinge of wildness in her aspect was derived from the black veil hanging like a rag against her cheek, and from the fixity of her black gaze where the light of the room was absorbed and lost without the trace of a single gleam (p.190).

Throughout the novel, the Verloc home, a space from which Winnie now wants to escape, is also a shop selling pornography, another form of 'secret wares': 'nondescript packages in wrappers like patent medicines; closed yellow paper envelopes, very flimsy, and marked two-and-six' (p.3). The home-cum-pornography shop is a sign of the commodification of women, and its hybrid nature points to Winnie's own domestic bargain. Yet though she is dressed to leave, she eventually stays, and the house that is in so many ways the sign of her oppression literally props her up: 'she leaned back, with her shoulders against the tablet of the mantelpiece, as a wayfarer rests against a fence.' If wayfaring is a form of freedom, the fence is both a support and a restriction of passage. More than this, it can set a boundary not only for private property, but also for wilderness: it is a protection from harm. But it also effectively fences off the 'tinge of wildness' that is part of Winnie's temperament, which is 'maternal and violent' (p.178) beneath her stony exterior. The duality of Winnie's oppression and commodification is enhanced by her complicity. This can be seen in relation to the shop, where she assists in the exploitation of the customers, who, disconcerted by being sold pornography by a woman, end up buying overpriced 'marking ink' (p.4). Winnie engages in a parallel exploitation of her husband, who believes he is loved 'for his own sake' (p.185); her 'secret industry' is hidden from her husband, who engages in the exchange without understanding the terms of the transaction. This economy

of secrets is very close to D. A. Miller's understanding, discussed in the previous section, of the role of secrecy in the negotiation and constitution of individual identity and autonomy. If, as Miller states, 'secrecy would be the spiritual exercise by which the subject is allowed to conceive of himself as a resistance: a friction in the smooth functioning of the social order, a margin to which its far-reaching discourse does not reach' (1988, p.207), this is precisely the illusion of freedom that has captured Winnie's imagination, for her murder of her husband is instrumental in maintaining the 'smooth functioning of the social order'—as I will go on to show in more detail below.

Mr Verloc is not the only man in the novel who unwittingly oppresses Winnie. Her obsessive love for her brother is a kind of Stockholm Syndrome. Though tempered by paternal violence, it is also wielded by her mother, who, while painfully aware that 'Girls frequently get sacrificed to the welfare of the boys' (p.118), is still willing to do the same herself. Stevie, in fact, is the root cause of Winnie's oppression, the systemic violence that parallels the literal violence of her childhood, operating through the morality of familial duty and responsibility. If Winnie's life—her identity even—is defined by her fierce love for her brother, then it is defined also by her oppression. When the limits of patriarchal violence are stripped away, Winnie ceases to exist. Yet the gendered responsibility that drives her to be a mother to her brother also undermines her maternal role, for her full-time nurturing of Stevie, the perpetual man-child, means that she has no children of her own. Furthermore, in completing her duties as a mother towards her son, Winnie's mother is complicit not only in her daughter's commodification, but in the re-routing of her maternal instinct into a dead end.

Winnie's pseudo-child can never be reared to maturity; he is destined to remain in a state of perpetual dependency. Winnie's realisation of her freedom is also a realisation of the end of this dependency, but the result is both a sense of liberation and a temporary paralysis, crushing loss, and the subsequent desire for revenge. Winnie overcomes her immobilisation through an eruption of violence that effectively completes her freedom from her oppressive marriage and the patriarchy it represents. Yet the removal of Winnie's ties causes her world to collapse, leading finally to her suicide when Ossipon, to whose arms she flees after having murdered her husband, abandons her. Winnie's fleeting freedom brings down the force of patriarchy and she is destroyed, but lingers on in the form of an ambiguous news story, a sign of her residual power. All that remains is her marital ring: the ironic bond to her husband with its own secret history of childhood abuse and sacrifice. In Conrad's gloomy diagnosis,

the shackles that bind us, those secret expedients that preserve society, are pathological and chronic because they are also the limits that define our individuality. Winnie's secret agency proves different to that of the lady patroness, not because it functions in a radically different way—both secrets are constitutive of identity—but because secrets for the patroness are a route to power (albeit male power) while, for Winnie, they are at once the eventual route to her own self-destruction and a lasting symptom of her oppression by men.

### *Holy Terror*

Yuet May Ching frames Winnie's death as the final instance in a 'sequence of sacrificial acts' (2007, p.40) that point to a wider 'sacrificial logic' in *The Secret Agent* (2007, p.38). This is the logic of bargain and exchange, where sacrifice is offered to a god in return for a favour; but Ching finds a cannibalistic inflection of sacrifice in the novel whereby characters make an exchange in the name of a 'greater good,' but end up consuming their own humanity as they do so. This logic of substitution then triggers the 'unending series of substitutionary violences that the novel demonstrates' (2007, p.40). Here, Ching follows Avrom Fleishman, who argues that Conrad's novels are 'not reducible to political ideology' (1967, p.ix). but suggests at the same time that Conrad's novel challenges the West by locating a sacrificial logic, linked to debased cannibalism, at 'the heart of Western civilization' itself (2007, p.38). It is important to note that while Ching's reading holds surface appeal, its sacrificial logic is itself a substitute for a simplistic 'justifies the means by the ends' utilitarianism (2007, p.39), and her suggestion that *The Secret Agent* can be read as a critique of this logic while at the same time remaining un-ideological is mistaken on two counts. It is mistaken, first, because—as I have suggested above—the logic of sacrifice in the novel is tied to a further logic of limits which shows how the bonds that restrict our freedom also define the terms in which we can approach it; and, second, because these limits are ideological and political. In *The Secret Agent* ideology and politics are inescapable. Thus, when Fleishman suggests that the novel is not reducible to political ideology, he is right that it is not reducible, but wrong in so far as he assumes that political ideologies, including those that inform *The Secret Agent*, are simple conceptual schema to which we can reduce complex artefacts. This error arises from the assumption that brief descriptions of ideologies such as liberalism are in fact the ideologies themselves, when in fact they are heterogeneously embodied in artefacts and institutions, documents and actions.

I want to suggest here that Ching's 'sacrificial logic' works better if it is connected to both Benjaminian understandings of violence (see Chapter One) and Terry Eagleton's sense of 'Holy Terror,' which finds that terror, far from being a modern phenomenon, is an ancient part of Western tradition. Eagleton connects terror explicitly to freedom. He might be accused of playing fast and loose with notions of terror and terrorism when he makes a connection between political terrorism and a version of Nietzsche's dichotomy between Apollonian reason and Dionysiac ecstasy. The latter is associated with terror, broadly conceived as a proxy for 'what Slavoj Žižek, after Jacques Lacan, has called "obscene enjoyment" or horrific *jouissance*' (Eagleton 2005a, p.3).<sup>7</sup> For Eagleton, however, terrorism does not arise from this phenomenon. Instead, it exists because we 'fear the monstrous lack of being at [our] own heart' (2005a, p.140)—the 'obscene enjoyment' that is a drive towards slaughter, destruction, and self-annihilation—and project this fear onto an other that we must eject from society. As he dramatically puts it, 'Reason, faced with libidinal riot, goes berserk, as one kind of excess (anarchy) provokes another (autocracy) into being' (2005a, p.5). It is no surprise that *The Secret Agent* is a central text in Eagleton's book, and though he does not make the connection explicitly himself, his grand vision of cycles of excess is certainly a part of Conrad's novel, where Russian autocracy provokes a kind of anarchy, which then justifies another kind of oppression: the Assistant Commissioner's racist 'crusade' (p.163) against 'all the foreign political spies, police, and that sort of—of—dogs' (p.166). Furthermore, the 'monstrous lack of being' that drives us to 'self-annihilation' is integral to Winnie's own self-destruction. After the death of Stevie, who is the embodiment of Winnie's history of oppression by patriarchy and also her reason for living (see above), Winnie becomes anarchically free, and once she severs her marital ties, which are the last remaining symbol of that oppression, her identity falls to pieces.

Eagleton is not the only critic to focus on the relationship between modernism and terrorism in *The Secret Agent*. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, Deaglan Ó Donghaile writes in *Blasted Literature* (2011) of Conrad's exploitation of the 'shock' of terrorism for both political and aesthetic purposes. Ó Donghaile highlights a distinctly modern affinity between 'bombs and books,' as diagnosed by Max Nordau in his controversial 1895 study *Degeneration*, in which the category of 'degenerates' includes both terrorist and writer: 'Nordau's model of modernity as a literary and cultural crisis amplified by the interplay of

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<sup>7</sup> See for example, Žižek 2008, Part 3.

aesthetics and revolutionary ideology presents the bond between art and political chaos as the key to understanding the rot in European culture' (2011, p.5).

Yet Ó Donghaile's sense of the connection between 'bombs and books' becomes strained when it comes to dealing with the legibility of anarchist terrorism. He describes the construction of 'anarchism as an unreadable literary and political code' in turn-of-the-century fiction (2011, p.98), making 'the anarchist a charismatically unreadable subject' (2011, p.99). Conrad's work is seen as both a part of this process and a response to it. *The Secret Agent* and his earlier short story, 'The Informer' (1906), contribute to this illegibility (2011, pp.98, 114), but it is also these 'enigmatic qualities, along with anarchism's capacity to inflict "shock and alarm,"' that attract Conrad's attention to it (2011, p.99). What Ó Donghaile does not make explicit, however, is that it is the very act of writing about terrorism and anarchism that renders them legible; and, as I have suggested in relation to *The Secret Agent*, it is not illegibility but rather its *opposite* that characterises terrorism and policing: twin forms of violence which themselves depend upon metaphorical reading (and literal reading via the print media) for their political effect. Anarchy and terror, by contrast, however much they might challenge our ability to form coherent interpretations, can themselves be subsumed into various non-fictional (for example, news reportage) and fictional texts.

If Conrad, Eagleton, and Ó Donghaile all engage to varying degrees in blurring the boundaries between fiction, terrorism, and terror, other non-literary theorists such as Walter Laqueur insist on the need to define political terrorism as a distinct practice. Laqueur is particularly scathing of attempts to 'obliterate the dividing lines between various kinds of violence, or at least to belittle their importance,' suggesting that nothing can be gained from such equations (2001, p.ix), and referring witheringly to the conflation of different political uses of terror, which potentially undermines distinctions between state terror and terrorism 'from below' (*ibid.*). Laqueur does not turn his critical gaze on the even broader kinds of blurring in which this chapter (and this thesis in general) arguably engages. However, it is crucial to acknowledge—and I hope to have made the case here—that considering the *relations* between these various forms of terror and the violence associated with them is by no means the same as arguing for their *equation* or positing the equivalence of their effects.

For Laqueur, whilst terroristic activity has a long history, dating back at least to the Palestinian *sicarii* who operated between A.D. 66–73, systematic terrorism 'begins in the second half of the nineteenth century,' spreading as a result of the rise of the Enlightenment: both because as its ideals became diffused, oppressive 'conditions that had

been accepted for centuries became intolerable,' and because 'terrorist groups could hope to tackle only nonterrorist governments with any degree of confidence' (2001, p.11). Terrorism's rise thus accompanies the rise of liberalism, and its plausibility depends upon liberal political circumstances. Additionally, terrorism depends for its effect on the institution of modern media: 'The success of a terrorist operation depends almost entirely on the amount of publicity it receives [...] it is not the magnitude of the terrorist operation that counts but the publicity' (2001, p.109). It is worth noting that in this sense, terrorism, far from being illegible, depends entirely upon being read by as wide a public as possible if it is to have an impact.

Though Laqueur does not himself make the link, there is a structural similarity between his conception of terrorism and liberalism's core of pluralism. Terrorism for Laqueur is primarily an 'insurrectional strategy,' but he still adds:

Those practising it have certain basic beliefs in common. They may belong to the left or the right; they may be nationalists or, less frequently, internationalists, but in some essential respects their mental makeup is similar. They are often closer to each other than they know or would like to admit to themselves or others. And as the technology of terrorism can be mastered by people of all creeds, *so does its philosophy transcend the traditional lines between political doctrine. It is truly all-purpose and value-free* (2001, pp.4–5, my emphasis).

The italicised section above could be a definition of liberalism itself, recalling John Rawls's conception of political liberalism (see Introduction) as neutral between competing conceptions of the good. This is captured in *The Secret Agent* in the way that terrorist 'propaganda by deed' is advocated *both* by the anarchist Professor *and* by the agent of Russian autocracy, Mr Vladimir. Conrad goes further than Laqueur, however, when he has the Professor observe that the 'terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality—counter moves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical' (p.52). It is most unlikely that Laqueur would agree with the Professor's appraisal, and in any case the latter's is hardly an unbiased assessment. It therefore seems worth clarifying some distinctions, between terrorism and the terroristic in particular. From here on, I will follow Laqueur in defining *terrorism* as a specific intention on the part of minority agents to use fear-inducing violence in a strategic attempt to influence politics. However, following Conrad's own implicit distinction between anarchism and Winnie Verloc's 'anarchistic end,' I will also use the term *terroristic* to denote the impact that fear of potentially violent social and political forces has upon individual lives. More

specifically, *The Secret Agent* suggests, for example via the case of Winnie Verloc, that a terroristic force preserves the status quo. To be sure, it does not deploy bombs and assassinations, but it nevertheless works *like terrorism* by publicising subjective violence through the media to ensure that her disruption of the social order is contained. If terrorism, for Laqueur, has rarely been effective in securing its purported ends, particularly if it is geared towards achieving freedom (2001, p.viii), Winnie's fate is the result of a highly effective terroristic apparatus of policing that operates independently of the police as an institutional force.

Not all the anarchists in *The Secret Agent* are terrorists. In fact, it could be argued that none of them is: only one, Karl Yundt, is labelled as such, while the Professor, though a bomb maker, does not follow up his own initiatives. The other anarchists, Michaelis and Ossipon, limit themselves to pamphlet writing and philosophising. Ó Donghaile describes how anarchism and terrorism can easily become synonymous in the popular imagination—something that *The Secret Agent* both passively reflects on and actively undermines. Yet as Laqueur observes, though anarchism certainly went through a stage where it advocated terrorism, by the early 1890s the major anarchist publications had explicitly rejected 'propaganda by deed' (2001, p.53). Additionally, most nineteenth-century terrorism was not anarchist in motivation (2001, pp.11–13). The international anarchist conspiracy was a fiction (2001, p.14), and Conrad's novel shows some awareness of this. If the only character in the novel to be called a 'terrorist' is Yundt, his terrorism is a performance:

The all but moribund veteran of dynamite wars had been a great actor in his time—actor on platforms, in secret assemblies, in private interviews. The famous terrorist had never in his life raised personally as much as his little finger against the social edifice. He was no man of action (p.36).

Yundt is an inveterate sham, a great actor, playing the role of terrorist but taking no effective action at all. The Professor's diagnosis that terrorism is a 'form of idleness' is accurate here. Yet Yundt is closer to the Professor than the latter would like to think. Both are characterised by inaction and ribald images of futility. Yundt possesses only a 'worn-out passion, resembling in its impotent fierceness the excitement of a senile sensualist' (p.32), whilst the Professor's fearsome reputation depends upon constantly wearing a coat of explosives, controlled by a detonator whose action comically resembles an act of masturbation:

I walk always with my right hand closed round the india-rubber ball which I have in my trouser pocket. The pressing of this ball actuates a detonator inside the flask I carry in my

pocket. It's the principle of the pneumatic instantaneous shutter for a camera lens. The tube leads up——”

With a swift disclosing gesture he gave Ossipon a glimpse of an india-rubber tube, resembling a slender brown worm (p.49).

Here, the Professor is depicted as part onanist, part flasher. The self-serving nature of his terrorist performance is apparent in his passivity throughout the novel: for though he supplies the explosives that kill Stevie, he only does so at Verloc's request, and beyond this is limited to a kind of passive aggression directed at the police, whose inability to arrest him is the principal source of his inflated self-esteem. The terrorist individual emerges from *The Secret Agent* as either a sham or a narcissist too consumed in self-love to be a genuine threat to the political edifice. This magnifies Laqueur's sense of the inefficacy of terrorism, translating his sense that terrorist techniques have little impact into the Professor's worry that the 'mass of mankind [is] impervious to fear.' Whether this is correct or not is left unanswered in novel, but what is absolutely clear is that individuals are certainly not impervious. Furthermore, as Ossipon is well aware, Winnie Verloc's 'anarchistic end' is testimony to the power of terror: a specifically terroristic social and political mechanism that ironically mirrors the workings of the terrorist 'propaganda by deed.' Let me now elaborate on this by returning to the novel's final scenes.

As *The Secret Agent* draws to its close, Winnie, the loose end in the cycle of mythic violence, is metaphorically tied up as she attempts to flee the gallows. This cycle is closed by representations of state violence:

Mrs Verloc, who always refrained from looking deep into things, was compelled to look into the very bottom of this thing. She saw there no haunting face, no reproachful shade, no vision of remorse, no sort of ideal conception. She saw there an object. That object was the gallows. Mrs Verloc was afraid of the gallows (pp.195–96).

When to write of the nature of a thing invites easy censure, metaphors of depth sometimes camouflage claims of essence. This is a particular risk in claims such as Terry Eagleton's that 'when it comes to civilization, terror in the sense of barbarism goes *all* the way down' (2005a, p.14, my emphasis). Yet Winnie, like Eagleton, sees an image of terror that goes to the very bottom of things. Her fear of the gallows drives her into the arms of Ossipon, who betrays her for Verloc's money, sending her alone to the continent in a ferry on which she commits suicide. In her submission to her husband's womanising associate she loses her newfound liberty: "Where are we going to, Tom?" she asked timidly. Mrs Verloc was no longer a free woman' (p.213). I would suggest that Conrad represents this process as terroristic:

With her eyes staring on the floor, her nostrils quivering with anguish and shame, she imagined herself all alone amongst a lot of strange gentlemen in silk hats who were calmly proceeding about the business of hanging her by the neck. That—never! Never! And how was it done? The impossibility of imagining the details of such quiet execution added something maddening to her abstract terror. The newspapers never gave any details except one, but that one with some affection was always there at the end of a meagre report. Mrs Verloc remembered its nature. It came with a cruel burning pain into her head, as if the words “The drop given was fourteen feet” had been scratched on her brain with a hot needle. “The drop given was fourteen feet.” (p.196).

Not only is it ‘abstract terror’ that drives Winnie to give up her freedom, but this fear also operates using the precise techniques of terrorism: horrifying violence by anonymous perpetrators, reported in the media to achieve sufficient publicity to have an impact. In Winnie’s imagination, however, the anonymous perpetrators are not the socially dispossessed but members of the elite, ‘gentlemen in silk hats,’ and the technology deployed is not the bomb but hanging, reported euphemistically in precise numerical terms that speak of social policing in its distinctly modern disciplinary guise. Winnie fixates on this detail, repeating the statistic six times while she is on the run. At the end of the novel, Conrad blends modern discipline with terroristic publicity to create an image of punishment in Winnie’s mind, ‘scratched on her brain with a hot needle’; the journalist’s pen is transformed into an instrument of torture that drives her to give up her liberty and eventually kill herself.

More to the point, Winnie’s terrorisation by visions of the gallows follows a scene in which the political context behind her actions is expressed in distinctly liberal terminology. Her end may be ‘anarchistic’ because it involves a radical form of liberty, but close examination of the representation of freedom in this section reveals it to be inextricable from a broadly liberal politics. The groundwork for this connection is laid in the very terms with which I opened my analysis of politics in *The Secret Agent*, namely the public/private split that is at the heart of liberalism. As she is coming to terms with the news of Stevie’s death, Winnie is characteristically unresponsive to Verloc’s attempts to reach her: ‘Mrs Verloc was a woman of singularly few words, either for public or private use’ (p.178). This is a strange and jarring invasion of the terminology of political theory into the Verlocs’ domestic space, mirroring the way in which the political violence of the narrative crystallises tragically in an absurdly magnified marital spat. Partway through the episode, however, Winnie comes to the startling realisation that she no longer has any reason to stay with her husband: ‘She had her freedom. Her contract with existence, as represented by that man standing over

there, was at an end. She was a free woman' (p.185). Once again, political-theoretical language breaks through the skin of domestic drama. The main effect of this is to announce that there is significantly more here at stake than a marriage contract: Conrad is engaging with liberal social contract theory, more particularly a Hobbes-inspired sense of humans as motivated by rational self-interest. For Hobbes, 'the condition of mere nature (that is to say, of absolute liberty, such as is theirs that neither are sovereigns nor subjects) is anarchy, and the condition of war' ([1651] 1994, p.233); and this is a condition, Conrad hints, to which Winnie will eventually—however briefly—succumb.

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In Eagleton's terms, 'absolute liberty' is tantamount to 'an obscene enjoyment,' a kind of limitlessness that destroys individual identity. He also suggests that our society's projection of 'monstrous lack of being' creates imaginary *doppelgängers*, scapegoats for our own hollowness (see also Chapter One). Terrorists are created from this process and cannot be defeated directly; instead, summary justice must be done to the scapegoats themselves (2005a, p.140). At the same time, there is a specific form of social hollowness that afflicts the modern age: the hollowness of liberty, which, without divine foundation, 'is left hanging in the void' (2005a, p.68). Freedom similarly embodies the contradiction between creation and destruction, for which Eagleton uses Dionysus as a metaphor (*ibid.*). Another way of putting this would be that freedom is divided between the potentially terroristic character of absolute liberty and the internal limits imposed by liberalism (see Introduction; also Chapter One).

In light of Benjamin's notion of mythic violence (see Chapter One) as well as Eagleton's sense of Holy Terror, it seems appropriate that Winnie takes on the character of a maenad when she murders her husband: 'As if the homeless soul of Stevie had flown for shelter straight to the breast of his sister, guardian and protector, the resemblance of her face with that of her brother grew at every step, even to the droop of the lower lip, even to the slight divergence of the eyes' (p.192). If Stevie is the dismembered child Dionysus, Winnie is possessed by his spirit, and she no longer appears to recognise her husband as she moves in for the kill: 'She did not wish that man to change his position on the sofa which was very suitable to the circumstances. She succeeded. The man did not stir' (*ibid.*). This reminds us in turn of Agave, who only recognises her son Pentheus when she carries his decapitated head back into the city. This sense of disconnection is enhanced by the typically Conradian

strategy of delayed decoding. Winnie does not realise the full significance of her actions until two pages after she has stabbed Adolf Verloc. It is important not to exaggerate these mythic parallels: Verloc is Winnie's husband whereas Pentheus is Agave's son, though Stevie, for whose death Winnie is partly responsible, is in effect a surrogate son, and it is Stevie's decapitated head that she sees as she decides to kill her husband: 'Mrs Verloc closed her eyes desperately, throwing upon that vision the night of her eyelids, where after a rainlike fall of mangled limbs the decapitated head of Stevie lingered suspended alone, and fading out slowly like the last star of a pyrotechnic display' (p.191). It is clear, for example, that *The Secret Agent* is not a simple retelling of the myth of Dionysus, but at the same time Conrad's decision to name the bar in which Ossipon and the Professor regularly meet after Silenus, the foster father of Dionysus, indicates that these classical myths are an intentional point of reference in the text.

In an alternative register, we might say that Winnie has become a kind of terrorist, striking out from the injustice of Stevie's terrorist death. Stevie himself, though radicalised by Adolf Verloc, has his own history of protesting injustice. Not only does he observe of the poverty he sees in the London streets, 'Bad world for poor people' (p.126), but in a previous job, goaded by tales of 'injustice and oppression,' he sets off fireworks in his workplace in a comic prefiguration of his later, more serious involvement with terrorism (p.7). In so doing he promptly loses his job, committing a form of professional suicide that, with grim absurdity, anticipates his later actual, albeit accidental, suicide. In Eagleton's formulation, Stevie is a kind of scapegoat that produces Winnie's terrorism, whilst social injustice motivates Stevie's. But it is Winnie herself who functions as the final scapegoat, her disappearance from the social world of the novel effectively ending the cycle of violence. For Eagleton, Samuel Richardson's Clarissa is an iconic example of the scapegoat:

Rather than die in a decorous, hole-in-the-corner fashion, she puts her dying brazenly on public show, converting her violated body into a political theatre. In performing her death like a martyr, she constructs her own public sphere and turns the tables with agreeable sadism on her remorseful rapist and horror-stricken relatives. The sacrificial victim thus turns its weakness into power [...] In yielding herself up to the morbid pleasures of the death drive, drawing secret delight from the process of her own dissolution, part of Clarissa's 'obscene enjoyment' lies in bringing her victors low (2005a, pp.137–38).

Winnie is a very different kind of scapegoat, however, and Conrad's vision is much less optimistic than Eagleton's. For what follows her explosion of 'horrific *jouissance*' is not a sign of her power, but of the dominance of the status quo. Winnie's death occurs off stage,

and is reported to us via Ossipon's own guilty obsession with the story in the news, where the terrible tale of an unknown lady, whom he immediately identifies as Winnie, is told. Nobody witnesses her death, and she simply disappears: 'less than five minutes later the lady in black was no longer in the hooded seat. She was nowhere. She was gone [...] An hour afterwards one of the steamer's hands found a wedding ring left lying on the seat' (p.226). Winnie's death at first appears to resonate not with mythic violence *à la* Benjamin, but with Benjamin's portrayal of its opposite, divine violence:

Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythical violence is confronted by the divine. And the latter constitutes its antithesis in all respects. If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine violence only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood. (2007, p.297, see also Chapter One)

Winnie is annihilated bloodlessly, simply erased from existence, and with her annihilation she is not purified of her guilt, but evades the law and defies explanation. There is no way for her society to explain her death: '*An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair*' (p.224, original emphasis). Meanwhile for Ossipon, the only person capable of explaining it, Winnie's death does not provide closure but racks him with guilt, leaving his 'brain pulsating wrongfully to the rhythm of journalistic phrases. ". . . *Will hang for ever over this act. . . .*" It was inclining towards the gutter. ". . . *of madness or despair. . . .*"' (p.227). Ossipon is mentally infected, his brain putrescent, 'pulsating' and inclined 'towards the gutter,' like Philoctetes with his un-healing foot, whose whole story is unknown because it exists only in fragments. As Benjamin points out, it is impossible to identify divine violence with any certainty (2007, p.252), and this is manifest not only in the ambiguity surrounding Winnie's death, but also in the difficulty we have in establishing the hand of justice in her suicide. She dies alone and betrayed, and her punishment perhaps seems in excess of her crime. With cruel black humour, in her attempt to escape hanging, she is transformed by the news press into another Niobe figure. Though she does not suffer the gallows, '*An impenetrable mystery is destined to hang for ever*' over her suicide, as the media, who created Winnie's fear of hanging in the first place, transforms her death into another kind of imaginary suspension.

Yet there is nothing divine or just in Winnie's death; it is simply the closing of a circle of mythic violence that her betrayal by Ossipon has brought to an end. Conrad, typically, manages to transform divine violence into its opposite. On the boat to the continent, it

hardly matters if she lives or dies, as she is no longer a threat to the political or social system. Winnie's identity, which was previously forged in the crucible of patriarchal violence, now finds itself dissolved by the terroristic force of social policing. The inscrutability of her suicide fails to render her illegible; rather, her total disappearance makes it easier to label as 'madness or despair' because there is nothing to contradict the newspaper's interpretation of her death. But this is also the realm of madness because the causes of her death are the processes of a social unconscious, the power of which derives from the drawing room of the 'lady patroness,' which—with its own impenetrable logic—previously acted to protect the status quo from foreign interference (Vladimir) and potentially dangerous revelations (Verloc).

This cycle is systemic: although the novel revolves around two visceral outbursts—Stevie's death and Mr Verloc's murder—these garishly violent events are directed by institutional pressures. Winnie's obsessive maternal drive pushes Stevie into Verloc's clutches, leading to his indoctrination and death, while her murder of her husband is also driven by this same instinct, itself the result of oppressive patriarchy. Extrapolating from this, gender strongly emerges as a focal point for the novel's critique of liberalism. In *The Secret Agent*, women are confined to private space and subjected to political erasure. Whether Winnie's violence is divine or not, it is certainly suggestive of the absence of women in the political world of the novel. Moreover, gender is not the only axis of inequality in *The Secret Agent*, which is also concerned—as discussed above—with class and wealth (within each social class women are limited to the private space and if they have any influence at all, it is mediated by men of lower social status). Additionally, on the lowest rungs of the social ladder, the cab driver inflicts violence on his poor horse, whereas Mrs Neale, through her alcoholism, is forced to turn it upon her children—and herself.

The relevance of this critique to modern liberalism, which rose with feminism and has overseen its institutionalisation in legislation, changes in work practices, and greater equality for women in much of the liberal world, is debatable. Yet patriarchy is still a dominant force, both in the West and elsewhere, and the heart of the novel's critique is not an attack on institutions or legislation, but on the insidious way in which patriarchy reproduces itself in women's psyches as it does in Winnie's. This is a mythic violence enacted upon the self, because it establishes the frontiers within which the self can operate. When those limits are transgressed—when a woman becomes free as Winnie does—the full terroristic force of systemic violence is available to put an end to it. This final insight,

however, is not limited to women. Male characters, including Stevie and Mr Verloc, suffer in the novel from various forms of systemic violence, and indeed Winnie's father is himself a victim of patriarchy as well as a perpetrator. It is the power of oppressive systems of class and patriarchy to reproduce themselves, not least through individual agency, that is amongst the deepest forms of violence that *The Secret Agent* represents.

### *Conclusion*

In *The Secret Agent*, liberal political institutions are suffused with the terroristic force of society, of J. S. Mill's 'social tyranny' (see also previous chapter). Society appears to be a mass of mankind that is not impervious to fear, but rather employs terror to protect itself. Liberalism's device to protect the individual from the power of the state, namely the public/private split, is presented as in effect an obfuscation that enables the public sphere to be dominated by the private interests of those who hold or serve power—mainly 'high society' and its bourgeois satellites. Conrad is not critiquing liberal *intentions* to protect the individual from social and political power, but the *effectiveness* of its apparatus. In particular, the conceptual and institutional wall liberalism builds in its attempt to protect the individual turns instead into a weapon of social and political power. As I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter, Conrad's novel encodes these observations within a self-aware modernist text that makes *reading* a key metaphor in both its aesthetic and political activity. The boundaries liberalism erects entail a limited communication across those boundaries that *The Secret Agent* evokes in the problematic idea of reading. Modernist aesthetic doubts about texts and interpretation are mapped onto political problems of identity and communication. This suggests in turn that society perpetuates itself through acts of reading and writing that police the individual more effectively than any police force. In particular, the boundaries of privacy are enmeshed with the idea of secrecy. The liberal public/private split becomes a locus of secrets and deceit for both private individuals and public servants. Secrecy, and especially secret agency in the various forms it takes in the novel, is entangled with illegibility, and thus ideas of reading and writing become bound up with notions of knowledge, power, and identity. The concept of legibility is entangled with the political notion of legitimacy, and since social and political power in *The Secret Agent* always finds the means to reincorporate the anarchic individual into a wider narrative, Conrad's novel provides a gloomy prognosis. Secret space, which for Miller enables the illusory formation of a liberal subject conceived in opposition to social power, is rendered legible to the same

degree. Finally, *The Secret Agent* suggests that the very power the liberal subject opposes takes on the guise of mythic violence in order to constitute what autonomy and authenticity individuals possess in the first place. If mythic violence establishes inequality, *The Secret Agent* indicates that individuality, as a form of difference, reproduces it. In so doing, Conrad's novel reveals the limits of the modern liberal vision of the self, exposing the paradox that the violence from which liberal institutions would protect us is the very stuff from which we ourselves are formed.



### 3. Autonomy, chivalry, and imperialism: *Lord Jim*

#### *Introduction*

*Lord Jim*, though not explicitly concerned with liberalism, mounts a critique of its politics and philosophy on several fronts. First, it deconstructs the key liberal notion of autonomy, suggesting that our selves are determined at least as much by social and instinctual factors as by individual agency, and that individual projects of self-actualisation too easily lapse into an egotism harmful even to those closest to us. Second, it suggests that liberalism is fundamentally enmeshed with illiberal values, some of them bound up in projects of violent conquest and imperialism, and that these values ironically promote the political interests of the 'liberal' West while also undermining the very liberality used to justify its own existence. This indicates that associating liberalism too closely with notions of modernity and progress is problematic, leading to a third element: that a matrix of 'modern' and 'archaic' values is used in the novel to legitimise violent acts that masquerade as being noble and honourable in their intentions. Such false behaviour frequently operates in *Lord Jim* under the rubric of *chivalry*, and I will go on in this chapter to show how the novel's predominant mode of self-actualisation involves an intersection of chivalric and imperialist modes that are shaped by its colonial setting.

*Lord Jim* is a tangled knot of a novel. It is full of twins and parallelisms, where ideas and ideals are both confronted by and entangled with their opposites. The novel revolves around three main structural elements. Its blending of opposites is achieved primarily through a series of doubles: most importantly Jim, the novel's protagonist, and his nemesis, Gentleman Brown, but also the double suicides of Jim and Brierley (an 'ideal' seaman who presides over Jim's trial), the key locations of the *Pat-na* and *Pat-usan*, and the twin figures of Stein and the so-called 'privileged man'—two key listeners to Marlow's tale who take a special interest in Jim. Jim and Brown in particular are two sides of the same coin, reflecting different aspects of class, martial codes, imperialism, and liberalism. They are also both supreme egotists who subordinate everything to the needs of their individual identities; and though they exhibit very different kinds of selfishness, their all-consuming narcissism is destructive of both others and, ironically, themselves.

*Lord Jim* suggests how liberalism taken to its limits, be these the inner boundaries of the self, the outer boundaries of political community, or, as in *Under Western Eyes*, the idealisation of liberal values, engenders a violence destructive of both the other and the self. Brown, in particular, is the figure through which liberal ideals are turned on their heads, highlighting not so much the hollowness as the moral ambivalence of liberal ideals of freedom and equality. The entanglement of liberalism with chivalry is achieved through the combination of liberal and chivalric modes in the values and actions of the characters, as well as through an intermingling of the stylistic registers of realism and romance. More specifically, romance is used in the text to probe the ('archaic') chivalric heritage of ('modern') honour codes and gentlemanly behaviour. An important overlap in the lexicons of liberalism and chivalry emerges, focusing largely on the medieval concept of *franchise*. This overlap suggests that, far from serving democracy, liberalism can easily prop up oligarchic and feudal political systems that support the interests of the few, often in direct opposition to the many. In *Lord Jim*, the narratives of individual and political progress that are central to modern liberalism are exposed to powerful forces of sham and deceit. The burlesque of the novel's pantomime villains—Brown prominent among them—is shown to permeate all the novel's characters and interactions, undermining the possibility of integrity and the ideal of self-actualisation that are at modern liberalism's core.

Before going further, it seems important to clarify the distinction between autonomy and self-actualisation. A good place to start is the chapter in J. S. Mill's *On Liberty* devoted to 'Individuality and Well-Being': 'He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan for life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself, employs all his faculties' (2003, p.124). Though here Mill chooses to use an animal to express the opposite of self-determination, his argument is better served when he later places the natural world in a positive light: 'Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develope [*sic*] itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing' (*ibid.*). For Mill, human choice is set up as a natural process in opposition to inflexible automation. Mill casts this as a process primarily determined by 'the inward forces which make a living thing,' though his sense of development 'on all sides' hints at a responsiveness to externals. The image of a tree, though undeveloped by Mill, is effective in suggesting a body that grows in response to its environs, but that increasingly determines this location as it grows. Mill goes on to

suggest, 'A person whose desires and impulses are his own – are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture – is said to have character' (2003, p.125). Mill's sense of 'culture' is one of *self-cultivation*, and although he is clear that tradition and circumstance are powerful factors, he is also certain that it is desirable to exercise personal judgement—'choice'—with the goal of bettering the 'mental and moral' faculties (2003, pp.123–24).

Mill's notion of 'self-cultivation' includes two differentiated strands: individual autonomy and self-actualisation (see also Chapter Four). The first of these relates to the power of the individual to choose, to self-determine; the second pertains to the capacity to make real a potential conceived as being on some level inherent. The notion of self-actualisation, later popularised by Abraham Maslow, who cast it as a key component in a hierarchy of needs in 'A Theory of Human Motivation' (1943), bears a striking resemblance to Mill's formula for wellbeing. Despite a lack of scientific support, this hierarchy maintains significant cultural currency, particularly in human resources and educational spheres. Maslow describes self-actualisation in terms of 'the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to be actualized in what he is potentially' (1943, p.382). Maslow's *self-actualization* is defined in terms very similar to Mill's *self-cultivation* in so far as both involve the reification of liberal notions of wellbeing. Although the notion of self-actualisation is arguably anachronistic to *Lord Jim*, the notions underpinning it are not and, as we shall see, Jim's attempts to actualise what he believes is his potential leads not to wellbeing but to suffering, for both others and himself. Maslow's formulation is idealistic and utopian, positing an 'authentic' self constituted by the positive potentials of individuals over the impediments of circumstance and character which also make us. In this sense, Mill's notion of self-cultivation is less idealistic, especially if we choose to read 'culture' in a broad sense not entirely consistent with his actual usage.

It is clear from Mill's account of self-cultivation that he views autonomy as a significant factor in wellbeing. But the nature and possibility of autonomy are highly contested in philosophy and political theory. An influential view of autonomy is expressed by Gerald Dworkin in his 1976 essay, 'Autonomy and Behavior Control,' later presented more succinctly in *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, where he argues that 'a necessary condition for being autonomous is that a person's second-order identifications be congruent with his first-order motivations' (1988, p.15). Dworkin goes on in the later work to consider even this criterion to be too strict, substituting 'the capacity to raise the

question of whether I will identify with or reject the reasons for which I now act' (*ibid.*) as the necessary condition for autonomy. The view expressed in the former definition, however, has proved to be widely influential, describing a perspective on autonomy which requires the individual not to disavow their own actions (Buss 2002). Dworkin's reformulation is particularly relevant to *Lord Jim* because it potentially enables a restoration of Jim's autonomy. It is clear when Jim leaps from the *Patna*, thereby abandoning the ship and its passengers, that he neither agrees with his own action as morally correct, nor is able to reconcile it with his own sense of himself, his 'first-order motivations.' According to Dworkin's earlier formulation, then, Jim is not autonomous. Yet he is clearly able 'to raise the question' as to his identification with the reasons for his actions, answering it in the negative, and devoting the latter part of his life (on Patusan) to refuting his former mistake.

A variant view on autonomy that is of particular relevance to Conrad's novel chooses to foreground the ways in which people's individual autonomy depends upon the communal relations that both shape and surround their agency. Diana Brydon and William D. Coleman express this sentiment when they describe how 'autonomy, the conditions for self-determination and the conditions enabling it, cannot be divorced from communal interactions. Communities remain important forms of collectivity for generating trust and feelings of belonging and for enabling humans to engage in collective action toward chosen goals' (Brydon & Coleman 2008, p.5). This definition seems rather far from an intuitive understanding of autonomy: 'self-determination' seems to be an opposite impulse to 'collectivity,' yet, as Brydon reminds us in an earlier essay, 'Autonomy functions as a value, a regulative ideal, and a process. It is always a matter of degree, because autonomy (even at the individual level) is a social concept that governs relationships within a social world. There can be no absolute autonomy' (2004, p.694). This sense of the impossibility of 'absolute autonomy,' which retains value as a 'regulative ideal,' runs counter to Dworkin's attempts to reformulate the criteria for autonomy. While Dworkin tries (and arguably fails) to define a plausible version of autonomy that might allow individual agents to be labelled autonomous, Brydon and Coleman accept this as unattainable.

Let me return now to *Lord Jim*. *Lord Jim* considers the potentially destructive consequences of an idealised pursuit of self-cultivation. This pursuit turns out to be one of self-transformation, but also self-deceit: Jim's leap from the *Patna* shows he is no hero, but through his dogged determination and with the considerable help of his friends, he manages to transform himself into one—with catastrophic consequences. Following Mill's

definition, Jim's persistence emerges as a kind of will to autonomy, and his success in writing his own story is a measure of its possibilities. It is simple enough to demonstrate that *Lord Jim* critiques naïve notions of autonomy, but what bears deeper investigation is the extent to which it undermines Mill's broader sense of 'self-cultivation,' especially when informed by more tentative or relational reworkings of autonomy, and this is the investigative task to which I turn below.

*He was one of us: Gentleman Brown*

As becomes clear early on in the novel, the culture that informs Jim's project of self-cultivation is rooted in the traditions and values of a colonial gentlemanly class, overlapping—as is the case with Marlow—with the professional codes of the British Merchant navy. Jim's loss of his maritime certificate in the wake of the *Patna* affair, however, not only signals his ejection from the profession, but also has profoundly unsettling implications for ideas of community linked by maritime concerns. Although Marlow is obsessed with the damaging effect that Jim's cowardice will have for their community—for in his eyes Jim is 'one of us'—it becomes apparent that this community is not limited to sailors. Two key figures in the novel, Stein and the 'privileged man,' are not seamen. Stein is a colonial trader who, though dependent on the sea to support his business, is a landsman. The profession of the 'privileged man' is unclear: he is a member of Marlow's audience who expresses a particular interest in Jim with the result that Marlow sends him his final written account. What defines the audience to the 'oral' section of Marlow's tale is not an affiliation to the fellowship of the sea, but a penchant for spinning after-dinner yarns in colonial club settings:

Perhaps it would be after dinner, on a verandah draped in motionless foliage and crowned with flowers, in the deep dusk speckled by fiery cigar-ends. The elongated bulk of each cane chair harboured a silent listener. Now and then a small red glow would move abruptly, and expanding, light up the fingers of a languid hand, part of a face in profound repose, or flash a crimson gleam into a pair of pensive eyes overshadowed by a fragment of an unruffled forehead (p.31).

So Marlow's 'community' is defined at best ambiguously, with a focus on leisure and luxury. It is quite an open concept, suggesting some of the ways in which a variety of colonial settings at around the time Conrad was writing would further dissipate the increasingly porous boundaries of late-nineteenth-century class.

The values of this class might be seen, at least in part, as chivalric in nature. Values in *Lord Jim* tend to revolve around the notion of gentlemanliness, and the novel's use of genre, particularly the tone and tropes of romance, traces the roots of modern gentlemanly codes to medieval knightly virtues. Rather than valorise these virtues, however, *Lord Jim* reminds us that they are rooted in violence. As a form of legitimised banditry, knightly codes preserved and justified a feudal ruling class that provided for itself by subjugating peasants. The definition of the knight through the right to bear arms represented a monopolisation of violence by a particular class, and the feudal system relied on both potential and actual aggression. In *Lord Jim*, Jim's rule of Patusan recreates these conditions, and his conflict with Gentleman Brown strongly suggests that Jim the 'benevolent imperialist' and Brown the 'pirate' are effectively two sides of the same coin. Gentleman Brown is a parody of gentlemanliness: 'supposed to be the son of a baronet' (p.265), his alleged origins place him at the upper limit of the gentry, which corresponds closely to the knightly class from which it is descended, one rung below the ruling nobility—dukes, barons, princes—who formed the highest class in feudal Europe. Brown, however, is hardly 'noble':

He would kidnap natives, he would strip some lonely white trader to the very pyjamas he stood in, and after he had robbed the poor devil, he would as likely as not invite him to fight a duel with shot-guns on the beach, which would have been fair enough as these things go, if the other man hadn't been by that time already half-dead with fright. Brown was a latter-day buccaneer, sorry enough, like his more celebrated prototypes; but what distinguished him from his contemporary brother ruffians, like Bully Hayes or the mellifluous Pease, or that perfumed, Dundreary-whiskered, dandified scoundrel known as Dirty Dick, was the arrogant temper of his misdeeds and a vehement scorn for mankind at large and for his victims in particular. The others were merely vulgar and greedy brutes, but he seemed moved by some complex intention. He would rob a man as if only to demonstrate his poor opinion of the creature, and he would bring to the shooting or maiming of some quiet, unoffending stranger a savage and vengeful earnestness fit to terrify the most reckless of desperadoes (*ibid.*).

Brown's piracy is motivated by elitism dressed in the garb of gentlemanly conduct. He duels according to this code, 'which would have been fair enough' except for his abuse of the notion of an equal contest: he terrorises his victims, using intimidation and humiliation to unbalance the duel in his own favour. Brown practises a distinctly unchivalrous form of chivalry. Crucially, he is not one of the 'merely vulgar and greedy brutes,' but is motivated by values other than his own enrichment and rooted in a counter-intuitive sense of his own superiority. He is a bizarre perversion of a gentleman, but also a throwback, 'a latter-day buccaneer, sorry enough, like his more celebrated prototypes.' Marlow reminds us here of a lost era of piracy, when pirates roamed in the sixteenth- and

seventeenth-century West Indies. This is also the era of Drake and Raleigh, themselves no more than pirates to the Spanish. Marlow connects Brown to a tradition of which he also speaks at length in *Heart of Darkness*, a long history of colonialists and adventurers setting forth from the mouth of the Thames:

It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled—the great knights-errant of the sea. It had borne all the ships whose names are like jewels flashing in the night of time, from the *Golden Hind* returning with her round flanks full of treasure, to be visited by the Queen's Highness and thus pass out of the gigantic tale, to the *Erebus* and *Terror*, bound on other conquests—and that never returned. It had known the ships and the men. They had sailed from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erith—the adventurers and the settlers; kings' ships and the ships of men on 'Change; captains, admirals, the dark "interlopers" of the Eastern trade, and the commissioned "generals" of East India fleets. Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! . . . The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires (*HoD*, p.137).

Brown is a parody of these 'knights-errant,' who are implicated in the profound critique of imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow reminds us that the ostensibly civilising mission of empire, the 'spark from the sacred fire,' is inextricably entangled with barbarity. He also reminds that intentions far nobler than Brown's, such as John Franklin's to conquer the Northwest Passage, can end in savagery and cannibalism (Rae 2012, p.241). The troubling figure of Brown establishes a three-way connection between chivalry, imperialism, and piracy that also exposes the dark heart of colonial ideology—the banditry and savage egotism that are most obvious in endeavours such as Leopold II's Congo Free State. He also exposes Jim's own pretensions and delusions:

He a man! Hell! He was a hollow sham. As if he couldn't have said straight out "Hands off my plunder!" blast him! That would have been like a man! Rot his superior soul! He had me there – but he hadn't devil enough in him to make an end of me. Not he! A thing like that letting me off as if I wasn't worth a kick!' (p.259).

To Brown, Jim is just another pirate guarding his 'plunder,' but the parallels do not end there. As I will show later, Jim props up his own version of colonial rule with a terrorism which, albeit less murderous, is more effective than Brown's own.

*Liberal imperialists and the party of romance*

As previously suggested, *Lord Jim* is less clearly concerned with liberalism than Conrad's other political novels, yet though its engagement is oblique, its critique still cuts to the bone. One of the novel's central obsessions, as also suggested above, is with the illusive nature of autonomy. Jim's quest to fashion himself as romantic hero is shattered early in the text when he deserts the *Patna* and its cargo of pilgrims. Subsequently, he is unable to settle anywhere because, though wherever he goes he achieves moderate distinction and a measure of happiness, his past eventually becomes known in these new communities, and he feels compelled once more to flee. This leads to the prime challenge that *Lord Jim* mounts to liberal notions of autonomy. Jim's ability to flourish depends more on the attitudes of his community towards him than on his own self-knowledge; only as long as the community remains in ignorance of his cowardice can he be content. Later in the novel, when Jim has finally fled beyond the reach of his reputation to Patusan, a remote Malay community on Borneo, he comes to depend on the non-European community there for his renewed sense of himself as heroic, benevolent leader. This leads, however, to another quandary: to what extent is Jim's autonomy dependent not simply upon others, but also on instrumentalising them in order to feed his own sense of self?

Before looking at this dilemma in more detail, I want to examine the two ways that *Lord Jim* engages with liberalism more generally, suggesting how the novel is inextricably entangled with the aristocratic ideology of romance. This entanglement is expressed through the two figures of the 'privileged man' to whom Marlow narrates the later sections of the novel, and who opens up its consideration of elitism, gender, and liberal imperialism; and Stein, who provides the novel with its most explicit exploration of the possibility of authenticity. Because explorations of liberalism in *Lord Jim* are continually enmeshed with considerations of elitism and chivalry, this will also introduce the novel's engagement with romance and its chivalric politics. This entanglement is immediately apparent in the novel's standard-bearer for liberal imperialism, the 'privileged man,' who is defined exclusively in terms of his elite status and gender, and who espouses a troubling version of a 'benevolent imperialism' also advocated by nineteenth-century liberals such as J. S. Mill (see also Chapters One and Two). A relatively undeveloped figure, he is the 'only one man' of Marlow's wider audience 'who was ever to hear the last word of the story' (p.254), because he alone 'showed in interest in [Jim] that survived the telling of his story' (p.255). He receives the last part of Jim's tale in a packet from Marlow: a

collection of letters accompanying a written narrative, in contrast to the purportedly oral delivery of Marlow's tale up to this point. The novel casts him as a former colonialist, now returned home:

[H]is wandering days were over. No more horizons as boundless as hope, no more twilights within the forests as solemn as temples, in the hot quest for the Ever-undiscovered Country over the hill, across the stream, beyond the wave. The hour was striking! No more! No more! – but the opened packet under the lamp brought back the sounds, the visions, the very savour of the past – a multitude of fading faces, a tumult of low voices, dying away upon the shores of distant seas under a passionate and unconsoling sunshine (pp.254–55).

John McClure has written about the imperative in imperial romance to discover blank spaces on the map. As the British Empire became increasingly global, these spaces disappeared, and thus later examples of the genre had to discover alternative, non-geographical spaces in which to locate the possibility of romance and thereby 're-establish the conditions of an earlier moment in imperial history, a moment when the aristomilitary and aristospiritual values central to the party of romance prevailed' (1994, p.5). At first blush, the 'privileged man' seems to be a card-carrying member of the 'party of romance,' a political affiliation apparently contradictory to the progressive, democratic politics of liberalism. These 'aristomilitary and aristospiritual values' will be given more specific names later in this chapter, but even at this point *Lord Jim* suggests a fundamental community between these values and liberal ideals (see also Chapter Four). The apparent contradiction between the nostalgia of romance and the utopian progressivism of liberalism is resolved in the reverie Marlow's letter prompts in the 'privileged man,' who looks back to a time defined by a sense of possibility, a feeling (though this will not last) of the potential for endless discovery and progress: 'horizons boundless as hope [...] the hot quest for the Ever-undiscovered Country.' The privileged man's liberalism is expressed in terms that recall J. S. Mill's justification of empire. In *Considerations on Representative Democracy*, Mill supports imperial rule as a measure to bring less advanced civilisations to a point of progress where they are capable of governing themselves (1977, pp.567–68). Compare this with the following statement from the 'privileged man':

You prophesied for [Jim] the disaster of weariness and of disgust with acquired honour, with the self-appointed task, with the love sprung from pity and youth. You had said you knew so well 'that kind of thing,' its illusory satisfaction, its unavoidable deception. You said also – I call to mind – that 'giving your life up to them' (*them* meaning all of mankind with skins brown, yellow or black in colour) 'was like selling your soul to a brute.' You contended that 'that kind of thing' was only endurable and enduring when

based on a firm conviction in the truth of ideas racially our own, in whose name are established the order, the morality of an ethical progress. 'We want its strength at our backs' you had said. 'We want a belief in its necessity and its justice, to make a worthy and conscious sacrifice of our lives. Without it the sacrifice is only forgetfulness, the way of offering no better than the way to perdition.' (p.255, original emphasis).

With the phrase 'giving your life up to them,' the 'privileged man' refers to the very thing Jim has achieved: the creation of a trade colony under his own authority. The connection to Mill's 'altruistic' justification of imperial rule is thus established, along with the sense that its underlying aim is to bring 'the order, the morality of an ethical progress' to the primitive, 'brute' races. It is interesting that the 'privileged man' chooses a mercantile as well as religious metaphor to describe the communication of Western ideology, 'the truth of ideas racially our own,' alluding obliquely to the capitalist nature of early imperial ventures and the deep connections between liberalism and property, but also gesturing towards the commodification of values so important to contemporary neo-imperialism. It is worth noting that the world of *Lord Jim* is a world of trade and commerce: Jim and Marlow are members of the merchant navy, and, when Jim leaves the sea to colonise Patusan, he is re-establishing a trading outpost of Stein's company. The 'privileged man' unites the nostalgic politics of the 'party of romance' with an idealistic progressivism that aims to civilise, not eradicate, the 'brute' populations of the earth. This transaction has religious elements. The expansion of Western markets runs in parallel with the export of a creed: the privileged man's notion of selling one's soul gestures towards the language of advertising, which though anachronistic to *Lord Jim*, has links to causative senses of the verb 'to sell,' whereby a property of an object promotes its sale, that arose in the early eighteenth century. The privileged man's formulation thus unwittingly anticipates the way Jim will sell himself to the Patusan locals as an ideal of white superiority—an action to which I will return. According to this ideology, the 'brutes' do not need to be slain, because in the very process of 'selling' them Western souls, they can be turned into humans.

The 'privileged' man's liberal imperialism fits into a pattern identified by Uday Singh Mehta in his 1999 study *Liberalism and Empire*. For Mehta, liberalism arose as 'self-consciously universal as a political, ethical and epistemological creed. Yet, it had fashioned this creed from an intellectual tradition and experiences that were substantially European, if not almost exclusively national' (1999, pp.1–2). The diversity of the British Empire would challenge this tradition, but ultimately provided a testing ground for liberal universalism (1999, p.8). Liberalism is paternalistic, explicitly so in later manifestations,

but from the early nineteenth century on it was possessed of ‘a paternal posture’ (1999, p.11) that is also apparent in the imperial apologetics of Mill. The perspective of the ‘privileged man’ resonates strongly with Mehta’s sense of liberal progressivism, but the ‘ideas racially your own’ seem in discord with liberal universalism. Mehta identifies this tension, however, within liberalism itself: alongside the liberal urge to civilise, to engender progress through the autocratic rule of more ‘primitive’ societies, there is also a parallel urge in liberals such as Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville to resuscitate elitist visions from the past: ‘Roman conceptions of virtue and freedom and medieval notions of honor on a grand scale’ (Mehta 1999, p.13). Roman and medieval value systems shared a common function: the promotion of cohesion in a minority ruling class. They also provided a means of mediating membership of that class. Technically neither the Roman citizenry nor the subjects of feudal chivalry were members of a hermetically sealed unit. Though these value systems provided the criteria by which outsiders, that is ‘non-citizens’ or ‘non-knights,’ could be judged worthy of election into the elite, the decision to include or exclude was taken by members of the elite itself and was thus subject to their interests and advantage. The contemporary liberal equivalent to such practices might be notions of good governance or economic viability (see also Chapter Four), with the former in particular having much in common with the values and traditions of Western societies, which are descended of course from Roman and medieval virtues. As we shall see in *Lord Jim*, chivalric notions in particular are at the heart of the process of recognising the ‘good’ qualities of both the other and the self.

In the case of the ‘privileged man,’ however, this liberal imperialism, which is progressive and patronising in equal measure, is undermined by his assertion that ‘that kind of thing’ can too easily slip into ‘illusory satisfaction [and] unavoidable deception.’ This is not a terminal diagnosis, but rather opens up the possibility that Jim’s ‘achievements’ will eventually prove to be a sham. The lasting influence of Jim’s intervention is unclear, though at the end of the novel the prognosis is poor: Jim has been executed by Doramin, Jewel is bereft, and the pre-existing structures of power (the despotic Rajah Allang, for example, has maintained his position) are largely undisturbed. For the Bugis Malays, Jim leaves things bleaker than when he arrived; meanwhile the decrepit Doramin has lost his son Dain Waris, leaving no heir to his throne. Another question opened by the ‘privileged’ man’s doubts is the extent to which Jim’s self-actualisation is ‘illusory’ and deceptive. The extent to which the novel leaves this open as well will be a thread I take up later in this chapter.

One thing is relatively clear, though: that the views of the 'privileged man' cannot themselves be privileged in a reading of *Lord Jim*. Though he prophesied 'weariness and disgust' for Jim, it is clear that the 'privileged man' is projecting his own experiences onto Marlow's subject—he 'knew so well "that kind of thing"'—and that his attitude towards his own colonial history combines nostalgia for the 'horizons as boundless as hope' with profound disillusionment. He has returned home, where his habit is to survey a dark landscape from a latter-day turret:

His rooms were in the highest flat of a lofty building, and his glance could travel afar beyond the clear panes of glass as though he were looking out of the lantern of a lighthouse. The slopes of the roofs glistened, the dark broken ridges succeeded each other without end like sombre, uncrested waves, and from the depths of the town under his feet ascended a confused and unceasing mutter. The spires of churches, numerous, scattered haphazard, uprose like beacons on a maze of shoals without a channel (p.254).

Home is not a place of succour or a beacon of progress, for although his building is built like a lighthouse, the surrounding town is threatening and dangerous, an un-navigable 'maze of shoals.' The 'privileged man' is at sea as much as when he was trading in the colonies, but this sea is foreboding, static and frozen, its 'dark broken ridges [and] uncrested waves' never reaching their peaks. Just as his 'lighthouse' offers no light, the 'privileged man' takes as his ally the deceptive 'beacons' of the church, an institution enmeshed with the networks of power and privilege that potentially block progress. We should remember that Jim's father, the parson, is himself implicated in this process, possessing as he does 'such certain knowledge of the unknowable as made for the righteousness of people in cottages without disturbing the ease of mind of those whom an unerring Providence enables to live in mansions' (p.10). Thus, any authority the 'privileged man' might hold is washed away by his lack of insight into the darkness at his own doorstep and by his complicity with the forces that hinder progress and equality. Indeed *Lord Jim* presents a bleak account of the products of the privileged man's 'ethical progress,' in terms which remind us of Marlow's portrait of the Thames in *Heart of Darkness*, a place he dolefully reminds us 'also [...] has been one of the dark places of the earth' (1990, p.138). The darkness in *Lord Jim*, though, is contemporary, and it is not Marlow's voice that communicates these sentiments, but rather the voice of the omniscient narrator, who returns to the novel briefly to introduce the 'privileged man.'

If the 'privileged man' is a kind of fossil, clinging inertly to the very forces he should be fighting against, Stein is another relic of a bygone age. Fredric Jameson describes Stein's history as 'the story of the passing of the heroic age of capitalist expansion' (1981, p.237). Like the 'privileged man,' he is also an anomaly: Stein exists on the periphery of Marlow's community while also functioning as one of Marlow's closest associates. Stein opens up the possibility that the race to which the 'privileged man' refers is *European*. He reminds us that the chivalric tradition, from which the modern gentlemanly code has evolved, is Continental in its origins, and that class similarities, which cut across national differences, are its principal calling cards. This undermines the privileged man's assertion of 'ideals racially our own,' positing instead a cosmopolitan gentlemanliness which unites members of different tribes. Marlow seeks Stein's advice on Jim because, though he is neither English nor a sailor, he is nonetheless the novel's closest embodiment of the intersection of values and circumstances that define this gentlemanly community:

His wealth and his respectability were not exactly the reasons why I was anxious to seek his advice. I desired to confide my difficulty to him because he was one of the most trustworthy men I had ever known. The gentle light of a simple, unwearied, as it were, and intelligent good-nature illumined his long hairless face [...] It was a student's face; only the eyebrows nearly all white, thick and bushy, together with the resolute searching glance that came from under them, were not in accord with his, I may say, learned appearance [...] He was also a naturalist of some distinction or perhaps I should say a learned collector [...] The name of this merchant, adventurer, sometime advisor of a Malay sultan (to whom he never alluded otherwise than as 'my poor Mohammed Bonso'), had, on account of a few bushels of dead insects, become known to learned persons in Europe, who could have had no conception and certainly would not have cared to know anything of his life and character. I, who knew, considered him an eminently suitable person to receive my confidences about Jim's difficulties as well as my own (pp.153–54).

Though 'not exactly the reasons' Marlow seeks out Stein, 'his wealth and his respectability' are first on the list of Stein's credentials, establishing that Marlow defines his community in terms of social class, and perhaps indicating in the process that these qualities are also important to Marlow's audience. It is also possible that Stein's gentlemanly credentials are emphasised to compensate for the fact that he is not British. His liberalism, particularly, falls into a post-revolutionary Continental tradition that was of crucial importance to British liberals. In this respect, Stein contrasts with the 'privileged man,' whose echoes of Mill place him in the latter camp:

He had been born in Bavaria and when a youth of twenty-two had taken an active part in the revolutionary movement of 1848. Heavily compromised, he managed to make his escape, and at first found a refuge with a poor republican watchmaker in Trieste. From there he made his way to Tripoli with a stock of cheap watches to hawk about – not a very great opening truly, but it turned out lucky enough because it was there that he came upon a Dutch traveller – a rather famous man, I believe, but I don't remember his name. It was that naturalist who, engaging him as a sort of assistant, took him to the East (p.156).

Alongside Stein's cosmopolitan background is a crosshatched history of liberal revolutionism. The German revolutions of 1848 attempted unsuccessfully to establish liberal constitutions and parliamentary democracies. The Bavarian movement was in some ways the most successful, forcing the monarch to abdicate in favour of his son, but nevertheless achieved little lasting institutional reform. Yet when Stein migrates into the colonial setting, he becomes mired in a feudal politics that contradicts his liberal origins. He benefits from an elite privilege structurally descended from the very aristocratic institutions against which he fought in his youth. Moreover, he is adopted by a Scot and ultimately inherits 'the Scotchman's privileged position and all his stock-in-trade, together with a fortified house' (*ibid.*). Stein ends up reproducing in the colonies a version of the origins of the European aristocracy, albeit one attached to the trappings of early global capitalism. The process by which Stein comes into his inheritance is enlightening:

[The Scotchman] was a heavy man with a patriarchal white beard and of imposing stature. He came into the council-hall where all the Rajahs, Pangerans and headmen were assembled, with the Queen [...] He dragged his leg, thumping his stick, and grasped Stein's arm, leading him right up to the couch. 'Look, Queen, and you Rajahs, this is my son,' he proclaimed in a stentorian voice. 'I have traded with your fathers, and when I die he shall trade with you and your sons.' (*ibid.*).

Stein's idealistic liberalism thus matures into a fusion of aristocratic inheritance (as witnessed by an appropriate gathering of 'Rajahs, Pangerans and headmen') and capitalist trade. Stein is, at heart, a *gentleman trader*, radically different to another of Conrad's failed republican revolutionaries, Giorgio Viola from *Nostromo*, who as I will go on to discuss in the next chapter, is compromised by elitism in very different ways.

Stein's later life goes on to develop the symbolic connections between militarism, represented by the fortified house, and capitalism. Marlow describes both sides of Stein's history, suggesting some kind of equilibrium between them. But running throughout his life and exploits is Stein's true passion, entomology, which far from being a dusty process of collection and categorisation, operates first as an extension of his early heroic valour, and

later as a conduit of his philosophical, proto-existentialist concerns. The most detailed episode in Stein's history occurs when Stein himself describes how he captured his prize specimen. The tale is shot through with romance and nostalgia for lost youth, but also for a family who are notably absent from Marlow's encounters with him. Stein is summoned by a message that has purportedly been sent by his local ally, Mohammed Bonso, one of 'various pretenders to the throne' on the Queen's death. Stein's relationship with Bonso is pure romance: 'They both became the heroes of innumerable exploits; they had wonderful adventures, and once stood a siege in the Scotchman's house for a month, with only a score of followers against a whole army' (pp.156-57). In this particular episode, Stein describes leaving 'the "princess," his wife, in command' of their fortified house; before departing, 'he laughed with pleasure a little. [He] liked to see her so brave and young and strong' (pp.158-59). On his way, he is ambushed and casually defeats his seven assailants; then, at the very moment of his triumph, he catches sight of the shadow of a butterfly flitting over the dead forehead of his last defeated adversary. He catches the butterfly, which up to this point has been the object of a mystic quest:

[W]hen I opened these beautiful wings and made sure what a rare and so extraordinary perfect specimen I had, my head went round and my legs became so weak with emotion that I had to sit on the ground. I had greatly desired to possess myself of a specimen of that species when collecting for the professor. I took long journeys and underwent great privations; I had dreamed of him in my sleep, and here suddenly I had him in my fingers – for myself! In the words of the poet' (he pronounced it 'boet')–

*So halt' ich's endlich denn in meinen Händen,  
Und nenn' es in gewissem Sinne mein.'* (p.160).

Alongside the familiar trappings of the romance quest—journeys, privations, mysteries, dreams—is a scientific language of specimens, species, and recondite learning. This coupling suggests that there are irrational dimensions to ostensibly modern, scientific narratives of progress. For it is not the clear rationality of science or the utilitarian calculus of progress which leads Stein to his butterfly, but chance and obsession; and much of the bizarre quality of this episode and the dubious eccentricity that attaches to it stems from the fact that, having just fought for his life and shot three men who lie convulsing on the ground before him, Stein starts chasing butterflies. To round off his narrative, Stein quotes Goethe's *Torquato Tasso* (1790), a drama that derives from Goethe's own time at the Weimar court and deals with the struggles of the bourgeois artist in an aristocratic setting. Despite Stein's own struggles with aristocracy, he eventually comes to speak the language of romance, with its invocation of mystic origins and its queasy nostalgia for a lost heroic age.

In so doing, he demonstrates that chivalric and capitalist modes are complementary in the violent setting of colonial expansion, and emerges as a kind of ironic Renaissance Man: soldier, scientist, philosopher, and capitalist, all rolled into one.

The multifaceted figure of the Renaissance Man captures a paradoxical intersection of aristocratic and bourgeois, strongly gendered of course, and rooted in the humanistic European traditions that also define the trajectory of liberalism. Yet this figure also unites (at least in its manifestation in Stein) the qualities of the poet and mystic with those of a brutal and callous killer, and it is the catching of the butterfly which simultaneously expresses both of these sides, not only because Stein can move so swiftly from violence to reverie, but also because ultimately his prized specimens will be killed, speared to display boards, and catalogued in the service of a science that names what it destroys. Stein kills the thing he loves and puts it in a glass box so as to expand the frontiers of a knowledge defined in relation to metropolitan values: when Marlow first encounters the specimen, Stein says: 'Only one specimen like this they have in your London and then – no more. To my small native town this my collection I shall bequeath. Something of me. The best' (p.155). If Stein nods here at the tensions between colony and metropolis, his small attempt to redress some of the imbalance of power is nevertheless paternalistic and egocentric. In bequeathing his collection, he is giving of himself, but also perpetuating himself. (Additionally, he assumes that this particular part of himself is of value to his 'small native town' and will be shared by its inhabitants. 'Only one specimen like this they have in your London,' he says with obvious pride.) Seen this way, Stein's story testifies to the entanglement of liberal ideals, scientific progress, and imperial history, with a heroic tradition of personal glory coming to be redefined in the language of chivalry and romance. This story bespeaks an egotism that joins chivalric honour to liberal projects of self-actualisation, two traditions which, however deeply concerned with communal political relations, express their highest ideals in terms of individual achievements and priorities that can easily run at a tangent to the needs of the communities they purport to serve.

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I have been arguing thus far that, although *Lord Jim* cannot be said to be explicitly about liberalism, its politics are inextricably tied to liberal ideals and projects. The novel demonstrates a profound awareness of the divided nature of this politics, capturing in the figures of Stein and the 'privileged man' a number of its paradoxical drives and urges: its

impulse towards democracy and revolution, but also its tacit elitism and its tendency to reproduce the power relations it is intended to challenge; its committed progressivism, but also its inertia and its apparent inability to navigate the ‘maze of shoals without a channel’ that characterises its domestic scene. Most significantly, *Lord Jim* establishes an elitist politics whereby liberals, like the ‘privileged man,’ become blind to the fossilisation of their own privilege, or like Stein, flee failed revolutions at ‘home’ only to export rigid structures of inequality ‘abroad,’ thereby reproducing the conditions they decry—and on a global scale.

As well as doubling the ‘privileged man,’ Stein is also set up against Jim, who apparently stands in stark contrast to Stein’s presumed inflexibility and immobility. He is constantly moving, first in his semi-intuitive quest for adventure and glory, then in fleeing the dishonourable reputation that his fateful experiences on the *Patna* had earned. When Jim finally settles in Patusan, his period of seemingly constant migration at an end, he channels his energy into building a community. The progress he makes, however, is far from durable, perishing with him at the end of the novel, not least because he has constructed the community of his own imaginings entirely around himself. Jim and Stein turn out not to be different in type, but rather in the stage they use to dramatise their own ambitions. Stein’s own history in many ways anticipates Jim’s, except for the fact that Stein survives; it is the people dearest to him who perish. Marlow seems oblivious to these parallels; for him, Jim eventually becomes a model of autonomy, a hero so peerless that he effectively exists in complete isolation:

Immense! No doubt it was immense; the seal of success upon his words, the conquered ground for the soles of his feet, the blind trust of men, the belief in himself snatched from the fire, the solitude of his achievement. All this, as I’ve warned you, gets dwarfed in the telling. I can’t with mere words convey to you the impression of his total and utter isolation. I know, of course, he was in every sense alone of his kind there, but the unsuspected qualities of his nature had brought him in such close touch with his surroundings that this isolation seemed only the effect of his power. His loneliness added to his stature. There was nothing within sight to compare him with as though he had been one of these exceptional men who can be only measured by the greatness of their fame; and his fame, remember, was the greatest thing around for many a day’s journey (p.205).

The definitive factor in Jim’s transformation, in Marlow’s eyes, is ‘the solitude of his own achievement.’ With this phrase, Jim appears as a fully autonomous agent, enacting his will upon a world that eventually conforms to his own idea of it. His isolation is a function of his power, a feature of what Marlow sees as his ‘close touch with his surroundings.’ Yet these ‘surroundings’ have little to do with land: it is not the jungle that Jim cultivates in the

novel. Rather, Jim's power is over the *people* of Patusan, based on his carefully self-constructed reputation for fearlessness. Marlow does seem aware that Jim is not completely alone; his depiction is hesitant and his language couched: Jim's 'total and utter isolation' is registered as only 'an impression,' though he was 'in every sense alone of his kind.' Yet while initially acknowledging the presence of the local people, Marlow goes on to efface them. This process of erasure is arguably more a product of Marlow's perception than of Jim's actual authority; for although Jim undoubtedly holds sway over the Bugis Malays, it is Marlow who acts as the prime agent of imperial domination, crafting a story in which the people of Patusan can slip in and out of our vision depending on his own narrative needs.

Marlow ignores the obvious fact that Jim's sense of himself depends almost entirely on how he is seen by the people of Patusan; his capacity to fashion his identity as hero relies almost totally on their faith:

He was not eloquent, but there was a deep meaning in the words that followed. 'Look at these houses; there's not one where I am not trusted. Jove! I told you I would hang on. Ask any man, woman or child. . . ' He paused. 'Well, I am all right anyhow.'

I observed quickly that he had found that out in the end. I had been sure of it, I added. He shook his head. 'Were you?' He pressed my arm lightly above the elbow. 'Well then – you were right.'

There was elation and pride, there was awe almost, in that low exclamation. 'Jove!' he cried, 'only think what it is to me.' Again he pressed my arm. 'And you asked me whether I thought of leaving. Good God! I! Want to leave! Especially now after what you told me of Mr Stein's . . . Leave! Why! That's what I was afraid of. It would have been – it would have been harder than dying. No – on my word. Don't laugh. I must feel – every day, every time I open my eyes – that I am trusted – that nobody has a right – don't you know? Leave! For where? What for? To get what?' (p.187).

Far from existing in splendid isolation, Jim's whole sense of self is bound up in the community he has adopted. Yet even in this dependence there is prejudice. Jim has won the trust of the local people, but this is not quite enough for him. Even as he seeks to assert the absolute faith the community has in him, he hesitates, able to reach only the tentative conclusion that he is 'all right, anyway'; only once Marlow has affirmed that he 'had been sure' of Jim's rightness is he able to express 'elation and pride.' The final confirmation of Jim's virtue must come to him from one of his own kind, exposing a submerged racism. Jim's confidence is further boosted by Marlow's news from Stein: he now convinces himself he cannot leave, especially after Marlow tells him about Stein's offer, which involves Jim taking ownership of the trade outpost (p.188). Stein himself had previously inherited his trading title from a surrogate father, McNeil, whom Marlow mentions in the transaction, and who turns out to be yet another colonial adventurer, like himself and Jim. Stein thus

effectively passes on his own privilege, reproducing the feudal modes—transposed onto a colonial setting—that had first established him as a power in the region.

Seen in this light, what Jim builds in Patusan resembles a fiefdom more than a colony, in which Jim rules over a people defined in terms of their moral, as well as martial, weakness—thereby conveniently disguising his own. But if this neo-feudal system is able to perpetuate itself through property inheritance, it cannot do so through traditional bloodlines: the arteries of kinship. It is not insignificant that the novel's three feudal colonists, McNeil, Stein, and Jim, are all childless. McNeil and Stein both survive to elect an heir, but Jim dies before he is able to conceive a child of his own with Jewel or to find a worthy successor. Sterility is logically consistent with a political system based on an ideal of autonomy, because procreation engenders networks of dependence and encourages relational visions of the self. Thus, colonial communities on the model of Patusan are both self-deceiving and unsustainable in direct proportion to their success in creating the conditions for their leaders' autonomies. It is fitting that Marlow's unfounded assertion that Jim was 'in such close touch with his surroundings that this isolation seemed only the effect of his power' makes Jim a kind of Fisher King; while it is equally appropriate that he is responsible for the death of Dain Waris, Doramin's son and heir, for just as the Fisher King's sickness and impotence eventually rendered the land infertile, so Jim ends up by cutting off the future of the community he purports to protect.

Marlow thus forges a vision of Jim's autonomy that both depends upon the erasure of local community and results in its at least partial demise. Deconstructing the possibility of autonomy *per se* leads, however, to a conundrum. Few would argue that complete or ideal autonomy is possible, but *Lord Jim*, rather than becoming bogged down in circular debates about this, suggests that the assertion of autonomy, along with the liberal values that promote it, primarily serves the interests of Western power. The theoretical actualisation of the self in *Lord Jim* requires the practical instrumentalisation of others; the Patusan locals therefore become mere extensions of Jim's persona, a supporting cast in the unfolding drama of his self-narrative. In this sense, the model of autonomy in *Lord Jim* comes close to the relational model proposed by Brydon and Coleman. Thus, while Jim's self-cultivation (in Mill's terms) is ostensibly married to a project whereby he works to increase the autonomy of his adopted community, granting them independence from the despotic Rajah Allang, the yoking of communal self-determination to Jim's colonial leadership finally results in a diminished ability on the part of the Bugis Malays to govern themselves. *Lord Jim* does not really

question this community's internal politics—it seems happy to accept that the Patusan communities operate according to their own systems of ruling families and inheritance. What the novel does show is how Jim's intervention fatally disrupts these power structures, with the consequence that those he has tried to help occupy a weaker position subsequent to his death, achieving the opposite effect to the intent underpinning Mill's justification of imperialism.

Such a reading potentially envisions *Lord Jim* in tragic terms, but it is clear—as in Conrad's other work—that the novel contains elements of comedy as much as tragedy, and its existentialism in particular can be read as a comic sideshow. In a parody of medical consultation,<sup>8</sup> Stein explains Jim's case:

'I understand very well. He is romantic.'

He had diagnosed the case for me, and at first I was quite startled to find how simple it was; and indeed our conference resembled so much a medical consultation – Stein, of learned aspect sitting in an armchair before his desk; I, anxious, in another, facing him, but a little to one side – that it seemed natural to ask –

'What's good for it?' (p.161).

Marlow pokes fun at the situation, though (not for the first time) he seems gloriously unaware that even if Jim is the ostensible subject of their conversation, he himself is in the position of patient, suggesting that he is as much in need of treatment as Jim. Stein's diagnosis accuses Jim of romance, but Marlow is an equally guilty party. Furthermore, Marlow's recourse to medical metaphor reminds us, as John McClure counter-intuitively suggests, that romance depends on rationalisation as much as it is threatened by it, because even though it requires the spaces of the irrational and the unformed to provide its narrative location, the narrative thrust of romance arcs towards ordering and rationalising those spaces, slotting them into more or less coherent narrative form (1994, p.9). McClure reads *Heart of Darkness* as an internalisation of the unmapped territory of romance where the un-chartable mind is the boundless terrain that romance explores. This sense is developed in *Lord Jim*, with a clearer focus on the interdependence of individuals' identities. Marlow's medical metaphor, with its rationalising imperative, is rendered all the more ironic by Stein's response to his question. For Stein, the only cure for Jim's condition is death—no cure at all, and the very opposite to the purpose of medicine.

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<sup>8</sup> As attractive as the prospect is, it is unlikely that this passage is directly satirising Freud, whom Conrad allegedly refused to read: in 1921, H. R. Lenormand lent him works by Freud and reports Conrad's unwillingness to engage with them (Najder 1983, p. 460). Nevertheless, Freud's first work, *Studies in Hysteria*, which introduced the notion of the talking cure through its descriptions of Freud and Breuer's work with 'Anna O.' was published in 1895, four years before *Lord Jim*, which was published in 1899, the same year as Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

What emerges, here as elsewhere in the novel, is that the real threat to reason is not the mythic space of *romance*, but rather the subversive ironic space of *comedy*, which revels in mocking those who take pleasure in mocking others; in this particular case, it is the ‘rational’ Marlow, seeking affectionately to send up the ‘irrational’ Stein, who is himself sent up. Similar ironies attach to philosophy in the novel, especially the philosophy of existentialism. In the following, Stein’s diagnosis of Jim takes a philosophical turn:

‘We want in so many different ways to be,’ he began again. ‘This magnificent butterfly finds a little heap of dirt and sits still on it; but man he will never on his heap of mud keep still. He want to be so, and again he want to be so.’ . . . He moved his hand up, then down. . . . ‘He wants to be a saint, and he wants to be a devil – and every time he shuts his eyes he sees himself as a very fine fellow – so fine as he can never be. . . . In a dream. . . .’ [...]

‘And because you not always can keep your eyes shut there comes the real trouble – the heart pain – the world pain. I tell you, my friend, it is not good for you to find you cannot make your dream come true, for the reason that you not strong enough are, or not clever enough. *Ja!* . . . And all the time you are such a fine fellow too! (pp.161–62).

This describes Jim’s problem perceptively, but for Stein the fundamental problem is the human condition itself. Here, Stein is asserting the impossibility of authentic self-creation, because human beings cannot live up to their own unrealistic expectations of themselves. The trouble is both external and internal since neither our external circumstances nor we ourselves allow us to achieve our dreams. Yet it is these impossible dreams that also sustain us: ‘A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavor to do, he drowns [...] The way is to the destructive element submit yourself and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up’ (p.162). Stein comes close to articulating a philosophy of life but ironically, as he steps into the light, it ‘destroyed the assurance which had inspired him in the distant shadows,’ leaving him only with the tentative conclusion that we must ‘In the destructive element immerse [...] That was the way. To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream – and so – *ewig – usque ad finem*. . . .’ (p.163, original emphasis). Stein’s perspective resonates with liberal views on the diverse paths to fulfilment, but he is distinctly more pessimistic. Though our dreams sustain us, for Stein they are ultimately unattainable, and even if some versions of liberal self-actualisation (see the discussion of Rorty’s work in previous chapters) mirror this sensibility, they are characterised in contrast by optimism and hope.

There is a nostalgia to Stein's pessimism, however, which leads Marlow to conclude that Stein himself is the greatest romantic (*ibid.*). As Stein says, 'That *was* the way' (my emphasis), and Marlow goes on to describe the way in which Stein in his youth had followed his own philosophy: 'His life had begun in sacrifice, in enthusiasm for generous ideas; he had travelled very far, on various ways, on strange paths and whatever he followed it had been without faltering and therefore without shame and without regret' (*ibid.*). If, as Jameson suggests, Stein is a throwback to a bygone era (1981, p.237), there is a suggestion that this solution is somehow inadequate to the new world order. Nevertheless, Stein and Marlow go on to concoct a solution to Jim's problem, sending him to colonise Patusan, which involves exactly the kind of destructive immersion that Stein himself describes. Stein and Marlow cannot help but reproduce their own pasts in the solutions they find for Jim, their subject. There is a fundamental insight for Conrad: that dreams for the future struggle to disentangle themselves from dreams of the past. More specifically, Stein's vision of the diverse paths to fulfilment available to mankind is suffused with a romance sensibility of chivalric heroism: there are 'so many different ways to be,' but we are 'fine' fellows, an allusion to a particular set of noble aspirations notably inflected by gender and class. Stein's attitude towards diversity is not as liberal as it might appear until we remember Mehta's identification of the liberal impulse, evident in Mill and de Tocqueville, to revive 'Roman conceptions of virtue and freedom and medieval notions of honor on a grand scale' (Mehta 1999, p.13). Stein, the former liberal revolutionary, aims at fashioning a 'new' identity for Jim that is strictly limited by his relations with the past. This identity is linked to 'the morality of an ethical progress' defined, not in terms of the transformation of morals and ethics, but rather in terms of a preordained set of moral standards that we continually fail to achieve. This hints at a paradox in the notion of progress itself: to measure a change against a predetermined standard is to hold it hostage to the past, and though it is possible to define new standards, these themselves must be judged in relation to something that already exists. By this and other means, *Lord Jim* ruthlessly deconstructs the notion of origins, suggesting in its structure of repetitions and retellings that life involves patterns of infinite regress and the uncontainable confluence of contingent events. Jim's progress through life, which is frustrated at all turns by chance occurrences, is also a regression of a kind, primarily the regression to a fantasy of the past conjured through the nostalgia of ageing ideologues, like Stein, whose paternalistic good intentions simply defer Jim's disgrace while also hastening the destruction of the very community Jim works to help.

Stein's introduction to the novel sets the stage for a farce as much as a tragedy: he is a caricature who emphasises a vein of comedy that runs through the whole novel, playing the role of an eccentric psychoanalyst who resembles his own patients too much. Stein lapses into half-baked German and Latin; he bursts into laughter inappropriately; and he experiences rapid mood swings from elation to lethargy, alternating between sudden flashes of insight and inspiration and apparently overwhelming uncertainty and distress (pp.158–165). At the very moment Stein seems about to reveal the answer to Jim's problem:

With a hasty swish swish of his slippers he loomed up in the ring of faint light and suddenly appeared in the bright circle of the lamp. His extended hand aimed at my breast like a pistol; his deep-set eyes seemed to pierce through me, but his twitching lips uttered no word, and the austere exaltation of a certitude seen in the dusk vanished from his face (p.162).

Instead of providing a bolt of wisdom, the beslippered Stein stands mouthing like a goldfish. In a characteristic Conradian manoeuvre, delusions of grandeur are punctured by bathos, and potentially earth-shattering revelations simply fizzle out.

What all of this suggests is that liberal views on the diverse possibilities for self-actualisation can easily collapse into more conservative visions of the 'good' life, particularly those marked by nostalgia for a 'fine' chivalric path. Seemingly innocuous language flows in channels already cut by our feudal past, thereby preserving and redistributing aristocratic sensibilities. Stein's analysis of Jim suggests that it is particularly when an individual holds himself up to strict moral standards, when 'he wants to be a saint, and he wants to be a devil,' that these sensibilities take hold—not least because chivalric values, as well as shaping the language of liberalism and providing much of its moral impetus, have had an equally great influence on the wider moral sensibilities of the West. Such hyperbolic talk of saints and devils also hints at the absurdity of the conversation, which overlooks the material inequalities of colonial societies in its misty-eyed pursuit of abstruse existential concerns. Seen in this light, the romantic tendencies shared by Jim, Marlow, and Stein seem not only out of place, but ridiculous and egocentric, and the gap narrows between Jim in particular and his nemesis, the preposterous Gentleman Brown.

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In *Lord Jim*, Stein's diagnosis of Jim as quintessentially romantic points to the novel's multi-layered engagement with romance as a literary form. Critics have interpreted this in various ways. For Linda Dryden (2000), Conrad subverts romance in support of a workaday vision

where ‘modern heroism exists in the performance of the prosaic tasks of everyday life’ (2000, p.198). Dryden asserts that in Conrad’s work a degraded reality will always reassert primacy over the heroic and idealistic. Martin Green (1980) and Patrick Brantlinger (1988) agree that Conrad adopts an ironic approach to romance, but also suggest that in so doing he tacitly validates it. For Brantlinger, particularly, Conrad’s critique of empire risks being undermined by his elitist aesthetic project: Conrad’s subversion of imperial romance is less an attack on romance’s dubious politics than an attempt to elevate it to the status of high art (1988, p.265). Katherine Isobel Baxter (2010) reproduces this analysis, but inverts the critique by regarding Conrad’s works as ‘philosophical romances’ in the sense coined by Robert Miles in his essay ‘What is a Romantic novel?’ According to Miles, romance uses an awareness of its own fictionality to demonstrate ideology as a construct. Baxter suggests that Conrad adds to this a modernist understanding that ‘the very possibility of epistemic truth [is continually] brought into question’ (2010, p.8). Thus Conrad’s engagement with romance both critiques its reactionary politics and capitalises on its ‘self-deconstructive quality,’ developing a modernist aesthetic of doubt that ultimately serves consolatory and humanistic ends (2010, pp.148–49).

More broadly, Laura Chrisman sees romance and realism as politically intertwined in Victorian imperial romance. She follows Benita Parry (1997) in regarding the late nineteenth century as inventing a justification of imperialism where ‘the positivist and aggressive phraseology of compulsory universal modernization is joined with the anachronistic and chimerical lexicon of chivalry’ (1997, pp.230–31). She suggests in passing that Conrad shares H. Rider Haggard’s ‘fraught responses to reification’ (2000, p.6); in Conrad, as in Haggard, realism and romance are combined with the end effect that both are mystified and contained (2000, p.32). The combination of romance and realism, Chrisman suggests, eventually achieves ‘the immobilization of the reader’s social and critical agency’ (2000, p.29). John McClure, for his part, places texts such as *Heart of Darkness* within a tradition of ‘late imperial romance.’ He contrasts this development with earlier Victorian popular adventure tales, which validated the imperial project by dividing the world ‘into zones of order and disorder’ (1994, p.2). For McClure, romance needs conflict and chaos to exist:

It requires a world at war – starkly divided, partially wild and mysterious, dramatically dangerous – in order to [...] provide the pleasures more commonly associated with romance. Without unordered spaces, or spaces disordered by war, it is impossible to stage

the wanderings and disorientations, the quests and conquests and conversions, the ordeals and sacrifices and triumphs that are the stuff of romance (1994, p.3).

These later romances offer responses to the diminished sense of possibility engendered by a global empire—they attempt, that is, to create new metaphorical territories of disorder, to “open up” again spaces of otherness and mystery ostensibly mapped by empire, or to protect the few spaces still unmapped, or to suggest that imperialism in its very triumph may make available new unmapped spaces’ (1994, p.4).

Taken together, these readings of Conrad and imperial romance explicitly or implicitly describe an ideological progression from feudal to liberal values in terms of aesthetic, and particularly generic, development. Crudely speaking, romance is linked to the ‘archaic’ chivalric values of feudalism, realism to a rational utopian phase of liberalism, and modernism to a liberalism based on an awareness of plurality and epistemic uncertainty. Conrad’s political and artistic achievement is charted through the ways in which he puts these different impulses into play with one another, though critics themselves differ in ascribing his primary affiliation either to nostalgia for an aristocratic past or to visionary modernism. Adherents of the latter interpretation have focused on how modernist uncertainty is served through Conrad’s merging of contradictory realist and romance modes, deconstructing either one or both.

I agree with Parry that the language of chivalry is ‘chimerical,’ but far from being ‘anachronistic,’ as she suggests, it shifts in meaning as part of a process of language evolution. Over time, chivalric terms have altered their meanings, but they have also maintained a position at the centre of political discourse, reconfirming the cultural and political significance of the concepts themselves. This is indicative in turn of the larger processes that shape political language and institutions: the ways in which political change, redefined in terms of existing ideologies, rests on the bedrock of authority and power. To use the lexicon of postmodern liberalism, these core terms are *redescribed* as a means of shifting the conversation onto new ground, ‘by enlarging the scope of one’s favorite metaphors’ (Rorty 1989, p.44). As part of this process of redescription, liberalism has adapted the lexicon of chivalry to express some of its central tenets. The danger with this redescriptive process is that it risks frustrating genuine change, acting as an inhibitor to the progress that liberalism advocates. *Lord Jim* itself strongly suggests that, far from causing ‘the immobilization of the reader’s social and critical agency’ (Chrisman 2000, p.29), the novel’s ideological concerns animate individuals. It is not individual agency that is

immobilised in *Lord Jim*; rather, wider political and societal structures are left unaltered by Jim's altruism, rooted as it is in chivalric honour codes that paradoxically express his own egotism. Furthermore, Jim's emancipatory intent, his attempt to liberate the Bugis Malays from their oppressive relationship with the despotic Rajah Allang, ultimately renders their political community sterile just as it paves the way for his own untimely death.

### *Chivalry and the liberal inheritance of franchise*

Critical attention to chivalric values in Conrad has tended to scant on detailed consideration of their content, while, beyond general allusions to aristocracy and violence, there has been little examination of exactly what constitutes feudalism in Conrad's work. In what follows, I want to engage with some of the ways in which the core concepts used to define chivalry over its long history resurface in the imperial setting of *Lord Jim* as values that determine the interaction between Western imperial adventurers and the locals they encounter. In particular, the chivalric concept of *franchise* is central to *Lord Jim*. In its contemporary sense, the word encompasses rights and freedoms, and the perhaps inevitable exclusions that accompany these, but *franchise* was also a core element in the lexicon of chivalric ideals. Maurice Keen identifies five core values in his definitive work on the subject, *Chivalry* ([1984] 2005). These are '*prouesse, loyauté, largesse* (generosity), *courtoisie*, and *franchise* (the free and frank bearing that is visible testimony to the combination of good birth with virtue)' (2005, p.2, original emphasis). Though all five operate in the novel to varying degrees, *franchise* and *prouesse*—frankness and courage—are the most important to *Lord Jim*. Jim's frank bearing (*franchise*) apparently testifies to his membership in the community of gentlemen that is central to the novel's narrative, but Marlow is troubled by the contradiction between this frankness and the lack of courage (*prouesse*) evidenced in Jim's self-serving leap from the *Patna*. *Prouesse* is more than simply skill but encompasses bravery in battle as well, while *franchise* connects the bearing appropriate to a noble with notions of freedom, privilege and, more contemporaneously, the right to vote. It also links to modern commercial meanings relating to corporate identity and the delegation of territorial exploitation rights—significantly, Jim rules Patusan as a franchise of Stein's Trading Company. Finally, at certain points in the history of the English language, 'franchise' has been synonymous with the concept of 'liberty' itself (*OED, franchise*).

As we have seen, *Lord Jim* only considers a limited range of possibilities for self-actualisation. The novel's engagement with romance is well documented, and numerous

critics have also made clear that the values which drive it, the privileged man's 'ideas racially our own,' are predominantly those of a male elite. It is not so clear, however, that these gentlemanly values are specifically chivalric. I want to suggest that, beyond the novel's engagement with the romance genre, an analysis of the relationship between Marlow and Jim and their shared values demonstrates that the pivotal ideals upon which their friendship and identities are based are those which Keen identifies at the heart of medieval chivalry, *franchise* being the most important. It is worth noting that although there is a strong connection between the literary tradition of romance and medieval notions of chivalry, in historical terms the idea of chivalry is complex and is accompanied by its own internal debates. Craig Taylor, for example, criticises the tendency to regard chivalry as an 'analytical concept,' to be used 'in the study of contexts far removed from the chronological, geographical and social boundaries of the knightly world' (2013, p.5), suggesting that 'to define chivalry in terms of the more romantic and civilized messages that were supposedly offered by chivalric literature would be to ignore the overwhelming presence of contradictory themes in exactly the same texts, especially the powerful encouragement of violence' (2013, p.6). Nevertheless, using chivalry as an analytical term is precisely what I propose to do here, because it is in this sense that it has had the greatest impact on debates and values after the age of chivalry itself. This is not to suggest that subsequent impressions of chivalry were necessarily more coherent than medieval notions, rather that an examination of chivalric values in *Lord Jim* is revealing, and that one particular thing it reveals is the text's interaction with liberal imperialism. Additionally, I will seek to show how Conrad's text is far from ignoring violence and its close relationship to chivalry. The following analysis will take a flexible approach, focusing predominantly on *franchise*, but engaging with various other chivalric concepts that are relevant to *Lord Jim*, including some concepts not on Keen's list.

Taylor, following Richard W. Kaeuper (1999), regards *prouesse* as the main chivalric virtue: 'prowess was the real cornerstone of chivalric culture, in particular the strength and skill to knock an opponent from his horse, and to wound or kill him in a violent, physical contest' (Taylor 2013, pp.91–92). Taylor distinguishes between prowess and courage, devoting separate chapters to each, while acknowledging that together they 'were the foremost criteria for honour, glory and fame' (2013, p.92). Keen also distinguishes between prowess and courage (2005, p.81), emphasising how *prouesse* served as an umbrella term for knightly competence, including elements as diverse as simplicity, courage, piety, and rank

(2005, p.13). Of particular relevance to *Lord Jim* is Keen's analysis of a popular anonymous chivalric text, the *Ordene de chevalelrie*, which recounts how Hugh, Count of Tiberias, ordained the infidel Sultan Saladin into knighthood. For Keen, what enables this otherwise unlikely act is the two men's mutual recognition as *preudhommes*, men of prowess. Meanwhile, though Keen does not state it explicitly, another chivalric virtue, *franchise*, appears to be at work here: both Saladin and Hugh exhibit a bearing appropriate to their status, and this enables them to form a bond despite profound political, religious, and ethnic differences. Keen defines *franchise* as 'the free and frank bearing that is visible testimony to the combination of good birth with virtue' (2005, p.2). This 'free and frank bearing' is also crucial in *Lord Jim*, but what Keen does not make clear is that *franchise* is the quality that, at least superficially, confirms an individual's status as *preudhomme*. So the terms *franchise* and *prouesse* fundamentally relate to differing articulations of the same qualities: *prouesse* denotes the actuality of noble, martial virtue; *franchise*, the appearance.

*Lord Jim* is driven by *franchise*. Central to the novel are the processes of recognition and identification enabled by this exemplary chivalric virtue, which appears in the novel's recurrent references to 'frankness.' Marlow's initial fascination with Jim stems from the dramatic contrast between the unambiguous possession of *franchise* and the equally clear evidence (made manifest in his leap from the *Patna*) of his lack of *prouesse*. Similarly, Marlow identifies *franchise* as a driver in Jim's later alliance with the Bugis Malays, a race itself described as being characterised by 'frank courage' (p.194), and of his particular friendship with Dain Waris, the heir to the Bugis throne:

[T]heirs was one of these strange, profound, rare friendships between brown and white, in which the very difference of race seems to draw two human beings closer by some mystic element of sympathy. Of Dain Waris, his own people said with pride that he knew how to fight like a white man. This was true; he had that sort of courage – the courage in the open, I may say – but he had also a European mind. You meet them sometimes like that and are surprised to discover unexpectedly a familiar turn of thought, an unobscured vision, a tenacity of purpose, a touch of altruism (p.198).

As he quite often is, Marlow is deeply patronising here, his racism all too apparent in the surprise he experiences when he encounters 'tenacity' and 'altruism' in non-whites. Thus, despite the fact that Jim has achieved a close friendship of which Marlow himself would be incapable, Dain Waris is distanced from the reader of *Lord Jim* by Marlow's own inability to transcend racial boundaries in the text. It is notable that the primary virtue with which Dain Waris is identified in the text is his martial prowess. Marlow's strange notion of

'courage in the open' is suggestive of the open field of battle we associate with chivalry, but also of *franchise*, the straightforward and open demeanour that is fitting to a knight. Marlow goes on to elaborate his knightly qualities: 'Dain Waris had a proud carriage, a polished, easy bearing, a temperament like a clear flame. His dusky face, with big black eyes, was in action expressive and in repose thoughtful. He was of a silent disposition; a firm glance, an ironic smile, a courteous deliberation of manner seemed to hint at great reserves of intelligence and power' (*ibid.*). Of Keen's five core chivalric virtues, all save *largesse* are represented here, perhaps hinting at the economically subordinate position of the Malay people. But *franchise* stands front and centre: the focus of the description is on Dain Waris's 'carriage,' 'bearing,' and 'manner,' which are in turn indicative of a variety of virtues: pride, power, polish, courtesy, intelligence.

If the non-European Dain Waris seems unambiguously to possess these knightly virtues, it is ironic that Jim appears to double him whilst actually concealing a vein of cowardice that shakes Marlow's belief in these virtues, and the communal values enshrined within them, to the core. When Marlow first sees Jim, his positive qualities are immediately apparent:

This was my first view of Jim. He looked as unconcerned and unapproachable as only the young can look. There he stood, clean limbed, clean faced, firm on his feet, as promising a boy as the sun ever shone on; and, looking at him, knowing all he knew and a little more too, I was as angry as though I had detected him trying to get something out of me by false pretences. He had no business to look so sound. I thought to myself – Well if this sort can go wrong like that! (p.36).

Jim has all the *appearance* of maritime virtue, and Marlow goes on to describe in detail his qualification to make this judgement (pp.39–40). What is clear though, even from Marlow's first impressions of Jim, is that this appearance strikes at the heart of their shared profession—'if this sort can go wrong like that!' Yet it is not only Marlow's success at his work that depends on his ability to judge, but also, in the hazardous profession of the sea, his life itself: 'I would have trusted the deck to that youngster on the strength of a single glance and gone to sleep with both eyes shut – and, by Jove! it wouldn't have been safe. There are depths of horror in that thought' (p.40). Jim's appearance of virtue is so great that 'a single glance' is enough to convince Marlow of his reliability, and although the 'depths of horror' immediately remind us of the fate that threatens all sailors, Marlow also echoes Kurtz, from *Heart of Darkness*, another gentleman whose promising appearance conceals horror. This connects Jim's journey upriver to rule a local community back to Kurtz's own river-borne journey to realise his African imaginary, during which he conjures up the vision

of a society more savage than anything he finds. Kurtz's journey notoriously reaches a genocidal conclusion—'Exterminate all the brutes!'—although by this point it is unclear whether 'the brutes' are African natives or white colonists (*HoD*, p.208). Jim's imaginary is less extreme than Kurtz's, although it too is rooted in fantasies of heroism nourished by the 'light holiday literature' (p.11) he consumed as a boy.

Jim's juvenile reading material is distinctly *nautical* in nature—and thus only indirectly the source of any chivalric values. Chivalry's relevance emerges, instead, out of a recurrent concern with gentlemanly behaviour, status, and honour. Social class is a concern from the very opening of the novel, when the omniscient narrator who precedes Marlow gives an account of Jim:

Originally he came from a parsonage. Many commanders of fine merchant-ships come from these abodes of piety and peace. Jim's father possessed such certain knowledge of the unknowable as made for the righteousness of people in cottages without disturbing the ease of mind of those whom an unerring Providence enables to live in mansions (p.10).

Jim's origins introduce a second important ideological factor, religion, which is represented as propping up the social order. Conrad defines class here in terms of abode, charting a line from 'cottages,' via the 'parsonage' that defines Jim's origins, to the 'mansions' of the ruling classes whose 'ease of mind' is protected by the likes of Jim's father with his 'certain knowledge of the unknowable.' Jim's father is perhaps a fool, but he is also an effective instrument for the preservation of elite privilege. The opening depiction of Jim's lineage also exhibits an unsettling combination of apologetic and sarcastic tones: the narrator attempts to justify Jim's background; the qualifying adjective, 'fine,' indicates insecurity; and the narrator eventually undermines Jim's heritage even as he tries so hard to establish the fact that he is well bred. It is additionally clear that the gentlemanly status that the officers of the merchant navy ascribe to themselves is a decidedly intermediate social grouping. *Lord Jim* does not shed much light on the world of mansions, but instead focuses on the (upper) middle classes who transact the commerce that, in the modern world, provides for the luxury of their rulers.

To be a gentleman in *Lord Jim* is both to recognise a particular set of values and to occupy a social position. Jim achieves early advancement in his chosen career because of this:

He was gentlemanly, steady, tractable, with a thorough knowledge of his duties. And in time, when yet very young, he became chief mate of a fine ship without ever having been tested by those events of the sea that show in the light of day the inner worth of a man,

the edge of his temper and the fiber of his stuff; that reveal the quality of his resistance and the secret truth of his pretenses not only to others but also to himself (p. 14).

Jim's ability 'to look so sound' leads to rapid success but without solid foundations, and without granting him an opportunity to know himself. Jim confides in Marlow because they are both gentlemen, saying early in their acquaintance: 'Of course I wouldn't have talked to you about all this if you had not been a gentleman. I ought to have known . . . I am – I am – a gentleman too . . .' (p.102). Crucially, what enables the recognition of a gentleman, by Jim's account, is to be a gentleman too. Yet Jim's membership of this club is deeply troubling, to Marlow and others. One such is Brierly, an exemplary captain who oversees Jim's trial. Jim's case is so troubling to Brierly that he wants to pay for Jim to escape the very justice over which he (Brierly) is presiding:

I will put up two hundred rupees if you put up another hundred and undertake to make the beggar clear out early to-morrow morning. The fellow's a gentleman if he ain't fit to be touched – he will understand. He must! This infernal publicity is too shocking; there he sits while all these confounded natives – serangs, lascars, quartermasters – are giving evidence that's enough to burn a man to ashes with shame. This is abominable. Why, Marlow, don't you think, don't you feel, that this is abominable; don't you now – come – as a seaman? (pp.55–56).

Again, gentlemanliness emerges as a quality that provides a particular kind of tacit understanding, and although Brierly is well aware of Jim's transgressions, he does not disavow Jim's membership of this group. Instead, he expects that Jim will still understand the shame of being subjected to evidence from 'confounded natives'—for Brierly, then, to be a gentleman is to understand the needs and responsibilities of communal honour. Additionally, gentlemanly conduct is connected to a community of work: Brierly appeals to Marlow 'as a seaman,' though it is clear that this appeal is not inclusive of all sailors: it does not include natives or even 'quartermasters.' This officer class is particularly threatened by Jim because, as Brierly observes:

We've got all kinds amongst us – some anointed scoundrels in the lot; but, hang it, we must preserve professional decency or we become no better than so many tinkers going about loose. We are trusted [...] We aren't an organised body of men, and the only thing that holds us together is just the name for that kind of decency. Such an affair destroys one's confidence' (p.56).

Marlow also links honour to his profession, wanting Jim to 'squirm for the honour of the craft' (p.40), though it is apparent from this sentiment that he disagrees with Brierly that

the shame of an inquiry is too great to be borne. They agree, however, on Jim's membership of their class:

I watched the youngster there. I liked his appearance; I knew *his* appearance; he came from the right place; he was one of us. He stood there for all the parentage of his kind, for men and women by no means clever or amusing, but whose very existence is based upon honest faith and upon the instinct of courage. I don't mean military courage or civil courage, or any special kind of courage. I mean just that inborn ability to look temptations straight in the face – a readiness unintellectual enough, goodness knows, but without a pose – a power of resistance, don't you see, ungracious if you like but priceless – an unthinking and blessed stiffness before the outward and inward terrors, before the might of nature and the seductive corruption of men – backed by a faith invulnerable to the strength of facts, to the contagion of example, to the solicitation of ideas. Hang ideas! They are tramps, vagabonds knocking at the back-door of your mind, each taking a little of your substance, each carrying away some crumb of that belief in a few simple notions you must cling to if you want to live decently and would like to die easy! (pp.38–39).

Beyond simply qualifying as a gentleman, Jim's appearance is so 'sound' that he becomes representative of the gentlemanly class. At the same time, this class that Jim supposedly represents is presented to us in terms that remind us more of Jim's failings than his qualities. Still, in facing the inquiry and in his subsequent dogged refusal to accept an image of himself as a coward, Jim does demonstrate 'a faith invulnerable to the strength of facts.' Marlow's definition of the gentlemanly class, and of gentlemanly courage itself, may be inadequate to the task of accounting for Jim, but Jim still possesses some qualities drawn from the set of family resemblances that define gentlemanliness to both Marlow and Brierly. What Marlow also makes clear is that *appearance* is the key factor, not in defining the group, but in establishing membership of it. In chivalric terms, it is Jim's *franchise*—his appearance of frankness—that marks him as a gentleman:

And all the time I had before me these blue, boyish eyes looking straight into mine, this young face, these capable shoulders, the open bronzed forehead with a white line under the roots of clustering fair hair, this appearance appealing at sight to all my sympathies: this *frank* aspect, the artless smile, the youthful seriousness. He was of the right sort; he was one of us. He talked soberly, with a sort of composed unreserved, and with a quiet bearing that might have been the outcome of manly self-control, of impudence or callousness, of a colossal unconsciousness, of a gigantic deception. Who can tell! (pp.63–64, my emphasis).

Again Marlow emphasises Jim's appearance, but now he defines it specifically in terms of his frankness of bearing, and his conclusion is unambiguous: 'He was of the right sort; he was one of us.' In contrast, the moral shading of Jim's frankness is not so clear: the sober manner of speaking that contributes to this *franchise* offers a variety of interpretations.

Gentlemanly conduct, like its predecessor, chivalry, is clearly subject to dispute and negotiation. For Brierly, the externals are tantamount. The appearance of gentlemanliness to outsiders makes *franchise* a quality achieved while concealing the group's failings under a veneer of reputation; Marlow, on the other hand, focuses on the intrinsic: on the 'inborn ability' that gentlemen possess. But Marlow's uncertainty regarding the interpretation of Jim's 'composed unreserve' indicates a moral ambivalence and neutrality to *franchise*, which becomes even clearer when a similar trait is displayed in Jim's encounter with Gentleman Brown, who of all the seamen in *Lord Jim* is most qualified to be designated an 'anoined scoundrel.'

Gentleman Brown exists at the outer limits of this elite, but he nevertheless benefits from a partial inclusion. A parody of a gentleman, he steals, kidnaps, and makes a mockery of the honour code by which Marlow tacitly defines his community. As demonstrated by his travesty of dueling (p.265), Brown highlights the extent to which chivalry can be seen as a code of practice that privileges particular forms of behaviour over any specific moral content, and that recalls not only a previous era of piracy, the 'knights-errant of the sea' of *Heart of Darkness*, but also the origins of the chivalric honour code to which Marlow too aspires. This code was once the practice of a warrior elite and was inapplicable to those who fell outside their particular class. Brown's behaviour aligns him with this elite group rather than with a wider tradition of common banditry:

[H]e seemed moved by some complex intention. He would rob a man as if only to demonstrate his poor opinion of the creature, and he would bring to the shooting or maiming of some quiet, unoffending stranger a savage and vengeful earnestness fit to terrify the most reckless of desperadoes' (*ibid.*).

This sense of superiority demonstrates an elite aspect to Brown's motivation that enhances its brutal and arbitrary efficiency: he wields terror in a manner inherited from a feudal elite who exercised their power over a significantly larger population.

Jim and Brown form a matched pair who together cement the significance of class in *Lord Jim*. Their appellations alone indicate that class is an important axis in the novel, as well as indicating the tension between conflicting versions of the elite. Jim's 'Lord' designates a significantly higher status than Brown's 'Gentleman,' although ironically it is Brown, as the alleged son of a baronet, who sits just outside the bounds of the peerage, whereas Jim, as the son of a parson, lies firmly in the middle class. Notably, the patrimony of both characters is established within a few pages of their respective introductions,

suggesting that though not absolutely their defining element, their class affiliations need to be established early on. Brown's credentials, however, are at least as dubious as Jim's. Not only is his near-noble birth only a matter of supposition, but his circumstances when Marlow finds him are also decidedly remote from these alleged origins. Marlow interviews Brown, who is on the verge of death from fever, in a 'wretched hovel' in Bangkok (p.260). Brown's ultimate abode evidences a more extreme destitution than the novel's original cottage to mansion spread, indicating his degradation but, more importantly, a degree of poverty in the colonies which exceeds the bounds of his homeland—as Jim will also find out. Brown, though of higher status than Jim, is far from embodying the honour by which both Jim and Marlow define their class. The irony is enhanced because, as a baronet's son, Brown falls just short of true peerage, belonging instead to the gentlemanly class and unable to use the appellation 'Lord' that Jim is granted, if only through a vagary of translation from the Malay 'Tuan' (p.10).

Brown and Jim represent different kinds of slippage down the social ladder. Jim gains entry into the gentry by nature of his gradual fall onto the lower rung of a class originally defined by nobility. Brown, on the other hand, represents a degradation of nobility itself, both in terms of his fall from title and his corruption of 'noble' values. Yet Brown's behaviour is as much a return to noble origins as a fall from grace, for his piracy is a latter-day recreation not only of the 'knights-errant of the sea,' but also of the means by which nobles extracted sustenance from those conspicuously weaker than themselves. Brown reminds us that knights were the terrorists of their day who maintained their livelihoods through the exploitation of peasants and the violent policing of their own privilege. Just as Stein has reproduced feudal modes of inheritance in the colonies, Brown attempts in straitened circumstances to reproduce knightly modes of control. When he attempts to invade Patusan, he tries to cow the locals by shooting one of them as he escapes:

The man sank flat, face down, and moved no more. 'That showed them what we could do,' said Brown to me. 'Struck the fear of sudden death into them. That was what we wanted. They were two hundred to one, and this gave them something to think over for the night. Not one of them had an idea of such a long shot before. That beggar belonging to the Rajah scouted down-hill with his eyes hanging out of his head.'

As he was telling me this he tried with a shaking hand to wipe the thin foam from his blue lips. 'Two hundred to one. Two hundred to one . . . strike terror . . . terror, terror, I tell you. . . .' (pp.279–80).

Brown's circumstances replicate those of the chivalric elite; vastly outnumbered but martially superior, their only recourse is terror, through spreading the fear of an arbitrary

‘sudden death.’ Brown’s terrorist technique is crude and direct, depending on a demonstration of superior arms combined with a show of callous ruthlessness that gives no quarter. Yet Brown is not the novel’s most effective terrorist; that title goes to Jim himself, who deploys violence in a far more sophisticated form. Jim carefully cultivates an image which gives him credibility in the eyes of his followers and strikes fear into the heart of his opponent, Rajah Allang. This is in part built on his reputation as a war leader, founded on his defeat of another power in Patusan, Sherif Ali, ‘an Arab half-breed, who [...] on purely religious grounds had incited the tribes in the interior (the bush-folk, as Jim himself called them) to rise’ (p.195). Jim’s victory gives birth to a legend that ‘gifted him with supernatural powers’ (p.201), but it is apparent that this legend grows because Jim carefully nurtures it. The opening of the Patusan narrative describes a visit by Marlow, after Jim is already well established. The first episode concerns the two men visiting Rajah Allang, who remains the main threat to Jim’s domination in the region:

That is where and how he received us when, accompanied by Jim, I paid him a visit of ceremony. There were about forty people in the room and perhaps three times as many in the great court-yard below. There was constant movement, coming and going, pushing and murmuring, at our backs. A few youths in gay silks glared from the distance; the majority, slaves and humble dependents, were half naked, in ragged sarongs, dirty with ashes and mud-stains. I had never seen Jim look so grave, so self-possessed, in an impenetrable, impressive way. In the midst of these dark-faced men, his stalwart figure in white apparel, the gleaming clusters of his fair hair, seemed to catch all the sunshine that trickled through the cracks in the closed shutters of that dim hall, with its walls of mats and a roof of thatch. He appeared like a creature not only of another kind but of another essence (p.174).

Though the odds are not quite two hundred to one, Marlow is at pains to emphasise how outnumbered they are, though ‘the majority, slaves and humble dependents’ pose little threat. It is clear though that there is some danger from the glaring youths, and Jim responds to the situation by projecting a confident and stern image, calculated to enhance his difference from them, which appears to Marlow to make him ‘of another essence,’ not just of another kind. Beneath Marlow’s somewhat racist depiction of the locals lies a sense of superiority which Jim is at pains to project. His ‘white apparel’ is calculated to resuscitate the legend of the superhuman white man. In a later episode, the deliberate nature of this calculation becomes apparent. Again with Rajah Allang, Marlow and Jim are offered coffee by Allang’s executioner. Jim insists on drinking it, not in spite but because of the risk of it being poisoned:

‘But the Rajah is afraid of you abominably. Anybody can see that,’ I argued with, I own it, a certain peevishness, and all the time watching anxiously for the first twist of some sort of ghastly colic. I was awfully disgusted. ‘If I am to do any good here and preserve my position,’ he said, taking his seat by my side in the boat, ‘I must stand the risk. I take it once every month, at least. Many people trust me to do that – for them. Afraid of me. That’s just it. Most likely he is afraid of me because I am not afraid of his coffee.’ (p.190).

Here, Jim projects an image of racial superiority as a means to terrorise Rajah Allang, whose main ‘fall guy’ role in the novel appears to be to collapse in apoplectic fear. When Jim defeats Sherif Ali, Allang’s ‘fears at first knew no bounds. It is said that at the intelligence of the successful storming of the hill he flung himself, face down, on the bamboo floor of his audience-hall and lay motionless for a whole night and a whole day’ (p.206); when Jim ‘escaped to Doramin old Tunku Allang got frightened and returned all [his] things’ (p.216); when he meets Marlow ‘he could not help showing his fear’ of Jim (p.189); and Gentleman Brown’s arrival on Patusan drives him ‘almost out of his mind with fear’ (p.281). Even when Allang takes Jim prisoner on arriving in Patusan, he ‘went nearly mad with apprehension’ because they ‘had him, but it was like getting hold of an apparition, a wraith, a portent’ (p.191). Marlow clearly relishes his caricature of Allang, which perhaps reflects his racism and love of a good yarn as much as the potency of Jim’s terrorism. Indeed, Allang is not the only local who Marlow enjoys casting in the role of superstitious craven:

Jim’s coming to that fishing village was a blessing; but to them, as to many of us, the blessing came heralded by terrors. So many generations had been released since the last white man had visited the river that the very tradition had been lost. The appearance of the being that descended upon them and demanded inflexibly to be taken up to Patusan was discomposing; his insistence was alarming; his generosity more than suspicious. It was an unheard-of request. There was no precedent. What would the Rajah say to this? What would he do to them? (pp.184–85).

It is clear that it is Jim himself who is the source of these terrors, although the uncertainty surrounding Allang’s response to Jim’s arrival is an equal concern. When Jim escapes from Allang and, having leapt from his stockade in a repeat of his jump from the *Patna*, runs through the Bugis village, ‘He was a flying terror’ (p.193). Jim’s fearful leap from the ferry is thus transformed into one that transforms him into an *embodiment* of fear. It seems obvious, but still bears saying, that *Lord Jim* is a novel about the ways that fear crafts identity; certainly, fear undermines Jim’s sense of himself and his hopes for his future while serving paradoxically as a technique in his self-cultivation as a ruling ‘Lord.’ Indeed, fear is Jim’s primary weapon, and its effect is primarily symbolic: immediately upon his

arrival in Patusan, he gives up the pistol Marlow has gifted him, which in any case he had forgotten to load. This is not to say that Jim has forsworn violence: the defeat of Sherif Ali is central to his reputation, but Jim prefers the threat of harm, the careful orchestration and management of violence that defines terrorism, as his primary means of social control (see also Chapter Two).

Brown and Jim share an intuitive understanding of terror as a technique, but they differ significantly in its execution. Brown attempts to leverage ‘a fear of sudden death,’ whereas Jim more successfully creates an image of racial superiority. This image is continuous with the chivalric notion of *franchise*, the quality which above all defines Jim as ‘one of us’ for Marlow. The fear Jim evokes stems from his projection of prowess both on and off the battlefield. He is an instrument of justice: in one episode, Solomon-like, he solves a dispute over pots that had threatened to divide a local community, leading to his vainglorious assertion that he ‘[c]ould settle the deadliest quarrel in the country by crooking his little finger’ (p.203). For Marlow, this is ‘the moral effect of his victory in war’ (*ibid.*). Jim’s use of violence is justified to Marlow in so far as it is motivated by a concern for justice. But Marlow himself is also enthralled by Jim’s image, succumbing not so much to fear as to a bizarre idealism. For Marlow, Jim comes to embody a nostalgic ideal that harks back to romance and is rooted in chivalric values:

And there I was with him, high in the sunshine on the top of that historic hill of his. He dominated the forest, the secular gloom, the old mankind. He was like a figure set up on a pedestal, to represent in his persistent youth the power, and perhaps the virtues, of races that never grow old, that have emerged from the gloom. I don’t know why he should always have appeared to me symbolic. Perhaps this is the real cause of my interest in his fate. I don’t know whether it was exactly fair to him to remember the incident which had given a new direction to his life, but at that very moment I remembered very distinctly. It was like a shadow in the light (p.200).

It is unclear whether Jim stands for a race of immortals, for those who never mature, or simply for those who die young. What is apparent, however, is that even while Marlow accepts the vision of Jim as a latter-day hero, he cannot forget the blot on his past, and ironically ‘the light’ of Jim’s achievements can only make the shadow more distinct. In addition, Jim represents ‘the power [...] of races that never grow old,’ but only ‘perhaps the virtues.’ This statuesque image of Jim highlights a commemoration of glorious achievement, but also speaks of propaganda and the often one-sided representation of memorialisation. Statues of warriors and generals rarely communicate the horrors of war,

but are fixated instead on the glory of the victors; and even while he celebrates Jim's 'persistent youth,' Marlow also evokes an image consistent with the imagery of immortality which often accompanies Jim: statues are statues because they outlast their originals, lending an everlasting presence to the dead. This paradoxical vision of Jim—forever young but a throwback to the past, emerging into the light but always tainted by the shadow—captures the duality of the 'progress' he symbolically represents. His beneficent colonialism, ideologically consistent with the imperialism of the 'privileged man' and, beyond him, liberals like Mill, cannot escape the terrors of the past, those 'ideas racially our own' which have evolved via a history of violent exploitation. This assertion is crystallised through Jim's doubling in Brown, which highlights that Jim's 'enlightened' attitude is little more than 'hollow sham.' Even if we accept Jim's good intentions and put his failures down to bad luck, Gentleman Brown will not disappear; his are the vices that haunt Jim's virtues. And even if, like Conrad, we are drawn to Jim's chivalric values, Brown reminds us that they are wide open to abuse.

Yet this shadow that enlightenment cannot erase, this past cowardice that mars Jim's present heroism, also reminds us that Marlow's judgement is unstable. We are taken back to the moment when Marlow first catches sight of Jim and cannot tolerate that Jim looks 'so sound' (p.36); when he considers how he would 'have trusted the deck to that youngster on the strength of a single glance and [...] it wouldn't have been safe!' (p.40). When Marlow looks admiringly at Jim on the Patusan hilltop, he is succumbing to another unreliable vision of Jim. In the end, Marlow succumbs to Jim's appearance, his *franchise*, but what appears as virtue to Marlow realises itself as an instrument of terror for Allang; while in the hands of Brown, processes of chivalric recognition are subjected to the bitterest forms of subversion and abuse. Jim's final downfall confirms this abuse of *franchise*, with his misplaced trust in Brown ironically leading to his own undoing. After Jim grants Brown quarter, allowing him to leave Patusan unhindered after he is defeated, Brown—in collusion with Cornelius, Stein's corrupt representative in Patusan before Jim arrived to usurp him—ambushes Dain Waris and murders him. Jim's error of judgement destroys the trust on which he depends, and he submits himself to Doramin's justice and is executed. Brown's 'frankness' is cited as one of the reasons for his trust:

It is evident that he did not mistrust Brown; there was no reason to doubt the story, whose truth seemed warranted by the rough *frankness*, by a sort of virile sincerity in accepting the morality and the consequences of his acts. But Jim did not know the almost inconceivable

egotism of the man which made him, when resisted and foiled in his will, mad with the indignant and revengeful rage of a thwarted autocrat (p.296, my emphasis).

Brown is by no means bereft of chivalric virtues: he is no coward, and he displays an alternative version of the *franchise* on which Jim also depends. However, the process of chivalric recognition is not only ineffective in identifying community between individuals, but rather constitutes a threat to the very communities it should serve. In the case of Jim, his *franchise* qualifies him as a member of Marlow's gentlemanly fellowship. Jim's threat to this band leads to a profound existential angst: this drives Marlow to go to great lengths to redeem Jim, but also drives Brierly—a 'paragon' of the class—to suicide. Similarly, Brown's possession of *franchise* enables him to discredit Jim and to do irreparable damage to the community Jim has adopted. *Franchise* thus proves doubly effective as an instrument of terror: initially deployed by Jim to intimidate Allang, it is used later by Brown to destroy the Bugis Malays' faith in Jim and to shatter their community.

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As should be clear by now, Gentleman Brown exposes the potential for sham in chivalry, both by highlighting Jim's failings and by pantomiming chivalric virtues to devastating effect. But alongside his twisted refraction of these values, he also casts a distorted reflection on liberal autonomy that implicitly suggests that liberalism and chivalry are coextensive despite the historical distance that separates them. Marlow tells us that Brown is motivated by 'a vehement scorn for mankind at large and for his victims in particular' (p.265), a form 'of evil [...] akin to madness, derived from intense egoism, inflamed by resistance, tearing the soul to pieces and giving factitious vigour to the body' (p. 259). Yet the account Brown gives of his particular reasons for attacking Patusan is revealing: 'He had done that kind of thing before – in the way of business; and this now was an absolute necessity, a question of life and death – or rather of liberty. Of liberty!' (p. 269). The attack on Patusan is a continuation of the story of Brown's escape from captivity, driven by his need for freedom above even life itself:

He was tired of his life and not afraid of death. But this man, who would stake his existence on a whim with a bitter and jeering recklessness, stood in mortal fear of imprisonment. He has an unreasoning cold-sweat, nerve-shaking, blood-to-water-turning sort of horror at the bare possibility of being locked up – the sort of terror a superstitious man would feel at the thought of being embraced by a spectre (p.267).

Brown not only represents the dark side of chivalry, then, but also a perversion of the values of liberalism. He is a passionate individualist, driven by ‘intense egoism,’ and motivated above all by a concern for freedom. His ‘liberty’ is tied to property and capital, and is achieved through the same means as his other ‘business.’ Yet Brown’s methods are in obvious contravention of liberalism’s fundamental concern with the protection of private property: in Brown, both liberalism and chivalry become entangled with their opposite and implicated with it as well. But at its root, Brown’s motivation is not liberty in any positive sense, but terror. He speaks to a liberalism which seeks to free us from chains, but which if left unchecked can simply lead to the exploitation of the weak by the strong.

It certainly makes sense, following Isaiah Berlin, to oppose Brown’s ‘negative liberty’ with the positive form that is associated with Jim as an autonomous agent, but to do so would also suggest a conceptual distinction between the two to which, despite the title of his famous essay, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty,’ Berlin himself did not entirely subscribe (2002, p.178). For Berlin, these two conceptions became distinct through a process of historical divergence, ‘not always by logically reputable steps, until, in the end, they came into direct conflict with each other’ (2002, p.179). Part of Berlin’s story of ‘positive liberty’—deeply relevant to *Lord Jim*—involves his analysis of a relational notion of self which he sees as dangerous. As Berlin describes it, when the self is posited at a social level, that is where ‘a tribe, a race, a Church, a state’ is posited as the ‘real’ self over and above the individual, this creates the conditions for oppression, which is then justified for the good of this self (2002, pp.179–80). According to Berlin, under liberalism this trajectory is guided by a belief that a rational way to govern people can be discovered, and that force is appropriate as a means to bring everyone to the realisation of this truth. The rational elite is thus justified in coercing the unenlightened mass; and the end point of this journey is ‘despotism, which turns out to be identical with freedom’ (2002, p.200). *Lord Jim* takes an opposite route to reach a very similar conclusion. Through the twinned figures of Jim and Brown, Conrad depicts the threat of the autonomous individual to the collective. Berlin notes the injustice of an individual or group achieving liberty only at the expense of the liberty of others (2002, p.172), but *Lord Jim* suggests that the pursuit of liberty, autonomy, or self-actualisation can constitute an egotism which aims at exactly such an imbalance. Indeed, egotism and individualism differ only in degree and not in kind—arguably they do not differ at all.

*A degradation of funny grimaces: irony and burlesque*

It is difficult when dealing with Conrad to draw conclusions that penetrate his veil of irony and circumvent his pervasive use of language as a tool to deconstruct itself. Brown's liberty is typical in this sense: it speaks of the deconstruction of liberalism in *Lord Jim*, enmeshing love of freedom with both the terror that Brown suffers at the prospect of its loss, and himself inflicts in his attempts to preserve it. Similarly, the autonomy that Marlow ascribes to Jim emerges as entirely contingent upon relations with the people of Patusan, and Jim's death at the hands of Doramin is simultaneously the culmination of his self-actualisation and a kind of self-destruction, with the Bugis community operating as both catalyst to Jim's achievement and eventual agent of his death (see also Chapter Four). *Lord Jim* can easily be characterised as a novel of failure, and possibly sometimes as a failure of a novel, though as Michael Greaney suggests this approach itself fails to capture the complexity of its achievement:

*Lord Jim*, too, might be said to 'fail' in its bid to deconstruct the myths of imperial adventure. Except that categorical judgements of this sort, couched in a binary language of success and failure, provide only a radically simplified understanding of the startling narrative innovations of *Lord Jim*; instead we ought to read the novel as a brilliant *transvaluation* of ideas or moral and narrative failure, in which 'embarrassing' jumps, breaks, silences, gaps, and inconsistencies are transformed into the very language of modernist fiction (2001, p.97, original emphasis).

The perspective that *Lord Jim* fails in its engagement with 'the myths of imperial adventure,' and the subsequent attempt to redeem this failure by re-identifying it as a sign of Conrad's modernism, is a generous assessment of the end of the novel, but Greaney cannot help noting the 'disappointing moral and narratological simplifications of the novel's second phase' (2001, p.80). By contrast, critics such as Linda Dryden and Katherine Isobel Baxter, who focus on Conrad's use of genre, regard the romance elements of *Lord Jim* as a strength, though they also connect this to the primacy of a modern sensibility, with Dryden suggesting that they ultimately undermine the elitist dreams of romance in favour of a 'modern heroism' of the everyday.

Yet as I have suggested above, to oppose the 'modern' and the 'archaic,' or 'modernism' and the 'romance,' is to ignore the ways in which *Lord Jim* suggests that these nominally separate elements are interdependent and entwined. According to Greaney's suggestion, the very disjunctions of the novel, the rift between realism and romance being among the widest, constitute its modernism. In a sense, *Lord Jim* is stylistically modern *through* archaism rather than *despite* archaism, deriving much of its momentum from the mutual

revitalisation of ideological narratives of ‘progress’ and ‘nostalgia.’ If chivalry is a fundamental aspect of the gentlemanly values of Marlow and Jim’s community, romance is the genre Conrad deploys to incorporate chivalry into the novel’s structure. At the same time, in its complex narrative structure, framed by an anonymous omniscient narrator and split into the *Patna* and Patusan episodes with their different generic and tonal registers, *Lord Jim* already provides the mechanism for the exposure and critique of romance. The irony of this critique cuts both ways, and the nostalgic romance of the Patusan episodes subverts elements of the first half of the novel, in particular those elements that resonate most strongly with high (modernist) literary form. What emerges is an engagement with two competing but also complementary forms of elitism. Fredric Jameson identifies ‘a nonsynchronous overlap in Conrad’s own values and experience (feudal Poland, capitalist England)’ (1981, p.217), but in *Lord Jim* these two forms of elitism coalesce in promoting the interests of the powerful: in this particular case, white gentlemen. Moreover, in *Lord Jim* liberal institutions both support capitalism and collude to conceal the older hierarchical structures of power that run in parallel with it. Liberal/chivalric collusion of this kind results in self-fragmentation, not self-actualisation; it can even issue in self-destruction. Finally, the formal elements of romance, the generic roles and tropes arising (often to be subverted) in the text—Jim as knight, Jewel as Damsel, Gentleman Brown as piratical Black Knight, etc.—interact with modernist forms in the novel to critique naïve formulations of progress.

Baxter examines some of the ways in which Conrad subversively employs romance techniques to emphasise a disjuncture between high ideals (rhetorically articulated) and the material world. For Baxter, the end game of *Lord Jim* revolves around nostalgia, not just for the lost honour of the romantic age, but also for the embodiment of these ideals beyond their traces in the narrative, which is itself a mere textual artefact ‘that can be handled and examined, like one of Stein’s specimens’ (2010, p.51). Both Jameson’s and Baxter’s interpretations pivot on a degenerative sense of historical transformation. But though radically altered, the past is a profoundly vital force in *Lord Jim*, and far from promoting an aesthetic of decay, the novel reminds us that nostalgia is possible only if we forget that the ideals we inherit from previous traditions are never manifested perfectly in reality, but are always mediated by powerful contingencies. In *Lord Jim* we may be witnesses to a degenerate present, but it is a degradation of an historical imaginary, which nostalgia renders a powerful force acting in the here and now.

Baxter goes on to assert that in *Lord Jim* we discover ‘a common paradox of romance, a paradox Conrad returns to again and again in his fiction [...] When heroic deeds are common they need no narrative, only when an age of heroism is gone do those former deeds appear in romance forms’ (Baxter 2010, p.47). Yet though *Lord Jim* partakes of romance’s aesthetic of decline, it is not nostalgic for an actual lost age, because in its deconstruction of origins it also reminds us that, like liberalism’s utopian futures, heroic pasts only exist in the nostalgic imaginary of present times. Jim’s failure stems in part from his inability to understand that the ideal heroism to which he aspires only exists in the ‘light holiday literature’ he consumes in his youth. Meanwhile, it is important to note that though medieval romance did set up the past as a model for the present, it was as much concerned with the impossibility of achieving the ideal as with suggesting that its readers could do better (Taylor 2013, p.17).

One of the cruellest ironies that Conrad inflicts upon Jim exists in the way he comes so close to achieving his impossible dream. On Patusan, Jim lives out—and eventually dies for—an unsustainable fantasy, but the irony is that had he not jumped from the *Patna* in the first place, he would not have come even close to the romantic life he leads by the novel’s close. His life as a sailor is ‘strangely barren of adventure’ (p.14), and his career choices before his disgrace are limited at best. In taking his berth on the *Patna*, Jim throws in his lot with those who ‘loved short passages, good deck-chairs, large native crews and the distinction of being white’ (p.16). Jim becomes one of those men who appear to do ‘so well on such a small allowance of danger and toil’ (*ibid.*). The accident demonstrates perhaps that opportunities for heroism can be thrust upon even the most unwilling, but it is categorically Jim’s failure to be a hero when the *Patna* founders that leads to his subsequent (if temporary) embodiment of the romantic ideal. It is his combination of disgrace and finer sensibilities that evokes Marlow’s pity, and it is Marlow in collusion with Stein who provides Jim with his real chance to be a hero.

The implausibility of Jim’s latter success, alongside those apparent ‘moral and narratological simplifications of the novel’s second phase’ identified by Greaney, are thus necessary features. Though some critics like Dryden and, before her, McClure (1981, pp.120–130) have designated *Lord Jim* as imperial romance, implying that the whole novel is indebted to the romance form, others like Jameson indicate that many readers feel ‘a tangible “break” in the narrative of *Lord Jim*, a qualitative shift and diminution of narrative intensity as we pass from the story of the *Patna* [...] to that more linear account

of Jim's later career in Patusan' (1981, pp.206–07). Jameson may well be right, but the threats to verisimilitude and narrative complexity signalled by this sense of rupture are overstated. Far from being a descent into a primitive narrative paradigm, the Patusan episode involves a dramatic *increase* in complexity. And although this episode's concerns are not so clearly aligned with modernist textuality, it still displays a complex polyphony and blending of generic registers that complements and enhances the ironies and evasions of the earlier sections.

Let me elaborate. The Patusan episode has not one, but *five* narrators, although four of these are mediated through Marlow, the fifth. It is the diversity and interplay rather than the number of narrators which makes the Patusan episode narratologically rich, involving the combined testimonies of Jim himself, Gentleman Brown, Jewel, and Tamb' Itam. After Jim, by far the most important of these three is Brown: Marlow relies on his dying testimony for the bulk of the closing sections. Jewel's contribution is the smallest. Thus the narrative enacts the power dynamics of colonialism itself, privileging the narratives of whites over non-Europeans, and those of men over women, while mediating the voices of Brown and Jim, a pirate and a deserter, through Marlow's less morally compromised voice. The Patusan episode is generically no less complex: romance, having lurked threateningly throughout the first half of the novel, now bursts to prominence only to become entangled with another register that weaves its way through *Lord Jim's* tapestry of genres. As is common in Conrad's work, it is the farcical and ribald mode of *burlesque* that surfaces occasionally to mar the pattern. Jim suffers embarrassing falls literally and metaphorically throughout the novel, gets stuck in the mud, and comes into conflict not with black knights or evil sorcerers, but with the supine Tunku Allang, who prostrates himself with disappointment whenever threatened or frustrated (pp.189, 206), the asthmatic Brown (p.259), and the 'slinking' Cornelius, whose 'slow laborious walk resembled the creeping of a repulsive beetle' (p.214). These are the caricatures of vaudeville and pantomime. Nor does Conrad reserve these caricatures for the Patusan episode: burlesque threatens the whole novel equally. Thus, Jim and Marlow first interact owing to a ludicrous mistake: on leaving the court after one of its sessions, Jim overhears Marlow and a friend commenting on a dog obstructing their way. Jim thinks Marlow has called him a 'wretched cur' when the target of the slight was the animal. Marlow comments, 'There may be those who could have laughed at his pertinacity. I didn't. Oh, I didn't!' (p.60), but in so doing he merely highlights the absurdity of the exchange. Later, when Jim is telling Marlow the tale of his leap, he recalls

having been confined on the small boat with the rest of the crew: ‘In this assault upon his fortitude there was the jeering intention of a spiteful and vile vengeance; there was an element of *burlesque* in his ordeal – a degradation of funny grimaces in the approach of death or dishonour’ (p.84, my emphasis). Jim himself subsequently sees the comedy in events, commenting on the death of the third engineer from a heart attack: ‘Why don’t you laugh?’ he said. ‘A joke hatched in hell. Weak heart! . . . I wish sometimes mine had been’ (p.85).

Jim’s connection early in the novel between comedy and death is fitting because his own death achieves a similar synthesis. In the end, *Lord Jim* achieves a bizarre amalgamation of burlesque and romance notes, creating an unstable conclusion that disallows authenticity. We know that Jim has been mythologised long before his death: both by the locals—after his defeat of Sherif Ali, ‘the legend had gifted him with supernatural powers’ (p.201)—and by the colonialists, with the incorporation of Jim and Jewel into ‘the story of a fabulously large emerald [...] as old as the arrival of the first white men in the Archipelago’ (p.211). (Note that the European myth created around Jim further ironises the colonial project by highlighting its preoccupation with untold riches.) At the end of the novel, though, there are two bizarre instances of unnecessary and strange archaisms that amplify the mythological tone. The first is spoken by Jewel:

‘Ah! but I shall hold thee thus,’ she cried. . . . ‘Thou art mine!’

She sobbed on his shoulder. The sky over Patusan was blood-red, immense, streaming like an open vein. An enormous sun nestled crimson amongst the tree-tops, and the forest below had a black and forbidding face.

Tamb’ Itam tells me that on that evening the aspect of the heavens was angry and frightful. I may well believe it, for I know that on that very day a cyclone passed within sixty miles of the coast, though there was hardly more than a languid stir of air in the place (p.310).

The archaism of ‘thee’ and ‘Thou’ gives the proceedings the solemn and portentous air of a ceremony, perhaps a marriage. The second instance of archaism follows swiftly, as Jim arrives in Doramin’s court:

‘He came! He came,’ was running from lip to lip, making a murmur to which he moved. ‘He hath taken it upon his own head,’ a voice said aloud. He heard this and turned to the crowd. ‘Yes. Upon my head.’ A few people recoiled. Jim waited awhile before Doramin and then said gently, ‘I am come in sorrow.’ He waited again. ‘I am come ready and unarmed,’ he repeated (p.312).

Jim moves in time with the voices of his adopted community and echoes their words, taking up the archaic tone they initiated. Repetition and rhyme add to the sense of solemnity and ritual, as well as evoking the stylistic register of chivalric romance.

Yet there is a further, less elevated register at work in the passage, playing on another sense of the verb 'to come.' Romance always threatens to descend not so much into farce as ribaldry. This particular burlesque degrades the dignified pathos of tragedy by focusing on the colloquial and the sexual, while the presence of a *double entendre* connecting death and orgasm, as in the French '*la petite mort*,' seems fitting given Conrad's tendency 'to slip into French when dealing with embarrassing and especially sexual subjects' (Hawthorn 2007, p.2). The consummation through suicide of Jim's 'wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct' (p.313) takes on an entirely different tone here. His self-actualisation is a rejection of a potentially life-creating marriage to the mixed-race Jewel, and an embrace of his suicidal affiliation with ideas 'racially his own.' Conrad's *double entendre* highlights this unsettling transference, reminding us of the processes of reproduction that Jim eschews, as well as the connection between sex and death in our (Western) cultural imaginary. The burlesque undertones that accompany Jim's 'death and dishonour' at the end of the novel undermine the dignity of events while underscoring the absurdity of the tale which, like a good farce, is full of literal and metaphorical falls. This is not to pretend that *Lord Jim* is a funny novel, but rather that comedy is a presence throughout the text that threatens authority, Marlow's in particular, since for him Jim's predicament is deeply troubling rather than amusing. And if Marlow's imperialistic voice is undermined by humour, so too are the elements of resistance in the text. Jim's rejection of liberal, Western notions of justice, his marriage to Jewel, and his friendship with Dain Warris, are equally subverted, reminding us that comedy can be a tool of oppression as much as freedom.

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If the critics are frequently divided in their judgement of the Patusan section of *Lord Jim* relative to the first half of the novel, they generally come together in valorising the modern in Conrad. Similarly, they tend to neglect the presence of the burlesque, which shifts the novel's tone subtly away from embarrassment towards ridicule. It should probably be acknowledged that there is discomfort, at least at times, with the elitism of modernism (for example, Greaney 2001, p.169), while the presence of burlesque in the novel complements its romance elements in aligning *Lord Jim* more with mass culture than its modernism

might initially suggest. However, critical attempts to restore the credibility of romance are nonetheless given to subordinate it to the present. This overlooks the various ways in which *Lord Jim*, while deconstructing notions of originality along modernist lines, foregrounds the role of the past in determining the present. The novel goes beyond this in suggesting that our origins are constantly reproduced so that they not only shape the present, but also synchronically *recur* in the present, determining narrative progression in the here and now. Like romance, burlesque is a backwards-looking genre that pits a degraded present against an idealised past. Unlike in romance, however, degradation is at the centre of burlesque's appeal: it is an aesthetic of pastiche that satirises the elevated affectations of its object. In a sense, the presence of burlesque justifies Jim's failure as much as it undermines his pretension; as a part of the fabric of the narrative it determines Jim's reality in ways over which he cannot have control. Furthermore, if romance is ideological, then so too is burlesque, which offers the possibility of hope by resisting the elitism of the dominant chivalric mode. As a popular genre, burlesque is democratic, even if it can just as easily subvert the pretensions of liberal democracy.

It is still worth noting, though, that burlesque is only an undertone in the novel—a troubling presence that opens the opportunity for resistance. The supremacy of chivalric ideals among the discourses of power is clear in *Lord Jim*, and the emergence of romance as the dominant genre by the end of the novel makes this all the more apparent. Chivalry is still the prime determining structure of Jim's life. Thus the disappointment some critics express at the novel's alleged aesthetic decline ignores the fact that it presents the patterns and structures of romance as very real—the abrupt generic transformation of *Lord Jim* is simply an emergence to the fore of ideological currents that run throughout the text. Initially romance is part of Jim's education: Craig Taylor reminds us that 'chivalric texts were not simple mirrors to the world around them but sought to be an active social force, shaping attitudes and advancing ideals for what the aristocracy ought to become' (2013, p.8). Jim's reading shapes crucial elements of his self-identity. But the novel takes on the shape of the romance genre to suggest that these ideological constructs, because of the impact they have on human agency, structure our social and political realities and the institutions, actions, and events which emerge from these realities. As McClure suggests, this ideology is not simply Jim's code, but comes to determine the subjectivity and actions of Jim's colonial subjects, the Bugis Malays, themselves (1981, pp.125–27). Romance as a genre in *Lord Jim* thus stands for the way in which chivalric values specifically *determine*

reality, suggesting that feudalism both marks the limits of modern liberalism and acts as a further limitation on liberal aspirations for equality as well.

### *Conclusion*

As I have been arguing in this chapter, *Lord Jim*'s colonial setting sharpens its engagement with liberalism by placing it in a context which permits both the representation of liberalism's civilising mission and its deconstruction; ultimately the violence that undoes progress emerges not from the savage exterior of the liberal community, but from within. This is accompanied by a parallel dismantling of individuality based on an awareness of the unconscious as a powerful force with social and biological origins. Political insights are enmeshed with the novel's style, and in particular its narrative and generic features. On the one hand, the novel's narrative structure internalises the inequities of colonial life while also placing them in an ironic framework. On the other, the novel's engagement with realism and romance creates an alternative frame that casts further irony on the liberal imperial project. Romance in *Lord Jim* highlights the recurrence of chivalric tropes with the narrative of liberal imperialism. The critique of liberalism in *Lord Jim* revolves around the crucial fact that key terms in the language of liberalism and capitalism are etymologically derived from the central tenets of chivalry, and highlights the ways in which aristocratic and militaristic values and virtues lie at the origin of liberal conceptions of freedom and justice.

*Lord Jim* reminds us powerfully that liberalism as a politics of freedom conflicts with a politics of equality, and that this involves the freedom to exploit the weak so as to preserve the liberties—the 'franchises'—of the elite. The morality of chivalry, though a real code for some, also prioritises membership of its own elite over this community's ethical imperatives. These imperatives are a justification of power that gestures only to the minority of the community who wield it. Its most important function is the preservation of the elite reputation that justifies rule, and, provided this is maintained, it can tolerate outliers like Gentleman Brown and indeed Jim. This is not to say that there are not good intentions—Marlow and Jim clearly have them—but that these good intentions, and general adherence to the code, entail honourable behaviour towards one's peers regardless of their actual behaviour.

If the transition to Brown reminds us of the dark heart of the community to which Jim and Marlow belong, the generic transformation that accompanies it only enhances our awareness of a degraded chivalry at work behind Jim's benevolent imperialism. At the point

when *Lord Jim* travels to Patusan, it effectively surrenders any pretensions to psychological realism, and becomes an imperial adventure tale heavily inflected with medieval romance. Romance is the genre that Conrad deploys to imbricate chivalry with the novel's structure. Yet this is not a simple ideology of form to be critically exposed, because in its complex narrative structure, *Lord Jim* provides a mechanism for the exposure and critique of romance itself. The end of the novel confirms this, conjuring not nostalgia but haunting; a far less benign form of the past resurfacing in the present:

And that's the end. He passes away under a cloud, inscrutable at heart, forgotten, unforgiven and excessively romantic. Not in the wildest days of his boyish visions could he have seen the alluring shape of such an extraordinary success! For it may very well be that in the short moment of his last proud and unflinching glance, he had beheld the face of that opportunity which, like an Eastern bride, had come veiled to his side.

But we can see him, an obscure conqueror of fame, tearing himself out of the arms of a jealous love at the sign, at the call of his exalted egoism. He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct. Is he satisfied – quite, now, I wonder? We ought to know. He is one of us – and have I not stood up once, like an evoked ghost, to answer for his eternal constancy? Was I so very wrong after all? Now, he is no more, there are days when the reality of his existence comes to me with an immense, with an overwhelming force; and yet upon my honour there are moments too when he passes from my eyes like a disembodied spirit astray amongst the passions of the earth – ready to surrender himself faithfully to the claim of his own world of shades (pp.312–13).

In *Lord Jim*, self-cultivation is the path to extinction. Jim's 'wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct' leads ultimately to death rather than the possibility of procreation; it also requires the sacrifice of a potentially fertile marriage to Jewel. But it is not chivalry alone that demands Jim's death; rather, as I have been suggesting throughout this chapter, romance is as much about the impossibility of perfection as about the exploration of romantic ideals themselves. The imperative to embody an ideal eventually forces Jim to submit himself to execution, thereby maintaining the fiction that he has become the modern incarnation of a perfect knight: 'But we can see him, an obscure conqueror of fame, tearing himself out of the arms of a jealous love at the sign, at the call of his exalted egoism.' Marlow diagnoses Jim's condition in terms of an excessive individualism. The combination of imperialism, chivalry, and autonomy proves to be a toxic mix, leading to Marlow's final analysis, which manages to be both characteristically inconclusive and almost impossibly bleak. Admittedly, the presence of burlesque as a contaminant in the narrative when Jim finally achieves his apotheosis/annihilation leaves us with the sense that perhaps a little degradation is not such a bad thing. Certainly from a liberal perspective, if the point

of origin is aristocratic and the criterion for judgement is social class, then less elevation may in fact be the cure rather than the disease. Indeed, another word for this process, more familiar in the liberal lexicon, might be 'progress,' a term which speaks to the liberal preference for evolution rather than revolution, but which as a result must satisfy itself with a degree of hybridisation that goes against aristocratic instincts towards purity. There is little comedy in the closing passages of the novel, however, beyond the plangent irony that Jim's 'shadowy ideal' has morphed into a 'world of shades.' Marlow remains haunted by this world, just as the violence of the past continues to haunt generations of Conrad's readers, rising again to make new shades and rendering liberal hopes for progress all the more urgent, but also more remote.

#### 4. Liberty and self-actualisation: *Nostramo*

##### *Introduction*

*Nostramo* is a novel of extremes that pushes categories and concepts to their limits. Generically, it troubles the boundaries of high and low art; whilst in terms of politics, it is just as challenging, fragmenting political concepts—in particular liberty and revolution—and entangling them with their opposites. It empties out ideals, transforming them into black holes: hollow centres of gravity that both gather together and potentially implode political actions. The modern liberal ideal of individual self-actualisation is the singularity at the centre of these motions. *Nostramo* suggests that self-actualisation is opposed to freedom and that self-destruction is the double of self-creation. Yet *Nostramo*'s circular logic presents us with cycles of contradiction: it also highlights the persistence of former selves, whether political systems and regimes or collective (for example, national) and individual identities. For Conrad, revolution is always an incomplete process; conversely, if the past is never entirely left behind, the weapons of progress in *Nostramo*—violence and capital—possess a twisted logic of their own that outpaces the liberal intentions of revolutionaries and reformers alike. This process transforms these tools into ends in themselves, but in yet another return also causes regression and the degeneration of progressive politics into new forms of slavery. This chapter will examine the backdrop of Conrad's fictional South American nation, Costaguana, whose dense tangle of New World and Old, of symbolic geography and mythic history, evokes the novel's wider social and political contexts. Within this setting, I will explore the perverted logic of self-actualisation as self-destruction as it pertains to four characters: Charles Gould, Giorgio Viola and Don Martin Decoud, as well as the titular *Nostramo* himself. Each character pursues a different vision of liberty, but what they all share is that their quests for freedom become obsessions, which prove fatal for *Nostramo*, Decoud, and also in a sense Gould.

The logic of self-destruction is described in all of the novels examined in this thesis. Razumov is, almost laughably, the least self-destructive of Conrad's political protagonists: he may succumb to a nightmare where he places himself on the rack, but he survives *Under Western Eyes* (even if there are doubts at the novel's close over how much more he can endure in his sickly state). In *The Secret Agent*, Winnie and Adolf Verloc both die at

Winnie's hand. It is Adolf, in bringing about the death of Winnie's brother, Stevie, who strikes the first blow against the family unit that constitutes their shared identity. But in her devastation at her brother's death, it is ironically Winnie who completes what he began by murdering her husband and then killing herself. Finally in *Lord Jim*, though his is technically not a suicide, Jim's voluntary submission to tribal justice for his failure to protect the community is effectively suicidal whilst also offering a logical conclusion to his self-construction as a latter-day chivalric hero who eventually succumbs to his pre-ordained fate. *Nostramo* is the densest expression of this logic of implosion, where the different arcs of Conrad's ironic representations come together in what is also the most wide-ranging critique of politics in his oeuvre.

Individual self-actualisation is a cornerstone of modern liberalism. It is, alongside autonomy, half of Mill's key notion of 'self-cultivation' (see Chapter Three). Alan Ryan writes: 'Modern liberalism is exemplified by John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, with its appeal to "man as a progressive being" and its romantic appeal to an individuality that should be allowed to develop itself in all its "manifold diversity"' (2012, p.25). John Rawls regards individual personhood as subject to politically 'self-authenticating sources of valid claims' (2005, p.32), playing into the liberal tradition that self-actualisation is a rational process in which personal goods are entangled with the rational (2005, pp.31–34, 176–177). Finally, Richard Rorty's self-avowedly postmodern brand of liberalism envisages human life as an ongoing project of self-revision, explicitly challenging the idea that this process might some day end—something Rawls also acknowledges (2005, p.29), albeit in lower key. Yet Rorty also foregrounds coherence as a central aim in the process of self-creation (1991, pp.161–62), making it a rationalising process that still fits the trajectory of liberal thought on self-actualisation. Indeed, addressing the needs of a fragmented society—which evolves in Rorty's case into a fragmented self—is a key strand in the liberal gene. Self-actualisation in a liberal mould is a competition between different visions of the good or contending versions of the self, but this process is always negotiated through modes of rationality, whether these take the shape of formal or narrative logics. With regards to this central aspect of modern liberalism, self-actualisation justifies liberty: to be free is to be unconstrained by external forces in the development of one's full potential, and in deciding what the nature of that potential might be as well. There are several ways of describing this developmental goal—self-actualisation or self-realisation being the foremost—and in certain contexts there are distinctions drawn between them. I will deploy both terms here,

with due acknowledgement that though they both involve a sense of intrinsic potential, the former tends to imply self-*creation*, the latter self-*discovery*. This points in turn to a tension between freedom and authenticity in modern liberalism that this chapter will address. It is also worth repeating the distinction between autonomy and authenticity addressed in Chapter Three: autonomy is an unachievable regulative ideal whereby we do not disavow our own actions (see Buss 2002; Brydon & Coleman 2008), and authenticity is truth to our inherent potential (cf. Maslow 1943). The two are clearly related, but what is central to my argument in this chapter is the relationship between self-actualisation and authenticity.

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*Nostromo's* critique of liberty is not limited, however, to an engagement with the paradoxes of liberal self-actualisation. It would be impossible to write about the novel without engaging with its critique of capitalism, and in the context of liberalism, capitalism specifically as a mode both of liberating (action) and dominating (thought). Capitalism is itself enmeshed with liberalism historically and ideologically, enabling critics such as Slavoj Žižek to argue that liberalism is the ideology of capitalism (2008b, p.132). Although it has been suggested that *Nostromo* depicts the insignificance of the individual on the grand canvas of history, and the domination of individual agency by the power of capital (Hay 1963, pp.162, 177), its focus is on the individuals that are lost. It presents a cast of characters who fail to find themselves, instead discovering a range of dead ends and switchbacks. Some of these characters—Giorgio Viola, the Italian Republican, or Charles Gould, or his wife Emilia—are explicitly committed to versions of liberal politics, and their personal disappointments and delusions enable a variety of typically Conradian deconstructions of the public values they serve. Yet there are two key characters in the novel that pursue liberal ends for entirely private reasons: Don Martin Decoud and Nostromo. It is no surprise, perhaps, that Viola and the Goulds, having devoted their lives to politics, are left individually unfulfilled, but Decoud and Nostromo, both relentless egoists, are subjected to the cruel irony that they are both responsible for their own destruction in the end. If Marxist readings of *Nostromo* risk eliding this concentration on individuals, the novel still succeeds in engaging with the different ways in which, as Herbert Marcuse suggested, 'liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination' ([1964] 2002, p.9). Furthermore, in *Nostromo* capital itself is a primary force both of liberation and domination, although its inhuman agency is always counterpointed by a parallel focus on

individual human greed. Capital is embodied in the silver around which the novel's plot revolves, both because it is the nexus of the material interests that descend on Costaguana, and because it is instrumental in undoing three of its primary characters: Nostromo, Charles Gould, and Martin Decoud. Let me begin, however, by paying particular attention to one of the novel's minor characters, Giorgio Viola, who I will argue serves to anchor the concept of liberty in the text.

*Viola and violence: fanaticism, worship, and the sea*

Viola's name may remind us first of a musical instrument, but as suggested in my subheading, it easily becomes a bad pun (there are quite a few of these in Conrad) pointing to his role in the text. Viola is more clearly connected to the concept of liberty than any other character in *Nostromo*, and his name is a central gesture in the development of its critique of liberalism. For, also more than any other character, Viola exposes the history of violence that defines liberation struggle, and delineates a version of liberty that is the opposite of the purportedly peaceful conversationalism of modern liberalism (see Chapter One). As will be seen, *Nostromo* undertakes a sustained engagement with the concept of liberty, but there is some work that needs to be done before reading this as a critique of modern liberalism. Of his four political novels, Conrad's 1904 work is the most attuned to the diversity and complexity of politics and political thought, presenting a nuanced and thorough examination of the political theory of freedom. This presents one particular challenge for my argument, for the novel has a keen sense of the divide between two specific forms of the politics of liberty that cannot be overlooked, namely republicanism and liberalism. Nevertheless, though Viola is not a modern liberal but a republican—and a libertarian fanatic at that—I will show how his combination of contradictory political views produces an assault on the politics of self-actualisation embedded within modern liberalism itself.

Viola, a veteran of Giuseppe Garibaldi's campaigns, maintains a hotel outside Sulaco, the capital of the Occidental Province. He is the alpha and omega for the novel's deconstruction of liberty, and it is therefore appropriate that his liberalism is idealised to the point of worship: 'The old republican did not believe in saints, or in prayers, or in what he called "priest's religion." Liberty and Garibaldi were his divinities; but he tolerated "superstition" in women, preserving in these matters a lofty and silent attitude' (pp.16–17). It is tempting to read this presentation of liberty either historically, for example by looking back at the classical republican tradition and its evolution into the late-nineteenth-century,

or in relation to contemporary projects such as Philip Pettit's to reframe classical republican ideals of liberty as a basis for contemporary political and ethical judgements. Pettit himself looks back to the history of republicanism, arguing that republicanism is not liberalism at all, but an older tradition to which liberalism developed in opposition (2012, pp.8–11). On this view, the conceptions of liberty in republicanism and liberalism are profoundly different. Yet the desire to make a strong distinction between these two branches of political thought is more strategically motivated than theoretically sound: after all, republican liberty is as contested as its liberal counterpart, with some critics casting it as positive, others negative (Ghosh 2008, p.133). For Pettit, for example, republican liberty is not regarded as being positive with a modern liberal focus on self-actualisation (2012, p.48f), even if he still sees it as being crucially different from what he characterises as the negative liberty of non-interference (2012, pp.9–11). These mutually indistinct liberties make it difficult to sustain any sense of stable difference. If there is a distinction, it lies not in the notion of liberty *per se* but in republicanism's focus on civic duty; on the political community rather than on the liberal prioritisation of individuals and their rights; and on the 'institutional ideals' of 'mixed constitution' and the 'contestatory role of citizens' (2012, p.11). I follow Richard Dagger, however, in regarding this distinction as resting on 'a misleadingly narrow conception of liberalism as an atomistic theory that encourages people to conceive of themselves as rights-bearing individuals who are bent on protecting themselves against the depredations of others while furthering their own interests as best they can' (1997, p.4). For my purposes, although republicanism can be distinguished to the extent that it explicitly regards civic virtue as intrinsic to the good life, it is also continuous with the liberal tradition. My definition of liberalism, following Rawls, prioritises pluralism (and consequently dialogism) combined with a sense of the importance of positive liberty, whether in the form of Rortyan self-actualisation or Rawls's own rationally autonomous citizens (see Introduction; also Chapter One). Furthermore, modern liberalism, like republicanism, does not regard individual liberty as inviolable, but instead prioritises a range of social goods. Thus, while modern liberalism certainly purports to value pluralism, it is also underpinned by a distinct set of historically and culturally specific values, which I am arguing throughout this thesis belong in particular to the elite strata of Western society.

Republicanism shares this heritage: it has a longer history than liberalism, taking inspiration from Roman politics, and describing a tradition of political thought encompassing Machiavelli and earlier fifteenth-century Italian thinkers, English republicans

(including Milton), and key thinkers (such as Jefferson) involved in the foundation of the USA. Yet many key republican thinkers, including Jefferson but also Montesquieu and Rousseau, are also important figures in the pantheon of liberalism. This is the starting point for my line of argument: that republicanism shares enough with modern liberalism to make a critique of liberty via a republican such as Viola apply to modern liberalism as well. Republican and modern liberal conceptions of liberty overlap, with both sharing an elitism that challenges their democratic credentials. Republicanism also has a clear historical relationship with the development of liberalism itself and, before that, a past stretching back to the oligarchy of the Roman Republic. In this and other ways, republicanism reveals an even older history of aristocratic norms contained within the gene of liberal thought than I have traced elsewhere in this thesis (see especially Chapter Three).

What is more, liberty in *Nostramo* is a malleable term, connected to wide-ranging and often conflicting political viewpoints. This enables it to target a broad range of politics. My interest here is in two specific aspects of this critique: firstly the different ways in which it empties liberty of substance, and secondly the equally various ways in which it undermines a range of distinct liberalisms, particularly modern liberalism. This last is the liberalism of diversity, the genealogy of which can be traced back at least to the freedom of conscience and ‘toleration’ central to thinkers like John Locke ([1689] 1983, p.23). As I will show in more detail below, there is a progression through *Nostramo* in its deployment of the concept of liberalism. Initially, it takes a republican form by association; it is then deployed in a variety of contexts that broaden, challenge, and ironically affirm republican liberty. In the closing third of the novel, two things happen to liberty: in one particular episode, it is rendered poisonous by autocracy; then, in the penultimate chapter of the novel, it is definitively emptied out.

Of course, Viola’s own conception of liberty is nowhere near clear or specific enough to meet the finer requirements of philosophical distinction, its representations functioning not by definition but association. What I will call Viola’s ‘liberalism’ is, like the ‘liberalism’ of *Lord Jim*, a politics founded in violence and elitism (see Chapter Three). And, like *Lord Jim*, *Nostramo* powerfully connects this liberalism to cross-hatched histories of colonialism and imperialism, speaking to their continuing force in liberal politics today. Viola’s liberalism is elucidated through his own personal history as a long-serving soldier under Garibaldi. The most arresting aspect of the novel’s accounts of Viola’s involvement with liberation movements is the fundamental importance of violence:

When quite a youth he had deserted from a ship trading to La Plata, to enlist in the navy of Montevideo, then under the command of Garibaldi. Afterwards, in the Italian legion of the Republic struggling against the encroaching tyranny of Rosas, he had taken part, on great plains, on the banks of immense rivers, in the fiercest fighting perhaps the world had ever known. He had lived amongst men who had declaimed about liberty, suffered for liberty, died for liberty, with a desperate exaltation, and with their eyes turned towards an oppressed Italy. His own enthusiasm had been fed on scenes of carnage, on the examples of lofty devotion, on the din of armed struggle, on the inflamed language of proclamations. He had never parted from the chief of his choice—the fiery apostle of independence—keeping by his side in America and in Italy till after the fatal day of Aspromonte, when the treachery of kings, emperors, and ministers had been revealed to the world in the wounding and imprisonment of his hero—a catastrophe that had instilled into him a gloomy doubt of ever being able to understand the ways of Divine justice (p.29).

This is self-evidently not a liberalism that favours dialogue and prioritises individual self-actualisation. Rather, Conrad frames Viola's politics in visceral terms: the food for his convictions is first and foremost the meat of 'carnage.' This is not to say that struggles for liberty are simply a pretext for aggression and butchery; characteristically, Conrad counterpoints 'carnage' against 'lofty devotion,' and the 'din of armed struggle' against the 'inflamed language of proclamations,' suggesting a communitarian politics sustained by both violence and demagogic rhetoric. But as well as providing a sense of balance between primal and other, nobler motivations for Viola's enthusiasms, the oscillations of this counterpoint suggest the degree to which these opposites are mutually involved. Carnage is the enabler of lofty devotion, and it is the din of armed struggle that gives fire to liberatory rhetoric. In this way, Viola's views reveal a strong sense of negative liberty—manifest in his revolutionism—whilst also registering the complicit relationship between violence and freedom, in particular the need for violence to enable freedom from oppression but also violence itself as a particular kind of freedom, a shattering of constraint (see also Chapter Two).

For Viola, liberty is defined not conceptually, but in terms of historical associations: explicitly in relation to Garibaldi and his liberty struggle, but also in relation to the long history of the West and, in particular, its warrior elites:

Then the tension of old Giorgio's attitude relaxed, and a smile of contemptuous relief came upon his lips of an old fighter with a leonine face. These were not a people striving for justice, but thieves. Even to defend his life against them was a sort of degradation for a man who had been one of Garibaldi's immortal thousand in the conquest of Sicily. He had an immense scorn for this outbreak of scoundrels and leperos, who did not know the meaning of the word "liberty." (pp.20–21).

Although the meaning of liberty is important to Viola, it is secondary to his loyalty to Garibaldi and his hatred of monarchy. Ironically, given the reason for his scorn, *Nostramo* withholds Viola's own definition. Old Viola's politics may not really be empty, but the effect is the same: conceptually 'liberty' is hollowed out, and what remains is Viola's membership of a political community, and pointedly one that, like his own youth, is lost in the past. Patriotism and love of liberty bind Viola's 'Italian legion,' but these sentiments are defined by displacement and dislocation, literally in that the legion are absent from their homeland, but also in the sense that they are never entirely present in the liberation struggles in which they fight 'with their eyes turned towards an oppressed Italy.' In addition, it is clear that the tree of liberty is watered with blood: the blood of patriots, yes, but also the blood shed by patriots. These latter do not simply sacrifice their lives; rather, their living enthusiasm for liberty grows out of a visceral engagement with the reality of violent struggle.

There are deeper histories at work in *Nostramo's* account of Viola's past. It is ironic, for example, that Garibaldi's campaign in Sicily is cast not as liberation but as 'conquest,' despite the fact that, with the support of the Sicilian people, he freed the island from Bourbon rule. 'Conquest' is appropriate, though, in so far as its end result was the incorporation of the island into a different form of authoritarian rule, and in so far as it reflected the disillusionment of the Sicilian populace, disappointed that the land redistribution they had expected never occurred. In light of the subsequent history of inequality between the North and South of Italy, Garibaldi's campaign fits the pattern of liberal imperialist conquest throughout the world. But there are even longer imperial histories evoked here, with the 'immortal thousand' recalling another famous battle for freedom—between Leonidas and the Spartan three hundred, and Xerxes at Thermopylae—an echo strengthened by Giorgio's 'leonine face,' which implicitly references the Spartan king's name. The ironies deepen because *Nostramo's* characterisation of the 'immortal thousand' elides the three hundred with the Persian Immortals, Xerxes' elite troops whom the Spartans defeated. Viola's liberal origin story thus links the republican Garibaldi with two warrior elites, Greek and Persian, and connects them to the ancient, paradigmatic imperialism of the Persian Empire. Yet though the story of Leonidas is itself exemplary (variously of the triumph of the underdog, anti-imperial struggle, and the fight for liberty), the Spartans were anything but liberals or republicans. On the contrary, Viola's nostalgia for Garibaldi's campaigns threatens to slide into a wider liberationist nostalgia for societies

which were the complete opposite of liberal: slave or serf economies whose elites justified their privilege through a need to defend society from real or imagined external threats. That modern capitalism in the service of liberalism engenders new forms of slavery is only one of the novel's many ironies, if one of its most brutal (see also section three below).

This ambivalence finds an echo in the divided politics of Garibaldi's march on Sicily, masterminded by the four fathers of Italian Unification: Garibaldi himself; Giuseppe Mazzini, republican and democrat; Victor Emmanuel II, king of Sardinia; and Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour and founder of the original Italian liberal party. The march would lead to the unification of Italy as a monarchy under Victor Emmanuel, with Cavour as its first prime minister. Viola's ironic liberalism is expressed through such historical and biographical associations, using terms that remind us of the complex interweaving of liberal interests and popular democratic politics, but also its further connections with monarchy, the aristocratic domination of early parliaments, and Garibaldi's own sacrifice of his republican principles to his unificatory desires.

Though the meaning of the word 'liberty' is presumably clear to Viola, it is not enunciated. Moreover, there is evidence in the text that 'liberty' is used as a tool of exclusion, for example in distinguishing Viola from the 'outbreak of scoundrels and leperos,' which refers to the mob uprising in Occidental province fomented by the Montero brothers and their allies against the Ribierists. This motley group, who are designated 'liberals' (also democrats) in the text, represent the wider populace, whereas the Ribierists are a predominantly aristocratic party representing the alliance of caballero and capitalist interests. Viola asserts that the former do 'not know the meaning of the word "liberty,"' thereby summarily excluding them from membership in the elite band—including the English Gould family, whose politics most closely resembles modern liberalism—in which he places himself. Furthermore, this communal history is connected back to classical antiquity, and in particular to the Spartans, an ancient warrior elite with a privileged position in society that is ideologically justified along lines akin to those chivalric elites of the Middle Ages that are conjured in the liberalism of *Lord Jim* (see Chapter Three).

So much is clear: Viola's liberalism is distinctly backwards-looking, defined in relation to his own past glories yet also harking back to Western classical inspirations. However, if Viola's active participation in wars of liberation is inscribed into the novel's past, the nostalgic enthusiasms that attach to it are not altogether different from those of the present-day 'scoundrels and leperos' who are themselves involved in their own passionate liberation

struggles. Viola views these new revolutionaries with scorn owing to his ‘contempt of the non-political nature of [their] riot’ (p.16), its main aim being an ‘attack on the railway yards, on the O.S.N. Offices, and especially on the Custom House, whose strong room, it was well known, contained a large treasure in silver ingots’ (p.15). For Viola, revolution has been degraded because it is primarily motivated by material concerns, represented by the novel’s iconic silver (see section three below). Yet this is ironised in turn by Viola’s own history of violence, his liberty in carnage being far bloodier than this alternative liberalism of redistribution, however right he is to expose it as greed and theft. Both Viola and the later Monterists fight in liberation struggles, combining desire for freedom with baser motives. Additionally, *Nostramo* makes it clear that there is nothing apolitical about capital—indeed in some respects silver itself becomes the prime political agent in the novel—rendering Viola’s claim that their struggle is ‘non-political’ only partially correct.

Although Viola’s sense of liberty emerges from the set of relations sketched out above, it is figured not as a rational political ideal, but as the basis of a creed religious in nature: he was ‘a Genoese with a shaggy white leonine head—often called simply “the Garabaldino” (as Mohammedans are called after their prophet) [...] The old republican did not believe in saints, or in prayers, or in what he called “priest’s religion.” Liberty and Garibaldi were his divinities’ (p.16). Although Viola denies the validity of such beliefs, his relationship to Garibaldi and liberty is framed consistently in religious terms, signifying not only the degree of his devotion to Garibaldi, but also the unreasonable and exclusive tenor of his views:

He grounded his old gun, and, turning his head, glanced at the coloured lithograph of Garibaldi in a black frame on the white wall; a thread of strong sunshine cut it perpendicularly. His eyes, accustomed to the luminous twilight, made out the high colouring of the face, the red of the shirt, the outlines of the square shoulders, the black patch of the Bersagliere hat with cock’s feathers curling over the crown. An immortal hero! This was your liberty; it gave you not only life, but immortality as well!

For that one man his fanaticism had suffered no diminution. In the moment of relief from the apprehension of the greatest danger, perhaps, his family had been exposed to in all their wanderings, he had turned to the picture of his old chief, first and only, then laid his hand on his wife’s shoulder (p.21).

Of a piece with his violent affiliations, Viola’s politics is defined by his idolisation of Garibaldi: he is a fanatic who has placed devotion to his dead icon before his own family. Additionally, the features Viola dwells upon are details of appearance: it is not Garibaldi’s politics that lives on, but simply his image, with the painting acting like a religious icon, a focus for Viola’s veneration. In Viola’s faith, liberty takes the place of grace, bringing with

it the promise of immortality and eclipsing the real present and future life embodied in his wife and daughters. And even if liberty, or at least the ascribed fame of liberation struggle, has conferred a sort of immortality upon Garibaldi, it has done no such thing for Viola himself. As one of a fondly imagined ‘immortal thousand’ Viola perhaps participates in a collective immortality, but, as is apparent from Xerxes’ Immortals, immortality in narrative embodies a textual agency that is beyond the control of the historical individual, and is subject to the kinds of fanatical interpretations and reinscriptions that Conrad (via Viola) is performing upon Garibaldi himself. For example, Conrad covertly satirises Garibaldi’s double standards when he dresses him in a ‘Bersagliere hat,’ which is the signature garb of the elite Savoy unit that defeated Garibaldi, halting his march to Rome and frustrating his republican hopes. Thus it is that both Conrad and Viola are taking liberties with Garibaldi’s legend, as well as the politics of liberty for which he is made to stand. Liberalism, religion, and fanaticism are not terms that sit comfortably with one another, particularly in a modern-day context where liberal rhetoric frequently places them in tension. Yet their juxtaposition in the figure of Giorgio Viola raises important questions about contemporary liberalism’s self-conception, especially because Viola’s creed is explicitly a politics that has grown out of violent conflict and imperialisms that resonate with the complexities of the international scene today.

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Viola appears to be one those ‘[f]anatical lovers of liberty’ that Razumov criticises in *Under Western Eyes*: ‘Liberty with a capital L. [...] Liberty that means nothing precise. Liberty in whose name crimes are committed’ (*UWE*, p.45; see also Chapter One). But arguably the greatest crime that Viola commits is to neglect those who should be closest to him: ‘In the moment of relief from the apprehension of the greatest danger, perhaps, his family had been exposed to in all their wanderings, he had turned to the picture of his old chief, first and only, then laid his hand on his wife’s shoulder’ (p.21). As we will see, Charles Gould is guilty of the same crime: he neglects his wife Emilia, and—unlike for the Violas—by the end of the novel there is no prospect for any Gould children. As for Viola, that his paternal affections have been sacrificed to politics is clear: ‘He loved his children, but girls belong more to the mother, and much of his affection had been expended in the worship and service of liberty’ (p.29).

It is his wife Teresa, however, who has suffered most from Viola's devotion to liberty. Even Giorgio bemoans 'the brute of a country where he was reduced to live for the love of liberty' (p.24), which leaves his family, as Teresa observes, 'lost in this country, all alone with the two children, because [Giorgio] cannot live under a king' (p.25). Teresa suffers both physically and mentally because of Viola's choices: 'while she looked at him she would sometimes put her hand hastily to her side with a short twitch of her fine lips and a knitting of her black, straight eyebrows like a flicker of angry pain or an angry thought' (p.25). Her 'angry pain' is closely related to his self-imposed exile: 'She had a handsome face, whose complexion had turned yellow because the climate of Sulaco did not suit her at all' (p.17).

Whatever the psychology and physiology of her suffering, Teresa is another victim of the violence of liberal patriarchy (see Chapters One and Two). This is evident not only in the actuality of the Violas' circumstances, which prioritise Giorgio's preferences over his wife's well-being, but also in his attitudes—for example the notion that 'girls belong more to the mother'—and his ideals: 'His austere, old-world Republicanism had a severe, soldier-like standard of faithfulness and duty, as if the world were a battlefield where men had to fight for the sake of universal love and brotherhood, instead of a more or less large share of booty' (p.313). Teresa's plight ironises 'universal love,' placing it in tension with 'brotherhood.' Viola's humanistic gaze effaces both the microscopic affiliations of family—itsself a category traditionally oriented towards the feminine—and the wider sisterhood of half the human race. In liberal terminology, Viola prioritises the public over the private. There is much that could be said about Viola's household relations and the concealed history of familial autocracy toward which the novel's account of Teresa gestures, but suffice to say that his domestic affairs seem to reproduce deeply illiberal power structures on the home front (see also Chapter Two).

To put this differently, Viola's fanaticism leads him to sacrifice his loved ones to an idealised brotherhood of man, nostalgically instantiated in the liberationist military campaigns of the past. He combines this idealism with a paradoxical secular religiosity where liberty becomes an object of worship, an article of faith. Even when Teresa dies, he characteristically manages to combine his love for his wife with a perverse affirmation of the religion of liberty to which he has betrayed her:

I have buried many men on battlefields on this continent. The priests talk of consecrated ground! Bah! All the earth made by God is holy; but the sea, which knows nothing of kings and priests and tyrants, is the holiest of all. Doctor! I should like to bury her at sea. No mummeries, candles, incense, no holy water mumbled over by priests. The spirit of liberty is upon the waters (p.341).

Here, Viola voices the desire to give up his wife one last time, burying her at sea under the watchful auspices of liberty, ironically elevating her in death by giving her up to a symbol of his first love. It is in part a seaman's gesture—'for Giorgio, like the great Garibaldi, had been a sailor in his time' (p.25)—but the connection he makes between liberty and the sea transforms this nostalgic gesture into a statement of political faith. Liberty operates in the absence of authorities, sacred or secular—'kings and priests and tyrants'—but at the same time it sanctifies: the absence from the sea of earthly authorities makes it 'the holiest of all,' ironically ascribing it to the dominion of the ultimate authority, God. Nor is this the only irony, for Viola's phrasing exploits the double meaning of '[a]ll the earth made by God,' which signifies both the material (earth) and the planet. 'The earth' as a planet includes the sea—indeed the majority of the earth's surface is sea—whereas the sea is also the earth's opposite. Furthermore, the sea's status as 'holiest of all' renders it a body not only between landmasses and their associated nations and empires, but also between heaven and earth. Reading this image in relation to Conrad's typically double-edged idealisations of the sea and the fraternity of sailors further complicates it since Conrad's ship-bound sailor communities are anything but free from authority, and are redolent of competition and violence instead (see especially Chapter Three). When read alongside Viola's religious imagery, we should recall that the Bible's first brothers were Cain and Abel, an irony which deepens in Viola's echo of Genesis: 'And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters' (Genesis 1:2, King James Version, original emphasis). Viola's paraphrase of the creation story to justify his desire to bury his wife at sea mingles creation with death in a move that the novel will later reprise in the creation of the Occidental Republic, whose birth is entangled with the death of Don Martin Decoud, the man who conceived of the Republic in the first place, and who buries himself at sea in a bizarre suicide that also echoes Conrad's own attempt on his own life (see section four below).

If Viola acts as a device to foreground the importance of political liberty in *Nostromo*, his statement of political faith—the 'spirit of liberty is upon the waters'—also signals Conrad's engagement of key political concepts in his symbolic geography of Costaguana.

Considering Conrad's personal relationship to the sea and the complexity and depth of his fictional representations of it, the resonance of Viola's statement is imposing. Robert Hampson (1992, p.101) argues that *The Nigger of the Narcissus* introduces a political vision of the brotherhood of the sea based on an ideal code of conduct articulated by F. Marryat: 'Private feelings [...] must always be sacrificed for the public service' (1834, p.247). He then argues that Conrad's subsequent novels, culminating with *Nostromo*, test this code of conduct 'to the limits' (1992, p.102). Viola is a key example of this process. Hampson's sense of the conflict between public and private is framed not simply on the level of the individual, but sets personal affiliations, such as class solidarity, against a 'the real (altruistic) solidarity of 'the brotherhood of the sea [so that the] individual escapes the solitariness and the negating power of death by commitment to the group' (1992, p.105). *Nostromo* brings this value system to dry land, where it dismally fails to adapt to its new context: in Costaguana, 'instead of a community organised towards a common end, there was only the clash of conflicting interests' (1992, p.158). Viola certainly tests the ideal of public service 'to the limits,' and perhaps beyond its limits. Viola's sacrifice of the private interests of family is ironically framed as a kind of egotism. His sense of who he is depends on his idealised conception of a violent brotherhood of republican revolutionaries, and in particular on his personal relationship with Garibaldi. What Viola shows above all is that devotion to a community can be selfish. His fanaticism limits his ability to engage in family affiliations, leading him to sacrifice them to a fruitless idealism. Viola's 'public service' also manifests as a form of domestic abuse: a violence of neglect in which his wife suffers for a political commitment that ultimately achieves nothing.

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More perhaps needs to be said about the sea and its sacrifice of 'private feelings' to 'public service.' As I will suggest later, the sea becomes implicated in the negating power of death, but it also presents a challenge to modern liberalism on a number of other fronts. For if the sea is a medium for transportation—a role that stands at the forefront of its relation to the Merchant Navy in which Conrad served—it becomes in Conrad's novels a conduit to a network of ideas and associations. More specifically, I want to suggest that the fellowship of the sea represents an inversion of liberal values. Hampson charts the downfall of *Nostromo* in relation to his conversion from the social ethic of a sailor to individualism and materialism (1992, pp.150–52). Yet if the idealised fellowship of the sea is at best an absent

presence in *Nostramo*, the sea itself figures strongly as a node of its symbolic geography. On the one hand, the sea couples freedom and danger; on the other, it presents a continual revolution of natural cycles as a counterpoint to Costaguana's endless patterns of political upheaval. Another key point of reference for the symbolic geography of the sea comes in a famous passage from *Lord Jim*:

A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavor to do, he drowns [...] The way is to the destructive element submit yourself and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up [...] In the destructive element immerse [...] That was the way. To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream – and so – *ewig – usque ad finem*. . . . (p.162–63, original emphasis).

Here, Stein captures the paradoxical image of the sea, which in his formulation is both 'the dream' and 'the destructive element.' If for Stein, the dream is the illusion of individual self (see Chapter Three), for Viola the sea is both this illusion and the dream of liberty upon which his sense of himself depends. This is accompanied by a cyclical process: the self is continually being actualised so the dream of liberty is never achieved but must be pursued 'eternally.' Stein's conclusion, '*usque ad finem*,' sounds a martial note: this is a fight to the death, a battle to the end. Similarly, if the ship in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* is in one sense an idealised political community, it still floats upon a natural body of water that is associated with violence and revolution. In a sense, the ship depends on 'the destructive element' for its very existence: the isolation that helps generate its idiosyncratic political community is a function of its position away from land. Although this 'destructive element' clearly also exists at the limits of Costaguana, it is naively conceived of by Viola as a space of freedom outside the sordid and constrained politics of the land. Viola's passion for this particular element of his past—the fellowship of the sea as spectral presence—is doubled by the fraternity of liberty, which is reflected ironically in the symbolic geography of *Nostramo*, including the geography of the sea itself.

***Counterfeit Gould: creolisation and monstrous hybridity***

As I have argued above, *Nostramo* offers Conrad's most fully sustained disquisition on the destructive nature of fanaticism. Fanaticism, as elsewhere in his work, gives a religious sheen to secular, often crudely material, interests: these are enshrined in *Nostramo* in the fetish object of the San Tomé mine. Holroyd's 'religion of silver and iron' has a disciple in the figure of Charles Gould, whose name homophonically makes his family a parallel to the

mine's silver. Yet their religions are different: for if Holroyd is (outwardly) a Protestant, Charles Gould places his faith in material interests, in capitalism as a route to progress. Similarly, if Viola's articles of faith are liberty and Garibaldi, Gould is a devotee of progressive liberalism, though by the end of the novel he emerges as no less fanatical than the old republican. In addition to liberal fanaticism, Gould embodies further paradoxes that arise from the tension in modern liberalism between freedom, self-actualisation, legitimacy, and authenticity—and from the violence at their core. Whereas I previously highlighted the violence of modern liberal conversationalism (Chapter One) or historical liberal imperialism (Chapter Three), I now want to show how *Nostramo* depicts these problems through *creolisation*. As might be expected of Conrad by now, creolisation does not involve an idealised cultural blending (see, for example: Glissant [1995] 2008) that potentially harmonises with liberal pluralism, but a process of oppression and repression that depends on the older meaning of 'Creole' as a descendent of European settlers: 'the pure Creole families' (p.64) who form the Spanish-speaking aristocracy of Costaguana. Charles Gould is an Anglicised version of such a Creole. This aristocratic form of creolisation invokes European identity as a claim of superiority that suppresses local affinities, on the one hand, and justifies domination, on the other. Gould's own political views, while never made explicit in the text, connect this process back to progressive liberalism, suggesting that modern liberalism, far from pluralistically putting alternative creeds on an equal footing, ideologically colonises them. At the same time, the logic of creolisation mounts a challenge to modern liberal ideals of authentic self-creation and demonstrable self-worth.

As in *Under Western Eyes*, liberalism is primarily associated in *Nostramo* with England. If the concept of liberty is first introduced to the novel by Viola, its connection to Englishness is subsequently signalled through his affiliations and revolutionary history:

Giorgio Viola had a great consideration for the English. This feeling, born on the battlefields of Uruguay, was forty years old at the very least. Several of them had poured their blood for the cause of freedom in America, and the first he had ever known he remembered by the name of Samuel; he commanded a negro company under Garibaldi, during the famous siege of Montevideo, and died heroically with his negroes at the fording of the Boyana. He, Giorgio, had reached the rank of ensign—*alferez*—and cooked for the general. Later, in Italy, he, with the rank of lieutenant, rode with the staff and still cooked for the general [...] And everywhere he had seen Englishmen in the front rank of the army of freedom. He respected their nation because they loved Garibaldi. Their very countesses and princesses had kissed the general's hands in London, it was said. He could well believe it; for the nation was noble, and the man was a saint (pp.30–31).

The English revolutionaries whom Viola respected in his past are duly fleshed out in the Gould family, beginning with Charles's grandfather, who 'fought in the cause of independence under Bolivar, in that famous English legion which on the battlefield of Carabobo had been saluted by the great Liberator as Saviours of his country' (pp.46-47). The content of English liberalism is developed more thoroughly, however, in relation to another of Charles's relatives: his uncle Harry. In contrast with Viola's blood religion of liberty, the Gould family's is a liberal politics that favours peaceful politicking over warfare—although it notably fails to disentangle itself from the latter—and that ultimately weds itself to the agency of capital to achieve its political goals.

If Old Giorgio's views hint at stereotypes of 'passionate Latinity,' the values of the Gould family initially appear to evoke an archetypal 'cool Englishness' that has pragmatism in its mindset rather than passion in its heart. Charles Gould has a very particular sense of the relationship between his politics and his family history:

The name of Gould has been always highly respected in Sulaco. My uncle Harry was chief of the State for some time, and has left a great name amongst the first families. By this I mean the pure Creole families, who take no part in the miserable farce of governments. Uncle Harry was no adventurer. In Costaguana we Goulds are no adventurers. He was of the country, and he loved it, but he remained essentially an Englishman in his ideas. He made use of the political cry of his time. It was Federation. But he was no politician. He simply stood up for social order out of pure love for rational liberty and from his hate of oppression. There was no nonsense about him. He went to work in his own way because it seemed right, just as I feel I must lay hold of that mine (p.64).

Charles's celebratory account of his uncle begins to give shape to the values that inspire the English, whom Viola so admires as being 'in the front rank of the army of freedom' (p.31). Harry Gould, executed during a political conflict (p.47), appears to have been one such foot soldier, a man who 'poured [his] blood for the cause of freedom' (p.30). In Charles's account, his uncle is a liberal in the classic English tradition: 'he remained essentially an Englishman in his ideas [...] He simply stood up for social order out of pure love for rational liberty and from his hate of oppression' (p.64). Harry's 'rational' stance aligns him with modern liberal tradition, and his support of 'social order' sets his politics in opposition to revolution, even if it depends upon it to achieve its ends (see also Chapter One).

The Goulds' 'English' political views are rapidly confronted, however, by their own contradictions. Charles, while still in Europe (that is, before he has involved himself in the 'miserable farce' of Costaguanan politics), admires his uncle because at first glance he is no

idealist: ‘He made use of the political cry of his time’ in an attempt to secure ‘social order out of pure love for rational liberty and [...] hate of oppression’ (p.64). Harry does have his ideals—‘social order,’ ‘rational liberty’—but he finds it increasingly difficult to act according to them; thus, as with so many other leading lights in Costaguana, his principles are first compromised then finally destroyed. And something more is amiss in Charles Gould’s representation of his uncle. There is no indication in the novel that Charles knew Harry well, and his assessment needs to be interpreted in the light of informal family history and hearsay. Having been sent away from Costaguana for his education in England, Charles is remote from Harry—the elder’s story comes to the younger second hand, most likely filtered through the lens of Charles’s father, whose letters are the main source of information on Costaguana for the youngest Gould. The political views of the father are in many ways opposite to those of the son, and so the favourable assessment of Harry Gould presented here depends upon Charles’s rewriting of family history. In effect, Charles’s account of his uncle reflects his own values; his depiction is part history part projection, geared toward justifying his decision to ignore his father’s wishes and take control of the Sulaco mine. Charles explains that Harry ‘went to work in his own way because it seemed right, just as I feel I must lay hold of that mine’ (p.64). Charles reconciles his betrayal of his father’s wishes with an appeal to an older family tradition of political involvement, beginning with his revolutionary grandfather and continued by his uncle Harry.

Thus, when Harry in a sense stands for ‘social order out of pure love for rational liberty and from his hate of oppression’ (p.64), he not only stands as a candidate for the presidency, underpinned by those values, but also stands for Charles himself. Harry represents a distinct political approach: pragmatic political manoeuvring so as to achieve the higher purpose of liberty. It therefore seems appropriate to read Charles’s account of Harry’s politics as his own manifesto championing what, to all intents and purposes, is a liberalism of social order—one which, though disdainful of politics, is willing to get dirt or even blood on its hands. It is ‘no nonsense’ in this brute sense, but also because, in the face of the relentless machinations of Costaguanan politics, Charles finds there to be something ‘rational’ about the political ends of the Goulds. The uncle’s politics ironise the nephew’s, with both eventually presiding over the independence of the Occidental Province and, subsequently, the Republic: Harry as president of the State of Sulaco, and Charles as its *de facto* potentate, ‘El Rey’ (pp.218, 239, 316, 405). Charles’s politics is illegitimate and inauthentic, inherited from an uncle in opposition to his father’s wishes, but also mired in

dishonesty. His views represent a pragmatic approach in which principles are betrayed in order to achieve political power. Yet Charles Gould's story is not simply one where history repeats itself; rather it follows *Nostramo's* ironic spiral of degradation—a spiral also seen in much of Conrad's other work.

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In order to achieve success, Charles secures the support of an American businessman, known simply as Mr Holroyd, who underwrites the rejuvenation of the mine. Their success inspires the opening of Costaguana to other interests, leading to the creation of a railway by English capitalists, who draw on the influence of the now-established Charles to secure their ambitions. In another liberal 'bargain with fate' (see Chapter One), the silver of the mine buys a sort of freedom, but at the cost of Costaguana's submission to external power in the form of English and American capital. Similarly, the 'social order' that both men support, and that is buttressed in turn by capitalism, is established through the agency of the mine and its silver. Enrichment follows order, but order requires placing limits on freedom, and using violence if necessary to achieve desired political ends.

Thus, if *Nostramo* tells the story of an attempt to create a less turbulent and oppressive community, it is nevertheless a story of imperial subjugation. In the telling, Conrad's novel demonstrates a keen awareness of liberalism's imperialistic urges. The Gould project is an attempt to bring the putatively common-sensical, reasonable politics of England to the former colony: to establish good governance in a fledgling nation blighted by 'Fifty Years of Misrule'—the title of Don José Avellanos's 'historical work on Costaguana' (p.112). In this aim, it echoes again J. S. Mill's justification of imperialism that I earlier discussed in relation to *Lord Jim* (see Chapter Three), but in contrast to that novel, the engine of capital—and the ideological force of liberalism that embellishes it—take priority over brute force and terror to effect the subjugation of Costaguana in the end.

If the legitimacy of Gould's political vision is challenged by the compromises he makes to achieve it, it is also both underpinned and undermined by Costaguanan communal and national affiliations. Charles's family connection to Costaguana makes him an authentic 'Costaguanero' in the eyes of other Creoles, so they support his *de facto* rule of Sulaco. But this legitimacy is complicated by his identity, for, like Harry, Charles is 'essentially an Englishman in his ideas,' and his appearance is a parody of Englishness:

Born in the country, as his father before him, [...] Charles Gould looked like a new arrival from over the sea. His grandfather had fought in the cause of independence under Bolivar [...] One of Charles Gould's uncles had been elected President of that very province of Sulaco (then called a State) in the days of Federation, and afterwards had been put up against the wall of a church and shot by the order of the barbarous Unionist general, Guzman Bento. [...]

Guzman Bento of cruel memory had put to death great numbers of people besides Charles Gould's uncle; but with a relative martyred in the cause of aristocracy, the Sulaco Oligarchs (this was the phraseology of Guzman Bento's time; now they were called Blancos, and had given up the federal idea), which meant the families of pure Spanish descent, considered Charles as one of themselves. With such a family record, no one could be more of a Costaguanero than Don Carlos Gould; but his aspect was so characteristic that in the talk of common people he was just the Inglez—the Englishman of Sulaco. (pp.46–47)

Charles Gould's English appearance connects him to a liberal tradition that is also a family lineage, embracing a love of 'rational liberty' and 'hate of oppression' that grants philosophical legitimacy to his political project. Yet his nationality suggests a gulf between appearance and actuality, for Charles is not as English as he appears, and—as discussed above—his approach is not so liberal either. Furthermore, there is an anxiety implicit in the need to reconcile the contrast between his appearance and his heritage, perhaps because 'in the talk of the common people he was just the Inglez' (there is clearly something dismissive in 'just the Inglez'). Attitudes to Charles also divide along lines of class: in contrast to the 'common people,' 'the aristocracy [...] which meant the families of pure Spanish descent, considered Charles as one of themselves.' The language here both reveals and conceals lines of colonial history. The use of Spanish, for example, suggests that Charles is both an outsider and a 'Costaguanero,' since it is the Spanish Creoles, themselves earlier immigrants, who regard him as one of their own, whereas it is not clear that 'the common people' who call Charles 'the Inglez' (which translates appropriately both as 'the Englishman' and 'the English,' rendering Charles synecdochic of an entire nation) do not include 'the country-people' who speak an 'Indian dialect' (p.48). Similarly, the phrase 'no one could be more of a Costaguanero than Don Carlos' suggests an authentic belonging to Costaguana that depends upon a history of Spanish colonialism. This seems to affirm Charles's own belonging, but it also ironically hints at the inauthenticity of the Blanco aristocrats who have embraced him; for though 'Costaguanero' might mean native to Costaguana, it is not a sign of authenticity but rather one of creolisation: Spanish is merely the language of an older imperialism and its status as a kind of 'original' is a sign of appropriation rather than indigeneity.

In addition, the national composition of Costaguana is far more complex than this first glance suggests: there are also numerous first- and second-generation immigrants of various European origins, including Italians like Viola and Nostromo, as well as Frenchmen, Germans, and Danes (p.192). In general, though, there are some consistent intersections of class and nationality: the aristocracy is Spanish, with English and other Northern Europeans representing a capitalist class that overlaps, via the Goulds, with the ‘Sulaco Oligarchs.’ Italians include the petit bourgeois Viola and the social climber Nostromo, and at the bottom of the ladder are ‘Negroes’ and ‘Indians.’ Walter D. Mignolo (himself a South American Creole) writes as follows of the problematic relationship between South American social groupings:

[T]ake the case of Creole elites in ‘Latin’ America, who are white and of European descent, but not Europeans. Seeing and feeling themselves to be different from Europeans (the Spanish first, the French and British later), Creole elites have chosen to adopt Latinity (*Latinidad*) as their way of establishing difference-in-sameness with Europe. But for the region’s many Indian and African peoples, *Latinidad* has not been an enabling concept, robbing them of the possibility of telling their own stories and consigning them to bit-part roles in the official accounts of European intellectuals and/or Creoles of European descent (2013, p.117, original emphasis).

Yet in *Nostromo* it is not *Latinidad* that robs Costaguana’s Indian and African peoples of the possibility of telling their own stories, but *liberalism*. As previously argued, the word ‘liberal’ defines the ability of non-Europeans in *Nostromo* to construct a political narrative, but it also has the paradoxical effect of undermining their claims to legitimate concerns. Charles Gould himself comments on the irony of how his opponents describe themselves: ‘Liberals, as they call themselves. Liberals! 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’ (p.408). The opponents of the Costaguanan Creoles, meanwhile, are ‘Negro liberals,’ whose adopted political identity suggest to Charles a degeneration of his high political ideals. Like the ‘Indian and African peoples’ described by Mignolo, these ‘Negro liberals’ cannot tell their own political story, but merely reflect back the language of the powerful. This results not in conversation, but derision. Charles is incensed at the apparent degeneration of his own principles in the political narratives of his rivals, but what he does not acknowledge is that it is the political dominance of European ideas that makes them unable to speak in different terms. Instead, he uses this to justify his own domination of Costaguana, turning a form of imperialism into his moral crusade against degeneracy,

corruption, and childish misunderstanding, which is framed by the novel in Manichaean terms as a conflict between Gould and his 'Blanco' allies against their 'Negro' foes.

It should be clear though that identity is not really black and white in Costaguana, nor is it simply a conflict between appearance and reality. In effect, Charles's surface appearance is a caricature of Englishness, which ironically conceals a hybridity that renders his identity as parodic as the Costaguana politics he decries:

He looked more English than a casual tourist, a sort of heretic pilgrim, however, quite unknown in Sulaco. He looked more English than the last arrived batch of young railway engineers, than anybody out of the hunting-field pictures in the numbers of *Punch* reaching his wife's drawing-room two months or so after date. It astonished you to hear him talk Spanish (Castillan, as the natives say) or the Indian dialect of the country-people so naturally. His accent had never been English; but there was something so indelible in all these ancestral Goulds—liberators, explorers, coffee planters, merchants, revolutionists—of Costaguana, that he, the only representative of the third generation in a continent possessing its own style of horsemanship, went on looking thoroughly English even on horseback. This is not said of him in the mocking spirit of the Llaneros—men of the great plains—who think that no one in the world knows how to sit a horse but themselves. Charles Gould, to use the suitably lofty phrase, rode like a centaur. Riding for him was not a special form of exercise; it was a natural faculty, as walking straight is to all men sound of mind and limb; but, all the same, when cantering beside the rutty ox-cart track to the mine he looked in his English clothes and with his imported saddlery as though he had come this moment to Costaguana at his easy swift *pasotrote*, straight out of some green meadow at the other side of the world (pp.47–48, original emphasis).

Gould *looks* English, but crucially he does not *speak* like an Englishman. His language is doubly out of place, neither 'Costaguanan' nor English though he has the ability to speak both Spanish and 'the Indian dialect of the country-people so naturally' (that is, not completely 'naturally'). These evocations of the natural move us away from the cultural notion of creolisation and prepare the ground for a conflicting metaphor that suggests not cultural relocation and imperialism, but monstrous hybridisation. Charles's style of riding, for example, which marks him out as 'thoroughly English,' also renders him a 'centaur'—a mythic-cum-supernatural image which, as well as suggesting hybridity, undermines the very idea of 'natural' identity. In Gould, nature and its opposite are combined in a single image, allowing Conrad to connect his equivocation of 'nature' with an inherently unstable Costaguanan national identity that also has the effect of rendering Charles's own claim to political legitimacy unsound. It transpires that his political credentials depend paradoxically upon his dubious naturalisation as a true 'Costaguanero' alongside his 'indelible' Englishness, which in turn underpins his credentials as a good liberal. However, these two sides of his identity refute one another: his status as Costaguanero, which grants him

political legitimacy through a local affiliation, undermines his philosophical legitimacy as an Englishman and an agent of liberal progress, implicating his own politics in the very ‘folly and murder’ he condemns.

If Gould’s naturalisation stands on shaky ground, his Englishness also takes on the extremity of the satirical cartoons of *Punch*. As historians have shown, the magazine was itself a significant factor in both the expression and production of British colonial representations (Khanduri 2014, p.4); while it was also named for the famous traditional British (and European) comedy of violence, *Punch and Judy*. Charles Gould and, by association, his politics are therefore ironised by being linked to the comedic and the bestial. As a centaur, both more and less than human, his riding is at once superior and inhuman. Meanwhile, via the figure of Punch he is connected to a folk tradition that renders his nobility ironic: *Punch* neatly captures his resemblance to the figure of the English gentleman-hunter, but in its name and satiric content it is humorous and humbling, even demeaning, at the same time.

These ironies have two potentially opposite effects. As we have seen, *Nostramo* covertly mocks questions of authenticity and legitimacy. Yet these ironies also absent the ‘pure’ European or Englishman from the text, potentially allowing a racist reading in which it is precisely this absence that acts as the source of Costaguanan degeneracy. For if it is true that ‘no one could be more of a Costaguanero than Don Carlos Gould,’ then Gould effectively becomes less a paragon of English ideals than of their corruption in the Costaguanan context. Gould’s failure can be read not as a breakdown of the ideals themselves but of their failed transplantation by a cartoon Englishman. *Nostramo* implicates Gould himself in ‘folly and murder,’ making him personally responsible for the debasement of political ideals whose degeneration he both bemoans and comes to represent. Yet if it sustains these contradictory versions, irony also highlights the importance of perspective and affiliation in shaping our reading. In other words, the different ways in which we might interpret Charles Gould are dramatically influenced according to which particular aspect of his contradictory nature is prioritised. If we choose not to favour one interpretation, irony forces us to incorporate paradoxes that cannot be resolved.

*Nostramo's* politics of affiliation is itself troubled by all manner of betrayals and duplicity. Even Charles's appeal to family in order to justify his actions is deeply ironic in that his commitment to politics leads him to neglect his wife. This represents a challenge to the prioritisation of public over private, which Hampson argues is the idealised ethic worked through in Conrad's early political writings, only to collapse in *Nostramo* (1992, pp.8–9). Hampson writes that Gould's idealism and its contribution to his betrayal of his wife are an 'idealistic attempt to align capitalism with morality [that] is represented as both fetish and fairy-tale' (1992, p.156). I have argued thus far that Gould's is a specifically liberal morality; in the remainder of this section, I will work through the fundamental clash within this liberal outlook between political and personal, or public and private (see also Chapter Two). I will argue that capitalism plays a key role here, functioning as Gould's political instrument but also ultimately enslaving him, transforming him into an agent not of 'ethical progress' (compare the portrayal of Jim in Chapter Three), but mere economic gain.

In the last chapter of the novel, Emilia Gould curses the silver that her husband has used to achieve his goals, telling Nostromo that 'I, too, have hated the idea of that silver from the bottom of my heart' (p.560). Though it has made her 'wealthy beyond great dreams of wealth, considered, loved, respected, honoured,' silver has also rendered her 'as solitary as any human being had ever been, perhaps, on this earth' (p.555). (It is worth noting here that Emilia's isolation is mirrored in Martin Decoud's, to which I will return in a later section.) At the end of the novel, in achieving all his political aspirations, and in winning the power to bring about the progress he desires, Charles and his mine have come to embody the very forces he set out to defeat. Emilia perceives this painful truth clearly:

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 [...] Poor boy! She had a clear vision of the grey hairs on his temples. He was perfect—perfect. What more could she have expected? It was a colossal and lasting success; and love was only a short moment of forgetfulness, a short intoxication, whose delight one remembered with a sense of sadness, as if it had been a deep grief lived through. *There was something inherent in the necessities of successful action which carried with it the moral degradation of the idea. She 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.* He did not see it. He could not see it. It was not his fault. He was perfect, perfect; but she would never have him to herself (pp.520–22, my emphasis).

Crucially, Emilia does not identify the failure of Charles's project because its failings are not the same as those of the previous regime. The mine's pitiless autocracy, its power 'over the whole land,' is terrible because it is inhuman, and Charles, though he has achieved 'colossal and lasting success,' is not the mine's ruler but its victim. His and Emilia's are amongst the first lives crushed: their relationship is sacrificed to the mine, but they are not the only ones predicted to suffer. As Dr Monygham tells Emilia:

There is no peace and no rest in the development of material interests. They have their law, and their justice. But it is founded on expediency, and is inhuman; it is without rectitude, without the continuity and the force that can be found only in a moral principle. Mrs. Gould, 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. [...] It'll weigh as heavily, and provoke resentment, bloodshed, and vengeance, because the men have grown different. Do you think that now the mine would march upon the town to save their Señor Administrador?' (p.511).

Monygham's argument has two strands: firstly the implacable motion of material interests, 'founded on expediency'; and secondly, the relativity that dictates human contentment. Although these two strands appear at first sight to be dependent, Monygham predicts that material interests will only 'provoke resentment, bloodshed, and vengeance' because they are inhuman and without moral principle. This conflict relates to the changes brought about by material progress, but its underlying cause is 'because men have grown different.' Because people adapt to their circumstances, what might have saved them from one oppression, 'the barbarism, cruelty, and misrule of a few years back,' ends up becoming the instrument of another: the subordination of human life and agency to the inhuman logic of capital. This is not to suggest that change is an illusion—it is clear that Monygham regards life in Sulaco as less cruel and barbaric than it was before—but the circumstances of the Goulds, who have benefited materially from these changes, imply that one of the costs of progress has been the degradation of human relations:

[Emilia] saw clearly the San Tomé mine possessing, consuming, burning up the life of the last of the Costaguana Goulds; mastering the energetic spirit of the son as it had mastered the lamentable weakness of the father. A terrible success for the last of the Goulds. The last! She had hoped for a long, long time, that perhaps— But no! There were to be no more. An immense desolation, the dread of her own continued life, descended upon the first lady of Sulaco. With a prophetic vision she saw herself surviving alone the degradation of her young ideal of life, of love, of work—all alone in the Treasure House of the World. The profound, blind, suffering expression of a painful dream settled on her face with its closed eyes. In the indistinct voice of an unlucky sleeper, lying passive in the grip of a merciless nightmare, she stammered out aimlessly the words—  
"Material interest." (p. 522)

As is clear from the passage above, the cost of progress is not only that the agent of change will in time become an object of resentment—in Monygham’s terms—but also that material improvement has failed to provide fulfilment. Life for Emilia Gould is not ‘large and full,’ but solitary and desolate. If Emilia’s initial wish had been to work ‘for the good of those who come after,’ she has been complicit in precisely the opposite. Yet this is not a failure, but a ‘terrible success’; not the destruction, but the ‘degradation of her young ideal of life, of love, or work.’ The tragedy is that by achieving everything they set out to, Charles and Emilia Gould—or Emilia at least—have set the seal on their own futility. Emilia is left ‘lying passive in the grip of a merciless nightmare’—an image that reminds us that although she blames ‘material interest’ for her plight, it is her own desires that have brought her to this juncture, frustrating what she now realises might have been her path to fulfilment.

Material interests are responsible in the text for more than just the collapse of Emilia Gould’s individual self-actualisation; for in *Nostramo*, the San Tomé silver mine is made iconic of slavery, a social evil that promotes conditions under which liberal goals are impossible. The connection between silver and slavery is made explicit in the text: *literal* slavery in so far as slave labour has provided the historical foundations for the mine, and *metaphorical* slavery to silver, which is the fate to which Nostromo succumbs. Less clear, though no less significant, is Charles Gould’s parallel enslavement to the mine. The symbiotic link between these two characters tangles liberal personal and political aspirations in a ‘dis-emancipating’ (freedom-denying) process that is opposite to liberalism’s aims. Domenico Losurdo, in *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, argues that liberalism over the centuries has progressed through a ‘dialectic of emancipation and dis-emancipation’ (2011, p.344). Furthermore, greater freedom and democratisation, far from emerging from within liberalism, have tended to arise as a result of external and often violent opposition. Liberalism’s key strength, argues Losurdo, has been its tendency to learn from its opponents, transforming itself to accommodate more radical politics (2011, p.343). Nevertheless, Losurdo, like Conrad, questions the extent to which liberalism can leave behind its dubious past and its illiberal origins; the malleability which allows it to transform also enables it to preserve older, less progressive versions of itself (2011, p.344). Losurdo has a point, but his liberalism is monolithic: proxy for a Western, largely Anglophone elite that slowly consumes its others, growing bloated and self-divided as it does so. Losurdo defines liberalism as a love of the concept of liberty that depends historically upon the enslavement of others so that freedom for a limited few can be

achieved. Moreover, his sense of liberalism makes even its opponents liberals. Edmund Burke is particularly prominent in this respect, and his case demonstrates a key aspect of Losurdo's thinking. Burke can be enlisted as a liberal, Losurdo suggests, because he wants to conserve a tradition that is 'eminently liberal,' 'the social and political institutions that emerged from the Glorious Revolution' (2011, p.62). Yet the Glorious Revolution was a coup that replaced a Catholic monarch with a Protestant, and that established parliamentarianism as the mode of government in the United Kingdom. It is without a doubt an important milestone in liberal history without being the 'real' liberalism; in effect, it belongs to that order of mythic false origins that proscribes a set of limits to political discussion without being able to determine where the conversation will lead (see Chapter One). Likewise, Losurdo suggests that because the rise of liberalism throughout the world was correlated by a parallel (albeit temporarily) exponential rise in formal enslavement, perhaps liberalism cannot really leave slavery behind but rather reinvents slavery under different guises. This progression from literal to metaphorical slavery is certainly reflected in *Nostromo's* representation of history and progress, but it is accompanied by a suspicion of exactly the kind of grand narrative that Losurdo constructs. In particular, while Losurdo fails to distinguish liberalism sufficiently from capitalism and imperialism, *Nostromo* suggests their historical and conceptual entanglement without making them interchangeable (see also Chapter Three).

Notwithstanding, any reading of politics in *Nostromo* that fails to engage its critique of capitalism would be incomplete. This aspect has turned it into a magnet for Marxist critics—like Losurdo. Fredric Jameson has famously accounted for the novel as 'systematically undermining the individual categories of storytelling in order to project, beyond the stories it must continue to tell, the concept of a process beyond storytelling' (1981, p.279) namely the impact of capitalism in 'its imperialist stage' (1981, p.273). For Benita Parry, it is a text focused on contradictions, presenting antagonistic views of history where one interpretation presents 'a thesis on the depravity of human nature and the futility of politics [while] the other registers anger at the foulness of the present condition and offers a prospect on the regenerative dimension to politics' (1983, p.118). Parry concludes that if there is hopefulness in the text, it consists in the ability of Nostromo himself to live on after his death as an heroic exemplar to the poor of Costaguana in spite of his moral fall, with the novel providing 'intimations of a transfigured future' in its closing lines (1983, p.127).

Yet as Allan Simmons (from a non-Marxist perspective) suggests, while *Nostramo* provides ‘a broadly Marxist vision of Costaguana’s history as the product of economic forces’ (2006, p.116), its fragmented chronology and ‘shifting viewpoints emphasise the impossibility of ever seeing the whole picture of Costaguana, while simultaneously calling attention to the limitation of any one interpretation’ (2006, p.128). Character and event in *Nostramo* are indeed refracted through a range of perspectives, and the histories of the nation cannot be disentangled from vested interests. Ursula Lord likewise suggests that though *Nostramo* resonates with Marxist understandings of the alienation of labour, its staging of ideologies is too fragmented and conflicting to grant it an affinity with a single political stance (1998, p.252); while Christopher GoGwilt argues that even if ‘*Nostramo* follows Marx’s critique of republicanism’ (1995, p.204), it ‘illustrates [...] the profoundly fictive structure of political history’ (1995, p.219). GoGwilt’s perspective in particular speaks to Jameson’s: for the latter, *Nostramo* goes ‘beyond storytelling,’ whereas in GoGwilt’s interpretation, it turns reality into stories. Both readings, however, hinge on a similar logic that places fiction as subordinate to reality. What really matters, Jameson implies, is the reality of ‘capitalism in its imperialist phase,’ whilst GoGwilt’s assertion carries the suggestion that ‘political history’ ultimately has no more validity than fiction. My own view, however, is that rather than turning perceived reality into fiction, *Nostramo* collapses the binary, showing how fiction plays a central role in determining reality, and demonstrating in the process that fiction and reality are inextricably entwined.

My reading of the novel is similar to that of the Marxists, however, in so far as I see silver as more than just a form of capital in *Nostramo*, but a symbolic marker for the potency of capitalism as a system of domination. The history of Costaguana, both before it achieves independence from the Spanish Empire and once it has become an independent nation, hinges on the San Tomé mine, a prodigiously productive institution with a long history of exploitation:

Worked in the early days mostly by means of lashes on the backs of slaves, its yield had been paid for in its own weight of human bones. Whole tribes of Indians had perished in the exploitation; and then the mine was abandoned, since with this primitive method it had ceased to make a profitable return, no matter how many corpses were thrown into its maw. Then it became forgotten. It was rediscovered after the War of Independence. An English company obtained the right to work it, and found so rich a vein that neither the exactions of successive governments, nor the periodical raids of recruiting officers upon the population of paid miners they had created, could discourage their perseverance (p.52).

Here, the symbolic geography of the text works not by conceptual but by historical association (see section two above). The link between mining and slavery is real, and that Nostromo becomes the 'slave of the San Tomé silver' is a modern manifestation of the historical relationship between early capitalism and slavery. Nostromo's enslavement to the silver is paralleled by Charles Gould's metaphorical incarceration. Again it is Emilia Gould who understands the horror of this situation and reflects on the consequences of a betrayal of liberal aims:

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. He seemed to dwell alone within a circumvallation of precious metal, leaving her outside with her school, her hospital, the sick mothers and the feeble old men, mere insignificant vestiges of the initial inspiration. "Those poor people!" she murmured to herself (pp.221–22).

The silver not only walls off Charles Gould from the private feelings that are embodied in his wife, but also separates him from the modern liberal 'social goods' she comes to represent in *Nostromo*: education, healthcare, and care for the vulnerable. These goods are the foundations of self-actualisation, with one of modern liberalism's key aims being 'to emancipate individuals from the fear of hunger, unemployment, ill health, and miserable old age, and positively to attempt to help members of modern industrial societies to flourish' (Ryan; see also Introduction). The irony lies in combining the Goulds' success in establishing these basic social goods with the dramatic extent to which they fall short of their aspirations. For, as already argued above, the Goulds' immeasurable wealth, far from enabling them to achieve their altruistic goals, has become an impediment to progress: Charles Gould's chosen weapon has been turned upon him, cutting him off from all he held dear.

In calling the mine a 'fetish'—another point not lost on the Marxists—Conrad might almost be playing with the notion of commodity fetishism (see, for example: Parry 1983, pp.104–05; Mulhern 2008, pp.487–92). In this reading, the silver becomes for Charles an objectification of the original 'inspiration' that motivated him to return to Costaguana and take over the mine, namely that it could then be used to promote a progressive liberal agenda for his suffering homeland. However, Emilia imagines the silver as a wall that isolates her husband from the very realities of poverty and suffering he had originally hoped to alleviate; Charles's obsession with the mine and its product has transformed a means into

an end in itself. In so doing, he has lost sight of a kind of use value embodied in the silver, though its usefulness depends on its value as a commodity. This is not Marxist commodity fetishism, then, but a second-hand version of it, another ironic reproduction. Charles attaches a moral value to the silver that depends upon its exchange value—he sees it as a potential force for good even if this power is indexed to human greed—but, as his wife observes, the silver itself replaces moral value as the focus of his obsession. Francis Mulhern uses a more strictly Marxist understanding of commodity fetishism when he reads Nostromo (the character) as a ‘universal factotum, exchangeable, silver, and capable of self-augmentation—or as Marx put it, “self-valorizing value”—Nostromo is money’ (2007, p.488). However, this performs a logic that is opposite to Conrad’s: for whilst Conrad *multiplies* the forms of value that pertain to the silver of the mine, Mulhern is reducing the text to a *single* allegorical signification. Though this serves his purpose of using *Nostromo* to pose a question about commodity fetishism and its central place in the development of capitalism (2007, p.492), it does no justice to Conrad’s novel or to the various critical insights on value it supports.

Moreover, if Charles Gould fetishises moral value in the San Tomé silver, Conrad himself derives aesthetic value from its image. Silver thus becomes a multi-faceted mode of symbolic expression as well as a multivalent object of individual/collective obsession, embodying capitalist ‘material interests,’ but also operating as a focal point for the human greed and lust for power demonstrated by, for example, the Montero brothers or Commandant Sotillo. Likewise, before Nostromo becomes a slave to the silver, he too deploys it aesthetically: as a sign of his prestige that is ironically also emblematic of his narcissism (Mulhern 2007, p.488). This is doubly ironic because when Nostromo displays silver ostentatiously, he is poor, whereas when he is rich, it must be hidden.

Silver, like gold (cf. Gould), has a use-value tied to aesthetic concerns, but it is its *malleability* as well as its appearance that makes it suitable as a material to produce finely wrought decorative objects. And if silver, like gold, is valuable because we can bend it to our own purposes, *Nostromo* conversely highlights its potential to turn against us. In both of these senses, silver emerges in the novel as both a symbol of material interests and a major force in Costaguanan politics. It makes Charles Gould ‘El Rey de Sulaco’ (pp.218, 239, 316, 405), a lesser monarch whose primary patron, Mr Holroyd, is also called (by Decoud) ‘the Steel and Silver King’ (p.240). Charles wields capital as a weapon and, at times, he does so almost literally. For example, at the nadir of his campaign to liberate

Sulaco, he decides to destroy the mine rather than let it be used by his opponents, rationalising his decision in a curiously involuted passage in which he imagines himself destroying his own instrument of violence:

He had gone forth into the senseless fray as his poor uncle, whose sword hung on the wall of his study, had gone forth—in the defence of the commonest decencies of organized society. Only his weapon was the wealth of the mine, more far-reaching and subtle than an honest blade of steel fitted into a simple brass guard.

More dangerous to the wielder, too, this weapon of wealth, double-edged with the cupidity and misery of mankind, steeped in all the voices of self-indulgence as in a concoction of poisonous roots, tainting the very cause for which it is drawn, always ready to turn awkwardly in the hand. There was nothing for it now but to go on using it. But he promised himself to see it shattered into small bits before he let it be wrenched from his grasp (p.365).

It is unclear in this passage to what extent the narrative voice reflects Charles's own thoughts. What seems like the commentary of an omniscient narrator bleeds into an account of Charles's decision, and it is left uncertain how much insight he has into his circumstances. Yet if Charles is willing to destroy the mine to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands, it is evident that on some level, the mine is also destroying Charles. In this sense, silver and the material interests it symbolises are destructive forces that can easily turn on those who wield them. It is a bad joke, but also a hard truth, in the novel that the silver Charles Gould wields to achieve 'the triumph of order and justice' undermines his cause; while Nostromo, who 'remains essentially a man of the People' (p.xiii), likewise becomes the silver's 'faithful and lifelong slave' (p.501). Figuring Nostromo as a slave recalls the literal slaves sacrificed to the mine in its early incarnation under imperial Spain. It also sinisterly suggests that the 'progress' by which Sulaco is established by the novel's close as a wealthy independent state is a not so much a development towards order and justice, rather a procession through various forms of slavery that come to repeat in the present the malfeasances of the past. Charles's revolution may bring technological progress and material comfort to Sulaco, but this is only at the cost of increasing inequality in Costaguana as a whole.

Furthermore, Charles Gould's betrayal resonates with Giorgio Viola's subordination of family to politics. As argued above (see section two), Viola's own sense of the world as 'a battlefield where men had to fight for the sake of universal love and brotherhood' casts these betrayals as a familial substitution in which political ideology (in the shape of liberal humanism) effectively replaces personal ties. The cost of this exchange is paid more by women, whose agency is engulfed by the choices of their husbands. This is not to say that

men in *Nostramo* are autonomous agents in full control of their destinies: they too are subject to external power. In the case of Charles, it is the inhuman forces of material interests, wedded to the monumental power of the mine itself, that impel him, eventually denying him humanity in an ironic reversal of the liberal image of the rational higher self. Ultimately in *Nostramo*, it is the human and the humane in liberal humanism that are sacrificed. What is left is cold metal along with its ideological equivalent, political machinery, which enslaves the very people it is intended to serve.

*Decoud, individualism, suicide*

The final strand of my argument in this chapter relates to a critique in *Nostramo* of a more conventional liberal individualism, focused in particular on the character of Martin Decoud. Critics have read Decoud as a mouthpiece for Conrad (Miller 2004, p.21), and certainly there are compelling ways in which Decoud mirrors Conrad. His suicide by shooting himself in the chest apparently reflects Conrad's own (deliberately?) failed attempt on his own life. While it is similarly tempting to read Decoud's cynical perspective on politics as reflecting Conrad's own, I will argue instead here that Decoud represents both the apogee and ironic refutation of a sceptical egocentrism. Although it is not directly inspired by modern liberalism, Decoud's political vision marks out its limits in two ways: first, in terms of *self-interest*, which modern liberalism sets out to defend (by aiming to protect private life from public invasion, modern liberalism affirms the right to withdraw from politics or pursue it purely for personal ends, which is exactly what Decoud claims to do); and second, in terms of *suicide*, which I will argue constitutes the limit of a liberal logic of self-authenticating individualism embodied in the freedom to take one's own life.

Decoud asserts that his involvement in Costaguanan politics, such as it exists, is to support his conquest of the ardently political Antonia Avellanos. However, he is motivated by an attraction that, in contrast to the Goulds' love, does not inspire political idealism. Decoud is purely focussed on winning romantic approval. Ironically, Decoud is successful in capturing Antonia's heart, but it is his death that guarantees her love and eternal fidelity. His death takes the individualist foundations of liberalism to absurd extremes in which they are made to undo themselves:

Solitude from mere outward condition of existence becomes very swiftly a state of soul in which the affectations of irony and scepticism have no place. It takes possession of the mind, and drives forth the thought into the exile of utter unbelief. After three days of waiting for the sight of some human face, Decoud caught himself entertaining a doubt of

his own individuality. It had merged into the world of cloud and water, of natural forces and forms of nature. In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part. Decoud lost all belief in the reality of his action past and to come (p.497).

Here, Decoud's surroundings become the vehicle of a destructive truth that shatters 'the sustaining illusion of an independent existence.' Like the clouds floating off the Cordillera, he loses himself on the Golfo Placido, his individuality 'merged into the world of cloud and water,' highlighting the conflicts that lie hidden beneath the placid surface of the gulf. This is a key passage in establishing the symbolic geography of the text (see also sections two and three above), which frames human impotence against a huge historical and political backdrop, but also an even vaster elemental world of 'natural forces and forms of nature' of which human beings are a 'helpless part.' Crucially, this impotence manifests as a crisis of individuality, striking at the most fundamental axiom of liberal political thought, which posits the individual as the unit of political action. In Decoud's case, there is only room for one—final—action, which both underlines and contradicts his sense of his own unreality in the face of an indifferent world. In killing himself, he simultaneously enacts his own agency and terminates it, actualising his own sense of himself as non-existent. Taking four bars of silver, he rows out to sea in the dinghy from the ship that had transported the silver:

He pulled straight towards the setting sun. When the gulf had grown dark, he ceased rowing and flung the sculls in. The hollow clatter they made in falling was the loudest noise he had ever heard in his life. It was a revelation. It seemed to recall him from far away. Actually the thought, "Perhaps I may sleep to-night," passed through his mind. But he did not believe it. He believed in nothing; and he remained sitting on the thwart.

The dawn from behind the mountains put a gleam into his unwinking eyes. After a clear daybreak the sun appeared splendidly above the peaks of the range. The great gulf burst into a glitter all around the boat; and in this glory of merciless solitude the silence appeared again before him, stretched taut like a dark, thin string.

His eyes looked at it while, without haste, he shifted his seat from the thwart to the gunwhale. They looked at it fixedly, while his hand, feeling about his waist, unbuttoned the flap of the leather case, drew the revolver, cocked it, brought it forward pointing at his breast, pulled the trigger, and, with convulsive force, sent the still-smoking weapon hurtling through the air. His eyes looked at it while he fell forward and hung with his breast on the gunwhale and the fingers of his right hand hooked under the thwart. They looked——

"It is done," he stammered out, in a sudden flow of blood. His last thought was: "I wonder how that Capataz died." The stiffness of his fingers relaxed, and the lover of Antonia Avellanos rolled overboard without having heard the cord of silence snap in the solitude of the Placid Gulf, whose glittering surface remained untroubled by the fall of his body (pp.500–01).

Decoud's realisation of the illusory nature of his individuality is not a lifting of a veil covering the truth, but is refracted through another hallucination: the 'cord of silence' that represents the isolation that initiated his existential crisis (see also Chapter One). For Decoud, there is no discovery of overwhelming truth, but only competing and paradoxically intertwined illusions. Ironically, Decoud himself actualises his own sense of himself as indistinct from the landscape. Although the Golfo Placido 'remained untroubled by the fall of his body'—there is no mark of his passing, and there will be no burial mound as proof of his existence—it is through his individual agency that this happens; in the very action by which he ends it, his individuality is paradoxically affirmed. This dynamic is reinforced by Conrad's style, especially his signature use of delayed decoding. As is well known, Conrad's protagonists are often enveloped in the immediacy of their own subjective perceptions, delaying revelation—to both themselves and the reader—of the reality of the events that have overtaken their conscious awareness. Here, Decoud is only too aware of what he is doing, but the narrative of his suicide detaches his consciousness from the depiction of events. It is as if his awareness is suspended for a moment, returning only as he dies—only for the reader is there any possibility of delay in decoding the outcome of these actions.

Delayed decoding is a technique which manifests the immediacy of experience and the tardiness of comprehension in episodes of visceral intensity; a technique which aims at verisimilitude in the moment of trauma, the representation of subjectivity in a series of rapidly unfolding sensations and events. Yet where it represents a lack of understanding on the part of its subject, it simultaneously aims at the opposite in the reader, slowing time to create an ironic double vision where we apprehend the reality of the situation long before the protagonist does—or can (Watt 1980, pp.175–76). Seen in this light, Decoud's death offers a variation on a common Conradian theme that radically inverts its usual structure. We lag behind Decoud in the apprehension of the unreality of his individual existence; indeed, we may not come to accept it at all but rather view it as a symptom of his insanity. This is definitely not how it is presented in the text, however, where the narratorial voice interjects: 'In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part.' As with more classic examples of delayed decoding in Conrad's work, the narration of Decoud's *comprehension* of events is suspended, and the focus rests on a succession of *sensations*—but not because Decoud is unaware of what is happening, but rather because the narrative focus is on his eyes, which seem passively to observe the unfolding actions of his hands. The

symbolic force of this image is overwhelming: his eyes—the mirrors of his soul—look on independently as he kills himself. In this way, the narrative effectively surrenders Decoud's individual consciousness, breaking him down instead into autonomous body parts. It is a sick joke because, on the one hand, the narrative reflects Decoud's subjective sense of being divided—of no longer possessing 'individuality.' On the other, delayed decoding, a technique which capitalises on failures and errors of subjective perception in the moment of trauma, further undermines Decoud's own sense of things: for although he certainly *knows* what is happening, and the narrator affirms the accuracy of this realisation, whether he is correctly *interpreting* what is happening is left in doubt.

Alongside this lingering doubt is the ambiguity of the symbolic baggage that accompanies his self-destruction: four ingots of silver; a wide-angle landscape that evokes the mutual contingency of human and natural agencies; and, especially, 'the spirit of liberty [...] upon the waters,' in which the sea functions as ironic locus of freedom and obliteration alike. Decoud's suicide does not resolve these complexities, nor should we expect it to; indeed, *Nostromo's* evocation of the cycles of nature speaks against the possibility of resolution, suggesting that in political affairs, too, revolutions are a part of broader natural patterns that describe not linear progress, but something more akin to the ebb and flow of the tides.

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As Don Martin drops almost soundlessly into the waters of the gulf, we might recall Giorgio Viola's wish to bury his wife at sea because 'the spirit of liberty is upon the waters' (see section two above). I want to use this intermingling of Decoud's death and Viola's politics to bring liberalism into conversation one last time with the novel's political and artistic vision. It is 'upon the waters' that Decoud arguably achieves some kind of liberation from 'sustaining illusion,' cutting the 'cord of silence' that binds him to others and ending his life. For Don Martin, this cord has become over time both the mechanism of his continuing existence and the instrument of his torture:

[H]e dreaded the sleepless nights in which the silence, remaining unbroken in the shape of a cord to which he hung with both hands, vibrated with senseless phrases, always the same but utterly incomprehensible, about Nostromo, Antonia, Barrios, and proclamations mingled into an ironical and senseless buzzing. In the daytime he could look at the silence like a still cord stretched to breaking-point, with his life, his vain life, suspended to it like a weight (p.499).

Decoud's connection to other people is embodied in the vibration of this cord. Similarly, each character in the novel can be seen to represent a different aspect of his dwindling hopes: Nostromo was his hope for salvation from his predicament; Antonia is his intended bride, who motivated his involvement in politics; and General Barrios and his troops register confidence in the revolution. Now all of these hopes are reduced to 'senseless buzzing,' and the contradictory image of 'a still cord' which nevertheless 'vibrated with senseless phrases' resonates with the paradox that the politics of liberty is nevertheless a form of entrapment, part of 'the solidarity [...] which binds men together' even when conflict tears them apart. Suicide represents a final severing of these ambivalent ties; and while Decoud consequently loses a sense of his individuality in the absence of other people, freedom in its purest form—the freedom to end things—requires the actualisation of this selflessness in the total solitude of death.

Should the insanity brought on by Decoud's solitude seem extreme, pushing the bounds of plausibility, we would do well to remember its parallel in Emilia Gould's more quotidian isolation: she represents both the loneliness of a woman locked in a private world by patriarchy and a public one in which politics is hijacked by capitalism. The potential force of 'social tyranny' feared by Mill (see Chapters One and Two) is figured as necessary in spite of the dangers it poses to authentic self-actualisation. Yet in Decoud's death, this paradox appears—characteristically in Conrad—as black comedy, whose foremost aficionado in the novel is probably Decoud himself:

Of his own country [Decoud] used to say to his French associates:—Imagine an atmosphere of opera-bouffe in which all the comic business of stage statesmen, brigands, etc., etc., all their farcical stealing, intriguing, and stabbing is done in dead earnest. It is screamingly funny, the blood flows all the time, and the actors believe themselves to be influencing the fate of the universe. Of course, government in general, any government anywhere, is a thing of exquisite comicality to a discerning mind; but really we Spanish-Americans do overstep the bounds. No man of ordinary intelligence can take part in the intrigues of *une farce macabre* (p.152).

The novel's satirical intent is already announced in the name given to its own setting: Costaguana translates as 'coast of excrement.' Decoud's heightened sense of the farcical nature of its politics is echoed by others, including Charles Gould, who labels it a 'miserable farce of governments' (p.64), and the narrator himself, who—albeit inconsistently—calls the tale 'a tragic farce' (p.364). There is no evidence that Conrad read Marx, yet *Nostromo* certainly sheds sardonic light on Marx's assertion that history repeats, 'the first time as tragedy, the second as farce' (1974, p.146). However, in typical Conradian style, it proceeds

to deconstruct the binary. The balance is unequal: comedy is mentioned far more than tragedy. ‘Farce’ or ‘farcical’ occur eight times in *Nostramo*; ‘comedy’ and cognates on eight more occasions, ‘burlesque’ once; while ‘tragic’ and its cognates occur only five times, and of these three are qualifiers for ‘comedy’ or ‘farce.’ But if comedy is mentioned more than tragedy, and the latter is more often than not syntactically subordinated to the former, there is very little that is actually funny in *Nostramo*. Decoud’s sense of ‘*une farce macabre*,’ in which the typical motion is to ‘overstep the bounds,’ is perhaps the best description of the tale: it is grim comedy that, in a bizarre generic involution, becomes a parody of itself, mirroring the politics of self-destruction it represents. And if politics as farce is a recurrent motif in *Nostramo*, it also recapitulates another theme that runs through all Conrad’s political novels. In response to a young railway engineer who has expressed his support for the Ribierist cause because it suits English financial interests as well as his own personal ambitions, Decoud remarks cynically to Emilia Gould and Don José Avellanos:

The natural treasures of Costaguana are of importance to the progressive Europe represented by this youth, just as three hundred years ago the wealth of our Spanish fathers was a serious object to the rest of Europe—as represented by the bold buccaneers. There is a curse of futility upon our character: Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, chivalry and materialism, high-sounding sentiments and a supine morality, violent efforts for an idea and a sullen acquiescence in every form of corruption. We convulsed a continent for our independence only to become the passive prey of a democratic parody, the helpless victims of scoundrels and cut-throats, our institutions a mockery, our laws a farce (pp.170-71).

Following my arguments in Chapter Three, where the ironic sense of liberal progress in *Lord Jim* is exposed as being rooted in histories of imperialism and aristocratic plunder, both justified by ‘noble’ ideologies, the dissolute ‘Costaguanan’ character seems a fitting stand-in for liberalism: ‘chivalry and materialism, high-sounding sentiments and a supine morality, violent efforts for an idea and a sullen acquiescence in every form of corruption’ (p.171). Likewise, in that chapter I suggested that comedy acts as a democratising counterpoint to elitism, which is mirrored here in Decoud’s matching of democracy to parody. In *Nostramo*, however, democracy is not *served* by parody but *implicated* in it, with the parallelism of Decoud’s phrasing indicating the direction in which democracy parodies: it is the Sancho Panza to Don Quixote, the materialism to Quixote’s chivalry, a ‘supine morality’ which looks up to the ‘high-sounding’ sentiments of the aristocracy while simultaneously debasing itself in ‘a sullen acquiescence in every form of corruption’ (*ibid.*). And if Sancho Panza is a parody of Don Quixote, then he is also the parody of a parody; here perhaps we begin to see, in a novel that turns relentlessly

around excesses, just why it is that Decoud takes things too far (see also Chapter Two). In yet another example of *Nostramo's* formulations turning in on themselves, Decoud's argument is self-defeating. This inward spiral towards collapse is the defining movement of *Nostramo's* arguments: one eventually enacted on Decoud himself, the 'imaginative materialist' (p.364) who unifies the qualities of Quixote and Panza, and who, through his suicide, takes the logics of individual self-actualisation, liberty, and capital to their extremes.

### *Conclusion*

I have argued in this chapter that *Nostramo* undoes the conceptual bindings of liberalism, rendering them 'ironical and senseless' (p.499). What can be extricated from the unholy mess are various networks of affiliations: Charles Gould's familial and national politics; Giorgio Viola's religion. The novel suggests that what meaningful content there is in liberalism resides in historical and communal ties, which place necessary limits on freedom. The question of liberty, in this sense, is not one of absolute emancipation but rather resides, alongside the particular limits on freedoms one chooses to struggle for and against, in the specific ties one chooses to maintain. Conrad's novel indirectly suggests that opting for modern liberalism means accepting the contradictions that are at its heart: dialogism alongside the desire to legislate for all communities; democratic commitment and elitist values; visions of progress at the cost of various forms of degradation; the movement from visceral conflict to systemic violence; rationalism and religiosity; self-destructive individualism. This last contradiction is key. In *Nostramo*, to a greater extent than in his other political novels, webs of contingency connect the liberal self to illiberal histories and prevent the realisation of a truly individual identity. For Conrad, art itself is an agent in the creation of these webs, its primary aim being to manufacture the solidarities upon which communal life relies. But as Conrad's own work graphically demonstrates, art also has the power to undo the same ties it fashions. Like Decoud's cord of silence, art is both a vehicle of affiliation and the instrument of its destruction. Yet if all this amounts, as it does for Decoud, to the sound of 'ironical and senseless buzzing' (*ibid.*), it also registers a radical indeterminacy from which may yet be extracted a kind of hope. As Conrad's ambiguity underwrites his literary afterlife, allowing his work the potential to be repeatedly read anew, so perhaps liberalism can be re-read, rediscovered as a politics fit for the fallen world he represents. Benita Parry describes this admirably:

It is this inclusive prospect connecting the present both to its known origins and to its indeterminate outcome, and looking on history as a continuous and continuing human narrative, that is seen by Emilia Gould in her despair at having placed the exigencies of immediate practical need before the aspiration to distant goals which respects tradition even while exceeding it [...] With this the conflict between faith and action is transcended by the introduction of a prospect where the two are joined in the utopian desire to realise an ideal world. Against the grain of a rhetoric deriding the efficacy of politics and vilifying the practices of radical movements, and in defiance of a perspective that disparages the visionary impulse of social hope as chimerical, the text engenders an opposite vision in which politics is seen as the agency of deliverance from the soulless materialism of a debased world (1983, p.109).

Perhaps it is fitting, though, that the last word on liberty in *Nostromo* should belong to Giorgio Viola. At the end of the novel, Nostromo is unhappily engaged to Viola's eldest daughter, Linda, but then contrives to elope with Giselle, his youngest. At the same time, he has eyes on the hidden silver that is buried on the islands where Viola has become lighthouse keeper. Viola, overjoyed at the marital arrangements he believes will now proceed without impediment, leaves Nostromo alone with Giselle to cook a celebratory meal. His plan to elope duly hatched, Nostromo rushes off to retrieve the silver (later, he will mistakenly be killed by Viola while doing so). But before this, when Viola returns from the kitchen and discovers Nostromo's absence, he misinterprets the sudden departure as an expression of his (Nostromo's) misgivings about marriage, declaring: 'Liberty, liberty. There's more than one kind! He has said the great word, and son Gian Battista is not tame' (p.543). This is black comedy indeed: the last word on liberty is played out in a domestic drama whose genre might be described as 'opera-bouffe' (p.152) if it did not end in tragedy. It seems worth asking again in relation to Conrad's work whether comic licence is another kind of freedom. If so, is it any better than liberal freedom? Laughter can be deployed to close down dialogue, to deride and denigrate. Yet even as it deflates, it tends to spread, thriving on gaps and mistakes, on creative improvisation. Laughter offers a democratic violence to which Conrad's work is irresistibly attracted, and to which liberal political philosophies of both past and present are just as keenly drawn.



## Conclusions

Benita Parry's vision of 'social hope [and] politics as the agency of deliverance from the soulless materialism of a debased world' does not entirely account for the broad logic of degeneration I have charted in Conrad's work, particularly in the second half of this thesis. Instead I have argued—against the grain perhaps—that Conrad's political novels see degeneration and debasement as *desirable* insofar as they represent a dilution of the elitist origins of liberal values. We have long known that degraded or debased political ideals are a cornerstone of Conrad's writing, yet there is considerable ambiguity surrounding what 'degeneration' and 'debasement' actually mean in his work. They do not describe a downward spiral as often as we might think; on the contrary, they are often located by Conrad in the *origins* of an ideal—Gentleman Brown as an exposure of the banditry underpinning nobility is a good example. On the other hand, the debasement of 'high' tragedy by 'low' forms of comedy—especially farce and burlesque—offers a further ironic sign of Conrad's technical sophistication. The wider backdrop of generic hybridity likewise permits the ironic recuperation of popular genres such as romance. While the dubious aesthetic and political reputation of these genres has arguably tarnished Conrad's lustre, their presence is a crucial element of his political novels. Genre evokes ideological concerns, and thus the clash and blending of genres in Conrad entails a parallel engagement with different ideologies.

Far from providing a neutral stance, these generic conversations are staged through another genre, the novel. Conrad's aesthetic technique thus reproduces a key feature of modern liberalism itself: it is a tradition that enables—but also limits—the conversation of conflicting views and values. Conrad's novels are nothing if not self-aware, politically as well as aesthetically: consider the engagement with the politics of reading in *The Secret Agent* and the treatment of conversation in *Under Western Eyes*. They achieve political self-examination through a modernist aesthetic of self-reflexivity. However, though self-reflexivity, particularly with regards to the individual self, is also frequently seen as a quality of modern liberalism, Conrad suggests that it falls short in this quality. Nevertheless, these insights begin to answer a question about the political novel that I posed at the beginning of this thesis: what ideological freight does it carry? One version of

the answer would be that—unlikely though it may initially appear—Conrad’s political novels turn out to be carrying modern liberal cargo, but in the process dissect and disperse it, transforming it into something else.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, Conrad’s political novels starkly expose one particular liberal blind spot: the close relationship between freedom and violence. Moreover, they imply that the idea of liberal ‘progress’ transforms historical relations that are mediated through *subjective* violence into socio-political relations that are shaped by *systemic* violence. Rather than holding a steady state, systemic violence is represented as deferring subjective violence, and as channelling its harmful effects away from the powerful, pushing these down the social ladder or outside liberal society. Policing the internal limits of class, on the one hand, and the external limits of socio-political inclusion and alienation, on the other, is of crucial importance to modern liberalism, and political contest always returns to their definition and defence.

This broad concern is accompanied in Conrad’s work by modernist preoccupations with individual alienation and identity that speak to modern liberal concerns with individual self-actualisation. As I have shown, his political novels repeatedly present individual identity as both a saving illusion and a limiting violence, both of which mirror the wider systemic violence of liberal institutions. Ironically, the stronger the impulse to achieve this individuality and the freedom it entails, the closer an individual comes to the dissolution of this illusion. This has devastating consequences for the individual who does so. Razumov, Winnie Verloc, Nostromo, Decoud, Jim: all of these characters pay a terrible price for their individual self-assertion or egotism. Whether they become aware of the illusion, like Decoud, or die to preserve it, like Jim, the result is the same: an over-reaching drive towards individual self-actualisation leads them inexorably to self-destruction.

Just as comedy partially recuperates tragedy, it serves as a means in Conrad’s political novels to preserve modern liberalism even as it degrades it. Liberal ideas of progress generally depend upon a gradualism that conserves elements of the past as well as modifying them: in Conrad’s eyes, this creates a burlesque parody of their origins. Yet given the frequency of its occurrence in his works, Conrad appears to love burlesque even as he acknowledges it as a debased form; indeed, burlesque emerges in this thesis as a key element of Conrad’s ironic assertions and affiliations. Burlesque, like other forms of parody, is after all an assertion of the importance of the original: it must be popular enough to be recognisable, even in modified form. In this thesis, I have argued that burlesque is an

affectionate form of parody that highlights both the value and the flaws of its object. It takes things to extremes, and in so doing reveals pretensions and absurdities that exist, albeit in muted fashion, in their original form. At the same time, it reduces art forms to their lowest common denominator, revelling in crass sexuality and toilet humour. This tension between violent extremes, highs and lows, liberty and domination, affection and revulsion, is characteristic of Conrad's political writings, which indicate that a similar tension shapes the limits of modern liberalism itself.



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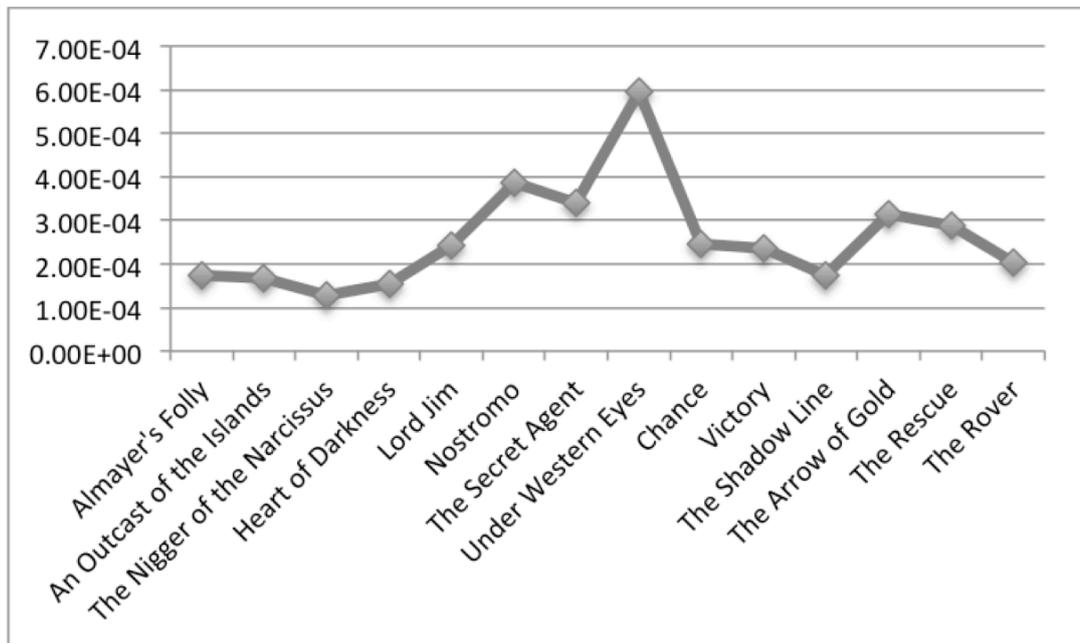
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## Appendix



*Fig.1: Frequency of occurrence of liberty, freedom, and cognates in Conrad's novels. The x axis = frequency/total word length.*