

Chapter 1

Origins and originals

Hamblen's *Nicolo* and Conrad's *Nostromo*

'I'd rather have written Conrad's "Nostromo" than any other novel.' So Scott Fitzgerald wrote in 1920. Many other novelists have rated *Nostromo* just as highly, but other than Fitzgerald I know of none that have singled out the character of Nostromo in particular as their main reason.

In his 'Author's Note', dated October 1917, Conrad gave what was, compared to many of his brief prefatory remarks for other novels in the collected edition, an unusually detailed account of *Nostromo's* origins. After finishing the tales in the *Typhoon* volume, published in 1902, Conrad wrote, 'it seemed somehow that there was nothing more in the world to write about'. (Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard*, ed. Keith Carabine (Oxford, 1984). Hereafter cited as *N.*) This 'strangely negative but disturbing mood' was finally broken by 'a vagrant anecdote completely destitute of valuable details'.

Conrad had actually heard the substance of the anecdote before. 'In 1875 or 6,' he recalls, 'when very young, in the West Indies or rather in the Gulf of Mexico I heard the story of some man who was supposed to have stolen single-handed a whole lighter-full of silver, somewhere on the Tierra Firme seaboard during the troubles of a revolution.' Conrad had made two voyages to the Caribbean in his adolescent days; and on the second of them, sailing on the *Saint-Antoine* in 1876, he was ashore in South America for what was almost certainly the first and last time in his life (*NA*, 44). But, as he says in the 'Author's Note', 'having no particular interest in crime *qua* crime', Conrad forgot the story of the stolen silver until

twenty-six or seven years afterwards I came upon the very thing in a shabby volume picked up outside a second-hand book-shop. It was the life story of an American seaman written by himself with the assistance

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of a journalist. In the course of his wanderings that American sailor worked for some months on board a schooner, the master and owner of which was the thief of whom I had heard in my very young days.

There is no doubt that the book Conrad refers to was *On Many Seas: The Life and Exploits of a Yankee Sailor*, published in New York in 1897. The author is listed as Frederick Benton Williams, which is actually a pseudonym for Herbert Elliott Hamblen; and the book was 'edited by his friend William Stone Booth', whom Conrad calls a journalist, and who was certainly guilty of the hardly less opprobrious charge of believing that Shakespeare's plays were written by Bacon.

The book relates Hamblen's adventures as a seaman between the years 1864 and 1878. Towards the end of his story Hamblen spends a page and a half telling how he had shipped on a large schooner which was owned and commanded by 'a swarthy, piratical-looking fellow' named Nicolo (287–9). One night Nicolo recounted his story to him and his companions. Landed in Panama at the age of sixteen, Nicolo had risen to be captain of a lighter belonging to the Pacific Mail Steamship Company. Nicolo so completely won the confidence of his employers that, during what he calls one of 'the usual revolutions', they entrusted him with a lighter containing silver; he was instructed to take it to a port just north of Panama, and there deliver it to the first north-bound steamer. Nicolo set out very late that night; murdered the two negroes of his crew; deposited the treasure in shallow water; and ran the lighter on to a beach. Rather incredibly, Nicolo then continued to work for the company for another five years; and only then, Hamblen writes, did he start raising his treasure bit by bit. Nicolo also bragged openly about his theft; and this was very well-remembered by Conrad in the 'Author's Note', and copied by his Nostromo. For example, in *On Many Seas*, Nicolo says: 'You tink . . . I make money wid dis schooner? No; I no care for what leedle money I made here, but I mus git reesh slow, don you see?' Conrad's version of this in the 'Author's Note' is: 'He used to say: "People think I make a lot of money in this schooner of mine. But that is nothing. I don't care for that. Now and then I go away quietly and lift a bar of silver. I must get rich slowly –

you understand.”’ We observe that although Conrad spares us Hamblen’s pidgin English, both the substance and some of the verbal parallels are very close; especially the line: “‘I must grow rich very slowly,” he meditated, aloud.’ Conrad gives exactly the same words to his Nostromo (*N*, 503).

There are many other parallels between Nicolo and Nostromo. They both claim that their lighter was rammed by a steamer; they both swim ashore; and if Nostromo does not, like Nicolo, hide the silver in shallow water, he passes on that notion to Dr Monygham in the novel, who uses it to delude Sotilla. But Hamblen’s account of Nicolo raises a basic question: Did Nicolo, or anybody else, really steal the silver? Hamblen’s veracity is not beyond question; in *On Many Seas*, for instance, he claims to have become the captain, a rank he apparently never attained, of a great ship, *The Electric Age*, whose existence was never recorded. But in the present case it is probably Nicolo’s veracity which we must doubt. For many reasons. First, the loss of a large cargo of silver by an important shipping company would surely have been reported at the time, but there is no mention of it even in the local paper, the *Panama Star and Herald*. For another, the geography of the episode is unconvincing – Malme, for instance, where the silver is said to have been sunk, seems not to exist. It is much more probable that Nicolo cast himself as the hero of a story he had heard; and this probability is increased by the fact that Hamblen tells a very similar tale in a later novel, *The Yarn of a Bucko Mate* (1899).

We may surmise that the ultimate source both for what Nicolo said, and for what Conrad had heard not very much later, was the most famous story of all about hidden loot – the Cocos Island treasure. This tale related that one Captain Thompson was given an enormous treasure for safekeeping by the citizens of Lima during the insurrection of 1821 in Peru. Instead, Thompson hid it on Cocos Island, which is in the Pacific, west of Costa Rica, and, more or less, opposite both to Panama and to the probable site of Conrad’s Sulaco in the novel. One treasure-seeker estimated that ‘more than *four hundred*’ expeditions had attempted to recover this purported

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treasure, but he, and many others, have concluded that the whole story was invented. If so, *Nostromo* would be an unintentional reflection of a well-known fictional myth which Conrad had both heard and read.

Another reason for doubt about Nicolo's story is his own character. As Conrad makes clear in the 'Author's Note', the character in Hamblen was quite unsuited to his purposes in *Nostromo*: he is 'an unmitigated rascal, a small cheat, stupidly ferocious'; and, as Conrad comments, Nicolo's employers 'must have been singularly poor judges of character' to have trusted him. Then, as Conrad writes,

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

The character of Nostromo had to be someone who could be fairly taken by the key actors in Sulaco as a thoroughly reliable person; only so could he bear the weight of representing the story's central irony of a misplaced and betrayed trust.

Conrad makes three further points in the 'Author's Note' about the very different character of his Nostromo. First, in the novel Nostromo represents the contrast between the Italian as opposed to the Anglo-Saxon character, represented by Charles Gould, who is also 'captured by the silver of the San Tomé Mine'. Second, Nostromo, with his self-absorbed craving for public admiration, also offers a striking generational and moral contrast with the heroic selflessness of his adopted father, 'Giorgio Viola the Garibaldino, the Idealist of the old, humanitarian revolutions'. Conrad continues that 'I needed there a man of the People' who 'does not want to raise himself above the mass'. The last point Conrad makes is that 'Nostromo is what he is because I received the inspiration for him in my early days from a Mediterranean sailor.'

That sailor was a forty-year-old Corsican, Dominic Cervoni, who had in fact been the first mate on the *Saint Antoine*, and who later became a close associate of Conrad in his gun-smuggling exploits in Marseilles. Conrad gave a memorable account of Cervoni in a chapter of *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906),

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which he wrote as a relaxation from his agonies with writing *Nostromo*. Here is part of Conrad's description:

From the slow, imperturbable gravity of that broad-chested man you would think he had never smiled in his life. In his eyes lurked a look of perfectly remorseless irony, as though he had been provided with an extremely experienced soul. . . . On board the *Tremolino*, wrapped in a black *caban*, the picturesque cloak of Mediterranean seamen, with those massive moustaches and his remorseless eyes set off by the shadow of the deep hood, he looked piratical and monkish and darkly initiated into the most awful mysteries of the sea.

(*M*, pp. xl–xlv, 162–4)

In the 'Author's Note' to *Nostromo* Conrad remarks that, despite their differences, Dominic 'would have understood the younger man perfectly – if scornfully'. Conrad also affirms that 'Many of *Nostromo*'s speeches I have heard first in Dominic's voice.' He cites two examples; both of them illustrate the habitual irony of both men towards their social superiors. One remark, for instance, is that Dominic Cervoni would say: "‘Vous autres gentilshommes!’" in a caustic tone that hangs on my ear yet', and, Conrad comments, 'Like *Nostromo*!' Dominic's greater age – forty as opposed to *Nostromo*'s twenty-four – and his great pride in his ancient Corsican ancestry, are important differences; and so is Dominic's conscious and almost gratuitous pleasure in waging war against customs agents. *Nostromo*'s own sense of himself is deeply, though not altogether rationally, invested in being seen as the loyal and indispensable servant of the powers that rule Sulaco; and it is presumably *Nostromo*'s egotistic pride in himself, combined with his subservience to his employees, which Scott Fitzgerald particularly singled out for admiration:

I think it is the greatest novel since 'Vanity Fair' (possibly excluding 'Madame Bovary'), but chiefly because 'Nostromo', the man, intrigues me so much. Now the *Nostromo* who exists in life always has existed, whether as a Roman centurion or a modern top sergeant, has often crept into fiction, but until Conrad there was no one to ponder over him.

Kipling, Fitzgerald then concedes, had portrayed the type in a more superficial way; but only Conrad, he affirms, has done justice to

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one of the most important types in our civilization. In particular he's one that always made a haunting and irresistible appeal to me. So I would rather have dragged his soul from behind his astounding and inarticulate presence than written any other novel in the world.

Fitzgerald gives what might be called a sociological interpretation of what Conrad intended by his stress on Nostromo as 'essentially a man of the People'. It is certainly this representative status which gives him his importance in the novel. Conrad gives Nostromo much more attention – over half of the 'Note' – than anyone else; and it is the same in the novel. From the first action, in which he rescues Don Ribiera, up to the last scene, in which he is killed, the novel features Nostromo in action more prominently than any other character. There is further convincing evidence for the importance of Nostromo: Conrad's first mention of the tale in his letters says that he had been unable 'to write a single word – except the title, which shall be, I think: *Nostromo*' (*A*, 1, 308).

Nostromo, it must be confessed, is an odd-sounding title. Its etymological basis is presumably *nuestromo* or *nostramo*, Spanish for 'our master'; in Italian it means 'boatswain'. Teresa Viola, however, mocks Nostromo's concern for 'the praise of people who have given you a silly name' (*N*, 256–7); that 'silly' nickname was one which 'all the Europeans in Sulaco, following Captain Mitchell's mispronunciation, were in the habit of calling Nostromo' (*N*, 43). This suggests an abandoning, or an ignorance, of the specific Spanish and Italian meanings of the name, in favour of the literal meaning of the two Italian words 'nostro uomo' or 'our man'. It is an essential part of the character of Nostromo that he has no interest in being called by his real name, Gian' (or Giovanni) Battista Fidanza; and his nickname serves Conrad's ironic purpose excellently, since to call him 'our man', rather than 'boatswain' or 'our master', gives him an ambiguity which enforces the novel's central irony. The reader must ask himself: Is Nostromo really 'our man', or do only some of the Europeans think so? And does he later in the course of the tale change from being 'our man' to being only his own man? In any case Conrad certainly intended his title to be both foreign-sounding and at the same time rich in significant irony.

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The titles of Conrad's early novels – *Amayer's Folly* in 1895 or *An Outcast of the Islands* in 1896 – clearly reflected Conrad's hostility to the protagonist they designated; but the title of *Nostromo* is more in line with its predecessor, *Lord Jim* (1900), and its successor *The Secret Agent* (1907). All three are pseudonyms which embody an ascending note of irony towards the central character. This attitude is only partly true of *Lord Jim*; Conrad's early treatment of him in the novel is very ironical, but it changes totally once Marlow takes over the narrative. *The Secret Agent*, on the other hand, suggests a parody of the usual 'foreign agent' novel; and parody is exactly what, in a sense, we get. But as a title *Nostromo* is more mixed in its literary implications. It is appropriately Italian; at the same time it suggests the basic issue of its bearer's shifting and uncertain loyalties; but, since few of us are experts in Italian, not so clearly as to force us to see *Nostromo* in a wholly ironical light.

Other sources

The only other character in *Nostromo* whom Conrad claims to have been partly based on someone he had known is Antonia Avellanos. Conrad devotes three paragraphs to her at the end of the 'Author's Note'. He begins by affirming her importance in the story: she is, he claims, along with Nostromo, one of the two 'creators of the New State'; and she does it 'simply by the force of what she is: the only being capable of inspiring a sincere passion in the heart of a trifler'.

That 'trifler' is, of course, Martin Decoud, to whose memory, after his suicide, Antonia remains faithful for the rest of her life. In the 'Author's Note' Conrad says he would be reluctant to go back to the Sulaco of the present because 'I should hate to see all these changes'. On the other hand, he writes, 'If anything could induce me to revisit Sulaco . . . it would be Antonia', whom 'I have modelled . . . on my first love.' We do not know who the girl was (*K*, 101–3); but the passage is suggestive, possibly revelatory, in at least two respects.

First, in that Conrad implies the likeness of Decoud to himself in the 'Author's Note'. Both of Conrad's parents had

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died before he was twelve years old; and we can imagine that, after sharing his parents' Russian exile, and seeing them die one after the other, he was most unlikely to be, like either of them, or his youthful love, an 'uncompromising Puritan of patriotism'. But Conrad's account of his Antonia lets us surmise that she must actually have understood a good deal of the sceptical and cynical elements in Conrad's character, though she apparently did not reveal her sympathy for them until their final interview. At the age of sixteen Conrad had to leave Poland; and then, he tells us, on the 'afternoon when I came in, a shrinking yet defiant sinner, to say the final good-bye, I received a hand-squeeze that made my heart leap and saw a tear that took my breath away'. It was not, Conrad goes on to say, that he felt a lover's vanity; it was, rather, that 'she had suddenly perceived (we were such children still!) that I was really going away for good, going very far away – even as far as Sulaco . . .'

The second notion which the passage in the 'Author's Note' perhaps supports arises from the coupling of Antonia Avelanos and Nostromo as the 'two creators of the New State' of Sulaco. It is interesting to note that the two characters in *Nostromo* who are in part based on people Conrad had known in his youth, are similar in one respect; they combine an astonishing self-possession with a certain predetermined and unyielding quality; memorably and picturesquely real, they do not convincingly change; perhaps Conrad had not known either of their originals long enough to have observed any development in them.

In *Nostromo* Conrad was starting a novel very different from anything he had ever written before; it was a novel in which the country, nearly all its people, and their story, were essentially new as far as his own experience was concerned; and so it is not surprising that he was driven to rely, as never before, on people he had known, on the information of friends, and on printed sources.

The main friend was Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham, the famous aristocratic 'cowboy dandy', revolutionary socialist, and excellent writer. In 1897 Graham had written Conrad a letter of enthusiastic praise for his anti-colonial story, 'An

Outpost of Progress', and the two men had quickly become intimate and life-long friends. Graham was the son of a half-Spanish mother; he himself married a woman of French and Spanish parentage who was born in Chile; and he had also spent much of his early life in South America, engaged in cattle ranching and horse dealing. He wrote many stories, sketches, and histories with a South American background; and we know that Conrad's debt to Graham in *Nostromo* was considerable, although it can no longer be reconstituted, since Graham's side of the correspondence has not survived (*GL*, 37–42). But we know that Conrad was very embarrassed to depend so much on Cunninghame Graham. He wrote, in the early days of the novel: 'I want to talk to you of the work I am engaged on now. I hardly dare avow my audacity – but I am placing it in Sth America in a Republic I call Costaguana.' Then Conrad added, as if to soften the blow, 'It is however concerned mostly with Italians' (*GL*, 143). The Italians would be Nostromo, and the Viola family, who are particularly prominent in the first of the novel's three parts. Later, Conrad wrote: 'When it's done I'll never dare look you in the face again' (*GL*, 145). When the novel was 'done' and came out, he announced to Cunninghame Graham, with ironical solemnity: 'I expect as of right and in virtue of our friendship an abusive letter from you upon it; but I stipulate a profound and unbroken secrecy of your opinion as before everybody else. I feel a great humbug' (*GL*, 155).

It was through Graham that Conrad met Santiago Pérez Triana (1860–1916). Triana was the son of a liberal president of Colombia who was forced into exile in 1893; and he wrote about his own escape in his book, *Down the Orinoco in a Canoe*, which was translated and published in English in 1902. Triana was a well-informed and passionate enemy of the policies of the United States in South America, and especially of their efforts to force the Colombians to give up their treaty rights in the area of Panama, so that the Canal could be built under the direct control of the United States. Triana wrote an important article on the subject, entitled 'The Politics of South America', which was published in 1901. Conrad had met Triana, and, writing to Graham on 26 December 1903, he apologised for having used

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him in the novel. This letter was written after the Panama revolution of 3 November 1903, which broke off its connection with Colombia; Conrad comments on it with sardonic disgust: ‘à propos what do you think of the Yankee Conquistadores in Panama? Pretty, isn’t it?’ (*GL*, 149).

At the time of writing *Nostromo*, then, Conrad shared the hostility of Graham and Triana to America’s intervention in Central and South America; and Triana was probably the ‘principal authority’ for much that Conrad showed happening in *Nostromo*, and particularly its closest contemporary parallel, the American promotion of the secession of the Panama Canal area from the state of Colombia (*GL*, 206–8).

We can be reasonably confident that the main source of Conrad’s knowledge of South America for *Nostromo* was his reading. Since 1897 he had been a member of the London Library, which meant he could have all the books he wanted sent by post; and he discussed books with many of his friends both in conversation and in letters. It is true that, not having even finished his high-school curriculum in Poland, Conrad feigned even deeper modesty than he really felt about claiming any critical or scholarly expertise; but though his reading was uneven, it was very wide, especially in history and biography.

The closest literary source probably concerns Giorgio Viola. He is described as ‘a Genoese with a shaggy white leonine head – often called simply “the Garibaldino” (as Mohammedans are called after their prophet)’ (*N*, 16). For Viola there are two probable literary originals. The first is one of Graham’s stories about Uruguay and Paraguay, ‘Cruz Alta’, which came out in a collection called *Thirteen Tales* in 1900. Conrad effusively praised that story when it came out; it was, he wrote, ‘tout simplement *magnifique*’ (*GL*, 137). It contains a character called Enrico Clerici, an Italian, who had ‘served with Garibaldi’, and who now kept a store and country inn (*SW*, 151–2). ‘Cruz Alta’ does not mention Clerici’s devotion to Garibaldi; but in a later story, Graham’s ‘The Captive’, published in a collection entitled *Hope* in 1910, we are told that Clerici, like Viola, kept a picture of his leader, and referred to him as ‘my saint’. Norman Sherry, who has given us the fullest account of Conrad’s