

The Empty Centre of Conrad's *Nostramo*: A New Economic Approach

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Twentieth century criticism of *Nostramo* (1904) often returns to the problem of the novel's so-called 'empty centre'. E. M. Forster's famous description of Conrad as 'misty in the middle as well as at the edges' relates to a perceived lack of integrity in the essays collected as *Notes on Life and Letters* in 1921, but it might well be appropriated as a description of the novelist's narrative strategy.¹ To misquote Forster's criticism in this way is to argue for the primacy of a necessary difficulty found in Conrad's rhetorical and narrative orders: a mistiness with a stylistic, as well as moral, function. The claim is particularly true of *Nostramo*, a novel populated by an array of puppet-like characters each dedicated to a singular or rarefied idea. The interconnected tales of these individuals revolve about the mysteriously ephemeral and yet problematically substantial San Tomé silver, and are told in a stubbornly non-chronological arrangement of diverging analeptic accounts. At no point does the reader catch up to the narrative present, set in a perpetually suspended future some time after the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company's Captain Mitchell retires to England with \$17,000 shares in the Consolidated San Tomé Mines safely in his pocket.² Instead, Costaguana's haphazard succession of rulers and dictators emerge from and retreat over the Sulaco mountains in a non-linear sequence which resists the historical timeline of the story's events. *Nostramo* thereby occupies an atemporal and shifting present, the deferral of a purchase in time giving the narrative the sense of existing all at once; the 'misty' qualities of Conrad's writing are integral to the novel's style. Forster, of course, didn't mean this by his

¹ E. M. Forster, 'Joseph Conrad: A Note', in *Abinger Harvest* (London 1936) pp. 134–7: 134.

² *Nostramo* (London 2012) pp. 418–32: 418 (Mitchell's retirement to England is on p. 445). Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the text.

review. '[T]he secret casket of his genius', it goes on to say, 'contains a vapour rather than a jewel'.³ This essay looks at the connection between these empty centres, vapour-filled caskets, and a vision of the international economy developed in *Nostramo*. It argues that Conrad is engaged in the production of a profound irony, which functions as a comment upon the much more significant 'empty centre' of capitalism's acquisitive nature. This irony is as much a part of the novel's form and style as it is of its ideology: a study of *Nostramo*'s economic logic reveals Conrad's representation of material substance and the financial structures it operates within as radical. Taking a New Economic approach to the novelist's writing advances established Marxist and post-colonial readings of his work, and it has consequences for how we might imagine the relationship between language and value in early twentieth-century fiction more widely.⁴

³ Forster, 'Joseph Conrad: A Note', p. 134.

⁴ See Andrew Francis, *Culture and Commerce in Conrad's Asian Fiction* (Cambridge 2015). Concentrating on Conrad's western world, Francis's book makes a case for assessing economics in literary research on Conrad. For more on New Economic Criticism, see Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen (eds.), *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics* (London 1999) pp. 14-16. This collection develops work on the homologies between money and language begun in the 1970s. Ferruccio Rossi-Landi's *Linguistics and Economics* (The Hague 1975), Jean-Joseph Goux's *Symbolic Economies*, trans. Jennifer Curtis Gage (Ithaca 1990) – published in French in two volumes, *Économie et symbolique* (Paris 1973) and *Les Iconoclasts* (Paris 1978), and Marc Shell's *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore 1978) and *Money, Language and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Berkeley 1982), are among the first studies to consider the parallels between economic and linguistic systems. A small but consistent interest remained in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley 1987) and Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants* (Chicago 2000). Interest in the field revived following the 2007–8 financial crisis; see e.g. Paul Crosthwaite, Peter Knight, and Nicky Marsh, 'Economic Criticism', in issues of *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory* since 2015; Joshua Clover and Christopher Nealon, 'Value | Theory | Crisis', *PMLA*, 127 (2012) pp. 107–14; and a special

For all the praise that has been directed at Conrad's work – for his innovation, his acute perception and expression, his necessary difficulty – he is rarely described as 'radical', particularly in relation to his exploration of economic relationships. Edward Said and Terry Eagleton have argued that the empty centre of *Nostramo* is indicative of the absence of a particular variety of imagination.⁵ Eagleton's materialist reading of the novel in *Criticism and Ideology* (1976) posits that because the action of the story (the despatch and subsequent theft of the San Tomé silver) has 'no coherent historical intelligibility' for Conrad, *Nostramo* can have no ideological centre.⁶ Said takes a similar line of enquiry, seeing that the dark magnificence of *Nostramo* is in part created by its 'crucial limitations of vision'.⁷ In his classic essay 'Through Gringo Eyes' (1988), he offers what has become the standard assessment of imperialism in the novel: Conrad writes as a man in whom a *Western* view of the *non-Western* world is so deeply ingrained that it blinds him to other histories, other cultures, other aspirations.⁸ What Said finds in Conrad is a writer limited as much by position as by perspective. Though the great compliment paid to the Polish novelist in the introduction to *Beginnings* (1978) positions his work as 'nomadic', such that its authority 'is never in the same place, is never always at the centre', this stylistic nomadism does not in the end

edition of *Textual Practice* titled 'How Abstract Is It? Thinking Capital Now', ed. Rebecca Colesworthy and Peter Nicholls, *TP*, 28 (2014).

⁵ See Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London 1976), pp. 138–40; Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London 1993); id., *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge, Mass. 1966); id., 'Through Gringo Eyes: With Conrad in Latin America', in *Reflections on Exile and other Literary and Cultural Essays* (Cambridge, Mass. 2002) pp. 276–81.

⁶ Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 138.

⁷ Said, 'Through Gringo Eyes', p. 277.

⁸ *Ibid.*

translate to a true displacement of experience.⁹ Its metaphorical realisation is incomplete, the supposedly itinerant authority always circumscribed by the limits of Conrad's gaze.

The imaginative failures noted here do not preclude a reading of *Nostramo's* empty centre as a functional part of the novel, and neither do the legitimate failures of Conrad's often-reprehensible representation of non-western people, though it is with care that we must proceed.¹⁰ Existing critical readings of *Nostramo* frequently prioritise the novel's dense and intricate texture in seeking to demystify its representational strategy. For Jacques Berthoud, *Nostramo* is complex to the extent it is 'a novel one cannot read unless one has read it before'; for Eloise Knapp Hay it is a 'concatenation' of disconnected effects; and for Fredric Jameson, the novel offers an ideological resistance to the 'realistic representation of history' itself.¹¹ In a more recent reading, Beci Carver argues that 'Conrad's mimesis ... adds to nothing when rounded up'.¹² Carver's observation has a particular resonance when considered alongside *Nostramo's* representation of the economy. Though the novel's capitalists are relentless in their pursuit of expansion and profit, just what it is that they seek to acquire slips persistently from their grasp, and from the reader's too. In constructing this perpetual irresolvability, Conrad figures a new way of seeing an increasingly diffuse global economy. The novel's empty centre is a form of imagining the social and financial relations necessitated by autotelic capitalist expansion: it is deliberately and resolutely empty, and it

⁹ Edward Said, *Beginnings* (Baltimore 1978) p. 23.

¹⁰ Benita Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers* (London 1983) p. 3.

¹¹ Jacques Bertoud, *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase* (Cambridge 1987) p. 97; Eloise Knapp Hay, *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad* (Chicago 1963) p. 176; Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London 1981) p. 280. See also Kenneth Graham, *Indirections of the Novel: James, Conrad, and Forster* (Cambridge 1988) pp. 116-19.

¹² Beci Carver, *Granular Modernism* (Oxford 2014) p. 3.

creates a vision of a world where everything is a subject of capital, and where everything is subordinate to economic connection.

HISTORY AS EMPTY CENTRE

Conrad's claim that Costaguana represents 'a South American state in general' gives credence to the case for the author's limited understanding of the non-western world.¹³ *Nostromo's* geography performs an imaginative colonisation of northern South America, sometimes neglecting and sometimes half-adopting the histories of places with historical contexts of their own.¹⁴ Despite this problematically flexible approach to geography, the novel is not uninterested in the local historical moment. As Benita Parry observes, *Nostromo* chronicles 'a society in transition from old colonialism to new imperialism' in South America: the wider economy that the novel's characters and materials participate within is

¹³ *Joseph Conrad's Letters to Cunninghame Graham*, ed. C. T. Watts (Cambridge 1969) p. 157.

¹⁴ The imaginary republic is crafted from a selection of features taken primarily from the Caribbean coasts of Colombia and Venezuela. Sulaco, centre of the novel's action, is encircled by the 'Cordillera' (from the Spanish *cordilla*, or 'little rope', a common geographical term for a chain of mountains), within which the grand Higuerota rises. These mountains are unmistakably the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, which climb abruptly from the Caribbean sea and stretch down the back of Colombia into Ecuador and Peru. The town of Santa Marta (Colombia) features, as does Cayta (based on Payta, the Peruvian port, but relocated north in the novel), and Esmeralda (Ecuador). Sulaco itself is most likely modelled upon Puerto Cabello (Venezuela). Paris (France) appears too; however, the great intellectual centre where Martin Decoud and Pedrito Montero acquire their revolutionary ideas is neither relocated nor displaced. See 'Costaguana and Sulaco', in Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Western World* (1st pub. 1971; Cambridge 2005) pp. 190–201: 190–1. See also Robert Hampson, 'Conrad's Heteropic Fiction: Composite Maps, Superimposed Sites, and Impossible Spaces', in C. M. Kaplan, Peter Mallios, and Andrea White (eds.), *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century: Contemporary Approaches and Perspectives* (New York 2005) pp. 121–36.

sympathetic to the exploitative conditions of late nineteenth-century trade between established and establishing economies.¹⁵ Much of the transition that the novel charts lies in the creation and manipulation of aggressive financial structures which seek to exert influence on Costaguanan land, people, and resources, without explicitly asserting a claim to the governance of the country.¹⁶ The money that Sir John and Holroyd flush the country with from London and San Francisco provides the infrastructure to connect Costaguana to the world market. It buys ‘more steamers, a railway, a telegraph cable’ (p. 32), which facilitate the subsumption of the material wealth of the Costaguanan earth into an international system of credit. This money is imported with ideological values attached: Holroyd’s protestant ‘Missionary Fund’ seeks to overthrow the country’s legacy of Spanish Catholicism, and Sir John facilitates the Goulds’ joint fantasy that his investment will create freedom for an oppressed and poor populace (pp. 74–75; 105; 449).

If the general context of the novel is this distinctive financial imperialism, then its setting in late nineteenth-century South America positions the narrative as party to a specific set of internal and external economic influences. Costaguana is at once invention and copy, a generic version of a South American republic with legitimate regional concerns played out within its boundaries. Cedric Watts’s ‘mildly absurd but certainly useful’ attempt to map *Nostromo*’s chronology to a timeline gives an approximate date of 1890 for the novel’s central action, though the novel’s mention of dates is sparse.¹⁷ The ageing Giorgio Viola fought alongside Garibaldi in Sicily (1860) as a young man (p. 26), and Charles Gould’s

¹⁵ Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism*, p. 99.

¹⁶ See Jeremy Hawthorn, *Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment* (London 1990) p. 204.

¹⁷ Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Conrad*, 2nd edn. (London 1992) p. 169, 171–2. See also *Nostromo*, ed. Ian Watt (Cambridge 1988) p. xiii.

grandfather took part in a fictional battle for Costaguana's independence under Bolívar (certainly between 1808 and Bolívar's death in 1830, and possibly contiguous with the 1821 Battle of Carabobo). Finally, Holroyd describes Gould's mining project as 'resembl[ing] the first start of the Atacama nitrate fields' (p. 68), which culminated in the war Chile fought with Peru and Bolivia between 1879 and 1883.¹⁸

The Atacama nitrate fields provide a model for the novel's financial imperialism: as Holroyd describes 'there was a financing house, a gentleman of the name of Edwards, and – a Government; or, rather, two Governments – two South American Governments' (p. 68). In *Nostromo*, the financing house is Holroyd's, the gentleman Edwards is Gould, and, as Holroyd makes plain, the Costaguanan Government is the 'only one South American Government hanging around for plunder out of the deal' (p. 68). For Holroyd, Costaguana is an abstract financial instrument, a long-term investment that will mature in good time, with little need for micromanagement. He cares little for the idea of Costaguana as a place:

'Now what is Costaguana? It is the bottomless pit of 10 per cent. loans and other fool investments. European capital had been flung into it with both hands for years. Not ours, though. We in this country know just about enough to keep indoors when it rains. We can sit and watch. Of course, some day we shall step in. [...] We shall run the world's business whether the world likes it or not. The world can't help it – and neither can we, I guess.' (pp. 68–9)

Holroyd's passive imperialism demands no presence in the country he has invested in. Costaguana is thereby transfigured into an immaterial idea that will eventually yield a

¹⁸ See Michael Monteon, 'The British in the Atacama Desert: The Cultural Bases of Economic Imperialism', *Journal of Economic History*, 35 (1975) pp. 117–33.

financial profit ‘worth taking hold of’ (p. 68) for the American financier. This colonialism-by-absence unsettles Gould, who is fixated upon the palpable silver ingots churned out of his mine, and it seems to arouse suspicion in Conrad too. The financier’s appearance is akin to Dickens’s Merdle after death; he is big-limbed’ and ‘burly’, but unlike Merdle, who becomes substantial only as his financial schemes dissipate, Holroyd’s physical size is contiguous with his financial clout.¹⁹ Indeed, Holroyd is *like* money, such that he is Janus-faced like the new capitalist imperialism he embodies: ‘his massive profile was the profile of a Cæsar’s head on an old Roman coin’ (p. 68). His mode of finance differs from the innumerable ‘10 per cent. loans’ arranged by Europeans in South America, and signifies a more abstract connection between the raw materials of the Costaguanan earth and their value within a distant economic system.

MATERIAL INTEREST AS EMPTY CENTRE

‘Silver is the pivot of the moral and material events, affecting the lives of everybody in the tale. That this was my deliberate purpose there can be no doubt.’²⁰ So wrote Conrad to Ernst Bendz in March 1923. Whatever centrality the author claims for the silver in the novel, it behaves as a persistently deferred token, its value always suspended somewhere within the narrative’s complex matrix of personal (moral), local (political), and international (economic) worth. On one hand, the *Nostramo*’s locus is undoubtedly the material dug from the San Tomé mine: it motivates Gould to revive the ill-fated family concession; it attracts investment from Sir John’s British consortium (providers of the critical infrastructure – the rails, roads,

¹⁹ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (London 2003) p. 738.

²⁰ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. by Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, 9 vols. (Cambridge 1983–2007), viii. 37.

steamers and telegraph wires – that bring the silver to the global market), and Holroyd’s Americans (who provide the ideology of value-in-motion, of always-liquid credit); it spurs the Montero brothers to military action in the quest to reclaim the wealth of their native land; it drives Sotillo to distraction as he searches the empty Sulaco bay for absent ingots; and, perhaps most importantly for the narrative moment, the base weight of the four metal bars stolen by Decoud sink his body after his suicide, preventing Nostromo, loyal servant and *our man*, from returning the incomplete treasure to the owners of the mine. On the other hand, the silver doesn’t matter at all: the novel’s irony is consistent enough that what is excavated from the Costaguanan earth is as much credit, reputation, and ideology as it is metal.

The centre of this interest lies not in the silver itself, but in the ambiguous ‘Material Interests’ that Charles Gould develops from the earliest phases of his plan to resurrect the San Tomé mine. Conrad’s ‘Author’s Note’ to *Nostromo*, written in 1917 and reproduced at the beginning of subsequent editions of the novel, describes Gould as ‘the Idealist-creator of the Material Interest’.²¹ Within the boundaries of the novel, that much is true. When Emilia Gould interprets Holroyd’s vision for Costaguana’s resources as ‘most awful materialism’, Charles refashions the intrinsically capitalist plan:

What is wanted here is law, good faith, order, security. Any one can declaim about these things, but I pin my faith to material interests. Only let the material interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound to impose the conditions on which they alone can continue to exist. That’s how your money-making is justified here in the face of lawlessness and disorder. It is justified because the security which it demands must be shared with an oppressed people. A better justice will come afterwards. That’s your ray of hope. (pp. 74–5)

²¹ *Conrad’s Prefaces to His Works*, ed. Edward Garnett (New York 1971) p. 89.

Emilia's response is to acknowledge, admiringly, that her husband has 'given a vast shape to the vagueness of her unselfish ambitions' (p. 75). Gould's 'shaping' is a restructuring of the materialism Emilia fears, a justification of the pursuit of profit, because economic wealth will – surely – trickle down from the Goulds to the poorest in Costaguanan society, the 'innumerable Josés, Manuels, Ignacios, from the villages *primero – segundo – or tercero*' that surround the mine (p. 88). What Emilia doesn't realise is that Charles, the 'Idealist-creator', is shaping 'material interests' as he speaks. The phrase is a metonym for the 'vast shape' of the mine's economic and social potential, and it too is lacking in definition. Outside of the novel, the words fit within a more established political dialogue. As Paul Delany observes, the material interest is analogous with the pure pursuit of capital from the land, and concordant with the principles advocated by free-trade economism.²² Gould excuses the quest for profit with his utilitarian argument, and following Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham, positions economic values as the most peaceful and productive social ends.²³ Of course, there is an imperialist facet to this supposedly disinterested pursuit of wealth, and – though she doesn't make a link here to *Nostramo* – Parry directs readers to Joseph Chamberlain's *Foreign and Colonial Speeches* (1897), which predates the novel's composition by seven years.²⁴ Chamberlain, an unapologetic imperialist, uses the 'material interest' to stand for the financial interest of the British Empire:

²² Paul Delany, *Literature, Money and the Market* (Basingstoke 2002) p. 79.

²³ See Thomas L. Jeffers, 'The Logic of Material Interests in Conrad's *Nostramo*', *Raritan*, 23 (2003) pp. 80–111: 103-4.

²⁴ Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London 2004) p. 115.

[The British Empire] is a dream that appeals to the highest sentiments of our patriotism, as well as to our *material interests*.

I have now to propose to you the toast of the evening, ‘Commerce and the Empire’, and, gentlemen [...] this is a toast of infinite scope which appeals to our imagination as well as to our *material interest*.

The unity of the Empire is recommended to us by sentiment, and sentiment is one of the greatest forces in human affairs, but it is recommended to us no less by our *material interests*, and it is the duty of every statesman, whether in this country or in the colonies, to make permanent and to secure this union by basing it upon material interests.²⁵

Though Costaguana’s context is already post-colonial – the republic achieves independence under Bolívar – its topography is configured and reconfigured by the financial and political powers of the white European creole population. Native labour is arranged to maximise the speed raw material is extracted from the earth, investment in the country’s infrastructure creates a transport network to take the silver to the global market, and political action taken against these aims (by the Monteros and Sotillo) threatens the further acquisition of wealth by the novel’s moneyed class.²⁶ The imperialistic focus of Gould’s ‘material interest’ is finally reflected upon as the novel draws to a close, when Dr Monygham shatters Emilia Gould’s

²⁵ See Joseph Chamberlain, *Foreign and Colonial Speeches* (London 1897) pp. 78, 101, 195, as cited in Parry, *Postcolonial Studies*, p. 115. Emphasis mine.

²⁶ See Huei-Ju Wang, ‘Haunting and the Other Story in Joseph Conrad’s *Nostramo*: Global Capital and Indigenous Labour’, *Conradiana*, 44 (2012) pp.1–28: 22.

faith in the ‘vast shape’ of her husband’s ambitions: ‘There is no peace and 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 continuity and the force that can be found only in a moral principle’ (p. 451).

The failure of the transformative project accompanying the Goulds’ pursuit of material interests emphasises the perils of a disinterested pursuit of capital. For all the hospitals, schools, and churches that Emilia presides over, the disparities between Costaguana’s governing class and those who work extracting raw value from its earth are irreconcilable. The novel offers no explicit criticism of these practices, and indeed seems blandly accepting of exploitative labour structures; however – and more significantly – it performs a critique of the structural ideology that facilitates the quest for wealth and wealth alone. In *Nostramo*, Conrad locates an empty centre in contemporary economic thought, and constructs a mimesis of its absence in the novel’s narrative.

A difficult relationship exists between ‘material interests’ the subject the phrase refers to. It might be said these interests are the ‘gold, silver, copper, lead, [and] cobalt’ (p. 445) that are excavated in the San Tomé mine, commodities like the ‘enormous pile of iron, glass, and blocks of stone’ (p. 72) that form Holroyd’s San Francisco office. Gould’s phrase gestures to these tangible resources, but extends beyond a conception of substance. In the passage cited above, Charles gives shape to the material interest when he outlines his project, meaning – as he is both ‘Idealist’ and ‘creator’ – that there is an idea anterior to the material interest itself. This process of creation can be traced through the early chapters of the novel, from the moment Charles hears he has inherited the mine, until his dedication to the newly born material interest is established. For Michael Wilding, the phrase is ‘a formula that finally becomes deliberately meaningless – a surrender to ignorance, a desire at least to give a

name to what is not understood'.²⁷ I don't think the formula 'becomes deliberately meaningless'; it is *always* deliberately meaningless. Rather than being representative of an eventual recourse to redundancy, a deliberate not-knowing, the 'material interest' is resolutely ambiguous, and at its heart, abstract. The phrase gives a name, not a shape, to an ill-defined collection of ideas developed by Charles Gould around the symbolic value of the mine he inherits from his father.

When Gould hears the news of his father's death in Costaguana, he relays the news to Emilia immediately:

She was the first person to whom he had opened his lips after receiving news of his father's death.

"It has killed him!" he said.

[...]

"It has killed him!" he repeated. (p. 55)

Gould's repeated 'it' has no specific referent: he does not claim 'the mine' has killed his father, or 'the silver', or even 'Costaguana', and the reader is left wondering what he is thinking of. A logical assumption might be the mine; his father acquired the concession as part of a piece of political manoeuvring by the Costaguana government, given under the pretence of paying a debt, but with the immediate condition that 'the concession-holder should pay at once to the Government five years' royalties on the estimated output of the mine' (p. 48), an untenable request given the situation of the mine and the immediacy of the demand. San Tomé is a 'curse' for the elder Gould, whose preoccupation with the mine drives his declining health. He becomes 'mine-ridden' (p. 50), obsessed with the deleterious

²⁷ Michael Wilding, 'The Politics of *Nostramo*', *Essays in Criticism*, 64 (1966) pp. 441–56: 449.

conditions of the unwanted acquisition: “‘It will end by killing me,’” he used to affirm many times a day’ (p. 51). The deictic pronoun indicates a certain intimacy: Charles has absorbed his father’s ‘it’ into his own, transfiguring the imaginative weight of the original financial obligation into imaginative potential. Jameson reads the ‘impossibility of getting into your mind what can be meant by ‘material interests’ as part of the novel’s reification of capitalist practice:

The whole drama of value and abstraction is concentrated in this antithetical phrase, in which the ideal sentimentalism of the capitalist dynamic is suddenly and brutally demystified.²⁸

‘Material interests’ refers to no specific thing, but to an ideological commitment that understands financial gain as meaningful in itself. The shifting focus of Gould’s antecedent pronoun forms a mimetic representation of the abstraction implicit in his understanding of the resources he has at hand in Costaguana. Unlike his father’s fixation, Charles Gould’s is

another form of enchantment, more suitable to his youth, into whose magic formula there entered hope, vigour, and self-confidence, instead of weary indignation and despair. (p. 53)

‘Material interests’ first appear in the novel twenty pages after this account. The phrase emerges from Gould’s idealist vision of the mine’s potential, but remains unfixed, born of the ‘magic formula’ of his irrational ‘enchantment’. Although Conrad does suggest a magical aspect to Gould’s thinking, he also demonstrates its compatibility with Marxian thought. The

²⁸ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 278.

similarities between ‘material interests’ and Marx’s commodity fetish have been noted elsewhere, often with a focus upon how the final value of a commodity—intrinsic within capital markets—collapses the complex labour involved in its production.²⁹ Marx writes:

In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.³⁰

Fetishism is the attribution of inherent value or powers to an object.³¹ Material interests, then, if they are seen as determinedly irresolute, cannot be fetishized: there is a dislocation between the scope of the idea and its expression as final commodity form – it is not equivalent to the bars of San Tomé silver produced in the mine. The critical metamorphosis that the novel orchestrates is the transformation of idea *itself* into an object that does not have a direct material corollary. This is, in some ways, an applied reading of Jameson’s take on *Nostramo*: he argues that the novel seeks to demonstrate the impossibility of coherent historical

²⁹ See Aaron Fogel, *Coercion to Speak: Conrad’s Poetics of Dialogue* (Cambridge, Mass. 1985) pp. 143–44; Parry, *Postcolonial Studies*, p. 15; Joshua Gooch, “‘The Shape of Credit’: Imagination, Speculation, and Language in *Nostramo*”, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 52 (2010) pp. 266–97: 271.

³⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. David Fernbach, 3 vols. (London 1976), i. 163–77: 165.

³¹ *Oxford English Dictionary* <<http://oed.com>>. Fetish derives from the French *fétiche*, which comes from the Portuguese *feitiço* (‘spell’), which in turn derives from the Latin *facticius* (‘artificial’) and *facere* (‘to make’). A fetish is ‘something irrationally revered’.

discourse, describing ‘a wondrous dialectical transfer’ in which ‘the historical “object” itself becomes inscribed in the very form’ of the text.³² When idea is object, it may be fetishized, and it is in a masterstroke of the novel’s characteristic narrative simultaneity that Conrad orchestrates the ascendancy of idea to object form. It is the fetishization of the newly-made object that exposes its object status. Emilia Gould observes of the San Tomé project: ‘[i]t had been an idea. She had watched it with misgivings turn into a fetish, and now the fetish had grown into a monstrous and crushing weight’ (p. 196). The separation of the phrase ‘material interests’ from any consistent sense of what those ‘material interests’ *are* in itself enacts the commodity fetish: the fetish form is rendered as a broken relation between idea and substance in the novel’s style.

Marx’s original description of the fetish depends upon the analogy he makes with religion. Quasi-religiosity matters for the development of material interests in *Nostromo*, and is exhibited by way of the transformation of ‘it’ from untethered pronoun to an idea that is served. ‘Material interests’ are the God that Charles Gould creates and then worships, their substance secondary to the ideological value they hold for their architect. As Marx writes in *Capital*,

Modern society, which already in its infancy had pulled Pluto by the hair of his head from the bowels of the earth, greets gold as its Holy Grail, as the glittering incarnation of its innermost principle of life.³³

³² Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 100.

³³ Marx, *Capital*, i. 230.

Gould is a miner of the Marxian variety: he finds spiritual value in the metal he extracts from the earth, and he develops this idea into an ideology. His practice is not unlike Marlow's, in *Heart of Darkness* (1899):

The conquest of the earth [...] is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to.³⁴

This idolatry depends upon the imbalance between idea and substance that Gould so resolutely – but so foolishly – constructs.³⁵ Marlow's justification for colonialist plunder is also a justification for *auri sacra fames*, the inextinguishable passion for gain that Marx, citing MacCulloch's *The Principles of Political Economy*, claims 'will always lead capitalists'.³⁶ Whatever obscuring rhetoric Gould and Marlow employ in their elevation of capitalist quest to quasi-religious ideology, the *auri sacra fames* (accursed greed for gold) relates practice back to substance, which, in *Nostramo*, is fundamentally unstable in its empirical manifestation.

SUBSTANCE AS EMPTY CENTRE

Towards the end of the first book of *Nostramo*, Emilia Gould takes the first ingot of silver produced by the San Tomé mine in her hands:

³⁴ *Heart Of Darkness* (London 2007) p. 7.

³⁵ David Simpson, *Fetishism and Imagination: Dickens, Melville, Conrad* (Baltimore 1982) p. 105.

³⁶ Marx, *Capital*, i. 254.

On the occasion when the fires under the first set of retorts in their shed had glowed far into the night she did not return to rest on the rough cadre set up for her in the as yet bare frame house till she had seen the first spungy lump of silver yielded to the hazards of the world by the dark depths of the Gould Concession; she had laid her unmercenary hands, with an eagerness that made them tremble, upon the first silver ingot turned out still warm from the mould; and by her imaginative estimate of its power she endowed that lump of metal with a justificative conception, as though it were not a mere fact, but something far-reaching and impalpable, like the true expression of an emotion or the emergency of a principle. (p. 94)

It seems Charles Gould and Martin Decoud are not the novel's only imaginative materialists. Emilia Gould watches the silver's transformation from ore ('spungy lump'), to 'warm' ingot, a process which endows a marker of global value upon the material Aaron Fogel observes as 'fecal'.³⁷ The excrement-like ore is reformed into a shape with a recognisable economic connection to the greater world, but nothing fundamental about its constitution changes when it is pressed into shape by the great 'silver stamps' (p. 93) of the San Tomé mine. It is a moment of imagination that orchestrates this 'endowing', undertaken when the silver's substantiality connects it—in Emilia Gould's mind—with a paradoxical inversion of its tangible form, and it becomes representative of something other than itself. The novel's very first paragraph describes Sulaco's gulf as 'an inviolable sanctuary from the temptations of a trading world' (p. 3); however, as the ore appears from the San Tomé earth, it is 'yielded to the hazards of the world', or in other words, put into a circulation of ideas and things where representation takes precedence over substance.

³⁷ Fogel, *Coercion to Speak*, p. 104.

One of the ways that the novel ironizes this relationship between substantivity and representation is in its construction of ‘incorruptibility’, a characteristic similarly ‘endowed’ on people and on objects. Nostromo is incorruptible. Mitchell is the first to apply this label (p. 112), in appreciation of Nostromo’s ability to corral and control the hired O.S.N. *cargadores* at the Sulaco dock. It is used for different reasons by Viola, who calls Nostromo ‘the Incorruptible’ (p. 414) for his resolute politics, and then by Decoud, who adopts the term as he realises Nostromo’s involvement will be vital to his plan to save the shipment of silver from Sotillo’s armed revolutionary forces. It is, of course, this incorruptibility that leads Nostromo to steal the silver, since he can’t face the reputational damage, and implications of theft, that returning the shipment incomplete would incur. For Nostromo, however, it is the metal itself that is incorruptible. He reminds Decoud as they bury the ingots on Great Isabel:

‘this treasure may be left safely here for hundreds of years. Time is on its side, señor. And silver is an incorruptible metal that can be trusted to keep its value for ever... An incorruptible metal,’ he repeated, as if the idea had given him a profound pleasure. (p. 264).

The pure belief in silver’s material value is reminiscent of Holroyd’s assured claim that American financiers can afford to ‘sit and watch’ Costaguana, before recouping the fruits of their investments at some unspecified point in the future. Though Holroyd’s assumption relies on an index-linked value relative to global commodities prices, and Nostromo’s to an inherent belief in the worth of a metal that will not decay or disperse, the delusion is shared: the metal is corruptible in both its idea-form and its substance-form.

The physical corruptibility of silver is perhaps the more conceptually difficult of the novel’s two broken forms to understand. The substance is, on the surface, often frustratingly

inert: it is ‘brought down’ (p. 184) from the mountain; loaded into the lighter by hand (p. 271); buried painstakingly in the earth by Nostromo and Decoud (p. 263); stolen to sink Decoud’s body (p. 441); and finally, spirited away piece by piece by Nostromo (p. 461). The material is always subject to action performed upon it, never assuming the spiritual life of the Gouldian ‘material interest’ fetish. To this end, *Nostromo*’s silver is always touchable. Emilia Gould lays her ‘unmercenary hands’ (p. 94) on the moulded ingots, just as the ore is ‘torn out’ of the earth ‘by the labouring hands of the people’ (p. 445). This tangibility verifies the material’s presence as solid thing in the novel, and makes real the work of the Gould Concession. It is in the manner that the mine’s product is connected to the global market that its substantivity becomes ambiguous and the novel’s dichotomous presentation of silver as thing and idea becomes manifest.

When the silver ore is being processed, it occasionally appears in its liquid form. Immediately before Emilia Gould takes the newly minted ingot into her hands, the mine’s noise is described, the distinctive ‘growling mutter of the mountain pouring its stream of treasure under the stamps’ (p. 92) as the silver is shaped. The material is transfigured from ‘spungy lump’, to molten stream, and finally to the ingot-shaped signifier of a ‘far-reaching and impalpable’ desire. As the silver’s material form becomes more solid in the novel, its representational form becomes more diffuse. In this first instance, liquidity is a representation of the silver’s material state, but subsequently, liquidity is a metaphorical vision of the credit that production represents. The novel represents this in three ways: firstly, by figuring the movement of the silver from the mountain to the coast as a flow; secondly, by segueing from this material flow into the image of flow as credit itself; and finally, by describing a reciprocal inbound flow of economic security in place of the outwardly travelling silver. Movement of the silver, facilitated by the mine’s and Costaguana’s newly developed infrastructure, stands in contrast to the manual, ingot-by-ingot, transportation of the metal

when it is withdrawn from circulation and loaded onto the lighter in the Sulaco bay. This same material is described as ‘an increasing stream of treasure’ that ‘swept through the streets of Sulaco’ (p. 101) before it is stored in the harbour’s strong room. Similarly, the unprocessed ore moves as if it were a liquid within the mine itself: ‘[t]he square mountain had gone on pouring its treasure down the wooden shoots’ (p. 119); ‘for years the rich rocks have been pouring down’ (p. 233). This uninterrupted supply is Charles Gould’s explicit aim:

His part, his inclination, and his policy were united in one endeavour to keep unchecked the flow of treasure he had started single-handed from the re-opened scar in the flank of the mountain. (p. 131)

The silver is absent here: it becomes ‘treasure’, fetishized, perhaps, within Gould’s ideological framework, and divorced from the simple fact of its substantivity. This rhetoric enables the vision of silver-as-credit, argued for by Decoud in his plan for Sulaco’s secession from Costaguana. ‘This stream of silver’, he claims, ‘must be kept flowing north to return to us in the form of financial backing from the great house of Holroyd’ (p. 194); ‘Let it come down so that it may go north and return to us in the shape of credit’ (p. 195). The juxtaposition of these arguments, made to Emilia Gould six paragraphs apart from one another, shows that the ‘shape of credit’ Decoud aspires to maintain is synonymous with ‘financial backing from the great house of Holroyd’. Neither has a physical shape, unlike the silver ingots, which lose their shape when they are transfigured imaginatively into the amorphous credit stream. The idea of the silver becomes more substantial than its material form. As David Trotter notes, it is finally valuable for its extrinsic, rather than its intrinsic, worth.³⁸

³⁸ David Trotter, *The English Novel in History, 1895–1920* (London 1993) p. 60.

The final stage of this process is conflation of the mine's output with the security its profits confer. Early in the novel, San Tomé's flowing silver exports provide a reciprocal safety: 'Security seemed to flow upon this land from the mountain-gorge' (p. 97); and later, the product of the mine and the intangible benefits it provides are even more closely correlated: the mountain 'seemed with its treasures to pour down the thundering ore shoots of the upper mesa, the gifts of well-being, security, and justice upon the toilers' (p. 350). The metonymic substitution of 'security' for 'silver' represents a narrative participation in the materialist ideology that the novel broadly criticises. Therein lies one of *Nostramo*'s greatest complexities: the vision of social progress in exchange for material profits is explicitly Gouldian, derived directly from the carefully-shaped rhetoric of 'material interests'. But the novel participates in the dissemination of an ideological framework it simultaneously criticises. It is only because the silver of the mine is so resolutely unfixated in its physical and metaphorical manifestations that the effect of this partaking is ironic rather than legitimising. Instead of reinforcing the subsumption of all social values to the contingent matrix of global economic credit, the novel ultimately draws attention to the hollowness of its own subject.

The necessary corollary to this work on substance is to consider how the silver's idea-form – considered in the context of the novel above – is corruptible when looked at outside of the text's own system of meaning. If the silver's representation in the novel always leads the reader back to nothing, then the external frame of reference the material exists within redoubles this effect. Silver is secondary to gold in the global market: as Fogel observes, it is a dependent currency, unstable in relation to more valuable gold.³⁹ Trotter puts it simply, stating that, unlike internationally standardised gold, '[t]here is no silver standard'.⁴⁰ This means that the San Tomé mine cannot generate intrinsic value, itself – as noted by Marx and

³⁹ Fogel, *Coercion to Speak*, p. 110.

⁴⁰ Trotter, *The English Novel in History*, p. 60.

Simmel – an illusion.⁴¹ The outputs of Costaguanan manufacturing are therefore doubly removed from the fundamental values that the Goulds seek to ascribe them with: once by their status as secondary to gold, and subsequently by the abiding myth of western culture, that there is an innate value associated with this stuff excavated from the land. A chapter by Walter Benn Michaels on the gold standard in Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1895), published in America nine years before *Nostromo*, considers the 'shared fantasy' of silver and gold as 'real' or 'primary' money'.⁴² Michaels finds that precious metals, 'to be money [themselves], need never be money at all and so ... *can* never be money at all.'⁴³ *Nostromo*'s interest in wealth is always more conceptual than money itself. Although the success of the Goulds' mine translates to financial riches, the novel deals only in more abstract tokens: Mitchell retires to London with 'seventeen of the thousand-dollar shares in the Consolidated San Tomé mines' (p. 445), the symbolic value of Nostromo's donation of his last coin to a poor woman on the roadside before his and Decoud's ill-fated journey into the gulf far outstrips the worth of the coin itself, and the dissenting voices to the new Costaguanan order do not scrabble for cash, as the Blanco governing order suggest in their racist dismissal of

⁴¹ Marx's notion of intrinsic value relates to the labour time involved in the production of commodities (see 'The Relative Form of Value', *Capital*, i. 153–7). Elsewhere in *Capital*, Marx hints that silver and gold have intrinsic value (see *ibid.*, pp. 184, 229); however, Marx cites Clement and Child to argue that the metals, in uncoined form, are commodities too. See S. Clement, *A Discourse of the General Notions of Money, Trade, and Exchange* (London 1695) p. 7, and J. Child, *A Discourse Concerning Trade* (London 1689) p. 2. For Simmel's discussion of the relationship between money and gold, see 'Does Money Possess an Intrinsic Value?' and 'The Development of the Purely Symbolic Character of Money', in Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. David Frisby and Tom Bottomore (London 2011) pp. 151–5, 155–62.

⁴² Walter Benn Michaels, 'The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism', in *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley 1987), pp. 139–80: p. 150.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

native claims to governance. Instead, they ‘mean to demand a share in every enterprise – in railways, in mines, in sugar estates, in cotton mills, in land companies, in each and every undertaking’ (p. 342). *Nostramo*’s preoccupation with value is with materiality, concept and relativity, not with the specific worth of any one government’s minted system.

During the 1890s arguments were put forward for the formalisation of a bimetallic standard to moderate fluctuations in silver prices.⁴⁴ It was projected that this standard would make it easier for countries not using the gold standard (including Argentina, Mexico, and India) to import goods, and further, that this standardisation would protect British and American banks from the sort of crisis that had occurred in 1890, when Argentina was forced to suspend the convertibility of its peso into gold.⁴⁵ Whilst bimetallism was never formally enacted in Britain, some countries tethered their own currencies to the pound or to the dollar. From 1898, British-occupied India linked the silver rupee to the pound at a fixed rate, and in 1906, the Straits Settlements in British-occupied southeast Asia fixed the silver Straits dollar to the pound.⁴⁶ The short story ‘Because of the Dollars’, published in New York’s *Metropolitan Magazine* as ‘Laughing Anne’ in September 1914 is the only other work by Conrad that deals directly with the joint concern of silver’s materiality and its use as money.⁴⁷ Set in the Malay Straits some time between 1903 and 1904, the story tells the tale of Davidson, who runs a small steamer and collects old silver trade dollars in anticipation of a new government currency issue.⁴⁸ At Davidson’s final stop, he is ambushed by a gang of

⁴⁴ David Kynaston, *The City of London*, 4 vols. (London 1994-2001), ii. 70.

⁴⁵ Gooch, ‘The Shape of Credit’, pp. 267-9.

⁴⁶ Kynaston, *The City of London*, ii. 165-7.

⁴⁷ Joseph Conrad, ‘Because of the Dollars’, in *Within the Tides*, ed. Alexandre Fachard (Cambridge 2012) pp. 137-68.

⁴⁸ Alexandre Fachard, ‘Contextualising ‘Because of the Dollars’’, *The Conradian*, 33 (2008) 44-66: 44.

thieves drawn to the material value of his cargo, a vast quantity of old dollars, packed in bags and then in cases.⁴⁹ The thieves want the dollars for what they see as their intrinsic metal worth, not their value as currency:

[Bamtz] saw all that lot of dollars melted into bars and disposed of somewhere on the China coast.⁵⁰

If the silver dollar is a secondary currency to gold, this illegal trade in melted down coins is tertiary; the theft effects a removal in the symbolic value of the token coin, and the metal becomes base once more, extracted from the authorised government system of declared and relative value. ‘Laughing Anne’ thereby enacts an almost perfect reversal of *Nostramo*’s process of turning silver into investment and credit: here, the coin, as a symbol of the global interconnection that facilitates the transformation of ore into token, is melted down to become the unprocessed commodity once more, just as the San Tomé ore is fashioned into ingots for sale into the market. By remaining at a remove from the representation of silver in circulation as coin, *Nostramo* declares its interest in the silver’s fungibility. ‘Laughing Anne’ is not similarly conceptualised: the silver is not the only object that circulates in the short story. Laughing Anne, named for her ‘pleasant silvery laugh’, is linked by this attribute to the second-tier materiality of the British and Mexican trade dollars.⁵¹ Anne is stuck on the Straits because she has been left there by a man, and is unable to forge another relationship that might allow her to leave.⁵² In this way she too is a commodity – ‘she always got dropped as it

⁴⁹ Conrad, ‘Because of the Dollars’, p. 139.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁵² *Ibid.*

might have been expected' – and she circulates, like the obsolete currency, between parties of men who appraise her for a (sexual) use value alone.⁵³ Her death as she strives to assist Davidson shows she is ultimately expendable.

The contextual worth of the stream of corrupted silver that flows from *Nostramo's* mine is contingent upon a value system that remains resolutely abstract in the novel. The transfigured metal 'flows north', and once it has been imaginatively transmuted, represents the host of possibilities that Gould 'shapes' in his crafting of material interests. Conrad is not dealing in real or representational values here. Instead, the silver, which has no fixed manifestation, is falsely fungible with the novel's various *ideas* about what the silver might represent. Both value system and material constituent are reduced to idea alone, and neither have any purchase in defining the other. In *Nostramo*, only emptiness can counter emptiness.

THE NEW ECONOMIC SUBJECT

Whereas existing criticism reads the empty centre of *Nostramo* as a stylistic or ideological flaw, an economic reading of the novel's approach to substance shows Conrad's representational strategy as involved in a complex critique of the ideals that drive its capitalists. As Joshua Gooch notes, the novel elicits two different kinds of reading from critics: 'they either attempt to untangle its narrative or they privilege its rhetorical opacity'.⁵⁴ The intricacy of *Nostramo's* narrative is a vital component in the construction of the novel's deferred financial subjects: just as a purchase in time is resisted, so too is a purchase in a coherent economic framework. The Chief Engineer of the Railway (never given a forename in the novel), describes the creation of a value matrix that depends only upon an individual,

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Gooch, 'The Shape of Credit', p. 266.

spiritual, sense of material worth: ‘things seem to be worth nothing by what they are in themselves. I begin to believe that the only solid thing about them is the spiritual value which everyone discovers in his own form of activity’ (p. 280). Spiritual value for Gould is found in the abstracted idea of the material interest, which he uses to connect Costaguana to the world market. He is unable to see the social limitations of his plans for the country and the San Tomé mine, and he resists any attempt to put power and resources back into the hands of the native people. But Conrad is not Gould. Conrad’s narrative provides a consistent resistance to the legitimacy of his protagonist’s ideas: the unspecified ‘material interests’ do not find a material corollary, and their substance-less form shifts whenever it is scrutinised. The commodity fetish that Gould constructs and engages in so enthusiastically is thereby revealed as hollow: the silver’s substance is mutable, and its value upon the world market that Gould strives to connect it to is expressed only in the terms of imagination. We might think here of other non-solid value forms in Conrad’s writing. There’s the ivory that flows downriver in exchange for other commodities in *Heart of Darkness*: a ‘stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass wire set off into the depths of darkness, and in return came a precious trickle of ivory’;⁵⁵ and also the ‘thrift’ in *Chance*:

He didn’t even explain what he meant to do with the money he had asked the public to pour into his lap. Of course he meant to lend it out at high rates of interest. He did so – but he did it without system, plan, foresight or judgement. And as he frittered away the sums that flowed in, he advertised for more – and got it.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *Heart of Darkness*, p. 21.

⁵⁶ *Chance* (London 1974), p. 74.

The final turn of this argument is to suggest that Conrad is ridiculing the empty *auri sacra fames* that drives his characters' desires to accrue material wealth. It is here that a subtlety in Conrad's imperial vision is revealed. Writing a defence of Conrad's economic system that does not border on defensiveness of his depiction of the world outside of the immediate western context is difficult. It is not adequate to put aside the novel's dismissal of its native characters: Pedro and Pedrito Montero are almost interchangeable in name and appearance; Gamacho's grotesqueness, noted by Trotter, conveys his ugly substantivity rather than his 'fleeting appearance as orator' in the narrative;⁵⁷ and the native opposition to Blanco rule in Costaguana is frequently 'stupid', animal (Montero is 'ape-like' and 'parrot-like', Gamacho bears 'yellow fangs', or ugly ('with his bull neck, his hooked nose flattened on the tip upon a blue-black, dyed moustache, [Montero] looked like a disguised and sinister *vaquero*') (pp. 340, 342, 106). But it is in the novel's economic rhetoric that relations between the different characters are re-written. When Pedro Montero raises a glass to Sir John as Costaguana's governing class celebrate the loan extended to the country's railways, he says:

'The honour of the country is in the hands of the army. I assure you I shall be faithful to it'. He hesitated till his roaming eyes met Sir John's face, upon which he fixed a lurid, sleepy glance; and the figure of the lately-negotiated loan came into his mind. He lifted his glass. 'I drink to the health of the man who brings us a million and a half of pounds.' (p. 106).

That last word is easily elided by the eye. General Montero doesn't celebrate the 'million and a half *pounds*', or the 'million and a half *of investment*' secured, but the 'million and a half *of pounds*' gained. I have said above that the novel is little interested in currency, but here the

⁵⁷ Trotter, *The English Novel in History*, p. 253.

focus is – it seems – upon the British Pounds Sir John has loaned Costaguana. The mistake Montero makes in describing the currency in the way one might describe a quantity of silver, or gold understands the novel’s economic fabric more effectively than any of the abstracted visions offered by the marauding ideological westerners. For Montero, Sir John loans the country a fixed number of a tangible thing, not a vision of a Costaguana networked with railways, roads, and telegraph cables, and connected to the world outside of the Sulaco bay. There is nothing of the fetishized subject of global capital to be found here. *Nostramo* presents a necessary void in the spiritual and substantial manifestation of the commodity at its own centre.

The sense that there is something empty, or insubstantial, about the core of *Nostramo* exists in criticism outside of the Marxist and post-colonial traditions. F. R. Leavis found that ‘the reverberation of *Nostramo* has something hollow about it’, and connected the ‘suggestion of a certain emptiness’ to the novel’s interest in the metaphysics of life and consciousness.⁵⁸ I counter this suggestion with the claim that this hollow reverberation relates to the novel’s interest in the unsure metaphorical qualities of the economic world it describes. A New Economic reading of *Nostramo* shows its empty centre to be anything but a representational failure. To return to E. M. Forster’s analogy of the empty casket: perhaps Conrad’s genius is in finding vapour, rather than a jewel, at the heart of capitalist enterprise.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London 1962), p. 200.

⁵⁹ Forster, ‘Joseph Conrad: A Note’, p. 134.