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‘A succession of incomprehensible images’: Decoud, boredom and history in Joseph Conrad’s *Nostramo*

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Introduction

During an early scene in *Nostramo*, Emilia Gould assures the chairman of the railway company that ‘nothing ever happened’ in Sulaco. ‘Even the revolutions, of which there had been two in her time’, the narrator adds, ‘respected the repose of the place’.¹ *Nostramo* is told during a time in which the possibility of historical reflection has been closed off by an overwhelming process of homogenisation inaugurated by the very historical event that it attempts to portray, as the narrator hints early on: ‘[t]he material apparatus of perfected civilisation which obliterates the individuality of old towns under the stereotyped conveniences of modern life had not intruded as yet’ (*N*, 77). To borrow from Jim Reilly, at the novel’s heart ‘is the contradiction that a work so obviously concerned with the movement of historical change is everywhere mesmerised by immobility’.²

The strange sense of historical impasse in Sulaco despite its tumultuous political history is part of what I will call *Nostramo*’s rhetoric of boredom. I want to suggest that Conrad’s novel embodies this rhetoric through its characterisation of Martin Decoud, the ‘idle *boulevardier*’ who commits suicide when marooned on an island with a consignment of the Goulds’s silver (*N*, 120). During his isolation, Decoud’s disengaged attitude to life leads him into a profound feeling of alienation in which his ‘sadness’, the narrator notes, ‘was the sadness of a sceptical mind. He beheld the universe as a succession of incomprehensible images’ (*N*, 394). His conception of the cosmos—as well as his weariness, apathy and frivolity—mark him out as a literary trope with which Conrad would have been well acquainted through his engagement with nineteenth-century French literature: that of the *flâneur*. This famous cultural figure is often said to embody the enervating effects of the great European capitals of the nineteenth-century on their inhabitants, of which boredom was a salient example; as Elisabeth Goodstein observes, many of boredom’s features—such as chronic fatigue, indifference, and the perception of one’s life as a series of inconsequential (non-) events—were commonly associated with this new urban existence and the

¹ Joseph Conrad, *Nostramo: A Tale of the Seaboard* (London: Penguin, 2007), p.30. All further references will be to this edition and will be given within parenthesis in the text as (*N*, page number).

² Jim Reilly, *Shadowtime: History and Representation in Hardy, Conrad and George Eliot* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1993), p. 152.

ways of formulating subjective experience that it helped to forge.³ By attributing these characteristics to Decoud, *Nostramo* locates the sceptical philosophy that ultimately leads him to commit suicide within a specific historical context. At the same time, however, *Nostramo*'s rhetoric of boredom is not limited to the characterisation of Decoud. As I will suggest in the final section of this paper, it surfaces at various points in the text through the depiction of relatively peripheral characters such as Giorgio Viola and Captain Mitchell. Moreover, the mode of narration through which these characters' impressions are presented expresses its content as 'a succession of incomprehensible images', often depicting its characters' interpretation of events through a paratactic accumulation of inconsequential details. The historically-constituted ways of thinking about subjective experience expressed by the rhetoric of boredom thus become the basis for the novel's own dissonant mode of historical narration.

I: Decoud, flâneur and boredom

Martin Decoud, 'the exotic Dandy of the Parisian boulevard', embodies a well-known literary trope (*N*, 180). 'He is a modern', writes John Cooper, 'cultivating the new Baudelairean disciplines of modernity. He is adrift and isolated on the boulevards, the *flâneur*-type, simultaneously *in* society but not *of* it'.⁴ The opening description of Decoud immediately suggests both his detachment from society and his desire to be seen as a part of it: 'Bearing down with the open palm of his hand upon the knob of a flexible cane, he had been looking on from a distance; but directly he saw himself noticed, he approached quietly and put his elbow on the door of the landau.' (*N*, 120) Decoud embodies 'the swings between involvement and detachment' that Mike Featherstone identifies as a salient feature of the *flâneur*'s aesthetic sensibility.⁵ Combined with his cosmopolitan background and his connections in the press, Decoud's rhetorical gifts allow him to participate in society precisely through what is perceived as his detachment from it. Writing articles on European affairs from Paris allows him to be seen as 'a talented young man [...] moving in the higher circles of Society' by his fellow Costaguanans; while in Paris itself, his mixed heritage and ability to convey the historical situation in his home country with 'railing verve' mark him out as an expert political commentator (*N*, 120-1). '[H]is French friends', the narrator tells us, 'would remark that evidently this little fellow Decoud *connaissait la question a fond*' (*N*, 121). 'Neither the son of his own country, nor of any other', as Father Corbelán observes contemptuously, Decoud's cosmopolitan élan both detaches him from and anchors him in society (*N*, 156).

³ Elisabeth Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 161-8.

⁴ John Xiros Cooper, 'Nostramo (1904)', in *A Joseph Conrad Companion*, ed. by Leonard Orr and Ted Billy (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 125-165, p. 155.

⁵ Mike Featherstone, 'The Flâneur, The City and Virtual Public Life' in *Urban Studies* (1998), Vol. 35, 5-6, 909-25 (p. 913).

However, while Decoud's rhetorical disengagement allows him to cultivate his social status, it also conceals what the narrator calls 'a mere barren indifferentism' that distances him both from his Costaguanan heritage and from his sense of self (*N*, 120). Although '[h]e imagined himself Parisian to the tips of his fingers', the narrator asserts, 'he was in danger of remaining a sort of nondescript dilettante all of his life. He had pushed the habit of universal raillery to a point where it blinded him to the genuine impulses of his own nature' (*N*, 121). Decoud's ironic detachment is as alienating as it is liberating. In this sense, his characterisation reflects the historical predicament of the *flâneur*. The *flâneur* is traditionally depicted as an indolent, aimless person ridden with boredom; as early as 1808, a dictionary of popular language defines 'Un grand flâneur' as 'a lazybones, a loafer, a man of insufferable idleness, who doesn't know where to carry his trouble and his boredom'.⁶ As Priscilla Ferguson points out, he becomes an increasingly marginalised figure during the nineteenth century: after his initial formulation as an emblem of artistic detachment and superior social status in the French *feuilleton* culture of the period, by the 1860s the *flâneur*'s '[d]istance and creativity no longer connote superiority to the milieu, but suggest quite the opposite – estrangement, alienation, anomie'.⁷ This gradual estrangement is related to the *flâneur*'s historical circumstances. The second half of the nineteenth century saw a radical modernisation of Paris' city centre—the process commonly referred to as 'Haussmannisation'. This modernisation created what might be called a new urban psychology and, with it, a new discourse. As Goodstein observes, the term 'ennui' was reconfigured during the latter half of the nineteenth-century in order to describe the new city's 'fatiguing, disorientating and destabilizing' effects on its inhabitants.⁸ Through the work of writers such as Balzac, Flaubert and Baudelaire, the *flâneur* became enmeshed in this new urban discourse that reflected the widespread feelings of isolation, weariness and despondency created by the new city: he became a 'failure', Ferguson notes, whose idleness was an outward sign of his alienated, paralysed will rather than of the creative estrangement characteristic of his literary predecessor.⁹ Conrad would certainly have been well-acquainted with the nineteenth century rhetoric of boredom through his intense interest in French literature, especially Flaubert and Anatole France, as well as its transfiguration in the *fin-de-siècle* literary culture he encountered in Britain.¹⁰ It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that *Nostramo*'s characterisation of Decoud is drenched in the rhetoric of modern boredom associated with the *flâneur*. When Father Corbelan insults him, for example, the narrator depicts him in a pose of 'slightly weary nonchalance' (*N*, 156);

⁶ D'Hautel (1808), *Dictionnaire du Bas-langage ou des manières de parler usitées parmi le peuple*, 2 vols (Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1972), cited in Priscilla Ferguson, 'The flâneur on and off the streets of Paris' in *The Flâneur*, ed. by Keith Tester (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1994), pp. 22-43, p. 24.

⁷ Ferguson, p. 33.

⁸ Goodstein, p. 161.

⁹ Ferguson, p. 33.

¹⁰ For the influence of Anatole France on the characterisation of Decoud, see Owen Knowles, 'Conrad, Anatole France, and the Early French Romantic Tradition: Some Influences' in *Conrad: Intertexts and Appropriations*, ed. by Gene M. Moore, Owen Knowles and J. H. Stape (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), p. 81. For Conrad and the *fin-de-siècle*, see Laurence Davies, 'Fin-de-siècle', in *Joseph Conrad in Context*, ed. by Allan H. Simmons (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 147-54.

and near his initial appearance in the novel, we see him ‘lolling back moodily’ (*N*, 132). Even when performing the ostensibly critical task of rowing out to the Isabels with the silver as enemy forces close in on Sulaco, Decoud speaks to Nostromo ‘a little listlessly’ and in a ‘careless tone’ (*N*, 209, 211); and, as he grows tired, he falls prey to ‘an extremely languid but not unpleasant indifference’, his speech becoming ‘a weary drawl’ (*N*, 132).

As well as performing the sense of languor and disengagement that many observers associated with the effects of the burgeoning capitalist metropolis on its inhabitants, the *flâneur* has been figured as a symbol of what Walter Benjamin called the ‘atrophy of experience’ in modernity, which Joe Moran glosses as the replacement of ‘the capacity to assimilate, recollect and communicate experience to others [...] by the sense of life as a series of disconnected impressions with no common associations’.¹¹ As Siegfried Kracauer wrote in an article entitled ‘Boredom’, for example, the *flâneur*

sauntered along aimlessly and covered the nothingness he detected around him and in him with innumerable impressions. Shop window displays, lithographs, new buildings, elegant attires, fancy coaches, newspapers – indiscriminately he inhaled the images which pressed in upon him.¹²

Kracauer’s *flâneur* is an ambulatory consumer of the urban spectacle, constantly stimulated by individual experiences that he never integrates into a coherent narrative or sequence; he immerses himself in the ‘innumerable impressions’ around him in order to cover the ‘nothingness’ that he sees at their root. While his disengagement allows him to perceive the astonishing variety of experiences on offer in the city as a spectacle to be consumed at a safe emotional distance, it also endows him with the capacity to see the futility of these experiences. Like Kracauer’s *flâneur*, Decoud views life as a series of inconsequential impressions. This attitude underpins his attitude to history. ‘There is a curse of futility upon our character’, he remarks in a bitter diatribe against the history of Costaguanan politics; ‘[w]e convulsed a continent for our independence only to become the passive prey of a democratic parody, the helpless victims of scoundrels and cutthroats, our institutions a mockery, our laws a farce’ (*N*, 135). He is also aware that Costaguanan history is seen as little more than a mild curiosity outside the country itself: he writes propaganda on behalf of the Ribierist party in full knowledge that it will be read by ‘a more or less attentive world’ (*N*, 184). In turn, his sense of the futility of the Ribierist cause is related to his belief that both his own role in it and his very life are inconsequential. He even presents the prospect of his death, a likely outcome in the event of his party’s defeat, as a triviality made comical by the repetitiveness of his political writing. ‘[Y]ou do keep me here writing deadly nonsense. Deadly to me!’, he explains to Antonia, before adding, in a tone of ‘light banter’, that should Montero triumph he ‘would get even with me in the only way such a brute can get even with a man of intelligence who condescends to

¹¹ Joe Moran, ‘Benjamin and Boredom’ in *Critical Quarterly*, 45:1 (July 2003), 168-181, (p. 169).

¹² Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Langeweile’, cited in and trans. by Anke Gleber, *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flânerie, Literature and Film in Weimar Culture* (Princeton, NJ: 1999), p.45

call him a *gran bestia* three times a week. It's a sort of intellectual death' (*N*, 142). As Patricia Spacks observes, boredom is 'a trivial emotion that can trivialize the world'.¹³ Decoud's boredom with what he sees as the triviality of his job leads him to trivialise his entire life. In this sense especially, his boredom is comparable with that of the *flâneur*.

II: Boredom and Scepticism: Decoud's Suicide

The disengaged pose through which Decoud expresses his rhetoric of boredom is closely linked to what is often referred to as his philosophical scepticism. Interpreting Decoud's scepticism in light of the rhetoric of boredom can have important consequences for how we read *Nostramo*. Conrad's sceptical philosophy is often cited in readings that privilege his attachment to a conception of an indifferent universe in which history appears as what Ludwig Schnauder calls 'a repetition of the unchanging same'.¹⁴ As Robert Hampson contends, while Conrad 'engages with pressing political realities and the problematic nature of history, he never loses touch' with the 'larger perspective', in which 'the "historicising impulse" is constantly threatened with dissolution into an abyss of silence, emptiness, futility'.¹⁵ This position has been developed further, in support of the idea that the sceptical repudiation of the notion of immanent meaning in the universe can also serve as a form of political resistance. Cedric Watts, for instance, argues that by deferring the narration of Decoud's suicide until after the complacent narrative through which Captain Mitchell presents his version of the historical events leading to Sulaco's independence, *Nostramo* articulates a form of resistance to the totalising impulse of historical metanarratives. 'Scepticism', he concludes, 'is validated in a scene which shows the self-destruction of the sceptic'.¹⁶

However, Conrad was also conscious that radical philosophical scepticism can quickly lead to a weary sense of universal futility. In his writing, his awareness of the limits of his own philosophical position often manifests itself through tension between the sceptical repudiation of all-encompassing metaphysical systems and expressions of a forlorn desire for the consolations that they offer. As Mark Wollaeger has observed, 'his discourse of skepticism includes a discourse of reaction', in which 'a nostalgic investment in the recovery of lost immanence prevents skepticism from becoming nihilism'.¹⁷ It might in fact be argued that rather than simply validating

¹³ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1996), p. 13.

¹⁴ Ludwig Schnauder, *Free Will and Determinism in Conrad's Major Novels* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), p. 196.

¹⁵ Robert Hampson, 'Introduction' to *Nostramo: A Tale of the Seaboard* (Ware, UK: Wordsworth Classics, 2000), pp. xxiii-xix, p. xix.

¹⁶ Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Conrad*, 2nd edn. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014; 1st edn. Pearson, 1982), p. 161-2.

¹⁷ Mark A. Wollaeger, *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 56.

scepticism, Conrad's work also expresses a 'reaction' against it by depicting it as a cause of boredom. As he has Marlow recall in *Heart of Darkness*:

I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, with no spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary.¹⁸

Marlow's 'tepid' sceptical doubt as to the congruity of any particular moral position renders even his struggle for life 'unexciting'. Tellingly, Decoud considers his own situation in similar terms when marooned on the Great Isabel. '[T]he silence of the gulf', the narrator remarks, was 'like a tense thin cord to which he hung suspended by both hands, without fear, without surprise, without any emotion whatever' (N, 394). Both Marlow and Decoud imagine themselves to be suspended in a void: Marlow's battle with death takes place in an 'impalpable greyness' and Decoud imagines himself tied to 'the silence of the gulf'. Moreover, just as Marlow describes his memory of events in *Heart of Darkness* as 'a dying vibration of one immense jabber [...] without any kind of sense', Decoud perceives in his insomnia that the silence around him 'vibrated with senseless phrases, always the same but utterly incomprehensible [...] and proclamations mingled into an ironical and senseless buzzing' (N, 394).²⁰ By presenting Decoud's worldview as a product of his conception of his own life as a series of senseless repetitions, the narrator depicts his plight through the same rhetoric expressed by Marlow. When they scrutinise the validity of their own sensations, both characters' philosophical scepticism leads them to a nihilistic conception of an indifferent universe.

Unlike Marlow, however, Decoud is ill-equipped to handle the consequences of his own philosophy. 'Solitude from mere outward condition of existence becomes very swiftly a state of soul', the narrator states, 'in which the affectations of irony and scepticism have no place'; as a result, Decoud 'was not fit to grapple with himself single-handed' (N, 393). Posing as intellectual dexterity, his rhetoric of disengagement leads him to doubt everything 'except the truth of his own sensations' (N, 181). Consequently, while Decoud produces performances of ironic detachment, the scepticism that accompanies them estranges him from the world in a very real sense. At the same time, this scepticism robs him of the belief necessary to overcome the estrangement to which it leads. Alone on a barren island where 'Not a living being, not a speck of distant sail, appeared within the range of his vision', Decoud 'lost all belief in the reality of his actions past and to come' (N, 393). As Haskell Bernstein has observed, a loss of belief in one's agency can be a sign of chronic boredom. Bored individuals, he notes, feel like 'phonies' who 'have the impression

¹⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 101.

²⁰ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 69.

that they are never fully participants in life but always observers of the passing scene'.²¹ While, as Wollaeger notes, philosophical scepticism 'leads naturally to an anxiety about agency', Decoud displays an increasingly firm conviction that his actions are futile rather than anxiety over whether they might be.²² In his isolation, Decoud can no longer even believe in 'the truth of his own sensations'. The philosophical scepticism that forms part of his pose of moody disengagement leads Decoud into boredom so debilitating that it undermines even the basis upon which that scepticism rests.

It might well be said, then, that Decoud's rhetorical performances of boredom end up defining him to a far greater extent than his sceptical philosophy and that his scepticism is in fact presented as part of this rhetoric of boredom. His actions are inseparable from the language of weary disenchantment through which he expresses his philosophical scepticism, and the novel's events conspire to ensure that this remains the case throughout.²³ When, for example, he tries to convey what the narrator calls 'a correct impression of [his] feelings' in the form of a testimonial to the novel's events, after two days of feverish activity without food or sleep, the narrator remarks that 'he could not keep out his weariness, his great fatigue, the close touch of his bodily sensations' (*N*, 182). Although he has very good reasons to feel tired, the consistency with which Decoud has been characterised through the rhetoric of boredom before he writes this account ensures that the physical and mental exhaustion that he writes into it are by now recognisably 'Decoudean' traits. Life begins to imitate art: living his life as a series of ironic 'affectations', Decoud dismantles the opposition between rhetoric and reality. When, for instance, Antonia remarks that 'nobody is really disinterested, unless, perhaps, you, Don Martin', his 'lightly' delivered reply might be interpreted either as a sincere declaration of his passion for her or as an ironic retort: 'God forbid! It's the last thing I should like you to believe of me!' (*N*, 140). In turn, this inability to distinguish between his disengaged pose and the reality of his actions becomes the basis for the profound boredom with which Decoud is afflicted in his final days. During his isolation on the island, the ironic distance from events that he had established through his affected disengagement is revealed to have estranged him so totally as to have robbed him of the 'sustaining illusion' of a coherent reality in which he might have felt disengaged in the first place. Instead of ironic disengagement, Decoud begins to experience an intense identification with what he sees as the nihilistic reality of the universe. The narrative expresses this by figuratively absorbing him into the landscape. When, in the lighter with Nostromo, he perceives the darkness and silence around him as so complete that

²¹ Haskell Bernstein, 'Boredom and the ready-made life' in *Social Research*, 42 (1975), 512–537, (p. 517).

²² Wollaeger, p. 120.

²³ Knowles interprets Decoud's fate in *Nostromo* as the result of the 'awkward technical strain' through which Conrad decides to simplify a character potentially 'more considerable than the Frenchified dandy to which he is initially compared' (Knowles, p. 89). While I do not deny the existence of fissures in Decoud's character, I would argue that these complexities, particularly his ardent love for Antonia, simply highlight the force with which his boredom undermines his passions.

only ‘the survival of his thoughts’ assures him that he is still alive, he ‘had the strangest sensation of his soul having just returned to his body from the circumambient darkness’ (N, 207); and on the Great Isabel, he ‘merged into the world of cloud and water, of natural forces and forms of nature’ (N, 393). Although he develops a ‘vague consciousness of a misdirected life given up to impulses’, the narrator observes that he ‘felt no remorse’; confronted with ‘the great unbroken solitude of waiting without faith’ on the Great Isabel, he concludes that his lassitude has been an appropriate response to an indifferent cosmos, that ‘all exertion seemed senseless’ (N, 394). As Beci Carver points out, ‘Decoud’s problem is precisely that he cannot distance himself from the chaos he sees: it implicates him’.²⁴ We might therefore interpret ‘the immense indifference of things’ that swallows him up when he eventually drowns himself as the product of his own disillusioned imagination, a kind of epitaph in free indirect style. When Decoud drowns, the metaphoric absorption into the natural landscape that had until now expressed his increasing alienation turns literal, and the narrator presents an image of the ‘immense indifference’ of the natural world in order to convey the extent to which Decoud’s own radical disengagement has shaped the worldview that leads him to commit suicide. ‘[T]he brilliant Don Martin Decoud’, we are told, was ‘a victim of the disillusioned weariness that is the punishment meted out to intellectual audacity’ (N, 396). As Goodstein contends, the lived experience of boredom involves a ‘nihilistic dynamic by which punctual disaffection becomes a universalized sense of meaninglessness’.²⁵ Decoud interprets the boredom upon which his sceptical detachment depends as compelling evidence of cosmological futility, of ‘the immense indifference of things’. His pose of disengagement creates the conditions for a kind of boredom so profound as to occlude any possibility of thinking beyond it. The Parisian *flâneur*, we might conclude, dies of boredom.

III: ‘He rambled feebly about “historical events”’: The rhetoric of boredom and narrative form

Despite his figurative detachment, however, Decoud is not an isolated feature of the text, and the role played by the rhetoric of boredom he embodies is not limited to the narration of his fate. ‘[T]he voice of the [Blanco] party or, rather, its mouthpiece’ (N, 158), Decoud is arguably the most pertinent example of what Keith Booker has called the tendency of *Nostramo*’s characters ‘to function not as distinct individuals but as players of specific social and ideological roles’.²⁶ The rhetoric of boredom embodied and expressed by Decoud is not limited to him: the sense of disengagement from historical events that it conveys surfaces at various points in the text through the depiction of what might be called ‘Decoudean’ traits, such as characters’ psychological weariness and inability to narrate their experiences coherently.

²⁴ Beci Carver, *Granular Modernism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 60.

²⁵ Goodstein, p. 415.

²⁶ M. Keith Booker, *Colonial Power, Colonial Texts: India in the Modern British Novel* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p.134.

Moreover, *Nostramo* deploys the ‘Decoudean’ traits which make up this rhetoric of boredom as aesthetic techniques; the disengaged perspective from which the universe is viewed as ‘a succession of incomprehensible images’ becomes a mode of narration in itself in Conrad’s tale. Therefore, I would like to conclude with the following suggestion: while *Nostramo*’s depiction of history through the ‘Decoudean’ rhetoric of boredom connects the novel to a cultural tradition with firm roots in the new affective discourse of the modern city, its narrative form forges a new aesthetic response to this discourse by adopting the fragmentary perspective through which Decoud formulates it.

Decoud is not the only character in *Nostramo* to be beset by ‘a succession of incomprehensible images’ in the face of what he perceives to be an indifferent universe. Early in the novel, Giorgio Viola experiences a similar feeling of stupefaction when witnessing a battle scene:

Horsemen galloped towards each other, wheeled round together, separated at speed. Giorgio saw one fall, rider and horse disappearing as if they had galloped into a chasm, and the movements of the animated scene were like the passages of a violent game played by dwarfs mounted and on foot, yelling with tiny throats, under the mountain that seemed a colossal embodiment of silence. Never before had Giorgio seen this plain so full of active life; his gaze could not take in all its details at once (*N*, 23)

The exertion of a particular rider is absorbed into the general chaos of the spectacle as Viola’s perspective moves from the sight of horsemen coming together and parting again to the image of one particular rider ‘disappearing’ with his horse, as if into a ‘chasm’. The scene becomes increasingly absurd (the narrator eventually likens it to ‘a violent game played by dwarfs’) before the perspective then shifts to a description of the sublime indifference of the natural world (‘the mountain that seemed a colossal embodiment of silence’). Viola himself is then reintroduced and his gaze is shown to be overwhelmed by the contemporaneous details before him (‘his gaze could not take in all its details at once’). In a manner comparable with the narration of the days leading up to Decoud’s suicide, the overwhelming experience of incoherence leads Viola to a vision of the futility of human endeavour before the majestic indifference of the natural world.

The battle scene can be said to express Viola’s own version of the ‘Decoudean’ rhetoric of boredom. He is often read as a nostalgic symbol of the type of failed populist alternative to capitalism that had flourished in the mid-nineteenth century, and of which his hero Garibaldi was a major example.²⁷ The revolutions in

²⁷ See, for example, Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge Classics, 2002), : ‘[the] two great lines of the book’s character-groupings, that which descends from the mine owner Charles Gould and that which descends from the Italian immigrant and Garibaldino Viola, sort themselves out into an immediately identifiable opposition: they correspond to the two great forces of nineteenth century history – industrial capitalism, expanding into its imperialist stage, and “popular”

Costaguana strike him as contemptible in comparison with the authentic dream of “liberty” for which he had fought under Garibaldi: ‘These were not a people striving for justice’, he laments, ‘but thieves’ (N, 18). Exiled among people whose own revolutions he sees as inconsequential and haunted by the sombre realisation that his own cause ‘seemed lost’, he is one of Conrad’s many bores (N, 27). As with Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, for example, his listeners find his stories ‘inconclusive’.²⁸ Although his fellow Italian emigrants ‘listened to his tales of war readily’ in his cafe, ‘they seemed to ask themselves what he had got out of it after all’; and as the narrator observes in a comment that seems to look ahead to Decoud’s absorption by the landscape, ‘the drone of old Viola’s declamatory narrative seemed to sink behind them into the plain’ (N, 27). A nostalgic teller of stories that are seen as inconsequential, incapable of seeing the events of his adopted country as anything more than a sad echo of his own failed revolution, Viola is both figuratively and literally cut off from what he considers to be the struggle for liberty that characterises historical change. It is therefore easy to interpret his response to what he sees as the incoherent spectacle of the battle scene as a result of his gloomy disengagement from history, embodied by the colossal image of mount Higuerota above. In this way, the depiction of Viola’s view of the battle scene can be said to express the same rhetoric of boredom as the narration of Decoud’s suicide: Viola’s disengagement causes him to view the ‘silence’ of the natural world as an expression of its indifference to futile human effort.

The incoherent spectacle that stupefies Viola, and whose futility is underscored by what he sees as the natural world’s indifference to it, is an example of how *Nostramo* frequently displays its content through the accumulation of disconnected impressions. To borrow Reilly’s description of Marlow’s narrative method in *Lord Jim*, Conrad’s novel ‘fractures into a neurotic scattering of momentarily arresting details [...] Sentence structure and speaker’s vision are alike slackly additive, paratactic rather than structured and syntactic.’²⁹ Perhaps the most striking example of this technique is Captain Mitchell’s tedious guide to Sulaco and its history:

This is the Harbour Gate. Picturesque, is it not? Formerly the town stopped short there. We enter now the Calle de la Constitucion. Observe the old Spanish houses. Great dignity. Eh? I suppose it’s just as it was in the time of the Viceroy, except for the pavement. Wood blocks now. Sulaco National Bank there, with the sentry boxes each side of the gate. Casa Avellanos this side, with all the ground-floor windows shuttered. A wonderful woman lives there – Miss Avellanos – the beautiful Antonia. A character, sir! A historical woman! Opposite – Casa Gould. Noble gateway. (N, 375-6)

[...] revolution of the classic 1848 type’; and Benita Parry’s observation that the characterisation of Viola is one of the novel’s ‘backward glances at the ideals of 1848 [which] are in the spirit of regret for a time that cannot be recovered’ in *Postcolonial Studies: A Material Critique* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 146.

²⁸ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p.10.

²⁹ Reilly, p.152.

Through his ambiguous deployment of the adjective ‘historical’ and the fragmented vision he offers of the town, Mitchell trivialises the historical events he purports to narrate. They provide the ‘picturesque’ backdrop against which his ambulatory account meanders inconclusively. He alludes to ‘the time of the Viceroy’, for example, without delving into it, his attention immediately taken up by the Sulaco National Bank; and he defines Antonia through what he considers to be her historicity without accounting for it. His descriptive method presents both the geography and history of Sulaco as a series of fleeting impressions. Pensioned off into a leisurely managerial role by the OSN Company after the revolution and leading a ‘privileged old bachelor, man-about-town existence’, Mitchell might in fact be said to be a kind of *flâneur*-figure turned amateur historian (*N*, 375). Like Decoud and Viola, his failure to integrate the series of impressions around him into a coherent narrative creates an overwhelming impression of futility.

Unlike Decoud and Viola, however, Mitchell is not the one bored by his own failure to draw a coherent narrative from a succession of fragmented impressions. In a move that might be said to demonstrate *Nostramo*’s awareness of its own participation in the general decline in narratable experience that it represents, Mitchell is given an audience, whom he bores. His avalanche of inconsequential observations, the narrator remarks, ‘went on relentless, like a law of Nature’ (*N*, 380); consequently, his guests are ‘stunned and as it were annihilated mentally by a sudden surfeit of sights, sounds, names, facts, and complicated information imperfectly apprehended’ (*N*, 384-5). Mitchell’s tedious rhetoric demonstrates the extent of his own disengagement from the history he attempts to convey, a delusional state that Emilia Gould remarks upon towards the end of the novel: ‘I fancy he regrets Sulaco. He rambled feebly about “historical events” till I thought I could have a cry’ (*N*, 401). However, the narrator’s presentation of the guests’ reaction also ensures that Mitchell’s ambulatory, fragmented mode of representation is depicted in a specific context: through the language of fatigue and futility characteristic of the ‘Decoudean’ rhetoric of boredom.

Conclusion

It is often remarked that *Nostramo* blurs the distinction between historiography and fiction, playing on what Yael Levin calls ‘the ongoing conflict between history and ahistory, between the impulse to document and the impulse to invent’.³⁰ Indeed, Conrad famously does so himself in his ‘Author’s Note’, referring to his character Don Jose Avellanos as the ‘venerated friend’ whose *History of Fifty Years of Misrule* was his ‘principal authority for the history of Costaguana’.³¹ Yet Conrad also described *Nostramo* as ‘the tale of an imaginary (but true) seaboard’, and many political readings of the novel have emphasised the fact that while its complex intermingling of narrative perspectives and chronological shifts enact a form of

³⁰ Yael Levin, *Tracing the Aesthetic Principle in Conrad’s Novels* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 69.

³¹ Joseph Conrad, ‘Author’s Note’, in *Nostramo*, p. 451.

resistance to totalising historical accounts, it remains a forceful and ‘true’ critique of global capitalism in its Imperialist stage.³² In my reading, *Nostramo*’s apparently paradoxical attempt to tell history through a narrative form that consistently undermines the notion of a unique historical event can be related to a way of thinking about and describing subjective experience that arose in response to the effects of Europe’s modern cities on their inhabitants. Through what I have called *Nostramo*’s rhetoric of boredom, the novel presents its own radically ahistorical conception of the futility of human action in the face of a meaningless universe as the result of its characters’ inability to assimilate and narrate their experiences coherently. By embodying this rhetoric in the figure of the Parisian *flâneur* Martin Decoud, Conrad acknowledges both his own debt to the writing of *flânerie* in French literature and the limits of his own philosophical scepticism. Moreover, through Decoud, *Nostramo* establishes a readily identifiable link between the sceptical mistrust of historical meta-narratives and the cultural impact of the specific historical conditions that gave rise to modern boredom. In this way, I suggest, *Nostramo* displays Decoud’s rhetoric of boredom as both its literary inheritance and the source of its dissonant mode of historical representation.

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³² See, for example, J. Hillis Miller, ‘“Material Interests: Conrad’s *Nostramo* as a Critique of Global Capitalism’ in *Joseph Conrad*, ed. by Harold Bloom (Chelsea House Publishers, 1998), pp. 151–68. For Conrad’s comment on *Nostramo*, see *A Personal Record*, ed. by Zdzislaw Najder and J. H. Stape (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 91.

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