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History, Cognition and *Nostromo*: Conrad's Explorations of Torture, Trauma, and the Human Rage for Order

"Always historicize!" Fredric Jameson, Preface, *The Political Unconscious*.

"The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living."
"In Memory of W. B. Yeats," W. H. Auden

Like many literary critics and analysts, I never stop being troubled by the endless possibilities of interpretation.¹ This can make my work – both with my students and in my own research – feel idiosyncratic and ephemeral; I worry that my reading is profoundly subjective, determined by my culture, time, background, taste, and personal values. As Jameson suggested, however, historicizing helps. Should we applaud or condemn Porphyro and Madeline's escape into the storm at the end of Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes"? Was Madeline liberated or betrayed? My own mind changed from year to year until I read Jack Stillinger's *Reading "The Eve of St. Agnes": The Multiples of Complex Literary Transaction* (1999). Though Stillinger argues for a multiplicity of interpretations, his own readings privilege historicism based on his marshalling of biographical information, intertextuality, and intellectual history. I would prefer to imagine a transcendence at the end of the poem, when Madeline and Porphyro escape the cold confines of the castle. I would prefer to believe that "The Eve of St. Agnes" is a rewriting of *Romeo and Juliet* that provides a happy ending. But Stillinger's meticulous historical analysis makes it clear that Porphyro may have more in common with the Lovelace of *Clarissa* than with Shakespeare's Romeo, his more accepted model. Historicism reads texts as places of ideological conflict that an attention to the many historical contexts help us unpack, and this provides a compelling basis for interpretation.

Cognitive literary studies can provide another such basis for interpretation. In her fine chapter on *Middlemarch* in *Imagining Minds: The Neuro-Aesthetics of Austen, Eliot, and Hardy*, Kay Young claims that the novel is structured around a series of transcendent, emotionally intense moments which occur when the boundaries between characters are suddenly broken down. Young shows that Eliot drew on the work of Hermann Helmholtz – the great nineteenth-century German scientist and physician known for his work on perception – to represent the way sound facilitates a profound connection between characters. In *Middlemarch*, Young writes,

¹ Despite the disdain of some contemporary critics for hermeneutical criticism, my project continues to be interpretive.

moments of transcendence occur when one character enters entirely into the thoughts and feelings of another, and the novel's moral climaxes occur when characters achieve intimate connections. "To imagine the boundary between minds as porous so that moments of mind-to-mind entrance, encounter, and exchange can occur requires *porousness* of the body – the boundary that keeps mind from mind" (75). Young argues convincingly that these moments occur invariably via *sound*. Dorothea is remarkable because "her voice is like music," as the enraptured Caleb Garth puts it (518), and because she is so permeable to the words of others. This reading does not settle any one, particular interpretive issue; few readers would argue that Dorothea, with whom characters most often experience these transcendent moments, is *not* an especially empathetic character. But this cognitive focus on sensation and the processing of sound enriches our understanding and interpretations of the novel, and it makes Leslie Stephen's remark, that Dorothea evinces "a dash of stupidity," seem itself to be rather stupid (*George Eliot*, 180). Along with sophisticating our interpretation of *Middlemarch*, Young demonstrates another vital feature of cognitive studies by drawing our attention to the way Helmholtz's theories, operating in Eliot's fictional world, continue to be confirmed and advanced in our own time (78).

Neither historicism nor cognitive literary studies can provide definitive readings, however. We know there is no one historical context. Which and whose history do we consult? History deconstructs under certain pressures, and literary texts are themselves the stuff of history, so we have the problem of the closed circle; we interpret fictional texts making use of non-fictional texts which themselves are susceptible to alternative interpretations. Conrad himself understood this historiographical dilemma; the second part of this essay reveals some of the ways *Nostramo* undermines the validity of conventional histories, though, as I will argue, the novel itself is presented as a reliable (though, of course, fictional) history of the formation of the Occidental Republic. For cognitive literary studies, on the other hand, one problem is that they evolve rapidly because the science they consult is always changing and self-correcting. To "prove" an interpretation based on scientific theory and evidence is to prove something on relatively unstable ground. My defense of using both historicism and cognitive studies as especially compelling aids to interpretation rests upon the simple truism that we can only work from what we know. Knowledge always evolves, and when the historic and scientific assumptions underlying particular interpretations change, the interpretations may change as well.

Ellen Spolsky brings historicism and cognitive literary studies together in “Cognitive Literary Historicism: A Response to Adler and Gross” (*Poetics Today*, 2003). Historicism, she writes, constitutes a “readjustment away from the production of ever more interpretations and toward the contextual understanding of valued texts, including the questioning of why we value them.” And she adds, “It is now time to argue not only that cognitive literary study must be embedded within the hard-won recognition of the historical imperative—the imperative, that is, to consider both diachrony and synchrony together—but to argue further that the necessity of that embedding itself argues that cultural/historical criticism must acknowledge the history of the human body and its mind” (165). We will never escape producing “ever more interpretations,” nor should we want to; producing new readings from the varying points of view of each emerging generation refreshes literature; the words of the dead, as Auden put it, are always “modified in the guts of the living.” Historicizing simply allows us to narrow and refine our interpretations. Cognitive studies, as Spolsky suggests, draw our attention to issues of human biology that make literary works resonate through time. They help explain why it continues to matter to us whether Madeline was betrayed; Porphyro’s violent passion and Madeline’s response richly correspond to our own emotional states, both troubling and exalting. The linking of historicism and cognitive literary studies therefore seems both logical and natural; historical analysis helps us understand the unique combination of contexts within which the work is embedded. Cognitive studies seek to uncover the biological sources of human behavior. Taken together, they can help us feel less insecure about our interpretive conclusions.²

In the limited reading of *Nostramo* that follows, I will historicize its treatment of what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder, demonstrating the ways Conrad anticipated our current understanding and treatment of the illness. The second part will address *Nostramo*’s treatment of historiography. Part three is concerned with epistemology and the relationship between

² Tony Jackson explicitly counsels *against* using cognitive studies as the basis for interpretations, arguing that literary interpretation and cognitive studies are incommensurate; if literary critics use the cognitive sciences in this way, our work will be judged by the standards of science, and our conclusions will not hold up under that scrutiny (Jackson, 2003). Marco Caracciolo (2016) ably answers this charge, arguing not only that cognitive literary studies may serve as an appropriate interpretive ground, but that even when the scientific ground for a reading shifts – as it has, for example, with psychoanalytic approaches – the reading based on that science may continue to be compelling and useful. See his discussion of Peter Brooks’s psychoanalytic reading of Balzac’s *La Peau de chagrin* in *Reading for the Plot* (190).

neurological discoveries concerning the gap between perception and consciousness and Conrad's use of delayed decoding.

Post-traumatic stress disorder: Dr. Monygham

Doctor Monygham (no first name is ever offered) enters the world of Conrad's post-colonial nation of Costaguana as the Chief Medical Officer in the administration of Guzman Bento, "Perpetual President" and "Citizen Saviour of the Country." In an eerie anticipation of Stalin's Doctors' Plot in the 1950's, the Dictator appoints a commission to root out an imagined conspiracy against him led, in part, by the doctor. Monygham is tortured by Father Beron, a sadistic army chaplain:

[Dr. Monygham] remembered [Father Beron] against all the force of his will striving its utmost to forget. Father Beron had been adjoined to the commission by Guzman Bento expressly for the purpose that his enlightened zeal should assist them in their labours. Dr. Monygham could by no manner of means forget the zeal of Father Beron, or his face, or the pitiless, monotonous voice in which he pronounced the words, "Will you confess now?" After all these years Dr. Monygham, in his rooms at the end of the hospital building in the San Tomé gorge, remembered Father Beron as distinctly as ever. He remembered that priest at night, sometimes, in his sleep. On such nights the doctor waited for daylight with a candle lighted,

And he could not forget Father Beron with his monotonous phrase, "Will you confess now?" reaching him in an awful iteration and lucidity of meaning through the delirious incoherence of unbearable pain. He could not forget. But that was not the worst. Had he met Father Beron in the street after all these years Dr. Monygham was sure he would have quailed before him. This contingency was not to be feared now. Father Beron was dead; but the sickening certitude prevented Dr. Monygham from looking anybody in the face.

Dr. Monygham had become, in a manner, the slave of a ghost. (371-74)
This reads like a case study of post-traumatic stress disorder. With it, Conrad anticipated contemporary work on its sources and consequences. In this brief passage, the word *forget* is repeated four times, the word *remembered* four times, and the full, professional names of

Monygham and his torturer are linked repeatedly. Beron's injunction that Monygham confess is repeated twice. The trauma is entirely overwhelming, and it does not abate over time or when his torturer dies. Father Beron remains eternally alive for Monygham: a terrifying ghost. The memory remains intact, unaltered, and unalterable; the victim remains possessed and irremediably affected by his memories. Readers are given a vivid, even painful understanding of Monygham's trauma. Indeed, the passage in *Nostramo* devoted to Monygham's terrifying post-traumatic memories, with its monotonal repetition of the torturer's very words, vividly recreates the way these overpowering memories come to possess the victim.

The narrative provides only a brief, incomplete picture of Monygham's life before the events of the novel. "It was known that many years before, when quite young, he had been made by Guzman Bento chief medical officer of the army. Not one of the Europeans then in the service of Costaguana had been so much liked and trusted by the fierce old Dictator" (311). All we know of him before he was given this professional responsibility is that he had been "surgeon in one of Her Majesty's regiments of foot" (375), and we never learn how he came to the Dictator's attention. Conrad provides Monygham no family and no friends; this puts Bento's accusation and Monygham's imprisonment and torture into sharp relief. Nothing mitigates the Dictator's betrayal; when Monygham's circumstances change from being "much liked and trusted" to being absolutely abjected by the authority figure who had favored and promoted him, the effect of the trauma is magnified. Conrad, in other words, took some pains to create a character who has no defense against the trauma, no supporters who would have helped him work through his experiences.

Monygham endures the torture for months and confesses to imaginary crimes, seeking relief in what he hopes will be his execution:

When making his extorted confessions to the Military Board, Dr. Monygham was not seeking to avoid death. He longed for it. Sitting half-naked for hours on the wet earth of his prison, and so motionless that the spiders, his companions, attached their webs to his matted hair, he consoled the misery of his soul with acute reasonings that he had confessed to crimes enough for a sentence of death—that they had gone too far with him to let him live to tell the tale. (374)

He outlives the dictator, however, and he is released. But Monygham lived by a severe, British gentleman's code of honor, so his false confessions under torture lead him to despise himself. Though he loses none of his skill as a physician, his terrible experiences turn him into an irritable, misanthropic cynic, incapable of engaging in normal human relationships. Monygham's character is written over by the trauma. He remains a competent physician and an insightful, if cynical, commentator. But his illness isolates him; he becomes a feared and ridiculed eccentric.

Few readers have paid sufficient attention to Monygham's central roles, for good and ill, in *Nostramo*. Because of his dishonor, he can never return to Britain. The torture and his false confessions "did away with his Europeanism" (375); he becomes, in the language of late-nineteenth-century colonialism, "deracinated."³ He never becomes a Costaguanero, however, because he is too irascible to be accepted there; the people consider him "'loco'—mad, if not a bit of a sorcerer" who has the "evil eye" (45). Readers might be tempted to dismiss this response as a consequence of ignorant superstition, but the narrative provides support for the people's fears. His self-loathing and misanthropy make Monygham a dangerous man, and at least one incident in the novel suggests the merit in the common fear of Monygham's "evil eye." During a particularly significant and heated moment in the novel, Nostromo's adopted mother, Teresa Viola, is dying, and Nostromo, the novel's adventure hero, refuses to find a priest; he has been charged with saving the latest shipment of silver from the San Tomé mine, and the silver must be saved at all costs. He has no time to find a priest. As he leaves the Violas' house, Nostromo tells Monygham, Teresa's attending physician, that he must hurry to keep the silver from being stolen by the invading army. Though Monygham is allied in this national conflict with Nostromo and should approve of his mission, he mocks him for his gambling and casual affairs, gratuitously, after Nostromo rightly claims that this will be a desperate affair, perhaps his last. When Nostromo asks Monygham what his reward should be for saving the silver, Monygham has this suggestion: "Illustrious Capataz, for taking the curse of death upon my back, as you call it, nothing else but the whole treasure would do." (259)

³ Conrad alludes to this deracination explicitly when he has another British character think of Monygham as a "beachcomber" (346), a term invented in the mid-nineteenth century to refer to disreputable, ex-patriot Europeans who lived marginally in the tropics.

Monygham's malice, the animus a self-loathing misanthrope might feel for the virile, self-confident, and successful Nostromo, is evident in his mocking of Nostromo's sexual conquests and his weakness for gambling. But with his final statement, tempting Nostromo, daring him to steal the silver entrusted to him, Monygham becomes Mephistopheles, successfully luring him to dishonor and death: Nostromo does indeed steal the silver and thereby destroys himself. Later, the voice of the novel declares that Monygham's soul had been "withered and shrunk by the shame of a moral disgrace" (431) produced by his torture-induced confessions; this is what leads him to treat Nostromo inhumanely. His indiscriminate, snarling cynicism, brought on by his post-traumatic stress, makes him treacherous at a key moment in the novel; the common peoples' fear of him is entirely justified.

Despite this, Conrad's presentation of Monygham is nuanced; he is not a villain. During the revolution, Monygham himself becomes something of an action hero, risking death to save his patrons, Charles and, especially, Emilia Gould. Monygham overcomes his despairing cynicism to act selflessly to save Sulaco.⁴ Emilia Gould, the novel's one entirely admirable character, recognizes this act of heroism, but she also appears to understand Monygham's great fortitude in the face of the suffering he continues to endure. Conrad's treatment of Monygham reflects a humane understanding of his circumstances, and the narrative suggests what a person in his circumstances needs to help him recover. Emilia's love and support at least partially redeem him; her kindness toward him and her support anticipate our contemporary understanding of how victims of PTSD may be successfully treated.⁵ One sign of that partial recovery is the way Monygham provides a loving, sympathetic (though silent) witness to the great tragedy of Emilia's own life: losing her husband Charles to the cold service of "material interests" and the San Tomé mine.⁶

Dr. Monygham's character and circumstances reflect Conrad's seemingly intuitive but remarkably comprehensive understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder: its origins in trauma, its consequences, and its treatment. Monygham's trauma occurs over months of imprisonment

⁴ Monygham manages to distract the murderous Colonel Sotillo and just escapes hanging, thus helping to secure the establishment of the Occidental Republic and the safety of Emilia Gould (*Nostromo*, 484).

⁵ Victims of PTSD can recover with the help of loving support, when he or she is led "to believe he or she is cared for and loved, that he or she is esteemed and valued, and that he or she belongs to a network of communication and obligation" (Sheehan).

⁶ See *Nostromo*, 504-22.

and torture, and the consequences of that experience include many of the symptoms currently associated with PTSD: a sense of shame⁷, sleeplessness, withdrawal, irritability (or, as psychologists would put it, hyper reactivity or hypervigilance), nightmares, and an inability to escape terrifying thoughts and images. The passage of time normally reduces trauma, but not for those suffering from PTSD; Monygham endures nightly fears associated with his torturer long after Father Beron is dead.⁸ Contemporary research on PTSD confirms that suppressing trauma and continuing to function takes extraordinary effort. Bessel van der Kolk might have been referring directly to the character of Dr. Monygham when he observes: “It takes tremendous energy to keep functioning while carrying the memory of terror, and the shame of utter weakness and vulnerability” (2).

As Ivo Vidan first pointed out in 1956, Conrad based Dr. Monygham directly on George Frederick Masterman, whose autobiographical *Seven Eventful Years in Paraguay* was an important source for *Nostramo*. The names and circumstances of nearly every major character in the novel, including Monygham⁹, derive from Masterman's memoir. Masterman was a chief medical officer for the Paraguayan dictator, Francisco Solano Lopez, who accused Masterman, as well as other Europeans in his administration, of conspiring against him. Masterman was “imprisoned, falsely accused of treason and conspiracy, and tortured to make him confess. As with Dr. Monygham in the novel, the investigators succeeded in breaking his resistance. The main torturer in both cases was a priest—Father Roman in Masterman's case, Father Beron in *Nostramo*” (Vidan, 290). Following up on Vidan's discovery, Norman Sherry later claims that “Masterman's book gives no suggestion that he is permanently affected by his experiences, either physically or mentally” (186). Yet Masterman lived in an age when any admission of

⁷ Shame is a common symptom of PTSD, paradoxically, since many people who suffer from the condition were entirely helpless when they experienced the trauma, and their helplessness exacerbates the condition. “It's hard enough to face the suffering that has been inflicted by others, but deep down many traumatized people are even more haunted by the shame they feel about what they themselves did or did not do under the circumstances. They despise themselves for how terrified, dependent, excited, or enraged they felt.” (Kolk, 13). This, again, makes Monygham a more sympathetic figure. He exaggerates his “crimes” against others under torture. He is truly haunted by the shame.

⁸ fMRI studies of PTSD survivors indicate that one area of the brain associated with the processing of visual images, Brodmann's area 19, lights up when patients are asked to recall the trauma long after the trauma occurred. See Kolk: recalling the trauma will “trigger a flashback that brings them back into consciousness, apparently unmodified by the passage of time” (44).

⁹ Conrad based his character, Dr. Monygham, on Masterman himself. But he took the name from Masterman's memoir. “Mr. Monygham, an English sculptor, makes a short appearance; he is seen for an instant while he is being put to torture” (Vidan, 289).

weakness was considered unmanly, and the Preface to Masterman's memoir hints that Sherry might have been wrong, that Masterman's trauma indeed persisted after his release. He writes, "I regret that the greater part of my book is devoted to descriptions of scenes of cruelty and disaster, *but with the marks of the sufferings I had endured still fresh upon me*, and from the anxiety I felt for the fate of my friends who were then prisoners in Paraguay, such scenes would necessarily constantly recur to my memory, and give a somber tinge to all I wrote of the country" (iii, italics added). We cannot know how long these marks of his suffering, both physical and psychological, remained with Masterman, or how long the scenes of his torment recurred to his memory. But Conrad seems to have taken this hint that Masterman's symptoms persisted after his escape via his creation of Dr. Monygham, whose speech, thoughts, and behavior manifest post-traumatic stress, a condition that permanently alters his personality.

A Second Story of Torture: Don José Avellanos

Don José Avellanos is another central character in *Nostramo*¹⁰ who suffers torture at the instigation of Guzman Bento. Avellanos had been a diplomat in the Federalist regime before Bento seized power, and the story of his torture parallels Monygham's, down to the presence of a sadistic army chaplain:

For years he had carried about at the tail of the Army of Pacification, all over the country, a captive band of . . . atrocious criminals, who considered themselves most unfortunate at not having been summarily executed. It was a diminishing company of nearly naked skeletons, loaded with irons, covered with dirt, with vermin, with raw wounds, all men of position, of education, of wealth, who had learned to fight amongst themselves for scraps of rotten beef thrown to them by soldiers, or to beg a negro cook for a drink of muddy water in pitiful accents. Don José Avellanos, clanking his chains amongst the others, seemed only to exist in order to prove how much hunger, pain, degradation, and cruel torture a human body can stand without parting with the last spark of life. . . . A lucky one or two of that spectral company of prisoners would perhaps be led tottering behind a bush to be shot by a file of soldiers. Always an army chaplain—some unshaven, dirty man, girt with a sword and with a tiny cross embroidered in white

¹⁰ The name Avellanos also appears in Masterman's memoir. See Vidan, 291, and Sherry, 187-89.

cotton on the left breast of a lieutenant's uniform—would follow, cigarette in the corner of the mouth, wooden stool in hand, to hear the confession and give absolution. (137-8)

Despite these horrific experiences, Avellanos does not experience post-traumatic stress disorder. Though he “was broken in health and fortune deplorably enough to present a truly gratifying spectacle to the supreme chief of democratic institutions” (139-40), Avellanos quickly returns to political life, leading the party that returns to power five years after Bento dies. He remains optimistic, sociable, effective, and highly respected. Once again, his case anticipates our own, contemporary understanding of why some people suffer PTSD after severe traumas and others do not. As Judith Herman notes in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, “stress-resistant individuals appear to be those with high sociability, a thoughtful and active coping style, and a strong perception of their ability to control their destiny” (58). Especially compared with Dr. Monygham, Avellanos is highly sociable, quite active in politics, and lovingly cared-for by his wife and daughter.

So Conrad created two case studies in how individuals respond to extreme trauma, with one victim suffering permanent psychological damage and the other making a full, psychological recovery. Most studies of PTSD have focused on soldiers returning from war, not those recovering from torture, and torture victims experience the illness at significantly higher rates.¹¹ But the symptoms and treatment are the same; those who suffer most from PTSD have fewer support systems in place; they are less likely to have supportive spouses, family, and friends.¹² Monygham was betrayed by the authority figure who had singled him out for favor, while Avellanos was imprisoned by a political opponent, a victorious peer. After his experience, Monygham is isolated, a foreigner with no family or friends to take him in, an Englishman whose code of honor isolates him still further; he cannot return to England because his extorted confessions have left him, in his own mind, irredeemably dishonored. By contrast, when he is

¹¹ See “Mental Health of Refugees and Torture Survivors: A Critical Review of Prevalence, Predictors, and Integrated Care,” which suggests 50% of torture survivors experience PTSD, while the figure is 30% for Vietnam War veterans.

¹² See “Spouse Support and Vietnam Veterans' Adjustment to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” where Constance Sheehan demonstrates “Being married, or more precisely, having a supportive relationship with one's spouse, considerably reduces the negative impact of combat and greatly aids in the recovery and healing process. Combat veterans who are low on spouse support are four times as likely to be demoralized and to exhibit various stress symptoms.”

released, Avellanos “retired to Sulaco. His wife had an estate in that province, and she nursed him back to life out of the house of death and captivity. When she died, their daughter, an only child, was old enough to devote herself to ‘poor papa’” (140). Avellanos regains his psychological, though not his physical health with the help of his friends and family, and he devotes the rest of his life to establishing just governance in Costaguana. Moneyham’s recovery is far less complete, though his love for Emilia Gould, the wife of Charles Gould, who oversees the San Tome silver mine, provides him with a partial recovery that enables him to risk his life to save her.

Fifty Years of Misrule: The Collective Drive for Coherent Narrative

One of the activities that saves Avellanos from post-traumatic stress is the writing of his magnum opus: *Fifty Years of Misrule*. In his “Author’s Note,” Conrad cites this fictional recent history of Costaguana as his primary source: “My principal authority for the history of Costaguana is, of course, my venerated friend, the late Don José Avellanos, Minister to the Courts of England and Spain, etc., etc., in his impartial and eloquent ‘History of Fifty Years of Misrule.’ That work was never published—the reader will discover why—and I am in fact the only person in the world possessed of its contents” (x). In it, Avellanos manages to maintain a remarkably disinterested view of Guzman Bento, the man who ordered his imprisonment and torture on false charges. The voice of the novel quotes from the manuscript, saying of Avellanos that he “had enough elevation of soul to write of Guzman Bento: ‘Yet this monster, imbrued in the blood of his countrymen, must not be held unreservedly to the execration of future years. It appears to be true that he, too, loved his country. He had given it twelve years of peace; and, absolute master of lives and fortunes as he was, he died poor. His worst fault, perhaps, was not his ferocity, but his ignorance’” (142).

Conrad introduces this fictional history to give *Nostramo* an air of verisimilitude, but also as part of his commentary on the creation of personal and collective attempts to impose a logical, predictable, and understandable order on the world. The dark joke, we might say, is that though *Fifty Years of Misrule* is presented as a disinterested and reliable history of Costaguana, it is never published. Instead, its pages are scattered during the revolution, as Decoud describes in a letter to his sister in France. Avellanos, Decoud tells his sister, has seen “the sheets of ‘Fifty Years of Misrule,’ . . . floating in the gutters, fired out as wads for trabucos loaded with handfuls of type, blown in the wind, trampled in the mud[.] I have seen pages floating upon the very

waters of the harbour" (235). By creating and then destroying this national history, Conrad has found the perfect metaphor to suggest that societies seldom appreciate rational, deliberate, and thorough reconstructions of their past. Instead, the "history" of the Occidental Republic that appears is a gross over-simplification. The events of the novel provide something like the true history, but what remains at the novel's close follows the epic formula.¹³ In the world of *Nostramo*, no individual attempt to impose a logical, essentially truthful order on the world can succeed, either at the personal or at the collective level, though, as I will argue below, one can come closer to writing a true history if one is willing to deal with the immense tangle of personalities, motivations, and forces – both internal and external – that make authentic history; the novel itself is the closest one can come to a true history.

In *Nostramo*, the official history of the new state results from something like collective amnesia, driven by the human desire for simple narrative coherence. As Emilia Gould thinks to herself after Sulaco's successful secession from Costaguana, even the "people who took part in it seemed to forget its memory and its lesson" (*Nostramo*, 507). Conrad emphasizes this forgetting in a wryly comic way by making "Fussy" Joe Mitchell the state's quasi-official historian. Captain Mitchell is the upright but somewhat dim, pompous director of the shipping company that dominates Sulaco's port. Throughout the novel, he identifies particular events as "historical." When a railroad financier travels to Sulaco from England, Captain Mitchell is "positively stony-eyed and purple in the face with the solemnity of this 'historical event'" (118). Near the end of the novel, Mitchell is shown entertaining a distinguished visitor in the city of Sulaco, now the capital of the newly formed Occidental Republic. Conrad employs Mitchell to fill the reader in on the most important events: the final battle for the city of Sulaco, the saving of the San Tomé silver mine and its administrator, Charles Gould, and the establishment of the new Republic. Mitchell's history, Conrad tells us, is "stereotyped" (473); Mitchell clothes the past in purple robes. Every event leading to the successful formation of the new nation is magnified and therefore distorted; Mitchell is unaware of its true foundation. It was conceived in the mind of a young journalist, Martin Decoud, as the only way he and the woman he loved, Antonia Avellanos, could stay together. *Nostramo*, who saves the Republic by making a dangerous

¹³ For a brief description of the way *Nostramo* mocks the epic conventions that inform the history of the new Occidental Republic, see *A Political Genealogy of Joseph Conrad*, 80-82.

journey through enemy territory to bring the conquering army to Sulaco, acted primarily to save the treasure he stole from the mine, not on any patriotic impulse.

The critical examination both of memory and of historical narratives, carried on so skillfully by Conrad in *Nostramo*, has its own ancient history. Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur, Alexandre Dessingué paraphrases Aristotle's distinction between personal memory and recorded history:

There is a distinction between the representation of memory and the writing of history. The main difference lies, not so much in the final product, as in the process of rediscovery, that is to say, in the hunt for the past. Historians are bound to base their work on known or established historical facts or on official sources, at the same time as they are obliged to document, or prove, their findings. To a much greater extent, the representation and the perception of memory integrates an emotional and pictorial dimension. (171)

This remains the commonly held understanding; memory is notoriously inaccurate while history, because it is based on verifiable fact, written by professionally objective historians, can always be trusted to be true.¹⁴ Conrad radically contradicts this traditional, Aristotelian view of history as a necessary and welcome corrective to individual memory. The official history of the Occidental Republic that emerges immediately after its founding is, in fact, *less* reliable than the memories of those who participated in its creation. Mitchell creates a conventional story of the foundation of a new nation, with villains and heroes, tragedies and triumphs, that might stand in for the way people memorialize the founding of any nation. They collectively forget features that fail to fit the narrative they want to tell themselves. With the creation of this false, collective memory, Conrad evinces a lively and sophisticated understanding of the ways individuals, typified by Captain Mitchell, create false memories and of the ways these memories become false collective memories – also known as national histories. History, *Nostramo* suggests, erases at least as much of the past as it commemorates.¹⁵

¹⁴ A contemporary critique of this view of history, anticipated by *Nostramo*, can be found in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, which reveals the ways nations are collectively imagined constructs.

¹⁵ For a defense of group memory, built on tradition, ceremony, and group identity – as opposed to official, recorded history, see Pierre Nora's "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." This is a position that might have been gleaned from the pages of *Nostramo*.

I will make one other point about historiography in *Nostromo*. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra notes that trauma is the most frequent and effective source of change in human history, from Adam and Eve's traumatic expulsion from Eden, to the founding of Israel via the collective trauma of the Holocaust, to the transformation of US culture after September 11, 2001, to, we can predict, our current Covid-19 pandemic (LaCapra, xii-xiv). Don Jose Avellanos overcame the trauma of his torture in part by writing a history of Costaguana, his *Fifty Years of Misrule*. Avellanos produces his history as an implicit, successful form of therapy, eliminating himself so successfully from the narrative that he can find praise for the man who had him viciously tortured. But by articulating the trauma, by turning his trauma into a national history, Avellanos violates the truth of his own experience and of the history he hoped to tell. The novel itself presents Guzman Bento as a monster; he only appears *less* of a monster in Avellanos's book. In order to process his experience, in order to integrate his experience with his consciousness,¹⁶ Avellanos needed to balance its horror with something like a fiction: Guzman Bento, he wrote in *Fifty Years of Misrule*, "loved his country." The evidence of the novel suggests this is absurd – Bento was a narcissistic sadist who loved only power and himself. A paranoid dictator who imprisons, tortures, and murders any who oppose him cannot be said to love his country. To write about his experience, Avellanos needed to mitigate that experience and therefore to fictionalize it. And this fictionalization, this effort to balance and rationalize the horrific and unspeakable, informs the creation of all traditional (and therefore false) historical narratives. If, as LaCapra suggests, collective trauma produces founding myths, and these myths inform subsequent behavior and belief, then the collective and individual traumas associated with the establishment of the Occidental Republic – not only the traumas suffered by Avellanos and Monygham, but also by Martin Decoud, who despairs and commits suicide; by *Nostromo*, who steals the silver he was commissioned to save, and by Emilia, who loses her husband to material interests and the San Tomé mine – are equally foundational and equally *elided* by Captain Mitchell's official, "stereotyped" history of the new Republic.

¹⁶ That Avellanos is able to create his history suggests another clue as to why he does not suffer PTSD. Those who suffer from the illness cannot fully process their trauma consciously. As Cathy Caruth notes in *Trauma: Explorations of Memory* (1996): "Perhaps the most striking feature of traumatic recollection is the fact that it is not a simple memory. Beginning with the earliest work on trauma, a perplexing contradiction has formed the basis of its many definitions and descriptions: *while the images of traumatic reenactment remain absolutely accurate and precise, they are largely inaccessible to conscious recall and control*" (151, italics added). That he can write *Fifty Years of Misrule* shows that Avellanos has the ability to consciously recall and control the events of his past, including his torture, in a way that Monygham cannot.

Conventional history, Conrad suggests in this extraordinary novel, is always false. So, to return to the opening of this essay, it would seem that using history as one basis for interpretation of this or any other novel is a fool's game. Yet the novel itself contradicts this claim because *Nostramo* provides something that comes closest to the true history of the Occidental Republic, founded on the experiences, memories, and traumas of its characters. The history of the founding of the Occidental Republic includes the story of the San Tomé mine, written in the lives, brutal work, and cruel deaths of the people who worked it. Its history includes the life and execution of Bonifacio, the courier who worked for Charles Gould and the mine. And it includes the forces that drive these events, both personal and impersonal: from Martin Decoud's love for Antonia Avallenos, which drove him to imagine the new republic, to the ominous "material interests," channeled by Holroyd, the wealthy financier based in San Francisco.

Delayed Decoding and the Imposition of Narrative

Captain Mitchell's oral history – which closes the novel, ties up the loose ends of the plot, and creates the myth of the foundation of the Occidental Republic – reveals the collective drive to produce coherent, self-justifying historical narratives. That drive for order and coherence also works powerfully at the individual level; the creation of glorifying national histories has its analogue in the individual need to create stable, coherent identities. Our brains continually put memory and sensory experience together to create a more-or-less whole conception of the self and of the world. Like so many features of neural activity, this function can be identified and analyzed most readily when it is impaired, as it was in Oliver Sacks's patient, Dr. P., who, because of a massive tumor in his visual cortex, became incapable of creating coherence from visual data, and therefore of identifying people and complex objects. So he is unable to identify a glove, mistakes fire hydrants for small children, and gives the book of essays its name by mistaking his wife's head for his hat.

Dr. P's aphasia operates at the visual level: the brain tumor in his occipital lobe did not prevent him from seeing objects; it prevented him from creating a coherent understanding of what he saw. His case illustrates how powerfully our brain seeks to provide visual order: when shown a *National Geographic* photograph of desert dunes, Dr. P saw "a river . . . a little guest house with its terrace on the water. People [were] dining out on the terrace." He described "coloured parasols here and there" (11). In *Stories and the Brain: The Neuroscience of Narrative*, Paul B. Armstrong addresses our equally powerful need to create *temporal* coherence.

Drawing on experiments that began with Benjamin Libet's findings in the late 1970s that conscious awareness is always preceded by unconscious awareness by as much as 500 milliseconds (59), Armstrong points out the temporal gap in our experience of the world. Because of this gap, our conscious understanding is always retrospective; we are always creating and then recreating our experiences. Armstrong describes this process in scientific detail, concluding that

the brain subliminally reorganizes the temporal relations between sensory stimuli to construct a coherent pattern that uses information about what came later to restructure what came earlier. . . . [This] recursivity is based on processes of temporal antedating, subjective referral, and intentional binding that are constantly at work in the relation between brain, body, and world, closing the gap between late-arriving perceptual awareness and the signals to which we have already responded. (62)

Armstrong argues that this continual, recursive action of the mind to create cause and effect relationships and coherence is analogous to the ways fiction requires readers to create unity retroactively, often fooling us into drawing false inferences, into creating false, overarching narrative coherence. As we read fiction, we “construct a coherent pattern that uses information about what came later to restructure what came earlier.” This recursive play is natural both to the temporal recreation of our own experiences and to our experience of narrative fiction.

Whether we characterize retrospective understanding as “late error detection” (briefly defined below) or as a process analogous to the natural work of neuro-systems, which always introduce a delay between any stimulus and the brain's processing of that stimulus, Joseph Conrad anticipated retrospective processing stylistically in many of his novels and stories via what Ian Watt famously described as delayed decoding.¹⁷ The most celebrated example of this technique occurs in *Heart of Darkness*. As Marlow, the narrator/protagonist, is piloting his steamship up the Congo River, several things happen that he initially finds incomprehensible. Instead of poling the river's depth, the poleman inexplicably lies down. Then Marlow sees sticks flying through the air. These events seem bizarre, and it takes him several seconds to conclude

¹⁷ Watt defines the technique this way in *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*: “delayed decoding . . . combines the forward temporal progression of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside world, with the much slower reflexive process of making out their meaning” (175). For a detailed examination of how the attack on the steamer in *Heart of Darkness* perfectly illustrates delayed decoding, see 176-79.

that the sticks are arrows and that his steamship is under attack. Conrad draws out the time of these events to illustrate a fact demonstrated by neuroscientists late in the twentieth century that we only understand the world retroactively, often only after a series of misunderstandings or total confusion.

Less famous, small-scale examples of delayed decoding also occur in *Nostromo*. One involves the title character. He has just returned from a dangerous, secret mission, and he must remain undiscovered. He is already somewhat off-balance – apprehensive and suspicious: an ideal frame of mind to construct inaccurate narratives. When he sees the shadow of a man in a lighted room, he assumes the man is a powerful enemy, and though *Nostromo* is known for his strength and courage, he retreats in fear from the menacing shadow. Dr. Monygham appears, however, and discovers that the man who frightened the great *Nostromo* away was actually Hirsh, a timid, Jewish hide merchant, given the strappado or reverse hanging by a sadistic colonel. Hirsh is hanging from a beam, and he is dead. For Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, consciousness serves as what Jeffrey Gray first called a “late error detector” (76). Consciousness exists, Gray argued, to correct conclusions made subliminally, before our consciousness is engaged.¹⁸ *Nostromo*'s false conclusion, created by his fearful circumstances, must be corrected by Monygham. In both cases, the reader experiences the same mistake as the characters; we experience their confusion and fear, and we gain an understanding of how conscious, coherent understanding emerges from our fragmented perceptions and may well be guided by our emotional state; the hypervigilant *Nostromo* would naturally impose a dangerous interpretation on the shadowy figure he observes.

In *Free Will and Determinism in Joseph Conrad's Major Novels*, Ludwig Schnauder notes this and other small-scale examples in *Nostromo*, as well as larger examples of late error detection or delayed decoding.¹⁹ The two examples noted above involving Marlow in *Heart of*

¹⁸ Gray believed that the 500 millisecond delay between the brain's registering of a stimulus and a person's conscious awareness of the stimulus gives our consciousness a chance to “correct” the pre-conscious perception and provides an evolutionary explanation for human consciousness. That claim has been challenged by subsequent experiments revealing that subliminal or pre-conscious perceptions may in some cases be *more* accurate; these conscious corrections may actually introduce error. That said, Gray's observation that consciousness *follows* perception, leaving our conscious awareness free to alter our understanding of the original perception, remains uncontested, and it confirms the postulate that we always gain knowledge retrospectively. For a remarkable description of contemporary experiments that reveal the gaps and interactions between subliminal and conscious processing of information, see Dehaene (2014), especially Chapter 2.

¹⁹ Here is Schnauder's partial list of small-scale examples of delayed decoding in *Nostromo*: “Minor examples include Decoud's perception of the collision with Sotillo's steamer in the Golfo Placido; *Nostromo*'s discovery of

Darkness and the character of Nostromo put the reader in the relatively comfortable position of watching a fictional character struggle to find meaning. The larger examples, however, create discomfort for the readers themselves, and they help make *Nostromo* an especially difficult novel for first-time readers, a chronologically-addled nightmare. It begins at the climax – chapters two through four provide fragments of the battle for Sulaco, which is the present of the novel; fourteen of the novel's twenty-nine chapters cover the battle in granular detail. But after three chapters of brief introduction which include the fleeing dictator, Ribiera, the indispensable Nostromo, Captain Mitchell, and the Viola family, the narrative does not return to the battle for eleven chapters. First-time readers can only know the significance of the events and characters retrospectively, after reading the extended flashbacks, and they must hold those earlier events in mind, sometimes for hundreds of pages. Once they accomplish that (increasingly rare) feat of narrative memory, they then watch the collective will transform those events into a glorified fiction of the birth of a nation.

Conrad rewards patient, careful readers by providing a history of the Occidental Republic known only to those willing to read the novel recursively, making *Nostromo*, like many of Conrad's greatest novels—*Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Under Western Eyes*—an extended study in epistemology. We can only make meaning retrospectively, and often that retrospection yields false inferences within the world of the novel. No one but Nostromo knows the treasure was saved, buried on the Great Isabel, and that Nostromo is not only the savior of the Occidental Republic but a thief. Only Nostromo knows that Martin Decoud committed suicide; Nostromo dies with these secrets. Only Emilia Gould knows that her marriage is a failure, that Charles betrays her to serve the San Tomé mine and the financier Holroyd's material interests. These individual memories constitute the true history of the new Republic. The collectively generated history of the Occidental Republic is a combination of simplification, mythologizing, and falsification, and the authentic history is founded on trauma. All the major characters hold secret, traumatic memories. Nostromo cannot tell anyone how he has been corrupted by the stolen silver, and Emilia's trauma leaves her mute; only Dr. Monygham, traumatized himself, can guess what Charles's betrayal does to her. Decoud

the murdered Hirsch in the Custom House; Monygham's inference from Nostromo's reappearance that the lighter's cargo of silver is lost; or Viola's assumption that the nocturnal visitor on the island is Ramirez and not Nostromo. In all of these instances the first-time reader shares the characters' initial misunderstanding of or bewilderment by the unfolding events" (195-96).

commits suicide in despair; his mocking world view leaves him defenseless to fend off the trauma of being left alone and voiceless on the Great Isabel. *Nostramo* is built on trauma: individual trauma and the collective trauma caused by massive human greed and war. Like human history, both individual character and plot hinge on trauma, often presented as unspoken and unspeakable.²⁰

Conclusion

Joseph Conrad was the most prophetic of modern writers. Despite its racial ambiguities, *Heart of Darkness* was the most effective, contemporaneous attack in fiction on European imperialism, an attack borne out by the national liberation movements of the twentieth century. With its understanding of the mechanics of terrorism and the psychological response of those targeted, *The Secret Agent* anticipated both the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the American reaction. In *Nostramo*, the torture and murder of Hirsch, the Jewish hide merchant, provides a small-scale but cogent and terrifying foreshadowing of the Holocaust, and *Nostramo* must also be considered the first great post-colonial novel. From the perspective of cognitive literary studies, Conrad's description of PTSD occurs before its identification as "shell shock" in WWI, and Conrad's treatment of Monygham and Avellanos reveals an intuitive understanding of what makes someone more or less susceptible to it. Attention to the novel's depiction of the etiology, course, and potential treatment of PTSD increases our understanding of Monygham's character; we see his suffering and its effects more clearly, more immediately. His trauma ripples through the novel, leading to the downfall of the titular character and leading the reader to see how so much of the novel flows from human trauma, beginning with the Native American slaves worked to death in the original working of the San Tomé mine. And Conrad's remarkable exploration of the effects of trauma brings *Nostramo* into the twenty-first century, aligning it with contemporary studies like those cited in this essay. The same thing happens – we get the same remarkable sense of recognition – when we discover the similarities between the mania of Ajax in the eponymous play by Sophocles and our own, contemporary understanding of bipolar disorder. Ajax is angered when Agamemnon and Menelaus give Achilles' armor to Odysseus, not to him. He plans to murder them, but Athena deludes him into attacking cattle and their

²⁰ For a fine, alternative approach to the unspeakable in *Nostramo*, characterized as a move away from the Cartesian cogito – from a world of cause and effect and retrospective coherence – to a being-in-the moment and out-of-time, see chapter 5 of Yael Levin's *Slow Modernism*.

shepherds instead. When his mania recedes, he discovers his error, suffers depression, and commits suicide. This reveals a twenty-four-century-old understanding of the pathology of bipolar disorder and depression²¹ and confirms that the literature of the past is always also contemporary.

Conrad's use of delayed decoding, which he employs to intrigue (or baffle, or infuriate) readers, reveals a profound understanding of the human drive for coherence, a drive that preoccupies both philosophers and neuroscientists and that can lead to individual and collective delusions. *Nostramo* brilliantly anticipates post-modern debates concerning the value of individual versus historical memory, the creation of individual versus historical narratives, and the terrible foundational power of trauma.

I hope this essay demonstrates some of the benefits of reading the literature of past centuries through the lens of 21st century cognitive science. Uncovering the historical sources of *Nostramo* extends our understanding of Conrad's cultural milieu: the unique biographical, ideological, and social circumstances that helped produce the novel. Historicism creates distance, preventing us from the facile imposition of contemporary beliefs and attitudes onto the past. Attention to cognition does the opposite. It helps us reach across historical difference in ways that bring the past into the present. We might call the process a form of critical, delayed decoding; new insights from the literature of the past occur retrospectively as our understanding of our cognitive processes evolve.

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21 For the description of Ajax's delusions, see lines 20-142. For his subsequent depression, "Aiai! My name is a lament!" . . . "The gods hate me, that much is clear," see lines 329-357 and 468-533. Sophocles provides what we would consider a fanciful etiology of the disorder – the Goddess Athena gives Ajax his delusions – but we still have no definitive understanding of the causes of bipolar disorder, so we have not advanced significantly in this regard beyond Sophocles.

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