(RE/DE)CONSTRUCTING UTOPIA IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S **'NOSTROMO'**

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Abstract: *In 'Nostromo', Conrad, in the "capacity" of a map-maker, offers the reader an imaginary setting of luxurious beauty, the province of Sulaco. Defined by Sir John, one of the characters, as "an out-of-the-way place" (78), Sulaco, which is thought to have been politically modelled after Latin American countries, enjoys a Utopian geographical location and detachment from the rest of the federation of Costaguana. Although this piece of land is geographically intended to be far removed from the grip of civilization and modernity and from the rest of the republic itself, it fails to restrain the envy of the conquistadores. Paradoxically, the history of Sulaco is a history of conquests and political instability and the land of Sulaco is a land inhabited by immigrants, natives and all other kinds of foreigners. Although at the beginning of the novel the "material apparatus of perfected civilization which obliterates the individuality of old towns under the stereotyped conveniences of modern life had not intruded as yet" (96) upon Sulaco, by the end of the novel we witness how this process is overtaking Sulaco.*

The paper discusses the way Conrad tracks and undoes the Utopian perspective of Sulaco by exposing the fragility of human character in view of the evolution of "material interests". The Azuera legend, the legend of the perished gold, which frames the story of the San Tomé silver mine, freezes this perspective from the onset.

Keywords: *utopia, material interests, Conrad.*

Introduction

The later stage of the Victorian period saw the development of a new kind of writing, collectively referred to as fantasy writing[1]. Among the different kinds of fantasy writing under this label is also utopian writing. Although the term "utopian" is not new but dates back to Thomas More's *Utopia*, a work fashioned after Plato's *Republic* which became somewhat more important than it because it not only gave us the word "utopia" but also the new concept of utopia from the play on the Greek words *ou-topos* ("no place") and *eu-topos* ("a good place"), that is, a place that is nowhere but that is good, the interest in utopia and nowheres saw a revival by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, most notably in Butler's *Erewhon* (backwards for "nowhere") and Morris's *News from Nowhere*.

The interest in utopian literary projects continued during the early modern period. It is no coincidence that the interest in utopian projects and ideas was revived during the turn of the century. Given the complex context of this period, social and political, more particularly the intellectual concern with the future of mankind, the risk of the First World War, the spread of new political ideas, writers would resort to utopianism as a viable means to test or rather question prospective social and political situations. On the whole, doubts and questions characterized intellectual thinking and literary writing throughout this period. Indeed, although these writings "are filled with allusions to utopian themes" (Waddell, 2012: 1), it is mainly questioning and doubting that characterize utopian ideas present in these works and also account for their

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[1] What I have in mind here is the works written by Lewis Carroll, H. G. Wells, Samuel Butler and William Morris.

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complexity, formal and thematic. Waddell also points out that it is in novels that these ideas most often appear, although they do appear quite as often in "short stories, poems, magazine articles, essays, autobiographies, and works of cultural criticism and reminiscence" (*op. cit.*, 1).

In this paper I will discuss Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* from the utopian perspective. Although *Heart of Darkness* is often referred to as Conrad's most well-known utopian project (Winter, 2006: 11; Hiraldo, 2011), I find *Nostromo* as representing a more complete utopian project, spatial, political, social, religious and so on.

While I am aware that the notion of utopia has expanded over time and moved beyond the scope of literature, I want to clarify here that in my discussion of utopia in *Nostromo*, I will have in mind More's utopia as a pure political and social project, which is controversial and ambivalent at the same time, but which offers the right paradigms for my discussion of *Nostromo*. What is more, I believe that the idea of utopia that the early modernists had in mind was less complex than it is assumed today and was literally intended for an ideal place to live in, for social betterment. What is more, as Waddell (2012: 5) points out,

> […] not one of the early modernist writers foregrounded in this book[1] sought a utopia of the kind in which all human desires are to be satisfied […]. All these writers took notice of the politics of their day as well as those of the eras preceding their moments in history; explored the nuances and contradictions of contemporary political programmes in order to provide their own visions of better socio-political or cultural futures; and, in certain instances, explicitly invoked the discourse of utopianism as a way of dismissing kinds of thought which they deemed impractical, misleading, or dangerous.

In this paper I will try to demonstrate how Conrad uses Sulaco, an imaginary province modelled after Latin American countries, to propose a quite complex social and political project and expose it to the dangers of material interests. Below I will try to prove how Conrad recreates More's project but in the meantime departs from it by undoing the very essence of it, communal values.

Utopia and Conrad's *Nostromo*

In this part of the paper I want to discuss Conrad's utopian project in *Nostromo*. As I mentioned earlier, utopia in this paper will be seen as an option for social improvement and welfare to be questioned and confronted against real political and social projects. The choice of *Nostromo* is no coincidence since I tend to believe that Conrad's utopian project in this work is far more comprehensive than elsewhere and as such is more fully introduced and questioned.

In *Utopia* Hythloday introduces this "out-of-the-way place" (*N* 78), to borrow Sir John's words from *Nostromo*, by following a certain order for the explanation of the rules and conventions regulating the political, social and religious aspects of life in Utopia. I will mainly resort to this order as a point of departure for my arguments in this paper and for the discussion of the several utopian paradigms Conrad recreates and eventually undoes in *Nostromo*.

[1] The writers he discusses in this book are Wells, Conrad, Ford, Lawrence, and Lewis.

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The geographical position, beauty and landscape of the imaginary Sulaco, a province in the imaginary republic of Costaguana have much to suggest of the utopian in More's sense. The choice of Latin American countries by Conrad as a model for the republic, while being inspired by the author's fleeting impressions about the West Indies as recorded by him in the "Author's Note" (2001), could be no coincidence with regard to his utopian project. In fact, Thomas Phillips (2008) argues that Latin America, more particularly Paraguay, has been the favourite *topos* for the creation of utopias and dystopias by several writers, on the grounds of it being politically and geographically isolated.

The novel opens with a description of Sulaco, historical and geographical, very reminiscent of the description of Utopia by Hythloday in Book II of *Utopia*. Spatially speaking, the construction of Sulaco corresponds to the geographical setup of Utopia. Sulaco, like Utopia, is renowned for its beautiful gardens. Both bays are well-protected and mainly used for commercial purposes. Inward movement is easy while the exterior part of both places is hardly reachable by foreigners.

> Sulaco […] had never been commercially anything more important than a coasting port with a fairly large local trade in ox-hides and indigo. (*N* 51)
> […] the whole coast is, as it were, one continued harbor, which gives all that live in the island great convenience for mutual commerce. (*U* 43)

The histories of both places are histories of conquests. Once called Abraxa, Utopia was renamed after Utopus, the conqueror who brought civilization and imposed certain rules of conduct onto the population. Similarly, we infer that Sulaco, an antique town, had been ruled by the Spanish [1] and that several conquests had followed afterwards. Thus conquest here does not follow the same paradigm or utopia. While the conquest of Utopia gave way to a stable political project, concretely implemented with the enforced geographical separation and its eventual conversion into an island whose coast is "fortified, both by nature and art" (*U* 43), the conquests of Sulaco and the rest of the republic have made the country politically relentless and have served one main purpose, commerce.

These "contending paradigms of conquests" (Stern, *op. cit*.: 6), to borrow Stern's phrasing, guide the governing philosophies of both places. If Utopus's project

[1] Although Sulaco is an imaginary province, facts about it follow the historical logic and chronology. The novel opens with the words "In the time of Spanish rule […]", which most likely refers to the year 1492 when Columbus arrived in America. In his brilliant analysis of the symbolism of the year 1492, which he sees as the beginning of modern world history since the year marks "[a] vast reconfiguration of world history" (1992: 3), Stern explains the various consequences or better the paradigms of conquest, as he calls them, it brought about: "Columbus initiated the Spanish claim to sovereignty, riches, and mission in America. The claim set off the rush to European imperial rivalry and indigenous disaster in America, to unification of continental histories into world history, to the building of power and prosperity on foundations of racial dominance and violence, to global expansion and ascendance of the West and capitalism. The Columbus voyage - or better yet, the date - stands as a kind of peak symbol for the dawning of modern world history.
The magnitude of consequence that issued from the collision of European and indigenous American histories: this, not Columbus himself, explains the outpouring of attention and commemoration, protest and debate, reflection and commercial hype, that has accompanied the quincentennial of 1492." (*ibidem*: 4). In fact, Conrad's republic of Costaguana is a case in point for Stern's arguments. Indeed, Conrad takes care to provide clues from history.

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aimed towards sameness, reflected in the architectural uniformity, geographical symmetry, simplicity of clothing, lack of greed and pride in the inhabitants, Sulaco's prospect as a utopian project is at risk by the commercial. The guiding philosophy of the novel is "material interests" (116), summed up by the taciturn Charles Gould, quite a regal figure in Sulaco by posture and position. Although purposefully stripped out from the grips of modernity, Sulaco's utopian chances are ruined by the presence of material interests. To illustrate the paradigmatic difference in the guiding philosophies of both places, I would like to analyse the attitude of the Utopians and of the inhabitants of Sulaco towards gold and silver. In both cases, we are informed that the places are rich in ores.

> […] since their constitution differs so much from ours, their value of gold and silver should be measured by a very different standard; for since they have no use for money among themselves, but keep it as a provision against events which seldom happen, and between which there are generally long intervening intervals, they value it no farther than it deserves, that is, in proportion to its use. So that it is plain they must prefer iron either to gold or silver; for men can no more live without iron than without fire or water, but nature has marked out no use for the other metals, so essential as not easily to be dispensed with. The folly of men has enhanced the value of gold and silver, because of their scarcity. Whereas, on the contrary, it is their opinion that nature, as an indulgent parent, has freely given us all the best things in great abundance, such as water and earth, but has laid up and hid from us the things that are vain and useless. (*U* 64)

> The Inspector-General of State Hospitals (whose maintenance is a charge upon the Gould Concession), Official Adviser on Sanitation to the Municipality, Chief Medical Officer of the San Tome Consolidated Mines (whose territory, containing gold, silver, copper, lead, cobalt, extends for miles along the foot-hills of the Cordillera), had felt poverty-stricken, miserable, and starved during the prolonged, second visit the Goulds paid to Europe and the United States of America. (*N* 449)

The lack of interest in the precious metals in the first case and the emphasis on the riches contained underneath the land of Sulaco along with the fact that the economy of Utopia unlike that of Sulaco is oriented towards the communal, should suggest that Utopians' philosophy is utilitarian, whereas Sulacans' materialistic. What is more, Conrad symbolically freezes the utopian perspective from the very beginning of the novel through the Azuera legend, the anecdotal version of the story, of the two gringos who perished in search of the hidden gold. Indeed, More's Utopians have no greed for precious metals, whereas Conrad's characters are enchained by the silver of the mine, by the material interests.

What is more, if the Utopians live in "a well-ordered commonwealth" (*U* 105), the inhabitants of Sulaco, local, native or foreign, share no such privilege. Mainly an immigrant society, Sulaco's people are trying to make their living in this remote part of the world. It is for this reason that the rehabilitation of the San Tome mine raises high hopes in them, especially among the Indians, once natives of Sulaco, at present the most marginalized members of Sulacan society.

The religious life of Sulaco also deviates from the utopian paradigm and is instead marked by stories of persecution. While the Utopians are tolerant of any form of religion and are allowed to worship whom they please, religion in Sulaco is a far more complex matter. Several forms of religion are confronted in the novel, which in my

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view can be labelled as spiritual, idolatrously, materialistic and mystical. Garibaldi's religion represents a spiritual form of belief. We are told that: "The old republican did not believe in saints, or in prayers, or in what he called "priest's religion." Liberty and Garibaldi were his divinities; but he tolerated "superstition" in women, preserving in these matters a lofty and silent attitude." (*N* 62) Mr Holroyd, under the pretence of disliking that form of religion which assumes the worshipping of icons, promotes Protestantism in Sulaco through his Missionary Fund. His interests are essentially materialistic. As Emilia Gould observes:

> "Mr. Holroyd's sense of religion," Mrs. Gould pursued, "was shocked and disgusted at the tawdriness of the dressed-up saints in the cathedral—the worship, he called it, of wood and tinsel. But it seemed to me that he looked upon his own God as a sort of influential partner, who gets his share of profits in the endowment of churches. That's a sort of idolatry. He told me he endowed churches every year, Charley." (*N* 106)

And there is Father Corbelan's mission with the wild Indians, an unusual and mystical form of preaching and living with religion:

> Rumours of legendary proportions told of his successes as a missionary beyond the eye of Christian men. He had baptized whole nations of Indians, living with them like a savage himself. It was related that the padre used to ride with his Indians for days, half naked, carrying a bullock-hide shield, and, no doubt, a long lance, too—who knows? (*N* 205)

The story at the point we follow it tells of a troubled Sulaco, ruined by the dictatorship of Guzman Bento and awaiting a new political situation in the country probably under the government of Ribiera. The political context is mixed with the personal lives of four male characters, Charles Gould, Martin Decoud, Nostromo and Dr. Monygham. It is through them that Conrad launches four possibilities for his utopian project. Out of a vindictive excuse for his father's death, Gould "pin[s] [his] faith to material interest" (*N* 116); the young and energetic Decoud, a journalist turned patriot out of love for the beautiful Antonia, proclaims in the capacity of a Utopus, the idea of the separation of Sulaco from the rest of Costaguana: "The Occidental territory is large enough to make any man's country. Look at the mountains! Nature itself seems to cry to us, 'Separate!'" (*N* 197); Nostromo, a man of the people, lives for his good name and gets involved with the mission on the lighter out of the need for more fame; and Dr. Monygham, an outcast in appearance and by public opinion, but a man who has suffered the tortures of the dictatorship and has gone through the test of self, who is sceptical about the promotion of material interests through the San Tome mine. Which of them is right? Conrad seems to suggest that as long as the material is involved with the political, then there is no way out for social betterment. Silver, the symbol of the material in the novel, is used to reinforce the idea that the touch of it bears the burden of a curse which brings about annihilation, physical or moral, as it can be demonstrated by the destiny of the first three characters. Gould by cherishing his fetish for the mine in the end finds himself alone, barren and morally blind. Decoud perishes in the infinity of sky and sea when he finally finds himself alone after his involvement in the adventure on the lighter with Nostromo. Nostromo after the same episode turns into a banal thief. The only truths to be pronounced in the novel are left to Dr. Monygham who declares to Emilia Gould:

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> "There is no peace and no rest in the development of material interests. They have their law, and their justice. But it is founded on expediency, and is inhuman; it is without rectitude, without the continuity and the force that can be found only in a moral principle. Mrs. Gould, the time approaches when all that the Gould Concession stands for shall weigh as heavily upon the people as the barbarism, cruelty, and misrule of a few years back." (*N* 454)

By the end of the novel when modernity has already shown its landmarks in Sulaco, Conrad gives his utopian project another chance when Nostromo is approached in hospital by a Communist photographer. To his request: "Do not forget that we want money for our work. The rich must be fought with their own weapons." (*N* 495), Nostromo makes no answer, thus manifesting his scepticism in any revolution that bases its success upon the material.

Conclusions

In the end we are left with two questions: Why does Conrad adopt this perspective? Why does he undo his own utopian project? In fact, Winter (2012, 80) rather than utopian calls Conrad a dystopian writer:

> The most eloquent dystopian writer in early twentieth-century England was Joseph Conrad. The reason I give him pride of place is because he made the imperial world his subject, and he showed the inherent violence within it, a violence which came home to roost, as it were, in 1914.

As it is typical of Conrad, he often resorts to facts, myths, the Bible or other well-known narratives and reworks them in the Conradian fashion by dismantling their texture and challenging or questioning their messages. The utopian project of *Nostromo* is one such case and proves Hiraldo's view that "utopian schemes lead to dystopian outcomes" (2011: 3). The political situation in Sulaco reinforces Hiraldo's argument that "attempts to establish utopian nation-states will inevitably lead to 'totalitarian dictatorships' and to the massive violence associated with these systems" (*ibidem*).

What is more, Conrad's viewpoints have often been deemed sceptical by scholars. This scepticism is not missing in *Nostromo* either. The mouthpiece for his scepticism is Martin Decoud whose death has been often claimed to be a result of sheer scepticism and lack of faith. Conrad's own view of the universe was far more than pessimistic. The often quoted letter to Cunningham Graham, December 1897, sums up his view:

> There is a—let us say—a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold!—it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider—but it goes on knitting. . . . You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident—and it has happened. You can't interfere with it. . . . In virtue of that truth one and immortal which lurks in the force that made it spring into existence it is what it is—and it is indestructible!
> It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions—and nothing matters. (*Collected Letters* 1: 425)

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This pessimism is obviously a product of the time in which he lived. Caught up between two centuries, the early modernists were often full of gnawing doubts, especially about the materialism that seemed to characterize the forthcoming century. Published in 1904, a decade earlier than the First World War broke out, *Nostromo* represents a suitable utopian project for understanding the possible course of mankind in view of a world overtaken by the material. Indeed, it once again proves that "Conrad is found to be firmly against the belief in the possibility of meaningful social improvement while regretting that human nature is so desperately unimprovable (49)" (Hadjiyiannis, 2012: 811).

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