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DPhil English Literature, University of Sussex

**The Representation of Latin America in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence
and Malcolm Lowry**

March 2013

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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THE REPRESENTATION OF LATIN AMERICA IN THE FICTION OF JOSEPH CONRAD, D.H.

LAWRENCE AND MALCOLM LOWRY

SUMMARY

With a language, landscape and culture unfamiliar to the majority of British readers, Latin America is a puzzling and anomalous presence in British modernist fiction. Yet, in the work of Conrad, Lawrence and Lowry it is also a setting that constitutes a minor tradition in its own right and one that offers a distorted reflection of the concerns and anxieties back home: from uncertainties over the future of the British Empire to the traumatic recognition of loss that attended the First and Second World Wars. In addition to these political and historical concerns, the representation of Latin America in British modernist fiction is also entangled with a corresponding crisis of culture. Consistently Latin America offers itself to writers in English as a suitable correlative to concerns which range from disturbing visions of the natural world to the disorientation that attended the engagement with the culturally unfamiliar along with the uncertainties that were related to the emergence of a truly global economy in which Britain was increasingly overshadowed by the United States. However, the place of Latin America in British modernist fiction is far from static. As this interest in Latin America matures, there is a progressive movement from an initial sense of doubt (Conrad) along with a contrary sense of desperation (Lawrence) towards a final sense of resignation (Lowry). As such, Latin America can be thought of as a fictional space in the British modernist novel – in the end, more of a fantasy than a reality – that reflects the frightening apprehension of a new world in which British fiction had found a suitable place to come to terms with some of its deepest fears and anxieties.

They change their climate, not their soul, who rush across the sea

— Horace

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Introduction

The relationship between theme and setting seems fundamental to most, if not all, works of fiction. It is also a relationship, however, that is sometimes more complex and deceptive than might initially appear, being related to thought processes and cultural assumptions that are often far less conscious than the reasons provided by authors themselves. With its geographical distance and unfamiliar culture, the setting of Latin America is a perplexing and anomalous presence in the British novel. In revealing a strange terrain to the majority of British readers, not only in the sense of its landscape but also in terms of its politics, language and culture, the setting of Latin America might readily convey an impression of insecurity, of not having a sense of place or a form of orientation.

Joseph Conrad's representation of Latin America in *Nostromo* (1904) conveys this uneasy sense of exile and dislocation. In terms of politics, it seems significant that the publication of this Latin American novel should have occurred at a time when the British Empire was showing the initial signs of weakness that would lead to its eventual collapse in the later stages of the twentieth century. This impression had appeared as early as the Boer War (1899-1902) when the British Army had struggled to fight off a guerrilla army of poorly equipped Boer farmers. The same period also saw other changes in the global balance of power when, after the Spanish-American War of 1898, the United States annexed the Philippines and Cuba which greatly increased its role in the western hemisphere. *Nostromo* is a reflection of a modern world in which Britain's role in international affairs seemed shrunken and diminished: something that is reflected in Conrad's unusual choice of location – a fictional setting that, in many ways, stood outside Britain's sphere of influence.¹ In this sense, the fictional Latin American

¹ The majority of the territory in Central and South America had come under Spanish and Portuguese control from the sixteenth century onwards. Even so, Britain held the small colonial possessions of British Honduras and the Mosquito Coast in Central America as well as British Guiana and Trinidad and Tobago in South America. In addition, Britain also gained control of a number of colonies in the Caribbean, such as Jamaica and Barbados. Primarily, however, the interest of Britain in this part of the world took the form of financial assets and concerns such as mining in Chile and railways in Argentina. British investment in Central and South America in the nineteenth century was greater than that of the United States or any other European country; a situation that would only begin to change at the turn of the century. Robert Freeman Smith, 'Latin America, The United States and the European Powers, 1830-1930' in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, p. 88.

state of Costaguana provides Conrad with the opportunity to represent a form of imperialism that had entered a new phase of exploitation: in the guise of an American capitalism that was beginning to dominate the world even more effectively than the colonialism of the past.

In the context of this study, the opening discussion of *Nostromo* in the first and second chapter functions as a preface to the remaining discussion of why Mexico also bears a distinctive relationship to the concerns of Lawrence and Lowry. This is not surprising given that Mexico embodies the same type of disturbance at a political, cultural and lexical level. As with the rest of Latin America, Mexico is a Spanish-speaking area of the world that was for a long time excluded from the concerns of Britain. Accordingly, Mexico functions as a comparable setting to the imaginary Latin American state of Costaguana for its same sense of exile and dislocation as well as its ability to represent concerns which range from the changing balance of power to the various crises of European politics. In *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) and *Under the Volcano* (1947), Mexico affords a similarly tangential treatment of political concerns that were intimately related to the First and Second World Wars. For Lawrence and Lowry, then, the distant setting of Mexico is related to some distinctly domestic concerns in a comparable sense to the way in which Costaguana embodied this same association for Conrad.²

From its beginnings, the First World War had provided Lawrence with the impression that there was something deeply wrong at the heart of British politics and

² It is worth noting here that there was a comparable interest in Latin America among English travel writers from this period. For example, Aldous Huxley wrote about an extensive range of Caribbean countries as well as Guatemala and Mexico in *Beyond the Mexique Bay* (1934). Reflecting a similar tendency towards painful introspection as the authors of this study, Huxley dwells on such problems as 'the inadequacy of man's imagination' as well as the problematic relationship between the human capacity for cruelty and the function of organised societies. Aldous Huxley, *Beyond the Mexique Bay* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1934), p. 32, pp. 176-178. Likewise, Evelyn Waugh's Mexican travelogue, *Robbery Under Law* (1939), points to similar concerns that operate under the surface of the three novels selected for this study. Near the beginning of his travelogue, Waugh remarks: 'it is interesting to read the travel books of fifty years ago and notice their air of tolerant or intolerant superiority. Perhaps at the time there was some justification for it; now there is very little [...] recent history has made it impossible for a thoughtful European to view the world with the same easy assurance'. Waugh then attributes his gloom to the disparity between the lofty aspirations of revolutionaries and the sense of disillusionment that often followed the achievement of their aims; a spectacle which he sees on both sides of the Atlantic. In this sense, Waugh discerns a kind of political and moral equivalence between the failed revolutions of Latin America and the Bolsheviks and Nazis of Europe. Evelyn Waugh, *Robbery Under Law* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1939), pp. 14-15.

society. After the war, Lawrence was led to a profound sense of scepticism concerning the future of his own country and travelled widely in Europe, Australia and the United States before settling in Mexico. In turn, during his travels, Lawrence finally identified the American continent as a suitable location of political and cultural rebirth. In *The Plumed Serpent* this assumes the eccentric form of pagan revival in the context of 1920s Mexico. On the surface, then, while it might seem that these distant locations are far removed from British concerns, it is a setting that often enables the working through of distinctly domestic anxieties.

Writing in the wake of the Second World War, Lowry's *Under the Volcano* reveals a further shift in attitude even though he again alights on some of the same preoccupations. With his portrayal of Mexico as a country riven by shadowy ideological divisions, the setting of *Under the Volcano* reveals itself as a suitable means of working through the author's sense of a world that was facing another moment of crisis. In the wake of Franco's triumph in Spain and the loss of values and lives that attended the Second World War, Lowry represents a retrospective vision of Mexico at the end of the 1930s in which it appears to echo the author's dismal view of history and politics. Lowry's impression of a modern world on the brink of international disaster in 1938-39 seems curiously harmonised with the ruinous landscape of Mexico which reveals its own complex history of violence and misrule.

In addition to these political concerns, the fascination with Latin America for Conrad and with Mexico for Lawrence and Lowry is also bound up with a number of associated cultural anxieties. Again, also in this respect, Conrad's *Nostromo* can be interpreted as a template for these later literary engagements with Mexico. In this sense, the vertiginous impression that Latin America and Mexico represent offer itself as a correlative for an equally dizzying moment in western culture. These unfamiliar settings seem eminently suited to this type of examination where the writer of British fiction is able to confront some seemingly fundamental truths about the human condition outside the inhibited framework of European culture; or so, at least, it might initially seem. In this way, and to varying degrees of intensity, all the novels in this study yield epiphanies which present a dispiriting view of the natural world along with a vision of history and politics that is correspondingly rendered as futile and absurd. The Latin American landscape of Coastuaguana is routinely conceived of as a suitable

correlative for a distinctly nihilistic conception of both the natural world and human societies in much the same way as Mexico is for Lawrence and Lowry.

This is a vision of the natural world which also has important implications for the representation of the human figures in all of these narratives, where the force of the landscape, in its dramatic contrasts of mountain ranges and desolate plains, often threatens to overwhelm the fragile human presence. In turn, these reflections on the natural world are often figured as sites of decentring and disorientation; moments of existential vertigo in which mental consciousness retreats and sensory impressions of bewilderment assume the form of frightening revelations. These are also moments of revelation when the supposed reality of the natural world is shaken and objects and people are apprehended with a greater degree of clarity; even though this sense of clarity might also entail a debilitating revision of what it means to be human. These three modernist novels all contain an episode where the central character undergoes a moment of intense doubt in which all that they understand about themselves is called into question. And yet, while this type of giddiness is a source of anxiety for Conrad, it is portrayed as a moment of liberation for Lawrence. Lowry, in his paradoxically lighter treatment of this decidedly dark theme, portrays this moment of realisation as a moment of black comedy.

In turn, this fragmentation of identity is also mirrored in the often uneasy mix of styles that constitute these various literary texts. Conrad's *Nostromo* reveals a highly variable narrative voice, which is subject to a great number of shifting focalisations and narrators, in addition to the rumour and hearsay of the heavily populated storyline. These stylistic difficulties are also apparent in *The Plumed Serpent* where the conventions of the travelogue are subsumed under the weight of grand metaphysical speculations in the later stages of the novel and a transition from a narrative to a hymnal structure takes place. This drive towards narrative fragmentation seems to culminate in Lowry's *Under the Volcano* in a mixture of realist and modernist prose styles and a technique of typographical pastiche which makes use of extensive dialogue in a variety of languages, as well as menus, leaflets, price lists and street signs.

Nevertheless, as the studies of Anthony Pagden and Stephen Greenblatt make clear, when the fictional setting of Latin America and Mexico is considered from a broader European perspective, the impression of novelty soon begins to fade. The New

World had, after all, been an object of fascination for Europeans ever since Christopher Columbus had set out on his first voyage of 1492 with the aim of establishing a lucrative spice route with Asia and had inadvertently discovered a new continent. From the moment of its discovery, the New World had thrown western assumptions about the nature of the world into disarray. The discovery of the New World had cast considerable doubts on some of the most cherished beliefs of western culture. This was an unfamiliar area of the world that could be conceived of in terms of an otherness of the European in a more thoroughgoing sense than Africa or Asia which, despite having foreign customs, had been known by Europeans since antiquity. Modernist English writers were faced, like the European explorers of the fifteenth century, with similar choices about how to respond to the enigmatic presence of this strange new world. From this broader perspective, the modernist fascination with Latin America and Mexico can be conceived of as a recasting of this much older form of engagement.

These fictional engagements are also associated with the modernist notion of the primitive. In the writing of Conrad and Lawrence there is the underlying assumption that modern western societies tended to suppress powerful human drives and desires. As a corollary to this assumption, Latin America and Mexico were conceived of as enabling locations for the confrontation with supposedly brutal human realities; a revelation of a collective human heart of darkness. With a Darwinian sense of the evolutionary origins of the human species, Conrad and Lawrence viewed this area of the world in the same primitivist terms of Malinowski and Freud who 'sought the universal truth about human nature and conceived of primitive societies as the testing ground, the laboratory, the key to that universal truth'.³ In this sense, Latin America and Mexico are also revealed in modernist British fiction as locations that are equivalent to the European past and as foreign locales where the truth of human nature could be discovered and dramatized for the curiosity of their readers back home. In this sense, at least in imaginative terms, the process of travel is not only a spatial journey but also a temporal one.

³ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), p. 7.

This study is concerned with answering the question of why a number of writers of British fiction from the beginning to the middle of the twentieth century began to take an interest in the unfamiliar landscape and customs of Latin America in a general sense and then Mexico in particular. In an effort to answer this question, the study will focus closely on an individual work from three different modernist authors: Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*, D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent* and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*. With each novel, the approach is divided into two parts. There is an initial chapter which explores the novel from a biographical and contextual perspective. The following chapter then considers the same work as part of a wider cultural and intellectual framework. Given that each author was responding to distinct and unique historical forces, these chapters do not follow the same pattern. However, in the chapters concerned with culture, it has been possible to identify some of the same concerns across these three different authors. The same anxieties and frustrations surface time and again in each of these three novels; concerns which range from representations of the natural world and depictions of cultural otherness to various apprehensions of a new world increasingly ordered according to the imperatives of American finance.

Part I

Joseph Conrad: *Nostromo* (1904)

Chapter I: The Literal and Figurative Representation of Costaguana

In contrast to the two novels that will be explored later in this study – D.H. Lawrence’s *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) and Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* (1947) – Joseph Conrad’s *Nostromo* (1904) is the unmistakable product of the Edwardian age when the British Empire was at the height of its military and economic power. Compared to these later novels – responses in part to the sense of loss that attended the First and Second World Wars, not only in terms of lives but also in terms of values – there is a sense in *Nostromo* of a novel which is written from the more stable centre of an imperial power. And yet, as was noted in the introduction, the Boer War (1899-1902) had already exposed some initial signs of weakness when the British Army struggled to maintain order in the Boer Republics in the face of a debilitating and prolonged guerrilla war. The Italian ambassador Baron Francesco de Renzis reflected on this spectacle of his European ally: “the grandeur of [British] imperialism in fact lacks the support of a large, war-hardened and well-trained army” and added: “the country will perhaps see to it now that it has found out how weak its armour is”.⁴ These types of anxieties were also attended by fears about the health of the British population; something brought home by the fact that nearly half of the army recruits in industrial cities such as Manchester were unsuited to active duty.⁵ Conrad reflected these type of national fears himself when he wryly observed to a friend: ‘I should think Lord Salisbury’s dying nation must be enjoying the fun’.⁶ And, in addition to anxieties over military strength and national health, the British Empire was having to contend, at the same time, with a variety of other threats: from the danger of an ambitious Germany, which had not only increased its share of overseas trade but had embarked on a naval programme around the time of the Boer War,⁷ the advances of the Russian Empire in Persia and the growing

⁴ Quoted in Gilles Ferragu, ‘Italy and the Boer War’, in *The International Impact of the Boer War*, ed. by Keith Wilson (Chesham: Acumen, 2001), p. 103.

⁵ Philip Blom, *The Vertigo Years* (Chatham: Phoenix, 2008), p. 340.

⁶ *Joseph Conrad’s Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham*, ed. by Cedric Watts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 128.

⁷ Feroz Yasamee, ‘Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz and the Boer War’ in *The International Impact of the Boer War*, ed. Wilson, p. 201.

influence of the United States which had recently annexed the Philippines and Cuba after the Spanish-American War of 1898.⁸

In any case, by setting his eleventh novel in Latin America Joseph Conrad was writing against the grain of the majority of English modernist fiction which had tended towards locations in Britain or, at the very least, its colonies. Even before his use of this New World setting, this Polish *émigré*, and former sailor of both the French and British Merchant Marine, had taken the unusual step of introducing Borneo into English literature with *Almayer's Folly* in 1895. When Conrad extended his unfamiliar and distinctive range to include Latin America it might be wondered whether this fictional acquisition enacted a type of pseudo-imperialism at a time when the empire was showing the initial signs of weakness that would lead to its eventual collapse. And yet, the Republic of Costaguana is entirely fictitious. For this reason, any political and biographical study of this modernist novel must contend with why Conrad chose to set *Nostromo* in Latin America; and, why Conrad chose a fictional, as opposed to a real, nation state. An obvious place to start is with the beginning of the novel itself where, as if burdened by what might have seemed the insuperable task of describing the intricate political convulsions of an imaginary revolutionary state, Conrad opens *Nostromo* in a verbose and strained literary style:

In the time of Spanish rule, and for many years afterwards, the town of Sulaco – the luxuriant beauty of the orange gardens bears witness to its antiquity – had never been commercially anything more important than a coasting port with a fairly large local trade in ox-hides and indigo. The clumsy deep-sea galleons of the conquerors that, needing a brisk gale to move at all, would lie becalmed, where your modern ship built on clipper lines forges ahead by the mere flapping of her sails, had been barred out of Sulaco by the prevailing calms of its vast gulf.⁹

In terms of syntax these two sentences are difficult and awkward, making it hard not to stumble on an initial reading. In both, the subject of the sentence is separated from the main verb by a lengthy parenthesis. What is more, the narrative shuttles back and forth uneasily between different historical periods: from the time of Spanish rule to the

⁸ Keith Wilson, 'The Boer War in the Context of Britain's Imperial Problems' in *The International Impact of the Boer War*, ed. Wilson, pp. 160-61.

⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo* (Letchworth: Broadview, 1997), p. 51. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

modern age. It is as if Conrad was impatient to draw these types of comparisons – clearing the way for the later ironic parallels that are drawn between the earlier ‘barbaric’ age and his own age of ‘progressive’ modernity – and forgets the more practical concerns of storytelling in the process. Even so, the character of the narrator is established in these opening sentences: with the mention of the local exports in ox-hides and indigo, as well as the innovations in sailing ships, the narrator emerges as an erudite, well-travelled and sensitive observer. However, for the rest of the opening paragraph a degree of awkwardness remains:

Some harbours of the earth are made difficult of access by the treachery of sunken rocks and the tempests of their shores. Sulaco had found an inviolable sanctuary from the temptations of a trading world in the solemn hush of the deep Golfo Placido as if within an enormous semi-circular and unroofed temple open to the ocean, with its walls of lofty mountains hung with the mourning draperies of cloud.

Though the comparison between Sulaco and other harbours is handled efficiently by its orderly separation into two sentences, the vividness of the passage is threatened by the strange metaphor of the temple: after all, temples are not generally ‘unroofed’ so the vehicle of the metaphor is extremely problematic in terms of its visualisation. What is more, the metaphor loses its main rhetorical function by transforming into a literal description of the natural landscape; the ‘walls of lofty mountains’ which are ‘hung with the mourning draperies of cloud’ do not continue with the metaphor of the temple but instead revert to a factual description of the surrounding mountains and cloud. Curiously, this slippage between a literal and a figurative use of language is suggestive of Costaguana as a whole, which, as will emerge during the course of this chapter, is figured both in terms of a concrete Central or South American state and as a metonym for the forces of global capitalism. In any case, it seems reasonable to assume that the awkwardness of the opening paragraph was the result of some creative trepidation.

At the prospect of tackling the enormous imaginative task of writing *Nostromo*, it is possible that Conrad was unsure of where to begin, or how to contain, in only a few opening sentences, all that he wanted to represent in the novel as a whole. As the 2007 edition of Zdzislaw Najder’s biography makes clear, Conrad’s most ambitious

works were also produced under pressure of spiralling debts and gruelling schedules.¹⁰ *Nostromo*, Conrad's eleventh novel at the age of forty seven, was also more substantial than anything he had worked on before, both in terms of its political scope – it involves a struggle between democracy and dictatorship; between regionalism and federalism – and its social milieu – it portrays an ethnically diverse society formed of Europeans, Indians¹¹ and Africans, in addition to a mixed social class of railway workers, agricultural labourers, land owners, miners, soldiers, merchants, investors and politicians. What is more, with its large number of characters, who are subject to a variety of national and social influences and referred to by a variety of names (the eponymous hero is variously referred to as Nostromo, *Giovanni Battista Fidanza*, and *Capataz de los Cargadores*), it also extends beyond Conrad's other literary achievements in terms of characterisation. Conrad's work on the novel also proceeded in tandem with other writing commitments: proofreading *Romance*, his collaboration with Ford Madox Ford (and set in the Caribbean); writing the sea sketches which later became *The Mirror of the Sea*; and composing an introduction to Maupassant, as well as an article on Anatole France. During this time, Conrad also wrote the unpublished 'A Glance at Two Books', a critical piece on John Galsworthy's *The Island Pharisees* and William Henry Hudson's *Green Mansions*.¹²

On a more personal note, it was also during this time that Conrad's wife, Jessie, injured both her knees during a trip to London, which had a long-term impact on her mobility and health. When Conrad returned home later from London, Najder suggests

¹⁰ Zdzislaw Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Life* (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2007), pp. 306-46.

¹¹ The term 'Indian' originated from the colonial encounter between the Genoese explorer Christopher Columbus and the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Believing that he had found an alternative route to the East Indies, Columbus used the term *indio* (the Spanish term for Indians) to describe the indigenous people whom he encountered and wrote about in his journals. As a broad term for the diverse tribal and ethnic groups that existed before and during the Conquest, the term Indian always gave the misleading impression of the indigenous peoples of the Americas as a single, homogeneous ethnic group. In any case, as a consequence of this usage, the term Indian also became ingrained in the European imagination and was also widely used in modernist literature, including the three authors selected for this study. The term is a constant reminder that the relationship under discussion here is a largely imaginary one which was constituted by the initial colonial encounter and from then on remained entangled with distinctly European modes of thought and expression. For a detailed discussion of the manner in which Columbus refused to identify the discovery of America as a 'New World' see Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: from Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 17-24.

¹² Zdzislaw Najder, pp. 334-39.

of this atmosphere that 'it was akin to entering a domestic infirmary'.¹³ Nevertheless, these circumstances do not seem to account for why Conrad suffered six attacks of gout in an eleven month period during the writing of *Nostromo*, nor why, for nearly half a year after completing the novel, he was unable to get on with any substantial creative work; the only exception being 'Autocracy and War' (1905) which in many ways continued with the same political themes of international relations and the global effects of imperialism, though in a more factual and less creative form. What, then, was the underlying cause of Conrad's illness and distress during the writing of *Nostromo*? The answer to this question is, of course, a matter of speculation but it is worth noting that many of the novel's themes may have resonated with the writer's childhood experiences in Poland.

Among admirers of Conrad, it is a matter of common knowledge that the writer's parents died as a result of their commitment to the cause of national independence: something which finds a distant, and satirical, resonance in the revolutionary aim of the Montero brothers in *Nostromo* with their effort to recapture the silver mine for the good of their country rather than the benefit of the foreign powers of Britain and America. Conrad's father, Apollo Korzeniowski, had campaigned for Polish independence in a similar fashion; a political commitment which eventually resulted in his arrest and exile. During this period of exile, Apollo learnt of the failure of the Polish uprising and the increasingly helpless cause of its quest for independence. Making matters worse, both Conrad's parents were burdened by a long period of illness; something which was compounded by an absence of proper medical care and a perennial lack of money. Following her exile, Conrad's mother Ewa suffered from long bouts of consumption and eventually died as a result of these complications in 1865. Shortly afterwards, Apollo became ill himself with tuberculosis and died four years later, leaving Conrad an orphan at the age of twelve.¹⁴ For these reasons, the Latin American struggle for political and economic legitimacy might well have struck Conrad as a distorted reflection of the political turmoil and personal disaster that he had experienced as a young child. This early childhood experience of a failed political ideal

¹³ Zdzisław Najder, p. 342.

¹⁴ Zdzisław Najder, pp. 22-26.

might also account for the world-weary tone of resignation that forms an integral part of the often dispiriting vision of *Nostramo*.

In any case, whatever the cause of these early signs of awkwardness and uncertainty at the beginning of *Nostramo*, Conrad goes on to reveal an extremely vivid sense of place. Following the initial summary of Sulaco's role as a local trading port, the narrative moves onto a geographical description of the town where its gulf is located on the seaboard of the Republic of Costaguana. Then, after an anecdote about the mythical hidden treasure of the peninsula setting (which has a thematic importance that will be discussed in terms of the novel's representation of capitalism in the next chapter of this study), there is this descriptive passage with its stunning evocation of place:

On crossing the imaginary line drawn from Punta Mala to Azuera the ships from Europe bound to Sulaco lose at once the strong breezes of the ocean. They become the prey of capricious airs that play with them for thirty hours at a stretch sometimes. Before them the head of the calm gulf is filled on most days of the year by a great body of motionless and opaque clouds. On the rare clear mornings another shadow is cast upon the sweep of the gulf. The dawn breaks high behind the towering and serrated wall of the Cordillera, a clear-cut vision of dark peaks rearing their steep slopes on a lofty pedestal of forest rising from the very edge of the shore. Amongst them the white head of Higuerota rises majestically upon the blue. Bare clusters of enormous rocks sprinkle with tiny black dots the smooth dome of snow.

(p. 53)

This passage is remarkable not only for its rendering of landscape and setting but for its convincing portrayal of local beliefs and attitudes. The narrative here centres on a concrete description of the gulf and surrounding landscape, which is entirely visual in its sensory appeal. The contiguous movement from the description of the gulf's cloud cover to the effect of shadow and then to the mention of the mountain range is written in the descriptive style of a travelogue, with each successive detail conveying additional information about the setting. And, the repetitive use of the present tense ('The dawn *breaks*', the 'enormous rocks *sprinkle* [...] the smooth dome of snow' [my italics]) has the effect of making the process of visualising these images more speedy and immediate. Only the liberal use of adjectives ('the *towering* and *serrated* wall of the

Cordillera', 'a *clear-cut* vision of *dark* peaks') is in excess of this straightforward, but evocative, pictorial style. This powerful evocation of place continues:

Then, as the midday sun withdraws from the gulf the shadow of the mountains, the clouds begin to roll out of the lower valleys. They swathe in sombre tatters the naked crags of precipices above the wooded slopes, hide the peaks, smoke in stormy trails across the snows of Higuerota. The Cordillera is gone from you as if it had dissolved itself into great piles of grey and black vapours that travel out slowly to seaward and vanish into thin air all along the front before the blazing heat of the day. The wasting edge of the cloud-bank always strives for, but seldom wins, the middle of the gulf. The sun – as the sailors say – is eating it up. Unless perchance a sombre thunderhead breaks away from the main body to career all over the gulf till it escapes into the offing beyond Azuera, where it bursts suddenly into flame and crashes like a sinister pirate-ship of the air, hove-to above the horizon, engaging the sea.

At night the body of clouds advancing higher up the sky smothers the whole quiet gulf below with an impenetrable darkness, in which the sound of the falling showers can be heard beginning and ceasing abruptly – now here, now there. Indeed, these cloudy nights are proverbial with the seamen along the whole west coast of a great continent. Sky, land, and sea disappear together out of the world when the Placido – as the saying is – goes to sleep under its black poncho. The few stars left below the seaward frown of the vault shine feebly as into the mouth of a black cavern. In its vastness your ship floats unseen under your feet, her sails flutter invisible above your head. The eye of God Himself – they add with grim profanity – could not find out what work a man's hand is doing in there; and you would be free to call the devil to your aid with impunity if even his malice were not defeated by such a blind darkness.

At this point, Conrad turns from the visual to the auditory, making this descriptive passage all the more vivid by broadening its sensory range. In the next paragraph: 'a sombre thunderhead breaks away from the main body to career all over the gulf till it escapes into the offing beyond Azuera, where it bursts suddenly into flame and crashes like a sinister pirate-ship of the air, hove-to above the horizon, engaging the sea.' The verbal 'bursts' and 'crashes' is suggestive of the effect of thunder itself as the strong stresses are forceful and onomatopoeic while the metaphor of the pirate ship makes this acoustic effect almost tangible. This auditory technique is continued in what follows: 'At night the body of clouds advancing higher up the sky smothers the whole quiet gulf below with an impenetrable darkness, in which the sound of the falling showers can be heard beginning and ceasing abruptly – now here, now there.' In this way, the description of the distinctive darkness of the local microclimate is followed by

a caesura and two rhyming iambs, which has the effect of mimicking the sound of the irregular rainfall. Of further interest is the revelation that these nights of extreme darkness 'are proverbial with the seamen'. In this way, the narrator consolidates his familiarity with local knowledge by deploying the culturally specific metaphor of the 'black poncho' to describe this effect.

At first, this type of metaphor, as well as these vivid descriptions of the gulf, might suggest that Conrad had a great wealth of personal experiences in this part of the world. However, somewhat surprisingly, Conrad's personal experience of Latin America was limited and brief. Najder's biography provides details of Conrad's early voyages when these fleeting visits to Central and South America were made. Indeed, Najder recounts how from Marseille, as a young man, Conrad sailed twice to Saint-Pierre aboard the *Mont-Blanc*, firstly as a passenger, when he arrived on 6 February 1875, and secondly as an apprentice, when he arrived on 31 July of the same year. Of the first voyage, Najder comments: 'We do not know where [Conrad] spent the time of over seven weeks the barque remained in port...it is possible that instead of staying put, the young man undertook some independent travelling in the Caribbean.'¹⁵ Nevertheless, Najder conjectures that Conrad may have had his glimpse of Columbia and Venezuela at this time; two countries that may have served Conrad as a source of inspiration for his later creation of Costaguana. Details about the two months that the *Mont-Blanc* spent at Saint-Pierre on Conrad's second voyage are also mysterious. However, what is known is that Conrad's third voyage aboard the *Saint-Antoine*, while he again disembarked at Saint-Pierre, took him to St Thomas, Haiti and Port-au-Prince.¹⁶ According to Najder's account, then, and also the writer's own (to his close friend and confidant Cunninghame Graham, Conrad wrote: 'I just had a glimpse 25 years ago'¹⁷), Conrad's personal experience of Latin America amounted only to a handful of experiences over a few days during his youth. How was it, then, that Conrad was able to evoke such a vivid sense of place about an area of the world relatively unknown to him?

¹⁵ Zdzislaw Najder, p. 50.

¹⁶ Zdzislaw Najder, p. 55.

¹⁷ *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham*, ed. by Cedric Watts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p.145.

The answer to this question is that, more than any other of his other novels, *Nostromo* involved an extensive period of research. To take just one example, Cedric Watts has demonstrated how the descriptions of Sulaco's harbour are indebted to Eastwick's account of Puerto Calbello in *Venezuela*.¹⁸ And, this is only a small portion of the overall imaginary effort involved in the creation of Costaguana. After all, Conrad's novel is not only remarkable for its visual rendering of a Latin American harbour town, but much more so for its rich evocation of late-nineteenth century Latin American political and economic turmoil. In this respect, Conrad's sources for the novel are known to have included Ramón Paez's *Wild Scenes in South America* (1862), Masterman's *Seven Eventful Years in Paraguay* (1869) and Richard Burton's *Letters from the Battle-Fields of Paraguay* (1870).¹⁹ From these nineteenth-century studies, Conrad obtained information on local terms and customs, details on specific countries and regimes in addition to a variety of colourful anecdotes, all of which are seamlessly incorporated into *Nostromo*. Mindful of the disparate and scattered nature of this research, Conrad himself referred to *Nostromo* as 'an achievement in mosaic'.²⁰

In addition, it is also worth acknowledging here that *Nostromo* started out as a Mediterranean novel and only later transferred to Central or South America. In November of 1902 Conrad began writing with this new location in mind, though he assumed that it would be a short story, similar to the length of 'Karain'.²¹ What was it that prompted Conrad to shift the location of the novel and begin the most ambitious project of his literary career? As a close friend of Conrad's, who had frequent meetings and discussions with the writer for five years before the publication of *Nostromo*, Cunninghame Graham was a source of inspiration for the social and political themes of the novel and also the explanation for this change of location.²² Conrad's friendship with this unusual man – a Scottish aristocrat turned Latin American cattle-dealer turned English parliamentarian – began a few years before the composition of *Nostromo* in August 1897 after Graham wrote Conrad a letter expressing his enthusiasm for 'An Outpost of Progress' which had impressed Graham for its

¹⁸ Cedric Watts, *Nostromo* (London: Everyman, 1995), p. 418.

¹⁹ Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Conrad* (London: Longman, 1993), p. 146.

²⁰ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, 9 vols, ed. Frederick R. Karl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), VI, p. 231.

²¹ Zdzisław Najder, *Joseph Conrad*, p. 326.

²² *Joseph Conrad's Letters to Graham*, ed. by Cedric Watts, p. 37.

thoughtful and penetrating meditations on the subject of imperialism.²³ The exchange of letters that followed soon developed into a friendship with Graham's extensive experiences in Latin America proving an object of real fascination for Conrad. Graham had travelled in Central and South America between 1869 and 1884 in an effort to begin a career as a cattle trader.²⁴ During this time, Graham also became involved in the revolutionary struggles of Argentina and Paraguay, where he allegedly witnessed the brutality of rule under the dictator Lopez.²⁵ Afterwards, Graham wrote a variety of works related to these experiences: two travel books, seven histories and a number of biographies on some of the continent's more colourful political figures.²⁶

Of course, Graham's experiences of Central and South America were of great interest to Conrad as he struggled to envisage an imaginary country with its richly textured social and political themes. As Watts has shown through his analysis of his letters, Conrad was very much aware of Graham's knowledge and experience of Latin America.²⁷ The two men also had a similar political outlook: both Conrad and Graham held a critical view of a modern world dominated by the concerns of financial interests. In this way, some of the novel's comparisons between the Spanish conquistadors and American capitalism may have been suggested by Graham who wrote about this theme in his own works. Graham also published scathing news articles in the *Saturday Review* on the growth of American power and influence in the region.²⁸ In this way, Conrad's friendship with Graham provides some explanation for Conrad's interest in using Latin America as a setting.

In a more general sense, however, Conrad's interest in Latin America can also be seen as a development from his earlier interest in 'exotic' locations, which started at the beginning of his literary career with the coast of Borneo in *Almayer's Folly*. In this respect, there were two main advantages to using Latin America as a setting: it allowed Conrad to vent his anger at colonialism, in the form of the Spanish conquistadors, and his despair at 'material interests', in the form of American capitalism. In other words, by using this unfamiliar setting Conrad could engage in a more indirect form of political

²³ *Joseph Conrad's Letters to Graham*, ed. by Cedric Watts, pp. 20-21.

²⁴ *Joseph Conrad's Letters to Graham*, ed. by Cedric Watts, p. 9.

²⁵ Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Conrad*, p. 145.

²⁶ *Joseph Conrad's Letters to Graham*, ed. by Cedric Watts, pp. 28-29.

²⁷ *Joseph Conrad's Letters to Graham*, ed. by Cedric Watts, p. 37.

²⁸ *Joseph Conrad's Letters to Graham*, ed. by Cedric Watts, p.39.

criticism without fear of alienating the British publishing houses or his British readership. In its mixture of social classes, political ideas, and ethnic groups, Latin America also enabled Conrad to represent his complex understanding of the inter-relatedness of these themes while remaining within a single, fascinating and compelling location.

In addition to the influence of Graham, there was one extremely important topical event that may have provided Conrad with some additional motivation: the secession of Panama from Columbia in November 1903. This was a political deal that had allowed the United States to fulfil its long-standing ambition of controlling an isthmian canal between the Pacific and Atlantic Ocean, something which is forcefully echoed in the theme of Sulaco's secession from the Republic of Costaguana – a scheme which is also backed by Holroyd's American dollars and 'the United States cruiser, *Powhattan*' (p. 435). The secession of Panama was a political event that resonated with Conrad's sense of an important historical shift that was taking place in the beginning of the twentieth century: a moment when the world which had been dominated by the colonial European powers for more than five hundred years was slowly giving way to a new world in which global trade was subordinated to the American dollar.



Steam and Silver: a United States Cruiser Sails Down the Panama Canal.

The Literal Interpretation of Costaguana: the Panamanian Secession

The secession of Panama was a political event which presaged a new kind of American imperialism under the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. Of this president, Conrad would later remark: 'The truth is that the ex-autocrat of all the States does not like rebels against the sullen order of the universe. Make the best of it or perish – he cries.'²⁹ And, as evidence that the Panamanian secession was on Conrad's mind at the time of writing *Nostromo*, there is his derisive commentary in one of his many letters to Graham. Echoing a characteristic strategy of *Nostromo*, Conrad compares American capitalism with Spanish colonialism: 'What do you think of the Yankee Conquistadors in Panama? Pretty, isn't it?'.³⁰

In contrast to Conrad and Graham, the British press was generally sympathetic towards this American intervention. After all, *The Times* newspaper called the American military presence in support of Panamanian independence 'studiously correct'.³¹ A few days later, the same newspaper also acknowledged that this political event portended a new form of American imperialism, but showed no signs of criticism, much less alarm: 'the Isthmus will be, as our Correspondent has pointed out, henceforth in all essentials under her protectorate. It will be interesting to watch the influence of this fact upon American imperialism, and to see whether it will insensibly draw the United States into relations of fuller responsibility not merely towards Central but towards South America'.³² This was only a small part of a wider debate on the subject of Latin American politics that was taking place in the British press at this time. During the month of the Panamanian secession (November, 1903), *The Times* published no fewer than forty three news articles and three editorials on the subject of this Latin American country.

As a consequence of this extensive newspaper coverage, the reading public of Conrad's time would have been more aware of the events that lay behind the writing of *Nostromo*: very much more aware than the majority of Conrad's readers are now. Furthermore, as well as revealing how natural and reasonable imperialism could seem

²⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* (Teddington: The Echo Library, 2008), p. 38.

³⁰ *Joseph Conrad's Letters to Graham*, ed. by Cedric Watts, p. 149.

³¹ 'A revolution against the Columbian Government', *The Times*, 5 November 1903, p. 7.

³² 'Affairs in Panama' *The Times*, 10 November 1903, p. 9.

at the turn of the century, this type of coverage also demonstrates how unusual Conrad's own views actually were. Conrad was surrounded by friends and acquaintances who held a similarly dim view of these 'Yankee Conquistadors'. Through Graham, Conrad was also in contact with Santiago Perez Triana: the ambassador of Columbia to London and Madrid, and the son of a former Columbian president (Santiago Pérez de Manosalbas who governed the country from 1874 to 1876).³³ Not surprisingly perhaps given his nationality, Triana was deeply affronted by the intervention of the United States in Panama which had incited rebellion in Panama and supported this coup with its own marines. In fact, Triana wrote the chapter on 'The Republics of Latin America' in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, where he stated with indignation that 'the high-handed policy of the United States with reference to Columbia sent a thrill of painful surprise throughout Spanish America'.³⁴

What, though, were the origins of the American interest in Columbia and Panama? In addition to securing easy access for the American navy between the Atlantic and Pacific, the building of a canal route was extremely advantageous to commerce. In an age when steamships dominated commercial activity, it presented the opportunity for more rapid international trade because it would allow a route of transit between the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean.³⁵ In addition, the United States also wanted to extend its power and influence; something which had been revealed as early as 1823 when President Monroe proposed a reciprocal Pan-American system founded on the principles of freedom and liberal economics.³⁶ Nevertheless, for almost a century, the United States had been restrained from acting in this capacity because of the comparative strength and influence of the European powers in the western hemisphere. When, after a prolonged period of negotiation, Panama proclaimed its independence from Columbia in 3 November 1903 this situation had finally begun to

³³ *Joseph Conrad's Letters to Graham*, ed. by Cedric Watts, p.40.

³⁴ Santiago Perez Triana, 'The Republics of Latin America' in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, Volume XII (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 698.

³⁵ Robert Freeman Smith, 'Latin America, The United States and the European Powers, 1830-1930' in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, Volume IV (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.86.

³⁶ Robert Freeman Smith, p.85.

change.³⁷ After a period of fifty years, Europe was beginning to accept the increased role of the United States in the western hemisphere.

However, despite its strong relevance to the story of *Nostromo*, the historical parallels between Panama and Sulaco are not without their pitfalls. After all, the movement towards Sulaco's independence is motivated by its silver reserves rather than the strategic importance of an isthmian canal. And, of course, if Conrad had intended Sulaco to be identical to Panama there would be no reason for inventing a fictional place name. What is more, it is the native-born, French-educated Martin Decoud, not the American Holroyd, who devises the plan of Sulaco's secession, which he describes in this clandestine, and mock-heroic, way: 'late at night we formed a small junta of four – the two women, Don Carlos, and myself – in Mrs Gould's blue-and-white boudoir [...] 'and here, in this boudoir,' [Decoud] said, 'you behold the inner cabinet of the Occidental Republic that is to be.' Nevertheless, Decoud speaks of the necessary help of Holroyd, who is motivated by 'a missionary zeal to [introduce], not only justice, industry, peace, to the benighted continents, but also that pet dream of his of a purer form of Christianity' (p. 241).

More importantly, in the events that follow this fictional secession, Conrad also finds a means of voicing his criticism of this new form of American imperialism. The repercussions of this event take central stage when the narrative turns to the device of using Mitchell's pompous retrospective account of these 'historical events'. It is during his narrative that the intervention by the American navy is mentioned, which puts an end to the Sulaco-Costaguana war, and strongly indicates the historical parallel of the American warships which ensured the success of the Panamanian secession. As the narrative moves forward in time to the changes of separation, and discusses the material changes brought by mining and trade, there is also mention of 'Holroyd's missionaries', which indicates the religious motivation that underpins this American-style capitalism. More significantly, the idea of reunification is also sounded: refugees from Sta Marta have come to Sulaco and hold audiences with Father Corbelan and Antonia Avellanos concerning the possibility of Costaguana invading Sulaco. There is also mention of Nostromo taking part while Hernandez is also considered as a

³⁷ Santiago Perez Triana, 'The Republics of Latin America' in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, p. 699.

possibility for heading this latest military effort ‘with the new cry of wealth for the people’ (p. 454). At this point, the misanthropic Doctor Monygham seems to reveal the author’s own interpretation of these events when he identifies the influence of material interests as the principal source of instability and corruption:

‘No!’ interrupted the doctor. ‘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.’

(p. 454)



Central America: Reproduction of a Map from 1904.

Costaguana and Latin America

As already mentioned, the theme of Sulaco’s secession from Costaguana points to the historical secession of Panama from Columbia. In this respect, it is worth noting that there are also some passing similarities not only between Panama and Sulaco but between the fictional Costaguana and the historical Columbia. Both countries, the

fictional and the historical, gained their independence only to find themselves plunged into a drawn out political struggle. In the case of Columbia, this came in the form of a series of conflicts between Centralists and Federalists who contended for power in no fewer than eight civil wars during the course of the nineteenth century;³⁸ something which recalls Conrad's description of Costaguana as 'the hotbed of corrupt revolutions' (p. 179). Both also suffered from weak constitutions which were susceptible to military coup at the slightest sign that such a move might be buttressed by popular support – for Costaguana, of course, this uprising comes in the form of the Montero brothers who exploit the popular resentment of the foreign interests which hold their country to ransom. In particular, the Montero uprising might suggest the contemporaneous historical parallel of Columbia's civil war, the War of a Thousand Days' (1899-1902), which raged between the Conservative and Liberal factions of the country.³⁹ And yet, there are problems with this interpretation.

After all, the roots of civil war in Columbia were related to a long-standing religious dispute concerning the position of the Catholic Church: between Liberals who pursued a policy of decentralisation and anti-clericism and Conservatives who clamoured for a strong centralised state supported by the institution of the Church.⁴⁰ Although the origin of Costaguana's civil war is rooted in the centralist drive of the Montero brothers, their greedy desire to secure the prosperity of the Gould Concession lies at the heart of their plan rather than a concern for the status of the Church. Superficially, the cruel dictator of Costaguana Guzman Bento might also suggest the figure of Columbia's Rafael Núñez who ruled Colombia throughout the late nineteenth century and outlawed any form of political opposition while also restricting the freedom of the press.⁴¹ For Watts, however, the fictional dictator of Guzman Bento has been seen to have strong similarities to the Paraguayan dictator Francisco Solano López whom Conrad had read about in Masterman's *Seven Eventful Years in Paraguay*.⁴²

In this sense, the central problem for an entirely literal form of interpretation is that *Nostromo* details a political struggle which is broadly similar to the conflict that

³⁸ Grace Livingstone, *Inside Columbia: Drugs, Democracy and War* (London: Latin American Bureau, 2003), p. 62.

³⁹ W. O. Galbraith, *Columbia: A General Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 15.

⁴⁰ W. O. Galbraith, p. 14.

⁴¹ P. M. Holt, *Columbia Today – and Tomorrow* (London: Pall Mall, 1964), p. 30.

⁴² Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Conrad*, p. 146.

most Central and South American republics experienced after gaining independence from Spain. Rather than being identical to Columbia, then, or any other Latin American state, Costaguana is perhaps best considered as a melting pot for the events, ideas, personalities and place names of the entirety of Latin America.⁴³ Unusually for a writer who tended to obscure rather than clarify his artistic intentions, Conrad offered this type of guidance himself when he claimed, in another letter to Graham of 31 October 1904, that 'Costaguana is meant for a S. Amcan state in general'.⁴⁴ These difficulties in tracing precise historical parallels can be removed by following the advice of the critic Albert J. Guerard who argued along similar lines that 'in its absurd rhythm of exploitation and misrule, of revolution and counterrevolution, Costaguana may evoke almost any South or Central American republic' and added 'the force of deception and self-deception are the same as those at work anywhere'.⁴⁵

With this comment, however, Guerard also reveals a similar prejudice to Conrad himself who portrays the revolutions of Latin America in the absurdist terms of a political farce; a 'nightmarish parody of administration without law, without security, and without justice' (p. 120). By contrast, more recent Latin American historiography has revealed how the overthrow of imperial Spanish rule at the beginning of the nineteenth century was associated with a crisis of political legitimacy in many Latin American post-independent movements.⁴⁶ Many Latin American countries had achieved a sudden political transition from monarchism to republicanism but there had been no 'comparable revolution in the economy or in society'.⁴⁷ In this precarious context of transition, the ruling creole oligarchs had struggled to find a political solution that might bind their countries together in a united cause. With the loss of

⁴³ In a related sense, Cedric Watts has indicated a variety of similarities between Costaguana and a range of Latin American countries in terms of geography. Specifically, Watts has located the town of Sulaco on the Pacific seaboard between Ecuador and Columbia while also pointing out that there is a town with the real place name of Sulaco in Honduras. Watts has also explained that the descriptions of Sulaco's harbour are indebted to Eastwick's account of Puerto Calbello in Venezuela. In addition, for Watts, the country of Costaguana is seen to possess a number of geographical similarities with Columbia: specifically its large size, its mountain range, and its Caribbean and Pacific seabords. Again, these geographical parallels indicate the extent to which Conrad's portrayal of Costaguana drew on broad range of references an entire continent in a haphazard and unsystematic fashion. Cedric Watts, *Nostromo*, pp. 418-19.

⁴⁴ *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham*, ed. by Cedric Watts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 157.

⁴⁵ Albert Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 178.

⁴⁶ Edwin Williamson, *The Penguin History of Latin America* (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 233-247.

⁴⁷ Edwin Williamson, p. 233.

colonial Spanish authority, the patriarchal, feudal order lost its means of self-justification in the ultimate form of authority in the figure of the Spanish monarch.

And, while the realisation of independence had suddenly allowed the creole elite the opportunity to govern for themselves without the supervision of a colonial power, they were far from being ideologically unified. Broadly, the creoles were divided between conservatives who wanted to protect the traditional interests of the Church and the landed gentry and liberals who embraced the idea of democratic institutions, free trade and industrial development. In addition, in these turbulent political contexts, liberalism, with its tenets of fairness and free elections, often proved insufficient in managing these divided societies of mixed loyalties. This is the reason perhaps why there was a general tendency towards contradiction among nineteenth-century liberal reformers: in terms of rhetoric, revolutionary leaders were sympathetic to political liberalism and spoke in favour of representative government while, in reality, they often imposed their reforms in a brutal form of governance which resembled various forms of dictatorship.⁴⁸

Concomitantly, this absence of political legitimacy also witnessed the rise of political mercenaries known as *caudillos*; charismatic leaders who gained power and influence through military ability and political resourcefulness.⁴⁹ Owing to centuries of feudalism under Spanish rule, which encouraged a vast system of protection, favours and patronage, these *caudillos* struck up beneficial relationships with the creole elites. These types of individuals are reflected in *Nostromo* with characters such as General Montero whose rise to power is described in the terms of military opportunism and political bargaining:

General Montero, whom the beginning of the struggle had found an obscure army captain employed on the wild eastern frontier of the State, had thrown in his lot with the Ribiera party at a moment when special circumstances had given that small adhesion a fortuitous importance. The fortunes of war served him marvellously, and the victory of Rio Seco (after a day of desperate fighting) put a seal to his success. At the end he emerged General, Minister of War, and the military head of the Blanco party.

(p. 80)

⁴⁸ Edwin Williamson, p. 236.

⁴⁹ Edwin Williamson, pp. 237-39.

Here, the narrator attributes the success of General Montero to his opportunistic alignment with Ribiera: a career move that sees him rapidly transform from an obscure 'army captain' into the 'Minister of War' when Ribiera assumes the later political office of dictator. As such, and in keeping with his satirical portrait of Latin America, Conrad portrays this promotion more in terms of good fortune than political skill. General Montero's rapidly growing status has been achieved in a context where minor military successes yield disproportionate rewards. However, this type of promotion also conceals a more subtle ethnographic point. As someone of mixed Indian and African ancestry, General Montero is part of a Latin American underclass whose chances of success depended on gaining favour from the powerful creole elites, something which is indicated here in this passage with the reference to 'the Blanco party'. This type of opportunism is likewise reflected in the character of the former bandit chief, Hernández, who recasts himself towards the end of the novel as another in a long line of *caudillos* with his ambition of rousing "the country with the new cry of wealth for the people" (p. 454).

For now, it might also be noted that, with its rich portrayal of a Latin American republic, *Nostromo* is also filled with cultural references which are specific to this area of the world. As a means of indicating the range of these terms, it will be helpful to list some of these here. Firstly, and most memorably, the novel makes frequent use of Spanish vocabulary to describe the landscape of Coastaguana; among these terms are the *campo* (prairie), the *cordillera* (mountain range), the *llanos* (plains), the *mesa* (plateau), the *palmeral* (palm grove), the *paramo* (upland plain), the *quebrada* (gorge) and the *sierra* (mountain range). Similarly, there are also numerous references to the buildings that occupy this landscape, such as the *barracoon* (barn), the *cabildo* (municipal offices), the *calabozo* (prison), the *cancilleria* (chancellery), the *casa* (mansion), the *colegio* (college), the *comandancia* (headquarters), the *fundacion* (establishment), the *Intendencia* (Town Hall), the *mirador* (watch-tower), the *posada* or *pulperia* (inn) and the *rancho* (hut). There are even references to items of food and drink that are only found in Latin America, such as *asado* (a type of broiled meat), *cana* (a type of rum) and *maté* (a type of Paraguayan tea).

And, when a character's profession is mentioned, it is often provided in Spanish. In addition to the description of central characters such as Charles Gould as the

administrador (administrator) – or the more colourful *El Rey de Sulaco* (the King of Sulaco) – there are references to many other professions in the novel, such as the *caballeros* (horsemen), *cargadores* (dockers), *ladrons* (brigand), *lanceros* (lancer), *llaneros* (plainsman), *matreros* (outlaws), *mayorals* (foremen), *mozos* (manservants), *peons* (unskilled labourers), *policias* (policemen), *salteadors* (highwaymen), *serenos* (watchmen) and *vaqueros* (herdsmen). The culture and identity of Latin America also comes across in the local phrases and expressions that are interspersed throughout the narrative. Among these are *bueno* (good), *adios* (goodbye), *caramba* (damn it), *cielo* (heavens), *Madre de Dios* (Mother of God), *muy bien* (very well), *muy valiente* (very brave), *que picardia!* (what a bad trick), *quien sabe* (who knows). Local terms and phrases are also used to describe certain character attributes; adjectives such as *loco* (crazy), *paralíticos* (paralytics), *bribon* (rogue), *lepero* (wretched person) and *tramposo* (swindler) are used liberally throughout *Nostromo*.⁵⁰

There is a broader point to make here about the inclusion of so many foreign terms and phrases in an ‘English’ novel. After all, this technique is not only stylistic but produces a kind of lexical disturbance in *Nostromo* where the English language is represented as one form of signifying practice among many others. In addition, the reader is also reminded that Spanish as well as English can also be the language of the colonialist. In its challenge both to the provincialism of the English novel as well as the naturalness of British hegemony, this kind of stylistic rupture is mirrored in the unfamiliar social and political context of the Latin American setting. In addition, Conrad also describes another form of disturbance in *Nostromo* which is a reflection of a context that reveals the rise of a global market in which Britain was increasingly having to accommodate itself to the realities of American business in the western hemisphere.

The Metonymic Interpretation of Costaguana: the United States and the Global Market

“The Costaguana Government shall play its hand for all it’s worth—and don't you forget it, Mr. Gould. Now, what is Costaguana? It is the bottomless pit of 10 per cent. loans and other fool investments. European capital has been flung into it with both hands for years. Not ours, though. We in this country know just

⁵⁰ For a comprehensive glossary of these terms see Cedric Watts, *Nostromo* (London: Everyman, 1995), pp. 441-45.

about enough to keep indoors when it rains. We can sit and watch. Of course, some day we shall step in. We are bound to. But there's no hurry. Time itself has got to wait on the greatest country in the whole of God's Universe. We shall be giving the word for everything: industry, trade, law, journalism, art, politics, and religion, from Cape Horn clear over to Smith's Sound, and beyond, too, if anything worth taking hold of turns up at the North Pole. And then we shall have the leisure to take in hand the outlying islands and continents of the earth. We shall run the world's business whether the world likes it or not. The world can't help it—and neither can we, I guess.”

(p. 111)

Firstly, this self-confident speech on the theme of American power by the San Franciscan financier of the San Tomé mine reveals a bold vision of the future where the world will one day be ruled by the business interests of the United States. And yet, Holroyd's prophetic words also reveal the strategy of postponement. At the moment of making this speech, the United States is readying itself before this dawning of a new world, poised between the concerns of domestic security and foreign adventurism: of choosing to remain 'indoors' or of daring to 'step in'. In this sense, the sentiment of Holroyd's speech reflects the central tenet of the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 which stipulated that the United States would no longer tolerate European interventions in Central and South America. However, with his sense that this time has not yet arrived, Holroyd also indicates a certain reluctance to follow through on the practical implications of this doctrine. Although the United States no longer wished to tolerate the presence of the European powers in Central and South American it had been constrained in acting in this capacity for almost a century.

For these reasons, the military and diplomatic involvement of the United States in the secession of Panama, of which the secession of Sulaco from Costaguana in *Nostromo* is a reflection, must be seen in the historical context of the United States' growing involvement in international affairs, especially its interest in Central and South America during the course of the nineteenth century. As Robert Freeman Smith has argued: 'Americans in the late nineteenth century became increasingly convinced that their export trade was threatened by the new imperial world order' and as a consequence: 'a growing number of influential citizens and political leaders were coming to the conclusion that the nation would have to reorient its foreign policies to meet the changing world conditions and effectively confront the challenges posed by

imperial rivalries'.⁵¹ As a consequence of this reorientation, North America had begun to challenge Britain in terms of its injection of capital in Central America near the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵² In this sense, *Nostromo* captures its author's sense of a modern world which was at the turning point when the imperatives of European colonialism would soon be overtaken by the mechanisms of American finance.

Secondly, the identity of his interlocutor also reveals something important about this shift in global power relations. Holroyd is addressing a native Costaguanera of English descent: or, as Holroyd himself explains, "one of the Costaguana Goulds, pure-bred Englishmen [...] all born in the country" (p. 113)). This displacement and complication of Englishness, where it becomes a hybrid form of identity that is retained abroad but traversed by a form of cultural syncretism, reveals a type of disturbance which mirrors the novel's comparable treatment of the English language. In any case, this conversation between the two businessmen takes place after the industrialist and owner of the San Tomé mine, Charles Gould, travels to the United States in order to arrange financial backing for the re-opening of the silver mine; an asset that he has inherited from his deceased father. Although Holroyd's investment in the Gould concession is seen as something of an eccentricity by the younger clerks in his office, the narrator puts forward the views of older office workers who view this investment as nothing less than the first step in a new form of imperialism: 'others, elderly and insignificant, but full of romantic reverence for the business that had devoured their best years, used to mutter darkly and knowingly that this was a portentous sign; that the Holroyd connection meant by-and-by to get hold of the whole Republic of Costaguana, lock, stock, and barrel' (p. 114). In this way, Conrad reveals the details of a financial arrangement where a business enterprise in Latin America is beholden to American rather than British finance: the 'stream of silver must be kept flowing north to return in the form of financial backing from the great house of Holroyd' (p. 225). As such, the details of the re-opening of the San Tome mine reveals the transition that was taking place in the western hemisphere where the flow of

⁵¹ Robert Freeman Smith, p.89.

⁵² Edwin Williamson, p. 281.

American capital had greatly increased and would soon eclipse that of the European powers.

What is more, the shadowy presence of Holroyd in *Nostromo* is often figured by Conrad less in terms of a human character and more in terms of a metonym for the United States:

Thus spoke the considerable personage, the millionaire endower of churches on a scale befitting the greatness of his native land—the same to whom the doctors used the language of horrid and veiled menaces. He was a big-limbed, deliberate man, whose quiet burliness lent to an ample silk-faced frock-coat a superfine dignity. His hair was iron grey, his eyebrows were still black, and his massive profile was the profile of a Caesar's head on an old Roman coin. But his parentage was German and Scotch and English, with remote strains of Danish and French blood, giving him the temperament of a Puritan and an insatiable imagination of conquest.

(p. 110)

Here, the narrator's description of Holroyd's physical appearance, as well as the attributes of his character, indicate something about the United States as a whole. With his mixed European heritage, which gives Holroyd the temperament of a Puritan, from Germany, Scotland and England, along with an insatiable desire for conquest, from Denmark and France, Holroyd's character is suggestive of the divided identity of the United States itself where moral puritanism is complicated by an ambitious frontier spirit. Furthermore, when Holroyd's profile is compared to 'a Caesar's head on an old Roman coin' Conrad seems to suggest that the modern world is about to be introduced to a new form of empire: one that is every bit as intimidating as Ancient Rome but one that will also be defined squarely in terms of finance and business. The references to Holroyd as 'big-limbed' and his profile as 'massive' also suggest a sense of America as a fearsome presence; something which is revealed again a few pages later with the reference to Holroyd as a 'great man, massive and benignant' (p. 112).

Thirdly, Holroyd's speech also reveals an important cultural strain in the emergence of the United States as a powerful presence in the western hemisphere at the end of the nineteenth century; something which can be seen in his judgement that 'time itself has got to wait on the greatest country in the whole of God's Universe'. This issue of faith, and the broad distinction between Protestantism and Catholicism, plays an

important role in the novel. After all, for Holroyd the financial success of the silver mine is interwoven with the spread of a 'purer form of Christianity'. This is also something that the politically astute Decoud identifies in his notebook when he writes: "as long as the treasure flowed north, without a break, that utter sentimentalist, Holroyd, would not drop his idea of introducing, not only justice, industry, peace, to the benighted continents, but also that pet dream of his of a purer form of Christianity" (p. 241).

This theme has a much wider significance for a novel which sets the Catholicism of Latin American against the Protestantism of the United States. The competition between the widespread Catholic practices among the Amerindians, along with its supporting social framework of peasantry and landowners, is set against this new form of American business and puritanism. In this way, the narrative of *Nostromo* describes the absorption of an isolated trading province into the global capitalist economy. Sulaco's small economy, based on the modest export market of ox-hides and indigo, is transformed when its silver mine and mineral reserves are brought into a transatlantic trading network under English management and American finance. The agricultural and ecclesiastical past is superseded by the modern, puritanical capitalist present in a form of analysis that gestures towards a kind of Weberian logic where there is a close relationship between religious culture and economic practice. While Spanish colonialism could never extend to such remote areas as Saluco, the implication is that modern American capitalism can now extend anywhere and everywhere.

Lastly, as a further indication of the scope of these rivalries between the United States and the European powers at the time of Conrad's *Nostromo*, it is worth noting that this geo-political drama was also being played out in other areas of the Americas. For example, the same rivalry between Britain and the United States had also reached a moment of crisis with an on-going territorial dispute between British Guiana and Venezuela during the 1880s and 1890s.⁵³ As Robert Freeman Smith explains, when the Venezuelan authorities finally appealed to the United States for diplomatic support in 1894, this was endorsed by American politicians who were eager to curtail the influence of Britain in yet another country of the Americas. The United States had also been angered by the British intervention in a property dispute in Nicaragua when

⁵³ Robert Freeman Smith, pp. 91-92.

British forces had occupied Corinto in 1895 in an effort to forcefully negotiate repayment for damages to British property.

As a consequence of these disputes, Robert Freeman Smith explains that the United States had become increasingly concerned that it was failing to implement the fundamental tenets of the Monroe Doctrine. Reflecting an enlarged sense of purpose and confidence, President Grover Cleveland determined in the same year of 1895 that the United States should resolve the Venezuelan territorial claims without the agreement or involvement of the British. As a consequence of this turn in American diplomacy, there was even speculation of war between the two countries. However, Britain was finally unwilling to uphold its own claims in British Guiana or Nicaragua with any form of military intervention. At this time, Britain was far more concerned about the growing unrest of the Boers in South Africa and the increasing power and influence of Germany.⁵⁴ These subtle changes in Anglo-American diplomacy represent a landmark in relations between the two countries: distracted and overstretched, Britain had allowed the United States to assert itself unilaterally in Latin America.

It is also worth pointing out that Britain was not the only European country who had almost come into direct conflict with the United States during this period. After all, the Spanish-American War of 1898 had seen the Spanish colonies of Puerto Rico and Cuba pass to the United States.⁵⁵ And, though Germany was a distraction for the British, it was a cause of distinct alarm to the United States. This was not simply a case of national hysteria. In 1903 Germany devised a military campaign known as Operation Plan III, setting out details of a war with the United States which would be fought in the western hemisphere.⁵⁶ In this way, German aggression became another conspicuous reason for the American desire to strengthen its hold over the Caribbean. It was President Roosevelt who presided over this increased role when he started negotiations to build an isthmian canal in Central America. During his presidency, Roosevelt also increased the remit of American interventionism, known as the 'Roosevelt Corollary' to the Monroe Doctrine, stating that the United States would

⁵⁴ Robert Freeman Smith, p. 93.

⁵⁵ Robert Freeman Smith, p. 96.

⁵⁶ Robert Freeman Smith, p. 99.

extend its authority by involving itself in situations abroad that it regarded as necessary.⁵⁷

For these reasons, then, *Nostromo* can be regarded as an effort to represent the seismic changes that were taken place in the fabric of global politics; changes that had been gathering pace throughout the later stages of the nineteenth century. In terms of the western hemisphere, the United States had begun to assert itself in its decisive realisation of the Monroe Doctrine. As such, Conrad reveals a vision of a thoroughly modern world in which the authority of the European past is challenged by a vision of the American future; and in which the Old World was being supplanted by the New. In the process, Conrad also reveals a displacement and complication of Englishness and institutes the location of Latin American as a suitable location to work through the author's sense of a modern world dominated by American finance.

⁵⁷ Robert Freeman Smith, p. 101.

Chapter II: Scepticism and Doubt in Sulaco

As a writer of modernist fiction, Conrad began his literary career at the moment when the ideals of European culture were becoming increasingly problematic in the wake of the political and ideological upheavals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Among these concerns, the most troubling for Conrad were the aggressive imperialist policies of the European powers in their competitive drive to gain dominion over Africa. As such, Conrad consistently reveals a sense of disenchantment with imperialism as well as a wariness of the values that sustain its practice. In an often-quoted passage from *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Marlow remarks that 'the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.'⁵⁸ This same sense of moral disapproval survives in *Nostromo* but is substituted for a scathing attack on the broader and subtler theme of material interests. Contemplating the influence of foreign powers over his beloved Costaguana, the French-educated Martyn Decoud comments with bitter irony on 'that great Costaguana undertaking which is to put money into the pockets of Englishmen, Frenchmen, Americans, Germans, and God knows who else' (p. 234).

Nevertheless, although Conrad appears to hold nothing but disdain for the British and American business interests that hold Costaguana to ransom, he also reveals an unmistakable anxiety about the prospect of the natives governing their own country for themselves. During the violence of the riots, for example, Conrad refers to the native uprising disapprovingly as an 'armed mob of all colours, complexions, types and states of raggedness' (p. 355) while the leader of this national cause is interpreted as 'the exaggeration of a cruel caricature' who reveals 'the atrocious grotesqueness of some military idol of Aztec conception and European bedecking, awaiting the homage of worshippers' (p. 147). This unsympathetic interpretation of the revolutionary politics of Latin America reveals Conrad's wariness of racial ambiguity and cultural syncretism; two related themes which are consistently associated with the impression of political instability. During the course of this chapter, the ideological origins of this position will

⁵⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 31-32.

be explored in terms of the eugenic theories of the nineteenth century and the related fears of racial and national degeneracy. For the moment, it might also be observed that, from a biographical perspective, these anxieties are also a reflection of Conrad's general horror of national uprisings; something which he had learned to distrust since his childhood experiences of Polish nationalism (a political cause which had, after all, claimed the lives of both his parents).

This sceptical attitude towards the machinery of imperialism as well as the revolutionary nationalism that might overthrow or, at least, call such forms of hegemony to account seems to terminate, in the writing of Conrad, in a forlorn sense of acceptance despite his initial, or concurrent, sense of moral disapproval. From a broader perspective, this contradictory and disarming attitude is also bound up with Conrad's metaphysical outlook: his views on the nature and origin of a universe as an accidental outcome of physical properties which had suggested that all human actions were futile and absurd. After all, Conrad was writing at a time when new scientific discoveries had undermined many of the moral and religious certainties of European thought. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection had, of course, radically called into question the privileged, and flattering, view that human beings were made in God's image. This was, however, only part of the much wider growth in the explanatory power of the natural sciences which had wrought similar upheavals in the disciplines of astronomy, geology and physics. For Conrad, this growing sense that every aspect of human behaviour could be explained by the impersonal and natural laws of science led to a belief in a type of philosophical determinism. Conrad's often-quoted letter to Cunninghame Graham on 20 December 1897 is representative of his distinctly modern, scientific 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 [...] And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself; made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident – and it has happened.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham*, ed. by Cedric Watts, p. 56.

Nevertheless, despite these flights of despair, there is a general consensus among critics that Conrad occupies a precarious position between the Victorian and the Modern periods. This type of contradiction can be seen in *Nostromo* which features a quintessentially Romantic hero who comes to the distinctly modern realisation that he is implicated in a vast network of economic relations that sustains the free-market system of the western world. This same tension is also mirrored in the style of *Nostromo*, which reveals a commitment to the realism of the English novel-writing tradition but exhibits, at the same time, the modernist influences of impressionism and symbolism which came to Conrad through his extensive reading of French writers like Baudelaire and Flaubert. For all these reasons, Conrad has often been situated between the Victorian and Romantic traditions as well as being identified as a writer who is also representative of the verve and invention of English literary modernism.⁶⁰

Writing on the subject of this ideological tension in Conrad's writing, Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan has drawn attention to Conrad's contradictory Ptolemaic (pre-modern) and Copernican (modern) outlooks, arguing that his career can be understood as a troubled quest to restore the former while either contesting, or denying, the latter. From this perspective, Conrad is interpreted as 'an incurable moralist' who is nevertheless 'infected with the ethical relativism of his age'.⁶¹ And, as a consequence of this cultural ambivalence, Conrad's work is judged to be 'uneven' not only ideologically but also in its numerous 'aesthetic contradictions'.⁶² Cedric Watts has also identified similar tensions in Conrad's fiction, arguing that his work exhibits an extreme form of pessimism which is balanced between ancient and traditional moral affirmations. In this respect, Watts reaches the conclusion that Conrad remains unaligned to any single point of view and that this amounts to a form of 'self-cancellation' or 'ideological stalemate'.⁶³ In agreement with Erdinast-Vulcan and Watts on this point, it will be argued that the overriding impression conveyed in *Nostromo* is not one of a strong moral evaluation but principally one of doubt and uncertainty; an attitude that is most clearly conveyed in Conrad's interpretation of the natural world.

⁶⁰ Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Conrad*, p. 42.

⁶¹ Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan *The Modern Temper* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), p. 3.

⁶² Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, p. 4.

⁶³ Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Conrad*, p. 43.

Costaguana and the Nihilistic Vision of Decoud: 'He beheld the universe as a succession of incomprehensible images'

In *Nostromo* the characters that populate this satirical drama of 'material interests' are made powerless by human and inhuman forces alike. The reader of *Nostromo* is encouraged to consider not only the political and economic constraints of a dense network of human social relations that constrain human behaviour but also the inhuman, and desolate, natural landscapes in which its various characters are situated. Throughout Conrad's novel, there are many descriptions of this landscape and – with its rocky mountains, jagged coastlines and barren plains – this often suggests an atmosphere that is both spectacular and foreboding. Brooding on this landscape, Teresa Viola, an Italian living in Costaguana with her elderly husband, Giorgio, contrasts it with a more cheerful European vista from her past in Spezzia, a major port in north-western Italy:

Sometimes she had no patience with pain. For years its gnawing had been part of the landscape embracing the glitter of the harbour under the wooded spurs of the range; and the sunshine itself was heavy and dull – heavy with pain – not like the sunshine of her girlhood, in which middle-aged Giorgio had wooed her gravely and passionately on the shores of the gulf of Spezzia.

(pp. 69-70)

Here, the experience of the expatriated European is revealed to be one of misery which is associated, in turn, with the notion of place and the condition of exile. In both cases, the central imagery is related to the sun; while the Latin American sun, or the effect of sunshine, is 'heavy and dull', the qualities of the Mediterranean sun are not precisely identified but are nevertheless associated with the more positive memories of Teresa's youth. Throughout *Nostromo*, the Latin American sun and its heat are linked to a presiding atmosphere of oppression and cruelty, which often functions for Conrad as a natural correlative to the barbarous politics and cruel militarism of the setting. Similarly, the human form is frequently dwarfed by the expanse of Costaguana's rolling plains and its imposing mountain ranges. When the narrative is next focalised to Teresa's husband only a few pages later, Giorgio provides this impression of a nearby riot:

On this memorable day of the riot his arms were not folded on his chest. His hand grasped the barrel of the gun grounded on the threshold; he did not look up once at the white dome of Higuerota, whose cool purity seemed to hold itself aloof from a hot earth. His eyes examined the plain curiously. Tall trails of dust subsided here and there. In a speckless sky the sun hung clear and blinding. Knots of men ran headlong; others made a stand; and the irregular rattle of firearms came rippling to his ears in the fiery, still air. Single figures on foot raced desperately. 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 upon the plain by dwarfs mounted and on foot, yelling with tiny throats, under the mountain that seemed a colossal embodiment of silence.

(pp. 70-71)

Again, on this occasion, the imagery of the sun is invoked. The narrator establishes a contrast between its effect on the temperature of the plain (the 'hot earth') and the nearby mountain of Higuerota, which, with its 'cool purity,' is the antithesis of the heat and chaos of the frenetic, human-centred scene that unfolds below. When the narrator alludes to the sun directly its brightness has the oppressive, even disabling, effect of 'blinding'. The plain is also home to 'trails of dust,' and, with the 'fiery, still air' that surrounds Giorgio, this suggests even further the inhospitality of the arid climate. The participants of the riot are likewise described in terms that make their presence seem absurd and their actions futile: those individuals on foot are described ignominiously as 'knots of men' who 'race' around 'desperately' while the horsemen are made to seem frenetic by the string of verbs that describes their movements: a single sentence has them 'galloping,' 'wheeling' and 'separating'. With the metaphor that brings the paragraph to an end, the mock-heroic mode is maintained; a 'violent game' suggests, of course, an event lacking in consequence, meaning, and sense. Primarily, however, this effect is achieved through juxtaposition; the human participants are described as 'dwarfs' who yell 'with tiny throats' in dramatic contrast to the mountain, 'a colossal embodiment of silence'. As well as the contrast of size, then, there is also one of sound: while human beings are absurdly small and loud the natural world is majestically large and silent. Similarly, the description of the smallest island of the gulf succinctly reflects the novel's central antagonism between human beings and the natural world, where the human form often seems ill-suited to this barren and inhospitable landscape:

‘There is the Great Isabel; the Little Isabel, which is round; and Hermosa, which is the smallest. That last is no more than a foot high, and about seven paces across, a mere flat top of a grey rock which smokes like a hot cinder after a shower, and where no man would care to venture a naked sole before sunset’ (p. 54).

Nevertheless, the two passages explored at this stage only provide a partial indication of the treatment of nature in *Nostramo*. So far, the natural world has been characterised as an enormous and dignified presence, separate from the human, socio-political realm which is variously rendered as futile and absurd by comparison. This distinctly modern vision of nature, however, is often placed alongside a very different form of representation in the novel; something which relates to this notion of Conrad as a writer who, at times, reverts to much older moral traditions.

As the midday sun withdraws from the gulf the shadow of the mountains, the clouds begin to roll out of the lower valleys. They swathe in sombre tatters the naked crags of precipices above the wooded slopes, hide the peaks, smoke in stormy trails across the snows of Higuerota. The Cordillera is gone from you as if it had dissolved itself into great piles of grey and black vapours that travel out slowly to seaward and vanish into thin air all along the front before the blazing heat of the day. The wasting edge of the cloud-bank always strives for, but seldom wins, the middle of the gulf. The sun – as the sailors say – is eating it up. Unless perchance a sombre thunderhead breaks away from the main body to career all over the gulf till it escapes into the offing beyond Azuera, where it bursts suddenly into flame and crashes like a sinister pirate-ship of the air, hove-to above the horizon, engaging the sea.

At night the body of clouds advancing higher up the sky smothers the whole quiet gulf below with an impenetrable darkness, in which the sound of the falling showers can be heard beginning and ceasing abruptly – now here, now there. Indeed, these cloudy nights are proverbial with the seamen along the whole west coast of a great continent. Sky, land, and sea disappear together out of the world when the Placido – as the saying is – goes to sleep under its black poncho. The few stars left below the seaward frown of the vault shine feebly as into the mouth of a black cavern. In its vastness your ship floats unseen under your feet, her sails flutter invisible above your head. The eye of God Himself – they add with grim profanity – could not find out what work a man's hand is doing in there; and you would be free to call the devil to your aid with impunity if even his malice were not defeated by such a blind darkness.

(pp. 53-54)

In this passage, there is the suggestion not only of the indifference of the natural world to various human endeavours, but an indication of malevolence with the ships being

'the prey' of winds which 'play with them'. There is a further anthropomorphism with the mention that the clouds 'swathe in sombre tatters the naked crags of precipices' and 'hide the peaks', something which indicates not only a sense of natural volition but the melancholic and devious manner with which this action is seemingly carried out. There follows a more deliberate positioning of the reader within the natural scene by the inclusion of the second person pronoun, recalling an aural and – perhaps more significantly – ancient, mode of storytelling: 'the Cordillera is gone from you as if it had dissolved itself into great piles of grey and black vapours that travel out slowly to seaward and vanish into thin air all along the front before the blazing heat of the day.' This technique is then elaborated on, with similar effect, by a string of possessives in the second paragraph: 'In its vastness your ship floats unseen under your feet, her sails flutter invisible above your head'.

And yet, these observations are finally aligned to the fanciful observations of sailors, as the use of parentheses attributes this anthropomorphic view of the natural world to them. At first we are told: 'the wasting edge of the cloud-bank always strives for, but seldom wins, the middle of the gulf. The sun – as the sailors say – is eating it up' and then that 'these cloudy nights are proverbial with the seamen along the whole west coast of a great continent. Sky, land, and sea disappear together out of the world when the Placido – as the saying is – goes to sleep under its black poncho'. In this way, the anthropomorphism of this passage is made relative and problematic, where it becomes difficult to gauge the narrator's own attitude to this mythical, pseudo-religious view of the natural world. In keeping with this fragmentary, kaleidoscopic vision of nature, Conrad also discloses a view of the natural world which has more in common with the eighteenth-century picturesque, where visions of the natural world are equivalent to scenes from a landscape painting.

This picturesque attitude to nature can be found in a descriptive episode that occurs when the engineer-in-chief of the local railway waits for the arrival of the chairman, Sir John:

The chairman of the railway company had courageously crossed the mountains in a ramshackle *diligencia*, mainly for the purpose of meeting his engineer-in-chief engaged in the final survey of the road.

For all the indifference of a man of affairs to nature, whose hostility can always be overcome by the resources of finance, he could not help being impressed by his surroundings during his halt at the surveying camp established at the highest point his railway was to reach. He spent the night there, arriving just too late to see the last dying glow of sunlight upon the snowy flank of Higuerota.

Pillared masses of black basalt framed like an open portal a portion of the white field lying aslant against the west. In the transparent air of the high altitudes everything seemed very near, steeped in a clear stillness as in an imponderable liquid; and with his ear ready to catch the first sound of the expected *diligencia* the engineer-in-chief, at the door of a hut of rough stones, had contemplated the changing hues on the enormous side of the mountain, thinking that in this sight, as in a piece of inspired music, there could be found together the utmost delicacy of shaded expression and a stupendous magnificence of effect.

(p. 81)

In this passage, the 'courageous' journey of the chairman reveals the struggle and mastery of a difficult terrain. It is an attitude inseparable from his development of the railway and his taming of the environment for the fulfilment of this same goal. The reader is informed that Sir John must overcome various obstacles: the mountain range and the calm gulf, which offer geological and geographical barriers, and the land-owning Spanish families, who hold fertile territory and disapprove of the railway's development. In his conversation with Mrs Gould a few pages earlier – which deals with the later chronological event of the dinner party of political and business leaders aboard the *Juno* steamship – Sir John had spoken in jubilant terms of Sulaco's modernisation: 'you shall have more steamers, a railway, a telegraph-cable – a future in the great world which is worth infinitely more than any amount of ecclesiastical past. You shall be brought in touch with something greater than two viceroyalties' (p. 78). As someone who understands the world according to form and function, Sir John's response to the natural world in this passage is rendered in purely aesthetic terms: 'For all the indifference of a man of affairs to nature, whose hostility can always be overcome by the resources of finance, he could not help being impressed by his surroundings during his halt at the surveying camp established at the highest point his railway was to reach'. Like Petrarch, that paradigmatic advocate of the picturesque, Sir John considers the landscape from an elevated and distant perspective. From the mountainside, Sir John feels 'impressed,' which suggests a detached, cerebral, rather

than emotional, response. In this way, the domination of the natural world by capitalism is blended seamlessly with an evaluative, objectifying gaze which is as old as the Enlightenment itself. However, what is the significance of the fact that he narrowly misses the sunset, and its effect on the surrounding landscape?

Though this could simply be attributed to unfortunate timing, it seems to indicate that Sir John may be missing something that does not escape the attention of the more perceptive engineer-in-chief. Confounding this explanation, however, the latter's experience of the natural scene is described, if anything, in even more picturesque terms. The effect of the sunset on the snowy mountain side is framed by the surrounding 'black basalt' much like a landscape painting, which seems to imply some sort of equivalence between the natural world and its artistic representation. The atmospheric conditions of the high altitude turn the natural scene into a static image, where it is 'steeped in a clear stillness'. This human-centred, aesthetic appreciation of nature is then deepened with the extended metaphor of a musical composition, which compares 'the changing hues' of the mountain during the sunset to the harmonic 'delicacy of shaded expression' and 'the enormous side of the mountain' to 'a stupendous magnificence of' some musical 'effect'.

Of course, this view of the natural world is very different from those visions that were disclosed earlier by Teresa and Giorgio, where their apprehensions of the natural world were entirely comparable to the modern interpretation of nature as an austere presence that often threatens to overwhelm and envelop the human subject. And, it is different again, from the narrator's anthropomorphic description of Sulaco's harbour, which seemed to belong to an earlier age of myth, religion and superstition. However, these alternative visions of the natural world are underscored by the distinctly modern view which remains the most powerful impression of the novel as a whole. In these passages, Conrad provides a powerful vision of how the natural world is related to human consciousness, which occurs in two parts and is separated by more than one hundred pages: the first, when Decoud and Nostromo are aboard the lighter on their mission to remove the silver from Sulaco ('The plan' as we are told 'is to load it into the largest of the Company's lighters, and send it across the gulf to a small port out of Costaguana territory just on the other side of the Azuera, where the first northbound steamer will get orders to pick it up' (pp. 246-47)); the second, when Decoud is

stranded alone on the Great Isabel awaiting the return of Nostromo, an episode which leads to his eventual suicide.

In the first of these episodes, after leaving the harbour during the night, Decoud and Nostromo plan to remove the silver from Sulaco but find themselves unable to leave the gulf owing to an absence of wind. During this tense episode, Decoud finds himself troubled by the stillness of the air and the extreme darkness of the gulf, the same weather conditions that were described in the opening chapter of the novel (and quoted in the first chapter of this study), where the cloud cover had turned the gulf pitch black and showers of rain had started and ended abruptly. The same metaphor of the poncho is reprised to capture the effect of this disappearance of land, sea, and sky, ('tonight the gulf, under its poncho of clouds, remained breathless, as if dead rather than asleep' (p. 261)) where the loss of elemental boundaries resonates with Decoud's similar loss of more personal, existential boundaries:

The enormous stillness, without light or sound, seemed to affect Decoud's senses like a powerful drug. He didn't even know at times whether he were asleep or awake. Like a man lost in slumber, he heard nothing, he saw nothing. Even his hand held before his face did not exist for his eyes [...] Decoud shook himself, shuddered a bit, though the air that drifted past him was warm. He had the strangest sensation of his soul having just returned into his body from the circumambient darkness in which land, sea, sky, the mountains, and the rocks were as if they had not been.

(pp. 258-59)

In this passage, Decoud is deprived of the sensory stimulus that he had habitually relied on for his sense of orientation and identity. As a consequence, Decoud experiences a disturbing loss of the boundaries that had previously given shape and coherence to his life. In this way, Decoud experiences a type of existential vertigo. The 'enormous stillness' again suggests the same representation of the natural world as a monumental but indifferent force as the one that had been recorded earlier by Teresa and Giorgio. It is comparable to the one offered by Schopenhauer which sees nature as a force which operates blindly in the individual and the natural world: 'the innermost

essence, the kernel, of every particular thing and also of the whole' which 'appears in every blindly acting force of nature, and also in the deliberate conduct of man'.⁶⁴

During the second episode that again describes Decoud's isolation, there is a sense of a profound dislocation between the human and the natural worlds, as if the two are fundamentally unsuited to one another. The world of human meaning is contrasted with the tranquillity of the natural world but Decoud regards 'the universe as a succession of incomprehensible images' (p. 444). As someone who has defined his existence in exclusively social terms, Decoud's isolation on a tiny island with no human company leads him into profound doubt about the meaning of life and the nature of his personality; a form of doubt that is revealed to have deadly consequences when, after weighing himself down with silver, Decoud sinks into the impenetrable blackness of the gulf.

Although Conrad's portrayal of the natural world reveals a contradictory sympathy for ancient, naturalist and modern points of view, this powerful representation of existential despair that follows on from a distinctly nihilistic vision is perhaps the most lasting impression of *Nostromo*. Decoud's sense of despair and isolation is precisely mirrored in Conrad's own sense of the universe as an insensible and indifferent knitting machine which has 'made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart'. In general, it seems that there is something about the setting of Latin America which lends itself to this type of metaphysical despair. After all, Latin America is interpreted as a location which produces a rather dizzying effect among those exposed to its decentring and disorientating power. It is helpful to understand this episode with reference to the modernist attitude towards epiphany.

It is, after all, a vision of nature that has much in common with the comparable vistas provided in the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Though they arrived at radically different conclusions, these two thinkers had also interpreted nature as a raw energy or an amoral force. In this sense, for Charles Taylor, while the Romantic period had installed the idea of nature as a source of self-understanding, these two thinkers encouraged 'a further enrichment of our sense of the inner depths of a human being, a renewed sense of our link with the whole of nature, but as a great

⁶⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume I (Mineolo, NY, 1966), p. 110.

reservoir of unbridled power which underlies our mental life'.⁶⁵ In addition, the natural world was also consistently revealed to constitute, or envelop, the human subject, according to these post-Romantic visions. Accordingly, then, there is also the more fearful question of whether a positive evaluation of life is still possible within this context that holds to this distinctly modern vision of nature.⁶⁶ From this transformed and pessimistic outlook, the possibility arises that life itself is devoid of meaning. In this sense, the vision of the natural world that presaged Decoud's suicide is essentially a Schopenhauerian vision of a deeply impersonal universe that has been stripped of meaning and purpose.

From a broader historical perspective, this type of identification might also be related to the traditions of how European encounters with the New World have been formulated and reformulated over centuries since the beginning of the Spanish Conquest. As an area of the world that stood outside the time-frame of the classical and biblical scholastic tradition, it had always been difficult to reconcile this unfamiliar area of the world with the intellectual currents of the west which had limited the known world to the European, Asian and African continents for more than two thousand years. In this sense, the ideological instability of the early twentieth century had again alighted on a geographical location that had aroused complex feelings of wonder and amazement among Europeans since the time of the Spanish Conquest.⁶⁷

The Horror of Degeneracy: an 'armed mob of all colours, complexions, types and states of raggedness'

The portrayal of the natural world in *Nostromo* is not simply a direct representation of the landscape itself but a form of representation that is mediated by the conflicted ideological concerns of a European culture at a time of crisis and doubt. The landscape of Costaguana in *Nostromo* is figured in terms of a conflicted inheritance which fluctuates uncertainly between ancient, Victorian and modern evaluations. And, in *Nostromo*, there is a comparable identification in Conrad's portrayal of Latin American

⁶⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 446.

⁶⁶ Charles Taylor, p.448.

⁶⁷ Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: from Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 89-95.

society. In his portrayal of the complex ethnic diversity of Latin America, Conrad often reveals a vision of Costaguana as a country populated by a degenerate people; something which, again, had its origins in fears and anxieties that were much closer to home.

Indeed, Conrad's portrait of Costaguana owes an obvious intellectual debt to the science of eugenics which received a great deal of interest and attention towards the end of the nineteenth century. The notion that society might be improved through selective breeding appealed to a range of writers, scientists, politicians and intellectuals from a variety of countries and from progressive and conservative ends of the political spectrum. Sir Francis Galton was the key figure in this respect as the founder of eugenics and the principal spokesman of the movement in Britain. In *Hereditary Genius* (1869) Galton had argued for a ruthless form of selective breeding where the strong were favoured over the weak, observations which were associated with the opposition that he discerned between the upper and lower classes.⁶⁸ Ultimately, Galton was concerned with how the superior stock of Britain's ruling families might be preserved amid, as he and many of his contemporaries saw it, the alarmingly higher birth rates of the lower classes. For these reasons, Galton forged a connection in the minds of the British public between eugenics and anxieties over the state of the nation and the health of its population. In part, the historian Philip Blom attributes the rising tide of national anxiety that followed in the decades after Galton had publicised his views to the British experience of the Boer War:

The fear was that Britain herself was turning into a feeble nation, a spectre that seemed especially threatening after the Boer War [1899-1902], during which the world's greatest army did not only appear to have found its match in a handful of farmers with rifles, but which had also shown that in industrial centres like Manchester, 403 out of every 1,000 recruits were unfit for medical service.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, regardless of its precise causes, this anxiety over national degeneracy had, before long, become a conspicuous presence in English literature. In this respect, it is of interest that Conrad's satirical portrait of late nineteenth-century London in *The*

⁶⁸ David Bradshaw, 'Eugenics: "They should certainly be killed"' in *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, pp. 36-37.

⁶⁹ Philip Blom, *The Vertigo Years* (London: Pheonix, 2008), p. 340.

Secret Agent was published in the same year as the influential Eugenics Education Society (EES) was founded in London in 1907.⁷⁰ The anxieties surrounding ideas of degeneracy are registered in ambiguous terms in this novel. When the character of Stevie is introduced to the reader of *The Secret Agent* the narrator offers a portrait of his appearance that resembles a description that might have been written by a nineteenth-century eugenicist: 'he was delicate and, in a frail way, good-looking, too, except for the vacant droop of his lower lip'.⁷¹ The emphasis on the lower lip suggests a flaw in Stevie's appearance that is, in turn, a reflection of his mental degeneracy. And, though the precise reason for Stevie's mental disability is never overtly stated, the narrator provides a hint with the revelation of his parentage. The narrator explains that Stevie's mother 'considered herself to be of French descent, which might have been true' and that she was married to 'a licensed victualler of the more common sort'.⁷² On this occasion, Conrad implies that Stevie's degeneracy is the result of the corruption of healthy and robust English national character, in the form of some indeterminate foreign influence or the corrupting influence of the lower classes.

By contrast, in his characterisation of the anarchist Comrade Alexander Ossipon, Conrad reveals a distrust of the explanatory power of eugenics, casting doubt on its legitimacy as a science. Ossipon is revealed as a former medical student who subscribes to the eugenic theories of Cesare Lombroso: the nineteenth-century criminologist who not only argued that criminality was hereditary but posited a belief that criminal propensities could be identified by the presence of physical flaws. For Ossipon, as a follower of Lombroso, Stevie is a "'very good type'" of "'that sort of degenerate'" which is confirmed by "'the lobes of his ears'".⁷³ However, in a cautionary response to these eugenic observations, Karl Yundt, another anarchist from Mr Verloc's circle of friends, suggests bluntly that 'Lombroso is an ass'. In turn, this dim view of eugenics seems to be shared by the narrator at this point when Ossipon is identified as an 'ex-medical student without a degree' and the author of 'a popular quasi-medical study'.

⁷⁰ David Bradshaw, 'Eugenics: "They should certainly be killed"' in *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, p. 39.

⁷¹ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (London: Everyman, 1992), p. 6.

⁷² Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, p. 3.

⁷³ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, p. 42.

Finally, this conflicted response to eugenics – whereby Conrad seems both to subscribe to some of its prejudices while subjecting it to ridicule – resurfaces in the closing stages of the novel with the murder of Mr Verloc. When Stevie's sister, Winnie Verloc, fatally stabs her husband in revenge for the death of her brother, the narrator describes her violent actions in these terms: it was 'as if the homeless soul of Stevie had flown for shelter straight to the breast of his sister, guardian and protector, the resemblance of her face with that of her brother grew at every step, even to the droop of the lower lip, even to the slight divergence of the eyes'.⁷⁴ Paradoxically, Ossipon also reveals this hereditary aspect of Winnie's character himself when he identifies her towards the end of the novel as 'the sister of the degenerate' and 'a degenerate [...] of a murdering type'.⁷⁵ By aligning this judgement with a character who had been discredited by the narrator as an 'ex-medical student without a degree', Conrad reveals a sense of critical distance from the eugenic inheritance of the nineteenth century – especially in its linking of criminality with heredity and physical flaws.

It is, however, the spectre of biological degeneracy and racial impurity which provides Conrad's portrait of Latin America in *Nostromo*, in part, with its distinctive shape and texture.⁷⁶ The racial hybridity of Costaguana is identified by Decoud as the principal source of the national instability when he detects the following cyclical pattern in a long history of violence and misrule: 'After one Montero there would be another, the

⁷⁴ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, p. 239.

⁷⁵ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, p. 265.

⁷⁶ Under the Spanish and Portuguese, Latin America was divided according to a colonial logic that discriminated between different racial groups. At the top of this European-imposed model of racial hierarchy were the Spanish conquerors and those who followed afterwards in the capacity of administrators, priests and merchants. Over time, these New World settlers were identified as creoles who were eventually regarded as distinct from native Spaniards for their appropriation of a foreign culture. Among those of mixed race, the proportion of Spanish ancestry was something which was attached directly to the notion of social rank; a prejudice which was not only held by the Spanish conquerors but by their descendants for hundreds of years to come. Though the mixed-race *mestizos* became the largest racial group in Latin America in the years that followed, they had a status lower than that of the creoles in terms of social standing though higher than that of the native Indians. At the bottom of this racial hierarchy, beneath even that of the Indians, were the African slaves; a smaller but still significant proportion of the populations of these Latin American countries overall. Edwin Williamson, *The Penguin History of Latin America*, pp. 144-45.

lawlessness of a populace of all colours and races, barbarism, irremediable tyranny. As the great Liberator Bolivar had said in the bitterness of his spirit, 'America is ungovernable. Those who worked for her independence have ploughed the sea' (pp. 198-99). In this way, the eugenic inheritance of the nineteenth century presents Conrad with an apparent explanation for the turbulent politics of Latin America at the turn of the century: the 'populace of all colours and races' provides the seemingly precarious basis for the country's endemic condition of 'barbarism' and 'tyranny'. At times, this impression of chaos and instability can also be a source of amusement where it is revealed in the hyperbolic terms of political farce; something which can be seen in the stories that are told about the construction of the country's rail network which almost reads like an involuted account of the novel's design itself: 'The engineer-in-chief had not finished telling his amusing story. The humours of railway building in South America appealed to his keen appreciation of the absurd, and he told his instances of ignorant prejudice and as ignorant cunning very well' (p. 204).

This same characterisation of national instability is also revealed in Emelia's dealings with the local creole families. On this occasion, however, the theme receives a more serious treatment in line with this character's earnest concern for the social and political welfare of the country. During her tour of the region, Emelia visits some of the local haciendas where she is provided with an impression of a country torn apart by civil war from the land-owning perspective of the country's creole elite:

She was given the head of the tables, where masters and dependents sat in a simple and patriarchal state. The ladies of the house would talk softly in the moonlight under the orange trees of the courtyards, impressing upon her the sweetness of their voices and something mysterious in the quietude of their lives. In the morning the gentlemen, well mounted in braided sombreros and embroidered riding-suits, with much silver on the trappings of their horses, would ride forth to escort the departing guests before committing them, with grave good-byes, to the care of God at the boundary pillars of their estates. In all these households she could hear stories of political outrage; friends, relatives, ruined, imprisoned, killed in the battles of senseless civil wars, barbarously executed in ferocious proscriptions, as though the government of the country had been a struggle of lust between bands of absurd devils let loose upon the land with sabres and uniforms and grandiloquent phrases. And on all the lips she found a weary desire for peace, the dread of officialdom with its nightmarish parody of administration without law, without security, and without justice.

There is perhaps a tacit respect for the powerful creole families in this passage with the description of a feudal social structure where master and vassal compose 'a simple and patriarchal state'. Similarly, it is also possible to detect a note of approval in the narrator's representation of the 'ladies of the house' who 'talk softly' and impress Emelia with the 'sweetness of their voices'. This sense of approval may simply be a reflection of Emelia's sympathy but it could also reflect Conrad's own sense of class loyalty as someone who was raised among the land-owning class of the Polish *szlachta* and who often had little time for the supposed benefits of democracy.⁷⁷ In any case, the real significance of this passage lies in its revelation of the creole families' attitude towards the country's cyclical experience of civil war. These revolutions are not defined as a series of political struggles, which might suggest acts of political violence carried out with rational motives but as various manifestations of 'political outrage', which suggests the Costaguaneras' inability to govern in the responsible manner of their European counterparts from whom these creole families are descended. Any rational explanation for the violence is suppressed in the same moment as this 'outrage' is emotively rendered in the grammatical elisions where only noun and verb appear: 'friends, relatives, ruined, imprisoned, killed'. When the participants of the civil war are also described as 'absurd devils' who are 'let loose upon the land with sabres and uniforms and grandiloquent phrases' the narrator even seems to encourage an interpretation of these revolutions in terms of something diabolic and inhuman. In this passage, there is also Conrad's familiar sense of separation between the deceptions of seductive political rhetoric ('grandiloquent phrases') and the often brutal reality of politics and power ('a struggle of lust').

This same type of egoistic posturing is something which returns most forcefully in the narrator's characterisation of the mixed-race Montero brothers in *Nostramo*. What is more, in terms of Conrad's representation of race, the characterisation of General

⁷⁷ In his letters to Joseph Spiridion, Conrad characterised England as a place of political refuge, but reflected warily on the extension of political representation to the working class; of the Reform Acts, land reforms, and socialism in general, Conrad commented with grim self-assurance that 'Disestablishment, Land Reform, Universal Brotherhood are but like milestones on the road to ruin'. Joseph Conrad, *Collected Letters*, Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, eds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), I, p.17.

Montero is especially revealing. For Conrad, the most prominent feature of Montero's racial identity is its essential ambiguity; its resistance to any ready-made form of identification or classification. In this sense, the racial identity of Montero becomes a kind of enigma in the novel; an unsolved puzzle which is a source of irritation and disturbance and seems to mirror the similarly disturbing and chaotic loss of boundaries that is seen elsewhere in *Nostramo*, whether in the form of the decentring visions of the natural world or the impersonal mechanisms of commodity exchange that traverse national borders in their restless search for profit.

In detailing his biography, the narrator reveals a certain snobbishness with the mention that 'there was nothing aristocratic in his descent' and that Montero's mother was 'a baptized Indian woman from the far interior' (p. 80). The adjective 'far' here seems to indicate a type of provincialism that adds to the narrator's sense of alarm at the prospect of the uncultured lower classes holding positions of high office. And, while the creole landowners likewise characterise Pedro Montero in similar ethnic terms as a 'shameless Indio,' (p. 202) the narrator identifies a different racial inheritance when the appearance of the two brothers is pondered in the derogatory terms of a nineteenth century ethnographer: 'They were very much alike in appearance, both bald, with bunches of crisp hair above their ears, arguing the presence of some negro blood' (p. 357). On this occasion, the detection of African ancestry is equivalent to the discovery of a character flaw: the revelation of baldness and crisp hair suggests a type of biological degeneracy which reflects his inability to govern responsibly.

However, the most venomous description of General Montero is reserved for the episode with the dinner party that is held aboard the *Juno* steamship. On this occasion, the narrator emphasises the arrogant demeanour and grotesque appearance of this military hero. The narrator describes 'the imbecile and domineering stare of the glorious victor of Rio Seco' which is said to reveal 'something ominous and incredible' (p. 147). The description continues with the revelation that it was 'the exaggeration of a cruel caricature, the fatuity of solemn masquerading, the atrocious grotesqueness of some military idol of Aztec conception and European bedecking, awaiting the homage of worshippers. Don Jose approached diplomatically this weird and inscrutable portent, and Mrs Gould turned her fascinated eyes away at last'. Here, the source of anxiety is

centred on the revelation of cultural syncretism rather than racial ambiguity. The cultural mixture of the Aztec and the European is the principal source of alarm where the egoism and pomp that Conrad associates with Aztec culture is revealed as incompatible with the imposition of European fashion and culture. The aversion of Mrs Gould's eyes from this spectacle of the possibilities offered by native rule seems to reveal Conrad's own sense of revulsion. Towards the end of *Nostramo*, after his brother's military coup, Montero arrives in Sulaco where there are several descriptions that further reveal the novel's depiction of racial ambiguity. The force that is commanded by Gamacho – the 'Sulaco National Guard' – is referred to in a manner which aligns those of mixed race with political chaos: it is an 'armed mob of all colours, complexions, types and states of raggedness' (p.355).

Costaguana and the Idea of the Primitive: 'violent men but little removed from a state of utter savagery'

Although the racial ambiguity of the Montero brothers appeared to be a considerable source of anxiety for Conrad, these same two characters can also function in a somewhat contradictory way as a potent symbol for the primitive; a theoretical premise which also had a peculiar relationship to the historical moment of literary modernism. After all, the concept of the primitive exerted a strong influence on a variety of art forms at the beginning of the twentieth century, from the paintings of Picasso and Cezanne, which were often inspired by the geometrical compositions of African art, to the ballets of Igor Stravinsky with their imitations of pagan rituals.⁷⁸ In her study of its place in the modernist imagination, Torgovnick has revealed how the concept of the primitive was the guiding principle in European notions of cultural otherness for many thinkers in the early twentieth century. Both the intellectual pioneers of anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski and James Frazer, as well as psychologists, Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud, held to the notion of an underlying and essential human nature that could be rediscovered through an engagement with

⁷⁸ Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 76.

primitive foreign cultures.⁷⁹ In turn, this view of our collective human nature was governed by the logic of an 'evolutionist paradigm' for these thinkers who viewed these primitive societies in terms of the European past. As such, the process of travelling abroad, to the African continent or the unfamiliar and distant countries of Latin America, was conceived not only as a spatial journey but also a temporal one.⁸⁰ In *Nostromo*, the identification of Latin America with the primitive can be seen in the atavistic character traits that Conrad associates with Pedro Montero:

They were a good sample of the cavalry of the plains with which Pedro Montero had helped so much the victorious career of his brother the general. The influence which that man, brought up in coast towns, acquired in a short time over the plainsmen of the Republic can be ascribed only to a genius for treachery of so effective a kind that it must have appeared to those violent men but little removed from a state of utter savagery, as the perfection of sagacity and virtue. The popular lore of all nations testifies that duplicity and cunning, together with bodily strength, were looked upon, even more than courage, as heroic virtues by primitive mankind. To overcome your adversary was the great affair of life. Courage was taken for granted. But the use of intelligence awakened wonder and respect. Stratagems, providing they did not fail, were honourable; the easy massacre of an unsuspecting enemy evoked no feelings but those of gladness, pride, and admiration. Not perhaps that primitive men were more faithless than their descendants of to-day, but that they went straighter to their aim, and were more artless in their recognition of success as the only standard of morality.
(p. 356)

Here, Conrad explains the rise of Pedro Montero according to a Hegelian conception of the universal past in which natural morality is the order of the day and the Master triumphs over the Slave through the application of strength and cunning. It is a vision of cultural otherness that sees the foreign land of Costaguana in terms of an evolutionary paradigm and according to a universal view of human history: 'The popular lore of all nations testifies that duplicity and cunning, together with bodily strength, were looked upon, even more than courage, as heroic virtues by primitive mankind'. The most significant feature of this account, then, is the notion that the Latin American present is precisely equivalent to the European past. To this extent, even if only temporarily, Costaguana does not appear to occupy the same historical time

⁷⁹ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), p. 7.

⁸⁰ Marianna Torgovnick, p. 8.

frame as the modern, industrial present of the western world despite the global free-market theme of the novel which elsewhere describes the intrusion of British and American business interests.

Similarly, the peasant Indian population of Costaguana are often represented as commensurate with the peasant communities of Europe. In this sense, Conrad portrays the indigenous people of the country as representatives of a common humanity that erases all sense of cultural otherness. Again, this is something that Torgovnick identifies as a recurring European reflex where 'to study the primitive brings us always back to ourselves, which we reveal in the act of defining the Other'.⁸¹ During Mrs. Gould's guided tour of the Sulaco province, this attitude can be seen in her response to the peasant population of this unfamiliar country:

Mrs. Gould was indeed becoming a Costaguanera. Having acquired in Southern Europe a knowledge of true peasantry, she was able to appreciate the great worth of the people. She saw the man under the silent, sad-eyed beast of burden. She saw them on the road carrying loads, lonely figures upon the plain, toiling under great straw hats, with their white clothing flapping about their limbs in the wind; she remembered the villages by some group of Indian women at the fountain impressed upon her memory, by the face of some young Indian girl with a melancholy and sensual profile, raising an earthenware vessel of cool water at the door of a dark hut with a wooden porch cumbered with great brown jars. The solid wooden wheels of an ox-cart, halted with its shafts in the dust, showed the strokes of the axe; and a party of charcoal carriers, with each man's load resting above his head on the top of the low mud wall, slept stretched in a row within the strip of shade.

(p. 120)

Revealing the same Conradian sympathy with the idea of common humanity that was suggested in his 1895 preface to *Almayer's Folly* ('there is a bond between us and that humanity so far away'),⁸² Mrs. Gould's knowledge of the peasantry of Southern Europe is revealed here as the experiential basis of her understanding of the 'great worth of the people' of Costaguana. However, from the logic of this humanist perspective, there is little sense of the native population having their own sense of history and culture that might be meaningfully distinguished from that of Europe. In turn, this type of universal knowledge and cultural symmetry reveals a form of appreciation of the

⁸¹ Marianna Torgovnick, p. 11.

⁸² Joseph Conrad, *Almayer's Folly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 3.

Indian peasant for Mrs. Gould that inspires the consequent extension of her sympathy. Having this former experience of 'true peasantry', which leads to the appreciation of the Costaguanera's 'great worth' is something which brings about her detection of humanity: 'the man under the silent, sad-eyed beast of burden'. Mrs. Gould's humanising portrait of the harsh conditions of the Costaguanera's employment is something that encourages a type of charitable compassion in the same moment that it undermines any recognition of cultural difference. With the subsequent details of the 'young Indian girl' who possesses 'a melancholy and sensual profile' and the men who sleep 'in a row within the strip of shade' there is also an indication of a certain picturesque form of representation: where these beautiful peasants reveal themselves as charming curiosities not only to Mrs Gould but to the objectifying gaze of the narrator and the reader.

In addition to Torgovnick's theory that 'the study the primitive brings us always back to ourselves', Anthony Pagden offers some guidance on the intellectual heritage of this type of identification when he explains how European writers and explorers – from the Genoan Columbus in the fifteenth century to the Prussian Humboldt in the nineteenth century – identified the encounter with the unfamiliar and puzzling New World as a 'daunting' problem.⁸³ The engagement was conceived of as 'daunting' not only because of its unfamiliar flora and fauna but because of the strangeness and unfamiliarity of Amerindian culture; or what has been succinctly identified by Pagden as its 'cultural incommensurability'.⁸⁴ There is also a competing European reflex in the opposing direction of trying to contain these contradictions; the desire to eradicate or tame this impression of the new by an intellectual effort of making what is foreign familiar. For Pagden, this 'principle of attachment [...] became an enduring feature of most European efforts to steady the initially vertiginous experience of being in a "new world"'.⁸⁵ Something similar can also be detected in Stephen Greenblatt's theory of possession where he writes of Columbus' contact with the New World as 'the paradox of the [New World]...sign' which is 'hollow or transparent: a glass through which

⁸³ Anthony Pagden, p. 2.

⁸⁴ Anthony Pagden, p. 2.

⁸⁵ Anthony Pagden, p. 24.

Columbus looks to find what he expects to find'.⁸⁶ For Greenblatt, the European encounter with the New World is also conceived of as profoundly unequal and as a process of cross-cultural understanding that is 'continually mediated by representations'.⁸⁷ As Torgovnick has argued in her discussion of the primitive, these western forms of representation are also often ordered according to a series of far less conscious concerns:

To study the primitive is thus to enter an exotic world which is also a familiar world. That world is structured by sets of images and ideas that have slipped from their original metaphoric status to control perceptions of primitives – images and ideas that I call tropes. Primitives are like children, the tropes say. Primitive are our untamed selves, our id forces – libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous....the ensemble of these tropes – however miscellaneous and contradictory – forms the basic grammar and vocabulary of what I call primitivist discourse, a discourse fundamental to the western sense of self and Other.⁸⁸

According to this paradoxical cultural inheritance, where the other is figured as both an antagonistic and constituent of the western self, Conrad can be seen to make these types of unconscious identifications himself. For example, although Conrad, at times, acknowledges the education and accomplishments of the primitive peoples of Costaguana he does so by invoking unflattering animal comparisons. In terms of his European elegance and education, General Montero is said to possess 'an ape-like faculty for imitating all the outward signs of refinement' along with 'a parrot-like talent for languages' (p. 357). By employing these types of metaphorical associations, Conrad reveals a prejudice that was often felt by many of his contemporaries from Britain and America. After having been dispatched to file reports on General Huerta, for example, the American William Bayard Hale similarly reported to President Wilson with a note of alarm that the new Mexican president was 'an ape-like man [...] of almost pure Indian blood'.⁸⁹

In addition, Conrad often interprets Latin America in terms of the primitive trope that associates non-western cultures with children. For example, Conrad comments on

⁸⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 88.

⁸⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, p. 119.

⁸⁸ Marianna Torgovnick, p. 8.

⁸⁹ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 529.

the underlying cause of all Latin American revolutions in these dismissive terms: it was 'rooted in the political immaturity of the people, in the indolence of the upper classes and the mental darkness of the lower' (p. 358). This comment not only reveals the presence of another primitive trope but the eugenic inheritance of the nineteenth century with the degradation that is implied here with political infiltration of the lower classes. Similarly, Emelia views the country's own political movements as 'a comedy of naive pretences' and refers to these political struggles as being carried out by 'depraved children' (p. 89). With its implication of a form of irresponsible behaviour unfettered by moral restraint, Emelia's use of the term 'depraved' also suggests the way in which Conrad associated Latin American with the violent excesses of the unconscious.

In a manner that is again consonant with Torgovnick's study, there is also a close relationship in *Nostromo* between the setting of Costaguana and the impression of irrationality. On witnessing the military embarkation of General Barrios and Montero, this type of attitude is revealed among the European observers of this spectacle: 'Mrs Gould heroically concealed her dismay at the appearance of men and events so remote from her racial conventions, dismay too deep to be uttered in words even to her husband. She understood his voiceless reserve better now [...] since so much that seemed shocking, weird, and grotesque in the working out of their purposes had to be accepted as normal in this country' (p. 180). This detection of the 'shocking' and the 'weird' and the 'grotesque' signals that the reader has entered a nightmare world of the unconscious where European forms of behaviour are exaggerated to the point of parody and where the processes of sense-making are confounded by unfamiliar 'racial conventions' and even more unfamiliar political motives. During the revolutionary riots of the town, the engineer-in-chief reflects on this same detection of irrationality when he observes that 'Ribierism has failed, as everything merely rational fails in this country' (p. 301). Likewise, Decoud also voices this same attitude when he speaks of his desire to defend the town from the unruly mob in these terms: "'I would have carried one of those rifles, in which Don Jose believes, with the greatest satisfaction, in the ranks of poor peons and indios, that know nothing either of reason or politics'" (p. 194).

The Logic of Material Interests: 'more soulless than any tyrant, more pitiless and autocratic than the worst Government'

Despite this mixture of racial anxieties in *Nostromo*, it is the theme of 'material interests' that has received the most attention from literary critics. This critical focus is something which was anticipated by Conrad himself when he commented that 'Nostromo has never been intended for the hero of the Tale of the Seaboard' but that 'silver is the pivot of the moral and material events, affecting the lives of everybody in the tale.'⁹⁰ This authorial interpretation is mirrored in more recent anti-humanist readings of *Nostromo*. In broad agreement with the author on this point, Terry Eagleton has written that 'the silver is the unifying principle of the entire action; but since that action has for Conrad no historical intelligibility, it is a principle which must of necessity be dramatically absent.'⁹¹ Similarly, for Fredric Jameson, the novel's search for events and origins is seen to arrive at the 'Althusserian/Derridean realization' of capitalism 'as the supreme and privileged mystery of a synchronic system which, once in place, discredits the attempts of "linear" history or the habits of the diachronic mind to conceive of its beginnings'.⁹²

The theme of 'material interests' was, of course, suggested by the location of Costaguana itself. This Central, or South, American location not only allowed Conrad to describe the distinctly modern process whereby an obscure trading province was absorbed into the global market of commodity exchange but permitted a form of representation which captured the way in which the United States had begun to challenge the European powers, especially Britain, in its increasing control of the western hemisphere. In this sense, Conrad's familiar moral disapproval concerning the machinery of imperialism survives in *Nostromo* but is substituted for a scathing attack on the subtler theme of 'material interests'. Contemplating the influence of foreign powers over Costaguana, the French-educated Martyn Decoud identifies 'that great Costaguana undertaking which is to put money into the pockets of Englishmen,

⁹⁰ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. by Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 37.

⁹¹ Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 1978), p. 138.

⁹² Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 279-80.

Frenchmen, Americans, Germans, and God knows who else' (p. 234). And, when taken as a whole, the narrative of *Nostromo* reveals the liberal consensus concerning the merits of capitalism as little more than a sustaining illusion; where the economic model of the western world is shot through with the author's familiar sense of doubt about a modern world structured according to the soulless logic of 'material interests'.

As part of its rhetorical strategy, then, *Nostromo* presents an attitude to wealth accumulation which, on occasion, reflects the liberal economic consensus of the early-twentieth century. The platitude that there is an indissoluble link between wealth and political stability is often articulated by the entrepreneurs and investors of the silver mine. Charles Gould argues for this view himself during a conversation with his wife when he suggests that 'what is wanted here is law, good faith, order, security. Anyone can declaim about these things, but I pin my faith to material interests. Only let the material interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist. That's how your money-making is justified here in the face of lawlessness and disorder' (p. 116). General Barrios also reiterates this view during his crude interpretation of the political ideals of Don Jose Avellanosa: "'That is what Don Jose says we must do. Be enterprising! Work! Grow rich! To put Montero in a cage is my work; and when that insignificant piece of business is done, then, as Don Jose wishes us, we shall grow rich, one and all, like so many Englishmen, because it is money that saves a country'" (p. 180).

However, the fervour with which these views are expounded in itself sounds a note of caution. And, as has already been suggested, the narrative movement of *Nostromo* tends to expose the connection of wealth and stability as little more than an illusion. The primary object of the riot is, after all, revealed to lie in the aim of the mob of getting hold of the San Tomé silver, which is stored in the lower rooms of the Custom House (p. 234). Other characters such as Martyn Decoud and Emelia Gould also provide an internal critique in the novel where many of these liberal assumptions are questioned. When the narration is focalised to Emelia Gould, for example, there are frequent meditations on the effect of 'material interests' which conflict with the prevailing liberal ideals of Charles Gould and General Barrios: 'she saw the San Tomé mountain hanging over the Campo, over the whole land, feared, hated, wealthy; more soulless than any tyrant, more pitiless and autocratic than the worst Government;

ready to crush innumerable lives in the expansion of its greatness' (p. 460). This type of scepticism is also shared by Doctor Monygham who argues that 'there is no peace and no rest in the development of material interests' (p. 454). Monygham continues: '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'.

Building on this Conradian sense of doubt, the political commitment to the economic cause of the silver mine in the novel is often related to highly personal, and often, obscure motives. In this way, *Nostromo* makes a mockery of the grand narratives of history in which the processes of political and social change are seen as intelligible and transparent. For Charles Gould, the pursuit of wealth is revealed as a means towards the opaque end of seeking atonement for his father's failure to make a success of the silver mine. Similarly, on the other side of the novel's political divide, Pedrito Montero is revealed to be motivated in his lust for power by the egoistic and absurd aim of imitating his favoured French aristocrat, the Duc de Morny (p. 239). In this way, *Nostromo* suggests that a commitment to a cause is often a highly personal affair, even though these types of commitments have the power to shape the future of an entire country. The pursuit of wealth is rendered as a partly irrational aim in the novel which motivates certain individuals in the same way as romantic love or religious devotion.

In a related respect, *Nostromo* tends towards a view of history as a cyclical phenomenon rather than as a linear path towards political and economic progress; something which is revealed in the ironic parallels that are drawn between Charles Gould and Charles IV. This point is made overtly in the passage where Charles Gould is said to ride 'like a centaur' insofar as 'riding for him was not a special form of exercise; it was a natural faculty, as walking straight is to all men sound of mind and limb' (p. 88). In the next paragraph, 'the big equestrian statue of Charles IV' is mentioned and, if the reader fails to miss the point here, Charles Gould is then immediately referred to as 'the other Carlos'. For Conrad, then, the historical transition from imperialism to capitalism is conceived of in terms of a continuation, rather than a departure, from the colonial past; an idea which was also revealed in Conrad's judgement that the intervention of the United States in the Panamanian secession when Conrad wrote with derision of 'the Yankee Conquistadors in Panama'.

Furthermore, this impression of doubt about the economic model of the western world in *Nostromo* is also complicated by a further layer of ambiguity; something which again arises from this sense of Conrad as a writer of contradictory moral inheritance. In this sense, the economic theme of *Nostromo* is complicated by the writer's sympathies with alternative moral values in the same way as his varied representation of the natural world. Conrad's representation of modern capitalism as a form of economic practice which is resistant to any form of teleological explanation exists alongside a mythical presentation of human greed and avarice. And, these contrary frames of interpretation, in a similar sense to Conrad's representation of the natural world, are ultimately irreconcilable so that the novel as a whole tends to resist any attempt on the part of the reader or critic who might seek to uncover a unified meaning.

In the opening chapter of *Nostromo* the local myth of the lost treasure of the Azuera peninsular is described. As well as indicating the mixed ethnicity of this fictional Latin American republic (there is mention of 'the common folk of the neighbourhood' who believe in this local myth and include 'tame Indians coming miles to market' as well as observers like the local 'negro fisherman' (p. 52)), it sets up an important contrast between the Christian world and the indigenous mythology that has the sailors' apparitions haunting the local peninsular in the condition of eternal torment. Significantly, the narration of this mythical event comes after the mention of the historical transition from the time of Spanish rule to the modern industrial present which occurs in the previous two paragraphs of the novel's opening. At this point, the novel suggests that the transition from an imperial to modern capitalist economy is also associated with other forms of transition: the epistemological transition from mythology to history and the theological transition from paganism to Christianity. At least, by juxtaposing these historical and mythical frames of reference, such associations are invited by the narrator in a novel that consistently reveals the contradictory moral inheritance of its author.

It is worth remembering that the story of the lost treasure of Azuera will be echoed later by the hero's own buried treasure – the silver ingots which Nostromo hides on the largest of the three Isabels. This stylistic method of contrast, which functions by means of contiguity and parallelism, is part of the wider structure of the novel which works by

a series of complex implications rather than straightforward pronouncements. However, this connection between the historical and the mythical is also made explicit when Nostromo, in conversation with Doctor Monygham, draws this comparison himself before setting off with Decoud aboard the lighter: “I shall linger on earth after I am dead, like those Gringos that haunt the Azuera”. What is more, moments later, he even refers to his undertaking of saving Sulaco’s hoard of silver as a spell and curse: “It is as if I were taking up a curse [...] I shall float along with a spell upon my life” (p.256). In addition, his adoptive mother, Teresa, functions as a kind of prophet when she predicts his fall from greatness to penury. It is as if she has just strayed into the narrative from a Greek tragedy when she intones: “Your folly shall betray you into poverty, misery, starvation. The very *leperos* shall laugh at you – the great Capataz” (p. 255).

In the character of Nostromo, the mythical and historical are intertwined as they were at the very beginning of the novel. When he converses with Doctor Monygham later in the novel, after having buried the silver ingots, he seems to experience something akin to class consciousness when he rails against the influential and powerful of Sulaco whom he believes have risked his life on a whim: “Is it that the *hombres finos* – the gentleman – need not think as long as there is a man of the people ready to risk his body and soul? Or perhaps, we have no souls – like dogs?” (p. 395). There are also other intimations in the novel of this complex relationship between myth and history. Charles Gould’s father is harassed and debilitated by tangible historical forces (‘the grotesque and murderous bands that played their game of governments and revolutions after the death of Guzman Bento’ (p. 94)), but he conceives of the country’s enforced tribute in terms that are suggestive of the mythological frame of interpretation. In summarising his letters to his son, the narrator reveals that ‘he occupied whole pages in the exposition of the fatal consequences attaching to the possession of the mine from every point of view, with every dismal inference, with words of horror at the apparently eternal character of the curse (p.95).’ Like the gringos of the Azuera, the bearer of the mine is also in possession of a treasure that entails a curse. In this way, *Nostromo* presents money as abominable substance whether this is rendered in the form of myth, history or at some point between these two frames of interpretation.

With his social status in question, Nostromo, like Decoud before him, receives his own form of existential crisis: 'Already the doctor had left him. He remained leaning against the wall, staring at the dark water of the harbour; the shrilling of cicadas filled his ears. An invincible vagueness coming over his thoughts took from them all power to determine his will' (p. 388). While Decoud suffered through his contact with the inhuman force of nature, Nostromo suffers through his contact with that distinctly human force: the world of business and finance. Conrad therefore suggests a curious relationship between the two: the cruelty of the natural world finds an almost exact correlative in the indifference of a vast financial network that reduces human beings to their functional role within the larger economy. While Decoud is 'a victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the retribution meted out to intellectual audacity,' Nostromo is described as another kind of victim: he is 'the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores, victim of the disenchanted vanity which is the reward of audacious action (p.447).' His sense of a worthless affair also leads Nostromo to '[listen] as if in a dream, felt himself of as little account as the indistinct, motionless shape of the dead man whom he saw upright under the beam, with his air of listening also, disregarded, forgotten, like a terrible example of neglect' (p. 392). The eventual death of Nostromo is also partly described in mythical terms. With the pretext of visiting the Violas in their new home on the Isabela, Nostromo is said to feel that he has 'mastered the fates'. And, this allusion to a mythical context seems to prepare the fulfilment of the eventual curse, which his adoptive mother, Theresa Viola, had earlier pronounced. Nevertheless, the novel also portrays Viola's later shooting of Nostromo as a blind accident, more in keeping with a distinctly modern absurdist view of events with their less than logical or straightforward relation of cause and effect.

Part II

D.H. Lawrence and *The Plumed Serpent* (1926)

Chapter III: The Dream of an Alternative Revolution

Joseph Conrad portrayed the fictional Latin American republic of Costaguana as a country troubled by political turmoil, cultural upheaval and social instability. And, during the course of *Nostromo*, this turbulent atmosphere was frequently revealed as economic in origin; a consequence of the intrusive and disruptive influence of foreign business interests. Conrad described in intricate detail a financial process whereby the national interests of a sovereign state were subordinated to the concerns of a global system of commodity exchange. The insightful Emelia Gould reflected on the international enterprise of the silver mine, which was renovated by her ambitious husband of English descent and financed with North American money, that it was 'more soulless than any tyrant, more pitiless and autocratic than the worst Government' and was, furthermore, 'ready to crush innumerable lives in the expansion of its greatness' (p. 462). On such occasions as these, it seemed that the omnipresent silver mine – with its tendency to quash all other concerns and set one faction of the country against another in order to obtain its 'greatness' for themselves – was the ultimate cause of Costaguana's instability and turmoil. Nevertheless, the silver mine was not the only reason for the political maelstrom that was so richly portrayed by Conrad.

There was also a more immediate and proximate cause. It was, after all, only when the mixed-race Montero brothers began their military coup and toppled the Ribierist dictatorship that there was a further descent into the political anarchy of civil war. In this way, the riots and revolutions of Costaguana were also revealed as an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of the natives attempting to govern their own country for themselves. As a result of these vivid and almost farcical descriptions of social and political chaos, it seemed that the English reader for whom Conrad wrote was invited to reflect on the ensuing chaos with a kind of amused detachment. Lingering in the background of this theatre of political farce was a flattering sense of cultural, even racial, superiority on the part of Conrad, if not the reader. Along these lines, Edward Said once observed that 'Conrad's novel embodies much the same paternalistic arrogance of imperialism that it mocks in its characters' and surmised: 'when they

rebel they simply confirm our views of them as silly children, duped by their western masters'.⁹³ By contrast, in his enthusiastic response to Latin American politics, D.H. Lawrence represents the native rule of Mexico in *The Plumed Serpent* as a welcome point of departure when the country is able, at long last, to move away from its European inheritance and embrace its own indigenous culture in a heady moment of self-realisation.

In the writing of Lawrence, the *caudillo* becomes an object of praise rather than censure. The celebratory restoration of Mexico's ancient gods through the confident leadership of the creole Ramón and Indian Cipriano in *The Plumed Serpent* is portrayed by Lawrence in a heroic rather than comic mode and as a welcome antidote to a whole range of political and social problems: from the exploitive practices of global capitalism and the modern obsession with industry and technology to the country's reliance on, as Lawrence saw it, its moribund Catholic past. As such, the native leadership of Ramón and Cipriano suggests not the introduction of chaos, as it might well have done for Conrad, but the restoration of order; albeit a type of order, with its chauvinistic sexual politics and institution of male violence, that might strike the majority of modern readers of the novel as troubling and unpalatable.

Aside from the modern reader's likely discomfort, however, the revolution of Ramón and Cipriano is envisaged by Lawrence less as a political programme of reform and more as a cultural revolution of the spirit. According to the revolutionary scheme of *The Plumed Serpent*, the revival of these ancient gods is a means of recapturing the Mexican soul that has been lost at some distant point in the country's colonial past. And yet, despite the Mexican setting of *The Plumed Serpent*, this spiritual revolution is not limited in its implications to this country alone. Towards the end of the novel, there is the speculation that similar practices, rooted in local customs and history, might serve the purpose of some equivalent revival throughout the wider world. Following the eccentric logic of this idea, Ramón, speaking on the subject of the revival of Mexico's pagan gods towards the end of the novel, advises Kate in all seriousness: 'Tell them in your Ireland to do as we have done here.'⁹⁴

⁹³ Edward W. Said, 'Through Gringo Eyes' *Harper's Magazine*, April 1988, p. 71.

⁹⁴ D.H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 427.

Though there are undoubtedly many ways in which Conrad and Lawrence might be contrasted (they are, after all, at the extreme ends of the Romantic and anti-Romantic currents of modernism), this quotation indicates the most significant difference: whereas Conrad often seemed perturbed, even, at times, horrified, by the prospect of the political rule of non-European races, Lawrence is energised by its implications for change and renewal. Despite its unquestionable eccentricity, *The Plumed Serpent* reverses the imperial dynamic that was encountered in *Nostromo* where the 'advanced' nations of Europe are conceived of as the parent to the 'barbarous' Latin American child. It is for reasons such as these that critics such as Neil Roberts and Amit Chaudhuri, representing a recent trend in the critical reception, have tended towards a revisionist interpretation of Lawrence.⁹⁵ According to this revisionist perspective, Lawrence's novels and poems are even seen to foreshadow the postcolonial writing of the latter half of the twentieth century. Of course, this view of Lawrence, which seems driven by a desire to redeem his tarnished reputation, contrasts markedly with the earlier criticism that has condemned Lawrence's work as fascistic.⁹⁶

During the course of what follows, it will be argued instead that these types of contradictions can be understood by viewing Lawrence in terms of the historical circumstances peculiar to the context in which the novel was written. The political and cultural context that Lawrence himself experienced in Mexico during the 1920s provided the stimulus for his ambitious, and sometimes, perplexing vision of Mexico in *The Plumed Serpent*. Nevertheless, Lawrence's interpretation of Mexican society and culture also involves a great deal of artistic license in its colourful exaggeration of these themes. Far from offering a historically accurate reflection of Mexico itself, the model society that is portrayed in the novel often appears as a fantasy of the author's own making. As such, *The Plumed Serpent* offers nothing less than a comprehensive re-imagination of Mexico in the 1920s according to a set of ideas and themes that had preoccupied Lawrence for many years before his arrival in Mexico. Despite all this,

⁹⁵ See Neil Roberts, *D.H. Lawrence, Travel and Cultural Difference* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2004) and Amit Chaudhuri, *D.H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁹⁶ The contemporary British philosopher Bertrand Russell claimed that Lawrence's theory of 'blood-consciousness' was not only 'frankly rubbish' but a doctrine that 'led straight to Auschwitz'. Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Volume II (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1968), p. 22. Later, in the 1970s, Kate Millett offered a similar view of Lawrence when she identified the tone of such works as *Aaron's Rod*, *Kangaroo* and *The Plumed Serpent* as distinctly 'protofascist'. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1977), p. 281.

there remains an unanswered question: what was the origin of Lawrence's interest and enthusiasm for Mexican society and culture?

The answer to this question, as might be expected given the sizeable distance between English and Mexican culture, must be explored by an indirect and circuitous route. It will be necessary to make a slight detour by examining the experiences of Lawrence's life more than a decade before he even arrived in Mexico. After all, Lawrence's enthusiasm for Mexico rests on the foundation of having first arrived at the conclusion that there was something deeply wrong with modern western culture. This sense of there being something wrong was amply provided for Lawrence only a month after Gavrilo Princip assassinated the Archduke of Austria Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914 in Sarajevo when the countries of Europe were plunged irrevocably into the 'inferno' of war.

Lawrence and the First World War: 'How shall we get out of this Inferno?'

In the course of what follows, it will be argued that Lawrence's enthusiasm for the foreign values and beliefs of Mexico is tied up with his disenchantment with English society in the years that followed the outbreak of the First World War. In spite of some nuances and fluctuations in Lawrence's attitude – we will see later on, for example, how the war led Lawrence to question such things as the legitimacy of democracy and his fundamental understanding of human cruelty – it is important not to lose sight of the fact that Lawrence's intuitive response to the war was one of horror and disgust. When writing to his friend Lady Cynthia Asquith (one of the many friendships that Lawrence had cultivated among the English upper class), Lawrence expressed his feelings plainly when he confided: 'for me the war is utterly wrong, stupid, monstrous and contemptible'.⁹⁷

Lawrence's long-standing horror of automation and machinery was something that was only exacerbated by the First World War when, as the fighting continued, the nature of conflict transformed into something resembling a morbid industrial process. There had, after all, never been a conflict where death had been dealt to both sides on such a massive scale nor a conflict that was so mediated by the munitions industry.

⁹⁷ *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, ed. Aldous Huxley (London: Heinemann, 1932), p. 378.

Later on, in 1917, after reading reports of the loss of life on the western front in Flanders, Lawrence confided to another friend, the Scottish music critic and composer Cecil Gray, that 'people are not people any more: they are factors, really ghastly, like lemures, evil spirits of the dead'.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, in a manner that also reveals that Lawrence was not immune to feelings of optimism, even in these introspective moments of misery and gloom, he showed his sense of resolve by immediately posing the following question in the same letter: 'What shall we do, how shall we get out of this Inferno?'.

Despite Lawrence's fundamental hatred of the war, then, his response to the conflict was also thoughtful and productive. Though Lawrence was predisposed to brooding over grand philosophical questions, the First World War greatly intensified this aspect of his personality and writing. The war prompted Lawrence to ask himself a number of questions about what it meant to be human and about the function of organised societies. Lawrence's immediate response to the outbreak of war was to write a probing account of its underlying cause and motivation. In his poem 'Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani?' (1914) Lawrence turned away from any political explanation of the conflict and identified its cause in terms of a pathological hatred of the body and a latent desire for death. In a manner which reveals some similarities with a Freudian interpretation of the war, the soldier of the poem reveals how these unconscious drives are intertwined with a perversion, or distortion, of sexual energy:

Like a bride he took my bayonet, wanting it,
Like a virgin the blade of my bayonet, wanting it
And it sank to rest from me in him,
And I, the lover, am consummate,
And he is the bride, I have sown him with the seed
And planted and fertilized him.⁹⁹

As can be seen from this extract, the narrator of the poem assumes the persona of a soldier engaged in trench warfare. And, throughout the piece, the narrator articulates the thoughts of the soldier's unconscious as if these thoughts were wholly transparent

⁹⁸ *The Collected Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, ed. Harry T. Moore (New York: Viking, 1962), p. 528.

⁹⁹ *The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence*, eds. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (London: Heinemann, 1964), p. 742 (ll. 37-42).

to the soldier himself. At this moment, the soldier is revealed killing his enemy with a bayonet as the two combatants are engaged in a violent confrontation that is bluntly portrayed as a substitution for the act of sex. From this pseudo-Freudian perspective, the drives of *Thanatos* and *Eros* are intertwined in one violent and orgiastic moment of lustful annihilation. Some years later in *Aaron's Rod* (1922), Lawrence located the source of this psychic repression with the Christian culture of Europe when Rawdon Lilly, a writer in the novel who bears a strong resemblance to Lawrence himself, encourages Aaron to turn away from the 'love-urge' which is identified with 'the Buddhists in Burmah' and 'the newest fangled Christians in Europe', remarking: 'how sick they make themselves with love, they always rush for more, like a dog to his vomit'.¹⁰⁰

In a related sense, Lawrence also became increasingly concerned with the issue of how society ought to be organised, or, again, how the country might emerge from the inferno of war. Commissioned by the 'Writers of the Day' series, and published in the same year as 'Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani?' Lawrence's *Study of Thomas Hardy* (1914) swiftly deviates from the subject of literary criticism. Revealing his tendency towards self-absorption, Lawrence uses this publication to provide an explanation of his own beliefs on writing and life during this difficult stage of his career. In a letter to his literary agent, J. B. Pinker, Lawrence complained: 'what a colossal idiocy, this war' and went on to explain that 'out of sheer rage [he had] begun [his] book about Thomas Hardy'.¹⁰¹ As with 'Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani?', Lawrence again reveals a view concerning the origins of the conflict based on a set of assumptions about the underlying mental geography of the human species, in which the drive towards personal flourishing is contrasted with the competing impulse towards self-preservation.¹⁰² The formulation of this theory provides Lawrence with a further explanation of the war when he suggests that this fixation on self-preservation has resulted in a dangerous form of repression: 'Does not the war show us how little, under all our carefulness, we count human life and human suffering, how little we

¹⁰⁰ D.H. Lawrence, *Aaron's Rod* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 294.

¹⁰¹ *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, 7 vols, eds George J. Zytaaruk and James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), III, p. 212.

¹⁰² D. H. Lawrence, *Study of Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 12-13.

value ourselves, at bottom, how we hate our own security'.¹⁰³ Whereas 'Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani?' reveals the influence of Freud on Lawrence's thinking, his view of life in the *Study* shows the unmistakable impact of Nietzsche where the origins of conflict are explained according to a repressed human impulse which closely resembles the will to power.¹⁰⁴

Aside from Lawrence's general horror of the war as a commentator who deplored what was taking place in Europe from a distance, there was also his more personal sense of trauma to consider. In his biography of Lawrence, John Worthen discusses the difficult moment in the writer's life when the war transformed his thriving literary prospects virtually overnight.¹⁰⁵ In the precarious climate of war, Worthen explains how Lawrence's publisher, Methuen, returned all their recently submitted manuscripts, including one written by Lawrence himself: the multi-generational study of marriage which would eventually be titled *The Rainbow*. Furthermore, this predicament was made worse when critics severely criticised the book on its eventual release and the police seized every remaining copy. In addition to these difficulties, there were also other far more ambitious projects that failed to achieve any form of success in this anxious and difficult climate.

With an ambitious view to influencing public opinion, Lawrence's desire to publicise his own theories on politics and society met with a response from the reading

¹⁰³ D. H. Lawrence, *Study of Thomas Hardy*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁴ The influence of Nietzsche on Lawrence is something that will be returned to again in the next chapter where it will be identified as a significant source of his understanding of the natural world as well as something that shaped the writer's interpretation of the cultural otherness of Mexico. For now, it is worth noting that the influence of this German philosopher on Lawrence is an area of research that is well documented. In his wide-ranging study of the impact of Nietzsche on the literary circles in England at the turn of the century, David Thatcher has demonstrated 'that Nietzsche's impact was most strongly felt, not in academic circle, but in artistic ones'. Among those English writers whom Nietzsche influenced directly, Thatcher identifies D.H. Lawrence, George Bernard Shaw, John Payne, John Davidson, Havelock Ellis, A.R. Orage, Edward Thomas, Arthur Symonds as well as the Irish poet W.B. Yeats and the novelist James Joyce. The reason for this interest is revealed in terms of reverence where Nietzsche was identified as kindred spirit and intellectual pioneer among English writers who wished to transform values and challenge what was often identified as the Philistinism of their own culture. David S. Thatcher, *Nietzsche in England 1890-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 6, pp. 121-137. In terms of a more particular study on the connections between Lawrence and Nietzsche, Colin Milton has discussed a range of issues from Lawrence's use of language to his treatment of human relationships and his analysis of human instincts. Colin Milton, *Lawrence and Nietzsche* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987). In his biography, John Worthen also reveals that Lawrence began his study of Nietzsche during his teaching career in Croydon between 1908 and 1910. John Worthen, *D. H. Lawrence: The Life of an Outsider* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 59.

¹⁰⁵ John Worthen, *D. H. Lawrence*, p. 148.

public which could be described as lukewarm at best. With a group of friends, who included Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murry, Lawrence published a magazine called *The Signature* which, he had hoped, would function as a platform for his own views and even as a stepping stone towards reform.¹⁰⁶ However, this ambitious project came to nothing when the two contributors decided to withdraw from the project after a family tragedy in which Mansfield's younger brother died in France.¹⁰⁷

In addition, Lawrence experienced a form of discrimination largely due to his marriage to the German Frieda Weekley. In his detailed study of the war's effects on Lawrence, Paul Delany explains: 'We will never know the precise roles of the various civil and military authorities in harassing the Lawrences during the war years; but certainly they were never left in peace for long'.¹⁰⁸ Of course, this persecution did not stem solely from Frieda's nationality. Lawrence's wife was also born to the prestigious Von Richthofen German family and was a distant cousin of Manfred von Richthofen: the flying ace who was known to the British public as the infamous 'Red Baron'.¹⁰⁹ Later on in the war, largely owing to this family connection, the Lawrences were even accused by local authorities of signalling to enemy submarines in the channel from their home at Zennor in the Cornish coast.¹¹⁰ As a consequence of this fear, the Lawrences were banned from living in the coastal regions of England and were almost made homeless in the process; something they only narrowly escaped through the help of Mansfield and Murry.

In addition to these professional and financial burdens, Lawrence was required to attend a number of medical examinations in the programme of conscription that was sweeping the country. Although Lawrence had decided to leave England for America as early as 1916 he was prevented from doing so by the overbearing institutions of the

¹⁰⁶ Paul Delany, *D.H. Lawrence's Nightmare* (Hassocks: John Spiers, 1979), pp. 140-46.

¹⁰⁷ Paul Delany, p. 152.

¹⁰⁸ Paul Delany, p. 315.

¹⁰⁹ Paul Delany, p.283. In his detailed study on the influence of the von Richthofen family connection, Martin Green has argued that 'it has not been generally appreciated [...] how completely Lawrence submerged himself in the von Richthofen milieu when he ran away with Frieda'. In turn, Green argues that this gave Lawrence's novels a distinctly German influence. For example, Green argues that *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* reveal traces of the *Bildungsroman* while the intellectual and cultural life of Schwabing had a strong ideological impact on Lawrence's leadership novels. In this sense, Green locates Lawrence's interest in Nietzsche in a broader cultural context that also embodied a deep immersion in the cultural life of German bohemia. Martin Green, *The von Richthofen Sisters: The Triumphant and the Tragic Modes of Love* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 339, pp. 349-50.

¹¹⁰ Paul Delany, p. 317.

English establishment. Of this episode in the writer's life, Delany explains how Lawrence's travel plans were derailed by the military authorities who would only allow travel for the purpose that served the national interest.¹¹¹ Lawrence was so angered by these limitations on his personal freedom that he protested of his own country: 'I curse it, I curse England, I curse the English, man, woman, and child, in their nationality let them be accursed and hated and never forgiven'.¹¹²

When the ignominy of the medical examinations eventually arrived, Lawrence's patience was tested to breaking point. As someone who had an enormous sense of pride in his own body, it is hardly surprising that Lawrence objected to this type of intrusion. After the third examination at Derby towards the end of the war in September 1918, which involved a humiliating anal examination, Lawrence insisted: 'They shall *not* touch me again – such filth...from this day I take a new line. I've done with society and humanity'.¹¹³ Commenting on this traumatic experience, Delany recounts the passage from *Kangaroo* (1923) where the protagonist, Richard Lovat Somers, is subjected to the same medical intrusion as Lawrence himself. Of this episode, Delany suggests: 'the account of the examination in *Kangaroo* is so saturated with contempt that Lawrence often loses control of the fictional tone and yields to pure rage'.¹¹⁴ This imbalanced emotional tone anticipates the spontaneous eruptions of personal indignation that can also be observed in *The Plumed Serpent*.

In this respect, the most revealing passage from Lawrence's Mexican novel in terms of the war – a passage which also provides an important link between Lawrence's experiences of the war and his interest in Mexican culture – can be found when the narrator describes Kate's restless state of mind as she struggles to sleep at her rented house in Sayula. In this passage, the reader is told that the province is having problems with 'a band of robbers' which immediately plunges the whole village into a state of raw anxiety (p.133). Then, rather suddenly, the war is mentioned in the following passage that appears a few pages afterwards:

¹¹¹ Paul Delany, p. 282.

¹¹² *The Collected Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, ed. Harry T. Moore, p. 501.

¹¹³ *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, III, p. 287, p. 288.

¹¹⁴ Paul Delany, p. 375.

Kate lay and thought hard, in the black night. At the same time, she was listening intensely, with a clutch of horror. She could not control her heart. It seemed wrenched out of place, and really hurt her. She was, as she had never been before, absolute physically afraid, blood afraid. Her blood was wrenched in a paralysis of fear.

In England, in Ireland, during the war and the revolution she had known *spiritual* fear. The ghastly fear of the rabble; and during the war, nations were nearly all rabble. The terror of the rabble that, mongrel-like, wanted to break the free *spirit* in individual men and women. It was the cold, collective lust of millions of people, to break the spirit in the outstanding individuals. They wanted to break this spirit, so that they could start the great downhill rush back to old underworld levels, old gold-worship and murder lust. The rabble.

(p. 136)

Here, Lawrence seems unable to contain his personal sense of indignation and anger. The personal nature of this passage is revealed with the loose and puzzling association that is made between the first and second paragraphs. The passage moves abruptly from reflecting on Kate's 'paralysis of fear' as she lies in her bed unable to sleep to the description of her experience in England and Ireland during the war during which, the reader is told, 'she had known *spiritual* fear'. It soon becomes clear that this commentary is little more than a thinly veiled reflection on Lawrence's personal war-time experience. In the next sentence, the narrator complains of the supposed European habit of suppressing exceptional individuals, presumably like Lawrence himself. The reader is informed by the diagnostic narrator: 'It was the cold, collective lust of millions of people, to break the spirit in the outstanding individuals' (p. 136).

However, the most curious feature of this passage is not the criticism of the war, nor even Lawrence's own wounded sense of pride, but the use of the term 'mongrel-like' to describe the majority of Europeans who supported the war effort. It is worth pointing out here that the same term is also used by Lawrence in *Kangaroo* (1923). In a passage from this earlier novel which deals with the theme of war more directly, the narrator had railed against exceptional individuals who 'shirked their duty' by not objecting to the war strongly enough and allowed the 'stinking mongrelism' of those who supported the conflict to win the argument.¹¹⁵ What, it might be wondered, lies behind this strange identification of the war with all that is implied by the use of the term 'mongrel'?

¹¹⁵ D.H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 217.

The First World War and the Spectre of Mongrelism: 'a lethal chamber as big as Crystal Palace'

In order to answer this question, it is helpful to remember that the word 'mongrel' had been used by Lawrence before. In the opening chapter of *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence had turned his attention to the European cultural inheritance of Mexico and had described, with palpable distaste, 'the mongrel mass of a mongrel city' (p. 20). And, this was by no means the only occasion when the term 'mongrel' appeared in the opening chapter. The restive spectators of the bull fight were likewise described as 'lost mongrels' who '[prowled] back and forth' as they anticipated the ensuing spectacle with a level of enthusiasm that appalled the moral sensitivities of the protagonist (p. 12). With the bull fight underway, the matadors themselves are also revealed as 'mongrel men' who '[skip] for safety' when the bull begins its desperate and futile charge (p. 17). In this way, the derogatory term 'mongrel' was used in the opening chapter to describe the ethnically mixed population of the inner city.

What is more, this sense of revulsion and distaste in the presence of racial ambiguity stands in marked contrast to the narrator's approving recognition of racial purity. When Kate comes across the heroic Cipriano towards the end of the opening chapter, after fleeing the bullfight in distress, his ethnicity is indicated immediately in the robust form of his 'heavy Indian momentum' (p. 21). It then becomes clear in this same moment that Cipriano's Indian-ness is an object of intense fascination when the narrator dwells on his distinctive appearance and demeanour: 'His eyes were dark, quick, with the glassy darkness that she found so wearying [...] his manner was superficially assured, underneath perhaps half savage, shy and farouche, and deprecating'. In the next chapter, this note of approval is again linked to his ethnicity when Kate again meets Cipriano for a second time and identifies him as an 'Indian pure and simple' (p. 30). Again, on this occasion, Kate recalls various features of his appearance with approval and fascination, which is also attended by a certain level of anxiety and alarm: 'she remembered his erect, alert little figure, something bird-like and the face with the eyes slanting under arched eyebrows [...] yet those black, inhuman eyes'.

As with the discussion of Conrad's attitude to the mixed-race Montero brothers in *Nostromo*, the relationship between eugenics and modernism seems pertinent to the discussion here. In this respect, it will be recalled from the previous section on Conrad how, as the nineteenth century was drawing to a close, the emerging science of eugenics received a great deal of interest and attention. In the context of the *fin de siècle*, and well into the early decades of the twentieth century, the notion that society might be improved through a process of selective breeding appealed to a range of writers, scientists, politicians and intellectuals from a variety of countries and from both the progressive and conservative ends of the political spectrum.

Any doubt that Lawrence was sympathetic to eugenics himself can be removed when we consider that, almost twenty years before writing *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence had written of his enthusiasm for herding the supposed unfit into gas chambers: 'I would build a lethal chamber as big as Crystal Palace, with a military band playing softly, and a Cinematograph working brightly; then I'd go out in the back streets and main streets and bring them in, all the sick, the halt, and the maimed'.¹¹⁶ As this quotation reveals, the anxiety that society might be toppled under the weight of its more populous and debased elements is an important component of Lawrence's thinking. And, this same anxiety manifests itself in *The Plumed Serpent* where, in addition to his derogatory use of the term 'mongrel', it lingers in the background of Kate's distinctive interpretation of post-revolutionary Mexican politics:

[Kate] wanted to leave the city. The new President had come in quietly enough, but there was an ugly feeling of uppishness in the lower classes, the bottom dog clambering mangily to the top. Kate was no snob. Man or woman, she cared nothing about the social class. But meanness, sordidness she hated. She hated bottom dogs. They all were mangy, they all were full of envy and malice, many had the rabies. Ah no, let us defend ourselves from the bottom dog, with its mean growl and its yellow teeth.

(p. 81)

In this extract, Kate voices her anxiety about the new president in a manner that again reveals the eugenic heritage of the nineteenth century. The image of the mangy dog recalls the use of the term 'mongrel' as Kate voices her anxiety about the inversion of a

¹¹⁶ Quoted in David Bradshaw, 'Eugenics: "They should certainly be killed"' in *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, p. 43.

natural hierarchy where the weak appear to govern the strong. Kate's disavowal of snobbery seems entirely disingenuous in this passage which reflects, all too transparently, Lawrence's own indignation towards a political scene that is democratic and populist in orientation. In this way, it would seem that Lawrence's negative judgement of mixed-race Mexico, along with his desire to seek out some form of racial purity, is related to the First World War and his concerns over racial purity in general.

However, if the broad theme and meaning of *The Plumed Serpent* can be understood in terms of the war, one further aspect of the passage during Kate's restless night in Sayula seems especially revealing. After this reference to the war, it is revealed that Kate's former husband Joachim believed that 'evil was the lapsing back to old-life modes that have been surpassed in us' (p. 137). For Lawrence, the war itself could, at times, appear as nothing less than a direct consequence of a universal human tendency towards violence and cruelty. As the war progressed, Lawrence's growing misanthropy was joined with a sense that humanity was possessed of some underlying impulse towards murder and destruction. This was something that Lawrence felt to be no less true of those that condemned the war, such as his friend Bertrand Russell, as those that supported it.¹¹⁷

In this respect, *The Plumed Serpent* can be regarded as a reflection on how this primordial force might be absorbed into a new form of social praxis. One distinctive feature of Lawrence's Mexican novel is the substitution of a modern political state for a social order that is feudal and patriarchal in nature and which institutes human cruelty as an important aspect of a symbolic religious order. In *The Plumed Serpent* male leadership often appears as the miraculous solution to a whole gamut of complex social problems. Towards the end of the novel, with the ancient religious practices of Mexico restored, Kate reflects on this reversion to brutal paganism and male leadership that it is 'better to stand behind a really brave man, than to push forward into the ranks of cheap and obtrusive women' (p. 405). What was it that led Lawrence to become so enamoured with the possibility of returning to a primitive form of social organisation based on the respect for a male authority figure?

This attitude may have been partly inspired by Lawrence's study of ancient history during this stage of his literary career. From Bertrand Russell Lawrence learned of John

¹¹⁷ Paul Delany, pp. 84-85.

Burnet's study *Early Greek Philosophy* which had a transformative effect on his thinking.¹¹⁸ In particular, after reading about the ideas of Heraclitus, Lawrence announced: 'I have been wrong, much too Christian, in my philosophy' and added with a note of gratification: 'these early Greek have clarified my soul'. Lawrence then continued in a more political frame of mind: 'You must drop all your democracy [...] There must be an aristocracy of people who have wisdom, and there must be a Ruler: a Kaiser: no Presidents and democracies'.¹¹⁹ A few years later in 1918, Lawrence also began reading Edward Gibbon's account of the fall of the Roman Empire which encouraged his belief in the legitimacy of authoritarian rule still further.¹²⁰ The world might be saved, Lawrence seems to have believed, by reverting to a form of government based on a strong male leadership. It is this authoritarian turn in Lawrence's thinking that sheds some additional light on the appeal that Mexico exerted over his imagination. As a country with a long history of dictatorship, Mexico could offer Lawrence a model of the society founded on strong male leadership, a modern Rome perhaps with its own series of emperors.

Lawrence in Mexico: 'A seed that falls into new ground'

Before writing *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence had also been inspired by his travels in Italy and Australia; something which is reflected in his fictional output. As with his later Mexican novel, then, the process of travel is also linked to the potential for personal rebirth in *Aaron's Rod* (1922). At the beginning of this story, the protagonist, Aaron Sisson, leaves his wife and two children, along with his profession as a union official in the industrial Midlands, and decides to move to Italy. Having settled in Florence, Aaron encounters a number of people in this foreign location who have a transformative effect on his personality; among them is Josephine Ford who, in a manner that prefigures the effect that Cipriano will have on Kate in *The Plumed Serpent*, is said to have the blood of aboriginal America and to have moved around 'like some savage squaw'.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Paul Delany, p. 118.

¹¹⁹ *The Collected Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, ed. Harry T. Moore, p. 352.

¹²⁰ Paul Delany, p. 362.

¹²¹ D.H. Lawrence, *Aaron's Rod*, p. 69.

As far back as 1922, then, when Lawrence had begun working on *Aaron's Rod*, he had demonstrated an eagerness to learn from other cultures, especially those that he determined to be in some way primitive. In *Kangaroo* (1923) this same passion manifested itself with reference to Australia when the protagonist, Richard Somers, journeyed to New South Wales after the war in order, in part, to explore the 'real new way' that is suggested by Australia.¹²² Nevertheless, Somers is eventually disappointed in these aims because Australia, he learns, has been contaminated by the old ideas of European civilisation and reveals a similarly corrosive obsession with materialism. In a precise echo of Lawrence's own thoughts and subsequent journey to America, Somers reasons that 'to be pure in heart, man must listen to the dark gods as well as to the white gods, to the call to blood-sacrifices as well as to the eucharist'.¹²³

As the conclusion of *Kangaroo* suggests, it was the American continent, more than any other area of the world, which seemed to offer Lawrence the opportunity for a new beginning. As early as 1915, Lawrence had declared that his life in England was over and had identified America as the place of his rebirth. To Cynthia Asquith, Lawrence wrote: 'When I drive across [England], with autumn falling and rustling to pieces, I am so sad, for my country, for this great wave of civilisation, 2000 years, which is now collapsing. In the same letter, Lawrence then declared: 'I want to go to America' and added 'my life is ended here. I must go as a seed that falls into new ground'.¹²⁴ Lawrence was not, of course, referring to the United States on this occasion. Instead, Lawrence's interest centred on those Indian communities that had retained a degree of cultural and religious independence from Spain and North America. For Lawrence, this was the authentic face of America. These isolated tribal communities offered a positive opportunity for identification and a means of escaping many elements of western societies that Lawrence found so deeply troubling.

¹²² D.H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, p. 138.

¹²³ D.H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, p. 268, p. 342.

¹²⁴ *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 431-32.

Lawrence had initially moved to the United States after Mabel Luhan invited the writer to her ranch in New Mexico after reading *Sea and Sardinia*. As an aspiring patron of the arts, this wealthy North American had hoped that Lawrence would write with equal sensitivity about the Native Americans she admired.¹²⁵ Despite some initial reluctance, Lawrence accepted this invitation and sailed for San Francisco with Frieda on 11 August 1922 on board the *Tahiti*.¹²⁶ One month later, Lawrence had arrived at Mabel Luhan's estate in Taos, New Mexico, where he stayed until the beginning of December that same year. The domestic circumstances that Lawrence was exposed to here had a direct influence on the eventual design of his Mexican novel. After all, Lawrence began writing the first draft of *The Plumed Serpent*, with its theme of interracial marriage after he learned of Mabel's marriage to the Indian Tony Luhan.¹²⁷ In this respect, Lawrence's experiences of New Mexico were, somewhat confusingly, an important influence on the eventual shape and substance of his Mexican novel.

It was not until 19 March 1923, however, after this period in New Mexico, that Lawrence departed for Mexico. Lawrence and Frieda arrived in the capital four days later, where they were joined by two homosexual American friends, Witter Bynner and Willard Johnson.¹²⁸ From the beginning of *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence draws extensively on this experience in Mexico City. The novel begins with a recreation of a bullfight that Lawrence attended with Frieda and their two American friends only a little over a week after their arrival. And yet, the biographical details behind the novel are considerably more complicated than the simple relation in fictional form of Lawrence's initial visit to Mexico City. The actual substance of the story – the indigenous religious revival – only really begins once Kate travels from Mexico City to the rural district of Sayula.

In this respect, Kate's journey corresponds to the one taken by Lawrence himself in his effort to find a house in Mexico on his initial visit to the country. Lawrence eventually settled on the rural district of Chapala after travelling there by himself from Mexico City on 27 April 1923.¹²⁹ Lawrence remained at the lakeside village of Chapala

¹²⁵ John Worthen, p. 255.

¹²⁶ John Worthen, p. 272.

¹²⁷ John Worthen, p. 288.

¹²⁸ John Worthen, p. 286.

¹²⁹ John Worthen, p. 288.

where he worked intensively on the first draft of his Mexican novel from April to July 1923.¹³⁰ This earlier work constitutes a separate novel in its own right and was completed at breakneck speed during his brief three-month stay. It was named after the Mexican god who was most central to its theme of an indigenous religious revival, Quetzalcoatl.¹³¹

At the end of their stay in Chapala, Lawrence and Frieda had travelled to New York with the intention of sailing back to England. However, while Frieda wanted to keep to this plan, Lawrence decided to travel further in the United States by himself after expressing a reluctance to return to England. After travelling westward through Chicago and spending a brief period in Los Angeles, Lawrence settled again in Mexico for a second time with his friend Kai Götzsche in late September 1923. Worthen characterises this period of the Lawrence's life as 'three miserable months' and maintains that Lawrence was 'tortured [...] by his months of independence'.¹³² Although Lawrence briefly visited Mexico City and Chapala again during this time, he spent the majority of his trip in the foreboding western districts of Mexico.

Indeed, the Sierra Madre, a mountain range in north-western Mexico, provided the location for the short story that in certain respects anticipates the revised version of his Mexican novel.¹³³ After all, 'The Woman Who Rode Away' (1924) features a female protagonist who takes an interest in Native American culture. This short story, however, culminates in a religious ceremony where the narrative terminates moments before the heroine is sacrificed. It is a narrative strategy that is used again in the execution scene of *The Plumed Serpent* where four men and one woman are also brutally put to their deaths in a ritualistic act of violence. The literal acts of cruelty and violence in

¹³⁰ John Worthen, p. 290.

¹³¹ In this way, the draft that Lawrence had written during his initial stay in Mexico also provided the template for the novel that would become known as *The Plumed Serpent*; a new title that Lawrence objected to himself but was encouraged to adopt by his publisher. This new title was a direct English translation of the Nahuatl term 'Quetzalcoatl' for the same ancient Mexican deity which has the literal meaning of 'plumed' or 'feathered serpent'. This heavily revised work was more than twice as long as the original novel and occupied Lawrence for a much longer period. It was not completed until January 1925. For a detailed discussion of the differences between *Quetzalcoatl* and *The Plumed Serpent* and of the relationship between these two versions of the text and Lawrence's travels see Mark Kinkead-Weekes, 'Decolonising imagination: Lawrence in the 1920s' in *The Cambridge Companion to D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Anne Fernihough (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 68-83. From this point on, all references to *The Plumed Serpent* in this study are to the final version of the text.

¹³² John Worthen, pp. 293-94.

¹³³ John Worthen, p. 295.

both cases, however, often seem intertwined with the rather more symbolic slaying of western subjectivity, the real object of Lawrence's scorn.

In any case, after three months of wandering in western Mexico, Lawrence eventually decided to meet up again with Frieda and return to England. Having resolved to make this journey, Lawrence sailed from Vera Cruz with Götzsche and arrived in Plymouth on 11 December 1923. Worthen draws attention to the fact that, on returning home, Lawrence's response to England frequently ran to 'images of death, burial and enclosure'.¹³⁴ By contrast, Lawrence continued to identify the American continent with the idea of rebirth. For this reason, perhaps, Lawrence decided to visit Mexico again for a third time. On this occasion, from October 1924 to March 1925, Lawrence resided in the Mexican state of Oaxaca where he continued to work on *The Plumed Serpent* and the remaining chapters of *Mornings in Mexico* (1927). Lawrence had settled in this area of the country after it had been recommended to him by the British Consul, something which had followed Lawrence's stated preference for an area of Mexico with a higher population of Native Americans.¹³⁵

Taking the Politics out of the Mexican Revolution: the Substitution of 'Sympathy' for 'Blood'

Although a restive mood seems to have taken hold of Lawrence during the first half of the 1920s, he resided in Mexico on three separate occasions. It is, then, Lawrence's direct experience of Mexico during these three separate visits to the country during this period of time that provides the basis of his rapturous response towards its distinctive culture and politics. More precisely, what lies behind this enthusiasm, is the vibrant national culture that gripped Mexico in the wake of its revolution. The episode in *The Plumed Serpent* when Mrs Norris holds a tea party in her home is a crucial moment in the novel for understanding Lawrence's attitude to the post-revolutionary, modern state of Mexico. While the British and American guests are being introduced, Mrs. Norris solicits Kate's opinion of Mexican society. After Kate replies that Mexico

¹³⁴ John Worthen, p. 296.

¹³⁵ John Worthen, p. 317.

'strikes [her] as evil', there is this revealing exchange between Mrs Norris and her guests:

'It does! It does!' said Mrs Norris. 'Ah, if you had known it before! Mexico before the revolution! It was different then. What is the latest news, Major?'

'About the same,' said the Major. 'There is a rumour that the new President will be turned down by the army, a few days before he comes into office. But you never know.'

'I think it would be a great shame not to let him have a try,' put in Owen hotly. 'He seems a sincere man, and just because he is honestly a Labour man, they want to shut him out.'

'Ah, my dear Mr Rhys, they *all* talk so nobly beforehand. If only their deeds followed their words, Mexico would be heaven on earth.'

'Instead of hell on earth,' snapped the Judge.

(p. 34)

Although he appears under the name of Tomás Montes in the novel, this fictional president is based on Plutarco Elías Calles, who was inaugurated as the President of Mexico in December 1924.¹³⁶ Calles came to power with the aim of recapturing the spirit of the revolution and turning away from the years of compromise that had characterised the regime of the previous president, Álvaro Obregón Salido.¹³⁷ It is this type of political ambition which is reflected in Owen's observation on the socialist policies of the new leadership. Owen identifies the new president as 'a sincere [...] Labour man' which reflects the new president's association with the labour union and his support of worker's rights. The subsequent comment, however, that 'they *all* talk so nobly beforehand' reflects the more wary feelings that often attended the inauguration of a new Mexican president during this post-revolutionary period of the 1920s.

When Lawrence first arrived in Mexico with Frieda in 1923 it was a time of comparative calm when the moderate Álvaro Obregón Salido, who held office from 1920-1924, was nearing the end of his presidency. Mexico had begun to emerge from the violence and chaos of its revolution and had entered a more peaceful stage in its history.¹³⁸ The specific fear alluded to in this passage was that General Ángel Flores, after his defeat in the 1924 election, would challenge Calles for power with an armed

¹³⁶ D.H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent*, p. 450.

¹³⁷ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 582-87.

¹³⁸ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, pp. 580-81.

rebellion.¹³⁹ Although the rebellion never took place this comment reflects the anxiety that was in the air in Mexico in spite of the peaceful transition from Obregón to Calles. The judge's statement that Mexico is nothing more than 'hell on earth' seems to capture the popular North American view of Mexico's revolutionary politics; something which is also summed up in the illustration below from a contemporaneous American magazine.



'What? Again!': a Popular Cartoon Depicting a North American Response to the Mexican Revolution.

However, the most revealing comment of this dinner party is Mrs Norris claim that Mexico was better off before its revolution: 'Ah, if you had known it before! Mexico before the revolution!' After all, Mrs Norris's negative judgement of the revolution reflects her opinion of what came before: namely, the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz who ruled Mexico from 1876 to 1911. This authoritarian Mexican leader is mentioned

¹³⁹ D. H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent*, p. 450.

during the course of *The Plumed Serpent* on a number of occasions. In general, Lawrence casts the Porfiriato (the title given to the period of Mexican history when the country was ruled by Díaz) in terms of a golden age of political and social stability. With a degree of nostalgia that echoes Mrs Norris's own judgement the narrator wistfully reflects that 'in Porfirio Díaz' day, the lake-side of Sayula was 'the Riviera of Mexico' before 'revolutions started erupting again' (p.98). On one other occasion, the narrator also alludes to the 'safe quiet days' of the Porfiriato (p. 112) as if this period of Mexican history was one of harmony and concord.

However, the nature of the Porfiriato was more problematic than is indicated by the favourable view expressed by Lawrence. Though Díaz was responsible for the economic growth and technical modernisation of Mexico there were a number of negative consequences to this type of progress. With his frequent recourse to violent coercion, press censorship and falsified election results, Díaz exerted a tyrannical hold over Mexico in much the same way as any other twentieth-century dictator.¹⁴⁰ What is more, in spite of the favourable impression created by some economic indicators (the Porfiriato resulted in a doubling of output in manufactured goods as well as huge increases in foreign trade),¹⁴¹ the situation for ordinary Mexicans actually deteriorated during this period. The inequitable hacienda system of land ownership, with its concentration of land among a few elite creole families, was replaced by a system where businesses were able to purchase land with even fewer restrictions.¹⁴² It is also worth pointing out here that the political regime of Díaz treated the Indian population of their country with disdain. To be sure, the Mexican Revolution was largely energised by a desire to liberate this underclass from the exploitive conditions imposed on them by Díaz.

It is possible that Lawrence's admiration for Díaz reflects the contemporary attitudes of the time. However, it seems more likely that Lawrence's own attitude is associated with his general approval of strong male leadership during this period of his writing career. After all, Díaz, as the quintessential Mexican strongman, was the kind of political leader with whom Lawrence had been infatuated after his reading of Burnet

¹⁴⁰ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, p. 453.

¹⁴¹ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, p. 449.

¹⁴² Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, pp. 457-60.

and Gibbon. There is surely a degree of irony, however, in Lawrence's reverence for a leader who was responsible for suppressing the Indian population of the country. As will be seen after the discussion of one further episode, this sense of irony is deepened by Lawrence's largely negative judgement of the Mexican Revolution.

During his initial stay in the country, Lawrence also had the opportunity to visit the National Preparatory School in Mexico City. It was here in 1923 that Lawrence observed the murals of the celebrated Mexican artist Diego Rivera (1885-1957). Rivera was the most prominent among a group of young artists who had been commissioned to paint these murals in public buildings only a few years earlier in 1921.¹⁴³ Rivera had received this commission from the Minister for Education, José Vasconcelos, who served under the Obregón administration. By these means, the post-revolutionary leaders of Mexico were attempting to use Mexican culture as a means towards the political ends of the revolution.

The fact that these murals were commissioned for public buildings reveals that this cultural movement was an effort to democratise art works by taking them out of galleries and delivering them into the hands of ordinary Mexican people. It also reflects the political aim of a movement which sought to galvanize a revolutionary sense of nationhood by celebrating the dignity of the indigenous Mexican population. In this context, Rivera built his reputation around a series of murals that took the Mexican Indian as their subject. Typically, Rivera's artworks revealed the Mexican Indian as an exploited underclass along with a view of history where this ethnic group had been placed in this subordinate position since the beginning of Spanish colonialism. These type of frescoes are referred to directly in *The Plumed Serpent* with the narrator's observation that the university had been 'given over to the young artists to decorate,' observing that 'since the revolutions, nowhere had authority and tradition been so finally overthrown as in the Mexican fields of science and art' (p. 52).

¹⁴³ Brian R. Hamnett, *A Concise History of Mexico*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 318.



Revolutionary Nationalism: a Mural by Diego Rivera in the National Preparatory School.

Lawrence represents this aspect of the post-revolutionary Mexican culture of the 1920s with the episode in *The Plumed Serpent* when Kate and Owen visit 'the University' in the capital in order to view a number of 'Ribera's frescoes'; a thinly disguised reference, of course, to Diego Rivera himself (p. 52). Firstly, the reader is informed how these frescoes only reveal an interest in the Indian Mexican from a political vantage; or, in the narrator's words: 'there was sympathy with the Indian, but always from the ideal, social point of view'. Kate, much like the author himself, is more interested in the spiritual and physical aspects of Indian life. In this respect, the reader is informed that these murals 'never [provide] the spontaneous answer of the blood' (p.52). When the tour of the university moves 'to the Old Jesuit convent' which is 'now used as a secondary school' the socialist theme of these frescoes becomes even more apparent. These radical art works reveal 'strident caricatures of the Capitalist, and the Church, and of the Rich Woman, and of Mammon painted life-sized and as violent as possible' (p. 53). It is these frescoes that rouse Kate to denounce the socialist cause in Mexico in abrasive terms. She admonishes the young Mexican professor who

accompanies them with the stern and disapproving judgement that 'you aren't even Mexicans, really' adding: 'you are just half-Spaniards full of European ideas' (p. 53).

From these early episodes in *The Plumed Serpent* – the dinner party episode discussed above as well as Kate's visit to the National Preparatory School in Mexico City – Lawrence's response to the Mexican Revolution seems idiosyncratic. While Lawrence dismisses the socialist cause of the Mexican Revolution he nevertheless reveres its efforts to engineer an indigenous cultural revival. In this way, as we have already observed, Lawrence tends to overlook the fact that the two were linked in the same revolutionary project. In terms of his understanding of the Mexican revolution, then, Lawrence's views are deeply embroiled with his own more personal concerns.

The Plumed Serpent can be thought of as the literary outcome of this broad cultural movement and the author's own much more personal concerns. The presiding Mexican political project of the 1920s coincided in a variety of significant ways with Lawrence's own interests as a writer. In the light of the disenchantment that followed in the wake of the war, it presented Lawrence with a clear opportunity to move beyond the destructive limitations of European politics. Although the meeting never took place, Lawrence had even arranged to have lunch with the Minister of Education, José Vasconcelos, to talk about this extremely topical issue.¹⁴⁴

As we have seen, Kate strongly disapproves of the socialist direction of the Mexican Revolution. Instead, the heroine of *The Plumed Serpent* is far more interested in the indigenous customs and traditions of Mexico that pre-date its contact with Europe. In this respect, the preoccupations of this fictional character closely match Lawrence's own enthusiasm for seeking out alternatives to western culture. The fundamental reason why the political programme of the Revolution is of little interest to Lawrence is because its ideological origins are European. It is revealing, then, that the next episode in this same chapter begins the narration of the religious revival. After returning to her hotel after viewing the frescoes of the National Preparatory School, Kate stumbles across a newspaper article in the *Excelsior* with the following headline: 'The Gods of Antiquity Return to Mexico' (p. 56).

The Culture of Post-Revolutionary Mexico in the 1920s: 'Do as we have done here'

¹⁴⁴ John Worthen, p. 286.

Specifically, the two main historical sources for Lawrence's inspiration of a religious revolution in Mexico were the popular and state-led interest in Native American culture that rejuvenated Mexico in the wake of its violent revolution and the anti-Catholic policies of President Calles, who ruled Mexico as its president from 1924 to 1928. These two features of the historical context that Lawrence was exposed to during his three visits to Mexico from 1923 to 1925 provided the necessary stimulus for the extremely bold, and initially perplexing, vision of a resurgent native Mexican culture that Lawrence offers his readers in *The Plumed Serpent*.

The Revival of Pre-Columbian Culture: 'not so dead as the Spanish churches'

It will be helpful to consider again the episode in the second chapter of *The Plumed Serpent* when Kate and her two American friends attend a tea party in Tlacolula. After all, at this social gathering, which takes place in the suburb of Oaxaca, the hostess, Mrs Norris, is not only revealed as the widow of a former 'English ambassador of thirty years ago' (p. 29) but also as 'an archaeologist' who specialises in Mexican ruins (pp. 32-33). The character of Mrs Norris is, in fact, based on the American archaeologist and anthropologist Zelia Maria Magdalena Nuttall with whom Lawrence was acquainted and whose work provided Lawrence with an important source for understanding the indigenous culture of Mexico.¹⁴⁵ When Kate follows Mrs Norris to her terrace shortly before sitting down to dinner with the other guests, the narrator indirectly alludes to her former profession again by describing the various artefacts around her home: 'On the low stone parapet were Aztec things, obsidian knives., grimacing, squatting idols in black lava, and a queer thickest stone stick, or bâton' (p. 39).¹⁴⁶

Although it receives little attention in the characterisation that follows, Ramón is also introduced to the reader as 'an eminent historian and archaeologist' (p.58). By including the character of Mrs Norris, along with this incongruous detail about the

¹⁴⁵ D.H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent*, p.449.

¹⁴⁶ Helen Delpar explains how the home of Zelia Maria Magdalena Nuttall in Mexico City was a 'showplace' for Mexican artefacts and art for the North Americans and Europeans during the early twentieth century who revealed a similar interest in the cultural achievements of the pre-Columbian past as well as contemporary Mexican art. Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1992), p. 6.

hero of the religious revival, Lawrence reveals his interest in an area of research that had emerged in the field of archaeology at the beginning of the twentieth century. Even though none of the letters have survived, Lawrence is on record as having corresponded with Manuel Gamio, who, at the time of the writer's first visit to Mexico in 1924, held a government post as Director of Archaeology.¹⁴⁷ In a recent article, Renato Gonzalez Mello has identified Gamio as 'the founding figure of twentieth century Mexican anthropology' and as a figure who was as crucial to the emergence of the Mexican nationalism of this period as Vasconcelos was in his commissioning of public murals.¹⁴⁸

With a comparable recognition of the relationship between politics and culture, Gamio identified the subjects of archaeology and anthropology as a means towards Mexican social reform. In order to inspire his fellow Mexicans with a sense of national pride, Gamio sought to increase public awareness of the country's cultural heritage by promoting illustrated works on the subject of pre-Columbian culture and by encouraging museum exhibits of the country's ancient artefacts. There was also an international dimension to this growing interest in Mexican archaeology; something which is revealed in the surprising connection between Gamio and the character on whom Mrs Norris is based in Lawrence's Mexican novel. After all, it was Nuttall who recommended the name of Manuel Gamio to the German-born academic Franz Boas for a scholarship to Columbia University for a Master's degree in anthropology.¹⁴⁹

In this sense, Lawrence was not the only writer to have been deeply fascinated by Mexico. Lawrence was caught up in a North American cultural movement which often identified Mexico as an object of fascination for a whole range of concerns throughout the 1920s. Identifying an underlying motive for this trend, Helen Delpar has argued that this interest 'must be seen in the context of the larger international role of the United States after 1900 and the expansion of its hemispheric consciousness'.¹⁵⁰ In terms of more proximate causes, Mexico had also appealed to a number of American writers and artists during the 1920s for two main reasons: on the one hand, Mexico

¹⁴⁷ D.H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent*, p. 457.

¹⁴⁸ Renato Gonzalez Mello, 'Manuel Gamio, Diego Rivera, and the Politics of Mexican Anthropology' in *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 45 (Spring, 2004), p. 161.

¹⁴⁹ 'Manuel Gamio, Diego Rivera, and the Politics of Mexican Anthropology' in *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, p. 162.

¹⁵⁰ Helen Delpar, p. 7.

was identified as a political refuge for left-wing politics; a consequence of its populist revolution and the installation of socialist governments in the form of Obregon and Calles;¹⁵¹ on the other hand, with its revival of indigenous art and culture, the Mexico of the 1920s also appealed to the bohemian sensibilities of American artists searching for a cultural alternative to what was often identified as the brash commercialism of their own culture and the decaying cultural forms of a war-torn Europe.¹⁵²

In addition to Lawrence, then, there were a great number of North Americans who took a comparable interest in Mexico during the 1920s: the poet Witter Bynner (who wrote a collection of poems called *Indian Earth* after visiting Mexico between 1923 and 1925));¹⁵³ the anthropologist Frances Toor (who published a magazine called *Mexican Folkways* in the early 1930s);¹⁵⁴ the novelist Waldo Frank (who wrote about Mexico in *Our America* (1919) and *Virgin Spain* (1926));¹⁵⁵ and the economist Stuart Chase (who wrote the bestseller *Mexico: A Study of Two Americas* (1931) which was illustrated by Diego Rivera).¹⁵⁶ Much like Lawrence, these American writers, artists and intellectuals also had a tendency towards a primitivist identification of Mexico in terms of aligning it with a spontaneous form of living that entailed a greater sense of personal freedom. The American novelist Malcolm Cowley wrote of his experience of Mexico in the 1920s that it was a place where he could 'live without moral scruples or modern convenience' and 'in the pure moment'.¹⁵⁷

The American photographer Edward Weston, who lived in Mexico from 1923 to 1927, is another significant American figure. Weston had been personally introduced to Lawrence on 2 November 1924; a meeting which took place through a mutual acquaintance shortly after Lawrence had been accepted as a member of the PEN club (Poets, Playwrights, Editors and Novelists).¹⁵⁸ Weston was a close friend of the muralist Rivera and revealed a similar fascination with the themes of the Mexican landscape

¹⁵¹ Helen Delpar, p. 15.

¹⁵² Mary Panzer, 'The American Love Affair with Mexico, 1920-1970,' in *Archives of American Art Journal*, p. 15.

¹⁵³ Helen Delpar, p. 61.

¹⁵⁴ Helen Delpar, p. 62.

¹⁵⁵ Helen Delpar, p. 68.

¹⁵⁶ Helen Delpar, pp. 69-70.

¹⁵⁷ Quoted in Mary Panzer, 'The American Love Affair with Mexico, 1920-1970,' in *Archives of American Art Journal*, p. 16.

¹⁵⁸ John Worthen, ed., *The Cambridge Biography D.H. Lawrence, 1885-1930*, Volume III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 206-08.

and its people in his photography. In this sense, Lawrence was moving in literary and artistic circles in Mexico in the 1920s that took an active interest in the country as a site of alternative political and cultural ideas; something which no doubt helped to energise his own creative vision of the religious revivalism in *The Plumed Serpent*. As a consequence of this interest in Mexican art and archaeology and the excavations that accompanied the growing importance of this discipline, the achievements of Mesoamerican civilisation were brought a great deal of recognition; a recognition that also extended beyond Mexico itself as these discoveries soon transformed the image of Mexico abroad. In this way, the mention of the pyramid of Quetzalcoatl in the fourth chapter of *The Plumed Serpent* reflects this new-found enthusiasm for pre-Columbian Mexican culture and its relation to the emergence of a new form of Mexican nationalism.



Aztec Wonder: the Pyramid at Teotihuacán.

The mention of this ancient city in *The Plumed Serpent* is a fictional mirror of Lawrence's own visit to Teotihuacán in 1923.¹⁵⁹ Teotihuacán, which is located 30 miles northeast of Mexico City, is one of the largest archaeological sites in the world and features three large pyramids in addition to the residential quarters and road networks that comprised this ancient city. Incidentally, this is an archaeological site that had been the subject of Gamio's three-volume *La poblacion del Valle de Teotihuacán*

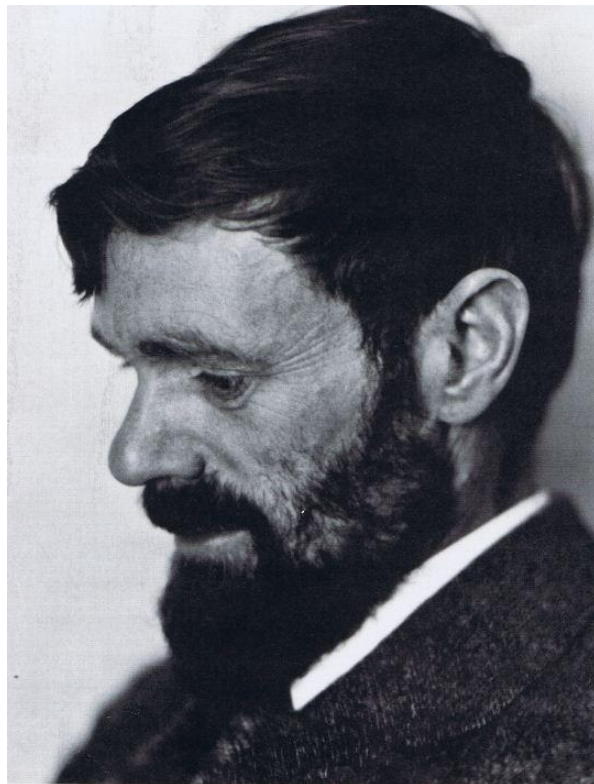
¹⁵⁹ John Worthen, ed., *The Cambridge Biography D.H. Lawrence*, 1885-1930, p. 102.

(1922). This episode in the novel reveals the manner in which these ruins energised Lawrence's utopian fantasy. For Lawrence, the cultural revival that was at the heart of the Mexican nationalism of the 1920s offers a means to the future rebirth of western society and culture. While visiting this ancient site, Kate reflects that the native Mexican religion of the pagan past is more alive in the country than Christianity. In this frame of mind, Kate mourns the fact that cultural and spiritual life in Europe is effectively over and speculates that 'white men had had a soul and lost it' (p. 78). In the previous chapter, the narrator had offered a similar judgement when it was observed that 'over in England, in Ireland, in Europe' Kate 'had heard the *consummatum est* of her own spirit' and concluded: 'it was finished, in a kind of death agony' (p. 50). The decline of Christianity then segues into a celebration of Mexico's pagan past. Quetzalcoatl, one of the gods among the pantheon of ancient Mexican deities, the reader is told, 'is not so dead as the Spanish churches' (p.79).

Towards the end of *The Plumed Serpent*, there is the speculation that was alluded to at the beginning of this discussion: the idea that similar practices rooted in local history and customs might serve the purposes of some equivalent revival throughout the wider world. Following the eccentric logic of this idea, Ramón even goes so far as to advise Kate to tell the Irish to revive their own pagan gods: 'Tell them in your Ireland to do as we have done here (p.427)'. In this sense, *The Plumed Serpent* identifies some important themes of the political and cultural context of the 1920s but greatly exaggerates their significance. With Lawrence, the resurgent indigenous Mexican culture of the 1920s becomes the inspiration for a pagan revivalism throughout the western world; a means of escaping a morbid form of Christian worship which had been linked in Lawrence's mind with the pathologies of western culture and the origin of the First World War.



Janitzio, Mexico, Photographed in 1926 by Weston.



D. H. Lawrence, Photographed in 1924 by Weston.

The Rise of Anti-Clericism: 'Jesus's Farewell'

When Lawrence visited Mexico in the 1920s, it was also a time of religious and social tension, a consequence of the opposition that existed between progressive socialist reformers and the conservative Catholic Church. Though the immediate aim of the Mexican Revolution had been the removal of the dictatorial Porfirio Díaz, along with the inequitable society that his regime had supported, this violent and popular uprising also fuelled a lasting antagonism between the church and state. In the post-revolutionary climate of the 1910s and 1920s, the secular and religious establishments in Mexico could rarely agree on the future direction of their country. For the majority of the conservative-leaning Catholics, mindful of a religious heritage which reached as far back as the colonial church of the sixteenth century, the Mexican character was defined solely in terms of faith.¹⁶⁰

The Mexican Revolution, with its more modern ideas of nationhood, and its ideological roots in socialism, posed an obvious challenge to this entrenched belief of what it meant to be Mexican. In drafting a new constitution suited to the politics of post-revolutionary Mexico in 1917, the radical Francisco Múgica had suggested, among other prohibitive policies, the inclusion of an article outlawing religious education, arguing: 'I am an enemy of the clergy because I consider it the most baneful and perverse enemy of our country'. Múgica then posed the following question: 'What ideas can the clergy bring to the soul of the Mexican masses, or to the middle class, or the wealthy?' and answered with venomous disapproval: 'Only the most absurd ideas – tremendous hate for democratic institutions, the deepest hate for the principles of equity, equality and fraternity'.¹⁶¹ As might be expected from this inflammatory language, the constitution of 1917 aggravated the already volatile relationship between the church and state.

With further anti-clerical provisions, such as the banning of outdoor religious ceremonies and the organisation of religious congregations under law, the revised constitution angered the country's Catholic population to the point of armed rebellion. Writing on this series of violent protests, the historian Brian R. Hamnett has pointed

¹⁶⁰ Brian R. Hamnett, pp. 224-226.

¹⁶¹ Quoted in Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, p.543.

out that 'between 1916 and 1937 an intense conflict took place between Mexican Catholics and the revolutionary authorities'. Hamnett provides the following detail by way of illustration: 'in Jalisco, a stronghold of Catholic traditionalism, repeated conflict broke out in 1917-19.'¹⁶² And, far from abating in the years that followed, this climate of antagonism was only intensified with the arrival of the self-avowed atheist Plutarco Elías Calles as president in 1924. Though it lies slightly outside the historical time frame of *The Plumed Serpent*, the later policies of Calles, which included the seizure of church property and the exile of foreign priests, eventually led to the Cristero War of 1926 to 1929: a between the Federal Army of Calles and the self-proclaimed *Cristeros* ('defenders of Christ the King') who employed guerrilla tactics to wage a long war of attrition against the Mexican government.¹⁶³

It is this theme of religious persecution, of course, which receives a comprehensive treatment in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (1940). Greene's novel is based on his visit in Mexico in 1938 when the intimidation and harassment of the Catholic Church was at its most extreme point; something which is also documented at length in his travelogue *The Lawless Roads* (1939). Set during the 1930s in the Mexican state of Tabasco, *The Power and the Glory* recounts the story of the Catholic 'whisky priest' – an epithet which describes a self-destructive alcoholism that prefigures Geoffrey Firmin's same addiction in *Under the Volcano* (the themes of alcoholism and descent are somehow linked in the minds of both writers) – at the time of the Mexican government's violent suppression of the Catholic Church. The 'whisky priest' is pursued by a lieutenant who identifies the Catholic Church as the enemy of equality and the principal source of corruption. In this sense, the lieutenant is representative of the militant form of socialism that had become such a prominent feature of Mexican politics in the 1930s.

In terms of its impact on *The Plumed Serpent*, the antipathy between the church and state is not directly replicated by Lawrence in the same way as it is by Greene. On

¹⁶² Brian R. Hamnett, p. 225.

¹⁶³ Brian R. Hamnett, p. 225.

the contrary, Lawrence's Mexican novel is not concerned with the historical conflict between the Catholic Church and the socialist adherents of the revolution in a precise sense. Though it owes an obvious debt to this climate of antagonism, *The Plumed Serpent* does not describe a conflict between the church and state but between two rival religious factions: the Catholic Church and the revived Quetzalcoatl faith. In this sense, Lawrence merges two separate and distinct movements of the 1920s in *The Plumed Serpent*: the conflict between the Catholic Church and the socialist state is combined with the emergence of Mexican nationalism and the affirmation of the country's pre-Columbian past. This partly historical, partly imaginary conflict is most forcefully represented in *The Plumed Serpent* when, with his religious followers growing steadily in number and enthusiasm, Ramón launches a ceremonial takeover of his local Catholic church.

At the beginning of this ritualised occupation, there is a 'far-crying male voice' which announces the departure of Christian worship in Mexico in a song that is emphatically entitled 'Jesus's Farewell' (p.279). Accompanied by a congregation of his followers, who are arrayed 'in dark sarapes with the blue borders of Quetzalcoatl' (p.280), Ramón then forces his way into the local church to begin the removal of its Christian images. Among these representations, which are symbolically taken from the 'dark church' inside to 'the blazing sunlight' outside, there is the image of 'the lifelike Dead Christ' which is said to have 'seemed really dead' (p. 282). This emphasis on death is deeply emblematic in a novel that suggests that Christianity has not only exhausted itself in Mexico but also in a more general sense as well; something which also reflected in 'the candles' which are 'one by one going out' as the followers of Quetzalcoatl leave the desecrated church in triumph (p. 282). And, as if to drive this point home with even greater degree of clarity, when this collection of images are finally burned they are revealed ignominiously as lying 'on the iron bars of the grill, in a pathetic cluster together' (p. 285).

Only a few chapters later, the newly converted church is revealed to contain a statue of a naked man situated between the images of an eagle and serpent, raising his hand above his head in the same proud gesture that is often used by Ramón. In a reversal of the values and tenets of Christian meekness and compassion Ramón's pagan revival institutes new forms of religious practice which reveal a deeply

Nietzschean celebration of male strength and potency, something which is reflected symbolically in the description of the statue itself: 'This great dark statue loomed stiff like a pillar, rather frightening in the white-lit blue chancel' (p. 338). This installation of the new faith in places of Christian worship also offers a fictional reversal of the Christianisation of Mexico that has occurred since the beginning of the Spanish Conquest. Towards the end of *The Plumed Serpent*, the narrator reports on the progress of Ramón's efforts towards returning Mexico to the worship of its pantheon of native gods:

The Quetzalcoatl movement had spread in the country, but sinisterly. The Archbishop had declared against it, Ramón and Cipriano and their adherents were excommunicated. An attempt had been made to assassinate Montes.'

The adherents of Quetzalcoatl in the capital had made the Church of San Juan Bautista, which was called the Church of the Black Saviour, their Metropolitan House of Quetzalcoatl. The Archbishop, a choleric man, had summoned his fervent followers to march in procession to this Church of San Juan, now called the House of Quetzalcoatl, and seize it, and restore it to the Catholic Church. The government, knowing it would have to fight sooner or later, arrested the Archbishop and broke up the procession after some bloodshed.

Then a kind of war began. The Knights of Cortés brought out their famous hidden stores of arms, not very impressive, after all, and a clerical mob, headed by a fanatical priest, surged into the Zócalo. Montes had the guns turned on them. But it looked like the beginnings of a religious war. In the streets the white and blue serapes of Quetzalcoatl and the scarlet and black serapes of Huitzilopochtli were seen in bands, marching to the sound of tom-toms, and holding up the curious round banners, made of feather-work, of Quetzalcoatl, and the tall scarlet signs of Huitzilopochtli, long poles with the soft club of scarlet feathers at the top, tufted with a black point.--In the churches, the priests were still inflaming the orthodox to a holy war. In the streets, priests who had gone over to Quetzalcoatl were haranguing the crowd.

It was a wild moment. In Zacatecas General Narciso Beltran had declared against Montes and for the Church. But Cipriano with his Huitzilopochtli soldiers had attacked with such swiftness and ferocity, Beltran was taken and shot, his army disappeared.

Then Montes declared the old Church illegal in Mexico, and caused a law to be passed, making the religion of Quetzalcoatl the national religion of the Republic.

(p. 419)

Echoing the historical antagonism between the church and state in Mexico during this period, the Catholic Church is revealed here as having taken an active role in politics by declaring war on the Mexican state: the leaders of the new religious cult, Ramón and

Cipriano, are not only excommunicated but there is an assassination attempt on President Montes. This militant form of Catholic protest had also been reflected earlier in the attempted assassination of Ramón. Furthermore, Lawrence aligns the Mexican state with the emergent faith with the news of the government's breaking up of the Catholic procession outside the House of Quetzalcoatl and then more so with subsequent revelation of the outlawing of Catholicism by Montes. In this respect, Lawrence reveals the true nature of his religious fantasy where the Mexican government's historical relationship with socialism is substituted for the imaginary sympathy for pagan revivalism in the form of the Quetzalcoatl faith.

However, despite the occasional provision of such details, which have an obvious, if indirect, relationship to the historical circumstances of Mexico in the 1920s, Lawrence is primarily concerned with the cultural, rather than the political, implications of this pagan revival. After all, *The Plumed Serpent* contains a far greater number of reflections on how this religious awakening pertains to the interpersonal relationships between men and women; the principal element in Lawrence's philosophy since the publication of his study on Thomas Hardy. In an argument with his Catholic wife, for example, Ramón voices his disapproval of Carlota's faith, claiming that it has led to a form of love that is debilitating and lifeless. Ramón tells Carlotta with a brutal honesty: 'I dislike your monopoly of one feeling, I dislike your charity works. I disapprove of the whole trend of your life' (p. 207).

Ramón then explains to his wife that his new religion is a means of restoring the 'proper' relation between the sexes: 'Quetzalcoatl is just a living word, for these people, no more.—All I want them to do is to find the beginnings of the way to their own manhood, their own womanhood' (p. 209). For Ramón, in a manner which again reflects the concerns of Lawrence himself, this balance between male and female properties is inscribed in the wider oppositions that he discerns in his dualistic vision of the universe itself. In an earlier speech to his followers, Ramón had told his disciples that "'The earth is stirring in you, the sky is rushing its wings above'" and concluded his speech with the following instruction: "'Go home to your houses, in front of the waters that will fall and cut you off forever from your yesterdays'" (p. 200). In a manner that also reveals the importance that Lawrence assigns to male potency and leadership, Ramón had voiced his concern to Carlota for the effect that their Christian household is

having on their two young children, telling his wife: 'you are weakening and vitiating the boys' (p. 207). Above all, then, *The Plumed Serpent* is concerned with a recalibration of the relationship between men and women so that it accords with the theme of male leadership. In this respect, the ideological and cultural implications of Lawrence's religious fantasy are most clearly revealed in terms of the personal relationship between the Irish Kate and the Indian Cipriano:

As he sat in silence, casting the old, twilight Pan-power over her, she felt herself submitting, succumbing. He was once more the old dominant male, shadowy, intangible, looming suddenly tall, and covering the sky, making a darkness that was himself and nothing but himself, the Pan male. And she was swooned prone beneath, perfect in her proneness...

She understood now his power with his soldiers.'

(p. 325)

In this passage, the relationship between power and sexuality is forcefully made. The reference to Cipriano as 'the old dominant male' offers a view of the patriarchal order of ancient societies where a reversion to the past is figured as a return to what is authentic and natural. The adjectives that are used by Lawrence to enlarge on this sense of natural authenticity are also significant. Cipriano's association with what is 'shadowy' and 'intangible' presents this type of reversion to authenticity as something that defies reason and logic and is therefore unquestionable. What is more, the use of the word 'Pan' also legitimises the patriarchal rule embodied in the character of Cipriano while imbuing it with a religious and eternal significance.

In its flight into the realm of a utopian religious fantasy, *The Plumed Serpent* reveals Lawrence's desire to seek out some form of cultural alternative to the beleaguered civilisations of western Europe. And with his keen understanding of semiotics – of the relationship between politics and language – it seems that Lawrence was attempting in *The Plumed Serpent* to escape the signifying practices of a Christian culture that he blamed for a morbid hatred of the physical body and a self-sacrificing willingness towards the abuse and surrender of this same physical body; a culture that he also blamed for the outbreak of the First World War. In *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence offers his readers a cultural revolution in fictional form to the one that he once

dreamed of establishing with his close circle of friends; one closely bound up with his own philosophical concerns.

Chapter IV: Belief and Desperation in Sayula

Only one year after the First World War had begun, the idea of moving abroad presented Lawrence with an apparent solution to the difficulties that he had faced during this troubling stage of his literary career; difficulties which had ranged broadly from the problems in publishing *The Rainbow* to the overbearing surveillance of the Cornish authorities and the traumatic experience of intrusive medical examinations. Ultimately, these war-time experiences drove Lawrence's disdain for England downwards towards new depths and increased his restive desire for some form of escape. In this frame of mind, and as early as 1915, Lawrence had declared that his life in England was effectively over and had identified America not only as a more suitable place to live but as the potential location of cultural rebirth. On this point, Lawrence expressed his feelings plainly to one of his loyal confidants, Lady Asquith: 'When I drive across [England], with autumn falling and rustling to pieces, I am so sad, for my country, for this great wave of civilisation, 2000 years, which is now collapsing'. Lawrence then declared: 'I want to go to America' and added conclusively 'my life is ended here'.¹⁶⁴

And yet, the clearest indication of what the American continent meant to Lawrence is provided, not by his private correspondence, but by his other famous work of literary criticism, *Studies on Classic American Literature* (1924). In the opening chapter 'The Spirit of the Place' Lawrence writes of the 'alien quality' and of the 'new voice' of American authors such as Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne.¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Lawrence's study of American literature does not simply end in this type of praise. In a diagnostic turn, Lawrence maintains that America will never realise its potential, nor the potential of its national literature, if it continues to define itself negatively in terms of what it is not: that is, in terms of its relationship to European culture and history. Reflecting his disdain for any form of political equality, Lawrence suggests: 'American consciousness has so far been a false dawn. The negative ideal of democracy. But underneath, and contrary to this open ideal, the first hints and revelations of IT. IT, the

¹⁶⁴ *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 431-32.

¹⁶⁵ D.H. Lawrence, *Studies on Classic American Literature* (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 7.

American whole soul.’¹⁶⁶ For Lawrence, the means of obtaining ‘the American whole soul’ is to be found through an unflinching engagement with nature; a form of engagement that he aligns to ‘the aboriginal Indian vision’.¹⁶⁷

Again, this disdain for democracy, along with the identification of the natural world as a site of authenticity, is something which reveals the intellectual heritage of Nietzsche. In addition, the mention of Nietzsche also suggests how Lawrence’s thoughts on politics and nature could so easily merge with the idea of cultural otherness. After all, Nietzsche had retained an interest in Eastern philosophy throughout his career; something which is neatly captured in his letter to Cosima Wagner when, in the same year as his mental breakdown, he declared: ‘I have been Buddha in India, Dionysus in Greece’.¹⁶⁸ With his belief that European civilisation had come to an end, it is not surprising that Lawrence could make this type of identification himself. And, the modern vogue for the East could easily be substituted for something else; especially with the general fascination with the primitive and the enthusiasm for all things Mexican that Lawrence had been exposed to through his contact with American artists and anthropologists such as Edward Weston and Zelia Nuttall.

In the end, it was Mexico rather than the United States that captivated Lawrence’s imagination most of all. As we noted in the previous chapter, Lawrence had initially moved to the United States after Mabel Luhan invited the writer to her ranch in New Mexico after reading ‘Sea and Sardinia’. One month after his embarkation in Australia, Lawrence had arrived at Mabel Luhan’s estate in Taos, New Mexico, where he stayed until the beginning of December that same year. It was not until 19 March 1923, however, after this extensive period in New Mexico, that Lawrence departed for Mexico. As such, Lawrence’s initial contact with the United States had begun with his interest in the country’s Amerindian communities; something which explains how Lawrence’s attention could easily settle on different locations and stretch effortlessly

¹⁶⁶ D.H. Lawrence, *Studies on Classic American Literature*, p. 14.

¹⁶⁷ D.H. Lawrence, *Studies on Classic American Literature*, p. 32.

¹⁶⁸ Quoted in ‘Nietzsche’s Reading About Eastern Philosophy’, *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Autumn 2004, pp. 3-35

across national borders. In his wilful ignorance of social and political realities, Lawrence had even identified Mexico as 'the solar plexus' of the United States.¹⁶⁹

This metaphor of the solar plexus reveals Lawrence's tendency to identify Mexico closely with some of the fundamental tenets of his own philosophy. According to this outlook, Mexico struck Lawrence's imagination as the welcome antidote to everything that he had been searching for since the war had begun; a means of escaping all the pathologies of western culture that the First World War had thrown into violent relief, whether this was apprehended in the hatred of the body, the debilitating cultivation of the mind or the corrosive obsession with wealth and industry. As was explored in the previous chapter of this study, when speculating on the origin of the conflict in his creative and critical writing, Lawrence had reached the conclusion that there was something fundamentally wrong with the nature of European civilisation. And, with another intellectual debt to the philosophy of Nietzsche, Lawrence had singled out the Christian culture of Europe as the principal source of cultural malaise.¹⁷⁰ It is this type of cultural diagnosis that explains Lawrence's urgent desire for some form of alternative religious framework. In this sense, Lawrence's representation of Mexico in *The Plumed Serpent* is ordered according to his polemical vision of a religious and cultural renaissance that is not only shown to have a strong relevance to the country itself but is revealed to have important implications for the future of Europe.

From Conradian Despair to Lawrencian Affirmation: 'a deep purring sound, too deep for the ear to hear, and yet audible on the blood'

In 1922 when Lawrence moved from New York to his residence in Taos, New Mexico – to a ranch that was provided for him by Mabel Luhan – he was struck by the unfamiliar landscape of the western United States. Immediately this alien landscape not only captured Lawrence's imagination but challenged his fundamental view of the natural world. The landscape of New Mexico, with its imposing mountain ranges and broad,

¹⁶⁹ D. H. Lawrence, 'Au Revoir, U.S.A.', in *D. H. Lawrence: A Selection from Phoenix* (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 121.

¹⁷⁰ After all, Nietzsche identified Christianity as the 'ultimate corruption conceivable' which had 'left nothing untouched by its depravity'. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 196.

sweeping plains, provided Lawrence with a far grander, even sublime, impression of the natural world than he had ever received in England.

This type of interpretation is provided in his travel writing from the period where Lawrence remarks on the potential of the American landscape to subdue and overwhelm the human observer. In *Mornings in Mexico*, which was not published until 1927 but was written only a few months before the first draft of his Mexican novel in 1924, Lawrence had observed of the American state of New Mexico that 'nowhere more than this in Mexico does human life become isolated, external to its surroundings, and cut off timidly from the environment'.¹⁷¹ Throughout the same travelogue, Lawrence dwells on this distinctive impression of awe which consistently runs to the themes of existential isolation and personal enfeeblement. Like Conrad, then, Lawrence seemed to identify this unfamiliar area of the world as a suitable location for pondering grand metaphysical themes.

This interest in thinking through the human relationship to the natural world also resurfaces in Lawrence's writing after his move to Mexico itself; a fact not all that surprising given his tendency to interpret the world according to his own unique sense of cultural rather than national boundaries (during the war, Lawrence had even identified the people of Cornwall as a separate and distinct ethnic category from the Anglo-Saxon English). Nevertheless, aside from this eccentric and stubborn personality trait, it is also worth remembering that this type of identification had some foundation in certain historical and political realities: New Mexico had been part of Mexico itself before the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) and also possesses a similar landscape to the rural areas of Mexico that Lawrence himself visited in Oaxaca. It is for a combination of these reasons perhaps that the enormous mountains that loom over Mexico City provide the protagonist of *The Plumed Serpent* with an entirely comparable recognition of the natural world:

[Kate] climbed up to the flat roofs of the hotel. It was a brilliant morning, and for once, under the blue sky of the distance, Popocatepetl stood aloof, a heavy giant presence under heaven, with a cape of snow. And rolling a long dark roll of smoke like a serpent.

¹⁷¹ D. H. Lawrence, *Mornings in Mexico and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 23.

Ixtaccihuatl, the White Woman, glittered and seemed near, but the other mountain, Popocatepetl, stood farther back, and in shadow, a pure cone of atmospheric shadow, with glinting flashes of snow. There they were, the two monsters, watching gigantically and terribly over their lofty, bloody cradle of men, the Valley of Mexico. Alien, ponderous, the white-hung mountains seemed to emit a deep purring sound, too deep for the ear to hear, and yet audible on the blood, a sound of dread. There was no soaring or uplift or exaltation, as there is in the snowy mountains of Europe. Rather a ponderous, white-shouldered weight, pressing terribly on the earth, and murmuring like two watchful lions.

(p. 49)

In the first paragraph of this passage, the mountain that Kate observes from her hotel rooftop is distinguished by its qualities of size and indifference: Popocatepetl is not only 'a heavy giant presence under heaven' but is described as being 'aloof'. In this way, the narrator not only reveals that the natural world is foreboding owing to its sheer size but implies that it stands at some distance from the tumult of life in the city below. There is also something about the tropical Mexican weather which amplifies this distinctive effect: the 'brilliant morning' allows a clear vision of these monumental forms, drawing out the contrast between the snowy mountain peak and the magnificent blue sky. In the second paragraph, the idea that the forms of nature have a diminishing effect on the inhabitants of the city receives a greater emphasis where the residents of Mexico City are contrasted with the two mountains which watch 'gigantically and terribly over this lofty, bloody cradle of men'. The sense of the separation that exists between the forms of nature and the human world below is palpable and immediate. Of course, it is also an impression of the natural world that we have encountered before.

It might be remembered how the Italian expatriate of *Nostromo*, Giorgio Viola, had expressed a similar sentiment when he viewed the human activity of the plains below the mountain range. With a degree of philosophical detachment that he seemed to share with the author himself, Giorgio had reflected on these scenes of human conflict that they 'were like the passages of a violent game played upon the plain by dwarfs mounted and on foot, yelling with tiny throats, under the mountain that seemed a colossal embodiment of silence'.¹⁷² Despite their many other differences, both Conrad

¹⁷² Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo* (Letchworth: Broadview, 1997), p. 71.

and Lawrence reveal a similar impression of the natural world where it is interpreted as 'a great reservoir of unbridled power'.¹⁷³ In turn, this type of recognition of natural world seems to reveal an essential truth about the relative insignificance of human life. And yet there is an important and crucial difference between these two writers. Although Lawrence reveals the same Conradian sense of the world as being incompatible with certain human concerns, he does not view this type of separation as a tragic state of affairs. Instead, over the course of this chapter, we will see how Lawrence reveals a desire to incorporate this recognition of grandeur into a revised notion of the self.

If we look again, then, at the same passage, a more life-affirming tendency can also be detected in the description of the two mountains that loom over Mexico City. Firstly, in addition to dwelling on the mountains' monumental size, the narrator reveals that it possesses 'a long dark roll of smoke like a serpent'. This relationship between the animal of the snake and the Mexican landscape is, of course, an important feature in the design of the novel overall. It is an association which anticipates the religious revival of the novel's eponymous plumed serpent god, Quetzalcoatl. It is worth noting here that this same connection was also drawn at the beginning of the novel even before Kate's arrival in Sayula. While deliberating whether to stay in Mexico or return to her native Ireland, the narrator revealed that Kate 'felt like a bird round whose body a snake has coiled itself' (p. 72). As a consequence of this narrative strategy, where the narrator appears to observe a quite neutral feature of the natural world that will later on be incorporated into a wider symbolic scheme, the religious revival that the novel describes is made to appear as an entirely natural consequence of the environment itself.

Secondly, this same passage also picks up on the Lawrencian theme of blood-consciousness; something which is revealed when 'the white-hung mountains' are said 'to emit a deep purring sound, too deep for the ear to hear, and yet audible on the blood'. As such, this passage ties in with Lawrence's belief that the best guidance on

¹⁷³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 446.

how to live was provided not by the mind, as was the case for countless western thinkers from Plato to Descartes, but again, following a similar path to the one already taken by Nietzsche in the previous century, the more potent experiences of the body. In this way, the natural world also provides important life lessons to those who are attentive to its natural, pulsating rhythms. This somatic theme, of course, was something which preoccupied Lawrence throughout his writing career. As an indication that this type of thinking was still on Lawrence's mind around the time of writing *The Plumed Serpent*, it is worth noting that he had made a similar claim in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), arguing: 'the essential function of art is moral [...] a morality which changes the blood, rather than the mind'.¹⁷⁴

During the course of *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence reveals his preference for an organic society in which social and cultural values follow the apparent dictates of nature in a simple and straightforward form of correspondence. According to his essentialist understanding of the relationship between nature and culture, the meaning of human life is revealed through a meditation on the experience of being in the natural world. Despite its eminent sense of grandeur, the natural world, for Lawrence, can also function as a type of bulwark to the vibrant rhythms of the body, reawakening our capacities for spontaneous action and diminishing the debilitating influence of the mind. While Conrad offered a vision of human beings as a tragic form of life that stood at a distance from the natural world, Lawrence can be seen to have embraced a more optimistic vision of nature where no such separation exists.

So far, then, we have seen that Conrad and Lawrence bear a certain resemblance in their shared recognition of natural potency. Their main difference of opinion was revealed not so much in terms of what they saw but more in terms of the subsequent process of evaluation: whereas Conrad insisted that the potency of the natural world stood at some distance from human concerns, Lawrence revealed a desire to incorporate this sense of grandeur into a revised notion of selfhood. This evaluative distinction takes us to the heart of what separates Lawrence from Conrad. While both Conrad and Lawrence were responding to many of the same intellectual currents of modernity, their different attitudes divide along the fault line that Robert Pippin has identified in his study of modernism. Pippin has remarked that two principal, and often

¹⁷⁴ D.H. Lawrence, *Studies on Classic American Literature*, p. 180.

contrary, strains existed within the culture of modernism. Outlining this valuable distinction, Pippin suggests that modernism revealed a turn towards 'nihilism' as well as towards 'a new divination' of human power and potential.¹⁷⁵

This Lawrencian drive towards human divination can be seen nowhere more clearly than in his representation of the Mexican sun; something which is hinted at near the beginning of *The Plumed Serpent* when the narrator reports with a note of gratification that in Mexico 'the sun shone brilliantly every day' (p. 49). Elsewhere, the narrator refers to 'the full, dazzling gold of a Mexican morning' (p. 87) and also to 'the perfect morning sky, in the pure sunshine and the pure Mexican air' (p. 88). More significantly, Lawrence often draws attention to the life-conferring properties of the Mexican sun with an equal level of enthusiasm. From her veranda in Sayula, Kate looks out on 'the brilliant sun' (p. 109) which infuses everything that surrounds her with an abundant sense of fertility. The narrator alights on the details of 'the sparkling flowers and the seed-grass' along with the brightly coloured 'yellow banana trees'.

The origins of Lawrence's exuberant attitude to the Mexican sun might again have something to do with the First World War. In his study of British travel writing of the inter-war period, Paul Fussell has argued that 'the fantasies of flight and freedom which animate the imagination of the 20's and 30's and generate pervasive images of travel can be said to begin in the trenches'.¹⁷⁶ In turn, Fussell has argued that 'the tropical motif became a widespread imaginative possession of all in the trenches who were cold, tired, and terrified'¹⁷⁷ where it assumes the logic of a 'compensatory principle by which trench sensibility finds itself propelled toward the tropics'.¹⁷⁸ If, during the course of the inter-war period, the cold climate of Northern Europe was associated with misery and death, the Mediterranean, African, Australia and, eventually, Latin America were increasingly linked to the contrasting impressions of warmth and life. As a writer accustomed to thinking in terms of bold oppositions, it is not surprising that Lawrence was susceptible to this type of identification himself. Consistently, in Lawrence's writing, the idea of travelling became synonymous with a

¹⁷⁵ Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 2.

¹⁷⁶ Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Travelling between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 4.

¹⁷⁷ Paul Fussell, p. 5.

¹⁷⁸ Paul Fussell, pp. 6-7.

turn towards a new form of life in the southern hemisphere; towards sunnier climes where the drab weather as well as the violence of his native England could be gratifyingly left behind.

Lawrence's positive evaluation of the sun was also no doubt strengthened by the ceremonies that he had observed among the Amerindian cultures of New Mexico. In his discussion of the Hopi Snake Dance in *Mornings in Mexico*, for example, Lawrence had concluded, with a type of flamboyant machismo that is prescient of his later Mexican novel, that this Amerindian tribe were 'the lords of the earth's inner rays' and 'the black sun of the earth's vital core'.¹⁷⁹ The deification of the sun is a reflection of the same tendency that was found in a variety of pre-Columbian religious cultures: for example, the Ancient Peruvians worshipped the sun's energy while the priests of the Aztec Empire had attempted to harness and control its power.¹⁸⁰

In Lawrence's Mexican novel, then, it is not surprising that the sun should be linked with an affirmative attitude towards life which Ramón seeks to incorporate into a religious, symbolic structure. After all, in his promotion of the Quetzalcoatl faith, Ramón identifies the sun as the principal source of strength and vitality. This attitude is revealed in Ramón's letters to the Catholic clergy where he expresses this type of idea with characteristic force. In a manner that also reveals how this type of affirmation is related to the Lawrencian disapproval of industry, the leader of the religious revival explains that he wishes to 'turn to life: and from the clock to the sun and stars, and from metal to membrane' (p. 361). This type of representation differs greatly from Conrad's attitude where the sun is figured in the inhospitable terms of opposition and antagonism; a reflection of the separation between the human and natural worlds that was seen elsewhere in *Nostromo*.

This representation of the sun in *The Plumed Serpent* is also related to another crucial feature of Lawrence's outlook: the emphasis that Lawrence places on the dryness of the Mexican climate which, in turn, has a profound relationship to Lawrence's attitude to human and natural cruelty. In the opening chapter of *The Plumed Serpent*, when Kate travels in a Ford taxi to the bull fight in Mexico City, the 'stone buildings in Mexico' are also said to possess 'a peculiar hard, dry dreariness' (p.

¹⁷⁹ D. H. Lawrence, *Mornings in Mexico*, p. 88.

¹⁸⁰ D. H. Lawrence, *Mornings in Mexico*, p. 270.

8). And, in the following chapter, when the protagonist travels to the tea party in Tlacoluta, the valley is revealed to stretch 'away to its sombre, atmospheric hills, in a flat dry bed' (p. 31). As the novel progresses, it soon becomes clear that these observations are not limited to the physical properties of the landscape. These observations are also inseparable from a more general attitude towards life that Lawrence sees as embodied symbolically in the properties of the Mexican landscape.

When Kate travels to the countryside of Sayula, this same quality of dryness is again identified. In a deceptively quaint metaphor, the reader is informed that the 'big hills' are 'baked incredibly dry, like biscuit' (p.90). At this point, however, there is an important transition when the narrator remarks that 'this was Mexico again, stark-dry and luminous with powerful light, cruel and unreal'. A few pages later, the narrator again dwells on this same association with a chiasmic use of repetition: 'Everywhere the shores rose up pale and cruelly dry, dry to cruelty' (p.94). During the course of *The Plumed Serpent*, these physical properties of the landscape are then revealed to have some important implications for Mexican culture.

This is revealed in a scene when two local boys are shown playing beside the lake in Sayula as they mercilessly taunt a tethered water-fowl. When Kate stares into the eyes of one of the Mexican children, she confidently observes of the young boy that he 'could not see that the bird was a real living creature with a life of its own' (p. 218). As the scene progresses, the voice of the narrator then assumes control of the narrative, from which point far more general observations about Native American culture are made. With an even greater confidence, where the narrator appears to assume a near perfect level of insight into an unfamiliar culture, the reader is informed that 'his race had never seen' this essential truth about the suffering of other living creatures. The narrator continues in this vein commenting: 'with black eyes they stared out on an elemental world, where the elements were monstrous and cruel, as the sun was monstrous, and the cold, cruising black water of the rain was monstrous, and the dry, dry, cruel earth'.

According to this type of essentialist conflation of nature and culture, the supposed cruelty of Native American culture is revealed as a natural, and inevitable, effect of the environment itself; an idea which is also revealed in Lawrence's *Studies in American Literature* where Lawrence's description of the flogging of a sailor in 'Dana's Two Years

Before the Mast' is justified according to the natural order that is seen to exist between master and slave. Again reflecting the intellectual heritage of Nietzsche, Lawrence identifies this brutal treatment of the sailor as 'a passionate justice' and as 'a great and manly thing'.¹⁸¹ The acceptance and celebration of cruelty can be traced to Nietzsche's philosophical works where 'to see somebody suffer is nice' and that 'to make somebody suffer is even nicer – that is a hard proposition, but an ancient, powerful, human-all-too-human proposition'.¹⁸² With this type of inheritance, then, *The Plumed Serpent* goes on to describe the decline of Christian morality in Mexico and the rise of a religious culture which institutes human cruelty as part of some more 'authentic' and 'natural' ethical code.

Finally, there is one further similarity between Conrad and Lawrence. This concerns the two writers' shared tendency in dwelling on the decentring potential of the natural world, something which is consistently revealed in the form of an epiphany; a dizzying moment of revelation when the 'epiphanal centre of gravity [was] displaced from the self to the flow of experience'.¹⁸³ As an illustration of Lawrence's attitude towards this aspect of the Latin American landscape, it will be helpful to consider the epiphany of *The Plumed Serpent* in which Kate finds herself beside the lake in Sayula.

Kate knew these mornings by the lake. They hypnotized her almost like death. Scarlet birds like drops of blood, in very green willow-trees. The *aguador* trotting to her house with a pole over his shoulder, and two heavy square gasoline cans, one at each end of the pole, filled with hot water. He had been to the hot spring for her daily supply. Now barefoot, with one bare leg, the young man trotted softly beneath the load, his dark, handsome face sunk beneath the shadows of the big hat, as he trotted in a silence, mindlessness that was like death.

Dark heads out on the water in little groups, like black water-fowl bobbing. Were they birds? Were they heads? Was this human life, or something intermediate, that lifted its orange, wet, glistening shoulders a little out of the lake, beneath the dark head?

She knew so well what the day would be. Slowly the sun thickening and intensifying in the air overhead. And slowly the electricity clotting invisibly as afternoon approached. The beach in the blind heat, strewn with refuse, smelling of refuse and the urine of creatures.

¹⁸¹ D.H. Lawrence, *Studies on Classic American Literature*, p. 127.

¹⁸² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 46.

¹⁸³ Charles Taylor, p. 465.

Everything going vague in the immense sunshine, as the air invisibly thickened, and Kate could feel the electricity pressing like hot iron on the back of her head. It stupefied her like morphine. Meanwhile the clouds rose like white trees from behind the mountains, as the afternoon swooned in silence, rose and spread black branches, quickly, in the sky, from which the lightning stabbed like birds.

(p. 244)

In this passage, every element of the natural world appears to overwhelm Kate's sense of herself as a self-enclosed, autonomous observer. The imagery of death and hypnosis reveals a quintessential moment in Lawrencian fiction where mental consciousness dissolves and is supplanted by a moment of sensory meditation. Immediately, Kate is positioned in a natural context in which the 'mornings by the lake' encourage a somnambular state of consciousness in which she is 'hypnotized' in a condition that resembles 'death'. Kate then registers a series of loosely connected details in which 'scarlet birds' perch on willow trees and the local Mexican labourer returns with Kate's supply of hot water. In the second paragraph, there is an abrupt shift in the object of Kate's attention as her eyes alight on the dark heads of an ambiguous human or animal life that rise above the water. The ambiguous status of what lies beneath the water here captures Lawrence's deliberate blurring of the distinction between human and animal life in his effort to recapture the potent experiences of the body. The passage then terminates in an epiphanal moment where personal and egoistic concerns recede and the impersonal flux of experience assumes the focus in which 'clouds rose like white trees from behind the mountains, as the afternoon swooned in silence, rose and spread black branches, quickly, in the sky, from which the lightning stabbed like birds'.

As such, Lawrence reveals a desire to reinterpret the disorientating aspects of the natural world according to his more positive, life-affirming attitude. Though the natural world of Latin American might lead to existential instability and cultural vertigo it is also something which, for Lawrence, revives and strengthens the attachment to the physical body and the primacy of sensory experience. In this respect, the contrast of attitude between Conrad and Lawrence is revealed in the eventual fates of Decoud and Kate. Whereas Decoud's recognition of life as nothing more than 'a succession of incomprehensible images' was something that presaged suicide, this same recognition for Kate is something which is the springboard towards a revised notion of selfhood. In

this sense, Lawrence's attitude to the decentring possibilities of being among nature becomes a cause for celebration rather than despair.

This transformation assumes the form of a struggle between two existential modes; between the western individualism that Kate has grown up with in her native Ireland and the Indian subjectivity that is constituted in relation to Mexican culture. In this sense, both the nature and culture of Mexico have this same tendency to disrupt the security of the unitary self. In an essentialist elision of nature and culture, this interpretation is also revealed in Kate's experience of the ritualistic dance and music of the religious revival. When Kate hears the drum and flute of the first musical ceremony in the novel, for example, she is said to have 'felt that timeless, primeval passion of the prehistoric races' (p. 117). In the process, Kate reflects on the song and dance that she witnesses on the local plaza in these glowing terms: 'it seemed to her, life burned with a deep new fire' (p. 122). This transformative process is finally associated with the retreat of the mind and a reversion to the body: where the drum and the dance sends 'rhythmic gushes from her feet into the dark body of the earth' (p. 132).

The Spectre of Mongrelism and the Search for the Mexican Indian: 'Fifty per cent of the people in Mexico are pure Indian: more or less'

In contrast to its sermonizing and apocalyptic design overall, the opening chapter of Lawrence's Mexican novel is an exercise in delineating a form of cultural and racial inertia. In the following passage from the beginning of *The Plumed Serpent*, Kate reflects at length on the relationship between nature and culture and identifies some perilous implications:

Perhaps, [Kate] thought to herself, the white and half-white Mexicans suffered some peculiar reaction in their blood which made them that they too were almost always in a state of suppressed irritation and anger, for which they *must* find a vent. They *must* spend their lives in a complicated game of frustration, frustration of life in its ebbing and flowing.

Perhaps something came out of the earth, the dragon of the earth, some effluence, some vibration which militated against the very composition of the blood and nerves in human beings. Perhaps it came from the volcanoes. Or perhaps even from the silent, serpent-like dark resistance of those masses of

ponderous natives whose blood was principally the old, heavy, resistant Indian blood.

(pp. 54-55)

Though not defined in precise terms at this point, Kate makes an important ethnographic distinction in this passage between two distinct racial groups: Mexicans of European descent ('white') and Mexicans of mixed Spanish, African or Indian ancestry ('half-white'). And yet, this distinction seems of little importance in the observations that follow. After all, both of these racial groups are revealed to be equally susceptible to this 'peculiar reaction in their blood'. This physiological feature is revealed to influence Mexican behaviour overall, not any single racial group; something which is revealed in the observation that the composition of Mexican blood disrupts the natural or easeful 'ebbing and flowing' of life which, in turn, results 'in a state of suppressed irritation and anger'. In the second paragraph, the cause of this unstable blood reaction is then discussed in more detail.

Nevertheless, rather than offering any clarification at this point, the narrator only presents the reader with a further layer of confusion: when Kate considers a number of explanations for the cause of this instability no definite or conclusive answer is provided: the origin of the supposedly volatile Mexican character is located somewhere uncertainly in the natural world (specifically, 'the earth' or 'the volcanoes') or in the 'masses of ponderous natives'. However, despite this apparent obfuscation, there is a revealing conflation of nature and culture which has important implications for the novel as a whole. This conflation is not only revealed in the explanation of Mexican instability but when the narrator refers to 'the dragon of the earth' and the 'serpent-like dark resistance' of the native Mexicans.

During a dinner party hosted by Ramón, the mostly British and American guests return to the same subject that was broached by the protagonist herself when they discuss the Mexican national character at much greater length. The conversation turns to this subject after one of the guests, José Garcia, delivers the warning that "'we must do something'" else "'Mexico will go under'" (p. 62). Another guest at the dinner party, Julio Toussaint, then responds by identifying the source of the problem more precisely as the Mexicans themselves when he pronounces: "'They are at the mercy of their own

natures''' (pp. 63-64). In support of this argument, Toussaint then provides this detailed ethnography; the most detailed of its kind in the entire novel:

Fifty per cent of the people in Mexico are pure Indian: more or less. Of the rest, a small proportion are foreigners or Spaniard. You have then the mass which is on top, of mixed blood, Indian and Spaniard mixed, chiefly. These are the Mexicans, those with the mixed blood....Very well! Now you mix blood of the same race, and it maybe all right. Europeans are all Aryan stock, the race is the same. But when you mix European and American Indian, you mix different blood races, and you produce the half-breed. Now, the half-breed is a calamity...He is neither one thing nor another, he is divided against himself. His blood of one race tells him one thing, his blood of another race tells him another. He is an unfortunate, a calamity to himself. And it is hopeless.

(p. 65)

In this passage, Toussaint advances the essentialist view that race has a direct relationship to national character. The key point of Toussaint's argument, however, is not that there is any given race which is inherently problematic. Instead, Toussaint argues that race only becomes problematic once it becomes mixed and, therefore, impure. In turn, Toussaint continues, this ethnic mixing produces a type of blood that is unstable and divided against itself; a more definite conclusion than Kate reaches herself. Of course, these outmoded views on race will strike most of modern readers as unpalatable, rooted as they are in an early twentieth-century understanding of the relationship between race, blood and psychology with the obvious debt to the eugenic theories of the nineteenth century.

However, as will soon become clear, this is a racial interpretation of Mexico that is not only shared by the narrator but also Lawrence himself. In this passage, the anxiety that Lawrence felt when he apprehended racial ambiguity is filtered through the character of Toussaint. At this point, then, it will be helpful to recall how we identified Lawrence's interest in eugenics in the previous chapter; specifically, his related concerns over the apparent threat presented by the spectre of mongrelism and the potential cure embodied in the form of racial purity. As we have already observed, this anxiety concerning the spectre of mongrelism was revealed when the narrator alighted on the European cultural inheritance of Mexico and described, with palpable distaste, 'the mongrel mass of a mongrel city' (p. 20). Overall, the term 'mongrel' was used

consistently in the opening chapter to describe the ethnically mixed population of the inner city: the *mestizo* race of Mexico with its ethnic identity of mixed European and indigenous ancestry. These anxieties not only reflected Lawrence's concerns over racial purity but also revealed his discomfort over his recognition of cultural hybridity: the manner in which native Mexican culture has already been infiltrated by European culture (a process begun as early as the Spanish Conquest and greatly intensified by the mass media age of modernity).

As was already suggested in the previous chapter on Lawrence, these anxieties over the apparent racial impurity of Mexico City are ultimately related to the cultural inheritance of the nineteenth century. In the context of the *fin de siècle*, and well into the early decades of the twentieth century, the notion that society might be improved through a process of selective breeding had appealed to a range of writers, scientists, politicians and intellectuals from a variety of countries and from both the progressive and conservative ends of the political spectrum. Any doubt that Lawrence himself was sympathetic to these ideas was removed when it was observed how, almost twenty years before writing *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence had written of his enthusiasm for herding the unfit into gas chambers ('I would build a lethal chamber as big as Crystal Palace, with a military band playing softly, and a Cinematograph working brightly; then I'd go out in the back streets and main streets and bring them in, all the sick, the halt, and the maimed'). What is more, this deep-rooted anxiety over the spectre of mongrelism was absolutely central to Lawrence's interpretation of the origin of the First World War.

In the previous chapter, we saw how Lawrence had ascribed the origin of the conflict to an underlying biological, or eugenic, cause in a double sense: the war was seen as a result of impurity and racial degeneracy, of a European continent overrun by its baser, mongrel elements; but also as a symptom of the failure of those who were supposedly suited to the role of leadership to offer guidance at a time of crisis. In a further radicalisation, Lawrence came to believe that the solution to these problems was to be found in some return to a form of racial purity along with a return to a more authoritarian social structure (something which was informed both by his early reading of Nietzsche and his war-time interest in Edward Gibbon's history of Ancient Rome). At the same time, however, Lawrence increasingly turned away from European civilisation

during his restless period of travel during the 1920s until he came to identify the racial purity of the Mexican Indian as a means of spiritual salvation and cultural renaissance.

The Mexican Indian and the Idea of the Primitive: 'that timeless, primeval passion of the prehistoric races'

In the writing of Conrad there was the underlying assumption that modern western societies tended to suppress powerful human drives and desires. With a Darwinian sense of the evolutionary origins of the human species, Conrad viewed modern western societies as an elaborate controlling framework of laws and customs that kept these violent and egoistic tendencies in check. As such, this view of our collective animal nature is subject to a distinctly negative treatment in the work of Conrad in his representations of 'lawless' settings that lie outside the 'civilised' European continent: a form of representation that can be seen in the violent descent of Kurtz in the African jungle and in the rise of Pedro Montero who achieved success through the atavistic qualities of strength and cunning on the desolate plains of Costaguana.

In this sense, Conrad expressed much the same view of so-called primitive societies as the intellectual pioneers of twentieth century such as Malinowski and Freud who 'sought the universal truth about human nature and conceived of primitive societies as the testing ground, the laboratory, the key to that universal truth'.¹⁸⁴ In this way, the process of travelling outside Europe, to the African continent or to the unfamiliar and distant setting of Latin America, was figured less as a spatial journey and more as a temporal one; a movement that was equivalent to a reversion to the European past whereby the truth of human nature was discovered by the insightful author and disclosed to his readership back home.

This notion of the primitive also rests on a certain ontological assumption that stems from a historically constituted idea of personal identity. After all, this notion of the truthful reversion to the primitive is intimately bound up with the divided inheritance of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, where the western construct of the primitive can also be mobilised as a means of escaping the dominant culture of rationalism, as well as being elided with post-Romantic notions of amoral intensity and

¹⁸⁴ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, p. 7.

power. With the same intellectual inheritance as Conrad, then, Lawrence conceives of the Mexican hinterland of Sayula in the same ancestral terms as a return to human origins. In the writing of Lawrence, however, in accordance with his distinctly Romantic legacy, the values that are attached to the 'civilised' countries of Europe and the 'barbarous' setting of Latin America are reversed: that is, the inhibitive tendency of modern western societies is identified as a source of corruption while the reversion to the primitive is seen as a means towards salvation. As such, it is the failure of modern western civilisation after the First World War, for Lawrence, which frames the terms of his imaginative creation of an organic, primitivist society in *The Plumed Serpent*.¹⁸⁵ The primitive becomes the means whereby the more vibrant and authentic self can be recaptured and the inhibitive pathological tendencies of modern industrial societies cast aside. In her discussion of the primitive, Torgovnick has devoted a section of her study to *The Plumed Serpent* in which she argues that the novel 'frees Lawrence because it allows him to integrate the dualities that plagued him' throughout his literary career and which 'collapses together the ideas of the primitive as the dangerous and the primitive as the idyllic'.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ In contrast to the view of Lawrence that is presented here, some recent critical interventions have offered a more sympathetic view of the writer's attitude to cultural otherness. From a revisionist perspective, Lawrence has been reinterpreted as a radical writer whose attitude towards cultural otherness has been consistently misunderstood over the course of the late twentieth century. In this respect, the two most interesting and significant critical interventions are found in Neil Roberts *D.H. Lawrence and Cultural Difference* and Amit Chaudhuri's *D.H. Lawrence and 'Difference'*. As might be expected from their shared use of the Derridean term 'difference', these critical positions often draw on the critical ideas of poststructuralist criticism in an effort to reposition Lawrence. In addition, Roberts and Chaudhuri draw on ideas from postcolonial theory in an effort to identify Lawrence's attitude to cultural otherness. For Roberts, *The Plumed Serpent* is identified as 'a bold attempt to imagine beyond the terms of western culture and, though by no means a flawless work, deserves to be treated seriously as such'. Neil Roberts, *D.H. Lawrence, Travel and Cultural Difference* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2004), p. 41. Meanwhile, for Chaudhuri, Lawrence is seen in kinship terms as a fellow writer of postcolonial literature when he observes that 'the themes of difference, marginality, and identity are, I think, as apposite to Lawrence...as they are to the post-colonial subject elsewhere'. Amit Chaudhuri, *D.H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 163. Though the aim of these critical interventions seems laudable, there is a risk that such critical approaches remove Lawrence from the historical moment of literary modernism. After all, these views of Lawrence tend to obscure Lawrence's anxieties over racial degeneracy with its foundation in the eugenic theories of the nineteenth century as well as the manner in which his ideas of cultural otherness were filtered through the modernist fascination with the primitive. Moreover, these critical interventions also tend to cast Lawrence as a writer who was somehow able to transcend the limits of his own culture in such a way that occludes any sense of how Lawrence is writing within an ideological framework that constrains and shapes his attitude towards cultural otherness.

¹⁸⁶ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, p. 168.

Dealing with the latter identification first, it can be seen that, with a Romantic division between the town and country, it is only when Kate turns away from the 'mongrelism' of Mexico City and towards the 'purity' of the Mexican hinterland that the heroine is able to discover the real object of her interest: the isolated Indian communities of rural Mexico that represent 'that timeless, primeval passion of the prehistoric races' (p. 117). In the context of this rural retreat, Kate interprets the Mexican landscape and its people in terms of the European past which is registered as an almost transcendent moment of harmony between human beings and the natural world.

This part of the road Kate knew. She knew the fine villa on the knoll, with its tufts of palms, and the laid-out avenues that were laid out, indeed, as the dead are, to crumble back again. She was glad to be past the villas, where the road came down to the lake again, under big shady trees that had twisted, wriggly beans. On the left was the water, the colour of turtledoves, lapping the pale fawn stones. At a water-hole of a stream in the beach, a cluster of women were busily washing clothes. In the shallows of the lake itself two women sat bathing, their black hair hanging dense and wet. A little farther along a man was wading slowly, stopping to throw his round net skilfully upon the water, then slowly stooping and gathering it in, picking out the tiny, glittery fish called charales. Strangely silent and remote everything, in the gleaming morning, as if it were some distant period of time.

(pp. 159-60)

In this passage, the narrator reveals a description of the natural world in terms of a Romantic rural idyll. This idyllic impression of the Sayula hinterland is also figured as a return to human origins when the scene that unfolds here is compared to 'some distant period of time'. Initially, the tranquil impression of the landscape is conveyed by the gentle impression of the water where the action of 'lapping' is suggestive of ease and comfort and is reinforced by the gentle and unobtrusive colour of the water ('the colour of turtledoves') and of the stones ('pale fawn'). These types of descriptions are then echoed in homologous terms with the descriptions of the relaxed and easeful attitude of the human figures. With their picturesque habit of washing clothes in the local stream and their 'black hair' which is described in fecund terms as 'dense and wet', these women reveal an idealised representation of the non-western woman. Earlier, this point had been made more explicitly when Mexican Indian women were

said to possess a 'wild submissiveness' which is identified by Kate as 'the primitive womanliness of the world' (p. 77). In addition, the easeful manner in which the fisherman goes about his simple task reveals a kind of insouciant and effortless proficiency which suggests a state of perfect equilibrium with the natural environment.

During the course of *The Plumed Serpent*, the rural-dwelling Indians of Mexico are not only identified with the universal human past but with the biblical notion of the antediluvian past. For Lawrence, then, in accordance with his idyllic representation of the Mexican Indian where they exist in a pure state of innocence, these indigenous people offer the means whereby the western observer might be redeemed; a form of redemption which is again linked to Lawrence's positive evaluation of the body and the unconscious:

Sometimes, in America, the shadow of that old pre-Flood world was so strong, that the day of historic humanity would melt out of Kate's consciousness, and she would begin to approximate to the old mode of consciousness, the old, dark will, the unconcern for death, the subtle, dark consciousness, non-cerebral, but vertebrate. When the mind and the power of man was in his blood and his backbone, and there was the strange, dark inter-communication between man and man and man and beast, from the powerful spine.

The Mexicans were still this [...]

Kate was more Irish than anything, and the almost deathly mysticism of the aboriginal Celtic or Iberian people lay at the bottom of her soul. It was a residue of memory, something that lives on from the pre-Flood world, and cannot be killed. Something older, and more everlastingly potent, than our would-be fair-and-square world.

(p. 415)

On this occasion, the Mexican Indian present is represented as being equivalent to the collective human past in such a way that erases any notion of Mexico having its own sense of history and culture. And, in the same moment, the Mexican Indian is represented in the same terms as the Mexican landscape, which, it might be remembered, brought about a similar re-engagement with the experiences of the body (for example, 'the white-hung mountains' that lay outside Mexico City were said 'to emit a deep purring sound, too deep for the ear to hear, and yet audible on the blood'). As such, Lawrence's vision of Indian Mexican culture can be seen as subject to two forms of ideological distortion: on the one hand, the Mexican Indian is revealed in terms of European culture and history – as a representative of the biblical past – and,

on the other hand, the Mexican Indian is subject to homologous treatment that reveals an essentialist unity of culture and nature.

The reversion to the potent experiences of the body is also associated with the transition from the human to animal where this 'subtle, dark consciousness' is related to that 'dark inter-communication between man and man and man and beast, from the powerful spine'. Similar comparisons are drawn throughout *The Plumed Serpent*. There is, for example, an animal motif that runs through the chapter which describes the members of Juana's family. At first, and in a manner that seems to indicate a degree of conflict and rupture, the narrator disavows this type of interpretation insisting that 'they were not animals' (p.140). Yet, only a few pages later, the narrator observes how Concha peers out of the window 'like some animal from a cave' (p.143). In a related sense, the principal Mexican Indian character, Cipriano, is identified throughout *The Plumed Serpent* as being distinctly child-like in his behaviour and demeanour. When Kate first encounters Cipriano, for example, he is said to possess a 'quick, naïve, childish smile' (p. 24). During the ceremony in which Kate is transformed into the goddess Malintzi, Cipriano is also revealed as being like a child in his enthusiasm for the various symbols and rituals of the ceremony. In the process, by participating in the ceremony herself, Kate is returned to a state of child-like innocence: 'Ah yes, it was childish. But it was actually so. She was perhaps fourteen years old, and he was fifteen. And he was the young Huitzilopochtli, and she was the bride Malintzi, the bride-girl' (pp. 393-94).

In this sense, the Mexican Indian is aligned to the irrational or unconscious properties of the human mind – whether through their identification with animals or children – in the same way as Costaguaneras were for Conrad. In any case, by drawing these types of associations, we are reminded that Lawrence, like Conrad, reveals a vision of cultural otherness in terms of the primitive whereby 'to study the primitive is thus to enter an exotic world which is also a familiar world' and where 'primitives are like children' or 'our untamed selves'.¹⁸⁷ The difference between the two writers in this respect can again be defined in terms of evaluation where, in contrast to the vision of Conrad who saw this type of irrationality in terms of social chaos and political

¹⁸⁷ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, p. 8.

instability, Lawrence interprets this reversion to the unconscious as an awakening of the more vibrant and authentic self.

During the course of *The Plumed Serpent*, the Mexican Indian is also subjected to another form of ideological distortion which bears a strong relationship to Lawrence's own philosophical concerns. After all, the character of Cipriano emerges as the principal representative of the Indian male where he is routinely identified in the Nietzschean terms of potency and power. Kate reflects on the character of Cipriano in these terms herself:

The mystery of the primeval world! She could feel it now in all its shadowy, furious magnificence. She knew now what was the black, glinting look in Cipriano's eyes. She could understand marrying him, now. In the shadowy world where men were visionless, and winds of fury rose up from the earth, Cipriano was still a power. Once you entered his mystery the scale of all things changed, and he became a living male power, undefined, and unconfined. The smallness, the limitations ceased to exist. In his black, glinting eyes the power was limitless, and it was as if, from him, from his body of blood could rise up that pillar of cloud which swayed and swung, like a rearing serpent or a rising tree, till it swept the zenith, and all the earth below was dark and prone, and consummated. Those small hands, that little natural tuft of black goats' beard hanging light from his chin, the tilt of his brows and the slight slant of his eyes, the domed Indian head with its thick black hair, they were like symbols to her, of another mystery, the mystery of the twilight, primitive world, where shapes that are small suddenly loom up huge, gigantic on the shadow, and a face like Cipriano's is the face at once of a god and a devil, the undying Pan face. The bygone mystery, that has indeed gone by, but has not passed away. Never shall pass away.

(pp. 310-11)

Here, the ineffable and mysterious qualities of Cipriano's character emerge as an important component of Lawrence's vision of Mexican Indian overall. However, this impression of mystery is ultimately revealed as no real mystery at all when it is aligned to the values of potency and power: the 'mystery of the primeval world' is explained by Kate in the same revelatory moment when 'she knew now what was the black, glinting look in Cipriano's eyes'. What is more, as the passage progresses, this sense of power is revealed in increasingly flamboyant terms before it terminates in the revelation of what Pippin has identified in his study of modernism as a form of 'human divination': from the initial moment of recognition that 'Cipriano was still a power' the passage moves to the vibrant sense of Cipriano as 'a living male power' and then to an enlarged

feeling that this 'power was limitless' before ending with the giddy impression of Cipriano as 'once a god and a devil'. In turn, this recognition of power is aligned to the distinctly Lawrencian concerns with the potency and vitality of the body with the mention of 'his body of blood' which 'could rise up that pillar of cloud which swayed and swung, like a rearing serpent or a rising tree'.

This celebration of male power is yet another point of contrast with Conrad whose equivalent portrayal of Pedro Montero revealed an attitude in which his potent qualities of strength and cunning were an object of ridicule and censure. In a manner that is typical of his pedagogic writing style, Lawrence also reveals the changing attitude of his female protagonist as she begins to favour the ancient moral code that Cipriano represents. In the infamous scene which describes the execution of the prisoners who made an attempt on Ramón's life, Kate initially surmises that the cruel and ceremonial manner in which these are carried out is 'all terrible *will*' (p. 387). By the end of the execution, however, Kate is revealed to have undergone a shift in attitude when she accepts Cipriano's hand in the execution, concluding: 'Why should I judge him? He is of the gods' (p.394). In this narrative movement, Lawrence describes the process whereby Kate's initial feelings of repulsion are transformed into a form of acceptance: the female protagonist, however, not only accepts the reality of male violence but embraces it in the same moment as it is transformed, or transvalued, into something that is righteous, even godly.

In her study of primitivism, Torgovnick has also touched on the subject of the attraction of violence for men in the west during the age of modernism and speculated on the curious identification of the primitive in this respect. In a comment that seems to have an especially strong relevance to Lawrence, Torgovnick has theorised that the 'ritualized enactments of violence and death [...] both test and affirm men's need to maintain separation, difference, and controls as attributes of masculinity'.¹⁸⁸ For Lawrence, then, it might be said that this treatment of violence seems directly related to his sense of impotent frustration with regard to the spectacle of the First World War. *The Plumed Serpent* can thus be regarded as a fictional reflection of how the primordial force of human cruelty and violence might be absorbed into a new form of social praxis. In this respect, Lawrence's Mexican novel reveals the substitution of a

¹⁸⁸ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, p. 151.

modern political state for a social order that is feudal and patriarchal in nature and which institutes human cruelty as an important aspect of a symbolic religious order. The object of Lawrence's disapproval can be more particularly identified not in terms of violence itself but in terms of the democratisation of violence that was represented in the trenches of Flanders. Finally, Lawrence seems to have reached the dubious conclusion that if this was as ineradicable part of human nature then it would be best expressed by those who were in some sense more 'naturally' suited to the responsibilities of male leadership.

The Demise of the Market and the Return of Quetzalcoatl: the movement 'from metal to membrane'

With his sense of the Mexican Indian as a representative of the European past, Lawrence, not surprisingly perhaps, reaches for this same primitive solution in his effort to resolve the complexities and inequalities of the global market. In contrast to Conrad, whose representation of capitalism was seen as a type of unsolved intellectual puzzle that terminated in an anti-teleological disavowal of origins and revealed a deeply paradoxical moral inheritance, Lawrence's critique of capitalism in *The Plumed Serpent* often assumes the form of a simplistic reversion to the labour practices of the past. In contrast to the ideological ruptures and moral contradictions of Conrad's *Nostromo*, then, Lawrence's portrayal of Mexico in *The Plumed Serpent* is ordered according to the ideas of Lawrence's own philosophy during this stage of his leadership phase of his literary career.

Despite their differences, however, Conrad and Lawrence were united in their mutual disdain for the modern capitalist economy. After all, Conrad had deplored the 'Scramble for Africa' and the associated European obsession with wealth accumulation in *Heart of Darkness*. In a passage from this novella which has already been quoted in this study, the narrator had remarked with his inimitable blend of resignation and despair that 'the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a

pretty thing when you look into it too much.’¹⁸⁹ With *Nostromo*, Conrad extended his critique to encompass the idea that modern capitalism was little more than a continuation of imperialism by other means. The politically astute Decoud observed with bitter irony on ‘that great Costaguana undertaking which is to put money into the pockets of Englishmen, Frenchmen, Americans, Germans, and God knows who else’.¹⁹⁰

In Lawrence’s Mexican novel, Cipriano complains to Kate in similar terms of “those men who take, only take everything from Mexico—money, and all—everything!” (p. 55). And, during the course of *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence reveals how this form of exploitation has resulted in a deep wariness and hostility towards foreign investors, remarking: ‘An angel from heaven would not have been popular, these years, if he had been known as the owner of property’ (p. 98). This lingering resentment is also revealed to lie behind the often tense and difficult relationship between Kate and her Mexican housemaid, Juana. The narrator records how Juana ‘cherished a deep malevolent grudge against rich people, white people’ (p. 148). On occasion, Juana expresses her resentment directly in more oppositional terms, telling Kate: “You know, Niña, the gringos and the gringuitos take everything away” (p. 148). Yet, while Lawrence can be seen to echo a number of similar concerns to Conrad there is also a substantial difference between the two writers in their attitude towards this type of exploitation.

While Conrad portrayed this exploitive relationship in *Nostromo* as a regrettable feature of the modern industrial economy, there was little sense of a viable alternative. By contrast, Lawrence revealed a commitment to the themes of change and renewal throughout his writing career. This extremely confident, even, at times, messianic, belief in himself as a harbinger of change and renewal is not only revealed in Lawrence’s creative writing but is reflected in his aim of setting up a magazine called *The Signature* during the war which, he had hoped, would function as a platform for his own views and even as a stepping stone towards reform. In keeping with the attitude that is suggestive of a writer who had taken such steps towards action and reform, the following statement from ‘Nottingham and the Mining Country’ (1929) is typical of Lawrence’s forceful and diagnostic critique of capitalism:

¹⁸⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 31-32.

¹⁹⁰ Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo* (Letchworth: Broadview, 1997), p. 234.

The real tragedy of England, as I see it, is the tragedy of ugliness, The country is so lovely: the man-made England is so vile...The great crime which moneyed classes and promoters of industry committed in the palmy Victorian days was the condemning of workers to ugliness, ugliness, ugliness: meanness and formless and ugly surroundings, ugly ideas, ugly religion, ugly hope, ugly relationship between workers and employers.¹⁹¹

In a manner that echoes his treatment of the same theme in *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence appears to think through the implications of capitalism here in the existential terms of its consequences for the nature and quality of being. Coupled with this hatred of industry and commerce, something which is portrayed disdainfully with the use of the adjective 'mere' and emphatically with the rhetorical repetition of 'ugly', there is the idea that industry represents a general perversion of this amorphous 'human energy'. Nevertheless, despite the existential focus of this criticism, Lawrence does see the relationship between industrialists and workers in terms of exploitation: there is even something Dickensian in the mention of the Victorian promoters here who enslave their workers to the industrial machine.

However, it is the liberation of this basic human energy that is the principal aim of Lawrence's literary career. Lawrence's interest in the liberation of this basic human energy is something that is often conflated with his urgent desire to recalibrate the relationship between men and women. In his contemporaneous 'The State of Funk' (1929), Lawrence wrote that 'our civilisation [...] has almost destroyed the natural flow of common sympathy between men and men, and men and women' and declared: 'it is this that I want to restore to life'.¹⁹² This idea is revealed in *The Plumed Serpent* with Ramón's notion that the followers of the burgeoning Quetzalcoatl faith could 'find the beginnings of the way to their own manhood' and 'their own womanhood' in the wider unities of the cosmos (p. 209). This almost Deistic, perhaps even ultimately Platonic, concept of cosmic order and harmony is at least as old as Lawrence's discussion of this same topic in his study of Thomas Hardy where the balance between male and female forces is seen as vital for a healthy and vibrant culture. In a manner that also

¹⁹¹ D. H. Lawrence, 'Nottingham and the Mining Countryside', in *D. H. Lawrence: A Selection from Phoenix* (London: Penguin, 1971), pp. 108-09.

¹⁹² D. H. Lawrence, 'The State of Funk' in *D. H. Lawrence: A Selection from Phoenix* (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 370.

anticipates the florid symbolism of *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence writes of a 'male [force that] seethes and whirls in incredible speed upon the female, where the two are one, as axle and wheel are one, and the motion travels out to infinity'.¹⁹³

Similarly, the narrator of *The Plumed Serpent* consistently situates the problems of economic exploitation in terms of existential concerns. This is revealed in the episode of the novel when Kate and Owen visited 'the University' in the capital to view a number of 'Ribera's frescoes' (p. 52). For Kate, as was explored in the previous chapter of this study, these frescoes, with their political message of reform in the direction of worker's rights and equality, were a profound disappointment. Specifically, Kate had complained of these frescoes that 'there was sympathy with the Indian, but always from the ideal, social point of view'. Much like Lawrence himself, Kate was more concerned with the spiritual and physical aspects of Indian life. In line with Lawrence's own philosophical concerns, the reader is informed that these murals 'never [provide] the spontaneous answer of the blood'. Similarly, when asked about this same topic in *The Plumed Serpent*, Ramón disavows any interest in politics when pressed on this subject by his second in command, Cipriano.

In this vein, Ramón argues that the current president, Montes, only holds political 'ideas' that are 'American and European' in origin. The policies of Montes (especially his appetite for social reform, much like the President on whom his character is based) are not seen by Ramón as the means whereby Mexico can flourish. By contrast, the revolution that Ramón wishes to carry out is distinctly religious and cultural in orientation. It is Cipriano, after all, who claims that England has sold its soul in the quest for wealth and materialism and that Mexico, by contrast, is about to flourish under the guidance of Ramón (p. 234). This type of criticism also involves a prediction about the future rebirth of Mexican society which is particularly apparent when Cipriano speaks of the dominion of 'the gringos' but suggests this will all change owing to the 'second strength' which is behind the sun (p.363). This is somewhat similar to the advice of Ramón who identified the true nature of the earth as consisting of 'Valleys of the Soul' rather than 'cities of commerce and industry' (p. 249). In this sense, the primitivist religious revival depicted in Lawrence's Mexican novel also

¹⁹³ D. H. Lawrence, *Study of Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 54.

embodies a type of anti-capitalist critique; a form of critique that is far more polemical than anything that could be found in Conrad's *Nostromo*.

The hymn entitled 'Quetzalcoatl Looks Down on Mexico' offers a damning criticism of industry and capitalism. At first, Quetzalcoatl is simply revealed observing such features of modern Mexico as 'trains,' 'railways,' 'automobiles,' and 'cities of stone' before stating that this is a 'curious' situation. Quetzalcoatl also observes with similar astonishment 'the men that worked in the fields, with foreign overseers' (p.240). As the hymn continues, however, these observations deepen and broaden before transforming into a blistering attack on the 'money-vermin' of Mexico who are singled out as objects of fierce condemnation. Similarly, Quetzalcoatl suggests that such 'men upon the body of the earth are like lice, | Devouring the earth with sores' (p. 242). Quetzalcoatl, in the end, offers his followers a rather stark choice: either they choose to realise themselves and overthrow the capitalists and foreigners or he will simply 'smother them all' (p. 241). After reading this hymn, and again reflecting the pedagogic design of the novel, Kate herself concludes that 'men are less than the green-fly sucking the stems of the bush, so long as they live by business and bread alone' (p. 243).

In addition, Lawrence often describes the Indian relationship to the land in historical terms as 'a lingering feeling of tribal, communal land-ownership and distribution' (p. 145). Similarly, Ramón writes appealing letters to his countrymen expressing his belief in 'the old communal system' (p. 360). For these reasons, it is entirely in keeping that the hero of the religious revival should also be the owner of a hacienda himself. Through his marriage to Carlota, the narrator reveals that Ramón has not only gained money from mining but also from maize, sugar and fruit farming (p. 155). Around his estate, there are a variety of labourers who are professional artisans rather than industrial labourers. There are, for example, descriptions of a blacksmith and a sculptor who are engaged in producing various items for the religious ceremonies (pp. 170-71). In the attitude of these labourers towards Ramón as an inspirational overseer, the real significance of this reversion to the labour practices of the medieval past is revealed: 'The men working were almost instantly aware of his presence [...] They were men, and his presence was wonderful to them [...] they worked the quicker for having seen him, as if it gave them new life' (p. 170). Ramón's

allegiance to a form of social and political organisation of this kind is not all that surprising. It is a form of labour practice that allows for such social discriminations as those between lord and serf, or master and slave; an attitude which again reflects the influence of Nietzsche in his transvaluation of cruelty and power.

Part III

Malcolm Lowry: *Under the Volcano* (1947)

Chapter V: The Troubled Circumstances of 1938

With its precise fixture of a Latin American town in geographical context, the opening of Lowry's *Under the Volcano* unmistakably recalls Conrad's *Nostromo*. Aside from the similarly descriptive prose, there is an almost identical, and paradoxical, tension between the efforts to orientate the reader in a concrete location which is also partly disrupted by a form of disorientation. In this opening paragraph, geographical place names are referred to alongside the partly fictional place name of Quauhnahuac. And yet, Lowry's situation of Quauhnahuac – the Nahuatl or Tlahuican name for Cuernavaca¹⁹⁴ – is more global than Conrad's situation of Costaguana in its tentacular reach to the Revillagigedo Islands, Hawaii, Tzucx, British Honduras and Juggernaut. The reach of these references seems to indicate *Under the Volcano's* status as a global rather than 'English' novel:

Two mountain chains traverse the republic roughly from north to south, forming between them a number of valleys and plateaux. Overlooking one of these valleys, which is dominated by two volcanoes, lies, six thousand feet above sea-level, the town of Quauhnahuac. It is situated well south of the Tropic of Cancer, to be exact, on the nineteenth parallel, in about the same latitude as the Revillagigedo Islands to the west in the Pacific, or very much farther west, the southernmost tip of Hawaii—and as the port of Tzucx to the east on the Atlantic seaboard of Yucatan near the border of British Honduras, or very much farther east, the town of Juggernaut, in India, on the Bay of Bengal.¹⁹⁵

With its descriptions of Quauhnahuac lying 'six thousand feet above sea-level' and its situation according to the latitude of the nineteenth parallel, Lowry locates the Mexican town in the meticulous and scrupulous style of a modern cartographer. It is an evocation of place that is conveyed in the relative terms of other places from around the globe; a sense of context that is eminently suited to a novel where – in a similarly metonymic treatment to Conrad's *Nostromo* – the town of Quauhnahuac functions both as a literal setting as well as a sign of the troubled circumstances of

¹⁹⁴ Malcolm Lowry Project (2012), <http://www.otago.ac.nz/english/lowry/content/parent_frameset.html>, p. 3.3.

¹⁹⁵ Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 9.

1938 in a more figurative sense. After all, *Under the Volcano* not only reflects on the events of Mexican history – the Spanish Conquest; the rule of Porfirio Díaz, Juarez, Huerta and Cárdenas; the nationalisation of Mexican oil and the programme of land reform – but dwells on the significance of European events such as the Spanish Civil War and the rising power of Adolf Hitler. Lowry also suggests a type of parallelism between these national and international themes in which the ideological divisions between the socialist government of Cárdenas and the pseudo-fascistic Unión Militar suggest the looming ideological conflict in Europe and the beginnings of the Second World War.¹⁹⁶

And yet, despite the sense of similarity with Conrad, the next paragraph – with its mention of highways, golf courses, swimming pools, hotels and its playful juxtaposition of churches and cantinas – indicates that the reader has now also entered a very different fictional world from the one described in *Nostromo* and *The Plumed Serpent*; no longer a transitional world caught precariously between the traditional and modern, Quauhnahuac represents a vision of Mexico which is wholly commensurate with the industrial west:

The walls of the town, which is built on a hill, are high, the streets and lanes tortuous and broken, the roads winding. A fine American-style highway leads in from the north but is lost in its narrow streets and comes out a goat track. Quauhnahuac possesses eighteen churches and fifty-seven cantinas. It also boasts a golf course and no fewer than four hundred swimming-pools, public and private, filled with the water that ceaselessly pours down from the mountains, and many splendid hotels.

With its mention of an ‘American-style highway’ which slowly transforms into ‘a goat track’ Lowry reveals Mexico as a location that has been infiltrated by the modern world. If the American highway suggests the intrusion of modern technology and infrastructure then the mention of ‘eighteen churches and fifty-seven cantinas’ also

¹⁹⁶ Critical interpretations of *Under the Volcano* have often been divided by critics such as Victor Doyen who have offered a view of the novel based on its complex structure and dense web of literary allusions (see ‘Elements Towards a Spatial Reading’ in *Malcolm Lowry, Under the Volcano: A Casebook*, Gordon Bowker, ed. (London, Macmillan, 1987) and critics such as Dale Edmonds who have revealed analyses of the novel’s situation in the political context of the 1930s and 40s in both a national and international sense (see ‘A Mosaic of Doom: A Reading of the ‘Immediate’ Level’ in the same volume). To some extent, these differing approaches follow logically on from the composite nature of Lowry’s Mexican novel which seems to strike a precarious balance between the literary and political worlds.

reveals Lowry's delight in amusing juxtapositions. The presence of the churches reveals the heritage of Mexico's Spanish colonial past while the greater number of cantinas gestures both towards the alcoholic downfall of Geoffrey Firmin and the brash, fun-loving commercialism of modern Mexico. The mention of golf courses and swimming pools also reveals Lowry's sense of Quauhnahuac as a leisure resort for the wealthy officials of the Mexican government. In this sense, for Lowry, Mexico is no longer associated with the Lawrencian notion of a Romantic retreat. The town of Quauhnahuac is figured as a modern place which is subject to a dizzying range of commercial forces.



Cuernavaca with Popocatepetl Looming in the Distant Horizon.

Although Jonathan Cape published *Under the Volcano* in 1947 the events that the novel describes took place more than a decade earlier in 1938 and 1939. The long hiatus between 1938 and 1947 is, of course, a consequence of the novel's long and painful period of composition (another similarity with Conrad who went through a comparable struggle in writing *Nostromo*). Nevertheless, this earlier time period – before the beginning of another world war, even more destructive than the one which horrified Lawrence – shapes the entire tone and fabric of this mid-twentieth century novel. *Under the Volcano* reveals Mexico in 1938 as a country torn between two opposing political ideologies and in the full sway of a violent, nationalistic fervour. In

addition, the time period of 1938 also reveals the deeply autobiographical nature of the novel.

On his initial visit to the country, Lowry had arrived in Mexico on 30 October 1936 and left on 23 July 1938.¹⁹⁷ Lowry's residence in Mexico had followed a long period of exile from England in which he had first lived in Paris in 1933, where he married his first wife, Jan Gabriel.¹⁹⁸ Shortly afterwards, in 1934, the couple had moved to New York where Lowry mixed in literary and artistic circles and wrote *Lunar Caustic* (1968), a novel which not only anticipates *Under the Volcano* in its apocalyptic ambience but in its theme of personal disintegration in the figure of the alcoholic Bill Plantagenet.¹⁹⁹ From New York, the Lowrys eventually travelled to Mexico, staying briefly in Long Island, Taos, Los Angeles and San Francisco before sailing on the *SS Pennsylvania* to Acapulco.²⁰⁰

During his initial visit to Mexico, Lowry then toured fairly widely in the region, visiting Iguala, Tanc and Mexico City. However, with its volcanoes, 'barranca', hotels and local cinema, it is the town of Cuernavaca, where Lowry stayed for the majority of his visit, which provides the distinctive and memorable landscape of the novel.²⁰¹ More importantly, Lowry's much more personal concerns can be seen to have played a significant role in shaping the content of *Under the Volcano*. As much as it is a political commentary, the novel is also a harrowing, though rarely humourless, account of Lowry's own experiences of alcoholism and marriage breakdown in this difficult period of his life. In December 1937, Jan Gabriel left Lowry alone in Mexico, after which he embarked on a prolonged bout of alcoholism in the province of Oaxaca.²⁰² During this period of wallowing in cantinas and soaking up the atmosphere, Lowry also roused the suspicion of the Mexican authorities and was thrown in jail on two occasions. The circumstances of his second arrest provided the material for the conclusion of Lowry's

¹⁹⁷ Gordon Bowker, *Pursued by Furies: a Life of Malcolm Lowry* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 205, p. 243.

¹⁹⁸ Bowker, pp. 172-73.

¹⁹⁹ Bowker, pp. 185-204.

²⁰⁰ Bowker, pp. 202-204.

²⁰¹ Bowker, pp. 205-208.

²⁰² Bowker, p. 229.

Mexican novel in which the drunken Consul is accosted by a brutal Mexican 'policeman'.²⁰³

And yet, even though Lowry returned to Mexico many years later in 1946, the majority of the work on *Under the Volcano* only took place once Lowry had left Mexico. In 1938, after leaving Mexico for Los Angeles, Lowry had met his second wife, the actress and writer Margerie Bonner, who is represented in Lowry's Mexican novel by the character of Yvonne. For a lengthy period during the composition of *Under the Volcano* Lowry stayed on the Canadian border in a small town of Dollarton. Here, in a modest wooden shack by the sea, Lowry worked on the novel. He continued to work on the manuscript in this context even though it was repeatedly rejected by publishers. After the third rejection, Lowry decided to rework the novel far more extensively than before.²⁰⁴ In the process, in the context of the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, Lowry increasingly identified the novel as a commentary on the age in which he lived. In his famous letter of defence of his novel to Jonathan Cape in 1946, Lowry suggested that 'the drunkenness of the Consul is used on one plane to symbolise the universal drunkenness of mankind during the war'²⁰⁵ and that simultaneously 'the volcanoes, which have been getting closer throughout, are used as a symbol of approaching war'.²⁰⁶

²⁰³ Bowker, p. 233.

²⁰⁴ Bowker, pp. 308-09.

²⁰⁵ Malcolm Lowry, *The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, Sherrill E. Grace, ed. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 507.

²⁰⁶ Malcolm Lowry, *The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, p. 522.



Lowry's Wooden Shack in Dollarton.

In addition to these international themes, the other most conspicuous feature of Lowry's writing style is its ironical self-consciousness; an omnipresent sense of writing in a long literary tradition. In his detailed biographical study, Bowker speculates that the bookish nature of Lowry's identity, as well as his often unstable sense of self, led him to admire a host of other writers who, to some extent, were to function as father figures throughout his literary career; these are quite numerous and cosmopolitan, ranging from English writers like Conrad and Lawrence and American writers like Aitken and Melville to the Norwegian writer Nordahl Grieg.²⁰⁷ Lowry had admired Conrad from an early age since reading him as a child at boarding school,²⁰⁸ something which may account for his decision to set his first novel at sea. This type of admiration is sustained in *Under the Volcano* in the episodes that describe Hugh's experiences on board the *Philcotetes*.

In turn, this episode in *Under the Volcano* is also modelled on Lowry's own experiences at sea which had taken its inspiration from Conrad who went to sea at the same age of seventeen. Lowry's seafaring experience assumed the form of a much-

²⁰⁷ Bowker, p. xvi.

²⁰⁸ Bowker, p. 35.

publicised trip to Yokahama shortly after finishing his schooling and before taking the Cambridge entrance exam.²⁰⁹ The trip itself, and the manner in which it was carried out, works its way into the reflexive and allusive style of *Under the Volcano*. While on board the *Philoctetes*, Hugh refers to the seafaring experiences of Conrad, remarking that 'he was vaguely aware Conrad hinted somewhere that in certain seasons typhoons were to be expected along the China coast' (p. 166). Unlike Lowry, however, Hugh emerges as a less bookish individual than the author himself when the narrator confides: 'Hugh, far from aspiring to be a Conrad, as the papers suggested, had not then read a word of him'.

Nevertheless, despite the impression created by these direct references to Conrad, when describing his own literary interests Lowry identified Lawrence as one of his major influences (the other writer that he singled out in this regard was James Joyce).²¹⁰ And, even though there are no direct allusions to Lawrence in *Under the Volcano*, Bowker mentions that Lowry had read Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent* and *Mornings in Mexico* shortly before his own visit to Mexico.²¹¹ Towards the end of *Under the Volcano*, the narrator recounts the events of a bull-throwing spectacle that is similar to the opening of Lawrence's Mexican novel. Not only is there the same apparent fascination with the gruesome nature of the event itself ('a tiresome and odious spectacle' (p. 259)) but this attitude of revulsion and distaste occurs when the prose is filtered through the perspective of a female character. Likewise, rather than representing the matadors as heroic, the reader's sympathy is steered in the direction of the bull who is shown to be duped and humiliated.

On a more superficial level, there is the precise symmetry of the trio of the two male (Hugh and Geoffrey in *Under the Volcano*; Owen and Villiers in *The Plumed Serpent*) and female characters (Yvonne in *Under the Volcano*; Kate in *The Plumed Serpent*). As with the nature of his admiration of Conrad, there is also a strong sense in which Lowry can again be seen to be self-consciously reliving the life experiences of yet another literary hero. After deciding to visit Mexico in 1935, Lowry set sail for New York in the same ship, the *Berengania*, which brought Lawrence to America a decade before

²⁰⁹ Bowker, p. 63.

²¹⁰ Bowker, p. 155.

²¹¹ Bowker, p. 189.

when he travelled there with Dorothy Brett. Lowry seems to have deliberately set about re-tracing Lawrence's steps, even choosing to visit Lawrence's former home in Taos, New Mexico and afterwards following a similar route to the one Lawrence took in 1925.²¹²

In terms of another major literary influence, Lowry's portrayal of Mexican history owes a great debt to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). In his biography of Lowry, Gordon Bowker has acknowledged the considerable influence of Eliot's poem on Lowry during his time as a Cambridge undergraduate from 1929 to 1931, pointing out that Lowry 'memorize[d] long passages'.²¹³ The intellectual impact of Eliot's poem can be seen in *Under the Volcano* in a broad sense: from the manner in which Europe is figured as a dying civilisation, to the numerous references to non-western cultures and the absence of any optimism that might attend the possibility of cultural and spiritual redemption. More specifically, as we will see in the following section, this impression of a ruinous wasteland is something that is revealed in Lowry's representation of Mexican history.

The Images and Relics of the Past: 'Ghosts [...] certainly lived here'

As well as its detailed evocation of place, then, Lowry's *Under the Volcano* is equally meticulous in its representation of Mexican history. These historical references reflect the diverse inheritance of the country and range broadly from Mexico's Aztec past and its contact with Spain to its struggles for independence and its emergence as a modern nation state. It is also an Eliotic form of historical representation which often suggests that the past is only available in modern Mexico via the commodified forms of advertising images or merchandising gimmicks.

It was already seven o'clock. Though Vigil and he would probably dine later at the Gambrinus or Charley's Place. He selected, from a saucer, a quarter lemon and sucked it reflectively, reading a calendar which, next to the enigmatic María Landrock, behind the bar portrayed the meeting of Cortez and Moctezuma in Tenochtitlán.

(p. 33)

²¹² Bowker, p. 203.

²¹³ Gordon Bowker, p. 87.

Here, the colonial encounter between the Spanish conqueror and the Aztec emperor – the fateful moment of first contact between ancient Mexico and colonial Europe which was the beginning of the Conquest – is revealed in the form of background noise in the context of a wider circulation of images. This image from a calendar appears incidentally and arbitrarily alongside a picture of the German actress María Landrock. In this way, the juxtaposition of an image from history alongside an image from popular culture suggests the erasure of the categorical distinction between history and commerce. As such, Lowry offers a representation of history that avoids the satirical and ironical treatment offered by Conrad where modern Anglo-American capitalism is elided with Spanish colonialism. With its playful juxtaposition of history and commerce *Under the Volcano* suggests that absence of a clear foundation on which such an irony and satire might rest. In addition, Lowry also avoids the ideologically-laden representation of history offered by Lawrence where the pre-Columbian past was figured as an antidote to the modern industrial present. The opening two chapters of *Under the Volcano* also alight on architectural signs of the past in the form of Maximilian and Carlota's ruined palace and the equestrian statue of Adolfo de la Huerta.

By the time he reached the Palace the sun had set.

In spite of his *amour propre* he immediately regretted having come. The broken pink pillars, in the half-light, might have been waiting to fall down on him: the pool, covered with green scum, its steps torn away and hanging by one rotting clamp, to close over his head. The shattered evil-smelling chapel, overgrown with weeds, the crumbling walls, splashed with urine, on which scorpions lurked – wrecked entablature, where love had once brooded, seemed part of a nightmare. And Laurelle was tired of nightmares. France, even in Austrian guise, should not transfer itself to Mexico, he thought. Maximilian had been unlucky in his palaces too, poor devil. Why did they have to call that other fatal palace in Trieste also the Miramar, where Carlotta went insane, and everyone who ever lived there from the Empress Elizabeth of Austria to the Archduke Ferdinand had met with a violent death? And yet, how they must have loved this land, these two lonely empurpled exiles, human beings finally, lovers out of their element – their Eden, without either knowing quite why, beginning to turn under their noses into a prison and smell like a brewery, their only majesty at last that of tragedy. Ghosts. Ghosts, as at the Casino, certainly lived here.

(p. 20)

The historical reference here is to the rather peculiar event in Mexican history which saw the installation of the Austrian Habsburg duke Ferdinand Maximilian as the Emperor of Mexico by Napoleon III of France in 1864; something which followed on from the earlier military intervention of the same European power in 1861.²¹⁴ Although France had originally only sent its military forces to Mexico in order to enforce a loan repayment this intervention turned into an expedient form of colonial occupation which led to the forced expulsion of the Mexican president Benito Juárez. As such, with the subsequent installation of Maximilian, this was a turn of events that represented the reintroduction of colonialism (as well as monarchism) after Mexico had achieved its independence from the Spanish Empire in 1821. It was, however, a return to the practices of the colonial past which was relatively short lived when Juárez swiftly returned with a military force of his own and tried and executed the new emperor in 1867.²¹⁵ In fact, the forces of Juárez had been armed by the American government who, as will be remembered from the earlier discussion of *Nostromo* in the first chapter of this study, were keen to limit the expansion of the European powers since the founding of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823.²¹⁶ In terms of its representation in *Under the Volcano*, this political event from the Mexican past appears in the ruinous forms of 'broken pink pillars' and 'crumbling walls' of Maximilian's dilapidated palace.

The colonial misadventure of Maximilian and his wife, the empress Carlotta, strikes Monsieur Laruelle as nothing short of 'a nightmare' from the past in which 'France, even in Austrian guise, should not [have] transfer[ed] itself to Mexico'. This is a judgement that seems to be echoed by the narrator with the references to 'green scum', a 'rotting clamp', the 'evil-smelling chapel' and, most forcefully, to the palace walls which are 'splashed with urine'. With these images of putrid decay, the colonial misadventure is not only defined in terms of ruin but also in terms of the lost values of the colonial past which are now an object of ridicule and derision. During the course of *Under the Volcano*, the tragic fate of Maximilian and Carlota also bears a thematic relationship to Geoffrey and Yvonne's failed marriage and gestures towards the fulfilment of the novel's tragic climax. Furthermore, the reference to Carlota's

²¹⁴ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, pp. 388-95.

²¹⁵ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, pp. 400-01.

²¹⁶ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, pp. 396-97.

subsequent mental breakdown after the events of Mexico in the Miramar at Trieste also again points to the global reach of the novel which shuttles back and forth between the Old and New Worlds. Further still, in its representation of the Mexican past as something ghostly, Lowry portrays Mexico in the 1930s as a place in which the images and relics of the past reveal themselves at every turn.

The former Mexican President Adolfo de la Huerta (who ruled the country for a brief period of five months in 1920) is another ghost who haunts Quauhnahuac's ruinous and broken landscape.

The old bandstand stood empty, the equestrian statue of the turbulent Huerta rode under the nutant trees wild-eyed evermore, gazing over the valley beyond which, as if nothing had happened and it was November 1936 and not November 1938, rose, eternally, her volcanoes, her beautiful, beautiful volcanoes.

(p. 49)

After her two-year absence from Quauhnahuac and her alcoholic husband, Yvonne is immediately confronted on her return with this familiar image of the local bandstand and statue of Huerta in the town square. In this way, Lowry again represents the Mexican past in fragmentary and incidental terms as the visual impressions of the past are relayed in the form of their effect on human consciousness. On this occasion, the fixed gaze of Huerta conveys the uncanny effect to Yvonne that her previous two-year absence was little more than a figment of her imagination. And yet, the reference to Huerta's gaze as 'wild-eyed' also conveys the sense that something more is going on here than the portrayal of solipsism. And, towards the end of the novel, the same statue will appear again to Yvonne in the same moment that the former Mexican president is referred to as 'the drunkard' and 'the murderer' (p. 336). In this sense, the statue of Huerta also conveys the author's impression of Mexico's turbulent and violent post-Revolutionary history.

Huerta had installed himself as president in 1913 after opportunistically switching sides during a military coup which had been led by Díaz and Reyes.²¹⁷ The former president Madero had originally enlisted the military skills of Huerta and placed him in control of the government army in order to defeat a rebel force that was dissatisfied

²¹⁷ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, p. 524.

with the lack of welfare reforms.²¹⁸ In this sense, Huerta can be identified as a *caudillo* in the same mould as Conrad's General Montero in *Nostromo* or Lawrence's Cipriano in *The Plumed Serpent*. Once installed, Huerta quickly assumed the full powers of a dictator in an effort to suppress the rebellious factions that threatened to undermine national cohesion. Under Huerta, with his programme of national conscription, government spies and press censorship, it was as if Mexico had again been cast back to an earlier stage of its history: though this time, in the form of the authoritarian politics of the Porfiriato.²¹⁹ Again, however, this was another event in Mexican history that was relatively short-lived. After an American intervention in Veracruz, a distracted Huerta had allowed himself to lose ground to the revolutionary forces that disapproved of his militarisation of Mexican politics.²²⁰ Realising that his situation had become hopeless after his enemies had seized strategically important locations, such as the state of Zacatecas, Huerta promptly resigned on 8 July 1914.²²¹

As with the representation of the ruined palace of Maximilian and Carlotta, the statue of Huerta also reveals a relationship to the thematic concerns of Lowry's Mexican novel where the alcoholic Huerta offers an historical parallel with the character of Geoffrey Firmin. There is also an intertextual point to be made about the presence of the Huerta statue in the novel. After all, it is a typographical feature that recalls the presence of the statue of Charles IV in *Nostromo*. However, this intertextual parallel also reveals a further stylistic disparity: whereas the presence of the statue in *Nostromo* offered Conrad the means of contrasting the colonial past with the capitalist present, the statue of Huerta in *Under the Volcano* functions more in the non-interpretative terms of juxtaposition.

The Ideological Divide: Lázaro Cárdenas del Río and the Sinarquista Movement

M. Laruelle passed up the hill: he stood, tired, in the town below the square [...] he sauntered down the Avenida de la Revolución [...] Newsboys ran past selling copies of *Quauhnahuac Nuevo*, the pro-Almazán, pro-Axis sheet put out, they said, by the tiresome Unión Militar.

(p. 29)

²¹⁸ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, p. 519.

²¹⁹ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, p. 524.

²²⁰ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, pp. 531-534.

²²¹ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, p. 533

In addition to its bewildering range of obscure historical references, *Under the Volcano* reveals a political landscape that is riven by equally perplexing ideological divisions. This need not be seen as a deliberate attempt on the part of Lowry to frustrate and confound his readers; it is perhaps best seen as a form of representation that richly conveys Lowry's own sense of confusion and mystification during his time in Mexico. After all, Lowry had been exposed to a complex world of political rivalry and dissonance when he lived in Mexico in the late 1930s. It was a political context of sharp ideological divisions between conservative and liberal elements which often combined with long-standing grievances between the church and state. In this sense, it was a context where the political ideals of Europe often assumed a confusingly localised orientation. As he continues his meandering walk back home, Laruelle is confronted by newspaper vendors in this passage who sell the Unión Militar's newspaper *Quauhnahuac Nuevo*.

The shadowy Unión Militar is a reference to the right-wing movement in Mexico known as the Unión Nacional Sinarquista (UNS).²²² The representation of the UNS in *Under the Volcano* can be explained by the circumstances of Lowry's stay in Mexico. Bowker points out that Lowry spent a good deal of time in the city of Oaxaca where there was 'a significant Sinarquista presence'.²²³ This was a political organisation which was founded in 1937 by practising Catholics who were concerned by the irreligious direction in which the country was headed and had the express aim of subverting the liberal Mexican state.²²⁴ In terms of the specific revelations from this passage, the reference to this organisation as pro-Almazán and pro-Axis refers to the fact that the UNS were supportive of the right-wing presidential candidate Juan Andreu Almazán in the Mexican election of 1939²²⁵ as well as to the rumour in left-wing political circles that the same movement also had links to Nazi Germany.²²⁶ For these reasons, the presence of the UNS movement in *Under the Volcano* is extremely important for a contextual reading of the novel. However, it is also a political movement which can only

²²² Douglas W. Veitch, *Lawrence, Greene and Lowry: The Fictional Landscape of Mexico* (Waterloo, ON: 1978), p. 135.

²²³ Gordon Bowker, p. 230.

²²⁴ Héctor Hernández, *The Sinarquista Movement* (London, Minerva Press, 1999), pp. 188-89.

²²⁵ Héctor Hernández, p. 233.

²²⁶ Héctor Hernández, p. 192.

be understood in a broader political context. In this respect, it is important to realise that Lowry lived in Mexico during the presidency of Cárdenas who was in power from 1 December 1934 to 30 November 1940.



The UNS on the March in the 1930s.

As was indicated by his nationalisation of the railways and the oil industry in the late 1930s, Cárdenas was a politician who was committed to recapturing the socialist politics and reformist spirit of the revolutionary period from the very beginning of winning the election in 1934.²²⁷ It is also worth pointing out here that when Cárdenas came to power he had ended a period in Mexican history known as the *Maximato*: a phase of Mexican history which had seen a shift to the political right during the later stages of Calles' hold on the Mexican state where he transformed into the Supreme Chief, or *Jefe Máximo*, and controlled a series of puppet presidents: Emilio Portes Gil (1928-1930); Pascual Ortiz Rubio (1930-1932); Abelardo L. Rodríguez (1932-1934).

²²⁷ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, pp. 596-98.

During this period, the social reforms of the Revolution had been effectively abandoned while members of the Communist Party were sent into exile.²²⁸

When Cárdenas assumed the role of Mexican President in 1934, then, it had also been with the support of Calles. Calles had hoped that Cárdenas would be yet another politician whom he could control behind the scenes. However, shortly after assuming power, Cárdenas dismantled the state machinery of the *Maximato* and even arrested Calles and sent him into exile to the United States in 1936. In his role as the new Mexican President, Cárdenas restored the socialist orientation of the Revolution and embarked on a bold series of reforms.²²⁹ It is not surprising, then, that in this political context the idealistic, left-leaning Hugh Firmin can ponder these possibilities with such optimism: “Communism to me is [...] simply a new spirit, something which one day may or may not seem as natural as the air we breathe” (p. 306). It is also worth pointing out this energetic political movement to the left is something that would have been familiar to Lowry even before his arrival in Mexico.

Lowry had, after all, been acquainted with left-wing intellectuals such as Waldo Frank since his time in New York in 1935. In his biography, Bowker explains that Frank’s ‘studio on West 83rd Street was a centre of radical debate’ and that ‘he had written several books on South America’. In particular, Frank had followed the reformist policies of Cárdenas closely and may have even personally encouraged Lowry to visit Mexico.²³⁰ Hart Crane was another influence on Lowry during these years. Bowker has identified how ‘Lowry became deeply affected by Crane’ whose poetic visions of Mexico captivated his imagination and increased his desire to visit the country.²³¹ This American poet had a deeply sympathetic attitude towards Mexico, seeing it, in a similar manner to Lawrence, as the potential birthplace for an alternative and vibrant culture.²³² In this sense, Lowry had been exposed, like Lawrence before him, to a bohemian set of North American writers, artists and intellectuals who identified Mexico as a place of alternative ideas and values; in the areas of both politics and

²²⁸ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, pp. 590-92.

²²⁹ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, pp. 296-97.

²³⁰ Gordon Bowker, p. 194.

²³¹ Gordon Bowker, p. 195.

²³² Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1992), p. 78.

culture. In any case, there can be little doubt that Lowry gained first-hand knowledge of this political movement towards the left once he arrived in Mexico itself.

The opening of *Under the Volcano* conveys a sense of toppled regimes and economic turbulence; a type of complement to the general sense of ruin that is conveyed in the form of historical relics that haunt the Mexican landscape. The terrace of The Hotel Casino de la Selva where Dr Arturo Díaz Vigil and Monsieur Jacques Laruelle drink *anís* at the beginning of the novel, after playing tennis and billiards, reveals this immediately when the reader is informed that

It is no longer a Casino. You may not even dice for drinks in the bar. The ghosts of ruined gamblers haunt it. No one ever seems to swim in the magnificent Olympic swimming pool. The springboards stand empty and mournful. Its jai-alai courts are grass-grown and deserted.

(p.9)

The disused casino here is a consequence of the difficult transition that had taken place in Mexican politics a few years earlier with the dismantling of the *Maximato*. As was already mentioned, in order to free himself from the domineering presence of the former Mexican President Plutarco Elías Calles (the president who appears in *The Plumed Serpent* under the name of Montes), President Cárdenas had proceeded, on winning the election of 1934, to dismantle the vast network of Calles supporters who reached into all areas of Mexican politics; which included a form of government corruption in which casinos were run for the personal enrichment of the *Callistas*.²³³ Further indications of this widespread change and disruption are also revealed a few pages later when Laruelle takes leave from his friend and makes his way home on foot.

He crossed the street, making for the station. Although he would not be travelling by train the sense of departure, of its imminence, came heavily about him again as, childishly avoiding the locked points, he picked his path over the narrow-gauge lines. Light from the setting sun glanced off the oil tanks on the grass embankment beyond. The platform slept. The tracks were vacant, the signals up. There was little to suggest that any train ever arrived at this station, let alone left it.

(p. 13)

²³³ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, p. 597.

Though it receives no direct mention here, these railway disruptions described were one possible result of the upheavals that were taking place in the running of this area of Mexican infrastructure during the period of the late 1930s. Cárdenas had taken the bold step of bringing the railways under state control in 1937 which he then transferred to the Railway Workers' Union a year later.²³⁴ The sleepy impression of Quauhnahuac's train station is, therefore, a possible reflection of the disruptions that had resulted from this sudden change in management. There is also a hint of further economic trouble with the mention of the perhaps symbolic 'setting sun' which 'glanced off the oil tanks on the grass embankment beyond'. The falling export market for Mexican oil – due to competition from Venezuela and the waning interest of foreign investors after government interference – had also devastated the Mexican economy towards the end of the Calles administration from the middle to late 1920s. These difficulties were also made considerably worse by the falling prices of other prominent Mexican exports on the global market: such as silver and copper.²³⁵ From 1938 onwards, these economic difficulties were compounded further by the nationalisation of the Mexican oil industry which had the effect of discouraging foreign investment.²³⁶

Bowker has revealed how Lowry was at the point of renewing his residence in Mexico at the moment when the country's oil interests were nationalised on 18 March 1938.²³⁷ Not surprisingly, then, the oil nationalisation is also revealed in the novel, though in the characteristic form of tangential background noise and contextual colour. When lying 'face downward' (p. 82) on the Calle Nicaragua after a bout of heavy drinking, Geoffrey is interrupted in his drunken stupor by an anonymous Englishman who, after enquiring about Geoffrey's well-being, remarks: 'Pity about all this oil business, isn't it? Bad show' (p. 85). The resulting diplomatic tensions also receive some mention later in the novel in a similarly glancing fashion. When speaking with Yvonne on this same subject, Hugh mentions the resulting diplomatic tensions between Mexico and Britain in his characteristically brusque style: "'England [is] *persona non grata* here, so to speak, after Cárdenas's oil shindig'" (p. 100). The

²³⁴ Brian R. Hamnett, *A Concise History of Mexico*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 231.

²³⁵ Brian R. Hamnett, p. 218.

²³⁶ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, p.606.

²³⁷ Gordon Bowker, p. 237.

nationalisation of Mexican oil also has some broader implications for the character of the Consul, Geoffrey Firmin. As a direct consequence of this nationalisation, diplomatic relations between Britain and Mexico had ended in 1938 and did not resume until many years later in 1947.²³⁸ The diplomatic fallout from the oil nationalisation provides a suitable public context for the protagonist's much more private existential crisis as the diplomatically isolated former British Consul. Lowry also makes similarly glancing references to another significant policy of the Cárdenas administration.

When Hugh walks with Yvonne in the Mexican countryside, Hugh recollects this colourful anecdote about his Mexican friend Juan Cerillo:

Trained as a chemist, he worked for a Credit Bank in Oaxaca with the Ejido, delivering money on horseback to finance the collective effort of remote Zapotecan villages; frequently beset by bandits murderously yelling *Viva el Cristo Rey*, shot at by enemies of Cárdenas in reverberating church towers.

(p. 111)

The fictional character of Juan Cerillo is based on Lowry's friend Juan Fernando Márquez; a Zapotecan Indian who was involved with Cárdenas' programme of land reform through his work for the Ejidal Bank in delivering its funds to local villages.²³⁹ The anecdote here refers to the programme of land reform which signalled nothing less than the end of the hacienda system which had dominated Mexican agriculture since the founding of the early colonies following the Spanish Conquest. Though the *ejido* system of land ownership had begun as early as 1917, the significance of the policy under the direction of Cárdenas was that, in contrast to Calles' programme of private holdings, Cárdenas supported the transition towards communal possessions of land.²⁴⁰ In this way, this new form of collective ownership was designed to benefit the peasant communities who would now hold the land in common. However, as is indicated by the reference to the gun shots of bandits in the passage above, this socialist policy of land reform was often met with fierce hostility. There was opposition to these reforms from land owners who stood to lose their substantial farm holdings as well as from peasants who resented the intrusion of the state and preferred their traditional status as *peons*

²³⁸ Brian R. Hamnett, p. 234.

²³⁹ Gordon Bowker, p. 235.

²⁴⁰ Brian R. Hamnett, p. 232.

rather than *ejidatarios*.²⁴¹ As the yell of '*Viva el Cristo Rey*' ('long live Christ the King') indicates the question of land reform was also an issue that was entangled with other less immediately transparent anxieties.

As was indicated by the opening quotation at the start of this section, a crucial point about these socialist reforms is that they also inspired a political movement in the opposite direction. Indeed, the UNS was founded as a reaction to the socialist policies of the Cárdenas administration in 1937. As Hernández explains, the name of the organisation itself revealed its identity as an antidote to the chaos that was felt to be symptomatic of the Mexican government under Cárdenas. After all, as Hernández points out, the Greek meaning of the term Synarchism literally meant 'with' (*syn*) 'order' (*arje*). In this sense, 'the term "Synarchism" was chosen as the antonym of "anarchy", the anarchy of decadent liberalism and atheistic communism against which the Synarchist professed to be marshalling the forces of order and religion in Mexico.'²⁴²

As is suggested by this mention of 'order' and 'religion', the emergence of the UNS was also related to the position that the church found itself in during this same period. As was discussed earlier in relation to Lawrence, many Catholics in Mexico felt that they had been placed in a perilous situation ever since the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) had embraced the idea of a secular state. The constitution of 1917, which had outlawed religious education from state schools, had also exacerbated this type of antagonism. This antagonism, of course, eventually led to the Cristero War (1926-1929) between the forces of the federal government and the self-proclaimed *Cristeros* ('defenders of Christ the King'). In this sense, then, the UNS, as a 'Catholic nationalist movement', can be seen as an expression of discontent that reached back to this earlier phase of antipathy between church and state.²⁴³ The more particular grievances

²⁴¹ Héctor Hernández, p. 129.

²⁴² Héctor Hernández, p. 189.

²⁴³ Brian R. Hamnett, p. 238.

of the UNS also provide an explanation as to why this antagonism between the church and state could so easily become entangled with the topical issue of agrarian reform.

This is something which was seen in *Under the Volcano* with the gunshots and cry of 'Viva el Cristo Rey' as Juan Cerillo struggled to deliver government money to the Zapotecan villagers. This same type of hostility is also revealed in Hugh's remark to Yvonne that 'lots of people [...] don't like Cárdenas [...] as you know, or have any use for his agrarian laws' (p. 299). For Hernández, 'the land problems of the nation contain the key to understanding Synarchism' for the simple reason that 'the UNS made more progress in the areas where agrarian reform had experienced most difficulty'.²⁴⁴ In this sense, the UNS reflected peasant dissatisfaction with the agrarian reforms that often failed to deliver on its promises; 'although the number of peasants who had benefited was considerable (over one million ejidatarios), there remained nearly three million peasants with recognised, or pending claims, for whom there was no good quality land available'.²⁴⁵ From an ideological perspective, the UNS was hostile to the socialist logic of the *ejido* which placed the Mexican peasant in a servile relationship to the Cárdenas administration. Instead, the UNS embraced a reactionary vision of agriculture in which the peasants would be transformed into a propertied class of individual landowners and the country would be returned to a state of autarky.²⁴⁶

In his detailed study of the UNS, Hernández also points out that there were effectively two main explanations as to the origin of this organisation in the contemporary climate of the 1930s. On the one hand, those who were sympathetic to the movement argued that it had arisen as a result of the chaotic Cárdenas administration and aimed to restore some form of social order based on traditional Christian teachings.²⁴⁷ On the other hand, those on the left maintained that the UNS Movement was established by German Nazis as part of some wider international conspiracy.²⁴⁸ Even though Lowry never fails to overlook the distinctively domestic issues which were entangled with the emergence of the political right in Mexico, he often tends towards an international view of these right-wing politics that aligns these

²⁴⁴ Héctor Hernández, pp. 400-01.

²⁴⁵ Héctor Hernández, p. 402.

²⁴⁶ Héctor Hernández, pp. 411-419.

²⁴⁷ Héctor Hernández, p. 376.

²⁴⁸ Héctor Hernández, p. 394.

movements with Nazism. This, of course, suits the global design of the novel, which tends towards broad international comparisons, but it may also be a reflection of the left-wing circles in which Lowry tended to move (in New York with Waldo Frank and in Mexico with Juan Fernando Márquez). However, as Hernández explains, it may ultimately be misleading to identify the UNS with Nazism for the reason that 'it is easy to mistake religious ardours and ultra-nationalism for full-scale commitment to Nazi or fascist doctrine'.²⁴⁹ In this sense, the representation of the shadowy and enigmatic Unión Militar is given an international significance in *Under the Volcano* which portrays a world poised at the moment of crisis.

Visions of Apocalypse and the Second World War: Like a baranca, a ravine, choked up with refuse

The road, which was terrible and full of pot-holes, went steeply downhill here; he was approaching the little bridge he stopped; he lit a new cigarette from the one he'd been smoking, and leaned over the parapet, looking down. It was too dark to see the bottom, but: here was finality indeed, and cleavage. Quauhnhuac was like the times in this respect, wherever you turned the abyss was waiting for you round the corner.

(p. 21)

In this passage, the town of Quauhnhuac is revealed as a literal setting as well as a sign of the times in a more figurative sense. This recalls a similar form of representation to Conrad's *Nostromo*, where the fictional setting of Costaguana was figured both in terms of a concrete Central or South American state and as a metonym for the forces of global capitalism. Appropriately, then, given the troubled context of the late 1930s, the setting of Quauhnhuac is associated with a moment of ruin and crisis in both a national and international sense. In the quotation above, Jacques Laurelle gazes over the parapet at the abyss below and, with this sense of imminent descent, the setting of Quauhnhuac is associated with the notion of a ruinous wasteland ('the road...was terrible and full of pot-holes') as well as impending catastrophe ('wherever you turned the abyss was waiting for you round the corner'). This sense of a world at the brink of crisis is also reflected in Lowry's personal correspondence during this war-time period.

²⁴⁹ Héctor Hernández, p. 200.

In a letter to Margerie Bonner at the beginning of the conflict in September 1939, Lowry reflected: 'I shall be hearing soon from England which must be one hell of a dreary place if it's still there'.²⁵⁰ In the same letter, Lowry went on to mention that he had warned his family that 'the world' was 'hurling to disaster' [sic] before reflecting that 'they took no damn notice. Result: they'll probably not only lose all their money, but be killed'. Though there is an insinuation of anger here, the tone of levity and humour points towards a different response to conflict than the tortured response of Lawrence to the First World War. The same casual, off-hand resignation in the face of conflict also appears in *Under the Volcano* when Laurelle reflects of the war in these terms: 'He had few emotions about the war, save that it was bad. One side or the other would win. And in either case life would be hard. Though if the Allies lost it would be harder. And in either case one's own battle would go on' (p. 15).

Nevertheless, the Second World War exerted a strong hold over Lowry's imagination. In particular, it is the event that lies behind his portrayal of the UNS which, rather than dwelling on the domestic concerns of the position of the Catholic Church, is revealed in terms of broader international themes. As was indicated by Lowry's tendency to associate the movement with Nazism, then, the presence of the UNS in *Under the Volcano* affords Lowry with a tangential means of representing German Nazism. The fourth chapter of *Under the Volcano* opens with a garbled telegram that Hugh sends to the Daily Globe about the rising prominence of anti-Semitism in Mexico:

DAILY GLOBE intelube londres presses collect following yesterdays head-coming antisemitic campaign mexpress propetition see tee emma mex-workers confederation proexpulsion exmexico quote small jewish textile manufacturers unquote learned today perreliable source that german legation mexcity actively behind the campaign etstatment that legation gone length sending antisemetic propaganda mexdept interiorw ards borne out pro-pamphlet possession local newspaperman stop pamphlet asserts jews influence unfavourably any country they live etemphasises quote their belief absolute power etthat they gain their ends without conscience or consideration unquote stop Firmin.

(p. 98)

At first, this telegram might appear rather like the novel itself in miniature form, where the reader is thrown into an unfamiliar environment, filled with political intrigue, and where there exists a strange, puzzling and unstable use of language. Nevertheless, this

²⁵⁰ Malcolm Lowry, *The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, p. 233.

telegram is based on a real telegram which Lowry had obtained from a reporter and reproduced verbatim.²⁵¹ This news story refers to a petition that was made by the Confederation of Mexican Workers (the '*see tee emma*') who objected to an anti-Semitic campaign which had threatened Jewish textile manufactures with expulsion from Mexico. Established as a socialist confederation of labour unions under the Cárdenas administration, the Confederation of Mexican Workers is revealed here as a site of opposition in the struggle against the right-wing movements of Mexico. As an investigative journalist, Hugh has also exposed that the German legation in Mexico City is behind this rising tide of anti-Semitic propaganda.

Lowry's international treatment of the UNS is, then, not something that is limited to his own point of view. As Hernández has pointed out, the right-wing movements of Mexico during the 1930s 'resembled each other in their hatred displayed against communism, their anti-Jewish racism, their admiration for Germany and for Franco's Spain, and their tendency to use violence as a means of action'.²⁵² Even so, Lowry greatly extends this international significance by offering a comparatively light treatment of the domestic concerns. After all, the UNS was mostly energised by far more domestic concerns in the shape of its hostility to the programme of land reform and the difficult position of the Catholic Church.

²⁵¹ *Malcolm Lowry Project* (2012),

http://www.otago.ac.nz/english/lowry/content/00_annotations/00_pages/ann_frameset4.html, p. 94.1.

²⁵² Héctor Hernández, p. 226.

COMPANIA TELEGRAFICA MEXICANA
WESTERN UNION

CLASE DE SERVICIO DESEADO	
INMEDIATO	
CARTA DIURNA	DIFERIDO
NOCTURNO	CARTA CABLE
CARTA NOCTURNA	GRÁFICA
<small>El remitente sujeta a su pago en la clase de servicio deseado. DE OTRO MODO DE TABARA A TARIFA INTERNA.</small>	

NUM.	CARGES
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OFICINA PRINCIPAL:
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140 words *June 25*

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jews influence unfavourably any country they live etemphasises
quote their belief absolute power etthat they gain their ends
without conscience or consideration unquote stop

Servase transmitir el precedente mensaje con sujeción a las condiciones al reverso las cuales quedan aceptadas.

The Western Union Telegram.

Lowry also situates these ideological conflicts in a larger international political context through his frequent references to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Remembering his 'English friend fighting in Spain' (p. 105), Hugh considers his cigarette metaphorically as a commentary on the relationship between war and humanity: 'Hugh put one foot up on the parapet and regarded his cigarette that seemed bent, like humanity, on consuming itself as quickly as possible'. Bowker offers some clarification on this point, explaining that the Spanish Civil War 'took hold of Lowry's imagination much as it did other members of his literary generation' and that 'Spain began to feature in his stories and in poems he wrote soon afterwards in Mexico'.²⁵³ The association between these two political contexts is not as obscure as it might first appear. Again, this identification with Spain is not something that only existed in the minds of western intellectuals. Commenting on the rising power and influence of the UNS in Mexico, Hernández attributes the success of the movement to a variety of

²⁵³ Gordon Bowker, p. 200.

national as well as international causes. In particular, the success of Franco in Spain, who, like them, was also a social conservative and supporter of the Catholic Church, is singled out as especially significant: 'No less significant to all right-wing organisations was the victory of the nationalist side in the Spanish Civil war and the subsequent rise in prestige of European fascism'.²⁵⁴

In the fateful bar scene in the Farolito in Parián the representation of right-wing Mexican politics and the distant cause of the Spanish Civil War are finally combined. When the Consul traces a map of Spain in spilled liquor, innocently associated in his own mind with Yvonne and intended as a point of conversation with Diosdado, he arouses the suspicion of the Mexican bartender. Next, this is interpreted by the UNS officials as a sign of political allegiance who intervene with the interrogative remark "'You make a map of the Spain? You Bolsheviki prick?'" (p. 357). As such, the final bar scene of *Under the Volcano* reveals the ideological tension between fascism and communism in the blackly comic terms of failed communication.

In this episode of fatal misunderstandings and ideological rupture, two other visual cues contribute to the Consul's death. The Consul's beard – as far as the Unión Militar are concerned – associates him further with communist figure of Leon Trotsky while his dark glasses – worn simply for protection from the symptoms of alcoholism – is seized on as evidence of an attempted disguise. False clues are then seized on with no attempt at verification. The presence of Hugh's telegram is another misread sign which is interpreted by the UNS in terms of another object of disapproval: which is mistakenly read by the UNS chief in such a way that again hits on an important international theme: 'It say you are a Juden'. The Consul is, then, put to his death after a series of misread signs; signs that are misinterpreted according to the fascistic outlook of the UNS chief.

Lastly, the war also seems to cast its dispiriting and forlorn shadow over the tonal fabric of the novel. It is this loss of faith in twentieth-century idealism which sets Lowry apart from Lawrence and more in line with the resignation and conservatism of Conrad. It is highly revealing in this context that Laurelle sees the idea of changing the world as both 'absurd and presumptuous' (p. 15). Earlier in *Under the Volcano* this type of attitude is also voiced by the Consul during his conversation with Hugh:

²⁵⁴ Héctor Hernández, pp. 206-07.

Read history. Go back a thousand years. What is the use of interfering with its worthless stupid course? Like a *barranca*, a ravine, choked up with refuse, that winds through the ages, and peters out in a - What in God's name has all the heroic resistance put up by poor little defenceless people all rendered defenceless in the first place for some well calculated and criminal reason [...] to do with the survival of the human spirit? Nothing whatsoever. Less than nothing. Countries, civilizations, empires, great hordes perish for no reason at all, and their soul and meaning with them'.

(pp. 311-12)

Here, the Consul's sceptical view of human history suggests the metaphor of the *barranca* 'choked up with refuse'. In contrast to the idealistic Hugh, the Consul dismisses any form of individual political action as futile and pointless in the context of a world inhabited by powerful subterranean forces that are both calculating and criminal. In this way, the dispiriting political events of the 1930s and 1940s – a period which saw the triumph of Franco in Spain and the loss of millions of lives during the Second World War – is revealed as having transformed the Consul's understanding of politics and history. The Consul offers a forlorn vision of a modern world in which any form of rhetoric about 'the survival of the human spirit' is revealed as mere nonsense; a type of rhetoric that belongs to a more distant age.

Chapter VI: Acceptance and Resignation in Quauhnahuac

With Geoffrey Firmin's immersion in the vibrant, eclectic, and sometimes bewildering, culture of 1930s Mexico – from the Day of the Dead, to the secrets of the occult and the landscape of ominous *barrancas* and towering volcanoes – it might appear that the former British Consul is undergoing a similarly transformative journey to the one taken by Kate Leslie more than twenty years before. This journey, after all, adheres to the same basic pattern. At first, the culture of Britain, or, at times, the entire western world, is revealed as having reached a moment of crisis. From this recognition that there is something wrong with western societies, there is the consequent idea in both of these narratives that the experience of travel enables a possible escape from this condition of cultural, and personal, decline.

In turn, the situation of the protagonist in the new location of Mexico brings about the potential for renewal, a Damaskan-like opportunity for conversion and salvation. In particular, by witnessing the unfamiliar customs and behaviour of Mexico, the exiled westerner is able to leave a variety of limiting ideas behind them, experience the world afresh and start their life again in this foreign location. Regardless of its own unique social and political problems, Mexico is conceived as a cultural space which is redemptive for the European traveller who is open-minded enough to learn the lessons embodied by the encounter with its inherent unfamiliarity; or what, in Pagden's phrase, has been recognised by western observers since Columbus as its 'cultural incommensurability'.²⁵⁵ More precisely, *The Plumed Serpent* and *Under the Volcano* both grow out of the later European obsession of the early twentieth century where an interest in primitive cultures was conceived of as means of returning to a more vibrant and robust form of living; a way of escaping from the complicated, modern and industrial present and returning to the primitive human past which was figured in universal and authentic terms.

Nevertheless, the end of the Consul's journey is altogether different from the terminus of Kate's retreat into the hinterland of Sayula. Despite the occasional promise of redemption, Geoffrey dies at the end of *Under the Volcano* a broken man. As he

²⁵⁵ Anthony Pagden, p. 2.

plunges to his violent death at the bottom of the *barranca* at the end of the novel it is the essential cruelty of both the human and natural world that forms the most lasting impression of the novel. Although Kate's redemption might have seemed problematic for its chauvinistic sexual politics and veneration of male violence, it seems hard to deny that Kate's journey was conceived in redemptive terms by Lawrence himself. For Lawrence, by turning away from the fallacies and neuroses of her own civilisation, Kate was able to achieve a degree of solace. The Consul's journey, by contrast, is represented by Lowry as a yearning for some form of redemption that is never achieved. Geoffrey is unable to avoid his tragic fate despite the alternatives presented to him by the mysteries of the occult, the Mexican landscape or, for that matter, the love of Yvonne.

In contrast to the life-affirming attitude of *The Plumed Serpent*, then, where the natural world was often figured in Nietzschean terms as a vital source of amoral energy which revived and strengthened the human spirit and even led to a form of human divination, the landscape of *Under the Volcano* is routinely associated with the impressions of desolation and despair. In this sense, Lowry's Mexican novel has more in common with the often dispiriting and nihilistic visions of Conrad's *Nostromo*, a view of the natural world which often resembled the gloomy philosophy of Schopenhauer: a vision in which the 'blindly acting force[s] of nature' lay behind the debilitating experience of Decoud and prescribed his eventual suicide.²⁵⁶ Near the beginning of *Under the Volcano*, before revealing his impressions of the natural world, Laruelle gazes over the parapet of The Hotel Casino de la Selva and dwells on some distinctly human scenes and concerns, reflecting on the troubled past and pondering the meaning of human tragedy.

The Nature of Ugliness and Squalor: 'Somebody threw a dead dog after him down the ravine'

M. Laruelle finished his drink. He rose and went to the parapet; resting his hands one on each tennis racquet, he gazed down and around him: the abandoned jai-alai courts, their bastions covered with grass, the dead tennis courts, the fountain,

²⁵⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume I (Mineolo, NY, 1966), p. 110.

quite near in the centre of the hotel avenue, where a cactus farmer had reined up his horse to drink. Two young Americans, a boy and a girl, had started a belated game of ping-pong on the verandah of the annex below. What had happened just a year ago to-day seemed already to belong in a different age. One would have thought the horrors of the present would have swallowed it up like a drop of water. It was not so. Though tragedy was in the process of becoming unreal and meaningless it seemed one was still permitted to remember the days when an individual life held some value and was not a mere misprint in a communiqué.

(p. 11)

In his survey of 'the abandoned jai-alai courts' and 'the dead tennis courts' of the hotel Laruelle draws the reader's attention to the collapse of the *Callista* regime that was discussed in the previous chapter of this study. Here, the sense of historical ruin lends an appropriately desolate impression to the oddly random human scenes that Laurelle observes. After all, it is hard to imagine two more divergent human actions than the cactus farmer who leads his horse to drink and the two young Americans who play a game of ping-pong. The faintly comical effect of such juxtapositions is to portray human actions in terms of insignificance, awkwardness and incongruity. After this contiguous impression of historical ruin and the futility of human actions, Laruelle then recollects the events of the previous year and dwells on the comparative triviality of individual human tragedy. In a historical reference which gestures obliquely towards the Second World War (the framing narrative of *Under the Volcano* is set two months after the invasion of Poland on the Day of the Dead on 2 November 1939), Laurelle identifies the 'horrors of the present' as something which has deprived human tragedy of meaning. In the next paragraph, Laurelle's impression of the natural world is then revealed:

He lit a cigarette. Far to his left, in the northeast, beyond the valley and the terraced foothills of the Sierra Madre Oriental, the two volcanoes, Popocatepetl and Itaccihuatl, rose clear and magnificent into the sunset. Nearer, perhaps ten miles distant, and on a lower level than the main valley, he made out the village of Tomalín, nestling behind the jungle, from which rose a thin blue scarf of illegal smoke, someone burning wood for carbon. Before him, on the other side of the American highway, spread fields and groves, through which meandered a river, and the Alcpancingo road. The watchtower of a prison rose over a wood between the river and the road which lost itself further on where the purple hills of a Dore Paradise sloped away into the distance. Over in the town the lights of Quauhnahuac's one cinema, built on an incline and standing out sharply, suddenly

came on, flickered off, came on again. '*No se puede vivir sin amar*,' Mr. Laruelle said... 'As that *estúpido* inscribed on my house.'

In this paragraph, the ubiquitous local volcanoes, Popocatepetl and Itacchiuatl, loom over the town of Quauhnahuac in a comparable manner to the imposing mountain range of Costaguana. In *Nostramo*, Giorgio had reflected on the relationship of the dignified Higuerota mountain and the scenes of human conflict that they 'were like the passages of a violent game played upon the plain by dwarfs mounted and on foot, yelling with tiny throats, under the mountain that seemed a colossal embodiment of silence'. The passage also recalls the two mountains that Kate observes from her hotel rooftop in *The Plumed Serpent* where these colossal forms had a similarly diminishing effect on the inhabitants of the city (the two mountains which '[watch] gigantically and terribly over this lofty, bloody cradle of men'). When the volcanoes of Popocatepetl and Itacchiuatl are described here as 'clear and magnificent', then, it is an indication that we have returned to a comparable representation of the natural world as 'a great reservoir of unbridled power'.²⁵⁷

And yet, the mention of 'illegal smoke' and 'someone burning wood for carbon' – an effect of the preparation of crude mescal or tequila²⁵⁸ – conveys an entirely different impression of human activity. Although there is a comparable distance between the human and natural worlds this sense of distance is no longer formulated in terms of a problem or identified as a cause for concern. The anonymous character in this passage appears to carry on with his illegal activity in ignorance of the surrounding landscape; or, at least, Lowry apparently feels no need to dramatise this type of disjuncture or to burden it with any particular significance. In a related sense, Lowry's vision of the natural world also reveals the conspicuous signs of modernity in the form of the American highway and the local cinema. With these types of juxtapositions, Lowry portrays the natural world as a space which is no longer conceived of in terms of Romantic idyll or retreat. Without any sense of conflict or disruption, Lowry moves from an acknowledgment of the grandeur and dignity of the natural world to the contiguous impressions of barefaced illegality and the most conspicuous sign of

²⁵⁷ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 446.

²⁵⁸ *Malcolm Lowry Project* (2012), <http://www.otago.ac.nz/english/lowry/content/parent_frameset.html>, p. 5.8.

twentieth-century culture in the form of the local cinema. In offering this type of representation, Lowry moves away from the binary treatment of the town and country that was revealed in the writing of Lawrence and instead reveals the heterogeneous and fractured nature of modern existence in 1930s Mexico.

With a more nuanced and complex representation of the relationship between thought and experience, Lowry also suggests that intuitive responses to the landscape can often be highly misleading and deluding. In the world of *Under the Volcano*, initial moments of consolation quickly transform into occasions for disappointment. One such occasion occurs when Yvonne notices a 'little silver lake glittering cool, fresh, and inviting' shortly before she comes to realise that it is nothing more than 'a broken greenhouse roof' which is also revealed to be covered in 'weeds' (p. 280). In an allusive novel where individual experience is often mediated by fictional and historical parallelism, this revelation is accompanied by an anecdote from the Consul about the Bishop of Tasmania who was temporarily consoled by the prospect of a mountain which is then revealed as nothing more than 'sunlight blazing on myriads of broken bottles' (p. 281). There is a similar deflationary movement when Laurelle dwells on the hybrid qualities of the Mexican landscape.

The Mexican landscape – much like the country's kaleidoscopic history – is often portrayed as a composite of world landscapes and climates. With this thought in mind, Laurelle reflects: 'you would find every sort of landscape at once, the Cotswolds, Windermere, New Hampshire, the meadows of the Eure-et-Loire, even the grey dunes of Cheshire, even the Sahara, a planet upon which, in the twinkling of an eye, you could change climates, and, if you cared to think so, in the crossing of a highway, three civilisations; but beautiful, there was no denying its beauty' (pp. 15-6). In the same moment as recognising its diversity and hybridity, then, Laurelle also identifies the Mexican landscape with the quality of beauty. Almost as soon as this type of recognition appears, however, it is undermined and subverted; like the lake that transforms into a broken greenhouse roof before Yvonne's eyes.

Only a few pages later, after departing from the Hotel Casino de la Selva, Laurelle makes his way homeward and, after crossing a nearby bridge, picks out the following detail: 'Birds came swarming out of the southeast: small, black, ugly birds, yet too long, something like monstrous insects, something like crows, with awkward long tails, and

an undulating bounding, laboured flight' (p. 19). In contrast to everything that birds have routinely represented in poetry and prose since the Renaissance, these local birds of Mexico are revealed as irredeemably ugly and awkward. This type of treatment is echoed by the Consul who compares the beauty of the natural world unfavourably with his appreciation of the Mexican cantina. Shortly after they are reunited, the Consul asks Yvonne: 'what beauty can compare to that of a *cantina* in the early morning? Your volcanoes outside? Your stars [...] Forgive me, no' (p. 55).

In this way, *Under the Volcano* offers a treatment of the natural world where it is no longer identified as a Romantic source of salvation or consolation. It is a vision of nature in which the detection of ugliness is more frequent than the recognition of beauty. In the passage from *Under the Volcano* which describes the bus ride to Tomalín there is a representation of nature in which this tendency to demythologise appears more forcefully. As Geoffrey, Yvonne and Hugh cross over a bridge in the *camión* they are presented with a vision of the ominous ravine below:

They were crossing a bridge at the bottom of the hill, over the ravine. It appeared overtly horrendous here. In the bus one looked straight down, as from the main truck of a sailing ship, through dense foliage and wide leaves that did not at all conceal the treachery of the drop; its steep banks were thick with refuse, which even hung on the bushes. Turning, Hugh saw a dead dog right at the bottom, nuzzling the refuse; white bones showed through the carcass.

(p. 236)

Here, the countryside is no longer represented in the Romantic terms of a retreat or idyll. The natural world has already been infiltrated by the modern world: in the 'steep banks' of the ravine where 'refuse' is revealed to have 'even hung on the bushes'. There is also a more squalid and morbid image with the 'dead dog right at the bottom, nuzzling the refuse' whose 'white bones showed through the carcass'. This image not only anticipates Geoffrey's own fate, of course, but suggests an evaluation of life that is more uncompromisingly negative than anything that might be found in the writing of Conrad whose nihilistic visions of the cosmos were mediated by a contradictory cultural inheritance.

For Lawrence, it will be remembered that there was a strong sense in which the distinction between town and country held some legitimacy. After all, Kate's journey from the industrial Mexico City to the idyllic Sayula enacts a journey that is identical to

the journeys taken by Romantic poets such as Wordsworth where the city is identified as the location that makes us ill and the country is where one goes in order to become well. There is the related notion of the city as somewhere that is too heavily mired in culture; or, perhaps, it might be accurate to say that this is conceived of as the wrong type of culture. This sense of the social world as something that results in the corruption of the self is something that was frequently represented in *The Plumed Serpent*. By contrast, for Lowry, it is as if an incurable form of sickness pervades all forms of human experience.

Coupled with this occasional identification of nature with ugliness, and his erasure of any meaningful distinction between the town and country, then, Lowry also reveals the ways in which our attitudes to nature are shaped by the wider cultural and social context of modern existence. In a manner that again contrasts with the representations of the natural world offered by Conrad and Lawrence, *Under the Volcano* reveals how our sense impressions are mediated by the ubiquitous images and sounds of popular culture. This type of playful treatment can be seen in a passage that describes Hugh's broadly ranging reflections on the reasons for volcanic eruptions:

People pretended not to know. Because, they might suggest tentatively, under the rocks beneath the surface of the earth, steam, its pressure constantly rising, was generated; because the rocks and the water, decomposing, formed gases, which combined with the molten material from below; because the watery rocks near the surface were unable to restrain the growing complex of pressures, and the whole mass exploded.

(p. 241)

Here, the variety of explanations points to the prevalence of the natural sciences as well as the vague manner in which they are frequently absorbed. In the same paragraph, Hugh goes on to reflect on how volcanic eruptions are reflected in films: 'In movies of eruptions people were always seen standing in the midst of the encroaching flood, delighted by it'. This juxtaposition of modern science and popular culture, and the casual manner with which the narrative moves from one to another, reveals an important stylistic point about *Under the Volcano*. In a manner that is prescient of postmodernist British fiction, Lowry represents various trends of modern western culture with no indication of any hierarchical distinction.

Similarly, there is a passage in the chapter when Hugh imagines that the trees that he observes comment on his personal reflections:

A strong gusty wind howled over the garden. Refreshed by his swim and a lunch of turkey sandwiches, the cigar Geoff had given him earlier partially shielded the parapet, he lay watching the clouds speeding across the Mexican skies [...]

I *am* a prodigy. I *am* young. I *am* a dashing fellow. Am I not? You are a liar, said the trees tossing in the garden. You are a traitor, rattled the plantain leaves [...] *Ahhh!* Hugh, as if to rid himself of these thoughts, turned the radio dial back and forth, trying to get San Antonio [...] two Mexican voices on different wavelengths were breaking in.'

(p. 155)

In this passage, the sounds of a local radio station mingle with Hugh's reflections on the past and his impressions of the natural world. The impression of pathetic fallacy – where the trees comment on the character's condition and awaken his guilty conscience – is firmly anchored to the personal vision of Hugh. And yet, despite the narrator's use of this familiar literary trope, the dominant impression is one of discord. The voices from the radio that Hugh is unable to tune correctly, intrude into this personal vision of the natural world. In a form of solipsist form of representation, Hugh's impressions of the natural landscape are also determined by his own unique, and limited, way of seeing. As such, *Under the Volcano* tends to obfuscate the boundaries between the observer and the observed, suggesting that any unmediated impression of the latter is unobtainable. In this sense, Lowry's Mexican novel is also a more sceptical text than either *Nostromo* or *The Plumed Serpent* in its Schopenhauerian portrayal of the limits of human knowledge and perception.

This type of subjective distortion is most clearly revealed in the visions of the natural world that are disclosed to the Consul. Whenever *Under the Volcano* is focalised to the Consul's point of view, the treatment of nature becomes self-reflexively symbolic and doom-laden.

As for the demons, they were inside him as well as outside; quiet at the moment – taking their *siesta* perhaps – he was none the less surrounded by them and occupied; they were in possession. The Consul looked at the sun. But he had lost the sun: it was not his sun. Like the truth, it was well-nigh impossible to face; he did not want to go anywhere near it, least of all, sit in its light, facing it.

(pp. 208-09)

In this passage, Lowry reveals a vision of the sun that is in marked contrast to the positive evaluation of the sun that was discerned in the writing of Lawrence. From the Nietzschean, life-affirming perspective of Lawrence, the sun was transformed into a potent symbol of life and energy and even calibrated to the symbolism of the religious revival depicted in *The Plumed Serpent*. And yet, Lowry's portrayal of the sun is not identical to the gloomy vision that Conrad offered in *Nostromo* where it was correlated to a fundamental sense of dislocation that Conrad discerned between the human and natural worlds. For Lowry, the negative evaluation of the sun is partly anchored in the vision of the Consul; only 'partly' because these are demons that are described as being both on the 'inside [...] as well as outside'. Comparable treatments of the sun can be seen in Lowry's poetry where the human mind is revealed to occlude rather than to enable an appreciation of the natural world. In 'Sestina in a Cantina' (1947), for example, Lowry offers a vision of personal dislocation in which 'the mind has ways of keeping us in prison'. In this poem, which describes an oxymoronic 'horrid beauty', the sky is described as 'fungus-colored' and the sunset as 'quite intolerable'.²⁵⁹

At times, in *Under the Volcano* this type of subjective distortion is carried to hallucinatory heights when the Consul imagines that the whole insect world is pursuing him with malicious intentions: 'the thin shadow of isolated nails, the stains of murdered mosquitoes, the very scars and cracks of the wall. Had begun to swarm, so that, where he looked, another insect was born, wriggling instantly towards his heart. It was as if, and this was what was most appalling, the whole insect world had somehow moved nearer and now was closing, rushing in upon him' (p. 152). And, as a complement to the manner in which Hugh's interpretation of the natural world is mediated by the sounds and images of popular culture, the Consul's visions of the Mexican landscape, in keeping with his more bookish personality, are often filtered through a distinctive range of literary allusions. In this respect, the Consul's vision of Popocatepetl is registered in a moment that gestures towards the tragic vision of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) in the following metaphor: 'The sun shining brilliantly now on all the world before him, its rays picking out the timber-line of

²⁵⁹ Malcolm Lowry, *Selected Poems*, Earle Birney, ed. (San Francisco, CA: City Light Books, 1962), pp. 42-43.

Popocatepetl as its summit like a gigantic surfacing whale shouldered out of the clouds again' (p. 80).²⁶⁰ In a more general sense, the Consul's impending doom is often related to the seemingly malignant forces of the universe: 'it was as if behind the scenes certain strings were being pulled, and while continents burst into flame, and calamity moved nearer – just as now, at this moment perhaps, with a sudden jolt and grind, calamity had moved nearer, and, without the Consul's knowing it, outside the sky had darkened' (p. 149-50).

Nevertheless, it is the closing scene of *Under the Volcano* which reveals the Consul's most powerful vision of the natural world. This is a comparable moment of disorientation to the epiphanies of Decoud in *Nostromo* and Kate in *The Plumed Serpent* which revealed a similarly dizzying moment of revelation when the 'epiphanal centre of gravity [was] displaced from the self to the flow of experience'.²⁶¹ As the Consul is mercilessly thrown in the *barranca* after his fateful meeting with the Unión Militar, his dying impressions are revealed in terms of personal dislocation and confusion:

Strong hands lifted him. Opening his eyes, he looked down, expecting to see, below him, the magnificent jungle, the heights, Pico de Orizabe, Malinche, Cofre de Perote, like those peaks of his life conquered one after another before this greatest ascent of all had been successfully, if unconventionally, completed. But there was nothing there: no peaks, no life, no limb. Nor was this summit a summit exactly: it had no substance, no firm base. It was crumbling too, whatever it was, collapsing, while he was falling, falling into the volcano, he must have climbed it after all, though now there was this noise of foisting lava in his ears, horribly, it was in eruption, yet no, it wasn't the volcano, the world itself was bursting, bursting into black spouts of villages catapulted into space, with himself falling through it all, through the inconceivable pandemonium of a million tanks, through the blazing of ten million burning bodies, falling, into a forest, falling –

Suddenly he screamed, and it was as though this scream were being tossed from one tree to another, as its echoes returned, then, as though the trees themselves were crowding nearer, huddled tighter, closing over him, pitying...

Somebody threw a dead dog after him down the ravine.

(pp. 375-76)

In these last brutal moments of his life, the Consul experiences a fundamental dislocation of time and place: rather than ascending the summit of the volcano, he is in

²⁶⁰ This literary allusion is identified in Chris Ackerley and L. J. Clipper, *A Companion to Under the Volcano* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), p. 117.

²⁶¹ Charles Taylor, p. 465.

the process of fatally descending the *barranca*. In the same moment, the illusion of having reached firm ground also gives way to the realisation that he is suspended in a moment when there is 'no substance' and 'no firm base' beneath his feet. In a closing echo of the deflationary movement that was seen elsewhere in the representation of the natural world, the illusion of ascent is substituted here for the reality of falling as hope simultaneously transforms into despair. In the same moment, the Consul's fall assumes a deeper significance in the reference to 'the inconceivable pandemonium of a million tanks' and 'the blazing of ten million burning bodies'. In this sense, the Consul's downfall appears as a metonym for the mass slaughter of the Second World War. Lastly, the ironic gesture towards pathetic fallacy where the inanimate trees are capable of pity suggests a literary tradition from which the novel itself is estranged. The comical effect of sensory disorientation and the closing reference to the dead dog instead point to Lowry's almost Conradian delight in the absurdity of the human condition and his black sense of humour. The mention of the dead dog also suggests an equivalence between human beings and animals, which, in turn, seems to embody a refutation of the idea of humanity as something that is uniquely privileged and set apart in the natural world.

With this closing epiphany of *Under the Volcano*, then, we have returned to a comparable vision of the natural world that was provided to Decoud moments before his suicide. And yet, this epiphany also takes place in the context of a novel that also describes the natural world in terms of ugliness and squalor. In this sense, Lowry's vision of the natural world is also more thoroughly modern than Conrad's insofar as it is a form of representation that is no longer mediated by a conflicted cultural inheritance of ideological rupture and ambiguity. Lowry's vision of the natural world is thoroughly modern where the only remaining refuge offered to the reader appears in the form of comedy.

The Acceptance of Mexican Otherness: 'inflexibly muy correcto, like most Mexicans of his type'

In a further departure from the intellectual heritage of Conrad and Lawrence, the eugenic inheritance of the nineteenth century no longer reveals itself as a significant

feature of Lowry's attitude to Mexican racial hybridity and cultural syncretism. In a manner comparable to his blurry distinction between the town and country, Lowry rarely reveals the same level of anxiety in the face of ethnic indeterminacy. This more accepting attitude can be seen in the opening chapter of *Under the Volcano* when the French film director Laruelle converses with his Mexican friend, the local Quauhnahuac physician Dr. Arturo Díaz Vigil.

M. Laruelle watched the doctor leaning back in the steamer chair, yawning, the handsome, impossibly handsome, dark imperturbable Mexican face, the kind deep brown eyes, innocent too, like the eyes of those wistful beautiful Oaxaqueñan children one saw in Tehuantepec (that ideal spot where the women did the work while the men bathed in the river all day), the slender small hands and delicate wrists, upon the back of which it was almost a shock to see the sprinkling of coarse black hair.

(p. 12)

Although this passage reveals a primitivist identification of Mexicans with children, where his eyes are identified as 'innocent' and compared to 'the eyes of those wistful beautiful Oaxaqueñan children', Dr. Vigil is represented here in flattering terms as a good-looking, graceful and civilised man. In this sense, it is a very different form of representation from Lawrence's wholly negative portrait of the city-dwelling Mexicans in *The Plumed Serpent* who, as we saw in the fourth chapter of this study, were dismissed as 'the mongrel mass of a mongrel city'. However, the detection of 'coarse black hair' that is received as 'a shock' is somewhat similar to Conrad's description of the mixed-race Montero brothers of *Nostromo* that was quoted in the second chapter of this study ('They were very much alike in appearance, both bald, with bunches of crisp hair above their ears, arguing the presence of some negro blood'). And yet, although the coarseness of Vigil's hair is rather strangely revealed as an object of alarm, the description is not preparatory to any comparable form of ethnographic remark. The precise ethnic identity of Dr. Vigil is never overtly defined in *Under the Volcano* even though his Oaxaqueñan eyes and coarse black hair might have been intended to suggest someone of mixed racial ancestry. For Lowry, Dr. Vigil is simply a Mexican whose ethnicity remains unstated and ambiguous. It is, therefore, no longer

an object of fascination; a subtle attitudinal shift which reveals Lowry's accepting attitude towards Mexican otherness.

With its departure from the eugenic outlook of the nineteenth century, this is an outlook which is very different from Lawrence's deliberate strategy in *The Plumed Serpent* in turning away from the racial hybridity and cultural syncretism of Mexico City and subsequent quest of seeking out some form of racial purity in the Mexican hinterland of Sayula. There is similar type of acceptance in Lowry's representation of the manager of the local cinema, Senor Bustamente:

The manager of the *cine* was standing before him, cupping, with that same lightning-swift, fumbling-thwarting courtesy exhibited by Dr Vigil, by all Latin Americans, a match for his cigarette: his hair, innocent of raindrops, which seemed almost lacquered, and a heavy perfume emanating from him, betrayed his daily visit to the *peluquería*; he was impeccably dressed in striped trousers and a black coat, inflexibly *muy correcto*, like most Mexicans of his type, despite earthquake and thunderstorm. He threw the match away now with a gesture that was not wasted, for it amounted to a salute. 'Come and have a drink,' he said.

(p. 31)

Although there is a conspicuous homogenising tendency in this passage in aligning the cinema owner's behaviour and demeanour with attributes that are shared by all Latin Americans, Bustamente is nevertheless represented in positive terms. And, as with his representation of Dr. Vigil, Lowry no longer reveals an interest in drawing a precise ethnographic portrait. In a conceptual departure from the eugenic outlook of Conrad and Lawrence, the racial hybridity and cultural syncretism of Latin American is no longer associated with a sense of anxiety. In the characters of Dr. Vigil and Sr. Bustamente, the distinctively hybrid qualities of Latin America are often passed over with no sense of disapproval, anxiety or even recognition. Nevertheless, there are other occasions in *Under the Volcano* when a number of ethnographic remarks are made by the characters themselves.

This type of representation can be seen most in the episode during the eighth chapter of the novel when the Consul, Hugh and Yvonne discover a dying man beside the road during their bus ride to Tomalín. When a passenger joins the bus outside the El Amor de los Amores – described as a ‘one of your Fascist joints’ (p. 236) – the Consul remarks in an aside to Hugh: ‘You may not think it, but he’s a Spaniard’ (p. 237). This observation then encourages Hugh to reflect in the ethnographic terms of an early twentieth-century anthropologist: ‘certainly his features, high, prominent nose and firm chin, were of strongly Spanish cast’. For Hugh, the hands of this individual, identified as ‘huge, capable and rapacious’ are then said to resemble the ‘hands of the *conquistador*’. And yet, for Hugh, the appearance of this man suggests the mixed racial properties of the *mestizo* when he subsequently reflects on ‘the confusion that tends eventually to overtake *conquistadors*’ in Mexico. Although there are a number of ethnographic points made during this episode, these observations are firmly located in the impressions of the Consul and Hugh. In the course of what follows, we will also see how these ethnographic remarks are subjected to a form of critique within the novel itself.

As the bus travels along the American highway towards Tomalín the *camión* is brought to a sudden halt with the discovery of a man, identified as Indian throughout the encounter, who lies dying near the roadside with a serious head injury. On closer inspection, the dying Indian man is also revealed to have some silver pesos and centavos concealed under the collar of his clothing. Initially, Hugh is eager to lend assistance but is discouraged by the Consul who explains that by doing so his brother would, according to Mexican law, become ‘an accessory after the fact’ (p. 245). The Consul and Hugh speculate on the cause of violence – wondering whether it is the result of ‘robbery, attempted murder’ or that the man had simply ‘been thrown from his horse’ (p. 247) – and rather than offering any firm explanation either way the event remains shrouded in uncertainty. However, in the course of what follows, another crime is discovered. A few pages later aboard the bus again, it is revealed that the Spaniard who the Consul and Hugh had observed earlier had stolen the Indian’s money which he then uses in payment for his fare (p. 253).

In terms of the representation of race, Lowry subsequently formulates the relationship between the Mexican and the European in the self-reflexive terms of

ideological interference. This is revealed when Geoffrey, Hugh and Yvonne discuss the dying Indian who they discovered by the roadside later on. Along with his political allegiance (“‘What if this man by the roadside had been a Fascist and your Spaniard a Communist...Never mind, I think your thief is a Fascist, though of some ignominious sort, a spy on other spies or -’” (p. 298)), the ethnicity of this dying man is something that the three characters discuss. As with numerous other incidents and characters in the novel, then, the events of this episode are shrouded in ambiguity. The Consul, however, offers this astute observation:

‘So that the man beside the road may be an Indian, of course,’ the Consul suddenly called from his stone retreat, though it was strange, nobody seemed to have heard him. ‘And why an Indian? So that the incident may have some social significance to him, so that it should appear a kind of latterday repercussion of the Conquest, and a repercussion of the Conquest.

(p. 297)

In this sense, *Under the Volcano* embodies an internal critique of the attitude that seeks to identify Mexicans all too readily with the quality of Indian-ness or any such notion of racial purity. In this way, the Consul makes the subtle point that the way in which Europeans interpret Mexico is often informed as much by our desire to impose our own beliefs and prejudices onto the events that they experience as much as those events themselves. Moreover, this type of self-reflexivity has implications for the manner in which the European encounter with Mexican otherness is conceived. By objectifying the tendency to impose order and meaning on events that would otherwise be quite inscrutable, the Consul foregrounds the tendency of European travellers to impose their own wilful interpretation of cultural otherness. By identifying their fellow passenger as Spanish and the dying man as Indian, the Consul and Hugh had succumbed to a temptation to see the event in the terms of a ‘latterday repercussion of the Conquest. As such, in this self-reflexive movement, *Under the Volcano* reveals the European encounter with Mexico as a type of relationship that is ‘continually mediated by representations’.²⁶²

²⁶² Stephen Greenblatt, p. 119.

The Primitive and Ironic Distance: "I'm thinking of becoming a Mexican subject, of going to live among the Indians, like William Blackstone"

In the writing of Conrad and Lawrence there was the underlying assumption that modern western societies tended to suppress powerful human drives and desires. As a corollary to this assumption, the countries of Latin America were conceived of as enabling locations for the confrontation with supposedly brutal human realities; a revelation of our collective heart of darkness. With a Darwinian sense of the evolutionary origins of the human species, Conrad and Lawrence viewed the countries of Latin America in the same primitivist terms of Malinowski and Freud who 'sought the universal truth about human nature and conceived of primitive societies as the testing ground, the laboratory, the key to that universal truth'.²⁶³ In this sense, the settings of Costaguana and Mexico were revealed as being equivalent to a reversion to the European past in which the truth of human nature was discovered by these writers of British fiction and dramatized for the curiosity of their readers.

In turn, this notion of the truthful reversion to the primitive was intimately bound up with the divided intellectual inheritance of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, where the western construct of the primitive was conceived as a means of escaping the dominant culture of European rationalism. And, with Lawrence, in accordance with a distinctly Romantic legacy, the values that were attached to the 'civilised' countries of Europe and the 'barbarous' setting of Mexico were reversed. The inhibitive tendencies of modern western societies were identified as a source of corruption while the reversion to the primitive was seen as the means towards a form of salvation. In the case of Lawrence, this notion of the truthful reversion to the primitive was conceived in the form of an escape or refuge. In particular, it was the First World War, along with the attendant impression of the western civilisation as either dead or dying, which, for Lawrence, framed his imaginative creation of an organic, primitivist society in *The Plumed Serpent*. In this sense, the primitive Mexican Indian – especially in the indomitable and charismatic figure of Cipriano – became the means whereby the more

²⁶³ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, p. 7.

vibrant and authentic self could be recaptured and the inhibitive, pathological tendencies of modern industrial societies gratefully left behind.

By contrast, Lowry no longer identifies the Mexican Indian as a representative of the collective human past. Eschewing an evolutionary understanding of cultural difference, Mexican culture no longer offers itself to the western observer as an insight into the experiences of our collective and universal past. This type of rejection of the Mexican Indian as a means of European salvation is something that comes across most forcefully in the reflections of the Consul. Noticing an Indian on horseback – the same Indian who is encountered lying dead on the roadside in the following chapter – the Consul reflects romantically on the impression of freedom and simplicity that this figure conveys to his imagination before ultimately dismissing this redemptive identification as delusional:

Toiling, they edged into the Palace wall to let a man on horseback pass, a fine-featured Indian of the poorer class, dressed in soiled white loose clothes. The man was singing gaily to himself. But he nodded to them courteously as if to thank them. He seemed about to speak, reining in his little horse – on either side of which chinked two saddle-bags, and upon whose rump was branded the number seven – to a slow walk beside them, as they ascended the hill. *Jingle jingle little surcingle*. But the man, riding slightly in front, did not speak and at the top he suddenly waved his hand and galloped away, singing.

The Consul felt a pang. Ah, to have a horse, and gallop away, singing, away to someone you loved perhaps, into the heart of all the simplicity and peace in the world; was not that like the opportunity afforded man by life itself? Of course not. Still, just for a moment, it had seemed that it was.

(p. 216)

With his simple white clothing, polite courtesy and joyful act of singing, the 'fine-featured Indian' appears in the first paragraph of this passage to present the Consul with an idealised object of identification: a type of noble savage in the Romantic tradition of Rousseau. However, in the second paragraph, this Romantic judgement evaporates in the face of a more knowing, unexcited and thoughtful moment of reflection. In a departure from the Lawrencian identification of the Mexican Indian as redemptive, the Consul makes this connection himself only to reveal it as a hasty error of judgement. In this way, *Under the Volcano* represents a conceptual shift in the fictional representation of the European encounter with the Mexican Indian. The

Romantic identification of Lawrence is substituted for a self-reflexive effort to demythologise this form of engagement so that it is objectified as a delusion of the western mind.

What lies behind these types of observations, is no longer a comparable Lawrencian desire of seeking out alternative and non-western ways of understanding the cosmos and the self. Rather, *Under the Volcano* represents the failure of this Romantic identification in the same moment that it satirises the possibility of any form of redemption. In this sense, Lowry's treatment of this theme differs from Lawrence in a number of respects. Moreover, what makes *Under the Volcano* distinctive is not the nature of the Consul's quest for redemption itself but the self-conscious and ironic manner in which it is carried out. The principal manner by which Geoffrey associates himself with the Mexican Indian is through his highly self-conscious identification with the historical figure of William Blackstone.

William Blackstone (1595-1675) was a graduate of Cambridge University who left England in 1623. Throughout *Under the Volcano* Blackstone functions as an imaginary point of identification for the Consul as a similarly bookish man who lived among the Indians on his farm in the Rhode Island of the seventeenth century.²⁶⁴ Shortly after their reunion, the Consul boldly informs Yvonne that he is 'thinking of becoming a Mexican subject' and 'of going to live among the Indians, like William Blackstone' (p. 87). In this sense, in *Under the Volcano* there is knowing self-awareness that we approach the other through a set of representations; a sense of the world approached *a posteriori* in the light of a vast store of historical and literary signifiers. Alternatively talking to his cat and Mr. Quincey, while intoxicated, the Consul later reveals the details of Blackstone's biography: 'He's a character I've always liked. I think it was William Blackstone [...] one day he arrived in what is now, I believe — no matter — somewhere in Massachusetts. And lived there quietly among the Indians' (p. 139). And, revealing the strength of this identification, the Consul even provides the name of 'Blackstone' to the police who accost him as the novel draws to its violent conclusion:

²⁶⁴ Chris Ackerley and L. J. Clipper, *A Companion to Under the Volcano* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), p. 85.

‘Blackstone,’ he answered gravely, and indeed, he asked himself, accepting another mescal, had he not and with a vengeance come to live among the Indians? The only trouble was one was very much afraid these particular Indians might turn out to be people with ideas too.

(p. 358)

In this moment, the Consul’s sentimental attachment to the historical character of Blackstone – as well as the attendant romantic identification with the Mexican Indian – is subjected to the same form of disillusionment as the Consul’s temporary Romantic bond with the Indian on horseback whom he had admired for his supposed qualities of freedom and simplicity. Here, the Consul’s sentimental desire to live among the Indians is brought up against the violent reality of the Mexican *Sinarquista* in a disillusioning moment of black comedy. Rather than being confronted by the noble savage, the Consul is confronted by Mexicans who have their own ‘ideas’: ideas, of course, that will imminently lead to the Consul’s violent death. Signifying a clear departure from Lawrence, Lowry refuses to sentimentalise Mexicans because he is acutely aware of the mixed nature of the country’s thoroughly modern, complex reality. This type of acceptance of a modern world without clearly defined boundaries is mirrored also in Lowry’s representation of commerce and advertising.

The Voice of the Marketplace: ‘EL POPO’

As with any other writer, it is impossible to know with any degree of certainty how the experiences of Lowry’s early life shaped his attitude to the circumstances in which he lived. Nevertheless, it seems likely that these experiences exerted some degree of influence on the views that he later held as an adult. It would also seem to follow that this is no less true of his attitude to the natural world and cultural otherness than his attitude to capitalism. In this respect, it should be of more than passing interest that Lowry grew up in a middle-class household in Liverpool and was the son of a successful businessman whose commercial interests frequently took him overseas, including to South America.²⁶⁵ Given this context, it is not surprising perhaps that, from an early age, Lowry demonstrated a willingness to engage in acts of self-publicity. As a teenager,

²⁶⁵ Gordon Bowker, pp. 1-11, p. 60.

Lowry had taken the step of travelling the world on board a sailing vessel to Yokohama while revealing his plan to a local newspaper reporter.²⁶⁶ This seems to indicate a rather shrewd business sense while also suggesting, at the same time, a more accommodating attitude towards the world of commerce and industry than either Conrad or Lawrence.

Unlike Conrad, then, Lowry tends not to devote too much time and energy in *Under the Volcano* to describing the circumstances of the global economy in the form of exploitive relationships between workers and employers; or between Anglo-American financiers and the export-driven economies of Latin America. Instead, Lowry portrays the febrile market place in ontological terms as something which exerts a strong influence over the various characters of *Under the Volcano*. Nevertheless, this is not the same type of subjective treatment that was found in Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent* where the marketplace was portrayed as a corrupting influence which separated Mexicans from the vibrancy of the natural world. Rather, Lowry reveals an attitude of acceptance and resignation in which the marketplace is figured in unbiased prose as an ineradicable aspect of modern life.

To some extent these changes in the portrayal of Mexican culture and society from *The Plumed Serpent* to *Under the Volcano* can be associated with the changes that had taken place in the country during the course of the intervening decades. After all, there had been increased levels of urbanisation in Mexico between 1920 and 1940 and the influence of North American technology had grown at a conspicuous pace.²⁶⁷ Meyer has suggested that 'by the mid-1930s the commercial cinema had begun to challenge the bullfight for pre-eminent in entertainment'.²⁶⁸ In addition, in a further development, there has been a considerable increase in the availability of electricity while the highway and railway networks, two further conspicuous sign of modern infrastructure in *Under the Volcano*, had also expanded rapidly after the injection of government money throughout the 1920s and 1930s.²⁶⁹ In this sense, Lowry was exposed to a thoroughly modern Mexico between 1936 and 1938 during his stay in Cuernavaca, something which he powerfully conveys in his Mexican novel.

²⁶⁶ Gordon Bowker, pp. 63-67.

²⁶⁷ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, pp. 609-10.

²⁶⁸ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, p. 611.

²⁶⁹ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, pp. 611-12.

There are numerous references to the modern capitalist economy in *Under the Volcano* from such features as advertising, fashion, magazines, travel and Hollywood and these diverse external forces are shown to penetrate the lives of the characters Lowry represents. In a thoroughly modern form of characterisation, Hugh is revealed as a songwriter who has had a career as a guitarist while Yvonne is described as former teenage star of Hollywood. Furthermore, the professions of both these characters are revealed as having been touched on by the conspicuous public relations industry. Yvonne is said to have 'acquired an agent who managed to execute some excellent publicity', but 'on strength of her earlier rough-riding successes' is unable to re-establish her later career in Hollywood (p. 265). In addition, Yvonne is also revealed to have 'been a victim of "bad press" following her divorce to a millionaire playboy' (pp. 264-5). Similarly, Hugh indulges in 'some great publicity' by singing on 'board the s.s. Philoctetes' (p. 161) in an attempt to launch his music career. There is a further detail that Hugh informs the London dailies of his voyage, receives some brief coverage but later learns the 'story had gone dead before the songs were published' (p. 173).

Echoing the experiences of Lowry's own teenage years, the narrator also recounts Hugh's proficiency in playing the guitar, his ambition of becoming a song writer, the crammers that he attended before enrolling as a student at Cambridge and the ship he sailed aboard as part of his precocious publicity stunt (pp. 158-61). During these descriptive passages, the artfully constructed nature of Hugh's identity emerges as one of his most conspicuous personality traits. Hugh's interest in playing the guitar is singled out as the only consistent aspect of his personality: 'it was due to a guitar he'd become a journalist, it was due to a guitar he had become a songwriter, it was largely owing to a guitar even – and Hugh felt himself suffused by a slow burning flush of shame – that he had first gone to sea' (p. 159). In this way, Hugh's effort to reinvent his personality as the occasion demands often appears as a secondary effect of the volatile market. Incidentally, this is also something which this fictional character seemed to share with Lowry who, throughout his literary career, revealed an obsessive interest in the 'inventive nature of human life'.²⁷⁰

In a manner that again distinguishes Lowry from Conrad and Lawrence, the 'landscape' of the marketplace is every bit as important in *Under the Volcano* as the

²⁷⁰ Gordon Bowker, p. xvi.

landscape of the natural world. The new technology of the mass media age is also revealed at the point at which it intersects with the private thoughts of individual characters. As we have already seen, the voices from the radio that Hugh is unable to tune into correctly, intrude into this personal vision of the natural world. In the form of the cinema, Lowry also reveals that Mexico had grown accustomed to another conspicuous feature of modern entertainment by the 1930s. Of course, the local cinema is one of the distinctive landmarks of the novel and it makes its appearance in the very first chapter.

Even more than radio, there is a strong sense in which the lives of the individual characters are mediated by the imagery of the cinema. After pondering the science behind volcanic eruptions, for example, Hugh's thoughts had turned to the way in which 'in movies of eruptions people were always seen standing in the midst of the encroaching flood, delighted by it' (p. 242). Likewise, political events are also caught up in this new medium as a way of disseminating information and providing a more immediate form of reportage. The local cinema owner Bustamente reveals that he shows the 'latest news' at his establishment too with 'the first newsreels from the Spanish war' (p. 32). And, the imagery of the cinema is also calibrated to the metaphoric scheme of the novel when Monsieur Laruelle considers *The Hands of Orlac* with Peter Lorre as an emblem of Nazi Germany: 'an artist with murderer's hands'.

In addition to the sounds of the radio and images of the cinema, the modern culture of advertising is one of the most conspicuous elements of the *Under the Volcano* where it forms part of the novel's symbolic landscape. There are many examples but the episode where Geoffrey and Yvonne are reunited in chapter two offers a suitable illustration where their awkward and stilted attempts at conversation are interrupted by an advertisement for a boxing match, acting as an objective correlative for their own turbulent relationship while disturbing the rhythm of their dialogue:

– ¡Box! Preliminar a 4 Rounds. El TURCO (Gonzalo Calderón de Par. de 52 kilos)
vs EL OSO (de Par. de 53 kilos)

'I had a million hours of sleep on the boat! And I'd *far* rather walk, only –'
'Nothing. Just a touch of rhematiz. – O is it the sprue? I'm glad to get some circulation going in the old legs.'

—¡Box! Evento Especial a 5 rounds, en los que el vencedor pasará al grupo de Semi-Finales. TOMA AGUERO (El Invencible Indio de Quauhnahuac de 57 kilos, que acaba de llegar de la Capital de la República). ARENA TOMALÍN. Frente al Jardín Xicotancatl.

(p. 57)

Here, the advertisement for the boxing match insinuates itself uncomfortably and provocatively into a section of dialogue. The typographical disruption appears like a fictional mirror of the intrusive nature of the advertisement itself. This effect is also amplified by the stilted dialogue where Lowry employs the literary trope of aposiopesis terminating sentences abruptly before the characters are able, or willing, to articulate their respective thoughts. As such, this passage also seems to reveal the manner in which the modern world is inundated with the imagery of advertising as well as the associated nonchalant attitude of Geoffrey and Yvonne towards these conspicuous encroachments.

The influence of popular culture and photographic images also extend further when they look through a painter's shop window. John Orr draws attention to the photographic enlargement of the 'glacial deposit in the Sierra Madre, of a great rock split by forest fires [...] called: *La Despedida*,' (p. 59) suggesting: 'The landscape reflects back symbolic images of their separation'.²⁷¹ In the next moment, this image is also revealed to infiltrate Yvonne's consciousness: 'La Despedida, she thought. The parting!' In this way, the characters of *Under the Volcano* not only suggest a symbolic interpretation of this photograph, but interpret themselves and the circumstances of their own lives through the engagement with the sounds and images of popular culture. What is more, there are also moments in the novel which portray a partly ruined urban landscape which is populated by advertisements.

Towards the end of the novel, for example, Hugh and Yvonne encounter a cantina called the El Petate where the 'inevitable advertisements for Moctezuma, Criollo, Caféaspirina' and 'Mentholum' appear (p. 320). The reader is then informed that this is all that remains of 'the formerly prosperous village of Anochtítlán'. This may be intended to reflect the signs of economic ruin or difficulty that Lowry himself encountered while in Mexico. Nevertheless, the advertisements listed here are also of

²⁷¹ John Orr, *The Making of the Twentieth-Century Novel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), p. 151.

interest for the way in which they touch on the country's pre-Columbian history, or again represent that history by reference to visual culture and advertising. An even clearer indication of this same tendency was seen in the previous chapter where one of the same alcoholic drinks is alluded to as Hugh and the Consul comment: 'Moctezuma on the bottle [...] that's all he is now' (p. 302). These advertisements also appear in the closing chapter of the novel where they assume a more aggressive form.

As he sits in the bar of the *Farolito* cantina in Parià, the Consul notices a ‘bottle of Anís del Mono’ which has a label with an image of ‘a devil brandishing a pitchfork’ (p. 338). In this way, the advertising images of the marketplace relate to some of the thematic concerns of the novel. The image here occurs only moments before the death of the novel’s central character and resonates with the Faustian storyline. It is only fitting, perhaps, that the theme of damnation should be represented in the novel by means of an advertisement that appears on a bottle of spirits. In addition, as the Consul is propositioned by a local pimp who offers the services of María, he discerns: ‘slashed advertisements on the slimy feebly lit walls: *‘Clínica Dr Vigil, Enfermedades Secretas de Ambos Sexos, Vías Urinarias, Trastornos, Sexuales, Debilidad Sexual, Derrames Nocturnos, Emisiones Prematuras, Espermatorrea, Impotencia.* 666’ (p. 352). The voices of advertising that Geoffrey observes towards the end of his life are among the cacophony of voices that penetrate his consciousness.

Even though *Under the Volcano* adheres to the form of a modern tragedy, the cumulative effect of this strategy is one that is playful and ironical. The typography of the novel, interspersed as it is with letters, street signs, menus and price lists, has a similar effect. The narration and dialogue of the novel are frequently surrounded not only by the text of mostly Spanish and also occasional French and German but other textual forms of representation. Street and railway signs appear in the novel but typically carry little semantic value. This same treatment is also revealed with the presentation of menus and price lists as in the following example:

'EL POPO'
SERVICIO A LA CARTE

[illegible]

Chiles rellenos	o.75
Rajas a la 'Popo'	o.75

(p. 329)

The inclusion of this kind of textual detail in *Under the Volcano* tends to produce a kind of typographic disturbance which, in turn, reveals a more significant point about the relationship between the printed word and the capitalist economy. After all, this highly self-conscious gesture draws attention to the now defamiliarised printed page and, consequently, to the reader's own sense of engaging with the novel as a textual form. As such, it tends to indicate an inevitable co-existence rather than an elevation above such textual signifiers. Moreover, it reveals the novel itself as inescapably rooted in the commodity-based culture of the twentieth-century marketplace. In this respect, Michael Wutz has even remarked that this technique sets *Under the Volcano* apart from a modernist aesthetic: in which these 'icons of commodity culture [...] advertise not the novel's autonomy as modern *objet d'art* existing in aesthetic suspension but its condition as a postmodern artefact available for consumption.'²⁷² In contrast to Conrad and Lawrence, then, Lowry reveals a vision of the marketplace in the terms of inescapability. The reader of *Under the Volcano* is constantly reminded of the febrile marketplace that absorbs all forms of human experience – even the private pleasure of reading – into a commodified experience of the dizzying marketplace.

²⁷² Michael Wutz 'Archaic Mechanics', in *Reading Matters*, Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz, ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 70.

Conclusion

At the turn of the century, the fictional Latin American setting of Costaguana in *Nostromo* allowed Conrad to represent a form of imperialism that had entered a new phase of exploitation: in the form of an Anglo-American capitalism that dominated the world even more comprehensively than the European colonialism of the past. The Central, or South, American location of Costaguana not only allowed Conrad to describe the distinctly modern process whereby an obscure trading province was absorbed into the global market of commodity exchange but permitted a form of mimesis which captured the way in which the United States had begun to challenge the European powers, especially Britain, in its control of the western hemisphere at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this sense, the setting of Costaguana was figured both as a concrete Central or South American state and as a metonym for the forces of global capitalism.

Concurrently, the appeal of Latin America for Conrad also had something to do with its dramatic landscape: of mountain ranges that loomed over sun-scorched plains; of islets that were too hot to accommodate human trespass and of eerily silent gulfs that revealed nothing more than an impenetrable blackness. This was a foreboding landscape, far more dramatic than anything that might be found in the British countryside, which also seemed to diminish the importance of human actions, casting the riots and revolutions of the country in the terms of political farce. In this sense, the landscape of Latin America also offered itself as a suitable correlative for Conrad's sense of a mindless and futile universe, whether this was suggested to his imagination by evolutionary theory or the contemporaneous discoveries in the fields of astronomy, geology and physics. Accordingly, the vision of the natural world that was disclosed to Decoud moments before his suicide was the most lasting impression of Conrad's Latin American novel in which all human forms of meaning retreated in a nihilistic recognition of the world as nothing more than 'a succession of incomprehensible images'.²⁷³ In this moment, the setting of Latin America also became associated with an uncharacteristically metaphysical turn in British fiction.

²⁷³ Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo* (Letchworth: Broadview, 1997), p. 444.

With Lawrence, there was also something about the strangeness, and estrangement, that was experienced in Latin America which seemed to coincide with his similarly conflicted modernist sensibility. In the writing of Lawrence, however, the sense of European values as the product of a dead, or dying, civilisation coincided with an urgent need to find an entirely new set of beliefs and values. As such, the unfamiliar setting of Mexico presented Lawrence with a type of blank slate which was suited to the founding of a fresh set of ideals. And, the subject lingering in the background of this Lawrencian transvaluation of values was, of course, the First World War. According to this outlook, Mexico struck Lawrence's imagination as the welcome antidote that he had been searching for since the war had begun; a means of escaping all the pathologies of western culture that the First World War had thrown into violent relief, whether this was apprehended in the hatred of the body, the debilitating cultivation of the mind or the corrosive obsession with wealth and industry.

In its flight into a utopian religious fantasy, *The Plumed Serpent* revealed Lawrence's desire to seek out some form of cultural alternative to the beleaguered civilisations of western Europe which had revealed itself in the form of a catastrophic error. Lawrence also offered his readers nothing less than a cultural revolution in fictional form to the one that he once dreamed of establishing with his close circle of friends; and one which was closely bound up with his own philosophical concerns. At the same time, the religious fantasy of *The Plumed Serpent* was associated with a masculinist ideal of strong leadership and the inevitable subjugation of its female protagonist. In turn, then, Lawrence's Mexican novel involved a reversion to the political and economic values of the past in which the model of the hacienda was represented as the solution to the complexities and inequalities of the modern capitalist economy.

Lawrence's representation of Mexico was also accompanied by a distinctively modern vision of the natural world. For Lawrence, then, the Mexican landscape was conceived, much like the fictional landscape of Costaguana, in terms of 'a great reservoir of unbridled power'.²⁷⁴ And yet, for Lawrence, this impression of power was correlated to a different vision of humanity in which these natural forces were incorporated into a revised notion of the self. Following Nietzsche, the natural world was figured by Lawrence as a means of turning away from the debilitating life of the

²⁷⁴ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 446.

mind and towards the potent experience of the body. And though this type of absorption might also lead, on occasion, to a moment of decentring, this was portrayed as a moment of liberation rather than despair for Lawrence. As such, the vision of the Mexican landscape in *The Plumed Serpent* was strongly correlated to Lawrence's own philosophical concerns; especially his preference for the experiences of the body over those of the mind which had appeared in his writing long before his arrival in Mexico.

In contrast to the ideological uniformity and polemical vision of *The Plumed Serpent*, *Under the Volcano* represented a return to the same bifurcated representation that characterised Conrad's *Nostromo*. The setting of Quauhnahuac revealed a world of shadowy ideological divisions that not only seemed to portray the Mexican political scene of 1938 but offered itself as a metonym for the looming crisis in European politics and culture; a sense of a world poised at the moment before the eruption of another world war. The shadowy Unión Militar suggested itself to Lowry's imagination as a comparable moment in European politics to the rise of Hitler in Germany and the triumph of Franco in Spain. Collectively, these political movements towards extremism on either side of the Atlantic created an apocalyptic impression of ideological division; a sense of a modern world at the point of imminent collapse.

In addition, Lowry offered a vision of nature which in many ways continued with the same themes and concerns that were identified by Conrad and Lawrence. Likewise, then, Lowry portrayed the natural world as a source of power and potency that was indifferent to human concerns which were, in turn, rendered as trivial and absurd by comparison. And, with the final descent of the Consul into the ravine, Lowry offered a similarly Schopenhauerian vision of nature to Conrad where the human desire for sense and meaning was subverted and revealed as incompatible with a disquieting vision of reality. And yet, Lowry's representation of the natural world in *Under the Volcano* was even bleaker than the vision that was presented by Conrad. After all, there was not the same sense of ideological rupture and conflicted inheritance that offered moments of contrast to the nihilistic vision of Decoud in *Nostromo*. In a further departure from Conrad and Lawrence, Lowry also represented a vision of the natural world which was traversed by the modern world of commerce and advertising. In this sense, the natural world was no longer figured in the idyllic terms of a retreat or refuge

but as a type of compromised space which was incorporated within the framework of modern existence.

In terms of the representation of cultural otherness, the intellectual heritage of eugenics was revealed as an ideological framework which structured the responses of both Conrad and Lawrence. In *Nostromo*, Conrad ascribed the turbulence of Latin American politics to what he identified as the corrupting influences of racial hybridity and cultural syncretism. In his ethnographic portrait of the Montero brothers, who revealed a complicated mixture of Indian and African ancestry, Conrad aligned the detection of racial hybridity with an egoistic form of political misrule. This form of representation was something which contrasted with his flattering portrait of the creole landowners who were described as standing apart from the revolutionary years of violence and misrule that characterised Costaguana's bloody history.

In the opening chapter of *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence had described 'the mongrel mass of a mongrel city' with an obvious sense of disapproval.²⁷⁵ And, this was by no means the only occasion when the term 'mongrel' appeared in the opening chapter. The restive spectators of the bull fight were likewise described as 'lost mongrels' who '[prowled] back and forth' as they anticipated the ensuing spectacle with a level of enthusiasm that appalled the moral sensitivities of the protagonist.²⁷⁶ In this way, the derogatory term 'mongrel' was used in the opening chapter to describe the ethnically mixed population of the inner city. It is only, of course, when Kate turns away from the 'mongrelism' of Mexico City and towards the 'purity' of the Mexican hinterland that the heroine was able to discover the real object of her interest: the isolated Indian community of the Mexican hinterland of Sayula that seemed to reveal nothing less than a point of access to the timeless, untroubled human past.

For Lawrence, however, the eugenic inheritance of the nineteenth century was also implicated in his understanding of the First World War; especially in terms of his theory of its origins. After all, the war was partly seen as a result of impurity and racial degeneracy, of a European continent overrun by its baser, mongrel elements but also as a symptom of the failure of those who were biologically and spiritually suited to the role of leadership to offer the guidance at a time of crisis. In a further radicalisation,

²⁷⁵ D.H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 20.

²⁷⁶ D.H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent*, p. 12.

Lawrence also seems to have arrived at the conclusion that the solution to these problems was to be found in some return to a form of racial purity along with a return to a more authoritarian social structure (something which was informed both by his early reading of Nietzsche and his war-time interest in Edward Gibbon's history of Ancient Rome). At the same time, Lawrence identified the racial purity of the Mexican Indian as a means of spiritual salvation and cultural renaissance.

In a departure from this intellectual heritage, the eugenic inheritance of the nineteenth century no longer revealed itself as a significant feature of Lowry's attitude to Mexican racial hybridity and cultural syncretism. In a manner comparable to his blurry distinction between the town and country, Lowry no longer revealed the same level of anxiety in the face of ethnic indeterminacy as Conrad and Lawrence. In describing the Mexican characters of Dr. Vigil and Sr. Bustamente, Lowry often passed over the issue of racial hybridity and cultural syncretism entirely. What is more, in the dying Indian episode and the subsequent interpretation of this event within the novel, Lowry subjected the ethnographic identification of the Mexican Indian to a form of scrutiny that terminated in a recognition of such racial categories as little more than a form of misguided representation.

It should also be clear by now that the study of the modernist interest in Latin American cultures sheds light on the broader development in the familiar twentieth-century concept of the primitive. The three modernist authors of this study provide an indication of how the European attitude to cultural otherness developed over the course of the early- to mid-twentieth century. Initially, in the first two chapters of this study, we noticed how Conrad often expressed despair at the European treatment of Amerindians. The narrator of *Nostromo* made the observation that the modern form of Anglo-American financial exploitation was equivalent to the Spanish colonial exploitation of the past: powerfully conveyed in the parallels that were shown to exist between the Spanish conqueror, King Charles, and the English owner of the silver mine, Charles Gould. Conrad seemed to suggest that little had changed between these two time periods: one form of exploitation (colonialism) had simply been replaced by another (capitalism). Nevertheless, despite this rather shrewd insight about the cyclical nature of human history, there was little sense in which Conrad's attitude moved beyond the parameters of a primitivist outlook.

By contrast, we then saw how Lawrence represented a departure from this Conradian position. Lawrence's own attitude might be thought of as an inversion of conventional imperial discourse. Rather than the white colonialist teaching the non-white people of a colonised nation, the familiar imperial roles are effectively reversed. In *The Plumed Serpent*, it is the native Mexicans Ramon and Cipriano who educate the Irish Kate in how to lead a better life, not the other way around. Yet, this notion of inversion, or reversal, also revealed that Lawrence remained firmly rooted in a primitivist identification of Mexican Indians with the innocence of children and animals. On closer examination, particularly in connection with his own philosophical concerns with a more vibrant form of living, it was observed how Lawrence's celebration of the culture of Mexico never strayed too far from the Romantic notion of the noble savage.

Finally, while Conrad offered the Amerindians sympathy and Lawrence idealistically celebrated Mexican culture as redemptive, Lowry avoided both of these forms of identification. Lowry shunned viewing Amerindian culture in terms of primitivism almost entirely by representing Mexican culture as something that was contemporaneous with the modern industrial present. In this sense, Mexican culture is treated as a cultural space, inhabiting the same moment in time as the modern west. And, whereas Lawrence displayed a desire to seek out some idealised peasant community, Lowry revealed this quest as largely illusory. In a deflationary movement, the Consul is often revealed as identifying the Mexican Indian in Romantic terms only to have this form of association brutally discredited. In a more general sense, the notion of Mexico as place where the European might venture in order to be redeemed is subjected to a satirical form of representation in *Under the Volcano*. The Mexican Unión Militar are revealed as the agents of his destruction rather than salvation in the Consul's troubled quest to find some form of redemption that remains beyond his grasp.

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