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C O N R A D A N D C R I T I C I S M

The first in a series of Fun Articles

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Criticism of literature is a subject sufficiently interesting to attract the attention of a large array of very intelligent thinkers over the space of many years. Samuel Johnson started the ball rolling with his unfair inclusion of very sharp remarks about the poetry in a volume called LIVES OF THE POETS. Others have followed suit - some ^{critics} have been creative artists; most, mercifully, were not. Henry James wrote novels and criticism with equal facility, but Cambridge doyen F R Leavis, has not, to my knowledge, published a novel in his life. Neither is he known as a poet.

Which all goes to show that criticism is not just the activity of the idle madmen, as some would have you believe. Some of these nay sayers are authors themselves, and they just don't like the damn interfering critics. Others are s f fans who do not reply to editorials about reviewing and criticism, and therefore get the sort of fiction they deserve. (The connection between these statements is rather obscure, I admit, but the observant may see a link between the s f fan's attitude to criticism and consequent mediocrity of his reading matter, and the Australian public's attitude to politicians, and the consequent mediocrity on that score). There are people like George Turner who write monumental articles like ON WRITING ABOUT S F, and receive back about two letters from that vast creative fraternity that seemed so intelligent when Halan Ellison described them in DANGEROUS VISIONS.

My argument all along has been that Criticism is fun. If that puts it somewhere in the pigeon hole that contains maths puzzles, having children, and other unlikely pastimes, then I really cannot apologize. There are English Departments at Universities for those who can see their way clear to Criticizing professionally, and I often wish I was among their number. In the meantime, one can gain some pleasant mental exercise by reviewing for publications such as S F COMMENTARY.

And... one can reminisce. For instance, I can remember the time when there was time for sitting in the Baillieu Library at Melbourne University and, when not dozing, time to read books, and time to read books about books. Because of the unfortunate circumstance that I could gain incredible marks on essays like the one you are about to read, but did rotten English exam papers, I am not ^{still} in Baillieu Library, but flinging round great clods of intellectual nonsense in the classrooms of Ararat Technical School. I'm not sure that the Education Department would have allowed me time off to be an intellectual anyway.

The excuse for presenting this article, and those that follow, then, is that Criticism Is Fun (I must have something of the teacher in me - that's just another slogan) and that Criticism is Nostalgia,

because it is an activity in which I can no longer indulge at leisure. In this spirit, I want to talk about NOSTROMO, a novel by Joseph Conrad.

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Opinion is typically divided on ~~some~~ ^{Conrad} Important People do not like Joseph Conrad or NOSTROMO, but that Very Important People like F R Leavis and his friends liked both very much indeed. The trouble is that Conrad himself wasn't a Revolutionary like D H Lawrence (yes, there were Harlan Ellisons in mainstream, as well) nor did he pretend to be. The turn of the century, when Conrad's novels appeared, was not the time for inflammatory talk or revolutionary writing. By training, Conrad was British to the core (although he was born in Poland) and many of his shorter stories, such as N-----OF THE MARCISSUS, have a nauseating stiff-upper-lip quality. To be more precise; if I had not read NOSTROMO, and had only read Conrad's shorter stories, then I would be an anti-Conrad critic.

Conrad has a reputation for sea stories; his works still appear on school book lists. Conrad has all the more obvious marks of a first class bore. What's so special, then, about NOSTROMO?

For a start, it has an extremely complex story, which doesn't concern me here. It does mean however, that some of Conrad's stories have the reputation for being "difficult", which is a murderous reputation to have in Australia. The story cuts backwards and forwards over the time of a revolution in Costaguana, archetypal Central American republic. The colonial representatives appear to lose for awhile, the yokel Latin Americans bungle the whole thing, and both the author and characters observe the fracas with commendable equanimity. On the surface, nobody comes out too badly, except one poor sap who drowns himself. The Nostromo of the title is a mysterious figure who goes about saving people, and puts people In Contact With Each Other. Does that sound slightly more modern than 1904, H G Wells and all that? It should.

NOSTROMO is an important novel for its times, and for its author, because it is such a remarkably dry, un pompous book for both its era and writer. It's a Realist novel: it's one of those few novels that really tries to see Things As They Are.

But that cliché, as you may be aware, is the sort of thing revolutionary writers, or self-styled revolutionaries, say about their works. Come 1800, it's Blake, and later Coleridge who call the Country Parson Set of the 1700s a collection of - country parsons. "See things as they are!" Come passion, heroes, excitement, wars and the assorted catastrophes of the 19th century. Beethoven also died Seeing Things As They Are. Come the 1930s, and - "Boyoboy, the 19th century was stupid and melodramatic - let's See Things As They Are." Since the French never do anything else, the British, who are always behind the times in these things, jazzed up some Symbolist techniques, hired some propagandists at SURVEY magazine, and got back to the real nitty-gritty. People are still complaining about That Modern Poetry.... And you all know about Hippies, and science fiction, and all that.

Having left literary history bleeding onto the pages of this magazine, and having libelled countless worthy gentlemen, I return to NOSTROMO. The important thing is that NOSTROMO does not shout about its revolutionary qualities. As I have said, its plot is conventional enough, except that Conrad rearranges time sequences in a very sophisticated manner in order to gain some precise effects that have nothing to do with literary dogma. The important thing, indeed, is that NOSTROMO does not shout at all - it is a novel of enormous verbal range, much of it pianissimo.

Why then is NOSTROMO one of the most important novels in the English language? The answer lies somewhere in the summary that "NOSTROMO is a profoundly sceptical novel". The revolutionary books of the world are presumed to be sceptical by definition - to question all is a sceptical activity. However, the revolutionaries of any time claim for themselves an entirely new perception of reality, one that has nothing to do with what has gone before. How then does Conrad manage to be truly realistic without trying to sweep away the past? How does Conrad manage to be a "comfortable" absorbing writer, and at the same time disturb his readers as much as any other writer who has ever lived?

It's been a cliché during the last few years to call a novel a "sceptical" piece of fiction. "Deeply disturbing" novels sell in their millions, and this may say a good deal about today's reading public, but little about the state of modern literature. For one thing, "scepticism" is often confused with "pessimism". The Oxford Dictionary defines a "sceptic" as a person who either is a person who "questions the possibility of knowledge", or is "indisposed in general, or on a particular subject, to accept currency or authority as proving the truth of opinions." Scepticism does not necessarily involve hopelessness, although the trend since the First World War has been to confuse the two terms. How then does Conrad, in NOSTROMO, contrive to be truly sceptical, i.e. committed entirely to the attempt to see past falsehood, but at the same time not overcome with horror at the sights his search reveals? Scepticism has brought paranoia to many other authors, remember.

On the surface, as I have said, NOSTROMO does not necessarily entail scepticism. We are told an unusually complex story about a minor revolution, in which the forces of order seem to win convincingly, and establish a Liberal Republic of prosperity and political stability.

But the time-jumps involved in the story are puzzling, and if one investigates the main characters at all, one immediately faces the problem of the complexity of their motives, and the stress laid on individual personal problems and thoughts. Furthermore, Conrad guts the traditional good-solid-yarn medium with Part III of the novel, the last section. The comfortably stupid Captain Mitchell narrates the superficial triumph of the Republic, but Conrad has already shown us the private view of Nostromo's tragedy, and the disturbing death of Don Martin Decoud.

A sceptical novelist makes the reader ask "Why?" in every sentence. I want to investigate how Conrad uses every complex relationship of plot, characterization, description and abstraction, to press for that only important question: "Why?"

The most penetrating insights occur in the long passage of the book in which Nostromo (Capataz of the Cargadores), after whom the novel is named, and young nobleman Don Martin Decoud, drift on the Golfo Placido in a lighter laden with silver from the Gould mine. This passage can be examined from a number of viewpoints (for its cinematic directness, as one line of attack), but scepticism is perhaps the most useful.

Nostromo and Decoud set out on the lighter immediately after a disturbing interview between Nostromo and Italian ~~matr~~ Teresa Viola. The extract flows as a continuous whole, and then flows back into the texture of the novel. To slice it is to maim the passage. To leave it unexamined is injustice, and to look carefully at more than one of the important passages of this novel, is impossible.

As the voyage commences, Nostromo and Decoud seem to have the same, or very similar goals. At any rate, they keep a common face to each other. Several times, Nostromo seems to speak for them both in saying:

"I spoke to you openly as to a man as desperate as myself," explained the Capataz. "The silver must be saved from the Monterists..."

(Pp234-235, Penguin edn)

However, as Decoud and Nostromo lie in the darkness at the mercy of the Gulf and a steamer that nudges close to them during a very thick fog, Conrad demonstrates an ambiguous connection between Nostromo and the silver loaded in the middle of the lighter. The previous events of the same night are recalled by Nostromo; that is, the strange conversation at Teresa Viola's deathbed. It is early in the journey - Nostromo's mind is shown in an unusually reflective state:

"Look here, senor," Nostromo went on. "I never even remonstrated about this affair. Directly I heard what was wanted I saw what a desperate affair it must be, and I made up my mind to see it out. Every minute was of importance... Later on, that poor dying woman wanted to see me, as you know. Senor, I was reluctant to go. I felt already this cursed silver growing heavy upon my back, and I was afraid that, knowing herself to be dying, she would ask me to ride off again for a priest.... I pretended I did not believe she was going to die. Senor, I refused to fetch a priest for a dying woman... The thing sticks in my throat. She may be dead already, and here we are floating helpless, with no wind at all. Curse on all superstition. She died thinking I deprived her of Paradise, I suppose. It shall be the most desperate affair of my life."

(Page 225)

Conrad shows us a man prevented from taking any positive action for one of the few times in his life, as the boat drifts in near complete stillness. He sees his own will as the most important part of the whole affair. "Every minute was of importance" rings through this whole passage, because Nostromo can use every minute profitably, when circumstances allow him to. Nostromo's sincerity in this reference to that "poor dying woman" contrasts with the ruthlessness he later shows, both towards Hirsch, the cringing figure

found on the boat, and even in his more desperate statements to Decoud.

Nostromo is afraid of nothing within his ordinary experience, yet the writer makes us feel the "cursed silver growing heavy" on his back, and his fear of being forced to ride for a priest. Nostromo's mind grapples with his reasons for not aiding Teresa. These reasons, spoken in a flat, sullen tone, contrast with the rising passion of "I refused to fetch a priest for a dying woman", and culminate in the self-revealing, crisp and haunting statement: "The thing sticks in my throat". Nostromo adds, with an explanation that lacks the emphasis and feeling of the previous statement, but is concerned more with his own physical vulnerability: "She may be dead already, and here we are floating helpless, with no wind at all". Conrad then demonstrates that Nostromo will not face up to the implications of the statement he has just made. Nostromo facetiously blames the whole problem on "all superstition", and adds the emotionally blank, almost cruel, statement that "She died thinking I deprived her of Paradise, I suppose. It shall be the most desperate affair of my life." The silver is again all-important. Several lines later, we see that Nostromo's practicality again controls his aspirations: "Now, Don Martin, let us take up the sweeps and try to find the Isabels". Whatever the possibilities of fog-bound contemplation, the silver must be hidden from the Monterist revolutionaries.

Every aspect of the lighter's journey resounds to the influence of the silver: its preciousness, its proximity, its power to dull creative thought and generate heroic energy. Nostromo and Don Martin discover the paranoid Hirsch hiding terror-stricken on the barge as it drifts through the fog. Hirsch is a living symbol of other men's fears, as he jumps over and around the silver and Nostromo and Don Martin clamber after him.

The writer also reminds us that the silver is an objective representation of the political strife that causes the journey in the first place. In particular, the reader is shown the contrasting reminiscences of both men concerning Charles Gould, silver mine manager and political entrepreneur, around whom the revolutionary situation revolves. At the same time, a steamer containing carousing revolutionaries creeps towards them through the fog, and threatens both their lives and purpose:

Decoud stood as if paralysed; only his thoughts were wildly active... He remembered the Casa Gould on his last visit, the arguments, the tones of his voice, the impenetrable attitude of Charles, Mrs Gould's face so blanched with anxiety and fatigue that her eyes seemed to have changed colour, appearing nearly black by contrast. Even whole sentences of the proclamation which he meant to make Barrios issue from his headquarters at Cayta as soon as got there passed through his mind; the very germ of the new State, the Separationist proclamation which he had tried before he left to read hurriedly to Don Jose, stretched out on his bed under the fixed gaze of his daughter... Decoud had that very draft in his pocket, written in pencil on several loose sheets of paper, with the heavily printed heading, "Administration of the San Tome Silver Mine, Sulaco, Republic of Costaquana". He had written

it furiously, snatching page after page on Charles Gould's table. Mrs Gould had looked several times over his shoulder as he wrote; but the Senior Administrador, standing straddle-legged, would not even glance at it when it was finished. He had waved it away firmly. It must have been scorn, and not caution... And that showed his disdain, the true English disdain of common prudence, as if everything outside the range of their own thoughts and feelings were unworthy of serious recognition.

(Pages 233-234, underlining mine)

The reader remembers from earlier in the novel, that on previous visits to the Goulds, Decoud was the rather arrogant young political journalist who thought he understood the whole Costaguanan situation and all the people involved, and simultaneously separated himself from any direct action.

However, for this one occasion, he is committed to full involvement in the political life of the country. Conrad's scepticism about Decoud's (or anyone's) capacity for such involvement, and indeed whether such is ever justified, is revealed in the passage above. We are shown that Decoud never really understood the Goulds, the manipulators/whose interests he works. His impressions are a pastiche of isolated images that appear with confusing swiftness across the reflecting screen of his mind. It is not a pleasant picture, especially the images connected with Decoud's main interest: the "whole sentences of the proclamations". The "seed" of a hope in a Separationist State seems planted in gloom ("Mrs Gould's face...") and a generally upsetting confusion. Conrad's irony can be seen in the passage underlined above. All the importance of the Proclamation is wasted on "loose sheets of paper" upon which the "heavily printed heading" is imposed inevitably and ominously. We are made to feel Decoud's increasing bitterness as he crouches on the raft, and remembers the scorn of Gould, a scorn that did not strike him at the time.

Conrad and the reader want to ask Decoud the question he is himself not prepared to face - why expend so much passion and energy on a man who regards "everything outside the range of (his) own thoughts and feeling..." as "...unworthy of serious recognition"? In a passage several pages later, Nostromo's complementary memories of the Goulds, (this time voiced aloud), include the thought that "Those gentlefolk do not seem to have sense enough to understand what they are giving one to do... It was as if they had been deaf." And this from the man who must save their silver!

Nostromo does not lighten the gloom, when he comments that the two of them will be "as safe as the silver".

And for the reader perusing the novel for the second time, there is the knowledge that the silver remains safe - forever buried in a gully in the middle of a small island in the middle of the Golfo Placido, while its two protectors die under its influence.

II

Scepticism about the characters' motives turns into scepticism about knowledge in general. How far can men understand and actually communicate about each other? The theme of NOSTROMO is nothing if

modern. Then there is the theme that is just as universal, and modern - how far can we understand the structure of nature within which men must live and think? NOSTROMO ostensibly deals with politics, but the first chapter describes the Golfo Placido in almost mystical terms, so that the mysterious and all-consuming stretch of water flows through the novel, while the human adversaries bob over its surface.

Conrad does not fall into the trap of delivering a philosophy lecture (this he leaves to innumerable ANALOG story-writers). The whole experience of "knowing" and "not knowing" is created in the reader's mind, drawing it closer and closer to Conrad's own scepticism which informs and enlightens. Conrad's literary technique is so finely wrought that the framework of scepticism becomes essential to the novel. Conrad does not just adorn a quite neutral plot, as in "psychological thrillers", for instance. What better way to examine the relationship between people and their universe, than to have three highly individual examples of humanity floating on a silver-laden lighter in the middle of a gulf at the dead of a very dark night? Their backgrounds and purposes may be disparate, but they stay together for the whole of the journey.

In addition, Conrad describes the voyage in such a way that the reader experiences the duration of every minute. This is accomplished through a brilliantly sustained technique, in which Conrad uses as far as possible the stability, power and duration of monosyllabic words. He varies the effect so that the most time-consuming events on the lighter are the longest events in the reader's mind. The reader is engaged in the business of survival and introspection as much as Decoud and Nostromo. Compared with many novels, the element of suspense during the steamer-lighter encounter is not used to speed up the reader's reactions, but to slow them down.

Two strands of thought are separated in the Golfo Placido passage. Nostromo becomes increasingly involved with his purpose, while Decoud becomes increasingly detached. This effect arises not only from the separate natures of the men themselves, but also the effect each has on the other, and, very importantly, the effect the Gulf and the uncontrollable element of Hirsch has on them both:

He heard Nostromo mutter again, "No! there is no room for fear on this lighter. Courage itself does not seem good enough. I have a good eye and a steady hand; no man can say he ever saw me tired or uncertain what to do; but por Dios, Don Martin, I have been sent out into this black calm on a business where neither a good eye, nor a steady hand, nor judgment are any use.." He swore a string of oaths in Spanish and Italian under his breath. "Nothing but sheer desperation will do for this affair."

These words were in strange contrast to the prevailing peace - to this almost stolid stillness of the gulf. A shower fell with an abrupt whispering sound all around the boat, and Decoud took off his hat, and, letting his head get wet, felt greatly refreshed. Presently a steady little draught of air caressed his cheek. The lighter began to move, but the shower distanced it. The drops ceased to fall upon his head and hands, the whispering died out in the distance. Nostromo emitted a grunt of satisfaction, and grasping the tiller, chirruped softly, as

sailors do, to encourage the wind. Never for the last three days had Decoud felt less the need for what the Capataz would call desperation.

"I fancy I hear another shower on the water", he observed in a tone of quiet content. "I hope it will catch us up".

Nostromo ceased chirruping at once. "You hear another shower?" he said, doubtfully.... The sound which Decoud had detected came along the water harshly. Nostromo recognized that noise parta king of a hiss and a rustle which spreads out on all sides of a steamer making her way through a smooth water on a quiet night.

(Pages 231-232)

In the incident quoted above, Conrad tries to examine knowledge in three aspects, and therefore show how tantalizingly close people may come in their understanding of one another. Events are seen through the eyes of Decoud. He continually attempts to, and fails to, understand his companion, because, shortly beforehand, he thought he had nearly caught the essence of the man from his treatment of Hirsch. Nostromo is shown through Decoud's, and our, eyes attempting to account for Hirsch in his own plans. "No! there is no room for fear on this lighter" seems uttered as a defence against the tactile symbol of fear represented by Hirsch. In general the novel shows that Nostromo is incapable of fear, but on the other hand: "Courage itself does not seem good enough." Nostromo is completely aware of and able to use his powers to ensure his physical courage. All his life his "good eye" and "steady hand" have been sufficient for his purposes. However, the threatening darkness of the ulf arouses the most pressing frustration he has ever felt. Nostromo's use of the negative words "black calm" and "neither" and the string of "nors", effectively cancel in his own mind the power of his physical advantages. Such is his frustration that he can only explode into a string of completely useless oaths. Nostromo then utters one of his rare abstract statements: "'Nothing but desperation will do for this affair'." Conrad creates two effects in this monologue. Nostromo has achieved much by questioning his total reliance on his own physical and mental powers in any situation. At the same time we and Decoud realize that the only practical strength and ingenuity on the lighter is Nostromo's. Conrad has already derived quite some humour from Decoud's notable incapacity to perform any but the simplest tasks on the lighter.

It seems for the moment that Decoud may have achieved some understanding of Nostromo. Much of the entire novel concerns itself with the attempt, and failure, of people to understand each other, and the difficulty is the same in time of stress or in time of social ease. People such as Gould are nearly blinded by their ideals and aims, while others such as Mrs Gould and Dr Menygham understand each other well, but lack the power to make such an understanding meaningful in the light of Sulaco life and politics. The incident under discussion is so vital to Conrad's examination because it provides the closest necessary proximity of two people in the whole novel. For practical purposes alone, Nostromo and Decoud must nearly act and think as one. However, even in this situation, Conrad does not find a relationship one could call understanding, or mutual self-knowledge.

the practicalities, the business at hand, dominates the thoughts of both participants. Conversation is restricted by the necessity for silence. Always there is the mocking "prevailing peace... this almost stolid stillness of the gulf." The gulf is a living barrier to understanding, a tangible equivalent of the limiting role of politics in the rest of the novel. The Gulf reassures its own at times - we share in Decoud's refreshment as the shower passes. We share the sights and sounds of the gulf - the "abrupt whispering sound" and the wet hair.

However, the stillness always returns. Nostromo, however, has ceased to wonder about fear and courage. Now we hear a "grunt of satisfaction" from him and his soft chirruping is the sound of a "man on the job". His self-sufficiency covers him again.

Decoud has also become oversatisfied - no longer is he concerned about Nostromo. His reliably unreliable sense of the practical breaks the bond of understanding with Nostromo as he disturbs him at his work. The satisfying "chirruping" stops. The "hiss and a rumble that spreads out on all sides", and the necessity for rapid thought and action as the steamer approaches, completely destroys the quietly exultant mood of the previous passage. During the rest of the journey, the two men's experiences do not so closely approach each other again. They are compared and contrasted, and their parting is accompanied by some ill-feeling and blatant irresponsibility on the part of Nostromo. Conrad asks all the questions of this relationship that need to be asked, then leaves the reader to experience the grinding process triggered by these questions.

In many ways, Decoud spiritually wastes away during the whole novel. Only at its end does he face up to his strange physical death. In the passage below, two forms of scepticism cling closely together, although the passage is not as well-written as the passage just discussed. The reader is most closely involved with Nostromo's reactions to the probable death of Decoud:

That empty boat, coming out to meet him mysteriously, as if rowed by an invisible spectre, exercised the fascination of some sign, of some warning, seemed to answer in a startling and enigmatic way the persistent thought of a treasure and of a man's fate... In the distance the transports, more in a bunch now, held on straight for Sulaco, with their air of friendly contest, of nautical sport, of a regatta; and the united smoke of their funnels drove like a thin, sulphurous fogbank right over his head. It was his daring, his courage, his act that had set these ships in motion upon the sea.

(Page 404)

Conrad "builds in" his effect by ensuring within the story that Nostromo never meets Decoud again after he leaves the young man to guard the treasure on an island in the middle of the Gulf. This failure of enterprise is itself an unprecedented rebuke to Nostromo's powers. It brings him to his closest point towards examination of his own motives. His guilt appears to him in thought as an "invisible spectre" presenting the "sigh" and "warning" he has felt for the last few weeks. Both his positions as keeper of the silver and the man who placed another man on an island to wait, are recalled in his "persistent thought of a treasure and a man's fate". The

transports mock Nostromo with their gay complacency. They ask no questions - all is a "friendly contest", a "nautical sport", a "regatta" to them, as they represent all that is most mechanical and efficient in Gould's regime. Nostromo is haunted by the "thin, sulphurous fogbank right over his head". Later, as he stares out into the gulf, the responsibility that Nostromo never felt before appears visibly as "a living expression came upon the still features, deep thought crept into the empty stare - as if an outcast soul, a quiet, brooding soul, finding that untenanted body in its way, had come in stealthily to take possession". However, again the knowledge that will forever elude Nostromo evades him. He "again surrendered himself to the universal repose of all visible things".

Is this however a cause for ultimate pessimism? Scepticism and pessimism nearly become the one term, in the passage that deals with Decoud's fate. Does Conrad say that all honest sceptical questioning must lead to ultimate negativism? Conrad tries to answer this by showing us the death of a man openly committed to scepticism as a way of thought and life. In the gulf episode Decoud only looked silly in the practical situations of the trip, and his attempted analysis of Nostromo also looked naive.

There is something annoying about the passage dealing with Decoud's death. The best prose of NOSTROMO deals with descriptions of the two objective "standards" of the novel - the Gulf itself, and the frustrations of the political situation - or with interpersonal scenes in which one or more characters are contrasted with the other characters. Without the latter type of drama, Conrad turns moralist in some passages, such as:

In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part. Decoud lost all belief in the reality in the reality of his action past and to come.

in which we are not sure whether these really are Decoud's experiences or part of some vague wider experience of Conrad's that he could not pin down legitimately any other way within the novel's structure. The vague sweep of a lecturer's pointing finger does not measure up to the sustained horror of Decoud's last few days of life.

But Conrad, and the reader, and maybe even Decoud, see clearly for all that:

After a clear daybreak, the sun appeared splendidly above the peaks of the range. The great gulf burst into a glitter all around the boat; and in this glory of merciless solitude the silence appeared again before him, stretched taut like a dark, thin string.

(Decoud) unbuttoned the flap of the leather case, drew the revolver, cocked it, brought it forward pointing at his breast, pulled the trigger, and, with convulsive force, sent the still-smoking weapon hurtling through the air.

"It is done," he stammered out, in a sudden flow of blood. His last thought was: "I wonder how that Capataz died." The stiffness of the fingers relaxed, and the lover of Antonia

Avellanes rolled overboard without having heard the cord of silence snap in the solitude of the Placid Gulf, whose glittering surface remained untroubled by the fall of his body.

(Page 411)

At the end of the Gulf incident, Nostromo sought the sunlight, but Decoud had liked the protection of darkness. The sun, the giver of life, mocks the solitary Decoud, who is maddened by constant lassitude and lack of sleep. Now his entire stock of thought and experiences vanish before the spectre of the physically felt entity of "the silence". The sceptic who doubted all, and especially the *raison d'etre* of those closest to him, makes his last positive action one of violent self-destruction. The reader sees and feels the last exercises of death, but not the moment of death. We cannot remain within Decoud's mind, because he has no mind left at this stage. During the novel he slowly rejects the world, until finally he throws himself out of his own consciousness. The Gulf that mocked him most alarmingly, "remains untroubled by the fall of his body" - surely an ultimate statement of the negative effects of scepticism, and the most horrifying sentence in the novel.

Why then does Conrad avoid falling into the void that Decoud embraced? For a start, Conrad's style concerns itself with the business of living, no matter how objectionable the motives. Living may not be worthwhile, existence may not be worthwhile, but they may be approached and examined, and the examining process itself enriches the life of the examiner. Conrad's scepticism is that of a man who embraces life and then examines it: Decoud's was that of a person who rejects life and then wonders why it didn't make sense. Conrad's prose introduces a life that is far more exactly and deeply felt than the superficial "life" that hurtles past our daily viewcreens. At the same time, it is life of the same order, and after reading NOSTROMO we may have the means to look in the face of our own Golfo Placidos.

-Bruce R Gillespie.
April 1966 (revised).

NOTE : Good references on novels are scarce, compared with the suffocating avalanche of material on Shakespeare and the English poets. The only book I found of much use on NOSTROMO was Arnold Kettle's AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH NOVEL, Volume ii. It is a good book on most of the central English novels, and there is nothing much to complement it.

The edition of the novel that I used was that of PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS: 463 pages; the novel was first published in 1904; and the edition cost 7/6 when I bought it, which shows how long ago that was.

NEXT ISSUE : Some more ambiguity - this time the weird and wonderful mind of ANDREW MARVELL, a 17th century poet with a Philip Dick type of mind (or is it the other way around?)

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OVERTIME ON SUNDAYS

Bernie Bernhouse

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What can you say to a plumber who believes alcohol is good for you, that we should all go marching off to war - "Stop the Communists!" - and who keeps mumbling things under inflammable breath like "For the community!", "What about the community?" when holding a malicious looking wrench in one hand, and cradling his clenched fist (other hand) like a new born baby? How sweet.

I mentioned that I believed there was more to the news than Lionel Rose spraining an ankle while dancing the fox-trot.

Sacrilege is a very interesting thing, and it occurred to me that here was an extremely religious man. Not only did he once send a prayer up to heaven "to help me find the bloody spanner... and it worked" (he added confidently), but apparently any view which conflicted with that of his own (in itself debatable) was obviously the work of the devil, presuming that the devil does put in his eight hours per day - with overtime on Sundays.

And he told me so, with an ambivalent mixture of disgust and pure pity intertwining within his alcohol laden travels. He also proceeded to tell me that he was a "believer" (I couldn't have guessed) and about the joy he had experienced upon reading the Bible.

Now I'm normally prepared to listen to anything for a certain amount of time. But this particular guy had now been talking for over half an hour and it was getting rather ridiculous. A quarter of an hour earlier I had decided to give up, and show him that I was bored. Every time I tuned in he would be talking about another act of God or so. I kept nodding while he rambled on, then finally began interchanging between "yes" and "no", "hmm" and "ahmmm".

He wouldn't stop. I was desperate. I tried a whole series of exclamations, ranging from "Incredible!" "You're joking!" right through "Sensational!" "Colossal!" to "Really?" It was to no avail.

I tried disagreeing with everything he said, but that was no good, as half the time he couldn't differentiate what I was saying, and the other half of the time he wanted to know why I disagreed with the word of God.

I was just about asleep, when suddenly he stopped. He must have thought that I was closing my eyes from intense concentration, trying to picture it, as it were - but he asked: "Are you all right?"

The time had come. I needed a good question. I asked him what

would happen if he missed.

"Missed what?"

"Well, if you are sending a prayer right up to heaven, what happens if you miss?"

It was an ingoent question, and he accepted it as such. An angelic look seeped through a blood-shot face, his hands closed on an imaginary Bible in front of him, and his gravel voice now contained an element of wise passiveness, although the suppressed wonder was deeply sincere.

He said "It is guided by Benign Providence!"

I asked: "It's divine, isn't it?"

"Oh yes!" he replied, nodding towards his boots. "It's marvellous!"

At this point I escaped, leaving him in privacy.

- Bernie Bernhouse

oo

M U D G L O R I O U S M U D

To paraphrase Harry Harrison: "Bruce never realized that Harlan Ellison was the cause of it all." You see, I was reading DANGEROUS VISIONS when John Foyster's STRAIGHT TALK arrived in the mail like any other piece of junk mail. Now Harlan Ellison is a pretty sharp guy, and a very loquacious writer (You can confuse the terms here - much of Ellison's part of DV reads like the transcription from a couple of nights with a tape-recorder), and he is America's Number One Exponent of Loud Insult and the Indignant Rejoinder. I don't know which award fans should give him for that. Suffice to say that Ellison's influence is so pervasive that, after sufficient exposure to his prose, one could easily get into the habit of shouting insults at the flies that walk across the ceiling.

Now STRAIGHT TALK had more impact than the average jay-walking fly, and in answer to it I wrote a strange document called MUCK MAN, which made a lot of sense but sounded awful. In fact, some people actually feared that I had a feud with Foyster.

But never fear. John sent me a letter in reply to MUCK MAN (so that we could cut down the postage expenses somehow) in which he more or less demonstrated that we could agree to disagree on most points. John says: "I further point out that I didn't indulge in mud-slinging (had I done so you would have resigned from the apa)." This I believe. John still thinks we have a holy duty to protect Leigh Edmonds, which sounds all right to me, except that Leigh doesn't seem to worry too much about protecting himself. Somehow that takes the point out of all this hoo hah. John also seems to think, despite everything I have said, that I was covering up Stephen Campbell's age before he joined the apa. It is true that I did not tell anyone officially (although I think that I told both Leigh and Paul in at the club several weeks before Stephen submitted the first ARMAGEDDON) but this was only because I saw no real reason to. John Foyster sees differently. ::: Therefore, both of us must leave any action etc, to the rest of you. Good luck. I'm going back to s f.

enough - but this is a place where you can publish what you like. Or had you forgotten that during the last two months?

LEIGH EDMONDS

MECHANISM 6

Somehow I think it would be a mistake to put Mozart in the light classical section. True, there is a constant purity in Mozart's music which sounds like naivety sometimes, but this seems

to spring from Mozart's absence of musical eccentricity. Play records like the later symphonies, the later violin concertos, and the piano concertos and all you hear are the traditional forms. But keep playing them and slowly you can separate the individual themes and effects. But it takes time and effort, and I get far more for my time and effort if I listen to Beethoven. Mozart is, I am informed, a "musician's musician", whatever that means. ::: Your picture of the groovers of 300 years time is one of the best ideas in the Mailing. While Jim and Joan take their Ph Ds in Twentieth Century Rocknroll, the Miniminibopper Record Company will gain its first billion seller - Wolfgang Amadeus on the 5000-watt Paris Pipe. Not to mention the musical instruments that may come from downtown Betelgeuse.

PAUL STEVENS

HOT-DAMN 1

LSD 10

"DO YOU DRINK? Then drink clear, sparkling, health giving MUDD." At least you can claim prophecy as one of your talents. ::: OPUS will no doubt arrive in the same envelope as SCYTHROP. I will have been dead a

number of years, but as I said... prophecy is one of your developing talents.

"One good thing about having your own fanzine is that you can talk about anything you like". Your prophetic gland wasn't working so well the day you did LSD, Paul. Better luck next time. Try the Melbourne Cup and help finance some good films for the next Convention.

HALIFORD HOUSE was nasty, sly, vulgar and completely accurate. I hadn't laughed so much for months, and I certainly haven't done much laughing over the last two months. I would offer to reprint it, but Leigh Edmonds must already have it on stencil. Oh well...might as well leave overseas fans with their pleasant fantasy that Australian fans actually talk about science fiction.

FILMS SEEN RECENTLY? This is as good an excuse for not writing film reviews for Leigh Edmonds as I can think of. THE FIXER wasn't bad, but it wasn't great either. As Colin Bonnett said about MAN FOR ALL SEASONS, which wasn't very different, real saints are dramatically dull people. What does it matter if the state hangs them and the Church burns them, and the Czarist government tortures them? They are right anyway, and all we can do is sit there and feel indignant about those ratty torturers who are Them. The saint pictured is always Us. Alan Bates was superb, the colour photography was good, but should have been black and white (no matter what Lee Harding says) the Russian cruelty seemed authentic enough. But in the long run the viewer remains fascinated only because he wants to know: "Do they knock him off, or don't they?" I leave the answer to the vast mob of ANZAPANS now surging away from the Palladium.

MERVYN BINNS

RUBBISH: BIN(NS)

Merv would perhaps rightly say that I have no right to talk about the Melbourne S F Club, because I see the place so infrequently. However I have some right to talk about next

year's Convention, as I will be one of the people who will sit through it. The Club still has the most extraordinary atmosphere, and it would be a pity to move to another venue. However, our move to Murrumbidgee on the Sunday this year gave us plenty of space to move around in, limited kitchen facilities which were still better than the Club's, and a supper room. Why not make a tentative booking? Also, Leigh Edmonds was more than pessimistic about next Convention - not because he doesn't think you will run it well, but because he thinks, like myself, that it will be run traditionally. I'm still trying to think of ways to break away from the traditional format, but break away we must. With more room, we might be able to run simultaneous items - auction going on while some film shown the previous night is rerun, for instance. More radically, we need far more serious discussions that really look at the various subjects of the Con in depth - an all-stops-out discussion between people really interested in s f or films, but don't see each other from one end of the year to other... or else a comics jam session which is structured so that people may genuinely swap ideas instead of just doodling around. Or, may I suggest that all items from all previous conventions be scrapped, and the program built up from scratch, with an item included only if there is an organizer for the item itself, and if that organizer knows where he is going and why. In this way we may get sections of the Conference far more light-hearted than any we could have arranged in the club. There are still some basic American traditions that we have not even tried, e.g. a true Convention banquet. We have not really tried to interest overseas fans in our national Conventions. We need an already-established style if we are to obtain the World Convention in 1975. Via ASFR, we have the kind of support that could gain us that Convention. We must think about our '75 offerings now.

Excuse the table-thumping, Merv. It's the best offering in lieu of non-attendance at Committee meetings (if Committee meetings there may be).

Total switch of subject: could you find out all the Doubleday s f releases, Merv? They have some Good Stuff, even if it is expensive, and I've missed out on some of it because you've not put it on the McGills list. : By the way, Welcome to ANZAPA, Merv!

NOEL KERR

SWEET NOTHINGS No 4

The interview with Mrs Gurney was the best item in the Mailing, Noel. You are not only a continual name-dropper, but an interesting one as well. Even though it is mainly poor

journalism, I still have quite some affection for THE SUN, if only for LI'L ABNER and the 3DE Top Forty every Friday. Diluted perhaps, the important news sneaks into THE SUN, but their popular journalism still remains much better than those Sydney papers I've seen. The ads for NEWSDAY weren't very encouraging - their biggest star

seems to be Dame Zara Gate cooing about "poor babies". Never have I seen one publication so obscenely proud of being lowbrow.

STEPHEN CAMPBELL

ARMAGEDDON 1

Rotten typist and printer you've got there. Hope he improves soon. You caused quite a riot with ARMAGEDDON 1, didn't you? Very good - the natives had been getting

too quiet. What could you do for an encore, I wonder? Send your Mailing to the Police Department? Reveal that all the Sydney fans are really Customs officers in purple ditto disguises? Don't look now, but Foyster and Bangsund are having a mutual heart attack. ::: You've convinced me that I should at least look at some MARVEL comics, Stephen, but since you can't bear to take them out of your room, let alone carry them through the violent badlands of Ararat streets, somehow I don't think I will see too many of those comics.

REDD BOGGS

ON THE CONTRARY 1

I'm not sure why legendary American fans always come in blinding shades of horrible orange or bilious beige. White paper seems to have followed virginity into an all-American

obscurity that remains only on this side of the Pacific. In other words, welcome to the fight-ring. San Francisco, earthquakes and all, is probably safer. ::: I was so surprised at discussion of science fiction in the apa, that I didn't have the courage to read any further. Accordingly, these comments are brief (for me).

GARY WOODMAN

WOODMAN'S AXE No 3.14182

This is where Foyster's "measurably dirtier" thermometer glows brightly. That's probably unfair, but your vocabulary seems to be more the sort of thing that constipates constables

than Noel Kerr's necking sessions, or anybody else's brilliant quotes from TIME magazine. However, I don't suppose you care, and I don't care much, so let's skip it, huh? Don't look now, but isn't there a majestic bearded figure over in that shadowy corner who won't let us skip it? ::: It's 9.30 pm and deadline snuffles closer, so I can't be bothered reading WA right through, so here are my answers to your points on my articles. (They have a word for this sort of thing - incest?).

Emphatically do I deny that I am attracted to "quiet, gentle, almost sidling light-hearted classics". No record is fully accepted in my flat unless it can make at least one wall tremble, and the floor must thud palpably. Since the walls are double-brick, you can see that my classical record range has a certain sameness of decibel range. Aids the digestion at tea-time, though. Listening to classical music on the ABC, by the way, is like putting pillows over the speakers on the stereo. All the important noises are left out. I agree that music is more abstract than most of the other arts, and that the scientist/mathematician often responds to music where he dislikes other arts. Psychological studies seem to support this analysis. As one lecturer told us: "There are child prodigies in only three fields: mathematics, chess and music" and

concluded that these three activities are much the same. ::: I had considered "conversation, especially between old biddies over tea and cookies". The small talk of the Australian race seems to ^{be} its most dismal, objectionable feature. Raised in an atmosphere of small talk, that's about all I can emit while among real talkers. However, back among small talk, I can only think about the real talk that should be in its place. In other words, I try to talk as little as possible, which makes it very hard being a teacher. (I've worked out fairly clearly this year most of the reasons why I don't like teaching, and that one seems the most satisfactory, all-encompassing reason: I don't like talking nonsense, and that's about all I can talk about while teaching. To talk about anything interesting to me would invite disaster. And the only time I'm really merry is in front of a typewriter pounding incoherent notes for ANZAPA). In other words, very few people ever communicate with their mouths, or they do so only if they stop talking long enough.

PETER ROBERTS

50% BRAN (WITH RAISINS) 3

Still no sign of MOR-FACH, or whatever you call your rag. I've sent SFC - you are warned. Gian Paolo Cossato sent me an old copy of BADINAGE from Birmingham

- has that folded? Thanks for the checklist of English fanzines.

Another country blues fan! I have five tapes full of the stuff (3 x 5 = 15 hours), with a lot of Dave Ray, John Koerner, Leadbelly, Doc Watson, Tom Rush, Snooks Eaglin, and other superb stuff. They were taped from the collection of a friend of mine. The tapes remain with me, but my friend had the records stolen. Anybody who can help with the early Dave Ray albums or the BLUES RAGS AND HOLLERS anthologies (Elektra Records) should write to me, and I'll pass on the message. My pop collection is quite different again: 8 Rolling Stones, 7 Righteous Bros, 3 Roy Orbison, 3 Lovin's Spoonful, 2 Ray Charles, 2 Shadows, and so on. I now have 80 classical lps. Since I had about ten this time last year, I think it is true to say that I've spent altogether too much money during the last year.

RON CLARKE

EOS 5

Driving around Bacchus Marsh is enough to give me the willies, and I hate travelling by car, train or anything else that travels for more

than a few hours. In other words, I admire your courage but have no wish to follow your example. ::: You did write after all.

Thanks. But I still haven't written about M13. Warning to all: My correspondence is in a complete shambles at the moment, and it will take at least a fortnight to sort out; even longer, if SFC 6 appears soon. Never fear - anything worth answering always comes to the top of the pile somewhere.

ALEXANDER ROBB

ROGER TOOMLEY

Your story wasn't much, but no energy at the moment to tell you why. It's a Campbell-type story: if the ending is inevitable, why bother writing the rest?

I'm not sure that your review of NEW MAPS OF HELL would necessarily have been rejected from S F COMMENTARY as well - but we will look into that later maybe? ::: Kingsley Amis left an incredible amount unsaid. Chapter I is STARTING POINTS which covers the pre-Gernsback days fairly well. At least it is an introduction. This is more than can be said for the review of the forties and early fifties. Amis jumps straight from early AMAZING STORIES to Cliff Simak and Fred Pohl without as much as an apology. The rest of the book concerns itself with a few of the themes of s f, and then refers mainly to the work of the fifties. More importantly, there is little discussion of style in s f, which, as you may see from the first article in METAPHYSICAL REVIEW, is the central issue of literary criticism. It is not enough to say that the style became slicker during the forties and fifties - why? were the stories themselves genuinely more sophisticated? If they were not, has science fiction really come far since its origins? There would be a good general volume available if anybody had the time and the money to sit down and answer those three questions alone. I don't think Amis even started asking the right questions, so no wonder his book reads more like Sam Moskowitz's plot-summary volumes than anybody has yet admitted. Besides all those doubts about the worth of Amis' book, then one must say that it is hopelessly behind the times; Mike Moorcock had not even started writing sword-and-sorcery in those days, and Brian Aldiss had only published a couple of novels. No marks to Mr Amis. ::: Nevertheless, Alex, this is a reasonable review which only points out the faults of NEW MAPS OF HELL. ::: If you really think Heinlein is good, then I suggest you borrow from Gary Mason (for one) an article by FRANZ ROTTENSTEINER called CHEWING-GUM FOR THE VULGAR, which appeared in THE JOURNAL OF OMPHALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGY number 1. It will be reprinted soon in Dick Geis's SFR, so you might like to wait for it.

JOHN BROSCHAN

WHY BOTHER? 5

No comment possible. If you think you are paranoid already, don't take up school-teaching at all. It's not knives-in-the-back up this way (all right, I will touch wood) but

some of our young innocents have some very interesting friends who periodically visit the local gaol for several months at a time.

MICHAEL JOLLY

MICHAEL JOLLY'S FANZINE 1

We Rolling Stones fans must stick together, I say. Welcome to ANZAPA. John Foyster tells me that I met you at the Convention - sorry for not remembering. Maybe you will be at

Syncon; in fact, everybody had better be at Syncon. I hope you received the copy of S F COMMENTARY I sent you. ::: Not heard Blind Faith, but the supergroup that performs NATURAL BORN BUGIE sounds good to me. Since we are exchanging hit charts and other things that nobody ^{else} except cultured Leigh Edmonds is interested in, here is my weekly Top Ten Favourites for 2nd October: 1. HONKY TONK WOMEN. 2. NATURAL BORN BUGIE (Humble Pie). 3. ME & BOBBY McGEE (Roger Miller). 4. DON'T FORGET TO REMEMBER (Bee Gees). 5. SALTY DOG (Procol Harum). 6. SHE'S MY BABY (Johnny O'Keefe). 7. SOMETHING IN THE AIR (Thunderclap Newman). 8. GIRL THAT I LOVE (Russell Morris). 9. ROMEO & JULIET (Henry Mancini). 10. ST PAUL (Shane). ::::

I do so your ~~to~~ sport in ~~regardful~~ ~~science~~. ~~nothing~~ ~~in~~ sport really would bring out the wrathful Harlan Ellison in me. Suffice to say that I have fought a life-long battle against people who think that sport is good for me, good for my soul, even good for my body. How can anything so earnestly detested be anything more than a source for a stomach ulcer?

JOHN FOYSTER

SPUNDS 1

John and myself could probably coexist in the same apa if he were OE, but I could certainly coexist better with Peter Darling as OE. And I'm not going to be idiot enough to run for OE. On the other hand, if Leigh Edmonds shows the slightest sign of running ANZAPA, instead of letting it run itself into the ground, then I will vote for him. And the Yanks thought they had voting troubles in last year's Presidential elections. ::: Thanks for yet another list of books I should have read but haven't. Faber has now released THE ALEXANDRIA QUARTET in paperback for \$3, so that will probably be first road. :: And, apart from the fact that I didn't give myself time to work out how to do it, that ANAPO POLL seems unnecessary. You seem to like lists as much as I do, but I joined ANZAPA only to publish a free-form genzine into which I could put any rubbish I liked. Trying to be popular as well seems too much altogether. ::: You may remember another part of our conversation that day. I said I would try fiction for this issue. Sorry.

JOHN BANGSUND

CHRONOPHOTONTOLOGICAL REVIEW 1

As you may have noticed, those Mailing Comments have become more and more garbled, less and less interesting, and altogether a waste of expensive paper. But John Bangsund being what he is, and CROG being what it is, I may need a little space with which to finish. My auntie, who suggested some of the improvements in S F COMMENTARY 5, is very curious to know why/^{we}revere John Bangsund in hushed voices and with upturned eyes. (Not too upturned - we'd miss the top of your head altogether). You see, my auntie also belongs to the ubiquitous Church of Christ, and remembers seeing you at least once as a student minister. And any student minister who is now running fanzines is not... how shall I say it?... persona bona fides (that's probably rotten Latin, but never mind). Anyone, if you want/^{to}convince my auntie that being a fanzine editor is far more interesting (though not very rewarding financially) than being a student minister, or a student anything else, then send a copy of ASFR or RMH or CROG to Mrs I Gillespie, 23 Wild Cherry Road, Carnegie, and you will probably get back a very interesting letter. Come to think of it, there are probably a large number of my friends and relatives who think they should be John Bangsund fans but have never seen one of his magazines, so haven't made up their minds. An article for S F COMMENTARY would help clear up this untidy situation :: Thanks for the further material on music. I must be improving a bit... heard an exciting piece of music at 11.30 the other night, thought it sounded Russian, but it wasn't Shostakovitch or Prokofiev, so it might be Sibelius. And it was Sibelius. Geo whiz. I can tell the Rolling Stones in three seconds, so maybe there wasn't anything wonderful about such a feat.

And nothing for Ken Bull. Enjoyed A LA CARTE. Always do. (Now that's the kind of MC that should have dotted the rest of the zine).