

1981

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### Recommended Citation

Mnthali, Felix, Continuity and change in Conrad and Ngugi, *Kunapipi*, 3(1), 1981.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol3/iss1/12>

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### Abstract

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's own tribute to Joseph Conrad can be made the starting point of a fruitful exploration. In a lecture referring specifically to *Nostromo*, Ngugi says: The African writer and Joseph Conrad share the same world and that is why Conrad's world is so familiar. Both have lived in a world dominated by capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism ..

# Continuity and Change in Conrad and Ngugi

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's own tribute to Joseph Conrad can be made the starting point of a fruitful exploration. In a lecture referring specifically to *Nostramo*, Ngugi says:

The African writer and Joseph Conrad share the same world and that is why Conrad's world is so familiar. Both have lived in a world dominated by capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism...

Critics have also been quick to follow Conradian echoes in Ngugi's work. Peter Nazareth compares *A Grain of Wheat* with *Nostramo*<sup>2</sup> while Ebele Obumselu works out a close identification of the most important features of *A Grain of Wheat* with those of *Under Western Eyes*.<sup>5</sup> Where similarities between *A Grain of Wheat* and *Under Western Eyes* are not immediately obvious *Lord Jim* and D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* are brought in to provide a clearer perspective. The risk here is that of creating an almost watertight neatness which ignores the gulf between Conrad's scepticism and Ngugi's commitment to change.

Parameters of consistency, those landmarks unifying an author's canon show that Conrad is ambivalent and Ngugi has a clear point of view. Conrad often tilts precariously towards continuity while Ngugi sees rebellion as the beacon towards change.

What is continuity and what is change? Continuity is the sameness of things beneath turbulent change. Continuity is irony, the irony behind all feverish zeal for change doomed to a repetition or even deterioration of an old order. Says Martin Deccoud in *Nostramo*:

'We convulsed a continent for our independence only to become the passive prey of a democratic parody, the helpless victims of scoundrels and cut-throats, our institutions a mockery, our laws a farce.'

Continuity is deceptive change. Real change is the precious little improvement in danger of being swallowed by yesterday. It stands opposite irony. Says the devoted revolutionary Sophia Antonovna in *Under Western Eyes*:

'Remember, Razumov, that women, children, and revolutionaries hate irony, which is the negation of all saving instincts, of all faith, of all devotion, of all action.'<sup>5</sup>

In the essay 'Autocracy and War' (1905) Conrad comes across as a bitter opponent of Russian autocracy and yet in *Under Western Eyes* he makes the choice between this autocracy and the wooden figures parading as revolutionary leaders an invidious task. Even Sophia Antonovna, is called 'wrong-headed'. Peter Ivanovitch, Madame de S—, Nikita nicknamed Necator are presented in a worse light than General T— and Councillor Mikulin, their adversaries. Haldin comes out as an almost demented fanatic. Conrad's revolutionaries are caricatures because their sceptical creator believes that real change is an illusion, 'a will-o'-the-wisp' for which only men of faith (read, 'victims of illusions') will strive. Says the Professor of Languages in *Under Western Eyes*:

'A violent revolution falls into the hands of narrow-minded fanatics and of tyrannical hypocrites at first. Afterwards comes the turn of all the pretentious intellectual failures of the time. Such are the chiefs and the leaders. You will notice that I have left out the mere rogues. The scrupulous and the just, the noble, the humane, and devoted natures; the unselfish and the intelligent may begin a movement — but it passes away from them. They are not the leaders of a revolution. They are its victims: the victims of disgust, of disenchantment — often of remorse. Hopes grotesquely betrayed, ideals caricatured — that is the definition of revolutionary success.' (*UWE*, 134-5)

The views of the Professor of Languages form the main prism through whom the drama of an autocracy battling a revolution comes to us. It is interesting that these views coincide with those of the main character Razumov. To both, continuity is the nature of change. In the episode where Razumov is trying to fend off Sophia Antonovna's uncomfortable questions surrounding Haldin's arrest, continuity remains uppermost in his mind:

As if anything could be changed! In this world of men nothing can be changed — neither happiness nor misery. They can only be displaced at the cost of corrupted consciences and broken lives — a futile game for arrogant philosophers and sanguinary triflers. (*UWE*, 261)

The anarchists of *The Secret Agent* are toothless bulldogs more

frightening in their speeches and in their unreal programmes than in what they actually achieve. The only revolutionary act in the book, the attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory, is committed by the half-wit Stevie who perishes on the spot. The revered secret agent Verloc is just what his symbol says he is, the empty space in the triangle of family, untried terrorism and phony respectability.

The unifying force behind Conrad's vision is a ruthless scepticism which questions the very grounds from which his fiction emerges:

'The fact is you want more scepticism at the very foundation of your work. Scepticism, the tonic of minds, the tonic of life, the agent of truth, the way of art and salvation ... A creator must be indifferent, because directly the 'Fiat' has issued from his lips, there are the creatures made in his image that'll try to drag him down from his eminence, and belittle him by their worship ... You seem for their sake to hug your conceptism of right and wrong too closely...'<sup>6</sup>

The weakest and strongest links in this scepticism are nowhere more obvious than in *Heart of Darkness*, that over-scrutinized and often misunderstood work. Conrad attacks Europe's scramble for Africa which he has described in his *Last Essays* as 'the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of mankind and of geographical exploration'.<sup>7</sup> In particular, he is attacking King Leopold's devastation and depopulation of the Congo after the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 had endorsed the King's hypocritical views on civilization and geographical exploration and had, in effect, ceded to his personal exploitation what is now Zaire. A country bigger than Nigeria had been made the private farm of one man! Conrad's attack against this kind of imperialism is forthright and it stems from his rejection of the pretenses that often cover human declarations.

This attack is, all the same, neutralized by Conrad's acceptance of one of the cornerstones of modern imperialism, namely, racism. Conrad's Africans are a subhuman species at the earliest end of the evolutionary scale. Psychoanalysis has surrounded *Heart of Darkness* with an incredible number of fantasies centred on the Freudian 'id', the Jungian 'shadow' or the more common 'outlaw' or 'secret sharer' concept. Achebe is right in saying that in Europe and America *Heart of Darkness* 'fortifies fears and prejudices and is clever enough to protect itself, should the need arise, with the excuse that it is not really about Africa at all'.<sup>8</sup> Much of the blame for the distortion which results from reading the story outside its historical perspective must be placed on Marlow's portentous pronouncements. As Leavis rightly noted, Conrad is striving for effects and only succeeds in cheapening the tone of his story.<sup>9</sup> Without the

critics' tendency to associate the dark forces of the unconscious with Africa and the Africans, i.e. without the racist assumptions at the heart of psychoanalytical criticism, most of what has been read into *Heart of Darkness* hardly holds any water.

*Heart of Darkness* has a clearly identifiable setting in space and time. The point here is that we now need a little anthropology around *Heart of Darkness* and a lot more history. It is often forgotten that *Heart of Darkness* is a story within a story and that its *frame*, or outward shell, is an evening on board a ship, the *Nellie*, and that the characters in the frame are the bulwarks of commerce and industry; the Director of Companies, an Accountant, a Lawyer, a sailor and the unnamed narrator.

In the prologue to 'one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences' we are given a lecture on Roman imperialism and modern imperialism. The River Thames is shown to be a gateway to piracy, international commerce and the ascendancy of Britain's maritime power as well as the growth of the British Empire.

The main body of Marlow's tale takes us into the workings of a large 'trading' concern based in 'the sepulchral city' of Brussels and sucking the Congo dry. Large areas are devastated and depopulated ('vigorous action', 'unsound methods', etc.) in an insatiable quest for ivory. Taken together with its frame and prologue, Marlow's tale dramatizes imperialism as the most sinister and ruthless stage of capitalism. The chicanery of sanctimonious self-deception ('a labourer is worthy of his hire') and pretentious declarations (seventeen-page letter to the Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs!) is thrown in for good measure. Conrad sees through the hypocrisy of imperialism but accepts uncritically the racist shibboleths on which men like Leopold I built their case. That is the source of failure in *Heart of Darkness*, the source of the strained efforts to impress the reader with the 'abomination of desolation' supposed to be Africa.

It is true that in *Heart of Darkness* imperialism is a form of darkness. Marlow observes that the map of the Congo had ceased to be a wide blank and has become 'a place of darkness'<sup>10</sup>. A French man-of-war is firing into a continent and Marlow sees in the proceedings 'a touch of insanity ... a sense of lugubrious drollery'. The 'purposeless blasting' and the 'wanton smash-up' near the grove of death, the aimless stroll of 'the pilgrims' holding pointless staves, the conflagration and comedy at the Central Station, the trigger-happy road-supervisor who has no road to look at, the brick-maker who has not made a single brick — are all part

of the *danse macabre* which Marlow associates with imperialism.

The darkness of imperialism is then seen as the contradiction between the stated aims of bringing 'civilization, that spark from the sacred fire' to Africa and the naked exploitation and indolence represented by the pilgrims and curious groups like the Eldorado Exploring Expedition which Marlow sees as a bunch of 'sordid buccaneers ... reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity and cruel without courage' (*HD*, p. 43). This is the 'paralysed force' built into T.S. Eliot's poem, 'The Hollow Men', a poem inspired by a reading of *Heart of Darkness*.

It has been suggested that 'the chief contradiction of *Heart of Darkness* is that it suggests and dramatizes evil as an active energy but defines evil as a vacancy'.<sup>11</sup> The contradiction is that of imperialism as such — for imperialism in *Heart of Darkness* is an assault on Africa in the name of civilization but with selfish exploitation in mind. In 1876 King Leopold II convened the Brussels Geographical Conference and said:

The subject which brings us together today is one which must be a supreme preoccupation to all friends of humanity. To open to civilization the only area of our globe to which it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the gloom which hangs over entire races, constitutes, if I may dare put it that way, a crusade worthy of this century of progress, and I am delighted to note how deeply public opinion approves its accomplishment: the tide is turning our way.<sup>12</sup>

That was the prelude to Leopold's exploitation of the Congo. He speaks of 'the gloom which hangs over entire races'. In the frame of *Heart of Darkness* a 'brooding gloom' hangs over London and 'the sepulchral city' is Brussels. In the grove of death at the coastal station men are dying in a 'greenish gloom' (*HD*, p. 24). Conrad, then, associates gloom, darkness with the unfolding drama of imperialism in Africa. Leopold's speech to the Brussels Geographical Conference resembles Kurtz's seventeen-page letter to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs:

He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them in the nature of supernatural beings — we approach them with the might of a deity ... By simple exercise of our will, we can exert a power for good practically unbounded...' There were no practical limits to interrupt the magic current of phrases. (*HD*, pp. 71-2)

Leopold does not counsel his officers to 'exterminate all the brutes' as Mr Kurtz does, but he creates a system of taxation and extortion that

amounts to the same thing. In a debate in the Belgian Parliament in 1903, four years after the publication of *Heart of Darkness*, the following letter was quoted:

The District Commissioner Jacques to the Official in Charge of the Station at Inoryo:

M. Chef de Poste,

Decidedly these people of Inoryo are a bad lot. They have just been and cut some rubber ... vines at Huli. We must fight them until their utter submission has been obtained, or their complete extermination.<sup>13</sup>

The International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs is not a figment of the imagination either. Leopold did organize an international Society for the Civilization and Exploration of Central Africa. The sordid devastation and depopulation of the Congo was ably reported by the British Consul, Sir Roger Casement, and denounced by various groups in London. The outcry led to the Belgian government's taking over the Congo from the personal rule of King Leopold II. *Heart of Darkness*, then, is at the storm-centre of an important historical event and Conrad's position is clear. He makes Kurtz, the demon of his tale, represent certain declarations:

'Each station shall be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing.' (*HD*, p. 47)

Conrad was no doubt familiar with the second item on the agenda of the Brussels Geographical Conference of 1876. It reads as follows:

Location of routes to be successively opened towards the interior, setting-up of medical and scientific posts and of 'pacifying' bases from which to abolish the slave-trade, establishment of peace among the chiefs and provision of just and impartial arbitration etc. etc.<sup>14</sup>

That Conrad shows the other side of this declaration, the sordid side, is very much to his credit and is the strongest point in his scepticism. The racism is something else again ... it damages his art.

Conrad speaks of Africans as 'pre-historic man' (*HD*, p. 51). He accepts the humanity of the Africans as 'a dim suspicion' because Europeans are now remote from 'the night of first ages' (*HD*, p. 51). The case of the fireman is so crassly racist as to need no elaboration here. The fireman is compared to 'a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs' (*HD*, p. 52). Conrad's Africans leap and howl

and make horrid faces. They are associated with witchcraft and cannibalism — nothing more. In what way then is Conrad better than the colonizers and imperialists he is attacking? His Malaysian tales show a concern with the Malay way of life. The Malays think, love and hate just like the Europeans. Not so with Conrad's Africans. They are either still in the night of first ages as in *Heart of Darkness*, or made pawns in the game of slavery as in 'An Outpost of Progress' or at the centre of primordial, inscrutable evil as in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*!

Conrad and Ngugi 'share the same world' and the narrative technique of *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* has much in common with *Under Western Eyes*, *Lord Jim* and especially *Nostramo*. Both authors make extensive time-shifts, flash-backs, interior monologues as well as diaries, letters and reminiscences. Somewhere beyond these devices, a layer or two of satire beneath the ironic mode, similarities end. Conrad believes in doubt and Ngugi in hope. Although *Nostramo*, for example, leaves the reader with such a bitter taste of Latin American upheavals and Anglo-American capitalism, Conrad removes himself from any clear condemnation of either side by looking at the denouement of his story in terms of 'games' or 'opera bouffe'. Political goals are identified with base passions, cynicism parades as 'declarations' and both the exploited and the exploiters are enmeshed in a scramble for loot and plunder. It is perhaps Conrad's lack of a firm point of view which has led both Albert Guerard and F.R. Leavis to detect a certain 'hollowness' about *Nostramo*.<sup>15</sup>

Ngugi's canon hangs together by a different thread. From the earliest and least perfected works to *Petals of Blood* men and women wake up to the contradictions surrounding their lives and strive to undo them. In *The River Between*, Waiyaki's leadership fails precisely because it is unable to meaningfully address itself to the problems of a people whose land is being taken away and who are forced to live on the same lands and pay taxes to a government that has no claim on their allegiance. The war of liberation in *Weep Not Child* gathers its momentum on this very question of land which to peasants like Ngotho was handed down to Gikuyu and Mumbi (the first man and woman) by Murungu (God) who dwells on Keri-nyaga (Mount Kenya). To settlers like Howlands the land is the fruit of their sweat in Africa. It never occurs to people like Howlands that the squatters on their farms may well be the title-holders to these lands, and that the Mau Mau war is on because the present deeds of ownership have no validity.

It is possible to see *A Grain of Wheat* as embodying 'the conservative

moral that ideal historical purpose cannot be imposed on the plurality of our private conditions'.<sup>16</sup> But is the book about 'our private conditions' or about the collective aspiration which sucks into its service unwilling heroes like Mugo and destroys conservative liberals like Thompson? Is it not, in fact, about the collective goal being deflected from its path by selfish M.P.'s who rush to erect enclosures around the very land they should be delivering to the people? The author's note to *A Grain of Wheat* says:

Names like that of Jomo Kenyatta and Waiyaki are unavoidably mentioned as part of the history and institutions of our country. But the situation and the problems are real — sometimes too painfully real for the peasants who fought the British yet who now see all that they fought for being put on one side.<sup>17</sup>

*Petals of Blood* explores the implications of this statement. In one sense it brings together all that Ngugi stands for as well as all that he deplors. The courage of Nyakinyua and Wanja echoes the courage of Njoroge's mother in *Weep Not Child*. Wanja is a reincarnation of the barmaid Beatrice in *Secret Lives* ('Minutes of Glory') who transcends the contempt of men and other barmaids by stealing from a customer who usually comes to her out of pity. With the money she transforms herself and takes her turn at looking down on the very men who would never have winked at her before her transformation. Eat or be eaten. It matters little that hers have only been a few 'minutes of glory'. Munira's father and mother as well as his wife Julia seem to have been developed from the characters of 'Wedding on the Cross' again in *Secret Lives*. The delegation from Ilmorog to the city echoes the delegation from the village to 'the black hermit' in *The Black Hermit*. The heroism of the cripple Abdulla on 'the long march' to Nairobi echoes the heroism of Mau Mau warriors, and Abdulla himself is associated with Dedan Kimathi, the renowned general in the struggle for independence. On 'the long march' tactics are forged and everyone grows in stature just as in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* the struggle generates new techniques and men and women grow with their struggle. In *Petals of Blood* the various shades of the new entrepreneurial class who are the tempters in *Dedan Kimathi* are now in Blue Hills, an exclusive suburb in which they spend their 'useful' lives in prayer, business deals and cocktail parties. Ngugi is committed to the collective aspiration of a Kenya free from internal and external exploitation. *Petals of Blood* shows how far society has moved away from this goal. The Mau Mau struggle, 'a link in the struggles of black people everywhere', has now been deflected from its correct course by a class

which contributed least and reaped most from its partial victory. Kimeria, the very one who ruins Wanja, betrays Abdulla's comrade, and Karega's brother Ndinguri, the colonialists' trusted 'spear-bearer', is now one of the richest men in Kenya and one of the brains behind the infamous scheme to administer Mau Mau oath to the Kikuyu of an independent nation in order to defend the holdings of the rich. Ngugi makes this man unmask himself in a statement which combines duplicity with a smug and hollow casuistry:

'You see how things have changed ... Now, Mr Nderi wa Riera. We used to have our little differences. He was what you might call a, eh, a freedom fighter, that is he was a member of the party and was taken to detention. And I was, well, shall we say we didn't see eye to eye? Now we are friends. Why? Because we all realize that whether we were on that side of the fence or on this side of the fence or merely sitting astride the fence, we were all fighting for the same ends. Not so? We were all freedom fighters...'<sup>18</sup>

The opulence of Blue Hills where we find men like Kimeria (alias Mr Hawkins), Chui, and the Reverend Kamau (alias Rev. Jerrod Brown!) contrasts sharply with the poverty surrounding the heroes of the struggle for independence such as Abdulla. In Blue Hills men have anglicized their names all the better to enjoy their role as the new colonialists:

They stood in the verandah. From there Karega could just manage to see the workers' houses of mud-walls and grass thatch in two lines. And all along Abdulla was thinking: and we fought to end the red fezzes and red bands on our bodies. Munira was imagining his own father in fervent prayers of devotion. (*PB*, pp. 146-7)

The new *Wazungu* have taken over everything from their predecessors — right down to the last button worn by their menials. We see them here from the point of view of the new proletariat: the trade-unionist Karega sees 'the mud-walls' defining the accommodation of workers in independent Kenya. The heroic follower of Dedan Kimathi immediately thinks of the collective aspirations now being trampled on by the new colonialists and Munira sees a sanctimonious father who would not take the Mau Mau oath to fight for freedom but who takes it (Bible in hand!) to defend property! The spirit of capitalism and the Protestant ethos! R.H. Tawney, anyone? *Petals of Blood* derives part of its strength not only from the fire and sparks of paragraphs such as these but also from a kind of symmetry in setting and metaphors. Blue Hills stands on the opposite extreme of the abject poverty in which some of the heroes of the struggle for independence such as Abdulla find themselves:

'I waited for land reforms and redistribution.

'I waited for a job.

'I waited for a statue to Kimathi as a memorial to the fallen.

'I waited...

'Still I waited.

'I heard that they were giving out loans for people to buy out European farms. I did not see why I should buy lands already bought by the blood of the people. Still I went there. They told me: this is new Kenya. No free things. Without money you cannot buy land: and without land and property you cannot get a bank loan to start business or buy land. It did not make sense. For when we were fighting, did we ask that only those with property should fight?' (*PB*, p. 254)

The logic of 'eat or be eaten' takes care of that question. Abdulla the heroic follower of the legendary Dedan Kimathi is reduced to the life of a vendor of oranges (echoes of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi?*), forced to live in the slum quarter of the New Ilmorog of a few flickering neon lights and numerous bars, an industrialized Ilmorog whose soulless character negates all that the forest warriors fought for.

Between 'New Jerusalem', that typical African hell of the dispossessed, and 'Cape Town', the exclusive suburb of the 'master-servants of bank power, money and cunning' stands All Saints Church, 'now led by Rev. Jerrod Brown. Also somewhere between the two areas was Wanja's Sunshine Lodge, almost as famous as the Church' (p. 281). Church and brothel between exploiters and exploited. Physical and spiritual amnesia to mediate contradictions.

The point being made here is that although Ngugi is not using a fictional republic such as Conrad's Costaguana, he has endowed his Ilmorog with all the existential immediacy typical of a Conradian microcosm. We see Ilmorog change from a sleepy rural backwater with all the idiocy typical of such a stage of development (and Ngugi overdoes this idiocy, especially in the cult that follows the forced landing of the surveyors' plane!) to a modern manufacturing town — all through the coming together of four complete strangers with interlocking histories: Abdulla, Munira, Wanja and Karega:

'It seems to me that we all have our reasons for coming to Ilmorog. But now we are here. There is a crisis facing the community. What shall we do about it?' (*PB*, p. 113)

From this point on the roles of the four protagonists are clearly demarcated. Karega, who develops into a tradeunionist of national stature, is the man of action. His ideas are tested and perfected in action. Munira the dreamer tells us most of what we know about Ilmorog. In his

statement at the New Ilmorog Police Station are included the personal remembrances of Nyakinyua, Wanja, Karega and Abdulla. Thanks to Inspector Godfrey's way of investigating crime, Munira's statement constitutes the bulk of *Petals of Blood*. Ngugi returns to this statement at every crucial turn in the plot, though we must also assume an unnamed first-person omniscient narrator who waxes lyrical at times (to praise Munira, Wanja, Karega and Abdulla!) and impresses on us a sense of historical continuity from geological times to the present theories of Ogot, Muriuki, Were and Ochieng (*PB*, p. 67). A whole country is on the move and the narrative grows into an epic extolling Ndemi, Tshaka, Amilcar Cabral, Nkrumah, etc.

Wanja is the innocent girl whom the changes in Kenya's history develop into a formidable entrepreneur. We see in her humiliation, poverty and later wealth the 'eat or be eaten' philosophy. Though she joins the exploiters whom she cannot defeat, we still have the lingering belief that she is at heart with the oppressed. Even Karega for all his profound lecture on choice and commitment (*PB*, pp. 326-7) does not remove our sympathy from Wanja. It is a fitting tribute (sentimental, perhaps, too close to Hollywood!) that we see her at the end expecting a baby — she who has suffered so much for the lack of one. It is again a fitting tribute to both Wanja and Abdulla that the baby should be for Abdulla now transformed in Wanja's imagination into 'images of Kimathi in his moments of triumph and laughter and sorrow and terror — but without one limb' (*PB*, p. 338).

There are other dimensions to Wanja's development. She is associated with fire and when the light in her hut in pre-industrial Ilmorog is accidentally blown out by Munira, we see her 'think of the water and the fire of the second coming to cleanse and bring purity to our earth of human cruelty and loneliness' (*PB*, p. 65). Wanja's second exit from the city follows a fire which consumes her belongings. It also reminds her of the fire which burnt her aunt. Perhaps through Wanja a fire is going to burn up the dispensation of the Chuis, Mzigos, Kimerias, but the murder and arson in Sunshine Lodge are not a revolutionary act. Already Nderi wa Riera, M.P., the ghoul who thrives on Kenya's human and natural resources with the help of foreign capital, is organizing 'a strong delegation to all cabinet ministers and to even higher authorities if necessary to demand a mandatory death sentence for all cases of theft, with or without violence' (*PB*, p. 184). This isolated act of arson in Sunshine Lodge is like the doomed heroism of Wanja's grandfather, a lesson against the 'tendency to act alone' (*PB*, pp. 324-6).

In one sense, however, the murder and arson are a form of liberation. Wanja lays the ghost of Kimeria once and for all. Abdulla admires Munira for doing what was in his own mind (*PB*, p. 316) and Munira for the first time becomes an active participant in the events around him. It matters little that he is already 'not of this world'. The fact is that he no longer feels a stranger to himself and can pour his soul on the page to the extent of giving us almost the whole of *Petals of Blood*. That poetic energy long dammed by a puritanical father, an even more rigorous puritanical wife (prayers before and after making love), a hopeless love for Wanja, alcohol, horoscopes, and now millenarian zeal, finds its fullest outlet at the Police Station. No more advertisements about Then'eta now. The real Muse is out...

Ngugi, like Conrad, orchestrates his images, symbols and setting. Unlike Conrad, however, he endows his world with perpetual motion. The Ilmorog that is slowly dying in the sun when Munira first drives his iron horse through it is merely resting from geological formations and the frantic activities of Ndemi, ancient traders, ancient wars, the slave-trade, the coming of the white man, two world wars, the struggle for independence. In five years it is a very different Ilmorog. We see Kenya's transition from a subsistence economy to large-scale farming, enclosures, small-scale industries and the strangle-hold of money-men from Nairobi and overseas. Nairobi waxes in direct proportion to the wasting away of places like Ilmorog:

'In my mind I now put this wretched corner beside our cities: skyscrapers versus mud-walls and thatch; tarmac highways, international airports and gambling casinos versus cattle-paths and gossip before sunset. Our erstwhile masters had left us a very unevenly cultivated land: the centre was swollen with fruit and water sucked from the rest, while the outer parts were progressively weaker and scaggier as one moved away from the centre.' (*PB*, p. 49)

When 'progress' does come to Ilmorog, the present exchanges his tiny holdings for an even more precarious existence than the one he had before:

'They crowded around the man fascinated as much by the up-and-down motion of his adam's apple as by the rounded voice coming out of the loudspeaker. Demarcation. Title deeds. Loans. Fencing the land. Barbed wire. One or two grade cows...' (*PB*, p. 268)

It all sounds magical. Is this not the coming of a new earth? 'Long live Nderi wa Riera! We gave ham our votes: we waited for flowers to bloom'

(*PB*, p. 268). Ngugi's irony is at its most devastating pitch as the narrative is suddenly broken off and we return to a different issue altogether. When we meet 'progress' again, seven pages later, Nyakinyua's land is being sold by auction and she becomes only one of many victims across the land who are now at the mercy of auctioneers, bankers, and lawyers — that priestly caste of parasites in Nairobi:

'She was not alone: a whole lot of peasants and herdsmen of Old Ilmorog who had been lured into loans and into fencing off their land and buying imported fertilizer and were unable to pay back were similarly affected. Without much labor, without machinery, without breaking with old habits and outlook, and without much advice they had not been able to make their land yield enough to meet their food needs and pay back the loans. Some had used the money to pay school fees. Now the inexorable law of the metal was driving them from the land.' (*PB*, p. 275)

Nyakinyua's desperate effort to regain her land is reminiscent of the desperate attempts by Okonkwo (*Things Fall Apart*) to persuade his countrymen to stand up to the new dispensation:

She tramped from hut to hut calling upon the peasants of Ilmorog to get together and fight it out. They looked at her and shook their heads: whom would they fight now? The government? The banks? KCO? The Party? Nderi? Yes, who would they really fight? But she tried to convince them that all these were one and that she would fight them... 'I'll go alone... my man fought the white man. He paid for it with his blood... I'll struggle against these black oppressors... alone... alone' (*PB*, p. 276)

Although Nyakinyua dies peacefully in her sleep, she carries her defiance with her to the grave. 'She had said she could not think of being buried in somebody else's land: for what would her man say to her when she met him on the other side?' (*PB*, p. 276). Wanja redeems her land on the day of the sale.

This heroism forces Wanja back into prostitution. It is the origin of Sunshine Lodge, that elegant brothel between 'Cape Town' and 'New Jerusalem'. Eat or be eaten. Wanja becomes wealthy and powerful. No, not pornocracy is dramatized here but the progressive deterioration of the moral horizon in direct proportion to the consolidation of 'development' in New Ilmorog. As that sceptic in *Nostromo* would put it:

'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.' (*Nostromo*, p. 511)

Quite a critique of the self-fulfilling prophecies of nineteenth century liberalism and laissez faire economics. We have no evidence to show that Conrad's bedside reading included Adam Smith, Riccardo, Bentham, Marx, but we have no reason to doubt that ideas that by 1900 were common currency in England helped to shape his view of the world. He may well have felt like Thomas Carlyle that the economics of his day was 'the dismal science'. We therefore have in *Nostramo* a world of ceaseless human activity and an amoral political economy. The exploitation of Costaguana for the benefit of England and America is rarely seen or condemned in moral times. On the reverse side it is not supported for moral reasons either. There are sentimental moralists in *Nostramo* as there are in most of Conrad's works. There is Holroyd who gives financial backing to Charles Gould because (a) he admires Gould's mettle and (b) he wants to bring to Costaguana 'a purer form ... of Christianity', i.e. Protestantism as opposed to Catholicism in which he sees a lot of idolatry. There is Charles Gould himself, 'El Rey de Sulaco', the uncrowned king of this typical 'third-world' outpost of Anglo-American imperialism. He says that his commitment to the silver mine is for peace and justice in Costaguana:

'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.' (*N*, p. 84)

Holroyd and Gould are exposed as sentimental men who are masking basic human passions with high-sounding declarations. Holroyd enjoys his power over Charles Gould and the Gould Concession. He enjoys holding in his hands the fate of a country (and in effect that of a continent!) for twenty minutes once in a while. It is a pet dream and gives him his only holiday in many years. His love of power includes a belief in the doctrine of America's 'manifest destiny':

'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 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.' (*N*, p.,77)

The last stage of imperialism? And much more. Holroyd is also an exponent of the Monroe Doctrine: 'Europe must be kept out of this conti-

ment' (*N*, p. 78). With the Gould Concession Holroyd has in his grip the Republic of Costaguana 'lock, stock and barrel' (*N*, p. 81). The Ribierist Party is funded from a bank next door to the Holroyd offices in San Francisco. When later Martin Decoud works out his plan of secession for the sake of his fiancée, it is the Gould Concession which bankrolls this 'Katangese' adventure. Men may kill each other in Costaguana as much as they please and make all the declarations they can together with all the parliamentary and diplomatic niceties which Don Avellanos is so fond of. The shots are called in San Francisco.

Holroyd's other hobby, the endowment of churches and the bringing of a purer form of Christianity to Costaguana is unmasked by Mrs Gould. She sees Holroyd's true religion as 'the religion of silver and iron' and Holroyd's own God as a sort of 'influential partner who gets his share of profits in the endowment of Churches' (*N*, p. 71).

That other moralist, Charles Gould, is unmasked well before he begins work on the San Tome mine. During his courtship of Emilia, he puts his love of minerals before his fiancée. When he brings to her the news of his father's death and she is trying to offer the usual condolences, he is pre-occupied with a broken marble vase in her aunt's house. So profound is the effect of rocks, minerals, mines on his psyche that they lead him to a kind of 'subtle infidelity' to his wife. They turn him on! The San Tome mine first turns 'into a fetish' then into a monstrous and crushing weight. 'It was as if the inspiration of their early years had left her heart to turn into a wall of silver-bricks...' (*N*, pp. 221-2). Later when the Monterist forces are on the verge of taking over Sulaco he makes preparations to blow up the mine! His real love had better be annihilated than fall into the wrong hands!

Conrad predetermines the direction in which the affairs of Costaguana will go, that is, neither backwards nor forwards but round and round in circles. It is not so much 'the curse of futility' upon the people's character deplored by the sceptic Decoud (*N*, p. 171) as a fixed sterility that precludes meaningful change here. The land has been forsaken by good and evil (*N*, p. 7) and is associated with the legend of treasure-hunters blighted by the Midas touch (*N*, pp. 4-5). Silver is as pervasive as ivory in *Heart of Darkness* and the exploitation here is only a shade more subtle, though in both cases the cow in 'the third world' is milked for all it is worth. Again Decoud is the one who sees in the new imperialism only a different version of the adventures of the bold buccaneers (*N*, p. 170).

There is in *Nostromo* the appearance of action on a grand scale — wars and rumours of war. Yet a monotonous sameness envelopes the land

— the many changes of government are unrelated to the real centre of power, the silver mine which continues to send its treasures to the north. The time-shifts also play interesting tricks on our understanding of Costaguana's affairs. We first see President Ribiera after he has been overthrown, arriving in Sulaco on a horse which expires under him at the end of the Alameda 'where the military band plays sometimes in the evenings between the revolutions' (*N*, p. 11). We see him next three chapters later (but eighteen months earlier!) turning the sod on the National Central Railway and praising the foreigners working on the 'great patriotic undertaking' (*N*, p. 34).

The first three chapters of *Nostromo* are given us with the sound of gunfire in the background, and the main body of Decoud's letter to his sister which constitutes a central part of the story is written by candlelight in Viola's house after a day of uprisings, sporadic gunfire and ineffectual deliberations by parliamentarians on a possible surrender. This also will be one of Costaguana's ineffective revolutions. There have already been at least two since Mrs Gould's arrival and no real change has taken place in Costaguana. Change comes with secession (to keep Decoud next to his fiancée and Gould's silver flowing north!) and that only leaves the people threatening another revolution to unite their divided country.

The point here is that Conrad is sceptical about the possibility of any real meaningful change in human affairs, although he also shows that human beings will always want change, hence the epigraph from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*:

'So foul a sky  
clears not  
without a storm'

Conrad sees history as a cyclical process of human endeavours and certain failure, man's essence being his insistence on rebuilding the very Tower of Babel which continually crumbles before his eyes. In *Nostromo* Viola, the faithful follower of Garibaldi (whose inn is called 'Albergo d'Italia Una', the 'House of United Italy') is a living example of a betrayed cause ('too many kings ruled yet in the land that God had created for the people') and the scholarly Avellanos' attempt at seeing the history of his country in terms of an ordered progression towards genuine patriotism (*Fifty Years of Misrule*) is used as cannon fodder in the Monterist uprising. Man is always creating and trying to live by certain values, and as Robert Penn Warren observes: 'The victory is never won,

the redemption must be continually reearned.<sup>19</sup> Conrad the sceptic posits not despair but the existence in man (and in society!) of tendencies towards change, though again, these changes are doomed to failure. Although the Occidental Province we see at the end of *Nostramo* seems materially better than the one we see at the beginning, the moral horizon is dark. Decoud's action has legalized balkanization and the very fiancée for whom all this was done is now clamoring for unity. Secret societies are organizing, some on Marxist lines. The struggle continues...!

Ngugi's sense of history is not cyclical. There is a clear progression from ancient tyrannies to modern inequalities. In all this the people of Kenya have stood up against oppression and degradation. Chapter Two of *A Grain of Wheat* traces the struggle to the days when women ruled and became tyrannical (and were overthrown by the united action of their long-suffering husbands!) right up to the eve of independence. In *Petals of Blood* Ngugi's dissection of the travesty of dawn is only matched by an almost lyrical tribute to the courage of men like Abdulla, Nding'uri, Ole Masai and the great general Dedan Kimathi. As the seasons change and the land blossoms and cracks to be later traversed by the Trans-Africa highway and New Ilmorog, we are continually reminded of struggles against drought and against human greed and oppression. Heroes walk the stage not only of Kenya's history but of the history of black people everywhere. Dessalines, Toussaint L'Overture, Cabral, Mondlane, etc. But the truly significant events in *Petals of Blood* are centred around the four otherwise insignificant characters: Munira, Wanja, Karega and Abdulla. Their coming together transforms Ilmorog (for better, for worse!) and to the very end we see them involved in struggles. Karega's work with the trade-union movement has politicized the workers and they are ready to hurl defiance at their greedy employers. The struggle will continue on other fronts such as Siriana Secondary School where the Chuis will meet the resistance of pupils like Joseph, the revolutionary heir to Abdulla, Wanja and Karega. The 'bedbugs', 'jiggers' and other parasites of the system will be confronted. This is Ngugi's bitterest denunciation of capitalism — and it is important that it is delivered by Karega, whose perception of Kenya's contradictions is the clearest of any character in *Petals of Blood*:

Her voice only agitated further images set in motion by her revelation. Imperialism: capitalism: landlords: earthworms. A system that bred hordes of round-bellied jiggers and bedbugs with parasitism and cannibalism as the highest goal in society. This system and its profiteering gods and its ministering angels had hounded his mother to her grave. These parasites would always demand the sacrifice of blood

from the working masses ... The system and its gods and its angels had to be fought consciously, consistently and resolutely by all the working people.

The message to Karega from the trade union movement is a defiant, 'You'll come back!' Ngugi has been working towards this in the titles to the four sections of *Petals of Blood*:

PART ONE: WALKING...

PART TWO: TOWARDS BETHLEHEM —

PART THREE: TO BE BORN

PART FOUR: AGAIN ... LA LUTA CONTINUA!

The first three sections evoke the Yeatsian critique of the modern age:

And what rough beast its hour come round at last  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born  
(“The Second Coming”)

The beast is the travesty of dawn in Africa. The last part, ‘the last duty’ to remember is that the struggle continues — *La luta Continua!*

## NOTES

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4. Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo* (London, 1904), p. 171. All further references are to this edition and will be included in the text.
5. Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* (London, 1911), p. 279.
6. Letter to John Garnett, quoted in Walter F. Wright, *Joseph Conrad on Fiction* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1964).
7. Joseph Conrad, *Last Essays* (London and Toronto, 1926), p. 25.
8. Chinua Achebe, 'Why Afro-European Dialogue Fails', *West Africa*, No 3266, 25 February 1980.
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13. Edmund D. Morel, *Red Rubber, the Story of the Rubber Slave Trade Flourishing on the Congo in the Year of Grace, 1906* (London, 1906), p. 37.

14. *The King Incorporated*, p. 94.
15. *Conrad the Novelist*, p. 216.
16. Ebele Obunselu, op. cit., p. 82.
17. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (Heinemann, London, 1967).
18. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (Heinemann, London, 1977), p. 153. All further references are to this edition and will be included in the text.
19. Robert Penn Warren, *Sewanee Review*, LIX, 1951, pp. 377-87. Now introduction to Modern Library Edition of *Nostromo*.