

【特別寄稿】

Capitalist/Semiotic Circulation and the  
Materiality of the Invisible/Inaudible:  
*Nostramo* and Post-Impressionism

Fuhito ENDO

要旨 ジョウゼフ・コンラッドのモダニズム性を再考するために、この作家と印象主義との関係を論じることは、フレドリック・ジェイムソンの議論を代表として主要な論点であるが、この文脈でポスト印象主義という視点が採用されることは頻繁ではない。本論文は、この空白を埋めるべくポスト印象主義を提唱したロジャー・フライの美学とコンラッドの言語を比較する。その目的は両者の伝記的水準での交渉の欠如といった事実を超えた類似性を示すことであり、そこに浮上するのは金本位制が金融システムとして揺らぐ中で「価値」の絶対（内在、超越論）性とその記号論的相対性との相克がモダニスト的な美学として言語化される次第と詳細である。それは知覚を超えた領野の物質化とその価値を相対化する空間的な関係性の対立／併存という形式となる。あるいはそれを近代における「質」の「数量化」への抵抗と呼ぶこともできる。対象テキストはおもに『ノストローモ』となる。

It has become almost a critical commonplace to explore the relationship between Joseph Conrad and Impressionism, aiming to re-evaluate his work within the context of Modernism, as argued by Fredric Jameson, for example. Meanwhile, a critical examination of Post-Impressionism, which, in my view, offers more insightful perspectives on the subject, has been less frequently undertaken in this context. The term 'Post-Impressionism' was coined by Roger Fry, whose art theory is remarkable for its alignment with Conrad's modernist aesthetics, despite the absence of any direct

biographical connection. Taking a comparative approach to their use of language reveals how psychological anxieties surrounding the institutional and financial instability of the gold standard at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries manifested themselves as both a simultaneity and contradiction of absolute (innate or transcendental) 'values' and their semiotic or capitalist relativity. These characteristics underscore their modernist aesthetics, in which one can also discern a contrast between the materialization of elements beyond human perception (invisibility or inaudibility) and the spatial relativization of their values. These aspects can be seen as symptoms of a modernist aesthetic resistance to the quantification of 'quality' in modern capitalist society.

### **Roger Fry and Post-Impressionism**

Something crucial, but often ignored, is the fact that Fry's conception of Post-Impressionism was a determined intervention into the preceding artistic movement. Commonly called Impressionism, this can be historicised as an aesthetic and theoretical engagement with human vision as pictorial expression under the influence of the contemporary pseudoscience of perception in the late nineteenth century. This endeavour may be understood as the theorisation of light captured by the retina as pointillistic impressions, a crucial consequence of which was an effective reduction of the objects of perception, or the external world as a whole, to fragmented visual impressions. Faced with such an obfuscation of the physical world, Fry's critique focused on the lack of materiality and constructive design in Impressionist representations. Thus, his definition of Impressionism in *Vision and Design* (1920) is 'the quasi-scientific description of new effects of atmospheric colour and atmospheric perspective' (10), a clear reference to the way in which physical objects are diluted and dissolved as a result of the reinterpretation of visual perception. Relevant here is something which he emphasised in his 1907 letter to the editor of a major art journal: '[an] appearance in which separate

forms are lost in the whole continuum of sensation' (*Letters I* 299).

Fry's Post-Impressionism is intended as a forceful rebuttal of this loss of formalist intention, with particular emphasis on the reintroduction of the material physicality of the objects expressed through a given picture and the reconstruction of the spatial and architectural relationality of the 'form' of each object. The latter is called 'design,' which is taken as the part of the title *Vision and Design*, in which the author argues: 'Those who indulge in this vision are entirely absorbed in apprehending *the relation of forms and colour to one another*, as they cohere with the object' (49; emphasis added). What needs to be stressed here is both the artistic significance of each object and their spatial relationship as 'design.' This means that the aesthetic value of a given painting lies less in the individual objects, forms, and colours than in their relative relation to one another. In other words, the artistic value of each part of a picture depends on or is produced by its difference from another part, in a manner reminiscent of Ferdinand de Saussure's idea of the 'signifier,' whose meaning is determined by another. This is not necessarily an arbitrary association; as I will argue, it is the unexplored crucial reason why Fry has often been considered a 'formalist.' My implication is that, given this kind of Saussurian semiotic production of aesthetic value, he can also be seen as one of the important precursors of the 'structuralist' viewpoint.

This leads one to wonder what is meant by the word 'vision,' the other half of the title *Vision and Design*. In contrast to his idea of 'design,' Fry's 'vision' can be viewed as a privileged moment in which a critic enjoys an insight into the innate and proper value and beauty inherent in each form or colour, an artistic intensity that is irreducible to spatial and semiotic relationality. In this book, Fry argues for what he calls the 'French Post-Impressionists,' with particular emphasis on their 'attempt to express by pictorial and plastic form certain spiritual experiences' (237). His resistance to the Impressionist obfuscation of the 'form' of the object of their representation prompts Fry to privilege 'plasticity' as one of his key

terms, the tactile materiality of which works to compose the 'closely-knit unity of texture' (239) of painting. This is generative of the physical surface of a painting as object, whose textuality is closely read and invested with aesthetic pleasure, or rather libido, in a way that recalls Roland Barthes's perusal of literary texts.

No less significantly, this 'texture' appears in Fry's criticism as the materialisation of a painter's 'spirit,' a crucial example of which can be found in his monograph devoted entirely to Cézanne:

I hope this tiresome analysis of a single picture may be pardoned on the ground that, if one would understand an artist, one must sooner or later come to grips with *the actual material of his paintings, since it is there, and nowhere else that he leaves the precise imprint of his spirit.* (51; emphasis added)

It is thus the case that the surface material texture of colour or paint is expressive of something spiritual and invisible, which explains his definition of Post-Impressionism as an 'attempt to express by pictorial and plastic form certain *spiritual* experiences' (emphasis added). This has to do with Fry's theory of the innate beauty of each form, colour, or line, inherent and proper to it. At the same time, it must be remembered that, along with this kind of 'vision' or insight into such an innate artistic and spiritual value, its semiotic relationality also works to produce the aesthetic value of a given picture. This is the full implication of the title of *Vision and Design*.

Of interest is the fact that Fry's 'vision' is also relevant to his sympathetic affinity with contemporary psychical research or spiritualism; his 'vision' can also be understood by a definition given by *O.E.D.*: 'The act or fact of seeing or contemplating something not actually present to the eye; mystical or supernatural insight or foresight.' The historical context of this interpretation is related to spiritualism at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Virginia Woolf vividly describes (56), Fry's

'vision' was close to the spiritualist discourses of the British Society of Psychical Research, of which he was a member whilst an undergraduate at Cambridge. There is a close analogy between the way in which the spirit was physicalised as the body of a psychic medium and the way in which Fry observed the materialisation of the spirit in his art criticism. In other words, Fry examined the pictorial surface as the materialisation of the painter's spirit in the same way that his contemporary psychical researchers observed the body of a psychic medium as the corporealisation of the dead spirit.

As I will argue, the contrast in Fry's language between the intrinsic value of something (the object of his 'vision') and its relational or semiotic value (the effect of his 'design') is analogous to that between the contemporary ideology of the gold standard, where monetary value was assumed to be fundamentally inherent in gold, and the exchange rate, which determined the relative or semiotic idea of monetary value. Equally interesting is a further analogy between Fry's spiritualist interest in the innate and invisible spirit materialised as the human body and the gold standard's assumption that fundamental monetary value is inherent in gold. Gold was assumed to be a privileged materialisation of the innate and invisible value of money as a whole. What unites these two seemingly unrelated ideas is their mutual preoccupation with what I call 'the materiality of the invisible,' which, I would emphasise, manifests itself in Conrad's language as well.

Something which further distinguishes Fry's theory of art is its radical anti-representationalism, by which I mean his endeavour to separate pictorial expression from representations of the external world, thereby maximising the intrinsic value of spiritual materiality: 'the attempt to give up all resemblance to natural form and to create a purely abstract language of form—a visual music' (239). The implication here goes beyond what I call anti-representationalism in the sense that the synaesthetic phrase 'a visual music' suggests the artistic aspiration to visualise and materialise

invisible sound. Of significance here is the idea that such a musical visualisation of the invisible can be seen to resonate with what has been argued as a spiritualist materialisation of the spirit, which is by definition invisible, and with the gold standard assumption that invisible monetary value is inherent in the physical precious metal. Underlying all of these discourses is the assumption that a given thing is an internalisation of an invisible value, or that an invisible value can be materialised/visualised as a thing.

As has been pointed out, Fry's concept of 'design' should be distinguished from such an essentialist exploration of such innate value or beauty: the former functions as an aesthetic theory based on the semiotic and relational production of value as in the exchange rate. Or rather, it is a kind of dialectic of these two theories of art, essentialist and semiotic, that is constitutive of Roger Fry's Post-Impressionism. This simultaneity of such opposing aesthetics is also generative of the modernist language of Joseph Conrad's *Nostramo*.

### **Painterly Moments in Conrad**

Reading the preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1903), one is struck by its similarity to Roger Fry's language, especially in its aesthetic terminology:

It is an attempt to find in its *forms*, in its *colours*, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of *matter* and in the facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential—their one illuminating and convincing *quality*—the very truth of their existence. (vii; emphases added)

All art, therefore, appeals primarily to *the senses*, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through *the senses*, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. It must strenuously aspire to the *plasticity* of sculpture, to the *colour* of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of *music*—which is the art of arts. And it is only

through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting, never-discouraged care for the *shape* and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to *plasticity*, to *colour*; and the light of *magic suggestiveness* may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace *surface of words*: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage. (ix; emphases added)

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*! (x)

And when it is accomplished—behold!—all the truth of life is there: a moment of *vision*, a sigh, a smile—and the return to an eternal rest. (xii; emphasis added)

What the underlined parts of the text strongly suggest is a striking similarity to Fry's art theory, where, for example, the determined foregrounding of 'form' and 'plasticity' tempts one to read Conrad's modernist language as Fry's contemporary alliance with his anti-impressionism or post-impressionist recovery of pictorial materiality or plasticity. Equally relevant to Fry's aesthetic is Conrad's painterly desire for synaesthesia, or his aspiration to visualise the musical in a way that recalls Fry's visual materialisation of the invisible or acoustic. As I will argue, *Nostramo* can be read as an extreme or critical point in the textualisation, materialisation, or visualisation of 'silence' as an inaudibility far beyond the realm of sound or music. Conrad's modernist language is thus preoccupied with the pictorial visualisation of the invisible and inaudible; or rather, its modernist ambition should be interpreted as a bold attempt to internalise the negativity of silence, or the complete absence of sound or sight, as the dead core of its own text.

Equally interesting is the way in which this preface is less interested in its representational function than in its linguistic and superficial plasticity of 'magical suggestiveness' on the 'surface of words.' The final quotation is the last paragraph of the text, in which the word 'vision' is used in such

a way as to recall the importance of this key word in Fry's aesthetic of pictorial plasticity. The implication of this word 'vision' here is to be understood as an artistic or pictorial insight into invisible sound (and the inaudible at its extreme), whose material plasticity as the 'surface of words' is charged with 'magical suggestiveness.'

### **The Gold Standard and Capitalist Commodity Form**

In my attempt to read *Nostramo* in the context of the gold standard, I will not make any distinction between gold and silver. David Trotter, for instance, makes this distinction on the grounds that historically there was no 'silver standard' (60), but I will not adopt this view. Rather, I will follow Karl Marx's argument of considering gold/silver as 'world money,' in which he does not distinguish between them (240-46). My focus is more on some ideas or illusions, and their literary figures, generated by the ideology surrounding the gold standard than on the actual monetary system *per se*.

Meanwhile, my argument is inspired by Marx's analysis of the way in which money flows:

The stream of gold and silver has a twofold motion. On the one hand, it spreads out from its sources all over the world, and is absorbed to various extents into the different national spheres of circulation, where it enters into the various channels of internal circulation. There it replaces abraded gold and silver coins, supplies the material for articles of luxury, and petrified into hoards. (243)

As suggested here, Marx exhibits no interest in a difference between gold and silver in his discussion of their circulation on the world market. More importantly, these modes of flow are relevant to *Nostramo*, where, as I will demonstrate shortly, the two forms of silver as 'world money' are significantly constitutive of the novel's narrative content: its global circulation as a commodity and its fetishistic seduction. This is precisely what Marx points out in the above quotation.



Walter Benn Michaels, a pioneer in the discussion of the literary imagination and the gold standard, offers a revealing semiotic expression: gold as 'the thing itself' and money as 'the representative of a thing' (145). This can be taken to mean that gold can serve as a signifier as the materialisation of its value/signified, where there is no distinction between signifier/signified, or rather that gold can be seen as value itself. Gold is an embodiment of its intrinsic value. In contrast, money is seen here as a mere signifier of the value of gold as signified: value is not inherent in money, but a mere representation of it.

This semiotic association is relevant in the present context, particularly in the sense that it allows one to explore the linguistic difference between 'language itself' and the narrative content it represents in a modernist context. In both Fry and Conrad, as has been observed, the above difference is crucial enough to enable one to say that the aesthetic value lies less in what is represented by painting or literature than in the beauty/spirit inherent in the material plasticity of their pictorial language itself. Given the invisibility of such value, this can be described as 'the materialism of the invisible,' which provides another but relevant analogy between the gold standard and the language of Fry and Conrad. What drives their aesthetic libido is the materiality of something acoustic and invisible; in Conrad's language, this negative materialism reaches the extreme of visualising the inaudible, the complete absence of sound and sight. *Nostromo* is a radical foregrounding of the plastic and linguistic materiality of such negativity.

This aesthetic can be considered an artistic version of what Marx terms 'commodity fetishism.' In this connection, Kojin Karatani, with reference to Saussure, attempts to reread Marx's theory of 'value-form' and concludes that the value of a commodity does not lie in it, but explains the exchange value, a product of the semiotic system of difference (18-9). Building on this view, he points out the way in which money, which theoretically makes possible the exchange of any commodity, 'provides an illusory appearance,

as if, within each commodity, there existed a value that could be expressed in a certain magnitude of money,' thus creating the illusion that 'the single commodity has an intrinsic value' (19). This leads to the following paradox: what Marx calls 'value-form,' as a system of semiotic difference (or exchange value), is both produced and concealed by money (19). In Marx's own words, the value-form is a product of 'social relations,' but 'the money-form,' as the 'finished form of the world of commodities,' both produces and 'conceals' its 'social character' (168). Hence, what Marx sees as 'commodity fetishism,' the failure to 'see gold and silver as representing money as a social relation of production' (176). Marx's fetishism can thus be read as concealing the 'social relation,' where the exchange value functions to produce monetary/commodity values. The point is the 'social character' of the value-form.

Evidently, Conrad regards silver as an object of such fetishism:

She [Mrs. Gould] had watched it with misgivings turning into *a fetish*, and now *the fetish* had grown 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, erected by the silent work of *evil spirits*, between her and her husband. (175; emphases added)

Mrs. Gould, well aware and critical of the fetishistic aspect of silver, sees it as the incarnation of the 'evil spirit,' but her critique of this ideology assumes that the negative value (evil spirits) is inherent in silver. Her critique thus functions as a semantically inverted repetition of Marx's commodity fetishism. More importantly, her negative fetishism is consistent with the rest of the text, where what I call the materialism of the invisible/spiritual is generative of its linguistic and pictorial expressions.

### **Fetishistic Sublime and Semiotic Differences**

Viewed in this light, the close aesthetic connection between Fry and

Conrad is striking. In the case of Fry, one can find the simultaneity of what can be seen as a fetishistic sublime, or the innate spirit/value of the material plasticity of pictorial surfaces (an insight into which is called 'vision'), and 'design' as an aesthetic effect of the semiotic differences of each part or form in a given picture. The language of *Nostromo* is driven thematically and figuratively by the intricate intertwining of the themes of this fetishistic sublime and exchange/semiotic value, especially around silver and Nostromo himself.

As Claire Wilkinson observes, what matters in this novel is the 'abstract connection between the raw materials of the Costaguanan earth and their value within a distant economic system' (206). Indeed, the silver in this text can generate a vast amount of money, a capitalist profit as exchange value within the context of 'social relations' with the United States in particular. Once this 'social character' of the global market is lost, when the silver is stolen and hidden on the island called 'the Great Isabel' by Nostromo, it is deprived of its exchange value and becomes a mere heavy metal or an object with use-value as an instrument in Decoud's suicide (396). On the other hand, this silver still functions as the sublime object of capitalist fetishism, to the point of prompting the self-reproducing increase of wealth.

Meanwhile, the rhetoric of the text reflects its thematic interest in the conflict between exchange and intrinsic values, as exemplified by the way in which Nostromo is repeatedly described as 'incomparable' (342; 415; 417; 425), whilst at the same time his immigration from Italy to Costaguana is represented by the metaphor of international trade: 'Nostromo—invaluable fellow—with some Italian workmen, *imported* to work upon the National Central Railway' (11; emphasis added). The recurring phase of 'material interest,' like other recurring phrases in Conrad's work, can be read as loaded with semantically ambiguous implications: the word 'material' is at once suggestive of the capitalist/materialist attachment to wealth (especially in relation to Mr.

Gould) and of its fetishistic aspects, as criticised by his wife. The word 'interest' connotes genuinely economic issues, such as the exchange value of silver as 'world money.' In this way, the thematic and narrative content of the text, down to the smallest detail, is structured by a series of rhetoric of the value-form (or exchange value) produced by what Marx calls the 'social relation' and, at the same time, by literary figures related to the fetishistic innate values of things and characters outside this global market. What is crucial here is the dialectical interrelationship between these two opposing thematic and rhetorical drives.

With Roger Fry's art theory in mind, I am interested in reinterpreting this dialectic in the context of pictorial expression and its plastic materialism. Fredric Jameson's argument about modernism in *The Political Unconscious* is worth mentioning here, especially with regard to his reading of *Nostromo*, in which the excess of perceptual intensity is paradoxically and dialectically generative of something beyond any perception within the text (227-31). He focuses on the way in which 'silence' is foregrounded in the scenes relating to the Great Isabel, whose imperceptibility is represented as 'a realm of heightened yet blank intensity' (230). Jameson attempts to historicise such excessive sensory perception to the point of being beyond perception in the context of the contemporary acceleration of capitalist institutions, particularly the highly digitalised economic system of 'exchange value in a money economy dominated by calculation, measurement, profit' (217). Repressed by this rapid digitalisation, 'the activity of sense perception has nowhere to go' (217); consequently, '[t]his unused surplus capacity of sense perception can only reorganize itself into a new and semi-autonomous activity' (217-18). What is revealed here is the visual intensity of 'pure color' or 'purely abstract color' (218), which Jameson sees as 'the objective precondition for the emergence of genres such as landscape'. In such a landscape, 'the viewing of an otherwise (or at least traditionally) meaningless object—nature without people—comes to seem a self-justifying activity' (218).

This kind of abstraction means that the colour used in a landscape painting—'purely abstract colour'—is not intended to represent actual external objects. Hence 'a new and semi-autonomous activity'. This argument, of course, can serve to explain the historicity of Roger Fry's anti-representationalism. Meanwhile, this 'self-justifying' and 'semi-autonomous' realm of excessive sensory perception, or rather a realm beyond human perception *per se*, should be understood as a kind of gap or chasm in capitalist economic systems of exchange values, a dialectical negativity generated by capitalism within itself.

Jameson's dialectical historicisation is brilliant enough, but as his lack of interest in the Impressionist/post-Impressionist distinction shows, his reading fails to grasp what has been called 'the materiality of the invisible/inaudible,' the intensely plastic materiality of which dominates the textual or pictorial surface of *Nostromo*. The following are some examples of the text's foregrounding of silence and darkness, the complete absence of sound and sight, or a realm beyond human perception as a vivid and overwhelming visual and even tactile plasticity.

The solitude could almost be *felt*. And when the breeze ceased, the blackness seemed to weigh upon Decoud like *a stone*. (208; emphases added)

... his [Nostromo's] voice seemed deadened by the *thick veil* of obscurity that felt warm and hopeless all about them. There were long periods when he made *no sound, invisible and inaudible* as if he had mysteriously stepped out of the lighter. (208; emphases added)

He [Decoud] exulted in its [the darkness's] impenetrable obscurity. '*Like a wall, like a wall,*' he muttered to himself. (224; emphases added)

Nostromo, at the tiller, looked back from time to time at the vanishing mass of the Great Isabel, which, little by little, merged into *the uniform of texture of the night*. At last, when he turned his head again, he saw nothing but *a smooth darkness, like a solid wall*. (239; emphasis added)

... the silence, remaining unbroken in the *shape* of a cord to which he [Decoud] hung with both hands... (394; emphasis added)

The great gulf burst into a glitter all around the boat; and in this glory of merciless solitude the silence appeared before him, stretched taut like *a dark, thin string*. (395; emphasis added)

What is striking here is a textual desire to expose the plastic and concrete 'form' and 'shape' of darkness and silence in an attempt to make the invisible/inaudible visible, in a way that recalls the preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. This could be called the materiality of a signifier without a signified, or that of language without any claim to represent something perceptible. Or rather, the text seems to be explicit in its desire to expose its pictorial surface as a materialisation of the invisible or inaudible. Stylistically and grammatically, for example, the indefinite article used here ('a smooth darkness') is intended to make one 'see' the material presence of the absence of sight. The word 'smooth' effectively evokes its tactile sense. This is also true of the sentence 'The solitude could almost be felt,' where the word 'felt' is evocative of the sense of touch. Interestingly, the phrase 'the uniform of texture of the night' is directly reminiscent of Fry's 'closely knit unity of texture,' which allows one to discern what Conrad and Fry share in their preoccupation with a dense materialisation and visualisation of a realm beyond sight and sound. Their 'textures' are thus indicative of a uniquely modernist textuality, or what Jameson historicised as a 'semi-autonomous' landscape within/outside the capitalist market of exchange values.

It is worth noting that this kind of textuality emerges on the midnight sea, a space completely isolated from what Marx calls 'social relations.' From the perspective of Karatani, who reinterprets Marx in a semiotic context, this space can be thought of as a gap in the world as a place for the semiotic and Marxist production of meaning/value. This space is also

an example of what Jameson regards as a 'semi-autonomous' realm outside the 'money economy' of exchange values, where the value of silver is separated from any exchange value and becomes a mere thing. Semiotically speaking, silver as signifier is cut off from exchange value as signified. In the same manner, Conrad's language is revealed here as the textual materiality of a signifier without a signified, or a signifier of the invisible/inaudible (the representation of the unrepresentable). As has been argued, the value/meaning of this thing-ness of a signifier is not produced by the semiotic system of difference (in the Marxist context, the global economy of exchange values), but lies in itself. This can be seen as the fetishistic materialisation of an invisible and innate value. It can thus be said that the language of the text, as the materialisation of the invisible/inaudible, contributes to the same kind of aesthetics of sublimated silver.

If this kind of semiotic/capitalist gap or chasm can produce a fetishistic and sublimated materiality, the following sentence is worth reconsideration: 'His part, his inclination, and his policy were united in one endeavour to keep unchecked the flow of *treasure* he had started single-handed from *the re-opened scar* in the flank of the mountain' (118; emphases added). This refers to the consciousness of Mr. Gould, who is on his way to his silver mine in the forest at midnight. This space, along with the 'scar' of the mountain, significantly suggests a realm or gap outside the global economy of commodities. This is also implied by the metaphor of the 'treasure', which makes it clear that silver is not yet produced as a commodity for exchange value. Silver can thus be seen as the sublime object of his fetishism.

Of course, the fetishistic attachment to money and language is an ideological illusion, and it is radically impossible to visualise and materialise an innate, invisible value. In this respect, it is worth recalling the work of Paul de Man, and especially his observation that language, faced with this kind of impossibility of representation, tends to be

excessively productive of figures or tropes. This may explain the excessive use of metaphor or simile in the scenes of the Gulf or the Great Isabel, or the space that can be read outside the semiotic/Marxist system of meaning/value. When language seeks to represent nothing but itself (signifier without signified), its materiality or physicality may appear as what Marx calls an 'absurd form' (169) in relation to commodity fetishism.

### **The Design of *Nostramo***

It is significant that in the 'Author's Notes' to *Nostramo*, Conrad emphasises his memories of Latin American landscapes (450-51). The spatial setting of the text probably reflects these memories, with the Gulf (Golfo Placido) in the foreground, the rugged high mountains and silver mine in the background, and the capital city of Sulaco in between. The aesthetic effect of this pictorial 'design' is not only reminiscent of Roger Fry, but also relevant to the Marxist mode of production and social relations. The silver mine in the high mountain in the background produces silver as a raw material, which is processed into ingots; this processed commodity is shipped from Sulaco and across the Gulf to become exchange value on the world market.

Given this, the following part of the text is worth noting:

To Charles Gould's fancy it seemed that the *sound* must reach the uttermost limits of the province. Riding at night towards the mine, it would meet him at the edge of a little wood just beyond Rincon. There was no mistaking the growling *mutter* of the mountain pouring its stream of treasure under the stamps: and it came to his heart with the peculiar force of a proclamation *thundered* forth over the land and the marvelousness of an accomplished fact fulfilling the audacious desire. He *had heard this very sound* in his imagination on that far-off evening.... (84; emphases added)

Significantly, the silver is rendered as a fetishistic object with an auditory quality before it acquires any exchange value as a commodity. That is, the



silver is sublimated in an auditory way, which is symbolically linked to the height of the mountain. Mr. Gould, still in the forest, looks up at the mountain here; when he climbs up to the silver mine, as Jameson points out, 'the silent darkness' (77) dominates there. This allows one to argue that silver in this text is aestheticised as the sublime object of invisibility or inaudibility as in hypsous: recalling the scenes of the gulf and the island, silver here is an incarnation of its innate, invisible, inaudible value outside exchange values. Meanwhile, the text is conscious of this kind of Marxist fetishist illusion, which is revealed in the way in which the silver 'horded' on the island, outside the global market, loses its value, or rather, its value is reduced to a suicidal use value.

As some critics have already noted, *Nostramo*, a subtle but powerful narrative of Marxist value-form or its perverted form of fetishism, refers to the gold standard or affective responses to this monetary system as one of its implicit contexts. On this basis, I have focused on the possible relevance between the gold standard and Roger Fry's aesthetics in an attempt to reinterpret the modernism of Joseph Conrad. As Jameson suggests, a wider historical context is the accelerated capitalist reification and quantification that produces some counter-directions, a desire for innate value or 'quality' (213-31), or the accompanying illusion of fetishism. This must have something to do with Walter Benjamin's 'aura' in the age of 'reproducibility,' one of the core questions of modernist studies.

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(Professor, Seikei University, Tokyo  
遠藤不比人 成蹊大学教授)