Schema Refreshment in *Nostromo*

Jiang Ning and Niu Yajun

Abstract—**This paper examines Conrad's treatment of time through a study of the textual structure of *Nostromo*. Based on a cognitive reading process that highlights the role of schema in meaning production, it argues that Conrad's achronology operates as a strategy to lead the reader beyond the text in order to remake the narrative schemata of time and history. It argues, through detailed sample analysis of passages from the novel, that Conrad's refashioned schemata view of time and history is multidimensional and repetitive.**

Index Terms—**History, *Nostromo*, refresh, schema(ta).**

I. INTRODUCTION

Nostromo is generally regarded as Conrad's most ambitious novel. Scott Fitzgerald ranks it "the greatest novel of the past fifty years" [1], and Eloise Kanapp Hay believes that it is compatible to Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* [2]. Richard Curle claims that *Nostromo* is "by far his [Conrad's] greatest" [3]. F. R. Leavis picks *Nostromo* as one of Conrad's five classics [4], while Albert J. Guerard declares that *Nostromos* is "Conrad's greatest creative achievement. [5]" However, the treatment of time in *Nostromo* poses such a challenge that many readers are frustrated when they use conventional cognitive models during their reading process. Even for critics like F. R. Leavis and Albert Guerard whose criticism contributed to its canonization in British literature, Conrad's temporal experiment is regarded as a serious flaw for this great work. Leavis believes that the constant shift of time and events reveals Conrad's incompetence in dramatic treatment of materials [4], while Guerard claims that Conrad's random piling of events and characters in the first part leaves the reader frustrated and disoriented. Guerard believes that *Nostromo* is "one of the most uneven of the great novels" in that it is paradoxical that "this ample creation of life and most serious vision of the historical and political process is conveyed by an experimental and necessarily unpopular method" [5]. He thus suggests that a story about history and politics should have been dealt with in the traditionally popular way which arranges everything in a causal chronological order on the basis of a backward logic deduction in our efforts to understand history. He elaborates in detail what the general readers would expect to experience with the text who are obviously baffled by Conrad. His comment, though made about half a century ago, captures the exact points of confusion and trained expectation on the part of the reader, and still relates to readers, especially those who are not yet acquainted with modern experimental fictional

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styles. Even for readers who are lovers of modern or postmodern novels that are supposed to be a departure from the traditional realistic novels, they may not be clear about the hidden mental mechanism that guides them through the reading. Guerard's remark, therefore, serves as a good starting point to trace the mental processing of the traditional reader, which primes for a discussion about what Conrad's arrangement does to the reader's mental construction of the story.

*The first part of Nostromo invites and then frustrates **the normal objectives of readers to an astonishing degree. A reader's first objective may be to identify with one figure and then use him as a post of observation**. But each opportunity… is withdrawn almost as soon as offered. So too it is normal if unconscious ambition of the reader **to live vicariously through an imagined experience; to live through scenes**. But every promised scene is here broken off, at most after a few pages. And so too, if only to combat that vertigo, the reader incorrigibly longs **to locate himself in time and space**, and incorrigibly wants **to apprehend experience in its order and degree of importance**. But this longing is frustrated from beginning to end of the first part. The common reader's notorious general aim – **to enter into the book and become one of its characters** – is carefully and austerely baffled. The novelist (shifting scene, time, emphasis, focus, post of observation) maliciously chops at his hand* [5]. (our emphasis)

We had a similar experience when we first read the novel. It defies our narrative schema about characterization or description of events which are supposed to be somewhat focused. Various characters come onto the stage without much given information; narrations of the past and present are juxtaposed. No single event or single person seems to hold the line of the story. These discomforts during the reading experiences are rooted in our reading schemata described by Guerard as reader's expectation in the above quoted passage. Such expectations like the identification with one character, the location in time and space, and the focus of one event or figure are the tacitly followed processing rules that guide the reading experience of readers who are accustomed to the narrative paradigm established in realistic narratives.

II. SCHEMA FUNCTIONING IN *NOSTROMO*

These processing rules are some reading schemata which are referred to by Guy Cook as "a theory of knowledge in interaction with text." They are specific instantiations of "mental representations of typical instances" and "typical ordering[s] of facts in a real or fictional world" which are essential for the reader to create coherence during the processing of texts [6]. These schemata guide our expectation,

speculation, and construction of the meaning by filling in the gaps with existing stereotypical and generic knowledge in a given discourse. However, the first part of *Nostromo*, as Guerard points out, defies every part of our conventional frame of reference. In other words, the norms or conventions that are usually associated with the mimetic realistic literary creations do not help the reader to work through the text. "Restless", "chaotic", and "unpredictable" are the words to describe feelings during our initial reading.

The story starts with the revolution of a country and mentions several times in passing of some previous revolutions in the country, so we have good reason to expect that it will be devoted to the historical development of the nation in a chronological order in a given era. But in *Nostromo*, no specific time is given at the beginning of the story except the information of the day of the riot against Ribiera, the dictator. It seems that it can be any day in the history of Sulaco. No causes of the revolution are offered except that ship passengers dare not to go ashore because of the firing and fighting. The chapter talks about the flight of the leader and the danger faced by the ordinary citizens, as if the revolution does not have to have any causes. With no hints of the advancement of the riot, the scene is abruptly shifted to 18 months ago of a ceremony with all the important people in the town of Sulaco in such a way that the riot reads like a farce. In between some fragmentary personal history is told about the hotel keeper, Viola. Nostromo, the title hero, in contrast, appears initially as a marginalized character with limited general legendary information circulated among the town. After the ceremony, a history of Gould, his family and the development of the silver mine is presented with no idea when exactly Gould restarted the business of mining and how long it has been kept so far. In addition, some other characters and their brief histories are introduced through their association with the Goulds, either in business (Don Pepe) or daily (political) interactions (Dr. Monygham and Don Jose Avellos).

All in all, new information keeps being snowballed without providing partial relief of the suspense surrounding the events described, or close observation of any characters the readers might identify with. Failure to satisfy readers' reading expectation suggests a mismatch between feeding scripts and the reader's schemata. At best, the first part, read through given familiar schemata, provides a panorama of the society which occupies one fourth of the story (97 pages out of a total of 405 pages). Such a reading of Conrad's narration seems to be far from the possible intention of the author who, as Amar Achera ïbu points out, has been all the time trying new directions in his literary creation [7]. Even though authorial intention has become problematic nowadays, readers still have every reason to speculate about the potential aim a writer wants to achieve in his deployment of information and characters. What can be Conrad's intention then? If our schemata are upset by the novel's narrative structure, what may happen to the schemata? What readers do with them? Just push them into the background? Or simply reject such experimental arrangements as pointless while keeping the existing schemata intact as they are? These questions lead us to the thinking of the interaction between literary texts and reading schemata.

In general, we tend to believe that schemata are relatively fixed structures that act upon text during our processing of meaning. Liu Yanmei shows in her empirical study that the activation of relevant schemata helps readers with the integration of new information which ultimately affects readers' comprehension and memory efficiency [8]. Nevertheless, "texts may change schemata", argues Guy Cook in his book *Discourse and Literature*. On the basis of the relation between the text and schemata, he divides discourses into three types: 'schema reinforcing', 'schema preserving', and 'schema refreshing' [6]. Since most interactions between schemata and new experience are "dynamic and reciprocal", he believes that there "may also be experiences and discourses whose primary function is to alter schemata, making the mind better equipped for processing in future. [6]" This ever-morphing potential of interior schemata is rooted in human being's cognitive need to assimilate and accommodate with the external environment [9]. While the first two types of discourses that Cook sets up serve as some confirmation and fortification of our existing cognitive patterns, the last type is often associated with literary texts that openly defy our comfort zone in terms of cognition. Instead, these texts demand the modification of one's schemata expectations to apprehend the imagined world and people that fill their pages. The call for adjustments can occur at almost any level of literary creation, the sentential and grammatical level, the structural and stylistic level, the subject matter or moral level, and so forth. What Conrad has done in *Nostromo* is to lead the reader away from the usual narrative paradigm of a historical development of a place to a baffled experience of reading which in turn forces a change of our comprehension through a controlled violation of expectation. Conrad's 'frustration' of the reader's expectation demonstrates the "experientiality" of narrative [10]. His purpose in dislocating readers' expectations is to re-form our mental structure of time and history, to re-fashion our existing schemata. Rather than telling the story in a chronological order, Conrad decides on a narration mixing the past and present together. This departure from the usual chronological cause-and-effect narrative pattern dislodges readers' acquired reading skill. Such a non-linear arrangement of time and events reveals Conrad's capture of mankind's online mental functioning. In this regard, we agree with Peters' claim that "Conrad's direct indirection anticipates stream-of-consciousness techniques in which narrative flow is determined epistemologically rather than chronologically. [11]" That is, epistemology-directed time flow is fundamentally experience-based and cognition-oriented.

Information processing in literary reading theoretically relies on bridging two worlds, the imaginary and the actual world. Reading demands working of our schemata of physical world for an interpretation of the fictional world in linguistic construction. The whole reading process, then, is composed of three pairs of relations — the relation between the text and schemata of texts, language and schemata of language, fictional world and schemata of the actual world. Schema of text here refers to "a typical ordering of facts in a real or fictional world" [6], which we treat in this paper mainly as the structural arrangements of events or

information. The interaction within each pair and between different pairs contributes to the final production of meaning (including schemata) for the reader. Once deviation is experienced at any level, corresponding schemata in the mind of the reader are subject to changes that in turn bring about changes in other factors among the relations. Fig. 1 here is a somewhat simplified processing chart with deviations at the central stage[1]. L, T, and FW stand for language, text, and fictional world respectively; S (L), S (T) and S (W) refer to schemata of language, text and (actual) world. The solid arc symbolizes an interaction between the elements, and an arrow signifies a change in the direction it points to. The sign "-" is used to mean the existence of deviation. Deviations at different levels trigger modifications of immediately responsible schemata and then ultimately reshapes our understanding of the world in our mental computation.
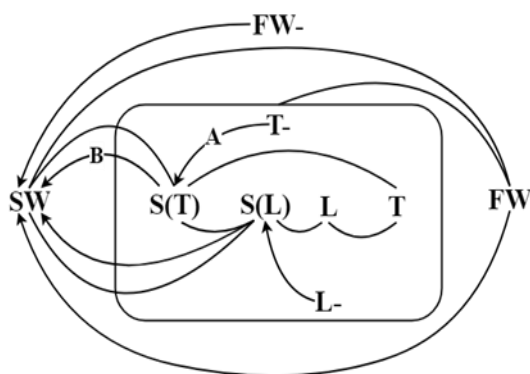

Fig. 1. Dynamic schemata in formation.

As a rule, readers would make sense of the seemingly incoherent discourse through a background knowledge of the generic schemata. As Fludernik notes, readers will work out a go-for-the-present structure of the events or actions within a pile of information showing least coherence [12]. Besides, readers would assume that the writer's arrangements are made for particular purposes even when incoherence is occurred within the text itself or in regard to the reader's schemata. These reveal a two-way operation in the mind of the reader when they encounter something unconventional. On the one hand, they still cling onto the existing schema to rearrange the blocks in isolation. On the other hand, they embark on a search for new dawning. During the process, readers learn to remake their cognitive frames and grow comfortable with more exposures. This makes it possible for experiments in literature to be accepted when they are first introduced, like the gradual reception of stream of consciousness, which has so far become a part of the reader's schemata due to its frequent employment after modernist's novel. As a forerunner of the modernist, Conrad consciously made all kinds of explorations into his narrative in a bid to reveal the complicated and mysterious nature of our understanding of the world, and to reveal a world as one experiences it in his or her actual daily life.

In *Nostromo*, Conrad blends a synchronic and diachronic panorama of a seaport in South America. It is "an

achievement in mosaic" [13] in which lives of people from different social classes, events of different periods, perspectives from different individuals, and affairs of personal concern or public interests are all entangled with each other. One of the materials in the making of the mosaic is time. In *Nostromo* (especially in the first part), Conrad mixes three narrative techniques in his unconventional treatment with the problem of time, namely, achronological narration, multiple narrators, and in *media res* narration [11], resulting in severe accusations of lacking cohesion and coherence, "beginning in the middle and finishing at the start. [14]" These unexpected treatments impose on readers' processing delays in our "expectation-driven understanding" [6] of the text. From the beginning of the story readers have good reason to expect some kind of history to be related to the town of Sulaco, but no familiar pattern of narratives associated with history are there. When conventional narration is interested in the chronological development of events with regard to the shift of the controlling political power, Conrad seems to pay more attention to the full swinging of life when the individual goes through the most intensively felt moment one by another. A backward description of the past is presented with the moment-by-moment private experiences of those insiders who are living their life with no idea of making history or being part of a history to be told later. For any historical grand narration, their lives do not seem to be eventful, and even too trivial to deserve anyone's attention most time. A fact which is often ignored is that each individual lives most earnestly in the sweep of unpredictable courses without any sense of themselves making history. In this sense, history should be foremost life. History only exists when it is related to the momentary life struggle of the individual. To highlight the momentary within the general course of the development of history, Conrad combines history in formation from both the perspectives of those undergoing the process and a reflective perspective of an omniscient narrator (not without an insider's angle). In this way, it unfolds as each moment is linked to the other in one's personal memory through association.

To treat history in a two-way examination explains Conrad's many juxtaposition in the first chapter: a riot in progress and a revolution in the same town more than one and half years ago, a description of Viola, the hotel keeper's present engagement and his past activities before his settlement in Sulaco, the town trapped in chaos and the same town indulged in celebration some time ago, and etc. To be more specific, we will take chapter II in the first part as one example to see specifically what Conrad does and what exactly Gurerard might be thinking about in his comment. There are altogether 17 paragraphs. The first eight paragraphs are devoted to an introduction about Sulaco's commercial activity in relation to the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company, during which Mitchell and Smith are mentioned in passing as officers. With the first sentence of paragraph nine, the reader's expectation is built up about the forthcoming content of some important political movements: "The political atmosphere of the Republic was generally stormy in these days. [13]" But "no glimpses of a genuine present" [5] comes to feed the reader's anticipation of a

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[1] The figure is based on Guy Cook's idea and figure about schemata, text and language on page 205, but we made some modifications to suit our purpose of discussion.

stormy country. What actually follows is a reflection of Mitchell about "a memorable occasion" of rescuing Ribiera, the political leader in escape in the unknown past. This reflection constitutes the first frustration of our application of schemata in its top-down processing, which searches for a match between the incoming information and "general predictions based on higher level" [15]. In this specific place, the opening statement quoted above triggers the top-down schemata in the reader for narrations of specific upheavals. Further reading of individual sentences and paragraphs intensifies such a failure, as more input seems to go against our expectation when as a rule, a bottom-up processing of detailed information will lead to the higher-level schemata in the "hierarchically organized" system. Instead, no particular event is given a follow-up, while new information is piled without being connected with each other.

Then two paragraphs are allocated to the description of events on that day with Nostromo mentioned in passing of high evaluation by his fellow townsmen. Paragraph 12 shifts to a very short introduction of Mitchel's appearance and personality. Paragraph 13 is Mitchell's free narration of limited information about the actual rescuing, and his disseminating about Nostromo's origin and his own opinion of the latter. In paragraphs 14, 15, and half of paragraph 16, the omniscient narrator comes back to relate the final scene of the rescue with Mitchell's action in the center. The rest one and a half paragraphs are given to Nostromo's act and people's opinion of him, whose story, expected to be continued in the next chapter, is saved by a shift to Violas family. Thus, Conrad's constant shifts from one scene to another, from one moment to another, and from one individual to another upsets the orderly array of events by a traditional, imposed chronological logic. The reader is dislodged without being able to stay with any of the fact, the person, the moment in search of some definite meaning. The constant movement backward and forward, the now and then, the here and there inevitably forces the reader to go beyond the language and the structure to locate the meaning.

This ceaseless shifting of information and scenes demands a reframing of reader's existing reading schema associated with the textual format. Instead of tracking a historical description through the conventionalized arrangement of events, the readers are thrust into uneasy and unsettling feelings in the interaction with the text. This readers' feeling experience of similar things coming back and forth in a random way must be suggestive of the minute-by-minute making of history and about people's state-of-mind going through those so-called historical processions. In such an achronological narrative structure, history is the chaotic cycling of things and of individual's struggling moments. Characters involved in the procession of history may not be able to tell where they are heading; instead, they experience a flux of movements in a variety of assemblies both familiar and orderless. The mind at such moments may not be able to follow any single thought, but keeps flashing with immediate snapshots taken at each instant. If the collective history and individual's history are compared, there seems to be no difference, as each repeats certain elements in some way and each steals itself into the mind of people through association with the present. History is some kind of memory. "In remembering, we appear to be dominated by particular past events which are more or less dated, or placed, in relation to other associated particular events. [16]" That accounts for Mitchell's many digressions from the focus in reader's assumption, and that explains Viola's retreat into his youthful days seeing the painting on the all. And that, we believe, is also at work in the omniscient narrator's telling of the course of story development. Conrad's rendering of history, therefore, is not a recording of external happenings, but a penetration into the historical moment at which three phases of time in relation to this very moment meet – the past, the present, and the future are joined together in the mind's eye of the experiencer. Hence, no specific time (for example, a numerical time) is ever given, making "the literal chronology of *Nostromo*" "presumably irrecoverable. [5]" Time sequence is no longer important. What matters are only relations between things which are meaningful or correlated in the character's personal mental calculation. Thus, fixed physical temporal frames is of little relevance and significance, and have to be cast away by the reader as bondages to their mind's free travel in time and space.

Many critics tend to treat Conrad's presentation of past and present in close combination as a way of spatial arrangement of time, putting the past, present, and if possible, the future on one single canvas as we do with different elements in paintings. Eliose Kanpp Hay, for example, believes that the time shift forms "almost a modernist collage" [2]; Ivo Vidan [17] and Deng Yingling [18] make spatiality of time one of their major concerns. The parallel treatment of the present, the past, and the future is frequently referred to as 'juxtaposition'. The word 'juxtaposition', however, is somewhat misleading as it often suggests an artificial placement of two or more different things. A careful reflection of a mental picture when one is reminded of something happening in the past reveals that our mind holds simultaneously both the present and the past, as well as the here and there, because parallel distributed processing enables simultaneous function of the integrated brain, as neuroscience reveals about the neural connectivity [19]. Thus the so-called juxtaposition is not some artistic treatment for spatial effect, but a virtual state of our mind at work. Our mind is neurologically equipped with a faculty to transcend unconsciously time and space for personal understanding, which underlies our capacity to consciously reframe our reading schemata, if the material is grouped in a cognitive fashion of the mind. Conrad may not consciously know the trick of the mind, but he seems to have reproduced that working picture of the mind in the come-and-go moment in *Nostromo*. His narrative arrangement, though challenging to the general reading practice, is in tune with our mental cognitive device. That is to say, it is within the readers' cognitive potential to meet the demand of the working of new reading schemata in the navigation of *Nostromo*. It is up to the readers to turn these new schemata into default reading skill with more exposure to similar reading experiences.

III. CONCLUSION

Such newly arrived understanding of reading code not only produces an understanding of the structuring narrative

of history and time in this text, but also helps to refresh our existing mental imagination of both. The novel's schemata about history and time do not confine themselves to a linear, chronological advancement of one event after another. They can be moments after moments of blurring pictures between the present and the past, the same and the other, the living and the lived. True history of ordinary people is momentary perceptions between which time only serves as a link. When the riot is treated as such a point of temporal departure in the first chapter of *Nostromo*, it brings together Nostromo's fighting with the rebels, his courageous safeguarding of Ribiera in another social upheaval, and his accompanying of the railway chairman Sir John through the area of bandits in another peaceful period. It introduces the mine and its developers of present and past, its moment of crisis and moment of glory. It connects the Violas hiding for Nostromo's help, who is on duty in the street. His absence at the moment further sends forth Teresa's complaint which reveals Nostromo's movement in the morning of the day and also that of everyday. At no point it seems that the present is cut off from the past and vice versa. Therefore, the present, past, and even the future coexist at the same moment, circulating all along into the dynamics of life. This fusion of the then-now-later, a deviation of the text, results in a change in the schemata of the text (shown in the figure by the arrow labeled "A"), and in turn, this change further promotes a change in the schemata of the physical world (arrow "B"). The final formation of the schemata follows the meaning production in a chain reaction: constantly shifting scene and people in time – challenging orderly arranged development of events and characters – possible indication of chaotic, repetitive cycle of life – time exists multidimensionally, and history is the circulation of moments.

Hence, Conrad's achronological narration in *Nostromo* demands extremely active participation from the reader. To fully apprehend the novel, one needs not only probing in depth the meaning within the text, but also to go beyond it. That is to say, one has to strike a balance between working with existing schemata and working out of them. A reader's frustrated experience is usually a signal for the reshaping of conventional mental frames. The textual deviation in *Nostromo* compels the reader to reexamine the fixed linear structure of time and history by shifting the reader's attention to his interactive responses during text reading, and to the constant shifting of perspectives and focus in the passages. As a result, we come to see time and history in its unfolding moment with elements gathering together lights, marks, traces, and sediments at different periods, forming a private reality of coexistence and continuous circulation. No present is cut off from the past, and no history is barred from repetition. Thus, our schemata about time and history are refreshed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Jiang Ning conducted the research; Niu Yajun drew the diagram and did the proofreading. Both authors had approved the final version.

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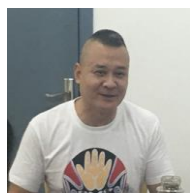
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