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***The Nigger of the “Narcissus” :*
Resignation and Compassion**

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A man may destroy everything within himself, love and hate and belief, and even doubt ; but as long as he clings to life he cannot destroy fear.... (“An Outpost of Progress” *Tales of Unrest* 92)

Joseph Conrad’s *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* first published in November, 1897, tells the story of a merchant ship and its crew, menaced from within by the impending death of a member of the crew, and from without by a storm, during their voyage from Bombay to London. Conrad claims that it deals with “the psychology of the mass” and the crew is “brought to the test of...the moral problem of conduct” (*Last Essays* 72). The work has previously been discussed by critics from diverse perspectives : Albert Guerard regards it as “a study in collective psychology, and also..., a comment on man’s nature and destiny” (100) ; Avrom Fleishman calls it “Conrad’s most didactic political tale” (25) ; and various critics have commented on its narrative method because of its instability. This essay examines how the “Preface” to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* guides us to an interpretation of the novel.

I.

One of the distinguishing features of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* is that there is a preface attached to the work.¹ However, the preface was not published as a preface, together with the story as a preface should be, until 24 years after it was written. It was first published in 1897 in the *New Review*, in which *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* was first serialized, as an “Author’s Note,” after the last installment was published. Later, it was published as “a pamphlet” by Heinemann in November 1902, as “an essay” entitled “The Art of Fiction” in *Harper’s Weekly* in May 1905, and then as “a promotional handout” by Doubleday, along with “To My Readers in America,” in April 1914. In England, it did not appear as a preface until the publication of the Heinemann Collected Edition in 1921. (Knowles and Moore 327)

This rather complicated history of publication of the “Preface” may have left some mark on readers’ response to the work. The critical history of the “Preface” to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* shows that it has not often been read as an introduction to the story ; it has more often been read as a kind of artistic manifesto. According to Ian Watt, “Conrad’s main effort in the Preface is

1 Apart from this preface, Conrad wrote a brief “Preface” to an anthology of short stories, *The Shorter Tales of Joseph Conrad* (1924), and two other prefaces : “A Familiar Preface” to *A Personal Record* (1911) and “Preface” to *The Nature of a Crime* (1923), a collaboration with Ford Madox Ford.

...to set his own personal feelings about writing within the general context of other human activities in the ordinary world.” (Carabine 86), and Jacques Berthoud maintains :

It offers itself...as an apology for fiction, and the position it assumes is characteristic of such apologies ; that those who write fiction are not indulging themselves in careless, capricious or irresponsible activity, but performing a conscious and voluntary action, demanding sincerity in the writer and seriousness in the reader. (Conrad 1984 : 175)

There is no doubt that Conrad wished to discuss the meaning of art and the role of the artist in the “Preface.” However, a preface generally means an introduction to a book, and an introduction is the first part of a book, giving us a general idea of what is to follow. Can the “Preface” to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* be called in any way an introduction to the story that it is attached to? If it can be called an introduction, it may afford us a clue as to how we might interpret what Conrad said about *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* during a conversation with G. Jean Aubry, which took place in June 1924 : “I do not write history, but fiction, and I am therefore entitled to choose as I please what is most suitable in regard to characters and particulars to help me in the general impression I wish to produce” (Najder 82).

Of course, as it is often argued, the meaning of a work is not necessarily what the writer had in mind during its composition. In fact, Conrad wrote the “Preface” to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* not while he was writing the story, but after he had finished it, when he was having some difficulties with “The Return” ; again, however, the meaning of a work is not necessarily what the writer thinks the work means after it is finished. Nevertheless, it is possible that Conrad, on reading the work after he had finished it, recognized that he had succeeded in embodying in the work some of the things that he had intended, and had wished to suggest as much in the “Preface” by way of an introduction. If that is the case, has he succeeded in suggesting his intentions in any way in the “Preface” as a preliminary to the story?

A passage in the “Preface” to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* when it is read in conjunction with a similar passage in “A Familiar Preface” to *A Personal Record* (1911), suggests an idea which, when the story is read in accordance with that idea, instigates in the reader a particular emotional attitude that highlights one of the important themes of the story.

II.

The “Preface” to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* and “A Familiar Preface” to *A Personal Record* are both prefaces, but the former is a preface to a sea story whereas the latter is a preface to a book of reminiscences. Moreover, the “Preface” to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* was published more than a decade earlier than “A Familiar Preface.” For this reason, it seems significant, and more than just a coincidence, that a strikingly similar passage should appear in both the prefaces, indicating a way of looking at our surroundings — including men — with particular feelings.

The following passage from the “Preface” to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* appears towards the end of the work :

To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadow ; to make them pause *for a look, for a smile, for a sigh* — such is the aim...reserved only for a very few to achieve.... 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. (xlv, emphasis added)

In this passage, the words “sigh” and “smile” occur twice, coupled once with the word “look” and once with the word “vision.” These words may, possibly, refer back to the words, “passing glance of wonder and pity,” (xii) which appear earlier in the same “Preface,” in which case, the two words may be interpreted as indicating, respectively, a smile of “wonder” and a sigh of “pity.”

However, interestingly enough, a more substantial clue as to how the words “smile” and “sigh” may be interpreted is found in a passage in “A Familiar Preface,” written fourteen years later in 1911 ; it so happens that here again Conrad couples the idea of vision with the words “sigh” and “smile” :

The sight of human affairs deserves admiration and pity. They are worthy of respect, too. And he is not insensible who pays them the undemonstrative tribute of *a sigh which is not a sob and of a smile which is not a grin*. (16, emphasis added)

In this passage, the words “sigh” and “smile” are accompanied by the modifying phrases “which is not a sob” and “which is not a grin,” and these narrow their meanings. Moreover, the lines that directly follow this passage seem to provide a further clue ; Conrad goes on to say :

Resignation, not mystic, not detached, but resignation open-eyed, conscious, and informed by love, is the only one of our feelings for which it is impossible to become a sham. (16)

In these lines, the word “resignation” is used, not in its usual negative sense, but in a positive sense, as welcoming the inevitable. Moreover, the proximity in meaning of the words “resignation” and “sigh” suggests that the word “sigh” indicates “a sigh of resignation,” and “a sigh of resignation” is certainly not “a sob.” “A Familiar Preface” seems also to provide a clue to readers’ understanding of the other word, “smile,” for in the preceding page of “A Familiar Preface,” there is a phrase that refers directly to a smile, namely “smiling compassion” (15), and a “smile of compassion” is definitely not “a grin.”

The two passages in conjunction suggest a certain idea, which is that in seeing or observing our surroundings we should adopt an attitude of resignation for the inevitable and compassion for the pain that accompanies such resignation. In other words, we are required to have a clear insight into others, by learning to accept what is inevitable, and an attitude of sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings of others.

Supposing that resignation and compassion were the emotions that Conrad particularly wished

to induce in the reader, what hopeless situation would require us to respond to others with such feelings? Aging, for instance, is inevitable and may also be painful, but those who die young manage to escape the sorrows of old age. Illness seems also to be inevitable, especially in old age, but healthy people may be killed in an unforeseen accident or a natural disaster, and there are people who commit suicide whatever their age. If the “Preface” to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* does indeed perform a function as an introduction, the answer to this question must be found in the story itself.

III.

In a letter to Conrad dated 13 January 1898, W. H. Chesson, a reader for T. Fisher Unwin, calls *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* “a final expression of the Pathology of Fear” (Stape & Knowles 30). Later, Ian Watt points out that it is James Wait’s “unacknowledged terror of approaching death” that baffles the crew, swaying them between sentimental sympathy and resentful suspicion: “... behind the mysterious and menacing authority of St Kitts’ Negro, there is only a common human predicament; Wait is a symbol, not of death but the fear of death...” (Kimbrough 252). *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* depicts a variety of emotions, such as pity, sentimentality, grief, mirth, bravery, and cowardice, and one of these emotions is fear, and in particular, the fear of death. For if there is anything that everyone, whether old or young, healthy or unhealthy, must face sometime or other, it is death.

On a close examination, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* depicts the fear of death in a variety of forms as it is manifested by the members of the crew.

James Wait is genuinely sick, as it may be inferred from the symptoms he has developed, such as his rattling cough, a typical symptom of tuberculosis. Yet he cannot face his imminent death, because he is psychologically himself so dependent on others. He lacks any sense of self-responsibility, and has long been accustomed to ascribing his own deficiencies to others. For instance, when his shipmates save him from the cabin in which he has been trapped during the storm, instead of thanking them, he reproaches them for coming so late. He takes it for granted that the crew should come to his rescue, and in the same way, Wait is waiting for the crew to save him from his impending death.

The extent of his psychological dependence on the crew and his surroundings is demonstrated in the following scenes. Even when Wait lies feeling comparatively peaceful in his cabin, he requires others to enjoy that peace; Wait does not like to be alone in his cabin because, “when he was alone, it seemed to him as if he hadn’t been there at all” (148). The sight of the surroundings seen through the cabin door soothes his feelings: “He could see.... He could hear.... He was cheered..., reassured..., soothed.... Life seemed an indestructible thing” (105). It is as if Wait identifies himself with the crew and his surroundings, but the fact is that James Wait is no longer able to draw sufficient life force from within himself, therefore tries instead to draw it from the crew and his surroundings.

Ironically, it is this very lack of psychological self-dependence that enables him to succeed in his attempt to pretend to himself that he is a malingerer so as to conceal the fact that death is im-

minent. Conrad says that “James Wait, afraid of death and making her his accomplice, was an impostor of some character...” (Kimbrough 168) The attempt is pathetic as well as deceptive because in the end he is destined to struggle with the fear of death alone, and the crew is aware of this: “...he stood silent for a moment, battling single-handed with a legion of nameless terrors, amidst the eager looks of excited men who watched him far off, utterly alone in the impenetrable solitude of his fear” (119).

The crew that eagerly watches James Wait instinctively senses his fear: “In his wasted lungs and in his very name, he brings on board the *Narcissus* the reminder of inevitable death” (Kirschner 103) Thomas Moser says of the crew that “The truth is...that their sympathies are really for themselves. They see in Jimmy’s impending death their own mortality, and they cannot bear the sight of it” (33). Podmore, for instance, attempts to impose his faith on Wait pitilessly, which is in fact a reflection of his own fearful apprehension of death. Podmore believes in an afterlife, yet that belief, especially his belief in Hell, seems to inflame his fear.

The fear of death is discernable in Captain Allistoun. After he orders Wait not to come on deck to the end of the passage, under the pretext that Wait has been shamming illness, Captain Allistoun confesses, “When I saw him standing there, three parts dead and so scared — ...no grit to face what’s coming to us all — the notion came to me all at once before I could think” (127). This action demonstrates that Captain Allistoun was able to understand and share James Wait’s fear of death, and as such it suggests that he is aware of his own fear of death, only he has enough self-possession to face up to it. Captain Allistoun’s awareness of the inevitableness of death, as in the case of Singleton, may have been born from his contact with the sea, and his professed wish to live in a cottage in the countryside “out of sight of the sea” (31) may reflect his desire to stay away from an environment that evokes the fear of death in him.

Old Singleton, too, is not depicted as immune to the fear of death. To the first-person unidentified narrator, it seems that “Singleton lived untouched by human emotions” (41) and “seemed to know nothing, understand nothing.” However, as Jeremy Hawthorne points out, there is an “oddity in the manner of Singleton’s portrayal,” (108) and he seems to be both “meditative and unthinking” (26). During the storm, Singleton is made to face up to his own fear of death when he is finally relieved of steering the ship, has a fall, and finds himself unexpectedly weak :

He had never given a thought to his mortal self. He lived unscathed, as though he had been indestructible.... Old! It seemed to him he was broken at last.... Getting old ... and then? He looked upon the immortal sea with the awakened and groping perception of its heartless might. He looked afar upon it, and he saw an immensity tormented and blind, moaning and furious, that claimed all the days of his tenacious life, and, when life was over, would claim the worn out body of its slave.... (99)

The phrase “all the days of his tenacious life” reminds us of the words of the narrator of “An Outpost of Progress” : “...as long as [a man] clings to life he cannot destroy fear...” (*Tales of Unrest* 92). Through this experience, Singleton is forced to reflect on his mortality. He realizes for the first time that he is aging, and therefore approaching death. It is clear from the use of the

Free Indirect Discourse in the above passage, “Old!... Getting old...and then?” that he is quite capable of reflecting. It suggests that Singleton is, in fact, well aware of the fear of death; perhaps even more aware of it than his shipmates. Singleton knows that death is inevitable, and is even aware that dying entails solitude, and is honest enough to tell Wait: “Get on with your dying...; don’t raise a blamed fuss with us over that job. We can’t help you” (42). Yet, what he cannot tell is when exactly it may come, for death is unforeseeable. Singleton is brave enough to accept the inevitability of death, but he is afraid of the fact that it cannot be foreseen. It is this fear of the unforeseeable aspect of death that makes Singleton so excessively credulous to the irrational belief in supernatural influences that “the land draws away life from sick sailors.” (147) He wants to believe that James Wait must “Die in sight of land” (130), for in that event his fear of the unforeseeable aspect of death will be allayed. The buoyancy that Singleton exhibits when Wait dies as he predicted demonstrates not his wisdom but his naivety.

Finally, even Donkin is made to feel the fear of death intensely. The unidentified narrator refers to Donkin sarcastically as: “the sympathetic and deserving creature that knows all about his rights,” and then goes on to denounce him as “[knowing] nothing of courage, of endurance, and of the unexpressed faith, of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship’s company” (10–11). During his last visit to Wait’s cabin, Donkin is insensitive enough to steal the sick man’s money, and to make out a death warrant to Wait for burial at sea, to which Wait, with a sense of self-awakening, responds, “Overboard! ... I! My God!” (153).

Donkin, however, is affected by Wait’s impending death, just like other members of the crew. His face suddenly becomes grave when he hears Wait’s rattling cough (33–34). He decides to visit Wait after land has been sighted, because he is curious to know whether Singleton’s superstitious belief that “the land draws away life from sick sailors” (147) is true. In witnessing the intense fear that he himself has aroused in James Wait, Donkin is compelled to share the painful feeling that he has aroused. Donkin, moreover, becomes the only person on board to attend Wait’s deathbed and thus to witness the very moment of Wait’s death, and the vision affects him profoundly: “Donkin, watching the end of that hateful nigger, felt the anguishing grasp of a great sorrow on his heart at the thought that he himself, someday, would have to go through it all — just like this — perhaps! His eyes became moist. ‘Poor beggar,’ he murmured” (153–54). The irony of the scene is that Donkin, who is depicted as the most merciless member of the crew, should find himself acknowledging resignation in the face of the inevitability of death, and expressing compassion for the dying. Donkin in this scene seems to demonstrate the very emotional attitude that the “Preface” instigates in the reader.

IV.

Read in conjunction to “A Familiar Preface” to *A Personal Record*, the “Preface” to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* may be read as a kind of introduction to the story, as well as an artistic manifesto. The words “sigh” and “smile,” which appear in both the prefaces coupled with “vision,” point to an emotional attitude of resignation to and compassion for what is inevitable when observing our surroundings. An examination of the story itself indicates that what is absolutely inevitable is

death. Death is inevitable, but so is the fear of death, and the fear is shared by all the members of the crew. Ian Watt aptly warns us :

His aim — “to make you *see*”— has often been quoted : but there has been less emphasis on how Conrad specified that the objects in the “presented vision” should be such as to “awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity ; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate, which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world.” (Kimbrough 257)

Death is unforeseeable, therefore uncertain. Some critics may argue that “Conrad is not so naïve as to believe that there are latent feelings that bind together all humanity” (North 37), but Zdzislaw Najder observes that “Conrad believed that the only firm basis for human bonds can be found in emotions...” (212)². Emotion is one of the main themes of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus.”* The awareness that all beings share the fear of death engenders in us compassion for fellow beings, and, consequently, awakens in us a feeling of solidarity that binds all men to each other : Captain Allistoun to James Wait, and Singleton to Donkin. It binds not only the characters but also the reader. Jacques Berthoud states, “The crew of the ‘Narcissus’ may not find it easy to face their mortality steadily ; but the novel continuously reminds us of it” (xxi).

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2 In *Lord Jim*, Conrad depicts Marlow in quest of “some essential disclosure as to the strength, the power, the horror, of human emotions” (48). Tadaichi Hidaka, a Japanese professor of English literature, who visited Conrad at Oswalds in 1922, writes that Conrad said to him : “I want you to read and feel my works as much as you can” (Okuda 85). The words suggest that Conrad valued not only the emotions depicted in his works, but also the emotions that his works induced in the reader.

Incidentally, the word “emotion” does not appear in Raymond Williams’ *Keywords : a vocabulary of culture and society*, published in 1976, but it appears in *New Keywords : A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, published in 2005. According to Patrick Colm Hogan, a literary cognitivist, research in emotion in the West has advanced considerably in the last few decades, owing largely to the work carried out by research scientists operating in the general context of cognitive science. Hogan says that the success in this field comes from the fact that the research programs are interdisciplinary, integrating work on emotion from such areas as neuroscience, psychology, philosophy, and linguistics. He regrets, however, that literary art is largely absent from this work, in spite of the fact that the stories that literature present us systematically depict and provoke emotions. (Hogan 38)

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