The Nigger of the “Narcissus”

History, Narrative, and Nationalism

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This essay will argue that the narrative of The Nigger of the “Narcissus” offers a maritime myth of national identity. First, I shall place The Nigger of the “Narcissus” within a historical frame, looking particularly at the history
of its composition and its moment of reception. Second, I shall consider the work’s narrative techniques, especially its obsession with symmetrical patterning, to argue for its self-conscious artistry. And, third, I shall draw on these two strands to argue that the novella contributes to a sense of national self-fashioning, focused on the sea. My object in linking these three areas is to show that, at the levels of composition, narrative technique, and the fashioning of a nationalist ideology, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* demonstrates the self-styled “homo duplex” Conrad’s inclusive and conflicted approach to tensions and oppositions.

**History**

*The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* was published in 1897, Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee year, and a moment when notions of “Englishness” were undergoing important revision. The Women’s Suffrage movement and the formation of the Labour Party in 1896, at home, had their counterpart in challenges and setbacks to Empire abroad. For instance, 1896 had seen the Jameson raiders repulsed by the Boers in South Africa—and the first major defeat of a white colonizing power when the Italians were defeated by the Abyssinians at Adowa. This is not to say that Empire was on its last legs: what Kipling termed “the white man’s burden” still provided a mainstay of the British economy and, as the Battle of Omdurman in 1898 demonstrated, its defense was ruthless. But other voices were being heard, too.

The example of Kipling himself is a case in point, for while his standing as the poet of Empire is deserved, he is far more nuanced than this allows. Written for Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee, his hymn “Recessional” warns Britons against pride in their inevitably transient empire. Similarly, his invitation to “take up” the “burden” of colonialism is directed abroad, to the United States (in the Philippines). The Jubilee celebrations were, of course, imperial in pageant and ceremonial: colonial premiers and troops paraded in the procession, and Elgar marked the year with his *Imperial March*. As David Cannadine argues, the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras saw “the heyday of ‘invented tradition,’ a time when old ceremonials were staged with an expertise and appeal which had been lacking before, and when new rituals were self-consciously invented to accentuate this development” (1992, 108). A paradox ensues, however, as Cannadine traces the emphasis upon ceremonial in this period to the waning power of monarchy, in the face of a growing, politically conscious electorate: “as the real power of the monarchy waned, the way was open for it to become the centre of grand ceremonial . . . made possible because of growing royal
weakness” (1992, 121; emphasis in original). Thus historicized, the inverse relationship between power and popularity inflects the 1897 Diamond Jubilee celebrations with equivocalness.

William Gladstone’s decision to espouse the cause of Home Rule for Ireland split the Liberal Party in 1886 and resulted in twenty years of virtually uninterrupted Conservative rule sustained by an anti-Gladstone, anti–Home Rule alliance. Empire, the fact of contemporary British life, was the currency of political debate and Gladstonian liberalism was perceived as anti-imperial. In a letter to W. E. Henley, of 3 January 1893, Rudyard Kipling noted with mock annoyance that his daughter, Josephine, had been born on 29 December, Gladstone’s birthday, adding that if she had been a boy he would have disposed of her “lest she also should disgrace the Empire” (in Lycett 1999, 256). By contrast, the Conservatives were the party of Empire. Benjamin Disraeli enhanced this through, among other things, the purchase of shares in the Suez Canal, gaining a controlling interest for Britain, in 1875, and proclaiming Queen Victoria “Empress of India” the following year.

But imperial might and method was also being questioned. In the face of the statistics at Omdurman, forty-seven British casualties against ten thousand Mahdists, Belloc’s jibe seems heartless: “Whatever happens, we have got / The Maxim Gun, and they have not” (“The Modern Traveller”). A year later Conrad rightly predicted that the Boer War would become “repugnant to the nation” and offensive to “reasonable English ideals” (CLJC 2: 211; emphasis in original). And 1899, of course, also saw the publication of “The Heart of Darkness” in Blackwood’s Magazine. By the end of the nineteenth century, the narrative of Empire had become irresistibly dialogic.

In March 1896, Conrad wrote to Edward Garnett: “You have driven home the conviction and I shall write the sea-story” (CLJC 1:268). But the “sea-story” he commenced was what would become The Rescue, the final novel in his Lingard trilogy-in-reverse. In the same month, Conrad married Jessie George and the couple departed for a six-month honeymoon in Brittany during which work on “The Rescuer,” as it was then titled, was suspended while Conrad turned his hand to writing short stories for the more lucrative and burgeoning magazine market. Three of the five stories that comprise Tales of Unrest (1898) were written in Brittany, where The Nigger of the “Narcissus” was also begun, intended as “one of the short stories” for the collection (CLJC 1:319). Instead, it grew to novella length and was published in the New Review between August and December 1897, with the “Preface” following the December installment.

The Nigger of the “Narcissus” offers a blatantly different kind of “sea story” from that contained in The Rescue. In it, Conrad rethinks the subject of the
sea, wresting it from mimetic backdrop to active and determining foreground. The creative keys to unlocking this trove of past experiences include his recent reading of another writer of the sea, Louis Becke. Conrad’s letters to T. Fisher Unwin of August 1896 record that he has reread *Reef and Palm*, which he admires—envies—for Becke’s “perfect unselfishness” in telling his stories (*The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* [hereinafter CLJC 1:298], and has read *First Fleet Family*, sent to him by Unwin and which, he claims, “speaks of life—but it has no more life in it than a catalogue” (CLJC 1:302). In its narration and scope *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* can be seen to respond to both of these issues. An obvious, further source of inspiration came from Brittany itself. To Unwin he professed himself “exhilarated by the view of the wild coast, of the great sands and of the blue and immense sea.” From the perspectives of biography and psychology, rather than literature, this tale of the sea is also about the experience of foreignness. Begun on honeymoon in France, composition of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* was attended by Jessie’s experience as the Englishwoman abroad for the first time and by Conrad’s confrontation with France, the land of his second language.

Recent critics, including Willy (1985) and McDonald (1996), have examined the novella’s publication in W. E. Henley’s *New Review* as an expression of Conrad’s self-fashioning at this stage of his career. The argument runs that the patriotism and antiliberal sentiment in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* were designed to appeal to Henley’s Toryism and the *New Review*’s masculine, imperial tenor. In addition to overlapping with Henry James’s *What Maisie Knew*, serialization in the *New Review* meant that *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* rubbed shoulders with pieces entitled “The Art of Cricket” or “William Blackwood and His Men,” a review of Mrs. Oliphant’s *William Blackwood and His Sons* (1897); Nicholson’s portraits of Kipling and Rhodes; and C. de Thierry’s three-part essay, “Imperialism.”

1. Letter dated 9 April 1896; CLJC 9. Sea-references dominate Conrad’s honeymoon-letters: he describes his situation as “on as rocky and barren [an] island as the heart of (right thinking) man would wish to have,” the coast as “rocky, sandy, wild and full of mournful expressiveness,” and himself as “looking at the sea” (CLJC 1:272, 274, 275). When Garnett contracted typhoid, Conrad invited him to Brittany to recuperate: “This sea air here is quite tonic” (CLJC 1:277).

2. Conrad’s association with the magazine began indirectly. H. G. Wells, to whose anonymous review of *An Outcast of the Islands* Conrad responded with an appreciative letter (CLJC 1:278–79), was, for a time, a member of the group of writers known as “Henley’s young men” or the “Henley Regatta” (CLJC 1:281 n. 4).

3. “Karain: A Memory” appeared in *Maga’s* November 1897 issue, beginning Conrad’s association with Blackwood’s, one that lasted until the publication of “The End of the Tether” in 1902. In his review of Mrs. Oliphant’s book, J. H. Millar stresses the “robust stamp” of Blackwood’s Toryism and claims that she “is quite within the mark in pointing out how *Maga* has evoked in her contributors much the same feeling of proud and devoted attachment as that with which sailors regard their ship” (1897, 654).
After Almayer’s Folly and An Outcast of the Islands, The Nigger of the “Narcissus” certainly signaled a new, identifiably “English” note in Conrad’s writing. The Narcissus is sailing “home” to England. Even Donkin boasts that he is “an Englishman” (12). Furthermore, after Conrad’s earlier use of epigraphs from Amiel and Calderón, the epigraph is now provided by an Englishman: diarist and chronicler Samuel Pepys. Stylistically, Conrad attempts to distinguish regional and national types—the bo’sun is a “West-country man” (79); “Taffy” Davies is Welsh—and to ventriloquize accents, at times with confusing results: “Belfast” Craik, an “Irish beggar” (80) to James Wait, is now Irish, now cockney, and now Scot on the transliterated aural evidence. The officers in the Narcissus are British, the crew is international. All, however, are serving in the British Merchant Service, under the Red Ensign. In “Imperialism,” de Thierry claimed that, “by means of the Navy and Mercantile Marine, England unites a world” (1897, 316). Published in the Jubilee year, Conrad’s novella implicitly queries what nationality is. After all, the “home” to which she sails is presumably not home to Hansen or Wamibo.

In his iconographic representation of crew life Conrad achieved his intention “to do for seamen what Millet . . . has done for peasants” (CLJC 1:431). The result is a poetics of the everyday that, by dignifying the lives of ordinary sailors, “the humble, the obscure, the sinful, the erring” (CLJC 1:355), offers both eulogy and chronicle, for whatever else it is The Nigger of the “Narcissus” is a celebration of the British Merchant Marine, the workhorse of the British Empire—whose scope included James Wait’s birthplace, the St. Kitts islands in the British West Indies. This historical fact gives an added inflection to Wait’s claim to “belong to the ship” (18).

But despite such evident and national realignment of his subject matter, I do not find compelling the evidence that Conrad was attracted to Henley’s view of England when composing The Nigger of the “Narcissus.” In Garnett’s words: “Conrad wrote from necessity” (1934, 14), and as his output in Brittany suggests, he recognized the financial responsibility placed upon him by his recent marriage. Simply put, the author’s financial circumstances surrounding the novella’s publication are these: wanting better terms than Unwin was offering, on Garnett’s advice Conrad turned to the New Review as an outlet for his new tale. In October 1896, he informed Unwin: “I would like to try W. Henley with my ’Nigger’—not so much for my own sake as to have a respectable shrine for the memory of the men with whom I have, through many hard years lived and worked” (CLJC 1:308–9). A week later, Conrad informed Garnett, who was by then steering the novella’s public fortunes: “I shall try to place it for

4. Does one detect a turn of the screw, perhaps, in the reference to one publisher that another’s pages offer a “respectable shrine”?
serial publication with Henley or elsewhere” (CLJC 1:310; emphasis added). Against this one needs to set Conrad’s evident delight in being taken up by Henley: “Now I have conquered Henley I ain’t ’fraid of the divvle himself” (CLJC 1:323), he wrote to Garnett in December 1896.

Attached to the manuscript of The Nigger of the “Narcissus”, now housed in the library of the Rosenbach Foundation in Philadelphia, is a note in Conrad’s hand that includes the following dating: “Begun in 1896 June. Finished in 1897 Febry.” If this dating is correct, he began the novella halfway through his honeymoon in Brittany. It follows that, by the time Henley is mentioned—in October—Conrad was halfway through the period of composition. Although one needs to be wary of the tones adopted for different addressees in private correspondence, Conrad’s letters of the period repeatedly place his financial anxieties above the prestige of the publishing house. To Fisher Unwin he writes: “I must live. I don’t care much where I appear since the acceptance of such stories is not based upon their artistic worth. It is probably right that it should be so. But in that case there is no particular gratification in being accepted here rather than there” and “I can’t afford to work for less than ten pence per hour” (CLJC 1:293, 308); and to Garnett: “I do not want to leave him [F.U.] if he gives me enough to live on. If cornered I would try to escape of course. It’s simply a matter of ‘to be or not to be’” (CLJC 1:306).

I suggest that Conrad’s ideological vision of England and Englishness, as expressed in The Nigger of the “Narcissus”, is discordant with what Watts calls Henley’s “virile imperialism” (1989, 68). The author of poems like “What Can I Do for Thee, England, My England” and such collections as For England’s Sake (1900), William Ernest Henley (1849–1903) was Scottish, though London-based. Lyra Heroica: A Book of Verse for Boys, edited by Henley, was published in 1892 and quickly became standard fare in British classrooms with its poetic rendering of patriotic deeds and masculine prowess. Henley’s most famous poem, “Invictus” (1888), includes the ultraconservative apostrophe to individualism: “I am the master of my fate: / I am the captain of my soul.” Despite the narrative’s fluctuating focus of perception, which contains formal echoes of the clash between social organization and individualism, this is obviously not the vision of Conrad’s tale of the forecastle. Slight discrepancies between

5. This widely anthologized piece has recently been quoted by both the Atlanta Olympic Games bomber, Eric Rudolph, and the Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh, in their respective “explanations” of their actions. Oscar Wilde also turned to “Invictus” in his prison cell, in the early months of 1897, but only to detach himself from its message of invincibility. Instead, he told Lord Alfred Douglas in the letter since called De Profundis: “I was no longer the captain of my soul” (Hyde 1982, 437). Henley had published Charles Whibley’s virulent review of The Picture of Dorian Gray in the Scots Observer of 5 July 1890.
the serial and book versions of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*—for instance, in the paean to England as “[a] ship mother of fleets and nations!” (163)—have been discussed by Cedric Watts, who distinguishes between the *New Review*’s “persuasively deliberate and controlled” tone and that of the first English edition: “excitedly rhetorical” (1989, 72). Even here, though, the inference that Conrad is under the influence of Henley should be resisted: the “excited” ideal vision of England only increases the discrepancy with the all too real vision that succeeds as the *Narcissus* sails up the Thames. In other words, the rhetorical style facilitates disillusion.

### Narrative Technique and Style

Generally perceived to be the author’s early artistic credo, the “Preface” to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* has attracted almost as much critical attention from Conrad scholars as the novella itself. In it, Conrad’s attempt to explain how the artist “endows passing events with their true meaning” (xli) leads to the famous formulation: “My task . . . is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see!” (xlii). Thus what he calls the “moment of vision” (xliv) that the successful artist communicates is formulated in terms of a progression in which sensory perception leads, by way of affective conviction, to mental insight.6 This process has a direct bearing upon the theme of community in the novella for, Conrad claims, the artist appeals to “the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts” (xl), and, as Berthoud notes, “if there is a necessary connection between ‘visionary truth’ and ‘human solidarity’ it is because the latter is the test of the former” (1992, 181). My examination of the narrative will necessarily extend to the cadences and rhythms whereby the reader is invited to “hear” and “feel” as a prelude to “seeing.”

In its repeated recourse to symmetry, iconography, and framing, the narrative of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* has affinities with the techniques of nineteenth-century narrative painting.7 In the hands of the Pre-Raphaelites this genre of painting, which sets a scene to tell a story, acquired a distinctly social conscience. So, for example, Madox Brown’s portrait of the dignity of manual labor, entitled *Work* (1862–65), also serves as a comment upon the idle rich and social ills.8 Structurally, the southbound progress of the *Narcissus*

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6. See Berthoud 1992 for a full discussion of this.
the Indian Ocean is balanced by her northbound progress in the Atlantic; the
two storm scenes, meteorological and social, afford contrasted visions of the
crew’s solidarity; and, framing the voyage itself, the muster in the first chapter
is symmetrically complemented by the paying-off and dispersal of the crew in
the last.\textsuperscript{9} Within this arrangement, a host of pictorial images acquire symbolic
weight: Singleton is portrayed, standing like a caryatid in the forecastle door-
way, “with his face to the light and his back to the darkness” (24), and James
Wait as “a black idol” in “a silver shrine” (105). In a letter to Helen Watson,
Conrad writes: “Candidly, I think it has certain qualities of art that make it
a thing apart. I tried to get through the veil of details at the essence of life”
(\textit{CLJC} 1:334).

The variable perspective from which the narrative is presented serves the
parallel with the visual arts. Not only is the shift from third-person narra-
tion at the beginning to first-person narration at the end symptomatic of the
trajectory of Modernism in its surrender of omniscience, but the fluctuating
focus of perception, which includes omniscience, (paradoxically) qualified
omniscience, first-person plural, and first-person singular—together with the
use of free indirect discourse—also has obvious consequences for narrative
distance and narrative authority as the reader is encouraged to “see” the voyage
from within and without, felt and reflected experience, isolated incident and
the broader canvas in and against which it acquires meaning.

\textit{The Nigger of the “Narcissus”} ushered in the period of Conrad’s most sus-
tained creative interest in the merchant service: it was followed by the early
Marlow-trilogy and “Typhoon.” But by the time of its publication in 1897,
steamships like the \textit{Nan-Shan} had already stolen the seas from sailing ships.
As Wilson claims: “Technology is the vital fact in the imperial story” (2002,
493)—and Conrad described himself as “the last seaman of a sailing vessel”
(\textit{CLJC} 3:89). Historicized, the novella’s paean to the era of sail thus offers one
in a series of contrasts or binary oppositions that pattern the narrative. Others
include land and sea values, the weight of inherited tradition and the irresist-
ible claims of the present, marine romance and economic realism, and low
subject matter and high art. I shall argue that the coexistence of such “irrec-
 oncilable antagonisms” (\textit{CLJC} 2:348) yields the mythical dimension of \textit{The

\textsuperscript{9} I am grateful to Jeremy Hawthorn for pointing out the contrasting structural arrangements
of \textit{The Nigger of the “Narcissus”} and \textit{The Shadow-Line} (1917). The later novel opens with the
narrator leaving his ship mid-voyage and ends with him preparing to set sail the following day.
Moreover, the previous captain dies mid-voyage and Ransome leaves the ship mid-voyage at
the end of the novella—just as the young captain does at the beginning. In contrast, the near
equivalence of voyage and narrative in \textit{The Nigger of the “Narcissus”} suggests a more optimistic
view of the power of journeys and fictions to subsume human differences into a common pattern
than do the varied trajectories of different characters in \textit{The Shadow-Line}.\textsuperscript{9}
Nigger of the “Narcissus” and by extension the vision of England that is composed of both the inherited privileges of class that ensure that Mr. Creighton rather than Mr. Baker will “get on” in the service, being “quite a gentleman” (167), and the necessary if necessarily subversive clamour for “the right of labour to live” (172).

The structural elegance of the tale is complemented by the microcosmic narrative detail of which paired descriptors and phrases are a noticeable feature. (The following list is not meant to be exhaustive but rather to reveal the widespread nature of this feature.) Singleton is “a lonely relic of a devoured and forgotten generation” (24); his contemporaries were “strong, as those are strong who know neither doubts nor hopes. They had been impatient and enduring, turbulent and devoted, unruly and faithful” (25); “the slim, long hull” of the Narcissus moves beneath “loose upper canvas” blowing in “soft round contours, resembling small white clouds” (27); her passage is “lonely and swift like a small planet” (29); sailors’ lives are “busy and insignificant” (31); during the storm they are “obstinate and exhausted . . . vacant and dreamy” (77); the rescued Wait’s lower lip hangs down “enormous and heavy,” his rescuers are “bothered and dismayed,” and totter with “concealing and absurd gestures” (71); following the storm, “Our little world went on its curved and unswerving path carrying a discontented and aspiring population” (103); Podmore views himself as “meritorious and pure” (83); when he visits Wait, the cabin contains “an immensity of fear and pain; an atmosphere of shrieks and moans; prayers vociferated like blasphemies and whispered curses” (117); addressing the crew, Allistoun’s movements are “unexpected and sudden,” his tone to Donkin “short, sharp” (135); Wait is “black and deathlike . . . appealing and impudent” (122–23); dying, his face is “strange” and “unknown,” “a fantastic and grimacing mask of despair and fury” (151); the sea reveals “the wisdom hidden in all the errors, the certitude that lurks in doubts, the realm of safety and peace beyond the frontiers of sorrow and fear” (138).

I am not suggesting that such pairing is the only characteristics of the narrative. The Nigger of the “Narcissus” is also stylistically marked by what we might call the “generative sentence-construction” that is a hallmark of Conrad’s style in, say, An Outcast of the Islands, where descriptive phrases and clauses proliferate, breeding further phrases and clauses. But here such expansion, often designed to convey scale or grandeur, tends to incorporate or extend to the pattern I have identified. Thus, during the storm: “Never before

had the gale seemed to us more furious, the sea more mad, the sunshine more merciless and mocking, the position of the ship more hopeless and appalling” (70–71); and “[t]hrough the clear sunshine, over the flashing turmoil and uproar of the seas, the ship ran blindly, dishevelled and headlong, as if fleeing for her life; and on the poop we spun, we tottered about, distracted and noisy. We all spoke at once in a thin babble; we had the aspect of invalids and the gestures of maniacs” (88).

Bearing out the appeal in the “Preface” to the “perfect blending of form and substance” (xli), this pattern of paired descriptors replicates at the level of grammar the rhythms that structure the lives of the sailors—as seen in their division into starboard and port watches, for instance, and such claims as: “They must without pause justify their life to the eternal pity that commands toil to be hard and unceasing, from sunrise to sunset, from sunset to sunrise” (90). The narrative emphasizes the nature of seaboard life as cyclical when comparing the *Narcissus* to the seasons: in the morning she has “an aspect of sumptuous freshness, like the spring-time of the earth” (132); while “[o]n clear evenings the silent ship . . . took on a false aspect of passionless repose resembling the winter of the earth” (145).

But while the synthesis of form and substance attests to the self-conscious artistry of the narrative, the appeal to aesthetics that it illustrates has a crucial bearing upon the ultimate meaning of the tale. Consider this set of pairings: Allistoun reproves errors “in a gentle voice, with words that cut to the quick” (31); toward Jimmy, “We hesitated between pity and mistrust” (36); the crew’s contradictory sentiments are voiced by Belfast’s “Knock! Jimmy darlint! . . . Knock! You bloody black beast!” (69); and toward Donkin: “We abominated the creature and could not deny the luminous truth of his contentions” (101). Here the grammatical balance brings into contiguity contradictions and contrasts, rather than echoes and comparisons. In other words, art provides the locus of coherence in which the tale’s thematic discordances might be suspended.

In discussing the condition of the narrative in these terms, I am aware of the danger of imprecision—and I want, for a moment, to be even more so by addressing, briefly, the poetic qualities of the prose. The rhythmic balance of Conrad’s prose in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* that I have identified is consistent with his expressed desire in the “Preface” to make the reader “hear” his written words. This aural quality is present in the description of how the voyage begins:

The *Narcissus* left alone, heading south, seemed to stand resplendent and still upon the restless sea, under the moving sun. Flakes of foam swept past
her sides; the water struck her with flashing blows; the land glided away slowly fading; a few birds screamed on motionless wings over the swaying mastheads. But soon the land disappeared, the birds went away; and to the west the pointed sail of an Arab dhow running for Bombay, rose triangular and upright above the sharp edge of the horizon, lingered and vanished like an illusion. (28)

Poetic qualities, such as rhyme, half-rhyme, assonance, and alliteration underscore the prose and, for all the talk of Conrad’s foreignness, the stresses fall, for the most part, where we would expect them to. Look at the trochaic rhythm of: “Flakes of foam swept past her sides,” for example. According to Yves Bonnefoy (2005) the respective acts of poetry and prose represent different points of view as to what reality is, the intuitive and the conceptual. The cross-fertilization of these different attitudes to words in The Nigger of the “Narcissus” takes various forms. For example, the variable perspective combines with the balance of scene and summary in the narrative to produce a form of ekphrasis: reading The Nigger of the “Narcissus” one is struck by the sense that the text often appears to be wondering at pictures of the sea, those ornamental sequences that throw the crew’s actions into relief and in which the plot seems to confess its subordination to a pictorial form. The resulting portrait of seamanship (and nationalism) is composed of often conflicting elements, where romance and realism coexist, and humdrum routine is transformed into heroic adventure.

**Mythology and Nationalism**

On the eve of departure, Mr. Creighton looks “dreamily into the night of the East” and sees in it “the caressing blueness of an English sky” (21–22). No less than Donkin, he is going “home.” I have argued that the narrative of The Nigger of the “Narcissus” synthesizes discordance through aesthetic patterns of balance and proportion. My concern in the rest of this essay will be to show that the different images of seafaring and England are similarly synthesized to yield a national mythology.

*The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* invites such interpretation: it is, after all, fashioned in the tradition of literary odysseys in which individual lives and actions acquire mythological status. The introduction to the crew in the opening chapter resonates with maritime stereotypes: old sea-salts, “shellbacks,” like Singleton; Archie sews while Charley practices tying knots; the crew demand “a bottle” from the liberty men—there is even a ship’s cat, “Tom,” to complete
the portrait. Such stereotypes coexist with a further set of archetypal and mythological references: Allistoun commands the ship from “the Olympian heights of his poop” (31), whence his voice “thundered” (160); while Old Singleton is “Father Time” (24) and, growling at the brake from within “the incult tangle of his white beard” (26), resembles nothing so much as Neptune. His memory is peopled by “a crowd of Shades” (141). Also included in this category are the name of the ship and the description of the Thames as “the dark River of the Nine Bends” (173) that recalls the mythological river Styx of the Underworld.

Added to this, the adjective-noun combinations ensure that the Narcissus is described in both micro- and macrocosmic terms simultaneously—“a small planet” (29) and “Our little world” (103)—while the sea offers “an image of life” (155). When James Wait looks out from his sickbed it is upon “a fabulous world made up of leaping fire and sleeping water” (104). Confronting the storm, the crew resemble “men strangely equipped for some fabulous adventure” (52). The worlds of the everyday and the fantastic are everywhere drawn into correspondence. Literal examples of this include Singleton’s immersion in Bulwer-Lytton’s silver-fork novel *Pelham* (1828), the sailmaker’s “impossible stories about Admirals” (32), and the crew’s refashioning of their actions during the storm: “We remembered our danger, our toil—and conveniently forgot our horrible scare” (100). Even Podmore envisions himself as “Samson” (115) when trying to “save” Wait. The need to fashion such myths to explain human behavior is an important feature of this narrative and evident in various formulations, including the ideal of seamanship, Podmore’s religious belief, and sailor superstitions. These appeals to explanations of human existence suit a tale about extreme experience. The voyage of the Narcissus ensures Singleton’s completed wisdom (99), for instance, while Wait’s death—“what’s coming to us all” (127), in Allistoun’s phrase—is magnified by persistent sepulchral references: forecastle berths are “like graves tenanted by uneasy corpses” (22); Wait’s sickroom is transformed into a potential “coffin” (66) during the storm; and sailors sleeping on deck resemble “neglected graves” (155).

A further aspect of the narrative that suggests a deliberate appeal to a mythical, folkloric register comes in the form of animal imagery. The novella’s frame of reference includes a veritable bestiary: thunder squalls resemble “a troop of wild beasts” (104); Belfast leaps “like a springbok” (68); during the storm, Jimmy is “[c]aught like a bloomin’ rat in a trap” (64); later he gasps “like a fish” (111); the boatswain compares Podmore’s ungainliness on deck to a “milch-cow” (81); Singleton is “[s]trong as a horse” (98); to Donkin the crew “ain’t men . . . sheep they are” (110); described as a “cur” (136) by Captain Allistoun, Donkin adopts the slander, referring to himself as “a mangy dorg”
Most apparent are the bird references persistently applied to Donkin: his hand is “like the claw of a snipe” (105); he has a “conical, fowl-like profile” (110); his ears resemble “the thin wings of a bat” (110); to James Wait he is “a poll-parrot” who chatters “like a dirty white cockatoo” (110); after Wait’s burial he resembles “a sick vulture” (128); he is described as “pecking” at Jimmy’s eyes (111) and as “perched” on the coal locker (144).

For my purposes, it is unnecessary to examine either the archetypal investment in such appellations or the implications of the metamorphosis involved in, say, Donkin’s transformation from bird to “mangy dorg.” I would, however, note in passing that the Narcissus herself is described as a bird: once in the English Channel and “[u]nder white wings” she is compared to “a great tired bird speeding to its nest” (161). This identification, albeit at the level of metaphor, includes Donkin in Wait’s claim to “belong to the ship” (18) and, as such, seems designed to trouble any idealized interpretation of the British Merchant Service.

Indeed, idealized interpretations generally are undermined or subverted in this narrative. Podmore’s brand of Christianity makes no converts among the crew, but as Wait’s funeral demonstrates, nor does religion generally: as Mr. Baker reads the funeral oration, “The words, missing the unsteady hearts of men, rolled out to wander without a home upon the heartless sea” (159). By contrast, Singleton’s sailor superstition is proved when Wait dies in sight of land. Poised between first-person and omniscience, the narrating voice offers varying degrees of authority, alternating between speculative belief and final knowledge, allowing different codes to coexist within the narrative.

Composed in 1896 and early 1897 and drawing upon Conrad’s two decades as a sailor, including his voyage in the actual Narcissus in 1885, The Nigger of the “Narcissus” is clearly “of its age,” the late-Victorian age of Empire. Like all narratives, it stands unavoidably at a confluence of discourses, those that defined the moment of its composition and those conferred from a distance by its subsequent reception. Although a work of fiction, its idealism is tempered by the realism of its nautical detail and its engagement with issues that bear directly upon prevailing definitions of England and Englishness, through such themes as racism, what constitutes a gentleman, and, perhaps the debate of English political identity, the conflict between unquestioning duty—the Nelsonian imperative in the context of the sea—and individual rights.

Old Singleton represents an ideal of unquestioning service and tradition.

11. “Mr. Baker read out: ‘To the deep,’ and paused” (159). The Anglican Book of Common Prayer provides a further repository of language and culture in the novella.

12. According to W. H. Chesson, “‘The Nigger’ is not an episode of the sea; it is a final expression of the pathology of Fear” (Stape and Knowles 1996, 30).
yet when we meet him in chapter 1 he is already a “relic” of a bygone era. Furthermore, in the face of the contemporary historical reality of labor rights and representation, the determination of such “everlasting children of the mysterious sea” (25) to remain “voiceless” seems stubbornly anachronistic. Described as “old as Father Time” (24), it is, wryly, time itself, in the form of the aging process, that Singleton is made to confront during his thirty hours at the helm during the storm. It is not going to far to claim that, in the novella, Singleton, simultaneously “Father Time” and “a child of time” (24), is forced to acknowledge the passing of time, is brought from timelessness into time. Yet time is measured by change and one aspect of this change is the demand for rights voiced by Donkin. Even Singleton’s prediction and explanation of Wait’s death appears to assert the claims of the past, voiced as a sailor superstition that, if true, also remains inexplicable. Any Manichean distinction between past and present, therefore, entails setting the appeal of tradition against the veracity of reason.

This is not to decry Singleton’s duty but rather to note that the tradition he represents is also presented as antithetical to social and political realities. Significantly, both “the everlasting children of the mysterious sea” and their successors, “the grown-up children of a discontented earth” (25), are presented in qualified terms: Singleton’s generation had been “impatient and enduring, turbulent and devoted, unruly and faithful,” their contemporary counterparts are “less naughty, but less innocent; less profane, but perhaps also less believing; and if they have learned to speak they have also learned how to whine.” The inclusiveness that defines the former—“unruly and devoted”—is contrasted with the lack (“less”) that defines the latter. That said, according to Captain Allistoun the crew are, “[a] good crowd, too, as they go nowadays” (103).

In the contrast between past and present expressions of seamanship, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* historicizes the sea. The conservative maritime ideal embodied in Old Singleton, whose very name (altered from “Sullivan” in the manuscript) contains an appeal to nineteenth-century individualism, encounters forces disruptive to the code of collective responsibility. The “votary of change” (14), Donkin, who deserted from his previous ship, declares: “I stood up for my rights like a good ‘un. I am an Englishman, I am” (12).13 By contrast, Singleton’s “inarticulate and indispensable” generation lived “without knowing the sweetness of affections or the refuge of home” (25). According to the third-person narrator, Donkin “knows all about his rights, but knows nothing . . . of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship’s company.”

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13. Donkin here voices the paradox that impinges on the story: obliged to surrender his individual rights by joining the crew, he has then had to defend these.
(11). When Captain Allistoun reprimands the crew after the near-mutiny it is in terms of “duty” (134); their response is to “stand by and see [Donkin] bullied” (136).

Multiple narrators technically complement the narrative’s emphasis upon the crew as a collective. The narrative begins with Mr. Baker wanting to muster “our crowd” (3); it ends with the now-first-person narrator’s detached survey: “You were a good crowd” (173). This is a group-fiction, as Conrad acknowledged in his comments on Stephen Crane’s The Red Badge of Courage: “Stephen Crane dealt in his book with the psychology of the mass—the army; while I—in mine—had been dealing with the same subject on a much smaller scale and in more specialized conditions—the crew of a merchant ship, brought to the test of what I may venture to call the moral problem of conduct” (Last Essays, 95). Indeed, the very terms and nature of Donkin’s appeal are to a specific socioeconomic group. He will, of course, have become a landlubber by the end of the narrative.

As their designation “children of the sea” suggests, the generation of seamen represented by Singleton are somehow outside human time—at least until mortality and aging are brought home to them by experiences such as the storm off the Cape of Good Hope. With their “home” as the sea—they are described as “without . . . the refuge of home” (25)—they are also detached from home as a physical place: it is Greater Britain rather than Great Britain that houses them. The chapter succeeding the storm scene begins: “On men reprieved by its disdainful mercy, the immortal sea confers in its justice the full privilege of desired unrest” (90). Such “desired unrest” locates the ideal of service outside the conflicted vision of home and belonging that is voiced in the novella. By including Singleton and Donkin, unquestioning maritime duty and subversive social rights, in the same boat, as it were, The Nigger of the “Narcissus” offers not only a contrast between the two but also an attempt to historicize and politicize the romantic ideal.

In the contest between past and present codes of conduct it is worth noting that it is Singleton’s reading of Pelham, the adventures of a gentleman dandy in fashionable society, that introduces, albeit in a minor key, the narrative of what constitutes a gentleman, whose subversive consequences for social hierarchy encourages the reader to view the world of the Narcissus as emblematic of broader society. As Magwitch’s attempt to buy a gentleman in Great Expectations (1860–61) demonstrates, inherited class divisions were becoming increasingly porous. The crew’s discussion about their social betters is interrupted by the narrator’s observation: “They were forgetting their toil, they were forgetting themselves” (32). But hierarchy itself is implicitly questioned in Allistoun’s signing of James Wait: “Sorry for him . . . Kind of impulse” (127).
This allies him with the “latent egoism of tenderness to suffering” (138) that defines the crew’s response to “Jimmy.”

As Hawthorn has argued, Conrad’s choice of James Wait as a central character is historically acute, “for if anything symbolized contradiction and unclarity in the late Victorian popular mind it was the figure of the Negro” (1992, 102). Casual racism inflects the crew’s reception of the “St. Kitts nigger” (37). Uncertainty about his illness only exacerbates this, leaving them stranded between “pity and mistrust” (36). Donkin’s view is that “damned furiners should be kept under” (13). He “didn’t want to ’ave no truck with ’em dirty furiners” (43). Historically, as Conrad himself discovered, the nation’s inability to meet the British Merchant Service’s demand for sailors meant that international crews were a common feature of the fleet. As second mate in the actual Narcissus, “Conrad Korzeniowski,” as he signed his name in the “Agreement and Account of Crew,” served with sailors whose birthplaces included Norway, Canada, Australia, Sweden, and Germany as well as those in Britain. One of the seamen, Joseph Barron, lists his birthplace as Charlton, which Jerry Allen suggests is Charlton, Georgia, and Ian Watt speculates may be a mistranscription of Charlestown, Nevis, near St. Kitts. It may, of course, simply be Charlton in the East End of London. My point, however, is that, writ large, the racism exhibited toward James Wait simultaneously entails a threat to the prowess of the merchant service that enabled Empire.

Shortly before his death, Wait recalls a “Canton Street Girl” who “[c]ooks oysters just as I like” and who “would chuck—any toff—for a coloured gentleman” (149). Admittedly Wait’s “scandalised” addressee, who “could hardly believe his ears” (149), is Donkin, but nonetheless his claim weaves together issues of race and class in a manner that seems designed to threaten inherited ideas of superiority. Put starkly, it poses a challenge to English manhood. Yet, for all of his subversive potential, before being committed to the sea, Wait’s coffin rests under a Union Jack (159).

Although my attention has been largely focused upon the crew, the novel-la’s epigraph steers the reader toward the Narcissus herself: “My Lord in his discourse discovered a great deal of love to this ship.”14 In Conrad’s tale, the romantic portrait of the Narcissus is framed between reminders of her commercial functionality. Although, famously, Conrad never identifies the ship’s cargo, this is a trading voyage, and the crew’s adventure is subordinate, or at least incidental, to the demands of economics. Stripped of her romance, along

14. The ship referred to in Pepys’s diary entry (for 30 March 1660) is the Naseby, in which Charles II returned to England after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. As Watts has noted, this connection sustains parallel, underlying motifs concerning the restoration of hierarchy after an “individual rights” revolt (1988, 133).
with her sails and cargo, at the end of the voyage, the Narcissus is reclaimed for realism, returned to her true status as a cog within the Merchant Service, to the reason she was born “in the thundering peal of hammers beating upon iron, in black eddies of smoke, under a grey sky, on the banks of the Clyde” (50). Like the belaying pin that Donkin fashions as a weapon, and perhaps like the individual crew members themselves, the Narcissus’s true identity is as part of a broader system.

In the actual Narcissus, Conrad sailed from Bombay not to London but to Dunkirk. His decision to alter this fact, ensuring that his adopted homeland is the destination of the fictional voyage, dramatizes the relationship between national identity and the British Merchant Service. The portrait of England that results, however, is by turns romantic and grotesque, now the view of an enraptured patriot, now that of an exile within his own community. As Conrad wrote of the tale: “There are so many touches necessary for such a picture” (CLJC 1:310).

The Nigger of the “Narcissus” is a Jubilee-year piece. It, too, is celebratory. But the image of England it offers, “A ship mother of fleets and nations! The great flagship of the race” (163), is a night vision, inspired by the comparison between a lighthouse and a ship’s riding light. As such it offers itself as an imperfect vision, emphasising this through contrasted attributes: “She towered up immense and strong, guarding priceless traditions and untold suffering, sheltering glorious memories and base forgetfulness, ignoble virtues and splendid transgressions” (162–63). This is not to divest England of her glory, rather to temper such glory with clear-eyed fact. The mythologizing in The Nigger of the “Narcissus” is characterized by this combination of idealism and realism, ensuring and ensured by the coexistence of both the poetic and the prosaic. The further up the Thames that the Narcissus sails, the less appealing seems England. Dickensian images punctuate the description: “tall factory chimneys appeared in insolent bands and watched her go by” (163). The river journey, like that of the sea voyage, thus serves as a journey of gradual disenchantment in which an elevated image of home is reconstituted by being forced into contiguity with the banal substratum on which it is founded.

In Donkin’s words, the crew lead a “dorg’s loife for two poun’ ten a month” (100). Whatever the truth of their exploitation, the material fact is that they put to sea for the same reason that Conrad wrote novels: economic necessity.

15. Donkin is presumably speaking of wages earned by an Ordinary Seaman (O.S.). In the “Agreement and Account of Crew,” held at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, the monthly earnings of Ordinary Seamen in the actual Narcissus was two pounds, two pounds five shillings, or two pounds fifteen shillings. The variance, presumably, relates to their maritime experience.
The literal voyage of the Narcissus ends among “the dust of all the continents” and overlooked by warehouses whose windows resemble “the eyes of over-fed brutes” (165); that of the crew ends with the payoff—before the narrator takes his “last look” (171) at them, outside the Mint. Economics and romance are further conflicted as the sailors seek the “illusions” dispensed at the Black Horse. But, look at what’s on offer: “the illusions [plural] of strength, mirth, happiness” and “the illusion [singular] of splendour and poetry of life” (171).

Before the voyage begins, new hands and liberty-men are rowed out to the ship by “white-clad Asiatics, who clamoured fiercely for payment before coming alongside the gangway-ladder” (4). In the ensuring exchange, the “feverish and shrill babble of Eastern language, struggled against the masterful tones of seamen, who argued against brazen claims and dishonest hopes by profane shouts” (4). This conflict, “over sums ranging from five annas to half a rupee” (4), proves thematically and stylistically directive: commercially it suggests that romance cannot free itself from economic forces, while linguistically it suggests an international presence at the beginning of a narrative that will query and try to give voice to national experience. The last point I want to make about the place of money in the narrative concerns its magical power. Conrad’s next composition, “Karain,” would extend this theme. In the novella, money is transformative. Donkin’s altered fortunes demonstrate this. But this magic appears, playfully, to work both ways in the commercial sleight-of-hand by which the wealth gathered from all the continents is reduced to the twice-mentioned “dust of all the continents” in the London docks. The Midas effect is reversed.

Flaubert identified Don Giovanni, Hamlet, and the sea as the “finest things God ever made” (Steegmuller 1980, 83). Conrad, who coincidentally shares the year of his birth with the publication of Madame Bovary, was an assiduous pupil. But to him, as this text shows, commerce is one of a matrix of factors that sullies the portrait of the sea. As its treatment of seamen demonstrates, The Nigger of the “Narcissus” relocates standard myths within a broader context that incorporates the human and commercial realities they tend to obscure. In Conrad’s mythologizing the forces of cohesion are inseparable from the forces of disintegration; thus, the heroism of the common man remains, but so too does his commonness; the romance of seafaring remains, but so too does the economic purpose that sustains it. The Nigger of the “Narcissus” negotiates both the nonfictions and the fictions of the sea. To do otherwise would have meant the novella shading into anachronism or pastiche. It has not been my purpose in this essay to charge Conrad with iconoclasm in his treatment of myths, national or maritime; rather I have tried to show how he reconstitutes such myths as unavoidably polyphonic.
Work Cited


