"To My Readers in America": Conrad's 1914 Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"

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"The nineteenth century was the first century of human sympathy,—the age when half wonderingly we began to descry in others that transfigured spark of divinity which we call Myself; when clodhoppers and peasants, and tramps and thieves, and millionaires and—sometimes—Negroes, became throbbing souls whose warm pulsing life touched us so nearly that we half gasped with surprise, crying, "Thou too! Hast Thou seen Sorrow and the dull waters of Hopelessness? Hast Thou known Life?" And then all-helplessly we peered into those Other-worlds, and wailed, "O World of Worlds, how shall man make you one?" (W. E. B. Du Bois, 235–36).

"In 'The Nigger of the Narcissus' the real hero is not Jimmy, the colored giant who deceives the others only to die self-deceived, but the crew as a whole. As a crew it is divided against itself, not by man standing against man, but by the conflict of two antagonistic emotions within the breast of every man. The emotions in question are those of pity and cruelty—both thriving side by side in primitive man, but so that one of them marks the past out of which he is emerging, while the other one points toward the future that is his goal." (Edwin Björkman, *Voices of Tomorrow*, 256).

"Reste cette formidable différence de notre universe avec tous ceux qui l'ont précédé: aujourd'hui, les victimes ont des droits. Si vous pouviez rencontrer des fonctionnaires grecs ou romains et que vous cherchiez à leur suggérer que les victimes ont des droits, cela ne les ferait même pas rire! ils ne comprendraient pas!"
Dans aucun univers avant le nôtre, ce n’était pensable! Tandis qu’aujourd’hui ce langage n’est contesté par personne” (René Girard, *Quand ce choses commenceront*, 23).

“The very conditions that have helped to stigmatize *nigger* have also been conducive to the emergence of certain troubling tendencies. Among these latter are unjustified deception, overeagerness to detect insult, the repression of *good* uses of *nigger*, and the overly harsh punishment of those who use the *N*-word imprudently or even wrongly.” (Randall Kennedy, 117)

I want to amalgamate the powerful insights of René Girard and our beloved Joseph Conrad. The best way to keep company with Girard is to take up seriously his regard for the greatest writers as antecedent and fellow researchers of human behavior. If we simply “apply” Girard, transcoding Conrad into Girardian terms, we have learned nothing more than Girard has already accomplished, and we have wasted Conrad.

Girard’s long view of human affairs employs a distinction between religious and judicial societies: the primitive is organized around the ritual sacrifices seemingly required by the gods, who alone can bring peace to the human community. The generative model for ritual that Girard proposes is simple: antagonists always blame each other for the conflict they share. The more two contest with each other, the more like-minded they become, focused on the same goal of vanquishing the other. If one becomes like one’s antagonist, then, correspondingly, one can look like the antagonist of another, of others, of all.

In any case, a conflict forces temporary outsiders to choose sides. Thus such conflicts easily spread, ending finally when one last enemy is vanquished by all the others who are left. Then there is peace. Ritual sacrifice addressed to the gods, who control all that humans can’t including violence, invokes this all-against-one spectacle which precedes peace because that is the form in which the gods brought them peace previously. Modern culture, on the other hand, depends on the judicial system to protect everyone, to punish the guilty, but never to allow anyone to take the law into their own hands. To put our modern difference simply: in the sacrifices of primitive culture we can see scapegoats, in the legal system we see judicial punishment.

How, according to Girard, did we disassemble sacrifice to become modern? If the universally occurring scapegoat ritual found across
world cultures suggests that sacrifice has been the sole model to achieve enough peace to leave some historical trace of social organization, nevertheless communities cannot leave alone the paradoxical sacer of the victim: profane because he is responsible for everything that goes wrong, but holy because, once he is sacrificed, the gods make everything go right again. Social structures and rituals of different societies resemble each other because they begin in the solidarity achieved through sacrifice, but they begin as well to diverge according to how they rationalize or structuralize out the paradox of profanity or holiness of a single victim.

In those communities which emphasize the holiness of the victim, correspondingly delay and ultimately discard his sacrifice, in favor of some substitute victim—out of this comes, Girard suggests, the kingship system. Other communities emphasize the victim’s profaneness, leading to a weaker, more secular leadership system, and the judicial system itself, which punishes the guilty with such authority that no reply is possible.

Of particular interest is Girard’s long view, that the passage to the modern is through demythologizing—not just of the divinity of kingship and divine rule, but of persecution thereby known as scapegoating. In his most pointed attempt to offer a primer to his hypothesis, The Scapegoat, Girard distinguishes between a scapegoat structure and a scapegoat theme. A medieval text of persecution which blames Jews and/or witches for everything that goes wrong has a scapegoat structure, unaware that it falsely accuses. A scapegoat theme reveals persecution to an audience which has a common and widespread understanding of the term.

Thus we can characterize modern reading or modern writing by assuming, as Girard does, that we are becoming ever more adept at recognizing persecution. This evolution from scapegoat structure to scapegoat theme is adumbrated but not completed in Conrad’s novel The Nigger of the “Narcissus,” and fully articulated in his later preface “To My Readers in America” in 1914.²

Yet the mechanism of scapegoating is so simple, so easily assembled or reassembled, that it can appear or reappear, at least in a rudimentary form, in all those behaviors uncontrolled by a judicial system—any “private” behavior that is not actionable or illegal, as well as inter- or intranational behavior which too often recognizes no transcendent or global judicial authority (such as the United Nations). The modern can
be thought of as a place where the recognition of scapegoating is highly developed but which coexists (as the above quote from Randall Kennedy suggests) with residual and often virulent regressions into collective violence that hijack this recognition of victimization.

The easy work is to see someone else’s innocent victims, to detect scapegoating in others. This is the final, resistant, and perhaps uniquely modern stage of violence, scapegoating others for scapegoating. The racism of one hundred years ago is easy to see. It is clear that the resistance of Conrad’s American publisher to the original title of his 1897 novel, The Nigger of the “Narcissus,” was due solely to the vulgarity of the language, not the pain of the term for those designated. In America, the novel was entitled The Children of the Sea instead, until 1914, when Conrad publicly thanked his publishers for returning to the original title.

I have chosen Conrad to accompany Girard because, if Girard is right about human behavior (and great writers as fellow researchers), we ought to be able to both confirm and refine Girard’s hypothesis about modern society in Conrad’s work. The Nigger of the “Narcissus” is a foundational text for understanding Conrad’s career as a writer as well as for modern literature. Yet our love for Conrad’s exemplary profundity and the scandal of the title of this novel that must be named whenever you talk of Conrad confound each other. The alarming and heartening offhandedness of Randall Kennedy’s statement of premise for Nigger (2002), “how are we doing with the N-word?” does not mitigate our certainty of the persistent toxic effect of that word in America. As in the case of Chinua Achebe’s censure of Heart of Darkness, we must ask for an increase in understanding human behavior to accompany the pain of these racist representations or we must strike Conrad from the syllabus.

The Nigger of the “Narcissus” (1897) is the book Conrad felt made him a writer; it is as well one of the most scandalously offensive titles in early modernism. There is little point in scapegoating Conrad as a racist, but there is no point in condescendingly forgiving Conrad for using the N-word because he was ignorant or naïve or unaware of the especially inflammatory American context. This novel proves that he knew the offensiveness of the term, and intended to strike the note of ethnic and racial conflict. At one point in the novel, James Wait exasperatedly curses Belfast as an “Irish beggar” for calling him a “nigger.” In his American preface, Conrad publicly and provocatively thanked his American publishers, who had originally censored his scandalous title
by publishing his novel as *The Children of the Sea*, for returning to his original title in 1914.

The novel opens with the modern culture of complaint in full bloom. On board the "Narcissus," Craik (a.k.a. "Belfast") invokes the solidarity of ordinary seamen oppressed by officers and owners, but his fury at their victimizers is "facetious"(8) and is regarded solely as a comic turn by his audience. Donkin (a.k.a. "Whitechapel") takes his turn at invoking identity-in-resistance politics, but his claim to (fellow) victim status is repudiated.

They all knew him. Is there a spot on earth where such a man is unknown, an ominous survival testifying to the eternal fitness of lies and impudence? . . . They all knew him! He was the man that cannot steer, that cannot splice, that dodges the work on dark nights; that, aloft, holds on frantically with both arms and legs, and swears at the wind, the sleet, the darkness; the man who curses the sea while others work. The man who is the last out and the first in when all hands are called. The man who can't do most things and won't do the rest. The pet of philanthropists and self-seeking landlubbers. The sympathetic and deserving creature that knows all about his rights, but knows nothing of courage, of endurance, and of the unexpressed faith, of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship's company. The independent offspring of the ignoble freedom of the slums full of disdain and hate for the austere servitude of the sea. (10–11)

They are waiting to be mustered, a crowd waiting to be led. Both Belfast and Donkin propose themselves as rivals to the authority of the merchant service. Belfast's humor saves him from being taken up on his offer of leadership, but Donkin is rejected, sacrificially, by the crew he tries to mobilize. The repetitive and ritualistic naming of Donkin's crimes represents the way that the community polarizes itself in solidarity against his claims of being a victim, a leader of other victims.

The community which "knows" Donkin's infirmities knits itself together by claiming for themselves the virtues it denies him. Eventually, the sailors express a recognizably modern charity by flinging at his ragged form the clothes they themselves wouldn't wear any longer: "The gust of their benevolence sent a wave of sentimental pity through their doubting hearts. They were touched by their own readiness to alle-
violate a shipmate’s misery.” (12) The peculiarly self-conscious and self-regarding gesture by which they grudgingly acknowledge his claim to victim status sequence-dates this as the modern age, which I’ve called elsewhere the age of hypocriticism, the moment when we know everything about persecution but do not act properly on what we know.

The performances of Belfast and Donkin help characterize their audience as the mustered crew which James Wait (freely referred to as “the Nigger”) will join and even, for a time, master:

They answered in diverse tones: in thick mutters, in clear, ringing voices; and some, as if the whole thing had been an outrage on their feelings, used an injured intonation: for discipline is not ceremonious in merchant ships, where the sense of hierarchy is weak, and where all feel themselves equal before the unconcerned immensity of the sea and the exacting appeal of the work.

(16)

The playing or putting on of a tone of injury declares that the crew is a modern crowd, that is, a postsacrificial “mob” (15), and that we are seeing an instance of the loss of differences peculiar to “une étrange sorte de non-culture ou d’anticulture que nous nommes, précisément, le moderne” (La Violence et le sacré, 261). Furthermore, Belfast, Donkin, and, especially, Wait inspire in the community of the ship a peculiarly modern forfeiting of this opportune moment to comprehend the increasingly visible and arbitrary nature of the victimizing mechanism, a resistance to the opportunity of the day and the hour for which “hypocrisy” is too mild a word.

Wait is a master of subaltern counterstrategy from his first appearance in the novel. He is so successful at immediately befuddling the first mate’s authority that it is hard not to think that he himself somehow caused his name to be blotted in the ship’s log so that he could commandingly and provocatively shout “Wait!” to Mr. Baker.

The narrator shows himself falling under Wait’s spell. At first, he notes that Wait “seemed not to hear” “a faint hum that sounded like the suppressed mutter of the word ‘Nigger’” (17)—in other words, the narrator can see that Wait acts as if he doesn’t know he is surrounded by a hostile mob. But soon we are told that he “enunciated distinctly, with soft precision. The deep, rolling tones of his voice filled the deck without effort. He was naturally scornful, unaffectedly condescending
..." (18). The narrator’s refined use of “enunciated” follows, perhaps unconsciously, Wait’s stylish explanation that Mr Baker “misapprehended.” All of these guises, like his ability to project his voice, are part of Wait’s repertoire of resistance, studied, not without effort.

Further, as Bruce Harkness has suggested, the first shift from third person to first person in the novel comes at just this point, as if the narrator has put aside impersonality to rejoin the crew, drawn back into the select circle which surrounds Wait’s charismatic performance. The integrity (not the failure) of Conrad’s narrator is indicated by every shift of narrative mode. Like Marlow on the deck of the Nellie when he remembers the Company’s chief accountant, he admits to feeling again (“Moreover, I respected the fellow. Yes. . . .” [68]) the respect he had then for these “achievements of character.”

If the narrator shows us the effect of Wait’s counterstrategy even on himself, he shows as well the profound metaphysical resentment of Wait’s difference. “The disdainful tones had ceased, and, breathing heavily, he stood still, surrounded by all these white men. He held his head up in the glare of the lamp, a head vigorously modelled into deep shadows and shining lights, a head powerful and misshapen with a tormented and flattened face, a face pathetic and brutal: the tragic, the mysterious, the repulsive mask of a nigger’s soul” (18). Our modern, even metabolic resistance to scapegoating immediately recoils from this passage as toxic. There is no self-reflective ironic distance or uncertainty here, no hint that the narrator might partially use the word “mask” as figure for Wait’s strategy—this is the full “metaphysics of resentment, irony, and impotent hatred without cause” necessary and preliminary to persecution.

I have repeated Girard’s formula for “metaphysical rivalry” in Deceit, Desire and the Novel to initiate a discussion which I hope shows ultimately that this outburst of racial hatred is repugnant, but not contagious in the sense of being imitable. Adding Conrad to Girard’s discussion of the great novelistic tradition amplifies both Conrad and Girard, applying them to the great problem of the twentieth century—the color line.

By discussing Cervantes, Stendahl, Dostoievski and Proust, Girard develops a triangular model of desire. Desire cannot be understood by focusing solely on the subject and his/her objects. Desire is copied or learned from another, never innocent or original. Further, Girard argues that the breakdown of inherited differences in favor of modern
democratic forms fundamentally changed the terms of imitation and desire from external to internal mediation.

Whom do we copy? In the earlier world of inherited aristocracy, one could emulate without rivalry because the disciple lived on a plane external to the model he admired. If the disciple copied the model's desires, he must find analogous desirable objects in his own world, not the world of the divinity from which he was ontologically excluded.

But when everyone exists on the same plane of being, our models can become rivals as well. As we learn our desires from our models, we reach for their objects. What is their response? The model feels an increased desire for his own objects, copying, in effect, his disciple's desire that reflects his own. Further, he now sees his disciple as a rival and forcefully rejects him.

What is the effect of this renunciation on the disciple-rival? The disciple focuses so completely on his model-rival's rejection that the object itself diminishes in significance. The disciple can now only associate success with the rival who blocks the way, not because of some latent masochism (or some other "abnormal" psychological mechanism), but because the only triumph which can satisfy him or her is over the rival who has vanquished him until now.

If one can understand how these two rivals can begin to copy each other, one can see how rivalry erases differences, even as the rivals see only monstrous difference in each other. Girard reserves the word metaphysical for a rivalry exacerbated to such an intensity that the contest is no longer over a prized object, but (rivalrous) being itself. "Men become gods in the eyes of each other."12

As in the case of spontaneous violence giving birth to mimetic polarization of all against one, one person's rival can become the rival of another, yet another, and then all. Girard powerfully connects his theory of modern desire with his scapegoat theory in a single chapter of Violence and the Sacred, "From Mimetic Desire to the Monstrous Double."13 One becoming charismatically everyone's model-rival in the modern world is akin to the mimetic process which produces the victim of scapegoat ritual. Any rival who has "successfully" accumulated the admiration of others can easily, perhaps even inevitably, become the obstacle of everyone's desire, the inhumanly monstrous enemy of all. The monstrous double is Girard's term for the unanimous victim of sacrifice seen through the transfiguring eyes of his persecutors' metaphysical hatred.
We can see in the passage above that Wait, body and soul, is the monstrous double of the "Narcissus." As a man like any other who must live before he dies, he must master (or be mastered by) the fluctuations of desire and hatred of the crew’s metaphysical resentment. On the best terms he can negotiate, in a social system he did not invent but nevertheless must work in, he draws and dispels admiration and anger to himself. The inability to rationalize out the contradictory pull of fascinated hatred and sympathy for Wait keeps the crew off balance.

The novel insists through repetitive imagery that Wait is seen as sacred to the ship in the full sense of sacer, holy and profane, adored and hated. The crew regard Wait’s place of rest as though it were a “church,” but they serve him with both “rage and humility” (37). “The little place, repainted white, had, in the night, the brilliance of a silver shrine where a black idol, reclining stiffly under a blanket, blinked its weary eyes and received our homage.” (105) Donkin compounds the sense of modern duplicity by officiating “with the air of a demonstrator” (105). They treat Wait like some ancient leader, like “a sick tyrant” (35); they approach him “as though we had been the base courtiers of a hated prince” (37). Something like the ancient sacred has been reborn on ship; Wait here is an external mediator, a leader raised to an ontological plane different from his followers.

We see a remarkable amalgamation of the scapegoat and the divine ruler or external mediator in what the narrator sees in Wait. But we must not mechanically stage Conrad’s thinking as plugging in evidence for a theory like Girard’s. Conrad, like all great writers, wonders about what he sees. Like all great modern writers, he wonders about the reapparance of myth and the primitive in modern behavior. Why does the crew’s attitude towards Wait resemble ancient worship and rite? Somehow, Wait has converted the metaphysical antipathy of racism to master the ship, without having a theory either. Wait only admits to shamming sickness, and perhaps (to himself) shamming while he is really sick.

If the toxic passage above depicting Wait’s soul characterizes ground zero of racial hatred, the narrator’s relation to his metaphysical attitude to Wait fluctuates during the voyage. Singleton maintains throughout a mythic certitude that niggers calm the headwinds until they die. “I have seen them die like flies.” He stopped, thoughtful, as if trying to recollect gruesome things, details of horrors, hecatombs of niggers. They looked at him fascinated. He was old enough to remember
slavers, bloody mutinies, pirates perhaps; who could tell through what
violences and terrors he had lived!” (129–30) Such episodes exactly
catch the revelatory potential of the narrator’s transitional middle posi-
tion between embodying racism and the rejection of racism as toxic.

On the one hand, his narrative permits a reader to believe that the
headwind somehow seems to pick up once Wait’s corpse is delivered
with difficulty to the sea; on the other hand, his self-conscious exaggera-
tion of language here indicates his distance from Singleton’s mental
image of “hecatombs of niggers.” We are watching a resistance being
born in the consciousness of the narrator. The narrator does not con-
sciously criticize slave trafficking, but when we remember the detailed
floorplans of the slave ships and the utter savagery of the enterprise,
how else are we to understand how the narrator has arrived at
“hecatombs,” the nightmarishly precise word for such rites?

It is in his resistance to his own sympathy (admitting both sympathy
and resistance to it, as in the passages above) that the narrator performs
his most valuable service in characterizing the modern.

[Wait] . . . was demoralising. Through him we were becoming
highly humanised, tender, complex, excessively decadent: we
understood the subtext of his fear, sympathised with his repul-
sions, shrinkings, evasions, delusions—as though we had been
overcivilised, and rotten, and without any knowledge of the
meaning of life. We had the air of being initiated in some infa-
mous mysteries; we had the profound grimaces of conspirators,
exchanged meaning glances, significant short words. We were
inexpressibly vile and very much pleased with ourselves. We
lied to him with gravity, with emotion, with unction, as if per-
forming some moral trick with a view to an eternal reward. We
made a chorus of affirmation to his wildest assertions, as though
he had been a millionaire, a politician, or a reformer—and we a
crowd of ambitious lubbers. (139)

As in the most lucid modern writers, the observable co-presence of
primitive rite and modern behavior does not celebrate some delirious
atavistic return to origins. “As if performing some moral trick” resem-
bles Sir James Frazer’s modern scepticism against primitives who
believe they can offload their sins on another, except that the narrator’s
scepticism is directed towards the celebration of modern “mysteries.”
The value of Girard’s discussion of primitive religion, ritual and myth is that he describes a model or mechanism of displacing resentment and violence onto a single victim which accounts for similarities as well as differences across cultures, without positing some collective unconscious or some impossible tribal migration. As mechanism, it can begin to reappear anywhere. But a full reassembly of the ritual practice which creates both victims and kings is scotched by the modern critical climate which refuses the divine nature of leadership and knows about scapegoats. The narrator names as focus of this community the modern, more temporary leaders of unstable “turbulence”—how long can a millionaire, politician or reformer (34) lead such a crowd, such a turbia, before it turns on him? These are the modern circumstances under which Belfast and Donkin fail to muster the crew in opposition to Baker, and in which Wait succeeds, at least for a time. How? Wait is ontologically sacred.

Conrad’s 1914 address, “To My American Readers,” by which he introduces both the famous preface and the infamous title, is a revelation of what he understands of his novel, the preface, and his vocation, after a lifetime of writing: “After writing the last words of that book, in the revulsion of feeling before the accomplished task, I understood that I had done with the sea, and that henceforth I had to be a writer. And almost without lying down the pen I wrote a preface, trying to express the spirit in which I was entering on the task of my new life” (ix–x).

We know that the earlier preface was not written immediately afterwards. Conrad has deliberately over-ridden the circumstances to make the connection between novel and preface even more compelling than it was.

There are three questions which Conrad’s “American” preface invites us to consider: why the “revulsion of feeling,” how did this book determine his sense of vocation, and how does the 1897 preface follow the novel?

Before we turn to Conrad’s own achieved understanding of the relation between the novel and the 1897 preface, however, we might consider Conrad’s comments on rereading the novel itself, from his position in 1914. Conrad begins the American preface by referring to his own experience with James Wait: “He was in my watch. A negro in a British forecastle is a lonely being. He has no chums. Yet James Wait, afraid of death and making her his accomplice, was an imposter of some character—mastering our compassion, scornful of our sentimen-
talism, triumphing over our suspicions” (ix). What Conrad remembers of Wait himself is his oppositional politics, that turn the ethnic and racial prejudices of a “British” sea-going vessel against itself.

But in the book he is nothing; he is merely the centre of the ship’s collective psychology and the pivot of the action. Yet he, who in the family circle and amongst my friends is familiarly referred to as the Nigger, remains very precious to me. For the book written round him is not the sort of thing that can be attempted more than once in a lifetime. It is the book by which, not as a novelist perhaps, but as an artist striving for the utmost sincerity of expression, I am willing to stand or fall. Its pages are the tribute of my unalterable and profound affection for the ships, the seamen, the winds and the great sea—the moulders of my youth, the companions of the best years of my life. (ix)

Conrad’s understanding that Wait is transfigured out of all resemblance to a fellow human being by the collective psychology of the ship, brings to maturity a hypothesis which was merely “incredible” to the 1897 narrator.

Had we (by an incredible hypothesis) undergone similar toil and trouble for an empty cask, that cask would have been as precious to us as Jimmy was. More precious, in fact, because we would have had no reason to hate the cask. And we hated James Wait. We could not get rid of the monstrous suspicion that this astounding black-man was shamming sick, had been malingering heartlessly in the face of our toil, of our scorn, of our patience—and now was malingering in the face of our devotion—in the face of death. (72)

The fluctuations of the narrative of the novel present a beautiful embodiment of Girard’s distinction between the scapegoat structure and scapegoat theme, both reflecting and revealing persecution of “the Nigger.” There are two novels which uneasily cohabit the final text: a celebration of sea-life, a text which ought to be called “The Children of the Sea,” but which is also a perniciously ethnocentric and mythological text which knows the truth about niggers—how they talk back, shirk work, even cause the winds to calm. The novel sometimes seems like an
ethnic free-for-all between Dutchmen, Swedes, Irish, Asians. This is the inside perspective. Bound together with it is a narrative of an international perspective which cannot help de-mythologising the sacrificial solidarity of an “English” ship which excludes Wait, properly called The Nigger of the “Narcissus.”

Conrad’s 1914 preface in fact admits two parallel victimizations: the mythological collective the crew of the “Narcissus” forged by excluding Wait, but also the book “written around him.” Conrad realizes that he was able to finish the book by not committing himself finally to either accusing or exonerating Wait, still “casting the stones of silence,” as Seamus Heaney’s “Punishment” puts it, by remaining in the inter-zone between reflection and revelation.

Conrad, I believe, wanted this novel to celebrate the solidarity of those who followed the sea, but the novels he wrote could not prevent themselves from becoming instruments of self-reflection and autocriticism, arenas in which to think through social behavior which concerned him. Revulsion is not unknown to writers at any stage of their work, but here it describes the certitude that Conrad can no longer reenter the zone of exclusive solidarity of those who “follow the sea” now that he has comprehended their social practice in his novel.

The famous 1897 Preface is a compensatory act which proposes art as committed to a solidarity without exclusions, the dead with the living, the living with the unborn, a unity of all living things, giving voice to all the voiceless and unremembered multitude. The Preface makes a fascinating distinction between the discipline of art, and disciplines which promise truth but only seem to deliver the sacrifice of successive interpretation: “The changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories” (xii). What Conrad gives us thereafter (Heart of Darkness comes immediately to mind) are fictions which represent compromised solidarities of a particular historical moment, the changing theories of social identity, measured always by a sense of solidarity that can’t exclude anyone, an ethnos of all things which live, have lived, or will live.

Conrad’s novel characterizes the modern period, containing both the scapegoats we can see, and the ones we can’t. James Wait is sacred to the crew of the “Narcissus” and their narrator: the sailors hate him, love him, seek his favor, reject him—their treatment of Wait shows the resurgence and virulence of sacrificial polarization which is always possible in any place not controlled by the legal system. In a way very
different—more resistant, more hesitating, Conrad agrees with W. E. B. DuBois's famous statement that the color line will be the preeminent problem of the modern period. In Girardian terms, the myths of race sustain the greatest level of metaphysical difference on the human plane.

The great texts of emancipation, as Edward Said calls them, properly polarize human behavior. In Albert Memmi's terms of engagement, you are a colonizer or one of the colonized—there is no middle ground. Yet in the contradictory position of sacrificing Wait while demythologizing that sacrifice, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* prepares for Marlow's small but significant shift forward in *Heart of Darkness*, away from colonization, away from the collaborationist inter-zone of those loathe to persecute, but not certain enough to fight persecution, the zone where 90% of the world weighs in, whose leaning in either direction inclines to sacrificial solidarity or a postsacrificial solidarity without exclusions.

No one better represents the potential conflict between liberation and their love for Conrad than Edward Said, whose carefully understated claim that Conrad "dates" imperialism in *Culture and Imperialism* deserves critical elaboration.

Conrad does not give us the sense that he could imagine a fully realized alternative to imperialism: the natives he wrote about in Africa, Asia, or America were incapable of independence, and because he seemed to imagine that European tutelage was a given, he could not foresee what would take place when it came to an end. But come to an end it would, if only because—like all human effort, like speech itself—it would have its moment, then it would have to pass. Since Conrad dates imperialism, shows its contingency, records its illusions and tremendous violence and waste (as in *Nostromo*), he permits his later readers to imagine something other than an Africa carved up into dozens of European colonies, even if, for his own part, he had little notion of what that Africa might be (28).

If Marlow's first narrative on the deck of the *Nellie* in *Heart of Darkness* ("this too was once a place of darkness") supports imperial efficiency, Marlow's second narrative moves forward to occupy a moment not sketched in by Said's own polarization of the alternatives, a moment in-between accepting European tutelage as a given, and a fully realized alternative to imperialism. There are two stories in *Heart of Darkness* also
but they do not contravene each other. After he hears his own professed devotion to efficiency rhyme with Kurtz, in the word “sacrifice” (51), Marlow stops, and tells a different story, on himself.

Herein resides the “profit” (also understated in Culture and Imperialism) which Said claims for reading the great works not already committed to liberation. Heart of Darkness gives us the first position of a weakening commitment to imperialism. Heart of Darkness can date imperialism because The Nigger of the "Narcissus" dates racism. Like the rest of the crew, the narrator as fellow sailor opposed Captain Alistoun’s fellow-feeling for Wait at the time he commits him to his cabin, but the narrator’s rendering of Wait’s last extremity, which we will remember better than our own, follows Alistoun’s lead.

Conrad belongs in the syllabus because his work makes sense of our historical struggle with racism—one of the most virulent and metaphysical forms of empty rivalry on the planet. By showing how two narrators lose their full commitment to racism and imperialism, we can better comprehend our historical moment where “victims have rights,” than if we solely read the grand narratives of liberation and the texts of persecution.

We can see, as Achebe does, the representation of racism in Heart of Darkness (and The Nigger of the ”Narcissus”). Achebe does not need European tutelage or Conrad to see racism. But the first person we should credit for seeing racism and imperialism as toxic in these narratives is Conrad himself—not as an intended and worked-for revelation, but as something one of our greatest literary intellectuals couldn’t not see.

NOTES

2. I must belatedly recognize Andrew Mozingo’s Joseph Conrad and the Art of Sacrifice, which appeared after I wrote this, and which I only discovered after this article was accepted for publication. Mozingo’s chapter on The Nigger of the ”Narcissus” properly builds his Girardian reading of the novel on the longstanding critical discussion of the variable narrator and oxymoronic style to see (as I do here) a contest between a scapegoat text and a scapegoat theme, between pagan and Christian solidarity, between persecution and its demythologization. For Mozingo this contest develops over time in Conrad’s fiction to a provisional “Christian orientation” (xii) in Chance. Mozingo also quotes Conrad’s American preface to corroborate his Girardian reading of Wait as scapegoat. Although he does not make the argument, the 1914 date is strong evidence for Molina’s hypothesis of Conrad’s development. Mozingo shows conclusively that the novel is a “modernisation” of Flaubert’s Salambo, a weakening of those abominable rites of sacrifice Flaubert seems to admire. However, he chooses not to engage
Michiel Heyn's *Expulsion and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, which argues that the modernist concern with form releases the novel from scapegoating (38). Mozina does not discuss racism in the novel, nor does he position Conrad as a fellow theoretician to Girard (for Molina, Conrad anticipates Girard and Derrida). I will indicate in my notes where Mozina makes a similar point; overall, we mutually corroborate the benefits of reading Conrad and Girard together on *le route antique des hommes pervers*.


5. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." Achebe notes that this essay was first delivered in *The Chancellor's Lecture Series* at The University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and first published in *Massachusetts Review*. Despite the Europe/Africa character of racial polarity in Conrad's story, the circumstances described within the essay (Achebe walking on an American campus), its initial publication, and its rhetorically defined audience are American. Like Conrad in his 1914 Preface, Achebe addresses an audience intimate with racial difference.

6. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus',* 79–80. All future references will be to this Canterbury Edition; page numbers will occur in parentheses following the quotation.

7. The narrator excludes Donkin from holding the values to which the rest of the crew subscribes. . . ." (Mozina, 18). Mozina does not discuss the way Belfast anticipates Donkin and Wait.

8. *In Violence and Modernism.*

9. Bernard Grasset, 1972. These lines were never included in *Violence and the Sacred*.

10. In a reading of a draft of this essay.

11. A *Conradian's* metabolic resistance to racial persecution in Conrad will always go back to Robert Kimrough's edition of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* in 1979, where Eugene Redmond's essay directly addresses the issue in a text meant for the schools.


14. We might usefully think of several of Conrad's novels as reflections on the paradoxes of the rise and fall of leaders in modern, that is, turbulent times. To telescope his long meditative process, we might suggest that Wait has learned from previous experience that the man chosen for his singular strength and size nevertheless receives special privileges for being sick. Death, as Donkin notes, is certain for all. But if it is true that Wait cannot disentangle guile from disease, it is also true that "we" find it difficult to disentangle his sickness from our menacingly close knit circle around him. The metaphysical, by which I mean the collective psychological nature of Kurtz's and Lord Jim's failures, needs to be studied in the manner of Ibsen's staging of Stockmann as the enemy of the
people, Joyce’s analysis of Parnell, Synge’s depiction of Christy Mahon, as sacrificial behavior.

15. Perhaps benefiting from Edwin Björkman’s review of Conrad’s work up through A Personal Record (1912), which emphasizes the crew as a whole, not Jimmy alone, as the hero of The Nigger of the “Narcissus.” Volume 5 of The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad usefully quotes from the passage (given at the head of this essay) in circumstantially identifying Björkman the recipient of a 16 May 1912 letter written by Conrad, based on a letter 11 June (MS Indiana) from Björkman to Conrad thanking him for commenting on his 1912 review article. Conrad writes: “You are the only critic who has put his finger on the psychology of the crew of the Narcissus. I have waited nigh upon fourteen years for the word you have spoken now.” (The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, Volume 5, 65–66).

The archival work of Frederick Karl and Laurence Davies show us that Conrad responded twice to this review, once as it appeared in the American Review of Reviews, and again upon receiving an inscribed copy of the book where the review appeared unchanged, before the American edition and preface to The Nigger of “The Narcissus” was published in 1914. It will take more archival work to sequence-date (1) Conrad’s fourteen years of already understanding the collective psychology of the crew, (2) the composition date of the American preface, and (3) the date of the letter circumstantially understood to be addressed to Björkman, as Voices of Tomorrow was published simultaneously in New York and London in 1913, a year after the date of the Conrad letter as given in Volume 5.

16. Portrait du colonisé, précédé du portrait du colonisateur

17. As in the example of Wilfred Owen’s German soldier, in “Strange Meeting,” whose hands were “loathe and cold” to continue fighting any more—not a full refusal or resistance, but an emotional withdrawal of support for war, even at his own expense.

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