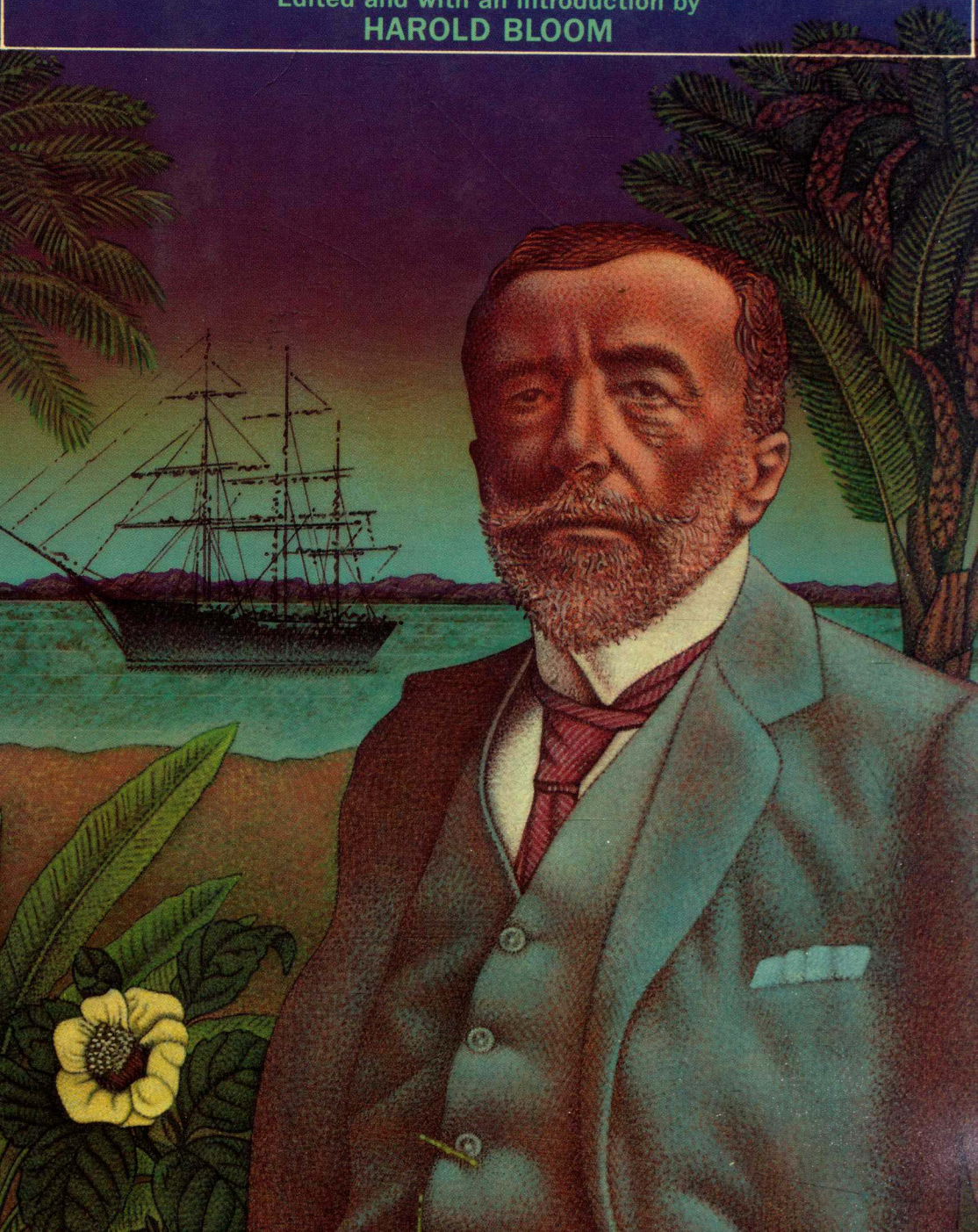


Modern Critical Views

JOSEPH CONRAD

Edited and with an introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



Modern Critical Views

JOSEPH CONRAD

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities

Yale University



CHELSEA HOUSE PUBLISHERS

New York ♦ Philadelphia

© 1986 by Chelsea House Publishers, a division of Main
Line Book Co.

Introduction © 1986 by Harold Bloom

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without
the written permission of the publisher.

Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum
requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence
of Paper for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Joseph Conrad.

(Modern critical views)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Conrad, Joseph, 1857-1924—Criticism and interpretation—
Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Bloom, Harold. II. Series.
PR6005.04Z7496 1986 823'.912 86-2331
ISBN 0-87754-642-8 (alk. paper)

Editor's Note

This volume gathers together a representative selection of the best criticism devoted to the fiction of Joseph Conrad during the past quarter century, arranged in the chronological order of its original publication. I am grateful to David Parker for his aid in selecting these essays.

The introduction centers upon Conrad's mode of impressionism, which is seen as both reflecting the influence of Henry James's middle period, and as swerving away from the strength of that influence. A contrast is made between the relative failure of the language of Conradian impressionism in *Heart of Darkness* and the extraordinary success of that language in *Nostromo*.

Ian Watt begins the chronological sequence with his shrewd survey of Conrad criticism of the 1950s, particularly in regard to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* This sets the background for the criticism of the 1960s, starting here with Edward W. Said's exploration of the shorter fiction, with a strong emphasis upon Conrad's insistence that we survive, as writers and as humans, only through and by our eccentricities. The psychoanalytic critic Norman N. Holland follows with a reading of how style determines the eccentric and almost unique ethos of *The Secret Agent*. In a remarkable exegesis of *Victory*, R. W. B. Lewis also confirms Conrad's faithfulness to "the variable and highly unpredictable character of individual human beings."

Ian Watt returns with a strong defense of impressionism in *Heart of Darkness*, making a positive judgment that contrasts forcefully to the editor's dubiety in the introduction. Another short masterwork, "The Secret Sharer," is analyzed by Joan E. Steiner, who emphasizes the dialectical complexities that Conrad exploits in his version of a doubling relationship. Such complexities haunt the imagination of morality in both *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo*, a haunting that is investigated here by Daniel Melnick. Moral imagination, in Conrad, always takes us, via "the logic of perverse unreason," to the limits of the absurd, limits traced by Adam Gillon in the narrative patterns of two

of Conrad's aesthetic triumphs, *Under Western Eyes* and *Victory*, and the more dubious *Chance*, which was nevertheless a great popular success.

Conrad's women in his early novels, *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, are judged by Ruth Nadelhaft to be emblems of an alternative vision, one deeply set against "the morality of imperialism and colonialism." Two powerful accounts of *Lord Jim*, by J. Hillis Miller and Martin Price, call into question (in very different ways) any judgments made by moral readings of Conrad. Miller employs the resources of a deconstructive rhetorical analysis to show how indeterminate Conrad's meanings are, while Price subtly demonstrates how Conrad, in *Lord Jim* and also in *Nostromo*, drives apart the heroic and the authentic, without abandoning a desire for both.

In the final essay, Aaron Fogel performs a large-scale exegesis of the poetics of *Nostromo*, in order to examine the book's "tensions between force and farce." Fogel synthesizes a number of contemporary critical modes, and arrives at a powerful conception of Gould's fate as the necessarily Oedipal disaster of the man who has evaded "forced dialogue." Though Fogel sees this and *Nostromo*'s similar fate as farce, I myself would call it a mode of tragedy, because of *Nostromo*'s belated vestiges of the natural sublime. Such a debate, between Fogel and myself, returns this volume full circle to its introduction, and so begins again the endless cycle of critical responses that are prompted inevitably by the permanent and enigmatic strength of Conrad's fictions.

Contents

Editor's Note	vii
Introduction	1
<i>Harold Bloom</i>	
Conrad Criticism and <i>The Nigger of the "Narcissus"</i>	9
<i>Ian Watt</i>	
The Past and the Present: Conrad's Shorter Fiction	29
<i>Edward W. Said</i>	
Style as Character: <i>The Secret Agent</i>	53
<i>Norman N. Holland</i>	
The Current of Conrad's <i>Victory</i>	63
<i>R. W. B. Lewis</i>	
Impressionism and Symbolism in <i>Heart of Darkness</i>	83
<i>Ian Watt</i>	
"The Secret Sharer": Complexities of the Doubling Relationship	101
<i>Joan E. Steiner</i>	
The Morality of Conrad's Imagination: <i>Heart of Darkness</i> and <i>Nostromo</i>	113
<i>Daniel Melnick</i>	
<i>Under Western Eyes</i> , <i>Chance</i> , and <i>Victory</i>	131
<i>Adam Gillon</i>	
Women as Moral and Political Alternatives in Conrad's Early Novels	151
<i>Ruth Nadelhaft</i>	

<i>Lord Jim</i> : Repetition as Subversion of Organic Form	165
<i>J. Hillis Miller</i>	
The Limits of Irony: <i>Lord Jim</i> and <i>Nostromo</i>	181
<i>Martin Price</i>	
Silver and Silence: Dependent Currencies in <i>Nostromo</i>	205
<i>Aaron Fogel</i>	
Chronology	229
Contributors	231
Bibliography	233
Acknowledgments	237
Index	239

Introduction

I

In Conrad's "Youth" (1898), Marlow gives us a brilliant description of the sinking of the *Judea*:

"Between the darkness of earth and heaven she was burning fiercely upon a disc of purple sea shot by the blood-red play of gleams; upon a disc of water glittering and sinister. A high, clear flame, an immense and lonely flame, ascended from the ocean, and from its summit the black smoke poured continuously at the sky. She burned furiously; mournful and imposing like a funeral pile kindled in the night, surrounded by the sea, watched over by the stars. A magnificent death had come like a grace, like a gift, like a reward to that old ship at the end of her laborious day. The surrender of her weary ghost to the keeper of the stars and sea was stirring like the sight of a glorious triumph. The masts fell just before daybreak, and for a moment there was a burst and turmoil of sparks that seemed to fill with flying fire the night patient and watchful, the vast night lying silent upon the sea. At daylight she was only a charred shell, floating still under a cloud of smoke and bearing a glowing mass of coal within.

"Then the oars were got out, and the boats forming in a line moved around her remains as if in procession—the longboat leading. As we pulled across her stern a slim dart of fire shot out viciously at us, and suddenly she went down, head first, in a great hiss of steam. The unconsumed stern was the last to sink; but the paint had gone, had cracked, had peeled off, and there were no letters, there was no word, no stubborn device that was like her soul, to flash at the rising sun her creed and her name.

The apocalyptic vividness is enhanced by the visual namelessness of the "unconsumed stern," as though the creed of Christ's people maintained both its traditional refusal to violate the Second Commandment, and its traditional affirmation of its not-to-be-named God. With the *Judea*, Conrad sinks the romance of youth's illusions, but like all losses in Conrad this submersion in the destructive element is curiously dialectical, since only experiential loss allows for the compensation of an imaginative gain in the representation of artistic truth. Originally the ephebe of Flaubert and of Flaubert's "son," Maupassant, Conrad was reborn as the narrative disciple of Henry James, the James of *The Spoils of Poynton* and *What Maisie Knew*, rather than the James of the final phase.

Ian Watt convincingly traces the genesis of Marlow to the way that "James developed the indirect narrative approach through the sensitive central intelligence of one of the characters." Marlow, whom James derided as "that preposterous magic mariner," actually represents Conrad's swerve away from the excessive strength of James's influence upon him. By always "mixing himself up with the narrative," in James's words, Marlow guarantees an enigmatic reserve that increases the distance between the impressionistic techniques of Conrad and James. Though there is little valid comparison that can be made between Conrad's greatest achievements and the hesitant, barely fictional status of Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, Conrad's impressionism is as extreme and solipsistic as Pater's. There is a definite parallel between the fates of Sebastian Van Storck (in Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*) and Decoud in *Nostromo*.

In his 1897 "Preface" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, Conrad famously insisted that his creative task was "before all to make you see." He presumably was aware that he thus joined himself to a line of prose seers whose latest representatives were Carlyle, Ruskin, and Pater. There is a movement in that group from Carlyle's exuberant "Natural Supernaturalism" through Ruskin's paganization of Evangelical fervor to Pater's evasive and skeptical Epicurean materialism, with its eloquent suggestion that all we can see is the flux of sensations. Conrad exceeds Pater in the reduction of impressionism to a state of consciousness where the seeing narrator is hopelessly mixed up with the seen narrative. James may seem an impressionist when compared to Flaubert, but alongside of Conrad he is clearly shown to be a kind of Platonist, imposing forms and resolutions upon the flux of human relations by an exquisite formal geometry altogether his own.

To observe that Conrad is metaphysically less of an Idealist is hardly to argue that he is necessarily a stronger novelist than his master, James. It may suggest though that Conrad's originality is more disturbing than that of James, and may help explain why Conrad, rather than James, became the dominant

influence upon the generation of American novelists that included Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner. The cosmos of *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *As I Lay Dying* derives from *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo* rather than from *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*. Darl Bundren is the extreme inheritor of Conrad's quest to carry impressionism into its heart of darkness in the human awareness that we are only a flux of sensations gazing outwards upon a flux of impressions.

II

Heart of Darkness may always be a critical battleground between readers who regard it as an aesthetic triumph, and those like myself who doubt its ability to rescue us from its own hopeless obscurantism. That Marlow seems, at moments, not to know what he is talking about, is almost certainly one of the narrative's deliberate strengths, but if Conrad also seems finally not to know, then he necessarily loses some of his authority as a storyteller. Perhaps he loses it to death our death, or our anxiety that he will not sustain the illusion of his fiction's duration long enough for us to sublimate the frustrations it brings us.

These frustrations need not be deprecated. Conrad's diction, normally flawless, is notoriously vague throughout *Heart of Darkness*. E. M. Forster's wicked comment on Conrad's entire work is justified perhaps only when applied to *Heart of Darkness*:

Misty in the middle as well as at the edges, the secret cask of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel. . . . No creed, in fact.

Forster's misty vapor seems to inhabit such Conradian recurrent modifiers as "monstrous," "unspeakable," "atrocious," and many more, but these are minor defects compared to the involuntary self-parody that Conrad inflicts upon himself. There are moments that sound more like James Thurber lovingly satirizing Conrad than like Conrad:

"We had carried Kurtz into the pilot house: there was more air there. Lying on the couch, he stared through the open shutter. There was an eddy in the mass of human bodies, and the woman with helmeted head and tawny cheeks rushed out to the very brink of the stream. She put out her hands, shouted something, and all that wild mob took up the shout in a roaring chorus of articulated, rapid, breathless utterance.

“‘Do you understand this?’ I asked.

“He kept on looking out past me with fiery, longing eyes, with a mingled expression of wistfulness and hate. He made no answer, but I saw a smile, a smile of indefinable meaning, appear on his colorless lips that a moment after twitched convulsively. ‘Do I not?’ he said slowly, gasping, as if the words had been torn out of him by a supernatural power.

This cannot be defended as an instance of what Frank Kermode calls a language “needed when Marlow is not equal to the experience described.” Has the experience been described here? Smiles of “indefinable meaning” are smiled once too often in a literary text if they are smiled even once. *Heart of Darkness* has taken on some of the power of myth, even if the book is limited by its involuntary obscurantism. It has haunted American literature from T. S. Eliot’s poetry through our major novelists of the era 1920 to 1940, on to a line of movies that go from the *Citizen Kane* of Orson Welles (a substitute for an abandoned Welles project to film *Heart of Darkness*) on to Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*. In this instance, Conrad’s formlessness seems to have worked as an aid, so diffusing his conception as to have made it available to an almost universal audience.

III

An admirer of Conrad is happiest with his five great novels: *Lord Jim* (1900), *Nostromo* (1904), *The Secret Agent* (1906), *Under Western Eyes* (1910), and *Victory* (1914). Subtle and tormented narratives, they form an extraordinarily varied achievement, and despite their common features they can make a reader wonder that they all should have been composed by the same artist. Endlessly enigmatic as a personality and as a formidable moral character, Conrad pervades his own books, a presence not to be put by, an elusive storyteller who yet seems to write a continuous spiritual autobiography. By the general consent of advanced critics and of common readers, Conrad’s masterwork is *Nostromo*, where his perspectives are largest, and where his essential originality in the representation of human blindnesses and consequent human affections is at its strongest. Like all overwhelming originalities, Conrad’s ensues in an authentic difficulty, which can be assimilated only very slowly, if at all. Repeated rereadings gradually convince me that *Nostromo* is anything but a Conradian litany to the virtue he liked to call “fidelity.” The book is tragedy, of a post-Nietzschean sort, despite Conrad’s strong contempt for Nietzsche. Decoud, void of all illusions, is self-destroyed because he cannot sustain solitude. Nos-

tromo, perhaps the only persuasive instance of the natural sublime in a twentieth-century hero of fiction, dies “betrayed he hardly knows by what or by whom,” as Conrad says. But this is Conrad at his most knowing, and the novel shows us precisely how Nostromo is betrayed, by himself, and by what in himself.

It is a mystery of an overwhelming fiction why it can sustain virtually endless rereadings. *Nostromo*, to me, rewards frequent rereadings in something of the way that *Othello* does; there is always surprise waiting for me. Brilliant as every aspect of the novel is, Nostromo himself is the imaginative center of the book, and yet Nostromo is unique among Conrad’s personae, and not a Conradian man whom we could have expected. His creator’s description of this central figure as “the Magnificent Capataz, the Man of the People,” breathes a writer’s love for his most surprising act of the imagination. So does a crucial paragraph from the same source, the “Author’s Note” that Conrad added as a preface thirteen years after the initial publication:

In his firm grip on the earth he inherits, in his improvidence and generosity, in his lavishness with his gifts, in his manly vanity, in the obscure sense of his greatness and in his faithful devotion with something despairing as well as desperate in its impulses, he is a Man of the People, their very own unenvious force, disdaining to lead but ruling from within. Years afterwards, grown older as the famous Captain Fianza, with a stake in the country, going about his many affairs followed by respectful glances in the modernized streets of Sulaco, calling on the widow of the cargador, attending the Lodge, listening in unmoved silence to anarchist speeches at the meeting, the enigmatical patron of the new revolutionary agitation, the trusted, the wealthy comrade Fianza with the knowledge of his moral ruin locked up in his breast, he remains essentially a man of the People. In his mingled love and scorn of life and in the bewildered conviction of having been betrayed, of dying betrayed he hardly knows by what or by whom, he is still of the People, their undoubted Great Man—with a private history of his own.

Despite this “moral ruin,” and not because of it, Conrad and his readers share the conviction of Nostromo’s greatness, share in his sublime self-recognition. How many persuasive images of greatness, of a natural sublimity, exist in modern fiction? Conrad’s may be the last enhanced vision of Natural Man, of the Man of the People, in which anyone has found it possible to believe. Yet Conrad himself characteristically qualifies his own belief in Nos-

tromo, and critics too easily seduced by ironies have weakly misread the only apparent irony of Conrad's repeated references to Nostromo as "the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores." Magnificent, beyond the reach of all irony, Nostromo manifestly is. It is the magnificence of the natural leader who disdains leadership, yet who loves reputation. Though he is of the People, Nostromo serves no ideal, unlike old Viola the Garibaldino. With the natural genius for command, the charismatic endowment that could make him another Garibaldi, Nostromo nevertheless scorns any such role, in the name of any cause whatsoever. He is a pure Homeric throwback, not wholly unlike Tolstoi's Hadji Murad, except that he acknowledges neither enemies nor friends, except for his displaced father, Viola. And he enchants us even as he enchants the populace of Sulaco, though most of all he enchants the skeptical and enigmatic Conrad, who barely defends himself against the enchantment with some merely rhetorical ironies.

Ethos is the daimon, character is fate, in Conrad as in Heracleitus, and Nostromo's tragic fate is the inevitable fulfillment of his desperate grandeur, which Conrad cannot dismiss as mere vanity, despite all his own skepticism. Only Nostromo saves the novel, and Conrad, from nihilism, the nihilism of Decoud's waste in suicide. Nostromo is betrayed partly by Decoud's act of self-destruction, with its use of four ingots of silver to send his body down, but largely by his own refusal to maintain the careless preference for glory over gain which is more than a gesture or a style, which indeed is the authentic mode of being that marks the hero. Nostromo is only himself when he can say, with perfect truth: "My name is known from one end of Sulaco to the other. What more can you do for me?"

IV

Towards the end of Chapter Ten of Part Third, "The Lighthouse," Conrad renders his own supposed verdict upon both Decoud and Nostromo, in a single page, in two parallel sentences a paragraph apart:

A victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the retribution meted out to intellectual audacity, the brilliant Don Martin Decoud, weighted by the bars of San Tomé silver, disappeared without a trace, swallowed up in the immense indifference of things.

The magnificent Capataz de Cargadores, victim of the disenchanted vanity which is the reward of audacious action, sat in the weary pose of a hunted outcast through a night of sleeplessness as

tormenting as any known to Decoud, his companion in the most desperate affair of his life. And he wondered how Decoud had died.

Decoud's last thought, after shooting himself was: "I wonder how that Capataz died." Conrad seems to leave little to choose between being "a victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the retribution meted out to intellectual audacity" or a "victim of the disenchanted vanity which is the reward of audacious action." The brilliant intellectual and the magnificent man of action are victimized alike for their audacity, and it is a fine irony that "retribution" and "reward" become assimilated to one another. Yet the book is Nostromo's and not Decoud's, and a "disenchanted vanity" is a higher fate than a "disillusioned weariness," if only because an initial enchantment is a nobler state than an initial illusion. True that Nostromo's enchantment was only of and with himself, but that is proper for an Achilles or a Hadji Murad. Decoud dies because he cannot bear solitude, and so cannot bear himself. Nostromo finds death-in-life and then death because he has lost the truth of his vanity, its enchanted insouciance, the *sprezzatura* which he, a plebian, nevertheless had made his authentic self.

Nostromo's triumph, though he cannot know it, is that an image of this authenticity survives him, an image so powerful as to persuade both Conrad and the perceptive reader that even the self-betrayed hero retains an aesthetic dignity that renders his death tragic rather than sordid. Poor Decoud, for all his brilliance, dies a nihilistic death, disappearing "without a trace, swallowed up in the immense indifference of things." Nostromo, after his death, receives an aesthetic tribute beyond all irony, in the superb closing paragraph of the novel:

Dr. Monygham, pulling round in the police-galley, heard the name pass over his head. It was another of Nostromo's triumphs, the greatest, the most enviable, the most sinister of all. In that true cry of undying passion that seemed to ring aloud from Punta Mala to Azuera and away to the bright line of the horizon, overhung by a big white cloud shining like a mass of solid silver, the genius of the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores dominated the dark gulf containing his conquests of treasure and love.

IAN WATT

Conrad Criticism and
The Nigger of the "Narcissus"

So our virtues
Lie in the interpretation of the time
Coriolanus, IV, vii, 49–50

The increasing critical attention of the last decade brought forth in the centenary year of Conrad's birth a tolerably heated literary controversy: Marvin Mudrick's attack on the views of—among others—Robert W. Stallman, in his "Conrad and the Terms of Modern Criticism" (*Hudson Review*, Autumn, 1954), was answered in the Spring, 1957, issue of the *Kenyon Review* ("Fiction and Its Critics . . ."), an answer which provoked a pretty note of injured innocence from Mudrick in the subsequent issue. Their mutual acerbities may, I think, be welcomed, if only as a reminder that Billingsgate has an ancient title to not the least attractive among the foothills of Helicon; my present concern, however, is with the ultimate grounds of their disagreement and this because it involves several problems of some importance both for Conrad and for our literary criticism in general. It also happens that Mudrick amplified his case against Conrad in the March, 1957, issue of *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* with an essay on *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* a book which was at the same time the subject of a full-scale essay in the *Kenyon Review* by another of the writers attacked by Mudrick, Albert J. Guerard; and since *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* has also received considerable attention in the last few years from a representative variety of modern critics, it would seem that our discussion can conveniently be centered on the criticism of Conrad's first masterpiece.

From *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 12, no. 4 (March 1958). © 1958 by The Regents of the University of California.

I

In "The Artist's Conscience and *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*" Mudrick grants Conrad's mastery of "sustained passages of description unsurpassed in English fiction"; the storm, for example, and the early presentation of Wait, are wholly successful, for there Conrad gives us "an extraordinarily close and convincing observation of the outside of things." But—alas!—our verbal photographer does not always "keep his introspection to a respectful minimum"; he has the gall to tell us "what to think about life, death, and the rest"; and there results "gross violation of the point of view" and "unctuous thrilling rhetoric . . . about man's work and the indifferent universe and of course the ubiquitous sea."

The sardonic irony of that last phrase may give one pause; on an ocean voyage the sea is rather ubiquitous—if you can't bear it, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and, indeed, a good deal of Conrad, is best left alone. True, Stallman can show how impatient Conrad was with being considered a writer of "sea stories," but this methodological strategy seems suspect—minimizing the importance of overt subject matter so as to ensure for the critic that amplitude of sea-room to which his proud craft has of late become accustomed. One may, indeed, find Mudrick's contrary assertion in his earlier essay that the sea is "Conrad's only element" less than final and yet salutary in emphasis; in any case his present jaded impatience seems ominously revelatory.

Mudrick's main charges, however, are not easily dismissed. A number of previous critics have drawn attention to the inconsistencies in the point of view of the narration in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, and to the marked strain of somewhat portentous magniloquence in Conrad's work generally. Mudrick has only given old objections new force, partly by his enviable gift for the memorably damaging phrase, and partly by allotting them a much more decisive significance in his final critical assessment. In some form, I take it, the charges are incontrovertible; but a brief analysis of Conrad's practice and of its historical perspective (the book appeared in 1897) may lead both to a more lenient judgment on the technique of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and to a clearer realization of some of the problematic implications of our current critical outlook.

Among the "gross violations of point of view" specified is that whereby the reader directly witnesses the final confrontation of Wait and Donkin, although no one else, of course, was present. Mudrick argues:

though the violation in itself compels no distressing conclusions, it is a more important fact . . . than it would be in other, more