

## JOSEPH CONRAD'S *THE NIGGER OF THE "NARCISSUS"* BETWEEN THE WORK ETHIC AND THE REFUSAL OF WORK

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**Abstract** – In this essay, I investigate the role played by the work ethic in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*. I interpret the novel, in the wake of Fredric Jameson and Giuseppe Sertoli, as a political allegory expressing Conrad's views on the crisis of the value of work which took place during the *fin de siècle*. The novel represents an idealized pre-modern organic community, based on discipline and work, and embodied by the crew of the Narcissus, as it is attacked by the evil forces of degenerate modernity, embodied by the two antagonists James Wait and Donkin and their refusal of work. On the one hand, Wait stands for the turn-of-the-century decadent culture, which was undermining the Victorian faith in work. On the other hand, Donkin stands for contemporary social movements and criticism of the labour system of the time. By analysing the way the ethic of work and its discontents are represented in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, and by highlighting the ambiguous stance taken by the narrator and the author in the face of it, I intend to show how, in spite of his veneration of work, Conrad was well aware that such an attitude was quickly becoming anachronistic. The organic community in which the Victorian worship of work could be a meaningful social experience rather than a mere glorification of profit and social climbing was on the wane, and a new and more modern ethic of work had to be invented.

**Keywords:** Joseph Conrad; *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*; Work Ethic; Refusal of Work; Charles Marlow (character).

### 1. Introduction

In “Tradition”, an article published on March 1918 in the *The Daily Mail* and subsequently included in *Notes on Life and Letters* (1921), Conrad reacted to a speech given after the end of the Great War in the House of Commons by a “prominent statesman,”<sup>1</sup> who expressed his gratitude for the courage shown by the British sailors, and in particular by those belonging to the merchant marine that, by contrast to the military, “have had no tradition towards it.” (Conrad 2004, p. 154) Conrad felt this claim insulted the British Merchant Service and insisted that his old comrades, even in peacetime, had always been outstanding examples of self-denial, willpower, obedience, and courage. No other professional category, Conrad holds, so fully embodies the truth of Leonardo da Vinci's maxim with which he opens his article: “Work is the law. Like iron that lying idle degenerates into a mass of useless rust, like water that in an unruffled pool sickens into a stagnant and corrupt state, so without action the spirit of men turns to a dead thing, loses its force, ceases prompting us to leave some trace of ourselves on this earth.” (Conrad

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Bonar Law, Chancellor of the Exchequer. See Conrad 2004, p. 437.

2004, p. 153)<sup>2</sup> Conrad identifies work with the supreme ethical value from which all the other values descend.

From the hard work of men are born the sympathetic consciousness of a common destiny, the fidelity to right practice which makes great craftsmen, the sense of right conduct which we may call honour, the devotion to our calling and the idealism which is not a misty, winged angel without eyes, but a divine figure of terrestrial aspect with a clear glance and with its feet resting firmly on the earth on which it was born. (Conrad 2004, p. 153)

This unconditional and enthusiastic exaltation of work was, according to Ian Watt, “one of the most pervasive of the Victorian moral imperatives” (Watt 1980, p. 148) and was necessary, as Walter E. Houghton claims, “in a business society, and one that was strongly under Puritan influence.” (Houghton 1985, p. 189). As Conrad claimed in “Well Done,” another text collected in *Notes on Life and Letters*: “A man is a worker. If he is not that he is nothing.” (Conrad 2004, p. 150) Nonetheless, Conrad’s undeniable endorsement of the work ethic, does not simply align with the stereotypical Victorian exaltation of progress and industry, or with the belief that diligence goes hand in hand with success and reward. As Marlow says in *Youth*, very often “you fight, work, sweat, nearly kill yourself, sometimes do kill yourself, trying to accomplish something—and you can’t. Not from any fault of yours. You simply can do nothing, neither great nor little.” (Conrad 2010, p. 11) Work is for Conrad its own reward, a form of stoic resistance to the chaos and the dissolution of the world, a temporary stronghold of humanity and order against the advance of disorder and degeneration. As Ian Watt has highlighted, the combination in Conrad’s ideology of different and at times even contradictory stances is typical, and testifies to both the breadth of his mind and the tensions that traversed the confused period of the turn of the century. (Watt 2000, p. 18) Conrad’s complex ideological stance combines the nineteenth century work ethic with the *fin de siècle* nihilistic pessimism, subtracting the Victorian optimism and belief in progress from the former, and withholding the latter from degenerating into cynicism.

In this article, I investigate the role played by the work ethic in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*. I interpret the novel, in the wake of Fredric Jameson and Giuseppe Sertoli, as a “political allegory” (Sertoli 1974, p. 105) expressing Conrad’s way of perceiving the value crisis of the *fin de siècle*. The novel represents an idealized pre-modern organic community, based on discipline and work, and embodied by the crew of the “Narcissus,” as it is attacked by the evil forces of degenerate modernity, embodied by the two antagonists James Wait and Donkin and their refusal of work. Conrad’s greatness, though, lies in his subtlety, and the opposition between the premodern ethic of the organic community and modern individualism is more ambiguous than might be expected, opening the way to the definition of a new modern ethic of work.

<sup>2</sup> Conrad extensively and significantly changes E. McCurdy's translation from *Codex Atlanticus*, 785v (289v): “Iron rusts from disuse; stagnant water loses its purity and becomes frozen; even so does inaction sap the vigour of the mind.” (McCurdy 1906, p. 53). The original version is: “Si come il ferro s’arruginisce senza esercizio e l’acqua si putrefa o nel freddo s’addiaccia, così lo ’ngetto senza esercizio si guasta.” (L. da Vinci, Vol. IX, p. 194).

## 2. Between Work and Truth: Conrad's Ideological Consciousness

In *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Fredric Jameson's illuminating "symptomatic reading" of the text exhibits its ideological dimension as "what, as an absent cause, is inaccessible to us except in textual form," (Jameson 1981, p. 35) and which allows us to read "a given style as a projected solution, on the aesthetic or imaginary level, to a genuinely contradictory situation in the concrete world of everyday social life." (Jameson 1981, p. 225) Jameson characterizes the narrative of the novel "as one long tirade against *ressentiment*," embodied by Donkin, as opposed to the "existentializing metaphysics" that considers "the absurdity of human existence in the face of malevolent nature." (Jameson 1981, p. 216) Also Giuseppe Sertoli in *Conrad o dello scambio fra la vita e la morte* (1974) makes of such ideological tension the pivot of his analysis of the book. He interprets *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* as the record of an *impasse* experienced by the author in which opposite and contradictory stances coexist in an open dialectical tension. According to Sertoli, the basic structure of the ideology of the text is based on a series of binary oppositions – light/dark; white/black; sea/earth; ship/city; travel/stasis – all summed up in the fundamental opposition between life and death. The first side represents the positive set of premodern values that Conrad held dear, the second represents the dangers of modernity. If on the superficial level the message seems to be that of the victory of life over death, the hidden level implies the contrary, namely, the inevitability of the vanishing of the old values and the affirmation of a new individualist ethic. More recently, Paula Martín Salván has reinterpreted the main narrative conflict in the novel as "one between the conflicting demands of two communal models" (Salván 2015, p. 892) in which the social microcosm of the ship is threatened by the inoculation of "a sense of obligation involving notions of charity, hospitality and pity, that would normally be absent from normative behaviour in such a social context." (Salván 2015, p. 893)

Building on these works, I intend to evaluate the role played in this political allegory by work and the work ethic, through an analysis of "the dialectical relations between the main characters," (Di Piazza 2004, p. 40) – Wait, Donkin, and Singleton – around which the ideology of the work coalesces. The characters of *The Nigger of the Narcissus* constitute indeed a network of partial commonalities and partial differences that make up a system. In this respect Fredric Jameson's analysis of *Lord Jim* (Jameson 1981, p. 46) by means of a Greimasian semiotic square can be adapted to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* In this case the two basic axes making up the ideological structure of the novel can be identified by the indices of "work" and "truth."

Work	Truth
Non-Truth	Non-Work

In *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* "work" and "truth" are the mutually incompatible values that determine the ideological deadlock of Conrad's "political unconscious." "Work" identifies the ethical index, and it is determined by the performance of work or by its refusal. The index "Truth," by contrast, corresponds to the ability to interpret and understand reality as it is. The former is realized as a form of adhesion to the collective work in a coherent and organic whole. The latter, by contrast, is realized as a swerve from the collective opinion, where a certain detachment from reality and society is needed to interpret them correctly. The opposition between the dialectics of adhesion and that of the swerve implied by the two indexes determines the open dynamics of the system of values

represented in the novel. The square, in Jameson words, “maps the limits of a specific ideological consciousness and marks the conceptual points beyond which that consciousness cannot go, and between which it is condemned to oscillate.” (Jameson 1981, p. 46) It represents “an antinomy of the mind, a dilemma, an aporia, which itself expresses – in the form of an ideological closure – a concrete social contradiction.” The contradiction represented by the square, “as a double bind and a conceptual scandal,” accounts for the dynamism of the system and for the “desperate attempts to . . . produce new terms out of itself which ultimately ‘solve’ the dilemma at hand.” (Jameson 1981, p. 254) Accordingly, I am going to show how the system of the characters of the *Nigger of the “Narcissus”* embodies the tension expressed by the square and accounts for Conrad’s attempt to find a way out from the contradiction between, on the one hand, the adherence to the traditional ethic of work and, on the other, the need to face and deal with modernity.

### 3. James Wait: Degeneration and Decadence

At the beginning of the novel, the “Narcissus,” is presented as a microcosm inhabited by a lively and hardworking community based on collaborative effort. Everything has been prepared for the departure: “the decks had been swept, the windlass oiled and made ready to heave up the anchor; the big tow-rope lay in long bights along one side of the main deck ... in readiness for the tug.” (Conrad 1950, p. 3) The carpenter appears as the archetypical figure of the contented worker, who has “driven in the last wedge of the mainhatch battens, and, throwing down his maul, had wiped his face with great deliberation.” (Conrad 1950, p. 4) The muster, ordered by Mr. Baker, the chief mate, represents the final step of the preparation, the moment in which the crowd of lively and confused “hands” are made into an orderly and coordinated whole heading towards a common goal. This coherent whole, though, based on a shared ethic of work, is threatened by two forces, represented by James Wait and Donkin, who both threaten the organic community of the ship by refusing, in different but complementary ways, to be part of the common effort.

Wait’s role in the allegory of the novel is made clear by the pun his name occasions the first time it is pronounced in the novel. Mr Baker, the chief mate, has just finished mustering all the sailors except one, whose name is written “all a smudge” (Conrad 1950, p. 16) at the end of the list. A “deep, ringing voice” cries in the dark: “Wait!”, (Conrad 1950, p. 17) upsetting the mate who interprets the call as an intervention. The first utterance of this character is ambiguous, and indirectly expresses the very essence of the character, that is, the fact that he forces the community of the *Narcissus* to slow down and to wait for him. The meaning of the name is further reinforced by the homophone *weight*: Wait is a weight for the rest of crew, as it is made clear in the scene, strictly symmetrical to the one just mentioned, of his funeral. After service has been read the planks are pulled up to let the corpse slide into the sea, but it doesn’t budge. “James Wait gave no sign of going. In death and swathed up for all eternity, he yet seemed to cling to the ship with the grip of an undying fear.” (Conrad 1950, p. 159) Only after this “weight” has been dropped into the sea does the wind break the calm in which the ship was stuck allowing the “Narcissus” to continue its voyage to London.

Wait, who makes the “Narcissus” wait by challenging the ethic of work that holds the organic community together, represents a particularly pernicious menace because he does not merely refuse to do his share, but also affects the work and lifestyle of the healthy, forcing them to look after him and become more self-conscious. The ethic of the sea allows for compassion and sympathy only insofar as these do not interfere with the

overall mission of the ship (See Salván 2015). The “sympathetic consciousness” always depends on the awareness of a “common destiny” (Conrad 2004, p. 153) because the community is always more important than the individuals. This idea was not merely the effect of Conrad's idiosyncratic point of view, but was part of the traditional lifestyle aboard nineteenth century ships. In a passage from Herman Melville's autobiographical novel *Omoo*, for example, the narrator recalls that “among sailors as a class, sickness at sea is so heartily detested, and the sick so little cared for, that the greatest invalid generally strives to mask his sufferings” because they know that they will not be cared for. The sailors give “no sympathy to others, and [expect] none in return. Their conduct, in this respect, so opposed to their generous-hearted behaviour ashore, painfully affects the landsman on his first intercourse with them as a sailor” (Melville 1999, p. 47).

In *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* Singleton, the oldest sailor and the most genuine incarnation of the ethic of the sea, exemplifies this point. After a whole day at the wheel during the storm he tries to hide his exhaustion until he falls forward “stiff and headlong as an uprooted tree” (Conrad 1950, p. 97). The day after, the old salt is back to work “as if nothing had been the matter” and keeps his thoughts to himself. James Wait, on the contrary, shows off his sickness constantly reminding the other members of the crew of his poor health, of the fact that he might die soon, and that he deserves attention and care for that reason. He thus spoils the leisure time of the crew, who have to give up their amusements in order not to disturb him. Archie, the owner of the concertina, “after a couple of stinging lectures from Jimmy” about “that prospective decease of his” refuses to play, making the narrator complain that “our singers became mute because Jimmy was a dying man” (Conrad 1950, p. 36).

But what gives Jimmy such a power over his fellows? Wait's influence on the crew comes from his rhetorical skills, which he uses to raise compassion in them.<sup>3</sup> In a work that many reviewers found to be vulgar and at times churlish, in which the author strives to convey the flavour of the colloquial speech of the crew, in which the tone of the narrative is often dense and baroque, the good-mannered and almost affected tone of the protagonist stands out sharply. From the very beginning of the novel Wait's request for help in taking his luggage “was put in a manner that made refusal impossible” (Conrad 1950, p. 19). Wait, despite his illness, enunciates his words “distinctly, with soft precision” and in a “deep rolling” voice that “filled the deck without effort” (Conrad 1950, p. 18). He conquers the souls of his colleagues by playing the gentleman with them and using his whining tone to appeal to their sense of guilt. He is said to be “naturally scornful, unaffectedly condescending, as if from his height of six foot three he had surveyed all the vastness of human folly and had made up his mind not to be too hard on it” (Conrad 1950, p. 19). Wait manages to confound the other sailors' ability to distinguish truth from falsehood. Thanks to his ability in influencing the other members of the crew, Wait, in the first part of the story, convinces them of what he thinks is a lie, namely, that he is not working because he is pretending to be mortally sick; in the second part, by contrast, he convinces them to pretend not to be aware of what they know is a lie, that is, that he *is* going to die. In both cases Wait contaminates with his lies the atmosphere in the ship thus affecting the climate of trust and discipline so necessary to the ethic of the sea.

Such contamination begins with a pivotal even though apparently marginal episode: the theft of the Officers' Sunday fruit pie. Belfast, the member of the crew that is

<sup>3</sup> Sertoli highlighted the importance of rhetoric in James Wait, claiming that language is precisely what, as “evocation of life and expression of Wait's desire to exorcise death” constitutes the character's essential trait. (Sertoli 1974, p. 122, see also p. 92 and 112).

most influenced by Jimmy, steals a piece of pie that was reserved for the officers “to tempt [Wait's] fastidious appetite” (Conrad 1950, p. 38). The theft is a “bad symptom,” the first sign of the corruption that Wait's behaviour is spreading among the crew, and is interpreted as such by both the officers and the sailors. As the narrator tells the reader “such stealing in a merchant ship [...] may be taken as a declaration by men of their dislike for their officers” and “may end in God knows what trouble.” Because of Belfast's unlawful act “mutual confidence was shaken” (Conrad 1950, p. 23) and the atmosphere on the ship compromised.

All our certitudes were going; we were on doubtful terms with our officers; the cook had given us up for lost; we had overheard the boatswain's opinion that “we were a crowd of softies.” We suspected Jimmy, one another, and even our very selves. We did not know what to do. (Conrad 1950, p. 43)

Belfast's charitable and sentimental act is, within the ideological framework of the novel, dangerous and immoral, because it places the individual above the respect for the norms that define the common good: this kind of charity is not compatible with the ethic of the sea. Conrad was surely not the only one in Britain to share this view, which was instead particularly popular especially among the nationalist conservatives who would have been the average readers of *The New Review*, the conservative journal on which *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* first appeared and that owned its success to its “heavy colonialist propaganda [...], its nationalistic patriotism, its campaigns in favour of the British Empire promoted by Kipling and Haggard” (Di Piazza 2004, p. 10). Max Nordau, for example, whose *Degeneration* (*Entartung* 1892, Engl. trans. 1895) was a favourite read among the conservatives of the time, attacked this form of charity straightforwardly: “Every gift that a man receives from some other man without work, without reciprocal service, is an alms, and as such is deeply immoral” (Nordau 1993, p. 156). Indeed, Nordau himself praised Conrad's novel in a now lost letter that he sent him through a common friend and to which Conrad replied almost embarrassed.<sup>4</sup>

Undeserved compassion destabilizes the bond of trust and respect among the crew, but it also destabilizes the psyche of Belfast himself. His behaviour towards Wait incoherently oscillates between the extremes of passionate hatred and unreserved devotion. Just before stealing the pie, for example, Belfast had threatened to “knock [Wait's] ugly black head off” (Conrad 1950, p. 34). When Wait tells him ungratefully that the “blamed pie” has only made him worse, first “Belfast, with scarlet face and trembling lips, [makes] a dash at him” as if trying to strangle him, but “next moment [the crew] saw Belfast hanging over him. He was saying plaintively: - 'Don't! Don't, Jimmy! Don't be like that. An angel couldn't put up with ye – sick as ye are'”. (Conrad 1950, p. 39) Later on, during the rescue of the sailor during the storm, Belfast keeps calling Wait alternatively as “darling” and “bloody black beast” (Conrad 1950, p. 69) in an almost schizoid way. Belfast's behaviour is clearly verging on the pathological, and he is repeatedly addressed as “emotional,” “illogical” or downright “lunatic” (Conrad 1950, p. 38-9). But if Belfast is the most extreme case, it is the whole crew of the “*Narcissus*” that, as the voyage continues, is affected by Wait's “demoralising” presence. They all gradually get caught in the web of lies, self-deprecation and demoralization spun by Jimmy. As the narrator

<sup>4</sup> “Many thanks for your good letter and the enclosed Max Nordau autograph. Would Robert let me keep it? I own myself surprised. There is not the slightest doubt M. N. has understood my intention. He has absolutely detected the whole idea. This to me is so startling that I do not know what to think of myself now. However I am pleased. Praise is sweet, no matter whence it comes” (Conrad 2004, p.255).

recalls “through him we were becoming highly humanised, tender, complex, excessively decadent: [...] as though we had been over-civilised, and rotten, and without any knowledge of the meaning of life” (Conrad 1950, p. 139).

“Over-civilization” is the crucial term here. According to Nordau and many other leading intellectuals of the time, Western civilization was undergoing a process of degeneration, brought about by what was perceived as an excess of culture. This implied a generalized loss of virility, a tendency to renounce up truth in favour of mind wandering and daydreaming, a self-complacent forgetfulness of duty and order, and most importantly the renunciation of productive activity and communal work. In a word, decadence. This tendency was seen as originally characteristic of the upper sectors of society and the artistic world but highly and dangerously influential in the lower strata. This is exactly the situation allegorically represented in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* as the “aristocratic” Wait influences the rest of the crew to become “highly humanized.” Wait's refusal of work corresponds perfectly to Nordau's depiction of the degenerate's psychological mechanism according to which he justifies his weakness and inability to work by pretending that he actually enjoys his inaction. “The degenerate who shuns action,” Nordau claims “has no suspicion that his incapacity for action is a consequence of his inherited deficiency of brain. He deceives himself into believing that he despises action from free determination, and takes pleasure in inactivity.” (Nordau 1993, p. 20) He pretends that his refusal of work is an effect of his choice, while it is only the result of his weakness. Wait thus represents, within the allegorical frame of the novel, the degenerate sectors of society that infect, with their laziness and egotism, the healthy lifestyle of the traditional organic community. In terms of the ideological square previously presented, Wait occupies the position defined by the indexes of “non-truth” and “non-work”. Jimmy is characterized at the same time by the refusal of the ethic of the sea and by a radical – and unconsciously determined – rejection of the truth of mortality. He is too detached from the collectivity and too locked within his narcissism to be able to understand both the outside world and himself. This combination, that mixes ethical negativity to ignorance is what makes Wait the modern and fascinating character that he is.

#### 4. Donkin: Laziness and Revolt

Despite presenting Wait as a negative element, the narrator still proves somewhat sympathetic towards the black sailor and his quandary. By contrast, the narrator's opinion of Donkin is stark and clear.

This clean white forecastle was his refuge; the place where he could be lazy; where he could wallow, and lie and eat—and curse the food he ate; where he could display his talents for shirking work, for cheating, for cadging; where he could find surely some one to wheedle and some one to bully—and where he would be paid for doing all this. [...] 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. (Conrad 1950, p. 10-1)

Donkin is a despicable creature, a carrier of evil and deception for the whole ship, a parasite on the society of the ship. He embodies the subversion of all the values of the ethic of the sea, and in particular of its core value, work, as the almost obsessive reference to his laziness proves. In a terminology clearly recalling the key words of the social darwinism so common among the degenerationists he is said to represent “an ominous survival testifying to the eternal fitness of lies and impudence.” (Conrad 1950, p. 11) Wait too is a parasite, but differently from Donkin he is at least not totally aware of being one. By contrast, Donkin knows exactly what he is and shrewdly uses his intelligence to foster a mutiny.

Donkin, like Wait, is characterized by a confident rhetorical ability, but also under this respect the similarity is only partial. Donkin's “filthy eloquence” (Conrad 1950, p. 172) is different from Wait's “soft precision” (Conrad 1950, p. 18). Wait appeals to the crew's compassion and poses as superior to them; Donkin appeals to their repressed *ressentiment* and to an alleged feeling of solidarity among the lower classes. While Wait treats his colleagues as “over-civilized,” Donkin knows “how to conquer the naive instincts of that crowd” (Conrad 1950, p. 12). He proves this when, just arrived on the ship, he convinces the others to give him some clothing by appealing to their fellow feeling and making them feel “touched by their own readiness to alleviate a shipmate's misery” (Conrad 1950, p. 12). One can appreciate the difference between Donkin's rhetoric and Wait's in the first interaction between the two. Donkin approaches Wait straightforwardly, feigning comradeship and reciting the usual complaints about the ship: “There'a a blooming supper for a man', he whispered bitterly. ' my dorg at 'ome wouldn't 'ave it. It's fit enouf for you an' me” (Conrad 1950, p. 23). Having created an alleged bond of fellow feeling, he addresses Wait confidentially as “old man” and shows what he is really after: some tobacco. Wait, “unaffectedly condescending”, as always, stares at the other “like a man addressed unexpectedly in a foreign language” and only after having asked him not to be familiar – “We haven't kept pigs together,” he says – gives him the tobacco (Conrad 1950, p. 23).

The most relevant difference between the two characters who refuse the ethic of work, though, is that while Wait exerts a strong influence on the crew from his very arrival on the ship, when he asks for help with his chest in a tone “that made refusal impossible” (Conrad 1950, p. 19), Donkin at the beginning is less effective in leading the others (Sertoli 1974, 128). At first he “stood on the bad eminence of a general dislike” (Conrad 1950, p. 40) and the sailors make fun of him, marginalize him, ignore him and “rejoiced when the mate, one dark night, tamed him for good” (Conrad 1950, p. 40). Nonetheless, gradually, as Wait's influence corrupts the atmosphere on the ship, Donkin gains favour. After the end of the storm the crew start to listen to “fascinating Donkin” and his alleged “care for our rights, his disinterested concern for our dignity” and in spite of the fact that “our contempt for him was unbounded [...] we could not but listen with interest to that consummate artist” (Conrad 1950, p. 100) as he “talked with ardour, despised and irrefutable” (Conrad 1950, p. 101). The compassion and the self-pity spread around by Wait loosens the bonds of trust and solidarity, and Donkin foresees that this is an occasion to instil in the crew an alternative form of bond, based on class conflict propaganda. This is why Donkin does not “conceal his delight” when the crisis begins after the fruit pie theft, while the rest of the crew “were dismayed.” His fake friendship with Wait is important from this perspective: he pretends to care about Wait not only because this gives him an opportunity to loaf – spending time in Wait's cabin instead of at work –, but because he knows that Wait is his best, if unwilling, ally. As Sertoli points out, “Wait's decadent aestheticism, by destroying the bourgeois ethos, objectively opens the way to

what Conrad calls 'anarchy.' That is, the ousting of everything that, from his conservative point of view, appeared as venerable and holy" (Conrad 1950, p. 130). Indeed, Donkin's momentary triumph comes right after the moment when even the captain, the embodiment of order and hierarchy itself, yields to compassion for Wait, and himself agrees to be insincere in order not to hurt the black sailor's feelings.

Donkin's meaning within the political allegory of the novel is easy to determine. He clearly represents that form of socialist propaganda that Conrad so starkly despised, as shown in a letter written in December 1885 to Spiridion Kliszczewski commenting on the victory of the Liberals over the Conservatives in the recent elections. "The International Socialist Association" he laments "are triumphant, and every disreputable ragamuffin in Europe feels that the day of universal brotherhood, despoliation and disorder is coming apace, and nurses day-dreams of well-polished pockets amongst the ruins of all that is respectable, venerable and holy." England and its Empire, Conrad claims, had been until then "the only barrier to the pressure of infernal doctrines born in continental back-slums" but the elections signal that the climate is changing and that England too is destined to "darkness amidst much weeping and gnashing of teeth, to pass through robbery, equality, anarchy and misery under the iron rule of militarism [sic] despotism" (Conrad 2004, p. 16). It was in these feelings that the political allegory of the *Nigger of the "Narcissus"* was broiled, and Donkin is one of the "unscrupulous rascals" bidding the "herd of idiotic humanity [...] on the road to ruin" (Conrad 1950, p. 17).

The letter also offers a further hint to understand the political dynamics represented in the novel. The socialist movement is characterized as something alien, not original to Britain, and attacking it from the outside. Accordingly, Donkin is represented as an outsider, parasitically dependent on the ship, as opposed to Wait who maintains he "belong[s] to the ship" (Conrad 1950, p. 18). This is because Wait and Donkin embody two complementary dimensions in the *fin de siècle* crisis: Wait is the weakening of the will, the *decadence*, of individuals and classes belonging to the British society, who had been corrupted by the modern lifestyle and ideas. Donkin, by contrast, stands for the subversive and rebellious socialist ideas imported from the "continental back-slums" that affirm themselves in the symbolic and political empty space left by the retreat of traditional values. In the Jamesonian square, Donkin occupies the place defined by the combination of non-work and truth. On the one hand, he is a loafer who "never did a decent day's work" (Conrad 1950, p. 172) and refuses the ethic of work of the ship. On the other, and also thanks to the privileged point of view given by his status as outsider, he understands the psychological dynamics of the ship better than his colleagues and profits from this knowledge. In particular, he understands the logic of Wait's double denial, of his need to pretend that he is pretending, as well as that of the "common bond [...] of a sentimental lie" (Conrad 1950, p. 155), and uses this knowledge to foster the revolt.

## 5. Singleton: the Waning of Tradition

If the couple Donkin/Wait allegorically represent the complementary forces attacking the organic community, Singleton embodies the conservative forces of tradition opposing them. Nonetheless, the opposition between the two is not symmetrical. On the one hand, as opposed to Wait and Donkin, Singleton is the world that precedes the turn of the century crisis; on the other hand, though, as a part of the "Narcissus," which represents the society of the time going through such crisis, he is part of the crisis itself. Conrad knew that pure conservatism could not stop the advance of modernity, and that he was trying to

create a new ethic and a new idea of society in which the traditional values, transformed and updated, could live in the modern world. The crisis was then not only determined by external pressures (Donkin) and interior weakening (Wait), but also, as will be shown, by ossification or sclerosis of the tradition, which by stubbornly refusing to change becomes negative.

To prove this point one can look at Singleton's relation to language, which was a central element in the representation of both Donkin and Wait. While these were skillful orators, effective at convincing the others to follow them, Singleton is extremely taciturn and reserved. At his first appearance, surrounded by the chaotic clamour of the crew, he is quietly reading by himself, looking like the "incarnation of barbarian wisdom serene in the blasphemous turmoil of the world" (Conrad 1950, p. 6). In the first chapter his silence is interrupted on only two occasions. In the first one, asked politely by Wait about "what kind of ship is this" he replies laconically "Ship!... Ships are all right, it is the men in them!" (Conrad 1950, p. 24). In the second, while all the crew is already asleep, Singleton notices that the brake of the anchor needs to be tightened, and after having done so addresses the brake itself: "You... hold!" he growled at it masterfully, in the incult tangle of his white beard" (Conrad 1950, p. 26).

The fact that the first direct intervention of the old salt is addressed to an inanimate object instead of a person is extremely telling. His way of communicating with his fellows does not come so much through words as through communal work. He is such an efficient and well-oiled cog within the great machine of the "Narcissus" that the movement of cables and chain "were as much part of his existence as his beating heart" (Conrad 1950, p. 26), and "through his old lips" passed "the wisdom of that half century spent in listening to the thunder of the waves" (Conrad 1950, p. 24). He is not so much an individual subjectivity speaking, as the unconscious expression of the sedimentation of the centuries-long relationship of the man with the sea. As such, he is always only repeating what has always been said and thought in the traditional community of the sea, and that has become a set of inflexible crystallized formulae that are at the same time both an advantage and a weight. Indeed, the narrator says, "the thought of all his lifetime could have been expressed in six words" (Conrad 1950, p. 26).

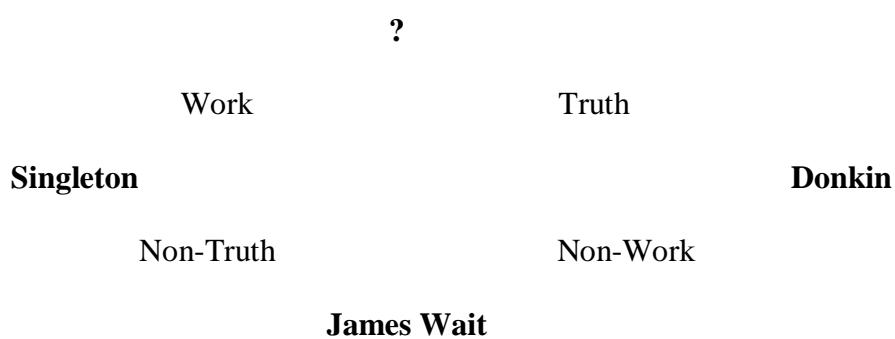
Singleton's silence is the silence of the heroic statuesque patriarch that serves as a model to his community. At the same time, though, his silence is also a form of sterile dumbness. In a reply to a letter by Cunningham Graham, that claimed that Singleton would have been a more interesting character had the author made of him a cultivated man, Conrad claims that an educated Singleton would have been a contradiction in terms. "Would you seriously, of malice pretence," asks Conrad "cultivate in that unconscious man the power to think? Then he would become conscious – and much smaller – and very unhappy." Education would teach this man, who is now "simple and great like an elemental force," that he is "nothing, less than a shadow, more insignificant than a drop of water in the ocean, more fleeting than the illusion of a dream?" Ignorance is the condition of Singleton's unshakable strength: it cannot save him from "the eternal decree that will extinguish the sun, the stars one by one, and in another instant shall spread a frozen darkness over the whole universe" (Levenson 1984, p. 33). but at least it can hide such truth from him. Cunningham Graham had missed this problematic side of Singleton, which makes of him a less ideal but more humane figure.

Singleton, despite being probably the most positive character in the novel, is indeed the simpleton in the community of the ship, since he is totally isolated and unable to understand himself or the world. Singleton's monolithic stance in front of reality is based on a removal of reality itself which is performed through his submission to work.

His dedication to work does not only mean his devotion to the values of the sea, but it is also a way to repress in routine and repetition the fear of death and decay. Only once, following the tempest, does he catch a glimpse of his mortality and realize he is a "slave" (Conrad 1950, p. 99) – and not a "child" – of the sea. However, he suddenly buries such a discovery in his work routine, turning up to duty "as if nothing had been the matter" because, as summed up by Levenson, "duty is an antidote to consciousness"<sup>5</sup> (Levenson 1984, p. 34).

Despite apparently representing alternative worlds, Wait and Singleton have something in common. On the one hand, Singleton – and the premodern world he represents – is saved from Jimmy's evil influence by his refusal of the "devilish and divine privilege of thought"; on the other, this same refusal makes him much more similar to Jimmy than it would seem at first sight. Both Singleton and Wait forget the tragic core of human life, its "heart of darkness," which is a painful experience, yet necessary to face the crisis of modernity without resorting to escapism. As Conrad claimed on a different occasion, each man seeks refuge from the consciousness of the vanity of human life "according to the prompting of his particular devil", that is "in stupidity, in drunkenness of all kinds, in lies, in beliefs, in murder, thieving, reforming, in negation, in contempt" (Conrad 2004, p. 226), and in all the ways to forget the only essential truth, that is, that we are mortal beings. Singleton's "particular devil" lies in the dullness of work and routine, and in the reduction of self-consciousness to its minimum, so as to become a mere "elemental force." By contrast, Wait forgets mortality through an excess of self-consciousness, an excess of "humanity," getting lost in a fantasy world made up of lies.

Singleton occupies the third slot of the square, combining "work" and "non-truth." As the most representative example of the ethic of work and sacrifice he is opposed both to Wait and Donkin. However, as already noticed, he shares with Wait a radical incapacity to interpret reality and himself so that he is, from this point of view, opposed to Donkin only. While the latter understands the real logic of Wait's behaviour, Singleton interprets it in terms of superstitious beliefs. While Wait cannot interpret the reality and himself because of his extreme narcissism, Singleton cannot interpret it because of the lack of minimal detachment from reality that allows its interrogation.



<sup>5</sup> Earlier on, when asked for his opinion about whether Wait was actually dying as he claimed or just malingering, Singleton had stated that "of course," (Conrad 1950, p. 31) Wait would die, thereby shocking the rest of the crew, who miss how that is an obvious truth regarding all humanity. As always, Singleton's knowledge does not come from reason, as from the immortal and collective truths sedimented through the centuries. In the passage just referred to, instead, Singleton intuits death not as the result of some abstract syllogism, but in the concreteness of his own destiny.

No character seems to fit within the empty slot, which combines the two positive terms of “Work” and “Truth.” Definitely it could not be the unstable Belfast, who is guilty of spoiling the climate of the ship by committing the fruit pie theft. Nor could the captain be a good candidate, because he too accepts the “bond of a sentimental lie” (Conrad 1950, p. 155) pretending to believe in Wait’s illness and giving Donkin an occasion to revolt. The last slot represents the impossible contradictory position that unites adherence to the community of the ethic of work, and a certain detachment necessary to question and understand reality and oneself. Only the narrator partially deserves this position, being at the same time part of the “we” of collective ethic, and an independent “I” observing, judging, and narrating the story (Lothe 1989, p 87). The oscillation in the narrative voice, though, is a only symptom of the fact that in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* the essential contradiction of Conrad’s “political unconscious” has no dialectical solution and the crisis represented in the novel is not yet overcome. In the “I” that speaks in the last paragraph of the novel there is only a glimpse of the synthesis which will overcome this contradiction and would later be named Charles Marlow.

## 6. Charles Marlow: “I like what is in the work”

Marlow, both in the novels *Lord Jim* (1899) and *Chance* (1912) and in the short stories *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Youth* (1898), represents the dialectical solution of the contradiction between “truth” and “work,” that is to say, between the adherence to the collective ethic and the individual detachment allowing for a critical questioning of reality. (See Wake) Like Singleton, Marlow shares the ethic of the sea, but unlike him he knows that such an ethic is not exempt from hidden contradiction, excessive rigidity, inevitable mistakes. Marlow adds perspective to the ethic of the sea, and the idea that the truth is never simply a given, but a story that has to be reconstructed from many different perspectives at the same time. Accordingly, while in *Lord Jim* the judges “demanded facts from him [Jim], as if facts could explain everything!” (Conrad 2012, p. 27), Marlow knows that, to echo Nietzsche, there are no facts but only interpretations, and looks instead for “the convention that lurks in all truth and on the essential sincerity of falsehood” (Conrad 2012, p. 68). Marlow, despite being committed to truth, avoids Donkin’s “perfidious desire of truthfulness” (Conrad 2012, p. 150) and interprets “the pauses between the words” (Conrad 2012, p. 84), in order to reach a fuller understanding of reality. As said in a famous passage from *Heart of Darkness*, to Marlow “the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (Conrad 2010, p. 45).

Marlow combines “truth” and “work” by transforming the former into a narration built on different points of view and distinguishing the latter from merely being a cog in the machine. “I don’t like work – no man does” Marlow admits in a pivotal passage of *Heart of Darkness*, “but I like what is in the work, – the chance to find yourself – your own reality – for yourself – not for others – what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show – and never can tell what it really means” (Conrad 2010, p. 72). This is the essence of Conrad’s mature ethic of work, the solution of the contradiction between the devotion to the ethical traditional values and his pessimism: an ethic of work that is essentially individualist, and that corresponds to an idea of truth as essentially open and perspectivist.

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