

Joseph Conrad's Use of Key Names in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*

i

"Wait!" cried a deep, ringing voice.

All stood still. Mr. Baker, who had turned away yawning, spun round open-mouthed. At last, furious, he blurted out: "What's this? Who said 'Wait'? What? . . ."

But he saw a tall figure standing on the rail. It came down and pushed through the crowd, marching with a heavy tread towards the light on the quarter-deck. Then again the sonorous voice said with insistence: "Wait!" The lamplight lit up the man's body. He was tall. His head was away up in the shadows of lifeboats that stood on skids above the deck. The whites of his eyes and his teeth gleamed distinctly, but the face was indistinguishable. His hands were big and seemed gloved.

Mr. Baker advanced intrepidly. "Who are you? How dare you! . . . he began.

The boy, amazed like the rest, raised the light to the man's face. It was black. A surprised hum—a faint hum that sounded like the suppressed mutter of the word "Nigger"—ran along the deck and escaped out into the night. The nigger seemed not to hear. He balanced himself where he stood in a swagger that marked time. After a moment he said calmly: "My name is Wait—James Wait."

So, in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* are we introduced to the man whom Joseph Conrad has called "the centre of the ship's collective psychology and the pivot of the action."¹ The scene of course is a clever, effective dramatic device in the hands of a writer who liked to surprise his reader. But I am interested here in showing that the use of *Wait* as a name goes much further, is indeed a purposeful and meaningful trope for the psychology and action of the story. I mean that the name goes beyond even the usual, conventional functions—the allegorically suggestive (Billy Budd, Christopher Newman) or allusive (Stephen Dedalus, Joe Christmas) or the comically descriptive (Thwackum, M'Choakumchild) and rather works in a way integrated and pervasive as we contemplate the structure of the novel, its characters and essential theme. It is perhaps similar in resonance to the way the protagonist's name illuminates the theme of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Conrad's vision was instinctively symbolic. "His world," wrote David Smith, "was a forest of pillars, his mind a wild of correspondences."² To Emerson, words were signs of natural facts and natural facts were signs of spiritual facts. So with Joseph Conrad: "Words, groups of words, words standing alone, are the symbols of life, have the power in their sound or their aspect to present the very thing you wish to hold up before the mental vision of your readers."³

I am confident that such names as *Wait*, *Singleton*, and even the ship's name, *Narcissus*, were quite deliberately chosen—or retained—as beautifully appropriate to the tale. Yet it would seem, at first glance, otherwise. For sometimes they are actual names. So we throw up our hands: "Well, it turns out after all that these events did occur aboard a ship really called *The Narcissus*, just such a ship as Conrad describes. And, what's more, there was a Negro named James Wait . . ." But the case is not so simple as that. Joseph Conrad, like some other great writers, did not have a great gift of invention. He depended heavily on actual

1. *Notes On My Books* (Garden City, N.Y., 1921), page 13

2. *The History of the Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus*, edited, with an essay by David R. Smith (Northampton, Mass., 1966), page 60

3. G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters* (Garden City, N.Y., 1927), I, page 28

experiences, persons, places, and events for inspiration, for (in James's term) the "germs" of his stories. I surmise that names could work as well. He tells us, in fact, that the incident of Wait's name called out in the beginning inspired the first scene of the book.⁴ But that episode, and James Wait himself occurred not on *The actual Narcissus* at all, but years earlier on another ship *The Duke of Sutherland*.⁵

So Conrad kept the incident and name from *that* voyage. But that was all. Like any artist, he retained or dropped or combined or distorted according to his needs:

I had forgotten the name of the real Nigger of the *Narcissus*. As you know, I do not write history, but fiction, and I am therefore entitled to choose as I please what is most suitable in regard to characters and particulars to help me in the general impression I wish to produce.⁵

To be accurate, the original's name was not really *Wait* at all. The true name of the black man on *The Duke of Sutherland* was *White*, but he spoke his name in the clipped accents of West Indies British: "Wait." Or so it sounded, at any rate, to Conrad's ear, and it was "most suitable" to Conrad to keep it that way.⁶

ii

James Wait's appearance on the deck of the lovely *Narcissus* introduces an external, catalytic element. He is *merely* as Conrad put it, the centre of the psychology and action. Wait is a mysterious stranger intruding on a normally serene and stable world. Apparently, he is very ill; it soon becomes a question of whether or not—or when—he will die. His cough is "metallic, hollow, and tremendously loud" and it causes the sky's dome to ring and the iron plates of the ship to vibrate. To say that the crew's sympathy is aroused is to understate it. They grow more and more preoccupied with Wait and with the aspect of "stalking death, thrust at them many times a day like a boast and like a menace by this obnoxious nigger." They pamper him, curse him, steal pie for him. And despite their doubts, disagreements, quarrels, they are united—all but one—in their compassion and concern for "Jimmy Darlin".

This show of sympathy brings us to the essential question posed in the novel: What is the bond, the right bond, that can unite all men in brotherhood? Conrad asks this question in his famous preface, which is, we sometimes forget, a commentary on this story. Art, he tells us, by appealing to experience, including the senses, can reach all temperaments, and thus speak "to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of human hearts." Art, then, when it renders life truly, eventually brings us to share our sense of mystery and reverence and shows us that we are all members of one another.

How is it then that such fellow feeling as demonstrated by the crew of the *Narcissus*— is regarded throughout in terms of scorn and contempt? Sure enough, the story is about solidarity, but there are at work false and therefore contemptible sources of sympathy, forces that pull the crew downward to baseness. The underlying action becomes a struggle, a triangular struggle, as it were, for the soul of this crew. At the base, exerting this downward pull, are the values represented in two characters, Wait and Donkin. What Donkin stands for is clear enough; he is the political aspect. His name, insofar as it has meaning, is more an example of what Fred C. Robinson calls "appropriate" as opposed to "meaningful" naming.⁷ It is suggestive of a lower social class. Conrad conceived of him as a cockney⁸ with all of the worst attributes of a product of London's slums. He is "The sympathetic and deserving creature that knows all about his rights, but knows nothing of course, of endurance, and of the unexpressed faith of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship's company."

4. *Ibid.*

5. Jean-Aubry, I, page 77

6. R. L. Megroz, *Joseph Conrad's Mind and Method* (New York, 1964) page 60

7. "Appropriate Naming in English Literature," *Names: Journal of the American Name Society*, XX (June, 1972), 131,137

8. Jean-Aubry, II, page 248

But it is Wait whose attraction is stronger, for the crew's compassion for Jimmy has a specious, corrupt seductive core. The crew of the *Narcissus* (I stress the name at this point) are possessed, we read, by "the egoism of tenderness to suffering." Theirs is an erring, misplaced compassion because it is, at bottom, vicarious, unstoical, and based on "a sentimental lie." For what the crew see reflected in their black mirrors is the face of their own *Todenangst*, a fear of death so obsessive that, clinging to the preservation of the self's identity, it negates the spirit of life itself. So—Conrad's narrator tells us—"The latent egoism of tenderness to suffering appeared in the developing anxiety not to see him die!"

Thus Wait's behavior throughout is based on his fear of death and the effort to deny its imminence. The crew—but one—are drawn into a game of deception. Significantly, even the Captain lapses once from adherence to truth, without which he cannot lead at all. He admits:

When I saw him standing there, three parts dead and so scared, black amongst that gaping lot—no grit to face what's coming to us all—the notion came to be at once, before I could think. Sorry for him—like you would be for a sick brute. If ever creature was in a mortal funk to die.

This in recognition of his own weakness. The result of Captain Alistoun's pity was for himself to succumb to the seduction of the communal lie. Out of pity, he pretended to punish Wait as a malingerer, who, as he admitted himself, was not very ill at all. And the result of this was to bring about a near-mutiny, instigated by the agitator Donkin.

And—beautiful irony—the despicable, heartless Donkin himself is for a moment capable of "compassion" for the dying man. "Poor beggar," he murmurs, and his eyes become moist, for he feels "the anguishing grasp of a great sorrow on his heart at the thought that, someday, he himself would have to go through it all—just like this—perhaps!" Donkin's conduct toward Wait is cunningly ingratiating and produces an effect that the narrator finds most curious. Donkin too feeds the lie by accusing Wait of crafty malingering: "Yer ain't sick—are yer? . . . Yer little game, eh?" And, we hear that, to the amazement of all, "Jimmy seemed to like the fellow!"

The exception among the crew, standing outside or above the "strong, effective, and respectable bond of a sentimental lie" is the taciturn old seaman Singleton. In this struggle for loyalties, it is he who stands at the apex, as it were, of the triangle. His separateness is, of course, expressed in his name (the original, aboard the *Narcissus*, was named Sullivan;⁹ He symbolizes old values: selfless dedication to his duty and to the ship. Ships are not at fault, he tells Wait, "It is the men in them." His tone is always oracular and often elegiac. "The men who could understand his silence," Conrad writes, "those men who knew how to exist beyond the pale of life and within sight of eternity . . . men enough to scorn in their hearts the sentimental voices that bewailed the hardness of their fate," these are gone. He alone is left.

Singleton's response to Wait from the first is to spurn the lie, for Singleton is "the incarnation of barbarian wisdom serene in the blasphemous turmoil of the world." He looks in on Wait. "Are you dying?" Shocked and confused into truth by the question, the Negro replies, "Why, can't you see I am?" "Well, get on with your dying," Singleton says, ("with venerable mildness"). "Don't raise a blamed fuss with us over that job. We can't help you." The crew, confounded as usual, ask Singleton, "You think he will die?" "Why, of course he will die." And they are impressed for the moment, until the ambiguity occurs to them. Like any oracle, Singleton's answer "meant nothing." The irony is that the answer meant everything.

iii

With his terrific, harrowing typhoon, Conrad provides the chemistry to bring out the worst and the best in these men, according to their innermost qualities. The hollow men reveal themselves in action—or in inaction. Donkin hides and shirks the duty and the risk while the others climb aloft in the howling wild. When the stricken *Narcissus* bows before it, he screams for the others to disobey the Captain's command

9. Elmer A. Ordonex, *The Early Joseph Conrad: Revisions and Style* (Quezon City, 1969) page 23

10. *Notes on My Books*, page 13

and cut the masts. On the other hand, Podmore, the cook, in fair weather a tiresome religious fanatic, now risks his life twice to secure water and coffee for the exhausted, freezing men. The crew again and again face fearsome death to save the ship. We see them pinned by the furious gale against the rigging "in attitudes of crucifixion." They confront death again to save James Wait, fighting their way to the overturned deckhouse where he is quartered and now trapped. They enter by the carpenter's shop, and, hands bleeding from the nails scattered about, break through a bulkhead to rescue the Negro, who has been screaming in his fear and knocking "with the hurry of a man prematurely shut up in a coffin."

iv

The meaning of *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, I suggest, is one with perhaps the most enduring, universal themes in literature: that which insists that reconciliation to death is the necessary and ultimate apprehension of life, of ongoing life, patterned in the cycles of days, seasons, ages; and tells us that to submit the recalcitrant ego to necessity is to be in harmony with Life, with Nature, with God. In *King Lear*, Edgar says to blinded Gloucester, "Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither." "Ripeness is all," he tells him. To Whitman, death is not to be endured; it is to be welcomed: "Come, lovely and soothing Death." is the outlet song. But James Wait can either endure nor welcome it. He represents that in us which cowers, squirms, shrinks, pretends, denies, lies. He is out of tune. He cries, "Wait!" When he comes aboard the *Narcissus*, the elements themselves respond to his recalcitrance. His appearance "seemed to hasten the retreat of departing light by his very presence; the setting sun dipped sharply, as though fleeing before our nigger." And, later since Wait lingers, will not die, Singleton, in his primitive and superstitious wisdom, blames the nigger for the head winds that imprison the ship and balk its homeward flight.

Wait dies. But even the death is not enough. Even dead, he *waits*. His enshrouded corpse will not slide down the planks and into the sea. Some ritual is required, some gesture from the crew of repudiation, some act to cleanse them of falsehood. And so Belfast, their spokesman, cries to the body: "Jimmy! Be a man! Go. Go, Jimmy, Go!"

His fingers touched the head of the body, and the gray package started reluctantly to whizz off the lifted planks all at once, with the suddenness of a flash of lightning. The crowd stepped forward like one man; a deep Ah-h-h! came out vibrating from the broad chests. The ship rolled as if relieved of an unfair burden.

And so the spell is broken. The sails of the *Nacissus* fill before a freshening gale and the crew is called to set sail for home. As the Ancient Mariner's acceptance of God's love, blessing all his creation, released that other entrapped vessel, so does Belfast's touch free the *Narcissus*. A weight is lifted.

v.

Years later, Conrad wrote to his American readers, "James Wait, afraid of death and making her his accomplice, was an imposter of some character—mastering our compassion, scornful of our sentimentalism, triumphing over our suspicious."¹⁰ But the final triumph, clearly, is neither Wait's nor his accomplice's, for the crew is saved from itself by its courage under pressure and its selflessness. It has committed itself to individual sacrifice. It has rejected the examples of Wait and Donkin, emulating rather Singleton, who, in that horrendous, interminable storm, has stood at the helm for thirty hours, collapsing like some great tree only when the struggle is over.

When the *Narcissus* reaches England and the crew, "paid off," are seen in their essential, unvarnished humanity, chattering, swaying in a dark knot down the city street, they become, for a moment, transmuted, even apotheosized. Even the crass, commercial fact of their whole enterprise is transcended in that moment, in the final image:

The sunshine of heaven fell like a gift of grace on the mud of the earth, on the remembering and mute stones, on

greed, selfishness; on the anxious faces of forgetful men. And to the right of the dark group the stained front of the Mint, cleansed by the flood of light, stood out for a moment dazzling and white like a marble palace in fairy tale. The crew of the *Narcissus* drifted out of sight.

Arthur Kay

The University of Arizona