

CONRAD AMONG THE CRITICS: THE EARLY REVIEWS

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INTRODUCTION: HISTORICISING CONRAD

As a discipline, literary interpretation has increasingly allied itself with context. The reception of Joseph Conrad's works reflects this tendency to historicise and sociologise texts. There is nothing new in such pattern-making: one thinks of how certain critics stretched the theme of betrayal in *Lord Jim* to find echoes of *Patria* and *Polska* in *Patna*. Fuelled by Conrad's trans-national allegiances, this reading borrows further from a nineteenth century concept of nation to discover that here, as in the rootlessness of his seafaring life, Conrad had stumbled upon the hallmarks of the modern age.

Nor do we need to stray into allegory; historical context is everywhere, functioning as a self-consciously mimetic property of the Conradian text. *Almayer's Folly's* reference to the British Borneo Company or the clamour for "rights" in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* – not to mention the "scramble for loot" (*Last Essays* 17) charted in "Heart of Darkness" – ensure that the reader cannot receive these texts without some awareness of the historical moment of their conception. The *Athenaeum* review of *Almayer's Folly* hints at Conrad's writing if not in response to then certainly on the wave of current events: "Why should he not give his readers, if he can, a sketch of the Straits Settlements, whose petition for fairer treatment, in respect of their military contribution, at the hands of the Government at home, has brought them into contemporary prominence?"¹

In our attempts to recapture the taste of the moment rather than impose the judgement of posterity, it is with no less verisimilitude that we respond to the mood and

¹ *The Athenaeum*. 25 May 1895, 671.

tone of a Conrad work, to argue that, say, "Heart of Darkness" contributes to and is sustained by *fin de siècle* anxieties as the Victorian age reached its conclusion.

In a word, Conrad's preoccupation with fiction as "rescue work" (*Notes on Life and Letters* 13) becomes ours, too, as we try to recapture the distinctive patterns of feeling that shape the moment of a work's composition and reception. Formalising this approach is New Historicism's diligent (if, one suspects, ultimately doomed) attempt to recreate the thoughts and practices of that moment. And if it seems at times that theory reduces texts to a supporting role, then it must also be acknowledged that historicism is necessary to save us from the distortions of "presentism," whereby the view of the past is moulded on the politics of the present. Furthermore, by ensuring that interpretation is context-sensitive, history can attune us to the complicated disputes that inhere in familiar words – words like "empire," for instance.

As has often been noted, Conrad's arrival on the literary scene coincided with a boom in the printing and publishing industries, quickly reflected in an increasingly professional market place, whose robust health can be measured in the burgeoning magazine market. In the 1890s, for instance, *The Bookman* and *The Strand* magazines began in 1891; *The Idler* in 1892; *Pall Mall Magazine* in 1893; *The Yellow Book* in 1894; *Pearson's Magazine* and *The Savoy* in 1896; and so on. Conrad, to whom New Grub Street was "as exciting as a peep into a brigand's cave and a good deal less reassuring" (in Garnett ed., 1928, xi), referred to his as "the age of Besants, Authors' Clubs and Literary agents" (*CL2* 417). Sir Walter Besant founded the Society of Authors in 1882. With the social impact of increased literacy in Britain, these were the years of Leopold Wagner's *How to Publish a Book* (1898) and Arnold Bennett's *How to Become an Author* (1903).

In particular, it was the advent of the literary agent that challenged the paternalism of the industry – a paternalism from which Conrad had himself benefited in his *Blackwood's* period. William Heinemann may have deemed the new middleman "generally a parasite" (Watts 1989, 85), but, as James Brand Pinker proved, the literary agent freed the author from the day-to-day task of finding publishers and negotiating contracts. Conrad's debt to Pinker is well attested, not least by the author himself who claimed "those books which, people say, are an asset of English literature owe their existence to Mr. Pinker as much as to me" (*CL5* 619).

Such context necessarily has a bearing upon the broader subject of Conrad's reception, and issues such as where his work was published – and, thus, how he reached the reading public – have been the subject of recent study by, for instance, Peter McDonald (1997) and David Finkelstein (2006). Similarly, Stephen Donovan's website, *Conrad First* (currently in process), aims to reproduce the periodicals in which Conrad's work appeared. Where a work was serialised has obvious relevance for the reception of Conrad. Periodicals such as the *New Review* or *Blackwood's* came with their own identifiable readership. In an often-quoted letter, Conrad wrote of the latter:

“One was in decent company there and had a good sort of public” (to Pinker, 12 or 19 November 1911; *CL4*: 506).²

More coincidental than analytical are the historical correspondences that help to place an author in his or her time. Yet these too have a bearing upon our placement and reception. I am thinking here of, for instance, of such coincidences as Michelangelo’s death and Shakespeare’s birth both occurring in 1564. In itself of little moment, this fact nonetheless conjures up the passing of the Renaissance torch from Italy to England.

Consider for a moment how such correspondences help to locate Conrad. He shares his birth-year, 1857, with Edward Elgar, who provided the Age of Empire in Britain with its soundtrack; the year is also, as his examiner in *A Personal Record* reminds him, “The Mutiny Year” (118), sometimes regarded as the first step towards a United Independence Movement. Historical coincidences perhaps, but, associated with an author whose fictional world is often that of Greater Britain, their correspondence usefully inflects our sense of Empire. 1857 also saw the births of Robert Baden-Powell and George Gissing. Pursuing these historical coincidences a little further, Conrad’s dates – 1857 to 1924 – mean that he was born in the year in which *Little Dorrit* was published in book form; in the year of his death, *A Passage to India* was published. Such is the space that Conrad occupies in the literary time-line. (He shares his death year with Franz Kafka.)

Conrad’s career as a published author begins with *Almayer’s Folly* in 1895, the year that saw the publication of Thomas Hardy’s last novel, *Jude the Obscure*. By serendipity or coincidence, here, too, there is the sense of a torch passing from one generation of artists to the next. Of course this symmetrical elegance didn’t help Virginia Woolf when, “in 1910 or thereabouts,” looking for living novelists from whom contemporary writers “could learn their business” (1950, 99). For, despite reserving her “unconditional gratitude” for “Mr. Hardy and Mr. Conrad” (1925: 185), she notes that the former “has written no novel since 1895” while the latter “is a Pole; which sets him apart, and makes him, however admirable, not very helpful” (1950, 99). It would be left to F.R. Leavis to claim Conrad for the “great tradition” of the English novel. (In terms of coincidence, Leavis was born in the year of *Almayer’s Folly*.)

But Woolf’s comments remind us that the period was one of self-conscious artistic debate. Her essays such as “Modern Fiction” or “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” take their place alongside Conrad’s “Preface” to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* James’s Prefaces to the New York Edition of his works, Holbrook Jackson’s *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913), and very public debates about the nature of art, such as that between James and H.G. Wells.

² Edgar Allan Poe provides a satiric extension of this in his spoof essay “How to Write a Blackwood’s Article,” where, under the name Signora Psyche Zenobia, he “instructs” the would-be contributor to *Maga*.

To risk a final coincidence, Conrad's political novels are generally recognised to form part of what Jacques Berthoud calls his "major phase"; this in a publishing career that begins in 1895, the year that marks the death of Engels, and lasts until 1924, the year of Lenin's death and of the formation of the first Labour government in Britain under Ramsay MacDonald.

Despite Bob Dylan's injunction to "take what you have gathered from coincidence," I repeat, these are only the coincidences of history, but the correspondences they evoke have a bearing on the manner in which we receive and respond to Conrad.

Looking at the literature published in a given year assists the task of trying to establish a frame of reference in order to see Conrad as others might have seen him. With whom is he rubbing shoulders in the market place? In this manner one attempts to see what his contemporaries saw rather than view him through the prism of posterity. Of course, this approach takes us beyond the bounds of what we have come to see as canonical. But even while reminding us of just how much has not endured, it does offer a more representative view of Conrad's contemporary market place.

So, who else was published during 1895? I have mentioned Hardy, whose first uniform and collected edition, "The Wessex Novels," also began to appear in this year. In addition, John Buchan (*Sir Quixote of the Moors*); George Gissing; H. Rider Haggard; George Meredith; Walter Pater; Coventry Patmore; Violet Hunt (*A Hard Woman*); Arthur Symons (*London Nights*); Robert Louis Stevenson (*Vailima Letters*); Oscar Wilde; and W.B. Yeats all published in 1895. Besides reading like a who's who of late nineteenth century literature, this roll-call also defines the fault line between high Victorianism and incipient Modernism.

The less canonical publications are no less relevant to the taste of the moment and hence to the notion of reception. For instance, in 1895 *Almayer's Folly* was published alongside such titles as: *The Woman Who Wouldn't*; *The Woman Who Didn't*; *The Man Who Didn't*; and (finally, thankfully) *The Woman Who Did*.³

Another feature that strikes one about the publications of 1895 concerns the short fiction. We know that for much of the year Conrad was composing *An Outcast of the Islands*, completed in September after a year of writing having begun life as a short story entitled "Two Vagabonds" in late 1894. Conrad married Jessie George on 24 March 1896, three weeks after the publication of *An Outcast of the Islands*. On honeymoon in Brittany, and probably on the advice of Edward Garnett, he turned his attention to short fiction, writing three of the five stories that would make up *Tales of Unrest* (1898). Pragmatically, this made sound financial sense. Short stories provided a lucrative means of supplementing his income from novels: in 1901, when average earnings were around £100 per annum, Conrad earned £40 for "Amy Foster," a story

³ My source for this information is the invaluable *Concise Oxford Chronology of English Literature*. Ed. Michael Cox (2004).

of 12,500 words.⁴ Furthermore, serialisation in a range of magazines kept Conrad's name before the reading public.

The year in which Conrad arrived on the literary scene with *Almayer's Folly* is also characterised by the market's evident predilection for short fiction. Kipling, for instance, published *The Second Jungle Book* – with *The Jungle Book* having been published the previous year – and there were reissues of two of his volumes of stories first published in 1888, including “Soldiers Three” and “Wee Willie Winkie.” Among those publishing volumes of stories were Henry James, Kenneth Graham, Quiller-Couch, and H. G. Wells, who weighed in with *The Stolen Bacillus, and Other Incidents*, *The Time Machine*, and *The Wonderful Visit*. Indeed, as Wells himself said of the 1890s, “Short stories broke out everywhere.”⁵

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

In 1973, *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Norman Sherry, was published. Although Sherry makes no claim to be comprehensive or complete, human nature being what it is, his collection of contemporary reviews has proved the last word on

⁴ My indebtedness to the painstaking research and calculations of Peter D. McDonald (1997) in what follows here will be obvious. Based on the evidence of the letters, Conrad's earnings from magazines for his earliest short stories are as follows: from the *Savoy* (October 1896) about £37 16s for “The Idiots” (10,000 words), or 1s for 13 words; from *Cornhill* (January 1897) £10 for “The Lagoon” (5,300), or 1s for 27 words; from *Cosmopolis* (June–July 1897) £40 10s for “An Outpost of Progress” (9,500), or 1s for 12 words; and from *Blackwood's* (November 1897) £36 for “Karain” (16,000), or 1s for 22 words. In all of these calculations, Unwin's 10 per cent commission on the magazine rights has been deducted (See *CL1* 285, 293, 350–351, 356, 367, 408). Conrad had received £20 for the full copyright of *Almayer's Folly* (64,000 words) and a £50 advance on 12.4 per cent royalty for the book rights of *An Outcast of the Islands* (115,000 words). Average earnings can thus be calculated as follows: 1s for 16 words for magazine stories; 1s for 160 words for *Almayer's Folly*. On this basis, serial publication offered a tenfold improvement! It is also salutary to recall here that Conrad's wage as first mate in the *Torrens* in 1892 was £8 per month (see Najder 1983, 153); and, according to the family budgets described in *Cornhill* in 1901, a working man who earned 30s a week was “in receipt of good weekly wages.” (See Arthur Morrison, “Family Budgets: I.A. Workman's Budget,” *Cornhill* April 1901, 446.) Calculated over a year, 30s per week yielded an annual wage of £78.

⁵ “Kipling was writing short stories; Barrie, Stevenson, Frank Harris; Max Beerbohm wrote at least one perfect one, *The Happy Hypocrite*; Henry James pursued his wonderful and inimitable bent; and among other names that occur to me, like a handful of jewels drawn from a bag, are George Street, Morley Roberts, George Gissing, Ella D'Arcy, Murray Gilchrist, E. Nesbit, Stephen Crane, Joseph Conrad, Edwin Pugh, Jerome K. Jerome, Kenneth Grahame, Arthur Morrison, Marriott Watson, George Moore, Grant Allen, George Egerton, Henry Harland, Pett Ridge, W.W. Jacobs ... I do not think the present decade can produce any parallel to this list, or what is more remarkable, that the latter achievements in this field of any of the survivors from that time, with the sole exception of Joseph Conrad, can compare with the work they did before 1900. It seems to me this outburst of short stories came not only as a phase in literary development, but also as a phase in the development of the individual writers concerned” (H.G. Wells, cited in Jackson [1966] 229).

Conrad's reception for the majority of scholars. Put another way, *The Critical Heritage* has inadvertently exerted a tyranny over Conrad studies, providing a view of the immediate reception that is skewed due to incompleteness.

The first question to address is: How much is left out of Sherry? Sherry excludes reviews relating to collaborations – *The Inheritors* (1901); *Romance* (1903) – reminiscences – *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906); *A Personal Record* (1912) – essays – *Notes on Life and Letters* (1921); *Last Essays* (1926) – and two short story collections: *Within the Tides* (1915) and *Tales of Hearsay* (1925). Thus a quarter of the twenty two volumes in the Dent Collected Edition are overlooked. Sherry also excludes any reviews of the plays because, as he tells us in his "Note on the Text:" "Conrad the dramatist is of such little significance" (1973, 45).

More pertinent for my purposes, though, is the number of reviews collected in *The Critical Heritage*. Again, I should stress that Sherry does not aim to be comprehensive, but I would also reiterate that this is the only port of call for most scholars when looking at Conrad's contemporary reception. Although a few others are mentioned in passing in the Introduction, the number of reviews reproduced – or extracted – for Conrad's first five volumes are as follows:

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|--------------------------------------|----|
| <i>Almayer's Folly</i> | 14 |
| <i>An Outcast of the Islands</i> | 13 |
| <i>The Nigger of the "Narcissus"</i> | 8 |
| <i>Tales of Unrest</i> | 4 |
| <i>Lord Jim</i> | 10 |

Without going much beyond the usual sources – the bibliographies of Ehrsam (1969), Teets and Gerber (1971), and Teets (1990) – one comes up with the follow number of reviews (I have not included foreign language reviews – such as Davray's in *Mercure de France* – nor reviews published after the first printing, say for a reissue):

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| <i>Almayer's Folly</i> | 41 |
| <i>An Outcast of the Islands</i> | 61 |
| <i>The Nigger of the "Narcissus"</i> | 81 |
| <i>Tales of Unrest</i> | 52 |
| <i>Lord Jim</i> | 46 |

In a few cases, the volume is only noted – under titles like "Books Received This Week" (or some such) – and in others the reviews may be very short, a line or two in an *omnium gatherum* of current fiction. Further, some reviews such as that in the *Bookman*, were published in both British and American editions which meant that they duplicated reviews or parts of reviews. All that said, the disparity between what is in Sherry and what is out there is striking. Sherry reprints 1 in 3 reviews of *Almayer's*

Folly, quite a respectable percentage. But 1 in 5 for *Outcast* seems miserly – and it gets worse, with 1 in 10 for *The Nigger of the “Narcissus.”* However we interpret these latter figures, they make a nonsense of using Sherry as the source for the early reception of these works.

The implications of these statistics for Conrad’s reception are vast. To receive 41 reviews for your first volume, 61 for your second, and 81 for your third is staggering even by today’s standards. These figures confirm the health of the market place into which Conrad had ventured while confirming the immediate impact he made upon the literary world.

The second question to address here concerns the scope of Sherry’s reviews. How wide a net did Sherry cast? The answer is simple: Not wide enough. So much so that the reviews offered assume parochial proportions. To take just the five volumes I’ve listed, from *Almayer’s Folly* to *Lord Jim* inclusive, of nearly 50 reviews Sherry offers, only 3 stem from the United States of America. Instead, Sherry draws overwhelmingly on British daily newspapers and literary magazines – the *Daily Mail*, *Daily News*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Glasgow Herald*, and the *Scotsman* are extracted alongside the *Pall Mall Gazette*, *Speaker*, *Spectator*, *Academy*, and *Athenaeum*. But, even leaving aside the establishment nature of these sources, the expanding print industry was international: as Conrad discovered when it came to selling his work, the American market place ensured being able to sell it twice.

And if the American market is responsible for providing Conrad with a sizeable proportion of his income, how he is sold to the book-buying American public is crucial to any sense of his early reception. Just consider for a moment what it means for Conrad’s reception to know that the following periodicals (and the list is by no means exhaustive) all carried reviews of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus.”* the *Boston Evening Transcript*, *Brooklyn Eagle*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Cleveland Leader*, *Chicago Daily Inter-Ocean*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Indianapolis News*, *New York Times* and *New York Tribune*, *St Paul Pioneer Press*, Minnesota, and the *Toledo Blade*. It no longer serves to describe Conrad as an English author; Conrad is an author in English. Furthermore, selling Conrad to the reading public was, from the outset, an international rather than a national affair. The London *Bookman* review of May 1896 (reprinted in Sherry) is repeated with some slight reshaping in the New York *Bookman* of July 1896.⁶ The implication is clear: twin markets and parallel readerships were being cultivated.

Conrad’s acerbic opinion of America and Americans is well documented. To take only comments he made in the same period as these reviews: siding with Cunninghame Graham, he expressed sympathy for the Spanish in the Spanish-American War in 1898, concluding that it “would be *real fine*” to “set the States & Germany by the ears” (*CL2* 81); to Ted Sanderson he sends up the gullibility of the “Yank” Robert

⁶ “New Writers: Mr Joseph Conrad.” *The Bookman* (London). May 1896, 41; “Chronicle and Comment.” *The Bookman* (NY). July 1896, 396–397.

McClure, who had just paid for the serialization of *The Rescue*: “The Child of the Screaming Eagle” is proclaimed “as innocent as a dove” (CL2 70–71); and to William Blackwood “I am not in a position to despise the almighty dollar – as yet” (CL2 140).

Against such disparagement, however, one might note the addressees in these letters: in their different ways each is a member of the clubs, national and professional, that Conrad was in the process of joining, whose laws of inclusion are in part defined by those of exclusion. We might also note Conrad’s cordial response to an unknown American admirer (CL2 98) during this time, who had written to him expressing appreciation of *Almayer’s Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, and seeking information about any further works. As John Quinn’s subsequent purchase of manuscripts or the Doubleday-organised 1923 publicity tour of the United States demonstrated, despite his brave words to Blackwood, Conrad was never in a position “to despise the almighty dollar.”

Having already charged Sherry with “incompleteness,” I shall now hoist myself with my own petard and, in the interests of space, restrict myself to reviews of the early works.

CONTEMPORARY REVIEWS

The degree to which Conrad “arrived” with the publication of *Almayer’s Folly* is remarkable. T. P. O’Connor devoted a full eight columns of *The Weekly Sun* to his review of 9 June 1895, and while much of this is given to quotation, the sheer amount of newspaper space covered by the review tells its own story.

In terms of cultivating conditions for Conrad’s reception, James MacArthur in the New York *Bookman* urges readers to read *Almayer’s Folly* alongside Swettenham’s *Malay Sketches*, arguing that the latter volume “satisfies a curiosity” aroused by the former.⁷ This contiguity between art and anthropology reminds of Conrad’s claim that “Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing” (“Henry James: An Appreciation;” *NLL* 17).

Of course there are also howlers to provide incidental pleasure, so let’s get these out of the way first. *The Book Buyer* describes *Almayer’s Folly* as “an Australian story” while *The Realm* describes Almayer as “an Englishman” whose ambition “is to take [Nina] to England and make a Saxon of her.”⁸ Disarmingly, in his review of *An Outcast of the Islands* the reviewer in *The World* (1 April 1896) admits to not having seen *Almayer’s Folly*, and complains of the being disoriented by the fact that Willems is only named on the third page. A subsequent review in *The World* is a triumph of vagueness:

⁷ James MacArthur. “New Books: Romance in Malaya.” *The Bookman* (New York). August 1895, 39–41.

⁸ *The Book Buyer*. July 1895, 353; *The Realm*. 10 May 1895, 966.

“An Outcast of the Islands,” by Joseph Conrad, is a very well written and vigorous but painful story of life in the South Pacific. The progressive putrefaction of a soul none too sound at the start is an unpleasing spectacle, and is not improved by a background liberally made up of other souls in a more or less advanced state of decomposition. And that is, in brief, what this novel presents. But the work is skilfully, even admirably done. The moral ulcers seem to be true to life, and the characters – or personalities, to be accurate, since they haven’t any characters – are such as to make one remember them almost as vividly as if the disgust of introduction to them in the flesh had been experienced. But some of the descriptions of scenery are superb. (3 January 1897, 6)

Despite Conrad’s forthright claim to Blackwood, “I am modern” (CL2 418), at least two reviewers were attracted to him because he *wasn’t* modern. *The Publisher’s Circular* of May 1895 praises *Almayer’s Folly* for its “strongly written ... vivid scenes” which “will please readers who can appreciate the romance of adventure of wild life as a pleasant change from the ‘problems’ of ‘modern’ fiction”; while *Bookselling* of April 1896 finds *An Outcast of the Islands* “a green, refreshing oasis in a desert of ‘modern’ fads and problems.”⁹

As ever when considering the early reviews, one feels chastened by how the same critical preoccupations persist a century later, among these whether Conrad’s style is a virtue or a vice: *The Daily Record* claims that Conrad’s style in *An Outcast of the Islands* “seems to be permeated by the languor of the sultry clime,” while the *Bookman* review of September 1895 links the pace of the novel to its setting: “The slow, vague mysterious East has cast its spell over Mr Conrad, with results not conducive to the interests of the volatile European reader.” Style is thus a function of subject and setting, with *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* describing Conrad’s style as “psychological impressionism.”¹⁰

At times, style is content, at others in opposition to it. *The Bradford Observer* is left wondering in its review of *An Outcast of the Islands* whether “Even Michel Angelo would have worked to much purpose with sandstone for material.” As ever, Conrad’s prolixity in his first two novels exercises reviewers, and there are repeated calls for “pruning”. In some quarters, description becomes a substitute for plot: to *The Court Circular* “the story [in *An Outcast of the Islands*] becomes of secondary importance, and wholly subservient to the descriptive passages”; while *The Christian World*, which claims that the novel’s “ethical ideas are rudimentary,” concludes: “But for the incidental pictures of tropical life we should have had difficulty in getting to the end.”¹¹

Unsurprisingly, trawling through the reviews one encounters the widespread and casual racism of the period. *Land and Water* commends Conrad’s ability to draw “the

⁹ *The Publisher’s Circular*. 4 May 1895, 474; *Bookselling*. April 1896, 205–206.

¹⁰ *The Daily Record*. 2 May 1896, 2; *The Bookman*. September 1895, 176; *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*. 10 April 1896, 4–5.

¹¹ *The Bradford Observer*, 22 May 1896, 6; *The Court Circular*. 25 April 1896, 426; *The Christian World*. 25 June 1896, 510.

crooked nature of the Malay and the wandering Arab with such a firm and convincing hand" (3 October 1896, 551). The same column in which the *Nation* "surely shamed itself,"¹² in Sherry's words, for its attitude towards Borneo, reviews eight volumes, beginning with George Gissing's *In the Year of Jubilee* – "Mr. Gissing's dreadful subject is 'The New Woman,' whom he handles without gloves" – and ending with *Kafir Stories* by William Charles Scully, which the reviewer prefers to Conrad, finding that Scully "manages to use his simple savage with considerable literary effect," and finding that the blood can be stirred in descriptions of battle "though the combatants are *only* Zulus and Makalakas" (emphasis mine).

At times a single periodical sustains a debate about a novel. For instance, Sherry quotes Arthur Waugh's review in the *Critic* of 11 May 1895 – which hopes that "the wily brotherhood of novelists, hunting for new material" doesn't follow Conrad's lead and "suddenly involve us in a torrent of Bornean fiction." Two days earlier the magazine had concluded another review thus:

Mr. Conrad's readers will proceed to annex his Borneo with the gusto of the Powers partitioning geographical Africa. Let us suggest to them to turn immediately from this lurid passion to Miss Austen's "Pride and Prejudice." We can recommend it as a curious and not altogether unprofitable experiment.

Nina and Dain at Pemberley, now there's a thought! And Waugh returns to *Almayer's Folly* on 29 June 1895: "The novel 'Almayer's Folly,' to which I alluded in this column upon its first appearance, some weeks ago, has more than justified, by its reception, any hopes which were entertained in its favour by those who were among the earliest to appreciate its promise." The novel is also noted in *The Critic* on 4 May 1895.

Trying to place Conrad clearly exercises reviewers. He is compared by many to the usual suspects – from Hugo and Loti to Stevenson and Becke – but there are also exceptions, with *The Educational Times* arguing that *An Outcast of the Islands* contains "not a single literary allusion, not a single evidence of his indebtedness to any other author."¹³

A dominant impression from reading the reviews of *An Outcast of the Islands* is just how well its predecessor was received – for instance, *Review of Reviews* for September 1896 refers to "Mr. Joseph Conrad, whose last story, *Almayer's Folly*, had so large and so well deserved a success." Another strand running through these reviews is that *An Outcast* surpasses *Almayer's Folly*: to the *North British Daily Mail* of 23 March 1896 it is "infinitely ...superior to the finest parts of *Almayer's Folly*;" while to the *Aberdeen Daily Free Press* (30 March 1896), in a review that claimed

¹² *The Nation*. 17 October 1895, 278; Sherry ed., 1973, 7.

¹³ *The Educational Times*. 1 April 1896, 219–220.

“Mr Conrad’s English gets into one’s veins”, *Outcast* equals if it does not surpass *Almayer’s Folly*.¹⁴

A further, obvious contribution of this greater survey of reviews is to allow the expansion of debates of which we have been allowed only a glimpse. Conrad’s reception as a “man’s writer,” for instance, is aided by Wells’s comment that Conrad made not “the slightest concessions to the reading young woman who makes or mars the fortunes of authors.”¹⁵ In this light, the terse comment in “Book Chat” in *Woman* a year earlier is intriguing: “Mr. Joseph Conrad in *Almayer’s Folly* has at least found a novel scene, the Malay archipelago, for his story of adventure. He is a conscientious author, with certain negative excellences which make his book agreeable. He frequently writes satisfactorily, and the characters of Nina, the half-caste, and Dain, her lover, are rather well-drawn” (29 May 1895, 7). For its part, *The Gentlewoman*, of 2 May 1896, finds *An Outcast of the Islands* Stevensonian, and its “only one glaring fault ... over-elaboration”; concluding: “We need such writers as Mr. Conrad, whose strength, originality, healthiness of imagination, and fascination of style point to a brilliant future” (556).

The *Academy*’s review of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* in December 1897 begins: “This is a book for men.” Conrad’s own observation about appearing in *Blackwood’s* consolidates this gender bias: “There isn’t a single club and messroom and man-of-war in the British Seas and Dominions which hasn’t its copy of *Maga*” (*CLA*: 506). And a view from the “messroom,” as it were, is provided by the *Army and Navy Gazette* review of 26 February 1898: “Difficult as it is to keep pace with the enormous output of fiction, naval officers should not neglect to read ‘The Nigger of the *Narcissus*,’ by Mr. Joseph Conrad.” Listing among its praiseworthy attributes “a knowledge of seamanship which is rather surprising in modern fiction ... most of the descriptions are so technical that we should doubt whether the book can be properly appreciated by the landsman” before concluding: “We are confident that no seafaring man could fail to appreciate Mr. Conrad’s work” (195).

As in Britain, the impact of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* on reviewers across the Atlantic was immediate. Here is *The Daily Pioneer Press* (St. Paul) of 14 August 1898: “The Children of the Sea” being from the pen of Joseph Conrad is a powerful study of its subject ... In Mr. Conrad’s hands, it is needless to say, all the possibilities of the situation are fully developed” (17). Besides enjoying the idea that Conrad was “big in St Paul,” the idea that his third novel already arouses such expectations speaks wonders for his international reception.

The title-change receives some curious comment. Some periodicals, like the *New York Tribune Illustrated Supplement* argue that the original title should have been retained (3 April 1898, 17), while *The Bookman* of March 1898 understands “that Mr

¹⁴ *Review of Reviews*. September 1896: 369–370; *North British Daily Mail*. 23 March 1896: 2; *Aberdeen Daily Free Press*. 30 March 1896, 3.

¹⁵ Letter to Conrad of late May 1896, cited in Stape and Knowles, eds., 1996, 21.

Conrad is delighted with the title given to the American edition" (3). To the *Dial*, the decision to rechristen the novel is "Utterly unaccountable" and "a piece of foolishness" (1 August 1898, 78), but to the Boston *Literary World* of 11 June 1898 the title change offers evidence of "our superior refinement" as "Our British brethren have a way of calling a negro a 'nigger'" (187). In similar vein, *The Brooklyn Eagle* of 9 April 1898 argues that the title was "wisely altered so far, at least, as public taste in this country is concerned," before undermining its case by commenting: "If the tale has a hero he is found in the darkey, James Wait," later "a sick and malingering darkey" (5).

In the same way that the British reception of, say, "Heart of Darkness," was steered by Garnett, so influential American voices helped to fashion Conrad's reputation, too. For instance, Stephen Crane's praise for *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (in *Bookman*) is quoted in the *Detroit Free Press* (28 March 1898). Crane argued "It is unquestionably the best story of the sea written by a man now alive. ... He comes nearer to the ownership of the mysterious life on the ocean than anybody who has written in this century." In 1897 *The Academy* judged *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* to be "too slight and episodic" (15 January 1898, 47). In his article Crane turned this against the *Academy*, calling its rules "too episodic" (*The Bookman* March 1898, 22–24). Of course, the Conrad-Crane connection is further sustained by the number of reviews that identify *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *The Red Badge of Courage*. (Identifying Stevenson's *Huish*, in "The Ebb Tide," as a prototype for Donkin provided another recurrent theme.) On the other side of this coin, the *Pall Mall Gazette* finds difficulty in comparing Conrad with any other writer, claiming: "He has a style entirely his own ... He is, in fact, unique" (20 December 1897, 11).

Mention must be made here of William L. Alden's "London Letter" in the *New York Times Saturday Review of Books and Art*.¹⁶ Alden's column returned to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* on at least four occasions: In February 1898 he praised Conrad's capacity to write a sea story and claims his "future work will be worth looking for"; in March he reported that the novel was "one of the most popular books of the season"; and in August he was claiming it as the only sea story which begins to rival [Melville's] "Redburn". On this evidence it seems that Alden was, in effect, conducting a campaign to sell Conrad to an American readership.

The style of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* afforded a contested space. To the *Saturday Evening Gazette* (Boston) "Mr Conrad is a master of style, and it is doubtful if a sentence in his book could be bettered" (16 April 1898, 6); but to *The Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago) of 2 April 1898, "The literary style of the tale is unpolished to a painful degree" (10). To *Illustrated London News* this is "as powerful as anything that has been done in this medium ... the school of fiction-brutality to which he belongs" (8 January 1898, 50); *Pall Mall Gazette* refers to language that is "warm, pulsating, nervous, and ... never forced or extravagant" (20 December 1897, 11). This stylistic "nervousness" is repeated in *Literature*: "displays mastery of a nervous style, of con-

¹⁶ See Knowles and Stape in *The Conradian* 33.1 2008.

tinuous and convincing atmosphere, of dramatic succinctness, and of a virile, mordant humour” (26 March 1898, 354).

The critics had discovered Conrad’s humour – “(hitherto unsuspected)” according to James Payne (in *Illustrated London News*); a “saving grace” according to the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* – and also how this humour helping to bring the techniques of high art to bear on low subject matter. *Court Journal* reported, “The pictures of life on board ship are painted in all their rugged humour ... the contrast between the coarse brutality and depravity of some of his characters and the ideas to which they give rise in the mind of the author is remarkable ... audacious uncompromising naturalism ... likely to induce a “mental dyspepsy” in those whose literary appetites are at all inclined to be delicate” (11 December 1897).

Whether it is the *Sunday Times* enjoining its readers “in ‘sea-girt Albion’” to take up *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* or *The Sketch* of 12 January 1898, which was lukewarm towards the novella, while describing its method as “photographic, not to say phonographic” (474), these reviews initiate critical strands that persist. They are part of the ongoing history of Conrad’s reception, helping the works to resonate beyond the historical moment of their first reception and into other times.

Reception, of course, brought its own problems. For example, Conrad disliked his characterization in the American press as a “Spinner of sea-yarns – master-mariner – seaman writer” (CL8 130). “All the same,” as Laurence Davies reminds us, “some of his most extraordinary works are marine stories that explore labyrinths far darker and more puzzling than anything that labels like ‘sea yarns’ or ‘the work of a master-mariner’ would lead us to expect” (2007, 29–30). Overwhelmingly these reviews celebrate Conrad’s arrival, and on both sides of the Atlantic, while simultaneously locating him within the tradition of the sea’s great writers: Smollett, Cooper, Scott, Marryat, and Russell. According to Theodore Adorno, “for a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live.” By the time he wrote *The Nigger*, Conrad had clearly already found a new address – at times on the front page of people’s lives. The headline of the *London Star* for 16 December 1897 was “Grave News from the Indian Frontier,” and this grave news shared the first page with, among other things, an advertisement for Dr Tibbles’ Malted Banana Biscuits (claiming to introduce “A New Era In Food”) and a review of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* that began by proclaiming it “Assuredly one of the most powerful and extraordinary books of the year.”

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