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Appealing [At]tributes: An Analysis of Conrad's "Preface to *The Nigger of 'Narcissus'* (1897)"

In "Preface to *The Nigger of 'Narcissus'* (1897)," Conrad explores the various appeals to truth¹ in light of Impressionism: one being scientific and analytical, making logical assertions about the truth in an attempt to achieve "triumphant conclusion[s]" (xi); the other being artistic appeals to and through the senses (ix) to evoke/induce "responsive emotions" (ix). Conrad delineates how when "[i]mpressed by the aspect² of the world[,] the thinker plunges into ideas, the scientist into fact" (vii); both ideas and facts are conceptual constructions attempting to justify an end other than that which is derived from and imminent in the "visible universe" (vii). In other words, the thinker/scientist³ "seeks the truth" (vii) to make assertions about it, "speak[ing] authoritatively" "with reverence" "to our credulity" (vii). Moreover, this suggests that the scientist/thinker appeals to "those qualities of our being that fit us best for the hazardous enterprise of living" (vii), ultimately necessitating meaning and functionality as they are concerned with "the perfection of the means and the glorification of our precious aims" (vii). As such, this displaces and subordinates everything in favour of reason and progress. The scientist/thinker is used to contrast the emotive aims of the artist.

Instead of trying to reduce the world into logical extrapolations, rendering everything into a mere byproduct of intellection, the artist "descends within himself"

¹ 'Truth,' here, is depicted as the "fundamental", "enduring and essential" quality of "existence" (vii).

² I have understood "aspect" to be the qualities of truth as found in the "visible universe" (vii).

³ I have conflated these personalities as they both appeal to the truth to make rational assertions about it, thus embodying the analytical and logical facet of the Apollonian/Dionysian paradigm I will later explore.

(viii) into the “emotional atmosphere” (ix) to find the “terms of his appeal” (viii) by emphasizing the corporeality of art. Conrad qualifies that the artist makes his appeal through a “train of [...] feeling” (viii), not “thought” (viii), emphatically distinguishing the terms as ‘thought’ evokes reason and ‘feeling’ evokes emotions. Moreover, the artist “speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the *sense* of mystery surrounding our lives; to our *sense* of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent *feeling* of fellowship with all creation” [my italics] (viii). As such, art is indebted to the senses, “appeal[ing] to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom” (viii).

These polarities can be analyzed through Nietzsche’s the *Birth of Tragedy* by likening the artist figure to Dionysus⁴ and the science/thinker to Apollo⁵. Within this paradigm, the sensual, sensory, and sensational conceptions of art subvert the rigidity, even sterility, of scientific methodology. As such, there is no room for fidelity to “formulas of [...] craft” (xi) within art, suggesting that the artist must “abandon”(xi) them to “the stammerings of his conscience and to the outspoken consciousness [...] of his work” (xi). Through “the stress and passion” (x) of the “presented vision of regret or pity, of terror or mirth” (x), in a quasi-Dionysian rapture, the artist, if he is successful, “shall awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity” (x) “which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world” (x).

However, Conrad suggests that art must “strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music[...] [a]nd it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance [...] that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and the light of

⁴ Dionysus is the figure who represents excess and indulgence in addition to the immediacy and precedence of feeling and emotion.

⁵ Apollo is the figure who represents the detached observer, who employs reason, rationality, and structure.

magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words” (ix). This passage evokes the dualism inherent in the *Birth of Tragedy*, necessitating a balance between the extremes of both Apollonian form and Dionysian emotion/rapture. Therefore, this reading suggests that through a reconciliation of intellection and sensationalism, can art truly come into fruition through a fusion of the two polarities as it “arrest[s]” (xii) both extremes: “all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sign, a smile—and the return to an eternal rest.”