The Challenge of Bewilderment

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The art of the novel, according to Henry James, is "the art of representation." In the history of the novel, however, the tradition of realistic representation reaches a turning point with James and his fellow literary impressionists Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford. These three writers challenge the conventions of realism. They examine self-consciously the processes of meaning-creation and interpretation which most traditional fiction quietly exploits to achieve verisimilitude. Their innovative, self-reflexive fictions take the first steps down the road that the modern novel travels as it moves away from fidelity to the everyday, social world and toward increasing experimentation with narrative structure and a growing fascination with the psychological and the fantastic. As they play with the workings of representation, the literary impressionists explore how we construct reality by interpreting it. Their narrative experiments challenge our sense of reality and lead us on a journey of discovery into the mysteries of how we create and construe meaning. James, Conrad, and Ford thereby inaugurate the self-consciousness of modern fiction about signs and interpretation—the widespread awareness in the literature of our century that we live in a world of signs that, when we interpret them, lead only to other signs and so on ad infinitum.

The change in the novel's direction which James, Conrad, and Ford helped bring about is signaled by the importance they assign to the expe-

Introduction

Experience of bewilderment. James claims, indeed, that "if we were never bewildered there would never be a story to tell about us" (Art of the Novel, p. 63). Bewilderment throws into question the interpretive constructs we ordinarily take for granted as our ways of knowing the world. James's novels of bewilderment show his fascination with the composing powers of consciousness. Hence his habit of telling his stories through "registers" and "reflectors" who change and develop their points of view as they struggle with dilemmas that threaten to defeat their capacity to fit elements together in a consistent whole. Fordian bafflement suggests that experience is inherently uncomposed. As Ford explains, he and Conrad "saw that Life did not narrate, but made impressions on our brains. We in turn, if we wished to produce on you an effect of life, must not narrate but render impressions." Ford's most successful novels dramatize the gap between confused, unreflective understanding and reflective interpretation that seeks to compose impressions into a clear, coherent narrative pattern. When surprised and confused, Ford's and James's characters often ask about the meaning of existence; but Conrad's Marlow is the great metaphysical questioner. Bafflement in Conrad has the power to awaken us out of "our agreeable somnolence," the "dullness that makes life to the incalculable majority so supportable and so welcome." This experience of disorientation then announces a metaphysical hermeneutics of suspicion and faith. Conrad's works ask whether "belief in a few simple notions" such as duty and fidelity can withstand the challenge of skepticism and hold back the darkness of nihilism. Conrad radicalizes James's fascination with the role of belief in understanding by showing that the hypotheses we project to make sense of the world have more profound metaphysical implications than we ordinarily realize.

In championing bewilderment, the impressionists redefine an experience that has had a rich and varied literary history. The significance of confusion and disorientation is one of the many points of disagreement, for example, which divide classicism and romanticism. To be bewildered, according to Samuel Johnson's definition, is to be "lost in pathless places, at a loss for one's way," "confound[ed] for want of a plain road." Johnson's metaphor reflects his Augustan faith in the capacity of judgment to establish clarity and order and thus to discern the "road" one should be on. For James,

4See the entry for bewilderment in the Oxford English Dictionary.
Conrad, and Ford, however, the experience of bewilderment has not a negative but a positive value because it can call into question our confidence in the "roads" that make up "reality." It reveals that the "real" is not simply there for judgment to uncover but is, rather, a collection of constructs—avenues we find laid out for us by social conventions for meaning-creation, or paths we chart for ourselves by projecting interpretations based on personal assumptions and expectations.

The impressionists are closer to the Romantics, who view bafflement not only as a temporary loss of direction but also as an opportunity to acquire a new understanding of oneself and one's world. The Romantic sense of wonder brings about a suspension of one's customary orientation, which can be confusing but also revealing because it makes the familiar strange. The impressionists and the Romantics disagree, however, about what bewilderment discloses. As Wordsworth crosses Westminster Bridge, for example, he is momentarily confused and surprised to find that the "ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples" of London can be perceived as one with the glories of nature: "Never did sun more beautifully steep / In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill." The disorienting experience of finding his ordinary divisions challenged (artificial city versus unspoiled country) enables Wordsworth to appreciate more profoundly than before the primordial unity of humanity and nature. James, Conrad, and Ford do not share Wordsworth's faith in the world's preestablished harmony. In their works bewilderment typically undermines a character's assumption that his or her mind is at one with the external world. The impressionists wonder whether reality is a unified whole or a collection of conflicting interpretations that may not be ultimately reconcilable.

The value of bewilderment was rediscovered at the beginning of the modern period not only by literary impressionism but also by literary criticism and philosophy. The Russian formalist definition of art as "defamiliarization" posits bewilderment as essential to the aesthetic experience. In this view, art breaks through the veils that disguise objects when perception becomes automatic and habitual: "art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. . . . The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms
difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception."^7 James, Con­
ad, and Ford similarly regard habitualization as double-edged. It may
make perception more efficient, but it also desensitizes us. The value of
bewilderment for Russian formalism and for literary impressionism is that
it can strip away the blinders of habit. For the novelists, however, defam­
iliarization is not a distinguishing feature of art; it is a recurrent aspect of
life. And its function, their works suggest, is not to reacquaint us with the
thingness of things but to call into question the bond of sign to thing
which our interpretations claim to establish.

As a vehicle for exposing unnoticed aspects of understanding, impres­
sionistic bewilderment is strikingly similar to Edmund Husserl's technique
of "reduction"—a method of philosophical reflection which begins with
the suspension of the "natural attitude" of unquestioned engagement with
the world. By stepping back from involvement with the objects of per­
ception, a philosopher can become free to observe the processes of con­
sciousness which constitute them. Ordinarily these processes do their work
so well that they escape attention.^8 Husserl understands the reduction as a
philosophical procedure—a technique to be learned, a discipline to be
developed. For James, Conrad, and Ford, however, the suspension of the
"natural attitude" bewilderment brings about is an occurrence that is always
possible in everyday life. Their works suggest that bewilderment is always
ready to overtake us because our assurances about what we are most
familiar with are often less reliable than we think.

Before I explore further what interpretation means to these pivotal
novelists, some attention must be paid to the concept of literary impres­
sionism. The critical heritage has long regarded James, Conrad, and Ford
as impressionists, but there is perhaps surprisingly little agreement about
what the terms impression and impressionism mean. The impression is an
elastic construct invoked by authors of widely divergent theories of knowl­
edge in philosophy, criticism, and art—from David Hume's skeptical em­
piricism, to Walter Pater's ethic of aesthetic cultivation, to the perceptual
primitivism of the French Impressionist painters. The list of writers who
have been called impressionist is similarly diverse—including, for example,
Henry Adams, Stephen Crane, Chekhov, Faulkner, Gide, Lawrence,
Proust, and Virginia Woolf. Impressionism covers so much ground that one

^7Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" (1917), in Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays,
trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965),
pp. 22, 12.

^8See Edmund Husserl, Cartesian Meditations, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Mar­
might despair of discovering common properties that unite even the novelists it designates, let alone the philosophers and the painters.9

One feature many of the impressionisms share, however, is a heightened self-consciousness about the way in which any technique for rendering the world rests on assumptions about how we construe it. In order to clarify the meaning of impressionism—or to sort out the similarities and differences among its many varieties—we need to explicate the presuppositions about knowing embedded in an artist's representational practice. This is the task I propose to undertake with James, Conrad, and Ford—first explaining their assumptions about how we understand and then showing how these are related to their experiments with representation. Rather than falsely forcing the impressionists into a uniform mold, I hope instead to clarify the epistemological bases of their diversity.10

Bewilderment and the Drama of Interpretation

James, Conrad, and Ford agree in the importance they assign to the problem of understanding, but each has a distinctively different epistemology. An especially revealing instance of James's attitude toward knowing is Isabel Archer's all-night "vigil of searching criticism" in the famous Chapter 42 of The Portrait of a Lady (Art of the Novel, p. 57). This chapter

9One widely accepted definition describes impressionism as an intuitive, personal mode of rendering which seeks to capture momentary perceptions and atmospheric conditions in all of their hazy immediacy. The best explications of this position are Maria Elisabeth Kronegger, Literary Impressionism (New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1973); and H. Peter Stowell, Literary Impressionism: James and Chekhov (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), especially pp. 13–55. Both Kronegger and Stowell recognize, however, that impressionism can mean many things. Stowell's interesting argument to the contrary, this definition is not an accurate description of the epistemologies and representational practices of either James or Conrad, although it has some affinities with Ford's artistic goals. Nor does it adequately characterize all of the other writers who have been described as impressionists.

10The diversity of impressionism is in part a normal consequence of the polysemy of language. Words customarily accumulate a multiplicity of meanings from a varied history of use and from different practices of definition. Only the context of application decides which is in force. See Paul Ricoeur, "Creativity in Language: Word, Polysemy, Metaphor," Philosophy Today 17 (1973), 97–111. A critical concept can be variable in meaning and still have hermeneutic usefulness (as with, say, realism, romanticism, and modernism). If impressionism is an inherently variable, pluralistic notion, however, we need to clarify the relations among its constituents. Otherwise the term's panoply of conflicting meanings may prevent it from communicating very much or from offering significant interpretive guidance. Careful attention to the many different epistemologies of the impressionists can provide the clarity we need.
Introduction

is rightly regarded as a hallmark in the development of James's epistemological realism—his portrayal of the vicissitudes of consciousness as a drama in their own right. Isabel's reflections dramatize the act of interpretation as a process of composition. That we understand by composing the world is first suggested by the impression prompting the vigil. Isabel is bewildered at the anomaly of finding her husband, Gilbert Osmond, sitting and her friend, Madame Merle, standing—a configuration that defies many of the structures through which Isabel had previously understood her world. The reason her husband is not politely on his feet and has not offered the lady a chair is, of course, as Isabel gradually puzzles out, that the couple know each other much more intimately than she had suspected. There is a larger hermeneutic point here, however. By suggesting such a momentous revelation through such a small disjuncture in a scene's composition, James shows the extent to which we expect the world to conform to our habitual interpretive schemes—the extent to which they pattern our perception in ways we do not notice until, as in Isabel's case, they break down.

Isabel's vigil and the impression that leads to it call attention to the inherent circularity of interpretation. Before their marriage, Isabel had misconstrued Osmond because "she had mistaken a part for the whole"; "she saw the full moon now—she saw the whole man." Isabel's efforts to correct her incomplete view transform into the stuff of drama the very workings of the hermeneutic circle—the circle whereby one can understand the parts of any state of affairs only by projecting a sense of the whole, even as one can grasp the whole only by explicating its parts. Seeing parts (Madame Merle and Osmond) in a configuration not compatible with her sense of the whole, Isabel can give them meaning only by searching back over her past in an effort to discover more encompassing hypotheses. The groping movements of Isabel's consciousness switch back and forth between gradually evolving general observations and increasingly striking particularities of her past. In portraying Isabel's awakening, James offers as an adventure in itself the ever-shifting relation between parts and wholes through which she seeks to recompose her world. James did not invent the hermeneutic circle, obviously, but he did discover that its movements could themselves form the action of a novel—and not just serve as the means to other ends in the development of a plot or a character.

Isabel finds that "she had not read [Osmond] right"—that "she had imagined a world of things that had no substance" (4:192). The circularity

of interpretation can turn vicious and entrapping, as Isabel discovers to her sorrow, because a sense of the whole depends on hypotheses and assumptions. Her imaginative projections about her husband are self-confirming until anomaly undermines her faith. Still, if James is aware that hypotheses can be solipsistically self-reinforcing, he also delights in the way that creative guessing can make possible heightened seeing. The Jamesian impression “takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations” and “guess[es] the unseen from the seen.”

It owes its epistemological power to the ability of belief to compose parts into wholes and to project hidden sides.

The dilemma that a hypothesis may disguise or reveal suggests some further questions about the relation between reality and interpretation. Is reality single, determinate, and independent of interpretation? Or is the world plural, dependent for its shape on the creation and construal of meaning, and hence a field of competing interpretations that may or may not overlap? These are central questions in James’s canon, and he paradoxically answers yes to both of them. James writes: “The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly not know, sooner or later, in one way or another; it being but one of the accidents of our hampered state, and one of the incidents of their quantity and number, that particular instances have not yet come our way” (Art of the Novel, p. 31). This is a declaration of faith in the independent, univocal determinacy of the real—the hard but incontestable truth about her husband and Madame Merle which Isabel finally, if belatedly, learns. But James qualifies his declaration in curious and important ways. His use of a double negative (what we “cannot not know”) suggests the absence of the real rather than its indubitable presence. Reality is deferred and distant (“not yet” there) or at best negatively present (what “cannot not” be disclosed). Negativity and absence are characteristics of a world of signs.

The “real” for James is thus not a given but a goal that signs lead toward with a kind of inevitability. But the ambiguity of such works as The Sacred Fount and The Turn of the Screw indicates that the force of “reality” may not be strong enough to pull interpretation to a definitive result. And such late works as The Ambassadors and The Golden Bowl suggest that, perhaps surprisingly, even the discovery of undeniable facts may not have the power to end the conflict between opposed readings. Consequently but paradox-

Introduction

ically, James abandons monism and embraces pluralism when he declares that "the measure of reality is very difficult to fix. . . . Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms" ("Art of Fiction," pp. 387–88). If reality is multiple rather than single, then interpretation may lead in many valid directions instead of finding itself pulled toward agreement about a determinate truth.

The paradox of James’s affirmative response to contradictory questions about reality and interpretation is well illustrated by Strether’s interpretive adventure in The Ambassadors. When Strether asks Madame de Vionnet what he should write to Mrs. Newsome about her son’s relation with the Parisian femme de monde, she replies: “Tell her the simple truth.” He, however, is bewildered: “But what is the simple truth? The simple truth is exactly what I’m trying to discover.” Strether eventually finds it. He finally stumbles across evidence proving beyond a reasonable doubt that their relation is not innocent but carnal, not platonic but passionate. Strether’s awakening makes their love affair seem like a fact—a reality he was long in discovering but which he ultimately could not not know.

After this revelation, however, Strether still disputes Woollett’s reading of the relationship. Woollett may regard Madame de Vionnet as a vulgar adventurer, but Strether envisions her still as “the finest and subtlest creature . . . it had been given him, in all his years, to meet” (22:286). Woollett may insist that Chad’s relation with her is hideous, but Strether still sees virtues in the attachment. This is not a case where reality exists in the middle between opposing extremes. Instead, James reopens the plurality of interpretations after Strether’s encounter with brute fact had seemed to close it. The justice of Strether’s opposing view, even after Woollett’s assumption of carnality has been vindicated, suggests that truth is not simple and single but various and multiple, a matter of interpretation.

The paradox here—that reality is both one and many, both independent of and dependent on interpretation—shows how James is a novelist of both the nineteenth century and the twentieth. James’s faith in the real makes him one of the last great members of the long and distinguished tradition of verisimilitude in the novel. But James also challenges the epistemological assumptions of mimesis by questioning the stability, uniformity, and independence of reality. And in doing so he announces the modern preoccupation with meaning and interpretation. The last realist, James is also the first modernist.

13Henry James, The Ambassadors, in Novels and Tales of Henry James, 21:253; original emphasis.
Conrad similarly oscillates between monism and pluralism, but he is more skeptical than James about the powers of belief as a hermeneutic instrument. In *Lord Jim*, for example, the opening chapters of third-person narration suggest that Jim has an existence independent of what Marlow and others may later think about him. And at the inquiry about the *Patna*, “there was no incertitude as to facts” in Jim’s case (*Lord Jim*, p. 56). But Conrad’s novel affirms the autonomy of the real only to throw it into question. Marlow sums up his efforts to understand Jim with this typical complaint: “I wanted to know—and to this day I don’t know, I can only guess” (p. 79). The blockage in Marlow’s quest for comprehension shows him and us the prevalence of belief in any act of interpretation. Marlow complains about Jim: “The views he let me have of himself were like those glimpses through the shifting rents in a thick fog—bits of vivid and vanishing detail, giving no connected idea of the general aspect of a country. They fed one’s curiosity without satisfying it; they were no good for purposes of orientation. Upon the whole he was misleading” (p. 76). Marlow’s glimpses of Jim remain fragmentary and disconnected. The gaps and contradictions between them hinder the Jamesian composition of parts into a whole, and their refusal to synthesize leaves Marlow without a sense of the consistency among elements in a pattern which is necessary for lucid comprehension.

His inability to make fragments fit together rebounds in turn and questions the trustworthiness of the glimpses themselves precisely because they will not cohere: Is Jim romantic or criminal? Is he courageous in facing the consequences of his acts, or cowardly in resisting the full burden of guilt? Marlow can achieve enough coherence to make Jim roughly comprehensible, but a lingering awareness of gaps in his knowledge and disjunctions in his pattern constantly causes him doubts. Where Isabel and Strether are deceived because the parts fit together all too well in the constructs they naively project, Marlow is blocked because his fragments refuse to compose completely.14

14I agree with Elsa Nettels that James portrays understanding as an evolving process where, by contrast, Marlow experiences “a succession of moments of insight, isolated, without causal or logical connection.” What I have tried to do is to trace this difference to its hermeneutic foundations—namely, their opposite treatments of the relation between wholes and parts. But Nettels oversimplifies their paradoxical attitudes toward reality when she depicts James as a pure believer in and Conrad as a pure skeptic about the discoverability of truth. See the nevertheless very interesting chapter, “The Drama of Perception,” in her book *James and Conrad* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977), pp. 44–79.
Marlow turns to others to help him decide what to believe about Jim. As he explains, "the thing was always with me, I was always eager to take opinion on it, as though it had not been practically settled: individual opinion—international opinion—by Jove!" (p. 159). What Marlow finds when he consults others, however, is a veritable conflict of interpretations—from Stein's romantic reading of Jim to Chester's demonic materialistic view, from Brierly's thinly veiled despair about the young man's implications to the cool professionalism of the French lieutenant's assessment, from the resentful animosity of Brown and Cornelius to the disappointed loyalty of Jewel and Tamb'ltam. Each of these attitudes reveals as much about its own rules for interpreting as it does about Jim. One of Conrad's best critics has plausibly argued that "the truth about Jim must be the sum of many perceptions." At a further question troubles Marlow, however: What if they do not add up? What if they are incompatible rather than harmonious and complementary?

Instead of advancing Marlow's clarity or certainty about Jim, the rival readings he discovers make the young man increasingly enigmatic. In almost every case, Marlow is as much impressed—if not more—by what an interpretation disguises as by what it discloses. And with such accumulations of blindness, he paradoxically feels at times that he knows less about Jim the more he acquires opinions about him. Each interpretation seems "true," at least to some extent—even the dark views of Brown and Cornelius, who find pretense and vanity in Jim's aloof moral purity. But considered as a group, the readings do not fit together. And because they are finally irreconcilable, they frustrate Marlow's attempt to develop a coherent, comprehensive view of Jim as much as they aid it. Irreducible hermeneutic pluralism thus displaces the monistic assumptions about reality with which the novel began.

Conrad regards belief not only as an epistemological challenge, however, but also as a metaphysical dilemma. Conrad's dual concern with belief as an instrument of knowledge and as evidence of the fragility of human constructs becomes apparent in Marlow's very first encounter with Jim: "There he stood, clean-limbed, clean-faced, firm on his feet, as promising a boy as the sun ever shone on; and, looking at him, knowing all he knew and a little more too, I was as angry as though I had detected him trying to get something out of me by false pretenses. He had no business to look

so sound. . . . And note, I did not care a rap about the behaviour of the other two [members of the Patna's crew]. Their persons somehow fitted the tale” (pp. 40–41). Marlow is disconcerted by Jim because he is an anomaly—a part inconsistent with Marlow’s expectations, given his faith in his community’s standard of conduct. Jim defies the set of types by which Marlow customarily composes the world. More is at stake here, however, than Marlow’s epistemological habits. By frustrating his interpretive hypotheses, Jim undermines Marlow’s confidence in the fundamental convictions on which his typology rests.

The young man is most disturbing because he introduces Marlow to the possibility of deception in matters he had thought immune to it. The possibility of lying suggests the presence of signs—conventions no stronger or more necessary than our belief in them, a confidence the liar manipulates and betrays.¹⁶ Jim’s deception reveals to Marlow that systems of meaning and value he had never doubted are basically conventional, no more substantial or secure than the agreement of their adherents to observe them. They may seem absolute, but they are also arbitrary, since others could always have been adopted in their place. Jim causes Marlow to doubt “the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct” (p. 50). Because this sovereignty can be counterfeit, it is a convention, not given by divine right. Marlow’s hermeneutic crisis in making sense of Jim quickly takes on metaphysical overtones because the failure of his rules for reading his world exposes the contingency of the convictions and conventions on which they are based.

Conrad’s combination of monism and pluralism is a reflection of his ceaseless (and potentially unstoppable) oscillation between an intense desire to overcome contingency and an equally compelling recognition that this can never be accomplished. Conrad wishes to discover a single truth that would transcend the variability of the realm of meanings and provide them with a stabilizing, unifying origin. But his pursuit of monism ever turns up new evidence of the world’s irreducible pluralism. His often-quoted preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus” describes art’s goal as the conquest of the accidental and the inessential in life through the discovery of the necessary and the absolute: “Art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by

¹⁶Umberto Eco argues: “Every time there is a lie there is signification. Every time there is signification there is the possibility of using it in order to lie.” See Eco, A Theory of Semiotics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 59.
Introduction

bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter, and in the facts of life what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential—their one illuminating and convincing quality—the very truth of their existence.”17 This quest for essences suggests the temperament of a monist for whom truth is ultimately single, the transcendental signified beneath the multiplicity of signifiers that both disguise and reveal it. But this crucial passage also betrays the sensibility of a pluralist.

Conrad not only calls truth “manifold” as well as “one.” He also refrains from claiming that the series of essences disclosed by art will eventually synthesize into a single “Truth.” More subtly but even more tellingly, his lengthy list of plurals at the beginning of the second sentence (“forms,” “colours,” “shadows,” and so on) insistently asserts the world’s inherent multiplicity and thereby implicitly undercuts the plea for oneness with which the sentence ends (itself a listing of several elements). If Conrad does discover a final truth, this is the ubiquity of nothingness.18 But once again monism leads to pluralism because a multiplicity of meanings ensues from the absence of a ground that might limit or unite them.

Ford also considers the ground of existence unstable, but for different reasons and in a different way. According to Ford, a novelist should give “the impression, not the corrected chronicle” because life does not present itself to us as a “rounded, annotated record.” Ford’s advice continues: “‘You must render: never report.’ You must never, that is to say, write: ‘He saw a man aim a gat at him’; you must put it: ‘He saw a steel ring directed at him.’ Later you must get in that, in his subconsciousness, he recognized that the steel ring was the polished muzzle of a revolver.”19 In passages like these, Ford argues for the aesthetic and epistemological primacy of our unreflective engagement with the world. Ford’s preference for “impressions” over “narration” gives preeminence to the way the world surges up,


Bewilderment, Understanding, and Representation

ambiguously and obscurely, through a haze of associations, before the ordering and clarifying syntheses of reflective composition intervene.\(^{20}\)

The Fordian impression is not formless, however. The man who sees a steel ring pointed at him still sees a figure against a background, even if this picture is unclear to the extent that his implicit recognition of it as a gun barrel has not yet been made explicit. A “steel ring” is as much a hermeneutic construct as the “muzzle of a revolver,” although a less completely synthesized and articulated one in this context because less fully reflected. We can see that the former construct was confused and rough only when it is compared to another figure we then realize is clearer and more refined. The movement from unreflective understanding to reflective interpretation is the substitution of one set of figures for another, not a progress from formlessness to form.

Ford shares the awareness of James and Conrad that all understanding depends on gestalts and conventional constructs. But he is interested in exploring the varying degrees of organization with which consciousness can interpret the world, from the obscurities of unreflective assimilation to the high lucidity of the Jamesian perceiver’s self-awareness. The relation between James’s and Ford’s epistemologies, like the distinction between “narration” and “impressions,” has to do with the difference between explicit interpretation and implicit understanding, thematized knowing and prepredicative seeing, self-conscious comprehension and primordial perception.

The paradox of Ford’s impressionism is that unreflective experience is both immediate and obscure, both dazzling in its freshness and dark in its ambiguities. As Ford explains: “Impressionism exists to render those queer effects of real life that are like so many views seen through bright glass—through glass so bright that whilst you perceive through it a landscape or a backyard, you are aware that, on its surface, it reflects a face of a person behind you. For the whole of life is really like that; we are almost always in one place with our minds somewhere quite other” (“On Impressionism,” p. 41). This is a moment of heightened perception, but it is also an experience of distraction. An impression of this kind holds the perceiver open to a multiplicity of meanings which a more attentive vision would

\(^{20}\)This is the epistemological principle behind the tendency in representational technique which Thomas C. Moser has observed: “For Ford . . . the impressionistic method serves not to render the external world but to dramatize a mind in a state of dislocation” (The Life in the Fiction of Ford Madox Ford [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980], p. 131).
Introduction

censor out. But at the same time the mind also wanders, somewhat baffled, its concentration deflected. Ford's works both celebrate and criticize the unreflected because it is both illuminating and blinding.

The structure of Ford's novel *The Good Soldier* recapitulates his distinction between "impressions" and "narration." Dowell apologizes at one point because he has told his story "in a very rambling way so that it may be difficult for anyone to find his path through what may be a sort of maze. . . . When one discusses an affair—a long, sad affair—one goes back, one goes forward." Dowell's narration rambles back and forth across his past because writing is his way of reflecting on his unreflective experience. His story traverses two levels of understanding: his original experience with the world and the work of self-consciousness to interpret synthetically and thematically what he first lived through uncritically, with a good deal of obscurity and incoherence. Dowell's rambling narration dramatizes the epistemological principle that we live forward but understand backward. His tale seems incoherent at times not only because confusion frequently marked his original experience but also because his reflections only gradually and tentatively close the gap between what he lived and what he understands.

It is not true, however, as Samuel Hynes has suggested, that Dowell "gropes for the meaning, the reality of what has occurred." In his rambling reflections, Dowell does not search for the significance of what at first was meaningless. Rather, he discovers a world of meanings already there in his experience—but meanings that are typically vague, obscure, or erroneous because he had never stopped to clarify and criticize them. Again and again Dowell says: "At the time I thought that" such was the case, "but I can figure out now" that this original reading was not adequate (p. 198). The domain of the unreflected is a particular level of understanding for Ford—not a realm beneath the process of conferring and construing meaning.

Whether to stress the reflective or the unreflective side of Dowell is one of the main quandaries that make *The Good Soldier* such a notoriously ambiguous novel. Dowell often despairs at his ability to translate his impressions into self-conscious understanding. "I don't know; I don't know," he laments near the beginning; "it is all a darkness" (pp. 9, 12). Dowell's complaint points out the excess of the unreflected over the re-

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Bewilderment, Understanding, and Representation

fleeted—an excess that is one of his first discoveries. A vast sphere of obscurity is always already there whenever self-consciousness takes aim at it. Dowell’s reflections will consequently forever be outstripped by his primary experience. They may try to catch up with it, but they can never completely equal it. Mark Schorer says of Dowell: “This is a mind not quite in balance” (p. x). And he is right to the extent that Dowell is never quite at one with himself because of the limits to what he masters through reflection. These limits give legitimacy to Freudian critics of the novel who demystify his self-deceptions about sexual desire. As they argue, this virgin cuckold never does understand the fascination and fear about his own desires and those of Edward, Leonora, Florence, and Nancy which his narration betrays. Readers will disagree about Dowell’s reliability as they stress the role of the unreflected or reflection in his story. Dowell does not make the obscurity of his original experience totally transparent, but he extends the reach of his reflective self by bringing clarity to areas where opacity had previously reigned.

These, then, are the primary ways in which James, Conrad, and Ford understand the adventure and challenge of interpretation. Their explorations into the meaning of reality and interpretation are intimately related, however, to their experiments with the conventions of representation. Just as they focus their dramatic attention on the processes by which we understand, so these literary impressionists explore self-consciously the epistemological bases of representation in the theory and practice of their fiction. It therefore remains to consider how their views on interpretation inform their innovations with the conventions of realism.

Representation, Understanding, and Reading

Conrad summarizes the workings of representation when he claims that “every novelist must begin by creating for himself a world”—a world “already familiar to the experience . . . of his readers” in some respects, but one that will also be “individual and a little mysterious.” Conrad here

23For example, see Thomas C. Moser, “Towards The Good Soldier: Discovery of a Sexual Theme,” Daedalus 92 (1963), 312–25; and Carol Ohmann, Ford Madox Ford: From Apprentice to Craftsman (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1964), pp. 71–111. Unlike Ohmann, however, Moser understands that Dowell can be self-deceived about sexual desire but still retain reliability as a narrator.

joins those who have argued that representation is, strictly speaking, not mimetic but poetic. A novelist represents by projecting a possible world and exploring ways of orienting oneself in it. Representation does not copy reality; rather, it reimagines and reinterprets our engagement with the world in a manner that will confirm, extend, or criticize the reader's habitual modes of being and understanding. A novel seeks to claim a sense of reality to the extent that it invokes or expands familiar ways of seeing and thus persuades the reader to acknowledge and participate in its world. The unfamiliar in fiction—what is "individual" and "mysterious"—may try to graft itself onto the familiar; or it may undermine the familiar to challenge the reader's horizons. If, as Conrad suggests, "the road to legitimate realism is through poetical feeling," this is because representing a world is basically figurative—a process of aligning parts in a whole which plays on the reader's sense of the figurative activity by which he or she constructs the world.25

All realistic fiction represents by projecting a world that offers a particular model of understanding. But with James, Conrad, and Ford, the interpretive aspects of the novel assume a special prominence. These literary impressionists write metanovels that make explicit the implicit dynamics of creating a fictional world. Their works lay bare the epistemological preconditions that make representation possible. The very structure of their novels comments on the hermeneutic processes by which representational fiction exploits everyday understanding in order to persuade us to believe its illusion.

These three literary impressionists take the novel beyond representation by pursuing its epistemological principles so radically that they make them thematic. Ford claims that literary impressionism tries to make fiction conform more systematically to the vicissitudes of understanding in order to convey "the sort of odd vibration that scenes in real life really have" ("On Impressionism," p. 42). But by exposing the epistemological processes that make representation work, James, Conrad, and Ford often

Bewilderment, Understanding, and Representation

sacrifice in their novels the traditional illusion of immersion in a lifelike world. When the impressionist wager pays off, the gain resulting from this sacrifice is greater self-conscious understanding of the processes of interpretation—processes at work not only when we inhabit a fictional world but also when we go about our daily lives.

In each of four crucial dimensions of fiction, the representational practice of these impressionists is a commentary on a major aspect of interpretation: (1) the role of aspects and perspectives in representation and the relation of disguise and disclosure in understanding; (2) the function of the manner of narration in controlling a work's perspectives and the problem of adjudicating the validity of opposing interpretations; (3) the temporality of the narrative and the role of expectations in understanding; (4) the relation between the reader and the world offered by the work and the dilemma posed by the gap between the self and others, the basis of much if not all misunderstanding. This model would be applicable to all of literature, but it is especially relevant to James, Conrad, and Ford because it stresses the epistemological functions of narrative.

Commenting on the first of these dimensions, James emphasizes the importance of aspects and perspectives when he criticizes Balzac (whom he ordinarily praises) for “the positive monstrosity of his effort” to create “a reproduction of the real on the scale of the real.” Balzac “sees and presents too many facts,” James complains, and his efforts at representation “may thus at times become obscure from his very habit of striking too many matches.” Even the most exhaustive description of a person, place, or thing will leave gaps and indeterminacies. Rather than follow Balzac in attempting the impossible task of filling them, the novelist should arrange what he leaves unsaid so as to depict objects from a certain angle of vision. According to James, “representation is arrived at . . . not by the addition of items” but by “the order, the reason, the relation, of presented aspects” that offer “the successfully foreshortened thing” (Art of the Novel, pp. 87–88).

The circular relation of parts to wholes and the dialectic of disguise and


27Henry James, The Lesson of Balzac (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1905), pp. 78–79.
Introduction
disclosure are at work in several ways here. Every specification of an object or a character offers a partial view, which the reader may take as a clue for projecting hypotheses about the absent entirety. By unfolding further aspects of the object as the work progresses, the novelist will confirm, modify, or overturn the configuration the reader has constructed. Each “presented aspect” reveals something about its object, but only by suppressing other potential aspects it might display. Moreover, as the various aspects that offer different objects combine and unfold over the course of the work, they form identifiable perspectives—ways of seeing which follow their own unique principles of how to understand the world. There can be a variety of perspectives, whether harmonious or discordant, in any given work. And different works in turn are distinguished by different perspectives—modes of interpretation not shared by other observers at other windows in the house of fiction, who select and combine aspects according to different assumptions about the world and different beliefs about how to compose parts and wholes. Any given way of arranging aspects in a total configuration will still offer only a perspectival, “foreshortened” view of the world which disguises other ways of construing it.

Now even in everyday experience, as James emphasizes in his fictions, we know the world by composing wholes from a limited point of view, which leaves some things hidden and indeterminate. All understanding has its own particular perspective on the world and is guided by a certain set of assumptions and expectations. For the novelist, then, the secret of realistic representation is to arrange the aspects and indeterminacies in the work so as to persuade the reader to bring its world to life by remembering his or her own everyday practices of understanding—understanding that is similarly perspectival, never fully determinate, and actively compositional.

James praises Conrad, since both of them “glory in a gap” and in the opportunities it offers for inciting the reader’s participation in activating the world of the work. And Ford praises James for his ability to “convey an impression, an atmosphere of what you will, with literally nothing” but indeterminacies that prompt the reader’s wonder. There are many ways in which an artist can manipulate the indeterminacies in a work—to arrange realistic perspectives, or to create an atmosphere of mystery, or to

Bewilderment, Understanding, and Representation

leave a matter ambiguous, or, by proliferating empty spaces (as much modern and postmodern fiction does), to convey a sense of the absence of signs from the presence of things. In each case, however, the relation between what an artist specifies and what he or she leaves open will establish the model of interpretation which the work offers. A familiar configuration of gaps and indeterminacies will confirm the reader’s sense of reality and customary interpretive habits. An unfamiliar set of perspectives will challenge the reader’s assumptions about the world.

James, Conrad, and Ford manipulate gaps and perspectives so as to draw attention to the workings of interpretation and to the role of aspects in representation. Consider, for example, James’s well-known strategy of depicting a situation by focusing on a character’s view of it. This strategy not only reflects James’s interest in the composing powers of consciousness; it also makes explicit the ordinarily implicit role of aspects and perspectives in representation. Where conventionally realistic fiction portrays objects and characters by silently unfolding a series of aspects that display them, James makes perspectives a theme in themselves and not just a means to an end. His reader is asked less to concretize the objects and characters offered through a work’s aspects than to examine and criticize the very ratio of disguise and disclosure typical of each thematized perspective—the dialectic of blindness and insight which characterizes its method of composing the world. Our task as readers is more to reflect about the hermeneutic principles that govern a character’s point of view than to immerse ourselves in a world of foreshortened people and things.

In their narrative practice, Ford and Conrad follow James’s lead in calling for reflection about the process of understanding. Fascinated by the ambiguities of unreflective knowing, however, Ford often depicts points of view that lack the composed lucidity of a Jamesian central consciousness. The perspectives Ford dramatizes are frequently vague, rough edged, and not yet fully coherent. The challenge to the reader is to maintain simultaneously the double awareness of what the fully composed object would be and what its partial synthesis in primordial perception is like. Both Ford and Conrad also typically fragment their narratives in order to interrupt the smooth unfolding and mutual completion of aspects. In traditional representation, this harmony gives the illusion of a fully rounded acquaintance with objects; although we know them only partially and incompletely, the internal consistency of their parts suggests that an infinite series of aspects could determine them absolutely. By breaking up the continuation of aspects, however, Ford and Conrad frustrate the processes of configu-
Introduction

ration by which we build wholes out of parts in life as in art. The bewildered reader is not only challenged to heighten his or her configurative activity in order to piece the disparate, dispersed fragments together. The frustration and the challenge the reader experiences should also prompt reflection about the circular, configurative process of interpretation in and of itself—a process that ordinarily goes unnoticed in everyday understanding because it is rarely called into view by interruption.  

Like each of the other three dimensions of fiction, the mode of narration is closely related to the presentation of aspects and perspectives. Just as James, Conrad, and Ford manipulate the workings of representation to expose the configurative activity of interpretation, so they experiment with narration in order to reveal the implications of establishing hierarchies among different ways of understanding. Ford is somewhat dogmatic in his well-known claim that “the author must be impersonal, must, like a creating deity, stand neither for nor against any of his characters, must project and never report and must, above all, forever keep himself out of his books” (“Techniques,” p. 60). In practice Ford and his fellow impressionists are not this rigid, however. Their works are marked by a remarkable range of experimentation with different modes of narration—for example, the fully dramatized and questionably reliable storytellers in *The Sacred Fount* and *The Good Soldier*, the aggressively ironic but finally uncertain voice of Marlow in *Lord Jim*, the multiplication of alternating points of view in *Nostromo*, and the controlling if minimally obtrusive third-person narrative presences in *The Ambassadors* and *Parade's End*. Actually, this

Aspects do not always unfold with uninterrupted continuity in traditional fiction, of course. Surprising reversals in the plot or in the development of characters are surprising precisely because they defy the reader’s expectations about how the aspects he or she has become acquainted with are likely to complete themselves. Unlike Ford’s and Conrad’s fragmented narratives, however, these reversals do not generally focus the reader’s attention on the circular process of aligning parts in a whole. They take advantage of this process, but they do not highlight it as an issue in itself.

This is perhaps the place to acknowledge that my remarks about “traditional fiction” and “conventional realism” have in mind a paradigmatic text that is as such necessarily a simplification in comparison with any of the great nineteenth-century novels. Further, although James, Conrad, and Ford make thematic the implicit workings of representation, this does not imply that the great realists were naïve or un-self-conscious about their art. From Balzac through Eliot, the realists frequently reflect about the techniques and aims of representation. My point is only that they do not make self-reflexivity about the epistemology of realism the guiding theme of their representational practice in the radical way the literary impressionists do. Rather than diminishing our regard for the realistic tradition, the literary impressionists’ thematization of its hermeneutic foundations should enhance our appreciation of its complexities and values.
variety of experimentation suggests the same point Ford makes dogmatically—for the literary impressionists the authority that can be claimed by any way of seeing has become a crucial point of contention. Their experiments with narration are an ongoing interrogation of the narrator’s privilege to rank and control the perspectives making up a work. They accept narrative authority only by simultaneously questioning it in ways that reveal how the choice of a mode of narration carries with it implications about the status of meaning and the availability of criteria to adjudicate the validity of competing views.

James, Conrad, and Ford expose for critical reflection the two main forms of the paradox of narrative privilege instead of exploiting them for realistic effect. First, whichever its person, the narrator is traditionally but paradoxically an artifice that helps naturalize meaning. For example, although Ford protests against intrusive narration in the name of a higher realism, an active narrative presence can facilitate the reader’s immersion in a lifelike world by providing a stable frame of reference and by guaranteeing that the assertions making up the fictional world are as trustworthy as the objects encountered in everyday reality. The narrators of James, Conrad, and Ford tend to call into question our assumptions about interpretation instead of conferring on meaning a quasi-natural stability. For example, rather than offering a firm foundation for meaning or sure standards for validity, Dowell and Marlow ask the reader to recognize the dangers of trusting the seeming referentiality of signs. Their uncertainty about their own stories challenges the assumption that the singleness of the “real” always allows hermeneutic differences to be resolved.

The second paradox of narrative privilege is that an authoritative narrator’s voice claims a contradictory position both inside and outside the work’s field of perspectives—inside as one perspective among many in the work, but outside their conflict through its superior knowledge and power. James dramatizes this paradox by both asserting and denying his narrator’s epistemological authority. Many readers have noted this duality in his narrative practice: although “James the old intruder” frequently steps in and demonstrates his narrator’s omniscience, “the consciousnesses of the characters sometimes merge indistinguishably into the narrator’s.”

Introduction

oscillation between superiority and equality in the narrator’s relation to the other perspectives in the work reduplicates James’s double allegiance to monism and pluralism. His intrusions claim the existence of a truth beyond the interpretive acts of his characters, but elsewhere the equality or even identity of the narrator’s perspective with their viewpoints suggests that no hierarchies outside the hermeneutic field are empowered to adjudicate disputes within it. When he does speak, the Jamesian narrator is often playfully aware of his status as an artifice. His interventions consequently have the effect not of encouraging immersion in an illusion but of reminding the reader that the fictional world is a contingent creation.

The literary impressionists also call for reflection about the stability and authority of meaning by their response to what James calls the “eternal time-question,” which is, “for the novelist, always there and always formidable” (Art of the Novel, p. 14). In his “Appreciation” of the master’s canon, Conrad notes with approval how often James refuses to “satisfy the desire for finality, for which our hearts yearn with a longing greater than the longing for the loaves and fishes of this earth.”32 Ford acknowledges that the “desire for finality” is “very natural” and only “human,” but he calls “imbecile” those novels “designed to satisfy it.”33 Finality supports the illusion of the natural attitude that “truth” is a fixed, determinate object—and not the ever-shifting goal of the infinitely variable activity of creating and construing meaning. Closure in fiction is thus unrealistic but nevertheless an aid to representation because it invokes and confirms the reader’s everyday assumptions about the world. James, Ford, and Conrad are known, of course, as pioneers in the art of open endings. The inconclusiveness of so many of their works refuses to allow a represented world to synthesize into a stable totality. This incompleteness challenges the reader’s desire for closure in order to suggest that interpretation is never final and that meaning begins only to begin again, without transcendental origin or determinate end.34

Ford and Conrad play with the gap between the time of the story and the time of the telling through strategies of narrative fragmentation which emphasize that meaning and interpretation are transitive activities. Once

again arguing in the name of a heightened realism, Ford claims that “what was the matter with the Novel, and the British novel in particular, was that it went straight forward, whereas in your gradual making acquaintanceship with your fellows you never do go straight forward” (Joseph Conrad, p. 136). By keeping a rough parallel between the chronology of presentation and the sequential order of the events themselves, the works Ford criticizes actually encourage an illusion of realism. Because they assist the reader’s efforts to discover and build consistent patterns, they reinforce the sense of continuity on which our customary assumptions about the world’s determinacy are based. But this continuity disguises the temporal processes of understanding which it manipulates—the ongoing interplay between anticipatory projection and retrospective modification through which understanding refines itself and expands.

Because of the circular interdependence of part and whole, interpretation is an ever-changing dialectic of forward- and backward-looking adjustments. In getting to know any state of affairs, we “never do go straight forward” inasmuch as we are always going around in a circle between expectations about what lies beyond our horizons and corrections of previous guesses in light of evidence that has since come into view. Ford’s strictures against “straight forward” narration would elevate this dialectic from a hermeneutic necessity into an aesthetic principle. Ford and Conrad interrupt the temporal continuity of their narratives so as to call attention to the temporal circularity of understanding. By making the bewildered reader work harder and more reflectively than with continuous narration to build a coherent whole out of the scattered bits and pieces of information that a Marlow or a Dowell offers, Conrad and Ford transform anticipation and retrospection from implicit processes of understanding into explicit, problematic issues in the very experience of reading their texts.35

A similar manipulation of strategies of representation with the goal of prompting hermeneutic reflection marks the practice of my chosen impressionists in the fourth and (for our purposes) last dimension of fiction. These authors call attention to the always-present epistemological challenges posed by the gap between the self and others by playing with the

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Introduction

relation between the worlds of their works and the subjectivities of their readers. According to James, reading a literary work “makes it appear to us for the time that we have lived another life—that we have had a miraculous enlargement of experience.”36 By lending the powers of our subjectivity to the acts of consciousness embedded in the marks on the page, we make the world of the work our own and participate in the worlds of the characters. But if reading is intersubjective in this fashion, it is also solipsistic, since we inhabit another world as readers only by virtue of our own powers of consciousness, without ever leaving our own subjectivity. We may “live another life” in reading, but it is still an “other” life—an alien world that remains “other” even as we merge horizons with it. In reading as in other areas of understanding, then, the relation of the ego to the alter ego is a paradoxical combination of community and separation; it is a being-with that is always inherently a being-apart.

James makes the paradox of the alter ego into an explicit theme and a resource for technical innovation in his experiments with point of view. James transports his readers across the gap between themselves and others by projecting them into the world of the character whose point of view he re-creates—into Maggie’s suffering but scheming consciousness in the second half of The Golden Bowl, for example, as she learns to read the inwardness of the other characters while holding herself opaque. By inhabiting her perspective as she feels and thinks it, the reader enjoys a rare view of another life from the inside, experienced by another for herself. But as the reader sees what Maggie is for herself, the reader also experiences as she does the gap between her and other characters in her world. These others still remain dark to varying degrees, their inner depths disguised by their self-for-others. Who can tell, for example, whether Adam Verver shares his daughter’s awakening, or whether Charlotte knows that she is defeated even though she pretends victory? In James’s thematicizations of point of view, we bridge the gap between self and other but do not overcome it; it is merely displaced. This double movement of transcending and reencountering the gap between selves dramatizes in the reader’s own experience the paradoxical combination of intersubjectivity and solipsism which characterizes personal relations.

If the otherness of others is for James a constant hermeneutic challenge and an endless source of fascination, then for Ford as well as for Conrad it takes on the proportions of a crisis. As Dowell’s listeners in The Good

Bewilderment, Understanding, and Representation

Soldier, we are invited into his world; but his anguished regret that we cannot converse with him—his lament that we are silent and cannot advise him—emphasizes the unbridgeable divide between him and us. Leonora’s revelations have shown Dowell how isolated he was even as he thought himself an intimate member of a community; but when he reaches to writing to transcend his solipsism, he simply rediscovers it in new form in his relation to his reader. Dowell’s experience suggests that the boundaries between selves must be recognized, but that the recognition of a limit is not in this case the same as overcoming it. The gap between the self and others proliferates in Lord Jim—with Jim telling his story to Marlow, for example, who relates it to his friends with the reader listening in, or with Gentleman Brown telling Jim’s story to Marlow, who writes about it to a friend over whose shoulder we read, and so forth. By multiplying Marlow’s informants and stacking them one on top of the other, Conrad opens Jim’s world to us only by emphasizing its ultimate inaccessibility. The reader of Conrad and Ford may have the experience of living for a time in another’s world, but the consequence of this exercise in intersubjectivity is a heightened sense of the solipsism always with us even (or especially) when we do not notice it.

According to Ford, “the word ‘author’ means ‘someone who adds to your consciousness.’ ”37 The discoveries that James, Conrad, and Ford make possible constitute a challenge to the reader to develop greater self-consciousness about the workings of consciousness in representation and interpretation. As with all literature, this challenge instructs and pleases by manipulating the relation between the familiar and the unfamiliar. We can assimilate the new and the strange only by grafting them onto what we already know, but the unfamiliar also thereby discloses and criticizes the limits of our previous experience. Understanding is a most familiar activity because we practice it all the time, yet it is also a most unfamiliar one, since we hardly ever notice it. Urging us to recognize that the ordinary is extraordinary, James, Conrad, and Ford unsettle our complacency about the process of understanding and call for wonder about the mysteries of meaning. Whether with anguished urgency or playful expansiveness, the novels of the literary impressionists ask us not to take interpretation for granted.

37Ford Madox Ford, “Introduction to A Farewell to Arms” (1932), in Critical Writings of Ford, p. 134.