EXPLORING LITERARY IMPRESSIONISM

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ABSTRACT

Exploring Literary Impressionism: Conrad, Crane, Ford and James.

By Daniel Weavis

As a literary category, ‘impressionism’ has only recently begun to receive regular critical attention. Where impressionism is firmly enshrined in Art History, the term has often been thought redundant in literary criticism. Several scholars have attempted to define and defend impressionism as a literary phenomenon, and while the present study seeks also to bolster its status—emphasising how it constitutes a crucial moment in the development of modern literature—it also scrutinises the deeper implications of the aesthetic. It is, in addition, the first comprehensive exploration of the literary relationship between the fictional work of the four central exponents of literary impressionism in the English language: Joseph Conrad, Stephen Crane, Ford Madox Ford, and Henry James.

Chapter One traces and summarises the aesthetic and cultural origins of literary impressionism. Chapter Two presents a working definition of impressionism, and considers the problems surrounding any such attempt. Chapter Three explores the unique and complex interaction between author, text and reader in impressionist fiction, and observes the potential contradictions involved. The moral and political capacity and alignment of the impressionist aesthetic are the subject of Chapter Four. Chapter Five examines the representations of, and implications for, identity, while Chapter Six develops the more radical implications of the fifth: investigating the consequences, opportunities and dangers of heightened subjectivity. The Conclusion locates the position and status of impressionism in literary history, looking beyond its relationship with modernism to anticipations of the theories and practices of our own time.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

(Abbreviations used in footnotes. Full references provided in the Bibliography.)

By Joseph Conrad:-

APR A Personal Record.
HD Heart of Darkness.
LJ Lord Jim.
LJC The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad.
N Nostromo.
NN The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’.
TSA The Secret Agent.
UWE Under Western Eyes.

By Stephen Crane:-

'BH' ‘The Blue Hotel.’
CSC The Correspondence of Stephen Crane.
M Maggie: A Girl of the Streets.
'OB' ‘The Open Boat.’
RBC The Red Badge of Courage.
WSC The Works of Stephen Crane.

By Ford Madox Ford:-

EN The English Novel: From the Earliest Days to the Death of Joseph Conrad.
TGS The Good Soldier.
IWN It Was The Nightingale.
JC Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance.
LF Letters of Ford Madox Ford.
LP The Last Post.
MCSU A Man Could Stand Up.
ML The March Of Literature: From Confucius to Modern Times.
NMP No More Parades.
'OI' ‘On Impressionism.’
PE Parade’s End.
PFL Portraits From Life.
RTY Return to Yesterday.
SDN Some Do Not...
'T' ‘Techniques.’
TTR Thus To Revisit: Some Reminiscences.
WBA When Blood is Their Argument: An Analysis of Prussian Culture.
By Henry James:-

A  The Ambassadors.
‘AF’  ‘The Art Of Fiction.’
GB  The Golden Bowl.
LHJ  Selected Letters of Henry James.
PL  The Portrait of A lady.
SF  The Sacred Fount.
TS  The Turn of the Screw.
WMK  What Maisie Knew.
INTRODUCTION

In 1872, the sun rose over a strange new world. First emerged Le Havre, transformed almost to abstraction by a thick, glowing haze against a backdrop of broken forms. Claude Monet's *Impression: Sunrise* marked this startling dawn—a break with tradition as much as a break of day—and would be singled out two years later in a landmark exhibition as 'the keynote of the show'.\(^1\) While its title prompted from less receptive critics a derisory yet enduring label for the visionaries of this new world—the 'Impressionists'—the influence of the painting changed the artistic landscape of France, then Europe and North America. Little more than a decade afterwards, however, the eighth and final Impressionist exhibition came to a close. And, as the bold, geometric colour-planes of Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh restructured the world again, Monet's innovative, ground-breaking sun had appeared to set.

In literature, as with music, the dawn began a little later. In 1885, one year before the final exhibition, Stephen Crane's 'red sun [. . .] pasted in the sky like a wafer,'\(^2\) lit the fractured world of *The Red Badge of Courage*: the first explicitly impressionist novel in the English language. But for the sister arts, the day of the impressionists would be just as brief. Writing in 1937, Ford Madox Ford reflected upon the brevity of the phenomenon he had done more than any other novelist to promote:

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for those infants—Mr. Pound and his disciples, Mr. T. S. Eliot, Mr. Frost, Miss Doolittle, and the rest of the London-transatlantic crowd, as for Mr. Norman Douglas, Mr. Tomlinson, or Mr. Wyndham Lewis (Percy), or for poor D. H. Lawrence, the Impressionists were already fairly old stuff [. . .]. That would be already in 1910 when Impressionism had hardly had twenty years of a run and had only just conquered the Intelligentsia.³

Looking back from the start of the twenty-first century, one observes that while the sun soon set on impressionism, it rose again to reveal a world profoundly affected by its legacy. As with the visual arts, the literary scene would never look the same again; unlike the visual arts, however, the importance, influence, even existence of impressionism would suffer comparative literary-critical neglect.

Recognition has certainly increased in the last twenty years, but literary impressionism has yet to receive the attention it deserves given its importance in the development of twentieth-century Western literature. In 1990, Julia van Gunsteren expressed that she 'was astonished to discover that in many works on the history of English literature the term “Impressionism” is not mentioned at all.'⁴ Indeed, when it is mentioned, it is often so vaguely summarised as to be effectively demeaning, or else, as in J. A. Cuddon’s Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, airily dismissed out of hand: ‘[t]he terms impressionist and impressionism have crept into literary criticism, but they are vague terms which we might well dispense with.’⁵

Perhaps unsurprisingly given its relatively weak status, most studies of literary impressionism have sought largely to define and defend the phenomenon, maintaining a generally sympathetic perspective. While I intend to contribute towards the further recognition of literary impressionism, I believe it is now sufficiently established to permit an honest and thoroughgoing critical exploration of the full implications. Such is the intention of the present thesis. In support of this approach, I would argue that if a

particular aesthetic is to attain full acceptance in such a critical arena as literary studies, it
must be exposed to unrestricted debate. On a more fundamental level, I trust that a vital
function of artistic studies is to challenge not only accredited theories and techniques, but
also those that would claim such acceptance, rejecting them, albeit more judiciously than
Cuddon, should they prove ultimately meaningless or counter-productive.

A second notable deficiency in previous general studies of literary impressionism
corns the selection of practitioners. Admittedly, we here enter particularly subjective
territory. Unlike its pictorial counterpart we cannot strictly term literary impressionism a
‘movement’, for despite Ford's retrospective speaking for Joseph Conrad, there was
never, among the writers we might now designate impressionists, general consent that
they themselves belonged to any such organised school. Far from it. We cannot then be
overly surprised to find among the alleged dramatis persona a near roll-call of major late
nineteenth—early twentieth-century writers. As Elsa Nettels remarks,

a partial list of writers of fiction whom different critics have identified as
impressionists includes Flaubert, Daudet, Proust, Mann, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Wilde,
George Moore, Lawrence, Conrad, Ford, Forster, Virginia Woolf, Dorothy
Richardson, Joyce, James, Crane, Faulkner, Dos Passos, and Gertrude Stein.  

The term ‘impressionism’ is only weakened by such informal admission. Categorisation is
further complicated by critical dispute over even the most elemental representatives. In the
1968 Symposium on Literary Impressionism, Herbert Howarth conceded that ‘[i]t may be
thought that Conrad should have figured in this paper. A number of critics regard him as
an Impressionist [. . .]. But his pictorialism is subservient to a larger method which, I
would argue, is far removed from Impressionism.’

(Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), p. 446.
6  In the Preface to JC, Ford claims his subject ‘avowed himself impressionist’ (London:
Duckworth, 1924), p. 6.
7  Elsa Nettels, 'Conrad and Stephen Crane', Conradiana 10 (1978), 280. One adds without much
pause F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingsway, Katherine Mansfield, Guy de Maupassant and Jean Rhys.
8  Herbert Howarth, Symposium on Literary Impressionism, Yearbook of Comparative and General
Literature, 17 (1968), 45.
While it might therefore constitute an act of critical arrogance to classify my designated authors those most eligible of the impressionist title (in the English language), common critical consent would, judging from the focus of previous studies, support the selection of Conrad, Crane, Ford and Henry James as, at the very least, encapsulating those most involved. This selection is bolstered by Ford’s own recognition of these other three as ‘almost equally, the protagonists of literary impressionism in Anglo-Saxondom.’

‘About this triad,’ he writes elsewhere, ‘there was a certain solidarity, a certain oneness of method and even a certain comradeship. They lived in the same corner of England, saw each other often and discussed literary methods more thoroughly and more frequently than can ever at any other time in England have been the case.’

Ford omits from this ‘triad’ his own similarity of method, his own comradeship—particularly with Conrad—and even his geographical proximity. It is then, as I mentioned, a deficiency, but also a curiosity that no previous study of literary impressionism has focused inclusively upon this central quartet. Neither, I trust, is their inclusion in the present thesis a mere statistical originality. For there is not only one technique, writes Ford, ‘but just as many as there are writers, each one differing by a shade,’ and it is the profound inter-relationship between these varying practices which shall locate and explicate the dynamic range and essence of literary impressionism.

As a third primary contribution this thesis investigates aspects of literary impressionism relatively neglected by previous studies. Bringing us first up-to-date, and covering familiar ground to some extent, the opening two chapters detail the origins of literary impressionism (Chapter One), and provide an exposition of its basis premise and technical variations (Two). The third chapter explores the unique relationship in impressionist literature between author, text and reader, questioning in particular the

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central tenet that attempts to suppress the controlling metanarrative of authorial presence and values. The repercussions of this argument extend throughout the remainder. Chapter Four considers the moral and political alignment and capability of impressionist fiction, while Chapter Five examines the representation of, and implications for, identity. The sixth chapter develops a more radical implication of the fifth, tracing the consequences, opportunities and dangers of heightened subjectivity. Finally, the Conclusion locates the position and status of impressionism in literary history, looking beyond its relationship with modernist prose and poetry to its anticipations of the theories of our own time.

Such major themes as politics, morality and identity have, of course, been endlessly scrutinised with reference to the work of these four major authors by several generations of literary scholars. Many such studies, furthermore, have effectively discussed the specifically impressionist implications of such themes. Crucially, however, they often failed to recognise the term and, by extension, the governing aesthetic, which might, besides affording it due credit, have better defined the broader significance of their findings. Stephen Bernstein, writing as recently as 1995, suitably illustrates the point:

Conrad is perhaps unique among early twentieth-century British novelists for the difficulty critics have had fitting his work into periodic categories. Michael Jones calls him ‘a writer straddling a gap between two centuries, not a romantic nor yet a Victorian, but oddly out of place among modernists too’ [...]. Romanticism, Victorianism, modernism, and postmodernism quickly emerge as the parameters within which we might begin discussion of Conrad’s periodization’.

Notably absent is the term that might well make historical sense to Bernstein and Jones of Conrad’s literary endeavours. It would then, to extend this point, be a delusion on my own part to promise a thesis of entirely original material on four authors so exhaustively documented as those here under consideration, but a further important project for the contemporary critic of literary impressionism is to bring such a valuable abundance of

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commentary into the arena of impressionist studies. Our understanding of both the aesthetic and the authors involved should benefit greatly from such an enterprise.

There is, of course, an evident counter-side to the broad range of this undertaking. Put simply, a thesis dedicated to the sole consideration of any one of these authors would be far from comprehensive. I have responded to this unavoidable obstacle in two ways. Firstly, and most obviously, the study must be carefully selective. The range of texts receiving detailed analysis is relatively confined, but also, I trust, sufficiently broad and appropriate to carry the weight of my argument. Secondly, the arguments themselves present something of an introduction to the respective topics. However, given the absence of studies specific to, for example, the implications of literary impressionism for the reader, or for identity, or for politics and morality, the contribution should be none the less.

It is as well finally to draw attention to the inherent value and interest involved with the study of impressionist fiction. For, as shall become apparent in the discussions which follow, many familiar and somewhat tired themes of literary criticism—appearance and reality, perception and imagination, truth and falsity, the function of the artist—take on, with such writers as Conrad, Crane, Ford and James, an invigorating new impression.
Chapter One:

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

I

‘You cannot write about a great writer of Actuality without giving some account of the times in which he lived.’ So wrote Ford in his study of Henry James.\(^1\) Whether we consider the impressionists writers of ‘actuality’ is a point I shall return to, but ‘some account of the times’ will certainly contribute to an understanding and appreciation of the impressionist aesthetic. In a study as broad as this the account itself must be something of an impression, but the crude details, here introduced, shall later receive greater treatment; this initial territory is, besides, to recall my introduction, comparatively well established.

Impressionist literature, to speak broadly, was born from a clash of Realist and Romantic impulses, and nurtured by the specific social and intellectual conditions of the day. More precisely, we might speak of realism and naturalism on the one hand and Aestheticism on the other: movements that were both precedents and contemporary. As with impressionism, these literary practices generally followed pictorial manifestations in both principle and chronology.

Realism is, for Cuddon, ‘[a]n exceptionally elastic critical term, often ambivalent and equivocal [...] which many now feel we could do without.’\(^2\) Again, Cuddon is overzealous in his housekeeping, but prompts the qualification that it is as a school of the midto late-nineteenth century rather than as a universal property that the term concerns us here.

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Before the French Revolution of 1848, the State-organised Salon in Paris had conferred highest status to religious paintings and grand depictions of heroism from history and mythology. Such status was represented most evidently by their size, dwarfing more modest scenes of rural life. The latter, however, remained to many commentators more relevant to the general community, and by the 1840s had acquired considerable popularity. But this was a notably anaesthetised rurality, the 'physical energies and [...] potential social force' of the peasants 'minimised in order to permit more Arcadian interpretations that [...] conjured up a nostalgic world of simplicity and innocence.' With the deposition of the monarchy and ensuing climate of hardship and instability, the demand for more honest and recognisable representations of social reality increased further. Jean-François Millet and Gustave Courbet embodied this new attitude more conspicuously than any other artists of the time, although their divergent methods exemplify the broad range of Realism.

Millet was a leading figure of the Barbizon school, whose exponents were characterised by their practice of accurate 'on the spot,' or plein-air, painting. His portrait of The Winnower was featured at the re-opening of the Salon in March 1848 and is notable for the comparative coarseness of both the subject and its treatment. The paint, thickly applied and without the neat precision of academic convention, physically encapsulates the earthiness of the scene: the harsh interior, worn clothes and strained posture. Equally evident was its large scale, competing with idealised allegories of the new Republic and bestowing full recognition upon the ordinary, often gruelling existence

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2 Cuddon, ‘[R]ealism’, p. 772.
5 Rosenblum describes the aftermath of Louis-Philippe’s abdication as ‘a series of chaotic provisional governments that instituted welfare workshops to alleviate the drastic unemployment [...]’, p. 218.
of rudimentary workers. And yet, in this and many of Millet’s subsequent peasant scenes, one finds an aspect of noble, almost timeless resistance to toil and suffering. The faces of The Gleaners (1857) are hidden by their stooping posture; brought closer to nature by their simple costume, and gaining physical stature from their unchallenged prominence in the wide, cultivated plane, these women acquire, in their quiet, dignified resilience, the poetic grandeur of symbols. Millet had been born a peasant; his father and grandfather were peasants before him and his brothers too were labourers. Disregarding portrayals of urban life despite the encroaching Industrial Revolution, Millet’s timeless landscapes, infused often with an almost spiritually luminous light, commemorate a life and past both personal and precious to the artist. ‘The most joyful thing I know,’ he wrote in 1851, is the peace, the silence, that one enjoys in the fields or on the tilled lands. One sees a poor, heavily laden creature with a bundle of faggots advancing from a narrow path in the fields. The manner in which this figure comes suddenly before one is a momentary reminder of the fundamental condition of human life, toil.7

Courbet’s Realism is in many respects more radical; it is, indeed, at times, overtly confrontational. Despite warm praise for his 1849 Dinner at Ornans and a second-class medal ensuring, ironically, acceptance at future Salons,8 Courbet’s uncompromising full-scale portrayals of peasant hardship aroused increasing controversy in the changing political situation of the mid-nineteenth century. The elections of May 1849 and March 1850 saw Louis Napoleon lose a substantial majority as ‘around one third of the rural electorate,’ judging him ‘the champion of the urban bourgeoisie [. . .] voted for left-wing republican candidates.’9 The Burial at Ornans, a stark, unidealised account of a rural community in evident adversity, was greeted thus with hostility at the Salon of 1850-51. Unlike Millet’s worn yet enduring figures, Courbet’s monumental canvas presents a

8 Details from Rosenblum, p. 224.
9 House, p. 314.
diverse multitude of individuals whose expressions, almost brutally rendered, range from intense grief to apparent nonchalance. The gaping grave that dominates the foreground weakens any supernatural consolation that the clerics, notably neglected by many of the congregation, might otherwise convey. Unconventional yet entirely credible on its own terms, the further implication is of a working class breaking free of Church authority: a contributing factor, needless to say, to its poor reception. Like so much of Courbet’s art, The Burial at Ornans rejects academic pre-conceptions as it asserts the primacy of the eye before the heart and mind.

In 1855, opposite an international exhibition established by Louis Napoleon—now Emperor Napoleon III by virtue of a coup d’état—to promote the Second Empire, Courbet staged his own display, complete with manifesto. ‘My aim,’ he declared, ‘is to render the custom, the ideas and the appearance of my age according to my own feelings.’\textsuperscript{10} This emphasis upon his artistic independence led Courbet also to reject ‘[t]he label “realist”’, which, he added, ‘was imposed on me just as the label “romantic” was imposed on the men of 1830.’\textsuperscript{11} The term had indeed been as loosely applied then as it is now, but in retrospect especially, Courbet’s complicity with the prevailing attitude and methodology commonly associated with that movement is so close, during this period in particular, as to classify him an archetypal exponent. ‘I believe’, he wrote in 1861, ‘that painting is an essentially concrete art and can only consist in the representation of real and existing things.’\textsuperscript{12} ‘Why should I’, he wrote elsewhere, ‘try to see in the world what is not there and distort by the efforts of imagination what is there?’\textsuperscript{13} Behind these statements is the confident assumption of a common phenomenal reality accessible to careful observation. Courbet’s Realism is, put another way, very much an expression of the age of Positivism.

\textsuperscript{11} Quoted Femier, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{12} Quoted House, p. 318.
The founder of Positivism, the French sociologist August Comte, published the six volumes of his *Cours de philosophie positive* between 1830 and 1842, and had substantially developed his system with a number of significant works by 1854. Comte described the evolution of human thought as progressing through three stages: the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive. The latter phase, to which Comte believed the current period belonged, defined an empirical, rationalist attitude served by scientific examination. Nature comprised definite laws which objective scrutiny, disregarding *a priori* assumptions, could expose. The mechanics of human behaviour were also accessible to such observation, although psychology, 'which was at that time,' writes Alan Lacy, 'amenable only to study through the subjective method of introspection, Comte ignored, presumably because introspection did not seem subject to proper scientific control.' Positivist thinking characterised the 'fifties, 'sixties and 'seventies: the decades we now associate with the high-water mark of Realist painting; its presence is equally felt behind realist literature.

II

Realist literature forms many parallels with Realist painting. There is, to begin, considerable flexibility in the application of the 'Realist' label. Again, our concern here is with the phenomenon that dominated the mid- to late-nineteenth century, and which generally expressed a greater confidence than novels of the eighteenth in achieving a

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15 Lacy, p. 706.
16 See George J. Becker, Introduction, *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, ed. Becker (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1963), p. 3: 'Though the words *realism* and *naturalism* are freely, even rashly, used, there is no general agreement as to what they mean.'
literal rendition of reality.\textsuperscript{17} This confidence, of which the associations with Positivism shall be emphasised below, was matched by a necessity felt also in the visual arts to compete with photography, which had made its debut in 1839 and brought increasing attention to documentary as a genre.\textsuperscript{18}

As with painting, literary realism had its greatest impact in France, where the most prominent exponents included Honoré de Balzac, Alphonse Daudet, the brothers Edmund and Jules de Goncourt, Guy de Maupassant, but perhaps most notably, Gustave Flaubert and, in the movement's subsequent naturalist development, Émile Zola. Maupassant described the appearance of Flaubert's \textit{Madame Bovary} in 1857 as 'a revolution in literature',\textsuperscript{19} while Zola would later 'dominate the movement for thirty years'\textsuperscript{20} with the twenty-volume series \textit{Les Rougon-Macquart} (1871-93).

The realists and naturalists shared with the painters and with Positivism a rejection of Romantic idealism as an outmoded manifestation of Comte's metaphysical stage. Empirical science had prevailed and literature was effectively to serve its endeavours by following its commitment to observable fact. Given that fiction is defined by its very difference to fact, this created something of a paradox. Through the accurate transcription of scrupulous observation, however, literature could yet support the scientific project. Such, at least, was the expressed belief of Zola. 'It is scientific investigation,' he explained, 'it is experimental reasoning that combats one by one the hypotheses of the idealists and will replace novels of pure imagination by novels of observation and experiment.'\textsuperscript{21} Like Balzac before him, Zola considered his multi-volume representation of French society to be more than 'mere' imaginative fiction: the subtitle described the

\textsuperscript{17} A comprehensive analysis of this development can be found in Lilian R. Furst, \textit{All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction} (Durham: Duke UP, 1995). Furst's study is the principal influence upon my subsequent account of literary Realist doctrine.
\textsuperscript{18} Details from Furst, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{19} Quoted Becker, Introduction to 'On Realism', p. 89. Becker reminds us that serialisation of the novel began in 1856.
\textsuperscript{20} Becker, Introduction, p. 8.
work as a ‘Natural and Social History of a Family under the Second Empire.’ This privileging of accuracy and fact before ideals and imagination necessitated a number of fictional strategies and entailed many consequences.

Transposed to the subject of realist literature, the rejection of idealism served, as with painting, to validate the recent and the commonplace; in Flaubert’s phrase, ‘Yvetot is worth just as much as Constantinople.’ Aspects of life previously shunned by novelists—alcoholism, domestic violence, poverty, sex, prostitution, mining, even boredom—now received attention. Notably prevalent, and extending the painting comparison, were subjects from low in the social scale. The new availability of formerly neglected subjects offers partial explanation; but perhaps more integral was the realists’ commitment to observation, combined with their predominantly ‘middle-class background’. There was also, as Becker continues, ‘a kind of implicit Benthamite assumption that the life lived by the greatest number is somehow the most real.’

Certainly, it was the life most generally familiar to the novelists’ readership.

One might further speculate that the greater financial dependence and often-supposed simplicity and immediacy of working-class life (discernible, for example, in Wordsworth’s ‘Preface to Lyrical Ballads’24) afforded greater opportunity for the study of determinism: a preoccupation for the realists and the defining characteristic of the naturalists. Acknowledging the influence of ‘Darwin’s theories’, Zola expressed his belief ‘that the question of heredity has a great influence in the intellectual and passionate

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23 Becker, pp. 24-5.
24 ‘Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition . . . our elemental feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended [... ] and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the action of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions’; 1850, The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1974), p. 124.

The effect of heredity on the tragic heroine Gervaise is also emphasised early in the novel:

She was like her mother, a tireless worker who’d died in harness after serving as beast of burden to Père Macquart for over twenty years. She was still very thin, while her mother had had a pair of shoulders on her broad enough to stave in a door, but just the same she took after her in the way she got desperately fond of people. And even her bit of a limp came from the poor woman, whom Père Macquart was forever beating to death.\footnote{Zola, \textit{L’Assommoir}, p. 39.}

The dominant theme of so much realist and naturalist literature, whether \textit{L’Assommoir}, \textit{Madame Bovary} or \textit{Middlemarch}, is the ‘generally painful negotiations between individual idealism and the dominant ideology.’\footnote{Furst, p. 177.} It is a conflict in which, outnumbered and oppressed, the former rarely prevails.

The narrative techniques employed to convey these attitudes were variable, as we shall see, yet certain characteristics were at least consistently emphasised. To begin, just as the empirical scientist must observe with scrupulous objectivity, so must the empirical novelist narrate. Flaubert was foremost among this practice. ‘I believe’, he wrote, ‘that Great Art is scientific and impersonal’, and of \textit{Madame Bovary} he declared ‘there is not in this book one movement in my name, and the personality of the author is completely
absent. Zola concurred: ‘What it is necessary to emphasize above all is the impersonal nature of the method.’ The emphasis simultaneously moved away from any overt ethical agenda (my caution shall later be clarified). ‘How stupid and false all works of the imagination are made by preoccupation with morality!’ declared Flaubert. ‘That is what is so fine about the natural sciences: they don’t wish to prove anything.’

Compared with their French counterparts, English realists were both more visible and more visibly involved with the moral implications of their material. English authors generally, wrote James in 1883, ‘are inferior in audacity, in neatness, in acuteness, in intellectual vivacity, in the arrangement of material, in the art of characterizing visible things. But they have been more at home in the moral world; as people say today, they know their way about the conscience.’ Some influence of French developments crossed the Channel, nevertheless. Even at its most intrusive, for example, one finds often in George Eliot’s narration a conscious gesture towards impartiality—occasionally, and with some irony, as an authorial demand of the reader: ‘If you blame Mr Riley very severely for giving a recommendation on such slight grounds, I must say you are rather hard upon him’, she writes in *The Mill on the Floss*; whereupon follows a defence from his perspective.

In practice, one finds also in both Flaubert and Zola an occasional address to, or at least an acknowledgement of, an implied reader, even if the suggested relationship appears altogether less familiar than in Eliot. ‘If she were beautiful, it was in her eyes,’ writes

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31 Zola, ‘The Experimental Novel’, p. 188.
Flaubert of his eponymous heroine: 'though they were brown, they seemed to be black because of the lashes, and they met your gaze openly with an artless candour.'

While the second person perspective intrudes, its enforced complicity of the reader’s perspective extends to the latter the consensus of perception typically implied between realist characters, thereby remaining consistent to realist assumptions of a common phenomenal reality. To this end, as Furst elaborates, the writers ‘eschewed the introverted forms of the novel in letters, as a diary, or in the first person in favor of a third-person authorial narration directed outwards towards the readers.’

A further identifiable technique of realist fiction is the comparative prominence, abundance and precision of descriptive data. Balzac is particularly associated with this tendency, as a necessarily expansive example from The Country Parson demonstrates.

Having first provided something of a preparatory architectural sketch of a château, Balzac gets down to business:

The façade of the château fronted the courtyard and faced the west. It consisted of three towers, the central towers being connected with the one on either side of it by two wings. The back of the house was precisely similar, and looked over the gardens towards the east. There was but one window in each tower on the side of the courtyard and gardens, each wing having three. The centre tower was built on something after the fashion of a campanile, the corner stones were vermiculated, and here some delicate sculptured work had been sparingly introduced.

A brief reflection on art threatens to leave our image incomplete, but successive paragraphs describe with tireless detail: ‘[t]he tower at either end (three windows in depth);’ the view ‘[f]rom the eastern [and western] windows;’ ‘[t]he wings’ and ‘central

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37 Furst, p. 65.
tower' (‘[r]idge tiles had been used for economy’s sake’); ‘[t]he plantations;’ and, of course, ‘[t]he whole grand floor of the château [. . .].’ Such attention reflects the newly accredited influence of the environment, while the precision of the description and matter-of-fact tone convey total confidence in achieving scientific objectivity.

The language of realist fiction typically conveys an air of perfect referentiality. It does not, in the spirit of scientific discourse, seek to draw attention to itself. Balzac’s dense accumulations of descriptive data privilege the denotative before the connotative and, by extension, metonymy before metaphor. It thereby complies with Roman Jakobson’s classification of metonymy as a defining principle of realism: ‘Following the path of contiguous relationships, the realistic author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in time and space. He is fond of synecdochic details.’ But as David Lodge remarks, ‘most [metonymic] texts, certainly most realist fiction, contain a good deal of local metaphor in the form both of overt tropes and of submerged symbolism.’ Flaubert’s experiences of his own writing as he worked on *Madame Bovary* bear this out: ‘I am hampered by my propensity for metaphor, which definitely dominates me too much.’ Despite this inevitability, demonstrated emphatically by post-structuralists, one would yet expect, with Lodge, the writer who is working in the metonymic mode to use metaphorical devices sparingly; to make them subject to the control of context—either by elaborating literal details of the context into symbols, or by drawing analogies from a semantic field associated with the context; and to incline towards simile rather than metaphor proper when drawing attention to similarity between things dissimilar.

With these three strategies, Lodge claims, the writer of realist fiction reduces to a minimum the most evident disruptions to referential discourse. Zola suitably demonstrates

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42 Lodge, op. cit., p. 113.
the second and third with such images as '[h]is laugh sounded like a pulley that needed greasing', and 'a sky as black as the bottom of a frying pan [. . .]'\footnote{Zola, \textit{L'Assommoir}, pp. 42, 390.} But the relative abundance of imagery in \textit{L'Assommoir} does not entirely subscribe to the first of Lodge's strategies, and in this sense Zola is representative of the stylistic evolution of the realist movement as it progressed through the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The shift was away from extensive passages of comprehensive, precision detail where, as in the scenery change of a play, the characters temporarily freeze or disappear from sight, to a more integrated attempt at indirect evocation\footnote{I acknowledge here the influence of Furst, p. 153. It is important to clarify that the development of narrative technique is one of emphasis rather than total transformation: as Furst remarks, 'descriptions of environment is already action in Balzac [. . .][though] [d]ensity is more prevalent in Balzac than in any later realist'; pp. viii, 152.}.\footnote{44\hspace{1em}4} Ironically, and for all their prosaic clarity, the dense, denotative descriptions of Balzac can, through their very prominence, become inadvertently self-referential, thereby hindering the reader's engagement with the material world portrayed. While narrative impartiality remained paramount, description became increasingly directed by the psychological and perceptual orientation of characters. Flaubert writes of Emma Bovary: 'When her eyes strayed over the Chinese screens around the fireplace, the big curtains, the armchairs, the things that assuaged the bitterness of her life, she was seized with remorse [. . .]'\footnote{45\hspace{1em}In one sense, this refinement of description away from static backdrop to dynamic integration accentuates still further the influence of environment in human affairs: the surroundings are, on a very literal level, fusing with, and generating, behaviour. The development also reflects, however, the increasing flexibility of narrative perspective in realist fiction. Focalisation and free indirect discourse, first mastered, Lodge speculates, by Jane Austen,\footnote{46\hspace{1em}were arguably more prevalent in \textit{Madame Bovary} than in any preceding French novel. Their effect is to further integrate individual perspective with omniscient narrative description, as in this portrayal of Emma's betrayed husband: 'his thick lips were}'}
trembling, adding a touch of stupidity to his face; even his back, his tranquil back, was irritating to behold, and in the very look of his great coat she found the banality of the man." Yet Flaubert was not seeking to relinquish explicit narrative omniscience. We find, first of all, instances of Balzacian precision: ‘the leg healed according to the book, and when, after forty-six days, Père Rouault was seen trying to walk all on his own around the yard, people began to consider Monsieur Bovary a man of great talent.’ Flaubert’s superior, discreet narrator is equally discernible in both the persistent narrative irony and the comparatively sophisticated narrative register. Each serves to ensure a distinction between the perspective of the narrator and the individual characters, and each is present in Flaubert’s mocking italicisation of bourgeois clichés: ‘[t]he father-in-law died and left almost nothing; he was most indignant, went in for textiles, lost some money at it, then retired to the country, aiming to make a bit.’

In L’Assommoir, the narrator is less aloof, adopting the multifarious aspects of Keats’s ‘camelion Poet’ [sic]. Far from Flaubert’s signalled parodies of bourgeois idiom, Zola’s narrator adopts and sustains throughout a colloquial, working-class linguistic register which at times blurs with the focalised thoughts and perceptions of the characters. The difficulty of locating the narrative position is compounded by the predominance and fluidity of the focalised free indirect discourse, with the narrator occasionally changing host mid-conversation:

And so, until one in the morning, they argued about getting married [...]. Gervaise kept coming back to [the children], making Coupeau look at them: she’d be

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45 Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 214.
46 Lodge, p. 39.
47 Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 214.
48 Ibid., p. 12; my emphasis.
49 Ibid., p. 3. (In the original: ‘La beau-père mourut et laissa peu de chose; il en fut indigné, se lança dans la fabrique, y perdit quelque argent, puis se retira dans la campagne, où il voulut faire valoir’; p. 87.) Author’s emphasis. Maria Elisabeth Kronegger notes the greater degree of focalisation in Flaubert’s subsequent L’Education Sentimentale (1869): ‘The author “identifies” with the illusions of the protagonists, and ironically, the distinction between author and protagonist, between illusion and reality disappears’, Literary Impressionism (New Haven, Conn: College & UP, 1973), p. 15.
bringing him a funny sort of dowry, she really couldn’t saddle him with two kids. And then, she felt ashamed on his account. Whatever would the neighbours say? [...] Coupeau’s answer to all these reasonable objections was to shrug his shoulders. A fat lot of good he cared what the neighbours thought! [...] All right, so she’d lived with Lantier first. What was so bad about that? [...] And Christ, as for the kids, Claude and Étienne would grow up, and they’d bring ’em up decent, wouldn’t they?\textsuperscript{51}

Elsewhere, and contrasting with Flaubert’s ‘forty-six days’, Zola’s narrator records that ‘[i]t must have been the Saturday after rent day, something like the twelfth or thirteenth of January, Gervaise wasn’t really sure.’\textsuperscript{52} Neither, indeed, is the reader, since the narrator, if aware, refrains from correcting.

Such indeterminacy, it might be argued, sits awkwardly with the naturalist’s commitment to scientific objectivity. One defence might be that describing the world as perceived by those involved is in fact a further claim to objectivity and impartiality: observing life \textit{as it is observed}. This vicarious approach to human behaviour would, however, still appear to compromise any claims of scientific authority, but in ‘The Experimental Novel’, Zola defended the naturalist practice as far more flexible than generally considered, while staunchly defending its accuracy of representation.

A stupid reproach made against us naturalist writers is that we wish to be merely photographers. In vain have we asserted that we accept temperament and personal expression; people go right on answering us with imbecile arguments about the impossibility of the strictly true, about the necessity of arrangements of facts to make any work of art whatever [...] The idea of experiment carries with it the idea of modification. We begin certainly with true facts which are our indestructible base; but to show the mechanism of the facts, we have to produce and direct the phenomena; that is our part of invention and genius in the work.\textsuperscript{53}

The full implications of this attitude shall be discussed in Chapter Three, but significant here is the acknowledgement of contemporary scepticism about the scientific and

\textsuperscript{51} Zola, \textit{L’Assommoir}, p. 50. (In the original: ‘Alors, jusqu’à une heure du matin [...] ils discutèrent leur mariage [...] Et Gervaise revenait toujours à eux, les montrait à Coupeau; c’était là une drôle de dot qu’elle lui apportait, elle ne pouvait pas vraiment l’encombrer de deux mioches. Puis, elle était prise de honte pour lui. Qu’est-ce qu’on dirait dans le quartier? [...] A toutes ces onnes raisons, Coupeau répondait par des haussements d’épaules. Il se moquait bien du quartier! [...] Eh bien! oui, elle avait eu Lantier avant lui. Ou était le mal? [...] Quant aux enfants, ils grandiraient, on les élèverait, parbleu!’ pp. 638-9.)

\textsuperscript{52} Zola, \textit{L’Assommoir}, p. 390.

objective claims of realist and naturalist doctrine. Significant qualifications of the realist project had been made before. George Eliot, for example, had earlier confessed in *Adam Bede* that her aim was to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is [...].

Flaubert's doubts were concerned less with the scientific capability of realist fiction than with its aesthetic limitations. 'Reality, as I see it, should only be a springboard,' he wrote, whereas Zola and Daudet 'are convinced that by itself it is the whole State. Such materialism makes me angry [...].' Flaubert's ambition, by contrast, was for a more autonomous art: 'I value style first and above all, and then Truth.' Though coming from radically different directions, Flaubert could finally agree with Courbet in saying 'I hate what is conventionally called realism, although people regard me as one of its high priests.'

Zola's epic series concluded in 1893. In the same year Ferdinand Brunetière, who ten years earlier had published the first thoughts on impressionism in the novel, defeated Zola 'in a contest for a place in the French Academy.' That year also marked the deaths of both Maupassant and Hippolyte Taine, the latter of whom had applied aspects of Comte's theories to the literary arena and had substantially influenced Zola in particular. It is not, then, particularly surprising to find that '1893 is often taken as a terminal date' for the 'initial impact of realism' in France. In truth, the reaction against realism had been immediate, albeit generally conservative. In Oscar Wilde's phrase, '[t]he nineteenth-century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.' But a

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55 Flaubert, 'To Tergenev', 8 November 1877; 'To Louis Bonenfant', 12 December 1856; 'To George Sand', 6 February 1876; quoted Becker pp. 96, 94, 96.
56 Becker, p. 9; see also Cuddon, 'Realism'.
more considered alternative soon began to develop in both literature and painting, and Wilde was its outstanding exponent.

III

The origins of nineteenth-century aestheticism can, writes Cuddon, be traced to 'several German writers of the Romantic period—notably Kant, Schelling, Goethe and Schiller'—all of whom shared the belief that 'art must be autonomous.' Their ideas, Cuddon continues, 'were diffused in Britain by Coleridge and Carlyle [and] in America by Edgar Allan Poe and Ralph Waldo Emerson'\(^5\), while foremost in France were Victor Cousin and Théophile Gautier. Cousin had coined the expression l'art pour l'art, while Gautier had announced, in the 1835 Preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, that art was completely useless, amoral and unnatural.\(^5\) While Aestheticism as a movement did not clearly emerge until the late 1880s, these early ideas took quick effect.

In England, 1849, the bottom left corner of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* featured, beneath his signature, the initially enigmatic letters PRB. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had quietly formed in the preceding year, the year the French people had overthrown their monarchy. It began with seven members, of whom the most important were John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt and Rossetti himself.\(^6\) Ford Madox Brown, grandfather of Ford Madox Ford (who was also the nephew of Rossetti), was 'probably the most important single influence' on the Pre-Raphaelites, although never himself a member of the Brotherhood.\(^6\)

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58 Cuddon, 'Aestheticism', p. 12.
Once again, we find no universal manifesto, yet among the artists common characteristics were immediately discernible, and partially accounted for by their collective title. They were agreed', writes Richard Muther, in recognising that art had always stood on the basis of nature until the end of the fifteenth century, or, more exactly, until the year 1508, when Raphael left Florence to paint in the Vatican in Rome. Since then everything had gone wrong; art had stripped off the simple garment of natural truthfulness and fallen into conventional phrases, which in the course of centuries had become more and more empty and repellent by vapid repetition.

This sterile, often contrived conventionality, they believed, was as much a blight on nineteenth-century art in Britain as it had been in France. By contrast, the Pre-Raphaelites returned to a sincere and typically detailed observation of nature, incorporating often a 'study of outdoor motives on the spot'. To this extent, they were the close cousins of Millet and Courbet. For the Brotherhood, however, the subject of this accurate observation and technique need not be working class or immediately recognisable everyday life. Historical, religious and literary subjects were more characteristic, often with an elaborate symbolism suggesting a moral quality. Behind this combined emphasis resides the presence of John Ruskin: the most influential British art critic of this period and the champion of the Pre-Raphaelites, defending them in 1851 from immediate criticism. For Ruskin 'all beautiful works of art must either intentionally imitate or accidentally resemble natural forms,' for in the soul [of nature] is the Deity. Here, however, the notion of the movement as a single entity begins to strain, with each artist adopting an individual agenda. 'For Rossetti, poetic or symbolic significance of some sort was most important; for Hunt a moral idea; for Millais, the content was not deeply significant as long as the

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62 This and the immediately subsequent explanation is guided principally by Treuherz, pp. 75-158, and Peter and Linda Murray, 'PRB', pp. 335-6.
63 Muther, p. 568.
64 Murray, 'PRB', p. 335.
ostensible subject was appealing. The group soon disbanded, only to be replaced by a
second manifestation, dominated by Rossetti, accompanied now by William Morris and
Edward Burne-Jones. The new emphasis, explains Julian Treuherz, was ‘away from the
realistic, hard-edged and brightly coloured early manner and looking forward to the poetic
and decorative bias of the Aesthetic Movement.’

Aestheticism reacted principally to the ugliness of mid- to late-nineteenth century
industrial expansion and capitalist materialism. Its exponents rejected for their art the
prescribed utility of Utilitarianism, seeking to retain the concept of beauty as at least one
aspect of modern life free from financial value or social function. This position
occasionally extended to an implicit critique of philistine and bourgeois attitudes such as
is discernible in Madame Bovary (one recalls, to this end, Flaubert’s expressed prioritising
of style). The Aesthetic artists characteristically retreated from social integration,
assuming the role of disinterested observers: not now with the realist/naturalist intention
of scientific accuracy, but to indulge the proclaimed autonomy of their craft.

The increasing secularisation of the later nineteenth century, for which Darwin had
been an inadvertent catalyst, was a further contributing factor to the Aesthetic
phenomenon generally. One prevalent response had been to ascribe to art the role
traditionally performed by Christianity. But with God went the very concept of a single,
categorical morality. Natural selection had discovered the basis for success (and perhaps,
by extension, sensible action) in strength and adaptability; Utilitarianism equated
goodness with the happiness of the majority; in philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche, like
William Blake before him, attacked traditional concepts of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ as outmoded

66 Watkinson, p. 49.
67 Treuherz, p. 103.
68 See also: ‘What strikes me as beautiful, what I should like to do, is a book about nothing, a book
without external attachments, which would hold together by itself through the internal force of its style
69 Pre-Raphaelite art was essentially Christian in outlook.
moral prejudice potentially denying the advancement of life. The social infrastructure itself was being radically transformed by an unprecedented level of technological and economic change. "Much previous thought and art," writes Malcolm Bradbury, "had emerged out of a provincial or pastoral culture, but that was really no longer the case. The post-village character of the modern England had eliminated much of that sense of cultural stability and organic and felt community [...]." The last decades of the nineteenth century, continues Bradbury, "were years in which a relatively coherent culture, a moral and human assent, was fragmented and in many ways destroyed altogether." With such heterogeneity, however, came potential freedom from moral and social prescription: perhaps more than ever art had the license to exist entirely on its own terms.

That the age of Ruskin was ending is perhaps best exemplified by an infamous court battle between himself and one of the leading Aesthetic painters in England, James Abbot McNeil Whistler. Whistler was an unusual exponent for the portrayal of strictly contemporary subject matter, yet this seemed ultimately a mere vehicle for his governing preoccupation with artifice. This is discernible in his choice of titles which typically stress the fundamental aesthetic constitution before the literal subject: Symphony in White No. 3, Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1: the Artist's Mother, Nocturne in Black and Gold: the Falling Rocket. As notable in two of these, Whistler's titles often assumed musical connotations, anticipating thereby Walter Pater's suitably Aesthetic dictum that "[a]ll art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." The Nocturne in Black and Gold (c. 1875), a dim night scene with iridescent traces of a falling rocket, attracted particularly hostile criticism from Ruskin for its (somewhat inevitable) lack of clarity and precision.

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70 See Rudolf A. Makkreel, 'The Problem of Values in the Late Nineteenth Century,' The Pimlico History of Western Philosophy, p. 560, and Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790).
72 Ibid., p. 62.
73 I am guided in this paragraph by Treuherz, pp. 131-58.
have seen, and heard,' wrote Ruskin, 'much of cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.' Recognising both the influence of Ruskin and the severity of these remarks, Whistler sued for libel. The trial centred around the concept of 'finish,' and several of Whistler's paintings were introduced as evidence. Of the *Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Old Battersea Bridge* (c. 1872-7), Burne-Jones, enlisted by Ruskin, himself too ill to attend, declared it 'merely a sketch,' showing 'no finish.' Whistler appealed to the judge: 'Your Lordship is too close at present to the picture to perceive the effect which I intended to produce at a distance [. . .]. The thing is intended simply as a representation of moonlight. My whole scheme,' he added, 'was to bring about a certain harmony of colour.' While Whistler won the case, a lack of both influential supporters and the opportunity to sufficiently expound his aesthetic theories confined his award of damages to a risible one farthing.

If Whistler, as we shall see, embodied something of a transition between Aestheticism and Impressionism, the same may be said in the republic of letters for Walter Pater. The emergence of explicitly Aesthetic principles in literature was soon established, as observed in Cousin, Gautier and even Flaubert. In England, the PRB had introduced within one year of its appearance *The Germ*, a journal featuring poetry by members and friends including both Rossetti and his sister, Christina. Such poetry exhibited several characteristics central to the painting: most typically, a tendency to withdraw from modern life, sensuousness no less than sense, archaic modes and language, a Classical mythological framework, and a medievalist interest in chivalry and romance. Morris,

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76 Quoted in Spencer, p. 85.
77 Information from Treuherz, p. 79.
Algernon Swinburne and Alfred Lord Tennyson may be considered among the major practitioners, with Keats and Edmund Spenser the key precedents.78

Pater’s Aestheticism principally resides, besides his elegant prose, in his attitude to life and art; nowhere is this expressed so memorably as in the Preface and Conclusion to his Studies in the History of The Renaissance (1873).79 Pater begins the Preface by revising (more significantly than he immediately proclaims) Matthew Arnold’s famous declaration that the business of criticism is “to see the object in itself as it really is.”80 For Pater, ‘the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is [. . .].’81 Arnold had indeed similarly advocated an inward turn, albeit in a paradoxical attempt to relocate religious values from their increasingly untenable metaphysical foundations to the solid empirical basis of personal experience and immediate perception.82 Michael H. Levenson succinctly explains Arnold’s central argument:

Of a Personal First Cause we can have no genuine acquaintance. But we have an immediate perception of certain primary religious categories: ‘Eternal’, ‘Righteousness’, ‘not ourselves’. These are verifiable data, insists Arnold, and we would profit by making our conceptions of deity correspond to such incontestable perceptions. Accordingly, he suggests that we redefine divinity in the light of these concepts. We were no longer to speak of an identifiable personal God but of ‘the Eternal Power not ourselves that makes for righteousness.’83

Pater extends Arnold’s retreat into subjectivity, while equally affirming the apparent consequences.

78 This brief exposition is guided by Cuddon, ‘Aestheticism’, pp. 12-14.
79 My quotations are from the revised 1893 text: see note 74 above. The Conclusion was composed in 1868.
81 Pater, p. xix. Pater’s influence on Wilde is particularly pronounced here. See, for example: ‘The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things’; Preface to Dorian Gray, p. 3.
83 Ibid., pp. 11-12.
For Pater, '[t]he inward world of thought and feeling' is not a placid reservoir of verifiable values, but a 'whirlpool' in which 'experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects.' When 'reflexion begins to play upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence; [...] each object is loosed into a group of impressions—colour, odour, texture—in the mind of the observer.' Such is the 'unstable, flickering, inconsistent' nature of these 'impressions', which 'burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them', that they effectively define 'the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world.'

Arnold anticipated the potential anarchy of this position and repeatedly expressed, writes Levenson, 'the need for a principle of organization to offset the drift towards sensuousness and disorder.' Pater, by contrast, disregards any such imposition of authority, emphasising that these 'impressions of the individual mind to which [...] experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight', unable thereby to support 'a facile orthodoxy, of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own.' With an implicit acceptance of Aesthetic amorality, Pater famously exclaimed that '[n]ot the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end.' The Aesthetic resonance of this position is unmistakably amplified with the concluding assertion that the 'interval' of our brief existence is best expanded by 'getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time [...] Of such wisdom', Pater declares, 'the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments sake.'

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86 I use this word with some caution. As Wilde remarks: 'The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium': Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray, p. 3. We might also consider, for example, Pater's following call to maximise experience through art, or the common Aesthetic intention to counter crass materialism with art, as moral imperatives.
87 Pater, pp. 187-90.
Pater's recognition of impressions as the essence of experience owes much to the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume. Hume had argued in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) that '[a]ll the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds', which he termed 'impressions and ideas'. The former constitutes 'all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul', and 'which enter with most force and violence'; the latter are 'the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning [...].' Hume's distinction and hierarchy reverberate throughout impressionist literature, and not without contention.

IV

Within days of his self-appointed emperorship in 1852, Napoleon III bestowed upon a city superintendent, one Baron Georges Haussmann, the supervision of a dramatic redesign of Paris. Intended partly to improve health and transportation, partly to appease the populace, the effect of the project was to create, within a generation, 'the place we know today, a city of fashion, elegance, effrontery and detachment.' As Eisenman elaborates: ‘Architectural homogeneity replaced urban syncretism; class segregation replaced social integration; a blasé public attitude replaced a changeable and energetic mien.' While the French capital was effectively being rationalised, it became simultaneously conducive to certain influential ideas of the French poet and essayist, Charles Baudelaire.

Baudelaire had appealed to artists in 1845 to engage with and capture the fundamentally epic quality of modern life. Developing this position in his seminal essay of 1863, 'The Painter of Modern Life', Baudelaire argued that by practising a combination

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90 Eisenman, p. 238.

of immersion and aesthetic remove, ‘to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world,’ the ‘[o]bservable, philosopher, flâneur—call him what you will’, becomes both ‘a painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains.’ And so is the essence of ‘modernity’ expressed, for by modernity Baudelaire means, with notable anticipations of Pater, ‘the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.’ The emerging Paris of showy fashion and sophistication provided fertile ground for such an enterprise. The visual arts, meanwhile, Baudelaire modestly considered the central medium for conveying its modernity; but he stipulated that ‘in trivial life, in the daily metamorphosis of external things, there is a rapidity of movement which calls for an equal speed of execution from the artist.’

Baudelaire’s ideas find early expression in the paintings of his contemporary and friend, Edouard Manet. Both figures are represented in Music in the Tuileries Gardens (1862): a scene of elegant Parisian society in which they join a number of eligible top-hatted dandies as themselves the ironic subject of observation. Equally notable is the impression of rapid composition: one critic wrote disparagingly of Manet’s ‘mania for seeing things as patches […] the Baudelaire patch, the Gautier patch, the Manet patch.’

With echoes of Whistler’s court defence, Zola defended the picture for its realism:

If I had been there, I would have begged the visitor to draw back to a respectful distance, and he would then have seen that those patches live, that the crowd speaks, and that this canvas is one of the artist’s characteristic works, one in which he has followed the dictates of his eye and his intuition most closely.

Manet was anything but discouraged by the widespread criticism and would soon incite fierce controversy, first with his Le déjeuner sur l’herbe and then Olympia (1863). Besides

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93 See Rubin, p. 29.
94 Baudelaire, p. 4.
95 Information on this painting and Manet’s subsequent development principally derived from House: Eisenman; and Cachin, François, Charles S. Moffett, and Juliet Wilson Bareau, Manet (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983).
the overtly confrontational nature of these subjects—the former an enigmatic combination of fully clothed men and naked or semi-naked women; the latter a modern-day courtesan reposed like Venus and presenting an implicit rejection of Alexandre Cabanel’s idealised, coyly erotic, yet critically lauded *The Birth of Venus* (1863)—Manet’s radical techniques continued to provoke scorn. The figure of Olympia matched Courbet’s acknowledgement of physical imperfection with an increasingly pronounced immediacy of the painted surface; one critic accordingly bemoaned her ‘dirty hands and wrinkled feet’ and ‘outlines [...] drawn in charcoal.’ According to his biographer, Manet had used the word ‘impression’ with regularity from the late 1850s to describe his approach, and in 1870 Théodore Duret effectively recognised the painter’s Impressionist credentials, describing how ‘[h]e brings back from the vision he casts on things an impression truly his own.’

*Le déjeuner* was rejected by the official Salon in 1863, to be exhibited at the newly established Salon de Refusés; the possibly surprising acceptance of *Olympia* in 1865 only fuelled its own fiery reception. *Music in the Tuileries Gardens* was not even submitted to the Salon by Manet, but displayed instead in a private gallery of smaller pieces. Such independent exhibitions as these were, along with Courbet’s precedent, an important precursor to the forthcoming series of Impressionist exhibitions.

The Second Empire fell in 1870. In the following year France suffered a humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, followed by a week of appalling bloodshed as the Paris Commune, an independent municipal government established by radical Republicans, including Courbet, was suppressed by government troops. From out of this political turmoil emerged to prominence a new generation of artists who shared and

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96 Both quoted Cachin, p. 126.
97 For example, Giogione’s *Sleeping Venus* (1507-8) and Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538).
98 I am guided here by House, p. 321.
99 Quoted Eisenman, p. 242.
developed Manet's techniques and attention to the modern scene. Whereas that artist, however, continued to explore the more problematic areas of society, those emerging conveyed an apparently greater and somewhat Aesthetic concern for issues of light and perspective. Their critical reception was barely less negative, if now largely on the grounds of technique, but the opposition inadvertently served to bind the artists to something resembling a collective movement. As a nervously conservative Third Republic began to retreat from Napoleon III's more liberal art reforms (the Salon de Refusés, for example), the emerging artists were further prompted to establish their own independent exhibitions, with the first occurring in 1874.

In a contemporary review of the exhibition, and inspired no doubt by the title of Claude Monet's *Impression: Sunrise*, Jules Castagnary described the assembled artists as 'Impressionists in the sense that they render not the landscape but the sensation produced by the landscape [. . .].' Although less sympathetic critics discoloured the term to become an expression of derision, it was readily adopted by the artists as their collective title. However, as with every movement so far considered, the alleged exponents did not scrupulously conform to a single, unified practise. Monet, Camille Pissarro and Alfred Sisley, for example, were principally landscape painters; Edgar Degas and Auguste Renoir concentrated on portraiture, with the former especially preoccupied with unusual angles of vision. Renoir proceeded to disassociate himself from the notion of a 'school', while Degas failed to understand how the term 'Impressionism' was applicable to his own work. In addition, paintings such as Cézanne's *The Hanged Man's House* (1872-73), with its solid, heavy and angular structures, seem at a certain remove from the loose

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102 See Rubin, p. 42.
103 Quoted Eisenman, p. 244.
approximation of Monet’s harbour at Le Havre, and indeed anticipate the contrary
developments of Post-Impressionism. To some extent, this diversity is wholly appropriate
for a movement in which aesthetic independence and individuality of perspective were
integral concepts. Writing in 1868, Monet described his work as having the ‘advantage of
resembling no one else because it will simply be an impression of what I have
experienced.’\(^{105}\) Recalling Courbet’s earlier assertions of individual expression (see page 10, above), this attitude partially reflects the ‘individuality and self-determination that was
fundamental to the ideology of the new bourgeoisie’, to which both Monet and the
majority of the Impressionists belonged.\(^{106}\) Yet within this essential diversity of method
and approach we can trace once again a relatively coherent set of underlying principles
that bring into clearer focus a more widespread adjustment of perspective.

Impressionism was ultimately a claim to greater realism, a claim that I have
suggested Zola also recognised and endorsed.\(^{107}\) The effects of light and atmosphere,
typically neglected in previous studies, were now to be acknowledged to the point of
constituting the principal subject of many works. Nowhere is this more apparent than in
Monet’s later series of, for example, haystacks, poplars, or Rouen Cathedral, in varying
atmospheric conditions. ‘Poor blind idiots,’ he responded to adverse criticism of this new
recognition of atmosphere. ‘They want to see everything clearly, even through the fog.’\(^{108}\)
The land and seascapes of the English painter, Joseph Mallord William Turner, with their
radical dematerialization of structural forms by process of atmospheric diffusion, seem a
likely precedent for this aspect of Impressionist technique. So do the plein-air practices of
Millet’s Barbizon school, which became another characteristic feature.\(^{109}\) Impressionist
painters also regarded their treatment of colour as more realistic than in previous works,

\(^{105}\) Quoted Smith, p. 89.
\(^{106}\) Smith, p. 89.
\(^{107}\) Zola referred to the Impressionists as Naturalists, informs Van Gunsteren, p. 29.
and enhanced their naturalist credentials by responding to recent scientific research. Studies such as Michel-Eugène Chevreul’s *Law of Simultaneous Contrasts and Colours* (1838) and Hermann Helmholtz’s investigations into the psychology of colour vision (1880s), detailed between them the colour properties of light and shadow which characteristically permeate Impressionist paintings, and the effects of colour juxtapositioning in the eye and mind of the perceiver. Artistic precedence can here be found in the complimentary colour effects and tinted shadows of Eugène Delacroix, though never, once again, to the same extent as was now visible.

In contrast to this Realist-Naturalist aspect of Impressionism was the aesthetic implementation of the long-existing recognition that the world is not and cannot be perceived with perfect objectivity. As we have seen, the artists demonstrated an interest in the particularity of individual perception through an occasional defamiliarising manipulation of perspective and the recurrence of obfuscating atmospheric phenomena such as fog, steam or twilight. More fundamental to the Impressionist expression of subjectivity, however, was the revolution of the painted surface itself: broken, with visible brush and pallet-knife strokes, and seemingly the product of rapid work. By painting with immediacy, the immediacy of subjective reality could be conveyed—and never had reality seemed so immediate as in this modern world of flux and change. The Impressionists were, above all, recording their impressions of a scene, their first impressions, without, recalling Hume, the interference of mental preconceptions: grass is not green in certain light, leaves of a tree are not seen with individual precision in a casual glance, particularly

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109 The Barbizon school were themselves influenced by such artists as Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, Georges Michel, and, in England, John Constable. See Murray, ‘Barbizon School’, p. 20.


112 To quote Judith Ryan: ‘When the eighteenth-century empiricists wrote about perception, they were questioning the concept of objective reality.’ *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism*, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991), p. 10.
in a breeze. To the extent that they sought pure, impartial observation, their positivist heritage is apparent; but by acknowledging the subjective positioning and approximation of individual perception, the Impressionists were closer to the empirical philosophers of the final decades of the nineteenth century.

Studies such as Franz Brentano’s *Psychology from an Empiricist Point of View* (1874), Ernst Mach’s *Analysis of Sensations* (1886) and William James’s *Principles of Psychology* (1890), fused earlier empirical investigations into the nature of reality with an epistemological interest into the workings of consciousness and perception. Moving away from their positivist contemporaries, they adopted a ‘proto-phenomenalist [. . .] premise that the mind does not see objects as they “really” are’.114 The Impressionists breathed this subjective air and claimed no objectivity for their observations, yet by attempting to record their impressions without mental preconceptions, they sought to locate within their subjectivity a paradoxically objective capacity: the scene as it *truly* appeared to themselves at that particular moment in time.

The viewers of Impressionist painting are effectively encouraged to participate in this philosophical position. Two short, irregular, black horizontal blocks, each with small vertical extensions, are positioned amid light grey horizontal strokes with occasional longer perpendicu lar s; above are a number of indistinct and equally grey verticals, which, at their top extent, smudge into a thick auburn surrounding. The viewers of *Impression: Sunrise* may momentarily retain with the artist the optical truth of these visual components, the essence of the scene, before they habitually adopt the holistic, learned conception of small open boats silhouetted against the polluted reflection of factories.

Whistler’s compositional titles, we recall, express a similar interest in the naïve essentials of a painting, albeit with a greater interest in purely Aesthetic principles.

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113 On the issue of unusual perspective, consider, for example, Monet’s *Woman with a Parasol* (1875) or Degas’ *The Tub* (1886); instances of overt atmospheric intrusion include Monet’s *The St. Lazare Station* (1877) and *Rouen Cathedral, Cour d’Albane, at dawn* (1894).
Whistler had met and exhibited with the French Impressionists during the 1860s, and his paintings frequently demonstrate the kinetic and atmospheric considerations typical of their work.\footnote{Ryan, p. 10.} His \textit{Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Chelsea} (1871) anticipates Monet’s harbour of the following year, while the controversial portrayal of \textit{The Falling Rocket} almost transcends Impressionism as a work of near abstraction. The ensuing ‘Ruskin trial’ served to bring ‘many ideas associated with Impressionism in art to the attention of the British public’. As in France, however, the movement was slow to achieve public support. Experiencing internal divisions, Impressionism finally dissolved as a collective entity following the eighth exhibition of 1886.\footnote{Kirschke, p. 23.}

The enormous popularity of Impressionist painting today belies these difficult origins, as does the general critical consent that Impressionism was ‘the most important artistic phenomenon of the 19th century […] from which most painting of the last 100 years has been profoundly affected.’\footnote{Murray, p. 207-8.} Such widespread appreciation—or even recognition—has yet to extend to its literary manifestation.

Chapter Two:

LITERARY IMPRESSIONISMS

I

Why should literary impressionism have failed as a movement to capture attention so decisively as its visual counterpart, either at its inception or throughout the course of the twentieth century? Could its failure lie less with the fastidious neglect of typically voracious academics than with fundamental inconsistencies in its claims and theoretical constitution? Perhaps, indeed, the failing is the very lack of anything approaching a specific agenda, only a vague impressionist haze with little definition or tangible substance. One might counter that, far from being a failing, such a quality of indistinctness is supremely appropriate for its aims, denying both reader and critic the easy and quantifiable apprehension of form and meaning that are often, to judge from impressionist paintings, denied to the perceiver. By such reasoning, any attempt to define an aesthetic that deals and believes in the undefined and indefinite risks immediately betraying the essence of that aesthetic. The very real danger of an inflexible approach to the impressionist text shall be explored in the third chapter. What follows here is an attempt to find common ground between my four designated authors while resisting what Jakob Lothe describes as ‘New Critical assumptions [. . .] of structural coherence and artistic or thematic unity.’

Thankfully, the practitioners themselves reject any such assumptions.

‘I don’t resemble anybody,’ claimed Conrad in the full bloom of his career. ‘There is nothing in me but a turn of mind which whether valuable or worthless can not be

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imitated.\textsuperscript{2} With such reasoning (and perhaps a trace of pride) Conrad rejected an offer from Crane to pool resources: 'I feel somehow that collaboration with you would be either cheating or deceiving You. In any case disappointing you.'\textsuperscript{3} Although Conrad would soon accept Ford as colleague for three productions, two of these, \textit{The Inheritors} (1901) and the unfinished \textit{The Nature of a Crime} (1906), were particularly one sided (Conrad, for more reasons than one, eventually disowned the former\textsuperscript{4}), and all three, as Ford himself recognised, lacked 'any great artistic value.'\textsuperscript{5} James anticipated the failure: 'To me this is like a bad dream which one relates at breakfast [...]. Their traditions and their gifts are so dissimilar. Collaboration between them is to me inconceivable.'\textsuperscript{6} Ford's technique, it is true, would subsequently evolve and bear signs of Conrad's more experimental prose, but he opposed, as did Conrad with Crane, the 'gentlemen of the Press anxious to deprecate the writer' by claiming 'he imitated the work of Conrad. This', he assures us, evidently keen to retain his thunder, 'was not the case. It is a curious characteristic of the work of Conrad that, not only can you not recognisably imitate it, you hardly ever feel even the impulse to do so.'\textsuperscript{7}

The originality of Henry James might be traced back to the 'stimulating if slightly irregular education' he received from his father, in which 'eccentricities were readily tolerated' and 'freedom of self development' was paramount.\textsuperscript{8} Such attitudes in turn convey the ethos of American romantic individualism: 'a pervasive and widespread faith in the validity of the individual experience and mind as a source of knowledge and a guide

\textsuperscript{7} Ford, \textit{JC}, p. 176. Cf. Conrad's letter to Crane, 24 December 1897: 'Do you think I tried to imitate you? No Sir! I may be a little fool but I know better than to try to imitate the inimitable.' \textit{LJC}, vol. 1, p. 433.
\textsuperscript{8} Kirschke, p. 189.
to action." In his *Crumbling Idols* of 1894, Hamlin Garland carried this spirit of individual expression into the literary arena, aiming 'to weaken the hold of conventionalism upon the youthful artist,' and inciting the 'young man and woman of America' to '[t]urn your back on the past, not in scorn, but in justice to the future. Cease trying to be correct, and become creative.' Such words resonate like a manifesto for the innovations of Crane's greatest prose. *Maggie* (1893) had, of course, by this time been published, and *The Red Badge of Courage* was just months away, yet Crane's acquaintance with Garland precedes these works; begins indeed with his report of Garland's lectures on American literature for the *New York Tribune* in 1891—the year Garland was 'formulating and writing the essays which would comprise *Crumbling Idols*."

The precious and deliberate individuality of each author's fiction would alone be sufficient to challenge the notion of a rigid impressionist aesthetic. But this plurality within the group is compounded by that within the *oeuvre* of each writer as their themes and techniques continuously evolved. We will also find that no single text adheres entirely to the traits and assumptions that have traditionally been designated *impressionist*, including those strategies expounded by its own practitioners; neither indeed do all texts that are clearly *not* impressionist necessarily disregard a selective employment of its principal techniques.

Paradoxically, one of the most stringent and influential defenders of a single, unified impressionist aesthetic is Ford himself. And while by itself this need not contradict his own recognition of the unique properties of his prose, Ford's two-part article of 1914, 'On Impressionism', betrays some hesitation over the precision and authority of governing principles. '[A]s far as literary impressionism goes,' he declares, 'I claim no Papacy in the

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10 Quoted Pizer, pp. 89 and 94.
11 Pizer, p. 96.
matter.' Indeed, he wonders ‘if there could be said to be any school.’ The tone of modest, Dowell-like candour continues: ‘I don’t know; I just write books, and if someone attaches a label to me I do not much mind.’ A few pages later, however, and Ford’s tentative steps have become a confident stride: ‘It has, this school [. . .], certain quite strong canons, certain quite rigid unities, that must be observed.’ Such an apparent transformation is partially explained by the flexibility of Ford’s early summary of impressionism as ‘a frank expression of personality’, a dictum cannily preserving the essential autonomy of the artist. Yet elsewhere the formulae are more prescriptive, and at times the judgements deeply questionable. Part of the business of defining impressionism is to recognise the practitioners; these, I have ventured to suggest, may be retrospectively determined, as with the Romantics, for example; but Ford’s remark in his remembrance of Conrad that ‘[w]e accepted without much protest the stigma: “Impressionists” that was thrown at us’ sounds only fifty per cent credible.

In truth, Ford is distinguished among my quartet for his forthright and enduring acceptance of this ‘stigma’, describing impressionism as ‘the supreme discovery in the literary art of our day.’ He broadens this acceptance in Thus to Revisit, embracing the very notion of aesthetic movements as an antidote to the insularity and materialism of the post-War nation, mired in ‘[s]todginess and Academicism.’ This acknowledgement of the value of movements plural, simultaneously loosens the confinements of his own impressionist doctrine:

A Movement in the Arts—any movement—leavens a whole Nation with astonishing rapidity: its ideas pour through the daily, the weekly, and the monthly press with the rapidity of water pouring through interstices until at last they reach the Quarterlies and disturb even the Academicians asleep over their paper-baskets. A solitary thinker will take two aeons to make his voice heard: seven working in concert will forty-nine times shorten the process. And Movements make for friendships, enthusiasms, self-sacrifice, mutual aid—all fine things!

12 Ford, ‘OI’, Poetry and Drama 2.6 (1914), 167, 174, 169.
13 Ford, JC, p. 182.
14 Ford, HJ, p. 152.
15 Ford, TTR, pp. 63-4.
Both James and Conrad were, ironically, less enthusiastic about the notion of movements per se. It is true that James once claimed early in his career that ‘every man works better when he has companions working in the same line, and yielding the stimulus of suggestion, comparison, emulation,’ but he disliked prescribed doctrines and referred to labels and distinctions such as ‘[t]he novel and the romance’ as ‘clumsy separations.’ Similarly, Conrad criticised the ‘fettering dogmas of some romantic, realistic, or naturalistic creed’ as ‘a weakness of inferior minds when it is not the cunning device of those who, uncertain of their talent, would seek to add lustre to it by the authority of a school.’ To ascertain the attitudes of both writers towards impressionism, as a general quality if not a quantifiable movement, is not easy. To consider painting first, Conrad’s judgment is unmistakably negative, comparing works of the French Impressionists to ‘products of a mental asylum.’ In a review of the second Impressionist Exhibition in Paris for the New York Tribune, James was more charitable, if far from embracing: ‘the “Impressionist” doctrines strike me as incompatible [...] with the existence of first-rate talent’; they are, he explained, ‘partisans of unadorned reality and absolute foes to arrangement, embellishment, selection.’ James offers no explicit recognition of a literary equivalent, although, as I shall shortly examine, one might reasonably anticipate a position approximating that of Conrad’s judgement of Crane as ‘the only impressionist

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and only an impressionist. While subsequent detail of James and Conrad’s various qualifications, practices, and discernible intentions will serve to temper these dismissals, Crane’s sympathy towards impressionist art appears—hearsay and contradictions notwithstanding—notably warmer, if still less so than Ford’s. Thus, while one critic observes that ‘Crane apparently did not care to discuss literary –isms’, John Berryman is in no doubt as to Crane’s allegiance: ‘Impressionism was his faith. Impressionism, he said, was truth, and no man could be great who was not an impressionist, for greatness consisted in knowing truth.

Crane’s exposure to Impressionist art in his formative years is well documented: Garland had lectured on the subject and wrote about it in Crumbling Idols, while James Nagel records how Crane had been ‘surrounded’ by painters from ‘his early childhood,’ with many of whom he had ‘frequently explored the topic of Impressionism.

Acknowledgement and implicit appreciation of impressionist painting appears in Crane’s journalistic ‘War Memories’: ‘I bring this to you merely as an effect—an effect of mental light and shade, if you like; something done in thought similar to that which the French Impressionists do in color [. . .]. Such forthright comparison rather takes the wind out of the sails of Nagel’s claim that ‘there is no statement by Crane to directly link his knowledge of painting with his fictional aesthetic.’ Nevertheless, the pronounced lack of such comparisons from any of the four authors does further complicate attempts to define impressionism coherently and quantifiably.

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26 Nagel, p. 18. Nagel partially qualifies this assertion: ‘[. . .] at least nothing so direct as Ernest Hemingway’s comment that he “learned to write looking at paintings at the Luxembourg Museum in Paris.” However, one might yet consider Crane’s comparison more directly specific.
Given that literary impressionism takes its name from a firmly established school of painting, a central issue must be not only to what extent it resembles its immediate antecedent in concept and technique, but also to what extent words and brush strokes can be said to compare. Could it be, for instance, that an inability of literature to deal as appropriately as painting with certain impressionist assumptions accounts for its comparative critical neglect? Parallels elsewhere between different media would argue against too hasty a dismissal of literature as a necessarily incompatible expression: the classification of Byron, Chopin and Delacroix as 'Romantics' is, after all, virtually de rigueur, while references to Debussy's music as impressionistic have long been commonplace. The difficulty for impressionism in comparison with many movements, however, is the demanding technical criteria that result from its philosophical assumptions: criteria that do not always seem equally amenable to different media. Both painting and music, for example, deal in direct expression: colours, shapes, or sounds. Admittedly, the viewer of a painting must still progress mentally from sign to referent: this green hash represents leaves, and so on; but the mind does not register real leaves other than by such a cognitive process, and must first decode the same green form. Words, for all their tonal qualities, begin at a further remove, demanding a preliminary act of translation from signifier to signified: the word 'leaf' is not inherently leafy, though our idea of leaves may be. If we recall Hume's distinction between 'impressions and ideas' (see page 29), and Monet's striving for visual immediacy, for the unformed impressions of a scene, language appears to begin at a significant disadvantage. The disadvantage potentially deepens when we consider that the painters' principal intention of recording a direct, personal impression of a scene is fundamentally inconsistent with the notion of writing fiction. Novelists, that is to say, can only simulate or imagine the impressions of other perceivers, which are themselves typically the premeditated creation of that novelist: clearly a far remove from the notion of direct and personal observation. This is a critical
discrepancy between impressionist literature and painting to which I shall return at length in Chapter Three; further differences will also emerge as my study proceeds.

Left alone, these opening observations would more suitably introduce an obituary for literary impressionism than an exploration. But as I hope to have conveyed in my opening chapter, the movements that preceded impressionism, including Impressionist painting itself, reveal a similar diversity of intent and practice, an occasional resistance of the designated label by its supposedly central practitioners, and even (if we think of Zola’s naturalist objectivity) potential technical inconsistencies. This is not, by itself, a defence of literary impressionism, though it may quell some of the easy accusations I surveyed in my introduction. More substantial is the general sense of direction shared by these four novelists: notably distinct from previous and contemporary literary practices, and with discernable, if not exact, parallels to Impressionist painting.

Of course, none of the four began as fully-fledged impressionists; such early works as Crane’s *Maggie* and James’s *Washington Square* would more accurately be described as naturalist. But as we shall see, one immediate similarity between impressionist literature and painting is how each is in many respects a natural development of both Realism and Naturalism. ‘[G]reat literatures have only arisen’, claimed Ford, ‘when technical rules have been jumped off from [. . .]. The case of the impressionists differs from that of the others, however, in that they practiced, and, when they had the time, enjoined, a tightening rather than any slackening of the rules.’

Inspiration was found for the most part in France. Ford considered Flaubert and Maupassant to be early impressionists, referring to them—again on Conrad’s behalf—as ‘[o]ur chief masters

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29 This is borne out, as Nettels remarks, in Conrad’s letters of the 1890s, which ‘show that he was studying the methods of Flaubert and Maupassant as masters from whom to learn.’ *Conrad and James*, p. 86.
in style: Flaubert in the greater degree, Maupassant in the less. In about the proportion of a sensible man's whisky and soda.30 In England, however, as both Ford and James often remarked, the tight, impersonal control of French fiction was slower to take hold. '[I]t was not', Ford reflected, 'until [...] the very late nineteenth or early twentieth [century] that in England the mind of the public could be expected to take in the rendering—not the narrating—of a work'.31 Writing in 1884, James sensed that the English literary scene was just beginning to change around him:

Only a short time ago it might have been supposed that the English novel was not what the French call discutable. It had no air of having a theory, a conviction [...]. There was a comfortable, good-humoured feeling abroad that a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding, and that our only business with it could be to swallow it.

By the 1890s, a new seriousness had emerged, and renewed discussion and conviction brought variety and experimentation. 'After a long period of prosperity,' explains Arnold Hauser, 'the British Empire now passes through an economic crisis, which develops into a crisis of the Victorian spirit itself.' And, as both self-confidence and self-reliance declined, England became increasingly under the influence of foreign ideas—French in particular.32 'London had in fact been visited by one of its transitory phases,' Ford recalled, 'in which nothing seemed good but what came from abroad.'33 No single aesthetic could emerge from this 'incredible crucible': Wilde’s white-gloved decadence brushed against the 'renewed naturalist engagement of Gissing, Moore and Hardy.'34 Yet amid the mêlée, the strains of British impressionism were beginning to emerge. George Moore had discussed the French Impressionists, many of whom he had met, in both the autobiographical

*Confessions of a Young Man*(1888), and *Modern Painting*: a collection of essays

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30 Ford, JC, p. 195.
31 Ford, EN, p.30.
33 Ford, 'T', 25.
published in 1893.\textsuperscript{35} The influence of the painters is equally discernible in Moore’s fiction, most notably *A Mummer’s Wife* (1885): ‘The streets were filled with dark masses of people who passed in surging confusion toward Piccadilli [sic]. The evening was fine. Streaks of purple and touches of yellow hills rendered insignificant and toylike the unending angles of the town.’\textsuperscript{36}

The impact of the French Impressionists in England had been quick and considerable. Whistler’s early impressionism was bolstered in 1886 by the establishment of a sympathetic and organised school: the New English Art Club.\textsuperscript{37} Critical recognition of impressionism throughout the 1890s, however, remained confined primarily to painting, despite occasional off-hand references to Conrad, and Crane in particular, as ‘impressionists.’\textsuperscript{38} Ford’s formal consideration of the literary manifestation, ‘On Impressionism’, as with his own application of the approach, was still two decades away. But across the Channel, ‘L’Impressionisme dans le roman’ had been the subject of a serious study as early as 1879. Ferdinand Brunetière’s essay is a remarkable first analysis of a newly emerging aesthetic: by turns recognising, expounding, commending and finally noting severe limitations that must result in the quick demise of a literary equivalent to Impressionism. Brunetière begins by claiming that ‘the future does not belong to [Zola’s] coarse naturalism,’ for it ‘is not sufficiently original to parade for all to see what the average man is careful to conceal.’ It is, rather, Daudet, ‘the author of *Les rois en exil* who

\textsuperscript{35} My information here and immediately following on George Moore derives from Kirschke, pp. 111-113.

\textsuperscript{36} Quoted Kirschke, p. 113. Kirschke provides further examples.

\textsuperscript{37} Information derived from Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 172, and Murray, ‘NEAC’, p. 293.

seems to me to be truly striding towards something new." Engaging directly with the problems entailing 'a systematic transposition of the means of expression of one art [...] into the sphere of another’, in particular the aforementioned difficulties of respecting in language the immediacy of perception, Brunetière sees literary impressionism as ultimately an attempt whereby 'feelings and thoughts are translated into the language of sensation.' Once again, the notion of a rigid aesthetic is opposed, for of ‘all that we call correctness, sentence harmony, balance of phrases, [Daudet] no longer cares provided that he renders what he sees and renders it how he sees it.' Brunetière’s analysis is remarkable not least for the longevity of his early definitions. All the more significant therefore is his sceptical concluding judgement that to

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\text{transpose the same subject from one art into another [...] is one thing, to transpose the means of expression is another [...]}. \text{ To seek to paint in words and to hope to exhaust the infinite diversity of the aspect of things with the finite resources of language is rather as if one wished in painting to give their real thickness to the objects one is representing by means of impastos.}
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To evaluate this and the other difficulties associated with the concept of literary impressionism, we must of course have a clear understanding of what such an aesthetic entails. That, I have suggested, is itself problematic, not least because the aesthetic is as diverse as its practitioners. While the full multiplicity of impressionism will only become apparent in later chapters, what follows is an initial overview of its thematic, structural and linguistic manifestations.

II

A stroll through the Impressionist sections of the Musée d’Orsay in Paris reveals a wide variety of scenes. A sun-lit poppy field rests close to a bustling metropolitan railway

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39 Brunetière, ‘L’Impressionnisme dans le roman’, 1879, in Le roman naturaliste (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1896), pp 76-7 in original text. Translated by Mr. Eric Dickins: see acknowledgements. All page numbers will be to the corresponding pages of the French edition.
40 Ibid., pp. 87, 86.
41 Ibid., p. 88.
42 Ibid., pp. 96-7.
station thick with steam. The graceful movements of a ballet dancer are a head’s turn from the realist mundanity of a woman ironing.\textsuperscript{43} A similar diversity segregates the stories of my four novelists, both within their own collections and in the wider context of the quartet. A man flees from the terrors of violent, bloody death in the American Civil War; another ruminates over the intricate alterations of affection between guests at a social gathering. The scenes are as many as there are people to perceive them. And yet with this very notion we begin to discern the shared thematic concerns that might, were these novels paintings, suggest the hanging of \textit{The Red Badge of Courage} and \textit{The Sacred Fount} on the same wall, perhaps even in the same room as Degas’s laundrette and Monet’s poppy field. This complicity of deeper themes, if not immediate subjects, does not mean that the different artists expressed such themes with equal emphasis or approached them with the same attitude. It was, indeed, the acknowledgment that no two individuals share precisely the same view of the world that defines the first step for the impressionist aesthetic: a step from which all others follow.

Implicitly or otherwise, and with varying degrees of severity, the impressionists challenged more than ever before the notion of a common and quantifiable phenomenal reality. To look impartially at the same object in different atmospheric conditions is to observe the relativity of appearance. Perhaps the natural or instinctive attitude is still to say that an object has been discoloured, for example, by twilight; but the effect of Monet’s series of haystacks is to emphasise the equal validity of twilight as a natural condition and thereby to challenge the notion of a single correct identity. Descriptions from impressionist novels often convey the same visual contingency; occasionally, as in \textit{The Good Soldier}, explicitly to challenge conventional representation: ‘of course the country isn’t really green. The sun shines, the earth is blood red and purple and red and green and red. Or […] in another field […] there are little mounds of hay that will be grey-green on

\textsuperscript{43} See Monet’s \textit{Poppies, Near Argenteuil} (1873) and \textit{The Gare Saint-Lazare} (1877), Degas’s \textit{The Dancing Lesson} (1871-4) and \textit{Women Ironing} (1884).
the sunny side and purple in the shadows [. . .]. The implications of such a profound variability of aspect extend far beyond an occasionally unconventional colour attribution. If appearances are so transitory, the logic continues, do they thereby lose their authority of meaning? Can they no longer be considered a reliable index of depth?

The potential discrepancy between appearance and reality was hardly a new subject for literature, but never was the discrepancy so frequently the theme of an aesthetic, or the final resolution of which surface was true and which false so frequently complicated or denied. Such preoccupation with appearance and reality makes deception a ubiquitous plot component within impressionist texts: one recalls without pause the predicaments of Isabel and Osmond, Maisie and her parents, Maggie and the Prince, Fleming and his 'heroic' wound, the duplicitous Verloc and Razumov, and, on a broader scale, the fragile civilisation that only hides a heart of darkness. Equally notable is the perhaps unprecedented regularity with which the appearance-reality dichotomy remains unresolved or unresolvable. The governess at Bly is possibly deceived by the children; but possibly their innocence is genuine. The same may be said of the narrator and guests in *The Sacred Fount*. Ford's much-deceived Dowell gives a further twist to the issue of untangling appearance from reality: 'If for nine years I possessed a goodly apple that is rotten at the core and discover its rottenness only in nine years [. . .], isn't it true to say that for nine years I possessed a goodly apple?' One principal explanation of why appearance cannot easily be fastened to reality is that appearance, and, by extension, the parameters for understanding reality, are constantly changing.

The world in flux was, accordingly, a major preoccupation for the impressionists.

For the painters, looser, dynamic brush-strokes challenged formally the static artificiality

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44 Ford, *TGS*, 1915, ed. Martin Stannard, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1995), pp. 34-5. Although not generally considered impressionist texts, compare Crane's overt appreciation of Impressionist colour doctrine in *The Third Violet*, 'Horses – One Dash', and here, in *Georges Mother*: 'In the swirling rain that came at dusk the broad avenue glistened with that deep bluish tint which is so widely condemned when it is put into pictures.' *WSC*, vol. 3, p. 61; vol. 5, p. 13; vol. 1, p. 115.

of the photograph, while studies of seasonal or atmospheric change (Monet) or physical
movement (Degas’ ballet dancers) prevail. On a social scale, the Impressionists reflected
the accelerating change of the modern world. ‘In the 1870s,’ explains House,
both Manet and the Impressionists focused their attention on the outer fringes of
Paris and the city’s entertainments. They worked in particular in the areas of the
river Seine to the west and north-west of Paris, around Bougival, Chatou and
Argenteuil, which were at that time a meeting-point of three different worlds: that
of the old rural, agricultural villages of the Ile-de-France, and, invading it, the
world of pleasure-seekers from Paris and that of developing industrialisation.46

Monet’s studies of the Saint-Lazare train station suggest metaphors for the increasing
mobility, technology and industrialisation of the modern age. Many Impressionist
landscapes reflect the rapid expansion of industry and urbanisation: sometimes explicitly,
as in *Impression: Sunrise*; sometimes, as with Monet’s *The Promenade at Argenteuil* (c.
1872), in the small, background detail of a factory.47 Scenes of society in Paris and the
suburbs capture both the radical new street designs and the latest fashions. To this extent,
the early Impressionists were the exemplary ‘Painters of modern life’.

The themes of time and change are equally prevalent in impressionist literature.
However, in its representation of these, fiction had the clear advantage over painting of an
innate temporal capacity: something which Monet’s largely unprecedented series could
only faintly emulate. Pater, we recall, had spoken of ‘the moment’, of the ‘perpetual
motion’ of our physical life, and of our impressions as ‘in perpetual flight’.48 Characters
such as Dowell, Maisie and Fleming struggle to organise and comprehend the flow of
rapidly changing information. One could interpret *The Sacred Fount* as an allegory of a
world in flux. For the baffled narrator appearances and relationships change perpetually,
but also immeasurably and often inexplicably. On a wider scale, impressionist fiction
characteristically shared the painters’ acknowledgement of a rapidly changing society.

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46 House, p. 327.
47 I am guided to the latter painting by House, p. 326.
48 Pater, pp. 186-88.
James’s Europe was, in many respects, the true ‘new’ world for such American adventur-ers as Isabel Archer and Lambert Strether, each of whose values are challenged by a more dynamic moral environment. Written after one of the most momentous upheavals in the history of humankind, Ford’s Parade’s End brought to the fore a sub-text of The Good Soldier: not only was the world changing (it had always done that), it now seemed to be breaking away, with profound irreversibility, from fundamental concepts of tradition, order and stability. ‘Yes, mon cher!’ agreed Conrad with Ford. ‘Our world of 15 years ago is gone to pieces: what will come in its place, God knows, but I imagine doesn’t care.’

Conrad is somewhat nostalgic: the stress fractures within contemporary society were evident long before the Great War, and his own Heart of Darkness and The Secret Agent locate a profound egoism and moral relativism barely contained by the social mechanism. God, it seemed, did not care any more ‘15 years ago’ than in 1918. It was, moreover, this very loss of faith in the validity of religion (and, as The Good Soldier suggests, in a single, stringent practice\(^5\)) that accelerated the turn inward to private values and perspectives, and Parade’s End is a record of its climax. The defining introversion of the Impressionist painters is just another manifestation of the same retreat into subjectivity, as indeed is the private search for meaning and communion that motivates, as we shall see, so many impressionist texts.

It was, then, not only the transience and consequent relativity of the phenomenal world that frustrated a consensual and quantifiable understanding of its precise nature; the irreducible relativity of perception itself, by which that world might be accessed, was more widely acknowledged than ever before. Individual observation could only ever be from a single point in space and time, enforcing severe limitations upon what could be perceived and, by extension, understood. For Paul B. Armstrong, ‘one of the few

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\(^5\) Namely, Catholicism: see Chapter Four, pp. 135-6.
reasonably trustworthy tests of objectivity' is 'intersubjective validation': the verification of perception by consensus. 51 While Armstrong recalls the remark by William James that 'the breach from one mind to another is perhaps the greatest breach in nature', his concept is reinforced elsewhere by the philosopher's claim that '[n]either the whole of truth, nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the particular position in which he stands.' 52 With such reasoning, indeed, the physical particularity of the perceiver becomes a distinct advantage in the effort to map reality. Transposed to literature, Conrad's Novalis epigraph to Lord Jim—'It is certain my Conviction gains infinitely the moment another soul will believe in it'—would serve equally well on the frontispiece of, among others, The Turn of the Screw, The Sacred Fount, and The Red Badge of Courage. 53

The obstacles potentially hindering intersubjective validation, however, extend far beyond the positional disparity of the perceivers. The near-trademark fogs and steams of, in particular, Monet's impressionism, 54 suggest that sought reality (atmosphere is, after all, a further reality) is not something that can always be readily accessed, even granted the limitations of perspective. The same natural barriers to sensory information appear with notable regularity in impressionist fiction, whether as the fogs which engulf Valentine and Tietjens in their dog-cart, and Marlow in the Belgian Congo, 55 or as the persistent battle-smoke that intensifies Fleming's disorientation. Obstacles generally to clear perception are comparatively prevalent in impressionist fiction, and include tangible

54 Consider, for example, Impression: Sunrise; the steam-laden studies of the Saint-Lazare Station: Seine Backwater at Givey in A Mist (1897); Waterloo Bridge, Mist (1901-3); and Houses of Parliament, the Sun Breaks Through the Mist (1904).
obstructions, turned backs, darkness, distance, and even the distorting effect of tears.

Literature, of course, can as readily represent impediments to aural receptivity, such as we find when Marlow overhears the company manager in conversation:

The two below me moved away then, a few paces, and strolled back and forth at some distance. I heard: 'Military post—doctor—two hundred miles—quite alone now—unavoidable delays—nine months—no news—strange rumours.' They approached again just as the Manager was saying, 'No one, as far as I know [...]'

Who were they talking about now?\(^{56}\)

Marlow’s concluding question inadvertently acknowledges a further hindrance to intersubjective validation, and one of added pertinence to impressionist authors.

Anticipating Monet’s series at Rouen, Henry James reflected upon how his aggregated spatio-temporal perspectives of Chartres Cathedral could not finally overcome their essential subjectivity: '[...] I revolved around it, like a moth around a candle; I chose twenty different standpoints: I observed it during the different hours of the day, and saw it in the moonlight as well as the sunshine. I gained, in a word, a certain sense of familiarity with it; and yet I despair of giving any very coherent account of it.'\(^{57}\) The potential ambiguity and insufficiency of language constitutes, as we shall see, a major preoccupation for many impressionist texts, increasing further the isolated nature of perception. And this, in turn, introduces the final set of challenges to accurate perception and communal understanding: that which we might classify physiological and psychological.

It is not, as James acknowledged, simply the position of individuals that affects their perception. While there are 'a million [...] windows' overlooking 'the human scene', he explains,

we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find [...] But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same

\(^{56}\) Conrad, \textit{HD}, p. 34.
\(^{57}\) Quoted Kirschke, p. 199.
show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white [...].

Of course, perception is a process involving more than the eyes alone. What one sees significantly depends upon what one expects to see. The Impressionist painters, we recall, sought a greater purity of perception: a first impression, without interfering preconceptions. 'When you go out to paint,' Monet reportedly told the American painter, Lilla Cabot Perry, 'try to forget what objects you have before you—a tree, a house, a field, or whatever. Merely think, here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact colour and shape, until it gives your own naïve impression of the scene before you.'

Impressionist authors shared this interest in the interactions of the eye and mind, and explored the validity and merits of a heightened, precognitive perception. In a profound departure from the painters—a further consequence, presumably, of the analytical capacity of fiction—they simultaneously widened their focus to consider non-sensory impressions. These latter might include, for example, our impressions of a person or a book. Nevertheless, in each instance, a more genuine apprehension seemed most likely to result from an openness of attitude, evading the traps of habitual thought and prejudice. It is a point which I. A. Richards famously sought to demonstrate by withholding from his students authorial details of the texts they were to evaluate. 'Treat your notions like that,' Crane similarly advised a friend, tossing a handful of sand into the sea breeze. 'Forget what you think about it and tell how you feel about it.' Accordingly, characters of impressionist fiction typically make a significant ontological advance when

59 Quoted Smith, p. 27. Smith adds Perry's additional recollection that Monet "wished he had been born blind and then had suddenly gained his sight so that he could have begun to paint in this way without knowing what the objects were that he saw before him."
they shun preconceptions and adopt an open, receptive attitude. Sometimes this attitude is brought about less by intent than by circumstance. Marlow approaches the horror of Kurtz's insight as he leaves behind the precarious notions of Western colonial civilisation. His journey inland to the heart of darkness suggests, as has often been noted, a psychological journey to the inner psyche, but more specifically a return to primal, untainted awareness. Comparisons with The Ambassadors have also been made: Strether’s rigid Woollett values are exposed in cosmopolitan Paris, allowing him a deeper understanding of Chad’s decision to ‘go native.’ James’s interest generally in transatlantic interactions suggests, as I have said, an acute recognition of how new environments can challenge old ways of thinking and purify perception. Portraying a similar development, as Nettels observes, ‘[a]ction in most of Conrad’s novels begins with the sudden disruption of a character’s everyday routine life, disruption which destroys those illusions of self and the world in which he had found security.’ It is a template that could readily be applied to Lord Jim, The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes, and extended to The Red Badge of Courage, The Good Soldier (Dowell’s opening realisation that he has long been deceived) and, on a near-global scale, Parade’s End.

By themselves, however, new environments and situations are not always sufficient to defamiliarize perception: the perceiver must be receptive to the change. Isabel Archer fails to detect the callous egoism of Gilbert Osmond before accepting his proposal of marriage: a victim, not least, of her own preconceptions. James refers to her in the Preface as ‘an intelligent but presumptuous girl,’ and to Ralph she acknowledges that “I’m said to have too many theories.” Her opinions are typically undermined by scanty evidence and motivated by an implicit romantic idealism: demonstrated emphatically when James has Osmond confess to her, before their marriage, his attitude and history of

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62 I use ‘perception’ here in its fullest sense, as apprehension through the sight or with the mind.
63 Nettels, p. 64.
64 James, PL, pp. 8, 51.
'wilful renunciation', so obviously incompatible with her own. 'This', the narrator emphasises, 'would have been rather a dry account of Mr. Osmond’s career if Isabel had fully believed it; but her imagination supplied the human element which she was sure had not been wanting.'65 It takes an epiphany finally to crack the self-wrought rigidity of her consciousness. Encountering unexpectedly a liaison between Osmond and Madame Merle, the latter of whom, despite Isabel’s immediately favourable opinion, had conspired with Osmond to engineer her ensnarement, Isabel ‘stopped short’. ‘[T]he reason for her doing so being’, explains James, that she had received an impression. The impression had, in strictness, nothing unprecedented; but she felt it as something new, and the soundlessness of her step gave her time to take in the scene before she interrupted it. Madame Merle was there in her bonnet, and Gilbert Osmond was talking to her; for a minute they were unaware she had come in. Isabel had often seen that before, certainly; but what she had not seen, or at least had not noticed, was that their colloquy had for the moment converted itself into a sort of familiar silence, from which she instantly perceived that her entrance would startle them.66

There is much to note here. We are told that ‘for a minute they were unaware she had come in’, thus denying them the opportunity of further deception. She had also ‘time to take in the scene before she interrupted it’, suggesting she is properly receptive of the impression, not rushing to a conclusion. Crucial to the epiphany is that she stumbles upon the scene by chance, her mind unprepared and impartial at the moment of perception. We are told that she ‘received’ the impression: that is, passively; and the result is the awareness of something which previously ‘she had not seen, or at least’, in a significant addition, ‘had not noticed’. The full incident presents, furthermore, various expressions of uncertainty: what she has recognised is often referred to simply as ‘something’.67 But again, this implies openness, a kind of negative capability, and in a later ‘meditative vigil’,68 Isabel will scrutinise this impression, assembling its fragments and those of

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65 See James, PL, pp. 227-8.
66 James, PL, p. 342.
67 See also James, PL, p. 343.
others she had previously received but hastily discarded as incompatible with her theories, attaining a belated understanding of the scheme which deceived her, and of the true nature of Madame Merle.

Although not as neatly as critics have often proclaimed, it is the emphasis upon this post-impression analysis that divides most significantly my impressionist quartet into the dichotomy of James and Conrad on one hand; Crane and Ford on the other. The former stance, needless to say, jars most with Impressionist painting. Noting ‘the latent dangers of the impressionist practice’ in a study of the American painter John Singer Sargent, James remarked that ‘the highest result is achieved when to this element of quick perception a certain faculty of brooding reflection is added.’ For James, immediate and impartial perception alone is insufficient to check the subjectivity of individual comprehension. Despite Osmond’s aforementioned self-confession, both he and Merle more characteristically seek to deceive Isabel, to construct a false surface or impression. Isabel in turn proves particularly susceptible to appearances. In choosing a book, for example, we are told ‘she was guided in the selection chiefly by the frontispiece’. ‘[A]t important moments,’ the narrator adds, ‘when she would have been thankful to make use of her judgement alone, she paid the penalty of having given undue encouragement to the faculty of seeing without judging’. James appears therefore to be advocating a complex attitude whereby impressions must be perceived, passively and impartially, in order to

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69 See, for example, Eloise Knapp Hay, ‘Proust, James, Conrad, and Impressionism’ Style 22 (1988), 368-81. Hay writes of the practice of James and Conrad as ‘the very antithesis of impressionism as characterised by Ford and other writers like Daudet and Crane’, p. 370. A similar division is observable in modern psychology between ‘direct’ or ‘bottom-up’ theories of perception, where the individual has direct, unmediated access to the environment, and ‘constructive’, ‘indirect’ or ‘top-down’ theories, where perception is deemed dependent upon numerous internal processes. While the latter is the most accepted, Mike Cadwell suggests that ‘neither direct nor constructive theories of perception seem capable of explaining all perception all the time.’ Psychology, Longman A and AS-Level Revise Guides (Harlow: Longman, 1994), p. 33. See also Michael W. Eysenck and Mark T. Keane, Cognitive Psychology: A Student’s Handbook, 3rd ed (Hove: Psychology P, 1995), ch.s 2 and 4.


71 James, PL, pp. 33, 39.
approach their essence and penetrate preconceptions; but, following this must come active
analysis to verify the impression and explore its significance.

Conrad’s attitude is neither exactly comparable with James’s, nor entirely
consistent. His implicit rejection of ‘mere Crane-like impressionism’\(^72\) corresponds with
his comments upon reading *The Red Badge of Courage*: Crane’s dazzling surfaces
engaged Conrad while he read, but an implied lack of depth and resonance failed to retain
his attention once the book was closed. ‘It is as if he had gripped you with greasy fingers’,
Conrad remarked. ‘His grip is strong but while you feel the pressure on your flesh you slip
out from his hand.’\(^73\) In his own *The Secret Agent*, Adolf and Winnie Verloc share a ‘tacit
accord, congenial to Mrs Verloc’s incuriosity and to Mr Verloc’s habits of mind, which
were indolent and secret. They refrained from going to the bottom of facts and motives.’\(^74\)
The tendency, Conrad grimly implies, had contributed to the survival of their marriage,
but the ultimate consequence is the destruction of their lives. Winnie underestimates her
husband’s willingness to endanger Stevie’s life. Verloc fails, conversely, to ‘comprehend
the value of Stevie in the eyes of Mrs Verloc’: ‘It never entered his head that his wife
could give him up.’ Even in his final sight of a clenched carving knife, poised above his
chest, Winnie’s motives are to Verloc utterly bemusing: ‘His wife had gone raving mad—
murdering mad.’\(^75\)

As with Crane and Ford, the fuller complexities of Conrad’s attitude towards the
interaction of impression and analysis emerge within the very form of his expression: a
subject of the following section. Nonetheless, the visible conflict of attitude between these
four authors defines not only their common interest, but also the centrality of their

\(^73\) Quoted Elsa Nettels, ‘Conrad and Stephen Crane’, p. 271. Compare Conrad’s letter to Edward
Garnett: ‘With his strength, with his rapidity of action, with that amazing faculty of vision—why is he not
[very popular]? He has outline, he has colour, he has movement [ . . .]. While one reads [ . . .] he is not to be
questioned. He is the master of the reader to the very last line—then—apparently for no reason at all—he
seems to let go his hold’; 5 December 1897, *LJC*, vol. 1, p. 416.
\(^74\) Conrad, *TSA*, 1907, ed. Martin Seymour-Smith, Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics
preoccupation, in the processes and capability of perception. It is not, we shall see, that the world beyond the perceiver is a mere vehicle for the impressionists’ ulterior motives. But we begin to make sense of the wide diversity of scene and event within Impressionist paintings and texts with the recognition of a heightened epistemological emphasis. What we see in the world is no more important—indeed is radically dependent upon—how we look upon that world. This, if critical convenience demands it, is the defining subject of impressionism.

III

The defining form of Impressionism would probably strike the least informed visitor of the Musee D’Orsay. While it would be a gross simplification to see as identical the techniques of the Impressionist painters, an apparent sketchiness of composition would distinguish their works from those of other sections, and suggest, more than their ostensible subjects, the presence of a school. And here again the neglect of impressionism as a literary phenomenon is hardly surprising. A browse through The Red Badge of Courage, The Ambassadors and The Good Soldier, is unlikely to reveal a clear structural template. What may emerge is the sense of a certain effect produced by each: an effect, moreover, potentially evocative of that aroused by the broken brushwork of the Impressionist painters.

To interpret the formal motivation of impressionist literature, as well as painting, one must first acknowledge its dual focus. It is a simple distinction, each aspect of which has been considered to varying degrees by previous studies. But what is often curiously neglected is the very recognition of the distinction itself: that the formal properties of impressionist literature comparably implicate both fictional character and hypothetical reader; or, with painting, the artist and viewer. To emphasize this dual nature, I shall examine the dichotomy in its separate manifestations, with analysis of the formal
positioning of the reader/viewer constituting the next chapter. In truth, we shall see, the separation is not entirely distinct: readers of impressionist fiction are often as much its protagonists.

For the depicted characters of impressionist texts, the world, I have argued, is not readily accessible to the senses—at least not with any assured accuracy. One might reasonably assume that the reception and interpretation of sense impressions could best be explored when presented directly through the eyes of a perceiver. But first-person narration risks betraying the immediacy of engagement through its tendency to recapitulate experience, narrating after the impression. Extended present tense and stream-of-consciousness are potentially unwieldy solutions: restrictive and often overtly artificial; thoughts and perceptions are too quick and inchoate to be portrayed as they occur without making sizable assumptions. Instead, a variety of narrative strategies offer a sense of subjective immediacy.

A retrospective narrator might simulate, for example, something of the immediacy experienced at an earlier time. This would be no less presumptuous than a present tense description were it to describe mental and sensory operations in their entirety, but the narrative distance enables a considered approximation, or impression, of the overall effect received. This entails a shift of emphasis from informed explanation to ‘surface rendering’: presenting reality as it appeared at that instant. If the narrator subsequently revises, or accounts for, the initial impression, such rendering can extend to what Ian Watt has contentiously defined as ‘delayed decoding’. This procedure, he explains, simulates ‘the observer’s consciousness at the very moment of perception’ to show ‘the gap between impression and understanding.’ Watt provides a clear example from Heart of Darkness,

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76 I am influenced here and in the immediately subsequent analysis of first-person narrative variations by Nagel, pp. 24-5.

77 Stream-of-consciousness and the influence of impressionist literature upon such techniques are considered more fully in my Conclusion.

78 Watt, Conrad in the Nineteenth Century, pp. 175, 177.
recalling how Marlow, preoccupied with keeping his steamer afloat, and thereby withheld from examining his perceptions, becomes first puzzled, then angered, by two members of the crew who sit abruptly and cease working. Moments later, with a sensation of warm wetness about his feet, Marlow observes ‘little sticks [... ] flying about, thick.’ It is only after a delay that Marlow understands the sticks’ reality as arrows, that the ship is under attack, and that the presumed idle crewmembers, in one of whose blood he stands, have been shot. Describing this technique with specific reference to Conrad, Watt effectively reinforces Conrad’s alleged complicity with James: each author stressing the heightened validity of the analysed impression.

Not everyone, however, is convinced by Watt’s analysis. Bruce Johnson, for one, rejects both the terminology and interpretation of delayed decoding, countering that ‘to press back to the way [the event initially] seemed [... ] is to have puzzling access to truths largely obscured after the organizing concepts and causes and explanations have been imposed’. He continues:

virtually all of [the revisions] imply not so much an initial misunderstanding that will subsequently ‘clear up’ as they do an initial unguarded perception whose meaning may be far more revealing to the reader than the subsequent ‘decoding.’ The fact that the arrows seemed at first to be ‘little sticks’ may reveal more about the ambiguous attitude of Kurtz’s natives toward these intruders, and about Kurtz’s functioning among them as a god, than the subsequently official and rather self-limiting definition of this very complex set of events and feelings as, simply, an ‘attack’.

Johnson’s position respectfully recalls Hume’s hierarchy of idea and impression, which had, significantly, begun to enjoy something of a philosophical renaissance at the turn of the twentieth century—the period of Conrad’s text.

79 Conrad, *HD*, p. 45
80 Johnson, pp. 54, 57.
Phenomenology, the subject of a study by Hegel almost one hundred years earlier, took on its twentieth-century guise with the writings of Edmund Husserl. Husserl’s theories are elaborate and substantially modified by his own works and those of a long line of followers. But, as Johnson observes, ‘his mood at the turn of the century [...] is similar to Conrad’s’—similar, certainly, to Johnson’s interpretation of Conrad. Husserl’s regard of the impression as a ‘primordially primitive experience’ was served by his conception of ‘phenomenological reduction’: the exclusion of everything beyond our immediate experience to leave only the immanent contents of consciousness. That which remained might not be objectively verifiable—we cannot, like Descartes, be sure that what we see is not an elaborate illusion—but it would, Husserl believed, be true to our perception, and ‘the only trustworthy beginning for an ultimate grasp of essences.’ Husserl’s conception of a pre-suppositional foundation has been found wanting by theorists who counter that perception and intuition inevitably begin with their own intrinsic set of assumptions. This suspicion is, upon inspection, detectable in Johnson’s corrective of delayed decoding as a nagging qualification which threatens to dismantle the logic of his argument. He writes, for example, of the ‘enduring Lockean impulse behind much early impressionist painting that required removing a good many [that is, not all] of the mediating intelllections, [...] the deemphasis [again, not eradication] of internal abstractions [...] and so on toward the accomplishment of unintellectualized immediacy, or at least the illusion of it.’ His sympathy with this severely qualified ambition emerges when he claims

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82 Johnson, p. 54.  
84 I am guided here by Eagleton, Literary Theory, p. 55.  
86 Johnson, p. 54.  
that 'the associations Marlow makes with the puzzling [undecoded] events before his eyes serve only to [...] make him see more intently and with fewer prejudgements than he or the reader can usually manage', to 'have experienced for a moment the world all but emptied of [abstractions]. The prospect of fewer prejudgements is of scant consolation if we cannot detect their presence. Johnson is more convincing when he implies (without, however, resolving the aforementioned ambiguity) that while Conrad might not 'believe in anything like a Lockean model of consciousness, he shares with that intellectual climate a passion for the origins of consciousness'; shares also with Johnson, one suspects, a nostalgia, if nothing more, for confidence in reliable perception.

Ford's approach to the knotty ambiguity of whether impression or analysis yields the greater truth—the impressionist equivalent of the chicken and egg conundrum—is to collapse the two inextricably together: a move which also finds formal expression. It may be, Ford's episodes often suggest, that revisions produce a more accurate understanding; but the process of revision is continuous: the story is updating all the time, impressions replaced by new impressions, our conclusions subject to further revisions. Dowell, in The Good Soldier, begins writing about the convoluted events of the previous nine years without the critical distance afforded Marlow on the Thames or James's governess at Bly. Leonora has, we are to assume, recently brought Dowell up to speed with a detailed, if belated, exposition, and Dowell ricochets between attitudes built upon his old understanding and those prompted by the new information. 'Permanence? Stability! I can't believe it's gone [...]. No indeed, it can't be gone [...]. No, by God it is false! [...]. And yet, I swear by the sacred name of my creator that it was true [...]. I don't know [...].'

His account also begins before the story has played its course: after an interval of eighteen

88 Johnson, pp. 53, 68-70; my emphasis.
89 Ibid., p. 55-6.
90 James described Conrad's method as 'a prolonged hovering flight of the subjective over the outstretched ground of the case exposed.' Quoted Levenson, A Genealogy of Modernism, p. 116.
91 Ford, TGS, p. 12.
months, he picks up the narrative (Part IV: V) to add that Nancy has since been reported insane, that he has travelled widely in search of her, that he now lives with, and nurses, her, and that Leonora has married, and become pregnant by Rodney Bayham. But even after this addendum we are left with a sense of continuing development, frustrating the closure that might classify these shifting impressions as definitively interpreted.

Ford accentuates this sense of perpetual motion through extensive chronological disruption. Explaining early on that ‘I don’t know best how to put this thing down [. . .] [s]o [. . .] I shall go on talking’, Dowell is, unsurprisingly, inconsistent and forgetful. He only remembers to explain in the final pages how the novel’s eponymous figure met his death (‘It suddenly occurs to me that I have forgotten to say [. . .]’), and his entire account has the form and feel of a work-in-progress. Part of the motivation behind ‘time-shifts’, then, was for a more realistic simulation of psychological processes. But by juxtaposing events out of temporal sequence, the chain of cause and effect, initial impression and considered judgement, becomes increasingly entangled; less clear, certainly, than with the linear, ‘scenic construction [of] causally connected acts’ that characterises James’s narratives.

Conrad’s chronological dislocations, most extensively employed in *Lord Jim* and the first third of *Nostromo*, were the guiding influence upon Ford’s own practice, and served, like Ford’s, to challenge confident assumptions of direct, sequential cognition. It is true, as Torsten Pettersson remarks, that time-shifts were not unknown in nineteenth-century fiction, but never, he continues, were they so frequent, independent, or radical, as in Conrad’s fiction, in which the plot does not always return faithfully to the point of

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92 Ibid., p. 15.
93 Ibid., p. 161.
94 Ford expounds this intention comprehensively in *JC*, pp. 180-2. See also *TTR*, p. 55.
95 Nettels, p. 63.
96 Of himself and Conrad, Ford writes: ‘That we did succeed eventually in finding a new form I think I may permit myself a claim, Conrad first evolving the convention of a Marlow who should narrate, in presentation, the whole story of a novel just as, without much sequence or pursued chronology, a story will come into the mind of a narrator [. . .]’; ‘T’, 33.
departure, and often involves further, internal deviations. In turn, however, Conrad’s disruption of story by plot was rarely so sustained or disorienting as Ford’s in *The Good Soldier* especially. ‘When Conrad broke the usual order of events,’ writes Snitow, ‘his purpose was to give them an even tighter organization.’ The same, in truth, was true for Ford. ‘Of course,’ explained Ford, ‘you must appear to digress. That is the art which conceals your Art [. . .]. But really not one thread must ever escape your purpose.’

Nevertheless, the associative developments that instil Ford’s works with aesthetic unity are often less signalled or reposeful than in Conrad. Dowell’s narrative, splintered into short, restless scenes, has the appearance of meandering disorder: ‘I have, I am aware,’ he admits, ‘told this story in a very rambling way so that it may be difficult for anyone to find their path through what may be a sort of maze.’ By contrast, Conrad’s ‘stories maintain a strong linear movement’, remarks Snitow, even if their endings are equally without finitude.

Open endings are themselves a feature of many impressionist texts, further emulating the unquantifiable nature of impressions and experience. Even where, as often with Conrad, the death of the central protagonist affords the *story* finality, the speculation surrounding his or her motivation and conclusions only increases with the curtailment of disclosure. ‘[T]he last word is not said’, reflects Marlow upon Lord Jim’s enigmatic life; ‘probably shall never be said.’ The crew of the *Nellie* are equally aware that, in the story of Kurtz, ‘we were fated [. . .] to hear about one of Marlow’s inconclusive

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98 Snitow, p. 55.


100 Ford, *TGS*, p. 119.

101 Snitow, p. 55.

102 The point has also been made by Nettels, *James and Conrad*, pp. 65-6.

experiences.' While mysteries are often resolved in James’s fiction (The Turn of The Screw and The Sacred Fount are among notable exceptions), Conrad recognised in ‘the Master’s’ work the same irresolution of experience: ‘His books end as an episode in life ends. You remain with the sense of the life still going on [. . .].’ The Portrait of A Lady is a much discussed example: Isabel, like Strether, has fathomed the nature of the affair between Osmond and Madame Merle, but her own future, without the finality of separation (or, in the case of Strether, of remaining in Paris), retains a suggestive potentiality. ‘The obvious criticism will be that it is not finished’, acknowledged James in his notebooks, ‘[t]hat I have left her en l’air. This is both true and false. The whole of anything is never told; you can only take what groups together.’ A similar debate over closure surrounds The Red Badge of Courage, the validity of Fleming’s final assessment of his experience—and thus the future of his conduct—remaining ambiguous.

If the endings of impressionist novels were a rejection of the finality of experience, and of the impressions that constitute experience, then the openings were often equally resistant to a clear, phenomenologically reducible starting point from which to measure reality. Conrad and Ford, in particular, were fond of dramatic, in medias res, openings: establishing a strong impression and sense of activity before disclosing, through reflection or time-shifts, any discernible origins. The Good Soldier is an obvious example, jumping into the thick of Dowell’s story before erratically recollecting the past. Many chapters and ‘sub-divisions’ (for example, the three sequels to Some Do Not...) begin in similar fashion: this regularity distinguishing the technique from its use in earlier fiction. Ford clearly felt admiration for Conrad’s arresting opening to Lord Jim: ‘He was an inch,

104 Conrad, HD, p. 11.
107 See Kirk M. Reynolds: ‘The critics have argued inconclusively that the ending is affirmative, ironic, ambiguous, or, because the problems seem irresolvable, that Crane’s work is flawed,’ ‘The Red Badge of Courage: Private Henry’s Mind as Sole Point of View’, South Atlantic Review 52 (1987), 59.
perhaps two, under six feet, powerfully built, and he advanced straight at you with a slight stoop of the shoulders, head forward, and a fixed from-under stare which made you think of a charging bull.\textsuperscript{108} Not only did Ford cite as ‘a working model’ Maupassant’s similar introduction of a character: ‘“C’était un monsieur à favoris rouges qui entrait toujours le premier”’\textsuperscript{109}, but he began his own study of Conrad with comparable method:

He was small rather than large in height; very broad in the shoulder and long in the arm; dark in complexion and with a clipped black beard [. . .]. When you had really secured his attention he would insert a monocle into his right eye and scrutinise your face from very near as a watchmaker looks into the works of a watch.\textsuperscript{110}

Notably short of specific information (‘small rather than large in height’), such introductions constitute, once again, the presentation of impression before measured fact.

If James was less comfortable with beginning in the middle of his stories, \textit{The Turn of the Screw} demonstrates an alternative means of plotting epistemological uncertainty from the start. The governess’s account is framed by two recitals: first, that of Douglas to a select gathering of guests; then, at a later date, by one of the guests to the reader. Watt has remarked that, since the original account is written, the framing narrators ‘completely disappear once the governess’s tale begins’. He contrasts this cleanness of report with that of Marlow in \textit{Heart of Darkness}, who recites his own tale from memory, provoked by the ‘congenial setting’, and with the entire occasion relayed to us subsequently by another voice.\textsuperscript{111} But this fails to acknowledge the residual effect of James’s prologue, which delicately alters the tone of the ensuing narrative to induce immediate suspicion of its objectivity. Among numerous, resonant details, including the first and only meeting between the governess and her employer (‘He struck her as gallant and splendid’), Douglas describes the governess as ‘young, untried, nervous: [. . .] a fluttered anxious girl

\textsuperscript{109} Ford’s translation: ‘he was a gentleman with red whiskers who always went first through a door’; ‘OI’, 171. (Ford misquotes Maupassant.)
\textsuperscript{110} Ford, \textit{JC}, p. 11.
out of a Hampshire vicarage. Nevertheless, the narrative filters through which we approach Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim* and *Under Western Eyes* are certainly denser and more prominent. The Teacher of Languages begins by declaring that his account of Razumov is ‘based on a document’ which is something in a nature of a journal, a diary, yet not exactly that in its actual form. For instance, most of it was not written from day to day [...]. Some of these entries cover months of time and extend over dozens of pages. All of the earlier part is a retrospect, in a narrative form, relating to an event which took place about a year before.

One consequence of this imprecise source material is an occasional acknowledgement of uncertainty from its researcher: ‘As far as I can tell, Councillor Mikulin did not answer that question’, the Teacher remarks, in the final part of the novel. Greater doubt is cast upon the narrative by what the Teacher does not acknowledge here; for, despite an assertion that ‘all I have brought to the document is my knowledge of the Russian language,’ his own interactions with both Razumov and, more personally, the sister of the man Razumov betrayed, prove him more than a disinterested observer. ‘I am not ashamed of the warmth of my regard for Miss Haldin [...]. The late Victor Haldin—in the light of that sentiment—appeared to me not as a sinister conspirator, but as a pure enthusiast.’ There are, in addition, moments where the Teacher describes events beyond the scope of his own observations or research. Whether we consider these hiatuses as primarily the error of Conrad or the Teacher, the residual effect is once again to undermine the objectivity of the report.

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117 On page 362, for example, Razumov ‘stopped writing, shut the book [... ] and made up a parcel [... ]’. Being alone in his room, the immediately subsequent account of his thoughts and actions must be pure speculation.
The frame of *Lord Jim* is set as deeply as that of *Under Western Eyes*, but here an abundance of narrative perspectives further complicates the information pertaining to Jim’s life. A third-person narrator relinquishes perspective in the fifth chapter, to demonstrate instead a typical recital of events by Marlow to a group of silent listeners. Marlow’s recitals occur several years after the events on the *Patna*, and involve frequent recourse to further recollections from tertiary narrators such as Jim, the French lieutenant, and Gentleman Brown. As with *The Good Soldier*, Marlow’s recitals are themselves updated in a coda of even greater narratological complexity.

Switches of perspective are, in one sense, an appropriate option for impressionist authors, demonstrating, like James’s concept of the ‘house of fiction’, the variation of scene between ‘windows’.

While first-person narratives can ‘change hands’, or partially abdicate authority through extensive quotation of others, a more flexible and convenient approach to contrasting perspectives is provided by the third-person narrative, which indeed *Lord Jim* ultimately remains. In another sense, however, changes of perspective can potentially compromise the subjective limitations of individual perception, which, I have argued, can be portrayed through variations of first-person narrative. It is perhaps for this reason that most third-person impressionist fiction, while exhibiting extensive focalisation and free indirect discourse, remains predominantly confined to a single centre of consciousness.

Where third-person narrative offers the literary impressionist a more practical alternative to first-person is in its reduced dependency upon retrospective apparatus to justify, dramatically, an immediacy of presentation. Thus while Marlow, recollecting on the *Nellie*, needs temporarily to simulate ignorance to render his puzzled initial impressions of the arrow attack, a third-person, heterodiegetic narrator can readily offer

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118 See James’s Preface to *PL*, p. 7; also pp. 53, above.
immediate, if not entirely unmediated, access to the central consciousness. Not, of course, that third-person focalisation and free indirect discourse were new techniques. In my first chapter, I summarised how each had become increasingly integral components of nineteenth-century realist literature as it evolved, through Flaubert and Zola in particular, from Balzac’s comprehensive descriptions. But while impressionist literature was only a continuation of this trend, its advance was sufficient to dismantle the foundations of realism’s putative objectivity.

*Parade’s End* documents through its form the transition of third-person narrative from realist to impressionist. The stately, expository omniscience of the opening scene aboard the ‘perfectly appointed railway carriage’, encapsulates the remnants of Edwardian security and tradition which, though fractured beneath the surface, shattered publicly with the force of an explosion as the implications of the Great War emerged.\(^{120}\) Extensive, often disorienting focalisation combines with increasingly subjective rendering and chronological dislocation as Tietjens’s world of public order, values and hierarchies is driven inwards. By *The Last Post*, an array of discrete, quasi-interior monologues\(^ {121}\) has stretched Ford’s third-person narrative beyond the traditional associations of objectivity.

It will come as no surprise by now to read that the heightened, impressionist application of third-person focalisation and free indirect discourse employed by these four practitioners was not identical. One finds, indeed, an extension of the aforementioned dichotomy of, on one side, Crane and Ford as impressionists emphasising the immediate, and, on the other, James and Conrad as more expressive of the analysed impression. It is a difference of emphasis only, but perhaps most apparent when contrasting Crane and James.

‘[T]he rare thing about Mr. Crane’s art’, remarked Edward Garnett,
is that he keeps closer to the surface than any living writer [. . .]. [H]is sure instinct tells him never to quit the passing moment of life, to hold fast by simple situations, to reproduce the episodic, fragmentary nature of life in such artistic sequence that it stands in place of the architectural masses and co-ordinated structures of the great artists.\(^{122}\)

Crane’s depiction of perceived reality is direct, occasionally unclarified, and persistently visual: in evident contrast to the exhaustive, organised and cerebral ruminations of James’s novels and narrators. Fleming’s naïve consciousness is both sensitised by fear and bewildered by events beyond its experience or immediate comprehension. It records the rapid, chaotic flow of sensory information in the rush of battle without the time necessary to comprehensively evaluate its likely cause or significance.\(^ {123}\) While retaining a critical, often ironic distance (discussed in Chapter Three), Crane’s narrator faithfully renders Fleming’s perceptions in a series of descriptions overtly reminiscent of Impressionist painting:

The billowing smoke was filled with horizontal flashes.
Men running swiftly emerged from it. They grew in numbers until it was seen that the whole command was fleeing [. . .].
Wild yells came from behind the walls of smoke. A sketch in gray and red dissolved into a moblike body of men who galloped like wild horses.\(^ {124}\)

Among the disorder are occasional, almost incongruous suggestions that Fleming is recollecting the entire story (‘afterward he remembered that [. . .]’); and, as with James’s centres of consciousness, Fleming has plentiful time to reflect between ‘scenes’ of action.\(^ {125}\) Crane’s emphasis remains, however, upon the restless, fragmented succession of immediate experiences. ‘Even [Fleming’s] meditations on the psychological dilemma

\(^ {122}\) Quoted Nagel, p. 4.
\(^ {123}\) See Crane, \textit{RBC}, p. 86: ‘He recalled bits of color that in the flurry had stamped themselves unawares upon his engaged senses.’
\(^ {124}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 24.
\(^ {125}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 24.
\(^ {126}\) James’s narratological and structural method characteristically involved the alternation of ‘scene’ and ‘picture’, or objective action and subjective meditation. Walter Isle usefully adds ‘the qualification that the narrator’s consciousness is to some extent present throughout most of the scenes [. . .].’ \textit{Experiments in Form: Henry James’s Novels, 1896-1901} (Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1968), p. 221.
of fear', Perosa observes, 'are rendered as a staccato sequence of mental impressions, typical of a young mind dismayed by the war.'

IV

Crane’s language is further expression of his impressionist orientation. The 'barbarously abrupt' sentences of Maggie and The Red Badge of Courage correspond with the clipped paragraphs and scenes to emulate, for Crane, the disorganised immediacy of experience.

Whereas, for the realists, language served as a positivist microscope upon the operations of society, for the impressionists it became 'the act of perception' itself: 'experiential activity rather than a description of activity.' Crane’s 'terseness' of expression and ideas 'sharp cut as cameos', are emphasised by a variety of techniques, including fragmented syntax, suppressed conjunctions, and heavy alliteration; all present to some degree in the description: 'A dark battle line lay upon a sunstruck clearing that gleamed orange color. A flag fluttered.' Also evident in this quotation is Crane’s penchant for unconventional modifiers ('sunstruck'). Adjectives are frequently selected more for their immediately sensuous, often onomatopoeic qualities than for their literal semantic sense: 'A burning roar filled his ears'. Such unconventional diction seeks again to convey the precognitive through tonal and sensory immediacy (the roar does not literally burn, although its energy produces the impression). Crane’s language overall is geared towards enhancing sensory detail—visual especially—through, for example, 'syntactic isolation':

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127 Perosa, p. 88.
131 Crane, RBC, p. 18. Brunetière had remarked upon the 'suppression of the conjunction and' in impressionist fiction: “The train shakes, stretches, jolts [. . .].”; p. 86.
132 Crane, RBC, p. 27.
‘He faltered, and then became motionless, save for his quivering knees.’ Persistent, almost synecdochic attention to specific details emphasise the limited and selective focus of immediate perception: ‘Eyes gleamed with sudden fire, and calloused hands waved frantically in the air’, ‘The pavements became tossing seas of umbrellas.’

Each of these linguistic devices correlates recognisably with the compositional features of Impressionist painting: the fragmented brushwork, visual immediacy, and bold, defamiliarising rendering. Crane’s literary style greatly accentuates the painterly comparison through an extensive prioritisation of visual components and references. In this he closely resembles, yet finally exceeds, Conrad, who spoke of ‘effective’ art as ‘an impression conveyed through the senses’, and famously declared his task as ‘before all, to make you see’.

Perosa has observed that, in the relatively short text of *The Red Badge of Courage*, there are some 350 verbs indicating visual perception (‘to see, perceive, look, observe, [etc.]’), and ‘no less than 200’ expressions ‘like to seem, appear, look like, exhibit, glare, gleam,’ and so on. Perhaps more striking is the proliferation of colour references: ‘No other novel in American literature has so dense a concentration of color imagery as *The Red Badge of Courage*’, remarks Stanley Wertheim. Conrad’s *The Nigger of the Narcissus* and *Heart of Darkness* provide, significantly, the nearest comparison, yet theirs are largely monochromatic schemes suggesting a symbolic resonance as much as immediate sensation.

Notable in Crane’s treatment of colour, and strengthening the resemblance to Impressionist painting, is how often he presents colours in bursts; colours, moreover,

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136 Perosa, p. 88; Perosa’s emphasis.
which are generally bold and regular, such as primaries and secondaries. Katherine G. Simoneaux has observed this in a statistical analysis of colour terms in *Maggie*. The predominant colours—in order of frequency: red, black, yellow, blue, gray, white and green—appear thus, without more subtle gradations, in around 65 to 100 percent of instances. In truth, many Impressionist paintings are not so bold in colour, although a preoccupation with light demanded a stronger palette than many Realists required. However, the central Impressionist tenet of discrete brush strokes, presenting aspects of phenomena before they had coalesced in the consciousness, became, with the Neo-Impressionists, and Georges Seurat in particular, a practice similarly extending to colour. Seurat’s technique of *pointillism* (or *divisionism*) constituted the application of pure colour in small dots upon the canvas, to mix into subtle hues within the perceiving consciousness. Beside the aforementioned bursts of colour in Crane’s writing, encouraging colligation, one finds, albeit very occasionally, instances of colour presented as a juxtaposition of its constituent components, in the pointillist fashion.

In describing, for example, a ‘yellow-brown bottle’, or a ‘suit of yellowish brown’, Crane conspicuously avoids one of the many single and close colour synonyms, such as beige, buff, fawn or khaki. The effect is to bounce the mind between the colours and generate a sense of flux and immediacy. This is not the same, I should stress, as what Stallman describes as Crane’s ‘prose pointillism’, which loosely and rather misleadingly includes the juxtaposition of much larger structures (‘black masses juxtaposed against brightness, colored light set against gray mists’). Stallman’s principle encompasses elemental chiaroscuro, and is evident in much painting before either Seurat or the Impressionists. An interesting variation of Crane’s *pointillism*, by my own definition,

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139 Consider, as perhaps the best-known example, Seurat’s *Sunday on the Island o f La Grande Jatte* (1884-86).
140 Examples from, respectively, Crane, *M*, p. 9, and *RBC*, p. 18.
141 Stallman, pp. 185-6.
occurs in his description of a mortar shell that 'landed in the grove, and exploding redly flung the brown earth.'\textsuperscript{142} The adverbial colour is not a named property of the earth, but its close proximity, and the semantic confusion (a lack of punctuation partially casts the redness as a force of propulsion), invests the brown with aspects of red, and makes the image vibrate.

Synaesthesia is a recurring feature of Crane's prose, and usually performed by semantically ectopic colour: 'A crimson roar came from the distance', 'He imagined them shaking in black rage.'\textsuperscript{143} The effect is a more forceful expression, but also a blurring of sensory categories, once again strengthening the painterly associations of impressionist literature. The technique is, moreover, another means by which to portray the immediacy of the impression, as a sensation, before it potentially becomes distanced by rationalisation. Again, one finds a notable, if less extensive, application of synaesthesia in Conrad, particularly in the earlier, overtly visual, \textit{The Nigger of the Narcissus} ('[The breeze] changed to a black south-easter').\textsuperscript{144} Of all the major works by Conrad, James or Ford, \textit{The Nigger of the Narcissus}, with its high density of colour and persistent synecdoche, bears the closest stylistic resemblance to Crane's impressionism of \textit{Maggie} and \textit{The Red Badge of Courage}. Conrad's novel, however, as with his subsequent fiction, is perhaps most clearly distinguished from Crane's by a comparative flexibility of sentence and paragraph.

Frank Bergon has argued that Crane's '[d]irectness of expression [...] risks boring the reader with its wilful limitation of syntactical forms and vocabulary. It has to make up for what it lacks in variety, mass, and movement, with intensity. Repetition is often the result [...]'.\textsuperscript{145} In practice, Crane's best work is sufficiently inventive, as well as brief, to avoid such a failing, but his stylistic development suggests that he felt the restrictions of

\textsuperscript{142} Crane, \textit{RBC}, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 38, 53.
\textsuperscript{144} Conrad, \textit{NN}, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{145} Bergon, p. 7.
his earlier style. 'The Open Boat', Berryman has remarked, exhibits a 'supple mastery', which evolves again by 'The Monster' to become 'much more closed, circumstantial and "normal" in feeling and syntax.'\(^{146}\) Bergon adds that '[t]hese variations [...] are neither strictly chronological nor mutually exclusive', yet acknowledges a 'general shift from mannered to plain prose.'\(^{147}\) Crane's later works are generally considered less impressionist, for the most part, than those surrounding, and including, *The Red Badge of Courage*; but this is not to suggest that their characteristically brittle prose is the only or most successful mode for the impressionist.

Conrad and Ford made extensive use of fragmented language, but theirs was a notably selective application. Occurring particularly at occasions of disruption and excitement, not a default mode, it denotes to some extent the dominance in such moments of heightened immediacy over the reflective consciousness. It appears often, and accordingly, in conversation: not only during those recurring instances in Conrad where conversation is overheard imperfectly (see page 53), but also in Ford as an expression of the mind performing without the benefit of extensive deliberation, and subjected potentially to the heat of emotion:

'I know,' Sylvia said, 'you can't help it. ... But when, in your famous county family pride—though a youngest son!—you say to yourself: And I daresay if ... Oh, Christ! ... you're shot in the trenches you'll say it ... oh, between the saddle and the ground! That you never did a dishonourable action. ... And, mind you, I believe that no other man save one has ever had more right to say it than you. ...'

Tietjens said:
'You believe that!'\(^{148}\)

The pauses, meanderings, and interruptions by Sylvia herself and then by Tietjens, represent an overt claim to greater realism: a crucial aspect of the relationship between realist and impressionist literature. This is how the mind produces speech, Ford is implying; this is a higher realism. Such linguistic disruption extends to thought, especially

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\(^{146}\) Berryman, quoted Bergon, pp. 2, 4.

\(^{147}\) Bergon, p. 4.

where unsettled, and is encapsulated in particular by third-person free indirect discourse, extending at times to near-stream of consciousness: ‘This surge then of whitey-grey objects, sacrificed for fun, was intended . . . was intended ulti . . . ultim . . . then . . .’.

Even retrospective, first-person narrators such as Marlow, Dowell, and James’s governess, convey in their expression, whether by simulated immediacy or revived emotion, the spontaneous workings of the mind. Dowell and the governess in particular, in recording their experiences on paper, must be considered to be presenting an immediate, uncorrected draft; such is the recurrence of hesitations, interruptions, and repetitions, even to the extent of occasionally disrupting grammatical sense: ‘She said then—it was a moonlit morning and she was whispering in my ear whilst I stood on the ladder. [sic]’

James operates at the opposite pole to Crane’s renowned prose style, replacing the latter’s staccato expression with an approach equally defining and influential. If the appearance is far removed from Crane’s, the intention and effect are unmistakably similar. The long, grammatical but meandering lines that characterise James’s prose convey something of the movements of the mind, as he perceives them. Not that people think, moment by moment, with such elegant sophistication, but the modulating succession of sub-clauses, like a series of asides or fine adjustments, seeks to capture consciousness in its hesitant construction of sense. ‘It wasn’t till he had spoken that he became aware of how much there had been in him of response; when the tone of her own rejoinder, as well as the play of something more in her face—something more, that is, than its apparently usual restless light—seemed to notify him.’ That the sentences are so refined is further suggestion of James’s emphasis upon experience after the instant but before full

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149 Ford, MCSU, 1926, in PE, p. 562. Again, only ‘near’ stream-of-consciousness, perhaps, since the narrative mode remains third-person.

150 Ford, TGS, p. 61.

151 Thomas Beer claims, a little forcefully, that ‘Crane’s effect on Anglo-American prose has never been questioned by critics of any competence [. . .].’ Stephen Crane: A Study in American Letters (New York: Octagon, 1972), p. 128. The influence of James can be seen not least in Ford.

comprehension. Revisions are usually signalled when they do occur: ‘Strether was to remember afterwards [. . .].’ In his study of James’s later style, Seymour Chatman subdivides ratiocination into four stages: at its most immediate is ‘perception’; then, with increasing distance from the initial sensory stimuli, come ‘pre-cognition’, ‘cognition’ and finally ‘belief’. There are, Chatman observes, ‘relatively few acts of pure perception’ in James’s later novels. ‘What Jamesian characters “see”, for example, is more usually a situation, a moral or psychological issue [. . .] than a visible object.’ Typically tentative in their deliberations, these consciousnesses are more satisfactorily classifiable, for Chatman, as pre-cognitive: ‘more than merely observing, but not yet conclusively cognitive.’ Accordingly, he observes, we find the familiar intangible language of James’s later style, located somewhere between clear perception and clear thought.

The contrast with the strongly visual prose of Crane and Conrad will be apparent. Chatman remarks that ‘the style of the later Henry James is at least three times as intangible as that of any of his contemporaries.’ But this is not to deny, yet again, a deeper trend uniting these four authors. In a ‘Quantitative Stylistic Analysis of Impressionist Style in Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford’, Todd K. Bender and Sue M. Briggum demonstrate statistically how, between *Almayer’s Folly* and *Lord Jim*—the period, significantly, during which Conrad and Ford met and began collaborating—Conrad’s prose underwent an unmistakable shift of style. Measuring the recurrence and ratio of verbs defined as ‘[p]hysical (like to erect) [,] [p]sychic (like to think) [,] and [w]eak (like to be)’, the analysis reveals a ‘striking’ shift between the two novels, from the

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155 Chatman, p. 15.
156 Chatman measures the proportion of intangible grammatical subjects to those tangible between James’s early and late fiction. Intangible subjects are nouns pivotal to main or subordinate clauses and referring to abstract qualities as opposed to tangible entities such as people or objects. In his example, the first line of *The Ambassadors* sets the trend, beginning ‘not with “Strether”, but with “Strether’s [first] question”’: p. 6. My insertion.
157 Chatman, p. 7.
first grammatical category to the second and third.\textsuperscript{158} Such transformations in Conrad and James present us with something like a definition of impressionist language: ‘from emphasis on action [. . .] to emphasis on the [perceiver’s] unique perception of that action’: a movement, in practice, ‘toward systematic abstraction.’\textsuperscript{159}

This abstract, or rather intangible, presentation of literary impressionism has significant implications for the reader, and it is to this particular centre of consciousness that I now turn. We have seen that, despite numerous and substantial variations, impressionist language and form points ultimately in one direction as both description and expression of the principal theme of impressionism itself: the profound interaction of the consciousness and environment. It is, I have suggested, a theme treated in varying degrees of immediacy by these four authors. It has also been suggested that this is a theme with a dual aspect. The formal properties so far considered are primarily strategies for simulating the uncertainty and cognitive processing experienced by fictional centres of consciousness. A further, closely related range of techniques seeks to demonstrate the same concepts through implication of the reader. Here, however, the aesthetic runs into complications potentially damaging, strangely appropriate, and largely neglected by previous studies.

\textsuperscript{158} Todd K. Bender and Sue M. Briggum, ‘Quantitative Stylistic Analysis of Impressionist Style in Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford’, \textit{Computing in the Humanities: Papers from the Fifth International Conference on Computing in the Humanities}, ed. Richard W. Bailey (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1982), pp. 62-3. The results, in brief, show that ‘[t]he \textit{Almayer’s Folly} ratio of physical to psychic occurrences [. . .] is only 84\% of that of the pattern in \textit{Lord Jim} [. . .]. When psychic and weak verbs are combined and compared with physical verb occurrences, the \textit{Almayer’s Folly} is but 74\% of that of \textit{Lord Jim}’; p. 63.

\textsuperscript{159} Bender and Briggum, p. 61.
Chapter Three:
THE IMPRESSIONABLE READER

[...] I continued to feel that though we pretended to talk it was to him only we listened. He had us all in hand; he controlled for the moment all our attention and our relations. He was in short, as a consequence of our attitude, in possession of the scene [...]  

I

The reading of impressionist fiction is a dynamic and parallel experience. We observe a number of characters, and often, in particular, a single centre of consciousness, struggling to comprehend an environment that does not yield its secrets lucidly but presents a bewildering array of impressions. These impressions are occasionally conflicting and rarely definitive, serving finally to frustrate for these characters a single correct reading of their situation. No supernatural presence is on hand to guide interpretation or bring order and coherence to a world that appears more determined by contingency. If, by the novel’s close, these protagonists have reached a full comprehension of their world, it is typically through having made a series of assumptions that fill the gaps in their interpretation and smooth out the contradictions, enabling at least the illusion of accurate understanding.

Interpretation is no easier for the reader. In view of the impressionist philosophical position, we might consider this wholly appropriate. The reader is, after all, just another centre of consciousness, without access to objective reality. By the same reasoning, the author can assume no greater insight into the secrets of the universe. Of course, recent

2 See Conrad: ‘[...] in the sphere of an art dealing with a subject matter whose origin and end are alike unknown there is no possible conclusion. The only indisputable truth of life is our ignorance.’ ‘To the *New York Times* “Saturday Review”’, 2 August 1901, *LJC*, vol. 2, p. 348.
modes of thought have posited the text as, inevitably, a site of far-reaching contradiction and uncertainty. No ideological or metaphysical message can pass from author to reader, whether intentionally or otherwise, without first passing through the mixer of language. The impressionists convey something of this linguistic scepticism, albeit in varying degrees—a point to which I will return. More than this, however, they recognised that even to attempt imposing their subjective judgements upon the action of the text was potentially a violation of the reader’s personal experience of reading and interpretation.

The action of the text remained, needless to say, entirely the construction of the author—there was no escaping that. But what the author ‘told’ and what the author ‘showed’ or ‘rendered’ were considered quite distinct. There is, we shall see, some confusion over exactly what role these authors desired their readers to perform. The following is an attempt at clarification by dividing into three the principal modes by which the impressionist text positions the reader: those which we might term ‘objective: vicarious’, ‘objective: detached’, and ‘subjective’. Less easy to comprehend is how these three modes can operate without mutual contradiction.

‘[T]he general effect of a novel,’ wrote Ford, ‘must be the general effect that life makes on mankind.’ Writing elsewhere of his three closest practitioners, Ford elaborates:

they had before all for their strongest passion the desire to convey vicarious experience to the reader [. . .]. At any rate, the common aim was to take the reader, immerse him in an Affair so completely that he was unconscious of the fact either that he was reading or of the identity of the author, so that in the end he might say—and believe: ‘I have been in a drawing-room overlooking Boston Common, in a drinking saloon under a Yellow Sky or beneath the palm leaves of Palembang! I have been!’

Put another way, by withdrawing from the text, and employing a number of complicit narrative strategies, the author presents the subject of impressionism impressionistically, with reality coming to the reader in something like the manner in which it came to the

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protagonist. Indeed with such methods the reader *becomes* a protagonist, interpreting and assembling fragments as they emerge, all the while seeking accuracy and impartiality of perception. This suppression of authorial intrusion constitutes the 'objectivity' of the first approach; the immersion of the reader within the fictional scenario defines its 'vicariousness'.

The connection with Impressionist painting is once again apparent. By depicting only that which is immediately accessible to sight—an ambition assisted by rapid composition—the artist sought to circumvent personal prejudice and assumptions. Motifs and classical or literary allusions were judged artificial and intrusive, as was the traditional concept of clearly delineating forms and figures. Instead, broken brushwork served both to disengage the scene from the artist's full control and sensibility, and, in equal measure, to allow the viewer to participate more fully in the perceptual process. While not so scrupulously as Seurat, the Impressionists gave greater emphasis than before on allowing colours to be synthesised by the viewer, not ready-mixed upon the palette. Certainly, the consequent dissolution of clear, orderly representation distinguished their efforts from the unflinching observations of Courbet's Realism.

In literature, the impressionist emphasis upon suppressing authorial intervention and increasing reader participation was also a relatively recent development. Before the realist and naturalist developments of late nineteenth-century French literature took effect in Britain, English fiction was, to Ford among others, undermined by a slackness of authorial discipline and of professionalism. It is, in fact, difficult to overstate the degree of Ford's dissatisfaction: 'there are practically no English novels that are not artistically negligible,' bluntly encapsulates his assessment. 5 Ford's explanations are frequent and consistent, often adopting a mocking epithet, and centring upon the issue of verisimilitude:

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5 Ford, *HJ*, p. 52.
The trouble with the English novelist from Fielding to Meredith is that not one of them cares whether you quite believe in their characters or not. If you had told Flaubert or Conrad in the midst of their passionate composings that you were not convinced of the reality of Homais or Lord Jim, as like as not they would have called you out and shot you, and in similar circumstances Richardson would have shown himself extremely disagreeable. But Fielding, Thackeray, or Meredith would have cared relatively little about that [. . .].

While tracing the consistent application of more commendable methods to France, Ford is wisely cautious about an overly simplistic attribution:

It would be idle to say that it was Flaubert who first observed that the intrusion of the author destroyed the illusion of the reader. Such ideas arise sporadically across the literary landscape and get finally adopted by one or other of the distinguished though, long before that, they will have been in the air.

The growing demand for information about successful authors in the late nineteenth-century—a consequence, in turn, of ‘the heightened personal publicity’ brought about by ‘rapid changes in publishing and marketing’—prompted the emerging rhetoric of authorial self-effacement. ‘Many authors,’ explains Barbara Hochman, ‘imagining a growing mass of increasingly heterogeneous, potentially intrusive readers, sought a rhetorical haven in impersonality.’ This is not to undermine, however, the more aesthetically motivated intentions of the French realists in particular, as Ford explains: ‘with or after Stendhal, it became evident that if the novel was to have what is called vraisemblance, if it was so to render life as to engross its reader, the novelist must not take sides [. . .].’

Ford’s comments open up the two principal avenues by which, by his own reasoning, the author might be judged wrongfully to interfere with the reading process.

The first of these defines instances in which the author’s attitudes and personal prejudices clearly infiltrate, and thereby distort, events of the narrative that might

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6 Ford, EN, p. 89.
9 Ford, EN, p. 120-1.
otherwise, in their natural course and development, be considered credible by the reader.\footnote{84}

‘That tendency alone has deprived the novel in Anglo-Saxondom of almost all the artistic or even the social value that it might have had,’ remarks Ford.\footnote{10} He singles out Dickens as an example of undeniable genius spoiled ‘by the very intensity of [. . .] [his] reforming passions’, explaining that despite ‘a matchless command of English, [Dickens] took the simple course of presenting you with villains all black, heroes all white and ringletted heroines all pink.’\footnote{12} Such near-caricature simplicity of moral characterisation was, to Ford, a crude misrepresentation of reality and served only to cast the author’s shadow across the natural colours of society. While by 1820, Ford continues, ‘it had gradually become apparent, on the Continent at least,’ that ‘so many different codes of morality could synchronize in the same era, in the same nation and even in the same small community’, it was not until ‘slightly before the 1890s’ that in England the ‘loosening in morality [. . .] shook the idea that the novelist must of necessity colour all his characters with one or other hue’\footnote{13}. Ford locates this wider transformation in the development of James’s fiction, claiming that, ‘[e]ven until he had written \textit{The Portrait of a Lady}, in 1879,’ James still found ‘villainous characters and heroic [. . .] highly convenient’—if no longer ‘essential’.\footnote{14} By the period of Chad Newsome and Maggie Verver, the precise measure of character morality had become not only more complex, but a leading subject of narrative and critical speculation. For his own fiction, Ford’s Dowell explicitly advertises the moral ‘roundness’ of character in his own account, claiming that ‘[t]here is not even any villain in the story [. . .].’\footnote{15}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[10] See Ford, \textit{JC}, p. 208: ‘You must not, as author, utter any views: above all you must not fake any events.’
\item[11] Ford, \textit{EN}, p. 96. Ford’s acknowledgement of ‘social value’ will be considered further in Chapter Four.
\item[12] Ibid., pp. 96-7.
\item[13] Ibid., pp. 116-17, 131.
\end{footnotes}
The second avenue of interference occurs where the text exhibits, directly or indirectly, intentionally or otherwise, its fictional status. In its direct form, this might consist of explicit authorial intrusion. Again, such instances became less frequent on the Continent following the example of Flaubert in particular. 'In my book I do not want there to be a single movement or a single reflection of the author,' wrote Flaubert of his intentions for *Madame Bovary*. As James was to remark, the same could not be said for many British novelists:

Certain accomplished novelists have a habit of giving themselves away which must often bring tears to the eyes of people who take their fiction seriously. I was lately struck, in reading over many pages of Anthony Trollope, with his want of discretion in this particular. In a digression, a parenthesis or an aside, he concedes to the reader that he [is] only 'making believe.' He admits that the events he narrates have not really happened, and that he can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best. Such a betrayal of office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime [. . .].

Trollope's is, of course, an instance of the author intruding to declare fictionality, but then to some extent all intrusions do the same. The impressionists developed the advances of French realism and naturalism to explore how narrative modes might further reduce their visibility within the text.

Perhaps the simplest means was, as Ford remarked, to place the novel 'into the mouth of a narrator'. This figure 'must be limited by probability as to what he can know of the affair that he is adumbrating.' However, 'being already a fictional character, [such a narrator] may indulge in any prejudices or wrong-headedness and any likings or dislikes for the other characters of the book, for he is just a living being like anybody else.' The alternative, continues Ford, is to leave the narrative 'to the official Author and he, being almost omnipotent, may, so long as he limits himself to presenting without comment or moralization, allow himself to be considered to know almost everything that there is to

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16 Flaubert, 'To Louise Colet', 8 February 1852, quoted Becker 91. Flaubert's emphasis.
17 James, 'AF', pp. 25-6.
18 Ford, 'T', 33. See *EV*: 'It was to Diderot—and still more to Stendhal—that the novel owes its next great step forward. That consisted in the discovery that words put into the mouth of a character need not be considered as having the personal backing of the author [. . .]', p.115.
Ford's double use of 'almost' offers a vague acknowledgement that, in practice, the impressionists sought consistently to soften the omniscience of their 'omniscient narratives', to bring them into line with impressionist assumptions of limited perceptual awareness.

I described in Chapter Two the emphasis given in impressionist third-person narratives to focalisation and free indirect discourse. Through extensive use of either, whether by alternating between a number of perceivers, or else by indulging one particular centre of consciousness, an omniscient narrator could relinquish its potentially jarring God-like position and tone. There might remain instances, of course, where the story demanded a break from focalisation; where, for example, the narrator needed to hurry the story along. Building in this instance more upon the example of Zola than of Flaubert, the impressionists worked to blend the objective narrator into the subjectivity of the text's focalised passages. Zola, we recall, had differed from Flaubert in affording his third-person narrator both a (non-mocking) socio-linguistic register and perspectival limitations comparable to that of his characters. The result was to saturate the text with the subjective tone of focalised, free-indirect discourse, making distinctions between author, narrator and character difficult to discern. The reader would pass from passages of focalisation to direct narrative statement without experiencing any disruptive jolt into elevated authorial awareness.

James presents an often noted instance of such linguistic continuity between characters and third-person narrator, albeit one in which, unlike with Zola, one suspects the characters' language has been adjusted to align with the narrator's (and, implicitly, the author's) rather than the other way around. 'In many of [...] James's novels and stories,' remarks Michael J. Toolan, 'there seems to be no difference between the narrator's dialect

\footnote{19} Ford, 'T', 33.
\footnote{20} See Chapter One, pp. 19-20.
and a character’s, [. . .] only a single shared lect [. . .]."\(^{21}\) One significant exception is

*What Maisie Knew*—inevitably, as James recalls deciding. Intending the young girl for an exclusive centre of consciousness, James acknowledged that ‘I should have to stretch the matter to what my wondering witness materially and inevitably saw; a great deal of which quantity she either wouldn’t understand at all or would quite misunderstand—and on those lines, only on those, my task would be prettily cut out.’\(^{22}\) But if simulating the child’s perspective would be challenging, simulating her expression, as James continued, was unfeasible:

Small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all reducible, vocabulary. Amusing therefore as it might at the first blush have seemed to restrict myself in this case to the terms as well as to the experience, it became at once plain that such an attempt would fail.\(^{23}\)

James’s compromise worked magnificently. Reading the focalisation through Maisie proves sufficiently intense and undeviating as to produce a sustained impression of childlike apprehension. The effect is emphasised—again, recalling Zola—by the use of imagery appropriate to the perceiver,\(^{24}\) and, indeed, by the occasional application of the child’s own terminology. Thus, during more intense moments of focalisation, her parents appear in the text as ‘mamma’ and ‘papa’; and even a street name, ‘Gower’, mispronounced ‘Glower’ by Maisie, appears repeatedly uncorrected.\(^{25}\) Throughout, James further tempers the potentially discordant superiority of the narrator with occasional acknowledgements of uncertainty. Sometimes these are explicitly signalled, as with: ‘[. . .] I am not sure that Maisie had not even a dim discernment of the queer law of her own life

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\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 27.

\(^{24}\) For example: ‘a lady with eyebrows arched like skipping-ropes’; *ibid.*, p. 50. For Zola’s appropriate or ‘local’ imagery, see Chapter One, pp. 17-18.

\(^{25}\) See, respectively, *WMK*, pp. 71 and 138-9. ‘Gower’ appears again on p. 176. In the Preface James explains that ‘Maisie’s terms accordingly play their part—since her simpler conclusions quite depend on them; but our own commentary constantly attends and amplifies’, p. 28.
More often, and avoiding this ironically intrusive self-recognition ('I am not sure'), narrative concessions to subjectivity take the more elemental form of words such as 'seemed' and 'perhaps'.

Expressions of narrative uncertainty in third-person impressionist novels, even those where the narrator and author seem virtually synonymous, are so prolific as to be considered a defining trait. 'Of course there is nothing remarkable in occasionally using the word "seem"', writes Overland in a study of *The Red Badge of Courage*. 'But when it occurs 82 times in the course of a novel’s 180 pages we may safely consider it to be of some significance [...]'. Occasionally the narrators’ attempts to appear no more informed than their protagonists take startling form. 'The youth muttered something', remarks Crane’s narrator of Fleming, his centre of consciousness; something, clearly, which even the narrator did not catch.

Crane’s war novel is notable also for the brutally stripped-down presentation of character and dialogue. Characters are denoted almost entirely by a single characteristic or attribute ('the loud soldier', 'the tattered man'), simulating, to some extent, the sensory immediacy and limited knowledge of the new recruit. Conversations receive a similarly direct treatment. During moments of confusion—in particular, where soldiers present conflicting rumours of battle—the narrator occasionally leaves dialogue to 'speak for itself', unattributed, dislocated, as indeed it might appear to one present at the scene:

> 'They say Perry has been driven in with big loss.'
> 'Yes, Carott went t’ the hospital. He said he was sick. That smart lieutenant is commanding “G” company [...]'
> 'Hannises’ batt’ry is took.'
> 'It ain’t either. I saw Hannises’ batt’ry off on th’ left not more’n fifteen minutes ago.'
> 'Well—'

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26 James, *WMK*, p. 212.
27 Overland, p. 261.
28 Crane, *RBC*, p. 45.
29 Fleming himself, it is true, is typically referred to simply as ‘the youth’, suggesting again the equally subjective immediacy of the narrative position itself.
The general, he ses he is goin' t' take th' hull command of th' 304th when we get inteh action [...].

Ford added to this technique the notion that the 'Impressionist in a novel [...] will never render a long speech of one of his characters verbatim, because the mind of the reader would at once lose some of the illusion of good faith in the narrator. Again, it is Dowell, as a retrospective first-person narrator, who most explicitly advertises this approach, interspersing his recollections with such qualifications as: 'And then I said something like: [...]'. Indeed, as another manifestation of the attempt to present 'the impression of the moment [...] not the corrected chronicle', we should not be surprised, following the division noted between these four impressionists, to find short or else approximated speeches as more the province of Crane and Ford than of James and—recalling his habitual lengthy recollections—of Conrad's Marlow.

Ford's other approach to reducing his own visibility during passages of dialogue was not so much, like Crane, to remove signals of attribution entirely, as to lessen their prominence through simplification and repetition. Whereas Conrad, James and Crane had followed the conventional method of varying verbs for variety ('X declared:', 'Y remarked', and so on), Ford presents dialogue in Parade's End with the unobtrusive simplicity of drama: 'Tietjens said: "[. . .]"; Macmaster said: "[. . .]"; Tietjens said: "[. . .]".' In the context of fiction, this also has the effect of rendering dialogue staccato.

Ford's principal stipulation for language generally, then, was that it should be unnoticeable to the reader. Speaking again both for himself and Conrad, Ford wrote that '[o]ur most constant preoccupation [...] was to avoid words that stuck out of sentences

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30 Crane, RBC, p. 23. Of course, novelists before Crane had employed a similar presentation of dialogue, but Crane's entire method is towards simplification as a means of conveying the essential, unmediated, occasionally disorientating sensory detail of a scene, not, as with Jane Austen for example, principally for purposes of elegance and economy.
32 Ford, TGS, p. 69.
33 Ford, 'O!', 174.
34 The difference between Conrad's practice and his own is noted by Ford in JC, pp. 187-8.
either by their brilliant unusualness or their amazing "aptness." Words, on the contrary, should be precise in meaning, stripped of tangential associations, and yet unobtrusive in themselves. Ford's very application of the term 'le mot juste' implied the influence, once again, of 'Flaubert and all his horde'. But such transparency of expression remained, for Conrad at least, easier to define than to achieve, particularly in his second tongue.

'Conrad's indictment of the English language was this,' recalled Ford, '[...] that no English word has clean edges: a reader is always, for a fraction of a second, uncertain as to which meaning of the word the writer may intend.' While acknowledging that, as a native speaker, precision of expression 'was perhaps easier for me than it was for Mr. Conrad', Ford conceded that English was nonetheless 'particularly unsuited to our joint purpose, in that its more polite forms, through centuries of literary usage, have become absolutely unsuited to direct statement.'

Perhaps more problematical for Ford's linguistic demands than the difficulty of achieving them is that, in the wider context of his fellow impressionists, the very intention to comply often seemed absent. Ford's doctrines offer a fair summary of his own writings—Ezra Pound praised, and cited as influential, the novelist's 'exact rendering of things'. But 'direct statement' could hardly be applied to the convoluted prose of later James. Unsurprisingly, Ford declared his preference for James's middle period, but the discrepancy between Ford's theory and James's later practice remains, and is only complicated by the former's acknowledgement that 'Mr. James expresses matchlessly his race and his religion. These call for delicate and sympathetic deeds and gentle surmises

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36 Ford, *TTR*, p. 52.
41 See Meixner, p. 18. Slightly perplexing in this context are Ford's remarks that James, 'having found that his limpidities, from Daisy Miller to the Real Thing, not only suggested less than he desired, but carried suggestions entirely unmeant, [...] gave up the attempt at Impressionism of that type—as if his audiences had tired him out. So he talked down to us, explaining and explaining, the ramifications of his mind. He was aiming at explicitness, never at obscurities—as if he were talking to children.' *TTR*, p. 117.
rather than clear actions and definite beliefs.\textsuperscript{42} It would appear that if James’s language conflicts with Ford’s stipulations, it yet remains, as a faithful expression of his culture, suitably impressionist; that is to say, unobtrusive to his readers (since familiar in method and tone), and expressive of their mental processes. Moreover, the mentality that it conveys, the lack of confidence in ‘clear actions and definite beliefs’, is, as I suggested in my previous chapter, entirely appropriate for the impressionist position. Ford may dislike James’s later prose style, but he cannot deny its relevance to the impressionist attitude.

The suggestion that the impressionists sought a common stylistic model also breaks down once more with Conrad, as again Ford quietly concedes. After recognising that ‘our most constant preoccupation’ was ‘perhaps easier for me than for Mr. Conrad’, Ford continues: ‘or perhaps it would be more just to say that I desired it more than Mr. Conrad did.’\textsuperscript{43} While one rarely finds in Conrad’s mature prose the showy literariness that marks the chief target of Ford’s attacks,\textsuperscript{44} there is, particularly in such works as Heart of Darkness, a wilful mistiness of description that, as with James, belies the status of ‘direct statement’. Crane, in ironic contrast, employs exactly the kind of ‘too startling epithet’ and ‘simile’ that Ford considers, ‘however vivid, [...] however just, [...] a capital defect.’\textsuperscript{45} Neither is the ‘defect’ accidental. Crane’s unconventional diction seems motivated to free language from that so expected in the mind as to be invisible to the senses; a point which Overland usefully elaborates:

for the impressionist who tries to render a transitory impression, it is necessary to avoid ordinary and well used words and to choose words and phrases that have preserved their freshness. The impression is in itself unique, determined by conditions which are not likely to coincide in exactly the same manner at any other time. Thus it is self-evident that the impressionist writer cannot put his impressions on paper through the clichés of conventional language.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{42} Ford, HJ, p. 171.
\textsuperscript{43} Ford, TTR, p. 53.
\textsuperscript{44} See, for example, Ford’s dismissal of Stevenson’s line: ‘With interjected finger he delayed the action of the timepiece’, TTR, p. 769.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, p. 769. See my discussion of Crane’s unconventional modifiers and colour attribution, pp. 72-5.
\textsuperscript{46} Overland, p. 249.
Ford was certainly not seeking clichés, but neither, problematically, do his proposals so emphasise the extraordinary. Moreover, his own practice does not always concur with his theory. Dowell’s vague and circumlocutory story telling can be ascribed, as Ford suggested, to the licence granted by first-person narration, as might his occasionally startling imagery. But the ‘immense tea-tray, august, its voice filling the black circle of the horizon,’ that dramatically opens *No More Parades*, is, especially with the clarification of its reference to the effects of an exploding shell delayed, a ‘startling’ metaphor by any account.47

Of course, such imagery is *intended* to startle the reader. As indeed with all of the variations described above—the suggestive, convoluted prose of James, the wilful mistiness of Conrad, the unconventional diction of Crane—Ford’s image seeks as much to simulate the experience of the implicated character as it does to reproduce it for the reader; reproduce, that is to say, all the uncertainty and immediacy. While Ford’s theories, then, inadvertently draw attention to a discrepancy of practice, investigation once again reveals a deeper complicity of intention and effect.

The Realist and Naturalist heritage of the techniques so far described should be apparent: the self-induced retreat of the author gained prominence with Flaubert and developed further with the subtly integrated narrative voice and positioning of Zola. On these terms alone, the advance of impressionism was relatively small. Its more significant innovations are to be found, as with Impressionist painting, in the countering of authorial withdrawal with a corresponding development of the reader’s ‘writerly’ obligations.48 Of course, one might assume that the reader must inevitably fill the vacuum left by the author’s abnegation. What distinguishes the impressionists is their belief in, and liberal


48 The term is Roland Barthes’s. See p. 120, below.
presentation of, the depths and proliferation of these consequent lacunae. The worlds of Flaubert and Zola were, to themselves and, one suspects, their readership, entirely accessible through careful reading, and would reveal their pattern without the author needing to trace it ‘with interjected finger’. By contrast, the readers of impressionist fiction were placed in no doubt as to their responsibility for the production of both circumstances and significance. If there was a figure in the carpet, it would not be of the author’s making.

II

So close is the inter-relation of reader and perceiving consciousness in impressionist fiction that the means of retaining gaps for the former and simulating those experienced by the latter are often related. On a structural level, the ‘delayed decoding’ that presents a character’s deferred analysis of sensory information (leaving aside the question of whether that analysis yields a more truthful understanding) works with similar effect upon the reader. We may interpret as arrows, sooner than the preoccupied Marlow, the ‘little sticks’ that fly about his steamer, but the earliest signs—the poleman reclining at his post, for example—will most likely be no clearer to the first-time reader. Equally, the chronological dislocation that conveys the associative and fragmented nature of understanding and recollection produces a similar effect upon the reader’s own interpretative process. The reader, that is to say, faces breaks within the chronological order of events which require inference to establish logical continuity. Scenes that, alternatively, proceed chronologically but without explicit connection, such as often occurs in the fragmentary succession of episodes in *The Red Badge of Courage* or *Parade’s End*, demand from the reader a similar degree of participation. Finally, the uncertainty of interpretation experienced by the protagonist carries often into the experience of the reader. Largely confined to Strether’s field of consciousness, we have no more information than he as to
the precise involvements of Chad. While we may reach different conclusions and respond
with different speed, the experience of forming judgements from limited and occasionally
conflicting information presents a similar challenge. Of course, novels before
impressionism had witheld details of plot from the reader until a protagonist had
fathomed them independently. This was a fundamental element of surprise. But rarely had
the uncertainty of circumstances and significance been so pronounced or so often survived
the final pages, so that, with the listeners aboard the _Nellie_, we too can say ‘[w]e were
fated [...] to hear one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences.’ Dowell is, again, the
inadvertent spokesperson for what is otherwise a generally implicit appeal to the reader’s
interpretation, concluding more than once his various aporias with a direct invitation: ‘I
leave it to you.’

On a linguistic level, too, the impressionists sought to emulate the gaps that
characterise understanding. ‘Rendering’ itself acts like delayed decoding to align the
reader’s visual impressions with those of the fictional perceiver. ‘You must never,’
instructed Ford, ‘[...] write: “He saw a man aim a gat at him”; you must put it: “He saw a
steel ring directed at him.”’ The author’s refusal to mediate for either character or reader
(Ford does not say ‘He saw a steel ring directed at him; it was a gat’) leaves each to
interpret the same impression. This fundamental principle of withholding disclosure to
encourage reader participation underlies the characteristic sentence structure of Ford and
James in particular. While the elaborate grammar of James performs repeated sidesteps in
an effort to present the full gradations of significance, the completion of the initial clause
is conspicuously deferred. And, faced with the persistence and extremity characteristic of
James, there is a sense, neatly summarised by Chatman, in which the ellipses remain:

Even in simpler cases, ellipsis exacts additional effort from the reader, and when it
is extreme or intended (as not infrequently in James’s later style), considerable

49 Conrad, _HD_, p. 11.
50 See, for example, _TGS_, p. 156 (two instances).
51 Ford, ‘_T_’, 31.
energy may be required of the reader, an expenditure that might seem unrequited to anyone who insists on conclusive results. It is characteristic of the knottiness of the style that ellipsis, either alone or together with other complicating elements, often leaves even the diligent reader in doubt as to what precisely has been said. Extensive ellipsis cannot but breed ambiguity, and in James’s case it is an ambiguity of a vaguer rather than a sharper kind.  

It is, then, an irony of James’s style that the more information (or, at least, the more words) he provides, the less manifest his meaning becomes. Additionally ironic is how concordant this concept appears with Hume’s view of the elemental impression as the greatest expression of essence.

Clearly influenced by James’s style, Ford’s emphasises the complex ramifications of thought, and, in particular, the ‘slight mental confusions and gradual clarifications’ which put us ‘always one perplexing jump behind [our] racing perceptions.’ Ford differs more notably from James in emphasising the breaks and delays in understanding with ellipses of a more direct nature; ellipses that again transfer precisely to the reader’s own experience. The pages of Parade’s End in particular are sprinkled with suspension dots. It is a feature we find also in Conrad, though he confines it to dialogue or direct, first-person recollection.

The implications of this epistemological alignment of protagonist and reader are profound. Just as readers and fictional characters seek to interpret impressions that are often conflicting or incomplete, so must they avoid the same pitfalls of interpretation and, accordingly, employ similar methods. (For their part—perhaps ominously for the reader—the protagonists are often unsuccessful, or else learn too late to overturn the effects of misinterpretation.) ‘Don’t mind anything any one tells you’, Ralph Touchett advises Isabel Archer; ‘Judge everyone and everything for yourself.’ Elemental in itself, Ralph’s emphasis upon independent observation finds philosophical development in

52 Chatman, p. 87.
53 See p. 29.
55 James, PL, p. 214.
phenomenology and the 'reduction' to individual consciousness of everything considered external. At the reader's disposal is its literary equivalent in the form of phenomenological criticism. 'As with Husserl's "bracketing" of the real object,' explains Eagleton,

[...] phenomenological criticism aims [...] at a wholly 'immanent' reading of the text, totally unaffected by anything outside it. [...] It must purge itself of its own predilections, plunge itself emphatically into the 'world' of the work, and reproduce as exactly and unbiasedly as possible what it finds there.  

Given the similarity of method, it comes as no surprise to find that the reservations made against phenomenological assumptions of pure intuition, upon which the method's central notion of categorical essences depend, apply equally to its literary-critical manifestation. Intuition, like the impression, remains wholly unverifiable in the objective, or 'transcendently subjective',  sense supposed by such phenomenological reasoning, since it is ultimately and inevitably rooted in the subjective particularity of individual consciousness. So-called 'essences' are themselves determined, hypothetically at least, by the often-invisible influence of cultural forces. They present the alleged centres of what Derrida defines, and subverts, as logocentricism.

Returning, then, to Isabel Archer, I remarked that if, for Ralph and, implicitly, James, her propensity to judge without seeing—that is, seeing for herself—made her liable to misinterpretation, then neither was her 'faculty of seeing without judging', or not questioning the data of her senses, sufficient by itself to dispel the threat of presumption. James, in particular, portrayed as more successful the combination of free-minded perception and subsequent reflective investigation. While by no means in direct contrast, Ford emphasised more the process of continual revision, to reveal inaccuracies of interpretation over time, in a process potentially unending. Dowell is the exemplary exponent of this method: his account a record of assertions, doubts and re-evaluations both

56 Eagleton, Literary Theory, p. 59.
as to both what he understands and what it all might mean. But the reader’s complicity with this approach has also been suggested in the realms of reception theory, and is particularly applicable where the impressionist text is concerned.

Based upon a theory of Friedrich Schleiermacher in the early nineteenth century, the hermeneutical circle in literary criticism denotes the process by which the reader interprets a text through a ‘continual reciprocity between whole and parts.’ It acknowledges that interpretation is a revisionary process: an ‘ever-changing dialectic of forward- and backward-looking adjustments.’ Unlike the transcendental emphasis of Husserl’s phenomenology, it acknowledges also, in the very recognition of anticipation (the ‘forward [...] adjustments’), that readers invariably bring attitudes or presumptions to the text, that indeed interpretation is inconceivable without some understanding of the codes or conventions by which the text operates, be these linguistic, generic, or otherwise. ‘The most effective work for [Wolfgang] Iser’, writes Eagleton, is one which accentuates, like a catalyst, the revisionary process, by ‘forc[ing] the reader into a new critical awareness of his or her customary codes and expectations.’ The impressionist text not only achieves this, it also partially describes the process in its subject and execution.

Discussing the notion of circular interpretation, Armstrong remarks that ‘Ford’s strictures against “straight forward” narration elevate this dialectic from a hermeneutical necessity into an aesthetic principle.’ That is to say, the switches of chronology and perspective that characterise, for example, Dowell’s narrative or Marlow’s account of

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60 I am guided here by Eagleton, Literary Theory, pp. 77-8. See also Terence Hawkes: ‘The notion that we “encode” our experience of the world in order that we may experience it; that there exists, in general, no pristine range of of experience open to us, comes directly from the work of Sapir, Whorf and Lévi-Strauss.’ Structuralism and Semiotics, New Accents (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 106.
61 Eagleton, Literary Theory, p. 79.
Lord Jim, impose a similar method of interpretation upon the reader, encouraging the continual re-evaluation of initial assumptions. Readers read about the very process that they must perform to read at all. To this extent, the impressionist text is about the experience of reading, on both a textual and extra-textual level.

As if to emphasise the necessity for continual revision, impressionist texts appear often deliberately to entice not only the type of temporary misinference that besets so many of their protagonists, but indeed uses the very same examples. ‘You will gather from this statement that one of us had, as the saying is, a “heart”’, writes Dowell near the start of his account, in terms that sound as much an instruction as a presumption. Suspicions on the reader’s part that this may not be Dowell’s considered or retrospective opinion (as of course it is not) are likely to be alleviated with the casual intimation of his next sentence: ‘Captain Ashburnham also had a heart.’ Dowell, we may speculate, desires the reader to appreciate something of the difficulty he faced in recognising the otherwise humiliating deception of his wife. Ford’s broader purpose, however, is to convey the process and difficulty of interpretation per se.

The hermeneutical circle is most successful, then, when it turns readers around to recognise the nature of their own preconceptions. Just as Dowell and Isabel learn to step back from the conviction of their interpretations, to understand better the effect of their own subjective positioning, so the impressionists encourage the reader to disengage from the text, at least occasionally, for precisely the same reasons. This aesthetic distance from the text is, of course, clearly at odds with the vicarious element that I described earlier. It constitutes, rather, the second principal narrative mode by which the impressionist text positions the reader. While I have termed this mode ‘objective: detached’, the distinction in theoretical terms proves slender, and dissolves almost entirely in practice. For readers and perceiving characters do not share a perfect alignment of perspective or interpretation:

63 Ford, TGS, pp. 9, 10; my emphasis.
a discrepancy not produced by the former’s self-awareness, only emphasised. To quote Iser:

In thinking the thoughts of another, [the reader] temporarily leaves his own disposition, for he is concerned with something which until now had not been covered by and could not have arisen from the orbit of his personal experience. [. . .] This does not mean, though, that his own orientations disappear completely. [. . .] Indeed, we can only bring another person’s thoughts into our foreground if they are in some way related to the virtual background of our own orientations (for otherwise they would be totally incomprehensible). [. . .] In reading, then, there are always two levels, and despite the multifarious ways in which they can be related they can never be totally kept apart.64

Put another way, in being aware of the process of reading, the reader experiences both the perceptions of the perceiving character, and the perception of that character perceiving. Rather than reduce or soften the reader’s interpretative obligations, the author’s retained objectivity ensures that both experiences require a similar approach and equal caution. Thus readers may not, as Ford envisaged, believe themselves truly present at ‘a drawing-room overlooking Boston Common,’ but neither should they believe the process of their own (textual) interpretation to be any less ‘real’ or less problematic than for the characters depicted.

The potential for readers to succumb to partial interpretation, in ways that often characterise the downfall of impressionist characters, is evident in the methods and assertions of much literary criticism. The problem is not that different interpretations of impressionist fiction arise: this is inevitable given the gaps and ambiguities that, like a vacuum, draw inference from the reader to maintain the text’s comprehensibility; it is more the conviction with which these interpretations are frequently presented as definitive, in what amounts to a self-willed closure of the hermeneutical circle.65 Ford himself

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65 In his ‘Introduction’ to a selection of essays on Ford, Richard A. Cassell succinctly lists the wide diversity of assertions that have been made about The Good Soldier, in categories that include: ‘whether or not the narrator Dowell is reliable [. . .] (he is and he isn’t, most say, yet both have been argued separately), the moral norm or centre of the novel’, including the identity of the ‘villain’ and the ‘protagonist’, and indeed the very genre of the novel. Ford Madox Ford: Modern Judgements, ed. Cassell (London: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 22-3.
demonstrates the ease with which this can occur, describing the scenario of James’s notoriously ambivalent *The Turn of The Screw* in terms notably unambivalent: ‘This little boy and sister have been corrupted—in ways that are never shown—by a governess and a groom in whose society they had been once left and who now, being dead, haunt, as revenants, the doomed children.’\(^{66}\) As Iser remarks, ‘the interpreter’s task should be to elucidate the potential meanings of a text, and not to restrict himself to just one.’\(^{67}\)

It is ultimately, then, the attitude of critics and readers towards the openness of literature that determines the impartiality of their interpretation, particularly where impressionism is concerned. The New Criticism that characterised the first half of the twentieth century, and that still pervades, illustrates this observation. Its (theoretical) desire to divorce the text from the subjectivity of individual response is, on its own, conducive to, and arguably influenced by, impressionism. But the underlying attempts of this and so much criticism to demonstrate the organic integrity of a literary work is particularly inappropriate for an aesthetic that seeks to challenge this very quality. Thus, Wayne C. Booth’s frustration at being unable to nail shut his interpretation of James’s *The Aspern Papers* is readily apparent: ‘Again and again in the story one is forced to throw up his hands and decide that James simply has provided insufficient clues for the judgements which he still quite clearly expects us to make.’\(^{68}\) As Sallie Sears remarks, ‘Booth does not document that last—and critical—assertion, or indicate what in the story suggests that “clear” expectation on the author’s part.’\(^{69}\) In a similar vein, F. R. Leavis denounced the ‘adjectival insistance’ of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, adding that at times Conrad seems


\(^{67}\) Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 22. Iser continues: ‘Obviously, the total potential can never be fulfilled in the reading process, but it is this very fact that makes it so essential that one should conceive of meaning as something that happens, for only then can one become aware of those factors that precondition the composition of meaning.’


\(^{69}\) Sears, p. 33.
'intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means.'\textsuperscript{70} Certainly, in the light of impressionist principles, the ‘virtue’ is not necessarily the unequivocal failure that Leavis implies. Even William James gave ‘fairly constant criticism [. . .] on the lack of solidity and explicitness in [his brother’s] fiction.'\textsuperscript{71} One begins to suspect that the relative disregard, at least until recently, of impressionism as a collection of literary principles, stems from the possibility that many critics were unsure precisely how to respond to it. Eric Solomon inadvertently suggests as much in his remarks upon \textit{The Red Badge of Courage}: ‘Even the most sympathetic critics have been unable to call the book a unified whole. It has usually been passed off as an impressionistic novel.’\textsuperscript{72}

Such resistance to aporia, however, is not only the domain of New and Practical Criticism. Even Iser’s theories have been challenged as less liberal than they might initially appear. Indeed their failure, explains Eagleton, is at root the same as that which undermines these more conventional modes:

-Iser [grants] the reader a greater degree of co-partnership with the text: different readers are free to actualise the work in different ways, and there is no single correct interpretation which will exhaust its semantic potential. But this generosity is qualified by one rigorous instruction: the reader must construct the text so as to render it internally consistent. [. . .] [T]he ‘openness’ of the work is to be gradually eliminated, as the reader comes to construct a working hypothesis which can account for and render mutually coherent the greatest number of the work’s elements.\textsuperscript{73}

The impressionist text, to summarise, requires an impressionist reading: one that respects the openness and uncertainties central to its world-view and conveyed equally by its form.\textsuperscript{74} It would be easy to sneer at the reductionistic realist readings given above,

\textsuperscript{72} Eric Solomon, ‘The Structure of \textit{The Red Badge of Courage}’, \textit{Modern Fiction Studies} 5 (1959), 221; my emphasis.
\textsuperscript{73} Eagleton., \textit{Literary Theory}, p. 81.
\textsuperscript{74} See Ford: ‘[W]hat the artist needs is the man with the quite virgin mind—the man who will not insist that grass must always be painted green, because all the poets, from Chaucer to the present day, had insisted on talking about the green grass, or the green leaves, or the green straw.’ ‘OF’, p. 333.
were not they such a natural, arguably inevitable, response.\textsuperscript{75} Perhaps the best we can do is to remind ourselves continually that the hypotheses and patterns by which we instinctively interpret the text, and indeed the world, are only pragmatic guides to dealing with the uncertainties of an irreducible subjectivity, not a definitive or objective truth. What we may lose in conviction, however, we gain in improved awareness of the ways in which meanings and interpretations are produced and imposed upon our realities.

III

‘All art is at once surface and symbol’, declared Oscar Wilde. ‘Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.’\textsuperscript{76} Wilde’s cryptic and paradoxical epigram alerts us to a further danger faced by the reader of literary impressionism: the risk of regarding the text as pure surface, pure impression; in essence, truly objective. It is, in some senses, the flipside to the inappropriate realist approach detailed above, being rather the danger of a reductionist impressionist reading. Just as the reader’s own ‘will to interpretation’ must be recognised and resisted, particularly in the case of impressionist fiction where the text appears so open, so must readers remain wary of the author’s equal compulsion to narrow the text’s signification according to his or her own prejudices. Such authorial interference, of course, would contradict the declared impartiality of the impressionist aesthetic. That it occurs, and in various forms, is significant and shall be explored below. It is, moreover, the failure of authors to always

\textsuperscript{75} See, for example, William James: ‘Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide on an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, “Do not decide, but leave the question open,” is itself a passionate decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.’ James, William. ‘The Will to Believe’, 1897, The Works of William James, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1979), p. 20. On a purely textual level, Iser remarks that ‘we know from the extensive work done by perception psychologists in connection with the reading of the printed page (e.g., Richaudeau, Zeitler, Shen) that during continuous reading, the number of focal points for the eye does not exceed two or three per line, and it is physically impossible for the eye to grasp the form of each individual letter. There are numerous examples of typographical illusions’. The Act of Reading, p. 119.

\textsuperscript{76} Wilde, Preface, The Picture of Dorian Gray, p. 4.
recognise or acknowledge their subjective interventions that may lure readers into an interpretation that is both restricted and complicit with the author's own. Investigation uncovers some important qualifications to these initial allegations; nevertheless, the aesthetic does not emerge entirely unscathed. We find rather a contradiction at the heart of impressionism as to the precise role of the author, with implications that resound throughout the aesthetic.

The tension, in essence, is testimony to the positioning of impressionism between nineteenth- and twentieth-century art and science. Zola adopted the scientific reasoning of Claude Bernard to explain how the notion of observing phenomena without influencing their natural state could be readily applied to the novelist. The scientist-novelist is both observer and experimenter, explained Zola. 'We begin certainly with true facts which are our indestructible base; but to show the mechanism of the facts, we have to produce and direct the phenomena'. This is performed, however, 'without departing from nature', but by having "a basis in observed reality", so that 'it is necessary to emphasize above all the impersonal nature of the method'. Twentieth-century science and philosophy evolved the now widely held belief that there is no such purity of perspective in our dealings with the universe. From Einstein's relativity to Schrödinger's cat, the message remains that perceivers are embroiled within the very environment they wish to measure. Of course, the challenge to Zola's claims had been immediate, not least from the impressionists' emphasis upon the particularities of perspective and the potentially unquantifiable impurities of perception. These were reservations, I have demonstrated, equally applicable to readers and characters. Only with the consideration of their own position as authors did the impressionists betray the conflicting strains of their Positivist heritage: strains maintained by many critics, past and present.

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T. S. Eliot's often quoted remark of 1918 that James 'had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it', is, in essence, one such claim for the impressionists' perfect objectivity of presentation. Three years later, Percy Lubbock insisted, with specific reference to The Ambassadors, that James never stepped beyond the perceptual field of his centre of consciousness. 'To see [Strether's vision], even for a moment, from some different angle—if, for example, the author interposed with a vision of his own—would patently disturb the right impression. The author does no such thing, it need hardly be said.' John E. Tilford Jr. listed similar judgements of The Ambassadors from critics up to the mid-twentieth century—the date of his article. Any assumptions, however, that such attitudes are merely the preserve of more distant criticism are dispelled by Kirschke's (1981) parenthetical interjection in a quotation from Albert Guerard's (1958) study of Conrad: "the . . . central preoccupation of Conrad's technique, the heart of the impressionist aim, is to invite and control [I would have omitted these last two words, were I formulating the statement] the reader's identifications'. More recent still, and more explicitly, Gunsteren wrote in 1990 of '[t]he natural, intuitive, innocent eye of the Literary Impressionist'. The impressionist text, she continues, 'is not "ready-made," shown in advance, shaped and packaged by a trained writer-narrator. It is proffered to the reader like some fluid, poetic, enigmatic substance, and instead of following the plot line we wander around as if in a daydream.' (A daydream, needless to say, is precisely what the impressionists warn against as a condition for clear interpretation.)

The means by which authors might be considered to interfere with the text, or to guide response (the two, I shall argue, are not distinct)—in contradiction, that is, to their assertions to the contrary—have been explored most famously by Booth, and by many

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78 Quoted Watt, Conrad in the Nineteenth Century, p. 147.
81 Kirschke, p. 151. Kirschke's adjustments and interjection.
82 Van Gunsteren, pp. 58, 55.
subsequently in the field of narratology. The variations specific to impressionist literature
settle into a few categories. At their most manifest, intrusions take the form of direct
interjections. These may be explicit revelations to the reader, as when, in 'The Open
Boat', Crane writes: 'It is fair to say here that there was not a life-saving station within
twenty miles in either direction, but the men did not know this fact'.83 Or, on a smaller
scale, they may be first- and second-person pronouns in a third-person narrative,
effectively emphasising the relationship of author-narrator and reader as one of informed
teller addressing a passive recipient. This latter type interferes further when the narrator
speaks for a character on behalf of the reader ('our friend'), or refers to a character with
overt sympathy ('poor Strether').84 Quieter intrusions occur where the author or narrator
steps beyond the perceptual threshold of the supposedly dominant perceiving
consciousness. Under Western Eyes provides one such instance in a first-person narrative
(see p. 68, above), but discrepancies are equally evident where third-person narrators are
employed. We might wonder, for example, how Maisie, through whose eyes the story is
directed, can possibly be described as 'whiter than ever'.85 The distinction between author
and narrator is a small one here, particularly in third-person narratives: for whether the
author or an unspecified, uninvolved narrator intrudes as described, the effect is to
contradict the author's claims for neutrality of presentation, and, more significantly
perhaps, to influence the reader's reaction. Ford's comment that first-person narrators
have the licence to show bias or to intrude upon their narratives needs also to be qualified.
The clearly negative, almost caricatured presentation of Peter Ivanovitch and Sophia
Antonovna would be entirely attributable to the teacher-narrator, but Conrad offers
nothing to suggest that these figures are anything other than the exaggerated monsters they

83 Crane, 'OB’, WSC, vol. 5, p. 76. See also James, PL: 'The reader already knows more about him than Isabel was ever to know, and the reader may therefore be given the key to the mystery'; p. 332.
84 Examples abound in James, A; see, for example, pp. 174 and 18 respectively.
85 James, WMK, p. 261.
appear to the narrator. Instead, the narrator arguably becomes a disguise for Conrad's own prejudices.

A second principal form of intrusion is irony. It is, moreover, a form particularly appropriate for the impressionist author. Employed in its dramatic sense, the potential disparity between the assumptions of the perceiving consciousness and those of the reader and other characters sustains the impressionist theme of subjective interpretation. The adult reader brings to *What Maisie Knew* an understanding of adult relations that far exceeds the young girl's own, throwing a different light upon the same sensory data. Such irony is neither intrusive nor necessarily an attempt to influence reader response. The same has been argued for irony that subverts values and attitudes without replacing a firm—perhaps authorial—substitute. '[...]' Crane was ironic by temperament,' writes John W. Rathbun, 'suspicious of situations in which the ambivalent did not play a role.' Snitow, more precisely, distinguishes between the irony of Conrad and Ford; the former type, she explains, involves 'saying one thing while meaning another', while the latter constitutes 'saying one thing and not being finally sure of what other meaning was lurking beneath.'

Each of these temptingly clear statements risks over-simplification.

Crane's irony results, characteristically, from a manipulation of narrative focus and tone: adjustments made by the author to emphasize a particular meaning or significance, in much the manner of an auteur. These adjustments, furthermore, are not necessarily illustrative of ambivalence. Conceit and self-delusion are definite and recurring targets of Crane's irony. The satirical tone of *The Red Badge of Courage* is established from the outset: the 'tall soldier' returns to the camp 'swelled with a tale he had heard from a reliable friend, who had heard it from a truthful cavalryman, who had heard it from his trustworthy brother, one of the orderlies at division headquarters. He adopted the

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87 Snitow, p. 37.
important air of a herald in red and gold.' As Walcutt remarks, there is about such figures 'an excess that makes them comical, and the author seems to delight in rendering the flavor of their extravagancies.'

Snitow's view of Conrad's irony gains some support from *The Secret Agent*. Alongside numerous instances of dramatic irony is a type so overt, cutting and unequivocal as to push the text to the fringes of impressionism; an act furthered by the near-Dickensian portrayal of many principal figures: "'We want facts—startling facts—damn you [...]'". Conrad never pretended that his novel was anything other than satirical, but his mockery of Cesare Lombroso, the Italian criminologist who equated criminal tendencies with physical characteristics, creates one irony, given the (artificially) appropriate physical attributes of Conrad's own criminals, that the author might not have intended. Generally then, irony in *The Secret Agent* is of a particularly stable type, in a way that irony in *The Good Soldier*, with its destabilising equivocations, is not. Snitow's distinction between the two authors becomes less secure when the picture broadens to encompass *Heart of Darkness* and *Parade's End*. The former not only rejects clear dichotomies of value and tradition, it also reverses and frequently collapses them—lying, laws, and colonisation, for instance, are not straightforward moral issues. By contrast, and largely discarding the perceived French characteristics of *The Good Soldier*, Ford's tetralogy strikes a particularly English, even Victorian, tone. Occasional scenes of social comedy and farce are helped along by some heavily delineated characters, such as General Campion and the Rev. Mr. Duchemin. In this work, as Snitow acknowledges, 'Ford never

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88 Crane, RBC, p. 3.
90 Conrad, TSA, p. 61.
91 See the 'Author's Note' to TSA, p. 41: 'Even the purely artistic purpose, that of applying an ironic method to a subject of that kind, was formulated with deliberation and in the earnest belief that ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as in pity.'
92 See TSA, pp. 77-8. In his 'Introduction' to Conrad's text, Martin Seymour-Smith convincingly demonstrates the novelist's satirical presentation of Lombroso's assertions; p. 20. Seymour-Smith does not explain how Conrad's depiction of, for example, the Professor as of 'stunted stature' can be anything other than 'Lombroso'; p. 101.
undermines or complicates by counter-judgements his essential ironies at the expense of the home front, the tea-party population.\textsuperscript{93}

Though largely a tool for the ironist, caricature introduces a third form of potential authorial intrusion: details of an overtly symbolic resonance. (For convenience, I shall refer to such details in the context of this particular argument as ‘symbols’.) As with irony, these symbols may be ‘dramatically accountable’, ‘open’, or ‘closed’. In the first category, the presence and significance of the symbol remains credibly attributable to a character’s psychological predilections. The reader, for example, may suspect the weight of the author’s opinions behind the description of Osmond’s mansion—the ominous sounding Palazzo Roccanera—as ‘a dark and massive structure overlooking a sunny piazzetta’, with an ‘imposing [. . .] incommunicative [. . .] mask’-like facade.\textsuperscript{94} However, as Madame Merle tells Isabel:

‘we’re each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our “self”? Where does it begin? where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the things I choose to wear. [. . .] One’s self—for other people—is one’s expression of one’s self; and one’s house, one’s furniture, one’s garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive.’\textsuperscript{95}

Merle’s theory does not, of course, cover all aspects of physical appearance. While we may have influence over such details as clothes, hair, weight and posture, Merle’s own ‘full-rimmed mouth which when she smiled drew itself up to the left side’ arguably exaggerates, beyond full credibility, the correlation of innate appearance to character.\textsuperscript{96} A telling image in every sense with its sinister overtones (‘sinister’, after all, is Latin for ‘left’\textsuperscript{97}), Merle’s smile appears more as the artificial fashioning of James than a supposedly coincidental, naturalistic phenomenon. (Compare Mrs Wix’s ‘straighteners’,

\textsuperscript{93} Snitow, p. 226.
\textsuperscript{94} James, \textit{PL}, pp. 307, 195.
\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Ibid.}, \textit{PL}, p. 175.
\textsuperscript{96} \textit{Ibid.}, \textit{PL}, p. 153.
\textsuperscript{97} This point has been made, in another context, by Bernard Knox. ‘Notes’, Homer, \textit{The Odyssey}, transl. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1996), p. 504.
mirroring her moral rigidity.) The golden bowl of James's eponymous novel presents a more sustained instance of closed symbolism: cracked beneath the surface, the bowl's explicit (and, naturalistically speaking, contrived) relevance to the events of the narrative is only accentuated by its elevation to the novel's title.

Indeed, if we extend my particular application of the term 'symbolism' further, to include all details in excess of naturalist requirements, we find in impressionist fiction nomenclature and intertextual allusions to literature that verge on the allegorical. The latter may be 'internal', as with the title references that pervade the four volumes of *Parade's End*, or else 'external', as with the many relevant *Paradise Lost* references in *The Portrait of A Lady*. Character names occasionally seem more than a little representative. May Server of *The Sacred Fount* 'may serve' as Gilbert Long's mystical fount, Ida Farrange in *What Maisie Knew* strays/ 'ranges far'; Dowell holds his narrative together like the headless wood pegs that echo his name, while Mrs. Basil and Mrs. Maisie Maidan in that novel have names associated respectively with 'sweet basil' and 'the feminine state which has been traditionally thought of as fresh, innocent, and gentle.'

Despite these and other instances of contrived referencing, however, 'closed symbolism' (details with an overt, unequivocal and non-naturalistic symbolic signification) remains more common to pre-impressionist fiction. Artists of the Romantic era replaced conventional and 'universal' symbolic patterns with subjective and imaginative ones. Nonetheless, the range of interpretations remained largely clear and

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98 Among numerous thematic parallels to the notion of innocence falling to deception, see such lines as 'his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers' and, near the novel's close, "The world's all before us." *James, PL*, pp. 360, 489.
100 Observed by, among others, Meixner, p. 157.
quantifiable. With impressionism, often the precise meaning of symbols explodes outwards into the realms of an uncertain haze, in much the same way as Marlow narrates:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical [. . .] and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze [. . .].

The comparison, then, is closer to Symbolism, the first manifesto of which, as Watt notes, 'occurred in the same year as the last Impressionist exhibition'. However, as Watt also makes clear, despite much common ground ('they agreed in rejecting intellectual conceptualisation and traditional assumptions in the name of a directly apprehended personal and subjective vision'), the Symbolists ultimately sought 'coherent meanings and values for which they inwardly yearned but could not find in external reality.'

Impressionist symbols, or images of symbolic purport, have, by contrast, generally more 'pragmatic' purposes. They seek, firstly, often to convey the recognition or delineation of patterns as discerned by a perceiving consciousness, and through which reality settles into organised coherence; patterns, nevertheless, which may disintegrate with less partial inspection (a concept I shall explore more fully in Chapter 6). Secondly, such images may serve as a means of communicating directly to the reader a vivid sensory impression, precisely as a character or the author may have experienced it. In this latter sense, the symbolic image is a more 'painterly' way of communicating impressions, seeking to narrow the linguistic correspondence of signifier and signified.

Ultimately, however, details of symbolic resonance risk disrupting the open and naturalistic surface of the text, drawing readers into awareness of the text's fictionality,

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105 See Beverly Jean Gibbs, 'Impressionism as a Literary Movement', *Modern Language Journal* 36 (1952), 180. See also Arthur Symons: 'The Impressionist, in literature as in painting, would flash upon you in a new, sudden way so exact an image of what you have just seen, just as you had seen it [. . .]. The Symbolist, in this new, sudden way, would flash upon you the 'soul' of that which can be apprehended only by the soul—the finer sense of things unseen [. . .]. 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', 1893, in Arthur Symons: *Poetry and Prose*, selected by R. V. Holdsworth (Cheadle: Carcanet-Fyfield, 1974), p. 73.
and prompting them to interpret the text in specific ways, without complete freedom. Such
may be the weight of Conrad’s acknowledgement to Elsie Hueffer, Ford’s wife, of ‘the
fault of having made Kurtz too symbolic or rather symbolic at all.’ He continues: ‘the
story being mainly a vehicle for conveying a batch of impersonal impressions I gave the
rein to my mental laziness and took the line of least resistance.’

The last form of authorial intrusion I shall consider here is that of structure. To
appear both true to life and free of interference, the world depicted by the impressionist
must resemble everyday reality in all its loose ends and irregularity. ‘“Contrived”’, wrote
Conrad, ‘—that word of disparaging sound is the last word I would have used in
connection with any piece of work by Stephen Crane [. . .]’. The Red Badge of Courage,
he continued, is ‘a spontaneous piece of work which seems to spurt and flow like a tapped
stream from the depths of the writer’s being [. . .]’.

There are, indeed, what seem like realistic concessions to irrelevance in Crane’s fiction—a notion Barthes termed ‘l’effet du
réel’. Overland gives the example of a colonel calling over his shoulder: ‘Don’t forget
that box of cigars!’ ‘The youth wondered what a box of cigars had to do with war’, the
novel continues. ‘And so,’ adds Overland, ‘[. . .] do we. No more is ever heard of a box of
cigars. Why then put it into the book?’ On a larger scale, one recalls the numerous
digressions that characterise Dowell’s narrative and, as a consequence, the novel itself.

There is, of course, selection in every narrative. We never see every scene that we
can presume to have occurred, or every detail of those that are included. Joyce makes the
point famously in Ulysses by following his characters in even their most private and
domestic moments. But then, a degree of selection is equally characteristic of everyday
perception. ‘[E]ven in the field of sensation,’ wrote William James, ‘our minds exert a

108 This detail derived from Millicent Bell, Meaning in Henry James (Massachusetts: Harvard UP,
1991), p. 3.
certain arbitrary choice'; memory compounds the effect by ‘forgetting’ that which is
tedious or, sometimes, damaging to our self-image. More typical of fiction, however, is
the way that selection is motivated by the author’s attitudes and aesthetic purpose. The
box of cigars is included precisely to illustrate the perverse priorities of war and the
seemingly blasé attitude of other soldiers—points occurring to Henry at this stage of his
experience. Likewise, the digressions of Dowell are only ‘apparently mindless’—as
Thomas Moser (among others) has neatly demonstrated. More overt instances of
authorial selection occur where the author-narrator expresses a dramatically unaccountable
concern for editorial matters. In *What Maisie Knew*, this awareness concerns available
narrative ‘space’:

> It was granted her at this time to arrive at divinations so ample that I shall have no
room for the goal if I attempt to trace the stages; as to which, therefore, I must be
content to say that the fullest expression we may give to Sir Claude’s conduct is a
poor and pale copy of the picture it presented to his young friend.

Even more difficult to explain, in purely naturalistic terms, is why Isabel Archer’s
wedding, the first three years of her marriage, and the death of her child should be given
virtually in passing. Certainly this cannot reflect the protagonist’s own mentality.

The illusion of naturalistic selection is exemplified in Ford’s notion of the
‘unearned increment.’ This he describes as

> the juxtaposition of the composed renderings of two or more unexaggerated
actions or situations [which] may be used to establish [. . . ] a sort of frictional
current of electric life that will extraordinarily galvanize the work of art in which
the device is employed.

Ford gives the example of Rodolphe’s seduction of Madame Bovary during the
agricultural fair, the words of which blend comically with the public announcements of the

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111 This point is developed in Chapter Six.
113 James, *WMK*, pp. 162-3.
114 See James, *PL*, pp. 303-5.
115 Ford, *ML*, p. 734. Ford adds that it is with the ‘discovery’ of this device that ‘Impressionism
began’.
ceremony. But there is little ‘unearned’ about such increments. In less guarded moments, Ford described the purpose of selection as to ‘carry the story forward [. . .] faster and faster and with more and more intensity’: a process he termed ‘progression d’effet’. While this accelerating narrative may be dramatic, it is unlikely to be ‘true to life’.

Just as selection emphasises the extent of authorial control, so too does the balance and order of many impressionist texts. As with the discussion of irony and symbolism, there is a sense in which the symmetry of larger structures—those involving echoes of date or circumstance—may be accountable in psychological terms. Reflecting upon the ‘curious coincidence’ of the ‘4th of August’ that pervades his narrative, Dowell decides that ‘it may have been the superstitious mind of Florence that forced her to certain acts, as if she had been hypnotised.’ It remains the case however, as James remarks, that ‘[i]n proportion as in what [fiction] offers us we see life without arrangement do we feel that we are touching the truth; in proportion as we see it with arrangement do we feel that we are being put off with a substitute, a compromise and convention.’

Taken at face value, James’s statement condemns impressionist fiction to persistent failure: a failure that, at least in his own fiction, appears perversely self-willed. In the New York Preface to What Maisie Knew, James describes artistic neatness as a guiding principle: ‘I recollect, however, promptly thinking that for a proper symmetry the second parent should marry too’. He proceeds, it is true, to explain how this balance would also be dramatically accountable, but, following repeated expressions of satisfaction at the work’s formal symmetry, one suspects that this story-level justification is at least partially serendipitous. Certainly, such neatness is less convincing in the marriage of Adam Verver and Charlotte Stant. This event, as Douglas Hewitt remarks,

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117 Ford, TGS, p. 57. J. Hillis Miller makes a similar point about the repetitions of jumping (and so on) in Conrad’s LJ. Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 36.
118 James, ‘AF’, p. 38; James’s emphasis.
119 James, Preface, WMK, p. 23.
demands from Adam, in its calculating effect for his daughter, ‘a view of Charlotte which, if we allow ourselves to consider it, can hardly be other than inhuman [. . .]’. ‘I do not think that James wants us to think Adam wicked’, continues Hewitt, ‘but he is more interested in symmetrical conjugations than in the untidiness of feeling.’ Similarly, Conrad defended James against accusations of austere artistry, while conceding that there is ‘perhaps [. . .] too much perfection of method.’ H. G. Wells contributed most vociferously to the accusation that artistry takes an unnatural precedence in James’s fiction, but it would be fallacious to single out James as the only author implicated by the charge. In composing The Good Soldier, Ford expressed concern at ‘the danger of becoming too flawless, arid, soulless, & so on’. Meixner is more severe: ‘[. . .] in the last analysis, Ford probably should not be described as an Impressionist. What basically excludes him as such is his steady adherence to the ideal, learned from his Continental masters, of the tightly constructed novel.’ While Meixner does not dismiss the existence or validity of literary impressionism in itself, one is left wondering who could be judged as representative with this reasoning. Meixner’s remark does emphasise, however, a deep-seated tension within the impressionist aesthetic.

It is, in essence, a paradox. Fiction that strives to be naturalistic must either present only material directly relevant to the story and theme, in which case it is open to charges of being contrived and artificial; or else, by attempting to include the broad and messy diversity of life, it is deemed baggy and superfluous. At first sight, we find what appears to be a compromise. James wrote of the ‘explosive principle in one’s material’ as being that which must be ‘allowed to flush and colour and animate’, providing, that is, its

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'appetites and treacheries, its characteristic space-hunger and space-cunning [are] kept
down.' Such reasoning ultimately does little to dispel the underlying contradiction.

When James writes that 'art is essentially selection, but it is a selection whose main care
is to be typical, to be inclusive', the presumption that the great artist's selection is
typical, and that the inclusion is not selective, remains problematic by virtue of its
judgemental subjectivity.

It is only when we dig deeper to reveal more candid expressions of artistic intent
that the contradiction might be resolved. 'Really, universally, relations stop nowhere,'
wrote James in the New York Preface to Roderick Hudson, 'and the exquisite problem of
the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle in which they shall
happily appear to do so.' This represents an artistic sleight of hand common to all
impressionists. Thus Crane quotes Emerson: "There should be a long logic beneath the
story, but it should be kept carefully out of sight." 'Of course, you must agree to
digress,' agrees Ford. 'That is the art which conceals your Art [. . .]. But really not one
single thread must ever escape your purpose.' Evidently, the tapped stream of Crane's
fiction concealed, for Conrad, the same underlying control: 'The illusions come out of
your hand without a flaw', he wrote to Crane. 'It is not life—which nobody wants—it is
art [. . .].'

The prevailing popular assumption is that Impressionist paintings were similarly a
result of spontaneous composition. In fact, the painters faced the same paradox as the
writers, and made the same decision. '[T]he further I go,' wrote Monet in 1890, 'the better
I see that it takes a great deal of work to succeed in rendering what I want to render:

125 Quoted Millicent Bell, p. 13.
126 James, 'AF', p. 38.
129 Ford, IWN, p. 192.
“instantaneity,” [...] and I’m more than ever disgusted at things that come easily, at first attempt. Monet captured as much of the initial impression on canvas as was feasible, given the constraints of changing atmosphere and careful composition, often later retreating to the studio to rework irregularities and instil a greater unity. Even in principle, the process of artistic composition could never be anything but ‘contrived’.

Whether a matter of selecting the angle of perspective, the parameters of the frame, the particular occasion, the materials used, the length and direction of brush-strokes, and so on, the art of painting—like photography—is a discipline steeped in individual choice. Then there is the matter of what the Impressionist records—a point on which James was to remark: ‘If a painter works for other eyes as well as his own he courts a certain danger [...] of being arrested by the cry of the spectator: “Ah! But excuse me; I myself take more impressions than that.” We feel a synthesis not to be an injustice only when it is rich.’

Greater richness of selection, however, does little to resolve the impressionist paradox: it remains selection, and a deliberate control of impressions on the author’s part, which channels the response of the reader.

IV

It is this manipulation of response that makes the principle of authorial interference so pertinent to impressionism. The issue is not that authors fail to remove their attitudes and influence from the text. Since fiction is, by definition, imaginative work, such a complaint would be absurd. Rather, the attitudes integral to impressionism—the lack of order and certainty in perceived reality; the importance of both characters and readers responding to impressions impartially—are challenged with sharp irony by the quiet imposition of

131 Quoted Paul Smith, p. 102.
132 Information derived from various sources, including Paul Smith, pp. 25-7, 83.
134 Ford writes: ‘Mr. Conrad reveals himself as little in his books as does Shakespeare in his plays. Nonetheless, no author, however rigid his techniques of self-concealment, can conceal utterly his moral or material preferences [...].’ JC, p. 96. See also EN, pp. 128-9.
authorial order and value, and in ways comparatively unimportant to alternative aesthetics. For all its aspirations towards pure observation, realism’s corresponding assumptions of a common and coherent phenomenal reality lessen the discrepancy between theory and practice. Modernist art, by contrast, frequently sidesteps the conflict entirely. Less naturalistic than the impressionists, many modernists saw little need to mirror the perceived formlessness of modern reality with a similar formlessness of art. (Despite its formal dislocations of conventional form, there is nothing spontaneous about it.) Conveying rather the opposite intent, T. S. Eliot described the organising principle of Joyce’s ‘mythical method’ as ‘a step towards making the modern world possible for art’: a formal strategy evidently not precluded by Eliot’s own theory of ‘impersonality’. Art could provide the modernists with an order and cohesion regarded as lacking in the modern world. Ford recalls the attitude of a young modernist towards his own practices:

‘What is the sense,’ he said, ‘of all this “justification” of a subject that Maupassant and you and Conrad indulge in . . . You try to trick the reader into believing that he is hearing true stories . . . But you can’t. [. . .] Conrad takes twenty thousand words out of an immense novel to describe a public-house on the river at Greenwich . . . In order to “justifier” [sic] his story . . . It is a waste of time . . . What the public wants is Me . . .’.  

The impressionist aesthetic would be less vulnerable to the challenge of hypocrisy, however harsh that sounds, were the illusion less disguised. It is not, after all, a contradiction that impressionist authors should possess the same subjectivity of perception as that described in their own works as being fundamental to humanity. Readers would need ‘simply’ to approach the author with a scepticism equal to that required for the accounts of Dowell or James’s Governess. However, by pretending, and occasionally assuming, that the text is a site of independent impressions, or else by hiding behind a fictional narrator, the author puts the reader off guard, risking a heightened degree of manipulation that extends beyond the realms of fictional interpretation to matters.

135 Quoted Faulkner, p. 17; my emphasis.
136 Ford, TTR, p. 140; Ford’s emphases. This difference between modernism and impressionism is returned to in the Conclusion.
ideological. '[T]he novelist must not, by taking sides, exhibit his preferences,' instructed Ford. In terms more directly suggestive of entrapment, he elaborated: 'By pleasing [the reader], you hold his attention, and once you have accomplished that you may inject into him what you please: [. . .] only you must remember that in vain does the fowler set his net in sight of the bird.'

Ford’s imagery only emphasises the irony of this attitude in the context of impressionist fiction—an irony most evident in, but by no means exclusive to, the works of James. It echoes, for instance, the thoughts of Gilbert Osmond in his efforts to ensnare Isabel. Indeed, Osmond is more explicit about his intentions. Closer, then, to the impressionist author’s position in *The Portrait of A Lady* is the character of Ralph Touchett. Though expressly intended to promote the development of Isabel’s character and independence, Ralph’s silent redirection of her uncle’s fortune has a major influence upon the course of her life. It exposes her to circumstances of greed-induced seduction for which she proves evidently unprepared (hence *Paradise Lost* allusions). Ralph’s claims to refrain from guiding Isabel’s response to her various suitors equally fails to hold true in practice. We witness him ‘thinking hard how he could best express Osmond’s sinister attributes without putting himself in the wrong by seeming to describe him coarsely.’ It is not, however, *coarseness* of expression that potentially betrays Ralph’s impassivity; as Rowe remarks, the opposite is closer to the truth:

> Although the dictator may be difficult to overthrow, at least he designs his power to be recognised. [. . .] [A] subtler and more troublesome sort of authority would be that which disguises its power, effectively displacing the signs of its rule to others: both other agents and other orders of discourse.

The impressionists displace the signs of their authority to a primary narrator or centre of consciousness, hiding behind the narratological mechanics of supposed impartiality. At

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137 Ford, *EN*, p. 121.
138 Ford, 'T', 32.
139 Ralph’s denies at all acting upon Isabel on *PL*, p. 109.
141 Rowe, pp. 121-2.
the same time, their novels frequently explore the process by which authority and control deflect attention to another source. Ford described *What Maisie Knew* as 'a romance of the English habit of trying to shift responsibility.' It is a habit appropriately exemplified by the adults in their frequent use of silence to conceal or to evade unwanted inquiry.

In *The Sacred Fount*, Ford Obert suggests, perhaps inadvertently, that his acceptance of the narrator’s theories results less from independent interpretation than from the latter’s selective disclosure and intimations. ‘I do see,’ Obert tells the narrator. ‘But [. . .] only through your having seen first. You gave me the pieces. I’ve but put them together.’ It is a further irony of this novel—dependent ultimately upon our acceptance or rejection of the narrator’s sacred fount theory—that the latter theory attempts to impose order upon the contingent, by finding (or positing) behind unanticipated change a complex but neatly reciprocal system. In a similar way, Osmond seeks to subdue unwieldy life to formal artistry, whether for Isabel, Pansy, or himself. James clearly does not believe *The Sacred Fount* narrator’s fantasy, nor is he evidently neutral towards Osmond’s cold aestheticism, but this only deepens the incongruence of his desire for an architecture and expression of ‘proper symmetry’ within his fiction.

Aspects of disguised authority pervade *The Turn of the Screw*, in ways particularly relevant to impressionist practices. For all the critical attention bestowed upon the psychology and morality of the Governess, she remains ultimately subservient to her employer, the absent uncle of her charges. Afforded only the illusion of complete authority, the Governess is told by ‘‘the master’’ (ironically a common appellation for James) at their first and only meeting ‘‘[t]hat she should never trouble him—but never,

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142 Quoted Tytell, 367.
143 I am guided in this remark by Millicent Bell, who provides comprehensive examples, pp. 250-2. Maisie also learns to use silence, albeit more to avoid manipulation than enact.
144 James, *SF*, p. 131.
146 I am guided in the following account of *TS* by Rowe, pp. 119-146.
147 James, *TS*, p. 12.
never: neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything [. . .].” A refusal of communication as well as assistance (“‘mind you don’t report. Not a word.’”\footnote{149}), the Uncle’s instruction reinforces through its very abnegation of involvement the power and authority of his position, while rejecting all responsibility for the troubles and potential failures of his own family relations. Similarly, by claiming to withdraw from the text (‘There is not only from beginning to end of the matter not an inch of expatiation, but my values are positively all blanks’\footnote{150}), James prompts the reader to focus exclusively upon his protagonist, while silently directing proceedings from afar: ‘Only \textit{make} the reader’s general vision of evil intense enough, I said to myself [. . .] \textit{make} him think the evil, \textit{make} him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications.’\footnote{151} Present in their absence, both the Uncle and James have been described as ‘the true ghosts haunting the space of [\textit{The Turn of the Screw}].’\footnote{152}

Whether or not authorial presence is inevitable, there remain two principal ways in which the incidence of disguised, even inadvertent reader manipulation may potentially be qualified. Perhaps characteristically for an issue grounded in contradiction, the two avenues appear starkly opposed. The first is, particularly in the context of modern critical theory, a natural consequence of the very medium of literary impressionism. ‘[W]riting’, wrote Barthes, ‘is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin.’\footnote{153} Barthes distinguishes between the ‘readerly’ (\textit{lisible}) text, in which writing is transitive and referential, and the ‘writery’ (\textit{scriptible}), in which ‘a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any

\begin{footnotes}
\item[148] James, \textit{TS}, p. 6.
\item[149] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 10.
\item[150] James, Preface, \textit{TS}, p. 123.
\item[151] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 123; my emphasis. James further assumes in the preface that the reader will feel ‘sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends)’, p. 123.
\item[152] Rowe, p. 143. (Rowe in turn acknowledges Shoshana Felman.) See Iser, \textit{The Act of Reading}, pp. 26-7: ‘[. . .] the literary text at least potentially prestructures [its] “results” to the extent that the recipient can actualise them in accordance with his own principles of selection. In this respect, we can say that literary texts initiate “performances” of meaning rather than actually formulating meanings themselves.’
\end{footnotes}
function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself. The writerly text relinquishes its hook on extra-textual reality, and with it the authority of a definite meaning, conferring instead responsibility for signification upon the reader. In Barthes's terms, a 'disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.' Determining to which category impressionism belongs—readerly or writerly—proves relatively inconsequential. As Barthes's own elaborate study of Balzac's *Sarrasine* makes evident, there is ultimately no distinction to be made other than that of intent as discernible in the narrative voice—and intent is the very notion challenged. The readerly text can be proven, in a process Derrida would later term deconstruction, to be a 'neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost [...]. With the death of the author would come the end of all origins of authorial meaning. It is not that impressionist authors will have successfully removed themselves from the text; it is that their language will have done it for them.

If the impressionists could not control this saving inability of language to communicate their precise intentions, they at least recognised and even played upon its potential to fail. James's sentences perhaps exemplify Derrida's concept of *differance*: deferring and persistently qualifying definitive signification. Conrad's dissatisfaction with the blurred edges of the English language, and with communication generally, is often voiced by his narrators: Marlow doubts whether his listeners can grasp his experiences, while the Teacher of Languages declares at the outset that 'Words, as is well known, are

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154 Ibid., p. 142.  
155 Ibid., p. 142.  
157 Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 142.
the great foes of reality.'\textsuperscript{158} Crane's reservations emerge most clearly in his correspondence: 'Script is an infernally bad vehicle for thoughts. I know that at least.'\textsuperscript{159}

What the impressionists would never have conceded, however, is that the meaning of their language was entirely beyond their control. Neither was it, of course. It may be that the intricate deconstruction of textual signification can locate sites of contradiction and undo meaning, even to the point where initial intentions become quite neutralised. But their language first carried the essence of what they believed this meaning to be, however unstable it became after deconstructive readings. How else would the deconstructionist measure the success of the method? The theoretical tenuousness of authorial signification does not, in short, lessen its potential to colour the narrative for the reader, just as information proven false, such as propaganda, may have first misled. Even if we divorce the text from the notion of conclusive authorial intention—for we can rarely be sure of precisely what an author intended—we would have to acknowledge that language itself is not some neutral, transparent medium, but rather shot through with ideological preconception. Meaning does not predate language; meaning is shaped and constructed by the medium in which it must operate.\textsuperscript{160} And that medium, as Eagleton remarks, 'is ineradicably social.'\textsuperscript{161}

The second important qualification to be made about the residual authorial presence in impressionist fiction is more expressly intentional. It constitutes, indeed, the third principal mode by which the impressionist text seeks to position the reader: that which I have termed 'subjective.' After the approaches so far described, with their staunch denials of authorial intervention and corresponding assertions of strict impersonality, it might appear a startling contradiction to find Ford describing 'Impressionism [as] a frank

\textsuperscript{158} Conrad, \textit{UWE}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{159} Crane, 'To Nellie Crousce', 31 Dec 1895, CSC, vol. 1, p. 162.
\textsuperscript{160} I am guided in this argument by Eagleton, \textit{Literary Theory}, pp. 60-1, 129-30.
\textsuperscript{161} Eagleton, \textit{Literary Theory}, p. 60.
expression of personality [ ... ].

Conrad described the artist as one 'for whom self-expression must, by definition, be the principal object, if not the only raison d'être, of his existence [ ... ].' Conrad, Preface, *NN*, p. 145. ' [T]he artist', he continued, in the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, 'descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal.' Again, one of James's well-known dicta in "The Art of Fiction" is that '[a] novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life'. It is, then, hardly surprising that there should be, as Levenson remarks, a 'continuing debate over whether Impressionism is “subjective” or “objective”.' What might surprise us more is Ford's apparent ease with the discrepancy: 'the Impressionist author is sedulous to avoid letting his personality appear in the course of his book. On the other hand, his whole book [ ... ] is merely an expression of his personality.'

This is, as Ford remarked, an 'enormously complicated' aspect of impressionism, not helped by authorial declarations of intent that tend not infrequently towards the oblique. Conrad's Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* exemplifies gaps and ambiguities typical of his fiction. He defines art as 'a single-handed attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect.' It involves, he continues, 'the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments'; an appeal which, 'to be effective, must be an impression conveyed through the senses [ ... ].' Among the assumptions of Conrad's claim is that all people, authors and readers alike, share psychological properties, a certain 'temperament'. If authors can evoke their sensory

163 Quoted Nettels, p. 27.
165 James, 'AF', p. 29. My emphasis.
167 Ibid., p. 323.
170 Ibid., p. 146.
impressions directly and with complete sincerity ('temperament [. . .] is not amenable to persuasion'), their readers will respond with the same basic human emotions—individual differences outweighed by profound similarities. The similarity to Eliot's 'objective correlative' has been noted, although, as Pettersson has explained, 'Eliot differs from Conrad in wishing to place the emphasis on the work as an objective structure dissociated from the consciousness of its originator.' Thus, 'the feeling, or emotion, or vision, resulting from the poem', wrote Eliot, 'is something different from the feeling or emotion or vision in the mind of the poet.'

While Conrad's theory differs also from those of his fellow impressionists, the differences reside primarily in the emphasis: the similarities are more striking. As 'a personal, a direct impression of life', the work of fiction for James, explains Armstrong, 'begins with the author's impressions. Then in the reading process, it achieves the ends of representation by evoking impressions in its audience.' James talks less of shared temperament, but he describes as fundamental to the artist 'a capacity for receiving straight impressions.' The emphasis is on fidelity: if not to some objective reality, then to reality as it strikes the perceiving artist. 'I understand that a man is born into the world with his own pair of eyes,' wrote Crane, 'and he is not at all responsible for his vision—he is merely responsible for the quality of his personal honesty.' But this emphasis on sincerity implicitly recognises the artist's perceptions to be of profound value to all humanity, with the suggestion of a shared response. One recalls Ford's remark that, '[. . .] the general effect of a novel must be the general effect that life makes on mankind.'

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172 Eliot describes the 'objective correlative' as 'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of [a] particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.' 'Hamlet', 1919, Selected Prose/ T. S. Eliot, ed. John Hayward, 1953 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 102.
175 James, 'AF', p. 39.
Of course, for readers to respond sympathetically to the author’s personal impressions, the impressions must be conveyed accurately, without distortion. However, it is precisely language’s capacity for precision that we have seen questioned in varying degrees by the authors themselves. The implicit response is that, at its best, fiction has the power to partially overcome the shortcomings of language. This response becomes explicit in Conrad. ‘[T]he power of sentences has nothing to do with their sense or the logic of their construction’, remarks Marlow in *Lord Jim*.\(^{177}\) His author elaborates: ‘words, groups of words, words standing alone, are symbols of life, have the power in their sound or their aspect to present you with the very thing you wish to hold up before the mental vision of your readers.’\(^ {178}\) As a comment upon the power of language conveyed during the *experience* of reading, a power not amenable to distanced, methodical criticism, such reasoning arguably offers resistance to the semantic operations of deconstruction. Once again, it means that impressionist fiction must communicate itself indirectly, through rendering not direct authorial address.

Expressed in these terms, this third narrative mode of positioning the reader sits less awkwardly with the second than might initially have been suspected. Indeed, all three modes share enough aspects of theme, form and intent to render them as variable but consistent tenets of a single movement. Simultaneously, their differences reveal the tensions involved with both the notion of an aesthetic movement, and, in particular, the specific notion of literary impressionism.

\(^{177}\) Conrad, *LJ*, p. 49.

[O]ne writes for money, for fame, to excite the passion of love, to make an impression upon one’s time. Well, God knows what one writes for. But it is certain that one gains neither fame nor money; certainly one does not excite the passion of love, and one’s time continues to be singularly unimpressed.¹

The impartiality central to the impressionist aesthetic was a double-bind. By withdrawing from the text—or seeking to at least—the impressionist author desired to present the same fluidity of data as that experienced in the natural world, and to afford the reader the same freedom of interpretation as that which that world required. But to the extent that the impressionists succeeded they were unable to impinge or comment directly upon their world, in either its textual or extra-textual manifestations. ‘The artist can never write to satisfy himself’, wrote Ford, ‘—to get, as the saying is, something off his chest. He must not write propaganda which it is his desire to write’,² for ‘the artist turned politician is apt to falsify his renderings of life.’³ The age of impressionism was as fraught with issues of ideology and social injustice as any before or since, and this raises its own issues. To what extent, for example, did its aesthetic principles render impressionism ideologically toothless? Did not impressionism, rather, challenge the very concepts of morality and ideology? Finally, to what extent were the authors comfortable with the implicit values of a form they felt obliged to employ in the interests of fidelity?

² Ibid., pp. 333-4.
³ Ford, ML, p. 697. In JC, Ford adds that artist’s ‘business with the world is rendering, not alteration’, p. 208.
‘Conrad’s impressionism is for some critics his most praiseworthy quality’, writes Patrick Brantlinger. ‘[T]o others it appears instead a means of obfuscation [. . .].’ The latter perspective finds expression as one or both of two inter-related assertions. Firstly, it is argued, the impressionist text’s attention to immediate and individual experience restricts its own capacity to present or directly consider the causes of the ideological circumstances portrayed. Many commentators, for example, have remarked that *The Red Badge of Courage* ‘gives no hint of the broad moral issues behind the Civil War, such humanistic purposes as freeing the slaves or preserving the Union as an instrument of order [. . .].’ Confined rather to the immediate consciousness of a youthful and unworldly recruit, Crane’s ‘war’ novel can do little other than pass over such ideological particularities of a conflict that nevertheless engulfs and buffets his protagonist. Reflecting upon the consequent lack of specificity in his novel, Crane expressed no qualms: ‘[I]t was essential that I should make my battle a type and name no names’, he remarked.6

It is, however, the second asserted limitation of impressionism—the claim that its aesthetic requirements reduce the scope and potency of any discernible ideological issues—that draws most criticism.7 Brantlinger observes that ‘[i]nterpretations of *Heart of Darkness* which read it as only racist (and therefore imperialist), or as only anti-imperialist (and therefore anti-racist), inevitably founder on its impressionism.’ By ‘impressionism’, it is intriguing to note, Brantlinger refers to Conrad’s alleged ‘will to style’: a preoccupation (‘deviousness’) with ‘art and language’ comparable to the empty eloquence

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7 See, for example, Herbert Muller: ‘The dangers of this [impressionist] approach are indeed plain. It is likely to give disproportionate emphasis to fleeting sensations, to separate moments, and finally to leave the impression of tenuousness, precisioy, inconsequence; often it entails the sacrifice of too much of the solid bulk of the material world and the hard facts of existence in it.’ *Impressionism in Fiction: Prism vs. Mirror*, *American Scholar* 7 (1938), 365.
8 Brantlinger, p. 256.
of Kurtz.\(^9\) Side-stepping largely the issue of why Conrad might have felt obliged to
remove his presence and values from the text, Brantlinger observes instead the
consequences for ethical interpretation. Not only can Conrad not directly express his
attitudes towards race and imperialism, he explains, but the narrative frame of Marlow and
the anonymous primary narrator filters all subsequent information until little more than
speculation is possible: ‘At what point is it safe to assume that Conrad/Marlow expresses a
single point of view?’ asks Brantlinger. ‘And even supposing Marlow to speak directly for
Conrad, does Conrad/Marlow agree with the values expressed with the primary
narrator?’\(^10\)

In an article examining the revisions made to the 1881 edition of *The Portrait of A
Lady* for the New York edition of 1908, Nina Baym effectively broadens the range of
Brantlinger’s criticism. Acknowledging first that the ‘revised version is stylistically and
thematically closer to [James’s] later interests than the early one had been’, she argues that
the revised text loses force and clarity in the heroine’s attempts to retain independence
outside and inside of marriage. ‘It is thematically less timely and realistic,’ she writes, ‘for
its main concern is the private consciousness.’\(^11\) In the New York edition, she explains,
Isabel’s ‘responses toward her suitors has changed from feeling and impulse to reflection
and analysis.’\(^12\) Simultaneously, her ‘requirements [from a relationship] are more ascetic
and aesthetic’.\(^13\) ‘Visions of a “completed life” with Lord Warburton in 1881 change to
“completed consciousness” in 1908’, while Casper Goodwood’s ““limitations” became
“impediments to the finer respiration”’.\(^14\) The implications, argues Baym, are deeply

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\(^9\) Brantlinger, pp. 266, 273

\(^10\) Ibid., p. 257.

\(^11\) Nina Baym, ‘Revision and Thematic Change in *The Portrait of A Lady*, Modern Fiction Studies
22 (1976), 183.

\(^12\) Baym presents numerous examples on p. 186.

\(^13\) Ibid., p. 187.

\(^14\) Ibid., pp. 186-7. Baym provides further examples.
significant in the context of the topical "woman question." While Isabel seeks independence in both texts, the New York edition recreates 'the heroine as a person who is continually "reading" her environment and is consequently less active in it.'

Accordingly, writes Baym,

The matrix of values which radiates out from 'independence' in 1881 centres in 'awareness' in 1908, with attendant dislocations of emphasis. Awareness in 1881 is a means towards the end of an independent life; in 1908 the independent life is attained only in awareness—the two things are almost identical. The only possible independence is the independence of perfect enlightenment. Consequently, Isabel is no longer perceived as having failed [in the latter text], and therefore has no limitations or shortcomings of thematic consequence.

Baym also records the 'flattening' of secondary characters in the latter text. For Isabel to fall victim to Merle and Osmond in the 1908 edition, her 'finer intelligence [...] demands a finer trap'. The pair becomes, accordingly, less sympathetic and more duplicitous. But the ensuing 'melodrama of Isabel's later situation', continues Baym, 'detracts from the novel's social realism'. This flattening extends to the formerly positive figures of the Countess Gemini and Henrietta Stackpole: the first of whom complains repeatedly of the situation for married women, while the latter's toughness and professional career presents a yardstick for Isabel's development. For each character, the latter text presents 'grotesque exaggerations' that undermine their humanity and credibility. 'Quite possibly in later years James became more conservative on such issues as women's equality,' writes Baym, 'but more likely his growing absorption with the inner life made a character who was engrossed in the world of work and action appear inconsequential.'

Many critics of James and of impressionist authors generally echo the broad implications of Baym's analysis. The impressionist concern for matters of perception

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15 Baym, p. 183. Baym adds that the 1881 novel 'was one of an increasing number of works' about the status of women in marriage.
16 Ibid., p. 186.
17 Ibid., pp. 199-200.
18 Ibid., p. 190.
19 Ibid., p. 197.
20 See Baym, pp. 192-3.
21 Ibid., 191. Baym provides examples on pp. 192-3.
22 Ibid., p. 192.
suggests, and often produces, it is claimed, a passivity of response at various narrative levels.\(^{23}\) Thus, in adopting the role of aloof spectators, characters mirror the disinterested stance of their authors. The consequence is an aesthetic that is ‘non-committal’ and ‘non-involve[d]’—‘in short,’ writes Hauser, ‘the aesthetic attitude purely and simply.’ Hauser is forthright: ‘Impressionism is the climax of self-centred aesthetic culture and signifies the ultimate consequence of the romantic renunciation of practical, active life.’\(^{24}\)

Although the similarity between these sentiments and those of Baym and Brantlinger is evident, Hauser writes specifically of Impressionist painting. He describes the art as ‘rather an “aristocrat’s” style, elegant and fastidious, [. . .] sensual and epicurean, keen on rare and exquisite subjects, bent on strictly personal experiences’\(^{25}\). The parallels with both Wilde and Pater are unmistakable, and strengthened by the Impressionists’ attempts to arrest in art the fleeting moment. But the consequent absence of political interest in Impressionist painting is more evident still—at least on first impressions. The Franco-Prussian War, the political upheavals, the massacre of citizens during the suppression of the Commune: all are absent from the Impressionist canvas. Manet’s concerns with ambiguous and problematic areas of contemporary society were replaced by most of his fellow Impressionists with concerns for establishing an audience and a potential market.\(^{26}\) Attractive and commercial depictions of countryside and bourgeois recreation became the almost defining subject matter of Impressionist art, although these in turn were subordinated increasingly to a preoccupation with the effects of light and shade. Of course, the fundamental Impressionist stipulation for painting immediate and directly perceived experience made wars and uprisings subjects largely impractical for

\(^{23}\) Chatman (acknowledging Michael Shriber) records in James a grammatical correlative to this emphasis on passive perception: ‘James’s later—unlike his earlier—style, and unlike contemporary styles [...], strongly prefers recipient to performant or static “belief” verbs. The central consciousnesses of the late fiction are typically receivers of “felt experience” rather than deciders and judges;’ p. 17.

\(^{24}\) Hauser, p. 873.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 879.

\(^{26}\) Information derived from House, pp. 364-5.
representation. Not that such restrictions were always considered a loss. ‘To my mind a picture should be something pleasant, cheerful and pretty, yes pretty!’ remarked Renoir. ‘There are too many disagreeable things in life as it is for us to contrive still more of them.’

The same lack of interest in matters political appears often to characterise impressionist authors—albeit in varying degrees. James is the author most commonly cited on such grounds, in his own time as now. ‘These atmospheres, nuances, impressions of personal tone and quality are his subject,’ wrote Pound. ‘[...] [H]e is ignorant of nearly everything else.’ (T. S. Eliot’s aforementioned claim that James ‘had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it’ takes on, in this context, a less appreciative resonance.) Perhaps, as Kirschke speculates, James’s ‘admirable up-bringing’, wherein his father encouraged ‘the freedom of self-development’, made him ‘little inclined to political activity.’

Certainly, there is scant reference either to the Civil War in James’s fiction or to ‘the violent and rapid western expansion that took place in his own country’. Neither is there much recognition of either the working-classes or the conditions of the poor. ‘[W]e have developed a sort of compunction which our grandfathers did not have,’ commented George Orwell in 1948, ‘an awareness of the enormous injustice and misery of the world, and a guilt-stricken feeling that one ought to be doing something about it, which makes a purely aesthetic attitude towards life impossible. No one, now, could devote himself to literature as single-mindedly as Joyce or Henry James.’ As this remark suggests, James was not alone in avoiding some of the major issues of the day.

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28 Quoted Snitow, p. 78; original emphasis.
29 Kirschke, p. 189.
30 Ibid., p. 189.
Writing of her companion, Cora Crane informed a friend that 'a political novel [. . .] does not interest him. I think he finds the hypocrisy of politicians too sickening . . .'. By contrast, when Conrad's fiction does present political implications, he is often eager to distance himself from both the subsequent interpretations and accusations of intent. The Secret Agent's subtitle, 'A Simple Tale', was intended, Conrad informed his agent, J. B. Pinker, because 'I don’t want the story to be misunderstood as having any sort of social or polemical intention.' 'I had', he explained elsewhere, 'no idea to consider Anarchism politically—or to treat it seriously in its philosophical aspect [. . .].' Of his own friendship with Conrad, Ford remarked that '[n]ever once did we discuss any political matter.' While Ford gave as explanation their 'curiously impersonal' relationship, it remains the case that aesthetics were deemed a proper topic for debate. 'I never took much interest in party politics', wrote Ford more explicitly. 'I have always called myself a Tory, much as Shelley called himself an atheist. It stops political discussions when I find myself among the Advanced'.

The argument thus far presented suggests that impressionism is characterised by a combination of relative uninterest for specific matters of politics, and an awareness that the impressionist aesthetic cannot accommodate direct political expression. To an extent, of course, these two strands are intertwined. For by recognising that impressionist art and political sympathies are incompatible, the impressionists appear to choose the perfection of art before the perfection of society. Ford provides the clearest evidence for this line of argument. His expressed belief that 'the preoccupation that is fatal to art is the moral or the social preoccupation' emerges within his literary criticism with occasionally surprising implications. Arguing, for example, that '[s]ocial conditions appear to me to be

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35 Ford, JC, p. 121.
37 Ford, 'OI', p. 331.
temporary matters which change and then what is written of them dies’, Ford readily places the longevity of art before potential—if temporary—social reform and improvement. He accordingly instructed a fellow writer that she ‘wasted [her] immense talents on social aspects’.

Ford conceded that such figures as Dickens, Walter Scott and Thackeray ‘achieved notable reforms’ but added that, ‘as writers, they were merely negligible in so far as the reforming passages of their works were concerned’. The implication at least is that Ford would have sacrificed those real-life reforms for improved artistry: a judgement only reinforced when Ford declares, with evident approval, that ‘James’s conscious purpose in writing can obviously never have been to make people better.’

This apparent absence of political and social concern is, for Brian May, integral to the general impressionist attitude. ‘The pursuit of impressions itself’, writes May, ‘seems to entail an outward turn away from empathies and sympathies, from affecting significances of any kind, towards sheer egoistic, antisocial delight.’ Referring specifically to *The Good Soldier*, May recalls the moment when Dowell, enjoying picturesque ‘impression[s]’ during a train journey, observes a bullock throw a cow ‘into the middle of a narrow stream’. ‘I suppose I ought to have pitied the poor animal;’ remarks Dowell, ‘but I just didn’t. I was out for enjoyment.’

The arguments, then, against the moral and political interests and capabilities of impressionist fiction receive support both from practitioners and many of their commentators. However, as an evaluation of the fuller implications of impressionist art, these arguments are limited and imbalanced. The imperialist context of *Heart of Darkness*

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40 *Ibid.*, p. 23. Compare p. 28: ‘[James] couldn’t by any possibility be the great writer that he is if he had any public aims’.
42 Ford, *TGS*, p. 35. See May, p. 91.
may be shrouded in mist, as might the feminist implications of *The Portrait of A Lady*, the anarchist implications of *The Secret Agent*, and the ideological background of *The Red Badge of Courage*. But by choosing to situate the narrative within these areas of contention, and by having these and other ethical and ideological matters discussed, if without clear authorial endorsement, impressionism takes on a social resonance that is, indeed, true to its deeper principles.

In its broadest sense, impressionism is inevitably social as a product and expression of its era. Its choice of subject, its attitude to this choice, its treatment of the subject, including its formal decisions, are all expressive of its age. Nothing is more revealing of the implicit ideological involvement of impressionist fiction than the circumstances of its characters, and in particular the protagonists of Conrad’s so-called ‘political’ novels: *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Under Western Eyes*. In each text, the protagonists become embroiled in, and effectively subordinated to, overwhelming social and political situations. They are variously blackmailed into activism, or repeatedly assaulted by larger social forces. Moreover, these situations often impose a political identity and responsibility upon those wishing to resist involvement or remain neutral.

Razumov, for example, actively seeks distance from the political troubles of his contemporary Russia. ‘He was aware of the emotional turmoil of his time’, records the narrator; ‘he even responded to it in an indefinite way. But his main concern was with his work, his studies, and with his own future. […] He shrank mentally from the fray as a good-natured man may shrink from taking definite sides in a violent family quarrel.’

Haldin’s appeal to Razumov for political sanctuary (motivated, ironically, by the latter’s very distance from political involvement with his fellow students) forces Razumov to adopt a political stance and to act upon it. As the implications of his decision introduce further complications, Razumov reflects despairingly upon how ‘his moral personality was

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43 I am influenced in the immediately subsequent account by Hewitt, pp. 38-9.
at the mercy of these lawless forces’: ‘autocracy [. . .] and [. . .] revolution’. Of course, Haldin’s appeal only brings to light Razumov’s latent ideological attitude; by resisting political involvement in his university life, Razumov had conveyed at least tolerance of the current political regime, if not wholehearted endorsement. The child of Polish parents exiled for opposing the Tsarist domination of their country, Conrad was perhaps aware more than most of the citizens of his adopted country that life was inextricably political.

On a more fundamental level, Rowe has stated that ‘there are no impressions that are not always already involved in complex semantic, social, and historical determinations.’ Language, I have argued, is infused with ideology, ‘ineradicably social’. But the impressionist attention to the passive reception of sensory impressions emphasises equally the social rootedness of elementary perception. Impressionist art, writes Bender, ‘captures the moment of intersection when the exterior world impinges on a sensitive consciousness.’ It is a blending of external and internal, public and private, formally exemplified in the narrative mode of focalisation.

*The Good Soldier* exemplifies this inter-relation of private and ideological circumstances. “‘Don’t you see that that’s the cause of the whole miserable affair; of the whole sorrow of the world?’” Leonora asks Dowell. Her question, of course, refers explicitly to Martin Luther’s Protest against the Catholic Church, at the location of which they (mistakenly) suppose themselves to be. Luther’s Protest, in turn, anticipated the decision of Henry VIII to seek religious independence from Rome, not least to officially legitimise his divorce. The weight of Leonora’s remark, then, is that both marital and moral stability have been undermined by the rise of Protestantism. But the ‘miserable affair’ incorporates also the adulterous relationship, signalled just moments before,

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46 Rowe, p. 194.
48 Meixner makes a similar observation, p. 241.
between their respective partners. To Leonora’s mind at least, both references are intimately connected. Furthermore, her question follows the denunciation by Florence of Irish Catholicism, and precedes her vague explanation: “Don’t you know [...] that I’m an Irish Catholic?”

Ford extends the connection between domestic and international politics with the aforementioned repetitions of August 4th. It is not simply the date upon which Florence is born (1874), has an affair with Jimmy (1900), and marries Dowell (1901); nor simply the date of Maisie Maiden’s death, of the beginning of Florence’s affair with Edward (1904), and of Florence’s suicide (1913). It is also the date that England declared war on Germany in 1914. To quote Charles G. Hoffmann, ‘the novel explores [...] the causes of failure in human relationships, whether it be in love, marriage, friendship, national character, or international relations.’ Moreover, the causes are the same for both domestic and international politics: ‘The events leading up to Florence’s suicide and Nancy Rufford’s madness six months later are the causes of the breakdown of civilization, of a world gone suicidal and mad.’

As social commentary, Ford’s novel is necessarily oblique. As with Crane’s war novel, there are no sustained meditations upon the causes of present or impending conflicts, or upon the complex dialectic of individual and ideological circumstances. Such essays are as much beyond the inclination, and perhaps the full comprehension, of the characters, as they are beyond the licence of novelists whose principle stipulation is their own remove. However, what impressionist texts may lose in directness they arguably gain with the insight of unique and immediate experience: a return, in short, to the debate about whether impressions or ideas and analysis yield the greater truth. It is, after all, Dowell’s very inability to sustain a coherent evaluation of his recent situation that captures the moral and ontological disintegration of the larger world. Likewise, it could be argued that

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49 Ford, TGS, p. 38.
Fleming’s apparent disinterest in, and ignorance of, the political motivations of the Civil War reflect both the uncertainty of many of those caught up in the clash of compatriots, and their primary concern for personal survival. With this reasoning, the deliberate universality of Crane’s tale carries its political relevance into our own age of uncertain causes and blurred principles.\(^5\)\(^1\)

Such moral and political implications, however, are for the reader to recognise and contemplate. There can be no moralising on the author’s part in impressionist fiction, and no expression of political preference, whether by direct statement or idealistic manipulation of plot. The author ‘merely gives you the material’, as Ford wrote of James. ‘Upon the views of which you are at liberty to form your verdict and to direct your votes when the questions of divorce, marriage, crime, or society come before you in a practical sense.’\(^5\)\(^2\) As crucial for the reader’s moral judgement as the author’s impartiality was the latter’s devotion to the sincerity of his or her own impressions. ‘[T]he air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel’, wrote James, ‘—the merit on which all its other merits (including [. . .] conscious moral purpose [. . .]) helplessly and submissively depend.’\(^5\)\(^3\) Conrad encapsulates this interdependence of moral worth and accuracy of presentation in the famous declaration that ‘art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest justice to the visible universe’.\(^5\)\(^4\)

This stress upon fidelity produced three implicit stipulations for impressionist fiction concerning the choice of subject matter. Firstly, it prompted authors to confine themselves to subjects of which they were most aware. It is, indeed, on this ground that

\(^{51}\) Watt effectively provides another example of how an impressionist novel’s vague ideological content can accurately express its era: ‘The inconsistencies in Conrad’s attitudes to colonial and racial problems must in general be understood in their historical context; and those in Heart of Darkness are particularly influenced by the fact that it was written at a time when Britain had committed herself to stopping French and German expansion in Africa, even at the risk of war.’ Conrad in the Nineteenth Century, p. 160. See also Brantlinger.

\(^{52}\) Ford, \textit{HJ}, p. 28.

\(^{53}\) James, ‘AF’, p. 33. See also p. 44: ‘No good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind; that seems to me an axiom which, for the artist in fiction, will cover all needful moral ground’.

Ford justified the narrow social range of James’s fiction—his ‘up town’ subjects, in Ford’s phrase.\(^5\) Secondly, it demanded that writers keep their focus upon the contemporary world. ‘That is what is the matter with all the verse of to-day’, Ford corrected an amateur poet; ‘it is too much practiced in temples and too little on motorbuses—LITERARY! LITERARY! [. . .] [T]he moment a medium becomes literary it is remote from the life of the people, it is dulled, languishing, moribund and at last dead.’\(^6\) Within these parameters, however, and with implicit acknowledgement of French Naturalism (if not the same predilection for ‘down town’ subjects\(^7\)), nothing was to be considered out of bounds. ‘All life belongs to you,’ James instructed the ‘youthful aspirant’, ‘and do not listen [. . .] to those who would shut you up into corners of it and tell you that it is only here and there that art inhabits.’\(^8\)

The uncensored range of subject matter in impressionist fiction, combined with the moral detachment of its authors, implied a recognition of amorality that was considered immoral in certain quarters. The charge in this instance was not that impressionist fiction refused to consider social issues or to clarify its own moral and political implications. Rather it was against its supposed disregard for the ‘moral equities of life’. The phrase comes from a contemporary review of *Washington Square* in which the reviewer, R. H. Hutton, criticised the novel for ‘not merely [an] absolute hopelessness, but [an] absolute indifference to hope’. Asking why we are ‘made to feel that there was noting elastic in Catherine [Sloper] which rose against her troubles, nothing that found for her a gain in loss,’ Hutton concludes that ‘Mr. Henry James strikes us as nothing less humane than in the indifference with which he treats his characters, after he has brought them through

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\(^7\) James describes Zola’s fiction as ‘an extraordinary effort vitiated by a spirit of pessimism on a narrow basis.’ ‘AF’, p. 45.
\(^8\) James, ‘AF’, p. 44.
such melancholy shifts in their lot as he generally provides for them.'\textsuperscript{59} Hutton, in short, demanded from art a sense of moral comprehension, even retribution, to acknowledge, one suspects, the notion of an ultimately benevolent Christian universe. Similar criticisms to Hutton's were levelled against the Godless, unidealised accounts of realist and naturalist literature, and indeed \textit{Washington Square} is as close to that tradition as to the impressionism that it largely anticipates. Crane predicted similar 'moral' condemnation of the unflinching, even exaggerated, naturalism of \textit{Maggie}. 'It is inevitable that you shall be greatly shocked by this book,' he warned Hamlin Garland, 'but continue, please, with all possible courage to the end.'\textsuperscript{60} This resistance to the amorality of presentation characterised equally the response to explicitly impressionist fiction. One war veteran scrawled in a first edition of \textit{The Red Badge of Courage} the words 'insulting', 'unpatriotic' and 'damned nonsense' at points where Fleming doubts his own fortitude and moral fibre.\textsuperscript{61} Contemporary critics generally, Beer informs us, remarked with implicit disapproval that 'Mr. Crane's interesting novel contains no strictures on the cruel uselessness of war.'\textsuperscript{62} Such opposition reflects the fear of an age that felt all confidence in the truthfulness of its ethics slipping away. But the impressionists, as with, in particular, the French exponents of realism and naturalism, and with the Aesthetes (although, we shall see, for different reasons), were unwilling to adopt the role of moral spokesperson that had befallen Tennyson so heavily in the Victorian era.\textsuperscript{63} Not only was the role an unwelcome burden, it was considered to be a sham.


\textsuperscript{60} Crane, ‘To Hamlin Garland’, March? 1893, \textit{CSC}, vol. 1, p. 53; editor’s parentheses.

\textsuperscript{61} Information from Beer, p. 126.

\textsuperscript{62} Beer, p. 126. See also Ford, \textit{ML}, p.697: ‘[...] [T]hough the business of the artist is to render his own day, it is certainly none of his duty to approve or glorify it.’

\textsuperscript{63} 'In his later poems, it sometimes seems as if [Tennyson's] sense of public responsibility plays too large a part in determining the nature of what he writes. It was because Tennyson came to accept this “public” conception of poetry that he was able to fulfill the duties of Poet Laureate with such confidence—and was perhaps the last poet so able to act.' Peter Faulkner, \textit{Modernism}, p. 3.
II

The role was a sham, for the impressionists, because it involved promoting a moral code that seemed increasingly unverifiable. The insistence of the impressionist attitude upon both transience and the inevitable disparity of individual perception combined to reject implicitly the conventional notion of a single, objective and transcendental morality. To an extent, of course, the truth of the values to be espoused by artists was less important than the perceived necessity of those values for the preservation of society. Artists were entrusted with upholding civilised standards in the vacuum left by the challenges to fundamentalist religion. However, the impressionist devotion to truth, or at least to sincerity, demanded a representation of reality without the endorsement of conventional morality and systems of organisation.

This resistance to traditional concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, was, as noted previously, far from new. The world before 1870, Bradbury reminds us, 'was not [...] a compact one, sure of its ethics, capable of holding all experience in its hand; but after 1870 it was less so than it had been'. The reason for this shift, he continues, is not entirely easy to explain; this is not on the face of it a socially revolutionary period. The answer is surely that the last decades of the nineteenth century are one of those periods in history [...] when quantitative changes come suddenly to be seen as qualitative changes. It becomes clear that what has been developing and proliferating for a long time has made life so different that things must now be seen in a new way.

Impressionism effectively brought the implications of these social and intellectual developments into sharp focus. Its basic premise implied a view of ethics and politics that both partially corresponded with contemporary changes in society, and yet amplified (or exposed) the challenge of those changes to traditional values. While the full details and complexity of this argument far exceeds the range of this study, an overview reveals some of the underlying tensions and consistencies.

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64 See, in particular, p. 24-5
66 Ibid., p. 44.
The waning of faith in moral absolutes was intensified, if not initiated, by the post-Darwinian erosion of fundamentalist Christianity and its integral, clear-cut dichotomy of good and evil. Agnosticism was consistent, in turn, with the impressionist emphasis upon directly perceived experience. Of course, faith transcends personal evidence by its very nature. But the contemporary widening awareness of alternative religious perspectives (such as that encouraged by J. G. Fraser’s *The Golden Bough*, which appeared from 1890 onwards ⁶⁷), challenged even the authority of a single faith. Obliquely, the impressionist writers’ recognition of alternative cultural perspectives performed a similar function. ⁶⁸

This loss of confidence in absolute authority accelerated in turn a loss of confidence in the moral authority of hierarchy generally. Under monarchist rule, the widespread assumption was that class distinctions were innate and static, and properly so. Increasingly, however, as the nineteenth century progressed, radical changes in education, urbanisation and transport undermined this passive acceptance. The notion of ‘[a]ccepting one’s place,’ Faulkner writes, ‘[of] loyalty to authority [and] unquestioning obedience, began to break down [. . .].’ ⁶⁹ It was this emerging mentality that the impressionist attitude captured. Perspectives differed, values differed; no one (including the author) had the natural authority to designate, dominate or to interfere with another. With such reasoning, indeed, impressionism appeared to be aligned with the prevalent Liberalist ideology of the age, or at least its earlier manifestations, and in ways that bear exploration. ⁷⁰

William Gladstone’s Liberal party achieved office on four separate occasions between 1868 and 1894. It vied continually with Conservative governments, led first by

⁶⁸ Consider, for example, *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *Under Western Eyes*, *Nostromo*, and *The Ambassadors*.
Benjamin Disraeli, and then later by the Marquess of Salisbury. For the most part, however, front-bench Tory politicians adopted many of the fundamental Liberal attitudes, recognising their social, philosophical and electoral value. Paramount to Liberalism was the development of personal freedom and social progress. In domestic politics, Liberals opposed feudal restraints that prevent the individual from rising out of a low social status; barriers such as censorship that limit free expression of opinion; and arbitrary power exercised over the individual by the state. Economically, the demand was for ‘free trade’, the non-intervention of the State, emphasising, above all, the self-reliance of the individual within a self-regulating economy. In his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), John Stuart Mill described ‘every departure from’ the ‘general practice’ of ‘[I]aissez-faire’—‘unless required by some great good’—as ‘a certain evil’. ‘This view of individualism’, as Matthew observes, ‘gained from the widely popular writings of the social evolutionists’. Despite the presence of voluntary, largely charitable organisations, formed ‘to cater for spiritual and physical deprivation’, the belief in unrestrained, essentially competitive individual development was indeed tantamount to a survival of the fittest. It also goes some way, perhaps, toward explaining the paradoxical prevalence of imperialist attitudes within a Liberal-minded nation. Colonialism was not the ruthless domination of one country by another, but the education of alternate races into a superior social mentality: notably, a mentality accepting of free trade.

As the century progressed, the social consequences of unchecked industrial capitalism became more apparent, particularly the high incidence of poverty among the

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71 See Matthew, pp. 524 and 526-7.
72 Gay, ‘Liberalism’, I.
74 Quoted Matthew, p. 522.
75 Matthew, p. 522.
76 *Ibid.*, p. 550. Matthew adds: ‘Government responsibility for education’, developed in an Act of 1870, ‘was seen by contemporaries as one of Mill’s exceptions to the rule, not as the start of a wider acceptance of responsibility for social organization.’
77 See Matthew, pp. 559-65.
working class. The need for government intervention became an issue of greater contention, both within the fragile coalition Liberal governments and between the major political parties. Pressure built up for a revised, so-called ‘positive’ or ‘New’ Liberalism to ensure that ‘each individual had the means by which he or she could make the most of his or her individual capabilities.’ This entailed a greater commitment to taxation and redistribution, and to extended government control: a greater commitment, more generally, to the working class. Ironically, perhaps, workers were increasingly looking after themselves—albeit in opposition to the existing political arrangement. Trade unions proliferated in the 1890s (they became a force after a successful strike in 1889, having been formally recognised by government only in 1871), and in 1900 joined with the fast-emerging Independent Labour Party to form the Labour Representation Committee. The trend, in short, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, was from individualism to collectivism, from liberty to equality, from less to more government control.

Impressionism pointed in the opposite direction. Of course, as a set of philosophic principles, impressionism neither advocates nor acts upon a political system. This does not prevent us, however, from extrapolating the political implications of these principles. Neither is this a purely abstract exercise. For if we believe these principles to be true, or as truthful as we can determine from our limited perspectives—as of course do the impressionists—then these implications convey to us the fundamental political constitution (and inclinations) of humankind, against which everything else may be considered an artificial construct. Thus, the impressionist emphasis upon the absence of shared perspectives and ideals implies, and often communicates, the pretense of authority, defining anarchy instead as the natural state of things. Harry Hartwick reaches the same

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78 Matthew, p. 570.
79 Information derived from Kishlansky, ‘United Kingdom: History’, H1b.
80 Matthew, p. 571.
conclusion, albeit approached from the impressionist ‘philosophy of change’.\footnote{It stands for anarchy and the erasure of emphasis from life […]. It represents the collapse of consistency in thought and literature, and abolishes every form of tradition or precedence.} Quoting Bertrand Russell, Hartwick implicitly draws a parallel with impressionist painting:

‘[Impressionism] sees the universe […] as “all spots and jumps, without unity, without continuity, without coherence or orderliness […].”’\footnote{Hartwick, p. 41.} One recalls Dowell’s confession that ‘the whole world for me is like spots of colour on an immense canvas. Perhaps if it weren’t so I should have something to catch hold of now.’\footnote{Ford, TGS, p. 17.} Of the painters associated with Impressionism, both Seurat and Pissarro, we know, were sympathetic to anarchy:

‘[o]ur ideas impregnated with anarchist philosophy seep into [se déteignent sur] our works’, remarked the latter.\footnote{I am guided on Seurat by Rubin, p. 319; Pissarro quoted by Paul Smith, p. 129. (Smith’s parenthesis.) Smith adds: ‘In Pissarro’s paintings, no one tone rules; instead colours associate democratically, in a technique of a kind that Baudelaire once described as a kind of pictorial “anarchy”,’ p. 143.}

For all its gradual inclination towards the political Left, English society was considered by many intellectuals to be approaching anarchy in the early twentieth century.\footnote{See Watt, Conrad in the Nineteenth Century, pp. 161-2; Kishlansky, I2; and Kenneth O. Morgan, ‘The Twentieth Century: 1914-1991’, The Oxford History of Britain, ed. Morgan, pp. 582-3.} The Secret Agent was nothing if not topical. As science uncovered a number of potentially disconcerting hypotheses, confidence in the continual progress of civilisation was gradually replaced by a doom-laden ‘fin de siècle; fin du globe’ mentality.\footnote{This association is made in Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray, p. 171.} Darwin had demonstrated the animalistic origins of humankind, while Freud claimed that animalistic drives—potent and anti-social—remained intact (as the ‘id’), only pushed beneath the surface of consciousness by the ‘ego’ and ‘superego’. On a cosmic scale, the second law of thermodynamics associated entropy with equilibrium, concluding that Nature ‘seems to “prefer” disorder or chaos.’\footnote{See ‘Thermodynamics’, in Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 99.} In politics, the civilizing project of imperialism appeared ever more contentious, its failings fully exposed to the broader
public with the debacle of the (second) Boer War (1899-1902). Social unrest generally was wide-spread. By July 1914, the British government was facing a threatened national strike, pressure from the suffragettes, revolution in Ireland, and nationalist troubles in India and Egypt. The cataclysmic events of the following month ironically put many of these issues on hold, and had the effect of reconsolidating the nation. Nonetheless, the scale and brutality of the First World War were truly shocking, and for many—particularly those who, like Ford, experienced the disorder of trench warfare—served only to confirm that ‘beneath Ordered Life itself was stretched the merest film with, beneath it, the abysses of Chaos.’ Never before had impressionism seemed more accurate as an account of the fundamental moral and political nature of humankind. Neither had its implications appeared more immediately relevant.

III

The attitudes of my four authors toward the moral and political implications of impressionist philosophy differed both within the group and individually over the course of time. There remain, however, broad similarities of response and development, which, taken together, distil the full complexity of their positions into discernable tendencies.

Before world war threatened ‘civilisation’, the tendency among early modernist artists in particular was to challenge the stifling organisation of society as they perceived it. The national ideological shift toward State-controlled welfare presented for many artists, Levenson explains, increased security and material well-being at the expense of freedom and spontaneity. ‘The dominant perception’, he continues, ‘was not of anarchy but of complacency, not of too little control but of too much.’ Between 1901 and 1915,

89 See Matthew, p. 559-81; Morgan, pp. 582-3; and Kishlansky, 12.
90 Ford, IWN, p. 49.
91 Levenson, A Genealogy of Modernism, p. 139.
Ford's work was closely aligned with this resistance to emerging 'collectivism'. Ford was, in his own words, 'a sentimental Tory', sympathetic to the individualist, feudal ideology traditional to Conservatism. 'But inasmuch as the Tories stood in the way of Home Rule for Ireland,' continued Ford, 'I never voted or wrote for that Party.'

Unsurprisingly, given his Polish origins, Conrad shared Ford's hostility toward governmental abuse of power, particularly in the area in which power was most flagrantly increasing human misery—imperialism. As Marlow says, 'The Conquest of the Earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.' Ford was in agreement: 'from my earliest days I always hated the idea that any one man or set of men should have any temporal powers over any other men of races or religions.

While violations of liberty are as prominent a theme in James, they typically assume more domestic circumstances. The attempts of Dr. Sloper, Osmond, and Mrs Newsome to control the thoughts and actions of others are effectively the starting point for the novels in which they figure. As with Conrad, Crane and Ford, James extended this emphasis upon individual freedom into the realm of aesthetics:

A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say. The tracing of a line to be followed, of a tone to be taken, of a form to be filled out, is a limitation of that freedom and a suppression of the very thing that we are most curious about.

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96 Ford, *RTY*, p. 56.
97 James, 'AF', p. 29.
James reacted principally to ‘prescription’ and to ‘certain traditions [. . .], applied a priori,’ which he considered inconsistent with personal expression. Conrad’s dislike of controls on artistic expression is more politically resonant. Writing of the position of the censor, he asks: ‘who is to judge of his discrimination? [. . .] No. That function is impossible. The pretence to exercise it is shameful as all disguised tyranny is shameful.’

Beneath this shared resistance to infringements upon individual liberty was the more fundamental idea that abstract rules and ideologies generally were inappropriate for so subjective an entity as humankind. In keeping with the trend toward secularisation, Conrad, Crane and James rejected the moral inflexibility of their native religions: Catholicism with Conrad, Puritanism with Crane and James. (Ford’s own Catholicism was ‘eccentric’ if not ‘nominal’, and far from inflexible to judge from his life.) Religious dichotomies of good and evil, extending to codes of what one should and should not do, betrayed, they believed, the complex diversity of a world perceived from a billion vantage points. ‘Everyone must walk in the light of his own gospel’, declared Conrad. ‘No man’s light is good to any of his fellows. [. . .] That’s my view of life, —a view that rejects all formulas, dogmas and principles of other people’s making. These are only a web of illusions. We are too varied. Another man’s truth is only a dismal lie to me.’

Without moral and epistemological certainty, Conrad perceived, judgements of another’s conduct required a more flexible, pragmatic approach: ‘The part of the inexplicable’, he wrote, ‘should be allowed for in appraising the conduct of men in a world where no explanation is final. No charge of faithlessness ought to be lightly uttered. The

98 James, ‘AF’, p. 29.
appearances of this perishable life are deceptive like everything that falls under the
d judgement of our imperfect senses.'104 It is a lesson learned by Marlow and Strether in
their respective encounters with ‘Lord’ Jim and Chad.105 Each of the former pair comes to
distinguish between the apparent facts of the latter pair’s situations—that Jim deserted the
Patna; that Strether has been ‘got hold of’ by a wicked woman who can only be ‘very bad
for him’—and their complex emotional realities.106 Jim’s cowardice blurs with courage in
the severity of his self-condemnation and the nobility of his death; Chad’s attachment with
Madame de Vionnet has, from one perspective, refined his character: it is, indeed, his
attitude towards her that is open to question.

To the extent that the impressionists were comfortable with this subjective
approach to ethics and authority, they wilfully indulged impressionism to support it. ‘It
was’, writes Green of Ford, ‘comparatively easy to employ his impressionist fiction as a
means of attacking collectivism and what he perceived as the State’s infringements of
individual liberty.’107 Green is vague as to how precisely how this is ‘easy’, and what it
entails. His focus, indeed, is the ‘rather [allegorical]’ and comparatively un-impressionist
text of The Inheritors (1901): Ford’s thinly-veiled attack upon imperialist and reforming
attitudes within his preferred party.108 Nevertheless, and taking Green’s claim at face
value, the impressionist emphasis upon individualism and ‘self-rule’ is, I have suggested,
at least partially conducive to Ford’s attitudes. Impressionist novels demonstrate
repeatedly the danger of mistaking rigid systems of morality, ideology and authority for
objective truth. Figures such as Mrs Wix (What Maisie Knew) and Mrs Newsome (The

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104 Conrad, APR, 1912, in A Personal Record and The Mirror of the Sea, ed. Mara Kalnins, Penguin
105 The same point is made by Nettels, James and Conrad, pp. 46-7.
106 James, A, p. 44.
107 Green, Ford Madox Ford: Prose and Politics, p. 15.
108 Ford described it thus: ‘The novel was to be a political work, rather allegorically backing Mr
Balfour in the then Government; the villain was to be Joseph Chamberlain who had made the [Boer] war.
The sub-villain was to be Leopold II, King of the Belgians.’ Quoted Green, pp. 15-16. Chamberlain had
recently defected from the Liberal Party in opposition to Gladstone’s proposals for Irish Home Rule. His
position on imperialism and, especially, social reform, occasionally embarrassed Salisbury and his
successor, Arthur Balfour. See Green, pp. 15-16, and Matthew, p. 572.
Ambassadors), remain entrenched within uncompromising moral dichotomies, never recognizing their limitations or differentiating the subjective from the objective. Others, such as Marlow in Heart of Darkness, Strether, Tietjens, the Teacher of Modern Languages, and the narrator of The Sacred Fount, get to see beyond the parameters of their initial assumptions, typically through a change of location and/or circumstance. Their supposed truths are exposed as blind habit and cultural construct, while their tolerance of difference and respect for individual liberty is increased.109

Readers of impressionist fiction do not simply observe this dismantling of conventional attitudes and ideologies. As argued in Chapter Three, the impressionists used impressionist principles to encourage the reader into similar re-evaluations. Limited and multiple narrative perspectives expose readers to alternative modes of consciousness and corresponding alternative values. The occasional, at least temporary bewilderment arising from narrative immediacy and dislocation withholds immediate interpretation from readers, challenging expectations and encouraging a constructive openness.110 This constituted, for the impressionists, the true moral, even political value of impressionism. ‘Art derives a considerable part of its beneficial exercise from flying in the face of presumptions’, wrote James.111 ‘[W]e need accounts of human life not so much as a matter from which to draw morals for our own particular cases’, wrote Ford, ‘but rather as something that will take us outside ourselves and, as it were, to a height from which we may better view ourselves and our neighbours.’112 Writing of Maggie, Crane demonstrated the aims of this approach in practice: ‘[Maggie] tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless. If one proves that theory, one makes room in Heaven for all kinds of souls (notably an

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109 See Chapter Two, p. 55.
111 James, ‘AF’, p. 36.
112 Ford, EN, p. 46.
occasional street girl) who are not confidently expected to be there by many excellent people.\footnote{113}

Such aims and methods represent a modest approach to social reform. ‘Readers of Parade’s End will probably not rush to the barricades after reading it’, writes Paul B. Armstrong, ‘—or, for that matter, retreat to the countryside. Nostromo and The Princess Casamassima are equally unlikely to lead to political action.’\footnote{114} However, the impressionists perceived that changes in society would only ever follow a change of consciousness: ‘a civilising personality introduced into an affair is better than any lawsuit’, wrote Ford.\footnote{115} There is also, one might argue, nothing particularly original in the notion of fiction presenting alternative views and broadening consciousness. George Eliot, in particular, made a comparable claim: ‘The only effect I ardently long to produce in my writings is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring human creatures . . .’\footnote{116} What was new to impressionism, of course, was the emphasis upon the subjectivity of perception and the radical pervasiveness of preconceptions, combined with a technical approach that both vividly simulated these concepts at the story level, and simultaneously involved readers with their implications. This political function of impressionist fiction did not threaten its aesthetic principles because the author need not intrude to expose conventional pieties. Simply to demonstrate their limitations and present alternatives was sufficient, leaving readers free to interpret.

It is perhaps no coincidence that these four authors should be different kinds of exile. Conrad, Crane and James, of course, had moved to England; Ford was native

\footnote{114} Armstrong, The Challenge of Bewilderment, p. 260. 
\footnote{115} Ford, HJ, p. 38. Compare Ford’s belief, summarised by Snitow, that ‘[i]f . . . the French had read Flaubert’s Sentimental Education seriously and in sufficient numbers, they would have know enough to avoid the Franco-Prussian War.’ Snitow, p. 142. 
English but his German roots and inherited surname, Hueffer, were enough to distance his consciousness from complete identification with his homeland. Each perceived English culture partially from the outside, acutely conscious of alternative traditions and attitudes.

'There comes a time', wrote James:

> when one set of customs, wherever it may be found, grows to seem to you about as provincial as another; and then I suppose it may be said of you that you have become a cosmopolite. You have formed the habit of comparing, of looking for points of difference and of resemblance, for present and absent advantages, for the virtues that go with certain defects, and the defects that go with certain virtues.

There is no doubting the positive tone in James's description of a cosmopolitan attitude. One selects and tests cultures as one selects and tastes a fine wine. Yet, within this same reasoning, one can trace the general counter-response of the impressionists toward the moral and political implications of their philosophy.

To see beyond the rules and attitudes that define one's society is to feel somehow alien to that society, and, if one has lived abroad, to any society. Moreover, the security that comes from faith in a shared value-system lifts away like a warm blanket on a winter night. It becomes clear not simply that one is alienated from one's society, but that society is alienated from itself, from any definitive sense and purpose. There are no values for James that are not attended by doubt; no virtues that are without defects. Neither are there values, beyond, perhaps, aesthetic values, in which everyone can confidently believe. As a form of moral reasoning, pragmatism was ultimately problematic to the extent that the consequences of actions, by which their moral value might be determined, were themselves disputable according to differences of perception. 'The only indisputable truth of life is our ignorance', wrote Conrad. 'Besides this there is nothing evident, nothing

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118 Quoted Sears, p. 6.
119 Stanley Wertheim writes of Crane: 'His rejection of the firm moral code embodied in the manuals of piety compiled by his [Puritan] father was essential, but it left him with a feeling of isolation in a hostile universe which found expression in all his writings', "Stephen Crane and the Wrath of Jehova", *Literary Review* 7 (1964): p. 502.
absolute, nothing uncontradicted'. Conrad's sense of the isolation fundamental to a world without definitive meaning was intense, and encapsulated in his well-known metaphor of the universe as a godless, self-created knitting machine. 'It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions—and nothing matters.'

On a political level, I have argued, this absence of shared values and rules points towards anarchy. Pissarro and, more dubiously, the half-hearted activists of The Secret Agent, indicate the correlation of anarchist and impressionist principles, emphasising the uniqueness of the individual consciousness and thus the importance of free action and expression. However, Conrad also perceived the selfish, competitive inclinations of humankind, which were never more clear than in the contemporary climate of capitalism. Without human solidarity, strengthened by thorough regulations, he believed, the vacuum left by government would be filled by such figures as Kurtz: forceful and tyrannous, advancing their own survival without regard for others.

Impressionist fiction reflects the tension resulting from these conflicting desires. The Nigger of the Narcissus conveys Conrad's longing for the stability offered by hierarchies and social control. The mutiny that threatens the ship and its crew is born from dissatisfaction with working conditions and human rights: 'Through [Jimmy] we were becoming highly humanised, tender, complex, excessively decadent', recalls the narrator. While Donkin, with whom they temporarily align themselves, 'had a desire to assert his importance [. . .]; to be even with everybody for everything [. . .]—a perfidious desire for truthfulness.' Although it is perhaps less easy today to dismiss the claims of the egoistic Donkin so readily, there is little doubting Conrad's sympathy for the 'faithful'.

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122 Conrad, NN, pp. 85, 92 respectively.
‘unthinking’ Singleton. Inspired by his quiet diligence, and skilfully handled by Captain Allistoun, the crew return to their subordinate positions, their combined efforts averting the destruction of their microcosmic society. The novel pays homage to the collective spirit experienced by Conrad in his seafaring years. More broadly, however, its elegiac tone commemorates the selfless duty of Singleton as the quality of a bygone age.

*Heart of Darkness* presents a more rounded consideration of duty and “the devotion to efficiency.” Discipline and duty withhold both Marlow and the Company accountant from, respectively, ‘the inner truth’ of reality “—luckily, luckily”, and human sympathy. "The groans of this sick person,’ [the accountant] said, ‘distract my attention. And without that it is extremely difficult to guard against clerical errors in this climate.” The implications of these observations serve only to emphasise the potential contradiction of simultaneously advocating freedom and authority, individualism and collectivism. Servitude and efficiency distance individuals from the broader purpose of their actions and the hidden agendas of their designated rulers. Simultaneously, the desire of rulers to maximise efficiency, in addition to their elevation above the moral arena of everyday society, risks blinding them to the needs of their subjects. Without sufficient external controls (themselves in need of regulation), efficiency and authority risk degenerating into greed and exploitation: a tendency that echoes throughout *Nostromo*.

‘[C]arried far enough’, remarks Levenson, ‘the bureaucratic sensibility will engender the charismatic leader.’ In *Heart of Darkness*, barbaric exploitation begins with the European imperialists, and reaches its apotheosis in Kurtz: ‘a point well emphasized in the eagerness of the Company to exploit his sordid achievement.’ Thus, I would argue, the vague approach to imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*, bemoaned by Brantlinger, is less a

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123 Ibid., pp. 107, 15 respectively.
125 Ibid., *HD*, p. 36.
126 Ibid., *HD*, p. 22.
127 Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*, p. 49.
128 Ibid., p. 49.
consequence of the restraints of impressionist form than of Conrad’s divided loyalties toward an impressionist world. The same might be said for the ambiguous, non-committal presentation of anarchists and revolutionaries in both *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*. Revolution, for Conrad, was ultimately ineffective as a means of toppling corrupt government. In an attitude we now associate with Orwell, summarised here by Ford, Conrad believed that ‘all revolutions always have been, always must be, nothing more in the end than palace intrigues: intrigues either for power within, or for the occupancy of, a palace.’

Conrad’s complex approach to collectivism and individualism characterises also the attitudes and fiction of Ford, Crane and James. Ford shared Conrad’s desire for the stability of a feudal society, as well as a sense of its remoteness: ‘It seems to me that when the world was a matter of small communities each under an arbitrary but responsible head then the world was at its best.’ Adhering to the visible symbols of order, Ford confessed ‘I like pomp, banners, divine rights, unreasonable ceremonies and ceremoniousness.’ In a development, however, that parallels Christopher Tietjens in *Parade’s End*, Ford’s attitudes softened, or at least became more complex, following his experience of trench warfare. Tory aloofness and the dedication to abstract, largely anachronistic codes gave way to renewed appreciation of the contingency of experience, the responsibility to others (such as Tietjens feels to Morgan and Aranjuez), and the essential equality of humankind. Authority, by contrast, whether through politicians or military generals, was seen increasingly to be susceptible to misjudgement, corruption and ignorance. Thus, it was not simply the end of military parades—‘the sudden bursting out of the regimental quick step, as after a funeral with military honours’—that Tietjens, like

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129 Ford, *JC*, p. 59. See also Fleishman, p. 46: ‘Conrad remained committed to nationalist revolutions and declared social revolution a shortcut for the popular will, yet recoiled from the emergence of the anarchic forces which he knew to be latent and volatile in men.’
130 Ford, *RTY*, p. 81.
Ford, sensed at the end of the war.\textsuperscript{133} '[T]oday the world changed', reflects Tietjens. 'Feudalism was finished; it's last vestiges were gone. It held no place for him.'\textsuperscript{134} Ford never loses an awareness, however, of the equal danger of unrestrained individualism, embodied in the mercenary figures of Macmaster, Sylvia and (in \textit{The Good Soldier}) Florence. Indeed, '[t]he basis of Fordian "feudalism"', Saunders explains, 'is a distrust of the liberal insistence on "rights". For Ford, liberal individualism is a form of egotism; rights are generally alibis for exploiting those with fewer rights.'\textsuperscript{135} Ford's reservations extended, paradoxically, to a distrust of democracy. 'It is one of my most passionate convictions', he wrote, 'that no one individual can be sufficiently intelligent to be entrusted with the fortune or life of any other individual. Far less can he be morally capable of influencing to the extent merely of a single vote the destinies of millions of his fellows.'\textsuperscript{136} The paradox, needless to say, is that if no one votes, liberty is further jeopardised. The choice of nightmares, then, for Ford as for Conrad, is between the abuse of recognised authority and the abuse of competitive individuals.\textsuperscript{137} Tietjens's solution, with Valentine, 'to get into some hole together', amounts to a retreat from the modern world, seeking independence from both authority and the larger community.\textsuperscript{138} And this, of course, is precisely what Ford himself did after the war, first in the Sussex countryside and later in Provence. Self-sufficiency, however, the ideology of the small producer, also presented the twin prospects of seclusion and physical hardship.\textsuperscript{139}

As with Ford, Crane's attitude to collectivism was complicated by a dramatic personal experience. Shipwrecked, Crane had survived at sea in an open boat for nearly three days. 'The Open Boat' conveys something of his experience, as well as of his

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{133} Ford, \textit{NMP}, 1925, in \textit{PE}, p. 500.
\bibitem{134} Ford, \textit{MCSU}, p. 668.
\bibitem{136} Ford, \textit{RTY}, p. 81.
\bibitem{137} See Armstrong, \textit{The Challenge of Bewilderment}, p. 249.
\bibitem{138} Ford, \textit{MCSU}, p. 668.
\bibitem{139} See Armstrong, \textit{The Challenge of Bewilderment}, p. 259.
\end{thebibliography}
renewed appreciation of the value of discipline and collective effort. 'It would be difficult to describe the subtle brotherhood of men that was here established on the seas', remarks the narrator. Significantly, the crew operate by the traditional hierarchy: the cook, oiler and correspondent taking orders from the 'hurt captain'. But this socio-political convention is complicated by the latter's inability to contribute physically, leaving it unclear whether his rank would have otherwise commanded authority. What remains evident, however, is the crew's 'devotion to the commander of the boat', the narrator stressing that '[the captain] could never command a more ready and swiftly obedient crew than the motley three of the dingey [sic].'

In apparent contrast, however, to this portrayal of social harmony and hierarchy, such stories as 'The Blue Hotel' and 'The Monster' describe the closed-minded disregard for individuality generated by group dynamics. *The Red Badge of Courage* conveys the full complexity of Crane's attitude toward the value and possibility of hierarchy and solidarity. It is when most absorbed within his regiment that Fleming’s fears dissipate and his combat efficiency increases. He becomes 'not a man but a member [...] welded into a common personality which was dominated by a single desire.' However, despite the occasionally blatant callousness of his egoism, there is resonance in Fleming’s desperate clinging to selfhood, as well as in his demand for information and refusal to accept the alleged moral and intellectual superiority of his commanders. "'Good Gawd,'" the youth grumbled, "we’re always being chased around like rats! [...] Nobody seems to know where we go or why we go.' (The absence of communication from their generals had earlier induced psychological discomfort among the troops.) 'We just get fired around from pillar to post and get licked here and get licked there, and nobody knows what it's

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140 Crane, 'OB', *WSC*, vol. 5, p. 73.
done for. It makes a man feel like a damn' kitten in a bag.'"142 ‘I was a Socialist for two weeks,’ Crane once remarked, in a statement that encapsulates his divided attitude: ‘but when a couple of Socialists assured me that I had no right to think differently from any other Socialist [. . .], I ran away.’143

Chester L. Wolford describes Crane as ‘a rare figure in American literature’ for belonging ‘neither to that tradition which lauds individualism if it means praising captains of industry, nor to that which believes social reform to be a cure for America’s ills.’144 In as much as James was effectively ‘of’ American literature until he became a British subject, one year before his death, he constitutes a further rarity. James understood that the freedom so precious to himself as an artist and to his protagonists as social beings was intricately related to the ‘rampant entrepreneurship that was taking over the American economic and political world.’145 Figures such as Osmond, Ralph (for the secret but life-affecting donation of his fortune to Isabel), and even, as described in Chapter Three, the withdrawn employer of the Governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, ‘exercise their freedom’, as Millicent Bell remarks, ‘at the expense of the freedom of others.’146 The same tension between free expression and regulation also manifests, again as I have demonstrated, in the formal construction of James’s art: specifically, in the anarchic ‘explosive principle’ qualified by a desire for balance and authorial control.147

To the extent that the impressionists were uncomfortable with the notion of a fundamentally amoral universe, a universe apparently destined to operate in varying

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142 Ibid., p. 69. In a passage omitted from the published novel, Fleming’s thoughts echo impressionist reasoning. ‘It was always clear to the youth that he was entirely different from other men, that his mind had been cast in a unique mold. Hence laws that might be just to the ordinary man, were, when applied to him, peculiar and galling outrages. Minds, he said, were not made all with one stamp and colored green. He was of no general pattern. It was not right to measure his acts by a world-wide standard.’ RBC, p. 105.
144 Wolford, p. 4.
145 Millicent Bell, p. 38.
146 Ibid., p. 38. Bell includes Isabel herself as a figure who exploits others with her own liberty.
147 See pp. 113-15; Millicent Bell, p. 38.
degrees of anarchy and exploitation, they considered methods for managing, or even countering, the implications. In the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Conrad effectively counteracts his notion of the universe as a soulless knitting machine with a description of how art ‘knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts’. It achieves this by speaking to us of ‘the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation; the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity’. Conrad’s faith in shared psychological properties, a ‘temperament’ common to humankind, was nonetheless, by his own admission, easier for him to conceptualise than to exploit in fiction. The reader stands only to achieve ‘a glimpse’, at best, of ‘the solidarity in mysterious origin’, and for this the author must be both ‘deserving and fortunate’. Neither, in addition, could Conrad escape the suspicion that this mysterious, deep-seated solidarity of consciousness was itself a fiction.

A recurring feature of Conrad’s novels is the intense apprehension of guilt. In the instances of Lord Jim and Razumov, the sense of a betrayal of community is sufficient to provoke repentance, even after the possibility of social retribution has been evaded. Crane’s Fleming is policed, similarly, by his own awareness of a larger, common cause: notably that of his comrades. However, as Conrad recognised, conscience is not innate in the individual. It is, rather, ‘that heirloom of the ages, of the race, of the group, of the family, colourable and plastic, fashioned by the words, the looks, the acts, and even by the silences and abstentions surrounding one’s childhood; tinged in a complete scheme of delicate shades and crude colours by the inherited traditions, beliefs, or prejudices’. Conscience, in short, is a social construct: the invisible (‘despotic’) authority, not of some universal ethics, but of the prevailing ideology. Temperament is shared only inasmuch as ideology permeates society; to submit to conscience is ultimately to submit to

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151 Ibid., p. 92.
social preconceptions. Similar doubts underlie the paradox of Kurtz’s dying words. In whispering ‘The horror’, Kurtz pronounces moral judgement upon an amoral universe and, implicitly, his own actions. But the moral weight of his words evaporates with this recognition of ultimate amorality. It might mark the return of something like conscience in his dying breath, but a conscience that perceives its own futility and falsehood.

This recognition of the fictionality of both conscience and a common, definite purpose, was, for Conrad, a cause of profound sorrow and the ultimate failure of genuine human solidarity. ‘Yes. Egoism is good, and altruism is good, and fidelity to nature would be the best of all, and systems could be built, and rules could be made—if we could only get rid of consciousness.’ For though ‘[t]here is no morality, no knowledge and no hope’, ‘[w]hat makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it.’ The ‘unconsciousness’ of Singleton (‘[h]e stood, still strong, as ever unthinking’) is what yields his obedient efficiency. Conversely, the infectious individualism of Donkin exposes the crew to awareness of their moral vulnerability: ‘All our certitudes were going; […] [w]e did not know what to do.’

Whereas *The Nigger of the Narcissus* demonstrates the dangers of consciousness and amorality, and conveys nostalgia for a sense of their opposites, *Heart of Darkness* explores potential and practical responses. Exposed to the explicitly moral void of the unchartered wilderness, Marlow clutches tenaciously to a definite value system. These moral nuggets cannot, he understands, be carried lightly—accessed and discarded as appropriate, in perpetual acknowledgement of their artificiality; they must be indulged wholeheartedly, to inform consciousness and strengthen conscience.  "Principles won’t

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152 Conrad, *HD*, p. 68.
do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No. You want a definite belief.'

Nettels fairly remarks that, as with Conrad, 'James [never] discarded moral principles or espoused moral nihilism'. Among the many examples of self-retribution and moral commitment: Isabel returns to the husband she mistakenly chose to marry, Maisie remains with Mrs Wix, Strether refuses to gain for himself, and, in *The Wings of the Dove*, Merton Densher finally declines the money bestowed on him by Milly Theale's will. Nettels's comments also extend readily to Crane and Ford. Fleming's encounter with the tattered soldier makes it clear that Crane does not regard his hero's conscience as an unnecessary burden. Rather, irony exposes what is, for Crane, the adverse selfishness of his protagonist. Similarly, the callous treatment of the Swede in 'The Blue Hotel' and of Maggie by her family, reinforce Patrick K. Dooley's assertion that Crane's 'central moral position firmly rests upon two norms: an unselfish response to genuine human need and a tolerant respect for others.'

At any rate', wrote Crane, 'I hope it will be plain that I strongly admire the social god even if I do despise many of his worshippers.'

Ford's response to the dangers of amorality appear closer to Conrad's. For much of his life, Ford held out for what he perceived as the instilled altruism of the Tory gentleman: the selfless responsibility that characterises Tietjens initially, and Edward Ashburnham sporadically. Such qualities were, for Ford, worthy of promotion and regard. But they were also, it became increasingly apparent to himself, products of a former era at best, and arguably a vain ideal, another fiction. 'They are, [...]', he wrote, as war ravaged Europe, 'exploded traditions, here or anywhere else.' Nonetheless, Ford was not willing to abandon hope entirely. Echoing Marlow's deliberate self-application of a moral

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159 Crane, 'To Nellie Crouse', 11 February 1896, *CSC*, vol. 1, p. 203.
standard in the Congo, Tietjens counters his own snap remark, "'Damn all principles!'" with the recognition of their practical, indeed pragmatic value: "'But one has to keep on going. . . . Principles are like a skeleton map of a country—you know whether you're going east or north.'"\(^{161}\)

Perhaps appropriately, given the divisions of attitude discussed here for each author, one feels, finally, a conflicting response to the impressionists' upholding of values in the face of a moral void. Integral to the impressionist aesthetic (recalling Chapters Two and Three) was the importance of perceptual and representational honesty. Preconceptions were considered a distortion of the reality of the universe—whether held by fictional characters, the reader, or the author—and were thus to be rejected. Clearly, in this context, the endorsement of a moral code, recognised by each author as an artificial construct, presents a logical contradiction and a wilful denial of truth. Marlow demonstrates the force of this betrayal: "'You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie,'" he remarks, "'not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appals me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of the mortality in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—what I want to forget.'"\(^{162}\) Marlow's account concludes, of course, with his lie to Kurtz's Intended: an act that deeply discomfits him. Upon his return to 'the sepulchral city', he is nauseated at the vision of people living 'their insignificant and silly dreams'. Within a short while, however, Marlow's own delusions are largely re-established. In response to his savage dismissal of civilised society, he adds 'I admit my behaviour was inexcusable'.\(^{163}\) James is equally revealing in the face of his own illusions. Two years before his death, surveying the implications of World War One, he confided to a friend: 'I never wanted to live on to see the collapse of so many fond faiths, which make all the past, with this hideous card all the while up its sleeve, seem now a long treachery, an

\(^{161}\) Ford, SDN, p. 144.
\(^{162}\) Conrad, HD, p. 29.
\(^{163}\) Ibid., p. 70.
unthinkable humbug.' Coldly analysed, this amounts to an admission of preference for the 'treachery' of illusions over honesty: the same illusions, in principle, that his characters are typically condemned for harbouring.

In contrast, however, to this exposure of logical contradiction, one feels a sympathy for the impressionists that extends to admiration: if not for their moral fight, then for their standing up for humanity. 'The attitude of cold concern is the only reasonable one', declared Conrad. 'In a dispassionate view the ardour for reform, improvement for virtue, for knowledge, and even for beauty is only a vain sticking up for appearances as though one were anxious about the cut of one's clothes in a community of blind men.' Nonetheless, he wrote, 'It must not be supposed that I claim for the artist in fiction the freedom of moral Nihilism. I would require from him many acts of faith of which the first would be the cherishing of an undying hope; and hope, it will not be contested, implies all the piety of effort and renunciation.' As Conrad makes clear, the impressionists resist the full implications of their art; which is to say that the politics of impressionism are not the politics of the impressionists. Accordingly, impressionist literature is neither defeatist nor unconcerned.

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166 Conrad, 'Books', Notes on Life and Letters, p. 8. See also Crane: 'There is not even much hope in my attitude. I do not even expect to do good. But I expect to make a sincere, desperate, lonely battle to remain true to my conception of life and the way it should be lived, and if this plan accomplish anything, it shall be accomplished.' 'To Nellie Crouse', 26 January 1896, CSC, vol. 1, p. 187.
Chapter Five:

IMPRESSIONS OF THE SELF

I

In a painting by Monet of 1875, *La Promenade, la femme à l'ombrelle*, two figures, presented from a low perspective, stand against a shimmering sky of blue and white. In the foreground, a woman holds a parasol and looks with half-turned head towards the viewer. Behind her, a small child faces us directly, hidden from the waist down by the prominent field. From the vaguely suggested attire, one surmises that the child is a boy. There is little evidence in his features: two dark disks beside a suggestion of nose, patches of rose for cheeks, a slight red horizontal for lips. The woman's face is more defined, but still undefined: simplified and distanced by the veiled scarf that blows about her face, and further still by the sketchy treatment. There is something alien about these figures. They stand close but we cannot see them clearly. They look at us but we cannot fathom their gaze. It would be tempting to speculate that both were strangers also to the artist. Instead, we know them to be his wife and son.

The representational anonymity of these figures is not unique in Monet's *oeuvre*. We think of him as more a painter of landscapes than of figure studies. Certainly, landscapes are more abundant. Where people do appear, occasionally they are faceless, as with the foremost woman upon the *Boat in Giverny (En Norvégienne)*, 1887). Otherwise, their features are minimal and smudged, as with the two women behind her, or the female figure—Monet's step-daughter—of *Essai de figure en plein air (vers la gauche)* (1886). The indistinct rendering of these people emphasises their distinction from the perceiving
consciousness; no matter how familiar they may be to the viewer or to the painter, they remain profoundly separate entities.

For the narrators and characters of impressionist fiction, the irreducible otherness of others is a stark reality, and often a pressing concern. People remain incomplete to the perceiver: sketchy and inaccessible, unknowable in their thoughts and unpredictable in their actions. Marlow devotes repeated narratives to exploring the identity of Jim. Clues are gathered, hunches formed, but the uncertainty continues to the final page. Jim “...passes away under a cloud, inscrutable at heart”.¹ The Swede of “The Blue Hotel” remains inexplicable to everyone he encounters. The narrator of The Sacred Fount puzzles at what he perceives to be the changing identities of those around him. Dowell discovers belatedly that the people he thought he knew, his wife and friends, were not what he once supposed. The centrality of this theme to impressionist literature is unprecedented; impressionist characters typically lack the relatively stable and knowable identity supposed in earlier fiction. It is, furthermore, a development entirely consistent with impressionist principles.

At the heart of the explanation is the discrete centrality of the individual consciousness—as another painting illustrates. Manet’s A Bar at the Folies-Bergère (1881) presents a barmaid in a busy establishment, gazing with enigmatic but evidently dissatisfied expression to the left of the viewer. A mirror behind her suggests that the focus of her attention is a male customer, vaguely rendered. As with the similarly sketched crowd in the background, the man appears only as a reflection. Furthermore, the mirror appears, notoriously, misaligned: the correspondence between the barmaid and her environment strangely dislocated. ‘[W]hat is clear’, remarks Michael Wilson, ‘is that the girl [...] is the only palpable flesh and blood. The rest is illusion, from which she, psychologically, is isolated, an individual among many others, but still ultimately alone.’²

Manet’s painting hints at the ambivalent and marginalized position of women in

¹ Conrad, L. J., p. 246.
contemporary Parisian society. On an ontological level, however, it visually encapsulates
the physical and psychological isolation of the individual consciousness. There is no direct
correspondence between the mind and the world beyond, including the minds of other
people. At least, there is none that can be proven. To recall William James: ‘the breach
from one consciousness to another is perhaps the greatest breach in nature.’\(^3\) Moving in
the same direction as James, Pater took a further sizable step towards solipsism. In as
much as they are unique to each perceiver, he explained, and internalised upon reception,
constituting thus our mental life in its entirety, impressions effectively define the
impassable parameters of the individual consciousness:

Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed around for each of
us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on
its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every
one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each
mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world.\(^4\)

Impressionist fiction considers various attempts to transcend the narrow confines
of solitary consciousness. *The Ambassadors* presents what appears to be an encouraging
success in Strether’s imaginative identification with Chad. By discarding the Woollett
mentality whereby Chad could be nothing but corrupted, Strether learns, in Maria
Gostrey’s phrase, to ‘give [him]self up’: to resist monochromatic assessments of character
and absorb the conditions that might enable not only a more rounded consideration, but an
empathetic apprehension of another’s perspective.\(^5\) Like a detective or a method actor
assuming a foreign mindset, Strether seeks to recreate Chad’s mentality: ‘He wasn’t there
to dip, to consume—he was there to reconstruct. […] He reconstructed a possible groping
Chad of three or four years before.’\(^6\) For all his improved appreciation of Chad’s
independence and psychological development, Strether’s imaginative forays begin and end

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\(^3\) See Chapter Two, p. 51.
\(^5\) James, A, p. 27.
within his own consciousness, maintaining thus a significantly immeasurable degree of speculation. It is—it can only ever be—‘a possible ... Chad’ that he discerns.

While it soon becomes as much a quest to develop his own self, Strether’s attempt to ascertain the identity of Chad begins for the sake of Mrs Newsome and, implicitly, her supposedly wayward son. Yet the desire to identify with another is more often a personal necessity in impressionist fiction. There is a need to recognise in others the understanding that might overcome the daunting solipsism of Pater’s impressionist subjectivity. Fleming, we read,

would have liked to have discovered another who suspected himself. A sympathetic comparison of mental notes would have been a joy to him. [... ] His failure to discover any mite of resemblance between their view points made him more miserable than before. No one seemed to be wrestling with such a terrific personal problem. He was a mental outcast.7

Fleming’s attempts to ‘fathom a comrade with seductive sentences [... ] failed to bring forth any statement which looked in any way like a confession to those doubts which he had privately acknowledged to himself.’8 Fleming cannot be certain if the men are holding back, or whether even they are ‘in the proper mood’ for sympathetic identification.9

Such characters as Jim, Dowell and Razumov adopt a different approach. Each provides an account of their thoughts, feelings and actions in disclosures of complex and variable intent. (That we cannot explain, definitively, their intentions for narrating ironically underlines their ontological distance from us.10) What one immediately speculates upon as motivation, however, is the desire to justify their actions in a moral sense: a testament to the residual force of conscience, but also to the need of conforming to a collective mentality. Dowell writes of man’s ‘craving for identity with the woman that

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7 Crane, RBC, pp. 11, 16.
8 Ibid., p. 11.
9 Ibid., p. 11.
10 In Conrad’s UWE, the narrator remarks: ‘It would be idle to inquire why Mr. Razumov has left this record behind him’; pp. 4-5.
he loves. He desires to see with the same eyes, to touch with the same sense of touch, to hear with the same ears [...]. We are’, he explains, ‘all so afraid, we are all so alone, we all so need from the outside the assurance of our worthiness to exist.’11 To be recognised, or perceived, is not sufficient: one needs to be understood, to feel that our actions at least make sense to others, and are not simply the product of a mad, secluded consciousness. (It is significant that within the impressionist fiction of these authors, two of the four principal characters who might (in some instances: arguably) be considered insane—namely, the Governess, and the narrator of The Sacred Fount—provide a detailed, first-person account of their thoughts: a point I shall return to in the subsequent chapter. Of the other two—Kurtz and Nancy Rufford—both have, in varying degrees, renounced or been deprived of their most intimate human connections.) ‘I don’t want to excuse myself’, Jim tells Marlow early in their encounter; ‘but I would like to explain—I would like somebody to understand’.12 Marlow appreciates the sincerity of Jim’s divulgence, acknowledging that ‘[w]e exist only in so far as we hang together.’13

Jim’s explanation of his actions is, explicitly, an appeal to another—one person at least!—for understanding, and Marlow proves to be a sympathetic listener.14 Dowell’s account conveys a similar intent, but one made in the absence of an immediate audience. ‘[.. .] I shall just imagine myself for a fortnight or so at one side of the fireplace of a country cottage, with a sympathetic soul opposite me’, he writes.15 Razumov lacks even this expressed desire for an eventual reader. ‘It is inconceivable that he should have wished any human eye to see it’, writes the narrator.16 There is, we must infer, something in the very telling of our souls—a sense of communion—even where our stories may not

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11 Ford, TGS, p. 79.
12 Conrad, LJ, p. 52. In UWE, Razumov says to himself (and presumably therefore includes in his written account for the narrator to know) ‘‘I want to be understood’’: ‘The universal aspiration’, adds the narrator; p. 39.
14 Ibid., p. 52.
15 Ford, TGS, p. 15.
16 Conrad, UWE, p. 5.
be read or heard. To narrate is perhaps sufficient, implying to ourselves at least that others will understand us.

In practice, the monologues of Razumov and Dowell offer limited success in alleviating their isolation and justifying their actions. Without someone present to listen and respond to our thoughts, our words, we have only ourselves for acknowledgment, creating a closed circuit that again leads to eventual solipsism. Razumov remains intolerably lonely: his secret diary insufficiently compensates for his reluctance to confess and divulge his unseen past. Dowell, on the other hand, can never relinquish his nagging sense that, in literal terms, he writes only to himself; and is thus denied reassurance. 'Is all this digression or isn't it digression? Again, I don't know. You, the listener, sit opposite me. But you are so silent. You don't tell me anything.'

Conrad occasionally ventured beyond even this position, radically questioning the authenticity of the material universe:

Even writing to a friend—to a person one has heard, touched, drank [sic] with, quarrelled with—does not give me a sense of reality. All is illusion—the words written, the mind at which they are aimed, the truth they are intended to express, the hands that will hold the paper, the eyes that will glance at the lines.

Assuming the existence of an extra-conscious reality, one might contend that even an immediate audience is no guarantee of inter-subjective comprehension. We can never be sure that our words, though registered, are understood as we intended. Once they leave our mouths, or our fingers, words are no longer entirely our own. 'Half the words we use have no meaning whatever', writes Conrad, 'and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly or conceit.' This is perhaps a touch misanthropic: words inevitably are received differently according to the template of the individual consciousness, not least because each template is individual. Marlow, for example, speaks at length to convey his impressions of Jim to his various listeners, but

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17 Ford, TGS, p.17.
when his group-narrative concludes, the narrator remarks that 'each of them seemed to carry away his own impression, to carry it away with him like a secret.'

Characters such as Marlow and Dowell stress vociferously how 'very difficult' it is 'to give an all-round impression of any man.' Following the advice of his author, Dowell introduces Florence's uncle with 'an anecdote', which is, he believes, 'about the best way to give you an idea of what the old gentleman was like.' The Red Badge of Courage goes further still, substituting immediate physical traits for proper names, as if conceding that to give a name is to suggest a greater grasp of character than is possible. Such dependence upon sensory impressions signifies an implicit admission that surfaces are all we can know of another directly. Ultimately, of course, even this modest approach is problematic, with actions and appearance as indeterminate an index of identity as are words—and for a number of reasons.

Monet's various series demonstrate how our phenomenal environment—buildings, landscapes, skies—is in a state of perpetual flux, lacking definitive identity. The paintings with which I began this chapter suggest that people constitute further environmental phenomena to the perceiving consciousness and therefore exhibit similar contingency. Monet's figures in these works are, in effect, as impressionistic as the locations that (in conventional terms) provide their 'setting'. Devoid of hard outlines and modified by the same light that transforms the landscape into a patchwork of colour and shade, their bodies blur into their surroundings, as though an organic extension of the air that envelops them and the earth that carries their weight. We receive the same impression in The Red Badge of Courage, where the soldiers fighting within Fleming's field of vision are described as

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20 Conrad, LJ, p. 200. Compare Marlow in HD: "it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating existence. It is impossible. We live as we dream—alone...."; p. 30.
22 See Chapter Two, pp. 66-7.
23 Ford, TGS, p. 19.
continually melting’ into the woods and battle-smoke. From a temporal perspective, the perplexing change of others makes Chad a near stranger to Strether upon their first encounter in Paris: ‘The phenomenon that had sat suddenly there with him was a phenomenon of change so complete that his imagination, which had worked so beforehand, felt itself, in the connexion, without margin or allowance. It had faced every contingency but that Chad should not be Chad’. Various similar ‘sharp rupture[s] of identity’ confront the narrator of The Sacred Fount in his reunion with old acquaintances. The narrator is quick to assume that a radical transformation of his fellow guests has occurred. What he barely considers is the temporal relativity of his own perception. We are all changing, all aging, as Stowell explains, ‘but we see and believe that others age at different times and always faster than we ourselves do.’ Such perceptual relativity represents the temporal equivalent of James’s spatial ‘house of fiction’ metaphor; or rather, it completes that concept with the addition of a fourth dimension.

Faced with this perpetual transformation of our visual environment, the essential identity of all phenomena—including people—to the perceiving consciousness becomes dependent upon recollection. Appearances might be supposed to evolve more than they renew, suggesting a continuation of the visual self that enables identification of others through the recognition of consistencies. Over a long period of time, most of even these regularities will fade: photographs of the same person at seven and seventy may appear unrelated to the uninformed perceiver. Smaller durations make consistency more discernable, but never definitive given the limitations of memory. Details of our past are inevitably forgotten (we cannot recall every detail of even our most vivid or recent

24 Crane, RBC, p. 18.
25 James, A, p. 90; author’s emphasis.
26 Ibid., p. 90.
27 Stowell, p. 205.
28 See Chapter Two, pp. 53-4.
memory), or else altered beyond our awareness, creating an unquantifiable gap between what we remember and what we actually saw. The narrator of *The Sacred Fount* reminds us that he is recollecting his experience; simultaneously, his recalled surprise at apparently altered appearances depends upon his recollections of a still earlier time. That he offers little in the way of caution concerning the exactness of his narrative increases suspicions over the accuracy of his initial judgements. Dowell, as with Jim, may present a tentative approach in this regard (‘I can’t remember whether it was in our first year [. . .]’29), but his account gains in credibility by acknowledging what James’s narrator appears to neglect: the fallibility of memory.

This inescapable contingency of appearance is only one reason for its limitations as an indication of identity. The second—equally central to impressionism—is the potential discrepancy between surface and depth. That people often act differently from our anticipations derived from their visual image may stem less from a misreading of appearance than from its inexact correlation with psychological motivation. It is not necessarily that our sensory information is incorrect, but that its value as an expression of the unseen—the character of another—is ultimately speculative and too often relied upon. Dowell, whose ‘trust [. . .] in first impressions’ is confessed in, and betrayed by, his own narrative, complains that ‘the modern English habit of taking everyone for granted is a good deal to blame’ for how often one is surprised by ‘one’s fellow beings’.30 But his own nationality suggests that the habit is not confined to the English, and of course we witness the similar misinterpretation of Pete by Maggie, Razumov by Haldin, and Osmond by Isabel, to name just a few.

What compounds the difficulty of judging people by appearance is the human inclination to exploit and extend the inevitable discrepancies between thought and façade. This willingness is what Verloc employs for his career, what Razumov needs eventually

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29 Ford, *TGS*, p. 32.
for survival, what Marlow, reporting to Kurtz's Intended, considers humane, and what Maisie learns to be essential if she is to retain autonomy in the adult world. It is also, writes Armstrong, what Dowell 'depairs over' ('the gulf that separates selves'), and what Florence 'revels in' ('the opportunities it provides for gamesmanship and warfare').

While Armstrong's distinction is convincing, it is inconceivable that such a character as Dowell would have never exploited to some degree the possibilities extended to extremes by Florence, inconceivable that he would have always expressed his innermost thoughts and feelings, even where these might have worked to his own detriment. Dowell writes:

> In all matrimonial associations there is, I believe, one constant factor—a desire to deceive the person with whom one lives as to some weak spot in one's character or in one's career. For it is intolerable to live constantly with one human being who perceives one's small meannesses.

The desire to conceal aspects of one's self extends, of course, beyond marital confines. It threatens, nonetheless, to overtake initial intentions of self-preservation to betray one's sense of unity and self-control. Isabel Archer sets herself an impossible ideal: 'Her life should always be in harmony with the most pleasing impression she should produce, she would be what she appeared, and she would appear what she was.' The 'weak spot' in her 'career' is, to her own mind, the unhappiness of her marriage, for which she regards herself increasingly as responsible, making it thereby also a failure of 'character'. Pride prevents honest self-exposure, and so she feigns happiness. Caspar Goodwood is deceived; Ralph is more perceptive: 'Her mask had dropped for an instant, but she had put it on again, much to Ralph's infinite disappointment.'

> Isabel conforms accordingly to a division of the self into what is conventionally termed 'public' and 'private'. This distinction, between what we know and what we show, proves inevitable by impressionist reasoning. As we shall see in the second part of this

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32 Ford, *TGS*, p. 81: my emphasis.
33 James, *PL*, p. 54.
34 See James, *PL*, p. 422.
chapter, our thoughts and sensations are too many, too rapid, too varied and too unruly to find a perfect correlative in action and expression. Consequently, impressionist characters cannot judge others assuredly by the way they appear, nor by the way they have appeared; neither can they judge them by their actions. What characters do think about others, they must instead consider, is to a significant yet unknowable degree a combination of the image projected by the other, and of their own deep-seated expectations of both consistency in—and a discernibly logical cause for—the other’s actions. Edward Ashburnham maintains his public self—the epitome of ‘the Good Soldier’—despite his clandestine infidelities. Dowell, it is clear, buys into this persona. Furthermore, he clings to it despite its ruthless exposure, admitting that ‘It is impossible for me to think of Edward Ashburnham as anything but straight, upright and honourable.’ Dowell’s memory thus works against him, preventing him from seeing another clearly. Jim is similarly willing to cultivate his status of ‘Tuan Jim’ in Patusan: partially to conceal from himself the weaknesses and potential cowardice of his ordinary self, but also to satisfy his people’s desire for an almost god-like figurehead as their leader and inspiration. ‘“If you ask them who is brave”’, Jim tells Marlow, ‘“—who is true—who is just—who is it they would trust with their lives? —they would say, Tuan Jim. And yet they can never know the real, real truth . . .”’.

With the inner self of others so complex, seemingly inconsistent and ultimately unknowable, the public self presents the only consistent, perhaps the only manageable, impression of another’s identity. ‘It is when we try to grapple with another man’s intimate need that we perceive how incomprehensible, wavering, and misty are the beings that share with us the sight of the stars and the warmth of the sun’, says Marlow. ‘[T]he envelope of flesh and blood on which our eyes are fixed melts out before the out-stretched

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36 Ford, TGS, p. 78.
37 Conrad, LI, p. 181.
hand, and there remains only the capricious, unconsolable, and elusive spirit that no eye
can follow, no hand can grasp.  

As befits what I have termed the ‘dual nature’ of impressionist literature, the
difficulty of clearly ascertaining the identity of other characters extends readily to the
reader. Both James and Conrad, writes Nettels, created characters, like living people, who evoke widely different responses from
others and about whom the final word that would resolve the differences is never
said. Characters like Emma Woodhouse, Gwendolen Harleth, or Eustacia Vye may
be as complex as Conrad’s or James’s characters, but none has elicited such a
diversity of opinion as Rowland Mallet, Isabel Archer, Maggie Verver, or Heyst.

It is not only that we often perceive the characters of impressionist fiction externally,
without the aid of intrusive narrators to pry beneath the skin. (‘You seem to me to have
observed from the outside only’, complained John D. Barry to Crane. ‘I have little idea of
Maggie’s personality; she is not much more than a mere figure to me.’) This does not,
after all, account for the uncertainty of thought and motivation surrounding many
impressionist focalizing centres of consciousness and first-person narrators. Neither can
we entirely attribute this nebulosity of character to the immediacy of presentation—
although this accounts for much of the effect. There is, for example, little pre-history of
impressionist characters upon their introduction. Long passages of background
information are deemed rarely credible as the musings of a perceiving consciousness.
Furthermore, as Millicent Bell remarks, ‘It is an unnoted effect of James’s famous
“international situation” that it introduces an American lately landed in Europe whose

38 Conrad, LJ, p. 109. See also Dowell: ‘Who in this world knows anything of any other heart—or of
his own? I don’t mean to say that one cannot form an average estimate of the way a person will behave. But
one cannot be certain of the way any man will behave in every case—and until one can do that a “character”
is of no use to anyone.’ TGS, p. 104.
39 See Chapter Two, p. 59.
42 Dowell’s remark that ‘In my fainter sort of way I seem to perceive myself following the lines of
Edward Ashburnham. I suppose that I should really like to be a polygamist [. . .]’ is, on the face of it at least,
puzzling and sudden, and has provoked a wide critical response. Ford, TGS, p. 151.
home [and therefore shaping] conditions lie behind, not ever to be revisited, even by memory.”43 This ‘newborn’ condition of identity is accentuated, Bell continues, with the cases of ‘Isabel Archer and Milly Theale [as] orphans’: each lacking a clearly defined parental and domestic history.44 Ford adds to this a more fundamental explanation of how characters, as temporal entities, are perceived always with a perplexing immediacy:

[I]n your gradual making acquaintanceship with your fellows you never do go straight forward. You meet an English gentleman at your golf club. He is beefy, full of health, the moral of the boy from an English Public School of the finest type. You discover, gradually, that he is hopelessly neurasthenic, dishonest in matters of small change, but unexpectedly self-sacrificing, a dreadful liar but a most painfully careful student of lepidoptera [...].45

Implicit in Ford’s account is the paradox that acquaintances never are complete. Just as our understanding of others has evolved, so it will continue to do so, revelations potentially emerging even after death. And for these authors this applies as much to fictional characters as to living people. For characters also exist in the moment: in the sentence rather than the word, in language that operates in time, continually deferring, continually updating. When the language stops, when the novel ends, reflection begins; but this too is a temporal process. There can be no spatial or pictorial presentation of Strether, no consideration of his personality unaffected by the development of our understanding. He is neither the loyal servant of Mrs. Newsome who begins the novel, nor the comparatively independent individual who ends it. Even our re-readings are revisions—never the original experience. Far from capturing or freezing character, they present us with different nuances of interpretation.

What finally, however, makes impressionist characters as indefinite to the reader as to their fictional perceivers is their presentation as dramatised psyches. Just as Monet’s figures blur at the edges, so impressionist characters spill over the boundaries of their form through the force of their mental complexity. Lacking clear definition and consistency,

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43 Millicent Bell, p. 19: my parentheses.
44 Ibid., p. 20.
45 Ford, JC, p. 129.
they are less corporeal performers than modes of consciousness: never more clearly than when focalizing or narrating, and never more comprehensively than in James. This challenge to the notion of character as something amenable to clear description or analysis makes ‘character’ itself a problematic term for the depicted figures of impressionist fiction. Snitow has observed that, in his study of Conrad, ‘Ford writes sections about “surprise,” “cadence,” “style,” even “philosophy,” but never one entitled “character.” “Character,” that great category of Victorian writing, was a category no longer.’

For the reader, perhaps the most notable consequence of indefinite impressionist ‘characters’ (I use the word for convenience) is a sense of greater remove from the protagonists and a corresponding uncertainty of general circumstances. The vicarious experience of impressionist literature entails more the sharing with characters of perception than of consciousness: there is, after all, no discernibly stable fictional identity for the reader to inhabit. This same epistemological distance between reader and character instils the protagonists of impressionist fiction with feelings of acute dislocation and alienation from their companions. When Dowell remarks that ‘I know nothing—nothing in the world—of the hearts of men. I only know that I am alone—horribly alone’, his two remarks are synonymous. Jim, Fleming, Razumov and Dowell long, with limited success, for meaningful communion and to be understood. By contrast, relationships in impressionist fiction are typically fragmented and unsatisfactory: one thinks of Adolf and Winnie Verloc, Isabel and Osmond, Maisie’s parents, Maggie’s parents, Tietjens and Sylvia, Dowell and Florence, Edward and Leonora, and so on—each couple wracked with mistrust and misunderstanding.

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46 Snitow, pp. 63-4.
47 See also Armstrong: ‘The reader of The Good Soldier has difficulty stabilising a relation to its sometimes alien and sometimes intimate narrator.’ The Challenge of Bewilderment, p. 218.
48 Ford, TGS, p. 12. Compare Ford’s comment in JC: ‘It is that that makes life the queer, solitary thing that it is. You may live with another for years and years in a condition of the closest daily intimacy and never know what, at the bottom of the heart, goes on in your companion. Not really’; p. 123.
This general inability to communicate and to understand others unproblematically coincides with the prevailing liberalist-capitalist ideology described in the previous chapter. Whether, and to what degree, one intensified the other is a matter for conjecture. What is tempting to speculate, however, is that this epistemological isolation of the self, accentuated in impressionist philosophy and represented in its fictional manifestations, contributed towards what Ford in *Parade's End* portrayed as the splintering of contemporary western society and the alienation of the modern individual.

II

The inability to know another with any conviction, or to be known by another fully, provokes impressionist characters into heightened states of introspection. As with Descartes, the reasoning follows, one can at least be sure of one's own consciousness and 'therefore' of oneself. However, while impressionist characters never doubt their own existence, their anxiety of identity extends from the perception of others to that of themselves. 'He was not—if I may say so—clear to me', says Marlow of Jim. '[...] And there is a suspicion he was not clear to himself either.'

The individual consciousness—the essence of identity—is neither stable nor definable. There is no one self, constant in time. Just as our physical form evolves at the level of cells and atoms, so our minds—our thoughts and attitudes—undergo perpetual change. For William James, 'some kind of consciousness is always going on. There is', he explains, 'a stream, a succession of states, or waves, or fields [...] of knowledge, of feeling, of desire, of deliberation, etc., that constantly pass and repass, and that constitute our inner life.' It is a stream, to paraphrase Heraclitus, into which one may not enter twice. This did not mean for William James, however, that the self is lost or dissipated. The very image of a stream suggests a single, organic entity—possessing both form and

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50 William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, p. 19.
continuity—more than a disparate abundance of molecules. ‘One state [of consciousness] will seem to be composed of hardly anything but sensations, another of hardly anything but memories, etc.’, William James explained. ‘But around the sensation, if one consider carefully, there will always be some fringe of thought or will, and around the memory some margin or penumbra of emotion or sensation.’\(^5\) Transposed into terms of Impressionist painting, as Ryan observes, William James represents a view of the figure that ‘emphasizes [. . .] not the splashes of color that constitute its surface, but the fact that we see it as a connected picture.’\(^5\)

If taken no further, such reasoning would be to consider the self in isolation, as something separate from the environment in which it exists. Consciousness, by contrast, wrote William James, contains both ‘sensations of our bodies and of the objects around us’.\(^5\) These objects, which make up our environment, are external only hypothetically. For the impressionists, as for Husserl, they fuse with consciousness in the process of perception, constituting objects of consciousness, or sense impressions, rather than ‘things-in-themselves.’\(^5\) It follows for the impressionists, writes Kronegger, ‘that [if] we cannot know reality independently of consciousness, [then] we cannot know consciousness independently of reality.’\(^5\)

The implications of this interdependence of self and environment point in opposite directions—one of which will be considered in the following chapter. The other suggests a loss of self in the partial subordination of the perceiver to its surroundings: a loss, at least, of self-determination. Impressions are received, the argument follows—passively,

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\(^5\) William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, p. 20. See also Ryan: ‘[. . .] [James] stressed the sense of continuity that holds the self together regardless of any gaps in consciousness that may actually have occurred. [. . .] James adopted what he was later to call a “pragmatistic” position: [. . .] since [the self] accords with a strongly felt inner conviction, there was no reason to discard it”; pp. 13-14.


\(^5\) William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, p. 20. See Ryan: “The individualized self,” wrote William James in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, “[. . .] is a part of the content of the world experienced””; p. 75.

\(^5\) See Kronegger, p. 42.

involuntarily; they fill consciousness and provoke a response: a thought, a flinch, an emotion. The individual thereby is acted upon: not only physically and circumstantially, but by sense impressions at the level of the mind. It is a fundamentally cognitive form of determinism: an impressionist slant upon the more material manifestations associated with naturalist fiction, such as the lack of money, education, or opportunities. This is not to suggest, however, that the physical and biological circumstances of the individual are not acknowledged in impressionist fiction. They find expression, for example, in Ford’s theory of ‘justification’, which stipulates that ‘[b]efore everything a story must convey a sense of inevitability’. The actions of a character, Ford continues, must be ‘the only action that character could have taken [. . .] because of his character, because of his ancestry, because of past illness [. . .].’56 The early, largely naturalistic Maggie provides a clear fictional instance of Ford’s theoretical acknowledgement, albeit not immediately. Defined (and delimited) in the sub-title as ‘A Girl of the Streets’, Crane’s heroine, we are told, nonetheless ‘blossomed in a mud puddle. [. . .] None of the dirt of Rum Alley seemed to be in her veins.’57 It is, crucially, an observation made towards the beginning of the tale. Had Maggie emerged from her circumstances not broken, desperate, and finally dead, though still young, this initial independence would be truly distinctive. Certainly, her moral purity and idealism contrast starkly with those around her. But the insufficiency of these qualities to withstand the mistreatment of Pete and her own family only seals the novel’s fatalism.58

The Red Badge of Courage portrays Fleming as similarly guided by his surroundings in a direct and clearly discernable sense: ‘he instantly saw that it would be impossible for him to escape the regiment. It inclosed him. And there were iron laws of

56 Ford, JC, p. 204.
57 Crane, M, p. 16.
58 The almost fatalistic nature of this novel is apparent in this description of Pete’s voice: ‘burdened with disdain for the inevitable and contempt for anything that fate might compel him to endure’; M, p. 19. Crane wrote of the novel to Hamlin Garland: ‘it tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless.’ March? 1893, CSC, vol. 1, p. 53.
tradition and law on all sides. He was in a moving box.\footnote{Crane, \textit{RBC}, p. 18.} In this text, however, the mental subjugation of Fleming is equally evident. While he longs to believe himself as courageous, a hero in battle, more often, writes Walcutt, he appears, like Jim, ‘an emotional puppet controlled by whatever sight he sees at the moment [. . .], romancing dreams of glory while flinch[ing] at every danger.’\footnote{Walcutt, p. 79.} When, finally, Fleming relinquishes his resistance, caught up in the intensity of a collective assault, he advances ‘unconsciously’.\footnote{Crane, \textit{RBC}, p. 77.} It is a profound moment, implying a principally cognitive form of determinism. As his sense of self recedes, his environment appears all-pervasive. His mind becomes a sensitive film, a passive receptor of impressions. ‘It seemed to the youth that he saw everything. Every blade of the green grass was bold and clear.’\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, \textit{RBC}, p. 77.} When the charge subsides, his consciousness distances from the environment as he recovers himself. The soldiers were ‘returned to caution’, writes the narrator. ‘They were become men again.’\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, \textit{RBC}, p. 78.}

A notable variation of cognitive determinism characterises \textit{Under Western Eyes}. As with Fleming’s Unionist army, the despotic Tsarist regime provides a physical and material constraint upon Razumov and his compatriots. The greatest influence upon Razumov, however, is psychological. Once he decides to betray Haldin, the pressure of both the political regime and his conscience at betraying a comrade affects his subconscious as much as his conscious mind. Primed thus, his environment strikes at his innermost responses. ‘[A] man goes out of a room for a walk’, he muses. ‘Nothing more trivial in appearance. And yet it may be momentous. He comes back—he has seen perhaps a drunken brute, taken particular notice of the snow on the ground—and behold he is no longer the same man. The most unlikely things have a secret power over one’s thoughts.’\footnote{Conrad, \textit{UWE}, p. 59.} Razumov, the narrator elaborates, felt ‘a distinct sensation of his very existence being
undermined in some mysterious manner', and ‘he asked himself seriously if it were worth while to go on accomplishing the mental functions of that existence which seemed no longer his own.’

If the self is weakened by its dependence upon the perceived environment, however, it is threatened still further by the impressionist nature of that environment; which is to say, by the flux and subjectivity of received sense impressions. Definite and monolithic social forces shape the individual in naturalist fiction. By contrast, the forces of determinism in impressionist fiction are fluid and indeterminate. The latter environments shift with light, movement and focus: broken, like an Impressionist canvas, into discrete minutia. Correspondingly, the dependent self, immersed in its environment, loses orientation, consistency and stability. Tietjens begins *Parade’s End* with a clear sense of place in the social order, albeit one established partially by others. He is ‘Tietjens of Groby’, ‘[t]he youngest son of a Yorkshire country gentleman’, married and with a career in that most precise and measured of positions, ‘the Imperial Department of Statistics’.

The war and its disintegration of the moral and social adhesive, disrupt the equanimity of his daily existence. His wife, his job, his certainties, and eventually his own mind, come into question. He is, in short, successively shaped and broken by his dynamic environment—the familiar rug that maps his steps pulled suddenly from beneath his feet. Razumov undergoes a similar experience when his quiet, academic life is thrown into disarray by Haldin’s intrusion. Returning to his room on one occasion to find it searched and overhauled by a hidden yet pervasive authority, we read that

the disorder affected him profoundly, unreasonably. He sat down and stared. He had a distinct sensation of his very existence being undermined in some mysterious manner [. . .]. He even experienced a slight physical giddiness and made a movement as if to reach for something to steady himself with.

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As the epitome of his immediate, personal environment, Razumov’s room represents a bastion of his identity. Finding it altered beyond his control, he feels his supposed autonomy and his sense of self almost physically violated and undermined.

These experiences of Tietjens and Razumov are dramatic and, in certain respects, exceptional. However, by impressionist reasoning, the instability of the perceived environment applies universally, at the fundamental level of consciousness. ‘[T]hose impressions of the individual mind’, wrote Pater,

to which, for each of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight; [...] each of them is limited by time, [...] all that is in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it [...] To such a tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by, what is real in our life fines itself down. It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off—that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves.68

Pater’s response to this dissolution of selfhood was defensive to a degree: an attempt to find in transience opportunities for the self to consolidate. His notion of the ‘moment,’ writes Ryan, ‘emerged from the undifferentiated swirl of elements as a particular intensity of perception in which the vanishing away was temporarily swayed, a triumph of vision that both paved the way for art and was itself a kind of art.’69 This, as Ryan explains, is the basis of Pater’s ‘hard, gem-like flame’:70 ‘the “ecstasy” that gave a brief coherence to the moment and elevated it from the terrifying swarm to which it would ultimately return’.71 One thinks similarly of epiphanies in impressionist fiction, such as those experienced by Isabel and Strether, in which time as a continuum appears momentarily suspended, gathered instead into a comprehensive vision, with details past and present newly juxtaposed. Impressionist paintings, too, paradoxically freeze the moment as they record its transience. Ultimately, however, as discernable in the explanation of each of

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68 Pater, p. 188.
69 Ryan, p. 28.
70 Pater, p. 189.
71 Ryan, p. 28.
these instances, such privileged moments of consciousness, while extended in the Bergsonian sense of subjective time, must inevitably return to the ceaseless flow of the universe. The individual cannot exist in art.

An alternative defence of the self from the flux and determinism of its environment comes potentially from conscious reflection and self-analysis. Whereas in outward perception the self perceives something beyond itself, which it thereby depends upon for its identity, reflection, phenomenological reasoning proceeds, returns the self to itself, without recourse to anything other. I think, therefore I am, to recall Descartes. Self-analysis, to continue this line of argument, distances sense impressions from our immediate, felt experience. The world becomes estranged, defamiliarised, yet thereby more visible and separate. Tietjens begins Parade's End with what Ford identifies as the traditional English mentality: inclined never to examine his 'inner self'. 'As Tietjens saw the world, you didn’t “talk.” Perhaps you didn’t even think about how you felt.' The forced displacement of Tietjens from his orderly existence encourages him to revise his unthinking attachment to a society that itself is undergoing transformation. Given that changing circumstances have prompted this re-evaluation, one might argue that Tietjens remains determined by his environment. There is, after all, no ideologically neutral position from which we might evaluate ourselves; the very language we employ for self-analysis is not entirely ours, but rather diffuses us beyond our intentions. But at least, one might maintain, Tietjens acquires an improved awareness of his own interrelation with the perceived environment.

Perhaps a greater problem for the individual seeking autonomy of consciousness in these novels is that reflection and analysis distance the self from itself as much as from its

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72 Henri Bergson distinguished between objective, or clock time, and time as it is experienced in consciousness, varying according to intensity.
73 Compare Stowell: 'This ephemeral crystalline instant evaporates as easily and as mysteriously as it appeared; it returns to the flux and flow of durational time'; p. 38.
74 Ford, SDN, p. 6.
75 See Chapter Three, p. 120-22.
surroundings. 'Ask yourself whether you are happy', remarked John Stuart Mill, 'and you cease to be so.' Summarising Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Mark C. Taylor elaborates: 'The problem with this effort to return consciousness to itself lies in the “re” of the turn. This “re” points to an inevitable delay that makes it impossible for consciousness to re-capture or re-collect itself.' Indeed, by perceiving itself from its own position, the reflecting self splits in two, lost, as in a mirror, between the reflecting and the reflected self. 'I think, therefore I am not', one might revise: am not, that is to say, entirely present to myself.

Such hindering self-consciousness may be brought about by isolation. Fleming evades the company of his colleagues to ponder his likely response to fighting. In addition, we are told, '[h]e had the opportunity to reflect. He had time in which to wonder about himself and to attempt to probe his sensations.' His self-analysis drives a wedge between his conscious mind and his instincts. 'As his imagination went forward to a fight, he saw hideous possibilities': possibilities that divide his unthinking self between disparate responses. He is distanced, simultaneously, from his environment. 'Absurd ideas took hold of him. He thought that he did not relish the landscape. It threatened him.' Contrasting with this anxiety, Fleming's eventual 'mad' and 'moblike' charge, though stoked and guided by external influences, presents 'a temporary but sublime absence of selfishness.' One thinks similarly of Singleton: selfless, almost unconscious, yet apparently content—were it not, as with Mill, a virtual contradiction to recognize himself so.

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77 Charles C. Taylor, p. 23.
78 Jeremy Hawthorn presents a similar argument to my own that follows. See Multiple Personality and the Disintegration of Literary Character: From Oliver Goldsmith to Sylvia Plath (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), p. 85.
79 Crane, RBC, p. 19.
80 Ibid., p. 8.
81 Ibid., p. 19.
82 Ibid., pp. 77-8.
The self, then, is caught between selfless absorption with its environment and self-induced rupture arising from introspection: less a choice, in fact, than a combination. Even where the self resists reflection, it remains at least partially separate from its collective instincts. For one’s instincts are themselves in conflict: divided between ‘social conscience’, or assimilated ideology, and genetic or biological forces; between the id, the ego and the superego, in Freudian terminology. The self divides, accordingly, between public and private manifestations, even before one chooses consciously how to act or present oneself. Seeking to force consistency of self by repressing instincts not only fails to remove the civil war of the subconscious, it often exacerbates it, driving frustrated impulses to the surface in a visible rupture of projected coherence. ‘Now I can marry the girl’, says the docile, obedient Dowell just two hours after his wife’s death. The remark, repeated to him by Leonora, astounds him. ‘For I had never had the slightest conscious idea of marrying the girl [Nancy] [...]. It is as if one had a dual personality, the one I being entirely unconscious of the other.’ Edward Ashburnham presents a more persistently clear subject of conflicting instincts, torn between compassion and passion, between the responsibility appropriate to his social status (his public self: the good soldier), and the selfish drives of the libido.

Razumov’s repression of instinct is more strictly enforced, producing thus a more dramatic sundering of identity. Through Haldin, Razumov confronts a stark conflict of loyalties: allegiance to the state or to the individual. No decision can absent him from guilt, or bring harmony to his consciousness. The crisis of self deepens in his subsequent role of secret agent in Geneva (unusual circumstances, yet comparable to Verloc’s). From having ‘nothing secret or reserved in his life’, Razumov necessarily adopts a persona

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83 See Chapter Four, p. 144.
84 Ford, TGS, p. 73.
85 Ibid., pp. 72-3. Dowell writes also of ‘twelve years of [...] repressing my instincts’ and speculates that ‘my inner soul—my dual personality—had realised long before that Florence was a personality of paper’; p. 83.
congruent with the cause of the Russian émigrés. But the illusion cannot hold; his self will not be denied. Tired and frustrated from sustained repression, Razumov is drawn finally into openness by his love for Haldin’s sister. His fragmented words convey his mental conflict, while his diary, directed now to Natalia, describes the involuntary nature of his confession. ‘What could I have known of what was tearing me to pieces and dragging the secret for ever to my lips? You were appointed to undo the evil by making me betray myself back into truth and peace.’

As with Fleming, Razumov’s isolation intensifies his uncertainty of self. Time alone—a feature of his life even before his employment as a government spy—gives Razumov free-reign to reflect, with debilitating excess, upon his thoughts and feelings. One might suppose his journal to intensify his anxiety. The act of narrating one’s experience in words creates a dual perspective: a double subject, with one ‘I’ locked in the past tense, denying the present self full integration with its thoughts and history.

Dowell, accordingly, questions how ‘true’ his recorded experiences can be regarded now that his apparently goodly apple has proven rotten at the core. He cannot identify entirely with them, following his revised understanding; nor, by extension, with his remembered self. Among the implicit functions of Razumov’s journal, however, is that of ‘self-confession’. With the opportunity for unrestrained expression, Razumov acts to record and narrow by exposure his duplicity of persona, or ‘double identity’. Success, inevitably, is limited. While his journal remains secret, so does the reconciliation between his public and private selves.

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86 Conrad, UWE, p. 7.
87 See, for example, UWE, pp. 350-1.
88 Ibid., p. 358.
89 To write autobiographically, as Hawthorn remarks, ‘is to split ourselves into subject and object.’ Hawthorn, ‘Introduction’, UWE, p. xiii.
90 Dowell speaks repeatedly of true and false experiences on p.12; TGS.
91 Conrad, UWE, p. 167.
The psychologically self-distancing effect of autobiography and recollection, then, instigates the final challenge to the notion of consistent and verifiable identity. ‘But I, entelechy, form of forms, am I by memory because under everchanging forms’, reasons Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus. Clearly, without subconscious recollection, our identity would exist only in the eyes of others. In Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past, the young Marcel notes the self-salvaging function of memory. Describing himself returning to consciousness ‘in the middle of the night, not knowing where I was; I could not even be sure at first’, he recalls,

who I was; I had only the most rudimentary flicker of existence, such as may lurk and flicker in the depths of an animal’s consciousness; I was more destitute than the cave dweller; but then the memory—not yet of the place in which I was, but of the various other places where I had lived and might now very possibly be—would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself: in a flash I would traverse centuries of civilisation, and out of a blurred glimpse of oil-lamps, then of shirts with turned-down collars, would gradually piece together the original components of my ego.

Left at this, the success of memory in recovering identity seems unproblematic, if somewhat mystical. Absent in Marcel’s early account, however, is a logical resolution of how the unformed self gathers its own fragments into unity. Also absent is an awareness of the self-dividing potential of recollection. Instead, the ‘rope’ descends from Heaven like a deus ex machina, resolving his uncertainties.

Integral to Proust’s larger vision is the subconsciousness of primal recollection. Performing the role of a residual self, like a battery sustaining the files of a switched-off computer, Proust’s notion of subconscious memory both avoids the intrusiveness that threatens a self-division, and offers at least the impression of comprehensive self-continuity. Such intuitions, however, do not and cannot guarantee their own validity. Neither, by the same reasoning, can we be certain that the ‘involuntary’ recollections of

Marcel, such as that most famously involving the tea-dipped madeleine, are as complete and accurate as their associated sensations suggest. There are at least four arguments by which even Proustian, or 'subconscious' memory potentially fails to consolidate the self, with echoes resounding throughout impressionist fiction.

Memory, as I have emphasised, can be inaccurate and incomplete: its failings often unapparent to the self until proven so. The self that acts and builds upon distorted memory is altered correspondingly: continuous only upon the presumption of a falsehood. To the extent, secondly, that memory is subconscious, or involuntary, it determines us until, hypothetically at least, we are acting without self, without volition. In turn, the subconscious is determined immeasurably by the environment; it constitutes a sea of sense-impressions, gathered past and present, externally and involuntarily, by which memory thus binds us more firmly to our surroundings. Memory, finally, relates to the past by definition, unable to define the self in its contingency, in its condition of a continual present. Encountering new situations—of which the present entirely is comprised—we remain fundamentally unknown quantities, as much to others as to ourselves. Fleming, we read,

tried to prove to himself mathematically that he would not run from a battle. Previously he had never felt obliged to wrestle too seriously with this question. In his life he had taken certain things for granted, never challenging his belief in ultimate success, and bothering little about means and roads. But here he was confronted with a thing of moment. It had suddenly appeared to him that perhaps in a battle he might run. He was forced to admit that as far as war was concerned he knew nothing of himself.94

Overtly for Fleming, as for Jim, identity is perceived retrospectively: personality becoming visible only in the actions of the past, constituted solely of experience.95 In the flux of our environment and circumstances, however, the template of our identity becomes

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94 Crane, *RBC*, p. 8; my emphasis.
95 See Conrad's *LJ*: ‘when yet very young, [Jim] became chief mate of a ship, without ever having been tested by those events of the sea that show in the light of day the inner worth of a man, the edge of his temper, and the fibre of his stuff; that reveal the quality of his resistance and the secret truth of his pretences, not only to others but also to himself'; p. 11.
quickly obsolete. Our experience, our memory, emerges consequently as of limited value in the present, incapable of defining us.

What remains of the impressionist self after the conditions I have described is shadowy and nebulous: as indeterminate upon examination as others to its own consciousness, as the figures, indeed, of an Impressionist painting. Such a conclusion, on its own, should be considered as less evaluative than descriptive. For, while I have emphasised the negative implications of the fragmented self, impressionist fiction frequently explores its more favourable possibilities.

Shifting with the transience and diversity of its received impressions, the self in flux, contends Pater, is potentially thrilling: a perpetual becoming. ‘Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end’, Pater famously declares. ‘In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits [. . .]. While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses [. . .].’

Pater’s call to maximise experience (by ‘courting new impressions’) is heard again in Strether’s advice to little Bilham: “Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to.” Strether assumes Pater’s resistance of habit as he escapes, in Paris, the constraining influence of his fiancée, and recommends the same to Waymarsh: “Let yourself [. . .] go—in all agreeable directions.” Ortega y Gasset has claimed that ‘we do not begin to live until we feel ourselves lost’, until, that is to suggest, we escape the narrow, predictable, unfelt path of our own preconceptions. Impressionist fiction abounds with characters who resist change while their environments shimmer and modify; characters who restrict, moreover, their

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96 Pater, pp. 188-9.
97 James, A, p. 132.
98 Ibid., p. 275.
own potential and stifle their sensations. Those such as Dowell and Razumov who cling to stability, security and permanence risk a shallow existence and the chance of being left behind or defeated by the world. Others such as Strether and Tietjens learn, or are prompted by changing circumstances into, a heightened appreciation of their richness of being, their infinite possibilities. Conrad’s personal reaction to this profound fluidity of self, expressed in a letter to Garnett, was defensive yet tolerant: a concession that such a condition was natural at the deepest level of existence. ‘When once the truth is grasped’, wrote Conrad,

that one’s own personality is only a ridiculous and aimless masquerade of something hopelessly unknown the attainment of serenity is not very far off. Then there remains nothing but the surrender to one’s impulses, the fidelity to passing emotions which is perhaps a nearer approach to truth than any other philosophy of life. And why not? If we are ‘ever becoming—never being’ then I would be a fool if I tried to become this thing rather than that; for I know well that I never will be anything.101

With contrasting emphasis, Ford welcomed additional opportunities for the disruption of identity with an appreciation of aesthetic interfusion that approaches self-negation. ‘[F]orgetfulness of our own selves’ is, wrote Ford, ‘the best gift that Art has to bestow.’ Supporting his notion of vicarious experience, Ford explains: ‘whether it takes us into a world of the artist’s fancy or into one of his fellowmen’, art ‘confers upon us, to the extent of its hold, a portion of that herb oblivion’.102 Conrad’s recounted ‘self-surrender’103 during the composition of his own fiction suggests the accessibility of Ford’s transcendent state while challenging the latter’s assumption of its necessarily ‘blessed’ quality.104 Having suffered a nervous breakdown upon the completion of Under Western Eyes, (he lay ‘in bed holding “converse with the characters” of the novel’),

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100 Dowell: ‘Permanence? Stability! I can’t believe it’s gone.’ Ford, TGS, p. 11.
103 Conrad, ‘Author’s Note’, TSA, p. 42. ‘I have no doubt,’ remarks Conrad, ‘[…] that there have been moments during the writing of this book when I was an extreme revolutionist […] I don’t say this to boast. I was simply attending my business.’
104 Ford, Hans Holbein the Younger, p. 152.
Conrad's vicarious experiences suggest more a traumatic depletion of self than an ecstatic expansion through assimilation.\(^{105}\)

In his fiction, however, Conrad, as with Crane, acknowledged the occasional desire of individuals to escape their identities. Following the perceived weakness of their characters in practice—the desertion of each from their station—both Fleming and Jim attempt to reject at least aspects of their revealed personality, seeking less a stabilizing adherence to established selfhood than a secret longing for renewal. Significantly, their attempts are only partially successful. The detachment of Jim's recollection betrays a refusal to be associated with the acts that partially characterise his personality. """I had jumped . . . ", Marlow recalls Jim's response. """He checked himself, averted his gaze. . . . 'It seems,' he added.""\(^{106}\) Jim's discernible sense of guilt dogs him from the geographical region of his failure to successive new environments—culminating in Patusan—in which he seeks to redefine himself by name and status; to ""'begin with a clean slate'""', in his own words.\(^{107}\) Gentleman Brown perceives and exploits Jim's residual self, the almost subconscious awareness of his past failures, prompting Jim into a stark choice between recapitulation to behaviour he defiantly rejects and a self-effacing suicide. It is as if, for Jim at least, to defeat the innermost self definitively one must extinguish it. ""'A clean slate, did he say?'" exclaims Marlow. ""'As if the initial word of each our destiny were not graven in imperishable characters upon the face of a rock.'"\(^{108}\)

Fleming's attempts to evade his self-perceived cowardice are similarly thwarted by involuntary memory. Choosing initially to deny his past rather than to embrace the prospect of change, Fleming 'struggl[es] to marshal all his acts' in his mind, momentarily

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\(^{106}\) Conrad, \textit{L.J.} p. 69.

\(^{107}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 112.

\(^{108}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 112. See also Marlow's remark on p. 51: "'it is my belief no man ever understands quite his own artful dodges to escape from the grim shadow of self-knowledge.'"
believing himself 'that he was good'. It is a view shared by his misinformed comrades, but
one that he cannot sustain. His own experience, the distant roots of his identity, infiltrates
his self-image: 'the ghost of his flight from the first engagement appeared to him and
danced. [...] For a moment he blushed, and the light of his soul flickered with shame.'

Fleming and Jim effectively qualify Ford's notion of positive self-dissolution with
a reminder that it presents arguably less a freeing of self from its constrictive, realist
delineation than a regressive surrender to social forces that limit and determine one's
potential. What impressionist fiction often entertains, however, as perhaps a necessary
balance to the thrill of contingency, the Paterian liberation of identity, is the human need
for such stability, for a reprieve from existential responsibility, for a weight, in Milan
Kundera's phrase, to appease 'the unbearable lightness of being.' Dowell thus observes, in
terms that extend beyond his individual predilections, how 'man' seeks in love 'to lose his
identity, to be enveloped, to be supported.' With similar reasoning, Razumov appeals
to Haldin to understand his complicity with the prevailing autocracy:

'You are a son, a brother, a nephew, a cousin—I don't know what—to no end of
people. I am just a man. [...] I have no domestic tradition. I have nothing to think
against. My tradition is historical. What have I to look back to but that national
past from which you gentlemen want to wrench away your future?'

The impressionist self is torn, in a final paradox, between accepting and resisting its own
fragmentation: a conclusion that throws further into doubt the location, if any such
location be more than a fiction, of the authentic self. As Dowell remarks of Leonora:

You may put it that, having been cut off from the restraints of her religion, for the
first time in her life, she acted along the lines of her instinctive desires. I do not
know whether to think that, in that she was no longer herself; or that, having cut
loose the bonds of her standards, her conventions and her traditions, she was being,
for the first time, her own natural self.

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109 Crane, RBC, pp. 96-7.
110 Ford, TGS, p. 79.
111 Conrad, UWE, p. 61. See also p. 53: 'The sense of life's continuity depended on trifling bodily
impressions. The trivialities of daily existence were an armour for the soul.'
112 Ford, TGS, p. 131.
Chapter Six:
THE IMPRESSIONABLE WORLD

‘Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows?’

I

Impressionist painting has been called ‘a fundamentally passive’ aesthetic. This was Hauser’s opinion in 1951, and occasionally Monet’s too to judge from his own accounts. The Post-Impressionists were certainly of this view, regarding Impressionism as a constraining submission to mimesis, no matter how accomplished the results. (He is ‘only an eye’, declared Cézanne of Monet, ‘but my God what an eye!’) To the extent that literary impressionists sought to minimise their own presence, attitudes and emotions within the text, their renditions are comparably passive and impersonal, asserting a heightened mimetic realism. Their characters, similarly, appear typically to falter in accordance with their inability to receive impressions clearly and without prejudice.

Where preconceptions and imagination do interfere, I have argued, reality becomes distorted. At an abstract level, this may involve, for example, the misjudgement of duration. In visual terms, however, one’s mentality can literally warp perceived reality.

Combining both temporal and visual distortion, Fleming feels ‘astonishment’ in ‘discover[ing] that the distances’ covered in a military campaign charge, ‘as compared

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2 Hauser, p. 873.
3 See, for example, pp. 53-4.
5 See pp. 54-6.
with the brilliant measurings of his mind, were trivial and ridiculous. The stolid trees, where much had taken place, seemed incredibly near. The time too, now that he reflected, he saw to have been short. [..] Elfin thoughts must have exaggerated and enlarged everything, he said. Razumov, similarly, returns from his interview with Councillor Mikulin to "the middle of things" to find them "all changed, subtly and provokingly in their nature: inanimate objects, human faces, the landlady, the rustic servant girl, the staircase, the streets, the very air." These are instances, in Crane's phrase, of "[m]ad emotions, powerful enough to rock worlds". At their furthermost extreme, however, emotions, imagination and preconceptions may create phenomena independently of immediate sense impressions. Like Macbeth, Tietjens sees blood where none exists: from fatigue, he surmises, but also through force of guilt for the death of O Nine Morgan. Guilt prompts both Razumov to see before him, on several occasions, the vivid image of Haldin, and Jim to hear "'[s]houts for help'" where none, he reflects, were likely made. Equally delusional, depending upon our interpretation, are the ghosts perceived by the governess in The Turn of the Screw.

This would present an immediate riposte to the supposed passivity of impressionism, were not such world-shaping seemingly unintentional. For Husserl, the individual consciousness inevitably creates its world, at least partially, through "'intentional' activity." That is to say, it constitutes and gives meaning to its impressions, its objects of consciousness. To adopt a much-cited example, we see three sides of what appears to be a cube, and construct through assumption its volume and opposing three

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6 Crane, RBC, p. 85.
7 Conrad, UWE, p. 298.
8 Crane, "Killing His Bear", 1892, WSC, vol. 8, p. 251.
10 Ford, NMP, p. 355.
11 See Conrad, UWE, pp. 32, 37-8, 84; L/I, p. 82.
sides. 'If we discover later that these sides do not exist,' writes Armstrong, 'our surprise only shows that we had been intentionally active in assuming them earlier.'\(^{13}\)

Of course, one needs such assumptions to interpret anything at all. If we do not make connections and extrapolate suggestions, the world becomes impractically disparate and nonsensical. We would view everyday three-dimensional objects with bewilderment, never even trusting a chair with our weight until we had checked it had four legs and not the two or three we generally perceive. On the other hand, where assumptions are held with particular intensity, we risk affording disproportionate emphasis to the operations of consciousness while neglecting the original sense data. Fleming's anxieties reduce his fearful perception of the 'red, eyelite gleam of hostile campfires' from such knowing simile to suggestively conflated metaphor, inducing temporary delusion: 'Staring once at the red eyes across the river, he conceived them to be growing larger, as the orbs of a row of dragons advancing.'\(^{14}\) Depending again upon our interpretation, the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* arguably presents a more sustained example of confusing hypothesis with conviction. Within a matter of hours, he moves from regarding the apparent change of former acquaintances as an entertaining 'anecdote',\(^{15}\) puzzling but acceptable, to a complex and provocative notion of supernatural influence and deception. Indeed, his notion is dubious less for its fantastic elements, which, like science fiction, could be accountable in the context of a novel, and precisely *because* of his dogmatic leaps toward resolution: 'I made up my mind on the spot. [...] I saw it all.'\(^{16}\)

Dowell presents a character who has learned, by harsh example, to look beyond the most visible sides of the cube. Having accepted Florence's death 'in a limited aspect, from one side only', writes Armstrong, '(without any perspective on the sides of the affair available to Leonora, for example [. . .])', Dowell 'realizes that he had filled out these

\(^{14}\) Crane, *RBC*, pp. 3, 12.
\(^{15}\) James, *SF*, p. 5.
sides with the hypothesis of heart failure—an assumption that would harmonize with what he saw (the flask in her hand) and would fit together consistently with his beliefs about her ill health.\textsuperscript{17} His disillusioned attitude, within which he re-evaluates his past, is an example not only of greater respect for uncertainty, but of an occasionally excessive distrust of all assumption; a distrust, in effect, of the stability of his own chair: ‘I know nothing—nothing in the world’; ‘I don’t know; I don’t know;’ ‘It is all a darkness.’\textsuperscript{18}

Recognising that our assumptions have misled us may take years, as it did Dowell; alternatively, we may never realise at all. Fundamental to this predicament is the difficulty of measuring misinterpretation and psychological distortion—without which correction can hardly be expected. Perception and interpretation operate with such contiguity as to appear indistinguishable: neatly demonstrated in \textit{The Sacred Fount} when the narrator and May Server differ in response to a painting of a figure holding a mask.

\begin{quote}
"The artificial face [...] is [...] when you carefully look at it, charmingly pretty" [remarks the narrator]. "I don’t see the grimace."
"I don’t see anything else!" Mrs Server good humouredly insisted.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

That at least one of them perceives the image according to their psychological temperament seems certain, but there is no telling which. Intersubjective validation is a limited means of arbitration. As suggested in Chapter Two, it is difficult and perhaps impossible to assure perceptual accuracy when each perceiving consciousness is equally subjective.\textsuperscript{20} Majority consensus cannot definitively disprove the claims of the minority. If every successive viewer backed May Server’s view, the narrator would yet have some justification in retaining his own; indeed, the clearest delusion would be to pretend otherwise, a denial of one’s self. It is here, however, that impressionism considers a significant shift of perspective, which belies more convincingly its supposed passivity.

\textsuperscript{17} Armstrong, \textit{The Challenge of Bewilderment}, p. 208.
\textsuperscript{18} Ford, \textit{TGS}, pp. 12, 13, 15.
\textsuperscript{19} James, \textit{SF}, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{20} See pp. 52–4.
In the sense that our psychological disposition (including preconceptions and emotions) affects our perception—bending impressions to distort reality, creating objects of consciousness—we see something of what we are in our environment. While suggesting a strengthening of self, and a reversal of the self’s subordination to external reality explored in Chapter Five, the orientation of our mindsets seems yet largely unrecognisable to ourselves, and shaped by external factors: social, ideological, and so on. Instead of imposing our identity upon our world, our world by this reasoning would first shape and then project our fears and unconscious desires onto our surroundings. As with Fleming, we would be driven by our own delusions: the world a prison of our own making.

At least partly in defiance of this submission to the distorting effects of the subconscious, impressionist characters attempt often to determine, deliberately, their subjective reality through various delicate manipulations of sense impressions. William James advances this possibility in theoretical terms that prove consistent with impressionist practice. ‘Take our sensations’, he wrote. ‘That they are is undoubtedly beyond our control; but which we attend to, note, and make emphatic in our conclusions depends on our own interests; and, accordingly, as we lay the emphasis here or there, quite different formulations of truth result.’ James elaborates with examples:

We conceive a given reality in this way or in that, to suit our purpose, and the reality passively submits to the conception. [. . .] You can take a chess-board as black squares on a white ground, or as white squares on a black ground, and neither conception is a false one.

You can treat the adjoined figure as a star, as two big triangles crossing each other, as a hexagon with legs set up on its angles, as six equal triangles hanging together by their tips, etc. All these treatments are true treatments—the sensible that upon the paper resists no one of them.

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22 William James, Pragmatism, pp. 245-6.
23 Ibid., pp. 251-2.
This latter example is particularly interesting. As with those drawings that offer one of two discreet images depending upon 'how' one looks at it—either a young woman looking away or an old woman downcast, for instance—it is impossible to synthesise all possibilities;\(^{24}\) impossible, by extension, not to shape given data that are readily conducive to alternate interpretations. It remains, nonetheless, ourselves who influence into which image we wish the data to assemble at any given moment. I choose now to see a star; I choose now to see six small triangles. 'In our cognitive as well as in our active life we are creative', James continues. 'We add, both to the subject and to the predicate part of reality. The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands. Like the kingdom of heaven, it suffers human violence willingly. Man engenders truth upon it.'\(^{25}\)

James's analysis of mental authority over impressions rests finally with the interpretation of sense data that are themselves given and undeniable, such as the diagram above. 'We receive in short the block of marble,' wrote James, 'but we carve the statue ourselves.'\(^{26}\) The impressionists occasionally venture one step further, or perhaps simply extrapolate the implications of James's analysis, to explore how our will might be sufficiently powerful to create a hypothesis: to quarry, as it were, our own marble. It marks either way a subtle but significant change of approach from the essentially scientific (although non-rationalist) motivation of James's pragmatism—the attempt to understand reality as best we can given perceptual subjectivity—to suggest instead a creative, notably artistic, occasionally even playful liberation of consciousness from the demands of exploring a determined world.

Instances in impressionist fiction of the wilful manipulation or creation of sense impressions (or objects of consciousness: the two are virtually indistinguishable) are not

\(^{24}\) It is possible, that is to say, to conceive of a chess-board as adjoining white and black squares, with no background, and no evidence to the contrary.


\(^{26}\) Ibid., p. 247.
always easy to judge. There is firstly the problem of knowing whether what appears altered in and by the perceiver’s mind is in fact genuine and unadulterated (or potentially so) within the fictional context of the novel. The ‘sacred fount’ might be a genuine phenomenon insofar as the story is concerned. Secondly, there is the problem of knowing to what extent potential alterations were somehow deliberate, and if at all then at what level of consciousness. The consequent yet necessary conjecture of what follows is therefore ironic, underlining the creative processes similarly involved in reading; in reading texts, moreover, that refuse to delimit interpretation. Let us begin, though, with how one might wilfully affect one’s world through mental endeavour. Various possibilities emerge.

Behind all such efforts resides imagination. In the absence of information, I have said, the mind creates its own matter to fill the void. But the mind can equally elaborate upon information that is ontologically sufficient and complete. Many impressionist characters, such as Jim, Fleming, Isabel, the Governess, and Strether, are possessed, it is emphasised, of an abundant imagination. Often they indulge this faculty in romantic literature or in daydreaming of heroic exploits. Where, however, they hold their imaginations to be registers of ‘truth’, backed by intensity and commitment, they furnish their lived reality according to desire.

William James, for one, questioned how flexible such mental shaping of reality could be. While he claimed that ‘we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will’, he did not believe that we could believe just anything. ‘In concreto,’ he explains, ‘the freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem absurdities to him who has them to consider.’ James thereby dismisses the possibility of making oneself believe what one knows not to be true, such as ‘some patent

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27 See, for example, Conrad, LJ, p. 17: “At such times his thoughts would be full of valorous deeds: he loved these dreams and the success of his imaginary achievements.”
superstition.' While this seems evident in the immediate term, it is conceivable over the course of time that one might so alter one's expectations and outlook that reality is perceived according to both habit and desire. Or, to re-work Strether's analogy, one moulds consciousness into which impressions are, as it were, freely poured. Nothing, by this reasoning, is conjured incredibly out of thin air; rather, one creates a 'living option' by courting specific bias and prejudice, by indulging selected aspects of our interests and perceptions. Thus 'all our illusions' are 'evolved half-consciously', as Marlow contends; and, to reverse the claim (if not the practice) of the *The Sacred Fount* narrator, 'the wish [is] father to the thought'.

Suggestions of self-induced commitment to imaginative speculation abound among impressionist characters: most readily demonstrable in the fiction of Henry James. As a child, we read, Isabel adopted a particularly crude approach. 'She knew that [the] silent, motionless portal' of her Albany abode 'opened into the street [. . .]. But she had no wish to look out, for this would have interfered with her theory that there was a strange, unseen place on the other side—a place that became to the child's imagination, according to its different moods, a region of delight or of terror.' By early adulthood, her method has refined but the underlying intent remains unchanged: 'she had a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action'. Before marrying Osmond, the narrator adds, 'she so liked to think of him' as 'interesting': a semantic ambiguity that suggests Isabel's intention to find him favourable.

28 William James, 'The Will to Believe', p. 32.
29 Compare Ford, *SDN*: 'In electing to be peculiarly English in habits and in as much of his temperament as he could control—for, though no man can choose the land of his birth or his ancestry, he can, if he have industry and determination, so watch over himself as materially to modify his automatic habits—Tietjens had quite advisedly and of set purpose adopted a habit of behaviour that he considered to be the best in the world for the normal life'; p. 178.
30 Henry James, *A*, p. 132.
31 Conrad, *LJ*, p. 192; my emphasis.
32 James, *SF*, p. 3.
33 In particular I shall focus upon the governess of *The Turn of The Screw* and the narrator of *The Sacred Fount*, each of whom employ, to instructive exaggeration, a broad range of techniques for reinforcing the credibility of their own theories.
34 James, *PL*, p. 33.
35 *Ibid.*, p. 54; my emphasis.
as much as her actual pleasure in doing so. Similar unyielding words and phrases, such as ‘must’, ‘determined’ and ‘confirmed conviction’, run like iron rods through the theories (if this is not too cautious a term for what are often assertions) of the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, and of the narrator of *The Sacred Fount*. Occasionally, they gather and focus into statements of unmistakable presumptuousness: ‘I had made up my mind on the spot’, ‘I saw it all’, ‘I had already assured myself’. In turn, intensity fuels conviction and substitutes for evidence: ‘“He was looking for little Miles”’, the Governess tells Mrs Grose.

‘That’s whom he was looking for.’
‘But how do you know?’
‘I know, I know, I know!’

With comparable intensity, Jim hastens (in his mind) the sinking of the *Patna* (his involuntary imagination had ensured its demise), to justify to himself a prompt escape. Simultaneously, his mixing of temporal perspectives (respected, presumably, in Marlow’s re-telling) virtually renders the sleeping passengers truly lifeless, leaving no one to save: ‘“He stood still, [...] surveying the silent company of the dead. They were dead! Nothing could save them! There were boats enough for half of them perhaps, but there was no time. No time! No time!”’ Having chosen to abandon ship, Jim recalls how his fellow deserters claim, at least, to have seen the *Patna* sink —presumably, perhaps subliminally, to assure themselves of their correct action— ‘“and believed it for all I know.”’ Jim’s expressed distinction from these cowardly stories or delusions, Marlow speculates, may ironically be a further illusion of his own design.  

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36 James, *PL*, p. 237; my emphasis. See also Conrad, *UWE*: ‘[Razumov] had argued himself into new beliefs’, p. 246; and Ford, *TGS*: ‘She persuaded herself [...]’, and ‘Leonora held passionately the doctrine that the girl didn’t love Edward. She wanted desperately to believe that’, pp. 118, 156.
37 See, respectively, James, *SF*, p. 12, and *TS*, p. 30.
38 James, *SF*, pp. 19, 20.
39 James, *TS*, p. 25.
The guiding motivation of Jim’s appeal to Marlow is, recalling the novel’s epigraph, to strengthen his own conviction by having ‘another […] soul believe in it.’ As we have seen, the inability of others to share our beliefs may not disprove them, but if this dissension is persistent and consensual it may prove difficult to ignore. One means of protecting against the piercing scepticism of others is to select and limit what we disclose, ‘each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world.’ Just as the child Isabel refuses to look out upon the street in Albany, so Jim and Fleming keep apart from company to daydream. In The Sacred Fount, Mrs Briss attributes the narrator’s confessed reluctance to validate intersubjectively (‘“much as I see, I express only half of it”’) as the cause of his ‘fine fancy’:44

‘Oh, but add to my impression everyone else’s impression! Has anyone noticed anything?’

‘Ah, I don’t know what anyone else has noticed. I haven’t’ I brooded,

‘ventured—as you know—to ask anyone.’

‘Well if you had you’d have seen—seen, I mean, all they don’t see.’45

An alternative to avoiding criticism is to manipulate agreement. The protagonists of The Sacred Fount and The Turn of the Screw frequently interrupt others to complete and perhaps realign their sentiments to something approaching their own. They bully others into hesitancy (‘“people have such a notion of what you embroider on things that they’re rather afraid to commit themselves or to lead you on”’), and goad agreement: ‘“I do see”’, to recall Ford Obert. ‘“But”—he would come back to that—“only through your having seen first. You gave me the pieces. I’ve but put them together.”’ Agreement need not even be stated, providing characters can convince themselves of it from the absence of signalled disagreement. The Governess, for example, often happily takes the silence of Mrs Gross for consent:

‘And you know, my dear!’

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44 James, SF, p. 153.
45 Ibid., p. 175. See also TS, p. 18: ‘Scarce anything in the whole history seems so odd as this fact that my real beginning of fear was one, as I may say, with the instinct of sparing my companion.’
46 James, SF, p. 175.
She didn’t deny this, but I required, I felt, not even so much telling as that.47

In further related acts of dubious verification, the Governess records in her journal that ‘[w]e had been, collectively, subject to an illusion’, emphasising beyond grammatical necessity how all present are implicated by what remains her vision alone,48 and later informs Mrs Grose of dialogue between herself and Miss Jessel where (inexplicably, given the magnitude of the event) none had previously been noted to herself or her implied reader.49

Disagreement can be deflected, thirdly, through the development of theories invulnerable to logical challenge. Mrs Briss does not see the deterioration suffered by her husband in the magical exchange because, the narrator explains, “‘[t]he perception, if she had it, would be painful and terrible—might even be fatal to the process”’.50 Again, when Mrs Gross asks the Governess whether she knows Flora saw Mrs Jessel because the child told her, the Governess replies: “‘Not a word—that’s the horror,’” adding that “‘she’ll lie’” if asked.51 The pretension of such ‘failsafe’ reasoning is unmistakably exposed when the Governess looks for Quint, who is feasibly concealed by ‘shrubberies and big trees’, and decides: ‘He was there or not there: not there if I didn’t see him.’52

Where, in the final instance of engineered verification I shall consider here, characters record their experience in print, similar complicity can be encouraged among their intended readership. The Governess, for example, describes several visitations with a conspicuous attention to surrounding and apparently superfluous detail. Thus, upon observing with shock a figure standing at the top of a tower she had earlier visited, she

47 James. TS. pp. 25-6.
48 Ibid. p. 18; my emphases.
49 Ibid. p. 60. The identification of the apparitions as Miss Jessel and Peter Quint are further assumptions.
50 James. SF. p. 20. Compare p. 31: ‘The proof of it would be, between her and her imputed lover, the absence of anything that was not perfectly natural.’
51 James. TS. pp. 30. 31.
52 Ibid. p.21.
launches into an architectural analysis worthy of Balzac.\textsuperscript{53} 'The tower was one of a pair—square incongruous crenellated structures—that were distinguished, for some reason, though I could see little difference, as the new and the old. They flanked opposite ends of the house and were probably architectural absurdities [. . .]).\textsuperscript{54} This is a remarkably calm and incongruous observation to announce at the sight of an intruder. The effect, and the intent, one suspects, of such descriptive excursions (effectively demonstrating William James's notion of selective attention), is to add weight and substance by association to intangible entities: the apparitions of Quint and Jessel. (The Governess's much-noted re-enactments of the visitations appear similarly designed to ground the spectral visions in verifiable reality; ironically, however, they also further connect the ghosts with herself and, implicitly, her imagination.\textsuperscript{55} )

Helen Aristar Dry and Susan Kucinkas extend this unexpected disclosure of detail to a grammatical level, documenting how the Governess employs 'presuppositional constructions' that "background" most of the new information about the ghosts, introducing it as though it were already assumed by both speaker and hearer.\textsuperscript{56} Just as '[t]he sentence "John regrets failing English", for example, presupposes that John has failed English and asserts that he regrets it',\textsuperscript{57} so too does the Governess's remark: 'the man who met my eyes' move swiftly on from the assumption that we accept this detail—that a male intruder was there and did face her—to consider instead the implications.\textsuperscript{58} The new information is shielded thus from challenge, while encouraging consent by treating its validity as obvious and therefore natural and correct.

\textsuperscript{53} See p. 16-17.
\textsuperscript{54} James, TS, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 21: 'It was confusedly present to me that I ought to place myself where he stood. I did so; I applied my face to the pane and looked, into the room. [. . .] She [Mrs Grose] saw me as I had seen my own visitant'. See p. 20: 'it was as if I had been looking at him [Quint] for years and had known him always.'
\textsuperscript{56} Helen Aristar Dry and Susan Kucinkas, 'Ghostly Ambiguity: Presuppositional Constructions in \textit{The Turn of the Screw}', \textit{Style} 25 (1991), 71.
\textsuperscript{57} Dry and Kucinkas, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{58} James, TS, p. 16.
If this comprises how these characters may be wilfully creative, the question remains as to why. For there, indeed, resides the justification of such an interpretation, confirming that these characters are not necessarily, or even predominantly, the passive victims of their own imagination. There is, of course, evidence of submission. ‘Light or darkness, my imagination rides me’, says the narrator of *The Sacred Fount.*\(^{59}\) However, it is the evident thrill of the ride that suggests at the least a wilful surrender. He discusses his theory, for example, in terms of theatre and games,\(^{60}\) and writes that ‘for real excitement there are no such adventures as intellectual ones.’\(^{61}\) As Marlow appreciates, imagination promises to *enrich* personal reality: ‘“it is respectable to have no illusions—and safe—and profitable—and dull.”’\(^{62}\)

The Governess is, like the character of Jane Eyre she is evidently familiar with, a romantic in a romantic environment. ‘[... ] I came [... ] to be carried away’, she declares shortly upon her arrival.\(^{63}\) But there is, for her, no call to heroism, no immediate adventure, and no hope of ever re-encountering *her* Rochester in the foreseeable future. At least, that is how her new position soon strikes her, and in this context the first visitation is highly suggestive:

One of the thoughts that [... ] used to be with me was that it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet someone. Someone *would* appear there [the tone is of a command] at the turn of the path and would stand before me and smile and approve. [... ] That was exactly present to me.’\(^{64}\)

From here, her imagination can align her situation with the heady grandeur of gothic fiction. ‘Was there a “secret” at Bly—a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?’\(^{65}\) Conjecture that such

\(^{59}\) James, *SF*, p. 162.

\(^{60}\) See James, *SF*, pp. 30 and 41 respectively.


\(^{62}\) Conrad, *LJ*, p. 136. See also Conrad’s expressed necessity of illusion, as discussed on pp. 159-62.

\(^{63}\) James, *TS*, p. 9. See also p. 20: ‘Of course I was under the spell [of Miles’s charm], and the wonderful part is that, even at the time, I perfectly knew I was. But I gave myself up to it; it was an antidote to any pain [... ].’


\(^{65}\) James, *TS*, p. 17.
scenarios would be surely unwelcome to her is lessened by her readiness to assume the heroic mantle. Her newly elevated reality requires, she appreciates, an elevated role: 'I was able in these days to find a joy in the extraordinary flight of heroism the occasion demanded of me', she recalls. She is equally aware of how her courage might seem 'in the right quarter! [. . .] It was in short a magnificent chance.'

*The Sacred Fount* narrator betrays a similar satisfaction with his newly acquired attention and self-esteemed intellectual superiority; to the extent, indeed, that one suspects that these are what he initially longed for. When he writes of his theory: 'If it was a frenzied fallacy I was all to blame, but if it was anything else whatever it was naturally intoxicating', one can hardly envisage failure. His pride is excessive and almost all-conquering: 'I alone was magnificently and absurdly aware—everyone else was benightedly out of it.' With no one ostensibly to impress in his narrative, unlike the Governess, the narrator allows himself an occasional aside to reveal that at least *aspects* of his theory are consciously manipulated: "'your image, it seems to me, breaks down'", says Mrs Briss. 'It did a little, I saw, but I gave it a tilt up. "Not at all."'

The narrator's possible incentives for indulging his theory, however, extend beyond excitement and pure egotism. Just as religious faith offers hope and purpose, so might a faith that is secular and self-generated. It is for hope, indeed, that Fleming seeks to find in nature sympathy for his lonely plight ('[t]here was a caress in the soft winds; and the whole mood of the darkness, he thought, was one of sympathy for himself in his distress'); for hope, again, that the crew of 'The Open Boat' collectively perceive a life-saving station and rescuers, the former at least of which, the narrator makes clear, does not

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66 James, *TS*, p. 28. Beside this reference to her employer, the Governess is aware of an audience—Douglas in particular—for her *writing*: 'this matter of mine, think you will of it [. . .]'; p. 17, my emphasis.
67 James, *SF*, p. 105.
exist. The concept of the sacred fount additionally provides the narrator, however, with a more explicable comprehension of human interaction and development than the unruly, uncontrollable flux visible to his immediate senses. He describes himself thus as 'on the scent of something ultimate [. . .] a law that would fit, that would strike me as governing the delicate phenomena—delicate though so marked—that my imagination found itself playing with.' At times, his experienced mind recalls that '[t]hings in the real had a way of not balancing.' Yet still he searches for stability in an impressionist world, searches perhaps with sufficient intensity that inevitably he 'finds' it. Moreover, the success of his enterprise, with a further boost to his ego, overcomes the boundary between modest hypothesis and self-generated creation of reality:

To see all this was at the time, I remember, to be as inhumanely amused as if one had found one could create something. I had created nothing but a clue or two to the larger comprehension I still needed, yet I positively found myself overtaken by a mild artistic glow.

III

This reference to creative imagination as something artistic has pertinent ramifications. Despite the attempts of the impressionists to minimise their presence and distorting prejudices, fiction is, fundamentally, a creative act at the level of subjective imagination. And, just as such characters as those considered above deliberately reverse the reasoning described in Chapter Three, whereby sense-impressions were to be received, neutrally and passively, so do impressionist authors occasionally, and quite intentionally, add, subtract or modify details concerning their own lives and reality.

70 See p. 105.
71 See p. 119.
72 James, SF, p. 15; my emphasis.
73 Ibid., p. 108.
74 Ibid., p. 63. Compare p. 77 ('I had thought it all out, and to have thought it was, wonderfully, to have bought it.') and 126 ("the joy of the intellectual mastery of things unamenable, that joy of determining, almost of creating results.")
Writing enables this. Writing can rewrite experience, leaving only itself to others, and, increasingly over time, to ourselves: strategies clearly demonstrated, I suggested above, within the fiction. Thus, the Governess writes the events perhaps as she sees them: perhaps as she wants them seen. Or perhaps, to extend my interpretation above, she sees what she wants to write. With the latter two possibilities especially, what reaches Douglas and his audience is a world by her design. Dowell’s narrative, by contrast, reshapes his experience more for his own appreciation than for his (self-created, imaginary) readership. His various interjections and manipulations of chronology come increasingly to assert lost authority upon his past; to make events fit his (need for) understanding. Where gaps remain glaring to himself, he occasionally goes one stage further, filling them with speculations—‘I don’t know what Leonora put up as an excuse—something, I fancy, in the nature of a nightly orison that she made the girl and herself perform for the soul of Florence.’—that are quietly promoted, by himself, to fact: ‘And then, one evening, about a fortnight later, when the girl, growing restive at even devotional exercises [. . .].’

The parallel with authors is readily apparent. James’s ‘revision of himself in the New York Edition,’ notes Millicent Bell, ‘along with the still further revising prefaces, is at once an artistic act of rewriting and a revision of personal self.’ More controversially, James drew criticism from his brother’s son, Posnock informs us, for publishing some of William’s letters without comment, and, as he later admitted, with various alterations. ‘Conrad in autobiographical mode was notoriously unreliable’, adds Michael Fried. But of course it is Ford who takes all prizes in this contest. Herbert Gorman, summarised in turn by Saunders, recalled some of the novelist’s more demanding—if entertaining—

76 Millicent Bell, p. 326.
77 Posnock, p. 171.
claims, which include ‘Liszt playing for him; Ford helping Marconi “flash the first wireless message across the Atlantic”; James, “tears in his eyes”, running to him “with a novelistic problem to be solved”; or the great chef Escoffier declaring: “I could learn cooking from you, Ford.”’ Jessie Conrad was less amused at his extended portrayal of her husband in what she described as a ‘detestable book’. 80

Of course, Ford never pretended that his study of Conrad was strictly factual. His subtitle: *A Personal Remembrance*, sets the tone of a *subjective* history. It was to be, in his own words, ‘*a novel, not a monograph*’, consistent with impressionist principles whereby ‘you have a projection of Joseph Conrad as, little by little, he revealed himself to a human being during many years of close intimacy. It is so that, by degrees, Lord Jim appeared to Marlowe [sic, or that every human soul by degrees appears to every other human soul.’ The similarity with impressionist fiction extends to the approximation of detail. ‘*It contains no documentation at all; for it no dates have been looked up, even all the quotations but two have been left unverified, coming from the writer’s memory.*’ Then comes the defining qualification:

*Where the writer’s memory has proved to be at fault over a detail afterwards out of curiosity looked up, the writer has allowed the fault to remain on the page; but as to the truth of the impression as a whole the writer believes that no man would care—or dare—to impugn it.* 81

Jessie evidently cared, and dared: her protest concerning less the failings of Ford’s memory than the alleged deliberate inaccuracies that exaggerated, at the expense of Conrad, his influence in their literary partnership. 82

*Return to Yesterday* finds Ford more candid in signalling the *intentional* manipulation of facts, albeit with a similar defence: ‘Where it has seemed expedient to me I have altered episodes that I have witnessed but I have been careful never to distort the

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80 Todd K. Bender. ‘Conrad and Literary Impressionism’, *Conradiana* 10 (1978), 211.
81 Ford, *JC*, pp. 5-6.
82 Details from Bender, ‘Conrad and Literary Impressionism’, 211.
character of the episode. The accuracies I deal in are the accuracies of my impressions.\textsuperscript{83} This, in effect, expounds Ford’s notion of ‘literary personality’ as the ‘living’ personality conveyed by one’s memories and impressions.\textsuperscript{84} It is the personality, moreover, of one’s literary productions: the imagination, the expression, of one’s self as it emerges, shaped and diffused, in language.\textsuperscript{85} This narrowing of the distinction between fiction and autobiography is, however, a two-way process. Ford’s reminiscences are infused with imagination, while his overtly fictional works are at some level autobiographical—at least regarding his projected self. Many have noted, accordingly, aspects of Ford in Edward Ashburnham and Tietjens: aspects, indeed, largely elevated by their association. ‘Tietjens is both an “improvement” of Ford’, writes Saunders\textsuperscript{4}—a self portrait superimposed upon the features he admired in [Arthur] Marwood—and also the creation of someone quite other.\textsuperscript{86} (Marlow, similarly, has been considered an idealized—and Anglicised—version of Conrad.\textsuperscript{87})\textit{Parades End}, more generally, suggests ‘a fantastic rearrangement of Ford’s intimate, early history’, rescuing from oblivion the essence of his past experience, while simultaneously, like Dowell, shaping it into something more definite and meaningful.\textsuperscript{88} It is not, one should clarify, that Ford entirely substitutes the fantasy for the reality—although something of the \textit{desire} to is discernible;\textsuperscript{89} rather, he draws significance (and perhaps solace) from the playful manipulation of factual experience within fiction.\textsuperscript{90}

While this notion of literary personality may not dispel the contention of Jessie and Gorman that Ford’s impressions generally ‘happen’ to promote his achievements, it

\textsuperscript{83} Ford, \textit{RTY}, p. vii.
\textsuperscript{84} Saunders, vol. 2, p. 441; see more generally pp. 438-67.
\textsuperscript{85} Ford: ‘But however you do phrase your thoughts to yourself, the rhythm of your thought phrases will be your personality. It will be your literary personality…’. \textit{Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford}, ed. Frank MacShane, p. 160.
\textsuperscript{86} Saunders, vol. 2, p. 214.
\textsuperscript{87} It is worth recalling here that both Ford and Conrad changed their names to something more befitting of their desired public image.
\textsuperscript{88} Moser, p. 179.
\textsuperscript{89} Tietjens assures Valentine of the possibility of editing one’s past: “You cut out from this afternoon, just before 4:58 it was when I said that to you and you consented . . . I heard the Horse Guards clock . . . To now . . . Cut it out; and join time up . . . It \textit{can} be done . . . ”’, Ford, \textit{SDN}, p. 285.
\textsuperscript{90} See also Saunders, vol. 2, p. 270.
proves him at least faithful to the broad impressionist understanding of character and experience as subject to the demands and operations of consciousness.

Ultimately, Ford’s ‘cavalier attitude towards facts and history’, writes Green, is further part of the ‘movement inwards, away from the external world’; Ford was ‘in truth [. . .] an “expressionist” artist’, he adds. If Green’s proposed new appellation is somewhat sweeping—Ford is surely more impressionist than expressionist—it nevertheless highlights the significant connection between the two aesthetics, presenting a further challenge to the notion of impressionist passivity.

Post-Impressionist painting already bears the vibrant flowers of Expressionism, cultivated in Fauvism and later the works of Die Brücke and the Der Blaue Reiter. Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh portrayed nature through bold lines, wavy forms and strong colours (distinct: not juxtaposed to be mixed by the eye); nature not as it should be perceived, nor as it was perceived, but as an expression both of the sensations aroused by it, and of the unique psychology of the perceiving consciousness. Appearances, like abstract facts, were subject to unrestrained distortion. In The Starry Night (1889), Van Gogh stretches clouds into writhing tentacles and fills the sky with massive supernovas. Gauguin’s Vision After the Sermon (1888) and Manau Tapau: The Spirit of the Dead Watching (1892) virtually describe their aesthetic approach thematically, depicting the visions and ‘distortions’ of the portrayed figures: the devout Breton peasants and the superstitious Tahitian girl.

Such expressiveness is discernible also in Impressionist painting, particularly from Monet’s works of the 1890s onwards; whereupon, writes Paul Smith, he ‘started to accept,
and even exploit, how the unified painting had expressive possibilities which could exceed the possibilities of the impressions and sensations in which it originated. Compare Degas:

"It is all very well to copy what you see; it is much better to draw what you only see in memory. Then you get a transformation during which imagination collaborates with memory. You reproduce only what struck you, in other words essentials. There your recollections and your fancy are set free from the tyranny exerted by nature."

At the furthest point of Impressionism, Monet’s giant lily ponds of his final years seem happily to compensate the artist’s drastically failing eyesight with compositions approaching abstract expressionism.

Expressionism is still more apparent in impressionist literature. Besides the discussed imaginative engagement and hallucinations of many characters, the events and form of the narratives occasionally assume an intense and exaggerated quality more suggestive of their authors’ personal expression. Often a violent act of nature, or else some bold descriptive flourish, corresponds with dramatic human developments, such as the storm that lashes the Narcissus as the crew breaks ranks, or when Marlow writes:

"She sobbed on his shoulder. The sky over Patusan was blood-red, immense, streaming like an open vein. An enormous sun nestled crimson amongst the tree-tops, and the forest below had a black and forbidding face." That this latter is not the effect of Jim and Jewel’s heightened emotions is clarified in Marlow’s subsequent observation: "[... ] I know on that very day a cyclone passed within sixty miles of the coast". Nonetheless, the appropriate and expressive intensity of this phenomenon (why an enormous sun?) indicates a pathetic fallacy. One thinks also of the bold, emotive colours of Crane’s fiction, and of the hyperbolic violence of such tales as ‘The Blue Hotel’ and Maggie in

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94 Paul Smith, p. 104.
95 Quoted Blunden, p. 143.
96 Conrad, LI, p. 244.
97 Bert Bender compares Crane’s use of colour with Gauguin’s, ‘Hanging Stephen Crane in the Impressionist Museum’, Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 35 (1976), 51.
particular. The constant destruction of furniture by Maggie’s perpetually enraged mother is clearly more expressionist than credible on a literal, naturalistic level. As Walcutt remarks, ‘such people would not have more than one set of furniture, and it is improbable that they would in an ordinarily drunken quarrel reduce it to matchwood’. Such evocations of outrage, often socially motivated, Walcutt concludes, ‘anticipate dramatic expressionism in America by twenty years, as they do also the work of Kaiser, Toller and Wedekind on the Continent.’

If impressionism anticipates expressionism, however, in its emphasis of the effects and intervention of imagination and sensations—independently of immediate impressions—it builds in turn upon Romanticism. Both the Romantics and the impressionists sought to reclaim the world for the self from the imposing, objective depictions of Descartes, Newton and (for the impressionists) the naturalists. Just as the ‘I’, with Romanticism, became the centre of meaning, so the ‘eye’ was also emphasised in Impressionist painting and literature. The latter remained, however, at least partially subservient to consciousness, to the ‘I’ of the self and ultimately of the self’s imagination.

It is true that the impressionists keep at least one eye fixed to perceived reality, and convey constant and serious reservations about indulging the imagination with unrestrained conviction. “‘He is romantic—romantic,’” remarks Stein of Jim, recognising his Romantic idealism and heightened imagination as much as his romantic sentimentality. “‘And that is very bad—very bad. . . . Very good, too’”. Imagination was not, for the impressionists, so noble and assuredly profound a state as it typically appeared to the Romantics. As much as Jim, Fleming and (arguably) the Governess appear to drive their visions, so their imaginations, necessarily freed of directly conscious controls, simultaneously provoke their thoughts and actions: making nature malicious and

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98 Walcutt, pp. 68, 86.
99 See Sypher, pp. 20-1.
100 Conrad, L1, p. 131.
hostile, enemy soldiers into monsters, and a peaceful residence with two innocent children into a living nightmare. Imagination can result, furthermore, in social isolation, without the aloof grandeur associated with Byronic romanticism, and with the threat of insanity. The impressionists remain, finally, acutely conscious of the dangers that one's imagination may pose to others. The Sacred Fount narrator is momentarily appalled by both his own intrusiveness into the private lives of others and his provocative accusations concerning appearances and relationships.¹⁰¹ The death of Miles marks, one might argue, a more permanent and tragic consequence of imagined dangers.

What the impressionists share instead with such poets as Keats and Wordsworth is an acute awareness of the transience of imaginative states. Mrs Briss sends the narrator's "palace of thought" toppling;¹⁰² Fleming's conscience pricks the bubble of his heroic self-image;¹⁰³ reality persistently breaks through like the flashes of black lightning in Pincher Martin's desperate world. 'The real represents to my perception', wrote James, 'the things we cannot possibly not know, sooner or later, in one way or another'.¹⁰⁴

Weighed against all these fears and reservations, however, is the legacy of Romantic confidence in what Keats called 'the truth of Imagination'.¹⁰⁵ For the impressionists, this confidence concerns not the transcendental profundities of its Romantic manifestation, but the potential license for the self's assertions given the subjectivity of reality. Imagination retains validity for the individual where it has not been disproved—as ultimately, indeed, are neither the sacred fount nor the ghosts at Bly. It is

¹⁰¹ See, for example, James, SF, p. 28: '[. . .] the curiosity to which I had so freely surrendered myself began to strike me as wanton in taste.'
¹⁰² James, SF, p. 183.
¹⁰³ In a letter, Crane wrote: 'For the first time I saw the majestic forces which are arrayed against man's true success—not the world—the world is silly, changeable, any of its decisions can be reversed—but man's own colossal impulses more strong than chains, and I perceived that the fight was not going to be with the world but with myself,' 'To Nellie Crouse', 26 January 1896, CSC, vol. 1, p. 187.
¹⁰⁴ James, Preface to The American, 1907, The Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism, p. 473. James continues: 'The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never can directly know; the things that reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire.'
true also in the sense that it occurs within consciousness: alongside, and finally
indistinguishable from, elemental perception. Haldin’s posthumous appearance to
Razumov is a real experience—producing real emotions—as is the ‘plastic relief’ of
Stevie to Mrs Verloc’s mind, which ‘wrung from [her] an anguished and faint murmur’. Ford’s insistence upon vicarious experience reminds us that in reading, too, we experience
the text’s world through our immediate imaginative engagement; an experience that, Ford
suggests, though convincing at that moment, through time can blend with personal
memory, to become a sustained component of our ‘real’ past.

Twenty-five years ago [... ] I lay upon my back on the top of the great shoulder of the downs above Lewes—looking into the crystalline blue of the sky. [... ] It was an unforgettable experience. [... And yet it wasn’t my experience at all. I have never been on that particular down above Lewes [...]. And yet I am not lying! In the ‘nineties of the last century, I read that passage in Nature in Downland—and it has become part of my life.’

Ford’s extension of impressionist principles to his own recollections reminds us finally that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is indeterminate at best, and hypothetically non-existent. Objective, non-impressionist autobiography, or even history, is just another illusion—an imaginative reshaping of reality. (‘“The man who says he has no illusions has at least that one”’, says Peter Ivanovitch in Under Western Eyes.)

It is an illusion, nonetheless, which Ford in particular recognised long before it became a philosophical commonplace in our own post-modern age.

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106 In his biography of Keats, W. Jackson Bate writes ‘In fact, “Illusion” ceases to be a very meaningful concept when we pass from a simple notion of it to the thought of a vast range of human reactions that are constantly playing against—or interpenetrating—the human experience of reality [...]. If most of the happiness and misery of life—indeed all of it except that determined by direct sensation, and possibly a good deal of this too—is within the imagination, then where and how do we draw the line between the “real” in our experience and the virtual omniscience of what we call the illusory?’ John Keats (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1963), p. 549.

107 Conrad, TSF, p. 221.


110 Conrad, UWE, p. 207.
Conclusion:

THE MODERN IMPRESSIONISTS

Impressionism was more than a subsidiary movement of modernism. It was its inaugural expression: heralding its arrival and setting the tone that characterises all modernist undertakings. Modernism as a general tendency is infused with the spirit of impressionism. International and disparate, modernism lacks a stable, coherent centre; its expressions and manifestations flash and change and fade in quick succession, emphasising their subjectivity. 'If the changed mood [in the arts] is marked by anything,' writes Bradbury, 'it is not by a single new style or manner or movement, but by the way the developing situation seemed to throw any single tendency into question.'

If we magnify the cultural landscape, specific differences and similarities between the various movements of modernism emerge, but still they are not clear. The flurry of experimentation in this period makes sharp demarcations problematic. Chapters One and Six demonstrate respectively how impressionism blurs at the edges of both realism and expressionism. The plethora of labels only contributes to the uncertainty. 'The end of the nineteenth century was prolific in awarding names to its literary movements,' writes Scott, 'thus lending disproportionate emphasis to the differences among them. Today one sees more clearly the manifold affinities, and takes the differences as mainly those of emphasis.' Of course, the early twentieth-century witnessed a similar proliferation, albeit generally by artists, whose distinctions, nonetheless, were rarely cleaner. Lodge's list of

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2 Compare Muller, p. 361.
3 Scott, p. 206.
the tangled alliances and hostilities among writers of this period highlights the intersection of aesthetic aims and the frequent disregard for declared movements. To quote only the beginning: 'James admired Conrad but not Hardy. Virginia Woolf admired Conrad and Hardy. Lawrence admired Hardy and Conrad but with exasperated reservations; he seems to have had little interest in James and hated Joyce.'

Given this complex diversity of writers and aims, it would take a second thesis to explore the intricate connections between impressionism and all that followed.

Immediately evident, however, is the application by such writers as Woolf, Lawrence and Joyce of techniques radically developed—if not necessarily originated—in impressionist fiction. These include a general tightening and objectification of form; limited narrative perspective, facilitated in third-person modes through heightened focalisation; shifting or multiple centres of consciousness; disrupted chronology; and narrative immediacy, bought about through rendering, delayed decoding and free indirect discourse. Stream-of-consciousness, a development of the latter device in particular, is conventionally regarded as more the province of subsequent modernism. This is fair, but its roots gather in impressionist literature, to the extent that impressionism occasionally employs it outright—if typically to depict states of weakened consciousness, such as trauma, or the edge of sleep.

The abundance of these techniques in modernist fiction rightly indicates a corresponding preoccupation with the broad issues that characterise impressionism: flux and transience, immediacy, uncertainty, subjectivity, and the complex nebulosity of

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4 Lodge, p. 45.
5 The juxtaposition of multiple perspectives, whether resulting from different perceivers, or from the chronological dislocation of one reflecting consciousness, anticipates cubist presentations of subject simultaneously from various vantage points. Ford’s *TGS* has accordingly been referred to as a cubist novel. See, for example, Green, *Ford Madox Ford: Prose and Politics*, p. 91.
6 See Toolan, p. 128.
7 See, respectively, p. 76 and Conrad, *LJ*, p. 20: 'The life was easy and he was too sure of himself—too sure of himself to . . . The line dividing his meditation from a surreptitious doze on his feet was thinner than a thread in a spider’s web.' Of course, Molly Bloom’s concluding monologue—the most extended and extreme instance of stream-of-consciousness in *Ulysses*—also results from semi-consciousness.
selfhood. Following from these, in turn, are concerns with isolation, alienation, and the fragmentation of culture and society. (Occasionally one also finds, in modernist art of all media, including works by Lawrence, Picasso, and Stravinsky, an interest in primitive experience anticipated not only in the scenario of *Heart of Darkness*, but more fundamentally in the impressionist emphasis upon the initial, 'primordial' experience: upon, that is to say, the impression itself.) Given, then, these various similarities, it is not surprising to hear distinct echoes of Pater in Woolf's account of the 'mind receiv[ing] a myriad impressions—[. . .] an incessant shower of innumerable atoms', or else to recognise a visible resemblance to Conrad's 'glow brings out a haze' image in Woolf's equally familiar description of life as 'a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.'

If impressionism influenced immediately subsequent fiction, its reforms extended also to poetry—after a brief time lag. It is perhaps the consequence of impressionism being a predominantly *fictional* mode that the novel became the first explicitly modernist literary genre in England. The notion of impressionist poetry *per se* is more contentious than impressionist prose—particularly where the efforts of my designated practitioners are concerned. Having never published verse, James and Conrad are clearly excluded in this matter. Yet, while I have not the space to scrutinise the verse of Crane and Ford, the broad character of their efforts proves paradoxically significant in determining further the influence of impressionist fiction.

Crane's poetry is, in this sense, the least relevant, although there are points of similarity. Its brevity and absence of definite structure (unrhymed, particularly loose free verse, resembling vertically assembled prose) are vaguely conducive to impressionist experience as fleeting and amorphous. Thematically, too, it often challenges conventional

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9 See Bradbury, *The Social Context of Modern English Literature*, p. 94.
values, berates arrogance and presumption, engages with the absence of certainty, and considers how reality differs according to perceptual particularity and mental or emotional states.\(^\text{10}\) Altogether less impressionistic, on the other hand, are Crane’s abstract and unworldly scenarios, and the form of epigram or condensed parable that many of the poems take.\(^\text{11}\) Perhaps accordingly, and in stark contrast with Crane’s fiction, there are few attempts to render immediate perceptual experience,\(^\text{12}\) and the tone and diction are generally archaic and false:

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Tradition, thou art for suckling children,
Thou art the enlivening milk for babes;
But no meat for men is in thee.
Then—
But alas, we all are babes.\(^\text{13}\)
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Ford recalled how Crane, despite having ‘never seen a word of my poetry,’ once ‘shouted at me: “You ruin . . . ruin . . . ruin all your work by the extra words you drag in to fill up metres and the digressions in sense you make just to fill up rhymes.”’\(^\text{14}\) Although he never did so in print, Ford might as forcefully have censured Crane’s outmoded language. While, in fact, Ford characteristically employed free verse, often unrhymed (‘if it were to be rhymed, the rhyme must never lead to the introduction of unnecessary thought; [. . .] no exigency of metre must interfere with the personal cadence of the writer’s mind or the pressure of the recorded emotion’\(^\text{15}\)), his central stipulation for poetry was that it should be contemporary in both subject and expression. He added to this, however, an impressionist regard for objective presentation: rendering experience without

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\(^\text{10}\) See Dooley, p. 112, 117.
\(^\text{11}\) See Dooley, p. 111.
\(^\text{12}\) See Bergon, p. 24.
\(^\text{14}\) Ford, *RTY*, p. 70.
the putting of one thing in juxtaposition with the other—that seems to me to be much more the business of the poet of to-day than setting down on paper what he thinks about the fate of Brangäne, not because any particular ‘lesson’ may be learned, but because such juxtapositions suggest emotions. For myself, I have been unable to do it; I am too old, perhaps, or I was born too late.\textsuperscript{16}

If Ford understates his achievements,\textsuperscript{17} it was, nevertheless, the \textit{desire} to continue prose impressionist principles into his verse that influenced the poetry of those born later.\textsuperscript{18} Pound in particular praised Ford for aligning modern poetry with the ‘prose tradition’ of Flaubert and Ford’s own fiction.\textsuperscript{19} ‘Mr. Hueffer believes in an exact rendering of things’, remarked Pound. ‘He would strip words of all “association” for the sake of getting a precise meaning. […] He is objective.’\textsuperscript{20} He is also, by inference, a forerunner of Pound’s practice of imagist poetry.

Reciprocating Pound’s admiration of his poetry, Ford strengthened the resemblance between their works:

\begin{quote}
We may say that what most characterized their [the imagists’] products was a sort of cleanness. […] The work is free of the polysyllabic, honey-dripping and derivative adjectives that, distinguishing the works of most of their contemporaries, makes nineteenth-century poetry as a whole seem greasy and ‘close’ like the air of a room.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

One must add to this partial definition, of course, the centrality of the imagist image itself. Vivid, striking, and primarily visual, the images of Pound, T. E. Hulme, H.D., \textit{et al}, flash impressions from the page. They are as transient as their vehicles are generally succinct.

But like the epiphanies of James, and later of Joyce, they simultaneously rescue aspects of

\textsuperscript{17} See, for example, Todd K. Bender, \textit{Literary Impressionism in Jean Rhys, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Charlotte Brontë}, pp. 43-4.
\textsuperscript{18} Ford wrote: ‘It took me, then, a long time to arrive at any conscious idea of what I wanted to do in verse—it took me perhaps twenty-five years—and then I found that I was trying to do exactly the same thing as I had always been trying to do in prose.’ Quoted MacShane, \textit{Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford}, p. 155.
\textsuperscript{19} See Levenson, \textit{A Genealogy of Modernism}, p. 105.
\textsuperscript{20} Quoted MacShane, \textit{The Life and Work of Ford Madox Ford}, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{21} Ford, \textit{TTR}, p. 157.
everyday reality from neglect and obscurity. (‘An “image”’, wrote Pound, ‘is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.’) From this perspective, aspects of imagism are detectable not only in Ford’s writings, but in the terse expressions, startling images and ideas ‘sharp cut as cameos’ of Crane’s prose in particular. The visual emphasis of Conrad’s fiction, the attempt ‘before all, to make you see!’ is equally resonant: ‘[...] I don’t start with an abstract notion’, Conrad wrote. ‘I start with definite images and as their rendering is true some little effect is produced.’

We must not press the comparison too far, however. If impressionism paved the way for imagist poetry, and for the poetry that followed imagism (such as Eliot’s The Waste Land), there remain significant differences, which serve to further define each practice. For example, while impressionism is as objective and disciplined as imagism, the actual images it renders, and the corresponding mood and sensations, are often less clear and definite. Ford recognised that his own poetry was ‘more conversational’ than that of the imagists, who in turn ‘seem to be writing very simple and very carefully chosen words, sparingly, for incision on alabaster.’ This divergence of presentation widened as the latter movement developed into a second phase: increasingly embracing form and regarding as redundant ‘the realist and representational emphasis of Impressionism’. In truth, imagist poetry had always been more literary and remote than impressionism: never as directly referential. Imagists positioned the artistry of their image between the eye and the world, even while they sought to vivify that world. Pound’s famous poem,

In A Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

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23 See, respectively, pp. 72 and 73.
25 Ford, TTR, p. 159.
26 Levenson, A Genealogy of Modernism, p. 125.
presents its metaphor—the petals—as much as the initial scene. This same indirection distinguishes the alignment of the less chiselled impressionist image from the contemporary practice of Symbolist poetry: the vague suggestiveness of which sought to evoke a deeper, spiritual reality beyond everyday perception. While thus combining the indeterminacy of Symbolism with the forceful objectivity of imagism, impressionism remains distinct as the aesthetic most committed to presenting immediate and subjectively perceived reality.

Despite the aforementioned influence, comparable differences soon emerge between impressionist and (subsequent) modernist prose. One of the more prominent trends of all modernist art, not only imagism, was towards a heightened recognition of its own artistry and a restless experimentation with form. Technique for the impressionists served primarily to convey the subjective experience of the fictional perceiver, while affording the reader a similar subjective immediacy of engagement. This epistemological parallel between reader and fictional centre of consciousness required an impersonal presentation to create a convincing narrative illusion and to facilitate vicarious experience. Impressionist art was therefore innovative only in the service of a heightened realism, not to draw attention to itself as an art form.

The same cannot be said for *Ulysses*—the high-water mark of modernist fiction. Of course, much of Joyce’s vast array of techniques sought also to represent more truthfully than traditional realism the workings of consciousness, the difficulty of understanding and the formlessness of modern reality. But the frequent switching between narrative modes (the headlined subsections of the seventh chapter, the dramatic format of the fifteenth, the question-and-response arrangement of the seventeenth) undermined the naturalism of each, while elaborate leitmotifs, wordplay and the underlying Homeric

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parallel foreground artistic devices. Joyce may still be ‘invisible’, in terms of his voice and presence, ‘refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails’, but the tools of his art remain in clear view and sparkle obtrusively before us.\(^{29}\)

Joyce’s ultimate disregard for sustaining the illusion of reality allows him a wider focus and a greater flexibility of expression. One recalls the ‘young genius’ who berated Ford for his and Conrad’s elaborate “‘justification’ of a subject’: ‘You try to trick the reader into believing that he’s hearing true stories . . . But you can’t [. . .] It’s a waste of time . . . What the public wants is Me.”\(^{30}\) We may not seek Joyce, exactly, in reading *Ulysses*, but we cannot avoid his ‘encyclopaedic allembracingness’ that exceeds the confines of a plausible fictional consciousness.\(^{31}\)

Woolf makes a similar concession to narrative flexibility in, for example, *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Waves*. In contrast with *Ulysses*, Woolf retains a uniform narrative mode for each text. *Mrs Dalloway* adopts the basic impressionist format of sustained, focalised, free indirect discourse; *The Waves* consists almost entirely of reported dialogue, interspersed very occasionally with disembodied descriptions of a seascape at various stages in a day. What distinguish each novel most clearly from impressionism, however, are the frequent and measured alterations of consciousness and perspective. There is no third-person impressionist novel, we recall, that does not abandon temporarily the scope of its central consciousness, whether to assume the position of an heterodiegetic narrator or that of another character.\(^{32}\) But such variations are, typically, comparatively few and muted, preserving the overall tone of confined and often isolated individual subjectivity.\(^{33}\) In the Woolf novels, by contrast, particularly in *The Waves*, one detects a sense of some


\(^{30}\) See p. 117.

\(^{31}\) Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing*, p. 139.

\(^{32}\) See pp. 104-105.

\(^{33}\) See p. 69. Significantly, the two impressionist texts that most resist this trend—*The Golden Bowl*, for its central division between the orientation of The Prince and The Princess, and *The Last Post*, with its alternating focalisers, represent the final impressionist works of their respective authors, as if signalling a general transition.
deep-seated fusion of consciousness, of identity, even, which is both incompatible with the acute psychological isolation of impressionist characters, and more radical than Conrad's notion of a shared 'temperament' or response to impressions.\(^3\) Sears adds that, in contrast to Woolf's intersecting 'multiplicity of views', James's aim—though one might substitute any of the impressionists—'was not “synthesis”', but 'precisely the inability to engage in a real dialectical process or to reconcile conflicting if partial points of view. He is forever dividing reality into sets of mutually exclusive possibilities'.\(^4\)

Woolf's intimation of a possible deep connection between consciousnesses introduces the final characteristic of modernist fiction, after impressionism, which I shall consider here: modernism's frequent claim for, and presentation of, depth and unity despite surface fragmentation. The Post-Impressionists rejected what they saw as the frail and shallow transience of Impressionism. Beginning with Cézanne's declared intention to 'make of Impressionism something solid and durable like the art of the museums',\(^5\) their strong, geometric compositions sought to bring out the essence and permanence of reality. A cursory glance over the modernist landscape reveals a consistency of intent, if not always of method. One considers, without pause, the Symbolists' desire to evoke an underlying spiritual reality; Yeats's timeless Byzantium and his elaborate Vision of an orderly universe; Lawrence's organic, rooted consciousness, and the biblical resonance of The Rainbow; the religious and mythical references that, like Joyce’s Homeric parallel, strain to 'shore' Eliot's 'fragments [. . .] against [his] ruins'.\(^6\) One thinks also, by extension, of the 'tradition' and stable Christianity later embraced by Eliot, and of the

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\(^{3}\) See pp. 123-4, 157-8. Ryan writes of The Waves: 'the characters do not exist as discrete persons in the ordinary sense: they separate and fuse continually; until we gradually become aware how arbitrary the line is that distinguishes one from the other', p. 201. See also Hewitt, pp. 117-24.

\(^{4}\) Sears, pp. 38-9.

\(^{5}\) Quoted Blunden, p. 126.

rigid, authoritarian politics that attracted so many modernists. As several of these examples demonstrate, art was considered capable of providing order and permanence where society and perceived reality alone seemed insufficient.

This is not to suggest, of course, that the impressionists did not desire a similar stability. We have seen the nostalgia of Ford and Conrad for a feudalist society, and the concerns of James for an art of balance and economy. But each remained respectfully aware of the conflict between the order they desired, and the flux, indeterminacy, and lack of deeper truth which they perceived; moreover, their art remains an expression of the latter. In this sense, finally, the impressionists occasionally seem more modern than the modernists who followed them—as I shall now elaborate.

Ford's insistence upon the accuracy of his own impressions, I remarked at the end of the previous chapter, narrowed the gap between fiction and non-fiction in a way that anticipates postmodernism. A brief recapitulation of further impressionist characteristics extends the parallel. One recalls, for example, the relentless emphasis upon subjectivity and the plurality of interpretation; the imminence of perception—denying a transcendental vantage point—and the flux of impressions, perpetually deferring full understanding. The concentration upon surfaces in impressionist fiction—surfaces that appear unreliable or divorced from definitive meaning ('Most things and most natures have nothing but a surface', wrote Conrad; 'Life is, immensely, a matter of surface', wrote James)—brings to mind the rootlessness of the postmodern signifier. There are doubts generally in impressionist fiction about language and communication; doubts also about the legitimacy

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38 See Levenson: 'modernism was individualist before it was anti-individualist, anti-traditional before it was traditional, inclined to anarchism before it was inclined to authoritarianism', A Genealogy of Modernism, p. 79.
39 Fearing the disintegration of society at the outbreak of World War One, Ford temporarily aligned himself with the emerging resistance to representational art. 'Cubists, Vorticists, and the rest of them are in fact visionaries', he wrote. 'Post-Impressionists, Futurists and the rest of us are materialists. I wish I could be a visionary myself, but I don't know how.' Quoted Stannard, 'Preface' to TGS, pp. xiv-xv. In practice, Ford's impressionist career began in earnest in 1915.
of authority (concerning both fiction and society); and a corresponding invitation for increased reader participation. There are recurrent deconstructions of binary oppositions and traditional hierarchies, such as the levelling of black and white associated values in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, of truth and illusion, mind and reality, order and chaos, and so on. Finally (although the comparisons stretch far further), there is the opportunity, explored in Chapter Six, for creative play in the absence of rules and consensus—the impressionist equivalent, perhaps, of the postmodernist free-play of semantic signification.

It is not altogether surprising, then, that each of my four authors should have at some time been referred to as a postmodernist. Neither are such judgements necessarily anachronistic. Bernstein writes of Jean-François Lyotard's 'suggestion that the postmodern is coexistent with the modern', to which Stephen Connor adds that 'most accounts of literary postmodernism would want to insist on some form of critical engagement with modernism rather than a simple turning away from it.' But there exist substantial differences between the two tendencies: between, more specifically, impressionism and postmodernism. Foremost among these is the reluctance of impressionism, as with Impressionist painting, to let go its grip on the material world, even while it feels its words (/paint) beginning to slip. Impressionism rarely celebrates its own artistry or turns in upon itself; rarely loses all sense of signification, however fractured any residual meaning may ultimately appear. The impressionists, we might say, are the postmodern readers of their own modernist texts, seeing through the fragile order of their art.

It would seem sensible to avoid, therefore, the loose and forced membership of artists into a similar but ultimately incompatible aesthetic: a practice, I argued in my Introduction, from which impressionism has equally suffered. Such manipulation of likeness benefits neither movement. We can retain, nonetheless, an appreciation of how

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impressionism shaped its own era, and how its influence continues into our own. We still live in a world where extreme relativism and subjectivity push hard against our habitual and perhaps necessary assumptions of control, stability, and meaning. Impressionist fiction speaks to us of these matters perhaps more loudly than ever. If it has appeared to survive less as a *movement* than as the various writings of Crane, Conrad, Ford and James, less also than the familiar school of painting from which it took its name, then perhaps appearance once again deceives. Perhaps, that is to say, impressionist literature is still contemporary: its attitudes and techniques so commonplace that they have almost disappeared from our view. Impressionism, by this account, is a victim of its own success.
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