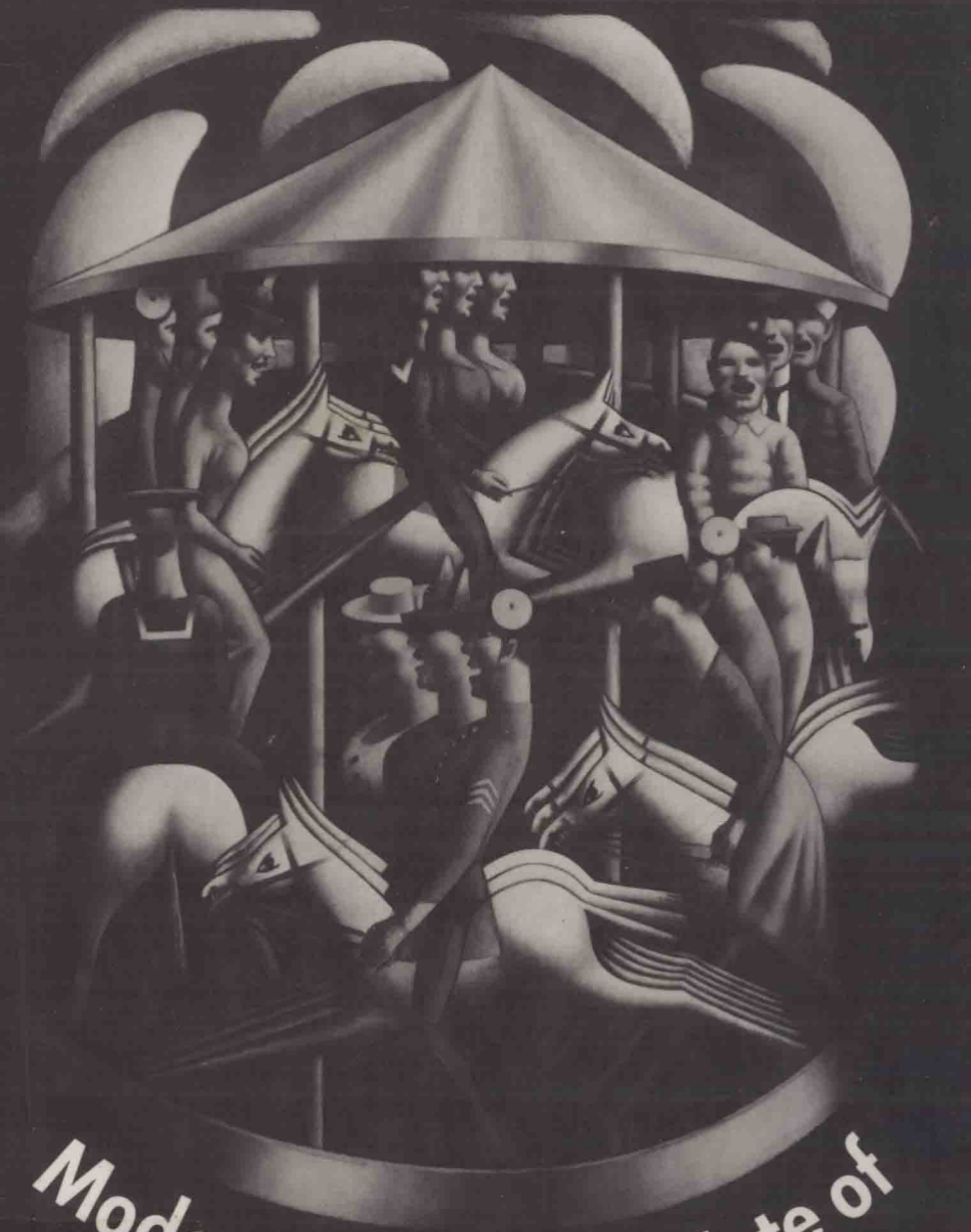
MICHAEL LEVENSON



# Modernism and the Fate of Individuality

## ıracter & Novelistic Form from Conrad to Woolf

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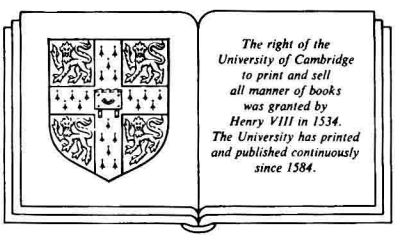


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# Preface

This thing we name the individual, this piece of matter, this length of memory, this bearer of a proper name, this block in space, this whisper in time, this self-delighting, self-condemning oddity – what is it? who made it? Ours may be the age of narcissism, but it is also the century in which ego suffered unprecedented attacks upon its great pretensions, to be self-transparent and self-authorized. It discovered enemies within and enemies without; walls within, mirrors without; it no longer perched securely on the throne of the self; it no longer sat confidently at the center of the social world. The wandering "I" is the protagonist of this study whose chief interest is to read eight big novels (big even when they are little) which move between the longing to recover some figure of the self, to preserve some vessel of subjectivity, and the willingness to let it go, to release the knot of subjectivity.

Accordingly, the main current of argument in this book will follow the diverse fortunes of individuality in modern English fiction: its changing verbal aspect, its historical limits and symbolic resources, its political dispossession, cultural displacement and psychological self-estrangement, its uneasy accommodation of mind and body, its retreat from the world and its longing for community. Cast in the broadest terms, this study attempts to chart the lambent movements of post-Romantic subjectivity as it endures the heavy pressures of modern history and modernist literary experiment. As the subtitle implies, the issue that organizes this general concern is the relationship between character and form, and this relationship has two pertinent aspects.

The first involves the relation of fictional character to narrative form. In the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, James

observes that in the course of his novel Maggie Verver "duplicates, as it were, her value and becomes a compositional resource . . . as well as a value intrinsic." The idea of a "duplication" emphasizes one distinction that my title means to suggest, the distinction between the "intrinsic" values that characters are made to embody and the "compositional" laws to which they must conform. The issue becomes most sharply defined in the fiction of James, Ford, Lewis and Joyce, but it has bearing on all the works to be considered in this study. One of the great concealed dramas of the modern novel is the struggle between certain enduring traits in literary character and certain innovations in narrative structure, the contest between a notion of fictional self inherited from nineteenth-century precedents and the new literary forms designed to contain it. The Romanticism of Stephen Dedalus, the liberalism of Margaret Schlegel, the Victorianism of John Dowell – to name just a few instances – stand in uneasy relation to the forms which surround them, and part of my historical claim is that the modern novel had to negotiate between conventions of character sustaining traditions and principles of structure attacking them. I shall argue, that is, that the struggle between character and form often takes the aspect of a conflict between tradition and modernity and that one way to understand this moment of transition in the history of the novel is in terms of nineteenth-century characters seeking to find a place in twentieth-century forms.

The second aspect of the problem concerns the relation of character, not to narrative form, but to social form. A repeated movement in these novels is the portrayal of a dense web of social constraints followed by the effort to wrest an image of autonomous subjectivity from intractable communal norms. The motif of exile is a conspicuous expression of this concern, but what is most notable about the aspiration to exile is how frequently it leads, not to an escape from the community, but to a withdrawal to its interstices. This common pattern establishes a subject that will be prominent in the study, the ambiguous boundaries between "I" and "Other," the chief thematic problem here being the attempt to construct a figure of individuality from within the rigid confines of community.

Although I describe this emphasis separately, in fact the pressures of social structure stand in close and provocative analogy to the pressures of literary structure. The dislocation of the self within society is recapitulated, reenacted, reconsidered, in the dislocation of character within modernist forms. And yet part of what makes these novels so tense and nervous is that they pursue their formal disruptions of character even as they so often sustain nostalgic longing for a whole self. A set of works that engage in self-conscious assault on a notion of character persistently associated with the nineteenth century continue to cherish nineteenth-century ideals of the autonomous ego, free and integral.

One methodological principle should be acknowledged here, namely that the strategy for reading these works is to invert the usual metaphoric relation between text and context, according to which "context" resembles a large backdrop behind and above and around the players who move within its horizons. It is true, or at least figurally well established, that novels participate "in" history, but it is at least as figurally significant that history unfolds "in" novels. The style of reading here is to see these novels as dense environments which have incorporated an historical artifact – seen in one description as a concept of individuality dislocated by social pressures; seen in another as a traditional method of characterization unsettled by new formal commitments – and which adopt revealingly diverse techniques for digesting the history they have swallowed. The crisis of liberalism, the challenge to Eurocentrism, the advance of bureaucracy, the contest between men and women – these are problems that enter my work as they entered these novels, but it should be said from the first that they receive nothing like a degree of attention proportionate to their magnitude. Their mention gives only a telegraphic sign of the full-scale social history that I once thought could stand among these pages.

It should also be said that this study refuses the artifice of thematic coherence, and that on those several occasions when an issue other than the fate of individuality rises to prominence it is not (at least not often) because the author has a subtle argumentative connection well in mind; it is because the author

happens to find it interesting. To the question that will occasionally occur to a reader, "How does he intend to fit *that* into the larger structure of the book?" the answer often is, "He doesn't."

# Acknowledgements

Always there are many incalculable debts, and always the greatest is to my family. But with this book I owe just as much to my graduate students at the University of Virginia. There are too many to name (too many called Ann, too many called Richard) but not too many to remember. At every stage they nodded and frowned, chatted and swatted, encouraged and chastened. From out of the fertile context they created, my ideas developed first into essays. Early versions of the material appeared in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, *Studies in Short Fiction*, *Modern Language Quarterly*, *Twentieth Century Literature*, *Papers on Language and Literature*, and *Modern Language Studies*. The essays then returned to the classroom, and under new generous scrutiny they reformed themselves until they settled into the chapters that follow. The quality of this book aside, the process of its composition has been for me a justification of academic life. Speech and writing, private thought and public exchange, intellectual detachment and emotional engagement, all flowed together and carried me in their stream. For their splendid teaching I thank my students.

# Contents

CHAPTER ONE

# Two cultures and an individual *Heart of Darkness* and *The Ambassadors*

## I

The first rude act in this frequently wilful study is its opening act, the decision to place *Heart of Darkness* and *The Ambassadors* side by side and to introduce a problem in modern English narrative by passing from one to the other. Admittedly, it is an almost absurdly comic picture to imagine Strether among the alligators of the Congo or to envision Captain Marlow in a tête-à-tête with Marie de Vionnet. And yet the incidents of these narratives, like the works themselves, belong to the same historical moment, and it is instructive to imagine that just as Marlow was pressing deep into the jungle, Strether was crossing the Tuileries, and that while Strether was lounging on a Parisian balcony, Marlow dodged arrows on an African river. The incongruity of these pictures gives us some feeling for the incongruities of the nineties, when the middle classes had perfected both the habits of leisure and the methods of colonialism. To enjoy the delicacies of a long cultural tradition and to overstep the boundaries of that tradition, to witness civilization at its most finely wrought and to confront its rude origins, to contemplate the refinements of social convention and to watch such conventions dissolve – these are concurrent historical possibilities that will allow us to locate modernist character within the expansive context that it demands.

Two novels so unlike in subject, tone and style should generate a warm friction when they are brought close together, and part of the point of this opening chapter is to take advantage of some marked dissimilarities in order to establish the range of issues that the rest of this study will pursue. But a deeper point is to show where dissimilarity yields to likeness.

These works that so decisively brought the English novel into the modern century contain frequent improbable echoes of one another, echoes so persistent that they establish the sound of literary change.

A man leaves his native country to travel to another, where he hopes to retrieve an unaccountably estranged member of his community. He finds himself entering a much older culture which deprives his own of its moral inevitability. With some difficulty he finds the object of his quest only to discover that a startling change has occurred in the man he seeks, who has taken on the manners and the morals of this alien community. As his own certainties waver, he finds himself drawn into unanticipated solidarity with the renegade, and his original errand seems to lose its point. Obliged to make a choice between the values he has inherited and the values he discovers, he chooses the latter; but having renounced his old measures and standards, he is still unable to live among these new ones. He decides to return home where he will live as a stranger among his neighbors.

This, in outline, is Marlow's story – and Strether's. And lest it seem my own unwarranted abstraction from imaginative detail, James's early description of *The Ambassadors* may be recalled. In his first notebook entry on the novel James decides that his hero will travel abroad in order "to take some step, decide some question with regard to some one, in the sense of his old feelings and habits, and that the new influences, to state it roughly, make him act just in the opposite spirit – make him accept on the spot, with a *volte-face*, a wholly different inspiration." From this situation of high generality James begins a slow descent into particularity. Suppose this man's mission involves "some other young life in regard to which it's a question of his interfering, rescuing, bringing home." Suppose our protagonist promises to restore the young man to his family, and then suppose that under the new influence he "se range du côté du jeune homme."[1] With only a few more details this outline will give the plot of *The Ambassadors*, but what is more significant is how readily it might have given the plot of *Heart of Darkness*. James's synopsis applies, with very little discrepancy, to Conrad's tale. As we shall see, Con-

rad did not derive the principles of his plot so systematically, but the final consequence is that Marlow too sets out to interfere, rescue, bring home; he too finds that old feelings yield to new influences; like Strether he accepts a different inspiration, makes a *volte-face* and forms a surprising alliance.

The formal congruence of these two plots should get us started. It should remind us that the difference between an African canoe and a French rowboat is not a final difference and that beyond their manifest contrasts the two works share certain primary features, most notably, the confrontation between cultures, the "sharp rupture of an identity," and the transvaluation of values.[2] To recognize these submerged parallels is to identify a shared narrative paradigm whose finer points it will be my task to elaborate.

Still, if the works met only on this plane of abstraction, their relationship would have a limited interest. The large issues that will be pursued through this study – the connection between character and form, self and society – will oblige me to move continually from such austere structures to concretely thematized detail. As a first instance, we may turn briefly to Marlow and Strether themselves in order to recall some homely facts that will gain in importance as we proceed.

One is a sea captain, the other an editor. No doubt if we could look at their hands, we could quickly tell them apart. And yet neither of them would have dirty hands – which is to say that both Marlow and Strether take exceptional pains to preserve their integrity within morally suspect contexts. Both find themselves entangled in the unrestrained economic activity of the period; the "great industry" of Woollett, a "big brave bouncing business" (I, p. 59), finds its complement in the immense trading concern that arranges Marlow's journey to the Congo. And each work places a single profitable commodity in the foreground: the notoriously unnamed object manufactured at Woollett and the ivory pursued so obsessively in Africa. Indeed, it is tempting to fancy another subterranean connection, a secret unmarked trade route that brings Kurtz's ivory to Woollett where the Newsomes fabricate it into their vulgar domestic artifact.

"I don't touch the business" (I, p. 64), Strether points

out, and while Marlow cannot be so fastidious, he too keeps his distance from the eager pursuit of private fortune. Surrounded by great wealth and economic opportunity, neither seeks personal gain, and their own labors have distinctly preindustrial pedigrees, stretching in the one case back to an heroic naval past and in the other to a tradition of humane letters. At the same time it is evident that they owe their positions to those who pursue profit without such fine scruples. Strether's journal is financed by Woollett's "roaring trade" (I, p. 59), and Marlow, who conceives his journey in a spirit of uncalculating adventure, can only carry it through by hiring himself to that Company for which he professes such contempt.

They are, if you will, members of the *lumpenbourgeoisie* who retreat to the interstices of the community even as they are conditioned by its values. Strether enters the novel with a "New England conscience" but a "double consciousness" (I, p. 5) and Marlow endures the old English version of this self-division. Neither romantic exiles nor revolutionists, the two figures are rather "aliens" in Arnold's sense – of, but not with, the cultures they inhabit. Possessing little authority and no power, they place themselves in the service of others; they are indeed *portable* sensibilities whose essential passivity makes them susceptible to change. James and Conrad are interested in those who can still move within a rigidifying social order, but this interest accompanies a recognition of the weight and inevitability of communal norms.

We may set out the opening problem of the study by bringing together these structural parallels and these thematic analogies in order to ask what relation obtains between individual experience and collective representations. This is the general form of a question that has many particular aspects, but as an initial step we can usefully divide it into two parts. The first concerns the integrity of personal values as set against the integrity of culture; the second concerns the relation of collective forms, especially language, to the form of individual character. These issues must be separated in order to keep their contours distinct, much as James and Conrad must be separated if their *rapprochement* is to be meaningful. I turn first to *Heart*

*of Darkness*, then to *The Ambassadors*, then alternate between the two, hoping in this way to establish the harsh lights of contrast by which surprising similarities may be seen.

## II

During the trip upriver just before the attack on the steamer, a dense fog settles upon the water, with the result, recalls Marlow, that "What we could see was just the steamer we were on, her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving, and a misty strip of water, perhaps two feet broad, around her – and that was all. The rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind."[3] And later, when Marlow remembers his desperate attempt to prevent Kurtz from returning to jungle savagery, he remarks that "There was nothing either above or below him – and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone – and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air" (p. 65).

These two instances signal a condition that persists all through Conrad's work, a radical *disorientation* that obliterates any stable relation between the self and the world, and that raises the question of whether there *is* a world to which the self belongs.[4] The fragility of identity, the barriers to knowledge, the groundlessness of value – these great Conradian (and modern) motifs appear most often in terms of a sensory derangement that casts the individual into unarticulated space, a space with no markers and no boundaries, with nothing behind, nothing above, nothing below.

In the face of this dizzying formlessness, the first word of Conrad's title has been a reassuring spatial index, a signpost directing readers Inward. Whatever ambiguity stirs and confuses the surface of experience, the heart promises a center of meaning (however dark), a psychological source, an inner origin. And in the view of *Heart of Darkness* that has prevailed until recently, the fiction has been regarded as a paradigm,

almost a defining instance, of interior narrative. Within this conception Marlow's journey only incidentally involves movement through physical space; in essence it represents a "journey into self," an "introspective plunge," "a night journey into the unconscious."[5] The African terrain is taken as a symbolic geography of the mind, and Kurtz as a suppressed avatar lurking at the core of the self.

Certainly the tale offers abundant metaphoric support for this standard line of interpretation. Marlow is first attracted to the Congo because it stands "dead in the center" (p. 13) of the map; he wonders what lies *behind* the coast and *beneath* the sea. When he arrives in Africa he travels to the Central Station, but it then happens, comically, cryptically, that the center is not near enough to the core. Marlow must travel hundreds of miles farther on until he reaches the Inner Station, where he meets a man whose soul "had looked within itself and . . . had gone mad" (p. 65). Kurtz's own passage into the wilderness is described as a "fantastic invasion" (p. 57) – a phrase that applies equally well to the received way of reading this fiction, according to which selfhood is seen as a central essence, a deep interior, a concealed core that must be penetrated before it will yield its meanings. As a first appraisal of modernist character we may begin with this familiar picture, sketched in the very phrase "heart of darkness," which renders the self as a kind of oblate sphere whose deceptive surface encloses the inwardness which gives the truth of personality.

In the last several years, however, a reaction has set in against the prevailing introspective approach. A number of readers have asked just what Inner Thing lurks at the mysterious center. The heart, after all, is a heart of darkness; Kurtz is "hollow at the core" (p. 58); the Manager suggests that "Men who come out here should have no entrails" (p. 25); and when Marlow listens to the venomous brickmaker it seems to him that "if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe" (p. 29). Confronted with images such as these, some critics have begun to argue that *Heart of Darkness* dramatizes no confrontation with an inner truth but only a recognition of the futility of truthseeking.[6]

In an essay called 'Connaissance du Vide" Todorov has

claimed that the tale addresses a problem of interpretation rather than action and that having meditated on the nature of knowledge it concludes that knowledge is unattainable. He emphasizes how little we know about Kurtz, who is eagerly anticipated and vividly remembered but scarcely ever present. Marlow seeks to interpret, to understand, to know Kurtz, but "Que la connaissance soit impossible, que le coeur des ténèbres soit lui-même ténèbreux, le texte tout entier nous le dit." Marlow journeys to the center only to discover that "le centre est vide."[7] Meisel concurs, arguing that *Heart of Darkness* enacts a "crisis in knowledge": "Rather than a psychological work, *Heart of Darkness* is a text that interrogates the epistemological status of the language in which it inheres." The conclusion of that interrogation, the real horror in the tale, is "the impossibility of disclosing a central core, an essence, even a ground to what Kurtz has done and what he is."[8] In this view Conrad's representation of character is the representation of an absence.

The introspectivist identifies the heart as an emotional plenitude; the sceptical epistemologist looks in the same place and finds an emptiness. Both are preoccupied with this one site of meaning, this one region of experience; and while its importance cannot be doubted, more is necessary to account for the intricacy of Conradian characterization. Indeed *Heart of Darkness* draws another diagram of experience that is just as prominent and just as necessary to its interpretation. In the description of Kurtz's final moments Marlow notes that

> he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible. (p. 69)

Here then is a second way to understand the crux of character: to cast it in terms of the end, the limit, the threshold, the edge, the border. Alongside the figures of penetration and invasion the tale offers these figures of *extension*, a reaching towards some distant point on the limit of experience.

Early in the tale the frame narrator describes the Thames waterway as "leading to the uttermost ends of the earth" (p. 8),

and when Marlow begins to speak, he describes the terminus of his journey as "the farthest point of navigation" (p. 11). "I went a little farther," says the Russian, "then still a little farther – till I had gone so far that I don't know how I'll ever get back" (p. 54). Kurtz, who has passed "beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations" (p. 65), understands the consequences "only at the very last" (p. 57). And when Marlow visits the Intended, he hears a whisper "speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness" (p. 74).

This second imaginative emphasis must be recognized for the distinct alternative it is. Suppose truth does not lie submerged in the deep interior; suppose it stands on the far side of a permanently receding horizon. Suppose that Africa was the "dark continent" not only because it was seen as a mirror of the darkness within but because it was seen as a window to the darkness beyond; and suppose that Kurtz's last words have their extraordinary effect on Marlow because they indicate the scarcely conceivable point that connects the "inside" of life to the "outside" which is death. Such considerations suggest that it is insufficient to look towards the center and to ask whether it is psychologically replete or epistemologically vacuous. Too much in *Heart of Darkness* occurs over the edge, at the last, across the threshold, at "the end – even beyond" (p. 65).

Early in the work, in a much-quoted remark, the frame narrator describes Marlow's peculiar method of narrative.

> 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 (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), 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, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (p. 9)

The representation of meaning as outside, "like a haze," awkwardly overlays the picture of a dark heart beating within the world's body. These conceptions are more than rival metaphors; they give two ways of orienting the ego, two ways of understanding the crux of character. Unlike the images of penetration, the images of extension suggest that the secret