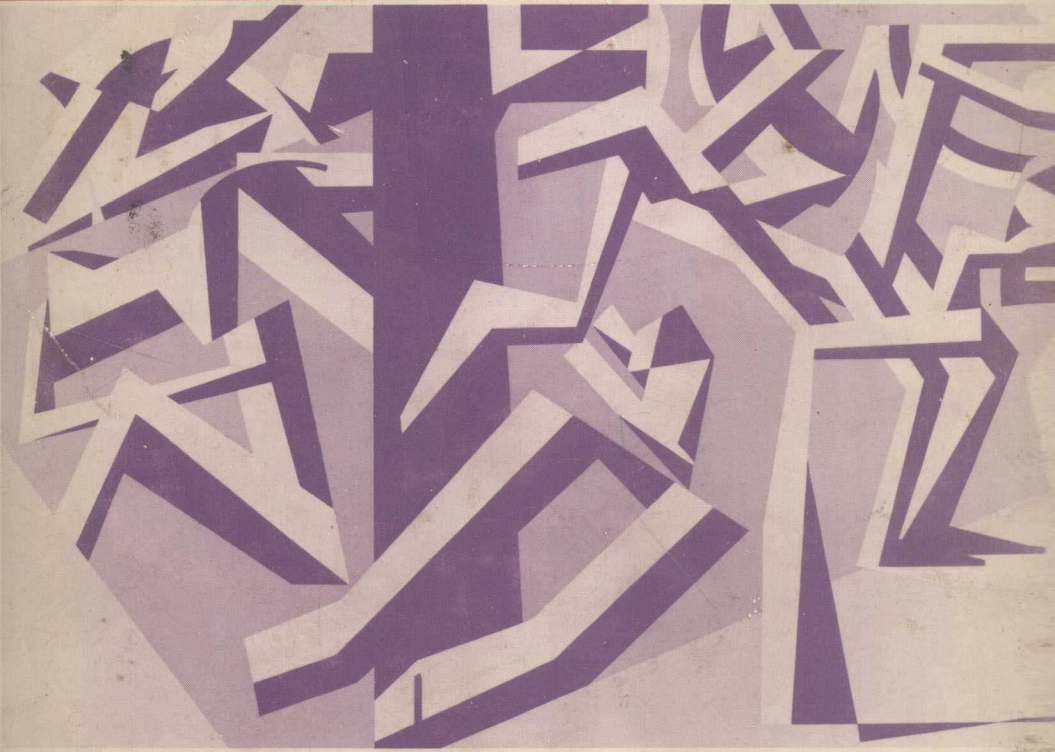


Michael H. Levenson

A Genealogy of Modernism



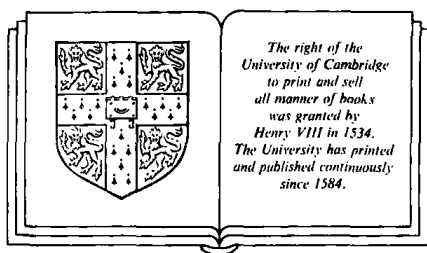
A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922

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Preface

Vague terms still signify. Such is the case with "modernism": it is at once vague and unavoidable. Anything more precise would exclude too much too soon; anything more general would be folly. As with any blunt instrument, the best that can be done is to use it for the rough tasks and to reserve the finer work for finer tools. As a rough way of locating our attention, "modernism" will do.

The problem of naming is apposite, since my subject is the emergence of a literary movement one of whose own problems was how to name itself. The movement is that associated with Pound, Hulme, Ford, Lewis and Eliot; Joyce, Woolf and Lawrence loom on the periphery. These are large and unwieldy figures, but that is undisturbing, since it is not with the careers of figures that we will be concerned. The study does not occupy itself with biography, nor with the elucidation of much-elucidated texts. The interest lies in the structure of English modernism, as it slowly assumed coherence, as aesthetic concepts received new formulation, as those concepts were worked into doctrine. Among the concepts were image, symbol, tradition, expression, objectivity. The doctrines were successively called Impressionism, Imagism, Vorticism and Classicism.

As for the dates, they, too, are a preliminary convenience. In 1908 Pound arrived in London; Ford began to edit the *English Review*; and T. E. Hulme joined the short-lived Poets' Club. In 1922 *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses* and the *Later Poems* of Yeats were published; the *Criterion* was founded. In 1914, the year that divides the study, Eliot met Pound and showed him "Pru-frock." Joyce began serializing *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. It was the year of the first Imagist anthology and the

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Vorticist journal *Blast* – also, of course, the year the war began. There is no need to quibble over these dates. They are only boundary stones; what is interesting is the terrain.

Still, as a contribution to the history of English modernism, this work encounters a number of difficulties that should be acknowledged. First, its principals keep changing. No one figure appears in every phase of the narrative, because no one figure followed all the turnings of the literary movement. T. S. Eliot emerges late in the study, but then immediately occupies the foreground. Ford Madox Ford and Wyndham Lewis are conspicuous for a time, and then drop from consideration. This is not because their later work or Eliot's early work is without interest. It is only because the book follows the thread of concepts, not the thread of lives; what will provide continuity are the constituent ideas of English modernism; these are the characters whose destinies will unfold.

Second, although modernist literary doctrine is the subject, its boundaries are not secure. On one frontier, the critical work became entangled in the creative work, and thus the model of text and context will not serve. Literary texts were often explained before they were written, and they themselves were often eloquent critical acts. On another frontier, the literary doctrine did not remain distinct from other forms of discursive writing – not from theories of painting and sculpture, nor from philosophic or religious speculation. One of the most notable features of the period was the continuity between genres and between disciplines, the self-conscious attempt to construct a unified theory of modernity. Any effort to isolate literary doctrine would only impoverish it, and one need not be ashamed to pursue the study of aesthetic concepts into the imaginative work that they describe and into the related disciplines that frame them.

Finally, there is the issue of the rhetoric of literary change. By temperament as well as by their cultural position, the English modernists were inclined to definitive opinions expressed in vehement tones. Literary attitudes were not offered as tentative hypotheses subject to revision, but as final judgments. However, in the course of very few years, final judgments succeeded one another at an alarming rate. Beliefs changed markedly, only

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the tone of conviction was unchanged. It is therefore well to consider at the start that the critical pronouncements were not the insights of Olympian minds, but more often the hasty formulae of polemicists.

What Mr. Murry does show is that there are at least two attitudes toward literature and toward everything, and that you cannot hold both.

(T. S. Eliot, "The Function of Criticism")¹

Eliot's remark is infelicitous. If there are "at least" two attitudes, then there can be no question of "both." Nor is this the cavil it may appear. The lapse is symptomatic, marking the strength of the modernist urge towards dualistic opposition and radical polarities. "Good" and "evil" may disappear from the modernist vocabulary, but the Manichean habit remains. In the essay on "Dante," Eliot writes that "Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third." In the modernist polemic, no *tertium quid* is allowed. Thus Pound separates the modern movement into "two camps," while Ford distinguishes "two distinct strains." Hulme concurs, arguing that "there are two kinds of art . . . absolutely distinct in kind from one another," that each "corresponds to a certain general attitude towards the world," and that each race is "inclined to one of these two tendencies." Moreover, Hulme regards the difference between the two attitudes as "simply the difference between true and false."²

The effect of such a dualism is to suggest a thorough historical discontinuity. Victorian poetry has been soft; modern poetry will be hard (Pound's terms). Humanist art has been vital; the coming geometric art will be inorganic (Hulme's terms). Romanticism was immature; the new classicism will be adult (Eliot's terms). "We have got clean out of history," wrote Lewis. "We are not to-day living in history."³

George Eliot, in a deft phrase, speaks of the "suppressed transitions which unite all contrasts."⁴ That provides a convenient way for me to identify my approach, for in one of its aspects this study is the attempt to establish the continuity of a movement which repeatedly announced a clean break with the

immediate past. Such an aim will require a close look at the minute changes which would be lost within too broad a vista. Accordingly, at the centre of the book is a detailed history of some transformations in modernist thought between the years 1908 and 1914. But for transitions to have meaning, they must be linked to contrasts, and the first and third sections attempt to construct a wider angle of vision. The book begins by approaching Conrad in the context of late Victorian ideology, and it concludes by locating T. S. Eliot as the heir to English modernism. Between the two it follows the increasingly tangled series of attempts to formulate a successful definition of modernity.

Within a decade and a half, a movement that set out to change the theory and practice of literature changed its own theory and practice. During this brief period, it may or may not have swept out "the last century the way Attila swept across Europe," but it certainly swept away most of its earlier assumptions.⁵ This process of change was not homogeneous or thoroughgoing, no stately changing of the literary guard: romanticism withdrawn, classicism attendant. It was a complex interaction of literary forces, passing through a series of distinct phases – a product of gradual and sometimes obscure developments, and of conflicting and sometimes contradictory values.

This is a study in literary transition, then, which attempts to recover some of the intricacy of the period. It hopes to take modest steps towards some finer conceptual distinctions and towards a greater historical precision. To do this, it must avoid loose appeals to the spirit of the age; it must consider the literary change not as something that descended but as something that was made; it must follow the determinate acts that accumulated to alter a sensibility; and it must, regrettably, exclude some writers of the first rank. This is only "a" not "the" genealogy of modernism. It is evident that Yeats, Lawrence, Woolf and Joyce belong in any comprehensive history of modern literature. But this is not a comprehensive history. It is the account of a recognizable lineage in a specific geographic centre during a confined period. Hulme, Pound, Lewis, Ford and Eliot did not just inhabit London within the same few years; they engaged in active debate and frequent interchange; they formulated posi-

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tions with one another and then against one another; they quarrelled and were reconciled; and the line of intellectual development connecting them is the axis on which the book turns.

Unlike these English modernists, I am happy to acknowledge my immediate predecessors. A study like this could be written only because previous scholars have interpreted difficult texts, uncovered lost manuscripts and traced complicated lives. Because of these efforts it is now possible to pursue the history of modernist doctrine more rigorously, to see the false starts, reversals, hesitations, resolutions. Part of the difficulty with modernism is that it has suppressed its origins. As it became an established cultural presence, it revised its history in line with its present inclinations. This is a "genealogy," then, whose aim is not to establish pedigree, but to redeem certain lines of development which have been obscured or neglected, and which, once traced, may help restore modernity to history.

Acknowledgements

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I. Progenitors

CHAPTER I

Consciousness

The modernist narrator on the Victorian sailing ship

In the first lines of the preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* Conrad defines art as "a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe . . ." ¹ This is reasonable and reasonably straightforward: it squares nicely with the stipulation that art "make its appeal through the senses," with the proposal to show life's "vibration, its color, its form" and with Conrad's oft-quoted summary of his aim: "to make you hear, to make you feel . . . before all, to make you see." ² Moreover, it conforms to a prevailing view of Conradian Impressionism which Ford Madox Ford was among the first to underscore and which emphasizes attention to physical, especially visual, immediacy.

But early in the preface Conrad pursues definition in another direction. Unlike the scientist or the thinker, he tells us, the artist "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." ³ The remark represents a sufficiently familiar romantic gesture, but in the context of the preface it provokes an immediate strain. If the aim is fidelity to the visible universe, then the inner life of the artist would seem beside the point. If the aim is "before all to make you see," then why should Conrad invoke that part of our nature "kept out of sight"? This tension appears throughout. On the one hand, Conrad makes a rousing rhetorical call for the sensory apprehension of life's surfaces; on the other, he demands inwardness and depth — thus his return to notions such as the "fundamental," the "essential," the "permanently enduring."

But this is a tension, not a contradiction, and Conrad's

resolution of the issue is telling if indirect. Fiction, he goes on to say, "appeals to temperament": "And in truth it must be, like painting, like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning, and creates the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time."⁴ The central notion here is that of temperament "endowing" events with their "true meaning." The implication, of course, is that such meaning is not intrinsic, that the significance of events remains incomplete without further adumbration. And this attitude goes some distance towards clarifying matters. For given the devaluing of mere appearances, Conrad's insistence on an inner artistic descent now becomes intelligible. It by no means marks a retreat from the programme of rendering "the highest kind of justice to the visible universe"; indeed it constitutes that justice. The "subtlety" of human consciousness is the source of meaning and artistic "justice"; against the evanescent flux of the phenomenal world, it provides permanence, pattern and significance.

This aspect of the preface is characteristically neglected. But once the meaning-giving function of temperament is recognized, then it becomes apparent why Conrad enjoins the artist to hold up a fragment of life "in the light of a sincere mood," or why he insists on a "light of magic suggestiveness" to play over the "commonplace surface of words."⁵ It is because words, like events, are in themselves speechless; they depend for their meaning on an animating subjectivity.

The preface has been taken – rightly, I think – as the central statement of Conrad's artistic position. Samuel Hynes has written that it contains his "whole aesthetic,"⁶ and Ian Watt calls it "the most reliable, and the most voluntary, single statement of Conrad's general approach to writing."⁷ Here, however, it will be taken as an entrance not into Conrad's thought, at least not only to his thought, but into the general situation of early modernism; it will serve as a representative text. In particular, I intend to show how the tensions in the preface point to certain widespread and fundamental literary tensions.

If we are to consider the preface, we must consider that to

which it is prefatory; the text of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* becomes illustrative. Among the values endorsed in the novel, there has been broad critical consensus that the steadfastness of Old Singleton is foremost. We are never to forget that he "steered with care" or that he is "the lonely relic . . . of the everlasting children of the mysterious sea." Where the younger sailors have grown swollen with egoism, Singleton "had never given a thought to his mortal self."⁸ In the face of social crisis, the stirrings of mutiny; he holds to his place in the ship's hierarchy. In the face of natural crisis, he holds to the wheel. Singleton is an exemplar of Conradian "Fidelity" and possesses the virtues peculiar to his type: persistence, self-denial, subordination to authority. Such, in any case, is the accepted view of the novel, which it is not my purpose to dispute. My aim is to indicate another dominant value, which is not subject to explicit thematic treatment, which was most likely not part of Conrad's avowed intention and which stands in opposition to the values that Singleton exemplifies. This is the value of consciousness, about which I have already had something to say.

The novel's intermittent first-person narration has provoked its share of critical controversy. It has been considered whimsical and capricious; the consistency of its point of view has been challenged.⁹ But rather than pursue discussion within such a normative context, we will do better to analyse the use of the narrator as part of the subjectivist perspective, which underlies Conrad's method here as elsewhere. For it is precisely the character of Singleton's heroism that it is a mute heroism. His taciturnity is as unbroken as his reliability. Such a conjunction is familiar in Conrad, particularly in this period: the capacity for work implies an abandonment of self-consciousness, a submergence of the intellectual function in the practical task at hand. Thus Singleton is the survivor of a generation which had been strong "as those are strong who know neither doubts nor hopes"; they were "voiceless men," "inarticulate and indispensable," "strong and mute." Of Singleton himself, we learn that the "thoughts of all his lifetime could have been expressed in six words."¹⁰ We are not told which six.

Plainly, such a figure does not satisfy all the requirements

identified in the novel's preface – he does not provide the registering temperament which might endow “passing events with their true meaning.” But the novel's narrator does just that. The narrator, that is to say, is the fictional manifestation of the preface's demand for “temperament” or “a sincere mood.” His appearance places incidents within the context of a perceiving subject, and this makes possible a more direct apprehension of meanings. The significance of an event need no longer be imputed or inferred; it is immediately accessible to the narrating consciousness. These are points that can be best elaborated through example. I quote at length a passage from the opening of the third chapter:

They watched the weather and the ship as men on shore watch the momentous chances of fortune. Captain Allistoun never left the deck, as though he had been part of the ship's fittings. Now and then the steward, shivering, but always in shirt sleeves, would struggle towards him with some hot coffee, half of which the gale blew out of the cup before it reached the master's lips. He drank what was left gravely in one long gulp, while heavy sprays pattered loudly on his oilskin coat, the seas swishing broke about his high boots; and he never took his eyes off the ship. He kept his gaze riveted upon her as a loving man watches the unselfish toil of a delicate woman upon the slender thread of whose existence is hung the whole meaning and joy of the world. We all watched her. She was beautiful and had a weakness. We loved her no less for that. We admired her qualities aloud, we boasted of them to one another, as though they had been our own, and the consciousness of her only fault we kept buried in the silence of our profound affection. She was born in the thundering peal of hammers beating upon iron, in black eddies of smoke, under a grey sky, on the banks of the Clyde. The clamorous and sombre stream gives birth to things of beauty that float away into the sunshine of the world to be loved by men. The *Narcissus* was one of that perfect brood. Less perfect than many, perhaps, but she was ours, and, consequently, incomparable. We were proud of her. In Bombay, ignorant landlubbers alluded to her as that “pretty grey ship.” Pretty! A scurvy meed of commendation! We knew she was the most magnificent sea-boat ever launched.¹¹

Close reading of the passage should open large issues. Of most interest is the sudden appearance of the narrator and its consequences. The early part of the paragraph (before the shift to the first person) reveals Conrad's familiar descriptive virtues: the close attention to physical detail, the sensitivity to motion, the eye for the telling gesture. The prose is restrained, the narrative tone detached. Moreover, the sentences are of almost

identical syntactic and rhetorical structure: a human subject ("they," "Captain Allistoun," "the steward") performs a physical action ("watched," "drank," etc.), and the subject or the action is then qualified – either through supplementary physical detail ("while heavy sprays pattered loudly") or through simile ("as though he had been part of the ship's fittings").

Indeed, the reliance on simile in the first half of the paragraph is striking. And this is a standard Conradian mannerism in third-person narration. Conrad depends then on metaphor or simile to *suggest* psychological attitudes or states, while he scrupulously avoids direct psychological speculation. Thus there are no explicit statements of attitude or emotion until the appearance of the first-person "we"; instead, simple actions (the way, for instance, the men watch the ship) are embellished with similes designed to *evoke* the intended psychological quality. We are not told that the crew "anguished" over the weather, only that they watched it "as men on shore watch the momentous chances of fortune." Nor are we told that the captain "loved" the ship, only that his gaze resembled the way "a loving man watches the unselfish toil," etc. Conrad here clings fastidiously to externals: he is reluctant to assign emotions directly to characters. Whereas his Victorian predecessors had allowed themselves unrestrained access to a character's consciousness, Conrad here inclines to restrict his attention to the directly available sensory surface. Precise devotion to physical detail becomes a way of defining a character's sensibility, as Captain Allistoun is defined through his movements and his glance. Ford would later describe this as a move towards a more scientific and realistic fiction, whose dictum was "Never state: present."¹² Whether Conrad formulated the issue in these terms is unclear. In any case, it is plain that the conventions of omniscience were breaking down, and that one result was an increased dependence on evocative physical description.

But the resources of description are only so great, and as the passage proceeds and emotion deepens, there is a complicating of prose strategies. Sentences become longer, their connotations more intricate. In the description of Allistoun's gaze, which occurs just before the shift to the first person, Conrad is

obliged to resort to a highly complex and intellectualized comparison in order to suggest the depth of emotion: Allistoun is like a lover, the ship is like a woman, the woman is like a thread, and on the thread hangs meaning and joy.

Just at this moment, when there is a straining after emotion, the perspective abruptly alters: "We all watched her." The effect is of a sudden relaxing of tension. The measured restraint in the prose disappears; the dependence on simile disappears; sentence length begins to vary. Conrad employs a greater range of prose effects: on the one hand, the grandiloquence of phrases in series ("in the thundering peal . . . in black eddies . . . under a grey sky, on the banks of the Clyde") and an increased use of adjectives ("the clamorous and sombre stream"); on the other hand, the casualness of colloquial speech ("ignorant landlubbers"). In Conrad's hands, the first person exercises great rhetorical flexibility, and in general he abandons the explicit narrating consciousness (as, for instance, in *The Secret Agent*) only when he is not primarily interested in such flexibility, when he is content to maintain a consistent tone, especially of irony.

Once the leap into consciousness is made, no need remains for the painstaking *reconstruction* of subjectivity by means of accumulated detail or evocative metaphor. Psychology, emotion, attitude become immediately accessible. There need be no scruples about the text penetrating a consciousness, because the text has become identical with a consciousness. Where an author may not go, the narrator is entitled to tread because, as a fictional character, he may quite plausibly give utterance to his beliefs, perceptions, inferences. Conrad no longer hesitates to make direct statements of attitude or to use psychological verbs (e.g. "admired," "loved").

A passage from George Eliot will provide a useful context for these issues. What follows are the concluding paragraphs from chapter 61 of *Middlemarch*, when the banker Nicholas Bulstrode offers Will Ladislaw money, as a way of atoning for his mistreatment of Ladislaw's mother.

Bulstrode was going to speak, but Will with determined quickness was out of the room in an instant, and in another the hall-door had closed behind him. He was too strongly possessed with passionate rebellion against this inherited blot which had been thrust on his knowledge to reflect at present whether he