

# TOWARD A THEORY OF NARRATIVE RELIABILITY IN MODERN FICTION: JAMES, CONRAD AND FORD RECONSIDERED

Chang-fang Chen

陳長房\*

摘 要

本篇論文旨在建構現代小說敘述聲音的可靠性。論述將集中探討詹姆斯的《碧廬冤孽》，康拉德的《黑暗之心》，和福德的《好軍人》等三部作品中的敘述問題。主要研究這三部作品中第一人稱可靠性的問題，諸如詹姆斯作品中飽受詆毀的女管家，康拉德故事裡的馬婁，和福德小說的杜威爾等三位敘述者，皆是本文討論的重點。晚近小說的演變蛻化已逐漸朝向作者隱遁，形式上不再以全知觀點主導本文的趨勢。本篇論文將質疑當代文學理論在探討敘述作品的結構時，刻意強調文本詮釋不穩定性的特質。姑且不論結構主義和解構主義是否塑成形式上的架構或詮釋的依歸，我們不認為詹姆斯，康拉德，和福德的作品要求讀者參與無止境的嬉戲無羈的詮釋活動。強調重建現代小說的敘述聲音容或不夠新奇詭譎，卻是為認識文學的老話題，再添注一道活水生機。

## Abstract

This paper is an attempt to establish a theory of problematically reliable narrative in modern fiction. I choose to restrict my focus to a single narrative problem posed by the works of three novelists: James's *The Turn of the Screw*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Ford's *The Good Soldier*. There is a problem of the reliability of their first-person narrators: among them James's much-maligned governess, Conrad's Marlow, and Ford's Dowell. By concentrating on the fiction of the three novelists, this paper tries to problematize the aporia of reliable narrators. For nothing characterizes the development of modern fiction from Thackeray to Joyce more clearly than the gradual disappearance of the author from his place of editorial omniscience above the text. In addition, I have not been persuaded by those contemporary approaches to narrative which insists upon the text's hermeneutic indeterminacy as its primary formal feature. Whatever the merits of structuralism and deconstruction as metaphysics, I do not believe that writers like James, Conrad and Ford asked of their readers a free play of interpretive activity. My commitment, which admittedly denies me access to a certain interesting responses to the literary text, is to a reinvigoration of an older way of understanding literature.

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Professor of English, Department of English, National Chengchi University.

\*作者為本校英語系教授

### A. Authorial Self-Effacement and the Rise of Modern Fiction

Critics have generally agreed that the rise of modern fiction has been characterized by a common impulse among novelists toward diminishing or banishing explicit authorial presence. By no means an absolute trend — considering the self-conscious fictions of post-modernists like Nabokov, Fowles, and Calvino; the lyric narratives of Gide, Kosinski, and Gass — the impulse to eliminate traditional kinds of reliable commentary from the text remains nevertheless what Joseph Warren Beach called “the one thing that will impress you more than any other” when you take “a bird’s eye view of the English novel from Fielding to Ford” (Beach, 14; Alter; Freedman). The novel as a form resists most generalizations we try to make about its historical development; indeed, what we once perhaps naively considered “history” is itself now under attack from various quarters as a metaphysics rather than a collection of empirical facts. But the striking truth has been that most of our best modern novelists have followed Flaubert and Joyce and aspired to the position of God of their creation: aloof, detached, invisible. Modern novelists are absent from their narratives as no nineteenth-century novelist was. And when they are present, as Joyce and Nabokov certainly are, that presence is numinous or otherwise problematical.

There is little agreement, though, about the factors which might have led novelists to share this impulse toward self-effacement — or more precisely, toward the illusion of self-effacement. According to the disciples of Flaubert and James, for example, if not for the Masters themselves, objective and impersonal modes of narration are inherently superior to the discursive postures of Fielding and Thackeray. The disappearing author represents an aesthetic advance in the practice of writing fiction. Wayne Booth has shown that while James himself was reluctant to prescribe laws about how the novel ought to be narrated, the process of codifying James’s preferences began with Beach and Percy Lubbock, who tended to reduce his many-windowed house of fiction to a cottage with a single view: the dramatic (Booth, 23-29). It is worth keeping in mind that Beach and Lubbock were defending one kind of fiction — the modern impersonal novel, then in need of defense — rather than attacking another. But the assault on authorial presence on purely aesthetic grounds began in earnest with the criticism of Ford Madox Ford, who believed passionately in “the suppression of the author from the pages of his book” (*ML*, 767), and who judged his predecessors largely by that criterion, admiring Richardson and detesting Fielding (MacShane, 3-15). After Ford, as Booth points out, the ideal of the aloof author became incorporated into common critical dogma, a

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concomitant of the modernist preference for showing as against telling. According to this view, then, the modern author has disappeared from his text because that disappearance is an aesthetic end in itself, contributing to the greater vividness and coherence of the work.

But the widespread inclination among critics to see narrative form as dependent upon a cultural or metaphysical reality lying outside the novel produces a second, very different explanation for the disappearing author. He has relinquished his position of authority because epistemological authority and certainty is itself the modern dilemma, which the serious novel must inevitably reflect. Or he has vanished as the God of Milton and Blake has vanished: his disappearance enacts on a smaller scale the theological void felt with increasing urgency by writers in the nineteenth century. Robert Scholes sums up this radically mimetic explanation for the disappearing author:

The tendency of modern novelists to shy away from full omniscience in one direction or another is no more an esthetic matter than . . . other historical developments in the narrative tradition. It is tied to certain changes in the entire cultural climate which have made some facets of this nineteenth-century device untenable in the twentieth century. (Scholes, 274-275)

For Scholes, these cultural changes involve “a movement away from dogma, certainty, fixity, and all the absolutes in metaphysics, in ethics, and in epistemology” (Scholes, 276). Many critics would agree with Scholes that a world of ethical and epistemological relativism makes untenable those omniscient, authoritarian modes of narration open to earlier novelists.

We have here two competing (though not mutually exclusive) explanations for an apparently genuine feature of the novel’s development. And we could add other explanations. Authors might have appeared to vanish from their texts to disguise the ultimate autobiographicality of their work (as Conrad often seems to). Or they may have disappeared for essentially arbitrary reasons, as the history of any magic trick requires new techniques for producing illusions when old ones become too obvious. Whatever the factors which might have led novelists to share this impulse (my purpose will be partly to offer a more satisfying answer to this question than the ones we presently have), there has been even less critical agreement about the effects of authorial banishment, less consensus about the meaning of many works where authorial presence is most radically effaced.

The interpretive problems to which authorial effacement gives rise are nowhere more apparent than in the middle works of the three most transitional novelists who wrote in the England of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and Ford Madox Ford. I am thinking, of course, of works like *The Turn of the Screw*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Good Soldier*, where an aloof author and an all-absorbing narrative perspective have for years produced confused and contradictory responses from readers. The critical question in these works has been thought to concern the reliability of the dramatized narrators: the degree to which these narrators are to be taken as authorial surrogates, or as objects of ironic self-revelation. Can we define these particular literary forms of James, Conrad, and Ford in such a way as to offer solutions to the specific problems associated with each, but to do so within a single controlling theory which would also clarify our general understanding of the impulse toward authorial effacement and of the rise of modern fiction? (Rader, 31-72).

In this essay, I want to offer such definitions and solutions. Despite the enormous critical attention which these works individually have received, such an inquiry need not be superfluous, because its aim will be to show, as clearly as possible, what the nature of these works must be for them to have been argued about in the way they have. Such an inquiry would take an apparent liability — reflected in the obvious difficulty anyone now has, for instance, in offering a “new reading” of *The Turn of the Screw* — and attempt to turn it into a hermeneutical asset. And its success could be measured according to far less ad hoc standards than is the case with the usual local readings of these works. For its value would reside in how well the answers it proposed could be felt to illuminate and be tested by at least four contexts of literary inquiry: our understanding of the individual works it examined, the careers of the novelists it treated, the transitional literary period in which they wrote, and especially the widespread contemporary debate among critics concerning the nature of narrative and the existence of “right readings” of texts.

The problem of narrative reliability in modern fiction is clearly a by-product of the disappearance of the author, and my hope is that an examination of the smaller problem — especially as it crystallizes in the work of three early modern novelists — will illuminate the larger one. I must observe at once that while detached authors and unreliable narrators (in the broadest sense of that term) exist in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fiction, as witness Sterne, that existence is anomalous rather than customary, and the problems posed by these earlier narrators are different in significant ways from those posed by later ones, indicating that a certain type

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of narrative unreliability is peculiarly modern.

I have only indirectly explained my use of the term narrative reliability, and it may be well to recall Booth's definition. Noting that our terminology "is almost hopelessly inadequate" for describing a type of cognitive discrimination readers nevertheless tacitly have to make, Booth defines a reliable narrator as one who "speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms)," and an unreliable narrator as one who does not, who "is mistaken, or . . . believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him" (Booth, 158-59). My use of these terms will depart slightly from that of Booth, who tends to conflate narrative mode with point of view, so that "reflectors" like Stephen Dedalus and Quentin Compson are seen as different only in degree of reliability from narrators like Barry Lyndon, or the governess of *The Turn of the Screw*. I prefer to identify narrative reliability as a problem peculiar to works in the first person — though not, interestingly enough, all such works. No novel in which the author's voice is even marginally present could produce quite the same problems in narrative reliability as *The Turn of the Screw*, the questions we may want to ask about Stephen Dedalus (Should we admire him or not?) are different from the ones we may have to ask about the governess (Should we believe her or not?). Thus I shall employ the term narrative unreliability to describe those works with dramatized narrators where belief rather than judgment has been the primary issue — where we suspect that much of a narrator's version of events must be doubted — although unquestionably the two problems finally have something to do with each other. The issue of a narrator's reliability is one that certain modern works of fiction raise with greater force, and with less reassurance that an answer even exists, than do the works of such earlier masters of stable narrative irony as Swift and Browning. Unreliability itself, we might even say, requires a thoroughly developed conception of reliability on the part of the reader before it can be successfully employed in fiction (Scholes, 264-65).

Skepticism about a narrator's version of (or understanding of) the events he records — because he appears morally or cognitively unequal to them — has long been a feature of our response to much modern fiction. In recent years, however, this skepticism has outgrown its original fairly definite boundaries and become our primary response to narrative itself, so that even such apparently stable narratives as *Tom Jones* and *Middlemarch* are viewed as radically unstable, as less than fully reliable. Is Booth's distinction between reliable and unreliable narratives meaningful any more? Or is this distinction anachronistic in a world where even the most superficially innocent of texts can be made to reveal an essential

hermeneutical indeterminacy? There are of course degrees of textual unreliability (reliability, by definition, could only be absolute), and it is becoming less and less easy to speak confidently of a novel's "norms." But I think Booth's distinction remains valid, if for no other reason than that it corresponds to a genuine pattern in critical response to English fiction: the reliability of narratives like *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Good Soldier* has been disputed for more than fifty years now; the reliability of narratives like *Tom Jones* and *Middlemarch* has been a comparatively recent issue.

In the remainder of this essay, I examine the history of critical response to these problematical first-person narratives, taking *The Turn of the Screw*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Good Soldier* as central examples. The interpretive patterns they have produced are remarkably similar, I want to show, which implies strongly that they be viewed within a common theoretical perspective able nevertheless to distinguish each formally from the other. I shall finally sketch a theory — what do novelists gain when they employ dramatized narrators? — and demonstrate briefly its strength and utility by bringing it to bear on the problems these works have produced.

But first I would like quickly to establish as fact the pivotal role I claim for James, Conrad, and Ford in the rise of modern fiction, both as novelists themselves and as theorists of the novel. Their contribution has been minimized by the more mimetically-oriented theorists of the period (David Daiches, Joseph Frank, Alan Friedman), yet partly misunderstood by more purely formal theorists (Lubbock and Beach) who nevertheless strongly recognize this contribution.

## **B. James, Conrad, Ford, and the Rise of Modern Fiction**

Whether they thought more consciously about the novel than did their predecessors is obviously difficult to gauge, yet without question James, Conrad, and Ford wrote more extensively about it than novelists had ever done before in England. James is quick to point this out (expressing some impatience over the fact) in the 1884 "Art of Fiction" essay:

Only a short time ago it might have been supposed that the English novel was not what the French call *discutable*. It has no air of having a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it — of being the expression of an artistic faith, the result of choice and comparison. ... It was ...

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*naïf* (if I may help myself out with another French word); and evidently if it be destined to suffer in any way for having lost its *naïveté* it has now an idea of making sure of the corresponding advantages. During the period I have alluded to 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. But within a year or two, for some reason or other, there have been signs of returning animation — the era of discussion would appear to have been to a certain extent opened. Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints; and there is a presumption that those times when no one has anything particular to say about it, and no reason to give for practice or preference, though they may be times of honor, are not times of development — are times, possibly even, a little of dulness. (375-76)

By the time of Conrad and Ford, this age of “dulness,” if it had ever really existed, had certainly given way to an era of discussion. The sheer quantity of their critical output is staggering, especially when we consider that Dickens said most of what he had to say about the art of fiction in a single preface, and Eliot did the same within the seventeenth chapter of her first long novel. Henry James, however, devoted three collections of essays, one monograph, and a series of critical prefaces to his collected works, as well as many letters and notebooks, to a definition of his theory of fiction. Conrad wrote less, but still produced prefaces to each of his volumes and a number of important letters which defined his views on art. Ford — with twenty volumes of literary reminiscence and journalism, four critical books on literature and novelists, and many journal articles — was prolific to the point of redundancy. And in so discussing, in exchanging “views” and comparing “standpoints,” these novelists began to articulate, among other things, a theory of the evolution of English fiction from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, from the novels of Thackeray and Trollope — about which they had reservations, though not as serious or extensive as is sometimes thought — to the novels of Joyce and Woolf, which in some respects they predicted and for which they made room.

As novelists themselves, James, Conrad, and Ford are peculiarly transitional figures in the history of the English novel, beginning their careers by writing a kind of fiction closer in form and spirit to the Victorian age, climaxing them with a fiction we have come to recognize as particularly modern. The novelists who were eventually able to write such masterpieces as *The Golden Bowl*, *Nostramo*, and

*Parade's End* had first to learn and develop their craft in *Roderick Hudson*, *Almayer's Folly*, and *The Fifth Queen*, and the transition from the one type of fiction to the other seems more radical, especially in formal respects, than the similarly impressive but less extreme novelistic development of Hardy, say, or even of Lawrence.

Thus in James, Conrad, and Ford we have transitional novelists who wrote at length about the novel. And they agreed on a wide variety of issues pertaining to the theory and practice of their art. The friendship of James and Conrad, the collaboration of Conrad and Ford, the acknowledged indebtedness of both to the Master ("Mr. James is the greatest of living writers," remarks Ford at the beginning of his odd monograph on James, "and in consequence, for me, the greatest of living men" [HJ, 15] represents an artistic cross-pollination unprecedented in the history of English fiction. As writers and theorists of fiction, James, Conrad, and Ford were united in their desire to gain respect for the novel as an aesthetic entity equal in power and significance to the older art forms; their constant emphasis on technique — on the conscious sequence of artistic decisions by which a novelist can create his effects — could be said to derive in part from that desire. It would appear difficult for any critic to develop a theory of the rise of the modern novel without testing it, at least implicitly, against the statements and productions of James and his immediate followers.

In point of fact, however, such theorizing has often proceeded without directly recognizing the contribution of James, Conrad, and Ford, partly because certain kinds of interpretive commitments among critics tend to obscure it. The seminal works of David Daiches and Joseph Frank on the modern novel, for example, propose theories which distinguish this fiction from what had immediately come before without direct allusion to James (Daiches; Frank, 221-40, 433-56, 643-53; *Gyre*, 3-62). It is worth asking why. In different ways, we may note, the theories of Daiches on the relationship between the modern world and the modern novel, and of Frank on its spatial form, stress the functional dependence of the works treated on cultural factors largely beyond their control. These factors, for Daiches, include new beliefs about what is significant in human experience (public issues like class, money, and marriage are no longer central), new conceptions of time, new notions of consciousness itself. Frank's subtle argument, that certain works of twentieth-century literature force the reader to apprehend them as a spatial configuration, in an instant of time, rather than as a temporal sequence, is not directly concerned with the underlying causes for the rise of this literature, but it notes in passing that the "insecurity, instability, the feeling of loss of control over the meaning and purpose of life" is responsible for spatial form (*Gyre*, 55). Modern literature, according



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to Frank, is in a sense mimetic in its counter-representationality: it abolishes time and history because these are the nightmares from which the twentieth century, like Stephen Dedalus, wishes to awaken.

More recently, Alan Friedman has focused attention directly on the transition from Victorian to modern fiction, still without reference to James, though with a valuable chapter on Conrad, and his exploration of the increasingly open-ended nature of the novels of the period — open-ended form mirroring the open-ended lives that people actually live — reveals a similar bias toward conceiving of literary form as radically mimetic, reflecting a cultural reality that precedes it and rigorously controls its shape. This approach to the turn of the novel, important as its results have often been, has had difficulty in taking the contribution of James, Conrad, and Ford into account (although Frank alludes to them, in a recent article, as precursors of spatial form in their disruption of narrative sequence) (Frank, *Reflections*, 281), probably because so strong a cultural groundwork underlies its conception of literary form. For though the new notions of consciousness, experience, time, and history are clearly involved in their novels, that involvement is not simple or direct. All three novelists saw literary form, especially narrative technique, as arising from considerations other than strictly cultural ones; their theories of fiction suggest specifically that we understand these techniques as generated largely by internal principles of causation: what narrative stance would be useful or necessary given the desire to write the particular kind of fiction at hand.

It is fair, of course, to ask how a novelist's culture might affect his desire to write one "particular kind of fiction" — allegory, say, or satire — rather than another. But our more general dissatisfaction with absolute mimetic conceptions of literary form — as Scholes's and Friedman's threaten to be — springs from our suspicion that art never mirrors life in any absolute way, as if a monotonous reality required a boring novel for its proper realization.

When we search for a conception of the rise of modern fiction which emphasizes the function of James, Conrad, and Ford in shaping it, we do not have far to look. For by 1932, Joseph Warren Beach was observing, as we saw earlier, that the outstanding feature of the modern novel is the disappearing author, a feature he noticed especially in James and Ford. In stressing this development in narrative technique as the most fundamental definition of modernism, Beach echoes Lubbock, who takes the "whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction . . . to be governed by the question of the point of view," and who locates an evolution of Western fiction as a whole in the movement away from the narrative omniscience of Thackeray and Tolstoy to the dramatized points of view and the more limited

omniscient forms of Joyce and Proust, in addition to James, Conrad, and Ford (Lubbock, 251). Lubbock's conception relies in turn, of course, upon Joyce (whose alter ego in *Portrait* speaks of the curve of narrative history as moving from the lyric cry to the impersonal dramatic projection), upon Flaubert (who writes, though undogmatically, of the novelist's striving to refine himself out of existence), and upon James himself (who in an essay on the new novel applauded Conrad's use of a bewildering multiplicity of narrators in *Chance*).

Booth's work provides a much-needed counterargument to the belief that the movement toward narrative impersonality represents an artistic advance. Our dissatisfaction with those explanations for the disappearance of the author which see it as an aesthetic end in itself lies simply in our regard for novels like *Tom Jones* and *Vanity Fair*. But the historical fact of such a movement seems indisputable. Scholes, for one, has noted that "in the growth of narrative artists' awareness of, and exploitation of, the ironic possibilities inherent in the management of point of view we have one of the really developmental processes of literary history" (Scholes, 241).

Here, then, is the critical tradition that stresses the role of James, Conrad, and Ford in the development of the modern novel. And in the particular shapes of their careers — from the early omniscient forms (*Roderick Hudson* and *The American*, *Almayer's Folly* and *Typhoon*, and *The Fifth Queen*) through the complex controversial first-person narratives of the middle periods, and on to the late masterpieces of limited omniscience (*The Wings of the Dove* and *The Ambassadors*, *The Secret Agent* and *Nostramo*, and *Parade's End*) — we see a striking local embodiment of the evolution of Western fiction as a whole, as Lubbock and Scholes describe it.

How can we understand the causes and effects of this evolution toward authorial effacement in modern fiction? To answer this question, I have suggested that we inquire into the factors that might have led these novelists to delegate narrative responsibility to dramatized narrators in certain instances. Although critics often appear to believe that this choice is purely arbitrary, I think it could be said with some truth that no artistic decision, however subtle, is really arbitrary. James, Conrad, and Ford were novelists supremely conscious of the narrative and stylistic options open to them, and they must have had good reasons for taking the enormous trouble to employ first-person narrators in the works they did. Yet critics who assume on the other hand that the disappearing author is an artistic end in itself, or a simple function of a relativistic universe, are even less likely to provide a compelling answer to this question. These distinctions will become clearer, as will the sort of

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answer we seek, when we review the interesting history of critical response of *The Turn of the Screw*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Good Soldier*.

### C. James, Conrad, Ford: A Pattern in Critical Response

We may be so accustomed to locating the effects of these works in their narrators' radical unreliability — as witnesses or reporters of what they think they have seen — that we are likely to be surprised, I think, when we discover that no critic before Edna Kenton, writing in 1924, finally questioned the sanity of the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, no critic before William York Tindall, writing in approximately 1956, ever impugned the sincerity of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, none before Mark Schorer, writing in 1948, doubted the essential veracity of Dowell in *The Good Soldier* (Kenton, 245-55; Tindall, 274-85; Schorer, v-xv.). But Dowell, for instance, was wholly credible for Rebecca West, and the author's mouthpiece for Theodore Dreiser, and this view has been expressed more recently by critics like Arthur Mizener and Thomas Moser, with the usual proviso that as a narrator Dowell is as clear-sighted as his world lets him be (Ford, Chapter Four; Mizener, 258-77; Moser, 122-95). Marlow, similarly, was considered by the early reviewers as merely a controlling "consciousness" by which Conrad's views on Imperialism, morality, race relations, or what-have-you could be explored, a perception not radically different from F. R. Leavis's more recent view of him as simply a "specific and concretely realized point of view" (Hough, 163; Kimbrough, 163; Leavis, 183). And all reactions contemporary to *The Turn of the Screw* conceived of it as indeed a ghost story, not a drama of psychosexual hallucination. One of the more sensitive of these conceptions, by the way, makes reference to the horror evoked by "the constant peepings-in of the ghosts . . . on the haunted mortals of the story." Thus spoke Ford Madox Ford (HJ, 118), whose judgment in this matter we may have reason to trust.

These straight readings have several features in common worth noting. Most importantly, they tend to conceive of the works as almost classically tragic in form, with the ghost-haunted children, the jungle-crazed Kurtz and the star-crossed Ashburnham as protagonists whose downfalls are recorded by the sympathetic observations of people placed close enough to be sensible of them: the straight readings are not able to account for the narrative modes in any more specific terms. The intended centers of reader attention, in these views, are therefore not the narrators, not the perceivers, but the perceived. While these straight interpretations

tend to be supplanted, of course, by ironic or otherwise more complex readings in more recent criticism, it will be important to recognize that each work is still read along these stable narrative lines by critics as intelligent as Wayne Booth, Marvin Mudrick, and Denis Donoghue (Booth, 311-16; Mudrick, 185-88; Donoghue, 447-52). Yet readers have increasingly become dissatisfied with the straight readings in more absolute forms because of what they perceive as narrative and textual anomalies those readings are unable to take into account. Most significantly, perhaps, the very degree to which these narrators as narrators obtrude — far exceeding Nellie Dean in *Wuthering Heights*, or Ishmael in *Moby Dick* — requires explanation.

Traditional readings of *The Turn of the Screw* have accepted, for the most part, the governess's account of the events as Bly, and the reality of the ghosts within the logic (or illogic) of the story. Mention is rarely made of the governess (hard as it now seems to believe!) by many of the early reviewers, whose main concern is with the tempted children:

It is the story of two orphan children, mere infants, whose guardian leaves them in a lonely English country house. The little boy and girl, at the toddling period of life, when they are but helpless babes, fall under the influence of a governess [the narrator's predecessor] and her lover who poison the very core of their consciousness and character and defile their souls. (Kimbrough, 175)

Although early reactions occasionally note the self-doubts and skittishness of the governess as she becomes conscious of the ghosts and their seduction of the children, the reviewers might find confirmation for their views of her as essentially stable in several textual areas. One is the (apparently) independent corroboration of the governess's first sighting of the ghostly Peter Quint, by the housekeeper Mrs. Grose, who immediately names the dead Quint when told by governess of the characteristics of the figure she has seen. How could the governess's hallucination take the precise form of a man who has died without her ever having seen him alive? A second confirmation of the ghosts' existence appears to be Mrs. Grose's report to the governess that the little girl, Flora, has indeed said "horrible" things, which again within the logic of the story indicates the supernatural threat to her. More normally, however, these questions are never raised by the early reviewers, who make of the story a chilling (or in some cases repulsive) drama of the effects of supernatural evil on innocence. And they are ultimately dismissed too by more recent critics

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like Robert Heilman and Alexander Jones, and by Booth, who feels that “the governess sees what she says she sees,” and “behaves about as well as we could reasonably expect of ourselves under similarly intolerable circumstances” (Heilman, 277-89; Jones, 112-22; Booth, 314).

The traditional readings of *Heart of Darkness* assume, as we noted earlier, that Kurtz is its tragic protagonist, whose European values are tested and finally destroyed by the primitive horror of Africa. To enlist again the aid of Joseph Warren Beach:

Kurtz is a personal embodiment, a dramatization, of all that Conrad felt of futility, degradation, and horror in what the Europeans in the Congo called “progress,” which meant the exploitation of the natives by every variety of cruelty and treachery known to greedy man. Kurtz was to Marlow, penetrating this country, a name, constantly recurring in people’s talk, for cleverness and enterprise. . . . The blackness and mystery of his character tone in with the savage mystery of the Congo, and they develop *pari pasu* with the atmosphere of shadowy horror.

This development is conducted cumulatively by insensitive degrees, by carefully calculated releases of new items, new intimations; and all this process is *controlled* through the consciousness of Marlow. (Beach, 343)

Beach goes on in this paragraph to link *Heart of Darkness* in its effect with *The Turn of the Screw*, but for now I want only to emphasize the extent to which this straight reading minimizes Marlow, who exists only to provide “control,” as the center of reader attention. Even Marvin Mudrick, who has been able to find more intended irony in Jane Austen than many of her deepest readers can comfortably accept, seems not to feel that Marlow’s musings, generalizations, and lies are meant to be judged ironically:

The process, as Conrad sets it up, is to persuade the reader — by epithets, exclamations, ironies, by every technical obliquity — into an hallucinated awareness of the unplumable depravity, the primal unanalyzable evil, implicit in Kurtz’s reversion to the jungle from the high moral standards of his report. (Mudrick, 187-88)

We should not be misled by this reference to irony: Mudrick seems to feel betrayed

by the novella because it is not ironic enough. He can detect no unreliability of Marlow's that is not also Conrad's. Yet paradoxically he reveals to us what remains the strongest piece of evidence supporting the traditional reading of *Heart of Darkness*, the apparent fact of Conrad's broad emotional investment in Marlow. For in the view of critics like Beach and Mudrick, Marlow seems invented only as Conrad's surrogate "persuader."

Although *The Good Soldier* has not until recently received the extensive critical attention paid to the novellas of James and Conrad, all descriptions of the novel before Mark Schorer's, and many since, conceive of Ashburnham's "sad story" as its center:

Captain Edward Ashburnham, heir of a wealthy British family, is wedded for reasons of family courtesy to Leonora Powys, the daughter of a financially embarrassed Irish landlord. The Captain is a sentimentalist, his wife a practical-minded moralist. Uninterested and unhappy in his wedded state he approaches or takes up with (1) La Dolciquita, a Spanish coquette, (2) Mrs. Basil, wife of a British Major in India, (3) Maisie Maidan, wife of another British Officer, (4) Florence Dowell, wife of an American globe-trotter who is the friend of the Ashburnhams, who tells the story, and (5) Nancy Rufford, a ward. . . . (Ford, 47)

And so on, with little attention to Dowell, in the description of the novel by Theodore Dreiser. Dowell, as we have seen, was identified strongly with Ford himself by Dreiser and by Rebecca West, and though it has become increasingly difficult to see him as other than foolish in his cuckoldry and confused in his narrative control, criticism as recent as Denis Donoghue's does not see this undependability as the central point of the fiction:

The main point is that there is only one story, and the reader is provoked into finding it, piecing it together with the doubtful aid of a narrator who, having survived the events, has time on his hands. (Donoghue, 447)

Whether they conceive of Ashburnham's story as purely tragic or, as in John Meixner's hybrid reading, tragic with comic undertones, these traditional views of *The Good Soldier* rely on some of the same general evidence as those of *The Turn of the Screw* and *Heart of Darkness*: we feel that there is significant investment of authorial emotion in these narrators, and we could not begin suspecting their

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mere reports without wondering where to stop. More recent critics make this beginning, as we shall see, but it is not easy to question the genuine poignancy of Dowell's discourse on love ("For every man there comes at last a time of life when the woman who then sets her seal upon his imagination has set her seal for good") or the truth of his assertion of Ashburnham's love for Nancy Rufford which follows ("I believe that he simply loved her").

Each of these works, as we know, was subjected to major rereadings in the Freudian, New Critical era, with the critical emphasis being directed away from the observed to the observer, who was then usually judged deficient in crucial respects. (Hugh Kenner's ironic reading of Joyce also arose out of this atmosphere, as did a host of other less well-known ironic revaluations of modern works.) Unquestionably Freud lies behind Edmund Wilson's famous reading of *The Turn of the Screw* as the governess's sexual fantasy (Hound, 385-406). So too do Empson and Brooks lie behind William York Tindall's and Albert Guerard's attempts to maximize the intended complexity of *Heart of Darkness* by establishing Marlow's autonomy from Conrad, conceiving of him rather than Kurtz as the protagonist, and charting his incomplete "voyage toward self-discovery" (Guerard, 38). And we can see both methodologies at work when Mark Schorer observes that *The Good Soldier* has a "controlling irony" which "lies in the fact that passionate situations are related by a narrator who is himself incapable of passion, sexual and moral alike. (Schorer, vii) Yet these readings do seem to account for certain textual features in more compelling ways than the more traditional views were able to do, most notably the very degree of narrative obtrusion (if *Heart of Darkness* is not about Marlow, says Guerard, "its length is quite indefensible") (Guerard, 42) and the rather striking inadequacies most readers have perceived in the narrative voices. These certainly include the governess's alternating moments of conceit and self-doubt as she confronts the ghosts, her smothering imposition of herself upon the children, and perhaps her infatuation with her employer (which according to the ironic reading of Edmund Wilson leads to her repressed hallucination). And they include Marlow's linguistic vagueness and his apparent lie to Kurtz's Intended, as well as Dowell's similar vaguenesses ("darkness" is at the center of all things for both narrators) and his ubiquitously odd moral equation ("It would have done [Ashburnham] a great deal of good to get killed") which makes Dowell-watching one of the major pleasures, and responsibilities, of the novel.

Until very recently, then, criticism of *The Turn of the Screw*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Good Soldier* could be said to divide neatly into two discrete interpretive camps: the straight readers and the ironic readers, those who accept

the narrators at their words, those who doubt nearly every word. I have meant to suggest something of the strengths and weaknesses of both readings by demonstrating that each responds to — or more precisely, isolates and emphasizes — a different set of textual facts.

Now perhaps we may say of his Babel of critical response, which is an especially neat microcosm of the kind much modern literature has elicited, that it is literature's glory, a certain sign of its richness and its meaningful complexity. It has of course become common for contemporary literary theorists to profess an interpretive pluralism which might logically lead them to welcome all competing meanings of a particular text, and to affirm the inevitability and the desirability of this multiplicity of meaning. And yet the competing readings of these works appear so radically distinct that it would seem impossible for even the most intrepid pluralist to accept their simultaneous truth. I want to show in a moment that, far from embracing a multiplicity of contradictory meanings, the most widely-held contemporary theory developed to describe these kinds of narratives attempts to consolidate within it the information provided by each reading, though each may appear absolutely to exclude the other. For now I only want to note that a common assumption, potentially misleading, underlies both the straight and the ironic readings of these works.

This assumption is that a principle of mimesis — depiction of either character evolution or revelation — is the fundamental principle of literary construction in all three works. The straight readers tend to minimize the role of the narrators as only local observers of character evolution (that of the children, Kurtz, and Ashburnham), mere authorial surrogates who are invented, as the narrators of *Tom Jones* and *Emma* are invented, as a means of controlling response to the action they describe. The ironic readers, on the other hand, reverse this system of artistic priorities: they maximize the role of the narrators by conceiving of these works as dramatizations of character revelation (that of the governess, Marlow, and Dowell). Both types of readers, however, endeavor to establish the psychological consistency of narrators whose "personalities" are thought to be constructed according to traditional mimetic principles. But this memetic commitment leads to emphasizing absolutely either reliability or unreliability in narrative perspectives which, it would appear, are so flexible that they cannot accurately accommodate either description. The strength of each reading suggests the inadequacy of the other: if Dowell is meant to be viewed as the characters (or omniscient authors) of nineteenth-century fiction are viewed, how can he seem both compellingly moving in his description of love but so foolishly blind as not to know of his wife's nine years of infidelity?



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If James's governess is meant to be judged in these ways, how can she seem to "behave about as well as we could reasonably expect of ourselves under similarly intolerable circumstances" yet "be pathetically trying to harmonize her own disharmonies by creating discords outside herself"? (Booth, 314; Kenton, 254). And if Marlow is also scrutinized by these standards, what do we make of the fact that he appears both clear-sighted in his description of his journey and a liar at its end? The point I wish to make is that these narrators are not merely capable, as all of us are, of being fooled at times and seeing clearly at others — they are by apparently random turns utterly fooled, and utterly and persuasively accurate. No reference to complex or humanly inconsistent characterization can explain these anomalies, however successful it is in accounting for the wonderfully contradictory characters of a Becky Sharp, or an Emma Bovary. If we accept at least the partial validity of the wildly disparate textual facts isolated by these readings, and if we are reluctant to see this apparent ambiguity in narrative reliability as an artistic failing, we must look elsewhere than to nineteenth-century mimetic principles for a narrative theory that would explain them. Perhaps it will prove unhelpful to conceive of the governess, Marlow, and Dowell as strictly "characters."

Contemporary narrative theory has apparently moved as far from mimesis as possible in its conception of the relationship between fiction and the real world. Far from conceiving of narrative form as dependent on the shape of culture and reality, as Daiches and Friedman do, or intended as moral dramatization of character, as in different ways Schorer and Booth do, contemporary theorists emphasize the degree to which fiction is an autonomous creation existing in complete (or almost complete) independence from the real world. Although I do not have time here to review completely the structuralist and post-structuralist manifestos as they have come to be applied to literature as a whole, I want to recognize them in general terms as a perspective brought frequently to bear on the works of James, Conrad, and Ford, which endeavors to consolidate the textual facts isolated severally by the straight and ironic readers. And I wish finally to demonstrate the fundamental inadequacy of this perspective as a means of answering the questions we have chosen to ask of these works, because though it allows us to recognize and affirm their formal similarities more compelling ways that do most straight or ironic readings, it is finally unhelpful in distinguishing one work in form from another (or indeed literature in general from other semiotic constructs), and is thus unable to register or explain the most basic implicit discriminations we make in our experience of literature.

The most subtle alternative to the seemingly endless straight-ironic debate over

*The Turn of the Screw*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Good Soldier* locates their meanings precisely in their endless play of opposed meanings, in their resistance to the discovery of final meaning, in their fundamental ambiguity. In this view, Booth and Wilson, Leavis and Guerard, Macauley and Schorer are all correct, but only correct in a limited way, for each posits a univocal interpretation of works where there exists an endless plurality. This alternate approach itself breaks into two smaller competing views, over the issue of whether the multiplicity of meaning is seen as authorially intended, usually as a kind of statement about modernity, or as an inevitable feature of any literary text. Critics like John Enck, Arnold Weinstein, and Samuel Hynes conceive of this ambiguity ultimately in both quasi-mimetic and historical terms; in much the same way as Robert Scholes, they argue that narrative increasingly becomes unstable with the rise of the modern novel as a mode of exploring and embodying the modern relativistic dilemma (Enck, 259-69; Weinstein; Hynes, 225-35). For deconstructive theorists like Derrida and Hillis Miller, however, there can never be a "correct interpretation" of a literary text, since the act of reading by their account always involves the importation of meaning into a work (and a world) which has no meaning in itself. Nor can we speak properly of intentionality, for the post-structuralist conception of the text as writing denies us recourse to any possible agency for the intention of meaning something. No literature has been appropriated more frequently than this to demonstrate the validity of structuralist and deconstructionist perspectives. However, and so we could expect structuralist critics to be sympathetic with the readings of Enck, Weinstein, and Hynes, though they would reject their implied account of an evolutionary development in literary history. And they should be especially uneasy about the subtle but distinct monism (and hence self-contradiction) of a reading which insists on ambiguity as *the* principle of literary construction.

In Enck's view of *The Turn of the Screw*, for example, James is careful to prevent us from determining whether the ghosts are real or illusory:

. . . [T]he closer the reading, the more one's sensitivity increases about the difficulty of all decisions: how very tenuous one's estimate of others — and one's self — must in civilized fairness be. The most solid appearance may dissolve as illusory to unmask irremediable horrors; an impeccable worship of "truth" (or "goodness" or "beauty") can conceal a temple to evil. One looks back at Bly and its unconventional inhabitants repeatedly because one cannot, dare not, make the final pronouncements. (Enck, 268-69)

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Hynes's account of the epistemology of *The Good Soldier* is similar; the novel resists normative judgment, as does its narrator, in order to force the reader to accept a vision of a world containing only "an irresolvable pluralism of truths" (Hynes, 231). And Weinstein speaks of Conrad's use of multiple narrative perspectives as a means of asserting "the tentative, arbitrary nature of judgment," and he combines all three novelists in a conception that emphasizes their interest in "remind[ing] us how little we know" (Weinstein, 52, 60). These readings implicitly deny the independent validity of either the straight or the ironic readings, but as we have noted, they have the apparent advantage of accounting for why these particular works might have received these utterly contradictory critical reactions in the first place. Their weakness, like that of all literary theories which treat art as primarily a species of knowledge about the real world, is that they tend to invest local elements of form with meaning of purely ad hoc ways, without attention to the principles of literary construction and causation upon which, alone, unique literary forms can be based.

No one would seriously deny that the works of James, Conrad, and Ford are concerned with the great problems of epistemology, ontology, and belief. (We may remember Beerbohm's great parody of Conrad: ". . . along the polished surface of his lean body, black and immobile, the stars were reflected, creating an illusion of themselves who are illusions.") To be concerned with epistemology, though, is not the same as having its subversion the principle of literary construction: knowledge of ambiguity, in E. D. Hirsch's formulations, is not necessarily ambiguous knowledge. We might also observe that it requires no special insight, and is potentially misleading, to discern in any difficult and complex work the sort of absolute relativistic "meaning" that Enck, Hynes, and Weinstein assign to these works of James, Conrad, and Ford. It is worth recalling that most of us felt unable to make "final pronouncements" about our initial experience of *King Lear*, and that if we read *The Brothers Karamazov* at eighteen, it assuredly reminded many of us "how little we know."

In commenting upon these epistemological readings (as I shall call them) of *The Turn of the Screw*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Good Soldier*, I have meant to begin to suggest the inadequacy of structuralist and deconstructionist approaches as well. At the risk of oversimplifying, I have suggested that structuralist criticism shares the same interpretive perspective as the epistemological readings, while rejecting their historical and mimetic bias. Thus *The Turn of the Screw*, in the recent structuralist analysis of Christine Brooke-Rose, is a "wholly ambiguous" text in which literally every word supports both the straight and the ironic readings; *The Good*

*Soldier*, in the recent deconstruction by Carol Jacobs, produces readers who are forever “lost in a labyrinth from which [they] can never escape”; and the works of all three novelists, in the recent quasi-structuralist analysis of Frank Kermode, “create gaps that cannot be closed, only gloried in; they solicit mutually contradictory types of attention and close only on the problem of closure” (Brooke-Rose, (1976) 265-94; (1976) 513-46; (1977), 517-62; Jacobs, 34; Kermode, 106, 891-915; Halperin *Theory*; Culler, “Signs”, 108; Ruegg, 189-216). This labyrinthine linguistic relativism is a feature of all literary texts (and indeed all non-literary texts as well) in the view of Barthes, Derrida, and Miller, who reject absolutely the presumption of artistic control and intentionality that even the epistemologists hold, and who encourage us to linger forever on the surface of the text, there to delight in the free play of possible meanings to which it gives access. If we wish, therefore, to understand these works of James, Conrad, and Ford as crucial experiments in the rise of the modern novel, we will find little explanatory power in the radically ahistorical structuralist approach. And if we intuitively feel those works to be such experiments, our intuition is not specifically accounted for — in fact it is denied — by the explicit theoretical statements of the structuralists.

This extreme ahistoricism, to which structuralist literary theory — as a synchronic undertaking guided by Saussure’s treatment of language — is in principle absolutely committed, is itself implicitly contradicted in much of the practical criticism of its practitioners: a fact worth noting in our attempt to understand the limitations of the theory. Barthes, for instance, begins his discussion of Balzac in *S/Z* with what appears to be a formal distinction between readable and unreadable texts, between the *texte de plaisir* characteristic of Balzac, and the *texte de jouissance* characteristic of Robbe-Grillet and other writers of the *nouveau roman*. But Jonathan Culler interprets this central structuralist opposition in narrative types not as we might expect, in at least partly historical terms, but as a tension that has always existed within fiction:

We might say [following Barthes] that between the traditional and the modern text, between the pleasure of the *texte de plaisir* and the rapture of the *texte de jouissance*, there is only a difference in degree: the latter is only a later and freer stage of the former; Robbe-Grillet develops out of Flaubert. But on the other hand we might say that pleasure and rapture and parallel forces which do not meet and that the modernist text is not a logical historical development but the trace of a rupture or scandal,

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so that the reader who enjoys both is not synthesizing in himself a historical continuity but living a contradiction, experiencing a divided self. But perhaps we should go a step further than Barthes and say that the facts which lead him to propose these two views indicate that we are dealing not so much with a historical process in which one kind of novel replaces another as with an opposition which has always existed in the novel: a tension between the intelligible and the problematic. (Culler, *Poetics*, 191)

This kind of formulation appears, at the very least, strained. It arises, I think, from Culler's (and Barthes') urgent need *not* to see literature as consisting of distinct objective forms which develop and change over time, when their own intuitions suggest that such development and change does indeed occur. Kermode must similarly arrive at a complex and artificial way of describing this paradoxical phenomenon of ahistorical narrative history, asserting that with James we have entered a world "of which it needs to be said *not* that plural readings are possible (for that is true of all narrative) but that the *illusion of the single right reading is possible no longer*" ("Novels," 111). And Edward Said, whose debt to continental literary theory appears on every page of *Beginnings*, must also struggle to maintain his synchronic interpretive commitments in the following passage, which seems nevertheless to find a historical evolution in narrative from one predominant notion of a text to another:

Another necessary qualification is that whereas I am primarily discussing a period of about fifty years in European (particularly British and French) literary history — years that give rise to a radical rethinking of what it means to create a text — there are examples from other periods for which some of the modern examples are relevant. All writers have faced the problems of the conflict between coherent development, let us say, and the mere dispersion of energy. All writers, certainly from the Renaissance on, have meditated in language upon the peculiarities of language. So while we can and do cite examples from many periods in history, these fifty years provide us with a sustained examination of the issues at other times. Such writers as Wilde, Hopkins, Proust, James, Conrad, and T. E. Lawrence in their works and lives completely transform the text from an object to be gained into an unceasing struggle to be a writer, into what Lawrence called "the everlasting effort to write." (Said 233;

*The World*

Does the text-as-struggle supplant the text-as-object-to-be-gained during the fifty-year period around the turn of the century, as Said initially seems to claim? Or does this occur earlier, "from the time of the Renaissance on"? Or, finally, is the opposition between these two notions of the text universal, as the sentences which begin with "All writers . . ." lead us to conclude? We might finally detect in this multiplying swell of raptures, ruptures, illusions, and dispersions the signs of a contradiction more nearly within structuralist theory itself than within the fiction it ostensibly describes.

There are more general difficulties with the structuralist/deconstructionist solution to the problems associated with these works beyond its ahistoricism, however. I have suggested that we require a theory of narrative which insists upon the formal uniqueness of these works within a conception of their general similarity, and this is something that the structuralist approach (by design) is not equipped to provide. The very formulation used by Brooke-Rose, for example, to describe the effect of *The Turn of the Screw* could be applied with equal accuracy to *The Good Soldier* and *Heart of Darkness*: a fact which, though a critical shortcoming in my view, might be considered a virtue in hers. Indeed, as Miller has made abundantly clear, the deconstructive approach is less an interpretive hypothesis *about* literary texts than it is an act imposed *on* texts of any kind, without regard for generic discriminations (Hills Miller, 5-31, 330-48). It is no wonder that the results of this act should always look rather the same, even when imposed upon the most non-literary "text" of the real world. (Barthes, of course, has examined clothing styles and advertisements from a French fashion magazine from this perspective, and an early *Glyph* article deconstructed Disneyland) (Barthes, *Systeme*; Marin, 50-66). It is here, finally, where the inadequacies of the deconstructive enterprise are for our purposes most apparent: in its unwillingness to register the literature/nonliterature distinction that many of us still wish to maintain. One of the primary effects of semiotics, Culler admits, is to "question the distinction between literary and nonliterary discourse" ("Signs," 107). But besides ignoring the fact that we constantly make this implicit discrimination in our experience of language, reacting to works like "I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox" very differently depending upon whether we confront them in a note on the kitchen table or in a volume of William Carlos Williams's poetry, the deconstructive critic seems not to recognize that art and language have evolved as cultural institutions expressly designed to mean something. Their status, which is the status of James,

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Conrad, and Ford, is of a significantly different order from that of fashion and amusement parks, though the deconstructive theorist chooses not to acknowledge that difference.

I have argued that the nature of critical response to these puzzling middle works of James, Conrad, and Ford suggests strongly that they be viewed from a common theoretical perspective, but that whatever other virtues the various existing approaches to these works may possess, they are unable to account specifically for their broad range of textual features while simultaneously doing justice to the unique formal identity of the individual works. In examining first the straight and the ironic readings of *The Turn of the Screw*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Good Soldier*, I tried to show that we must reject the notion of representation of character, of limited psychological consistency, as an explanation for the nature of narrative mode and as a principle of literary construction in these works. Each reading, I noted, possesses an unquestionable element of truth: the narrators are manifestly not merely authorial surrogates with complete narrative credibility, but neither are they unreliable to such an absolute degree that we could simply decode their messages. And yet these narrators can be by turns wholly credible and wholly self-deceived. How can we understand this? The most compelling contemporary solution to this anomaly — the structuralist/deconstructionist approach — is unsatisfying primarily because it makes of this apparent ambiguity the fundamental structuring principle in works where it is actually only a feature, a means to an end. In so doing, it obscures whatever formal and affective identity the works individually possess. The approach has no capacity, or desire, to separate artistic means from ends, and therefore fails to register the fact that readers have with reason felt that they have found in these puzzling works some degree of intrinsic intelligibility.

I want now to outline a conception of narrative which I believe will provide a more compelling explanation for the narrative modes of these works, and hence for the problems that have arisen as a result of them.

#### **D. The Uses of First-Person Narrative**

In contrast to those theorists of modern fiction who assume that narrative unreliability is best understood as an aesthetic end itself, or as a method for criticizing or undermining normative judgment, or as an embodiment of the impossibility of omniscience and the disappearance of God, I shall emphasize the sense in which narrative mode is primarily a way of focusing the reader's attention on a subject

in a particular manner and for controlling this response to it, evolving out of principles of literary construction — artistic needs — internal to the work of art. Although Fielding's narrator in *Tom Jones* and Eliot's in *Middlemarch* may seem to some of us as merely idealized versions of Fielding and Eliot, and not particularly well-integrated into the novels at that, I think we can still best understand their functions within the novels as devices for providing the ethical commentary and clarification, and for establishing the basis for reader expectation, which those novels manifestly require (Crane, 616-47; Sacks; Harver, 81-108). I shall similarly be treating the narrators of *The Turn of the Screw*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Good Soldier* primarily as devices for achieving certain effects — effects which must require for their realization an alternately reliable and unreliable narrator — rather than as characters.

First-person narrative is a radical form of direct presentation, a more extreme surrender of authorial commentary and authority than limited or full omniscience. To discover what James, Conrad, and Ford hoped to gain by occasionally employing it, it makes sense to explore briefly some of the uses to which it has — and has not — been put.

If, for reasons we have not yet specified, many novelists abandoned intrusive omniscient narrative toward the end of the nineteenth century in favor of first-person narrative or other forms of limited omniscience, what factors might have led to their choosing one type of more direct presentation over the other? What, in other words, made the narrative method of *The Ambassadors*, *Portrait of the Artist*, and *To the Lighthouse* unsuitable to *The Good Soldier*? Following upon James's own theory of narrative as expressed in his Prefaces, we can say that the limited omniscient technique of Woolf seems generally adopted when novelists wish primarily to represent individual states of consciousness largely for their own sakes, without the distancing effect of explicit narrative mediation. We have seen already how treating the first-person narratives of James, Conrad, and Ford as if representation of character were the primary artistic aim that runs into trouble. And we may note that first-person narrative form, with his greater potential for confusion in focus when the narrator is also the protagonist, is almost always less useful for this purpose. In his fine essay of the first paragraph of *The Ambassadors*, Ian Watt notices that James was particularly reluctant to employ first-person narrative when his primary need was to isolate an individual consciousness for his reader's inspection, for this form, as James himself observes, results inevitably in a "terrible fluidity of self-revelation" (Watt, 250-74; James, *Art*, 320-21). Too much of the narrator's thinking must be revealed, under most circumstances, for the novelist to be able



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to shape coherently his reader's expectations and desires around a figure who is both subject and object. (Novels like *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* might at first glance appear to be exceptions to this rule important enough to defeat it, since both are stories where "hero" and "historian," to use James's terms, are one. But the narrators of Dickens' retrospective novels, I think, are so far removed both ethically and temporally from their younger selves — the true heroes — that they seem like different voices altogether, closer in fact to Dickens' omniscient voice.) We can conclude, therefore, that first-person narrative is adopted by writers like James, Conrad, and Ford in works where exploration of represented states of consciousness is not the immediate artistic aim. *The Turn of the Screw*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Good Soldier* are not novels of character. (Several novels in the modern tradition employ basically reliable first-person narrators to direct our response to a tragic protagonist whose consciousness they do evoke, but to whom they are clearly subordinate. They function omnisciently for the most part, but the eyewitness does add a kind of authenticity which a relativistic age — where no fate is inherently tragic — perhaps requires. I am thinking of works like *Moby Dick*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Lord Jim*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *All the King's Men*.)

When we attempt to speak positively of the general reasons why a novelist might employ a participatory narrator, we confront an immediate obstacle. For it is impossible to unite works so otherwise diverse as *Tristram Shandy*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *The Catcher in the Rye* in a meaningful theory that accounts for their common deployment of first-person narrative. We can observe, however, that first-person narrators have historically seemed well suited for sustaining the illusion of actuality which so interested Conrad and Ford, for obscuring (if not eliminating) authorial presence, for heightening such effects as suspense and bewilderment when they are required, and for directing the reader's attention toward the world of external experience rather than toward character.

Thus novelists in the earliest years of British and American fiction commonly employed first-person narrative as a means of "actualizing" their work, as their own interests and the ethics and desires of their readers demanded. In England, Bunyan, Defoe, Goldsmith, Sterne, and (one could argue) the epistolary novelists like Richardson and Burney all used highly visible first-person narrators; so too did Maria Edgeworth in Ireland, Sir Walter Scott, James Hogg, and John Galt in Scotland, and Charles Brockdon Brown (not to mention Poe, Hawthorne, Melville and Twain) in America. Since ancient times, as scholars of Greek and Roman literature tell us, those stories which have unusual aspirations to actuality tend to

take the form of eyewitness narrative (Scholes, 243). To the ancients, the reliability of the *histor*, or detached third-person story-teller, seemed greater than that of the eyewitness, but the poet who spoke as *histor* sacrificed immediacy for credibility. At the time of the novel's birth in the eighteenth century, we notice that the eyewitness makes obviously unreal events seem more ordinary in works like *Gulliver's Travels*, even lending credibility to the much more realistic (but occasionally extraordinary) incidents of *Moll Flanders*. Both Defoe and Richardson, of course, go to enormous trouble to present their narratives as actual autobiographies and real documents, since these narratives could be seen as more exciting, and less immoral, if they were felt to be true. Indeed, it is impossible *not* to attribute the many first-person narratives in the eighteenth century partly to cultural factors — to a growing rage for the actual within a middle-class reading public, as well as (perhaps paradoxically) to a general public disapproval of the falseness of any literary art not devoted to God, a disapproval fostered throughout Britain since the Reformation by Puritanism of various kinds. In Calvinistic Scotland, Galt and Hogg could only have gotten their novels published by making them seem like actual histories (Craig; Q.D. Leavis, Watt; Scholes, 257).

The actualizing properties of first-person narrative seem to have made it particularly suited to formally didactic novels, to novelistic fables, where authors have compelling reasons for wishing to obscure their rhetorical presence. Beginning with the early epic and historical narratives, as we have seen, a document aspiring to achieve the look of truth was more likely to be seen as factual if it did not seem too personal, the idiosyncratic vision of one man who is recognizably the poet himself. First-person narrative has thus been employed by writers of didactic fiction because it disguises the presence of the author, who might otherwise seem to be arguing directly for the novel's norms, a rhetorician rather than a poet. The need among such early fabulators as William Godwin and Mary Shelley, as well as Bunyan, Hogg, and Brown, for validating their meanings without *appearing directly to assign them*, and at times for increasing the sense of mystery necessary for rendering those meanings palatable, led them to delegate narrative authority to participatory narrators. Ironic, naive, and unreliable narration in particular has been a favorite device in didactic and satirical works, because the reader is given an intellectual stimulus — the pleasure of deciphering the "real story" and collaborating behind the narrator's back — to apprehend the values by which the irony operates. In recent novelistic fables, quite often, a seductive first-person narrator may be employed as a way of assaulting the reader's own values so that he can consider, at least temporarily, radically different ones; novelists like Celine, Camus, Sartre,

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Hawkes, and Kosinski, among others, accomplish this in their most well-known fictions. In all these formally didactic works, first-person narrators are enlisted to make us participate in the discovery of norms that control the fiction. We thereby experience the illusion that these values are latent rather than authorially decreed (Sacks, Chapter One; Kolb, 698-717; Richter; Springer, 19-76).

A subcategory of didactic literature is the genre we commonly call the fantastic, which Tzvetan Todorov, in his important book on the subject, defines according to the characteristic feeling it produces: a hesitation common to both reader and character who confront an apparently supernatural event knowing only the laws of nature (Todorov, *Fantastic*). Such a person must ask himself: did this event actually happen, and must I therefore reformulate my sense of reality; or did it not happen, and must I conclude that I was the victim of illusion or delusion? While this uncertainty lasts, according to Todorov, that person may be said to be experiencing the fantastic. A number of works that would seem at first glance fantastic actually participate in the genre only temporarily, eventually to become "marvelous" (the events are shown to belong to a clearly paranormal world) or "uncanny" (the events are explained away as arising from natural causes: dreams, drugs, madness, and so forth). The great Gothic novels, for example, produce temporarily the effect of the fantastic, only to explain away the apparently supernatural event at the end (Radcliffe) or force us fully to accept it (Walpole, Lewis, Maturin). But those works which seem designed to sustain the reader's confusion about whether the events depicted are real or supernatural (Poe's "The Black Cat," Maupassant's "The Hair" and "Who Knows?," Hoffmann's "The Golden Pot," along with — among more well-known examples — "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and *The Turn of the Screw*) are all first-person narratives because the fantastic requires doubt. And the participatory narrator can awaken doubt as no third-person narrator can.

Although there is no reason why the fantastic could not be evoked as an aesthetic end in itself (the detective novel participates tangentially in the fantastic for no other reason than to satisfy our appetite for bewilderment), Todorov fails to recognize that the effect has more commonly been employed by serious writers to serve didactic ends. The fantastic is ideal when a novelist wishes to convince his reader of a vision about the world so unusual or extreme that it could not be easily accepted through more rational argument. The fantastic immerses us directly in that world, forcing us to participate in it.

For reasons which are fairly obvious, one other fictional genre commonly employs first-person narrative: the picaresque. Although the picaroon's moral and

psychological makeup may seem to define the peculiar quality of the picaresque novel, the fact that he tells the story, I think, works for the most part to deflect our attention from his character to his world. One could even argue that in formal terms the picaroon is not a hero because rogues and non-heroes lead the most interesting lives. In any case, the quasi-picaresque tradition — of *The Unfortunate Traveller*, *Lazarillo*, *Moll Flanders*, *Huck Finn*, and (in our own day) *Augie March* and *On the Road* — demonstrates the suitability of first-person narrative for providing continuity in a fiction of otherwise rather discontinuous incidents: in a fiction of experience rather than character (Alter, *Picaresque Novel*).

### E. A Theory of Problematically Reliable Narrative

First-person narratives constitute no meaningful generic category of their own, as the diversity of these examples makes abundantly clear. Nevertheless it is possible to observe that problematically reliable narrators in particular tend to contribute several effects to the works in which they appear. By “problematically reliable,” I mean those narrators who, like Dowell and the governess, are neither absolutely reliable nor unreliable in their ethical or cognitive capabilities — neither authorial surrogates nor ironic rhetorical devices — but who seem, at various times, like both of these things. These complex narrators are enlisted, I shall argue, primarily to *actualize* and *defamiliarize* the fictional subjects, in ways that omniscient narrators, with whatever degree of presence and authority, are less able to do.

Our survey of the early novel and of didactic fiction indicates that first-person narrators generally contribute to a work’s greater verisimilitude — recognizing, of course, that there are exceptions to this tendency (e.g., narrators aware of themselves as artificers, like Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*), and that literary realism is a notoriously intractable subject. But above all, as we have seen, a first-person narrator can be so deployed as to obscure an author’s immediate creative or rhetorical presence in works where that presence would be a moral risk (Galt) or an aesthetic one (Swift). First-person narrative is frequently employed by a novelist, I think, as a way for him to appear not to take active responsibility for a creative or moral act. Let us hypothesize, then, that first-person narrators are adopted by James, Conrad, and Ford in works where increasing the illusion of actuality is most crucial, *where that illusion would otherwise be most profoundly threatened*, but where exploring represented states of consciousness is not the immediate artistic aim. In their theoretical writings, James, Conrad, and Ford speak explicitly of their first-person

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narrators as an actualizing technique.

Their collective allegiance to the broad artistic movement Ford called literary impressionism is well known. Early in his career James subscribed to the belief that art must be a “direct impression of life” (*Partial Portraits*, 246), and while his later theoretical writings indicate a movement away from a mimetic conception of art toward an autonomous formalism (“It is art that *makes* life” [*Theory of Fiction*, 91], he eventually told Wells), he never really abandoned his interest in exploring techniques for sustaining the fictive illusion of actuality. The famous late style, for example -- which is viewed too often today as an aesthetic structure independent of any representationist motive — was certainly to James in part a method for exploring and rendering palpable an intangible psychosocial territory never really charted by novelists before. But especially when he was writing in nonrealistic modes, in fables and ghost stories, James searched for devices that would actualize his subjects and make them credible. The extraordinary is most extraordinary, he said in the Preface to “The Altar of the Dead,” “in that it happens to you and me, and it’s of value . . . but so far as visibly brought home to us” (*The Art of the Novel*, 257), Conrad, committed to rendering justice to the visible universe and to the truth of his own sensations, spoke constantly of his desire to “produce the effect of actuality” (*Joseph Conrad on Fiction*, 203) in his fiction, to “envelop” his subject “in their proper atmosphere of actuality” (*Joseph Conrad on Fiction*, 211) because those subjects were often radically subjective (“Youth”) or ethically extraordinary (*Heart of Darkness*). And Ford believed even more absolutely than either James or Conrad that a novelist must give his reader the impression that “he was witnessing something real” (*The Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*, 42). Ford’s obsession with the discovery of actualizing techniques (his experiments with Conrad in the areas of cadence, chronology, and the *le mot juste* were conducted with this aim in mind) grew out of his desire to be taken as an objective register of his own times, a painter of “unbiased picture[s] of the world we live in” (*Henry James: A Critical Study*, 46) — though of course we know that all pictures are inevitably biased, all renderings subjective. When James, Conrad, and Ford speak of sustaining the illusion of actuality in their fiction, then, it is usually on those occasions when their artistic interests border on the didactic or the extraordinary, on the unrealistic.

James seldom wrote of first-person narrative except to disparage it. But he did indicate consistently, in his comments on Fielding and Trollope, that intrusive third-person narrators risk destroying the illusion of actuality: Trollope’s admission in *Barchester Towers* that he is fabricating his story rather than reporting it horrified

James (*Partial Portraits*, 116). Conrad was more explicit about the effect of first-person narrative, observing that the Marlowesque narrator of "Gaspar Ruiz" gives the story "an air of actuality which I doubt whether I could have sustained without his help" (*Joseph Conrad on Fiction*, 199), that the old teacher of languages who narrates *Under Western Eyes* is "indispensable" (*Joseph Conrad on Fiction*, 203) in producing the same effect. Ford, once again, spoke more unequivocally of the "obvious and unchanging fact that if an author intrudes his comments into the middle of his story he will endanger the illusion" (*The English Novel*, 148). He felt that the novel must be put into the mouth of someone "limited by probability as to what he can know of the affair he is adumbrating," and that a novelist may "take sides" and "utter views" through a narrator as he must not in his own voice. If he does display that weakness, as Ford believed Fielding did, he will "to that extent weaken the illusion that he has attempted to build up" (*The Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*, 68-69).

This is not to argue, of course, that first-person narrators produce the effect of complete verisimilitude; James, Conrad, and Ford were never interested in having their art mistaken for actual documents. It is to suggest, however, that first-person narrators who are manifestly not authorial surrogates nor simple ironic foils tend to actualize works which without them risk being taken as overtly rhetorical, polemical, or extraordinary. It will be my task to demonstrate that works like *The Turn of the Screw* and *Heart of Darkness* run this risk, and that this accounts for their narrators.

I spoke of a second effect of problematically reliable narrators, and called this effect "defamiliarization." I owe this perhaps inelegant term to the Russian Formalist critic Victor Shklovsky; it has also been employed by Gestalt psychology in ways somewhat similar to the way I want to use it (Scholes, "Theory of Fiction, 107-24). For Shklovsky, who coined the term in his famous essay "Art as Technique," defamiliarization is virtually synonymous with art itself. The purpose of art, he argues almost as Monet would, "is to impart the sensation of things as they are felt and not as they are known"; art exists so that "one may recover the sensation of life," it exists "to make one feel things." The "technique of art," he adds, "is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged." Art, he concludes in italics, "*is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important*" (Shklovsky, 12-15). As an aesthetic end in itself, defamiliarization thus appears to be an absolutely countermimetic effect or process, especially if (as Shklovsky says) the object of defamiliarization is

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unimportant. But it is difficult to speak of literary art and its techniques so nonreferentially for long, and even Shklovsky comes to imply that defamiliarization characterizes the capacity of art in general and fiction in particular to give us a disorientingly fresh perspective on an otherwise stale and valueless object, and ultimately to allow reality itself — at least the reality evoked by fiction — to seem charged with latent meaning.

Whatever the merits of Shklovsky's general description of art as defamiliarization (his treatment of fiction as alternately mimetic *and* nonreferential seems contradictory), I want to borrow his term and apply it more locally to characterize the effect of certain problematically reliable narrators, especially the radically naive perspectives we encounter in narratives so otherwise diverse as the *Persian Letters* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. By confining us to unusual and cognitively limited perspectives, these works encourage us to infer a reality at some distance beyond their narrators' capacity to express or know it. And by forcing us to act almost as cocreator of this reality, these unfamiliar perspectives work to reestablish the latency of fact in value, in a world where more conventional forms of editorial omniscience and normative authority had implied their absolute disjunction. What better word could characterize the experience of an eighteenth-century Frenchman reading Montesquieu, or a nineteenth-century Southerner reading Twain?

Shklovsky speaks briefly of the peculiar power of first-person narrative to defamiliarize — his example is Tolstoy's odd story "Kholstomer," narrated by a horse — though he prefers to use the term more broadly, as I have said. We might observe, however, that of the unusual perspective given by speakers of dramatic monologues Robert Langbaum has argued that it "gives an unfamiliar view of familiar things, opening us to an apprehension of their meaning at the same time it reminds us of their physical reality. . . ." (Langbaum, 137) Langbaum obviously echoes Wordsworth's conception of his narrative task in *Lyrical Ballads*, to "throw over" common incidents and situations "a certain colouring of the imagination whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them . . . the primary laws of our nature. . . ." (Wordsworth, 51) In my study of James, Conrad, and Ford, I want to show that they also consciously enlisted first-person narrators to achieve the effect I call defamiliarization; James's stylistic difficulty ("Attention of perusal . . . is what I at every point . . . take for granted" [*The Art of the Novel*, 304]), Conrad's exoticism and narrative complexity ("The problem was to make unfamiliar things credible" [*Joseph Conrad on Fiction*, 211]), and Ford's technical experimentation ("If what you give [a reader] appears familiar

or half familiar his attention will wander” [*The Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*, 134]) can be seen, I think, as partial contributions to this effect. And I shall argue that the terror at Bly, the horror in Africa, and the sadness at Nauheim and Branshaw affect us as deeply as they do because these conventional, even potentially banal emotions are evoked through narrative voices unequal to them.

I can summarize the points I am trying to make about problematically reliable narrators by illustrating them with an analogy from modern poetry. William Carlos Williams deeply admired the fiction (and poetry) of Ford, and while I would never want to claim that his great early poem “The Locust Tree in Flower” was directly influenced by Conrad’s and Ford’s narrative experiments, I do suggest that the poem derives its power from its employment of what we may call a problematically reliable speaker, an extraordinary perspective:

The Locust Tree in Flower  
Among  
of  
green  
stiff  
old  
bright  
broken  
branch  
come  
white  
sweet  
May  
again

If we begin by considering “The Locust Tree” naively, we must be struck first of all by its impersonality: by the absence of any conventional “poetic” voice, and by the apparent detachment of the poet himself. Considered casually — and this is how I believe we are invited to consider it initially — the poem is a series of random prepositions, adjectives, nouns, and a verb, with a final adverb, arranged according to a logic that bears no resemblance to nonliterary prose. But if the conventional poet has in some sense disappeared, he has been replaced by a



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problematic kind of speaker, perhaps best described as emanating from somewhere below the level of conscious thought. What characterizes this voice? It possesses a vivid vocabulary without an apparent syntax; it supplies us with potential pieces of a poem without the apparent ability to arrange them in a coherent pattern. It is, in a sense, alternately reliable (normatively “poetic”) and unreliable (not in its ethical limitations but in its cognitive ones). The subject of the poem, then, is refracted through a limited, problematically reliable perspective, in somewhat the same way as the subjects of *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Good Soldier* are.

The object being actualized by this perspective in “The Locust Tree” is easier to discern than I have probably implied. Even without the title, James’s attentive reader would recognize that a coherent pattern *can* be detected in the words he encounters; in fact various patterns can be detected, and many more have to be suspected. We induce the tree itself initially, then the seasonal changes it undergoes, and finally the fact that the separate “stanzas” correspond to separate seasons, climaxing in the final word/stanza that suggests renewal and rebirth. The absence of the poet frees us to focus upon the literal, objective reality of the tree itself; the unreliability of the speaker disguises, at least temporarily, the poet’s creative agency. This is an object *observed* from a rigorously defined point of view: if J. Hillis Miller is correct when he says that for modern man “nothing exists except as it is seen by someone viewing the world from his own perspective” (Hills Miller, *Reality*, 4) the locust tree in flower manifestly exists.

While trees are not especially extraordinary or rhetorical subjects, they are grossly conventional ones. The illusion of actuality (never as important, or course, in poetry as in fiction) would certainly be threatened by the presence of any conventional poetic voice, by the presence of any ideas about the tree in place of the essential tree itself. Even the “so much depends” of Williams’s most famous poem would be disastrous here.

But “The Locust Tree in Flower” is primarily a poem of defamiliarization, where an otherwise potentially hackneyed poetic object (“I think that I shall never see . . .”) is refracted through an unfamiliar perspective that affirms the latency of its value and meaning. The narrative perspective (if it may be called that) encourages the reader to collaborate in the creation of the tree. We must seek out the implied connection between words (“Among *the leaves of the green tree* . . . ?”), and try to bridge all the syntactical gaps. We are rewarded for this effort almost as irony rewards us. We must also supply from our own experiences the associations and memories that can flesh out the poetic skeleton, so that each reader’s locust tree is finally different from every other reader’s, though the poem is not

for that reason “wholly ambiguous.” No art corresponds more closely to Shklovsky’s conception of defamiliarization: “The Locust Tree,” through its extraordinary perspective, imparts to use the sensation of the tree as it is seen and not as it is known. (It is an unrepeatable performance, for defamiliarizing techniques quickly become conventions: “The Magnolia Tree in Flower” would not succeed.) Like the difficult middle works of James, Conrad, and Ford, it is a triumph of referential art, though its techniques are not themselves uniformly mimetic.

While I have suggested that the extraordinary narrative perspective actualizes and defamiliarizes the tree in Williams’s poem, it would be possible, I acknowledge, to consider that perspective very differently, as an indication of (indeed, as the primary contribution to) the poem’s essential nonreferentiality. “The Locust Tree in Flower” could also be seen as a triumph of nonmimetic art, where the poem primarily insists upon itself as an aesthetic act, a structure of words, which *supplants* rather than expresses the tree. Unquestionably we do become aware of the poem as artifice, as at crucial moments we recognize a subliminal aesthetic control in the effaced modern narratives of Flaubert, James, and Joyce. But I do not believe that the object disappears in these self-reflexive modernist moments (though it may in the plastic arts). Nor do I believe that referentiality and nonreferentiality — art as mimesis and art as structure — compete in the works of Williams, or Joyce, or James. Narrative unreliability actualizes and defamiliarizes the object, but it does not in any sense replicate it: for it could not and still be art. I hope I have shown that the best of the problematically reliable narratives of James, Conrad, and Ford embody and resolve all the contradictions of the oxymoron “mimetic art.”

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