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Introduction: narratives of the brink

The purpose of this book is to investigate the detailed strategies of three masters of indirection in the early modern novel: James, Conrad, and Forster. Different though the three are from one another, they are linked by this historically crucial development they each represented in the technique of fiction: the deployment of a radically new openness, obliquity, and contradictoriness of narrative forms, both in the large-scale movements of narration and in the smallest details of descriptive language, scene, and dialogue. And what connects them even more profoundly, below this level of technical innovation and virtuosity, is that their innovations articulate, and articulate precisely, a shared response to a world of new uncertainty and danger. They are all writers of the brink. Their narrations waver, take risks, are always on the edge of retraction or contradiction. Private dreams and fears suddenly change the direction of a scene or a paragraph. Intellectual or moral scruple enforces a quick reversal, a renunciation; imaginative desire swells into idyll, or the image of escape and a new start; an impassioned responsiveness to the world-as-it-is produces a cacophony of arguing voices, a quick temporary compromise, a sardonic shrug in the narrating. In each of these three novelists is combined, in the most lambent interplay, the highest degree of artistic, moral, and intellectual awareness with the most self-betraying revelations of unreconciled feeling: control against risk and disarray, sophistication against nostalgia, authoritative assertion against self-testing by irony or by whimsy or, in James's phrase for the form-seeking of the artist, by some 'deep difficulty braved'.[1] Vulnerability is their obsession; the tell-tale vulnerability of their fictional characters, on behalf of all human vulnerability; and, not least, their pressing need as artists to find a form that is clear and definite yet will itself also be vulnerable, in the sense of being perpetually open, pliable, and sensitive to every nuance and change of fictional situation and of narratorial sensibility.

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All three share clear characteristics of transition: different elements that could be called post-Romantic, Victorian, and Modernist. James and Forster at times recall the mode of Jane Austen and Thackeray, even (in James's case) of Congreve. Conrad has an equivocal, dark Romanticism that is at times like Poe or Melville, with here and there a touch of the more sombre Dickens. James and Forster, less black-Romantic (though James has his Gothicism), can often seem haunted by some Romantic dream of an unattainable perfection and harmony, and can juxtapose the headiest nostalgia against the coolest, most worldly irony. They know, and frequently evoke, the Keatsian plangency of loss. They are all moralists in a nineteenth-century sense, with a sardonic high seriousness that only in Conrad's case is not lightened by wit, and they have an Arnoldian commitment to the critical social struggle between culture and anarchy. Like the Victorians, they particularly fear reification, alienation, hypocrisy, loss of will, self-betrayal, and the mechanical. They celebrate, with only some ambiguity (and a more radical doubt on Conrad's part), the value of personal relationships and the fullest play of individual consciousness. They uphold the validity – though hardly the solidity – of Character. And as for their Modernism – they are committed to art and to their profession (particularly James and Conrad) as supreme meaning-bearing activities in a world where other things have failed and where an Armageddon of deadened language, materialism, and fragmentation is never far from sight. Having left the revelations of religion far behind them, they use symbols to provide quizzical glimpses of something more ultimate, sometimes more ravening, than the everyday. Their language is intensely self-aware, even self-subverting, their narrative forms intricate and contradictory, their judgements ambiguous, their innate scepticism enlarged into a whole style of indirection that seeks to challenge fixity, formula, and closure. And they have all, being the antennae of the race, experienced the full terror of vacuity – psychological, social, historical, metaphysical – and pit against that vacuity all the inventiveness of their craft, the invigorating ambivalence of their responses, and their commitment to articulacy.

There is the space of a generation between the two older writers and the younger – James and Conrad born in 1843 and 1857, Forster in 1879. And it might be appropriate to consider the first

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two briefly as a pair before adding Forster – characteristically – to disrupt, juggle, and reshape them into a trio.

To begin with, they were both exiles, the American and the Pole. Whether that simple biographical fact can be taken as a strict cause of the literary effects I have in mind, or as a general influence, or even just as a suggestive analogy, both these writers do seem to stand somewhat at odds with their world, to ironize it with the cool, half-foreign tones of the *émigré*, to view it with detachment and a contradictory yearning to escape from detachment into commitment and action, and to be haunted by some nostalgic but quickly scotched rumour of a Great Good Place. When James made his long-delayed grand return to the States in 1904 he found he had become an exile there too, and wrote, as a jaundiced 'restless analyst', one of his subtlest and most entangled works out of that experience, *The American Scene*. And when Conrad returned in trepidation to Poland he arrived, by an extraordinary Conradian irony, in August 1914, at the very moment when his homeland vanished once again into its familiar tragic chaos of war and division, and had to retreat frantically, ill, and with difficulty, to Italy. Only in narrative, it seems, was the exile safe; and only there could self-division, anxiety, and the painfully unaccommodated intelligence find containment, within the scrupulous shapings of art.[2]

James's anxiety and self-division were very real. His famously enigmatic trauma of 1861, whether physical or psychological (genital or lumbar!), was only a prelude to a career of intermittent melancholy, recurrent nightmare, and ailment. But for him there was always a stronger countermovement in the form of wit, social ebullience, and an endlessly energizing curiosity about the human scene. And in the novels, for all their characteristic note of impending loss, the chance missed, the fruition not quite achieved, there is an essential confidence in the power of consciousness – that of his protagonists, that of himself as a novelist – which gives his writing a coloration quite different from Conrad's. Both men sound the note of the abyss: a personal abyss that is also the abyss of an old century dying and an ominous new century coming in. The coiling, uncoiling complexity of their narrative method expresses the instability of living in a time when the uneasy activity of consciousness itself has begun to replace externally supported

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values as the one thing we know. Characters like Maggie Verver and Razumov are beginning to live, to themselves and in the eyes of others, through their febrile faculty of story-making and image-building alone. But compared with the creator of Razumov (and Marlow, and Decoud, and Heyst) James had a somewhat securer (if always self-questioning) grasp of the reality and virtue of the tangible world; and also, within the limits of tragedy and ironic comedy, of at least some of the possibilities of action.[3] Life is rarely a dream for him, as it threatens so often to be for Conrad – though in Conrad, perhaps by a simple reversal of the Jamesian emphasis, the strong drift towards the dream, towards inanition and will-lessness, is in turn almost always challenged from within his narrative by the not-quite-paralysed forces of love, personal and communal, of fidelity, physical battle, yarn-spinning, justified scorn, and, at the very least, of rather grimly holding on.

That life is a dream is hardly to be deduced from most of Conrad's non-fictional prose. The one essay on James, for example, 'Henry James: an Appreciation', sees James and establishes Conrad himself in a distinctly heroic mode.[4] As a performance itself, indeed, the essay is lofty and orotund to an almost mock-heroic degree, its insights half-hidden by its rhetoric. Conrad is full of such awkwardnesses. In terms of style and narrative tact he is by far the most unsteady, the most vulnerable of the three writers I am considering. It is in the inner recesses of his narrations that the real quick and intricacy of his achievement lie. Conrad as exile – figuratively exiled, more than literally – best reveals himself covertly; and where his intricacy of method becomes most overt and self-advertising, as in *Chance*, the result is less a tribute to than a parody of *The Golden Bowl*.[5] Elsewhere, less hampered by artfully self-conscious circumlocution, he can allow the contrary pulses of narrative to articulate more freely the devious nature of his temperament and his outlook. Conrad at his best, I think, writes always on the edge of panic. A sharp note of half-controlled extremism is perhaps the major distinguishing feature between his late-Romantic imagination and the more urbane, elegiac Romanticism of James – though James, too, has his nightmare-images ('The Jolly Corner'), his fear of being overwhelmed, his perturbing fascination with renunciation, his flashes of febrile, cloying morbidity ('The Altar of the Dead' and 'Maud-Evelyn'). For Conrad,

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more obsessive and less varied than James, it is nevertheless only the edge of panic, not panic itself: he is one of the most icy and rigid of Modernism's starers-into-the-abyss. The tension in his writing between possible hysteria and a meticulous shrewdness is extreme, and, at its best, thoroughly dramatic and creative. He is clearly appalled by nihilism and moral anarchy, and is at his most lucidly critical when he exposes the pettiness and the self-delusions of his numerous tribe of cynics, core-less demoralizers, and bilge-rats: Ossipon, Michaelis, and their group in *The Secret Agent*, Donkin in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*; assorted mates, second mates, and engineers like Sterne and Massy in 'The End of the Tether'; Schomberg and his half-mythic quintessence, Mr Jones, in *Victory*; and so on – a sobering list of those who erode, calumniate, cheat, who are the very breath of the pit, but are looked at closely, fiercely, and with a pale, unyielding glare by Conrad, quite assured and unhysterical in his judicious exposure of them. Nevertheless, on the level of feeling, and in various layers of his language and movements of his narration, his fear and dislike sometimes swell up and reveal themselves in strange forms. For example, it appears to me that his exasperation in *The Secret Agent* with his own squalidly ineffectual anarchists, the pompous or devious self-seekers who oppose them, and the feebleness of the good-at-heart (the meek, like Winnie and Stevie, who will never, never inherit the earth) finds peculiar expression through the character of the Professor, who at least utters rage against the smothering world of mediocrity that Conrad himself has exposed:

> 'You are mediocre [he tells Ossipon at the end]. Verloc, whose affair the police has managed to smother so nicely, was mediocre . . . Everybody is mediocre. Madness and despair! Give me that for a lever, and I'll move the world.'[6]

Conrad condemns the Professor as a 'pest in the street full of men'; but by allowing him to harness to his own words, by quotation, the power and meaning of Winnie's suicide ('an act of madness or despair'), and by allowing him such a sardonic glitter of visage and style, Conrad, I suspect, is creating a vent-hole for some surreptitious passion of his own that the telling of the tale has built up in him. The story sceptically and forcibly judges the anarchists of every social class. But by a characteristic indirection of displaced

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feeling it comes close to embodying the impassioned nihilism that its would-be anarchists are too mediocre to express.

Time and time again Conrad, so at odds with himself, boxes himself in narrative into an intolerable moral dilemma, a state of intellectually unstable but aesthetically exciting impasse, in that the values he vehemently upholds of love, service, and fidelity are always revealed in stress to have an endemic central hollowness, a lack of total support from the universe, which the human will must nevertheless go on countering with passion and desperate self-delusion. It is this impasse that provokes the obliquity and cross-currents of his narrative modes, his sudden diatribes, or some compensatory excess of lyricism, his perpetual ironic reversals both positive and negative. For both Conrad and James irony, large-scale and small-scale, is not a mere serviceable device: it is the very fibre of their inconclusively speculative imaginations, their personal situations, and their shifting and ambivalent purchase on what they present as a shifting, ambivalent world. Verbal qualification and narrative transposition become for both of them a positive mode of building: of constructing by conscious craft an intricate edifice of aspects, nuances, and narratorial divagations in order to withstand the destructive pull of unleashed relativism, of human perversity, unstable words, loss of will, and 'the horror, the horror' of an ungraspable, nightmarish reality.

James, unlike Conrad, also pits against negation – against stupidity, betrayal, and failure – the vivifying movement of humour and of sheer aesthetic play. Such playfulness is no mere additive, but part of a general strategy for expression and discovery. Indeed, the centre of James's theory of the novel is the principle of movement and interplay, seen above all as a dynamic formal response to that very complexity of pressures that drove Conrad into his more centripetal and self-vexing posture. For James – by far the most articulate theorist of the three, though Forster is no slouch – form is never the imposition of convention and device but always an unfinished struggle and a multiplication of fluid relationships. It is an event, rather than an achieved stillness or an outline, and something closely akin to the two-way nature of perception itself: 'the state of private poetic intercourse with things, the kind of current that in a given personal experience flows to and fro between the imagination and the world'.[7] James's theory of form

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mirrors the basic drama of his themes: the interplay, sometimes comic, often tragic, between the irresistible stress of the real, the quotidian, and the equally irresistible free play of the shaping, wondering, appreciative mind – between the facts about Gilbert Osmond and Isabel's imaginative version of him, between lumpish Woollett, Massachusetts, the place of duty, provincial innocence, old age, and moral probity, and on the other hand Strether's free responsiveness to Paris, to Chad's youthful opportunity, to the quotidian and the mortal as transfigured, only half-delusively, into glamorous players and painted stage.

It is too easy to cite by themselves such famous instances of James slighting the claims of 'life' in favour of 'form' as these: the critique of the Tolstoian novel as 'large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary'; his impatience at 'the fatal futility of Fact'; and the attack on 'saturation' and the 'slice of life' in his exchanges with H. G. Wells – 'It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance.'[8] No less characteristic, however, are those instances where James describes the 'life versus art' issue in terms of something that is moving and incomplete: a perpetual struggle and drama, rather than an equation or a choice to be made. The drama is most clearly, and most appropriately, expressed by James's elaborate images or metaphors describing the very act of creating, the act of struggle between solicitous, sensuous, multitudinous life and the 'sublime economy' demanded by the shaping mind and the 'cold passion of art'.[9] For example, his reminiscences of battling to write *Portrait of a Lady* in Venice, or *The Tragic Muse* in Paris:

> The Venetian footfall and the Venetian cry . . . come in once more at the window, renewing one's old impression of the delighted senses and the divided, frustrated mind. How can places that speak *in general* so to the imagination not give it, at the moment, the particular thing it wants? . . . Such, and so rueful, are these reminiscences; though on the whole, no doubt, one's book and one's 'literary effort' at large, were to be the better for them.[10]

And again:

> Re-reading the last chapters of 'The Tragic Muse' I catch again the very odour of Paris, which comes up in the rich rumble of the Rue de la Paix – with which my room itself, for that matter, seems impregnated . . . to an effect strangely composed at once of the auspicious and the fatal. The

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'plot' of Paris thickened at such hours beyond any other plot in the world, I think; but there one sat meanwhile with another, on one's hands, absolutely requiring precedence . . . there being so much of the confounded irreducible quantity still to treat.[11]

These same two 'plots' represent the stress and the dynamic in James's concept of form: the dangerous stream of experience within which the artist's mind must seek to live, and the contending 'plot' of fictional device, compression, 'discrimination', and 'value'. There can be no adjudication between the two. Between them they make for stress and difficulty – 'the deep difficulty braved' – and between them they make art, certainly James's art, what it is in practice: an act of perpetually self-qualifying duality and indirection, close to the kinetic of consciousness itself, being self-referential in its linguistic textures but also reflective, celebratory, of the resistant world outside that allows, resists, and destroys. It is in the Preface to *Daisy Miller* that he describes most memorably, if congestedly, this creative act of engagement by the novelist which finds its dynamic and its dialectic intensity in the meeting between the disruptive pressures of the real and the passion to confer shape:

the simplest truth about a human entity, a situation, a relation, an aspect of life, however small, on behalf of which the claim to charmed attention is made, strains ever, under one's hand, more intensely, *most* intensely, to justify that claim; strains ever, as it were, toward the uttermost end or aim of one's meaning or of its own numerous connexions; struggles at each step, and in defiance of one's raised admonitory finger, fully and completely to express itself. Any real art of representation is, I make out, a controlled and guarded acceptance, in fact a perfect economic explosive principle in one's material thoroughly noted, adroitly allowed to flush and colour and animate the disputed value, but with its other appetites and treacheries, its characteristic space-hunger and space-cunning, kept down. The fair flower of the artful compromise is to my sense the secret of 'foreshortening' – the particular economic device for which one must have a name and which has in its single blessedness and its determined pitch, I think, a higher price than twenty other clustered loosenesses; and just because full-fed statement, just because the picture of as many of the conditions as possible made and kept proportionate, just because the surface iridescent, even in the short piece, by what is beneath it and what throbs and gleams through, are things all conducive to the only compactness that has a charm, to the only spareness that has a force, to the only simplicity that has a grace – those, in each order, that produce the *rich* effect.[12]

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Conrad would undoubtedly have subscribed to that eloquent credo, with its evocation of a multiplicity of 'connexions' and 'conditions' all tempered and made expressive by 'compactness' and 'grace' – though he is comparatively unconcerned with the complicating world of manners, of social and personal theatricality, that makes for so much of James's 'conditions' and is reflected in the particular 'grace' of James's surfaces and styles. Conrad's act of engagement is more anxious, and his sense of impending overthrow and chaos more urgent by far. But his faith in himself as artist, and in the voice of the storyteller – and of the storyteller within the story[13] – is at least as strong as James's faith in the impression-taking, shape-imposing struggle of the novelist and of his own super-sensitive protagonists. But novelists, in their essays and criticism, are at their most impassioned, their loftiest, when considering the high calling of their profession. In the novelist's ennobling responsibility to forge the conscience of the race, and in his opportunity for observation, expression, and display, flashing up against the endemic and opposing pressures of disorder, treachery, and wordlessness, both exiles saw the goal which they showed their fictional characters struggling to achieve: the fusion of thought and feeling, idea and action; a realized identity; and a connection with the world, however fluctuating, that might cancel banishment.

Forster would always have tried to deflate such high and solemn concepts – even in the act of subscribing to them. His famous evasiveness – the unexpected whimsy, the sideways shuffle, the dangling disclaimer, what Lionel Trilling called his 'insistence on the double turn' – is very much his own style, his own mode of confronting, and of defining, the same darkness that threatened James and Conrad. The elusiveness in personal manner that could both charm and infuriate – it made Lytton Strachey brand him, for Bloomsbury, as 'the mole' – becomes part of the essence of his art, where it ceases simply to evade or to posture and becomes, instead, his central creative scheme of reconnoitre and ambivalence.[14] Forster's indirections as a narrator keep him, comically in the Italian novels, dialectically in *Howards End*, tragically in *A Passage to India*, as slippery as a fish. He is more quick and darting as a manipulator than James – and a hundred times quicker than Conrad, who is the least playful, the most grimly solemn, of them all. He covers a more dangerous gamut of tones in a smaller

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compass than either of the other two, and can pass successfully within a few paragraphs from a gleeful smirk to the most solemn diapason or scathing disquisition, a sudden death, a kiss, an outrageous coincidence, a moment of allegory or symbol. He pulls the strings of his plots with even greater virtuosity than either of the others, and is an unequalled master of surprise, reversal, and *reprise*. Like James and Conrad, of course, he is intrinsically, from first to last, an ironist. And it might even be wondered, in this connection, if he, too, is not something of an ironizing exile: sexually a misfit, temperamentally shy yet waspish, essentially English yet excoriating English ways: the subtle yet downcast person in turban and dhoti, from Hertfordshire, squatting in the Maharajah of Dewas's courtyard.

Exile or not, virtuoso or not, what connects him emphatically with the two older novelists is the subtly variable ways in which his highly structured narratives and his humanistic code flex themselves, and controvert themselves, in order to cope with personal or generalized anxiety and with the emanations of chaos. It is a familiar observation that even the early novels – *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *A Room with a View*, and *The Longest Journey* – are full of violence and unexpected melodrama, with sudden shifts from the operatic to the meditative, from the rhapsodic to the essayistic to the morbid, even to the masochistic. The catastrophe in *Angels*, for example, is dazzlingly assured, even slick, in its handling of nightmare and cruelty, set in a context of Jane Austen-like satire and wittily edged lyricism: a startling amalgam of modes for a first novel, and in many ways a more daring range than Conrad ever or James often attempted (*Angels* appeared in 1905, it is worth remembering, only the year after *The Golden Bowl* and *Nostromo*). The book has begun like *The Europeans*, wittily, ruefully, and zestfully exposing the incompatibility of different cultures and codes of values and the petty problems of hypocrisy, misunderstanding, and falsity to self that beset people seeking to move between worlds. But the death of Lilia, after her premonitory attempt to escape from her false life ends literally and symbolically with her lying smothered and choked by dust in the roadway ('There is something very terrible in dust at night-time'), is a typically sudden darkening of the scene. The outbreaks of seriousness, amid the farce and the high-pitched sounds of the

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