LITERARY IMPRESSIONISM AND MODERNIST AESTHETICS

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"Fiction *is* an impression": so said Henry James, and many others, from Hardy to Woolf, from Pater to Conrad to Proust. But they did not mean that fiction should keep to the sketch, the fragment, the moment, the surface, the sense – that it should be "impressionistic." Such connotations come from painting, where impressions are momentary brushstrokes, or from philosophy, where impressions are primary sensations. The literary Impressionists meant that fiction should locate itself where we "have an impression": not in sense, nor in thought, but in the feeling that comes between; not in the moment that passes, nor in the decision that lasts, but in the intuition that lingers. If "fiction is an impression" it *mediates* opposite perceptual moments. It does not choose surfaces and fragments over depths and wholes but makes surfaces show depths, make fragments suggest wholes, and devotes itself to the undoing of such distinctions.

To get in the impression not just sense perception but sense that is thought, appearances that are real, suspicions that are true and parts that are whole – this was the "total" aspiration of the Impressionist writer. The Impressionist writer sought perceptual totality, at a time in which fiction seemed perhaps best able to claim it. When the Impressionists took it up, fiction had proven its link to life and was ready to enter the realm of art. It had been fantastic and natural, had done social life on a massive scale and scaled itself down to individual psychologies. And to this breadth of interest it designated a perceptual correlate, making many agree, with James, that fiction is both most vital and most artful when it is an impression; with Conrad that an "impression conveyed through the senses" might join men's hearts with their worlds, and with Pater, Proust, and Woolf that fiction's Impressionism is even the key to success in *life*.

As an impression, however, fiction was nothing very certain, and so its "total" aspirations came with second thoughts. For its resolu-

tions often seemed like compromises, collapses, or strange combinations. Joining sensation and thought might sensationalize thought or dematerialize sense, and depth of appearance might become depth of falsehood, or at least didactic description. Even worse, the ambiguity that undoes distinction might efface the moments of writing, and leave the Impressionist without a way to work.

What principally gives rise to these doubts about the impression's totality is the force of distinctions that militate against totality at another level. Perceptual moments are never simply or exclusively perceptual; rather, they come associated with sociocultural "moments" – with the distinctions of social life. The distinction between sensations and ideas (as Marxists dreaming of totalities have noted) corresponds to the distinction between classes, or (as feminists since Wollstonecraft have noted) to the distinction between women and men. If the impression promised totality, it did so against the will of distinctions dividing high from low, male from female, civilized from savage – distinctions at least as dear as the dream of perceptual unity.

How the impression entailed such social mixture, and with what result for Impressionism, is the subject of this book. Its first concern, to redefine Impressionism in literature in terms of the theory of the impression and its diverse mediations, leads to a second: to reckon with those collateral mediations that recast Impressionism into new social and political roles.

Taking the impression's double totality as a point of departure from which to revisit the problem of Impressionism in literature, this book intends, finally, to reconfigure Impressionism's cultural history. If Impressionism is a troubled theory of perceptual totality, it is important to the history of modernity, intervening (historically) between romantic unities and modernist fragmentation, and (conceptually) between utopianism and social critique. Such intervention makes it very different from mere pictorial embellishment, for it puts Impressionism in fiction's best possible place between the advent of modernity and its latest alienations.

Through his window at Balbec, the resort that sets the scene for Proust's *In a Budding Grove* (*À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs)*, young Marcel sees a changing picture. When he returns to his room to dress for dinner in the early days of the season, his window shows a sea sharply lined by daylight. As the days grow shorter, the sun

shines more diffusely; the window highlights a violet sky and lets in light that runs livid reflections across the glass panels of the room's mahogany bookcases. To Marcel, these paneled reflections seem like old reliquary paintings dismantled and hung side by side in a modern gallery. Sometimes these separate paintings make a "Cloud Study," a set of pictures of the same sky caught in the different tones of different hours. Sometimes there is uniformity, as the sea fills the whole window, raised up by the sky's matching blue. A few weeks later, the sun sets even before Marcel returns to his room, so that the window shows only a band of red, or, a bit earlier, a sky like pink salmon over a sea of cold blue mullet. These various seascapes come one after another, but they also accumulate, so that throwing himself onto his bed at season's end Marcel finds himself surrounded on all sides by every possible picture of the sea.

After dinner downstairs, he sometimes drives drunk to the casino of a nearby hotel. Alcohol stretches his nerves and opens him wide to intense momentary sensations. Usually so introverted, he finds that drunkenness helps him to "[cling] body and soul to the scent of a woman at the next table, to the politeness of the waiters, to the contours of the waltz that the band was playing."[1] He becomes "glued to the sensation of the moment, with no extension beyond its limits, nor any object other than not to be separated from it" (II: 540). In this state – this state in which "everything is reduced to appearances and exists only as a function of our sublime self" (II: 540) – he forgets all other preoccupations, enthralled by the "extraordinary intensity" of immediate sensuous experience.

Is this literary Impressionism? So it seems: pictorial descriptions of shifting light and color, subjective accounts of sensuous experience, transmission of immediate and evanescent feelings – these are literary Impressionism's specialties. Impressionists, we say, convey intense momentary perceptions, pitching sensibility to heights sublime enough to reduce the world to apparition, but the power they thereby get to "make us *see*" does not show us much more than "reduced" appearances. Impressionists reproduce all the lush kaleidoscopic beauty of Marcel's motile seascape, but this amounts to little more than drunken sights and sounds. So Marcel's Balbec experiences seem Impressionist, in style and in limitation, insofar as Impressionism records unextended sensation and the passing picture.

But Proust himself has other names for Marcel's pictorial and

sensuous experiences. Of his gluing to momentary sensations, Proust writes, "inebriation brings about for an hour or two a state of subjective idealism, pure phenomenalism" (II: 540). "Idealism" and "phenomenalism" are Proust's names for this clinging to pure appearances – reserving "Impressionism," it would seem, to name something else. In his account of the pictures that flood his room at Balbec, Proust recalls that he was too distracted to "receive any really profound impressions of beauty" (II: 524). "As often as not," he writes, "they were, indeed, only pictures [des images]." Only pictures, rather than profound impressions: it would be more accurate to call Marcel's experience here "pictorialist" – and once again let "Impressionist" stand for something else.

Marcel recalls that his phenomenalism lacks "extension." He tells us that his pictorialism lacks "connexion": he remembers the pictures at Balbec as "no more than a selection, made afresh every day, of paintings which were shown quite arbitrarily in the place in which I happened to be and without having any necessary connexion with that place" (II: 525). Here there is no "depth behind the colour of things," no extension beyond the phenomenal (II: 524). Proust distinguishes the arbitrary picture from the "profound impression" it fails to make.

What then, if not pictorial description or subjective sensuous report, is Impressionism?[2]

Impressionism is what occurs when Marcel (or the narrator) *does* receive "profound impressions" – moments that define the very form and focus of Proust's *recherche*.[3] Impressionism occurs, for example, in *Time Regained* when Marcel steps over uneven paving stones. He feels an obscure happiness, a pleasure at returning to a past time in Venice, something like the pleasure brought to him by the taste of the madeleine. Determined in this case, however, not to let the pleasure pass unknown, Marcel prolongs his staggering, hoping that tripping again will reproduce the pleasure, and indeed finds that it leads him onward toward a theory. "Seize me as I pass if you can, and try to solve the riddle of happiness which I set you" (VI: 256): what speaks here is the impression, and the answer to the riddle is Proust's theory of Impressionism.

When Marcel seizes the impression, he discovers lost sensations "waiting in their place," and finds that the pleasure of doing so somehow restores joy to life. But he does not know *why* this experience of two moments at once has "given [him] a joy which

was like a certainty and which sufficed, without any other proof, to make death a matter of indifference'' (VI: 257). He does what he can to prolong the experience, and other impressions come: wiping his mouth with a napkin returns him to Balbec; unfolding the napkin unfolds ''the plumage of an ocean green and blue like the tail of a peacock'' (VI: 259). Marcel finds himself enjoying ''not merely these colours but a whole instant of my life on whose summit they rested.'' ''Extensions'' and ''connections'' now proliferate. What marks the moment is its way of connecting two sensations – the two ''unfoldings'' – and its way consequently of sinking the present into the depth of a lost ''instant.'' Marcel only now truly enjoys Balbec. In this enjoyment he gives a good definition of the impression. The instant he now experiences is one ''freed from what is necessarily imperfect in external perception, pure and disembodied'' (VI: 259). It is not the kind of ''external perception'' that preoccupied him years ago at Balbec, but some pure internal experience found in the common abstract essence of two different moments; it is not phenomenal or pictorial, but the internal essence that two pictures or phenomena might have in common. It bridges varieties and moments of experience.

The impression is an experience freed from external imperfection, attached to its true counterpart in another time and place, and, in that connection, a paradise. Proust means ''paradise'' literally: the impression brings immortality. An impression is an experience of a present moment that is also an experience of a distant one, ''so that the past was made to encroach upon the present and I was made to doubt whether I was in the one or the other'' (VI: 262). The impression is therefore ''extra-temporal,'' it puts Marcel ''outside time,'' and gives him the power to ''rediscover days that were long past, the Time that was Lost.'' It is the ''miracle of an analogy'' that dispels the threat of death. When an impression is in progress, Marcel no longer worries about death, because the impression's miraculous analogy finds something ''common both to the past and to the present'' which ''is much more essential than either of them'' and robs the word ''death'' of its ''meaning'' (VI: 263). Insofar as cheating death is his goal, Proust owes his success to the impression's deathless analogy.

Impressionism is therefore not simply vivid pictures or intense sensations, but Proust's larger aesthetic enterprise. Pictures and sensations certainly participate in it, but as part of the larger process,

which exploits the impression's strange perceptual status to extend, connect, and analogize the moments that lead from pictures and sense to meaning. Impressions may begin in sense, but once the work of the whole *Recherche* is done, they fully cover the range of life from sense to the full apotheosis of mind and heart. As Proust finally defines it, "Only the impression, however trivial its material may seem to be, however faint its traces, is a criterion of truth and deserves for that reason to be apprehended by the mind, for the mind, if it succeeds in extracting this truth, can by the impression and by nothing else be brought to a state of greater perfection and given a pure joy" (VI: 275–76). In the case of the paving stones, the madeleine, and, by extension, countless other moments, an impression is that unit of experience that seems trivial, faint, or superficial, but is nevertheless a "criterion of truth" which, when well apprehended, perfects the mind and its pleasures.

Unlike other terms for aspects of perception and understanding, the impression has no location, but conveys perception and understanding from one point to the next, like a miraculous analogy among distinct perceptual moments. It is neither sensation nor idea; it combines present and past experience, connects the mind to the body, and, in such mediations, attains to immediate illumination more lastingly meaningful than the most timeless concept.

Proust was far from alone in trying for the impression's rhetorical dynamism. Many writers from Walter Pater to Virginia Woolf sought to "know one's own impression as it really is" and proceed onward from there to the best aesthetic judgment and to a life well lived.[4] They thought fiction was "in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life."[5] Like Proust, these writers found in the impression a metaphor for perception through which to aspire to "greater perfection," if not "pure joy."

They also found any number of questions about the metaphor's rhetorical behavior and its practical implications: what, first of all, *is* an impression, if neither sensation nor idea? What exactly is its perceptual status? How is it received, and how transmitted in literary form? And what process intervenes, through which the writer "apprehends" it? It is one thing to aspire to perceptual totality; it is another to theorize it sufficiently to enable some real activity. The Impressionist writers always found that passage through theory to literary act a problem. Walter Pater, for example, may have seen the "single sharp impression" as life's quintessence, but he had no clear

or consistent theory about it. It is "single" and "sharp," but then also something "dissipated" in groups, and "unstable, flickering, inconsistent" (*Renaissance* 187–88). It sometimes has the immediate materiality of a sensation and sometimes the removed discretion of an idea; it is sometimes a focus of Epicurean confidence in the adequacy of human perception, and sometimes a focus of skepticism. This uncertainty becomes definitive; diverse questions, rather than single answers, become key: where between sense and intellect does the impression happen? Does Impressionist experience flow and flicker, or does it strike sharply? Is the Impressionist's world one in which truth is available to perception, or one in which its depths are dark? Is Impressionist experience a matter of receptivity or discretion? Impressionists perpetually give different tentative answers to these questions and then dramatize the controversy that results. In this tendency, the Impressionist temperament worries itself into prominence and discovers the source of its ingenuity.

Notice what such ambiguity does in Proust's account of the larger process through which his *recherche* develops. He describes the impression's value: "For the truths which the intellect apprehends directly in the world of full and unimpeded light have something less profound, less necessary than those which life communicates to us against our will in an impression which is material because it enters us through the senses but yet has a spiritual meaning which it is possible for us to extract" (VI: 273). In this one sentence the impression does many different things. Proust explains its power to pertain, profoundly and necessarily (and with the "connexion" Marcel's pictorial experience lacks), to the real world, a power that comes through a combination of materiality, obscurity, and disruption of human agency. The impression commands attention, grabbing us before our thinking selves get in the way, and delivers life itself; from this sign of life we can extract the "spiritual" meaning that makes life worthwhile and makes art possible. But where and how does this spiritual meaning come in? It is the point of the *recherche* to answer this question, but what kind of answer does it give? Ambiguity surrounds the process through which the impression "enters through the senses," and then obtains to spiritual meaning. It is not clear why the intellect apprehends directly, in "unimpeded light," while impressions, better known for immediacy or superficiality, enter less directly and more deeply. The impression matters because it is not an idea – not a product of intellectualizing, and

therefore more authentic – but also because it is not a sensation – not merely a visual image or sensuous phenomenon. It is not concrete, for it is not brute or basic, and entails generalization; it seems abstract, since it finds the common pattern of different instances; but then again it lacks the detachment of an abstraction. It is, in Proust's words, "real without being actual, ideal without being abstract" (VI: 264). It mediates these standard oppositions, but inconsistently, so that extracting meaning from an impression can only be an unpredictable and exhilarating occupation. Proust can commit himself to "this contemplation of the essence of things," but he must perpetually wonder "how, by what means, was I to do this?" (VI: 269).

The confusion has benefits, manifest in the charm of the paradoxes it produces. Something real but not actual, something ideal but not abstract, has always been fiction's dream. But the confusion also has its hazards; with the exhilaration comes doubt. Proust writes that a writer "goes astray" when "he has not the strength to force himself to make an impression pass through all the successive states that will culminate in its fixation, its expression" (VI: 278–79). Does *he* have the strength? If the impression's material or sensuous aspect requires vitality, will he have the strength to manage it? If the succeeding states are not clearly marked, can any amount of force guide the impression through? Such questions come up explicitly at the end of the *recherche*, as Proust wonders if he has waited too long to start writing. And such questions come up implicitly throughout the work as Proust wonders what perceptual acuities the impression requires. Should an impressionist have strong sensory receptivity, or deep "spiritual" capacities, or acute powers of intellectual extraction – or, if possible, all at once? Collapsing familiar distinctions, the impression demands new powers and new strengths of will.

Virginia Woolf, too, fears that she lacks the strength to force the impression through; Joseph Conrad at times equates such strength with savagery, which he would prefer (paradoxically) to disclaim. But we owe the best work by these and other writers to the impression's dubious demands. When Proust, for example, worries about his power at once to receive and to extract meaning from his impressions, he makes the plan that gives his work its famous scope. The conflicting demands of receptivity and judgment become functions of experience and retrospection: a former self first receives an impression, and a later self receives its later counterpart and does the

work of retrospective analysis. In other words, the search for "lost time" itself answers the demand of Impressionism's "successive states" – as Proust spreads those states out over the broad temporal expanse of his work. In Woolf and Conrad such tactics must make us grateful for the Impressionist's uncertainty. In Woolf, it gives us a number of metafictional meditations on the process through which the writer of "modern fiction" confronts the stuff of "life itself." In Conrad, it gives us insight into the epistemological basis of the confrontation between the civilized and the savage.

First, the impression solves old aesthetic problems; then, the ambiguity of its solutions causes productive uncertainties, recreating old aesthetic problems in new forms. Proust reconfigures the old opposition between sense and intellect as a collaboration between past and present selves, and this self-division appears in the work of every literary Impressionist. And just as Proust makes Impressionist mediation the work of *collaborating* selves, his fellow Impressionists imagine some collaborative relationship, some juncture through which they can have *both* the impression's inspiring mediation *and* some safer division of perceptual categories. Most often, these collaborative relationships join types who best typify the elements of the impression's synthesis. The Impressionist writer tends to cast him- or herself in the role of the intellectual, abstract mind; for his or her counterpart – for the sensuous, concrete element – the Impressionist tends to draw on cultural stereotypes. He or she singles out someone whose social role makes that person a likely source of material vitality. For the "strength" necessary to launch the impression into its series of successive states, the Impressionist writer turns to women and the lower classes, engineering the impression's mediation through their greater apparent sensuous or nonintellectual receptivity. What Proust gains from his meeting of past and present selves, Ford Madox Ford gets from calling upon a peasant cabman, a figure whose impressionability is a figural boost to Ford's own Impressionist discretion. For Conrad, in the Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, this boost comes from a laborer working in the distance; for Woolf, it comes from "Mrs. Brown"; for James, it is a "woman of genius" who, in "The Art of Fiction," helps James explain how the literary impression runs its full perceptual range.

These figures personify the attempt to have the impression's unity while holding onto old distinctions. Impressionist collaboration is a strange compromise – a strange way to have things both ways – and,

like any such compromise, it leads to more trouble. But because of the way it conforms to social cliché, this trouble becomes, like the compromise in Proust, a spur to creativity. It gives Impressionist fiction more generally some of its most compellingly self-conscious plots and structures, as Impressionism becomes a focus of *allegorical* revision. Henry James, for example, for whom the novel *is* an impression, is unsure how to combine the receptivity and discretion that impressions seem simultaneously to demand. So he tends to make full experience a matter of collaboration between the intellectual connoisseur and the receptive "woman of genius." Dissatisfied with that collaboration, James gives it the revisionary attention of plot; his collaborating selves become allegorical figures, as in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), where the problem of marrying brilliant female receptivity to exploitative male sophistication comes to a crisis. That novel's bad marriage between Isabel Archer and Gilbert Osmond becomes the allegorical version of Impressionist collaboration, through which James reconsiders his own aesthetic theory. Similarly, Woolf revisits her Impressionism in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), where Mrs. Brown becomes two different characters and gets the revisionary treatment of feminism and elitism alike. In other writers as well, Impressionism extends to allegorical revision, as each writer lets the questions raised by the impression give structure to the fictions it motivates.

Proust writes that each of us has within us an "inner book of unknown symbols," a book that only we can read, and the translation of which is the only valid basis for art. This book gets its claim to significance from the nature of its relation to reality: "This book, more laborious to decipher than any other, is also the only one which has been dictated to us by reality, the only one of which the 'impression' has been printed by reality itself" (VI: 275). In other words, our deep inner experiences and perceptions are impressions printed obscurely by reality; it takes enormous inner scrutiny to decipher them; and our best books are those that decipher and transmit these impressions in art. "Impression" appears here in quotes because of a pun on printing: the best books are those that reality itself prints, as if there were no interference between that printing and what we see on the page. This of course is the dream of the literary Impressionist – this production of a book which bypasses all the interference that our perceptual categories place between reality and writing. But if the impression inspires that dream it also

keeps it from coming true. For this impression starts to fail as soon as it starts to work: the impression printed by reality's press upon us is hard to decipher because it is alien to us. It prints in a foreign language. The immediate impression takes time to decipher, and so it is not effectively immediate; the immediacy comes only after the work of deciphering, only after some mediation occurs. Just short of paradox, this problem perfectly epitomizes the Impressionist book. Wanting immediately to record reality's impressions, the Impressionist book ends up featuring the limitations of our figures for aesthetic perception, and therefore becomes the record of its own undoing.

As the record of that record, this book returns to a familiar problem – the problem thinkers have sought to solve ever since the "aesthetic" emerged to mediate between human reason and alien nature, between the forms of thought and the content of the world. Moreover the problem is familiarly that of Modernism itself, which famously entails a bid for immediacy which ends up only featuring the by-products of its failure to get it. But if the problem is familiar, the impression's part in it is not. Why so many writers sought to render impressions, and how the effort continues that of early aesthetic and romantic theory; how the impression summed up early Modernism's aesthetic hopes, but could not bear the weight of its sociocultural expectations; how it gave way to Modernism properly, and determined so many of Modernism's plots and themes: these things remain to be explained. It remains to show the impression for the impresario it was.