



**For Philip Weinstein, literary modernism ‘releases narrative from the failed project of knowing’ (Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction [2005]). Investigate the various ways in which novelists have destabilized ideas of knowledge and perception.**

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“**A**rt exists,” wrote Victor Shklovsky, “that one may recover the sensation of life, it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony...to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known...art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object, the object is not important<sup>1</sup>.”

Shklovsky’s statement in many ways sheds light on the artist’s age-long desire to replicate reality in his works. The question that becomes particularly relevant, and especially pertinent to the growth of the modernist movement with relation to its realist forbearer, is what constitutes a representation of art? This perennial question has perpetually forced artists of all manners to continuously reconsider the validity of their own work as an accurate representation of reality. Naturally, this entails a consistent reassessment of what reality is, of what knowledge of that reality constitutes, and what foundations the most effective recreation of that reality relies in artistic expression. Whether or not this reality is recreated in a literal, realistic manner, or a non-literal, abstract manner, it is difficult to contend with the axiom that art’s purpose is to, in some form, express mankind’s experience of reality. Literature is certainly no objection; as Henry James acknowledged in his contention that, ‘the only reason for the existence of the novel is that it does attempt to represent life. When it relinquishes this attempt...it will have arrived at a very strange place<sup>2</sup>.’

His statement could rather simplistically be construed as a clinging to traditional literary movements such as realism; prophetic of the ‘strange place[s]’ one could arguably see modernism or post-modernism as having landed the novel. It is of course, difficult to ascertain James’ exact intention behind these words, but it is reasonable to assert that the act of ‘relinquishment’ to which he refers does not simply envision a shift in literary style or alternate approaches to representations of life, but rather a wholesale abandonment of art’s project to represent, in some form, life; an abandonment that arguably may never happen. James himself acknowledged that ‘humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms’<sup>3</sup>. It is often the dissatisfaction with these forms that inevitably spawn new ones, which in turn will spawn new ones, across a potentially infinite sequential chain.

The form that will be the focus of this essay is of course, the modernist movement of the early to mid-twentieth century, with Conrad’s *An Outcast of the Islands* (hereafter *Outcast*), and Beckett’s *Watt*, conveniently representative of both the dawn and the twilight of the modernist movement.

<sup>1</sup> Victor Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique’(1917), *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, V. Kolocotroni, J. Goldman, O. Taxidou eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) 217-221 p.219

<sup>2</sup> Henry James, ‘The Art of Fiction’ (1894) *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, V. Kolocotroni, J. Goldman, O. Taxidou eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) 147-150 p.147

<sup>3</sup> James (1894) p.148

To understand the manner in which modernist texts rejected traditional forms of perception and representation of reality, it is prudent to turn to the most relevant of those traditions; realism, particularly as realism is frequently seen as, in Jameson's words, 'the straw man designating whatever modernism is not'<sup>4</sup>. Realist literature essentially opined that the best representation of reality was a literal one, a representation that founded itself on surface appearance, the ability to simply point towards pre-existing, objective knowledge of what 'things' were; little more than a 'type of mimetic processing of objective reality'<sup>5</sup>. Realism's efficacy is ultimately a subjective decision, but the early twentieth century saw a growing distaste for such modes of fiction: were objective perceptions of objects sufficient indicators of reality? Was Edward Muir right to say that 'art has *decayed*...into a reflection of [life]<sup>6</sup>? The frustration with realism as a reliable exploration of reality is succinctly spelled out in Peter Brooks' *Realist Vision*; the author summarises the argument that 'if art is an imitation of an imitation (appearances rather than true reality)—then the art that attempts to be most faithful to appearances/surfaces, will be the lowest in value'<sup>7</sup>.

The discontent with realism is essentially what became the breeding ground for the modernist movement (though it should be noted that the reified modernism to which we refer was not a concept that consciously acknowledged itself as such, but what Eysteinnsson describes as a 'construct created by the critical inquiry into a certain kind of text'<sup>8</sup>). Some of the new steps modernist writers took to alter previously existing conceptions of 'knowledge' and reality will be examined closely in the two novels mentioned above. Both novels draw parallels in their reassessments of representing reality; however, those parallels tend to be forged more due to the nature of their respective departures from realist literature than stylistic similarities. That is; Beckett's *Watt*, for instance, being a Late Modernist text, indulges in more radical recastings of previous literary styles, and by definition also serves to reflect upon early manifestations of modernism. In this manner it is more than simply a reaction to a realist system that was not 'working', but serves as an analysis and even critique of the possibly futile project of attempting to attain a sense of knowing and perceiving reality through literature, and even questions the attempt to undertake this process through language itself. Conrad's *Outcast*, on the other hand, being an early modernist text itself, is less radical in its escape from realistic portrayals of reality, but an escape nonetheless. Whilst Conrad, the 'proto-modernist' may have vehemently challenged the claim, *Outcast* is almost indisputably an Impressionist work; one of the earlier styles to step away from offering an objective reality that could 'readily be reformulated in sociopragmatic terms'<sup>9</sup>.

One of the most important stylistic departures from traditionally realist text can be observed in the transition from omniscient narrators into narrators that are closely married to an individual character's own consciousness. We shall examine the critical importance of consciousness-writing and the opportunities it affords to the casting of reality as an individual experience subject to the filter of human consciousness further on, but for the moment it is appropriate to simply examine the stylistic differences between the two forms of narration. A passage from Eliot's *Middlemarch* portrays a realist approach to the revelation of a character's inner mind:

Rosamond could not doubt that this was the great epoch of her life. She judged of her own symptoms as those of awakening love, and she held it still more

<sup>4</sup> Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1992) p.183

<sup>5</sup> Eysteinnsson (1992) p.192

<sup>6</sup> Edward Muir, 'What is Modern?' (1918), *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, V. Kolocotroni, J. Goldman, O. Taxidou eds (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998)

<sup>7</sup> Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (Yale University Press, 2005) p.7

<sup>8</sup> Eysteinnsson (1992), p.100

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.187

natural that Mr Lydgate should have fallen in love at first sight of her...Rosamond, though no older than Mary, was rather used to being fallen in love with; but she, for her part, had remained indifferent and fastidiously critical towards the fresh sprig and faded bachelor<sup>10</sup>.

The interpretation of Rosamond's thoughts is little more than an external commentary, relying on the reader's innate understanding of phrases such as 'awakening love' and 'great epoch'; they reveal nothing particularly original about Rosamond's mindstate nor do they indulge in any intrusion into that mindstate for clarification. Impressionist works, whilst not necessarily progressing towards first-person narration or stream-of-consciousness writing, make greater efforts to capture a character's thoughts as they might be played out in the latter's mind;

And he would have to drag that limp weight on and on through the darkness of a spoiled life. Horrible! Of course he could not abandon her and the child to certain misery or possible starvation. The wife and the child of Willems. Willems the successful, the smart, Willems the conf...Pah! And what was Willems now? Willems the...He strangled the half-born thought, and cleared his throat to stifle a groan<sup>11</sup>.

The difference between the two extracts is considerable. Whilst *Outcast* visibly retains residues of traditional narrative writing, particularly given its third-person narration and occasional passages more typical of an omniscient narrator, it is clear that Conrad commits himself to capturing, not the character's mood as much as his very thoughts; the 'little voice' in one's mind. The above passage illustrates this to the extent of even playing out a half-thought that Willems breaks off in frustration. Transition from the narrative into thought can frequently be observed in the novel via the shift in register from the literarily-charged narrative to simple colloquial rhetoric; a narratorial line preceding the above extract, for example, clearly shows a marked difference from Willems' thoughts;

'The pink-crested cockatoo started, on his appearance, into clumsy activity and began to climb laboriously up and down his perch, calling 'Joanna' with indistinct loudness<sup>12</sup>,

Beckett's *Watt* takes the representation of thought to further lengths. Whilst Watt's mind is largely the focal point of the entire novel, Watt is not the narrator. We discover that the narrator is a fellow inmate of Watt's who identifies himself briefly as 'Sam' (a pointed reference to the author himself), and is relaying Watt's story as the latter presented them to him. This does inevitably raise the question of narrator-reliability, but it is probably worth little to assess this; especially given the novel's own focus on the sheer futility of reasonably conveying reality through another's mind. Beckett's representation of thought, however, is of a far more extreme nature than Conrad's. Watt's mental ramblings are not curtailed according to what is traditionally seen as relevant to the plot; the stream of consciousness fires itself energetically along oblique tangents and often shackles narrative time to Watt's personal 'human time' for long, irrelevant and unedifying periods of the novel. This device, which shall be examined in more detail further on, represents Beckett's attempt to reflect Watt's 'whole mind', which, as Miller points out, is 'not *just* the rational [part]<sup>13</sup>,

<sup>10</sup> George Elliot, *Middlemarch* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Co. Ltd, 1972) p.110

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Outcast of the Islands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) p.22

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.22

<sup>13</sup> Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction and the Arts Between the World Wars* (California: University of California Press, 1999) p.173

The inclusion of a character's individual thoughts and point of view in a novel naturally was a step forward with regards to knowing a character, and more significantly, knowing their 'world'. If you could not witness their own thoughts, unadulterated (though only to an extent, as Beckett makes clear) by the narrator, to what extent could you otherwise know them? The introduction of character-consciousness desublimation, in addition to simply deepening ones understanding of a character, also served to open up a crucial new mode of reference in modernist literature: that of the importance of individual perception.

Often described as the 'prototype of the modernist "hero"<sup>14</sup>, the protagonist of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* foreshadows the concept of intensely individual perception and understanding of reality that was to become a prominent theme of modernist writing almost forty years later. The reclusive, mentally-ill narrator recounts incidents from his life from the confines of his basement in an intensely one-sided, epistemological fashion that allows him to make a firm purchase on reality and thereby make it his own. His interpretation of events is skewed at minimum, allowing him to construct his own reality which is effectively forced upon the reader with little room for argument. It is this style of narration that allows the protagonist—and consequently, the non-critical reader—to interpret a simple shoulder-barge with an officer as an act of mortal offense, upon which he broods, till he culminates his own revenge with a similar affront, transformed by his mind into a victory of an epic pseudo-duel existing only within his own deranged perception of reality.

*Notes from Underground* provides a strong example of the gulf between reality (or simply objects) and one's knowledge of that reality; a knowledge that is invariably to be transmitted to the reader. But such a knowledge necessitates that the narrative be focused upon a character's consciousness, for the character can be deluded and mistaken where an omniscient narrator can not.

We will briefly return to pre-modernist thought, before examining the ways in which *Watt* and *Outcast* explore subjective knowledge of the world. In his book *Paradox and Desire*, David Watson describes the type of innate objective indicators of reality (discussed previously with relation to realism) as a

'tissue of codes support our knowledge of the vrai... what Barthes refers to as the 'doxa', the body of received social wisdom and stereotypical knowledge which speaks in the discourse of truth<sup>15</sup>,

Watson asserts that, according to the realist framework, a novel must refer to this doxa to make sense and be 'readable', and that a novel that transgresses such codes is necessarily '*invraisemblable*'. Conrad, in addition to such views, also faced the scientific positivism movement and an era in which facts were considered paramount to obtaining knowledge, and that only rational, fact-based knowledge could be discerned as the truth. Naturally, for Conrad, whilst such scientific approaches to reality may have had a monopoly on fact, they certainly had no monopoly on truth.

One of Conrad's literary weapons against the ideas of fact and objectifiable knowledge was the common impressionist technique of describing objects not as the necessarily were, but as they were perceived by characters; often reverting to abstract symbolism which Conrad had hoped would lend the text the 'plasticity of sculpture, the colour of painting and the magic suggestiveness of music<sup>16</sup>:

The smooth darkness filling the shutter-hole grew paler and became blotchy with ill-defined shapes, as if a new universe was being evolved out of sombre chaos.

<sup>14</sup> Eysteinnsson (1992) p.29

<sup>15</sup> David Watson, *Paradox and Desire In Samuel Beckett's Fiction* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1991) p.5

<sup>16</sup> Wendy B. Faris, "Dehumanization" of the Arts: J.M.W. Turner, Joseph Conrad, and the Advent of Modernism, *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 41 No.4 (Autumn 1989) 305-326 p.305

The outlines came out, defining forms without any details, indicating here a tree, there a bush.<sup>17</sup>

The darkness itself qualifies for no objective existence beyond Lingard's own individual perception; exists as nothing save what his conscious filters through to the reader. Interestingly, the simile of the 'new universe' emerging from 'sombre chaos' is almost certainly a self-conscious reference to the genre of text Conrad was aspiring to develop in order to make sense of the perception of reality as precisely that: a sombre chaos. Conrad takes this gradual, individualistic perception of reality to further lengths with what John G. Peters refers to as his stylistic technique of 'primitive perception'<sup>18</sup>; involving the delayed decoding of an object as the character's perception gradually acknowledges what it actually is. An apt example in *Outcast* is Willems' dream-like vision of a head slowly emerging from the 'empty blackness'. Gradually, in a typically Conradian subjugation of mechanical time to human time, the head is attributed a vague figure; the outlines and facial features gradually becoming known across the next page, till the form is abruptly processed and delivered by Willems mind;

'[Willems] perceived suddenly that it was his own death that was groping towards him'<sup>19</sup>

Though the object was simply Omar; a blind old man, Willems perceives it gradually as a monstrous form emerging from the shadows, and ultimately as death itself (ironically, when Willems finally does face his death, he fails to perceive it at all, even as he is actually dying). Such primitive sight features frequently in Conrad's work, and often the ultimate decoding is long delayed beyond its first appearance, demonstrating essentially the subjective nature any such knowledge of an object takes.

*Watt* spills less ink querying the subjective nature of an object based upon visual perception and makes very little use of descriptive language or imagery. Rather, Beckett's approach to the same problem is situated within the psychological and linguistic realms of the mind. Beckett strives to subvert the idea of language possessing any sort of objectivity, in that, as Levy explains, 'language [can not] actually point to something real unaffected by it'<sup>20</sup>. A case in point is Watt's dilemma over calling a pot a 'pot':

'Looking at a pot...it was in vain that Watt said, Pot, pot...For it was not a pot, the more he looked, the more he reflected, the more he felt sure of that, that it was not a pot at all. It resembled a pot, it was almost a pot, but it was not a pot of which one could say, Pot, pot and be comforted'<sup>21</sup>.

Watt's longing for 'semantic succour' is repeatedly met with failure as he struggles to define reality using language alone; he cannot reconcile the world with the linguistic markers that are supposed to refer to it, and thus, he has trouble distinguishing reality from his own attempts to understand and determine it, as we shall see further on. *Watt* has been the object of considerable scrutiny and much has been discussed in an attempt to 'understand' the novel itself (despite Beckett's own warnings against this in the addenda). The novel frequently undoes traditional, idiomatic speech and toys with recognisable syntactical constructions that readers would be comfortable as interpreting as part of the linguistic doxa of society. Miller veers away from this interpretation of Beckett's 'conscious purification of language',

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Outcast of the Islands*, p.182

<sup>18</sup> John G. Peters, *Conrad and Impressionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p.41

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Outcast of the Islands*, p.114

<sup>20</sup> Eric P. Levy, *Beckett and the Voice of Species* (New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1980) p.28

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: John Calder Ltd., 1976) p.78

attributing the mutilation of familiar idiom simply to Watt's 'loss of autonomy'<sup>22</sup>. His argument is flawed at best, as it fails to acknowledge that firstly, Watt is not the narrator (despite, presumably, Sam's attempts to faithfully reconstruct Watt's thoughts), and secondly, outside of Watt's consciousness, Beckett continues to perform such counter-intuitive semantic gymnastics, for example, the conscious restructuring of the concept of 'kissing' in Part I:

the lady's tongue was in the gentleman's mouth... The lady now removing her tongue from the gentleman's mouth, he put his into hers<sup>23</sup>

Watt may not be present, but his choice of language certainly is. Beckett throughout the novel relentlessly subverts the ability of language to provide clear, distinct markers that point to reality, ultimately entirely destabilising the entire project of using language, that is to say, literature, to know, and thus assume, as Weinstein phrases it, 'a viable purchase on the exterior world'<sup>24</sup>.

In both novels, the inability to satisfactorily define objects outside of the self within the obsolete framework of the doxa feed into the ultimate themes of the difficulties in interacting with the overall reality they inhabit with any objectivity, or as in the case of *Watt*, with any success. Where Watt struggles to even know the world in which he lives, the characters of *Outcast* do have a knowledge of this world, but this knowledge is acutely filtered through the individual. The subjectivity of perception and knowing, as we have seen, is dependant on the shifting narratorial consciousness as the narrator switches focus from one character to the next. Where the white Europeans frame their dialogue with distinctly Christian oaths and references to God, the Muslim characters, even outside of dialogue and consciousness, are represented as existing in a reality tinged with Islamic imagery and world-views, even though ultimately Conrad anchors both approaches to life to the same reality as Babalatchi reminds Lingard of their commonalities in faith;

Yes; swearing to me by the name of your  
God and ours that he would burn me.<sup>25</sup>

The contrast between the white men and the non-whites serve as a powerful device that Conrad uses to blur the distinctions between the subject and the object, the self and the other, showing one cannot know the other without affecting it or being affected by it. For example, as in the *Heart of Darkness*, despite the differences between the Chinese, Arab and Malaysian races, the Westerners group all non-Westerners into one group; what Peters describes as the 'others-unlike-self'<sup>26</sup>. We see quickly that the Westerners' knowledge of themselves and their own identities can only be constructed by these Others; by what they are not. Willems, despite his marriage choice, is no exception, indeed, before Conrad presents his name, he presents his identity construct:

He fancied that nothing would be changed, that he would be able as heretofore tyrannise good-humouredly over his half-caste wife, to patronise loftily his dark-skinned brother-in-law, who... was so humble before the white husband of the lucky sister (1)

We learn soon after that Willems' brother-in-law is anything but humble to the former, but the passage tellingly reveals Willems' own subjective understanding of his status and the

<sup>22</sup> Miller (1999), p.203

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, p.6

<sup>24</sup> Phillip Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction* (Cornell University Press, 2005) p.5

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Outcast of the Islands* p.22

<sup>26</sup> Peters (2001), p.65

reality in which he exists, one that contrasts sharply with the non-Westerners' perception of their white counterparts as mad dogs and dwellers of hell.

In *Watt*, the eponymous character is less sure of his reality, and is conscious of his own struggle to define it. Watt's attempts to understand the world in which he lives, unlike Conrad's characters, are not refined or honed through contact with others, but those others prove as impregnable to Watt as he does to them. Watt's quest for information, Wulf suggests<sup>27</sup>, is represented by his attempts at understanding Mr Knott and his household. Watt's excessive mental workings may seem entirely irrational, but the contrary is actually true; through his title character, Beckett seeks to demonstrate the futility of attempting to understand the world through rationality and the 'principle of sufficient reason'<sup>28</sup>. In essence, Watt is actually a hyperrational personality<sup>29</sup>, which ultimately brings him no closer to obtaining a clear perception of reality. When Watt is given the simple directive to feed a dog Knott's leftover food, Watt proceeds to compile a colossal list of options before him; all quite rational and seemingly the result of straightforward logical deduction. The list spans approximately twenty pages and even Watt's solution fails to effectively remedy the situation, resulting in Watt simply losing interest as he moves floor.

Such lists are abundant throughout *Watt*, and are usually characterised by Watt examining (almost) every possible combination of events that might transpire during his service in the household. Beckett described this somewhat reductively as the 'comedy of exhaustive enumeration'<sup>30</sup>. But the scrutiny of all available possibilities serves a powerful purpose in throwing Watt's and therefore the reader's ability to acquire definite knowledge into turmoil. If we consider Watt's attempt to relay Knott's typical mode of dress;

The clothes that Mr Knott wore, in his room, about the house, amid his garden, were very various, very very various...As for his feet, sometimes he wore on each a sock, or on the one a sock and on the other a stocking, or a boot, or a shoe, or a slipper, or a sock and boot, or a sock and shoe, or a sock and slipper, or a stocking and boot, or a stocking and a shoe (...etc. etc.)<sup>31</sup>

Watt continues to mathematically detail Knott's dress, movement, furniture arranging habits and physical appearance for a further eleven pages beyond the above passage. By listing such a gargantuan range of possibilities and never definitively selecting one, the text confounds any ability to construct a 'linear causal chain' that could lead to any intelligibility of reality whatsoever, as one might receive according to a system that relied on doxal law. For all of Watt's attempts to understand and secure his perception onto a stable pole of objectivity, he progresses nowhere beyond his concessions of page 147

What had he learnt? Nothing.

What did he know of Mr Knott? Nothing.<sup>32</sup>

Watt's frustrated attempts at using either rationality and language to gain a grasp upon reality, symbolised quite consciously by his own speculation on the circle and centre, each consistently and hopelessly in search of a grounding with the other, ultimately end in failure. He fails to separate reality from his own conscious attempts to understand and experience it, and he eventually surrenders his quest for knowledge and attempt at finding any significance to reality.

<sup>27</sup> Catherine Wulf, *The Imperative of Narration* (Brighton: Sussex University Press, 1997) p.33

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36

<sup>29</sup> John J. Mood, 'The Personal System—Samuel Beckett's *Watt*', *Modern Language Association*, Vol.86 No.2 (March 1971) 255-265 p.256

<sup>30</sup> Mood (1971), p.259

<sup>31</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, p.200

<sup>32</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Watt* p.147

*Watt* and *The Outcast of the Islands* represent two rather different types of novel. Whilst both can be distinctly referred to as modernist texts, they differ radically in their form, narrative and characterisation. This ultimately begs the question of why they are both considered as belonging to, if not the same genre, the same movement. The answer lies, as we have seen, primarily in their rejection of tradition. Both novels make it clear that the old, realist movement of literature was insufficient in its ability to 'capture' reality in a novel, and that buying into doxa and innate societal knowledge was a poor way of truly representing life, and thereby withheld the reader from truly being able to understand, and to know.

That modernism released 'narrative from the failed project of knowing' is quite evident considering the feeling towards the old ways of knowing that accompanied and spurred on this new movement. Whether or not modernism turned the project of knowing into a success, however, is another question, the answer to which may change again and again as we question what it really is to represent our experience of reality in art.



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