The ‘power of the written word’: Literary Impressionism, Politics and Anxiety

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Joseph Conrad’s second book of reminiscences, *A Personal Record* (1912), includes a story about the novel *Nostromo* (1904), and what happened when he was interrupted during the writing of it by a neighbour:

. . . I had, like the prophet of old, ‘wrestled with the Lord’ for my creation, for the headlands of the coast, for the darkness of the Placid Gulf, the light on the snows, the clouds on the sky, and for the breath of life that had to be blown into the shapes of men and women, of Latin and Saxon, of Jew and Gentile . . .

‘How do you do?’

. . . The whole world of Costaguana . . ., men, women, headlands, houses, mountains, town, *campo* (there was not a single brick, stone, or grain of sand of its soil I had not placed in position with my own hands); all the history, geography, politics, finance . . . all that had come down crashing about my ears. I felt I could never pick up the pieces – and in that very moment I was saying, ‘Won’t you sit down?’

The wrestling with his creator is necessary so that he can be a creator himself. The passage recapitulates the Genesis story, with Conrad separating the earth from the waters, light from the darkness, and breathing life into his characters. He also has to invent what those characters create; to imagine their civilisation, society, history, politics, economics and so on. To that extent it is about the *author’s* quasi-divine power. It is about power *within* that invented world; as Conrad says, its ‘politics’ and ‘finance’. But it is also about powerlessness; being dragged by the interruption out of the world of his imaginative activity, and being required to say things like ‘Won’t you sit down?’ rather than curse the person who had unwittingly caused the devastation of the imagined world.
This vignette thematises some of the concerns that matter most to the group of writers who met around the Kent/Sussex coast at the turn of the century: Henry James, Stephen Crane, Conrad and Ford Madox Ford. These, and some of their contemporaries – Chekhov, Proust, Mansfield, Woolf – are increasingly being described as Literary Impressionists, notably in the work of scholars such as Paul Armstrong, Jesse Matz, Tamar Katz, John Peters and Adam Parkes.2

These writers did not all subscribe to being part of the same movement. This lack of express collective purpose has been taken by some critics to cast doubt on the coherence of literary impressionism as either a term or a movement.3 But while Ford was the most prolific advocate of both method and movement, he, Conrad, Crane and James shared a sense of art as primarily concerned with the rendering of impressions. Ford developed this idea in the books he wrote on James and Conrad, and in his essays on them and other writers.

Impressionism in literature has also been subjected to a trenchant ideological critique. As Adam Parkes puts it, paraphrasing Fredric Jameson: ‘Literary impressionism . . . gestures toward political engagement merely to indicate what it wants to escape.’4 This essay aims to counter both these arguments about coherence and escapism, by considering the ways in which James, Conrad and Ford are all preoccupied with what happens when you put together ideas of writing and ideas of power.

I argue that impressionist fiction engages with the political not only by thematising power in society (as Nostromo does) but also through thematising the power of words, of narrative, of ideas. Conrad furnishes the central case, because he is the object of some of the most influential theoretical critiques of impressionism. But the arguments apply equally to James, whose fiction everywhere articulates the hope of imaginative freedom in the face of tyranny, abuses, conspiracies, deceptions and exploitations, if generally played out in the domestic scene rather than wider social life; and to Ford, who regularly overlays the personal with the political; and whose Parade's End (1924–8) I have elsewhere subjected to a comparable analysis of its radical engagement with ideas of power, authority and control.5 The aim here is to show that rather than impressionism constituting a withdrawal from politics, it establishes the impression as a site of the political; that rather than revelling in perception and experience for their own sakes, or for art’s sake, literary impressionism represents perception and experience of power; that rather than amounting to a solipsistic liberal individualist fetishising of consciousness, impressionism’s interest in psychologies is as anxious subjects and objects of power.