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0521609445 - Modernism and the Fate of Individuality: Character and Novelistic Form from Conrad to Woolf

Michael Levenson

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Modernism and the fate of individuality examines the complexities and transitions of the idea of the self in the modernist period. Michael Levenson addresses the problem of individuality, structuring his argument around detailed readings of eight major novels by Conrad, James, Forster, Ford, Lewis, Lawrence and Woolf, and his discussion engages with the extensive body of modern theoretical writing on the topic. The book addresses issues such as the crisis of liberalism, the challenge to Eurocentrism, the advance of bureaucracy, and the contest between men and women. Central to its concerns is the problem, in locating the self within the entanglements of a community, of defining formal concepts whilst preserving a moral value.

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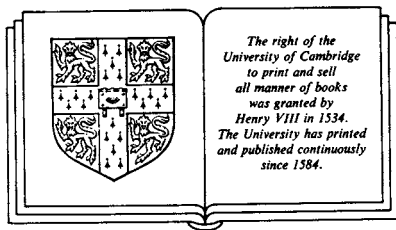
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MICHAEL LEVENSON

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For Karen, my fate

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Preface

This thing we name the individual, this piece of matter, this length of memory, this bearer of a proper name, this block in space, this whisper in time, this self-delighting, self-condemning oddity – what is it? who made it? Ours may be the age of narcissism, but it is also the century in which ego suffered unprecedented attacks upon its great pretensions, to be self-transparent and self-authorized. It discovered enemies within and enemies without; walls within, mirrors without; it no longer perched securely on the throne of the self; it no longer sat confidently at the center of the social world. The wandering “I” is the protagonist of this study whose chief interest is to read eight big novels (big even when they are little) which move between the longing to recover some figure of the self, to preserve some vessel of subjectivity, and the willingness to let it go, to release the knot of subjectivity.

Accordingly, the main current of argument in this book will follow the diverse fortunes of individuality in modern English fiction: its changing verbal aspect, its historical limits and symbolic resources, its political dispossession, cultural displacement and psychological self-estrangement, its uneasy accommodation of mind and body, its retreat from the world and its longing for community. Cast in the broadest terms, this study attempts to chart the lambent movements of post-Romantic subjectivity as it endures the heavy pressures of modern history and modernist literary experiment. As the subtitle implies, the issue that organizes this general concern is the relationship between character and form, and this relationship has two pertinent aspects.

The first involves the relation of fictional character to narrative form. In the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, James

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observes that in the course of his novel *Maggie Verver* “duplicates, as it were, her value and becomes a compositional resource . . . as well as a value intrinsic.” The idea of a “duplication” emphasizes one distinction that my title means to suggest, the distinction between the “intrinsic” values that characters are made to embody and the “compositional” laws to which they must conform. The issue becomes most sharply defined in the fiction of James, Ford, Lewis and Joyce, but it has bearing on all the works to be considered in this study. One of the great concealed dramas of the modern novel is the struggle between certain enduring traits in literary character and certain innovations in narrative structure, the contest between a notion of fictional self inherited from nineteenth-century precedents and the new literary forms designed to contain it. The Romanticism of Stephen Dedalus, the liberalism of Margaret Schlegel, the Victorianism of John Dowell – to name just a few instances – stand in uneasy relation to the forms which surround them, and part of my historical claim is that the modern novel had to negotiate between conventions of character sustaining traditions and principles of structure attacking them. I shall argue, that is, that the struggle between character and form often takes the aspect of a conflict between tradition and modernity and that one way to understand this moment of transition in the history of the novel is in terms of nineteenth-century characters seeking to find a place in twentieth-century forms.

The second aspect of the problem concerns the relation of character, not to narrative form, but to social form. A repeated movement in these novels is the portrayal of a dense web of social constraints followed by the effort to wrest an image of autonomous subjectivity from intractable communal norms. The motif of exile is a conspicuous expression of this concern, but what is most notable about the aspiration to exile is how frequently it leads, not to an escape from the community, but to a withdrawal to its interstices. This common pattern establishes a subject that will be prominent in the study, the ambiguous boundaries between “I” and “Other,” the chief thematic problem here being the attempt to construct a figure of individuality from within the rigid confines of community.

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Although I describe this emphasis separately, in fact the pressures of social structure stand in close and provocative analogy to the pressures of literary structure. The dislocation of the self within society is recapitulated, reenacted, reconsidered, in the dislocation of character within modernist forms. And yet part of what makes these novels so tense and nervous is that they pursue their formal disruptions of character even as they so often sustain nostalgic longing for a whole self. A set of works that engage in self-conscious assault on a notion of character persistently associated with the nineteenth century continue to cherish nineteenth-century ideals of the autonomous ego, free and integral.

One methodological principle should be acknowledged here, namely that the strategy for reading these works is to invert the usual metaphoric relation between text and context, according to which “context” resembles a large backdrop behind and above and around the players who move within its horizons. It is true, or at least figurally well established, that novels participate “in” history, but it is at least as figurally significant that history unfolds “in” novels. The style of reading here is to see these novels as dense environments which have incorporated an historical artifact – seen in one description as a concept of individuality dislocated by social pressures; seen in another as a traditional method of characterization unsettled by new formal commitments – and which adopt revealingly diverse techniques for digesting the history they have swallowed. The crisis of liberalism, the challenge to Eurocentrism, the advance of bureaucracy, the contest between men and women – these are problems that enter my work as they entered these novels, but it should be said from the first that they receive nothing like a degree of attention proportionate to their magnitude. Their mention gives only a telegraphic sign of the full-scale social history that I once thought could stand among these pages.

It should also be said that this study refuses the artifice of thematic coherence, and that on those several occasions when an issue other than the fate of individuality rises to prominence it is not (at least not often) because the author has a subtle argumentative connection well in mind; it is because the author

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happens to find it interesting. To the question that will occasionally occur to a reader, “How does he intend to fit *that* into the larger structure of the book?” the answer often is, “He doesn’t.”

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Always there are many incalculable debts, and always the greatest is to my family. But with this book I owe just as much to my graduate students at the University of Virginia. There are too many to name (too many called Ann, too many called Richard) but not too many to remember. At every stage they nodded and frowned, chatted and swatted, encouraged and chastened. From out of the fertile context they created, my ideas developed first into essays. Early versions of the material appeared in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, *Studies in Short Fiction*, *Modern Language Quarterly*, *Twentieth Century Literature*, *Papers on Language and Literature*, and *Modern Language Studies*. The essays then returned to the classroom, and under new generous scrutiny they reformed themselves until they settled into the chapters that follow. The quality of this book aside, the process of its composition has been for me a justification of academic life. Speech and writing, private thought and public exchange, intellectual detachment and emotional engagement, all flowed together and carried me in their stream. For their splendid teaching I thank my students.