

What Is It Like to Be Conscious? Impressionism and the Problem of Qualia

Paul Armstrong

Consciousness has become a hot topic in the cognitive sciences because of the problem of “qualia,” the dilemma of how to explain the first-person, lived experience of a sensation such as “seeing red.”¹ This is also a central concern of impressionism. The term “impressionism” is so heterogeneous that it might seem to defy definition, ranging from the painters in Monet’s school to the literary impressionists who led the novel’s transition from realism to modernism (especially Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and Ford Madox Ford).² What “impressionism” generally designates, however, is an interest in developing representational techniques that would do justice to first-person perceptual experience. As one recent study observes, “literary impressionism is usually described as a set of stylistic and formal strategies designed to heighten our sense of individual perceptual experience,” and the term “impression,” although variously defined, “signifies the mark of sensory experience on human consciousness.”³ How to render the subjective experience of a sensation or a perception with paint or words is the distinctive challenge of impressionist art, and the difficulties (perhaps impossibility) of attaining this goal are responsible not only for the heterogeneity of impressionism but also for its many paradoxes and contradictions.

Historically, the impressionist project began with a desire to radicalize the aesthetic of realism by exposing and thematizing its epistemological conditions of possibility. In painting as well as literature, the impressionists became impatient with the conventions of representation because they were inconsistent with the workings of consciousness and consequently seemed artificial. The paradox of

impressionism, however, is that the attempt to render faithfully the perceptual processes through which consciousness knows the world thwarts mimetic illusion building. The result is art that can seem strange, baffling, and unrealistic and that calls attention to itself as art (the formal qualities of the picture plane or the textuality of narrative discourse). This paradox points the way to the abstraction and anti-mimetic textual play that characterize the aesthetic of modernism. The reasons for these changes have to do with the elusiveness of consciousness as a target of representation. Impressionism gives rise to modernism because of the instabilities of an aesthetic of qualia.

The term “qualia” is associated with the philosopher Thomas Nagel’s memorably titled essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” in which he argues that conscious experience cannot be adequately explained in the objective terms of science. Nagel’s critique is aimed at the reductionist program of neuroscientists such as Francis Crick who, defiantly proclaiming “you’re nothing but a pack of neurons,” contends that “the neural correlate of ‘seeing red’” is objectively definable.⁴ Nagel is skeptical that first-person experience can be captured by the terms and concepts of the physical sciences because, he argues, “every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view, and it seems inevitable that an objective, physical theory will abandon that point of view.” As he observes, “even to form a conception of what it is like to be a bat (and a fortiori to know what it is like to be a bat) one must take up the bat’s point of view.”⁵ Whether humans without sonar echolocation can ever do this is perhaps doubtful, but it is worth noting that “point of view” is also a literary term often associated with impressionist art. Whether and how a point of view (of a human, if not a bat) can be rendered in a work of art so that the viewer or reader can imaginatively recreate its lived immediacy is the central question of impressionism.

Cognitive literary critics have recently argued that neuroscience has much to learn from literature because of its understanding of phenomena like qualia that defy objective, physical analysis.⁶ When David Lodge argues that “literature constitutes a kind of knowledge about consciousness which is complementary to scientific

knowledge,” it is no accident that the example he chooses is a novel by Henry James. After the cognitive scientist in Lodge’s novel *Thinks . . .* explains “the problem of consciousness” (i.e., “how to give an objective, third-person account of a subjective, first-person phenomenon”), the other lead character who not coincidentally happens to be a creative writer replies: “Oh, but novelists have been doing that for the last two hundred years,” and as proof she recites from memory the opening lines of *Wings of the Dove*. As Lodge observes, “we read novels like *The Wings of the Dove* because they give us a convincing sense of what the consciousness of people other than ourselves is like.”⁷ This accomplishment is not unique to impressionism (the other example Lodge’s writer gives is a poem by Andrew Marvell), but the impressionist aesthetic is of special cognitive interest because it represents not primarily the “what” of the world but the “how” of its perception by consciousness. This thematization of perception lays bare processes, problems, and paradoxes that are involved whenever literature and other arts attempt to render subjective experience.

These experiments are instructive because the access literature provides to qualia is not as straightforward as Lodge suggests. The artistic representation of experience is not, after all, a matter of simply offering up consciousness for direct inspection or of immersing us fully and immediately in another world. The “like” in “what it is like” can only be rendered by the “as if” of aesthetic staging.⁸ When literary works from whatever genre or period attempt to recreate what it is like to be someone other than ourselves, they can only do so by using styles, conventions, and techniques that are not identical to the subjective experience they seek to represent. Hence the paradox of Lodge’s example that Henry James renders the consciousness of Kate Croy not immediately and directly but through a recognizable, finely wrought, and notoriously controversial literary style.

Although similarly an attempt to capture the immediacy of perceptual experience, impressionist painting is also an identifiable style – so much so that what was originally a protest against established artistic methods would eventually become a convention

and even (some might say) a cliché (avant-garde works turned into calendar art). Lodge credits the invention of “free indirect style” with giving novels extraordinary power to open up inside views into other lives (see *Consciousness* 37–57). Not simply natural, immediate, and transparent, however, this technique is a contingent historical construct – a stylistic convention that only emerged through a long history of literary experimentation and that can be deployed in a variety of ways for different purposes.⁹ Literature may have powers to render what it is like to be conscious that the objective measures of science lack, but there is still a gap between the “as” of the “as if” recreation of another point of view in art and the immediacy of first-person consciousness. This gap is both disabling and empowering. It prevents literature from ever completely transcending the divide between one consciousness and another, but it also makes it possible for art to stage versions of other lives and to experiment with different ways of doing so.

Impressionism exposes this gap by attempting to overcome it, and this is why it is such a paradoxical phenomenon. Consider, for example, the contradictory aims and effects of Monet’s painting *Impression: Sunrise* (1872), often cited as emblematic of the impressionist aesthetic (see Figure 1). An attempt to render a visual sensation at a particular moment, under specific conditions of light and atmosphere, this painting exemplifies Zola’s description of impressionism as “a corner of nature seen through a temperament.”¹⁰ Aiming to capture accurately and precisely the experiential effects of a moment, it is both objective and subjective. Hence the paradox that impressionism has been regarded as not only more “scientific” but also more personal and phenomenal in its approach to representation than the conventions of realism it challenges.¹¹ The claim to greater realism of Monet’s painting of the sunrise is both its truth to the atmospheric conditions of the moment and its truth to the perceiver’s visual sensations. In a further important complication, however, it can only represent this perceptual experience in an arrangement of colored brushstrokes, and so another contradiction of this painting – one that looks forward to modernism’s focus on the picture plane – is that its atmospheric, sensational effects depend on



Figure 1 Monet, *Impression: Sunrise* (1872)

relations between color contrasts (red versus blue), shapes (the intense, off-center circle of sun and the sketchily indicated ships), and brushstrokes (vigorously and roughly applied in the sky and the water) that emphasize its tangibility as a made object (even signed and dated by its maker in the lower left corner).

The effects of these contradictions on the viewer are paradoxical and double, simultaneously immediate and reflective. Monet's painting is both an incitement to vicarious immersion in a momentary sensation and a call to reflect on the cognitive conditions it simulates as well as on the artistic techniques whereby it criticizes the unnaturalness of realism. As the art historian James Rubin perceptively notes, "Monet's techniques concentrate on purely visual phenomena to create a fascinating interplay between presence and absence – an interplay that calls attention to representation and illusion."¹² Oscillating between presence and absence, this painting seeks to render a first-person experience that it is not and cannot be, and its effort to create a simulacrum of experience foregrounds the material,

technical means through which it seeks to do so. This contradiction has the paradoxical effect of promoting aesthetic reflection about the formal features of the work (the abstract play of colors on the picture plane that is a harbinger of modernist abstraction) even as it incites the viewer to recreate an “as if” doubling of the original moment of sensation – a simulacrum of the moment that both is and is not what Monet experienced. The qualia of the sensation of the sunrise is both there and not there in Monet’s painting, and this duality sets in motion an oscillation between sensuous immersion and epistemological, aesthetic reflection.

These oppositions are evident in the conflict between two famous beholders, John Ruskin and E. H. Gombrich, who disagree about impressionism because they emphasize contrary poles of its defining paradoxes. According to Ruskin’s well-known formulation, “the whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify, as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight.”¹³ Ironically and inevitably, this account of primordial perception prior to the imposition of conventional categories relies on metaphors – fanciful comparisons to how a child or a blind person would see that are not strictly accurate. As the neuroscience of vision has discovered, the rear visual cortex will atrophy if it fails to receive stimuli during critical periods of early life that allow it to organize itself.¹⁴ Without establishing patterns of response to orientation, movement, and color, the visual brain loses its ability to make neuronal connections, and so a blind person who was suddenly granted vision literally could not see. Even if Monet’s painting is not how either a child or a sightless person would perceive the scene, Ruskin’s comparison is nevertheless evocative because it uses the “as if” of figurative language to suggest in memorable terms what it is like to have an original sensation.

Famously objecting that “the innocent eye is a myth,” Gombrich insists on the role of “schemas” in perception and painting: “seeing is never just registering. It is the reaction of the whole organism to the patterns of light that stimulate the back of our eyes.”¹⁵ This is indeed

a central doctrine of contemporary neuroscience, which understands vision as a to-and-fro process of assembling inputs back and forth across the visual cortex. In ways Gombrich insufficiently credits, however, impressionism also entails purposive play with pattern. Monet's painting relies on gestalts and constructs for its effects, not only in the formal alignment and juxtaposition of shapes and colors on the picture plane, but also in the viewer's ability to recognize features of the scene (the ships and the harbor, the rising sun, its reflection on the water) that both are and are not "there." The oscillations between presence and absence characteristic of the viewing experience are not evidence of formlessness but are the product of an interplay of figures and patterns. Ruskin and Gombrich are both wrong as well as right about what Monet is up to. Ruskin correctly understands that impressionism is an attempt to render qualia, but Gombrich is right that to do so it must deploy the aesthetic and cognitive resources of the "as if" to suggest "what it is like."

Similar paradoxes characterize literary impressionism, as is evident in the notoriously contradictory pronouncements of its most prominent advocate, the novelist and critic Ford Madox Ford. According to Ford, "any piece of Impressionism, whether it be prose, or verse, or painting, or sculpture, is the record of the impression of a moment."¹⁶ The goal is to produce "the sort of odd vibration that scenes in real life really have; you would give your reader the impression . . . that he was passing through an experience," with "the complexity, the tantalisation, the shimmering, the haze, that life is."¹⁷ As Ford and his sometime collaborator Joseph Conrad recognized, "Life did not narrate, but made impressions on our brains. We in turn, if we wished to produce on you an effect of life, must not narrate but render impressions" (*Conrad* 194–95). Following this advice, impressionist narratives such as *The Good Soldier* and *Lord Jim* disrupt temporal continuity, jumping back and forth across time to offer disconnected perspectives on events and characters that can be bewildering because they resist our attempt to build patterns. Ford claims that "the object of the novelist is to keep the reader entirely oblivious of the fact that the author exists – even of the fact that he is

reading a book" (Conrad 199). But these disorienting techniques would seem to have the opposite effect. Rather than promoting discursive invisibility, they call attention to the constructedness of the text and to the cognitive processes its disjunctions dramatize.¹⁸

As with the oscillations between presence and absence set in motion by *Impression: Sunrise*, this contradiction foregrounds the fact that qualia cannot be given directly and immediately in painting or literature but can only be recreated, simulated, and staged through manipulations of the "as if." Hence Ford's claim that "the Impressionist must always exaggerate" ("On Impressionism" 36), advice which would seem to fly in the face of his doctrine that the author and the text must disappear. Distortion is inevitable in painting and literature, however, because representation necessarily renders something "as" something other than itself. Rather than seeking to disguise this dilemma through mimetic illusion making, the disruptions of impressionism expose it.

Impressionism consequently has much in common with Viktor Shklovsky's well-known aesthetic of defamiliarization. The purpose of art, according to Shklovsky, is "to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception" and thereby to "recover the sensation of life, . . . to make one feel things, to make the stone *stonny*."¹⁹ Similar to the oscillations set in motion by impressionism, the effects of such defamiliarizing techniques can be paradoxical – not only promoting a sense of presence by revivifying perception, but also disrupting immersion by promoting reflection about how habit blunts sensation, and in doing so calling attention to artistic forms that resist naturalization. This doubleness is akin to the effects of distraction and bewilderment that Ford describes as characteristically impressionist:

Indeed, I suppose Impressionism exists to render those queer effects of real life that are like so many views seen through bright glass – through glass so bright that whilst you perceive through it a landscape or a backyard, you are aware that, on its surface, it reflects the face of a person behind you. For the whole of life is really like that; we are almost always in one place with our minds somewhere quite other. ("On Impressionism" 41)

This is an experience of doubling, an oscillation between presence and absence – simultaneously a heightening of perception and an interruption of automatic processing that prompts the viewer to reflect about an odd optical effect, a peculiarity that is aesthetically interesting even as it foregrounds otherwise unnoticed aspects of consciousness. This duality both renders qualia – what it is like to have a visual sensation – and calls attention to the way in which the staging of “what it is like” requires a manipulation of the “as” (here figured as an experience of decentered consciousness as if we were in two places at once).

If the “as” of representation prevents the impressionists from presenting qualia immediately and directly, it also allows them to foreground and explore various aspects of perceptual experience, and the differences in how they do this are reflected in the multifariousness of the impressionist aesthetic. James, Conrad, and Ford develop characteristic representational strategies that dramatize three distinct aspects of perceptual life: how patterns of consistency building and gap filling define a particular point of view, how understanding is a temporal process of anticipation and retrospection, and how the relation between consciousnesses is paradoxically both intersubjective and solipsistic (complementary perspectives on a shared world riven by an unshareable my-ownness). Their techniques dramatize each of these dimensions of consciousness in ways that are correlated to what cognitive science reveals about the workings of the brain. Complementary to the kind of knowledge science can provide, their narrative experiments stage for the reader simulacra of what these different aspects of perceptual life are “like,” even as they call for reflection about their epistemological and aesthetic implications.

On the first point, it is a basic principle of cognitive science that the brain knows the world by constructing patterns. Despite centuries of visual metaphors that depict the mind as a “mirror,” the sensation that we are watching a full-color picture that corresponds point-by-point with the external world is an illusion – a complex illusion that the brain constructs so efficiently that we rarely notice the hermeneutic machinery that produces it. As neuroscientist Semir Zeki notes, “what we see is determined as much by the organisation

and laws of the brain as by the physical reality of the external world.”²⁰ Visual inputs are filtered and differentiated according to the variable sensitivities of the receptors on the retina (rods and cones) and of the pathways transporting them (large- and small-ganglion cells that lead to the optic nerve). These separate, distinctive signals are then structured into patterns by the reciprocal interactions among visual systems within the cortex. For example, color does not exist as such in the external world but is a complex construction of constancies out of a flux of inputs that depends on the sensitivities of our sensory apparatus and interactions between neurons across the cortex. Different areas of the rear visual cortex are specialized to detect orientation, motion, and color and to identify objects and faces, and vision is a complex process of “binding” (to use the customary neuroscientific term) that synthesizes the activity of anatomically distinct, relatively autonomous regions of the brain. Because of the interactions produced by these reciprocal connections, the brain makes it possible for us to see by combining parts into meaningful patterns. Vision is literally hermeneutic – a circular, recursive process of assembling parts into wholes.

What this constructive activity is “like” in the experience of consciousness is a defining preoccupation of literary impressionism. James makes “point of view” a central principle of novelistic composition because of his fascination with the constructive powers of consciousness – how we know the world by “guessing the unseen from the seen” and composing patterns from a limited perspective that leaves some things hidden and indeterminate.²¹ Readers of *What Maisie Knew* or *The Ambassadors* are given a simulacrum of what this composing power is “like” – an “as if” experience of seeing the world as Maisie or Strether do but also noting ironically what they probably fail to observe or too imaginatively fill out (so that we share the child’s bewilderment even as we understand the narcissistic machinations of adults that baffle her, and we are not as surprised as Strether is when he learns that the “virtuous attachment” between Chad and Madame de Vionnet is not purely chaste). By thematizing a character’s perspective on the world and dramatizing how it is constructed according to certain assumptions, habits, and

expectations, James allows us to immerse ourselves in another consciousness (experiencing what it is like to share their point of view) even as we also observe its characteristic limitations and blind spots and notice the disjunctions between its hold on the world and other points of view that would construe things differently (the adults who cruelly laugh at Maisie's naïve questions, or Woollett's worries that Strether has been carried away by the Parisian Babylon). This doubleness calls attention to the constructive powers of cognitive pattern making that we ordinarily do not notice in everyday perception and that traditionally realistic fiction tacitly employs to portray objects and characters by unfolding a series of aspects that display them. James's experiments with point of view make perspectives a theme in themselves and playfully shuttle his readers back and forth between inhabiting another consciousness from the inside and observing with ironic detachment the defining strengths and vulnerabilities that characterize its constructive activities.

Conrad's and Ford's ambiguous, fragmentary narratives deploy different techniques for similar purposes. In *Lord Jim*, the inconsistencies between the different perspectives Marlow receives on the titular character resist synthesis into a coherent point of view and consequently leave him frustrated and bewildered: "The views he let me have of himself were like those glimpses through the shifting rents in a thick fog – bits of vivid and vanishing detail, giving no connected idea of the general aspect of a country. They fed one's curiosity without satisfying it; they were no good for purposes of orientation."²² Marlow's glimpses of Jim remain fragmentary and disconnected, and their refusal to synthesize foregrounds the drive to build consistency among elements in a pattern that is necessary for lucid comprehension. In Ford's impressionistic masterpiece *The Good Soldier*, the similar inability of the narrator Dowell to reconcile different versions of events as he revisits and revises his many mistaken assumptions and beliefs also leaves him baffled: "I don't know. I leave it to you," he repeatedly tells the reader even as his narrative draws to its inconclusive close.²³ The notorious ambiguities of both of these novels challenge and defy the reader to do a better job of fitting evidence into consistent patterns. In wondering

whether to trust or doubt their narrators' explanations and interpretations, we replay their uncertainties in our own experience. In this respect these texts resemble those ambiguous figures that can be construed as either a rabbit or a duck or as an urn or two faces – figures that fascinate cognitive scientists because they play with and lay bare the reliance of consciousness on patterns to make sense of the world.²⁴

The impressionists' strategies of narrative fragmentation also call attention to the temporal dynamics of consciousness. Consistency building in reading, as in life, is a temporal process of projecting expectations about pattern that are then modified, refined, or overturned. As the psychologist and proto-cognitive scientist William James liked to say, "we live forwards, . . . but we understand backwards."²⁵ Neuroscientist Francisco Varela has shown how the lived experience of time's to and fro is correlated to how neurons fire (how they generate "action potentials") and to how neuronal assemblies form and dissolve.²⁶ Neuronal assemblies come and go in a cycle of excitation and relaxation that exhibits a particular periodicity. This rhythm is a natural property not only of single neurons but also of collections of brain cells, and it is the neural correlate of our consciousness of time passing. The temporality of brain rhythms makes it possible for different regions of the brain to coordinate their activities. When we listen to music at a concert or watch a music video, for example, regions of the brain interact from the far corners of the cortex: auditory neurons in the mid-brain, motor and sensory areas across the central sulcus (as we tap our feet or recall playing an instrument), the visual cortex (as we coordinate what we see and what we hear), and areas of the cerebellum and the amygdala (as we respond emotionally). After an assembly is synchronized through a wavelike pattern of oscillatory excitation, it relaxes and must form again – or be replaced by another assembly. This pattern of phases corresponds neurologically to the rhythms of the passing moment as we read or listen to music.

Ford and Conrad elevate the to-and-fro process of temporal assembly from a cognitive necessity into an aesthetic principle. Arguing in the name of a heightened realism, Ford claims that

“what was the matter with the Novel, and the British novel in particular, was that it went straight forward, whereas in your gradual making acquaintanceship with your fellows you never do go straight forward” (*Conrad* 136). By keeping a rough parallel between the chronology of presentation and the sequential order of events, the novels Ford criticizes assist the reader’s efforts to discover and build patterns and thereby actually encourage the immersion in an illusion on which realism depends. Ford’s point, however, is that this continuity disguises the processes it manipulates. In getting to know any state of affairs, we “never do go straight forward” inasmuch as we are always going back and forth between expectations about what lies beyond our horizons and corrections of previous guesses in light of evidence that has since come into view. By making the bewildered reader work harder and more reflectively than with continuous narration to build coherent patterns out of the scattered bits and pieces that a Dowell or a Marlow offers, Ford and Conrad transform anticipation and retrospection from implicit cognitive processes into explicit issues in the experience of reading.

James dramatizes the temporality of understanding through different but related strategies that attempt to stage what it is like for a point of view to revise itself. Where Ford’s and Conrad’s readers must go back and forth to clarify retrospectively what a fragmentary presentation may initially leave mysterious, James typically invokes a kind of temporal double vision that joins together simultaneously the perceptions of a present moment and future acts of backward-looking reflection. At key dramatic moments when unexpected complications take Strether’s consciousness by surprise, James depicts in tandem the immediacy of his present experience and the mediating musings of the future that reflect back on it as part of the past. For example, when Strether unexpectedly encounters Chad and Madame de Vionnet in the countryside, the narrative soon shifts from the simple present to a complex temporal double vision that holds two pictures against each other simultaneously – the embarrassments of the moment that everyone awkwardly attempts to cover over and our hero lost in thought on his bedroom sofa until the early hours of the following morning: “He was to reflect later on and in

private . . . Strether was afterwards to remember . . . Strether was afterwards to remember further . . . he was to remember further still.”²⁷ This conjoined rendering of the scene itself and Strether’s retrospective reflections on its various meanings and implications is a more complicated version of Isabel Archer’s famous all-night vigil in chapter 42 of *Portrait of a Lady*, where James depicts the present of self-consciousness as it looks back over the past. In the temporal double vision of *The Ambassadors*, James plays with how we live forward but understand backward by simultaneously showing Strether doing both.

The literary impressionists play similar double games with the reader in order to stage what it is like to share the world with other consciousnesses. Any experience of reading entails a doubling of my consciousness with the intentionality held ready by the text that enacts what Merleau-Ponty memorably calls “the paradox of the alter ego.” As he explains, “the social is already there when we come to know or judge it” because the intersubjectivity of experience is primordially given with our perception of a common world. And yet, Merleau-Ponty continues, “there is . . . a solipsism rooted in living experience and quite insurmountable” because I am destined never to experience the presence of another person to him- or herself.²⁸

Neuroscience has proposed three ways of explaining the paradox of the alter ego, and the emerging consensus is that all three probably work in combination in the brain’s complicated, messy interactions with the social world.²⁹ The first approach, known as “theory of mind” (ToM) or “theory theory” (TT), focuses on our capacity to attribute mental states to others – to engage in “mind reading” through which we theorize about the beliefs, desires, and intentions of others that we recognize may differ from our own. The second approach, “simulation theory” (ST), argues that we do not need “theories” to understand the simple, everyday behavior of others but that we instead automatically run “simulation routines” that put ourselves in their shoes by using our own thoughts and feelings as a model for what they must be experiencing. Critics of ST claim it begs the question of how the simulator senses what is going on in the other person, but an answer may be provided by “mirror neurons”

that were first discovered in the motor cortex of the macaque monkey. These neurons fired not only when the animal performed a specific action but also when it observed the same action by another monkey or an experimenter – not only when the monkey grasped a piece of food, for example, but also when the scientist did the same thing. Experiments have shown that mirroring processes are evident not only in the motor cortex but also across the brain, in regions associated (for example) with emotion, pain, and disgust. All three of these theories are attempts to explain the acts of doubling “me” and “not me” that human beings routinely, automatically engage in as they negotiate their way through a paradoxically intersubjective and solipsistic world.

James thematizes this doubling in his experiments with point of view. By projecting the reader into the world of the character whose perspective he recreates – into Maggie’s suffering but scheming consciousness in the second half of *The Golden Bowl*, for example, as she learns to read the inwardness of other characters while holding herself opaque – James gives us a rare view of another life from the inside, experienced by another for herself. Simulating and mirroring her consciousness, the reader experiences as she does the gap between her perspective and other points of view that remain obscure and mysterious to varying degrees. Theorize as we might about other minds, we can never know, for example, whether Adam Verver shares his daughter’s awakening, or whether Charlotte realizes she is defeated even though she pretends victory. This double movement of transcending and reencountering the gap between selves dramatizes in the reader’s own experience the paradox of the alter ego and stages what it is like to theorize, simulate, and mirror other consciousnesses.

More radical than James in their skepticism that no amount of doubling can ever close this gap completely, Ford and Conrad develop narrative techniques that call attention to the otherness of the other that makes intersubjective relations also solipsistic. Their works return again and again to the residue of opacity left over by any act of theorization, simulation, or mirroring. In *The Good Soldier*, for example, Dowell affirms his intersubjective bond

with others by imagining a “silent listener” with whom he will share his reflections, only to complain almost immediately that this presence is absent and no help at all: “You, the listener, sit opposite me. But you are so silent. You don’t tell me anything” (*Good Soldier* 19). If the collapse of everything he had taken for granted about his world has shown Dowell how isolated he was even as he thought himself a member of a community, he seeks through writing to overcome his newfound solipsism only to discover it again because we, his readers, cannot converse with him. Marlow similarly reaches out to another only to be confronted with the barriers dividing us: “It is when we try to grapple with another man’s intimate need that we perceive how incomprehensible, wavering and misty are the beings that share with us the sight of the stars and the warmth of the sun. It is as if loneliness were a hard and absolute condition of existence” (*Lord Jim* 137). By multiplying Marlow’s informants and dramatizing their irreconcilability, Conrad opens Jim’s world to us only to emphasize its impenetrability. According to James, reading a literary work “makes it appear to us for the time that we have lived another life – that we have had a miraculous enlargement of experience.”³⁰ More complex and paradoxical than this formulation suggests, however, the experience of reading impressionist fiction is a simulacrum of the odd if everyday sensation that other consciousnesses are both complementary and inaccessible to our own.

One of the curiosities of impressionist experimentation in both painting and literature is that it must resort to such complicated technical innovation in order to render the seemingly simple, self-evident presence of consciousness to itself. But this contradiction is also a defining characteristic of modernism. For example, after denouncing the “tyranny” of plot and the “ill-fitting vestments” of conventional representation that fail to capture life’s “luminous halo,” Virginia Woolf memorably demands: “Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall.”³¹ She recognizes as well, however, that rendering first-person experience in all of its immediacy requires techniques and conventions, and

so she worries that her generation will be condemned to “a season of failures and fragments,” “smashing” and “crashing” and “writing against the grain,” because “the Edwardian tools are the wrong ones for us to use” and more adequate techniques have yet to be invented.³²

Hence the seeming paradox that the effort to render “what it is like” to be conscious produces a panoply of stylistic innovations, from Woolf and Joyce to Faulkner and beyond, a technical variety that the overused umbrella term “stream of consciousness” drastically oversimplifies. The issue is not which of these modernists’ distinctive modes of stylistic experimentation gets the “luminous halo” of qualia right.³³ Is “Time Passes” a more accurate representation of the “atoms” than “Sirens” or “Oxen of the Sun”? Is Benjy’s narration a more faithful rendering of consciousness than Quentin’s or Jason’s – or Mrs. Ramsay’s, or Leopold Bloom’s, or his wife Molly’s? The absurdity of these questions suggests that this is not the right way to frame the problem. What the experiments of the modernists and the impressionists reveal, rather, is that the quest to render the “what it is like” of qualia requires the deployment of the “as if” of representation and that this is open to endless variation.

The point is not that James, Conrad, and Ford are more or less “right” about consciousness but that their different technical experiments with figuring “what it is like” to be conscious use the “as if” to stage in the reading experience various dimensions of cognitive experience that neuroscience explores from its different perspective. The variability of the “as” in the “as if” and the “like” in “what it is like” is what gives rise to the variety of stylistic experimentation through which impressionism and modernism stage and explore consciousness, never getting “it” quite right because they are always staging what it is “like,” a process of experimentation, innovation, and variation that makes representation historical. Literature can never fully capture “what it is like” to be conscious any more than science can, but the experiments of impressionism and modernism can help us to understand why this is so, even as they attempt to transcend the limits of the “as if” and convey an experience that is beyond their grasp.

Notes

1. For example, see Nicholas Humphrey, *Seeing Red: A Study in Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
2. These figures are the primary focus of this chapter, but the term “impressionism” is sometimes extended to include any writer who attempts to render subjective experience, from Walter Pater and Stephen Crane to Joyce, Proust, and Woolf. For example, see Maria Elisabeth Kronegger, *Literary Impressionism* (New Haven, CT: College and University Press, 1973).
3. Adam Parkes, *A Sense of Shock: The Impact of Impressionism on Modern British and Irish Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), ix.
4. Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 3, 9.
5. Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 442, 437, 442n. For an instructive commentary on Nagel’s argument, see Jaegwon Kim, *Philosophy of Mind*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2011), 267–71.
6. For example, see Alan Richardson, “Defaulting to Fiction: Neuroscience Rediscovered the Romantic Imagination,” *Poetics Today* 32 (2011): 663–92.
7. David Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 16, 29–30. He quotes his novel *Thinks . . .* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 42–3.
8. See Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
9. See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), and Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).
10. Quoted in James H. Rubin, *Impressionism* (New York: Phaidon, 1999), 48.
11. See Mary Tompkins Lewis, “The Critical History of Impressionism,” in *Critical Readings in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism*, ed. Mary Tompkins Lewis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 1–19.
12. Rubin, *Impressionism*, 115.
13. James Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing* (London: Smith, Elder, 1857), 6n (original emphasis).
14. See the classic experiments of Thorstein N. Wiesel and David Hubel on the impact of visual experience on the development of the visual cortex, especially “Extent of Recovery from the Effects of Visual Deprivation in

- Kittens,” *Journal of Neurophysiology* 28 (1965): 1060–72. On the neuroscience of vision and its aesthetic implications, see my book *How Literature Plays with the Brain: The Neuroscience of Reading and Art* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 54–90.
15. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 298.
 16. Ford Madox Ford, “On Impressionism” (1913), in *Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Frank MacShane (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 41.
 17. Ford, “On Impressionism,” 42; Ford Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1924), 204.
 18. The analysis here and in what follows develops arguments originally introduced in my book *The Challenge of Bewilderment: Understanding and Representation in James, Conrad, and Ford* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).
 19. Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique” (1917), in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 22, 12.
 20. Semir Zeki, *Inner Vision: An Exploration of Art and the Brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.
 21. Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” in *Partial Portraits* (1888) (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 12.
 22. Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (1900), eds. J. H. Stape and Ernest W. Sullivan II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 62.
 23. Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (1915), ed. Thomas C. Moser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 282.
 24. See Semir Zeki, “The Neurology of Ambiguity,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 13 (2004): 173–96. Also see the chapter “The Neuroscience of the Hermeneutic Circle,” in my *How Literature Plays with the Brain*, 55–76.
 25. William James, *Pragmatism* (1907) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 107. He attributes this phrase to “a Danish thinker” whom his editors identify as Søren Kierkegaard.
 26. See Francisco J. Varela, “The Specious Present: A Neurophenomenology of Time Consciousness,” in *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*, eds. Jean Petitot et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 266–314. Also see the chapter “The Temporality of Reading and the Decentered Brain” in my *How Literature Plays with the Brain*, 91–130.
 27. Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (1903), in *The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (New York: Scribner’s, 1909), 22:259–60.

28. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 362, 358.
29. See the chapter “The Social Brain and the Paradox of the Alter Ego,” in my *How Literature Plays with the Brain*, 131–74.
30. James, “Alphonse Daudet” in *Partial Portraits*, 227–8.
31. Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction” (1921), in *The Common Reader: First Series* (1925), ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt, 1984), 149–50.
32. Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924), in *The Captain’s Deathbed and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1950), 112, 114, 116, 117.
33. The prominent cognitive narratologist David Herman makes this mistake when he characterizes modernist techniques as a teleological progress toward the insights of the “enactivist” theories of cognitive science. See his essay “1880–1945: Re-minding Modernism,” in *The Emergence of Mind: Representations of Consciousness in Narrative Discourse in English*, ed. Herman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 243–72.