Impressionism as an artistic movement is well known in painting and music, but it is also well adapted to fiction. To study Conrad’s Impressionism, it is helpful to begin with the best-known essay on Impressionism in literature, Ford Madox Ford’s “On Impressionism” (1913), a chatty, diffuse, but nevertheless important piece written by a distinguished novelist (best known for *The Good Soldier*, 1915). Instead of defining Impressionism, Ford muses on it—the essay is itself too impressionistic to offer a solid statement of what Impressionism is. But it is possible to tease out of it a coherent account (all quotations are from http://archive.org/stream/poetrydrama02monruoft/poetrydrama02monruoft_djvu.txt):

1. “Impressionism is a thing altogether momentary.” Impressionist prose is temporally shallow: the writer does not pause to reflect in order to offer a nuanced, gradated picture of the object to be treated, but instead delivers the thing as sense organs relay it at a given instant. Ford illustrates his point as follows:

   Sings Tennyson:
   
   “And bats went round in fragrant skies,
   And wheeled or lit the filmy shapes
   That haunt the dusk, with ermine capes
   And woolly breasts and beady eyes.”
   
   [*In Memoriam* 95]

   Now that is no doubt very good natural history, but it is certainly not Impressionism, since no one watching a bat at dusk could see the ermine, the wool or the beadiness of the eyes. These things you might read about in books, or observe in the museum or at the Zoological Gardens. Or you might pick up a dead bat upon the road. But to import into the record of observations of one moment the observations of a moment altogether different is not Impressionism.

2. “Impressionism is a frank expressionism of personality.” The method prizes idiosyncrasy, quirkiness, distortion, exaggeration: there is never any attempt to erode private truths into non-controversial statements of fact.

3. Impressionism is polyphonic. Many different processes of thinking and perceiving are whirling around in the Impressionist’s head at the same time, and the writer’s task is to make these simultaneous mental operations co-present in the text:

   It is . . . perfectly possible that a piece of Impressionism should give a sense of two, of three, of as many as you will, places, persons, emotions,
all going on simultaneously in the emotions of the writer. It is, I mean, perfectly possible for a sensitized person, be he poet or prose writer, to have the sense, when he is in one room, that he is in another, or when he is speaking to one person he may be so intensely haunted by the memory or desire for another person that he may be absent-minded or distraught. And there is nothing in the canons of Impressionism, as I know it, to stop the attempt to render those superimposed emotions. Indeed, I suppose that 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 a 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.

4. Impressionism is collage. Because the method stresses the momentary, literary Impressionism has a certain spatial and visual aspect: a given scene in an Impressionist text is to be apprehended all at once, as the eye apprehends a picture. Ford says that the Impressionist writer would like to

\begin{quote}
Attain the sort of odd vibration that scenes in real life really have; you would give your reader the impression that he was witnessing something real, that he was passing through an experience. You will observe also that you will have produced something that is very like a Futurist picture not a Cubist picture, but one of those canvases that show you in one corner a pair of stays, in another a bit of the foyer of a music hall, in another a fragment of early morning landscape, and in the middle a pair of eyes, the whole bearing the title of “A Night Out.” And, indeed, those Futurists are only trying to render on canvas what Impressionists tel que moi [such as I] have been trying to render for many years.
\end{quote}

Because Ford is writing as late as 1913, he can derive his visual metaphors for literary Impressionism from art well beyond the ken of the Impressionist painters of the 1870s and 1880s. Cubism was about six years old, and Futurism was about four years old. For Ford, literary Impressionism is a forward-looking moment, not something indebted to Monet (still painting water-lilies at Giverny at the time when Ford was writing).

Ford Madox Ford’s friend and sometime collaborator Joseph Conrad (and, by Ford’s account, an Impressionist), also considered that his artistic method was informed by contemporary science. In 1898 he and some friends watched a demonstrated of the new-fangled apparatus the X-ray machine, invented by Röntgen three years earlier:

\begin{quote}
All day with the ship owners and in the evening dinner, phonograph, X rays, talk about the secret of the universe and the nonexistence of, so called, matter. The secret of the universe is in the existence of horizontal waves whose varied vibrations are at the bottom of all states of consciousness. If the waves were vertical the universe would be different. This is a truism. But, don’t you see, there is nothing in the world to prevent the simultaneous existence of vertical waves, of waves at any angles; in fact there are mathematical reasons for believing that such waves do exist. Therefore it follows that two universes may exist in the same place and in the same time—and not only two universes but an infinity of differ-
ent universes—if by universe we mean a set of states of consciousness; and note, all (the universes) composed of the same matter, all matter being only that thing of inconceivable tenuity through which the various vibrations of waves (electricity, heat, sound, light etc.) are propagated, thus giving birth to our sensations—then—emotions then thought. Is that so?

These things I said to the Dr while Neil Munro stood in front of a Röntgen machine and on the screen behind we contemplated his backbone and his ribs. The rest of that promising youth was too diaphanous to be visible. It was so—said the Doctor—and there is no space, no time, matter, mind as vulgarly understood, there is only the eternal something that waves and an eternal force that causes the waves— (The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, ed. Frederick Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 94-95)

Like Ford, Conrad makes much of the word vibration: the human consciousness is a kind of tingling, and the purpose to art is to transmit that tingle as accurately as possible to the reader. And like Ford, Conrad has a polyphonic understanding of the mind’s operation: in fact he goes much farther than Ford by speculating that reality is polyphony of multiple and interpenetrating universes. (In 1901 Conrad and Ford co-wrote a novel, The Inheritors, in which emotionless “Fourth Dimensionists” try to overrrun the earth—a theme that, in later years, H.P. Lovecraft would find especially attractive.) In his fiction Conrad tries repeatedly to show the essential tenuousness and undularity of the physical world.

One year after he saw the bones of his own hand in the Röntgen machine, Conrad published Heart of Darkness, a book that dismantles many of the familiar structures of reality: when the universe turns fully diaphanous, you see through into its far side, a sort of inflected darkness. Of course it isn’t easy for a novelist to break down objects into pure vibration, primary sense data, in the way that Monet did—streaks and specks, a pattern of firing of the rods and cones of the retina. But it is possible, in prose, to record raw impressions of shape, color, glints and gleams of light, roarings and distant murmurs of sound. The Africa of Heart of Darkness is exceedingly deficient in recognizable objects, but exceedingly full of sense-data, perceptions that blast or tease the spectator. The Impressionistic method allows Conrad to appeal to his readers with great sensuous immediacy, but leaves the reader uncertain about how to constitute all these data into a definite world.

Conrad’s landscapes are impressionist in that they often struggle to present the eye’s whole infinite field of vision, unimpeded by particularities. This effect can be seen even on the novel’s first page:

The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark about Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, and town on earth. (Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness and The Congo Diary, ed. Owen Knowles (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), p. 3)

It is all very painterly: one can almost see the swirling brushstrokes in this panorama of sea and sky, and indeed expressions like “luminous space,” “red clusters of canvas,”
“gleams of varnished sprits,” “haze,” “vanishing flatness,” almost sound like cues to the painter. I imagine that Conrad was thinking of the style of J.M.W. Turner, but the methods of Monet’s *Impression: Sunrise* aren’t far from the implied methods of this word-painting. Except for a few red triangles, the oceanscape has been swept bare of things; it is the perfect introduction to this objectless novel, this book that deconstructs, dematerializes the world into a few vehement expressive gestures.

Conrad’s most Impressionistic device is his peculiar habit of refusing to name something until after he’s described it—it’s his way of imitating processes of cognition, where first you have raw sense data, then you grasp at some idea that regularizes and classifies the sense data as a finite object. Consider for example the attack on the steamship:

> Sticks, little sticks, were flying about—thick: they were whizzing before my nose, dropping below me, striking behind me against my pilot-house. All this time the river, the shore, the woods, were very quiet—perfectly quiet. . . . We cleared the snag clumsily. Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at! (p. 55)

The sticks stick around in Marlow’s brain for a few sentences, until at last the long thin cylinders get recognized for what they are: arrows. For Marlow, for anyone, the passage from *stick* to *arrow* would take much less than a second; but in the distorted, elongated time-frame of the attack, in which adrenaline stops the heart, stops time itself, the instant of recognition is agonizingly prolonged. We seem caught in a sort of epistemological caesura, in which the transformation of impression into knowledge seems indefinitely suspended. Monet spoke of trying to “see the world as a pattern of nameless colour patches—as a might a man born blind who has suddenly regained his sight.” In this sense, *Heart of Darkness* is a blind man’s novel, a novel of color patches slowly acquiring names.

One more example of this sort of deferred noun: Marlow raises his binoculars to study Kurtz’s ruined compound in the jungle:

> I made a brusque movement, and one of the remaining posts of that vanished fence leaped up in the field of my glass. . . . its result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow. . . . These round knobs was not ornamental but symbolic . . . I had expected to see a knob of wood, you know . . . there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids—a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole. (p. 71)

Here Marlow/Conrad is consciously teasing us by deferring the noun, *shrunken head*, until we’ve reached a decent tingle of anticipation of the horror. Conrad is a master of suspense on every level: on the level of plot, he suspends the sight of Kurtz, the horrified and horrifying European who has enslaved the local populace, until we’ve stared at a huge question mark for many pages; on the level of the sentence, he suspends the subject until we’ve had a lot of disturbing predicates.