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The Good Soldier by Ford Madox Ford

Edited Book

How to cite:

Haslam, Sara ed. (2010). The Good Soldier by Ford Madox Ford. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.wordsworth-editions.com/collection/classics/book/title/good-soldier>

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Introduction

When reviews of *The Good Soldier* began appearing, very soon after its publication in 1915, they focused on either the immorality, or the structure, of the tale. The ‘slow growth’ of events, the ‘little by little’ revelation of secrets all the way to the ‘nightmare quality’ of the final scenes, the ‘sex-morbid’ atmosphere and the end of ‘clean innocence’ exercised the critical faculties of those who read the book for the press. If it was judged harshly, as it was by some, it was on the same terms – because the story was ‘unpleasant’, or even ‘dangerous’. And the American novelist Theodore Dreiser wished Ford Madox Ford had asked him for advice, whereupon he would have suggested that he ‘begin at the beginning’, which to his mind was where Colonel Powys seeks to marry off his daughters, rather than with John Dowell’s opaque view of things. The *Morning Post* offered what might stand as a reasonable, objective summary of these critical opinions on 2nd April 1915: ‘*The Good Soldier* is a challenge, in matter and method alike’.¹ Ford himself would have welcomed such a description. His ‘method’ – of narration – is self-consciously innovative, as we shall see. The ‘matter’ is likened by the narrator in the opening pages to the end of a civilization. While this may be a claim too far, the story he tells is certainly an exposure of the rot at that civilization’s heart – as well as in the hearts of those who maintain it – and Ford said he had heard it, or some of it anyway, ‘from Edward Ashburnham himself’.²

In *The Spirit of the People* (1907), the last of the three books about Englishness that Ford wrote in the early 1900s, he introduces us to the character who becomes Edward Ashburnham, and his wife, and his ward:

I stayed, too, at the house of a married couple one summer. Husband and wife were both extremely ‘nice people’ – ‘good people’, as the English phrase is. There were also living in the house a young girl, the ward of the husband, and between him and her – in another of those singularly expressive phrases – an attachment had grown up. P__ had not only never ‘spoken to’ his ward; his ward, I fancy, had spoken to Mrs P__. At any rate, the situation had grown impossible, and it was arranged that Miss W__ should take a trip around the world in company with some friends who were making that excursion. It was all done with the nicest tranquillity. Miss W__’s luggage had been sent on in advance; P__ was to drive her to the station himself in the dogcart. The only betrayal of any kind of suspicion that things were not of their ordinary train was that the night before parting P__ had said to me ‘I wish you’d drive to the station with us tomorrow morning.’ He was, in short, afraid of a scene.

Nevertheless, I think he need have feared nothing. We drove the seven miles in the clear weather, I sitting I the little, uncomfortable, hind seat of the dogcart. They talked in ordinary voices – of the places she would see [...]

I won’t say that I felt very emotional myself, for what of the spectacle I could see from my back seat was too interesting. But the parting at the station was too surprising, too really superhuman not to give one, as the saying is, the jumps. For P__ never even shook her by the hand; touching the flap of his cap sufficed for leave taking. Probably he was choking too badly to even say

¹ Details of the reviews quoted are as follows: *Observer* (UK), 28th March, 1915; *New York Times Book Review*, 7th March, 1915; *Boston Transcript*, 17th March, 1915; *Daily News and Leader* (UK), 2nd April, 1915; *Athenaeum* (UK), 10th April, 1915; *New Republic* (US), 12th June, 1915; *Morning Post* (UK), 5th April, 1915. All are found in Stannard’s Norton critical edition of the novel, pp. 219-34. Full references for this and subsequent citations are in the Bibliography that follows this Introduction.

² In the Dedicatory Letter to the novel.

‘Goodbye’ – and she did not seem to ask it. And, indeed, as the train drew out of the station P__ turned suddenly on his heels, went through the booking office to pick up a parcel of fish that was needed for lunch, got into his trap and drove off. He had forgotten me – but he had kept his end up.³

Ford tells us the end of this particular story about one family’s misery. Miss W__ died at Brindisi on the voyage out, and Mr P__ needed to spend three years on the Continent having ‘rest cures’. But he understood, even as he wrote up this version of it, what such a story might signify about the cost of repression – a fundamental aspect of the kind of Englishness he was exploring in the trilogy. He found it ‘almost appalling’, and was not done with it, returning a few years later to give it more detailed treatment, in fiction this time. *The Good Soldier*’s ‘matter’ is sexual and emotional repression then, and hypocrisy, and the cost of silence. (As those who have turned to the novel first will know, it is also about sexual incontinence and the absence of ‘tenderness’.⁴) It is an unpacking of those quintessentially English phrases that Ford puts in speech marks in the passage above. It was intended as a challenge.

I

Forget about Piers Plowman, forget about Shakespeare, Keats, Yeats, Morris, the English Bible, and remember only that you live in our terrific, untidy, indifferent empirical age, where not one single problem is solved and not one single Accepted Idea from the past has any more magic [...]. It is for us to get at the new truths or to give new life to such of the old as will appeal hominibus bonae voluntatis [to men of goodwill]. Only to do that we must do it in the clear pure language of our own day and with what is clear and new in our own individualities.⁵

This ‘terrific sermon’ (his own description), was delivered by letter in the year in which Ford Madox Ford began work on *The Good Soldier*. It provides an excellent starting point for considering Ford’s state of mind, and his working philosophy, before he began to write what is his best-known novel. The letter, dated January 23rd, 1913, was addressed in typical and invigorating style to a fellow writer. Lucy Masterman, wife of Ford’s friend, the liberal politician C.F.G. Masterman, had sent Ford some poems for comment, and Ford took the opportunity to respond in broad terms, asserting his views on the urgent task before each and every writer at that crucial time in his career.⁶ ‘New truths’ and ‘new life’ for – or perhaps ‘about’ might be more accurate – the new age were what he believed was called for, and he was about to practise in his own fiction what he preached.

Ford states in the dedicatory letter to *The Good Soldier* (published first in the second American edition of the novel and included as you will see here), that he sat down to write the novel he calls his ‘best book’ on his fortieth birthday, 17th December, 1913.⁷ It is possible that work did, in fact, begin earlier; that summer perhaps, as he and Violet Hunt, the flamboyant novelist with whom he was then living, moved between Hunt’s summer cottage at Selsey in West Sussex, and South

³ His account of these events is given on pp. 312-5, and might be described as the ‘germ’ of one of the most significant relationships in the novel – that between Edward Ashburnham and Nancy.

⁴ See p. 315 of *The Spirit of the People*; the novel suggests a relationship between these things, as well as (in what may seem odd at first) between repression and sexual incontinence.

⁵ *Letters of Ford Madox Ford*, p. 55.

⁶ He did also offer an affectionate and detailed critique of her poems.

⁷ The second American edition appeared in 1927, published by Albert & Charles Boni. The second UK edition came out a year later, and also included the dedicatory letter, to Stella Bowen.

Lodge, her house in London's Campden Hill.⁸ Certainly Brigit Patmore, his first amanuensis for the novel, to whom he dictated its opening (so she and Ford heard the 'saddest story' aloud, like its narrator John Dowell imagines he does) was invited by Hunt to Sussex to stay in the summer months of 1913. It may be that it was only later, then, that it suited Ford to think about this novel as begun, symbolically, at the very start of his fortieth year. This would fit with the feeling he said he had that this would be his last book.⁹ It would also fit with his own perception of his place in the world of letters. His rousing call to his comrades – as delivered to Lucy Masterman – aside, Ford actually discerned a clear break between the writers of his generation and those he termed 'les jeunes', with whom the future lay. He found a powerful way of expressing this in the same dedicatory letter when he described *The Good Soldier* as his 'Great Auk's egg'. The Great Auk had become extinct nearly a hundred years previously: the curious, latent example of the species that he felt he represented became more credible on reaching forty, perhaps. (Though in what will emerge as a particular irony, *The Good Soldier* was, in fact, a technically bold and modern book.)

Ford worked fast, however, and his routine was to write every day.¹⁰ In addition, the novel as we know had been gestating for some time – 'when I did begin on it', Ford noted in 1928, 'I had almost every word of it in my head, and I dictated it very quickly'¹¹ – and could well have taken enough shape between 17th December 1913 and 20th June, 1914, when the first section appeared in *Blast* magazine, for the fortieth birthday story to be factually, as well as symbolically, true. This appearance, however, did little to support his view of himself as an 'Old Man' of letters, surrounded by a new generation in literary London to whom the future of writing belonged. It was much more in keeping with his intention to stir things up with his novel: *Blast* was the mouthpiece of the English Vorticist movement.¹² Though the instalment ended with the promise 'To be continued', by the time the next issue was released Ford's novel had been out for four months. *The Good Soldier* was published by John Lane in March, 1915.¹³ It carried the sub-title *A Tale of Passion* on its title page and its author was listed not as Ford Madox Ford but as Ford Madox Hueffer, as he used to be known. Both his own name, and the title of the book, were subject to change.

II

Ford's father and mother, Francis Hueffer and Catherine Madox Brown, had married in September, 1872. Their first child was born on 17th December 1873 and was christened Ford Hermann Hueffer. Francis Hueffer was German. He had come to England in 1869 as Franz Hüffer, anglicised his name slightly, and by 1879 was music critic of *The Times* – part of the artistic establishment, in other words, despite

⁸ Violet Hunt (1862-1942) was the author of several novels, and she collaborated with Ford on *Zeppelin Nights: a London Entertainment* (1916). She was a founder of the Women Writers' Suffrage League.

⁹ In fact, he published over 30 more volumes (novels, poetry, criticism, memoirs) before his death in 1939, as well as numerous essays and reviews.

¹⁰ A frustrated Joseph Conrad wrote in 1909 to their shared literary agent, J.B. Pinker, of Ford's facility and speed, 'I am not FMH who can dash off 4000 words in 2 hours or thereabouts' (*Collected Letters*, vol. IV, p. 276-8).

¹¹ From a publicity release accompanying the 1928 edition. See Stannard, p. 180.

¹² See note 00 to the dedicatory letter for more on Wyndham Lewis, its editor.

¹³ The text of the novel that follows is, with the exception of some minor corrections, that of the first English edition, published by John Lane in 1915.

his outspoken support of the German composer Richard Wagner's music.¹⁴ Ford embraced his German heritage, particularly in his teens, and his status as a quasi-outsider (who might therefore be expected to have a keen vision of 'Englishness'), was made more interesting on his mother's side; she had links to well-known but iconoclastic artists. Catherine was the daughter of the Ford Madox Brown, and their first born developed a particularly close and formative relationship with the painter, mentor to, among others, Dante Gabriel Rossetti.¹⁵ The names Ford Madox Ford eventually took were in part a homage to the man who influenced profoundly his creative and emotional development from an early age (Ford's father died when he was fifteen). Madox Brown illustrated Ford's first publication, a fairy-tale called *The Brown Owl* in 1891, and was the subject of his first biography in 1896. *The Good Soldier's* author began writing as Ford Madox Hueffer in 1900, but formalized the change just after it was published in July 1915, finally becoming Ford Madox Ford by another deed poll in June 1919. By this stage he was also a shell-shocked veteran of the First World War.

The war was one crucial context, of course, for the decision about whether to change his (Germanic) surname, so in many ways it is surprising he left it so late. Slightly less self-evident is the impact the war had on his choice of title for his novel of 1915, the year in which he also joined up. When the first instalment appeared in *Blast* it was under its original title, *The Saddest Story*, a key phrase which is flagged conscientiously by the narrator, Dowell, in his opening words. To many readers *The Saddest Story* seems an entirely just description of this account of suicide, madness, and astonishing emotional dysfunction. This despite the fact that it is not always as easy to locate those feelings of sympathy for the protagonists (or 'screaming hysterics' as Dowell graphically describes them, p. 00) as such a title might lead us to expect. Ford's publisher disagreed with him about its appropriateness, however. John Lane pressed Ford to come up with an alternative, fearing for the sales of a novel with such a gloomy title in the first full year of the war, as well as, one can imagine, what the reviews might say in comparison with news from the western front. In the event, *The Good Soldier* proved problematic in this respect too.¹⁶

III

Despite the title that Ford took back to Lane (and he insisted afterwards he'd suggested *The Good Soldier* with heavy irony, never expecting Lane to take him up on it), and despite the importance of the date of 4th August throughout the text, this is not a 'war novel' as such. If Ford did re-work parts of the manuscript later in 1914 to make the date when Britain declared war on Germany central to the novel's chronology (the alternative explanation, that this was sheer coincidence, is so unlikely that it makes the re-working case very strong), it is not as though he did so in the

¹⁴ George Eliot, for example, was an early fan, but there were precious few others.

¹⁵ Madox Brown's tempestuous relationship with the Royal Academy had broken down completely by the late 1850s. D. G. Rossetti (1828-82) was a poet as well as a painter, and formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with Holman Hunt and John Millais. He was brother to Christina Rossetti – one of Ford's favourite poets – and William, who married Ford's aunt Lucy in 1874. Ford published a biography of Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1902.

¹⁶ The *New Witness* review of June, 1915, for example, cites its 'misappropriation of such a title', and then works itself up to calling it a 'profanation'. The review was written by Thomas Seccombe (incidentally a friend of Ford's), Professor of History at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, during the war (Stannard, pp. 229-30).

attempt to foreground war itself.¹⁷ The tragedies of this novel are not those of war, as we have already seen, but of peace. They are domestic tragedies of repression, duplicity, lethargy and despair. And for all the political and religious resonance they gain as they are played out against a historical backdrop of maritally incontinent, Reformist kings and princes (Henry VIII supreme among them) it is clear that Ford intends to fix our vision on the local, and domestic: on the faces of those we may, in fact, dimly recognise still.¹⁸ For there are no real, fighting ‘soldiers’ here. There are only ‘good’ ones, who are not, perhaps, so good.¹⁹ The secret vices and torments explode primarily, though not exclusively, in the faces of those who are culpable, and complicit, not the powerless and beleaguered Tommy or Fritz of war fiction. As Dowell muses with characteristic, pathological detachment:

And that miserable woman [Florence] must have got it in the face, good and strong. It must have been horrible for her. Horrible! Well, I suppose that she deserved all that she got (pp. 000).

Horrible it was to see herself thoroughly exposed, and Florence kills herself soon afterwards. Yet the shock-waves as they permeate out from the shattered existences of these very particular ‘well-bred people, who live in sunny houses, with deer in the park, and play polo, and go to Nauheim for the “cure”’ on the face of it diminish rapidly in force.²⁰ Maisie Maudslayi is dead because Leonora settled on her as a lover for Ashburnham. Nancy loses her mind because she has been sharing Bramshaw Teleragh with the Ashburnhams, also becoming the unwitting focus of their selective appetites. Their suffering may be terrible, but it is, it would seem, also localised (in geographical and class terms), a far cry from the reach of the war as represented in Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), say, when Lady Bexborough opens a village bazaar with the telegram telling her that her favourite son is killed in her hand, or from its ubiquitous and monstrous presence in Wells’s *Mr Britling Sees it Through* (1916). ‘I am the Fact’ says War, absolute and personified, in this novel published the year after *The Good Soldier*, ‘there can be nothing else and nothing more in human life until you have reckoned with me.’²¹

This is all true. Ford, after all, had not yet seen the conflict up close.²² But the Dowells encounter the Ashburnhams on August 4th, albeit amid the exclusive and ‘cold expensive elegance’ of the Hotel Excelsior (p. 00). Ford also wants Dowell’s ‘absolute ignorance’ and his ‘perfect happiness’ to come to an end on August 4th (see pp. 000-0), the same day as Florence’s suicide. Though the war may not feature, Ford is letting us know that there is more than one way for a ‘civilization’ to end; and however narrow his focus may at first seem (a social class that owned land and had serious money to lose), his ‘matter’ in this novel is intended to speak to us all. Critics

¹⁷ We will probably never know exactly when Ford finished the novel – whether it was before or after August 4th 1914. For discussion on this subject see Saunders’ biography, vol. 1, pp. 434-38, the Norton critical edition, and a further essay by Stannard, ‘*The Good Soldier*: Editorial Problems’ in *Ford Madox Ford’s Modernity*, pp. 137-48.

¹⁸ As well as English King Henry VIII, whose divorce and re-marriage helped to determine the course of the Protestant Reformation, there is the man Dowell calls ‘Ludwig the courageous’, though he’s in fact referring to Philip the Magnanimous, who established in 1527 the world’s first Protestant University at Marburg – where Ford situates an important scene in the novel – and was given a dispensation by Martin Luther allowing him to marry a second wife bigamously.

¹⁹ The novel’s title is provocative in this respect; and Dowell’s (‘do well’) name is carefully chosen.

²⁰ This description is taken from Rebecca West’s review in the *Daily News and Leader*, see note 1 here.

²¹ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 4; Wells, *Mr Britling Sees it Through*, p. 182.

²² Later, though, he showed what he could do with war as his main subject: in *No Enemy* (1929), say, or in his volume of reminiscence, *It Was the Nightingale* (1934), or, most of all, in the four Tietjens novels of the 1920s, *Parade’s End* (1924-28).

have compared the force of the drama, however contained we may at first find it to be, with Sophocles' plays, and Shakespeare's, as well as with the neuroses of Vienna's upper-middle class as dissected in Freud's case studies. The mention of Freud is instructive, because although Ford was indeed writing about Englishness, and social class, he was using sex to do so. He called the novel, in a letter to John Lane, a 'serious analysis of the polygamous desires that underlie all men' – and, he might have continued, the emotional costs of both expressing and repressing those desires.²³ (He is silent in his letter, for good reason, about incest, although his novel is not.²⁴) Ford's description is oddly specific in one way, considering (for example) Florence's consummate ability to express herself sexually. But more importantly, in case we should think it is a novel only about ancient families with relics of Charles I to sell when they are being blackmailed (p. 00), it makes absolutely clear his intent to explore in *The Good Soldier* fundamental aspects of life that affect 'all men', and can undo, or even destroy them too. Telegrams also help Ford in his task. Here, though, they signify the reach, and the strength, of desire, and Nancy's from Brindisi precipitates Ashburnham's suicide as the novel comes to a close.

So Ford's use of August 4th – especially if it was intentional but even if it was, as is just possible, a coincidence – encourages readers to be aware of the novel's wider resonances, though the war itself may still be a matter for the future. As it is first deployed in 1904, as the date upon which the two couples meet each other, it certainly refocuses attention on the world before the war, reminding us of the need to read that pre-war decade with closer attention to detail, as the 'game', as Leonora terms it, began to unravel with such devastating consequences for them all. With quintessential Dowell-esque understatement he muses at one point that the period of the Land League and the Land Acts was one of 'troublesome times in Ireland' (p. 000).²⁵ Analysing what Dowell, typically, does not understand, Colm Toibin observes that Leonora, 'the most significant Irish presence in an English novel since Trollope', animates in *The Good Soldier* what was experienced as 'the dark and dangerous and confusing shadow of Ireland' in England at that time.²⁶ War with Germany was not expected in 1913; it wasn't even a certainty in Asquith's cabinet in July 1914. But civil war in Ireland was a very real possibility, while British industry was crippled by strikes and the Tories, aggravated by the decline in power that landed wealth afforded, tried to sabotage the Liberal legislative programme.²⁷ Though one can't see either Florence or Leonora as New Women, or as suffragists, the disturbing quality of

²³ The letter is dated 17th December, 1914 (Ford's birthday again) and appears in *The Ford Madox Ford Reader*, p. 477.

²⁴ This is one reason for the comparisons with Sophocles, author of the *Oedipus* tragedies. For a discussion of incest in the novel, based around the quasi-incestuous nature of this guardian/ward relation, see Saunders, vol. 1, pp. 420-7.

²⁵ The Land League was founded in 1879, by Michael Davitt, to secure reforms in the land-holding system in agrarian Ireland. Charles Parnell became the League's president, and its campaigns were linked with the demand for Home Rule in Ireland (the re-establishment of an Irish parliament with responsibility for internal affairs, a cause to which Ford was sympathetic). Davitt and Parnell were both imprisoned by the British government after the League was declared illegal. Between 1883 and 1903 the Land Acts were passed to address some of the worst features of the landlord system in Ireland.

²⁶ Colm Toibin, 'Outsiders in England and the Art of Being Found Out' in Gasiorek and Moore (eds), pp. 71, 77.

²⁷ The Liberal landslide in the election on 1906 was one of the seismic shocks of the period. Lloyd-George, as Chancellor, tried to introduce a 'people's budget' in 1909. It was rejected by the House of Lords, and one result of the constitutional crisis that followed was the Parliament Act of 1911. This ended that power of veto, and represented a huge blow to the power and influence of the landed aristocracy in the United Kingdom.

Florence's sexual duplicity, taking lovers behind her bedroom door as Nurse Dowell willingly surrenders his conjugal rights, has more than a whiff of the contemporary, reactionary fear of bike-riding single females about it. And then there was Freud, a literary as well as scientific figure in the years leading up to Ford's novel, suggesting that no-one (but especially not Dowell) was master in his own psychological house.²⁸ Pre-war political, social and cultural contexts provided many, then, if not in the end all, of the 'new truths' that writers needed to 'get at', as Ford had put it in the letter to Lucy Masterman in 1913.

IV

There are significant autobiographical contexts to be considered here as well. Ford's attention to and support of his fellow writers, of the kind shown in that letter quoted earlier, becomes more admirable still once it is examined against the backdrop of personal problems besetting Ford at the time.²⁹ The relationship with Violet Hunt, about which he was open and frank, was ultimately disastrous for him. It had begun in 1909, and at this point caused (or helped to cement) rifts in the important and close friendships he had with Joseph Conrad, Arthur Marwood, Henry James and Edward Garnett. Literary London was not ready – or rather, in a crucial distinction, was not about to be seen to be ready – for his flagrantly unconventional approach. When Ford referred to Violet as 'Mrs. Hueffer' in the introduction to a novel she published in 1912, it also led to a court case because Elsie, his legal wife, chose to sue. These were immediate, personally painful and destructive illustrations of the products of polygamous desire, sharpening the creative memories of that journey in the dogcart with a married man and his ward, years before. But though Ford's own life came closer to providing a model for some of the novel's characters (there was only repression in the dogcart as we have seen – ensured by Ford's presence – and there had been no declaration between the man and his ward, no 'affair'), he would have been horrified at the suggestion that he was writing in *The Good Soldier* about anything that had happened to him. When he wrote to Lucy Masterman specifying a need for the 'clear pure language of our own day' and 'what is clear and new in our own individualities' he did not mean basic autobiographical fact but the writers' business of immediate impression and 'serious witness', wherever 'something real is doing'. (One of Ford's biographers both agrees that *The Good Soldier* fulfils that aim, and plays on one of the novel's key words in saying so: *The Good Soldier*, Judd writes, 'goes to the heart of the matter in a way that James never did'.³⁰) As long as the focus was something 'real', then the more silent the author's 'self', or personality was in a tale the better, Ford thought. 'We used to say', he wrote in 1924, that 'the first lesson that an author has to learn is humility.' He continued, '[b]efore everything the author must learn to suppress himself; he must learn that the first thing he has to consider is his story and the last thing he has to consider is his story, and in between that he will consider his story'.³¹ The book this lesson appeared in was about Joseph Conrad, and while authorial 'aloofness' was significant to both writers, it was their

²⁸ Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), for example, first appeared in English in 1913. See also the introduction to *Freud's Literary Culture*.

²⁹ There is another example from a letter as he was at work on *The Good Soldier*. It's to R. A. Scott-James, founder of *The New Weekly*. Ford exhorts him to remember 'les jeunes', and add them to his list of 'extinct and semi-extinct volcanoes' (probably contributors Edmund Gosse, G. K. Chesterton and Thomas Hardy) in the magazine that began publishing in March, 1914 (*Letters*, pp. 58-9).

³⁰ Alan Judd, *Ford Madox Ford*, p. 245.

³¹ Ford Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*, p, 207.

(related) theory of literary impressionism that would do most to affect the style and substance of *The Good Soldier* and, indeed, to greater or lesser degrees, all the writing Ford would do after he met Conrad in 1898.³²

V

I have, I am aware, told this story in a very rambling way so that it may be difficult for anyone to find their way through what may be a sort of maze. I cannot help it. I have stuck to my idea of being in a country cottage with a silent listener, hearing between the gusts of the wind and amidst the noises of the distant sea, the story as it comes. And when discusses an affair – a long, sad affair- one goes back, one goes forward. One remembers points that one has forgotten and one explains them all the more minutely since one recognises that one has forgotten to mention them in their proper places and that one may have given, by omitting them, a false impression (p. 000).

In this key passage, and elsewhere in the novel, Dowell seeks to explain its structure – particularly usefully, perhaps, for any bemused first-time reader unsure why chronology and understanding, or plot and event, seem to be so distantly related to one another for so long. It's an explanation of why, contrary to what Theodore Dreiser would have liked, *The Good Soldier* does not 'begin at the beginning'. The notion of Dowell explaining anything means it demands attention and, sure enough, we can begin to see his true value once we are in a position to consider these explanations alongside the ruinous content for which he is responsible. Ford is interested in repression, in dark and unconscious motivations (though he would not have used the term), and primarily in the processes by which such aspects of the human psyche can become known. Dowell is the ingenious – tormented, ignorant, funny, ironic, remote – device that he finds to explore them all.

Dowell has often been seen and understood, perhaps even dismissed, as simply an 'unreliable narrator' (an obviously flawed or distorting centre of consciousness in a story). However, labelling Dowell in this way is, ultimately, to miss his point.³³ Turning to his own account of what it is he thinks he has been doing when in charge of this story, quoted above, helps to place his style of narration, rightfully, among Ford's ideas as to impressionism – broadly a literary technique concerned with the expression of the experience of knowing, or coming to knowledge, and at the same time the relationship between perceiving and understanding. First of all, Dowell employs an intensely visual illustration, a maze. This is in keeping with the numerous references to visual facility in the novel (as well as to colour, and painting).³⁴ His difficult aim, as narrator, has always been to give the reader an 'all round impression' of the events which make up his story (p. 000), he's trying to tell us that he will show us the story from all angles, borrowing Leonora's 'lighthouse' stare (p. 00) and Florence's 'seeing eye' (p. 00) as he does so.³⁵ But the process is painfully slow with him. As Dowell performs it, the 'seeing' eye bears much more

³² The two men collaborated on two novels: *The Inheritors* (1901), then *Romance* (1903). Though the relationship with Conrad was arguably the most significant of Ford's writing life, they quarrelled, and broke with one another in 1909.

³³ He can certainly be described as an unreliable narrator – the levels of irony that such a narrator engenders are certainly at play in Ford's novel – but this is not all that he is.

³⁴ See the use of colour, for example, at the beginning of Chapter II.

³⁵ Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* was published in 1927. It's a novel built out of impressions, in which more than one thing happens at once, and in which present and past overlap.

resemblance to the repetitively encountered dead end in his illustrative maze than it does to clarity of understanding. When, in one of the climactic scenes in the novel (at Marburg in Part I, Chapter IV), Florence lays a finger on Edward's wrist, Leonora recognises it as a sign. She knows that touch means a new affair for Edward, with Florence this time.³⁶ Dowell, though he sees it too, has no such clue. As he is our narrator, we are stuck with his myopic, desperately naive progression, forced into one dead end after another as we try to understand what each new piece of information means, how it fits in, to the story. Only as we re-trace our steps alongside Dowell, or add a new layer of impressions, do things – in all their horror and complexity – begin to become clear. (The threat is there that this process will be completed whether we want it to or not, an important consideration when taboo violation is at stake.)

When sound is introduced in the passage above, the sense of linear progression being defeated, interrupted, is reinforced. Dowell imagines his interlocutor can only hear in between gusts of wind, and the suck and release of the sea (in which ground is taken, and then given up, repeatedly). So although he is supposedly writing the story down, the words are designed not to get a reader from A to Z in a straight line, like words on a page might be expected to do, but messily, backwards and forwards and roundabout, like sight in a maze, or like hearing when challenged by a strong, competitive wind. Impressionism was tailored in Ford's hands to reflect his understanding that the mind works exactly like this, by building up impressions that must always be re-worked, gone over, extended. *The Good Soldier* is a textbook example, showing what must be done when duplicity and desire is what preoccupy a mind – Dowell's mind especially. But more generally, this novel's slow building of multiple perspectives (of time and space – from Philadelphia to Brindisi – and from varying levels of knowledge, or consciousness) reproduce in art what living is like. This is what art, according to Ford, must do.³⁷

Impressionism exists [Ford wrote in an essay as he was working on *The Good Soldier*] to render those queer effects of real life that are like so many views seen through bright glass – through glass so bright that while 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.

It also exists to render, among other key scenes in *The Good Soldier*, the night of Florence's suicide. Dowell has been bored rigid by Bagshawe, and is suddenly interrupted by the vision of Florence running in the bright light of the street 'with a face whiter than paper and her hand on the black stuff over her heart' (p. 000). What she is running from, and to, are in that moment known only to her. The drama is highly visible, but not yet comprehensible. Bagshawe may be simply odious to Dowell, but Florence has another view: his presence means the end of her charade, and thus very soon (but not quite yet) the end of Dowell's happiness too. When Bagshawe tittle-tattles to the cuckold in front of him about her coming out of Jimmy's bedroom at five in the morning, then the 'black stuff over her heart', already registered, becomes also the '*black stuff over her heart*'. That heart drops into what is

³⁶ This is another instance where the story Ford tells in *The Spirit of the People* about the contemporary behaviour of 'good people' is important to understanding the novel. Ford is careful to tell us that there is no single touch between Mr P__ and Miss W__ as they part. So the contrast with even this one touch is profound (Florence is American, after all).

³⁷ The essay 'On Impressionism', from which the following extract is taken, was written as Ford was working on *The Good Soldier*. It was published first in the magazine 'Poetry and Drama' in 1914. It is reprinted in the Norton critical edition of *The Good Soldier*, pp. 257-74 (263).

a more fitting semantic place. As the ‘cardiological obsession’ of the novel is further illuminated, Florence’s heart is made more real in its duplicity (she has no angina but has had lovers), more fully black, by this second impression, this second pass.³⁸

It is in ways like this that *The Good Soldier* is ‘a challenge in matter and method alike’. Ford’s novel strives to ‘get at’ new truths, and its author invents exquisitely right, and prototypically modernist, means of doing so. His facility is such that, despite the undoubted seriousness of the ‘matter’ at stake, there is definite and essential humour here too: the ripple of sexual puns in Dowell’s opening lines, for example (‘we had known the Ashburnhams for nine seasons [...] with an extreme intimacy [...] as loose and easy and yet as close as a good glove’s with your hand’), which complicate his character and develop the novel’s tragicomic tone.³⁹ But *The Good Soldier* is, as well, singularly visceral and primitive – truly a ‘Great Auk’s egg’. Some of the new truths treated in its cold light are, on closer examination, terribly old, emanating from deep in humanity’s evolutionary past, or deep in its consciousness. Perhaps we are not ready to see them all. So, generously, Ford offers us a ‘get out’ clause as it ends. In an impressionist novel, this is not too difficult to do. Like a Shakespearian fool, or a catalytic conductor in human form, Dowell is shown receding, visibly unchanged, trotting off to Leonora with Nancy’s telegram.⁴⁰ He is leaving the man he has claimed to love to suicide. What he chooses to tell us – aside from the fact that he remains ever attentive to ‘English good form’ – is that ‘she was quite pleased with it’. Depending on our view of his grasp of irony, as well as on the view of the world with which we want to be left, ‘good for Leonora’ is one perfectly feasible response.

Sara Haslam, November 2009.

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³⁸ Caroline Patey investigates this obsession in more detail in ‘Empire, Ethnology and *The Good Soldier*’ in *Ford Madox Ford’s Modernity*, pp. 83-102). She explores the ‘imperial theme’ of the novel, which there has not been space to do here.

³⁹ Vital here too is the farcical stage craft of the ‘heart’ problem, in which the untried bedroom doors hide a parade of lovers from Dowell, supposedly on the alert should he have to administer life-saving drugs.

⁴⁰ A couple of pages previously he has described how his life ‘peters out’, but swiftly adds that ‘there is always Leonora to cheer you up; I don’t want to sadden you’. It is at the beginning – where it resonates less strongly of course – that he tells us that he is ‘horribly alone’.

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Acknowledgements

For discussion and comment, thanks are due to Paul Clark, Rachel Foakes and Max Saunders.