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Ford Madox Ford *Unmuddled?*

FORD HERMANN JOSEPH LEOPOLD MADOX HUEFFER FORD! One's heart simply sinks to contemplate this life—the multiple identities, the philanderings, the “wives,” the vulnerabilities and self-exculpations, the feints and fetishes, the financial and emotional quagmires, the garrulities, the poetics and the politics, the frenetic career, the immense corpus of words and works, the conflicting critical evaluations, the whole “prison full of screaming hysterics,” to quote *The Good Soldier's* John Dowell, the most screaming hysteric of them all. And what a prison it was: its confining walls the boundaries of Ford's overwrought head, and its hysterics the offspring of his maddened and maddening psyche.

Twenty years ago, Arthur Mizener documented Ford's muddles and characterized them, in Ford's own words, as *The Saddest Story*.¹ His biography still provides the fullest account of a life driven by the ideals of art, the quest for a psychological utopia (“rest,” Ford deludedly called it), and his perennially desperate need for money. Yet even with his prodigious output of novels, social and literary histories, poems, journalism, and biographies, and notwithstanding his very considerable gifts and utter dedication, he never really caught on in England, and his success in America was only moderately greater. After his death in 1939 he was almost forgotten until the fifties, when *The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End* underwent a revival and championing by American academic critics, an exaltation-by-coterie that has been a consistent feature of Ford's literary history, at times approaching critical blackmail.

Born in England as Ford Hermann Hueffer (i.e., Hüffer) in 1873, Ford already represented a muddled amalgam of cultures: his father's German and his mother's English roots left him feeling like a native of nowhere. Later on, a certain amount of American and French ethos was thrown in for good measure, all of which proved useful as psychological security blankets for Ford's incompatible needs. Given a musicologist father and an artist grandfather (Ford Madox Brown) of whom he wrote a biography when he was only twenty-three, Ford always felt most at home amidst creative intellectuals, starting in childhood with the Garnetts (Richard, Edward,

¹ Arthur Mizener, *The Saddest Story: A Biography of Ford Madox Ford* (New York and Cleveland, 1971).

Olive, Constance) and the Rossettis (whose Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic he never entirely abandoned). In such a milieu, to be anything but an artist was merely to be “stuff for graveyards,” a view that later on exacerbated his poor relationships with publishers and literary agents, whom he tended to regard as little more than tradespersons (even though J. B. Pinker served him for years as an almost paternal provider of cash when Ford was on the edge of starvation). It was through the Garnetts that Ford met Joseph Conrad in 1908, setting off a close and intense friendship/collaboration that endured for a decade, during which Ford developed his poetics of the novel as a Flaubertian *artform*, beyond the mere narrativity of the Victorians. By this time, Ford had long since become a quirkily half-hearted Roman Catholic (adding in the process the Germanic-Catholic “Joseph Leopold,” as if he had not names and identities enough) and had eloped with Elsie Martindale. The marriage that evolved, from whose increasingly traumatic effects he could never shake free, was only one of the innumerable misfortunes that muddled his life while feeding his art, for he was skilled in thriving on adversity.

Underneath a seemingly imperturbable pink-faced, blond-haired exterior, Ford’s nervous sensibility, and his diffidence mixed with boastfulness and mendacity, contributed to the first of his psychological collapses in 1904, ten years into his marriage. The stresses of life at the verge of poverty and his constant moving from house to shabby house with two young daughters (who eventually broke off all relations with him) could only add to the gradual breakup of his precarious relationship with Elsie, though Ford as a house companion would have taxed the most stoic reserves. (Ezra Pound famously remarked: Put Ford naked in an empty room and within an hour behold total chaos.) It was Elsie’s refusal ever to grant him a divorce, however, that deeply entangled his subsequent relationships with women, of whom there were many. His liaison with Violet Hunt, a pretty wild character herself, ended up in a lawsuit initiated by Elsie to protest Hunt’s appropriation of the title “Mrs. Hueffer.” Ford had actually taken up residence in Germany with the dreamworld aim of being legitimately remarried there, no one quite understanding how, but this “marriage” turned out to be so unofficial, documentless, and phantasmal that it was easy for Elsie to demonstrate they were in fact not married at all. The resulting scandal alienated many of his friends and did not do his precarious literary reputation any good. Henry James wrote Violet Hunt a crass letter breaking off relations—and Leon Edel reports that James once even hid behind a tree to avoid meeting them, since at best they were always low in his hierarchy of desirables. But along with everything else in Ford’s life, episodes like these provided raw material for his sometimes vindictive fictions, Sylvia in *Parade’s End*, Leonora and Florence in *The Good Soldier* representing just a few of the more well-known embodiments.

In the Introduction to his biography, Arthur Mizener cites Pound’s

characterization of Ford as an “halluciné”; “He was the helpless victim of his own imagination. . . . He could not extricate himself from what he imagined and what actually happened. . . . He told stories about himself constantly and as the stories were retold he embroidered them. . . . He fabricated and elaborated his life as assiduously as he fabricated and elaborated his books.” He could tell someone that his latest book had sold 12,000 copies when it had sold only 1200, because he wanted to convey that *his* 1200 copies equalled the success of a 12,000-copy potboiler. In one of the letters included in Sondra Stang’s *The Ford Madox Ford Reader*, Ford writes the publisher Stanley Unwin from America, shortly before his death, to tell him that “I have really an enormous reputation here. I am generally regarded as the Dean of American Letters,” and that in the course of a dinner speech at the PEN club, Sinclair Lewis “styled me not only the Dean of American Letters but the most eminent man of letters not only in English but in the world.” Although it would seem impossible to add more, Ford could do it: “. . . and the sentiment was received with unanimous applause.”²

Ford’s misrepresentations of self were part and parcel of his misrepresentations of factual matters altogether. He conceded his inaccuracies but thought they were hardly worth correcting, for what really mattered, he claimed, was the accuracy of *impressions*; thus, the aesthetic of impressionism that underlies most of his writing. “I have for facts a most profound contempt. I try to give you what I see to be the spirit of an age, of a town, of a movement. This cannot be done with facts.”³ Mizener notes that “in Ford’s novels, the individual who sees or comprehends, moreover, is always Ford, never an objective, impersonal consciousness. Ford’s novels are never reliable representations of reality. Their value depends on the amount of authenticity he can give the imaginary life he creates in them.” Admittedly, this is what we generally mean by art, but in Ford’s case it has been carried to an extreme that contributes to our sense of his eccentricity, non-universality, and excessive particularity as a writer. Yet he was no more accurate in his memoirs or biographies, so that it has become a commonplace of Ford criticism to think of everything he wrote or said as a kind of fiction whose principal subject was himself—which makes it surprising that critics continue to take his descriptions of his own works so literally. His book about Henry James suffers from vapidness and vacuousness, his biography of Conrad—while powerful as an account of Ford’s own aesthetic—has surprisingly little to say about Conrad, his book about Provence is not *really* about Provence but about Ford’s own never-never land: in all these cases he is actually concerned with a world elsewhere, a world presented through anecd-

² *The Ford Madox Ford Reader*, ed. by Sondra Stang (New York, 1986), p. 509.

³ From his memoir, *Ancient Lights*, in Stang, p. 92.

dotes whose chief reality exists most fully in his fantasies of a psychological utopia.

Ford saw himself as a Tory Radical, a member, albeit threadbare, of England's ruling class, an heroic milieu in which, ideally at any rate, the landed aristocracy should play a paternalistic, even socialistic, role in caring for ordinary people suffering under the rapacity of capitalism. "The question for Ford," Mizener remarks, "was how a gentleman of Tory predilections, for whom the clear eighteenth-century mind was a model, who believed the feudal system of social relations the best mankind had ever devised, and who had an heroic sense of personal honor, would conduct himself in such a world." This magnanimous conception of society, another never-never land, became even more anachronistic after the Great War, though Ford had already depicted its ruins in *The Good Soldier*.

In spite of Ford's age in 1915, when *The Good Soldier* appeared, he sought a commission in the army and served at the front during the Great War, although he himself was not part of the fighting (but, like everything else he did, he gradually mythified it into a world-historical act). The psychological effects of the war on his life and writing were deep, approaching madness, and they dominated much of his subsequent writing, particularly the tetralogy, *Parade's End*. Yet this novel, it can be argued, though it goes downhill and has its longueurs and repetitions, is a more potent, more sane, more world-connected vehicle of Ford's inveterate representations of self than the more celebrated *The Good Soldier*. Roger Sale attributes the special appeal of its first volume, *Some Do Not . . .*, to the fact that Ford was in the initial, upbeat phase of his cohabitation with Stella Bowen, who had succeeded Violet Hunt as his unofficial wife. The subsequent falling off of the novel he sees, very plausibly, as a reflection of their deteriorating relationship.⁴ Admittedly, all artists produce out of the fullness of their selves—what else is there? But Ford's self was unusually full of itself, making the relationship between his life and his art especially close, always an aesthetic danger if one hopes to reach an outside world.

Through the character of Christopher Tietjens, *Parade's End* in the twenties traced the collapse of the Tory Radical country gentleman as a viable idea and offered in its place Ford's final panacea, the somewhat democratized rural haven and place of "rest" that he adumbrates more fully in *Provence* and *The Great Trade Route* close to the end of his life. In these works, which have their brilliances (such as Ford's metaphorical denunciation of the invention of the wheel as the source of all our capitalist/industrialist woe), he develops his notion, to quote Graham Greene, of "the Small Producer, as against the big individual capitalist and the small communist cog. He would

⁴ Roger Sale, "Ford's Coming of Age: *The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End*," in *The Presence of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. by Sondra Stang (Philadelphia, 1981).

have every man a part-time agriculturalist, because such a man is free in a sense unrecognized by either Fascist or Communist, free from the State ideal.”⁵ Yet even though Ford sounds by the 1930s like an ecologically prescient forerunner of Wendell Berry, right down to an awareness of environmental destruction by chemicals, his *Small Producer* was less a public-oriented reformer than a dispirited Fordian *Candide* seeking “rest” from a chaotic postwar world in the cultivation of his garden, just as Christopher Tietjens gives up his aristocratic patrimony and becomes a rustic dealer in antique furniture.

During the war, Ford had refused to capitulate about his German name, which had been a liability for some time, but not long afterwards he became Ford Madox Ford, principally, it seems, to avoid another contretemps with Elsie. Thus Stella Bowen is addressed as Stella Ford in the dedicatory introduction to the 1927 reissue of *The Good Soldier*. But this third major relationship was nonetheless compromised by Ford’s brief affair with Jean Rhys (whom he and Stella took in virtually off the streets) and Stella began to feel she had had enough. Ford’s liaison with Janice Biala endured until his death, though there were always other women.

With an art as deeply intertwined with life as Ford’s, biography serves an especially important mediating role. Mizener is ideal in assessing Ford’s strengths, shortcomings, generosity, insights, skill, and uncertain literary status. Critical though it may be of his failures, it does full justice to his successes, like Ford’s celebrated achievement in establishing the *English Review* in 1908. As an editor he was universally acknowledged as brilliant and the magazine’s attraction of a large roster of Edwardians and early modernists—Wells, Galsworthy, James, Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, Pound—was the direct result of Ford’s astuteness, skill, and wide acquaintance, even as his financial ineptness pulled it all down within a year and a half, forcing its sale and leaving him with debts he could ill afford. A similar sequence of events took place in 1924-25 when he started the *transatlantic review*, this time publishing Hemingway, Joyce, and other Paris expatriates of the twenties. Once again excellence did not preclude financial ruin.

Mizener’s documentation is massive but unobtrusive, his writing exemplary, his synthesis of evidence always penetrating, and he maintains awesome control of his rich materials. Since nothing of importance has taken place to reduce the stature of this classic work, the first question that arises in connection with Alan Judd’s biography⁶ is why he has produced it. Because he provides no documentation except for a Bibliographical Note at the end, my sense is that he offers little new information apart from a postscript to the American

⁵ Graham Greene, “The Landowner in Revolt,” in *Critical Essays on Ford Madox Ford*, ed. by Richard A. Cassell (Boston, 1987), p. 161.

⁶ FORD MADOX FORD, by Alan Judd. Harvard University Press. \$27.50.

edition (which he recently elaborated upon in the *TLS* of July 12, 1991). Here, Judd details his eleventh-hour discovery of unpublished letters and poems involving a hithertofore unknown American woman friend to whom Ford had actually been “engaged.” Otherwise, in his Acknowledgements at the beginning of the book, Judd announces he will mostly follow Mizener’s “chronology.” In reality, Mizener is the hovering presence that to a large extent has influenced—one might go so far as to say “generated”—the form and substance of this revisionary “life.”

Instead of replicating an already definitive “documentary” style, what Judd required was an entirely different genre to suit his different aim. He has therefore drastically pruned the known materials in order to provide uncluttered narrative units based on central thematic episodes, on which he expatiates much more freely and speculatively than Mizener, moving forward and backward from these centers as his interest dictates. His motivation is clear: to rehabilitate Ford both artistically and personally from the damaging quantities of negative commentary that have accrued over the past seventy-five years, particularly to rescue Ford from Mizener’s often acidulous plainspeaking. The method for achieving this is a closer, bolder, and more sympathetic approach to the interiority of his subject (“he thought,” “he felt,” “he imagined,” “he regretted”), perhaps in the belief that “tout comprendre c’est tout pardonner.”

The new story gets off to a disappointing start: “There are also the rich in spirit. It overflows and is seen in everything they do.” The syntactical awkwardness is not unforgivable, even though there are others like it, because Judd mostly tells his ruminative story well. The claim for Ford’s richness of spirit, however, seems melodramatic and excessive, even if we grant his generosity to other people and his aesthetic virtuosity, and it sets the exculpating tone that permeates the biography as a whole, weakening its credibility through unrestrained special pleading. “Ford’s failings are well known and have been re-heated and served up many times. . . . Yet he did nothing sensationally—or even unusually—bad. He had a checkered married life, told some lies, a greater number of tall stories and sometimes just embroidered the truth, often after saying that that was what he was doing.” Furthermore, we are told, we need Ford’s rambling, because “the ramble was the point . . . his soft tones, his stories, his contradictions, his unqualified assertions and his many qualifications are an architectonic creation.” Okay, but it is not going to be easy to overcome an already sizable and unusually high-quality critical tradition unless a brilliantly strong case can be made. And this is something Judd is not impressively able to do, however richly appreciative he turns out to be of Ford’s best qualities. Regarding Ford’s game-playing: “After all, the game-playing didn’t actually matter.” On Ford’s multiple identities: “No doubt it would be possible to debate at length as to whether he ever ‘found himself’ in the normal sense of

the term, whether he ever achieved the integrated personality that we are all supposed to evolve. But would it matter?" If Ford mismanaged his financial affairs—not to worry!—so does practically everyone else. If Ford tended to lie, to say he had been to Eton when he had in fact been to Praetorious in Folkestone, well, "if someone had nudged him after he'd mentioned Eton and said, 'Surely, Praetorious, Folkestone?' he would probably have nodded and said, 'Of course, yes, but you know what I mean. That sort of thing.'" If Stella Bowen complained that Ford "had a genius for creating confusion and a nervous horror of having to deal with the results," Judd can reply that "It was, in any case, a characteristic that had its beneficial aspect." Even as regards Ford's own art, Judd is ready to excuse much. "Nor does it matter that his practice did not always conform to his ideals. He often exaggerated and used superlatives, particularly in his journalism, and even in some of his more careful writing" he could be careless and lazy. "It is not really his contradictions, such as they were, that are the problem; rather, it is the effect they have on others." (But it takes two to tango.) And when a Ford admirer, Thomas Moser, asks, "Could an agoraphobic, neurasthenic, impressionistic solipsist—with, surely, a schizoid personality—write a good novel? It seems unlikely, except that Ford did it," Judd dismisses this as a "non-question." But Judd, unhappy as he is about all these badmouthings, is unable to counteract them by anything more weighty than the empty refrain that such pejoratives just don't matter.

Judd is strongest when he provides fuller and more speculative accounts than Mizener of Ford's involvement with Jean Rhys, Ford's politics and sexuality, Ford's lesser-known writings (there is a sensitive examination of the masterful style of his historical trilogy, *The Fifth Queen*), and as a novelist himself he is clearly aiming to fashion a prose vehicle that partakes of at least some of the consciousness-preempting qualities of fiction. This means that Judd takes many narrative liberties to suggest what might have been going on in Ford's mind, some of which work well and others not so well. Perhaps the single most unusual feature is his use of extended quotations, particularly the inclusion of all or part of a dozen or so of Ford's poems, one of them thirteen pages long. This attempt to rehabilitate Ford as a poet by providing the actual texts turns out to be rewarding, for the poems are oddly attractive in their informality (Ford wrote them quickly and didn't revise) and sometimes strong, especially about the war.

But if Judd appears to be successful in presenting a more positive Ford, it is an appearance only, achieved by the questionable expedient of leaving out lots of the truly awful stuff, like Ford's crazy letters to publishers and to Pinker, like the bizarre letter to his fourteen-year-old daughter reproduced by Mizener, and myriad other unsavory details essential to his life and art. Insisting that all these things don't matter will not enhance Ford's reputation, since any reading of his actual works is bound to reveal the falsity of this claim.

And surely those works put serious obstacles in the way of Ford's rehabilitation as a really first-rate writer of this century. Speaking personally, I found Ford's learning, breadth, keen intellect, peculiar sensibility, and comic insights more and more appealing as I read him more, but his garrulity, maunderings, absurdities, self-blindness, wound-licking, and other personalized specificities are obstructions to the achievement of truly free-standing, "autonomous" literary artifacts. Edward Garnett was right when he said that "acute things and flashes of true discernment are sandwiched with Münchhausen-like anecdotes and childish conceit."⁷ In sum, Ford is an uneven writer for whom too many excuses have to be made, and in this regard Judd's biography unwittingly gives away the show.

The problems present in most—if not all—of Ford's work can be seen even in *The Good Soldier*. This novel is widely considered Ford's "masterpiece" (with *Parade's End* a close runner-up), but, to continue speaking personally, I find myself in a minority position in experiencing it as a brilliant failure, a paradigm of Fordian muddles. In its singular first-person narrative, John Dowell relates the preposterous story of his own decade-long imperception of his wife's infidelities with, among other, Edward Ashburnham, whom Dowell idolizes as a model of English Tory Radicalism, not to mention Dowell's swallowing the story of her "heart condition" and her need to lock her bedroom door against intruders, myths she invents to keep him sexually at a distance while she enjoys her lovers right under his nose. Dowell has been regarded by critics as everything from comically dotty and "unreliable" to pathologically incapable of action or passion, to the only character capable of loving, to a serious stand-in for Ford himself. The novel as a whole, as inscrutable as *Wuthering Heights*, *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, unlike them has been seen as everything from utterly comic to pathetically tragic. When the most basic aspects of literary response like these cannot be agreed upon, one must wonder what it means to be a "masterpiece," since it is impossible to establish even the novel's minimal substantive nature. What, one wants to know, is *the thing* that is the masterpiece? This comedy? This tragedy? This sanity? This madness? Must not one *establish* the aesthetic object before one can pronounce judgment upon it?

Though for me *The Good Soldier* comes off as wildly comic, calling to mind *Tristram Shandy*, and though its narrator seems hopelessly demented, Arthur Mizener is surely right when he says that Dowell is to be taken seriously and that his opinions are pretty much those of Ford himself, for whom he is a stand-in. A widely recognized component of this probably unintentional comic effect is Dowell's

⁷ Edward Garnett, "Instructive and Amusing," *Weekly Westminster*, Feb. 14, 1925; reprinted in *Ford Madox Ford: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Frank MacShane (London and Boston, 1972), p. 141.

scatterbrained astuteness, but what is rarely attested to is the thoroughly cartoon-like quality of all the characters, except perhaps for Dowell himself (and even he easily qualifies as a Feiffer neurotic) and possibly Leonora, Ashburnham's wife. As cartoons, they make it impossible for me to feel any emotion short of astonishment at their inadequacy. To consider them as "people" is to attempt to assess the inner lives of Snoopy, Lucy, and Charlie Brown.

I think the reason *The Good Soldier* has been taken to be one of Ford's few really successful productions (even though there is no agreement as to its nature, a curious state of affairs) is that despite all of its vaunted aesthetic consciousness and controlled craft (and craftiness), it may be unique as an almost perfect recording of his primary processes, with all their affect, narcissism, hyperbole, fantasy, and self-flattering misperceptions. (Unlike the techniques of *Parade's End*, which register its characters with elaborate density, the representation of primary processes in *The Good Soldier* seemed to require little more than the cartoon shorthand of dreams, except for the consciousness of the narrator himself.) John Dowell, alternately raving and insightful but basically frightened and ineffectual, and Edward Ashburnham, philandering, handsome, virile, aristocratic (just as dotty as Dowell, but muted by English repression, a phenomenon that always intrigued Ford), together present an uninhibited expression of Ford's actual and fantasy selves. "I can't conceal from myself the fact that I loved Edward Ashburnham," Dowell explains, "and that I love him because he was just myself." In what boils down to a shadowy specimen of the *Doppelgänger* novel (like those of Conrad, Dostoevsky, Hesse), Ford has succeeded in engineering a polygraphic presentation of self—through the character of an unbuttoned narrator who gradually lets it all hang out—while simultaneously making self-protective use of the formal distancings of art. The result appears "successful," even a "masterpiece," because the outpouring of the narrator is so stunningly authentic (like *Notes from Underground*), practically orgasmic in its release of inexpressible, unintelligible emotion. (Dowell keeps remarking upon the impossibility of arranging all his material into any temporal order or coherence, an admission that his story is beyond the capabilities of mere narrative, which is already too rationalized to convey such primal, tormented reality.) At the same time, the performance is utterly nonplussing in its lack of resonance outside its own peculiar psychological hothouse, i.e., that prison of screaming hysterics, Ford's "rest"-seeking mind, a sort of Nirvana principle strapped to a runaway motorcycle. As a godsend for classroom analysis of the art of fiction, *The Good Soldier* fuses together the extremest aesthetic and solipsist elements of Sterne, Meredith, Conrad, and James. But its connections with an extra-Fordian world are just about nil.

Alan Judd expresses much admiration for *The Good Soldier*, though he has little to say that might convince us of the rightness of his

estimation. Perhaps he feels such justification is yet one more thing that doesn't really matter. But the critical writing that has accumulated around Ford testifies to the insurmountable complexities involved in any rehabilitative enterprise. Books from the eighties—on “the life in the fiction” and “the voice of uncertainty”⁸—are indicative of the epistemological and aesthetic problems to be faced in any revisionary attempt at canonization. The inescapable ambiguities of life vs. art, self vs. non-self, personal vs. public, essential vs. accidental are so far from not mattering that they would seem to constitute the essence of any Fordian confrontation. As for the sanguine hope of a Ford Madox Ford *unmuddled*, it's not bloody likely.

⁸ Specifically: Thomas C. Moser, *The Life in the Fiction of Ford Madox Ford* (Princeton, N.J., 1980), and Ann Barr Snitow, *Ford Madox Ford and the Voice of Uncertainty* (Baton Rouge and London, 1984).
