

WRITING THE SADDEST CHRONICLE: FORD MADOX FORD'S *THE GOOD SOLDIER*¹

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Abstract

The Good Soldier is told by John Dowell, one of the most famous unreliable narrators in English literature. Dowell reflects on a period of time (1904-1913) and on the traumas and fears of his generation: they were afraid of women and of the loss of masculine power. Ford Madox Ford associates the disintegration of two couples' lives with the wide course of history. My aim in this paper is to interpret this novel as a modernist chronicle. The chronicle as a genre includes features of the writing of history, the subgenre of "life-writing" and the journalistic chronicle. We may also find a mixture of fiction and autobiography in modernist chronicles. They lack the authority of historical writing, but display the authority of the writer/observer from his/her personal perspective, and add a sense of modernity through the formal subversion of narrative codes and generic limits, the absence of narrative closure, and the inclusion of digressions.

Resumen

The Good Soldier está contada por John Dowell, uno de los narradores poco fiables más famosos de la literatura inglesa. Dowell reflexiona sobre un período de tiempo (1904-1913) y sobre los traumas y miedos de una generación: los hombres temían a las mujeres y se resentían de la progresiva pérdida de poder masculino. Ford Madox Ford asocia la desintegración de la vida de dos parejas con el curso de la historia. Mi objetivo en este ensayo es ofrecer una lectura de esta obra como crónica modernista. La crónica como género incluye rasgos de la historia, de los subgéneros comprendidos en lo que hoy se denomina "life-writing" y de la crónica periodística. Podemos encontrar también una mezcla de ficción y autobiografía en las crónicas modernistas. Carecen de la autoridad de la escritura histórica, pero manifiestan la autoridad del escritor/observador desde su óptica personal, y añaden un sentido de modernidad debida a la subversión de la forma y de los límites genéricos, la falta de "closure" en su narración y la inclusión de desvíos y digresiones.

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The Good Soldier, whose preferred title for Ford was “the saddest story,” is told by John Dowell, a rich Philadelphian Quaker, who has no occupation. He narrates the events of his life in an effort to understand what has happened to him, and to those around him. The people he is principally interested in are his dead wife, Florence, and his close friends Edward and Leonora Ashburnham. The four of them seem to be happy, rich and leisured couples. They have every opportunity in life and they see their principal task in society to be setting a good standard. The most significant event of the first half of the novel is the affair between Florence and Edward. The major consideration of the second half is the relationship between Edward and a young woman, the “girl” Nancy Rufford. In the third part, we find Florence’s suicide as the most outstanding event, and in the fourth and last one, Nancy Rufford’s madness and Edward’s suicide appear as the key elements.

My aim in this paper is to interpret this novel as a modernist chronicle. The chronicle as a genre proliferates in England after the First World War, but it has not been defined in all its complexity by literary historians and critics. Chronicles include features of the writing of history, the subgenre of “life-writing” and the journalistic chronicle (in the sense of the immediacy of events, the quickness of their composition, and the urgency required to make that information available to a wide readership). These narratives are organized according to a temporal paradigm and do not follow a linear plot. They are the result of an author’s individual vision, and can be rendered in a fictionalized manner, as in the personal novel, which is based on the writer’s life. On the other hand, the text can also be clearly autobiographical. We may also find a mixture of fiction and autobiography in chronicles. They lack the authority of historical writing, but display the authority of the writer/observer from his/her personal perspective. There is a formal subversion of narrative codes and generic limits, an absence of narrative closure, and the inclusion of digressions.

Chronicles lead the reader to question their nature as fiction or as factual accounts of reality. Hayden White analysed the interaction between narrative and history in his classical work *Metahistory* (1975), and also in his books *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), *The Content of the Form* (1987), and *Figural Realism* (1999). A chapter in this last work, “The Modernist Event,” is particularly relevant for our study of *The Good Soldier*. White observes that, with regard to historical representation, we should establish a clear differentiation between events and facts. A fact is an event subject to description. The description and research about a

certain event will produce a fact, consequently, "facts" are created by statements about events. In the absence of a verbal or visual representation, events cannot exist, thus, a process of fictionalization always operates. This process implies a description that transforms an event into a possible object of analysis. According to him,

The dissolution of the event undermines a founding presupposition of Western realism: the opposition between fact and fiction. Modernism resolves the problems posed by traditional realism, namely how to represent reality realistically, by simply abandoning the ground on which realism is constructed in terms of an opposition between fact and fiction. The denial of the reality of the event undermines the very notion of fact informing traditional realism. Therewith, the taboo against mixing fact with fiction except in manifestly imaginative discourse is abolished (White 1999:66-67)

The concept of intergenre is relevant to define modernist chronicles. In a hybrid genre text, the author narrates his life story as if it were a fictional account, so he is pondering the relationship between experience and its narrativization (Rajan 1998:223). Also, modernist chronicles pose the question of the need for confession, which would be a reaction against the modernist imperative of objectivity.

The Good Soldier is told by one of the most famous unreliable narrators in English literature. John Dowell's chronicle is completely subjective and resembles a personal confession. The novel's obtuse first-person narrator and repeated time-shifts stand out so clearly as to exemplify modernist technical self-consciousness (Saunders 2004:422). In his text, Dowell reflects on a period of time (1904-1913) and on the traumas and fears of his generation: they were afraid of women and of the loss of masculine power. Ford associates the disintegration of two couples' lives with the wide course of history. It is the story of the breakdown of the ancient aristocratic tradition in modern life (Williams 2002:174). Max Saunders considers that *The Good Soldier* is the most analyzed of Ford's eighty books because it has a precision, a clarity of focus, and an economy that many of his books do not have (Saunders 2004:422). Critics such as Randall Stevenson (1998:27) and Peter Childs (2000:160) suggest that *The Good Soldier* does not have a center, whereas Tamar Katz mentions that the thematic core of the story is Dowell's permanent doubt about what he is writing (2000:108, 111). Dowell questions the contents and form of his narration very often, which makes readers uneasy. He does not seem particularly interested in understanding his friends' ultimate reasons or in grasping the key elements that account for the different situations he has witnessed.

Ford was closely connected with Henry James and with Joseph Conrad. His critical study *Henry James* appeared in 1915, the same year as *The Good Soldier*. Like some of James's fiction, *The Good Soldier* traces the perplexities of a naïve,

inexperienced North American encountering the complexities of European society, and like James, or Conrad, Ford places his central figure in an alien, unfathomable environment in order to highlight the relativity and particularity of perception (Stevenson 1998:26). James, Conrad and Ford were all innovators in their representation of character and in their construction of dense narratives notable for shifting spatial arrangements, temporal complexity and radical ambiguity (Childs 2000:148).

Henry James saw the work of many of his contemporaries as an undifferentiated transcription of reality, which, according to him, could not be fully accepted as art. Life was inclusion and confusion whereas art and writing should discriminate and select and be concerned with perception and perspective. James sought to provide some of this selection and discrimination in his own novels by the use of a character through whose perceptions and perspective the material of fiction could be carefully shaped and focused. We can see this disposition in James's work as early as *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and in *What Maisie Knew* (1897) (Stevenson 1998:18). *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) is, like many modernist stories, a text which has an enigma at its centre. James's text is inconclusive and relies heavily on ambiguity and openness to emphasize the complexity and uncertainty of representation, perception, knowledge and even sanity. In the story there are questions over the difference between what is seen and what is known. Both the narrative of the novella and the reader's understanding of it are concerned with the question of the "right" interpretation of what is happening. The reader has only the narrator's word to rely upon, just as the governess in the story has only her fallible senses to guide her (Childs 2000:153-154). The role of the intense perceiver can be most clearly seen in James's hero Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors* (1903). Strether is always guessing, interpreting, doubting and constantly unsure of the true nature of what is going on. Consciousness and its devices for assimilating complex experience, even its ability to do so at all, become the centre of the subject. *The Ambassadors* is a twofold anticipation of later developments of modernism: not only in moving the attention of the narrative away from the external world into subjective consciousness, but also in raising questions about how the areas of mind and world can be related, and about how, and how accurately or completely individual perception can reflect the world it encounters. *The Ambassadors* shares modernism's fascination with inner consciousness, intense perception and the nature of individual vision, and goes further than earlier fiction in making such matters an exclusive centre of attention for the novel (Stevenson 1998:19-20). Also, the complicity, the close relation that we sense between the author and his characters, makes us feel that the characters belong less to a world being imitated

than to a process, and they seem to participate in the act of their own creation (Fletcher & Bradbury 1991:397).

In Joseph Conrad's novels, the same overt awareness of the complexity of fictional structure is taken further and moved in other directions. The narrative pattern dramatizes the difficulty of establishing the material and ordering its significance, conveying its completeness: that becomes part of the story (Fletcher and Bradbury 1991:398). Older realism, that is to say, the assumption that things present themselves as they really are is questioned by several aspects of Conrad's writing in *Lord Jim* (1900). For Conrad, the visible, tangible, object world is of less significance than what is invisible and lies within. Conrad's narrator, Marlow, who communicates most of the story of *Lord Jim*, finds that much of what he tells has to be pieced together not from Jim himself but from the views of other characters who have encountered him. The inclusions of so many narrators and points of view fully exposes the impossibility of facts given the uncertainties of subjective, individual views of the world and the discrepancies which appear between them. Conclusions about Jim constantly vary depending upon the viewpoint recorded at the time. His nature, even his stature, remain persistently difficult to define, literally from the novel's first sentence to its last (Stevenson 1998:21-22).

The question of the relationship between language, narration, perception and knowledge is also at the core of *Heart of Darkness* (1902), where Conrad exemplifies the modernist suspicion that knowledge is a function of culture and language. While Marlow recounts his story, the listeners on the *Nellie* are slowly engulfed in darkness, making Marlow as difficult for them to perceive as his story, and articulating the reader's difficulty to grasp the meanings of such an enigmatic text (Childs 2000:153). Marlow's questions about how much even his immediate audience can see emphasize another kind of uncertainty: the difficulty of interpreting his story with confidence. Much of its darkness derives not only from the story's subject but from the unreliability of its telling. The voyage up river into the interior of the colony is also Marlow's symbolic journey into himself, and his encounter with Kurtz, overwhelmed by madness and savagery, confronts him with a darkness from which he finds he cannot consider himself immune. The discovery of this darkness anticipates modernist authors' deeper concern with character and inner consciousness. Conrad redirects the psychological interest of the novel upon the perceiver-narrator and ways of seeing rather than only on the characters that are seen. James, Conrad and Ford accepted a label borrowed from recent developments in the visual arts, "Impressionist," as a description of their styles. This definition suggests techniques which question objectivity in the novel and foreground the subjective vision of the figure observing or narrating it (Stevenson 1998:24-25).

Ford collaborated with Conrad in writing novels such as *The Inheritors* (1901) and *Romance* (1903). They had met in 1898, and both believed, together with Henry James, in the importance of the novel as an artistic form and not just as an entertainment genre. In some aspects, *The Good Soldier* particularly resembles *Lord Jim*. According to Randall Stevenson, Dowell is perplexed yet fascinated by the inscrutable Englishman Edward Ashburnham, much as Marlow is by Jim. Also, Dowell's notion that he is telling his story "in a very rambling way" (167), as if to a "silent listener" (167), makes *The Good Soldier* into the sort of "free and wandering tale" (5) which Marlow's after dinner monologue, in Conrad's view, made *Lord Jim* (Stevenson 1998:26). There are also, however, significant differences between *The Good Soldier* and *Lord Jim*. One of Marlow's difficulties is his distance, emotionally and often geographically, from Jim himself. Dowell, on the other hand, is personally and emotionally involved in the events he tells, and always much more concerned with his own responses to them. Marlow talks mostly about Jim rather than himself. Dowell is a more obvious centre of his own attention than Marlow is, at least in *Lord Jim*.

Their collaboration lasted for ten years and Conrad wrote his best works during this time, whereas Ford wrote *The Cinque Ports* (1900), *The Heart of the Country* (1906), and *The Spirit of the People* (1907). He also published the trilogy *The Fifth Queen* (1908). In 1908, Ford launched *The English Review*, whose first edition included the poem "A Sunday Morning Tragedy," by Thomas Hardy, the first instalment of Conrad's memories, "The Jolly Corner," by Henry James, "A Fisher of Men," by John Galsworthy, the first chapters of *Tono Bungay*, by H.G. Wells, and a translation of a story by Tolstoy. While Ford edited *The English Review*, the journal published texts by the most important writers of the time, and promoted new authors such as Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence and Wyndham Lewis. Ford was particularly good at discovering new literary figures and at selecting the best pieces of writing among those he received.

The Good Soldier is an example of the cyclic view Ford had of history, which he shared with other modernists such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Hulme, D.H. Lawrence and W.B. Yeats. Progressive views of history value change above all, whereas cyclic ones give pre-eminence to a fundamental stability underlying all change. According to these last ones, history was the store of the alternation of Chaos and Harmony, formlessness and form. Sometimes the world was chaotic and at other times it was harmonious. All the other characteristics of an age emanated from these fundamental principles (Williams 2002:210).

Ford became interested in the past after experiencing serious disillusionment with turn-of-the-century Britain and the modern world. A general feature of the

period was the erosion of the mid-Victorian confidence in the strength, stability and possible future of Britain and her empire. Initially, Ford was enthusiastic about the British Empire but changed his mind because of the Boer war (1899-1902) and after meeting Joseph Conrad, who opened his eyes to the reality of imperialism. This led him to reject the idea of cumulative changes in history. Ford began to admire the idea of permanence over that of change and to advocate circular views of the past and cyclic structures in general.

Since the beginning of their careers, Ford and other modernists had been grappling with the problem of how to create a new art that combined the best features of their predecessors while avoiding the worst. Initially, they appeared to prefer the Romantic art of emotion and imagination to a Victorian art of realism and social comment, but they soon rejected the escapism associated with Romanticism and began to appreciate the fact that the Victorians were responsible to the world and were taken seriously as writers (Williams 2002:31). Ford wanted his writing to be precise and a vital part of contemporary life but without giving up beauty, symbolism and spirituality.

The avant-garde visual art contributed to the development of Ford's aesthetic practices and cyclic views of history. He and other modernist writers appreciated the anti-humanist and non-naturalistic nature of modern art, as well as the artists' links with the world they lived in (Williams 2002:146).

Ford considered a fallacy the historical and political theories that proposed that freedom would result in automatic progress and replaced these ideas of progress with a cyclic pattern. Ford's historical opinions became evident in his artistic practice. He had always expressed an interest in rendering real life in his novels and he thought that the way to do it was to abandon progressive narrative. As early as 1911, Ford had begun to experiment with non-linear plot structures for his novels. But it was only in 1913 and 1915 that he theorized about this type of structure and made it the key of his artistic technique (Williams 2002:171-173).

In his essay "On the Functions of the Arts in the Republic," included in his volume *The Critical Attitude* (1911), Ford alluded to the uncertainty of modern life, caused by the breaking of the traditional social order. The consequences are alienation and nostalgia for a stable past which is difficult to recover, as well as the necessity to find new forms to understand the key elements of contemporary man's life: "so many small things crave for our attention that it has become almost impossible to see any pattern in the carpet. We may contemplate life steadily enough today: it is impossible to see it whole" (Ford 1911:28). Ford also identifies detachment from a more stable past as the condition of modern life. He writes: "Nowadays, life is slightly less happy-go-lucky than it was in the eighteenth century. It is slightly less commercial than it

was in the days of the Prince Consort, and it is much more bewildered than it has ever been since the Dark Ages” (Ford 1911:28).

Ford was aware of the different trends, and fights at the heart of British modernism because he conducted his personal and professional life in the midst of those antagonisms and debates. The essays he published while composing *The Good Soldier* show his rejection of escapist aestheticism and his resolve to make the modern writer assume the responsibility of working with the present lived experience of modern people (McCarthy 1999:307-308). His article “XXIII. Literary Portraits: Fyodor Dostoevsky and *The Idiot*,” in the February 1914 *Outlook* illuminates his goals for his own novel in progress: “The essence of my self-appointed task is to record my own time, my own world, as I see it” (Ford 1914a:207). In his piece “XXXV. Literary Portraits: Les Jeunes and *Des Imagistes*,” Ford shows that the Vorticist appeals to action and a radical aesthetic of involvement appealed to Ford, and were prominent in his mind while writing *The Good Soldier*: “I suppose that if anything characterizes this day of ours, it is a discontent –a discontent not so much with existing conditions as with existing modes of thought [...] the trend of all these discontents is almost uniformly reactionary [...]. Personally, I am entirely on the side of Les Jeunes [...] one wants to be reckless nowadays” (Ford 1914b:636). Ford is openly in favour of the Vorticist project, which helps explain the presence of “The Saddest Story” (an extract of *The Good Soldier*) in the first issue of *Blast*, the Vorticist journal.

In his essay “On Impressionism. First Article” (1914), Ford explained that the illusion of reality he tried to create was not based “on a sort of rounded, annotated record of a set of circumstances” (Ford 1914c:174) but on “the record of the impression of a moment [...]. It might even be the impression of the moment – but it is the impression, not the corrected chronicle” (Ford 1914c:174). Since the world appears to us only in various unordered pictures, the first obligation of the writer is a meticulous attention to that variety and disorder. Ford states that perception leads to knowledge and sensation to understanding, but he regarded these as distinctly secondary activities. He considered that the impression, the sensation, the emotion and not the concept constitute the foundation of experience (Levenson 2004:111). For Ford, impressionism was about the development of the novelist’s ability to represent the multiple aspects of human consciousness in order to “make you see.” The creation of the invigorating detail would be the key to good prose (Haslam 2002:204). Impressionism must “give a sense of two, or three, of as many as you will, places, persons, emotions, all going on simultaneously in the emotions of the writer [...].” (Ford:1914c, 173). It is, therefore, “an attempt to render those superimposed emotions” (Ford 1914c:174). However, we can find some

paradoxes in this theory. Both impressionist painting and literature attempt to represent the real by subverting the rules of “normal” perception. This fact explains why their formal principles are so often realized in unusual circumstances. The momentary impression displays itself in rare conditions, usually only at times of perceptual or psychological stress, thus, a movement that claimed to offer a general theory of human perception comes quite often to describe human perception *in extremis* (Levenson 2004:114). *The Good Soldier*'s plot is about a disintegration: “Someone has said that the death of a mouse from cancer is the whole sack of Rome by the Goths, and I swear to you that the breaking up of our little tour-square coterie was such another unthinkable event” (14).

In his book on Henry James published in 1915, Ford explicitly rejected the dogma of the 1870s “that it was necessary to have a story, ‘with a beginning, a middle and an end’ all complete” (Ford 1915:129). Thus in Ford's new novels, movement, change, narrative and progressive action would be abandoned in favour of simultaneity and superimposition. According to Louise Blakeney Williams, the flux of modern life would be frozen while a deeper, permanent reality beneath the surface would be exhibited by rigorous selection (2002:183): “the supreme discovery in the literary art of our day is that of Impressionism, that the supreme function of Impressionism is selection, and that Mr James has carried the power of selection so far that he can create an impression with nothing at all” (Ford 1915:152); “And that is what Henry James gives you –an immense body of work all dominated with that vibration– with that balancing of the mind between the great outlines and the petty details” (Ford 1915:155). Ford's words from *Henry James* can be used to present *The Good Soldier*, which was published that same year. The novel intended to render “the world of today, with its confusing currents, its incomprehensible riddles, its ever present but entirely invisible wire pulling, and its overwhelming babble” (Ford 1915:68). Max Saunders suggests that impressionism was not just the fundamental antecedent to modernism, but the ground on which modernism is constructed. For him, the free indirect style of Joyce as well as Flaubert is, after all, a technique for rendering impressions (Saunders 2004:430).

In 1922, Ford moved to Paris where he and his partner at that time, Stella, participated in the bohemian and artistic life of the American expatriates. Ford and Ezra Pound created *The Transatlantic Review* in 1923 with the financial aid of an American lawyer, John Quinn. Ford edited the journal till its demise in 1924. He asked Hardy, Eliot and Conrad for contributions and established a good relationship with James Joyce, who adopted the title of one of the journal's sections “Work in Progress” as a subtitle of *Finnegan's Wake*.

Although his relationships with many of the American writers of the time were not always good, *The Transatlantic Review* published texts by the most significant writers of the period (Ezra Pound, James Joyce, E.E. Cummings, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, Paul Valéry, and William Carlos Williams, among others). Ford published *Some Do Not* in (1924), the first novel of the Tietjens tetralogy, posthumously called *Parade's End*. The rest of the volumes are *No More Parades* (1925), *A Man Could Stand Up* (1926), and *Last Post* (1928). After the publication of the last volume of *Parade's End*, Ford wrote *No Enemy* (1929), where he evokes his memories and perceptions about the war, and his book of memories *Return to Yesterday* (1931), an essential book through which one learns about Ford's formative years and his impressions about the figures who influenced him at the time which culminated in the publication of *The Good Soldier*.

A comparison of Ford's *The Good Soldier* with the *Parade's End* tetralogy suggests ways in which novelists, by the end of the 1920s, had learned to enter more deeply and intimately into the consciousness of their main characters. Ford records the thoughts of his hero, Christopher Tietjens, by using frequent self-questioning and self-contradiction. The abbreviated and fragmentary sentences, repeatedly interrupted with ellipses, imitate the rhythm, hesitation and something of the nature of the thoughts as they occur to Tietjens. They represent a development from the tactics employed in *The Good Soldier*: we do not find a narrator telling a story to a silent listener, but a style which follows the inner voice of a character silently addressing himself. To the subjective methods Ford might have learned from Conrad and James there were added further techniques for entering the mind within, which had been introduced by D.H. Lawrence, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, Virginia Woolf and, eventually and most comprehensively, by James Joyce (Stevenson 1998:29).

This impressionist technique displayed by John Dowell in *The Good Soldier* manages to transmit his personal unrest, and, by extension, modern man's bewilderment and permanent doubts about his place in the world and about the discourses on love, man-woman relationships, loyalty, and friendship. Dowell's fragmented vision suggests his own fragmented identity: "The whole world for me is like spots of colour in an immense canvas" (21). Ford presents Dowell and Dowell presents himself as an example of the scrupulously realist narrator, but given the theoretical presuppositions of impressionism –the commitment to sensations and perceptions in all their heterogeneity and disorder– it is not difficult to understand why the realist narrator passes into the aberrant character (Levenson 2004:113).

One of the features that defines this novel as a modernist chronicle is Dowell's lack of a clear will to know the truth and to understand what he is narrating. Dowell's subjective narrative distances him from the traditional objective criteria that rule the writing of history. The novel's themes (love, infidelity, friendship, heroism, family relationships) are as old as literature itself, however, Dowell does not delve deeply into them or try to understand the reasons that justify the different characters' behaviour. We as readers are impressed by Dowell's insistence on his ignorance about what he is telling. In traditional historical chronicles, writers strived to present the bare facts deprived of any artifice, however, in *The Good Soldier*, Dowell constantly foregrounds his doubts about the narrative techniques he is using. According to Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, Dowell concentrates on form, on how to tell his story in order to escape from the difficult questions that same story poses. This constant reflection on his narrative techniques shields him from the true and probably uncomfortable meanings of the experiences he tries to represent in his chronicle (McCarthy 1999:11, 16). Dowell starts by wondering about his own reasons to write: "You may well ask why I write. And yet my reasons are quite many. For it is not unusual in human beings who have witnessed the sack of a city or the falling to pieces of a people to desire to set down what they have witnessed for the benefit of unknown heirs or of generations infinitely remote" (14). He also articulates his doubts about his own narration: "It is very difficult to give an all-round impression of any man. I wonder how far I have succeeded with Edward Ashburnham" (123); "I have, I am aware, told this story in a very rambling way so that it may be difficult for anyone to find their path through what may be a sort of maze" (147).

The repetition of dates (August 4th) and the retelling of certain episodes add a sense of circularity and reinforce the lack of progression of the novel. It is as if Dowell missed something in his narration of the different episodes and felt the need to go over them again. Examples of this are the trip to M. (37, 62), Florence's affair with Jimmy (74, 99), Dowell's consideration of his narration as "the saddest story" (13, 97, 132), Edward's lovers (128), and Florence's heart condition, which are referred to very often in the book.

The Good Soldier subverts many of the traditional formal conventions of novels. The narration does not have a clear closure and includes many digressions. Formally speaking, the novel ends with Edward's suicide and Dowell's taking a telegram from the girl to Leonora, but in previous sections of the novel, Dowell refers that he is writing eighteen months after Edward's death and that he is living in what was Edward's country manor, Branshaw Teleragh. At the beginning of *The Good Soldier*, Dowell states that he is going to narrate

his friendship with the Ashburnhams during the period of time he knew them, that is to say, between 1904 and 1913. Near the end of the novel, we read that thirteen years had passed since he met the Ashburnhams, so Dowell is writing the story four years after Edward's death. *The Good Soldier* transmits a sense of fragmentation because its writing method is based on accumulation and dissemination, not on linearity. An example of this technique can be found in chapter II. Dowell is reflecting on the best way to write his chronicle and then he soon starts to evoke a number of different memories that have to do with a trip with his wife Florence to Les Tours, the story of Peire Vidal, and his wife's family background. Dowell lets the reader know about Florence's future death in this same chapter and he mentions "the girl", for the first time. One must definitely adopt an impressionistic technique to read Ford in order to appreciate the reasons for non-linear representation of reality, for the isolation of moments out of time and their special significance (Haslam 2002:208). Dowell's chronicle relinquishes the pedagogical function history used to have and displays fireworks that dazzle us and fade away without any trace of a solid knowledge about the novel's characters or about what happened.

The Good Soldier's plot shows Ford's interest in domestic melodrama, traditionally considered a feminine genre. Stories about characters tortured by romantic secrets, about men torn between sympathetic young women and unsympathetic older ones appear in Ford's fiction from *The Good Soldier* through the *Parade's End* tetralogy. These motives mark Ford's view of the modern world as a place where people are not what they appear to be. According to Tamar Katz, Ford considered feminine secrets and unreliable narration as the central features of the modern age. In *The Good Soldier*, Ford describes that world, but also tries to imagine an adequate masculine response to that feminization of literature and, by extension, of the world (Katz 2000:109-110).

As we have already mentioned, the figure of Dowell does not evolve towards a full understanding of the story he is narrating. He manages to keep out of the real and often painful meanings of his narration and claims his role as an observer, emphasizing his ignorance about everything that takes place around him. Compared to that innocent ignorance, women emerge as the only ones who know something about themselves, about the others, and about the concrete and material aspects of everyday life. Also, female characters in the novel reveal their feelings and appear as human beings in flesh and blood. They love, they suffer, they get angry, they talk. On the contrary, the male characters look distant, insensitive, and unable to communicate their feelings. The figure of Edward remains paradoxical and artificial throughout the novel due to

Dowell's adulatory remarks. Dowell defines him as an extraordinary man with many virtues: "Have I conveyed to you the splendid fellow that he was –the fine soldier, the excellent landlord, the extraordinarily kind, careful and industrious magistrate, the upright, honest, fair-dealing, fair-thinking, public character?" (78), "Is it impossible of me to think of Edward Ashburnham as anything but straight, upright and honourable?" (96), but he also expresses his misgivings about his own portrait of Edward: "It is very difficult to give an all-round impression of any man. I wonder how far I have succeeded with Edward Ashburnham. I dare say I haven't succeeded at all" (123). Consequently, readers keep on wondering whether Edward is a selfish and superficial man or an innocent victim of women. On the other hand, Dowell's cynicism and impassivity come close to cruelty. Examples of this are his lack of regret for his wife Florence's death (92) and his passivity when he realized that his apparently beloved friend Edward was going to commit suicide. If Dowell adored him so much, why didn't he stop Edward from killing himself?: "I guess he could see in my eyes that I didn't intend to hinder him. Why should I hinder him? I didn't think he was wanted in the world [...]" (198).

Dowell maintains for as long as possible the impression that he is an unknowing and therefore innocent observer of events (Katz 2000:132). His doubts contrast with female knowledge, the only one that seems to circulate throughout the novel. He considers this female knowledge dangerous because it eventually comes to light and results in disastrous consequences for Edward, for the girl and for himself as well as threatens the social stability of high-class people like the Ashburnhams. Thus, Dowell positions doubt in a higher moral level than knowledge and shows his rejection of the feminine. Two of the novel's saddest episodes have to do with the characters' realization that they have been exposed (Florence) or with their finding out secrets about their beloved ones (Nancy). When Dowell's wife, Florence, suspects that a former infidelity is going to be revealed to her husband (85-86), she commits suicide. Nancy Rufford starts to lose her mind when Leonora talks to her about Edward's personality and her lovers. She considered him like a second father and is unable to recover herself from the shock of discovering the obscure relationship between Edward and Leonora (173, 188) as well as the existence of divorce, infidelity and marital violence in a world without God (171-172).

CONCLUSION

The period in which Ford Madox Ford began to write was a time in which a great number of challenges to established ideas in all areas of thought came to a climax. The horrors of Imperialism, the difficulties of the Boer war, and the growing violence in Ireland made him and other modernist writers realize that the ideal of British civility, and cultural and military superiority had little foundation in reality. The Edwardian age did not witness the horrors of the inter-war years, such as depression and unemployment, socialist and fascist violence, and the persecutions of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, however, the period was not free of great intellectual uncertainty and fear. Ford abandoned his belief in a progressive view of history because progress had been awaited for too long during the Edwardian period and simply had not arrived. He considered that cyclic views of history were more useful to provide a sense of optimism to face the challenges of the Edwardian age. Ford began to admire the idea of permanence over that of change and to advocate circular views of the past and cyclic structures in general.

The Good Soldier looks back to its Victorian and Edwardian predecessors and forwards to its modernist contemporaries and heirs. Ford deals with a period of transition between the Edwardian years and through the First World War. His literary impressionism overlaps with realism at one end and with modernism at the other. Ford's reflections on impressionism are particularly relevant to interpret *The Good Soldier*. He emphasizes the instability of impressions, and how they question chronological linearity and require time-shifts. For him, impressionism was about the development of the novelist's ability to represent the multiple aspects of human consciousness in order "to make you see."

John Dowell's narration lacks the authority of historical writing because basically he is constantly undermining the verisimilitude of his own impressions. His story about his friends the Ashburnhams and his wife Florence resembles a personal confession which subverts some of the features of traditional novels. The easy introduction to characters and situations provided by nineteenth-century novels is replaced by a fragmented story full of digressions and without a linear chronology. Dowell seems to state the impossibility of developing a truthful knowledge of facts and people. This involves a rejection of women because they are the only ones who know something in the novel. Dowell is afraid of women and fears the loss of masculine power. He lacks a clear will to understand the deep meanings of what

he is narrating, and his chronicle fails to offer a moral example. On the other hand, Dowell's portraits of a number of people who represent a social class anticipate new historiographic trends that will become prominent in the twentieth-century, such as those that foreground individual stories as part of history.

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