The Challenge of Bewilderment

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Chapter 5

Obscurity and Reflection
in The Good Soldier

Because Ford’s achievement was uneven, he lacks the heroic stature in the history of the novel which James and Conrad enjoy. Ford wrote more than twenty-five novels, but only two of them—The Good Soldier and Parade’s End—will probably survive. In these two works, however, Ford stands shoulder to shoulder with his two masters and fellow impressionists. Ford’s dramatization of Dowell’s belated quest to understand himself and his world is as penetrating a study of the vicissitudes of interpretation as any work in the canons of James or Conrad. It also equals their most innovative novels in the challenge it poses to the conventions of representation. Parade’s End is a less successful work, but its flaws are at least in part the result of its impressive ambition. It seeks to illuminate the paralyzing obscurities that mystify modern men and women about the relation between individual meaning and social history. Ford’s tetralogy reexamines the norms of historical fiction in order to call into question the reader’s assumptions about the status of the self and society.

Ford is both a contemporary of James and Conrad and one of their first heirs. He is at the same time a colleague and a student—a coinpressionist and a mediator between his teachers and later modern novelists.¹ Ford’s critical writings are perhaps primarily responsible for inculcating the view

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that he, James, and Conrad belong together under the title “Impressionism” in the story of the novel’s turn to modernity. But the very act of explaining the assumptions and techniques of James and Conrad marks Ford as a latecomer whose role is to interpret and transmit the contributions of his precursors. Ford invented his own unique brand of impressionism, but this creation is also in many ways a response to and a revision of the aesthetics of his two great masters.

For example, Ford, so as to call attention to the workings of understanding, adopts James’s strategy of making into a theme in themselves the perspectives that display a fictional world. Because of Ford’s conviction that “life doesn’t narrate,” however, he shifts his dramatic focus from the compositional activity of consciousness to the obscure, prepredicative immediacy of unreflected “impressions.” With Conrad, Ford portrays as deceptions the constructs that lend order and stability to the world. He too challenges our customary categories through narrative fragmentation that exposes the fragility of the coherence they project. The instabilities Ford discloses are not the metaphysical contradictions of contingency, however, but the flickering, uncertain images of our primordial perception of the world. In The Good Soldier and Parade’s End, we have the dual opportunity of studying an important variety of impressionism for its own sake and of examining an early, pivotal instance of the reception of James and Conrad by the modern novel.

There are two distinct modes of Fordian bewilderment. In a manner familiar to us from James and Conrad, both John Dowell and Christopher Tietjens suffer shocks that reveal the unsuspected tenuousness of all they had taken for granted about their worlds. Dowell is shaken once, but mightily, when Leonora disabuses him of his naïve assumptions about Edward and Florence. Christopher is repeatedly taken by surprise as his sureties collapse all around him. Their bewilderment suspends the natural attitude of unquestioned knowing and discloses that their worlds were a construct of beliefs that, now discredited, they must struggle to replace. But this experience of shock and confusion also opens up a second mode of bewilderment. For Ford a fundamental state of bafflement characterizes our unreflected experience. This bewilderment is a condition of epistemological obscurity which we ordinarily do not notice for the very reason that it is unreflected. Its darknesses and confusions are usually suppressed

by our assurances about the world's coherence. A condition of naïve bafflement is, in Ford's view, our original way of knowing the world.3

Ford's fiction reflects his epistemology. According to Ford, his ideal reader would not be an "intellectual" or a "gentleman" but "the man with the quite virgin mind"—someone with "a peasant intelligence," like "the cabmen round the corner."4 Now Ford's art requires keen intellectual abilities and sophisticated knowledge about narrative. Speaking literally, cabmen and peasants would probably find *The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End* boring, overly taxing, or incomprehensible. What Ford desires is a reader with a "non-preoccupied mind" who is willing to suspend "accepted ideas" about art and life.5 His ideal reader must be able to bracket everyday assumptions about fiction (that it must tell a story, for example) and about human understanding (that life narrates, or that reality is simply there without the need for us to believe in it). Ford's works are often bewildering because they defy the habits of perception which the conventions of realism encourage. The challenge to Ford's reader is to suspend customary assumptions in order to open oneself to epistemological wonder—wonder about the primordial obscurity of experience, wonder about the workings of both reflective and unreflective knowing, and wonder about how fictions take advantage of our hermeneutic faculties in order to project a lifelike world.

*The Good Soldier* is a novel about how Dowell knows, and its manner of narration incorporates Ford's views on human understanding. My reading of the novel provides a three-part analysis of Ford's epistemology and his relation to James and Conrad. Focusing first on Ford's unique emphasis on the primacy of unreflective experience, I examine the novel's depiction of the bafflement that occurs when primordial "impressions" overwhelm reflective interpretation. Next I turn to the novel's Jamesian

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3Both modes of bewilderment are implied by Thomas C. Moser's perceptive observation that "'Surprise' almost sums up Ford's view of experience. Seeing few connections between phenomena, and being perpetually absorbed in reverie, he finds every stimulus from the external world surprising" (*Life in the Fiction of Ford*, pp. 149–50). The solipsistic self-absorption this surprise interrupts is similar to the deceptive self-sufficiency of unquestioned belief which Dowell and Tietjens find themselves startled out of. But the distracted, disconnected state of mind Moser describes here is also a condition of profound immersion in the confusing, enthralling surge and flow of roughly synthesized perceptions which a more focused consciousness overlooks in its insistence on clarity and order.


5Ibid., pp. 51–52.
dimension—its dramatization of Dowell's mixture of success and failure in projecting beliefs to compose and complete his world. No longer certain as James was that reality “cannot not be known,” Ford suggests that the characteristics of belief as a hermeneutic instrument necessitate the coexistence of indeterminacy and insight. Then I examine how The Good Soldier takes up Conrad's longing for community and translates it into a lament over the volatility of personal relations. More existential than ontological, Ford does not pursue fidelity as a bulwark against contingency. His dream, rather, is that an ethics of care might stop the interpersonal warfare that devastates Dowell's and Tietjens's worlds. Ford's great moral theme is the potential for violence contained in the paradox of the alter ego.

Reflecting on the Unreflected

Dowell's narration is a prolonged, belated reflection on his earlier, unreflected experience. His rambling story is an attempt—not always successful but gradually improving—to clarify and organize impressions that, he finds, were more confusing, obscure, and misleading than he had realized because he had never paid much attention to them. The epistemological structure of The Good Soldier is an ongoing interaction between reflective and unreflective meaning-creation.

This interaction can be seen, for example, in Dowell's depiction of his wife's death. “Well, those are my impressions,” he declares after recalling his bafflement at the time; “what had actually happened had been this. I pieced it together afterwards.” Dowell lives forward and understands backwards. His original unreflective experience almost always requires retrospective elucidation. His primary “impressions” have the obscurity and dissociation of prethematic knowledge:

my recollection of the night is only the sort of pinkish effulgence from the

It may seem inaccurate to claim that Dowell reflects on his own experience, since he devotes so much of his story to past events in which he had no part. These events do belong to his experience, however, inasmuch as they make up the hidden sides of his relations with Florence, the Ashburnhams, and Nancy. For example, why the Ashburnhams were not simply “quite good people,” why Florence died, why Nancy went mad—all of these problems demand that he reconstruct sides not immediately available to him in order to understand what happened to him.

electric lamps in the hotel lounge. There seemed to bob into my consciousness, like floating globes, the faces of [three people in the room]. Now it would be the bearded, monarchical, benevolent head of the Grand Duke; then the sharp-featured, brown, cavalry-moustached features of the chief of police; then the globular, polished, and high-collared vacuousness that represented Monsieur Schontz, the proprietor of the hotel. At times one head would be there alone, at another the spike helmet of the official would be close to the healthy baldness of the prince; then Monsieur Schontz’s oiled locks would push in between the two . . . . That was how it presented itself to me. (Pp. 107–8)

Like the man who sees not a revolver but a steel ring pointed at him, Dowell perceives gestalts that contain implicitly and obscurely what he later, on reflection, makes thematic. His impressions can become clear and coherent only after retrospective acts of interpretation sort them out and identify the objects they hazily suggest.

The scene has a shimmering effect because the relations between objects have not yet stabilized into the consistent patterns that lucid comprehension demands. But Dowell’s impressions are not formless—if they were they would mean nothing at all. We can recognize them as rudimentary perceptions because the categories they invoke seem, on reflection, both striking and odd (heads are “floating globes,” whole people are summed up by their hairstyle or their headgear). The dissonance between the figures Dowell’s impressions project (the examples I just gave are a metaphor and a metonymy) and the types a more self-conscious interpretation would use makes the scene seem strange, even somewhat fantastic. Although Dowell’s impressions are not a totally unstructured flux, the perceptual schemes they deploy are extremely changeable, and their way of organizing a figure is both recognizable and bizarre, both fitting and anomalous. His impressions convey knowledge of the scene, but they also leave much for reflection to puzzle out by finding more coherent, comprehensive interpretive schemes.

Paradoxically, this scene and others like it in the novel are both fresh in their immediacy and dark in their lack of coherence. Dowell’s rudimentary types are both a revitalizing challenge to conventional descriptive categories and a sign that he does not know what is going on. His gestalts are shifting and strange because parts are dissociated from the wholes into which a more completely synthesized interpretation would compose them. Heads float freely through space and time; one feature of a person synecdochically replaces his entire identity. Dowell consequently experiences the scene with an openness to unusual and unexpected relationships which a more con-
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centrated gaze would suppress. But this absentminded incoherence is also a liability, since it increases his vulnerability to misapprehension—in this case blinding him to the true cause of Florence's death.

Not only his original impressions but also his recollections are organized by association. Dowell recognizes this and apologizes: "One remembers points that one has forgotten and one explains them all the more minutely since one recognizes that one has forgotten to mention them in their proper place" (p. 183). The paradox here is that the incoherences of memory may block the efforts of reflection to achieve a complete synthesis, even as recollection provides self-consciousness with the materials it needs to make sense of experience. Every step toward synthesis may provoke new associations that contest it. Or, even if they reinforce it, they may require Dowell to backtrack and modify various aspects of what he has previously come to know. Following up a new line of thought prompted by his reflections may interfere with the very attempt to fit the pieces of his history into a coherent pattern which is the task of self-conscious retrospection.

For all of these reasons, Dowell's reflections only slowly and hesitantly approach clear comprehension. Dowell begins his quest for understanding from a much more rudimentary position than does Lambert Strether or the narrator of The Sacred Fount. When one of their interpretive constructs is shattered, they soon come up with a replacement. Dowell's goal is to attain the level of composed interpretation—to reach the level where James's characters pursue their hermeneutic adventures. 8

8The relation between reflective and unreflective knowing suggests why Ford's impressionism may be profitably compared to David Hume's epistemology, although important differences also divide them. Ford's opposition between primordial impressions and retrospective narration recalls Hume's distinction between "impressions" and "ideas." Hume's two constructs differ in "the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind." For Hume, "impressions" include "those perceptions which enter with most force and violence," whereas "ideas" are "the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning." See David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature (1739), excerpted in The Essential David Hume, ed. Robert Paul Wolff (New York: New American Library, 1969), p. 30. Another similarity is Hume's contention that association is a primary mode of understanding which underlies even our conception of cause and effect. Unlike Hume, however, Ford does not regard reflective understanding as an exact duplicate of immediate perception, agreeing "in every other particular, except their degree of force and vivacity" (p. 31). The assimilation of Fordian impressions into narrative clarity and coherence changes more than their liveliness. For Ford the relation between the reflective and the unreflective levels is not a static, one-to-one correspondence but an ever-changing, mutually formative interaction. Self-conscious scrutiny transforms primordial perception by removing its obscurities and organizing its dissociations. Reverse effects are also
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It is debatable, of course, whether Dowell’s reflections succeed—whether his reinterpretations adequately clarify his past or instead introduce new obfuscations. This is one of the many puzzles that make *The Good Soldier* an irreducibly ambiguous work. As Thomas Moser notes, “careful readers of good will, in utter disagreement as to the reliability of its narrator, seem not to be discussing the same book.” *The Good Soldier* is not only a novel about the trials of human understanding; it itself is also an example of them, an occasion for interpretive dilemmas in the reader’s engagement with it, as can be seen from the controversy that has marked its reception. This controversy defies definitive resolution, just as the “impossible objects” I invoked to describe the ambiguity of *The Sacred Fountain* refuse conclusive proof that the rabbit should prevail over the duck. In order to show why readers have disagreed about Ford’s novel, I will try to identify aspects of the work which allow them to make different choices about how to compose it. In each case, these switch points in the reader’s experience are correlated to a specific aspect of the novel’s exploration of the characteristics of understanding—not only the dialectic of reflection and the unreflected, but also the role of belief in interpretation and the paradox of the alter ego. Like James and Conrad, Ford values ambiguity because it foregrounds the workings of interpretation—blocking their straightforward completion of their task so that they might emerge as a theme for reflection.

My reading of *The Good Soldier* results from my own decision to regard

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possible. The disorienting disjunctions of immediate vision can be a revitalizing challenge to the entrenched ideas of conscious understanding. On Hume’s relevance for literary impressionism, also see Todd K. Bender, “Conrad and Literary Impressionism,” *Conradiana* 10:3 (1978), 219–21.

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Dowell as a narrator who struggles, with mixed but increasing success, to give a trustworthy account of his history. In what follows I try to justify this choice, but I also point out why other decisions are possible—why other readers might prefer to see a rabbit where I see a duck. Although the viewer cannot see both the rabbit and the duck at the same time, it is possible to thematize the duck in a way that holds the rabbit ready on the horizon. I will try to do this by emphasizing the hermeneutic complexities of the work which allow other readings to arise—epistemological paradoxes the novel plays with to encourage disagreement about its meaning.

If Dowell grows in understanding, he does so by writing. His narration employs language not only as a means of communication but also as a tool for reflection—an instrument that makes possible the objectification and analysis of unreflected thoughts and feelings. Dowell repeatedly calls attention to his activity as the author of his text: “you must remember that I have been writing away at this story now for six months and reflecting longer and longer upon these affairs” (p. 184). We must remember the actual act of expression as a crucial dramatic element in Dowell's story because to write—or, even more vividly, to speak as he imagines he does “in a country cottage with a silent listener” (p. 183)—is to make the self present to itself by presenting it to others. This process of self-presentation is the function of Strether's conversations with Maria Gostrey, even after she is no longer his teacher and guide. Although Dowell has no Miss Gostrey, he finds a substitute in writing. “This is the saddest story I have ever heard” (p. 3), Dowell claims as he begins his tale. As we learn later, Dowell has indeed “heard” much of the story he tells from informants like Leonora and Edward. Even more, though, Dowell “hears” his story for the first time as he tells it. Dowell only discovers what he thinks and what his history means by offering his experience to himself in language. His unreflective experience already had meaning—but tacit meaning that awaits explication in words so that it can be examined. The act of writing puts Dowell at a remove from his unreflective engagement with the world. By taking up his pen, he takes his first step from the obscurity and

10 Also comparing the novel's ambiguity to a figure-ground gestalt, Snitow argues that “perception of the design as first the background and then as the design again alternates very quickly so that one almost sees both qualities at once” (Ford and the Voice of Uncertainty, p. 166; original emphasis). The “almost” is a crucial qualification. The viewer can only see one image at a time, even if at another level of reflection one may wonder what it is about the gestalt—or, in this case, the novel—that encourages opposing interpretations.
As he educates himself by writing, Dowell also advances his ability to express his new awareness of himself and his world. In the first few pages of the novel, Dowell shifts ground often—offering an assessment only to withdraw or reverse it, moving unpredictably from topic to topic, interrupting lines of development just as they get going, jumping unexpectedly from one level of discourse to another (from reporting past events, to judging himself and others, to philosophizing about the human condition). The jolts, contradictions, and incongruities at the start of the novel constitute a switch point where the reader must decide about the narrator's reliability: Are these disruptions an indication of incompetence and evasiveness, or are they an honest expression of confusion and pain? Is this a devious, defensive narrator, or one who is unusually sincere about his anguish and uncertainty? The epistemological issue Ford plays with here is the dilemma of choosing between unmasking and faith—of deciding whether to suspect or trust the surface presented to us. *The Good Soldier* is an ambiguous novel because neither choice can be conclusive. Both are guesses about the hidden or as yet undisclosed. They are wagers about what the future is likely to reveal, but they also influence those disclosures by setting up expectations that may to a considerable degree be self-confirming (once one starts seeing lies everywhere, where does one stop? when, similarly, does trust prove blinding?). Ford calls attention to this dilemma by forcing his readers to make a decision about his narrator which, however they choose, they cannot perfectly justify.

Toward the end of the novel, Dowell shows himself much more able to focus his attention and organize events than he was at the start. For a trusting interpreter, this can be seen as evidence that his reflections have increased his understanding (although a suspicious reader may of course reply that his deceptions have just become more skillful). For example, Dowell's gripping account of the impassioned and maddeningly labyrinthine entanglement of Leonora, Edward, and Nancy during their last days

11Jacobs's deconstructionist interpretation misses this aspect of the novel because she regards writing as autonomous and disembodied, detached from any originating subjectivity: "As the narrative rolls along in this manner, we begin to suspect that the text itself is a kind of adulterer, continually turning from the straight line of narration in which it might remain true to what it said before" ("The (Too) Good Soldier," p. 35; emphasis added). In contrast to the anonymity of *écriture*, Ford's novel portrays writing as the objectification of a subject's efforts to create meaning and understand the world.
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at Branshaw Teleragh has much more concentration, penetration, and narrative control than he could muster when he began his story. "Is all this digression or isn't it digression?" Dowell asks near the beginning; "again I don't know" (p. 14). But after much reflecting on the unreflected, Dowell gains enough sophistication about meaning and expression to evaluate his narrative strategy self-consciously. Acknowledging that he has not kept the time line of his story strictly chronological, Dowell explains: "I cannot help it. It is so difficult to keep all these people going. I tell you about Leonora and bring her up to date; then about Edward, who has fallen behind. And then the girl gets hopelessly left behind. I wish I could put it down in diary form" (p. 222). And then he reorients the reader by providing a brief chronology.

Dowell's bewilderment earlier about whether or not he was digressing differs from his resigned if disappointed awareness here about what he loses by choosing one way of organizing his story rather than another. His ability to orient the reader chronologically differs from his disorienting shifts at the outset. His grasp of alternative modes of narration differs from his frantic grasping about in the early pages for a way to tell his story. All of these changes ask us to reevaluate the doubts the novel's beginning raises about Dowell's competence. Suspicious readers may find his new coherence as devious as his earlier disjunctions. Others—like myself—may grant his narration increasing credence on the grounds that his growth in mastery as a writer is an index of what he has discovered by writing.

By trying to make life narrate, Dowell learns about the difficulties of narration and, to a large extent, how to resolve them. He therefore departs somewhat from the Jamesian type of writer-narrator who rehearses the past without changing his or her mind or style (as, for example, in "The Aspern Papers," The Turn of the Screw, or The Sacred Fount). Writing is not for Jamesian narrators an act of reflection whereby they increase their understanding and control over their story. This difference is attributable to the difference between Ford's fascination with the gap between reflection and the unreflected (with writing as a means of closing it) and James's interest in interpretation as an act of composition (with writing as a means for his narrators to present the assumptions and procedures by which they made coherent if not always reliable sense of their worlds). Dowell also differs from Conrad's Marlow whose narrative competence does not change significantly as he tells Jim's story.12 Because the meaning of Jim's

12For a further comparison of Marlow and Dowell, see Moser, Life in the Fiction of Ford, pp. 156–61.
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experience is ultimately indeterminate, Marlow can only circle around it without ever reaching it. Greater narrative skill would not change his epistemological dilemma, and his development as a storyteller is consequently not an issue. Although Dowell can never close completely the gap between reflection and the unreflected, he can narrow it by improving his abilities as an interpreter and a teller of tales—and one source of the drama of his novel is the question of whether he will rise to this challenge.

Although Dowell contemplates the alternative of re-creating a diary, a rigidly chronological narrative would not dramatize the temporality of self-consciousness with the hermeneutic verisimilitude that distinguishes *The Good Soldier*. The relation between present and past in Dowell’s way of telling his story re-creates in narrative form the temporal dynamics of reflection as a process of remembering. At one point Dowell pauses to remark: “looking over what I have written, I see that I have unintentionally misled you when I said that Florence was never out of my sight. Yet that was the impression that I really had until just now. When I come to think of it she was out of my sight most of the time” (p. 88). This passage contains in miniature the temporal structure of the novel. In recounting his original “impression” and then correcting it retrospectively, Dowell gives the past as he understood it and the present in which he reconsiders this unreflected understanding. Dowell’s discovery about Florence here invokes not only the distant past of their relation but also the more immediate past of his writing. From the perspective of the narrative present, Dowell looks back to his original experience across the horizon of what he has just written. His previous reflections have given him a better situation for understanding, just as his new knowledge of Florence projects the possibility of future enlightenment as his narrative proceeds.

Dowell changes his view of Florence (from a “poor dear” [p. 13] to a villainous meddler), of Leonora (from a noble sufferer to a deceitful destroyer), and of Edward (from “a raging stallion” [p. 17] to a misunderstood and misplaced sentimentalist). These changes are the consequence of many

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13This is one of the epistemological foundations of the much-discussed time shifts in Ford’s novel and in literary impressionism—what Arthur Mizener calls “the double perspective of the novel, the simultaneous awareness of what the experience was like for a participant as it was actually occurring and of what the full knowledge of hindsight shows it to have been” (*The Saddest Story: A Biography of Ford Madox Ford* [New York: World, 1971], p. 268). What Mizener describes as a static, relatively straightforward juxtaposition is actually a dynamic, developing process that covers, as Robie Macauley notes, “all the tenses of memory” (“The Good Ford,” *Kenyon Review* 11 [Spring 1949], 272).
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factors, but one important reason for them is that Dowell's memory changes as it views the past from the ever-changing temporal perspective of the present. By occasionally reminding us about how many months have elapsed while he writes, Dowell's narrative emphasizes that self-consciousness develops through time and thus constantly reconstitutes the past it examines as earlier acts of understanding prepare new situations for reflection.

When we read *The Good Soldier*, our acts of anticipation and retrospection complement the forward and backward movement of Dowell's reflections on his past. Dowell shifts focus, leaves and returns to aspects of his history, corrects or at least changes his views, and offers different perspectives on events as he seeks to make the hazy, disconnected aspects of his earlier experience compose into a narrative pattern. We as readers also attempt to compose his history. And our versions of it will change insofar as the shifts in his narrative and the development of his understanding persuade us to reconsider our original interpretations. These repeated moments of retrospective reconsideration provide a series of switch points where the reader may decide to go with Dowell in his new version of his story or against him according to an alternative configuration of the novel's meaning. The recurrence of these moments transforms into an explicit theme the implicit process of retrospective reconstitution which all reading entails. Whatever the reader decides about Dowell, the repeated need to reconsider his story and to make new choices about its narrator (or to review and reconfirm our old ones) distances us from our unreflective assimilation of the work. This distance makes room for reflection not only about Dowell but also about the unusually discontinuous, disruptive experience of reading his novel. *The Good Soldier* plays with the way our anticipatory and retrospective acts of interpretation challenge and change each other through the time of reading. Ford thereby calls attention to the temporal relations between original understanding and retrospective reflection in construing texts and interpreting the world.

As the temporal structure of *The Good Soldier* suggests, time makes reflection possible because the passing of moments allows the self in the present to relate itself to the self of the past. This temporal reduplication of consciousness is at the heart of Dowell's growing self-consciousness. But time also frustrates reflection. Dowell cannot relive his past; he can only try to remember it. The distance between past and present allows error in memory. But an infallible, unchanging memory would give Dowell a kind of omniscience. And an omniscient Dowell would not need to
struggle as he does to illuminate the darkness of the unreflected with the light of reflection.

*Prison or Minuet? Understanding as Believing*

The uncertainty that plagues Dowell owes less to the limits of his memory than to the limits of human understanding which he suddenly discovers when his unquestioning faith in his world collapses. Dowell had believed that he, his wife, and the Ashburnhams lived in "an extraordinarily safe castle" (p. 6). His attitude was one of "taking everything for granted" (p. 34)—so much so that he never recognized that he was pinning his faith on a world. When Dowell's unquestioned beliefs are shattered, he reverts to almost nihilistic despair: "what does one know and why is one here?" he asks; "there is nothing to guide us" (pp. 10, 12). Dowell finds his world made strange to him, just as Nancy Rufford finds her world overturned when all she takes for granted about the sacredness of marriage is shown to be naïve, untrustworthy belief.

Dowell experiences a combination of Jamesian and Conradian bewilderment. His surprise and confusion reveal that his "reality" was an interpretive construct, a composition based on hypotheses and presuppositions, just as Strether's bewilderment at the river shows how much he had too trustingly assumed about Chad and Madame de Vionnet. Similarly, just as the anomaly of Jim defies Marlow's most deep-seated convictions about humanity and the world, so the failure of Dowell's interpretive hypotheses throws into question his fundamental assumptions about human being—his belief, most of all, that peace and harmony could (and did) characterize personal relations.

As Dowell reflects on the surprises that at first confounded him, he comes to understand the limits of interpretation and the dangers of belief. Dowell remains uncertain at the end: "I don't know. I know nothing. I am very tired" (p. 245). Dowell knows more than he suggests here, but his new awareness could not develop until he discovered that indeterminacy and uncertainty must accompany any act of construal. Ford is not a simple relativist, however. Dowell's awakening itself suggests that there is a difference for Ford between right and wrong interpretations. But Ford's epistemology is more radical than James's contradictory allegiance to both reality and interpretation. *The Good Soldier* denies that knowing ultimately leads to something that is simply "there," single, independent, and deter-
minate. After Dowell’s naïve faith in reality is discredited, he finds that he must make his way in a thoroughly semiotic universe where sign leads only to sign. He discovers a panoply of conflicting viewpoints—a multiplicity that criteria for validation cannot finally simplify into a single “truth.” But he also finds that different perspectives can at least to some degree be ranked or reconciled. Interpretation in The Good Soldier is both limitless and bounded, and this paradox is due to the hermeneutic workings of belief.

The many surprises that overtake Dowell show him how much he had unwittingly projected hypotheses about hidden sides. The sides he saw led him to believe that he, Florence, and the Ashburnhams danced a graceful “minuet de la cour” (p. 6). But when the sides behind this facade emerge, Dowell discovers “it wasn’t a minuet that we stepped; it was a prison—a prison full of screaming hysterics” (p. 7). He believed that he “possessed a goodly apple,” only to find out it was “rotten at the core” (p. 7). Still, he asks, “isn’t it true to say that for nine years I possessed a goodly apple?” (p. 7). Dowell’s question suggests the extent to which the “truth” of any matter is a construct of unspoken assumptions. His “apple” was a hypothesis that existed for as long as he could continue to believe in it. Dowell’s surprise about its rottenness reveals, however, that he had seen it in only a limited aspect. He could assume he knew it completely only because he had filled out its indeterminacies with his own projections. His bewilderment is like the surprise a perceiver feels when, after seeing three sides of what seems like a cube, he or she discovers that the other three sides do not exist. Dowell had expected that the hidden sides of his apple would harmonize and agree with the sides he saw, and his justification in projecting the completion of his figure was the belief that the rest of it would fulfill the promise of the aspect in which he saw it.

Where Dowell had assumed that his apple was simply there—a reality independent of him—he finds that it has the status of a sign. The sides he saw stood for sides beyond his grasp—a signified both manifested and withheld by the signifier he interpreted. This dialectic of disclosure and deferral makes the lie possible, and to note that Dowell had been living a lie for many years is another way of saying that he had been living in a semiotic universe without knowing it. Dowell’s world is so semiotic that even the symptoms of illness are often deceptions. Florence’s Uncle John shows all the signs of heart trouble, for example, but he dies of bronchitis, and his heirs consequently do not know which illness to regard as his “real” affliction when deciding what kind of hospital to support with his
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legacy. More insidiously, of course, Florence uses heart disease as a ruse to mislead her gullible husband. The discovery that she was not really ill contributes powerfully to Dowell's new uncertainty about what "reality" is.

Because of the limits of Dowell's perspective, and because the signs in his world withold what they present, he cannot avoid using hypotheses to construe the absent and the hidden. The role of belief in understanding makes error possible, however, like Dowell's huge mistake about his relations with Florence and the Ashburnhams. The question Dowell's reflections must answer is whether and how belief also allows knowledge. Dowell had been a victim of the circularity of interpretation—the independence of beliefs about the whole and comprehension of its parts which fascinates James. Dowell must transform the hermeneutic circle from a vicious trap into a resource for making sense of his world. Dowell explains his original hermeneutic schema: "The given proposition was that we were all 'good people' " (p. 34). This belief guided (and, as it turns out, misguided) his projections about Florence and the Ashburnhams. It was an organizing hypothesis that, he felt, fitted all aspects of his world seamlessly together. Because this overarching construct and its constituent elements were mutually confirming, however, Dowell never stopped to question it—or to notice that the "reality" he believed in was an interpretive composition that might be a fabric of illusions.

The action of the novel is Dowell's attempt to find new paradigms for understanding to replace the discredited category of "good people." The first paragraph of the novel exemplifies this process. Dowell proposes one scheme after another only to correct it in a manner that amounts to rejecting it: "an extreme intimacy" becomes "an acquaintanceship," knowing the Ashburnhams "as well as it was possible to know anybody" becomes knowing "nothing about them at all," a statement about the nature of "English people" is followed by a confession of total ignorance about "the depths of an English heart" (p. 3). Dowell's search for adequate paradigms leads him to invoke a series of formulas about "sentimentality," Catholicism, the "English Tory," Americans, the Irish, women, and the "normal" versus the "proud, unusual individual." These are types Dowell needs in order to compose the elements of his world. But the extent to which his categories seem at times to be naïve prejudices marks the degree to which he has yet to make the reverse move of the circle, back to the individual to correct and refine the type. Dowell himself is skeptical about his formulas: "I don't attach any particular importance to these generalizations of mine."
Fordian Bewilderment

They may be right, they may be wrong. . . . You may take my generalizations or leave them” (p. 244). It is ultimately up to the reader to evaluate Dowell’s types in deciding whether to trust or suspect him. Ford’s narrator cannot do without global statements, though, because he cannot understand his world without assumptions about the whole.

Dowell’s quest for interpretive constructs also helps explain the abundance of metaphor in the novel. At one point, near the beginning, Dowell can hardly write a sentence without inventing a figure. He, Florence, and the Ashburnhams “were an extraordinarily safe castle,” “one of those tall ships with the white sails upon a blue sea,” “a minuet de la cour” (an image he develops in a paragraph-long conceit), “a prison full of screaming hysteric,” “a goodly apple that is rotten at the core,” or a “four-square house” with two rotten “pillars” (pp. 6–7). This very proliferation of metaphors is an indication of Dowell’s dilemma and of his task. At a loss for beliefs to organize his world, Dowell invokes metaphor as a substitute. His hysterical multiplication of metaphors is simultaneously a symptom of his confusion and an effort to get beyond it. Each of his tropes is an interpretive scheme, a way of seeing some aspect of his history, a proposal for organizing his past according to a certain configuration. As much as a type or a generalization, a metaphor can provide a paradigm to guide future acts of understanding—a global arrangement of parts in a whole whose meaning can be refined and amplified through further explication. Dowell’s entire narrative is in this sense an extended interpretation of the figure of the minuet which disguised a prison of hysterics.

Dowell habitually turns to tropes whenever he finds himself at an interpretive impasse: “I can’t define it and can’t find a simile for it. It wasn’t as if a snake had looked out of a hole. No, it was as if my heart had missed a beat. It was as if we were going to run and cry out; all four of us in separate directions, averting our heads” (pp. 44–45). Faced with an unfamiliar, inexplicable state of affairs, Dowell finds tropes helpful because they can create new meaning out of old materials—here describing an original perception of suppressed collective hysteria by juxtaposing several images that by themselves would be trite and lame. Dowell takes advantage of a metaphor’s ability to assimilate the unlike to the like through the “as if” process, which this example explicitly and repeatedly mentions. Grafting the unfamiliar onto the familiar, the “as if” invokes both similarity and difference; it suggests that something both is and is not so. The similarity aids assimilation, but so also does the difference, inasmuch as it clarifies what something is by distinguishing what it is not.
The metaphors in *The Good Soldier* have been described as one source of the novel's humor (Schorer cites Dowell's "rather simple-minded and, at the same time, grotesquely comic metaphors") or as an implicit critique of Dowell's judgment (Richard Cassell calls them "often exaggerated and contradictory, often either under- or overkeyed"). The dissonance of Dowell's metaphors is an indication of his shifting ratio of success and failure in interpreting his history. Their very exaggeration can signal success when their extremity does the work of "a very good novelist. . . . if it's the business of a novelist to make you see things clearly" (p. 109). Although still rudimentary, Dowell's early image of the "minuet-prison" falls under this heading, as does his figure of the "safe castle." Justified by their potential hermeneutic power, they are effective metaphors for his excessive willingness to believe and his misconstrual of hidden sides. When his tropes create an excessive picture of heroic grandeur or misplace the emotion of a scene, they suggest that Dowell's quest for sense-making constructs is not yet complete.

Where Dowell seeks to understand his world through metaphor, we as readers must interpret him by deciphering and evaluating his images. In either case, whether we judge a trope a success or a failure, the very act of evaluation calls upon us to note that metaphor is a tool for understanding. Dowell moves from taking for granted the stale image of "good people" to inventing original figures to interpret his world. Whether his new metaphors are convincing or not, this step in itself asks us to recognize that our sense of "reality" is metaphorical at base because it is configurative.

Not only in its profusion of metaphors but also in its experiments with representation, Ford's novel encourages its readers to share Dowell's discoveries about the hermeneutic workings of belief. Dowell's rambling, digressive, mazelike presentation challenges us to become self-conscious about the role of hypotheses in reading and, by extension, in all interpre-

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15For example, see Cassell, who argues that Dowell's comparison of Edward to "one of the ancient Greek damned" (p. 252) not only elevates him "to the universal level of classical legend and tragedy, but at the same time. . . . perhaps unconsciously, belittles [him] by overstating the significance of his suffering and sacrifice" (Ford: A Study of His Novels, p. 194). Also see Carol Ohmann, who finds fault with Dowell's "emotional and moral" understanding of Maisie Maidan's death because he depicts her through grotesque and trivial images (the trunk closing on her "like the jaws of a gigantic alligator" [p. 76]; Maisie "smiling, as if she had just scored a goal in a hockey match" [p. 76]; *Ford Madox Ford: From Apprentice to Craftsman* [Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1964], p. 76).
tation. Dowell habitually offers a partial picture of some state of affairs and then returns to it again, adding more to it or modifying his earlier description. He narrates by backing and filling. His handling of the Kilsyte case is typical. Dowell's first mysterious allusion to a scandal that almost sent Ashburnham to jail (see pp. 49–50) is briefly redefined later as "a conspiracy of false evidence, got together by Nonconformist adversaries" (p. 97), before the narrative finally gets around to recounting the actual encounter with the servant girl (pp. 149–50)—and even at this point the all-important effects of the case on Edward and Leonora are not specified until several pages later (pp. 156–58). Each incomplete reference to the incident both challenges and defies the reader to make coherent sense of its place in Ashburnham's history. A haze of indeterminacies surrounds each succeeding mention—blanks that set the reader to wondering without giving enough material to fill them in. Not until Dowell's final discussion of the affair can the reader fit together all the pieces and develop a coherent image of it as a turning point in the Ashburnhams' relationship and Edward's love life.

One effect of indeterminacies such as these and of Dowell's delays in completing them is to give us an opportunity to observe in ourselves the effort to specify the unspecified and to compose the uncomposed. These two basic hermeneutic activities are highlighted in the experience of reading *The Good Soldier* because they are provoked and blocked. By both inciting and thwarting the reader's efforts to transform partial information into fulfilled meaning, Ford emphasizes how states of affairs are given to us with an inherent incompleteness that we strive to complete. Similarly, by scattering the elements of Dowell's history across the course of his narration, Ford calls attention to how understanding depends on consistency building—a process foregrounded through the extremity of the demands made on the reader's capacities for fitting disconnected aspects together. The roles of gap filling and consistency building in understanding are important themes not only in Dowell's history as an interpreter but also in the experience of reading his tale.

Ford speaks in the name of mimesis when he argues that a novelist should abandon the artifice of telling a coherent story and should instead render a nonsequential series of incompletely synthesized images: "In that way you would attain to the sort of odd vibration that scenes in real life really have; you would give your reader the impression that he was witnessing something real, that he was passing through an experience."16 By

fristrating the expectation of coherence, a novel may indeed heighten its readers' involvement with its objects because we must work so hard to synthesize their aspects. The more we as readers contribute to a work, the more we may feel part of its world. But a coherent story encourages a reader's immersion in its events by facilitating the unreflective assimilation of meaning. The experience of Ford's readers is perhaps less conducive to verisimilitude. As readers of *The Good Soldier* go back and forth across the work's array of disconnected, incomplete pictures and attempt to piece them together, their attitude will probably not be immersion but puzzled observation, hermeneutic contemplation, or existential reflection. They are likely to find themselves becoming self-conscious about the very process of understanding precisely because it has been blocked.

Dowell avoided disillusioning surprise for so long because he ignored anomalies—incongruities suggesting that the construct “good people” might be a faulty guide for composing his world. Dowell is inaccurate when he claims: “I had never the remotest glimpse, not the shadow of a suspicion, that there was anything wrong” (p. 69). For example, during Leonora's strange outburst when they visited the Protest, Dowell “was aware of something treacherous, something frightening, something evil in the day” (p. 44)—so much so that his fear for the safety of the castle he believed in put him momentarily in a daze. When he recovered, Dowell used Leonora's remark about her Irish Catholic background to assure himself nothing more was the matter than that she was extraordinarily sensitive about her religion. “It struck me, at the time,” he remembers, “that there was an unusual, an almost threatening, hardness in her voice” (p. 68)—an anomalous intensity that gave a hint he chose to ignore about the horrible goings-on behind the foursome's pretended equanimity.

Two anomalies finally force Dowell to suspect what he had believed. These are, of course, Leonora's offhand comments about Florence's suicide and her adulterous affair with Edward. Edward's all-night confession prepared Dowell to learn from Leonora's revelations by showing him how sides hidden from his perspective could diverge drastically from the sides he saw—in this instance how “absolute, hopeless, dumb agony” could lie behind the pretended “spirit of peace” at Branshaw Teleragh (p. 20). That it takes so much to wake Dowell up is not only testimony to his remarkable naïveté. The deeper epistemological point here is the tenacity with which belief can resist correction by hanging on to cherished habits and assumptions.

Curiously, of the two anomalies with which Leonora presents him, Dowell is more struck at first by the revelation that Florence committed
suicide. Her affair with Ashburnham would seem to have more profound implications. But Dowell's misconceptions about his wife's death are indeed important because they provide him with a small-scale model of how understanding works (and can fail). "I had no possible guide to the idea of suicide," Dowell explains, "and the sight of the little flask of nitrate of amyl in Florence's hand suggested instantly to my mind the idea of the failure of her heart" (pp. 106–7). The revelation that the flask contained prussic acid is a turning point in Dowell's history inasmuch as it provides him with a comprehensible because limited example of how his unspoken hypotheses misled him. The acid is to Dowell what Chad's gray hair is to Strether—a small part with enormous implications because its refusal to fit the whole not only overturns his interpretive schemes but also calls attention to the very circularity of understanding.

Dowell's surprise here discloses to him all the previously unnoticed dimensions of knowing which, after he finishes talking with Leonora and begins to write, he invokes in the metaphors of the goodly apple with the rotten core and the minuet of hysterical prisoners. Dowell discovers that his position let him see Florence's death in a limited aspect, from one side only (without any perspective on the sides of the affair available to Leonora, for example, or even to the chief of police and the proprietor of the hotel). He realizes that he had filled out these sides with the hypothesis of heart failure—an assumption that would harmonize with what he saw (the flask in her hand) and would fit together consistently with his beliefs about her ill health. Correcting his mistaken assumptions about her death also leads Dowell to reconsider other hidden sides. He cannot understand her suicide without reinterpreting her relations with Leonora and Ashburnham, their relations with each other, and Nancy's relations with them.

Dowell reexamines his erroneous conjectures not to abandon hypothetical thinking but to project new beliefs. Although his earlier conjectures misled him, he cannot replace them with indubitable facts. He can only pursue the truth through hypotheses—including, for example, his speculations about how Florence must have felt when, before her death, she crept up on Edward and Nancy in the park and then ran into Bagshawe and Dowell in the hotel. Dowell's reflections are filled with phrases like: "I seem to gather that . . ." (p. 169), "So I figured it out that . . ." (p. 169), "I fancy that was how it was" (p. 172). The difference between these explicit conjectures and the unspoken hypotheses that misled him earlier is that now he knows what he is doing. His understanding of how his hypotheses went wrong enables Dowell to conjecture self-consciously and therefore more reliably (or at least more cautiously).
As Dowell's interpretive mastery expands, however, one of his main insights is the stubborn elusiveness of "truth." He develops a Jamesian ability to guess the unseen from the seen and to trace the piece from the pattern—but his new epistemological powers reveal to him ever more reasons why, as Marlow finds with Jim, aspects and perspectives can refuse to cohere with a singular, definitive consistency. Dowell increasingly realizes that the workings of belief as an instrument of knowledge make truth irreducibly plural. From ignorance that perspectives may diverge radically in what they disguise and reveal, Dowell progresses to considerable facility in reconstructing and appreciating different points of view. He claims, for example, to "have explained everything... from the several points of view that were necessary—from Leonora's, from Edward's, and, to some extent, from my own. You have the facts for the trouble of finding them; you have the points of view as far as I could ascertain or put them" (p. 184). He also reconstructs Florence's and Nancy's perspectives from what Leonora and Edward tell him and from what he remembers. The irony of his assertion that the "facts" are there if we only look is, of course, that his presentation of incompatible perspectives radically questions the "thereness" of reality. Dowell's desire to reconstruct these "several points of view" testifies to his newfound awareness that no observer enjoys a privileged position that embraces all the rest and thus displays the "real" in all its aspects. His narrative procedure enacts in the telling of his tale the semantic multiplicity of a universe of opposing interpretations.

As Dowell admits by listing Leonora's and Edward's perspectives in the same series with his own, his position as narrator is not privileged either. His interpretation is one among many. In Dowell's world, truth cannot be determined by an appeal to authority. Dowell's modesty about his privileges as a judge anticipates and encourages disputes about his reliability. His concern with understanding the hermeneutic standpoints of others may bring him closer than any other character to a position privileged by its ability to include other points of view. But rendering other perspectives does not allow Dowell to resolve their differences. And his own shifting passions about other characters, coupled with his at times bizarre prejudices (about Catholicism, for example), insist on the uniqueness of his own perspective even as he tries to mediate among others. His idiosyncrasies as an interpreter defy the presumption of a storyteller's authority by calling attention to the degree of disguise that accompanies every hermeneutic disclosure.

Dowell's epistemological humility protects his insights even as it emphasizes the indeterminacies they leave: "There are many things that I cannot
well make out, about which I cannot well question Leonora, or about which Edward did not tell me” (p. 139). If Dowell needs to speculate to construct other perspectives, he also knows the dangers of allowing his hypotheses to extend themselves beyond the limits legitimated by doubt. He says of Leonora that “at times she imagined herself to see more than was warranted” (p. 178). She commits an error he wishes to avoid—an error responsible for many of his mistakes in the past when he failed to recognize the precarious provisionality of his beliefs. But if Dowell does not hesitate to admit that some “things are a little inscrutable” (p. 185), then his confession frees him to trust his other hypotheses with the assurance that they are “only conjecture, but I think the conjecture is pretty well justified” (p. 116). To this extent, at least, aligning belief and doubt allows Dowell a positive understanding of his world. Although he never achieves Strether’s final clarity, Dowell’s very confession of ignorance and uncertainty preserves the headway he does make as an interpreter.

I have been trying to explain a paradox that Samuel Hynes also notes—namely, that The Good Soldier portrays “the development of the narrator toward some partial knowledge” through his confrontation with “the limits of human knowledge.” After asserting the possibility of “partial knowledge,” however, Hynes contradicts himself by arguing that the novel displays “an irresolvable pluralism of truths, in a world that remains essentially dark.” Dowell’s reconstructions of Florence’s, Leonora’s, Edward’s, Nancy’s, and his own perspectives indeed show “truth” to be more variable than he realized before his awakening. But it is a limited, not an “irresolvable,” pluralism, and his world is not “essentially dark.” It is a shifting, multifarious ensemble of competing lights and shades. Dowell can and does employ various criteria of validation to check his understanding. His dilemma, though, is that their imperfections prevent absolute certainty that what he knows is univocally true.

The Good Soldier explores the usefulness and limitations of the same tests for validity which James and Conrad dramatize. For example, the criteria of comprehensiveness and pragmatic power are both at work in Dowell’s surprise at his mistaken beliefs. On the grounds of inclusiveness, Dowell’s unspoken hypotheses were falsified by their inability to assimilate the anomalies in Leonora’s revelations. That Dowell can ignore incongruities

17Hynes, “Epistemology of The Good Soldier,” pp. 228, 235, 231. Basically I agree with Hynes’s deservedly classic reading of the novel. Here and elsewhere, however, an unfortunate imprecision plagues his language—an imprecision that can result in logical contradictions or blur crucial fine points of epistemology.
for so long, however, shows the weakness of this test; belief can almost always find a way of forcing awkward elements into consistency. We saw this with the narrator of The Sacred Fount, and we saw it again with Dowell's defensive reaction to Leonora's outburst at the Protest. There is also the further problem that the many conflicting perspectives Dowell portrays are all themselves internally consistent and comprehensive. But they fit things together according to mutually incompatible principles of coherence.

The test of practical productiveness similarly falsified Dowell's assumptions when they did not predict successfully how the sides he did not see would fill out what he did see. His beliefs proved powerless in two senses—in their inability to lead further to continued acts of comprehension, and in their failure to give Dowell control over his situation. Here again, however, productiveness is not always a reliable guide to "truth" in Ford's novel. For example, on pragmatic grounds, the most valid interpreter might seem to be Leonora if the power of her views is proved by her ascendancy at the end when everyone else in her circle is disillusioned, mad, or dead. Her interpretation manages to keep leading further when others are stymied or defeated. Ironically and horribly, however, Dowell feels that her power is based on misunderstanding—a failure to comprehend Edward—which ultimately breaks out in violence. An interpretation that is strong, such as Leonora's reading of Edward, may be merely tyrannical and not necessarily correct.

The uncertainties and indeterminacies plaguing Dowell testify as well to the limits of intersubjectivity as a criterion for validation. Dowell cannot ultimately resolve the disagreements between the many perspectives he recreates because the positions, temperaments, and beliefs they embody differ irreducibly. These perspectives agree despite their differences, however, at least to some extent. Carol Jacobs exaggerates when she claims that The Good Soldier "makes a mockery of all hermeneutic consistency." If there were no agreement among "the several points of view" Dowell offers, then his accounts of them would be no more than a random compilation of unrelated stories. They may not share any central core of identity which they all aim at beneath their disagreements. But resemblances and convergences join them as much as conflicts and divergences divide them. Areas of overlap and points of relation hold together the various perspectives in The Good Soldier within one intersubjective field—a field, however, that is

irreducibly multiple because of the hermeneutic diversity it contains. The
criterion of intersubjective agreement is of use to Dowell as he reflects on
his conversations with Leonora and Edward to amplify, refine, and confirm
his understanding of the history they have all participated in. But Dowell’s
sense of their mutual entanglement is equaled only by his awareness that
the divergences between their perspectives prevent a single, authoritative
account from emerging.

Dowell also appeals to intersubjectivity by imagining “a sympathetic
soul opposite” him by “the fireplace of a country cottage” (p. 12). This
imaginary construct should recall the passage from Novalis that Conrad
chose as the epigraph for Lord Jim: “It is certain any conviction gains
infinitely the moment another soul will believe in it.”19 Because, as Dowell
discovers, the limits of our perspectives threaten us with solipsism and
error, we gain a validity that transcends the relativism of the self when we
can convince others to share our understanding. Dowell appeals to his
silent listener to validate his account by assenting to it. But Dowell com­
plains to his imaginary auditor: “you are so silent. You don’t tell me
anything” (p. 14). In his isolation with poor mad Nancy Rufford at the
end, Dowell reaches out for sympathy, understanding, and assistance by
constructing a being whose importance suggests the significance of com­
passion and agreement but whose absence declares them inaccessible.
Ultimately, then, Dowell appeals to us as readers to grant validity to his
perceptions, conjectures, and judgments by agreeing with them. We are
the mute auditors whose assent he seeks. The debate about the reliability
of his reflections shows, however, that such intersubjective agreement is as
elusive as it is crucial as a criterion of validation.

We have here yet another switch-point that allows readers to go different
ways in making sense of The Good Soldier. As The Sacred Fount, The
Ambassadors, and Lord Jim all suggest, persuasion is essential in winning
confirmation from others, but it is also fraught with dangers. Persuasion
may seek free assent to its claims, or it may try to overpower and disarm
by devious means. Readers will differ about Dowell as they decide what
kind of rhetoric he is employing. Persuasion is inherently ambiguous
because there are no universal, unequivocal signs to distinguish sincere
from deceptive rhetoric. And this is yet another reason why the history of

19Ford himself uses almost exactly the same phrase, without attributing it to Novalis,
in “Impressionism—Some Speculations” (1913), in Critical Writings, p. 141. He invokes
it again—only this time putting it in quotation marks and crediting Novalis as its source—
the reception of Ford’s novel recapitulates the very conflict of interpretations, the very multiplication of perspectives, which makes up Dowell’s world.

Conflict and the Ethics of Care

Perfect intersubjective agreement eludes Dowell because of the gap between the self and the other which separates him from his silent listener. This same gap lies behind all of the frustrated relationships in this novel of thwarted care and impassioned conflict. “Who in this world knows anything of any other heart” (p. 155), Dowell laments; “I know nothing—nothing in the world—of the hearts of men” (p. 7). Dowell’s awakening reveals to him that others are a challenge and a mystery for interpretation. He finds that there is a remoteness between us which can only be conquered by complex acts of construal. One of the main themes of The Good Soldier is the opacity of others—the discrepancy between what they are for others and what they are for themselves which is also a central concern of the epistemologies of James and Conrad. Dowell may reduce this opacity by acts of sympathy and understanding, but he can never render it completely transparent if only because he cannot know the experience of another except from the position of his own experience. Dowell is not a solipsist, however. His anguish about his isolation shows that other human beings are not simply neutral external events with no special significance to his self-contained, self-referential consciousness. The gap between himself and others pains Dowell because he cares deeply about them. His pain testifies to the paradoxical combination of community and isolation which characterizes human relations.

There are several interrelated dimensions to Ford’s treatment of personal relations in The Good Soldier. What begins as a question of understanding extends for Ford to become a moral and political issue. The Good Soldier suggests that our primary ethical imperative is the impossible obligation

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20Hynes oversimplifies this duality when he contends that Dowell discovers only our essential solipsism: “we can know only one consciousness—the one we are in. Other human beings are simply other events outside” (“Epistemology of The Good Soldier,” p. 226). This imprecision once again leads Hynes to contradict himself. After arguing that “other hearts are closed to us,” he contends without explanation that “Dowell, in the end, does know another heart—Ashburnham’s, and knowing that heart, he knows his own” (pp. 230, 234; original emphasis). If this is true—and I think that, with some qualifications, it is—then Dowell is not the pure solipsist Hynes first claims he is.
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to resolve the paradox of the alter ego. The obstacles that thwart understand-
ing, sympathy, and love lead Ford to turn his attention from the contact of individual with individual to its social context and political implications. *The Good Soldier* moves from interpretation through morality to politics. Where it leaves off, *Parade's End* takes over in its exploration of the social and historical dilemmas that impede mutual understanding and frustrate an ethics of care.

Ford radicalizes James's existential ethics by placing almost exclusive emphasis on the value of community. The ethics of *The Good Soldier* are consequently simpler than the tripartite structure of moral values *The Ambassadors* explores (self-consciousness, freedom, care). But this simplicity disguises its own complexity because Ford radicalizes care's value only to find with Conrad that the impenetrability of human inwardness prevents its realization. Ford is closer to James than to Conrad in viewing community as an existential goal rather than as a potential means of ontological redemption. But Ford oscillates as Conrad does between a resolute endorsement of fidelity and an unflinching demystification of its claims. Dowell's discovery of the imperative of care is simultaneous with his recognition of the pervasiveness of solipsism.

Where Dowell despair's over the gulf that separates selves, Florence revels in the opportunities it provides for gamesmanship and warfare. Like Sylvia in *Parade's End*, Florence is a somewhat demonic figure because she exploits the paradoxes of personal relations in order to demonstrate and expand her power. Her opacity to others enables Florence to lie, as she does in deceiving Dowell about her heart condition and her sexual affairs. Florence lies to gain the power that comes from being more knowing than known. For Florence, to know means to be more subject than object, more acting than acted upon, whereas to be known means to have the powers of her subjectivity transcended by and made subservient to someone else. Hence her great concern with secrets, which the opacity of the self ordinarily protects from the intrusive gaze of others.

Florence gains power over Leonora when she happens upon her and Maisie Maidan in an embarrassing position and thus becomes one of the few "who had any idea that the Ashburnhams were not just good people with nothing to their tails" (p. 66). Her knowledge of the Ashburnhams' secret infuriates Leonora because it gives Florence a claim to ascendency. Florence asserts this claim by giving advice in which she insists she understands the Ashburnhams better than they understand themselves. But Leonora resists with mockery that asserts her own superiority as a knowing
subject: “You come to me straight out of his bed to tell me that that is my proper place. I know it, thank you” (p. 71). If possessing secrets assures Florence of her ascendancy as a knower, then to become known by having her secrets revealed is a fate worse than death. Or at least she chooses death rather than life with Dowell in part because, more known than knowing throughout their marriage, he inadvertently penetrates one aspect of her opacity by learning her secret about Jimmy. Florence’s obsession with power dramatizes the interdependence of interpretation and ethics. As instruments of power, lies and secrets are simultaneously hermeneutic puzzles and sources of violence.

Unlike Florence, many characters in *The Good Soldier* wish to show care—but only to find themselves enmeshed in conflict because of the breach between the self and others. At one time or another, and in one way or another, all of the major characters play the role of helper: Dowell the perpetual nursemaid, Florence in her pretended concern for the Ashburnhams’ marriage, Nancy in her offer to sacrifice herself to Edward, Leonora through her efforts to save herself and her husband from financial ruin and permanent separation, and Edward not only in his sentimental desire to comfort the mournful but also in his feudal conception of his obligation to his tenants and his nation. More often than not, however, the help they give is either ineffectual, misplaced, or positively harmful. This subversive paradox, the metamorphosis of care into conflict, is a major reason for the pessimism of Ford’s moral imagination.

Florence seeks to dominate in her solicitude for Edward and Leonora. At least at first, though, Leonora wants to show genuine concern for her husband’s welfare. Yet she discovers, much to her disappointment and confusion, that he construes her help not as liberating but as intrusive and constraining. “Why, [Leonora] asked herself again and again, did none of the good deeds that she did for her husband ever come through to him, or appear to him as good deeds?” (p. 179). With his growing understanding of personal relations, Dowell answers her question: “in a way, she did him very well—but it was not his way” (p. 168). Because their relation is plagued by constant mutual misunderstanding, what she assumes will please Edward invariably gives him pain. Where she feels that she is enhancing his possibilities by supporting his altruistic projects, for example, or even by smoothing the way for his liaisons with other women, Edward understands her acts of care as signs of antagonism since her intervention takes his freedom away from him. The destructive, purely dominating solicitude that, with Nancy as her innocent pawn, Leonora directs toward
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Edward at the end reflects her frustrating failure to find a way of helping him constructively. It is as if she decides to adopt a policy of killing by claiming to cure since her earlier attempts at curing had been felt as killing anyway.21

Dowell's theory of love describes the quest for intimacy as an attempt to release the self from the prison of its private consciousness. In a more resigned and insightful restatement of his early lament that nothing guides us, Dowell explains the despair that faces us when we recognize the limits of our individual worlds: “We are all so afraid, we are all so alone, we all so need from the outside the assurance of our own worthiness to exist” (p. 115). Dowell describes a man’s “love affair, a love for any definite woman,” as “something in the nature of a widening of the experience,” an attempt “to walk beyond the horizon” of the self in order “to get . . . behind those eyebrows with the peculiar turn, as if he desired to see the world with the eyes that they overshadow” (p. 114). In his “craving for identity with the woman that he loves,” a man “desires to see with the same eyes, to touch with the same sense of touch, to hear with the same ears, to lose his identity, to be enveloped, to be supported” (pp. 114–15). The motive for love, in Dowell’s view, is the ambition to understand the world from another’s vantage point—the desire to achieve the seemingly impossible experience of knowing someone else’s being-for-herself from the inside. The lover seeks to get beyond the walls of the self in order to expand and strengthen his own fragile, isolated world.

But Dowell’s skepticism about “the permanence of man’s or woman’s love” (pp. 113–14) acknowledges the limits to intersubjectivity which doom the search for union to failure. He pictures love as a restless quest ending not in victorious oneness but in retirement from the field. Boredom concludes one affair and incites new ones, he explains, because “the pages of the book will become familiar; the beautiful corner of the road will have been turned too many times” (p. 115). Originally a liberation from the confines of the self, union with another becomes a new trap when familiarity diminishes the quester’s sense of the otherness of the other. Knowing another’s world only increases his awareness of the many worlds he does not know. The quester never achieves deliverance; there simply “comes at

21 *Parade’s End* describes “killing” and “curing” as the two basic principles of personal relations and identifies the former with Sylvia Tietjens and the latter with Valentine Wannop. The tragedy of Leonora Ashburnham is that she sincerely wants to practice Valentine’s selfless, constructive sympathy, but that the difficulties and frustrations of this course drive her to embrace Sylvia’s aggression and violence.
last a time of life when... [he] will travel over no more horizons... He will have gone out of the business" (p. 115). The quester's final affair signals not the achievement of glorious communion but, rather, the ultimate intractibility of the divide that separates us from others.22

The gap between the self and others which Dowell finds so anguishing figures prominently in the aesthetics of Ford's novel. *The Good Soldier* plays with the paradox that reading is both an intersubjective and a solipsistic process. As we animate the acts of authorial consciousness lodged in a text and thereby live in the subjectivities of a work's characters, reading can provide the experience of self-transcendence which Dowell describes in his theory of love. But reading is at the same time a solipsistic activity since we engage other subjectivities in the work only by lending them our own powers of consciousness. First-person narratives ordinarily try to suppress this contradiction in order to encourage the reader's acceptance and assimilation of the world they project. Dowell's device of the "silent listener" foregrounds it. By bemoaning his inability to engage in dialogue with his imaginary auditor, Dowell calls attention to the ways in which writing and reading manifest the paradox of the alter ego. As Dowell writes, he reaches out to others; but he never leaves his own world. As we read, we inhabit his world; but we remain silent and do not converse with him because we are with Dowell only within our own consciousness. Like the quester for love, the reader of *The Good Soldier* transcends the limits of the self only to reencounter them.

The reader oscillates between connection and disconnection with this odd narrator who constantly talks but complains that we cannot talk back.

Because Dowell talks with considerable emotion about intimate matters here, his speech about love has been called a "Victorian parody" (see Paul L. Wiley, *Novelist of Three Worlds: Ford Madox Ford* [Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1962], p. 186). His remarks are, however, an original explication of the paradox of the alter ego—that by transcending the limits of the self we only rediscover them—and this makes his speech profoundly modern.

It is less easy to refute the objection that Dowell's theory of love wrongly underemphasizes "the question of the sex instinct": "I do not think that it counts for very much in a really great passion" (p. 114). The role of libidinal desire (or the lack of it) in the narrator's history strongly suggests that any understanding of love must take sexual urges into account. (This invalidates Mizener's argument that we must take Dowell's statement about sex at face value because it agrees with Ford's own pronouncements on the subject. See *Saddest Story*, pp. 259-60.) Sexuality is part of the unreflected that, despite his advances in other areas, Dowell fails to assimilate fully even at the end. But Dowell's reflections rightly stress that sexual desire alone cannot explain the drive to overcome the distance between selves. Existential needs can have as much urgency as libidinal ones—sometimes even more.
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This alternation in turn calls for reflection about the paradoxical combination of mutual involvement and mutual exclusiveness which characterizes relations between selves. By contrast, conventional first-person narrators encourage immersion by acting as if the barrier between writer and reader either does not exist or does not matter inasmuch as it can be bridged by direct statement. The reader of The Good Soldier has difficulty stabilizing a relation to its sometimes alien and sometimes intimate narrator. This instability encourages us to become self-conscious about its hermeneutic implications by refusing to let us become absorbed in a represented world—an absorption only possible if the objects and characters within it are relatively fixed and steady.

The significance of The Good Soldier’s manipulation of the reader may become clearer if we compare it to two important first-person narratives that preceded it—Great Expectations and The Sacred Fount. In a work such as Great Expectations, the distance between narrator and reader is relatively stable and is therefore less of an explicit theme in the process of engaging the text, less a dilemma demanding reflection about its hermeneutic underpinnings. In Dickens’s novel the ironic distance lies between old Pip and young Pip—a gap that confirms a oneness of collaboration between the reader and the narrator. By never calling itself into question, the unbroken monologue of the narrator disguises the impossibility of dialogue between himself and the reader. The pact between narrative and reader reinforces the communion between selves from which young Pip’s pride alienates him but to which his reborn humility returns him at the end. Like the older Pip, James’s narrator in The Sacred Fount never doubts his ability to communicate with the reader. But the ambiguities in what he communicates have an effect similar to Dowell’s laments about his absent interlocutor. As we exchange the roles of collaborator and critic, we alternate between involvement with and detachment from the narrator’s consciousness. The “alien me” whose thoughts we produce in ourselves as we read moves back and forth between oneness with and opposition to the “real me” of the reader, and this oscillation reenacts the possibilities of communion and antagonism which make personal relations paradoxical and problematic.

As in life, the paradoxical combination of intersubjectivity and solipsism in reading allows for different ratios of suspicion and faith, criticism and trust, toward the work’s world. By insisting that we are both with Dowell and separate from him, The Good Soldier heightens the tension between these two possible attitudes of understanding: a wariness of distance as a
vehicle for deception, versus an openness to others which seeks to bring them closer through sympathy. Although we are unable either to respond to Dowell’s pleas for help or to cross-examine him, we decide which we would do by choosing whether to trust or suspect him. The ambiguity of *The Good Soldier* thematizes in the reader’s experience the two attitudes toward others which their opacity may require—suspicion to unmask hidden sides, or faith to facilitate the other’s efforts to bridge the gap between us.

At the end of the novel, Dowell has solved some of the dilemmas created by the otherness of others, but not all of them. Part of his failure asserts our inability ever to make others completely transparent or to care for them perfectly. But part of Dowell’s success and failure here is related to the ratio between what he has mastered through reflection and what remains in the darkness of the unreflected. Consider, for example, Dowell’s controversial claim: “I loved Edward Ashburnham—and . . . I love him because he was just myself” (p. 253). Dowell asserts the intersubjective identity of one world with another which, in his view, love seeks. This claim is both valid and absurd, however, in a contradiction that points the paradox of our relations with others. Hynes argues for its validity: “by an act of perfect sympathy [Dowell] has known what Ashburnham was.”

Retrospective acts of understanding have indeed brought Dowell closer to Edward in death than they were in life. But Edward is dead, and his absence puts a stark limit on any communion with him. Nor can we gloss over all of Ashburnham’s qualities that Dowell admits he lacks—“the courage and the virility and possibly also the physique of Edward Ashburnham” (p. 253). All of these differences insist on the divisions between selves that stand in the way of the perfect union Dowell wishfully proclaims. His wishful thinking about Ashburnham represents a longing for an ultimate communion that, in his more sober moments, Dowell knows to be impossible.

His claim of identity with Edward also demands further reflection on sexual grounds. It shows a desire for libidinal gratification—for “robbing the orchards” (p. 254) as Edward did—which Dowell imperfectly understands and perhaps seeks not to confront. Identification in *The Good Soldier* is both progressive and regressive. It can lead toward increased self-consciousness by extending one’s understanding of others, a path Dowell

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23Hynes, “Epistemology of *The Good Soldier,*” p. 234. Moser also argues that “Dowell genuinely loves Ashburnham, Ashburnham may love Dowell, and Ford loves them both” (*Life in the Fiction of Ford*, p. 120).
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follows in his reflections by interpreting the perspectives of Edward and others. But as in Dowell's sexual identification with Ashburnham, it can also be an unconscious doubling, motivated by suppressed desires, to the extent that it remains unreflected.

Dowell has yet to reflect on the unreflected sufficiently, for example, to understand his reasons for suddenly declaring his intention to marry Nancy after Florence's death. He does not know how much of this wish, like his decision earlier to marry Florence, was mimetic desire. In both cases, he formed his desire by imitating what others desired (with Nancy, what Edward longed for; with Florence, what her many suitors sought). This imitation indicates that he was not clear about what he himself wanted.\(^{24}\)

Still, despite his confusion about sexual passion, Dowell's awakening to the trials of personal relations helps him clarify what he longs for—namely, that care and transparency replace the conflict and opacity that devastate his world. And Dowell's own ability to love is unusual. He is a nurse at the end as at the beginning of his story. But his commitment to caring for Florence was blind. His custodianship of Nancy is enlightened by his disillusioning awareness of all the obstacles to selfless, compassionate personal relations which his sad story dramatizes. These obstacles find culminating expression in his isolation at the end, separated even from Nancy, their marriage indefinitely postponed by the madness that makes her opaque to him.

The hermeneutic and ethical problems blocking harmonious personal relations are exacerbated by social dilemmas Dowell is only beginning to reflect on as his story closes: "I dare say it worked out for the greatest good of the body politic. Conventions and traditions I suppose work blindly but surely for the preservation of the normal type; for the extinction of proud, resolute, and unusual individuals. . . . Society must go on, I suppose, and society can only exist if the normal, if the virtuous, and the slightly deceitful flourish, and if the passionate, the headstrong, the too-truthful are condemned to suicide and to madness" (pp. 238, 253). Many read this statement as a comment on the antagonism between the passionate claims of the rebellious individual and the conventions that keep the collective united.\(^{25}\)


\(^{25}\)According to Hynes, for example, "Passion is the necessary antagonist of Convention, the protest of the individual against the rules" ("Epistemology of The Good Soldier," p. 233).
But there is a curious and telling contradiction in what "convention" and "passion" mean here. Conventions should preserve the community by keeping people together according to collective rules—but together at a distance that acknowledges the gap between the self and the other and that attempts to make it less volatile by putting it under the rule of law. Yet Dowell's description of "convention" aligns it with conflict rather than care. The "normal type" kills "the proud, resolute, unusual individuals" by using the distance that conventions establish between people as a cover behind which to attack and destroy. This is essentially his indictment of Leonora, but it is also an indictment of a society where the fundamental purpose of conventions has been subverted.

Now Leonora may not be as ignoble or the others as noble as Dowell suggests. But if his "proud, resolute, and unusual individuals" are admirable, it is because of their capacity to sacrifice themselves for others—a capacity that Edward, Nancy, and Dowell all show, however imperfectly, but that Leonora abandons when she goes over to the conventional and the normal by destroying Edward and Nancy. In the capping irony of the novel, then, the "proud individual" is described as the representative of selfless compassion, where the collective has become the seat of selfish antagonism. The values that attach to the individual and the community have been reversed. No matter how much Dowell expands his knowledge of himself and his world, he cannot by himself get beyond the collapse of care which this contradiction places at the center of the social structure.

At the end of the novel, there seems little that Dowell can do. Following Schorer, some critics condemn Dowell as lethargic and incapable of work in the world. Dowell has been extraordinarily active in his reflections, though. And he has shown himself able to act, as his defenders note, in picking Nancy up from Ceylon, in responding to the Ashburnhams' plea for his presence, and in other ways. Dowell was incapacitated by his naïveté before his awakening. But his paralysis at the end owes less to his own deficiencies than to the inadequacies of his social world. As Dowell himself notes, it is a world where individual initiatives almost always have unanticipated consequences—where any act is likely to lead to precisely the opposite result from the one desired:

Not one of us got what he really wanted. Leonora wanted Edward, and she has got Rodney Bayham, a pleasant enough sort of sheep. Florence wanted Branshaw, and it is I who have bought it from Leonora. I didn't really want it; what I wanted mostly was to cease being a nurse-attendant. Well, I am a
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nurse-attendant. Edward wanted Nancy Rufford and I have got her. Only she is mad. It is a queer and fantastic world. Why can't people have what they want? The things were all there to content everybody; yet everybody has the wrong thing. Perhaps you can make head or tail of it; it is beyond me. (P. 237)

Elsewhere Dowell suggests that a “blind and inscrutable destiny” (p. 49) seems to doom human projects. What Dowell describes here, however, is not the anonymous power of fate but a pervasive form of social alienation.

The social world can come to seem like an independent, anonymous force—a kind of fate—through mystifying processes that disguise their human origins. In a debilitating paradox, each of the individual agents in Dowell's world contributed by his or her own hand to establishing and perpetuating a system of relations that seemed to take on a life of its own for the very reason that it was beyond the control of any individual or even of the group as a whole. Although this system resulted from their participation in it, the fact that it transcended them meant that it deprived them of their freedom and power—that it could thwart their expectations and frustrate their plans. An implicit critique of the ideology of individualism, Dowell's lament describes a world where each pursuing the good of each does not result in the good of all. Worse still, the pursuit of individual goals is precisely and ironically what prevents a person from getting what he or she seeks. Pursuing self-interest not only dissipates one's energies in conflicts with others but also prevents individuals from collectively controlling the system of relations their actions create. At most, characters like Florence or Leonora can manipulate the system for a time to their advantage, but they too fall to its hegemony. Ford believes that “it is not individuals that succeed or fail but enterprises or groups that do.”

The Good Soldier exposes the awful dilemma that participants in a group may frustrate their own ambitions if, by failing to cooperate productively, they end up creating a seemingly anonymous system that controls and defies its own makers.

Dowell throws up his hands and leaves us to figure out for ourselves the logic of this mystifying state of affairs. Ford’s emphasis on the reader's

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27I have been giving the reasons for a phenomenon that has also been described by Wiley: “In Ford fatality is of human or historical making”; furthermore, “the attempt to initiate action is precarious, since the individual cannot measure the ramifications of the net encircling him, likely to make him victim rather than victor” (Novelist of Three Worlds, pp. 71, 75).
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share subtly but significantly alters the novelist's roles of social critic and political commentator. Ford invested these roles with high seriousness: "We stand to-day, in the matter of political theories, naked to the wind and blind to the sunlight. . . . It remains therefore for the novelist—and particularly for the realist among novelists—to give us the very matter upon which we shall build the theories of the new body politic."

But Ford also warns that "the one thing that you can not do is to propagandise, as author, for any cause." He has little patience with "fits of moralising" and "jobs of reforming." If "the business of the artist is to awaken thought in the unthinking," then outright commentary runs the risk of subverting this task by doing the thinking for the reader. Training the reader's faculties for interpretation is a more valuable political education, in Ford's view, than the inculcation of doctrine, inasmuch as the reader can transfer the very same skills he or she develops by construing the text to the demands of figuring out the social structures that exercise disguised control over life. *The Good Soldier* makes overtures in this direction, but Ford's masterpiece in political education is *Parade's End*. As Chapter 6 shows, the narrative strategies of this novel themselves challenge the reader to reexamine habitual ways of thinking about history and society.

Ford's explicitly enunciated political principles offer a response to the critique of alienation which *The Good Soldier* implicitly suggests. Ford declares: "I want a civilisation of small men each labouring two small plots—his own ground and his own soul." Ford's Utopia would be a loosely knit society of agrarian small producers, each relatively self-sufficient, working their own land and making their own handcrafted goods. The local community would replace central national government as the basic political unit. As a protest against the alienation of labor, the process whereby machines objectify human work in anonymous products that turn around and control it, Ford's call to return to small-scale farming and handmade crafts expresses a desire to let our acts and our products be our own.

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33For accounts of Ford's political views, see especially Cassell, *Ford: A Study of His Novels*, pp. 103-6, and Stang, *Ford*, pp. 65-66. According to Cassell, Ford derived his "idea of the small producer. . . . from William Morris, from Ford's knowledge of Provence and medieval history, from his own not very successful experiments in truck farming, and perhaps a little from Tolstoy" (pp. 105-6).
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own. If participation in groups can make individual practice impotent, then Ford's emphasis on small communities and self-sufficient producers is an attempt to enable the single person to do something by narrowing the field of action so that the consequences of any deed would be calculable and controllable.

By combating the alienating effects of large-scale individualism with a program of small-scale individualism, however, Ford leaves open the question of whether, as in Dowell's world, even a few people can combine to create a pernicious, seemingly unmanageable system. But because Ford locates care in the individual and conflict in the collective, he trusts private selves more than public groups to pursue an ethics of interpersonal harmony. This hope wars against his realization, however, that the agent of history is not the individual but the collective. Nevertheless, if the gap between selves makes antagonism and mutual misunderstanding a constant threat, then a world centered on private relationships may, Ford hopes, provide spheres small enough to offer the chance for individuals to overcome the obstacles to care. Once again, though, The Good Soldier suggests that small size alone is not enough to guarantee harmony and transparency among mutually opaque selves. The Good Soldier does not resolve the tensions and contradictions that characterize Ford's politics. Parade's End will not resolve them either, but it gives them a wider field of play.