

**Beyond Mimetic Englishness:
Ford's English Trilogy and *The Good Soldier***

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There is an extraordinary passage in the first chapter of *The Soul of London* in which Ford describes how the successful internalisation of the city's ceaseless routine completes the process by which a typical young provincial is transformed into a Londoner: 'Daily details will have merged as it were into his bodily functions, and will have ceased to distract his attention' (Ford 2003: 10). London, Ford argues, is experienced unconsciously by its inhabitants: 'a matter so much more of masses than of individuals' that 'it can only be treated as a ground bass, a drone, on top of which one pipes one's own small individual melody' (11). Here, he repeats a metaphor from the book's 'Introductory', in which historic London is described as 'like a constant ground bass beneath the higher notes of the Present' (4). These two themes are linked throughout Ford's trilogy, *England and the English*, as a fragile individualism, forever threatened with complete submersion in a dehumanised mass society, struggles to realise the promise of the 'Future'. It is for this reason that Ford equates the Londoner with the Modern and describes that embodiment of mass society, the suburbanite, in terms hitherto reserved for the romantic artist: 'in each of these houses dwells a strongly individualised human being with romantic hopes, romantic fears, and at the end, an always tragic death' (5).

Ford's characterisation of modern existence was anticipated by Georg Simmel's 1903 essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', which begins: 'The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individualism of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of his historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life' (Simmel 1971: 324). While, as Simmel notes, these problems have existed since civilisation began – with the conflict in Athens between individualised personalities and a de-individualising small town creating 'an atmosphere of tension in which the weaker were held down and the stronger were impelled to the most passionate type of self-protection' (333) – the modern combination of money economy and industrial production exacerbated the tension between collective and individual by enabling the rise of a romantic form of individualism in competition with the classical model.

Here, significance is attached not to the human quality of the unified subject, but to the existence of ‘qualitative uniqueness and irreplaceability’ – primarily expressed in commodified areas such as taste, style and fashion – which appealed to the masses recently ‘liberated from their historical bonds’. As Simmel argues, the developing relationship between these two forms of individualism charts ‘the external as well as the internal history of our time’ and culminates in a peculiarly poised historical conjuncture in which both forces not only ‘find themselves with equal legitimacy’ but also in a condition of mutual interdependence (339).

Ford describes a similar situation in chapter four of *The Soul of London*, concerning the relationship between the leisured upper classes and London’s emergent mass society. He relates an anecdote of how he offered to find a job on a farm for a recently unemployed man, who had come to London from the country as a boy, only to be rebuffed:

‘London’s the place,’ he repeated. I objected that he could not see much of London inside a soap factory. He considered for a moment and said: ‘No, but it’s the Saturday afternoons and the Sundays.’ He paused. ‘It’s when ye hahve your leisure’ (67).

Ford concludes: ‘Thus what London attracts with the mirage of its work shining across the counties and the countries, London holds with the glamour of its leisure’. In no other observable phenomenon was this as self evident as in the groups of shop girls and clerks parading up and down before the reflections of their fantasy-selves in shop windows; offering a vision of the future, as he somewhat playfully observes, to warm the heart of all good democrats (85-6). In an earlier passage he has already suggested that it is precisely this weekend emulation of the Leisured Class which keeps London working and, therefore, which paradoxically enables the very existence of the Leisured Class – all are one part of a unified social system in which the function of ‘the leisured class remains as a lure, as a sort of Islands of the Blest, glamorous in the haze above Park Lane and Mayfair, an incentive to health because wealth means leisure, wealth means work, and work health’ (73).

However, despite the similarities in sociological insight, Ford differs from Simmel in that he adopts an ironic stance to the metropolitan life he describes, dryly concluding of this lower class motivation to work that ‘a nobler incentive would of course be nobler ...’. Furthermore, a temperamental disinclination is detectable in his

references to modern democracy: ‘Only the most hardened of democrats, seeing humanity not as poor individuals but as parts of a theory, as negligible cog-wheels of a passionless machine, would deny that, from a human point of view Athens was better than Kensington High Street ...’ (89). Yet for all that, Ford’s analysis is ultimately more penetrating than Simmel’s because he demonstrates how modernity had already bypassed the crossroads in ‘the world history of the spirit’ that Simmel identified as having been created by the equipoise of the two competing forms of classical and romantic individualism. As Ford observes, ‘poor humanity’ – the mass – had already voted unconsciously against classical individualism (94). While the defeated faction’s cautionary warnings still echo a century later – ‘what will your Corporations of the future be like ... when you have swept away the love of place with your improvement schemes, when you have swept away all fear of public opinion by weakening our every individual tie?’ (93) – the condition of England in 2005 bears witness to the unique penetration of Ford’s insight in 1905.

Ford identifies the same fundamental changes that Jürgen Habermas was later to diagnose in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* as stemming from the reversal of the separation between state and civil society and the consequent rise in state intervention and marking the depoliticisation and ‘downfall’ of the public sphere ‘from the time of the great depression that began in 1873’ (Habermas 1989: 141-3). According to Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere had first come into being with the amalgamation between ‘court’ and ‘town’, which brought together a public display of authority descended from feudal society with a civil society separated from the state because based on the economics of private property. Thus, the term public no longer simply designated all those who were subject to public authority as in the early Middle Ages but came to indicate an increasingly autonomous sphere. The development of print culture facilitated the exchange of ideas and enabled the existence and enlargement of this public sphere composed of ‘private people engaged in rational-critical debate’ (106-7, 117). In particular, the widespread expression and discussion of private opinions was collectively manifested in the new historical phenomenon of public opinion: the high point of classical individualism and Liberalism. However, the public sphere began to break down under the pressures of industrial expansion in the second half of the nineteenth century, as its political function declined from that of a critically debating public into that of a mass electorate. Increasingly, public authority came to be inextricably linked with emergent

state institutions and legislation (health, education, employment etc.), creating a universal social sphere in which the formerly distinct concepts of ‘public’ and ‘private’ were merged. A new form of social experience came into being that was shared between those who would formerly have been described as workers and those who could formerly be said to have exercised control over the means of production. That is to say that a management process, largely separate from the exercise of property rights, emerged as commercial success became increasingly dependent on the internal functioning of the social sphere and correspondingly independent of the capital market.

This change in society is very clearly described by Ford in his account of the origin and rise of the ‘Modern Type’: the entrepreneur who like Napoleon combines an aim to replicate others’ past successes with the cultivation of popularity by attempting to fulfil social and functional needs he knows to exist from his own experience, such as the provision of a cheap reliable collar stud (see 49-50). Mass success becomes dependent precisely on the extent to which social experience is shared across classes and the emulation characteristic of leisure activities is extended into the world of business, where clerks imitate millionaires ‘gesture for gesture’ (51). This imitative tendency of mass democracy had, and would be, identified by commentators from John Stuart Mill to Wyndham Lewis as a force for the suppression of differences (Trotter 2001: 8). In *Paranoid Modernism*, David Trotter argues that the desire to resist this ‘social mimesis’ eventually drove writers such as Ford, Lewis and Lawrence to a paranoid imposition of distinct values and meanings by which ‘they deluded themselves into modernity’ (5). However, he concedes that *England and the English* precedes this cultural shift and is ‘a democratic book, perhaps even a liberal book’ (200). Indeed, in his earlier book, *The English Novel in History 1895-1920*, Trotter praises the trilogy precisely for the reason that at the height of Edwardian patriotism, when Englishness was being reasserted as a defence against the rise of modern mass society, Ford calmly avoids apocalyptic prophecy by insisting that the English way has always been to rub along together. Instead, Ford’s disinclination towards modern society is expressed through an ‘ironic measuring of “personal deterioration” [which] establishes a critical attitude impervious both to sentimentality and to paranoia’ (Trotter 1993: 166).

However, Ford’s trilogy is more than just a literary curiosity: not only does it display a sociological understanding that is normally considered alien to the British

empirical outlook but also it can be seen in historical context as the inauguration of a particularly English social and political discourse which still holds force to this day. In particular, Ford's achievement was to show how the spiritual homelessness or alienation inherent to modern mass society could be resisted by identification with a fantasy – almost parodic – vision of the 'Country': 'For if each man have (and each of us has) his own Heart of the Country, to each assuredly that typical nook, that green mirage that now and then shines between him and his workaday world, will be his particular Island of the Blest, his island of perpetual youth, his closed garden, which as the years go on will more and more appear to contain the Fountain of Youth' (113). For Ford, it is precisely the pursuit of such utopia which complements the metropolitan pursuit of leisure and by maintaining individualism in mass society holds alive the possibility of the 'Future'. There are two main ways in which this strategy of Ford's can be seen as a measured response to the political demands of modernity: theoretically and in the light of subsequent history.

Giovanni Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994) describes long centuries as overlapping systemic cycles of capitalist accumulation, which are distinguished by a fixed commodity form. For example, the 'Fordist-Keynesian regime of accumulation' was the dominant commodity form of the twentieth century (2). Periods of finance capitalism, when capital is released from the fixed commodity form, constitute the overlapping transitional phases between the cycles. Thus, the financial expansion of the period 1870-1914, which began with an economic depression as capital moved out of the fixed commodity form of nineteenth century industrial production, marked both the final phase of the long nineteenth century and the initial phase of the long twentieth century: a dual perspective which Ford captures adroitly in the trilogy. Of course, as we have seen, this period also saw the onset of the structural transformation of the public sphere (see also Hubble 2006: 17-37).

In response to these changes, the early German sociologists, such as Simmel, realised that social life could only be understood interpretatively from within by means of a developed version of the everyday understanding that all individuals need to function in the social sphere. However, their analyses were not merely attempts to understand society but also generated potential vehicles for social transformation as acknowledged by Simmel's analysis of socialism in aesthetic terms 'that society as a whole should become a work of art in which every single element attains its meaning by virtue of its contribution to the whole' (cited in Highmore 2002: 40). This model of

everyday life as a site of transformation was later developed by Marxist theorists like Walter Benjamin and Henri Lefebvre, who recognising that modern everyday life was characteristically experienced as a contradiction between the everyday – the irreducible remnant of historical consciousness – and everydayness – the reproducibility and interchangeability of money, time and human labour, sought the combination of the two in a historically consciousness mass society (see Roberts 1999: 16-29). Likewise, in *The Spirit of the People*, Ford describes the romantic ‘divorce of principle from life’ that characterises Englishness at the beginning of the twentieth century as originating in Puritanism (276). Poetry, which was formerly ‘the sublime of common sense’ and hence the basis of classical individualism, had been marginalised by principle: ‘wrong-headedness wrought up to the sublime pitch – and that, in essentials, is romance’ (272). Ford’s construction of the country as the city dweller’s utopia allowed the residual poetic common sense of the country to be recuperated for modern urban experience, in which principle had become so separated from life as to have passed through hypocrisy and a sense of muddling through to tolerance (see 283-4). In this, his aim was similar to the later Marxist theorists of everyday life, seeking a return to that poised historical conjuncture identified by Simmel in which the competing classical and romantic models of experience were linked in a state of mutual interdependence which provided the necessary condition for genuine human agency.

As well as this theoretical basis, a version of Ford’s strategy can also be seen to have been successfully implemented in interwar England by the Conservative politician, Stanley Baldwin. Responding to the prospect of Labour majorities – the logical threat posed by the introduction of universal suffrage in 1918 – Baldwin created a mass following for the Conservative Party from the rising new middle class of salaried white-collar workers living a commuter lifestyle in rapidly expanding belts of suburban housing. He cemented support with a series of speeches promoting a pastoral ideology that cast suburbia in the mould of a timeless rural Englishness: ‘To me, England is the country, and the country is England ... England comes to me through my various senses ... The sounds of England, the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the country smithy, the corncrake on a dewy morning, the sound of the scythe against the whetstone, and the sight of a plough team coming over the brow of a hill, the sight that has been England since England was a land’ (cited in Paxman 1998: 142). The result, as the historian Ross McKibbin describes, was that the Conservative

Party created a huge heterogeneous stable coalition, in which ‘the ruling definition of democracy was individualist and its proponents chiefly a modernised middle class’ (McKibbin 1998: 533). While this configuration was ruptured by the Second World War and the 1945 political settlement, the same strategy has been revived since 1990, at first tentatively by the Conservative Prime Minister, John Major and then, more successfully, by New Labour’s Tony Blair.

In particular, Major’s speech of 22 April 1993 can be seen as perfectly recapitulating, albeit unconsciously, Ford’s parodic construction of the ‘Heart of the Country’: ‘Fifty years from now, Britain will still be the country of long shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers and – as George Orwell said – “old maids cycling to holy communion through the morning mist”’ (cited in Paxman 1998: 142). The reference is to Orwell’s *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941), in which Orwell consciously parodied Baldwin in order, like Ford, to invoke an ‘Englishness’ which would temper and provide a future for the restless, cultureless life evolving ‘in labour-saving flats or Council houses, along the concrete roads and in the naked democracy of the swimming pools’ (Orwell 2000: 408). The success of this can be seen negatively reflected in David Goodhart’s now-notorious essay ‘Discomfort of Strangers’, first published in the February 2004 issue of *Prospect*.

Goodhart highlights the so-called ‘progressive dilemma’ that sharing and solidarity can conflict with diversity. The thinking behind this is that collective sharing – as embodied in a universal welfare system based on compulsory contributions for instance – only functions with a limited set of common values and assumptions and so is undermined by the kind of diversity resulting from equal rights being awarded to a wide range of peoples, values and ways of life. Goodhart suggests both that our current historical conjuncture – typified by ‘the erosion of collective norms and identities, in particular of class and nation, and the recent surge of immigration into Europe’ – is one in which the respective logics of solidarity and diversity are set to pull apart and that the residual tolerance in British society is only an accidental by-product of suburban Englishness:

Relative to the other big European nations, the British sense of national culture and solidarity has arguably been rather weak – diluted by class, empire, the four different nations within the state, the north-south divide and even the long shadow of American culture. That weakness of national

solidarity, exemplified by the ‘stand-offishness’ of suburban England, may have created a bulwark against extreme nationalism. We are more tolerant than, say, France because we don’t care enough about each other to resent the arrival of the other (Goodhart 2004).

Unpacked from prejudice, this ‘stand-offishness’ can be seen as not accidental but as a consequence of what Ford describes as the English evolution of a ‘rule of thumb system’ for mass living:

You may set down the formula as this: i. I do not enquire into my neighbour’s psychology; ii. I do not know my neighbour’s opinions; iii. I give him credit for having much such opinions as my own; iv. I tolerate myself; v. I tolerate him. And so, in these fortunate islands, we all live very comfortably together (Ford 2003: 248).

While it might be true that the parodic element discernible in this construction of Englishness serves to uphold Ford’s individuality, it also emphasises how Englishness is comprised of a set of practices and, therefore, promotes the potential for social mimesis in mass society. For this reason, Ford cannot be constructed as a ‘paranoid modernist’ in the way that Trotter presents him. Unlike Virginia Woolf, whose opposition to the forces of social mimesis is clearly reflected in her attacks on Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy, Ford seems always to have been aware that a modernist identity could not be constructed in opposition to modern mass society, but only in conjunction with it. Ford’s personal desire was not to oppose social mimesis but to go beyond it: an outcome he achieved with *The Good Soldier*.

As Sara Haslam points out, the ‘germ of the story’ of *The Good Soldier* is revealed in *The Spirit of the People* as part of a discussion of English emotional and sexual repression (Haslam 2003: xx). The anecdote has Ford playing Dowell to a friend’s Ashburnham by accompanying him on a ride to the station to dispatch his young ward, with whom he had fallen in love, on a round the world trip. At the parting neither friend nor ward spoke a word. She subsequently died at Brindisi on the voyage out and he spent the next three years having nerve cures on the continent. Ford concludes that the utter silence of the parting ‘seems to me to be a manifestation of a national characteristic that is almost appalling’ (315). However, he then proceeds unconvincingly to dismiss the tale as an exception that proves the rule:

Nevertheless, to quote another of the English sayings, hard cases make bad law, and the especial province of the English nation is the evolution of a standard of manners. For that is what it comes to when one says that the province of the Englishman is to solve the problem of how men may live together (ibid).

Knowledge of this passage, alerts the reader to the fact that *The Good Soldier* is concerned not only with emotional and sexual repression – the poetic sublime which had been historically marginalised by principle – but also with manners – the practice of rubbing along together evolved from the experience of urban everyday life – and, most importantly, with how the two can be reintegrated into a full consciousness.

As Dowell's narrative reveals, if the relationship between manners and emotions exists purely as a relationship between external and internal mechanisms, then it becomes possible to know everything about another person's outward behaviour without knowing anything about their inner self. The resultant false assumption, that one can know a person through his or her everyday behaviour is labelled by Dowell as 'the modern English habit of taking everyone for granted' (39):

You meet a man or a woman and, from tiny and intimate sounds, from the slightest of movements, you know at once whether you are concerned with good people or with those who won't do. You know, this is to say, whether they will go rigidly through with the whole programme from the underdone beef to the Anglicanism (40).

Classical individualism, as embodied in Ashburnham and manifested in such actions as his treatment of his tenants, remains invisible to the modern way of seeing the world. Yet at the same time, Ashburnham's passionate nature is rendered equally invisible and thus he is encouraged to become complicit with the modern values that he despises in order to gratify his desires. It is this dishonest accommodation between emotion and manners that is the cause of his downfall and which illustrates the nature of the particularly English form of hypocrisy laid bare by Ford in the novel.

The other side of this act of complicity is mapped out in relation to Florence. Trotter argues that she is 'the pure product of social mimesis' (Trotter 2001: 215), and cites Dowell's observation: 'she wasn't real; she was just a mass of talk out of guide-books, of drawings out of fashion-plates' (114). However, it would be more accurate to say that, mirroring Ashburnham's classical individualism, Florence embodies the modern form of romantic individualism in which qualitative uniqueness is expressed

through the commodified forms of taste and fashion. While it is true that she is baldly represented in these terms in the novel, this does not mean that we should necessarily follow Trotter's inference that her depiction reveals Ford's modernist disgust at the imitative tendencies of mass society. Purely at the level of narrative construction, Florence has to be identified with these forces in order to expose Ashburnham's complicity with them. Yet Florence is more than a simple cipher even in the most oft-quoted description of her: 'She represented a real human being with a heart, with feelings, with sympathies and with emotions only as a banknote represents a certain quantity of gold' (114). Trotter contrasts this with Ashburnham's '“solid, sound, golden English sovereign”': about the only thing in his life which *is* unequivocally solid and sound' before going on to suggest that Florence's issuing of paper currency against this limited gold causes the Ashburnhams to lose their 'high reserve' (Trotter 1993: 50, 60). However, gold and paper currency represent the two poles of a unified money system which only functions by allowing units of value to be interchangeable with units of exchange. The relationship is similar to that between potential and kinetic energy: for all its solidity, the value of gold lies in its potential to be exchanged rather as a stone resting at the top of a hill stores the potential kinetic energy that will be released when it rolls down. In the same way as the stone can be described as 'wanting' to roll down the hill so gold 'wants' to be exchanged as currency. Equally, much as the stone at the bottom of the hill 'wants' to gain the potential energy of a stone at the top, paper currency 'wants' to gain the potential of gold. The aptness of these symbolic terms for representing the mutual relationship of Florence and Ashburnham is reinforced by our understanding of the period as constituting a transitional phase between cycles of capitalist accumulation in which the financial fluidity marked a particularly poised balance of exchange between gold and paper currency. Viewed from the perspective of the waning long nineteenth century, the changes of the period look appear as a loss of stability. Viewed from the perspective of the emergent long twentieth century, the changes of the period appear as the origin of the present. Ford's achievement, however, in a novel he commenced to write on 17 December 1913 (see Ford 1927: 5) just before the period of financial capitalism which had run for forty years was about to come to its apocalyptic end, was to seize a moment of mutual interdependence between the two forms of individualism and hold it open in the face of its imminent historical closure.

The poised possibilities he wished to preserve were not, of course, those of Florence and Ashburnham caught in a web of hypocrisy and deception, but those presented by his narrator, Dowell. This might seem a strange claim because at one level Dowell is as much a product of social mimesis as Florence. On this point, Peter Nicholls comments:

... the regular association of Dowell with figures of weakness prepares us for that final moment of emotional identification which registers the full absurdity of imitative desire: thinking of Ashburnham, Dowell concludes that 'I love him because he was just myself. ... I am just as much a sentimentalist as he' (Nicholls 1995: 186; Ford 1988: 227).

Nicholls goes on to suggest that from the modernist perspective of Wyndham Lewis: 'Dowell's passivity signals modernity's collapse into passive imitation' (ibid). Yet this judgement seems to ignore the narrative framework of *The Good Soldier* which does not describe events as they happen but as Dowell chooses to retell them. The final moment of emotional identification might register the absurdity of imitative desire at one level but it also moves beyond that imitative desire in the very act of retelling it. Dowell's narration is very much a Freudian process of 'remembering, repeating and working-through' in which what was repressed – his imitative desire – is 'acted' out as a 'piece of real life' (see Freud 1958: 150-2). Therefore, passive imitation is transformed into active imitation and Dowell must consequently be seen as a modernist figure by Nicholls's own criteria – or, at least, Nicholls's criteria as summarised by Trotter: 'According to Nicholls, the Modernist self is a self saved from modernity's passive imitation by an active imitation of the cultural past' (Trotter 2001: 9).

This, of course, is exactly the version of modernism that Trotter attempts to label 'paranoid': 'Edward Ashburnham may or may not have been a "pathological case". Dowell probably is. And Dowell's paranoia, his will-to-abstraction, is Ford's experiment' (Trotter 2001: 219). According to Trotter, Dowell is driven by a disgust with social mimesis in general and a disgust with Florence in particular for being no more than an empty representation of a human being. Trotter argues that Dowell does not follow Florence upstairs on the night of her suicide 'because she has ceased to exist for him' (Trotter 2001: 216). Yet an alternative interpretation exists. With Florence's uncle now having been dead for five days (25), Dowell no longer needs to

play the ‘trained poodle’ (114) or to nursemaid Florence’s health because he is finally in position to inherit. He never gave her another thought after her death (113) because he had finally got what he wanted from her. Viewed in this light, Dowell corresponds not so much with the experimental modernist self as with the early modernist figure of the unreliable narrator, such as Mackellar in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889). Rather as Mackellar’s narrative both conceals and yet unwittingly discloses his desire for, and eventual attainment of, mastery (see Craig 1996: 77-80), so Dowell’s narrative can likewise be read with respect to his eventual usurpation of Ashburnham’s place as lord and master. This element of the story is indeed pathological but it is only linked by association to Dowell’s complex relationship with imitative desire.

It is the way that these different narrative elements overlap that overdetermines the motivations and actions of the characters and makes critical interpretation difficult. This is hardly surprising given that Ford by his own admission, having exhaustively studied how novels are constructed, ‘sat down to show what [he] could do’ (Ford 1927: 6). Contrary to Trotter’s opinion, one might argue that it is precisely this complex and multilayered narrative construction that constitutes Ford’s experiment rather than any will-to-abstraction. Furthermore, it is almost as though the particular strand of narrative construction, which associates unreliable narratorship with a certain form of modernist selfhood born out of opposition to the social mimesis of mass society, is expressly designed to show the link between will-to-abstraction and paranoia in order to subject it to ridicule. For it is only if Dowell is read monodimensionally as a diehard plotter and obsessive adherent of active values in the face of passive modernity, that his evident failure appears as absurd as the following admission implies:

I am that absurd figure, an American millionaire, who has bought one of the ancient haunts of English peace. I sit here, in Edward’s gun-room, all day and all day in a house that is absolutely quiet. No one visits me, for I visit no one. No one is interested in me, for I have no interests. ... so life peters out. (227).

The misdirection in this statement obscures the fact that Dowell is ultimately far more successful than this and guilty of neither paranoia nor will-to-abstraction. His distaste for normality, which Trotter correctly identifies, is motivated by an altogether

different set of concerns. Trotter's argument is that Dowell paranoically 'remasculinizes' himself by identifying with Ashburnham, the 'exceptional man', and effecting a 'reduction of Leonora to normality ... as savage as his earlier disavowal of Florence' (Trotter 2001: 218). Yet the whole point of the book is that Ashburnham is not in the least exceptional. Not only does Dowell explicitly label him as a 'normal man' (214), but on the last page of the book he delivers the punch line that Ashburnham's 'mind was compounded of indifferent poems and novels' (229). It is Dowell, himself, who is the exceptional person because he develops self awareness and an implicit critique of society:

Mind, I am not preaching anything contrary to accepted morality. I am not advocating free love in this or any other case. 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, and the too-truthful are condemned to suicide and madness. But I guess that I myself, in my fainter way, come into the category of the passionate, of the headstrong, and the too-truthful. For I can't conceal from myself the fact that I loved Edward Ashburnham – and that I love him because he was just myself (227).

Far from being absurd, this is deeply and knowingly ironic because the Ashburnham that Dowell loves is his own invention: it is not the empty-headed 'good' soldier who occasionally shows through, but a courageous, virile figure whose agency both leads to, and derives from, Dowell's own agency as narrator. To borrow William Empson's terminology of 'Comic Primness', Dowell achieves this narrative trick by adopting a position of 'Ironical Humility':

[this] is to say, 'I am not clever, educated, well born', or what not (as if you had a low standard to judge by), and then to imply that your standards are so high in the matter that the person you are humbling yourself before is quite out of sight (Empson 1995: 171).

Another way of looking at it is to allow that Nicholls and Trotter are both half right: Dowell's closing confession that he loved Ashburnham 'because he was just myself' is equally absurdly sentimental and obsessively paranoid:

In full Comic Primness the enjoyer gets the joke at both levels ... It is a play of judgement which implies not so much doubt as a full understanding of issues between which the enjoyer, with the humility of

impertinence, does not propose to decide. For this pleasure of effective momentary simplification the arguments of the two sides must be pulling their weight on the ironist, and though he might be sincerely indignant if told so it is fair to call him conscious of them. A character who accepts this way of thinking tends to be forced into isolation by sheer strength of mind, and so into a philosophy of Independence (ibid).

This is what happens to Dowell. He ironically negotiates the boundaries between classical and romantic individualism and ends up forced into isolation and a philosophy of independence. As we have seen, Trotter had made a similar judgement of Ford before he went on to the arguments of *Paranoid Modernism*: '[Ford's] ironic measuring of "personal deterioration" establishes a critical attitude impervious both to sentimentality and to paranoia' (Trotter 1993: 166). Therefore, if Trotter's arguments (in this particular respect) may be more profitably read in reverse – a manoeuvre which the second half of this essay has attempted to carry out – the impertinent question arises as to whether Ford too (in this particular respect) might be more profitably read in reverse.

If we look back again from *The Good Soldier* to the source story in *The Spirit of the People*, and Ford's account of driving in the dog cart with P----- to the station in order to dispatch his ward Miss W----- safely out of the way on a round the world trip, we find Ford making a very Dowell-like comment which even includes a slightly absurd ambiguity: 'I won't say that I felt very emotional myself, for what of the spectacle I could see from my back seat was too interesting' (314). Of course Ford is not talking about the landscape but the couple in front of him talking about the landscape and indeed anything else that might save them from having to acknowledge their own emotions and thereby from confronting society's norms. As we have seen, his dismissal of the characteristically English emotional horror of this scene as a 'hard case' by which to judge the English achievement of evolving a standard of manners that allow people to live together is unconvincing. By rewriting the story as *The Good Soldier*, he was able to create in his narrator, Dowell, an ironic accommodation between emotion and manners which allowed – indeed forced – a fully conscious engagement with everyday life in the modern world however absurd or paranoid that might appear. Therefore, not only does *The Good Soldier* owe as much to the penetration of Ford's sociological insight into the conditions of Englishness and modernity as *England and the English*, but also it demonstrates how modernist

identity is formed by going beyond the social mimesis of mass society rather than by acting in opposition to it.

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