

## OUTSIDERS IN ENGLAND AND THE ART OF BEING FOUND OUT<sup>1</sup>

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On January 23 1894 Henry James entered in his notebook two stories told to him by Lady Gregory, whom he had met first in Rome fifteen years earlier. She had given one to him, he wrote, as a plot, and ‘saw more in it than, I confess, I do myself’, James wrote.<sup>2</sup> ‘At any rate,’ he went on, ‘Lady G.’s story was that of an Irish squire who discovered his wife in an intrigue. She left her home, I think, with another man – and left her two young daughters. The episode was brief and disastrous – the other man left her in turn, and the husband took her back.’ James then went on to outline the details, as told to him by Lady Gregory, of the husband taking her back. It came with a condition: that she would stay until the daughters arrived at a certain age, and then she would leave. The husband had fixed a particular date in a particular year when she would be ejected, and they lived accordingly as their daughters grew up. Finally, when the date arrived, the wife was put out and the story explained to the daughters.

The second story told to James by Lady Gregory as a possible idea for him:

was that of the eminent London clergyman who on the Dover-to-Calais steamer, starting on his wedding tour, picked up on deck a letter addressed to his wife, while she was below, and finding it to be from an old lover, and very ardent (an engagement – a rupture, a relation in short) of which he had never been told, took the line of sending her, from Paris, straight back to her parents – without having touched her – on the ground that he had been deceived. He ended, subsequently, by taking her back into his house to live, but never lived with her as his wife.<sup>3</sup>

Lady Gregory was born some fifteen years before Leonora Ashburnham from Ford Madox Ford’s novel *The Good Soldier*. Although not a Catholic as Leonora was, Lady Gregory was brought up also in a household on an Irish estate where there were many daughters and in which there was a constant rumble of land agitation in the background. At the age of twenty-seven, she married Sir

William Gregory, thirty-five years her senior, with whom she had one child.

Sir William Gregory, by the time Lady Gregory told these stories to Henry James, had been dead two years. Six weeks before his death, their friend the poet Wilfred Scawen Blunt, whom the Gregorys had known in Egypt first in 1881, a year after their marriage, published in a new volume of poetry a group of sonnets which he called 'A Woman's Sonnets'. Nobody noticed, or indeed knew, that these poems had, in fact, been written by Lady Gregory about her affair with Blunt, an affair which began less than two years after her marriage to Sir William and had continued for eighteen months. These sonnets, which Blunt made small adjustments to – none of them helpful incidentally – were written in secret to commemorate what had happened in secret or in front of Sir William's nose, or often both simultaneously. According to Lady Gregory's diaries, Sir William had said to her during the Egyptian sojourn: 'You and Wilfred talk more nonsense than any two people settling the affairs of the world'.<sup>4</sup> She sent Blunt the sonnets. In his diary he wrote:

I have remodelled Lady Gregory's twelve sonnets, which I heard from her a day or two ago she would like to see printed in the new book, although of course without her name. They are really most touching and required little beyond strengthening here and there a phrase and altering a few recurrent rhymes.<sup>5</sup>

The first of the twelve sonnets went:

If the past year were offered me again,  
And the choice of good and ill before me set  
Would I accept the pleasure with the pain  
Or dare to wish that we had never met?  
Ah! Could I bear those happy hours to miss  
When love began unthought of and unspoke –  
That summer day when by a sudden kiss  
We knew each other's secret and awoke?  
Ah no! Not even to escape the pain,  
Debate and anguish that I underwent  
Flying from thee and my own self in vain  
With trouble wasted, till my strength all spent.  
I knew at last that thou or love or fate  
Had conquered and repentance was too late.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of a forbidden love also came to Lady Gregory in another poem apart from the sonnets written as she was returning to Europe

with her husband on board ship from India and Ceylon in 1886, when her affair with Blunt was several years past:

Or if – ah me! she chance to find  
 One led to her by wayward fate  
 In whom she learns a kindred mind  
 Found by her own too late – too late –  
 Ah pity her – for if she yield  
 What from remorse her soul can shield –  
 Or if she conquer the sore strife  
 May yet have cost her half her life –  
 The wound that ne'er can be laid bare  
 May be the sorest scar to wear –  
 The grief that brings no right to weep  
 May be the one to banish sleep –  
 Perchance not so in heaven above –  
 But here a woman may not love –<sup>7</sup>

The sonnets which Lady Gregory sent to Blunt were highly wrought pieces of work and must have taken a great deal of time to write. She must have worked on them in a place where she could not be easily discovered, where she could not be suddenly disturbed. She must have been careful about blotting paper picking up the mirrored traces of her love sonnets, or leaving a stray page on the desk. She must have had a hiding place for these pages, and she must have checked regularly that they were not disturbed. And she must have taken them with great secret care to hand to Blunt and must have desperately needed them in print to let him have them. She must have sworn Blunt to a dreadful secrecy, but must have known too that the chances of him telling no one at all were slim. He told his diary. She was, by nature, a careful and discreet person. She was opposed to exhibitionism and all forms of scandal. And not only did she have an affair with her husband's friend, younger and more glamorous than her husband, but this woman, a connoisseur of dutiful self-suppression, desperately needed some clue left to the world of her happiness with Blunt and her misery afterwards. It was not enough that it happened. The risk itself and the pleasures involved in the affair were not enough. She took one further risk in writing the sonnets and wishing Blunt to publish them in her husband's lifetime.

And when she told Henry James the story of the erring wives, his first thought in his notebooks was: 'When the stout middle-aged wife has an unmentionable "past", one feels how tiresome and charmless, how suggestive of mature petticoats and other frowsey

properties the whole business has become'.<sup>8</sup> It was as though he were looking at the stout, middle-aged widow who told him only two stories which he thought worth putting down from their conversations. They both were about matters which concerned Lady Gregory most, what she could not somehow keep to herself, what she wanted known and not known, concealed with care and dimly disclosed, to be discovered and to be kept secret at the same time: women who deceived their husbands and were discovered. It belonged to her nightmares but it somehow also belonged to a dark area within her psyche where she was ready to put herself in danger to have it known who she really was and what had once made her happy both beyond telling and only too ready to tell.

In these last years of the nineteenth century Henry James was merely one of a number of writers who were in exile in England to whom such stories as Lady Gregory's were told. They began, as outsiders, to consider the drama surrounding the brittleness of English manners and morals and the pressures on English stability. This offered them an alluring and mysterious and at times evasive subject. James, for example, remained fascinated by the English system of inheritance in which, on the death of her husband, the widow was cast aside while her son inherited the property. He sought to dramatise this in *The Spoils of Poynton*, published in 1896, in which there were only English characters. He was also interested, during the same period, in English forms of adultery and unfaithfulness which he dealt with in novels such as *The Other House* (1896) and *What Maisie Knew* (1897). His English characters lack the fluidity and yearning of his Americans; they are practical and rooted in the real world and only too ready to be treacherous to it should the need arise.

James is at his most powerful not when he is describing open and clear treachery among the English ruling class, but when he is dramatising secrecy among Americans. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, for example, there is a secret which is held for almost the entire body of the narrative. Something which has occurred in the past is withheld from both the reader of the novel and the heroine of the book. Part of the power of the novel is its forcing the reader to put the book down at a certain moment – the same moment in which Isabel Archer is alone by the fire – so the reader and the protagonist can reflect on all that has gone before, the levels of subterfuge and duplicity. How much they know now; how little they knew before.

What is astonishing is how close Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond have come to keeping their secret. If you trace Madame Merle's emotional position in the novel rather than Isabel's, the movement of her feeling is as interesting and as intense. It is close to that of Lady Gregory as she sent the sonnets to Blunt. Madame Merle needed her secret to be kept and she also needed at times just as desperately, for it to be known. She moved quietly and insistently from one need to the other. Her welfare depended on secrecy; but her life depended on being found out. It was thus essential for her emotional survival that Isabel and indeed the reader would know about her, just as it became essential for Charlotte Stant and Prince Amerigo in *The Golden Bowl*. They needed their secret understood not to clear the air, but to have something recorded and known because somehow private life and private acts were not enough; the art of loving and wanting involved, even in the most nuanced way, publicity, words. In Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, the narrator contemplated the words of passion used by Edward Ashburnham to the young girl, and his need to speak them, and what happened once such words were spoken aloud: 'It was as if his passion for her hadn't existed; as if the very words that he spoke, without knowing that he spoke them, created the passion as they went along. Before he spoke, there was nothing; afterwards, it was the integral fact of his life'.<sup>9</sup> Without public knowledge, without being told or spoken, feelings, including the most significant and strong, were like books imagined and sketched out but not written or published. They were no use to anybody. This was not only one of Henry James's and Ford Madox Ford's major themes. It was one of the themes in the public life of their country in the very years when they were paying most attention. It was part of the spirit of the age in which ideas of doubleness, secret selves and the possibility of discovery were essential elements.

As 1895 opened, for example, Oscar Wilde could move between intimate family life and, when he became bored with that, a life in hotels and foreign places. He could mingle among the great and the good and then pleasurably spend time with young men from a different, mostly a lower, social class. By May, Wilde was in prison, abandoned by most of his friends, his reputation in tatters, his name a byword for corruption and evil. Wilde's family life was destroyed, he

was declared a bankrupt and he was about to serve a sentence whose severity was beyond his imagination. He had been found out.

In the years that followed, everybody who wrote about him seemed puzzled by the fact that they had known a different facet of him and yet not seemed to know him at all. W. B. Yeats, for example, remembered Wilde the married man towards the end of the 1880s:

He lived in a little house at Chelsea that the architect Godwin had decorated with an elegance that owed something to Whistler . . . I remember vaguely a white drawing-room with Whistler etchings, 'let into' white panels, and a dining-room all white, chairs, walls, mantelpiece, carpet, except for a diamond-shaped piece of red cloth in the middle of the table under a terracotta statuette . . . . It was perhaps too perfect in its unity . . . and I remember thinking that the perfect harmony of his life there, with his beautiful wife and two young children, suggested some deliberate artistic composition.<sup>10</sup>

Oscar Wilde's younger son, Vyvyan, born in 1886, also remembered those years when his father was 'a real companion' to himself and his brother with 'so much of the child in his own nature that he delighted in playing our games . . . . When he grew tired of playing he would keep us quiet by telling us fairy stories, or tales of adventure, of which he had a never ending supply'.<sup>11</sup>

Among the writers for children which Wilde admired, according to his son, was Robert Louis Stevenson whose *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* appeared in 1886, the year of Vyvyan's birth. These were the years, as Karl Miller wrote in *Doubles*, when 'a hunger for pseudonyms, masks, new identities, new conceptions of human nature, declared itself'.<sup>12</sup> Thus Dr Jekyll could announce with full conviction: 'This, too, was myself' as he became 'a stranger in his own house'. Jekyll 'learned to recognise the thorough and primitive duality of man; I saw that, of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness, even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both'.<sup>13</sup> Thus as Wilde set to work on the creation of both himself and his character Dorian Gray, he was following an example which was embedded, as I have said, in the spirit of the age.

London in the years around the publication of Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1891, was the site where many artists, including W. B. Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, Joseph Conrad, Henry James and Ford allowed their doubled selves, and their work full of masked selves, secret agents, secret sharers and sexual secrets, to

flourish and further duplicate. Wilde in London was both an Englishman and an Irishman, an aristocrat and an Irish patriot, a family man and a man who never seemed to be at home, a dilettante and a dedicated artist. Everywhere he went, he left behind in some attic of the mind an opposite self, recently discarded.

Ford Madox Ford, who at one point used the same lawyer as Wilde, knew about Wilde's chameleon abilities and admired his ability, when the crisis came, to exude self-pity in enormous quantities while at the same time being able to see his own self-pity as a kind of play, or further self-dramatisation. Ford wrote:

There came a dramatic moment in the lawyer's office. Wilde began to lament his wasted life. He uttered a tremendous diatribe about his great talents thrown away, his brilliant genius dragged in the mud, his early and glorious aspirations come to nothing. He became almost epic. Then he covered his face and wept. His whole body was shaken by his sobs. Humphreys [his solicitor] was extremely moved. He tried to find consolations.

Wilde took his hands down from his face. He winked at Humphreys and exclaimed triumphantly:

'Got you then, old fellow.'<sup>14</sup>

In the same article, written in 1939, he remembered the visits of Oscar Wilde to his grandfather Ford Madox Brown. Wilde, once more, arrived as one of his own doubles. 'Mr Wilde was a quiet individual,' Ford wrote:

who came every Saturday, for years, to tea with the writer's grandfather Ford Madox Brown. Wilde would sit on the high-backed armchair, stretching out one hand a little towards the blaze of the wood fire on the hearth and talking of the dullest things possible things to Ford Madox Brown who . . . sat on the other side of the fire in another high-backed chair and, stretching out towards the flames his other hand, disagreed usually with Mr Wilde on subjects like that of Home Rule for Ireland Bill or the Conversion of the Consolidated Debt.<sup>15</sup>

Wilde, Ford wrote, continued these visits, 'as he said later, out of liking for the only house in London where he did not have to stand on his head'.<sup>16</sup>

It is only with the recent publication of the full transcript of the questioning of Wilde by the lawyer Edward Carson in Wilde's case against the Marquess of Queensbury that we have an idea of precisely the sort of risks Wilde was taking in bringing the case in the first place, how he himself was the main agent of his own unmasking. It is

fascinating to note how few people knew about him, even those who were wise in other ways.

In his preface to Frank Harris's book on Wilde, George Bernard Shaw made clear that neither he nor his associates, including Harris, knew of Wilde's homosexuality as a matter of fact until Wilde was cross-examined in the case. (This is confirmed by Ford, although he suggested that Wilde was unmasked not at the trial but some months before at the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.) Many of Wilde's friends knew of his decadence, of his flaunting a sort of sexual uncertainty, but they did not know that he was consorting with younger men of the lower classes nor that he had actually had sexual relations with Lord Alfred Douglas. Wilde's London life was a life of secrecy; it came to an end when a part of him decided that he desperately needed it to be revealed, despite the dangers and the consequences. There are some other explanations for what happened to him in the early months of 1895, but none as compelling as his own secret need to be found out.

Every man, W. B. Yeats pointed out in these same years, has 'some one scene, some one adventure, some one picture that is the image of his secret life'.<sup>17</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson wrote: 'I am a fictitious article and have long known it. I am read by journalists, by my fellow novelists and by boys'.<sup>18</sup> In August 1891, as he stayed at the Marine Hotel in Kingstown in Ireland, Henry James, described by his biographer as someone 'in search of, in flight from, something or other' had the idea for his story 'The Private Life' in which the sociable writer in the drawing room could at the same moment be found alone with his other self in his study.<sup>19</sup> Seventeen years later, James wrote his most haunting story of doubles, 'The Jolly Corner', in which a man who has been away from New York for more than thirty years but has kept an empty house there, and had it cleaned and cared for every day, sees a figure, his own double, who has never left these rooms, and tussles with him through the night. 'Rigid and conscious, spectral yet human, a man of his own substance and stature waited there to measure himself with his power to dismay.' 'The Jolly Corner' was, Edel wrote, 'a profoundly autobiographical tale'. In those years the writer was either two people, or he was nobody.

'It must not be forgotten,' George Bernard Shaw, who knew Wilde in the years of his fame as a playwright, wrote in 1938, 'that though by culture Wilde was a citizen of all civilised capitals, he was at root a very Irish Irishman, and, as such, a foreigner everywhere but

in Ireland'.<sup>20</sup> Wilde's Irish background remains an essential ingredient in his career, just like Stevenson's Scottishness, James's New England origins, Conrad's Polish birth and Ford Madox Ford's German heritage. Ford was acutely conscious of his status as both insider and outsider in England. 'Throughout my life,' he wrote in 1915:

whenever I have thought with *great* care of a prose paragraph, I have framed it in my mind in French, or more rarely in Latin, and have then translated into English; whereas when it was a matter of such attempts at verse as I have made my thinking has been done in colloquial English. When, on the other hand, it has been a matter of pleasures of the table, of wines and the like, I have been quite apt to think in German.<sup>21</sup>

It is hard to know in what language Joseph Conrad did his thinking. Ford Madox Ford described his railings against the English language as they both collaborated on a novel.

Then he would launch out into a frightful diatribe against the English language. It was a language for dogs and horses. It was incapable of conveying human thoughts . . . He would groan: 'No, it's no use. I'm going to France. I tell you I am going to set up as a French writer. French is a language; it is not a collection of grunted sounds.'<sup>22</sup>

In his long story 'The Secret Sharer', first published in 1910, Conrad joined the great game of dramatising two selves utterly separate and utterly the same. As the narrator, the captain of a ship alone at night on deck, rescues a man from the water he notes: 'It was, in the night, as though I had been faced by my own reflection in the depths of a sombre and immense mirror [. . .] He appealed to me as if our experiences had been as identical as our clothes.' The captain becomes alert to the idea that if a watcher were to 'catch sight of us, he would think he was seeing double, or imagine himself come upon a scene of weird witchcraft; the strange captain having a quiet confabulation by the wheel with his own grey ghost'. Later, he feels that the secret sharer owns a part of him. 'Part of me was absent. That mental feeling of being in two places at once affected me physically as if the mood of secrecy had penetrated my very soul.'<sup>23</sup>

'The Secret Sharer' seems, at first, an elaborate fantasy, but slowly as it is stretched to its limits, much like the elaborate fantasies in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* are stretched to their limits, these limits move away from fantasy towards a hard-won and mysterious reality. In the forceful way the fantasy is

worked and charged in all three pieces of fiction, something emerges which is not only haunting and suggestive and disturbing, but oddly credible and acute, as though offering an insight into the psyche of the creator which lay hidden from the conscious mind, part of their need to make duality seem unstrange.

Oscar Wilde could also write in French, but like his homosexuality, Wilde's Irishness left him psychically, like Conrad, in two places, an outsider in Oxford and London, but much of the time, invisibly and ambiguously so. The English upper class he wrote about in his fiction and his plays was, as Karl Miller writes, 'a class exoticized, eroticised, by an outsider'.<sup>24</sup> Henry James shared his fascination with the manners and mores of this class. All of these writers shared one essential ingredient with the English in whose country they had settled – a command of the English language. And this operated as a sort of alibi for them, allowed them to shine on the page and the stage, allowed them immense possibilities for invention and disguise. The voyage from one self to another gave them their style; their style, in turn, offered them an easy intercourse with the English themselves. They were capable of masquerading, if they needed to, as eminent Victorians, but a part of them, sometimes a central part, belonged elsewhere.

Just as it becomes fruitful at times to read *The Portrait of a Lady* as the story of Madame Merle whose need to be found out superseded a level of general discretion which was as advanced as that of Lady Gregory, so too it is useful to read *The Good Soldier* by Ford Madox Ford not as a novel of transatlantic incomprehension – how an American in Europe was all innocence and could be easily fooled – but as a novel about an Irishwoman married to an Englishman. Ford himself had strong views on the Irish question. Ireland, he wrote in 1911:

is the ruin of good men and great causes [. . .] There is about Ireland something that causes a madness akin to the African madness. You take a soldier and a gentleman [. . .] You send him to Ireland and he becomes a robber and a low sneak thief [. . .] I think we could contemplate Ireland with less humiliation if Cromwell had rooted out every Irishman. It would not matter much; they would be dead and gone and quiet in their graves, which would be much better for their descendants [. . .] No one can make Ireland pay; then, for God's sake, as we still have some Irish alive, let us leave them to starve in their own way.<sup>25</sup>

Such views were not unusual, it must be said. Henry James in his letter to an old Boston friend Grace Norton was almost as forthright and equally not amused. Ireland, he felt, could injure

England less with [Home Rule] than she does without it . . . She seems to me an example of a country more emancipated from every bond, not only of despotism but of ordinary law, than any so-called civilised country was before – a country revelling in odious forms of irresponsibility & license. And surely, how can one speak of the Irish as a ‘great people’? I see no greatness, nor any kind of superiority in them, & they seem to me an inferior and 3<sup>rd</sup> rate race, whose virtues are of the cheapest and shallowest order, while their vices are peculiarly cowardly and ferocious. They have been abominably treated in the past – but their wrongs appear, to me, in our time, to have occupied the conscience of England only too much to the exclusion of other things.<sup>26</sup>

Two years later, in 1888, he wrote to her again: ‘Here there is nothing but Ireland, & the animosities and separations it engenders – accursed isle! Literature, art, conversation, society – everything lies dead beneath its black shadow’.<sup>27</sup>

James was careful not to deal with Ireland in any of his important fiction, but in Leonora Ford Madox Ford created the most significant Irish presence in an English novel since Trollope. Leonora’s marital problems as recounted in *The Good Soldier* began with her views on how a landlord must treat his tenants, and they differed entirely from those of her husband whose tenants had held contracts for more than two hundred years, whose heritage was one of pure continuity. Her husband’s land-steward, for example, who we were told is ‘a moderate and well-balanced man . . . took it upon himself to explain that he considered Edward was pursuing a perfectly proper course with his tenants’ (*GS* 170). Neither Leonora nor her father who came to visit, however, agreed; they knew nothing of English continuity. Her father must have lived through the Great Irish Famine, and the years of eviction and disruption which followed. As Leonora was leaving Ireland, she was leaving a place where, the novel told us ‘three times in the course of that year the tenants took pot shots from behind a hedge’ at her father (*GS* 159). Her father had, we were told, ‘tenants on the brain’ (*GS* 168), and for very good reasons as these years were the years of the Land League in Ireland in which tenants gathered together into a mass movement to demand fair rents and fixity of tenure. They were also the years of the Land Acts, in which vast estates were being effectively confiscated from their owners and distributed to the tenants. ‘Those were troublesome times

in Ireland, I understand,' the narrator told us (*GS* 168). They were indeed, enough to make a landlord's daughter arriving from Ireland almost a total foreigner in England. Leonora would have spoken like an Englishwoman, much as Oscar Wilde spoke like an Englishman – although Ford remembered him as having 'a singular mixture of Balliol and brogue'<sup>28</sup> – but she carried with her the shadow of Glasmoyle, the house of her father in Ireland.

The year when scandal first erupted in the Ashburnham family, when Edward consoled the serving-girl on the train by kissing her, is given clearly in the novel. It is 1895, the year also of the unmasking of Oscar Wilde for also consorting with members of the lower orders. The story which emerged in the Wilde trial is the same story which comes to us in the pages of *The Good Soldier*. It is a story of marital treachery, of an Irish protagonist among the English, of blackmail, of the possibility of divorce and scandal placing decent people outside decent society, of class, of the need, so strange and hard to explain, for secrets to be made public in what the narrator of *The Good Soldier* called a 'final outburst' in which the characters became 'deucedly vocal' (*GS* 130).

*The Good Soldier* and Wilde's *De Profundis* are both full of a strange and intense yet oddly meandering tone, full of memory and analysis of key scenes and moments, full of an eloquence brought to a pitch of beauty by misery and pain as a first person narrator is forced to go over what he suffered for love and how betrayed he was by treachery, and how much he knows now versus how little he knew then. This is not to suggest that *The Good Soldier* was influenced in any way by *De Profundis* which Ford was unlikely even to have read, but to suggest something more interesting – that something in the very spirit of the age was in both texts, the need to set down in a story what had been up to then withheld, the need to be found out, for the words of disclosure to offer the comfort of meaning and publicity to what was merely, up to then, inchoate experience with a desperate need for no one to know about it. The tone comes from the intensity of both needs and the tone in *De Profundis* and *The Good Soldier* is everything.

One of the central moments of *The Good Soldier*, Leonora's most eloquent outburst, occurred when she said to the young girl Nancy: 'I wish to God that he was your husband, and not mine. We shall be ruined' (*GS* 240). She went on: 'That man [. . .] would give the shirt

off his back and off mine – and off yours to any . . .’ (GS 241) The cause of this outburst was Edward handing over his cob to a young man whose recently ruined father Edward had known all of his life. Nancy saw the act as entirely admirable. Leonora did not. In an English novel, knowing a tenant all of your life and feeling a glow of generosity towards his son is not only possible but easy to imagine, a part of life. It could happen without comment in George Eliot. But in Ireland it simply could not happen; a landlord handing his horse over without being threatened with violence should he not do so was simply unthinkable in those years.<sup>29</sup> It would be enough to make other landlords boycott him. (The very word boycott came from the relation between tenant and landlord in Ireland at this time.) It would be seen as an act of madness. Any Irish landlord who knew a tenant, now ruined, all of his life, knew him as a scoundrel, or at best a waster, and wished to have him evicted. Many Irish landlords, including Leonora’s father, were themselves facing ruin. A meeting with his son on friendly terms would be simply impossible. His son would be a member of a secret society. He would be standing in the shadows waiting to take a pot shot. Thus the clash between Edward and Leonora in *The Good Soldier* at its most intense was a clash between being Irish and being English in those years. And the fact that this clash between cultures made its way into the sexual realm also where it caused havoc should surprise no one.

In all of this, another court case, the trial of Charles Stewart Parnell in 1889, also given a full airing in the very period when Leonora was moving to England, casts an interesting shadow and interesting light on the subject of Ireland and England, marital infidelity and secrets and lies.

The writers who were fascinated by such dramas included Conrad, who had settled in England in 1896, having published his first novel the previous year. He was deeply interested in a small number of writers both in French and English whose work he studied carefully. Among these writers was Henry James. The relationship between his fiction and that of James may not seem obvious, despite the fact that, as Leon Edel has pointed out, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) bears strange similarities in structure and tone, if not in content, to James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).

Conrad had sent James his second book *An Outcast of the Islands* in 1896 with an elaborately flattering inscription. James admired the book and responded by sending him *The Spoils of*

*Poynton*. Conrad thought that ‘the delicacy and tenuity’ of James’s novel ‘was a great sheet of plate glass – you don’t know it’s there till you run against it’.<sup>30</sup> Ford Madox Ford reported ‘the rapturous and shouting enthusiasm of Conrad over the story’ and suggested that it ‘must have been the high-water mark of Conrad’s enthusiasm for the work of any other writer’.<sup>31</sup> The two men met for lunch in London in February 1897. James was fifty-three; Conrad thirty-nine. The piece of fiction which Conrad attempted immediately after their meeting was his story *The Return*, which is his most clearly Jamesian in tone and content, his most directly English in manner and background. It deals of course with marital treachery.

Among the books in Conrad’s library when he died was the autobiography of Katherine O’Shea, the woman who had been Charles Stewart Parnell’s secret mistress. The doubleness of Parnell, his ability to move from Ireland to England, from Westminster to Brighton, and his eventual unmasking and ruin fascinated writers in these years and told them a great deal about the drama between what was done as secrecy and then revealed as scandal, about a man whom vast numbers felt that they knew, and yet who remained a mystery, a man who was not known at all.

In the early 1880s, as Parnell began to dominate political debate in the two islands, Sir Charles Wentworth Dilke vied with Joseph Chamberlain as the rising star of the Liberal Party. In July 1885, as he was about to get married, he learned that he was to be named as the co-respondent in a divorce case. Although the legislation legalising divorce was almost thirty years in place, divorce cases were rare and treated as sensational by the press. Two or three hundred a year was the norm as against an average of 170,000 marriages per year. In the first three decades of divorce law, no politician had been judged the guilty party. Lord Palmerston had come close in 1864, but the case had been finally dismissed.

Dilke wrote in his diary:

Such a charge, even if disproved, which is not easy against perjured evidence picked up with care, is fatal to supreme usefulness in politics. In the case of a public man a charge is always believed by many, even though disproved, and I should be weighted by it through life. I prefer, therefore, at once to contemplate leaving public life.<sup>32</sup>

Dilke, however, soon changed his mind and decided to stay in public life and fight the case. His main enemy, Trevor Fisher has written in *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of Late Victorian Britain*, was:

the fanatical purity lobby within his own party which was now surging ahead on a relentless moral crusade . . . It was convinced of its own righteousness. It was soon to define its ideology as 'the non-conformist conscience'. And for the nonconformist conscience, absolute, spotless and above all demonstrable adherence to the dictates of Old Testament morality was demanded of all public figures as the condition of their being in public life. Hugh Price Hughes had thundered in the influential Wesleyan journal *The Methodist Times* in September 1885 that 'all impure men must be hounded from public life, expelled by the Supreme Court of the Public Conscience of the Nation'.<sup>33</sup>

As a result of being named in a divorce action, Sir Charles Dilke's career was effectively ended.

Dilke was represented by Sir Charles Russell, considered the foremost advocate of the day. He charged him the astonishing fee of three hundred guineas. It was the same Sir Charles Russell who acted for Parnell in what was effectively his trial for sedition in February 1889 – when it was believed that he was as doubled as a figure from any of the novels, that he was both a Westminster MP and an Irish terrorist leader – and conducted the cross-examination of the forger Richard Pigott on his behalf. In the shadow of Dilke's disgrace, Gladstone, when his nephew raised the possibility of Parnell's private life being less than wholesome, insisted that he did not believe it: 'You do not ask me to believe,' he wrote, 'that it is possible a man should be lost to all sense of what is due to his public position, at a moment like the present, in his very crisis of his country's fortunes, as to indulge in an illicit connection with the wife of one of his very own political supporters'.<sup>34</sup> Gladstone, by this time, knew Parnell as well as it was possible to know anybody.

Henry James, Lady Gregory and Oscar Wilde attended, although not in one another's company, what was called the Parnell Commission in London in 1889. And Burne-Jones, a figure from the world of Ford Madox Ford and his family was also there. 'Burne-Jones and I met a couple of times at the thrilling, throbbing Parnell trial,' Henry James wrote to a friend in March 1889, 'during the infinitely interesting episode of the letters, when if one had been once and tasted blood, one was quite hungry to go again, and wanted to give up everything and live there. Unfortunately, or rather, fortunately, getting in was supremely difficult'.<sup>35</sup> Oscar Wilde's

brother reported the trial for *The Daily Telegraph*. ‘Parnell is the man of destiny,’ he wrote. ‘He will strike off the fetters and free Ireland, and throne her as queen among the nations’.<sup>36</sup> Oscar Wilde said of Parnell: ‘The greatest men fail, or seem to have failed’.<sup>37</sup> Both brothers were triumphant at Parnell’s success at the Commission in 1889.

‘On the surface’, W. J. McCormack has written in his essay on Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Parnell’s acquittal:

the two crises differ in every important respect: the one arising from the publication of a short novel, the other from a vote of confidence in a political leader. Yet the common denominator was the recurrent and pervasive Victorian phenomenon of a double life. Parnell was both a bachelor and an undeclared sexual partner of a woman whose husband was politically sustained by the rival. Dorian Gray was an unblemished figure and a hidden icon of corruption and depravity. Moreover the creator of Dorian Gray was himself living a double life . . .<sup>38</sup>

‘At a deeper psychological level,’ McCormack goes on, ‘both Parnell and Wilde survived by the projection of exceptional personalities through public performances in which outrage played its part. Both walked the razor’s edge’.<sup>39</sup>

But when you watch Parnell and Wilde and Lady Gregory and indeed Leonora Ashburnham, you realise that something more interesting is happening, more mysterious and harder to explain. It was as though the moving from Ireland to England, the moving from being the owner of an estate where the tenants are likely to take pot shots at you, from a country where your position, both moral and political, is constantly to be questioned, to Westminster or the drawing rooms of London or a stable English estate involved a deep re-imagining of the self, creating a rich space for sexual duplicity. This idea of a very private and intimate doubleness which entered the core of the spirit of certain Irish figures who had gnarled allegiances at the end of the nineteenth century may help us to understand or further appreciate or indeed enjoy how William O’Shea might have both known and not known of his wife’s adultery and how Parnell and Mrs O’Shea might have become so skilled at pretending O’Shea didn’t know, living as though he didn’t know, while knowing all the time that he in fact knew. This too was what Constance Wilde did about her husband’s antics. She thought they were a pose while knowing too that they were not a pose. Parnell’s journey from London to Brighton,

where Mrs O'Shea lived, was like his journey from Ireland to England, from being a dull and hesitant speaker to becoming eloquent, a journey in which identity and knowledge and the very essence of the self could be transformed. So, too, Leonora in *The Good Soldier* could pose for many years as the good soldier's wife, could allow her husband to have an affair with Florence, making sure all the while that she could, when it suited her, pretend that she did not know or that it was not happening. This is what Captain O'Shea did when his wife was having an affair with Parnell; this, too, is how Constance Wilde behaved. It may even be how Sir William Gregory decided to behave in the light of his wife's behaviour with Wilfred Scawen Blunt.

This is not to suggest that only Irish people were involved in stories of knowing and not knowing, discretion and indiscretion, in Victorian and Edwardian England, but it is one way of explaining why Ford made Leonora Ashburnham Irish; it is to suggest that the Irishness of these figures, including Leonora, added spice to their predicament, exacerbated a general tendency towards self-invention which was in their aura in any case, may have indeed caused a predilection in their make-up for duplicity and emotional displacement, allowing it to flourish in a way more convincing and in a way finally, as each were led to their downfall, or as those around them were, not convincing at all.

This is not to omit the huge significance of American innocence in *The Good Soldier*, but what American innocence met was something quite precise in the public and private life of England in these years – the dark and dangerous and confusing shadow of Ireland. It has to be remembered and emphasized that it is Leonora in *The Good Soldier* who was the high-priestess of duplicity. Edward she found easy to read at all times. Florence needed to be found out almost as soon as her affair with Edward began. It was Leonora who managed things, who made sure that Dowell knew nothing, who watched day in day out – as Madame Merle watched, as Parnell watched, as Wilde watched, as Lady Gregory watched, as Conrad's captain in *The Secret Sharer* watched – to make sure the secret was kept, and it was the keeping of the secret which allowed the affair to go on. It was she too, like Parnell and Wilde before her, who was so skilled one moment at pretending and then so desperate for all to be told. It was Leonora rather than Edward who was the untrustworthy figure in the narrative, the unfathomable one in the story, the moral outsider in the book, whose motives were most gnarled and whose

psyche was most damaged. Part of the reason for this is that she came from elsewhere, but managed this otherness with such care, she almost succeeded in being found out mainly as a Catholic but not being found out as an Irishwoman, the daughter of a landlord, carrying all the darkness and guilt of those years in Ireland with her. She did this so well that the narrator of the book did not think it very important, and most critics have thought it unworthy of comment. It is not only that Dowell and his wife were not in their own country; this hardly mattered since they both were so alert to this fact, and Dowell all the more so when he came to narrate the story. A central aspect of the story of *The Good Soldier* was of a displaced Irishwoman, carrying with her a version of life full of darkness and danger, married to an Englishman who was not afraid of his tenants. In her journey, she learned a great deal about suppression and duplicity, sensing danger all around and telling no one and waiting for the final cataclysm.

She both loved and feared the lifting of the veil. That, as Irish, she shared this with certain Irish figures of the age may help explain some of what happens in *The Good Soldier*, but of course not all of it. The rest lies in the strangeness of the human personality when placed under certain pressures, our interest in telling stories, connecting the rhythms of the human voice with the shape of words on a page, the lovely mystery of being alive.

## NOTES

- 1 A briefer, unannotated variant of this essay appeared in the *London Review of Books* (20 March 2008), 24-7, under the title 'The Art of Being Found Out'.
- 2 *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock, New York: Oxford University Press, 1947, p. 145.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- 4 Quoted in Colm Tóibín, *Lady Gregory's Toothbrush*, Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2002, p. 18.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 6 Lady Gregory, *Selected Writings*, ed. Lucy McDiarmid and Maureen Waters, London: Penguin, 1995 p. 425.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 431.
- 8 *The Notebooks of Henry James*, p. 145.
- 9 Ford, *The Good Soldier*, London: John Lane: The Bodley Head, 1915 – henceforth *GS*; p. 137.
- 10 Yeats, *Autobiographies*, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980, pp. 134-5.

- 11 Vyvyan Holland, *Son of Oscar Wilde*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 52-53.
- 12 Karl Miller, *Doubles*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 209.
- 13 R. L. Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales*, ed. Roger Luckhurst, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 55, 53.
- 14 Ford, *Return to Yesterday*, London: Gollancz, 1931, pp. 40-41.
- 15 Ford, 'Memories of Oscar Wilde' (1939), *The Ford Madox Ford Reader*, ed. Sondra Stang, Manchester: Carcanet, 1986 – henceforth *Reader*; p. 139.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 W. B. Yeats, 'The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry', in *The Major Works: Including Poems, Plays, and Critical Prose*, ed. Edward Larrisssey, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 351.
- 18 Stevenson, letter to Sidney Colvin, 6 October 1894, quoted in Miller, *Doubles*, p. 215.
- 19 Henry James, *The Complete Stories: 1892-1898*, the Library of America, New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1996, pp. 58-92.
- 20 H. Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1976, p. 37.
- 21 Ford, *When Blood is Their Argument* (1915): in *Reader*, p. 319.
- 22 *The Bodley Head Ford Madox Ford*, Volume 5: *Memories and Impressions*, ed. Michael Killigrew, London: The Bodley Head, 1971, pp. 285-6.
- 23 Joseph Conrad, 'The Secret Sharer', in *Complete Works*, Vol. 19, New York: Doubleday, 1924, pp. 91-147 (pp. 101-02, 103, 125).
- 24 Miller, *Doubles*, p. 225.
- 25 Ford, 'A Tory Plea for Home Rule', in *Critical Essays*, ed. Max Saunders and Richard Stang, Manchester: Carcanet, 2002, p. 98.
- 26 James to Grace Norton, 1886, quoted in Fred Kaplan, *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992, pp. 294-5.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 296.
- 28 *Reader* 140.
- 29 Under the Penal Laws a Catholic could not own a horse worth more than five pounds. If he were offered five pounds by a Protestant, he would have to hand over his horse.
- 30 Conrad to Edward Garnett, 13 February 1897: *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, Vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 339.
- 31 Ford, *Mightier Than the Sword*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1938, p. 22.
- 32 Quoted in Trevor Fisher, *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of Late Victorian Britain*, Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1995, p. 100.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- 35 James to Charles Eliot Norton, 25 March [1889], *Letters*, ed. Leon Edel, Vol. 3, London: Macmillan, 1981, p. 253.
- 36 Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987, p. 122.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 553.

- 38 W. J. McCormack, 'Wilde and Parnell', in *Wilde the Irishman*, ed. Jerusha McCormack, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998, pp. 95-103. (p. 99).
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 100.