

***THE GOOD SOLDIER:* FORD'S POSTMODERN NOVEL¹**

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Abstract

Jean-François Lyotard distinguishes between two versions of modernism. The first laments the inevitable loss of realism and the impossibility of telling the truth in fiction; the second, which Lyotard calls the postmodern, celebrates the liberation this entails and the freedom to keep the reader guessing. Postmodernism gleefully refuses the reassurance promised by realism that the world is just as we thought it was. *The Good Soldier* creates the illusion that it is a realist novel, but in practice keeps us guessing throughout about exactly what happened and how we should interpret it. As the story unfolds, the novel doubles back on what it has previously encouraged us to assume, inviting readers to reassess the events, the characters and the relationships between them. The narrative voice equivocates. In the process, it promotes reflection on what we take to be the behaviour of the fictional figures, our own assumptions about the world, and the nature of the language that frames both.

I

According to a distinction proposed by Jean-François Lyotard, *The Good Soldier* is formally and thematically a postmodern novel. This classification has been put forward before² but I want to pursue its implications in some detail. To avoid misunderstanding, I should perhaps make clear that my design here is not to revive the moribund debate about the definition of postmodernism, but to draw on distinctions Lyotard makes in order to single out features of Ford's text. Once the label coined to identify a difference supplants the text itself as an object of debate, the label becomes an obstacle to criticism. We have probably heard enough about postmodernism as a category, and if any other term offered itself, I would gladly adopt it. But this is the word Lyotard used in 1982 to specify a particular version of modernism itself and I gratefully borrow it as a frame for a reading of the novel. In my view, *The Good Soldier* breaks rules and poses questions without laying claim to either a deeper truth or new answers. Instead, it asks its reader to reflect on the wayward behaviour not only of human beings but also of the language that both defines and delimits their options – and ours.

When Lyotard published 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?' in the French journal *Critique*, the essay appeared with a footnote, deleted from the English translation, that described it as a very personal '*texte de combat*'.³ Because this engaged and combative intervention takes no prisoners, it spells out, perhaps more sharply than usual, what is at stake, as far as Lyotard is concerned, in postmodernist art. His target is the retreat from experimentation, the slide back into the reassuring lap of realism – and by way of my own personal combative contribution to the discussion, I would add that, even after thirty years, the distinctions he makes in this essay are no less relevant to us now in the clutches, as we apparently are in the UK, of the pallid 'literary novel'. Ford, I suggest, was way ahead of our current favoured and prize-winning practitioners.

Lyotard's objection to realism was its propensity to protect consciousnesses from doubt. Whether in visual art or in writing, he argued, realism assumes that we recognize – or can be coaxed to recognize – an already existing reality. Perspective painting stabilizes the object depicted, places it in such a way that it is intelligible to the spectator from a given point of view, and invests it with a significance that is – or can be made – evident to everyone. The realist novel similarly invites recognition of a world seen as given. Appealing implicitly or explicitly to 'what we all know', invoking Roland Barthes's 'code of reference',⁴ classic realism reproduces a syntax and a vocabulary that permit readers to make sense not only of the text but at the same time of the world it depicts as familiar. By this means, Lyotard continues, realism encourages the reader to arrive without difficulty at a validation of his or her own identity in the course of experiencing the gratifying confirmation of an understanding shared with others. Communication takes place: heads nod. However surprising the events or the characters may be, however desolate the outcome, the perceiving subject and the objects perceived are in their proper places as evidence that the world depicted is possible, plausible, convincing as a replica of reality, the actuality we know as our own. Such art, such writing is 'therapeutic', Lyotard complains.⁵ Even if the story introduces us to new vistas, even though the tale makes us sadder or wiser, realism leaves the perceiving subject and consensus on the objects of perception in the same relation as before. 'Yes, that's it, that's how it is!'

Modernism, meanwhile, responds, he says, to 'the withdrawal of the real',⁶ a twentieth-century breakdown of confidence in what

passes for actual. But the emphasis varies. Modernism, Lyotard proposes, either regrets what is lost or takes advantage of the freedom scepticism confers. In the first case, the work, nostalgic for the missing certainties, preserves the pleasures offered by good form; the second, which Lyotard identifies as the postmodern *in modernism*, refuses that solace and seeks out new modes of presentation, proceeds without regulations in order to uncover after the event the rules of 'what *will have been done*'.⁷

II

To my mind, *The Good Soldier* not only refuses to deliver consoling certainties but also challenges the rules of representation. To begin with, attempts to reduce the story to consistency or locate a coherent theme seem doomed to disappointment. Whatever, for example, are we to make of a novel where the death of the protagonist – or the figure named in the title as the protagonist, since that too is open to discussion – is related in an afterthought? 'It suddenly occurs to me that I have forgotten to say how Edward met his death' (*GS* 168). And what is the genre of this final episode? Tragedy? Melodrama? Or a bleak form of comedy? The understatement of the final sentences perfectly encapsulates the pervading irony: 'I trotted off with the telegram to Leonora. She was quite pleased with it' (169).

This fatal telegram, delivered to Edward, who promptly takes out his little penknife – as unheroic an instrument of death as it is possible to name – seems to be (and cannot be) the same as the one read out at a hitherto quiet dinner by Leonora only six pages earlier (*GS* 163). But the temptation to document dates and places is as irrelevant as it is irresistible: that's not where the energy of the story lies.⁸ It is impossible to tell how many of the inconsistencies are due to oversight in a novel where one recurring strategy is definition and redefinition by contradiction. From the beginning *The Good Soldier* unfolds its story only gradually – and then backtracks: the life of the foursome was a minuet, they knew the steps, they were perfectly at ease with each other (11); on the contrary, it was a prison, 'full of screaming hysterics' (12); Florence was never out of the sight of her husband – and yet she must have been (12); an ideal couple, the Ashburnhams never spoke a word to each other in private (13). These conflicting observations come hard on each other's heels, foregrounding enigma. Other affirmations are not undermined until many pages later: Edward specializes in sentimental novels (26): he

has literary tastes (97). There is a great deal of prolepsis, as the narrator contrasts the dismal present with the seeming innocence of the past, but some of these forward glimpses are misleading: the narrator repeatedly hints that Nancy is dead (55, 87, 90, 91). Was her madness a still grimmer afterthought or are we to understand insanity as a figurative death? Dowell alludes to some of this, justifying it in the name of a deeper realism:

One remembers points that one has forgotten and one explains them all the more minutely since one recognises that one has forgotten to mention them in their proper places and that one may have given, by omitting them a false impression. (*GS* 125)

Is this a cover for carelessness? Or does Ford's literary impressionism distrust as improbable the prodigious memories of conventional first-person narrators? Is Dowell's layered commentary legitimately naturalized as record of his dawning awareness? Does his story mimic life in its subsequent revelation of new meanings for what seemed straightforward events? Or is the novel designed to mislead?

If some of the precise details of the plot are elusive, the themes are just as hard to pin down. What is this novel about, I wondered, as I read it for the first time? Desire, obviously, and there are some extraordinary observations on the nature of desire as a craving for confirmation, implicating the object of desire in the fundamental psychic life of the desiring subject (*GS* 82-3). All the characters want what they can't have; no one gets what they most want (158). At the same time, there is nearly as much talk of hate as there is of love. Edward intermittently hates Leonora: 'whatever she did caused him to hate her. [. . .] Hatred hung in all the heavy nights and filled the shadowy corners of the room' (121). Leonora sporadically hates Edward (25, 137, 140). Above all, Dowell hates Florence to the point where he would gladly see her damned: 'I hate Florence with such a hatred that I would not spare her an eternity of loneliness' (55).

If love and hate are opposite sides of the same coin, passion is also closely allied with power. Henry James makes his influence felt here, as elsewhere. Florence controls Dowell by means of her 'heart'; she has a hold over Leonora because she has seen through the façade; she has a hold over Edward, because he feels an obligation to her. Dowell has an unwitting power over Florence, who cannot face the possibility that he will learn about Jimmy. Above all, when Leonora

takes command of Edward's income, he cannot implement the generosity that is his defining virtue – can't be who he most is.

All this I grasped – if slowly – but I had the dissatisfied sense that none of it took me to the core of the novel. Would an ethical reading give me a place to stand, I asked myself. The strategy is always available as a last resort to anyone brought up in the vague aura of piety that characterized English studies in the 1970s and is still faintly perceptible among those who turn to literature to learn how to live. Besides, the novel from *Tom Jones* to *Lord Jim* has traditionally offered moral footholds, if not prescriptions. These may then be called into question: if we know how we value American innocence in *The Portrait of a Lady*, we might not be so clear when it comes to *The Golden Bowl*. Even in late James, though, it is possible to identify the terms of the debate about love and power.

But if *The Good Soldier* allows us to glimpse a virtue, it so often goes on to undermine its own proposition. Who, for example, are the culprits?⁹ There seems nothing to be said in favour of Florence, but Florence is not the precipitating agent of the final tragedy, if tragedy it is. 'The girl' is clearly not to blame: she is an innocent abroad in an unintelligible world. Leonora? She is surely as much victim as perpetrator. Dowell – Do-well? A previous generation of male critics, presumably testosterone-fuelled Lawrentians, took the line that the failure of his marriage was his own fault: apparently, he could have sorted Florence out by asserting his manhood. I'm not sure what anxieties these commentators were projecting onto Ford's unoffending narrator: let's hope that feminism was already beginning to frighten them. In any case, I don't think that line would persuade many people now.

How, then, are we to regard Edward, 'an excellent magistrate, a first rate soldier, one of the best landlords, so they said, in Hampshire, England' (*GS* 14)? In Ford's novel that interpolated 'so they said' might – or might not – speak volumes. Is Ashburnham presented as a hero at the mercy of a repressive society, or a villain who follows his own will whatever the cost? He doesn't apparently pursue his desires when it comes to Nancy, and yet for a romantic, if that's what he is, reciprocal renunciation has its own pleasures. What he wants more than her body is her love and he kills himself when she tells him she's having a 'rattling good time' without him (169). Meanwhile, is he a capable landlord if his serial philanthropy risks bankrupting the estate? And is he a good soldier? He is certainly a heroic one: he saves his

comrades when they're in trouble much as he means to come to the aid of distressed servant girls on trains; he earns the DSO and is twice recommended for the VC.

And yet, aren't heroics too called into question in this deeply ironic novel? What are we to make of the Red Sea voyage as conveyed by Dowell but from Leonora's point of view? Where exactly is the irony to be located?

One of their bitterest quarrels came after he had, for the second time, in the Red Sea, jumped overboard from the troopship and rescued a private soldier. She stood it the first time and even complimented him. But the Red Sea was awful, that trip, and the private soldiers seemed to develop a suicidal craze. It got on Leonora's nerves; she figured Edward, for the rest of that trip, jumping overboard every ten minutes. (*GS* 118)

Is the *Boys' Own* bravery named here to Edward's credit, and to Leonora's corresponding discredit, since she fails to respect chivalry, or is it continuous with the extravagant support of family retainers and the maintenance of expensive subscriptions he can't afford? Was the chivalric version of soldiery already in question when the First World War began?

In 1927 Ford claimed that he had named the book *The Good Soldier* in 'hasty irony' and that he had never ceased to regret it (*GS* 6). Perhaps. Earlier versions bear out his claim that he wanted to call it *The Saddest Story*. But doesn't the existing title perfectly condense the questions prompted by this novel? What are the values it asks us to recognize and share? What is there here to stabilize the object of knowledge, invest it with a consensual significance, or protect consciousnesses from doubt?

III

Among all the uncertainties, one feature of this text is clear. It's a page-turner. The recurrent prolepsis, the repeated deferrals, kept me on the edge of my chair. Far from the relaxed listener in a country cottage of Dowell's imagination (*GS* 15, 124), I found myself all alert concentration, anxious to make my way through the 'maze' he also calls his tale (124). The strategy of writing about the past from the present builds suspense by keeping two (or more) distinct temporal orders in view. The puzzle is how to find a path from one to the other(s), not least when these distinct temporalities so often seem to belong to different genres. The novel opens on what looks like a

comedy of manners: deracinated Americans find refuge with a model English couple, their companionable lives measured out in restaurant tables, concerts, visits to the baths. But within two pages, the narrator speaks from another time and in a different vocabulary: 'Permanence? Stability! I can't believe it's gone. I can't believe that that long tranquil life ... vanished in four crashing days' (11). Who is 'the girl' (21)? And why is Edward now to be thought of as having been in 'Absolute, hopeless, dumb agony such as passes the mind of man to imagine' (21)? And above all, how are we to resolve the contradictions? Ford insisted that the primary consideration of the author must be his tale: 'the first thing he has to consider is his story and the last thing that he has to consider is his story, and in between [...] he will consider his story'.¹⁰ In *The Good Soldier* that story engages the reader in wanting to make sense of the information presented in an order that is apparently rambling and in practice (probably) anything but random.

Classic realism similarly keeps the attention of the reader by setting up enigmas on the basis of information withheld: the narrator writing from the present knows all along who committed the murder or who married the heroine. But Ford takes that strategy to an extreme, since what follows often directly overrides the apparent proposition. On the first page of *The Good Soldier* Dowell confides at the mention of Bad Nauheim, 'You will gather from this statement that one of us had, as the saying is, a "heart", and, from the statement that my wife is dead, that she was the sufferer' (GS 9). Thus prompted, I did – and I was wrong: not everything we are encouraged to 'gather' is the case. The pattern is consistent. The aptly named Mrs Maidan, whose love affair with Edward was chaste on account of her 'heart', is first reported to have died 'quite quietly – of heart trouble' (42). This is the truth but not the whole truth, since it will later emerge, in one of the novel's characteristic touches of dark comedy, that her body is found upside down in a trunk with her feet in the air (58), perhaps echoing the strange, apparently unmotivated, upturned cow on the way to M[arburg] (36).¹¹

On a second reading some of the difficulties dissolve when with hindsight it becomes clear that we are to take many of the narrator's statements as ironic. 'Poor dear Florence' is now evidently not dear at all. 'She seemed to dance over the floors of castles and over seas and over and over the salons of modistes and over the *plages* of the Riviera – like a gay tremulous beam, reflected from water upon a ceiling'

(GS 17). The first, innocent reading is likely to attract us to the striking image of the dancing, trembling reflected light. Only the second time round does the full disparity become obvious between castles and seas, on the one hand, and dressmakers' showrooms on the other.

The identification of irony is always a pleasure: it puts the reader in the know; the stability of the referent is restored again, reassuring doubtful souls. But *The Good Soldier* does not always deliver such easy gratification. What, for example, are we to make of another early comment on Florence? 'I don't believe that for one minute she was out of my sight, except when she was safely tucked up in bed' (GS 12). 'Tucked up' is not quite how we shall later imagine her in bed with Edward or, for that matter, Jimmy, but the comment certainly resonates differently on a second reading. Is this ironic or isn't it? Irony is hard to be sure of; it may reside in the eye of the reader. The only guarantee that *A Modest Proposal* is ironic is a supposed intention we have no certain access to. Everything we know about Swift, including his predilection for irony, goes to indicate that he was not seriously inciting the Irish to eat their babies. At the same time, it is difficult to demonstrate from the text alone that the shocked readers who took *A Modest Proposal* at face value were wrong.

If Ford's irony is elusive, perhaps it is better defined as equivocation. Tucked up or not, Florence *is* in bed much of the time she's out of her husband's sight, but not in the sense that the reader is initially invited to suppose. 'You will gather [. . .] that my wife was the sufferer' evades the question of whether or not Florence really has a bad heart. Nor is the equivocation confined to isolated sentences. The play on 'heart' and heart is structural: there is nothing wrong with Florence's 'heart' but her heart is missing, presumed dead; Edward's physical organ does not need spa treatment but his emotional one is susceptible to a damage that will eventually prove fatal. Meanwhile, the record of the crisis at M[arburg], when Florence lays her finger on Edward's wrist, also palter with us in a double sense. In the first place, it is and is not a climactic moment in the novel. The vocabulary insists that a cataclysmic event has occurred and yet the episode apparently ends in bathos:

I was aware of something treacherous, something frightful, something evil in the day. 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. In Ashburnham's face I know that there was absolute

panic. I was horribly frightened and then I discovered that the pain in my left wrist was caused by Leonora's clutching it. (*GS* 38)

'Tracherous', 'evil' are strong terms and the panic is not Dowell's alone. And yet all this psychic energy is apparently dissipated when Leonora attributes her loss of control to Florence's comments on Irish Catholics. The explanation, Dowell notes, 'gave me the greatest relief that I have ever had in my life' (39).

In this instance, religious allegiances both are and are not what's at stake. The Protest Florence has taken them there to see, signed by Luther and others, *was* an important moment in the emergence of the Protestant ethic, just as Florence says it was, though its exemplar in the novel is her own Philadelphia-Quaker husband, not Edward, as she claims; in England the Reformation *was* the time when divorce became an option, although not for Irish Catholics like Leonora, even if that was what she wanted;¹² religious loyalties *are* critical in the relationship between Leonora and Edward, not to mention Florence and the Misses Hurlbird. And yet the treachery that has been brought out into the open, despite the elaborate façade constructed to conceal it, is Florence's affair with Edward, and from this moment on we simultaneously know this and don't know it for sure. And we both know and don't know that Dowell and Leonora know it but can't yet trust each other to confirm the fact. So when Leonora offers an alternative account of her outburst, Dowell gratefully represses what he has perceived, replicating the all-too-human practice of concealing from consciousness what consciousness can't bear to acknowledge, equivocating *with himself*. The façade is restored and his 'ignorance' remains 'absolute', he claims, for another seven or eight years (*GS* 73), as it must for the sake of the story, while the reader remains in suspense about the precise implications of the event until the novel revisits the issues nearly a hundred pages later from Leonora's perspective (126-9) and then Nancy's (147) – and perhaps beyond that.

IV

I would suspect my psychoanalytic reading as anachronistic, inappropriately post-Freudian, were it not for Dowell's own comments in a quite different context on his unforeseen declaration, in the state of shock produced by Florence's death, that now he can marry 'the girl':

Now that is to me a very amazing thing – amazing for the light of possibilities that it casts into the human heart. For I had never had the slightest conscious idea of marrying the girl [‘conscious’ is Ford’s own revision in the manuscript]; I never had the slightest idea even of caring for her [. . .] It is as if one had a dual personality, the one I being entirely unconscious of the other. I had thought nothing; I had said such an extraordinary thing. (*GS* 75)

Unconscious wishes unexpectedly make themselves known to consciousness in speech.¹³ The founder of ‘the talking cure’ himself could not have put it better.¹⁴ And Dowell adds reflectively, ‘I don’t know that the analysis of my own psychology matters at all to this story’ (75), prompting the knowing reader to exclaim, if not in so many words, ‘yes, it matters; it explains your role throughout; the ego censors what it can’t afford to acknowledge. In rapid succession you felt nothing at all about being a deceived husband and you felt everything, especially hatred (54-5).¹⁵ There’s no contradiction between such contrary states, thanks to what you will go on to call “that mysterious and unconscious self that underlies most people” (76)’.

As if to confirm the possibility of a knowledge held on what Freud calls that other scene,¹⁶ Dowell explains in very similar terms his lack of surprise when Bagshawe reveals Florence’s relationship with Jimmy: ‘I suppose that my inner soul – my dual personality – had realized long before that Florence was a personality of paper’ (*GS* 86). If psychoanalysis undermines ‘the old stable ego of the character’,¹⁷ by adding a further self concealed from the ego itself, it also transforms the possibility of certainty into a new kind of doubt by destabilizing the meanings that make truth an option. When Dowell and Leonora agree to ‘accept the situation’ at M[arburg] (53), it is a different situation that each is formally accepting. From then on Leonora was to take it for granted – both rightly and wrongly – that Dowell ‘had permitted all that she had permitted’ (75). Language itself proves duplicitous – without the least intention to deceive – when involuntary equivocation dislodges the old stable referent of the sign as the guarantee of accurate communication. Words can’t be trusted – and not only because people tell lies but because they speak in the same words of what might or might not be different things. Meanings are held in a suspense that may never be resolved.

What holds for exchanges between the characters also obtains in the relationship between Dowell and his listener, or the text and its reader. Even when it seems at its most transparent, the narrative often

provokes a sense that there's more at stake than meets the eye. In the event, the confirmation that Edward and Florence have been lovers comes for the reader a few pages after the trip to M[arburg] and entirely without emphasis, as if in passing, no more than a subordinate clause in a plea for pity for 'that poor wretch' Edward. 'I have the right to say it, since for years he was my wife's lover . . .' (GS 41-2). On the one hand, the revelation flatters the reader, who has obliquely been led to expect it and is now encouraged to feel perceptive. Here *The Good Soldier* mimics the strategies of nineteenth-century classic realism, taking to a logical extreme the device of teasing the reader by alternately hinting and confirming. On the other hand, the conventional classic-realist novel is finally resolved by the delivery of knowledge (we learn who dunnit, who is wicked or trustworthy, who will marry the heroine) and this offers the reader the reassurance Lyotard names: there is, in spite of everything, justice, moral worth, true love – or perhaps despair; at least there is a truth of the story, even if sometimes that truth is nihilistic. *The Good Soldier*, however, distances itself from such resolution with characteristic irony:

Well, that is the end of the story. And, when I come to look at it I see that it is a happy ending with wedding bells and all. The villains – for obviously Edward and the girl were villains – have been punished by suicide and madness. The heroine – the perfectly normal, virtuous and slightly deceitful heroine – has become the happy wife of a perfectly normal, virtuous and slightly-deceitful husband. She will shortly become the mother of a perfectly normal, virtuous, slightly-deceitful son or daughter. A happy ending, that is what it works out at. (GS 166-7)

But if we are not to believe this – and we're self-evidently not – the problem remains that we cannot count on getting at the truth of the story simply by reversing these propositions.

The inconsequential confirmation that Edward was Florence's lover, to return to that for the moment, marks the fact as oddly incidental, as if this is not the real issue. Again and again, the revelations in *The Good Soldier* are – or can be seen as – beside the point: *that*, we are entitled to feel, is not, after all, what we wanted to know. And indeed, Florence's infidelity as such is not what Dowell cannot face. After a year or two of marriage, long before the trip to M[arburg], there was, he later tells us, no longer any question for him of loving her; Florence had become a burden, an obligation (GS 68). And Dowell is exhausted – by, he still later confides, 'twelve years of

the repression of my instincts [. . .] twelve years of playing the trained poodle' (86). Instead, the threat at M[arburg] is to the quartet, to the minuet they tread jointly; the fear Dowell names is that 'we were going to run and cry out; all four of us in separate directions, averting our heads'. In some unspecified way, he needs the Ashburnhams: 'I do not believe that I could have gone on any more without them. I was getting too tired' (53).

But what exactly does that imply about their role in Dowell's psychic economy? Does their civilized, easy façade simply offer him relief by providing new addressees for Florence's unremitting chatter, or does he have a more personal investment in either or both of the Ashburnhams? What exactly is his relationship with the beautiful Leonora, whom he says he loves but not sexually, while resenting her marriage to Rodney Bayham (*GS* 157, 167)? And how are we to understand the place of Edward – his rival, or role model (as he says, 157, 168), or even unconscious object of desire (as he doesn't exactly say)? Explanations are postponed, deferred to a future place in the narrative, or withheld altogether. There is no sense of a final reckoning, a moment when the reader is invited to look back through the story and make sense of all that was mysterious at the time.

And the desire of the reader is maintained in the process, because what we are incited to want is resolution of the enigmas the novel builds. We are to be held by the desire for presence, for these people and their emotions made present and transparent to our understanding. But that is the one thing the duplicitous, equivocating signifier cannot be counted on to deliver, so that *The Good Soldier* has the power to sustain desire beyond its last page, even when all the 'facts' have apparently been laid bare. Facts themselves don't satisfy: as Conrad's Marlow points out in a different context, they 'are so often more enigmatic than the craftiest arrangement of words'.¹⁸

This observation itself equivocates, of course: in a novel there are no facts as such, but only ever an arrangement of words. It's surely safe to say that their arrangement in *The Good Soldier* is among the craftiest. Bleak in its account of human relations but jubilant in its power to exploit the possibilities of the signifier, the novel dramatizes what Lyotard would call the postmodern condition, in the grip of unconscious imperatives we cannot be sure we are aware of and held by an equivocating signifying system we cannot rely on as a ground of certainty.

V

But what about chronology? Surely a novel begun in 1913 cannot by definition be postmodern; it has to be modernist. This is where Lyotard's distinctions may be seen as most suggestive. In his account, dates are not the issue. Instead, what distinguishes the postmodern is the attitude it displays to the withdrawal of the real. On the one hand, there is nostalgia for lost presence, as we find in Proust and, arguably, Lawrence; on the other, we see a celebration of the possibilities released by the fact that presence is no longer an option, as, for instance, in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. The first suspects the pleasure of the text as a snare and a delusion; the second divorces pleasure from therapy, locating it in a challenge to orthodoxy. Duchamp and Joyce are in this sense postmodern, and Lyotard adds, 'The nuance which distinguishes these two modes may be infinitesimal; they often coexist in the same piece ... and yet they testify to a differend . . . between regret and assay'.¹⁹

The Good Soldier is not *Ulysses* but it does refuse the solace of conventional form. While it depicts a culture on the verge of collapse, it does not retreat into nostalgia for a past wholeness; nor does it campaign for an alternative future. If it implies that civilization has invented ideals for us to live by that are incompatible with the things we are, it does not make any demands for the emancipation of the desire it defines so closely. Instead, the novel poses questions. At the beginning these take the form of fairly crude oppositions: 'Am I no better than a eunuch or is the proper man [. . .] a raging stallion forever neighing after his neighbour's womenkind?' (GS 15). Critics who answer yes to either of these options are, to my mind, closing off the issues prematurely. Later, the text moves on to more open-ended questions: 'what should these people have done?' (155). Is there some sort of earthly paradise where people get what they want, or are all lives 'broken, tumultuous, agonised' (158)? This is where literary impressionism comes into its own: Dowell does not have to know the answers. Instead, he passes the responsibility on to the reader (his imagined listener): 'Perhaps you can make head or tail of it; it is beyond me' (158); 'I can't make out which of them was right. *I leave it to you*' (my emphasis, 163).

Given that 'there is nothing to guide us' (GS 15), we are put on the spot. Moralists and sex therapists may be eager to supply the missing contents: our job, in my view, as critics, is to note what is not there. And if there is no rule of conduct by which the characters are

found wanting, no big idea that might put things right, there are no pre-established rules that ought to govern storytelling, except that the author ‘must learn to suppress himself’.²⁰ Giving absolute priority to the story itself, *The Good Soldier* discovers its own rules as it goes along, evading the prescriptions of genre, while playing fast and loose with the classic-realist promise that, although red herrings are fine, the narrator will not misinform the reader. Ford tells a tale that is sad, absurd, comic, and inconsequential by turns. Refusing to answer its own questions, the novel destabilizes objects and values, withholding the therapy that protects consciousnesses from doubt. And yet it gives pleasure, not least by exploiting the potential duplicity of the signifier. Far from reiterating the familiar lament that language falls short of the whole truth, *The Good Soldier* demonstrates that the signifier can be full of meaning and at one and the same time quite withhold intelligibility. This might be easy to say: it is less easy to sustain across the course of a narrative without antagonizing readers. Desolate though its outcomes are, the clever, witty, disconcerting text of *The Good Soldier* gives the firm impression of enjoying itself. ‘Just look’, it seems to say, ‘at what fiction can do!’

NOTES

- 1 I modified my views in the course of discussions at *The Good Soldier* Centenary Conference, Swansea University, 2013. I am grateful to all the participants and, in particular, Harry Ricketts, Sara Haslam, Paul Skinner, Renée Dickinson and Elizabeth Brunton.
- 2 Eugene Goodheart, ‘What Dowell Knew’ (1986). Reprinted in Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier*, ed. Martin Stannard, New York: W. W. Norton, 2012, 382-91, (p. 382). All references to *The Good Soldier* (henceforth *GS*) are to this edition and page numbers are cited in the text. Other materials from this edition are cited as ‘Stannard’.
- 3 Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?’, trans. Régis Durand, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, 71-82. ‘Réponse à la question: qu’est-ce que le postmoderne?’, *Critique* 419 (April, 1982), 357-67, (p. 357).
- 4 ‘It was one of those evenings ...’; ‘She was the kind of woman who ...’ The code of reference appeals to a collective and anonymous wisdom. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, London: Jonathan Cape, 1975, pp. 18, 24, 25 and *passim*.
- 5 Lyotard, ‘What is Postmodernism?’, p. 74.

- 6 Lyotard, 'What is Postmodernism?', p. 79.
- 7 Lyotard, 'What is Postmodernism?', p. 81.
- 8 See Vincent J. Cheng, 'A Chronology of *The Good Soldier*' (1986), reprinted in Stannard, 391-5.
- 9 The question of culpability is raised but not resolved on pp. 113-14.
- 10 Ford, '[Developing the Theory of Impressionism with Conrad]', Stannard, 288-99, (p. 296).
- 11 Carol Jacobs, '[The Passion for Talk]' (1992), reprinted in Stannard, 354-61, (p. 356).
- 12 Later, when she persuades Leonora to explain Mrs Brand's divorce case, Nancy will remember 'Henry VIII and the basis upon which Protestantism rests' (*GS* 147).
- 13 Cf. Edward: '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' (*GS* 83).
- 14 It was Anna O. who called her treatment a 'talking cure'. See Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, ed. Angela Richards, London: Penguin, 1974, p. 83.
- 15 See also *Some Do Not . . .*, where 'A tramp who had had his leg cut off by a train had told him that he had tried to get up, feeling nothing at all The pain comes back though . . .': Ford Madox Ford, *Parade's End*, London: Penguin, 2012, p. 122.
- 16 *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 5, (1900-1901): *The Interpretation of Dreams (Second Part) and On Dreams*, i-iv, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1953, pp. 535-6.
- 17 James T. Boulton ed., *The Selected Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 78.
- 18 Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim: A Tale*, ed. J. H. Stape and Ernest W. Sullivan II, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 256
- 19 Lyotard, 'What is Postmodernism?', p. 80. 'Differend' is my translation. It denominates a difference that cannot be debated or legislated away and where 'One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy' (Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988, p. xi).
- 20 Ford, '[Developing the Theory]', p. 296.