

2011

## Poor Old Horse: Tragicomedy and The Good Soldier

Matthew Christian

*Bard College*

---

### Recommended Citation

Christian, Matthew, "Poor Old Horse: Tragicomedy and The Good Soldier" (2011). *Senior Projects Spring 2011*. Paper 18.  
[http://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2011/18](http://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2011/18)

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2011 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@bard.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@bard.edu).

Poor Old Horse: Tragicomedy and *The Good Soldier*

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of Literature

Of Bard College

by

Matthew Christian

Annandale-On-Hudson, New York

May 2011

You say you are a better soldier:  
Let it appear so; make your vaunting true,  
And it shall please me well: for mine own part,  
I shall be glad to learn of abler men.  
Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

## Table of Contents

1	Introduction
12	Chapter I: 'Small wonder that one should be tired out': Literary Impressionism and <i>The Good Soldier</i>
33	Chapter II: 'Les faiz, gestes, triumphes et prouesses du Bon Chevalier': Ashburnham, Dowell, and the Feudal
55	Chapter III: 'Orgueil et aberration': Retaking <i>The Good Soldier</i> as Comedy
78	Conclusion



## Introduction

He had been cheerful at tea, but in Squerries Park a mood of melancholy stole over him, and he sang me one melancholy song after another, some French, some German, ending with the Westmorland folksong *Poor Old Horse*. Ford's voice was not bad, his ear was good, and the expression he put into the words of the horse's cruel master was pathetic in the extreme. ... [Then] in the most unhappy voice Ford broke in to say something like this: "I am that poor old horse, David. ... Once I was a brilliant young poet, a famous writer ... now I am no more use to anyone and they kick me, now they have got me down. ... Poor old horse ..." I was in tears and, seeing this, Ford wept also; then brushed his tears aside for a moment to look at his watch and make sure that he was not late for his train.

(David Garnett, quoted in Arthur Mizener's  
biography *The Saddest Story*)

Ford Madox Ford was a writer gifted, by all accounts, with a preternatural sensibility for sadness. Indeed, if this sense of melancholy were evenly matched by any other quality, it could only have been his urge to share it; and Garnett's recollection shows this in all its force. Here, we see Ford pulling out all the stops in expressing his sadness—and we can easily believe that, hearing his gradual descent into musical pathos and his tearful identification with the poor, abused animal, his listener must have broken into tears along with him.

And yet that moment Garnett, at least, is immediately jerked back out of this emotional resonance. The smallest of actions intervenes: Ford pauses briefly, perhaps even unconsciously, to check the time; and if we take the suggestion implicit in Garnett's qualifier "for a moment," he turns back immediately to weeping. We have no record of Ford's experience of the event, but Garnett, it seems, was taken aback: it is clear that for him and for Mizener, it revealed—subtly,

and perhaps not even consciously—some curiously important attribute of Ford's. What is clear is that Garnett was surprised that Ford, in the midst of his tears, would think to check the time: it was, given Ford's emotional fervor, incongruous; and it seems that Garnett, taken aback, was suddenly made conscious of his own emotional state. He was in tears along with Ford; and yet when he sees Ford pause to check his watch, he finds himself suddenly distanced from the sorrow that he had just been experiencing, and reticent or unable authentically to return to it.

In any case, it does not appear from Garnett's telling that Ford experienced the same emotional detachment. On the contrary, might it be that the micro-comedy of his dependence on the train schedule in the midst of his despair even *contributed* to Ford's melancholy? Is there not a sense, in the Fordian worldview, in which he was fate's victim in being reduced to such baseness—in which he could not even experience the full sadness of his own tragic condition without being interrupted by the vulgar, humiliating necessity of observing railroad time?

If this reading rightly understands the sequences of events at Squerries Park, then, it would suggest that Ford's sensitivity to the tragic retained a surprising ability to coexist, not only with practical concerns, but with even with a consciousness of the element of comedy in his own melancholy. Indeed, it seems the one almost leads into the other: overcome by sadness over his writing career, Ford, suddenly reminded that he was still subject to the laws of train departures, could not have helped but notice the disjunction between his grand misery and continued daily necessity; and this inability fully to submerge himself into that tragedy—always pulled back by self-awareness—must only have contributed to his sense of misery.

*The Good Soldier* has, it seems, more than a little in common with Ford's afternoon in

Squerries Park. Certainly, it possesses a more-than-sufficient dose of tragic elements: adultery and betrayal among its major characters; multiple suicides, heart failure, and insanity; and a series of tepid, maudlin affairs. Yet it is also marked by the same ever-present awareness of comic potential seen in Garnett's remembrance: at each seemingly tragic moment, the novel stops for a moment, wiping away its tears as though to check the time. This self-awareness prevents the text—perhaps ultimately—from occasioning real sadness: it seems that comedy subtly and effectively undermines tragic representation and fundamentally impedes the on-looker—Garnett, in one case; and the reader in the other—from being moved in sympathy with Ford's emotional claims.

What is the relation between laughter and sadness in *The Good Soldier*, then? Is the comic an impediment to the tragic—or better put, does comic treatment subtly anesthetize tragedy, preventing any sadness from being felt in a text that, by its own estimation, should be “the Saddest Story?” Or does Ford still reserve—at the very close of this tragicomedy, or perhaps even beyond its boundary—the possibility of an authentic sadness?

*The Good Soldier* is the story of two well-to-do couples and the events that occur among them over the course of a decade. Edward Ashburnham—the title character—is a British officer, retired due to heart trouble, and the owner of an English manor. He is generous, honest, masculine, and apparently universally attractive to those around him; he is also slightly slow-witted, a reader of sentimental novels, and is perpetually engaged in a long series of affairs. His wife, Leonora, is the daughter of an economically struggling Irish Catholic family; she attempts



to keep the Ashburnhams financially sound against the costs of Edward's affairs, and has all but given up on regaining his fidelity. Their marriage is a sustained struggle between two ideologies, Ashburnham's 'knightly' generosity and disposition to romance, and Leonora's commitment to economy, stability, and respectability.

The Ashburnhams are paired up in a lengthy social bond with John Dowell and his wife Florence. Florence, a Vassar graduate, is Ford's portrait of the 'bright young American,' perennially giving little historical lessons to the Ashburnhams during their travels through the Continent. Sea travel and the consummation of her marriage are both forbidden to her by an (invented) heart condition—which she uses as cover for her long-standing affair with Edward, the novel's other 'heart-sick' protagonist. There is also a persistent gap, in each character, between outward self-representation and (often significantly more base) interior motivation. Thus Florence's love of education and care for those around her conceals her two affairs; Leonora's dedication to her husband rests upon a more fundamental obsession with keeping their household economically solvent; and Edward's self-image as a dashing hero and incorrigible romantic belies the fantastic, almost school-boyish shallowness of his conception of love—a conception he transfers readily, even ready-made, to each interchangeable lover.

Importantly, much of this information is not initially known to Dowell, the text's narrator. While Leonora is aware of Edward and Florence's affair throughout its duration, for instance, Dowell discovers it only later. The plot arc is therefore partly epistemological: the novel progresses simultaneously through its primary plot action and through Dowell's retrospective realizations of the story.

Within the fiction framework, then, *The Good Soldier* is Dowell's written summary of the

two couples' relationship: in effect, Dowell is the text's narrator. He is, further, an extremely visible narrator: he pieces together the plot events as the text advances, gradually recognizing the various deceptions and false appearances by which he had been taken in. In addition, he is not reticent to make emotional demands upon the reader: Dowell opens with the famous claim that “This is the saddest story I have ever heard;” and far from dry summary, his narrative consistently insists upon the sadness, tragedy, tearfulness of the events that it relates.

The core of the novel's action is constituted by the characters already mentioned. The passing characters are tied to the narrative largely as romantic objects or in brief segues into back-history by Dowell—Edward, for instance, has had affairs or attachments with a number of women, including a servant-girl in England, a Spanish dancer at a casino, and the wife of a major in the British army. Florence, meanwhile, has had her own previous affair with a talentless, unappealing American painter named Jimmy. The one remaining major character bears mention: the Ashburnham's young ward Nancy, who eventually becomes another object of Edward's romantic desire during the novel's lengthy denouement.

Were a narrative arc to be traced for the novel, it would be essentially binary. On one side, there would be the plot action of the novel, of which the core is the struggle between Edward and Leonora, the relationship between Edward and Florence, the inadvertent discovery of that relationship by Dowell, Florence's suicide, Edward's confession of romantic desire to Nancy—as overheard by Leonora—and Edward's final suicide after Nancy is sent back to her father in India in the throes of a mental breakdown. On the other, there is Dowell's epistemological progression through the novel, the concomitant changes and reversals in his estimations of the other characters, and the gradual evolution of his perspectives on society and

love.

It is, in short, a novel full to bursting with characters and plot events, all in a relatively short narrative space. One imagines, on the basis of this summary, a novel that draws the reader into its plot—and into identification, hatred, or attachment with regard to its characters. In brief, one imagines that *The Good Soldier* will perform what Walter Benjamin has written of the novel: that

the novel is significant ... not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about ("The Storyteller," 101).

The events of *The Good Soldier*, as they lead the characters inexorably toward the ends of their lives, must inscribe the action of those lives in a sort of meaningful framework: it is the effect of narrative itself to give direction, causality, and 'sense' to a jumbled web of action. Or to put Benjamin's claim—perhaps ever so slightly unjustly—in Fordian terms: to narrate a story means to invest into it an fundamental, inseparable emotional valuation. Events become a story at the moment they gain the ability, retold in their logical ensemble, to bring tears to the eyes of the reader.

And yet here *The Good Soldier* is precisely opposed to Benjamin's conception: it is a novel that refuses to give (narrative, moral, prescriptive) sense to its contents. The narrative structure—Dowell's often wandering retrospective account of the story—breaks up the plot arc; and it is difficult to identify any outstanding moments of tension, action, or resolution. Above all, there is not, at the novel's close, the sense of narrative conclusion or calm one expects from a *story*. It is precisely as Dowell writes:

I call this the Saddest Story, rather than “The Ashburnham Tragedy”, just because it is so sad, just because there was no current to draw things along to a swift and inevitable end. There is about it none of the elevation that accompanies tragedy; there is about it no nemesis, no destiny. Here were two noble people—for I am convinced that both Edward and Leonora had noble natures—here then, were two noble natures, drifting down life, like fire-ships afloat on a lagoon and causing miseries, heart-aches, agony of the mind and death. And they themselves steadily deteriorated? And why? For what purpose? To point what lesson? It is all a darkness (109).

Thus 'fate,' the essential function of the Benjamin novel—and the function which would constitute a normative interpretive strategy—is rejected absolutely in *The Good Soldier*:

Dowell's 'lack of current' is the precise opposite term to Benjamin's 'fate.' The novel does not bring the peacefulness immanent in a narrative conclusion; it refuses to give any final sense, beyond a sort of regretful horror, to the lives of its characters. Ultimately, the image provided by *The Good Soldier* is not the stylization of a meaningful life, but an insistence on meaningless life, life that is specifically unworthy of artistic representation, for its rereading offers nothing.

If it is not a stream but, in Dowell's term, a lagoon, *The Good Soldier* is thus directly opposed to Benjamin's conception of the novel: it fiercely resists investing any meaning into its plot action. One could say even that it attempts, through its complex, fragmented narrative structure and its constant reversals of character descriptions, to render the plot as a mere jumble of events rather than a fluent, causal narrative—thus resisting the Benjamian transformation into 'story.' Or, put, in Fordian terms, that it refuses to inject emotion into the progression of events: Ford's intention is that the reader come away from Dowell's narration *unmoved*. This lack of emotion is the sign of a meaningless narrative: if the reader is not drawn into sharing the value ascribed to each character, object, and event by the narrator, he will be unable, at the close, to feel its corresponding loss. And is not the moment of laughter—the moment in which Garnett, seeing Ford pause in the midst of absolute woe to check his watch, suddenly feels played for a

fool for having cried along with him—the moment where the emotion that narrative injects into events is most threatened?

If it insists on calling this emotion into question through laughter, then, *The Good Soldier* gravely risks wiping out the 'meaning' of its plot—that is, it risks absolutely alienating the reader from his investment into the story. The only conclusion, then, is that *The Good Soldier* is not available to Benjaminian criticism. Considering plot action in search of some sense or illumination there cannot assist this reading, because it was precisely Ford's point that nothing was there to be found.

Rather, what is vital is this absence itself. If Dowell's narration could not, in the end, loan any sense to these sense-impooverished lives, what does that mean for modernist narrative itself? Did the life-stories of Ford's world—the life-stories of retired Edwardian officers and their wives—offer material that could be, in Benjamin's image, consumed in the novel's flame and give warmth to its reader?

What *The Good Soldier* really treats, then, is not plot but the narrative process itself. It is one step separated from a narration of the events of human lives: instead its primary focus is a *treatment of the effort to give that narration*. *The Good Soldier* is a novel of narrative: what it really 'does' as a fictional text is not to tell human stories, but to consider in detail the teller of one such story, and to judge the success or failure of his telling.

In the following chapter, in preparation for a reading of *The Good Soldier*, I describe the relationship between the novel and Ford's major contemporary critical text, “On Impressionism.” It is my thesis there that beneath its vocabulary of “technique” and “craftsmanship” for the

purpose of entertainment, “On Impressionism” gives important clues to Ford's artistic endeavor in *The Good Soldier*. Particularly, it will suggest Ford's crucial awareness of the risks and instabilities of the Impressionist approach that, I will argue, defines Dowell's writing method. In “On Impressionism,” Ford is particularly attuned to the comic implications of his method: in reading the text carefully, it will seem that Ford even suggests that the most literal Impressionism can *only* result in humor when narrating an otherwise tragic story, and that the comedy that stems from this failed attempt at tragedy represents the most threatening implications of laughter for literary narrative. This fundamental ligature—or even inseparability—between Impressionist narratives of tragedy and the sudden comic element that appears in them, I will argue, defines Ford's case-study of Impressionist narrative in *The Good Soldier*.

In the second chapter, I will consider Ford's relationship to feudal ideology, focusing on the implications of that relationship for the title and 'key' of the text, “The Good Soldier.” Through a discussion of the connotations and conventions of the feudal, I will consider to what degree Edward embodies the construct of 'The Good Soldier' and to what degree he falls short of it. Though it is axiomatic here that Edward does not succeed in representing 'The Good Soldier,' a reading of that failure is still vitally necessary. For instance: to what degree does Edward's character remain appealing—that is, to what degree does Ford remain invested in his nobility or value? And, how is Edward's failure to represent 'The Good Soldier' related to the comic potential of the novel? Is the failure to adequately embody the expectations of Ford's 'feudal background' a central source of this comedy?

This question, though focusing most particularly on a reading of Edward and of the significance of the title itself, touches on many of the novel's major themes—for instance

nobility, soldiery, romance, charity, sacrifice, suicide—terms that seem often to be connoted by or associated with the feudal. Where possible I will identify the traditions and conventions implicated in the novel, and show Ford's construction of his narrative's systematic failure to satisfy conventional expectations. This failure will be considered particularly in light of its comic value: the fundamental question will be to what degree the 'tragic' themes of *The Good Soldier* become ironic through their juxtaposition with conventional expectations. It is my wager here that Ford's careful construction of these failures or 'fallings-short' constitutes the organizational principle of the novel, an organizational principle that is essentially comic.

The third chapter will further develop a theoretical account of the effects of comedy in Ford's novel. Through a reading of Aristotle and Baudelaire, I hope to resituate Ford's sense of the comic not as a instrument meant to entertain, but as a more fundamental 'trembling' of the tragic, the serious, and the ethical. Applying Baudelaire's conception of laughter to *The Good Soldier*, I will argue that it is Dowell's own 'valuation' of his peers that is progressively lost in the text's comedy, ultimately denying Dowell—and the reader—an experience of loss at the close of the text.

This theoretical argumentation will be used to consider several comic passages in *The Good Soldier*, showing that moments that appear to be mere comic 'entertainment' point upon closer consideration directly toward the comic inadequacies or 'shortfalls' identified in the second chapter, arguing that Dowell's comic treatment of those characters to whom he is least attached spreads pervasively into the subjects most important to him—virtue, soldiery, and Ashburnham himself. For this reason, comedy ultimately arrives at a complete undermining of Dowell's claim that the novel is “the Saddest Story:” indeed at the close of his narrative, I will argue, there is

literally no sadness at all, an absence that defines *The Good Soldier's* perspective on modern tragedy and tragic representation.

In a brief conclusion, I will offer a final discussion of the effects of this 'absence of sadness' from a text that insists so heavily upon its tragic qualities. Does comedy itself ultimately produce a 'tragedy of detachment' at the close of the novel? Even in spite of—or because of—the novel's comic treatment of tragic events, there is at its close an enormous sadness in Dowell's inability to portray himself as having suffered real loss. This suffering *because of the failure of tragedy* may itself, as Ford had found in the opening passage here, be a cause of sadness. I will thus argue that this final, sudden turn towards the 'tragedy of the comedy' may be what Baudelaire describes as the “*élément insaisissable du beau*” present in comedy: even as *The Good Soldier* succeeds in eliminating the experience of the tragic from its narrative, it discovers another, perhaps more profound sorrow in that absence itself.



## Chapter I

'Small wonder that one should be tired out': Literary Impressionism and *The Good Soldier*

*L'on en parle jusqu'à la nausée.*<sup>1</sup>

Jean Paulhan, *Les fleurs de Tarbes*.

A common point of departure for readers of *The Good Soldier* is the gap between Ford's position as author and Dowell's as narrator. Dowell is, to a large extent, faulty: his narration is wandering, emotionally affected, and often self-contradictory. Further, he insists on the tragic power of his text—thus opening a discontinuity with the reader's experience. At the moments where Dowell most insists upon the overwhelming sadness of the events, the reader feels very little; and it is this experience of alienation from the story itself that is the fundamental experience of reading *The Good Soldier*.

It would seem, then, that Ford's position relative to Dowell would be one of distance and unrestrained critique. And indeed, it is Ford's careful use of comedy to undermine Dowell's emotional claims that detaches the reader from Dowell's narration. If, as I have claimed, *The Good Soldier* is fundamentally a novel about the failure of narrative to produce an experience of tragedy in the reader, it stands to reason that Ford—as author of this text—should firmly dissociate himself from the fictional narrator that it is his project to critique.

Despite this, I will argue that Ford crucially—albeit provisionally—associates himself with Dowell. Dowell, in Ford's construction, is the model of the 'Impressionist writer,' a type

---

<sup>1</sup> 'We speak of it to the point of nausea.'

proposed by Ford in the critical manifesto, “On Impressionism,” which he published shortly prior to *The Good Soldier*.<sup>2</sup> There, Ford identified himself as an Impressionist; yet a year later in *The Good Soldier*, it seems to be Dowell who writes impressionistically and Ford who critiques him. Thus in creating the separation between himself and his fictional narrator—a separation that he uses explicitly to critique Dowell's narrative strategy and results—it seems that Ford turns against his own vision of Impressionism.

This chapter will thus examine the relationship between Ford's theorization of Impressionist writing and his treatment of Dowell's narration, in order to illuminate how *The Good Soldier* operates as a complex and philosophically-fraught critique of Impressionist strategy and the general possibility of modern narration. In this understanding, of course, *The Good Soldier*' critique of Impressionism is the essential point of departure. It will thus be necessary first to turn to a close consideration of “On Impressionism,” in order to examine what elements of Impressionist narrative were of such (contradictory) importance to Ford as to occasion his violent critique of Dowell so briefly after he had espoused the values of Impressionist technique.

In this reading, I will argue that although Ford's stated aim in “On Impressionism” is a simple discussion of writing technique, his understanding of Impressionism is in fact deeply laden with anxiety over the position and possibility of modernist prose narrative. Ford argues that Impressionist writing, through its attention to detail, is able to convey intense emotion—particularly tragic emotion—to the reader. Yet this method is deeply problematic: in the examples Ford actually gives in the text, Impressionist description seems to get out of control,

---

<sup>2</sup> According to Martin Stannard's Norton edition of *The Good Soldier*, “On Impressionism” appeared across two issues of *Poetry and Drama* from June to December 1914 (note to 257). *The Good Soldier* was first printed under its current title in 1915, but its first half had appeared in *BLAST* in June 1914, titled as *The Saddest Story*.

swelling to such proportions that it threatens to overwhelm the intended emotional effect in a surplus of literary detail. Ford is particularly attuned to the comic implications of this supersufficient detail: at the heart of “On Impressionism,” he seems threatened by the risk of an ‘Impressionist excess’ that would strike its reader—against its wishes—not with tragedy but with comedy.

I will then argue that Ford explicitly identifies Dowell as an Impressionist writer—suggesting that Dowell’s writing will also suffer from the problems that Ford has identified with Impressionist strategy. Ford thus links Dowell to the profoundly problematic relationship to writing—overproduction of tragic detail that results in inadvertent comedy—that he has identified in “On Impressionism” And this problematic, I will ultimately argued, is the key to understanding the real effect of *The Good Soldier*

### I. Counter-reading “On Impressionism”: Rabbit-Pie and the Risk of Laughter

The summer that the first excerpts from *The Good Soldier* appeared in *BLAST*, Madox Ford published an important theoretical text in the journal *Poetry and Drama*. Titled “On Impressionism,” the piece gives a glimpse of the state of Ford’s *ars poetica* in the summer of 1914. Ford’s focus, the term ‘Literary Impressionism,’ had been little-used in literary contexts despite its importance in visual art. Ford himself notes in the text that “A few years ago, if anybody had called me an Impressionist I should languidly have denied that I was anything of the sort or that I knew anything about the school, if there could be said to be any school” (34).

Indeed, though the word had been occasionally been applied in lower-case<sup>3</sup>, nothing had

<sup>3</sup> Giving a brief history of the term, Ian Watt writes that when taken cross-Channel “with the foundation of the New English Art Club in 1886 ... the term was very quickly extended to ways of writing ... thought to possess the qualities popularly attributed to the painters.” But “literary use of the term remained even more casual and descriptive; although Stephen Crane was widely categorised as an ‘impressionist,’ and in 1898 a reviewer of

appeared in contemporary writing to claim the capitalized term as a fixed school or technique.

Though the text's title would seem to propose precisely such a claim, Ford is strikingly evasive about giving a clear definition of Impressionism. Indeed, his first sentence explicitly suggests that he will avoid any such definition or general treatment. "These are merely some notes towards a working guide to Impressionism as a literary method" (33), he writes; and in this "merely" he proposes to forgo a strict definition of "Impressionism" *entirely*, instead discussing it from the standpoint of practice or technique. His text will thus move "toward" impressionism as a "working guide," rather than beginning *from* literary impressionism with a philosophical argument or artist's manifesto.

It is thus not so much that Ford's text has difficulty identifying the essence of impressionist practice, but that it refuses to do so. Rather, Ford prefers to treat impressionism with an ambiguity—and contradiction—appropriate to a technique focused on variability, subjectivity, and the individuality proper to every description and every experience.

To potential Impressionist writers, for instance, Ford suggests that "You must state your argument; you must illustrate it, and then you must stick in something that appears to have nothing whatever to do with either subject or illustration, so that the reader will exclaim: 'What the devil is the fellow driving at?'" (48). It seems that Ford intended to put this advice into practice in "On Impressionism," using the text's own digressions and contradictions, not to digress, but precisely to advance its central (if hidden) contentions. Ford's manifesto of Impressionism is thus an exemplar of the style it proposes: Ford succeeds in making his reader ask precisely "what the devil *is* the fellow driving at?"

---

Conrad's first collection of short stories .... described him as an 'impressionistic realist,' there was little talk of impressionism as a literary movement until considerably later" ("Impressionism and Symbolism in *Heart of Darkness*, 314-15).

Ford's own claim about Impressionist style—that it is necessarily evasive, contradictory, that it runs often at cross-purposes to its real intent—thus subtly and fundamentally destabilizes the terrain from which he can establish, for instance, the philosophical non-importance of Impressionism. If an Impressionist text that aims to convey the essence of “a long speech about the fish” consists necessarily of observations, for instance, about “the man at the same table with you ... talking about morals” and “a meeting with some lady,” what can assure the careful reader of *this* Impressionist text that Ford's hemming and hawing on the mere role of Impressionism as “style” and “technique” is not the cover for a different, perhaps more far-reaching understanding of Impressionism that is advanced *à l'oblique* beneath the 'proper' argumentation of the text?

Thus when Ford writes:

I am not claiming any great importance for my work; I daresay it is all right. At any rate, I am a perfectly self-conscious writer; I know exactly how I get my effects, as far as those effects go. Then, if I am in truth an Impressionist, it must follow that a conscientious and exact account of how I myself work will be an account, from the inside, of how Impressionism is reached, produced, or gets its effects. I can do no more (34),

the solidity of such an assertion has already been destabilized. Ford insists here that literary impressionism is merely a writer's tool with no more philosophical implications; but the attentive Fordian reader must suspect that something else is in play beneath the surface. In referring to Impressionism as a “literary method,” Ford suggests that it is merely a tool to convey impressions to the reader, and that it thus holds no more than an instrumental relationship to those impressions and to the function of the text. Yet if we take Ford at his word—if we accept that this 'conveyance of impressions' succeeds in producing emotion in the reader—does it not seem that the whole project of emotive writing hinges on the success or failure of the Impressionist method?

Let us begin, then, by considering the ways in which “On Impressionism” is not entirely unitary—cracks which will help to open up the complex and ambiguous relationship that the text bears to narrative practice. The most important contradiction, the one that runs through the very center of “On Impressionism” and which carries enormous implications for *The Good Soldier*, is centered on this question of detail. What Ford identifies as the essence of Impressionism is, on the one hand, a precise and exact sparingness in description. This representational reserve was evident, for instance, in his discussion of Hogarth's drawing in four lines; and it is the same reserve that Ford signals as essential when he discusses Maupassant's representation of Henry VIII. “All that de Maupassant finds it necessary to say is: 'C'était un monsieur à favoris rouges qui entraît toujours le premier.' And that is all that I *know* about Henry VIII.--that he was a gentleman with red whiskers who always went first through a door” (38). In this version of Impressionism, then, it is the element of concision that is necessary above all else: representation should be precise, and it should encapsulate as much of the signified as possible in a single term.

Yet, within a few pages, it seems that a good Impressionist must necessarily be verbose—that “in order to produce an illusion you must justify; in order to justify you must introduce a certain amount of matter,” matter that “may not appear germane to your story or to your poem” (44). It is a necessity that the Impressionist writer write too much, that he contradict himself, that he digress, and that above all else “the Impressionist must always exaggerate” (36). Thus stated differently: the essential contradiction in “On Impressionism” is between the ideal of absolute brevity and the necessity—in the practice of Impressionist writing—to furnish an immense quantity of detail.

What Ford discusses in “On Impressionism,” then, is not only the superliminal question

of the text—how to produce pleasant or appropriate style—but also, far more subtly and fundamentally, the danger of active prose style to its own effect. It is as though style depended for its function upon an absolute brevity and transparency, yet in seeking to provide detail in ever greater quantities in order to produce an emotional effect on the reader, suddenly got in its own way or became tangled in its own methodology. The very core of Impressionism—the furnishing of minute detail—contradicts with the necessity that Impressionism be brief and transparent; and the result is that, precisely *for having tried to produce an emotional effect*, it trips up, is discovered as style, and produces no resonance with the reader.

Thus at one moment Ford cites “Hogarth's drawing of the watchman with the pike over his shoulder and dog at his heels going in at a door, the whole being executed in four lines” as “the high-watermark of Impressionism” (36-37), arguing that it is the brevity of the depiction that constitutes its representational force; yet a few pages later, he writes that

If to-day, at lunch at your club, you heard an irascible member making a long speech about the fish, what you remember ... is that he said that the sole was not a sole, but a blank, blank, blank plaice; that the cook ought to be shot, by God he ought to be shot. The plaice had been out of the water two years, and it had been caught in a drain: all that there was of Dieppe about this Sole Dieppoise was something that you cannot remember. You will remember this gentleman's starting eyes, his grunts between words, that he was fond of saying 'damnable, damnable, damnable.' You will also remember that the man at the same table with you was talking about morals, and that your boots were too tight, whilst you were trying, in your under mind, to arrange a meeting with some lady. . . .” (41-42, ellipsis original).

In this second articulation, directly counter-posed to the case of Hogarth, it seems that quite a bit of detail—even an overwhelming quantity, so much that the writer can only trail off with an ellipsis—is necessary to convey the exact experience—the Impression—of hearing this club member's speech. It is necessary, then, to delve into all the surrounding experiences—even if only tenuously or contextually related—in order to convey the full, exact sense of the primary

impression to the reader.

The example of the Sole Dieppoise that Ford has given us here, further, is only a miniature study of the necessity of detail to Impressionist writing. Compared to the subject of a novel, the impression that it intends to convey is very brief—a several minute speech, next to some months or years in the lives of a whole group of characters. How much more context would be necessary to convey the impression of five years of life among a group of friends? How many innumerable, minute feelings—“the man at the same table with you was talking about morals, and ... your boots were too tight”—would have to be given to add up to the complete account of those years?

What Ford suggests, then, is a contradiction of massive proportions that runs to the very heart of Impressionist writing. It is necessary, on one hand, to capture an image as swiftly as possible: it is the essence, the very core of the impression that one must convey, not its context or extraneous detail. Yet on the other, it is precisely this extraneous information, perceived by the individual who is attempting to convey his own experience, that makes up his perception: it is impossible for him to separate his own experience of the club member's speech from his own edging uncomfortability at that moment due to the wholly unrelated problem of the fit of his boots.

Impressionism finds itself, then, in a quandary: it insists, to convey an emotion, that two contradictory approaches must be taken; and it will necessarily find itself unable to succeed. And the stakes of Ford's text, it must be insisted, are high: the essential functioning of artistic tragedy, for instance, is to produce an experience of emotion in its audience; and if this conveyance of emotional impressions is necessarily blocked, Impressionist tragedy is therefore impossible.



Within “On Impressionism,” however, Ford proposes a theoretical solution to this quandary—a stylistic unification of the contradictory necessities of detail and brevity. Ford writes that these terms will be reconciled, almost dialectically, at the moment when the mass of detail furnished by Impressionist writing is brought into a gigantic conceptual or emotional unity: it is when these details fuse into a single, vital Impression through the writer's sudden revelation of their interrelationship that the problems of Impressionism are overcome and Impressionist tragedy can function.

Describing this effect, Ford begins with the seeming unrelatedness of the details given during the Impressionist method:

The first business of Impressionism is to produce an impression, and the only way in literature to produce an impression is to awaken interest. And, in a sustained argument, you can only keep interest awakened by keeping alive, by whatever means you may have at your disposal, the surprise of your reader. You must state your argument; you must illustrate it, and then you must stick in something that appears to have nothing whatever to do with either subject or illustration, so that the reader will exclaim: ‘What the devil is the fellow driving at?’ And then you must go on in the same way—arguing, illustrating, and starting and arguing, startling and illustrating—until at the very end your contentions will appear like a raveled skein. And then, in the last few lines, you will draw towards you the masterstring of that seeming confusion, and the whole pattern of the carpet, the whole design of the net-work will be apparent (48).

By the end of the passage, they have been fused, almost soteriologically, into a massive interdependence in which each detail, once considered insignificant, is filled with meaning and rendered vital to the totality of the whole: without the inclusion of even the most unrelated experience in narrative—the poor fit of one's boots, for instance—the final meaning of that narrative cannot be arrived at.

Thus at the moment that the 'masterstring' is pulled, the contradictions of the

Impressionist method are resolved and the project succeeds—which in the case of *The Good Soldier* should mean producing in the reader an overwhelming experience of tragedy, when the myriad, contradictory experiences of Dowell are fused into a single, overcoming impression of “the Saddest Story.”

In “On Impressionism,” Ford gives an demonstration in miniature of function of the Impressionist masterstring. It is a story designed to show how Impressionist writing uses detail—detail to a degree that overwhelms conventional expectation of causality and plot development—to show a tragic history in its full proportions and full emotional effect, by bringing that detail into sudden, meaning-filled relation around a single all-important symbol or idea. Here is Ford's example:

Let me again illustrate exactly what I mean. It is not sufficient to say: “Mr Jones was a gentleman who had a strong aversion to rabbit-pie.” It is not sufficient, that is to say, if Mr Jones's dislike for rabbit-pie is an integral part of your story. And it is quite possible that a dislike for one form or other of food might form the integral part of a story. Mr Jones might be a hard-worked coal-miner with a well-meaning wife, whom he disliked because he was developing a passion for a frivolous girl. And it might be quite possible that one evening the well-meaning wife, not knowing her husband's peculiarities, but desiring to give him a special and extra treat, should purchase from a stall a couple of rabbits and spend many hours in preparing for him a pie of great succulence, which should be a solace to him when he returns, tired with his labours and rendered nervous by his growing passion for the other lady. The rabbit-pie would then become a symbol—a symbol of the whole tragedy of life. It would symbolize for Mr Jones the whole of his wife's want of sympathy for him and the whole of his distaste for her; his reception of it would symbolize for Mr Jones the whole of his wife's want of sympathy for him and the whole of his distaste for her; his reception of it would symbolize for Mrs Jones the whole hopelessness of her life, since she had expended upon it inventiveness, sedulous care, sentiment, and a good will. From that position, with the rabbit-pie always in the centre of the discussion, you might work up to the murder of Mrs Jones, to Mr Jones's elopement with the other lady—to any tragedy that you liked. For indeed the position contains, as you will perceive, the whole tragedy of life (44-45).

Ford—as he has told the reader, at least—has set out to show how emotion is produced in the reader. His subject in the story of Mr Jones should be an example of tragedy: it is the story of

the breakdown of several human lives over love, desire, and unhappiness; and it results in the death of at least one character. In good Impressionist form, the elements of the looming tragedy are introduced as seemingly unrelated—even insignificant—details: we are certain, as the story advances, that the “many hours” spent by Mr Jones' wife and the “great succulence,” even the “solace” of the pie will have some tragic denouement. Yet this tragedy is unclear until the moment when the diverse elements are placed in relation, a moment of sudden lucidity when every degree of emotional loss—from Mrs Jones' loss of her husband's love to the waste of her “many hours” in making the pie—is stacked in a simultaneous, overwhelming bacchanalia of emotive misery.

And yet at the moment of this denouement—the moment when the story's diverse elements are put into sudden, tragic relation around Mrs Jones' rabbit-pie—something horrifying erupts. The rabbit-pie must represent the Impressionist confluence of several human lives' sum of unhappiness, impatience, and sorrow; it is responsible, according to Ford, for the massive production of sorrow in the reader. Faced with all this, the pie can only burst under the weight: the reader at that moment in the story, faced with the representation of “the whole tragedy of human life” in a dramatic, overwrought rabbit-pie, can only laugh.

By all accounts, the story of Mr Jones should be sad. Indeed, it should be sad in the excessive, maudlin sense that Ford captures in repeated claim that the pie—wasting everything from Mr Jones' love to two perfectly good rabbits— is the “whole tragedy of life.”

Yet precisely because of this, laughter bursts out. Above all, this laughter comes from the hyperbole into which Ford's literary treatment of Mr Jones has forced the story. What is truly laughable is not Mr Jones' situation but its narration. The overwrought expectations established

by Ford's claim that "The rabbit-pie would then become a symbol—a symbol of the whole tragedy of life;" the whole tearful back-story of love and disillusion that is invested into the symbolic rabbit-pie; and the final, saddening results of the rabbit-pie's dramatic appearance conspire to render the authentically tragic elements of the story of Mr Jones profoundly comic at the exact moment that they should command the reader's sympathy.

Ford's example of Impressionist writing, then, does not support the point that he has been making—the point that Impressionism is a tool for conveying emotions. Instead it is fundamentally disruptive to that idea: here, a story that should be tragic on its own terms has, through the Impressionist focus on the comic 'blot' of the rabbit-pie at its center, been brought to mere comedy. It ought by all accounts to appear truly tragic to the reader: given the breakdown of a marriage, an affair, and a murder all in one passage, Mr Jones seems to be so overwhelmed with plot events that he is hardly "shivering," in Benjamin's terms, for lack of fate. Impressionist style—it is Ford's intention—will only heighten this effect by bringing these plot events, at their fullest and most detailed, together in a spectacularly sorrowful denouement. Yet the result of this Impressionist treatment is that the reader is left trembling not only with shivers but with laughter: no shred of 'fate' or 'meaning' can be gleaned from the tragedy of Mr Jones, because its narrative has brought all its tragic sense to mere laughability.

Thus is it not, in the end, Impressionist writing itself that is responsible for this fatal back-firing of tragedy in the story of Mr Jones? It seems that something in the functioning of Ford's Impressionist masterstring is profoundly broken. The string exists, to be sure: it does its work in bringing these diverse experiences into a simultaneous, totalizing relationship. Yet the impression it produces in doing so is ultimately anything but tragic.

This, then, is how the 'Impressionist anxiety' over brevity and detail has ultimately played out. Ford has attempted to resolve the contradiction—indeed, he has done so successfully—but at the moment that Impressionism forces its grand resources of detail into tragic meaning, its attempt has become so literary, so overwrought, so un-Impressionistic that only laughter results. Has Impressionism ultimately failed? That, it seems, may be the only conclusion to be taken from a careful reading of “On Impressionism;” and as will be seen in the argument that *The Good Soldier* represents a profound critique of Dowell's version of an Impressionist text, it was Ford's final decision as well.

What will be discussed next, then, is the relationship between *The Good Soldier* and Ford's highly problematic vision of Impressionism. *The Good Soldier*; I will claim, deals with the problems of Impressionism at its very heart: it is my contention that Dowell's narration of *The Good Soldier* is the quintessential Impressionist text, and that Dowell is the quintessential Impressionist.

## II. Dowell as Literary Impressionist: “On Impressionism” and *The Good Soldier*

What is the relationship, then, between “On Impressionism” and *The Good Soldier*? The wager I will make in this section is that for Ford, Dowell's narration was a model of Impressionist writing. There is, I will argue, firm evidence for consideration of Dowell as an Impressionist because of explicit borrowings in his writing from passages in “On Impressionism.” What this means, then, is that *The Good Soldier* represents an attempt to fully work out the contradictions and profound anxieties that Ford had developed in “On Impressionism.” Dowell's narration is a case study of Impressionist writing and its ultimate

success or failure in producing an emotional resonance in its reader; and *The Good Soldier* thus represents “On Impressionism” put into practice for the real stakes of tragedy or comedy.

Under consideration, then, will be Dowell's strategy of narration and its parallels to Ford's theoretical articulation of Impressionism. Dowell is under consideration here as a 'narrator,' but in order to fully appreciate his relationship to Ford, he must also be termed a 'writer' or 'author.' That is to say, Dowell is not a mere scribbler: Ford is careful to portray his work as thoughtful, researched, and above all, considerate of style. It is important to note that Dowell is a craftsman, because Ford's ultimate movement in *The Good Soldier*—a critique of the failure of Dowell's “Saddest Story” to produce anything more than laughter in its reader—would be nearly meaningless if Dowell were simply a portrait of a poor or careless writer. Instead, Dowell's writing is consciously literary: he is aware, I will argue, not only of where he intends to represent the story in a high-feudal tone or a tragic one, but also of his own relationship to humor.

It is vital to this argument, of course, that Dowell is no accidental Impressionist. His whole purpose, instead, is to convey a very particular experience—his position in the events that occurred between the Ashburnhams and the Dowells—to the reader. Further, he does so through a narrative that meets all the major conditions of Impressionist writing: it is—as Dowell is aware—digressive and associative rather than linear and historical; personal and emotionally-fraught rather than rational and objective; addressed to a sympathetic or emotionally resonant reader rather than a general, abstract one; and most importantly, focused on the complex relationship between highly diverse, even fragmentary events and experiences as the record of human experience that constitutes an 'Impression.'

In only a handful of passages of *The Good Soldier* does Dowell offer explicit discussion

of his methodology; and so it is striking that in two of these, Ford explicitly repeats syntactic choices—now in Dowell's voice—from his own manifesto of Impressionism. Thus in “On Impressionism” we have Ford's statement that the writer “must typify for himself a human soul in sympathy with his own” (48), a sentence whose central noun and adjective reappear directly, merely inverted, in Dowell's description of his self-imagination “for a fortnight or so at one side of the fireplace of a country cottage, with a sympathetic soul opposite me” (15). Ford's claim in “On Impressionism” is that the beliefs, aesthetics, emotional resonances—in a word, the sentimentality—shared with the reader are what allow the artist to convey his impressions; and thus for this same reason, Dowell writes that he will address only a sympathetic audience:

From time to time we shall get up and go to the door and look out at the great moon and say: “Why it is nearly as bright as in Provence!” And then we shall come back to the fireside, with just the touch of a sigh because we are not in the Provence where even the saddest stories are gay (*The Good Soldier*, 15).

Here, Dowell has not only borrowed an idea directly from Ford's model of Impressionist writing, but even shared the *content* of Ford's sentimentality as well.<sup>4</sup> Ford thus captured what was sentimental in his own writing—a love of Provence—and inflated it to grotesque proportions in Dowell's. Writing, if it will not hold its own weight, must be accompanied by “the touch of a sigh”—a conceit that is no less Fordian than Dowellian.

Two pages later in another of Dowell's self-critical passages, another textual moment of “On Impressionism” is explicitly reproduced. Ford writes in “On Impressionism” that the “human soul in sympathy ... [is] a silent listener” (48); but in *The Good Soldier* he gives that line to Dowell, who writes that “you, the listener, sit opposite me. But you are so silent. You don't tell me anything” (17). Ford's fascination with a silent and charitable reader—the one he imagines at

---

<sup>4</sup> As will be discussed in the next chapter, Ford had a lifelong appreciation—as well as some expertise—in Provence, chivalry, and Troubadour poetry.

his most maudlin moments—is here transferred to Dowell, and Ford gives particular emphasis to the choice by citing his own critical language in Dowell's articulation.

It has been shown, then, that Ford repeats imagery and syntax from “On Impressionism” quite vividly in Dowell's writing; and it seems that there is an excellent reason those repetitions appear in one of Dowell's consciously self-critical passages. Ford is not immune in *The Good Soldier* to the temptation of direct editorialization: as will be discussed later, his own artistic taste and influences are recognizable in Dowell's fascination with Provence and Troubadorial writing. In his notes to the text, Martin Stannard even notes a passage from *The Good Soldier* that Ford would later copy as a dedication of the book—more than likely a good sign that he found himself in comfortable agreement with Dowell's voice there (note to 80). In much of the minor area of *The Good Soldier*, then, Ford's relationship with Dowell is less clearly differentiated; but here, in Dowell's first discussion of his position as a writer and his own artistic theory, it would seem impossible that Ford should be unaware of the significance of formulating his narrator's method of writing in explicitly the same terms as his own. And indeed it is not unconscious: what is under discussion in *The Good Soldier* through Dowell's writing style is Impressionism itself; and in the success or failure of Dowell's project of writing Ford gives his judgment of the possibility of all Impressionist writing.

In addition to the parallels between “On Impressionism” and Dowell's own imbedded literary manifestos, *The Good Soldier* is structurally an Impressionist text. It advances through Dowell's reminiscences, at times taking up with the plot's chronology, moving associatively across it at others. Dowell himself is fascinated with the fragmentation and narrative alinearity of his own account: he asks, for instance, “Is all this digression or isn't it digression? Again I don't



know” (17). Later we have:

I have been casting back again; but I cannot help it. It is so difficult to keep all these people going. I tell you about Leonora and bring her up to date; then about Edward who has fallen behind. And then the girl gets hopelessly left behind. I wish I could put it down in diary form (142).

Dowell's reference to a diary is particularly illuminating: what could be more deeply Impressionist, in Ford's definition, than a text composed purely of personal memories and directly back toward the writer himself?

Dowell also follows Ford's injunction that the Impressionist writer be ambiguous, ever-changing, and even contradictory. Dowell's account is a text filled with contradiction: it is hardly an attempt at an objective history, more closely approximating a history of Dowell's own changing position and interpretation in the course of writing. He writes early on, for instance, that “I want to do Leonora every justice. I love her very dearly for one thing” (*The Good Soldier*, 43), but later describes her as cold and sadistic, writing that

Yes, Leonora wished to bring her riding whip down on Nancy's young face. She imagined the pleasure she would feel when the lash fell across those queer features; the pleasure she would feel at drawing the handle at the same moment toward her so as to cut deep into the flesh and to leave a lasting weal (135).

Dowell's narration, then, is precisely the product of an application of Ford's articulation of Literary Impressionism to a novel-length work. By massively recounting seemingly loosely-linked information, its project is to produce in the reader—when the master-connection of this account is suddenly made evident at the moment of denouement—precisely the emotional experience that its narrator has undergone.

What is suddenly threatened in Dowell's manuscript, then, is the effectiveness of that denouement. Dowell has given the reader an account of the tragic downfall of two couples and

the characters around them, with tragic results just as serious as those in the story of Mr Jones. Yet when this tragedy is made clear—when the meaning of the diverse recollections Dowell has given is suddenly pieced together by the reader—is the effect produced truly that of “the Saddest Story?” Or is it not that, just as the Impressionist masterstring brought about a perversely comic denouement in the story of Mr Jones, the moment at which Dowell's many recollections are worked into a plot results only in the comic detachment of the reader instead of the immense sadness that Dowell expects to produce?

This chapter set out to identify the stakes of Dowell's literary style in *The Good Soldier*, by considering Dowell's relationship to Ford's complex critical term “Impressionism.” Ford himself claims that his criticism is more technical advice for aspiring writers than a highly theoretical or literary endeavor. I have argued, however, this attitude on Ford's part masks a sophisticated discussion of prose style, the viability of aesthetic and artifice, and the risk of inadvertent comedy in modern 'serious' literature. Much of this is packed into Ford's usage of the term Impressionist, which Ford invests with such contradiction and ambiguity that the word itself stands more as an obstacle to the text than as a point of entry.

I have attempted precisely to unpack Ford's idea of Impressionism precisely by moving through these points of contradiction. Ford equivocates most of all on the question of concision versus detail in Impressionist representation. Thus at one moment, he insists on the necessity of absolute brevity in Impressionist work, due to what seems a lurking visceral horror of excessive description.

Yet at the same time, Impressionism demands an overwhelming degree of detail.

Impressions and their communicability seem to overrun the reader: in order to describe a man's reaction to a piece of fish, it is necessary for Ford to give an account of each of the man's rhetorical habits, to digress into his own immense boredom as his thoughts move elsewhere.

Ford ultimately attempts to reconcile these divergent tendencies in the idea of the 'masterstring,' a concept that I argue is played out in miniature in his example of Mr Jones and the rabbit-pie. There, it seems that Ford's integration of detail and concision into a single 'master-impression' succeeds: the rabbit-pie of the story serves to bring together all the diverse tragic elements into a single practical and symbolic object. Thus this object, the rabbit-pie itself, is laden with enormous narrative importance: it is, in Ford's scheme, the crux of the mechanism through which the single, overwhelming impression of Mr Jones' story will be conveyed to the reader.

It is precisely here, however, that the subterranean anxieties of "On Impressionism" emerge. The rabbit-pie—intentionally imagined as a mundane instantiation of enormously larger tragic elements—is comically out of proportion to the role it should play, and thus the reaction it suggests to the reader is laughter—crucially, laughter *in spite of the reader's awareness of the story's tragic elements*.

What "On Impressionism" poses at its most essential, then, is the threat that Impressionism—the attempt to convey the human sense of a perception, action, story—could be undone by itself: the profound and effective expression of human experience serves, as in the case of Mr Jones and his rabbit-pie, only to produce a sadness so maudlin and so disproportionate—what should be "the whole tragedy of life" is represented by a rabbit-pie—that, in a kind of nausea, it results only in comedy. In the attempt to invest a history with human

meaning, then, there is an uncontrollable overproduction in language that threatens the seriousness of the original: it is as though narrative turned upon itself in Impressionism and was unable to read its own product without lapsing into the comic.

What, then, is the relationship between “On Impressionism” and *The Good Soldier*? As delineated in the chapter, Dowell comes to take on many of the characteristics of Ford's model Impressionist. He does not give a ordered, 'logical' narrative, but instead retells his own emotions as they come to him; he does not address himself to a general audience but to an intimate, sympathetic one; he does not attempt to present a narrative free from subjective influence, but gives the most personally-inflected, emotion-laden account possible.

Indeed, Dowell's imagination of his narrative is, after all, as “The Saddest Story;” and his role as narrator is this to emphasize this sadness to the breaking point. Yet as we will see, Dowell's impression of sadness ultimately hinges on another faulty Impressionist master-string: at the moment he will reach the tragic conclusion of the text, it will have fallen prey to precisely the problems posed by Ford in “On Impressionism.” Laughter bursts out: the text is so overwhelmed by its pretensions to tragedy, to heroism, to romance that it collapses into laughter.

And yet it is for Ford no cheap comedy. Though Ford's Impressionism appears, ultimately, to result in a sudden and even inadvertent comedy, it must be remembered that in its intentions, at least, Impressionism was to be a literature of tragic sensibility, of melodrama, of hyperbole. And of all of these things, Ford was, to be sure, enamored: “On Impressionism” and even *The Good Soldier* must be seen, despite Ford's refusal to hide their comic disjunctions, as at least a real *attempt* toward the tragic. “On Impressionism” has shown that, given the implications of Ford's critical writing, this attempt had already become untenable. And thus as this reading

continues, *The Good Soldier* will show the results of Dowell's full-fledged application of that untenable approach. It is in the novel that Ford leads Impressionism to its natural conclusions; and as "On Impressionism" has foreshadowed, they will not perform what Dowell hopes.

## Chapter II

'Les faiz, gestes, triumphes et prouesses du Bon Chevalier'<sup>5</sup>:

Ashburnham, Dowell, and the Feudal

*Une grande révolution démocratique s'opère parmi nous ; tous la voient, mais tous ne la jugent point de la même manière.*<sup>6</sup>

Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*

*The Good Soldier* has been read, it is fair to say, as a modern novel. That is, Ford's major points of reference have been considered, for instance, Flaubert, Henry James, Joseph Conrad. I do not intend to criticize this approach: to do so would be absurd, given the importance of Conrad and his collaboration with Ford to the development of Ford's style. Nevertheless I will note that to locate Ford's work by these points of reference necessarily results in a very particular path of reading. Thus criticism that has taken this essential assumption has focused heavily on novelistic technique, and on complex character development and character 'psychology.'

Let us consider, for a moment, a novel hypothesis. If one considers *The Good Soldier* in another field of references—an associative network centered on the term 'feudal' and the importance of 'good soldiery' to Ford's novelistic project—a radically different text might emerge. It would suggest, for instance, Edward's failure to fulfill the conventional expectations

---

<sup>5</sup> 'The deeds, the acts, and the triumphs of the Good Knight.'

<sup>6</sup> 'A great democratic revolution is in operation among us; we all see it, but we do not all judge it in the same manner.'

of the figure of 'The Good Soldier,' rather than the psychological depth of his character.

To propose such a radically new associative field for *The Good Soldier* is, on the face of it, bold. Nevertheless, Ford's own historical position was such that his participation in a certain movement towards the aesthetic revitalization of the feudal was nearly mandated. Contextually, Ford is positioned perfectly: he had an early proximity to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood through his grandfather Ford Madox Brown (whose name he later took);<sup>7</sup> and his artistic career intersects importantly with Ezra Pound's at the time Pound was working on his own feudal reinvention, the Provencal translations. Though I will continue on to argue that a renaissance of feudal associations or aesthetics is central to the early modernist artistic climate around Ford (importantly touching on the Futurist and Vorticist movements), it is enough here to note the importance of this influence on Ford and on the depth of the medievalist background that he possessed. His father, Francis Hueffer, was a noted scholar of Provencal and of Troubadour poetry; Ford's fascination with Provence was sufficiently significant for him to later develop his own theory of feudal virtue in *A Mirror to France*—and to buy a house in the region.

Thus there is, given a casual survey, more than enough evidence to pursue a reading of these 'feudal associations' found echoing in *The Good Soldier*. Such a reading will, I am confident, profoundly inform a reading of the novel: the text's relationship to several key associative terms (first and foremost, 'Soldiery' and what it means to be a 'Good Soldier') is fundamental to its operation and 'sense.' In particular, the novel's failure to arrive at a satisfactory representation or re-presentation of these terms is central to the comic nature of the text, and to an understanding of the *importance* of that comedy.

<sup>7</sup> As its name itself emphasizes, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was interested in pre-Renaissance artistic methods and subjects. While their interest was less in the concept of 'soldiery' so important to Ford's novel, their high estimation of medieval art and culture arguably had enormous influence not only on Ford's education and work but on the whole fascination with 'modern feudalism' high modernist discourse.

## I

As a point of entry, I will give particular weight to a consideration of the intertextual relationship between *The Good Soldier* and a historical text, the 1527 *Histoire des faiz, gestes, triumphes et prouesses du Bon Chevalier sans paour et sans reprouche*. The text is a history of the life of Pierre Terrail, Lord of Bayard (1473-1524), perhaps the most famous exemplar of feudal chivalry. Believed to have been written by Bayard's archer and secretary, Jacques de Mailles, the text consistently refers to Bayard with the formula 'le Bon Chevalier' (e.g. "Chapitre I. Comment le seigneur de Bayart, pere du bon Chevalier sans paour et sans reprouche, eut vouloir de sçavoir de ses enfans de quel estat ilz vouloient estre" (147))<sup>8</sup> De Mailles' depiction of Bayard can thus be taken, in a sense, as de Mailles' account of what it is to be a 'Good Soldier' or 'Bon Chevalier.'

Historically, De Mailles' formula for 'le Bon Chevalier' has gained considerable weight: the story of Bayard, of which de Mailles' text is the closest original source, has been enormously important in the post-medieval mythologization of chivalric conduct. Thus de Mailles' account is highly representative, if not definitional, to the post-medieval understanding of what it is to be a 'Good Soldier.' *l'Histoire du Bon Chevalier* is the exemplar of a historico-literary discourse on chivalric conduct that has defined the '*faiz et gestes*' of feudal protagonists.

Ford was absolutely aware—as would anyone of his era—of the history of Bayard.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> 'Chapter I: How the father of the good Knight without fear or reproach wanted to know from his children of which estate they wanted be.'

<sup>9</sup> It is difficult to appreciate, given his near-disappearance from common discourse in the century since Ford, the 'pop-culture' standing of Bayard in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Bayard was known to the reading public through translations into modern French and English, such as those brought out by Hachette in 1882, by Chapman & Hall in London in 1883, and by James Pott in New York in 1900. Notably, the latter means that Bayard editions were available not only to well-read, multilingual, Francophile Ford, but to his slightly less knowledgeable—and American—fictional narrator John Dowell. There was even a genre of illustrated accounts



Indeed, it is mentioned explicitly in *The Good Soldier*: Dowell writes that Leonora, speaking of Edward, “made him out like a cross between Lohengrin and the Chevalier Bayard” (68).<sup>10</sup> That Ford had first-hand access to de Mailles' account is extremely likely—the 1527 edition had been reprinted in Paris in 1837, and an edition in modern French had been brought out by Hachette in 1882. Indeed, the household-celebrity status of Bayard was such that Samuel Shellabarger, the author of a highly enthusiastic history of Bayard published in 1928, could without irony open his text with the lines: “Among famous men, there is none who occupies a more distinct and enviable place than Pierre Terrail, Seigneur de Bayard ... He has become a household name for half the world” (3).

It should be noted that de Mailles was not the only contemporary chronicler of Terrail<sup>11</sup>, and the use of the epithet “le Bon Chevalier” to describe Terrail was not limited to his text. Thus in any case Ford would appear to have taken his novel's title from the history of Terrail—whether directly from de Mailles, from another source, or from the story in common circulation. This origin of the title is of enormous significance: its provenance situates Edward, not as 'the good Victorian officer,' or as 'the good modern military commander,' but in a specifically chivalric tradition—importantly, one that commands a certain code of conduct *not limited to military action*. That is to say: 'The Good Soldier' refers in this context not only to a facility with arms, but to a complete way of life.

---

of his “deeds and feats” intended for children, such as 1890's *The Age of Chivalry: Scenes from the lives of the Chevalier Bayard and Sir Philip Sidney* (London, Marcus Ward & Co.). All together, this means that Ford situated Dowell's own references to Bayard less as sophisticated or erudite allusions than as a fairly shallow, even romanticized consciousness of the feudal.

<sup>10</sup> Ford passes over this reference as lightly as possible—it is clear that excessive discussion would be extremely heavy-handed. As it is, Dowell's passing reference to Bayard seems entirely 'in-character,' given the familiarity of Bayard as a point of reference, and the faint sense of childishness with which Dowell experiences Europe.

<sup>11</sup> Bayard's other major contemporary chronicler, Symphorien Champier, published a text titled *Les Gestes, ensemble la vie du preulx chevalier Bayard* in Lyon in 1525. De Mailles' account thus places greater weight on the 'Bon Chevalier' formula than Champier's. According to Shellabarger, De Mailles is also believed to have been a much closer source to Bayard himself, and has historically been read more often than Champier.

To begin an intertextual reading, then, it will first be necessary to establish what de Mailles defines as a 'Good Soldier.' First, there is the social position of the Good Soldier. De Mailles writes that

*en iceulx trois estatz s'est si vertueusement gouverné, qu'il en aura quant à Dieu sa grace, et quant au monde verdoyante et immortelle couronne de laurier, pour ce que, touchant l'Eglise, ne s'en est jamais trouvé ung plus obeissant ; quant à l'estat de noblesse, ung plus deffensible ; et à l'estat de labour, ung plus piteux ne secourable (146).<sup>12</sup>*

For de Mailles, Bayard's success is thus fairly strictly delimited: he will have 'grace from God' and 'a crown of laurels from the world.' The criteria for such a success are also rigidly defined: it is not for having been 'Good' in generalized terms but for having met his obligations to the 'three estates' that he will have these rewards. Bayard has been obedient to the Church, protective to the nobility, and charitable to the poor.

For de Mailles, it would thus be impossible to fulfill the role of soldiery without the context of this society and its order; and Bayard's 'faiz et gestes' are essentially formulaic. De Mailles continues:

*Car, pour au vray amplifier les perfections d'ung homme, ne l'ay peu faire autrement, considéré que sans grace infuse du Sainct-esperit, depuis l'incarnation de nostre sauveur et redempteur Jesuchrist, ne s'est trouvé, en cronicque ou hystoire, prince, gentil homme, ne autre condition qu'il ait esté, qui plus furieusement entre les cruelz, plus doucement entre les humbles, ne plus humainement entre les petis, ait vescu, que le bon chevalier dont la presente hystoire est commencée (145-146)<sup>13</sup>.*

The most important consideration is thus Bayard's position relative to the contemporary social

<sup>12</sup> 'In these three social estates he was so virtuously self-governed that for it he shall have from God his grace, and from the world a verdant and immortal crown of laurels; for to the Church, there has never been found one more obedient; to the estate of nobility, a greater defender; and to the estate of laborers, one more pitying nor helpful.'

<sup>13</sup> 'For to truly amplify the perfections of a man, I could not have done it otherwise, considering that without the grace infused by the Holy Spirit, since the incarnation of our Saviour and Redeemer Jesus Christ there has not been found, in chronicle or history, a prince, nobleman, or other man of any other social state, who so furiously among the cruel, softly among the humble, nor more kindly among the small, might have lived, than the Good Soldier of whom this history is begun.'

order. De Mailles also focuses consistently on Bayard's willingness to risk himself (the 'freedom from fear' mentioned in the title), his charity to the working class, and the refinement of his manners, conduct, and speech.

Finally, De Mailles' account does not neglect conventions of romantic love:

*Il fault sçavoir que quant le bon Chevalier fut donné paige au duc Charles de Savoye, ceste dame de Fluxas estoit jeune damoyselle en la maison avecques sa femme; et ainsi, comme jeunes gens frequentent volentiers ensemble, se prisrent en amour l'ung l'autre, voire si grande, gardant toute honnesteté, que s'ilz eussent esté en leur simple vouloir, ayant peu de regard à ce qui s'en feust peu ensuyvre, se feussent pris par nom de mariage* (203).<sup>14</sup>

His account insists most of all on the dedication of Bayard to the lady of Fluxas and the singularity of their romance. There is, in de Mailles' telling, no possible repetition of the experience, because it is absolutely singular—an idea that will be in sharp contrast to the replicability and indeed replaceability that is the central theme of Ashburnham's affairs.

The importance of de Mailles' to a reading of *The Good Soldier* is that Bayard represents a successful instantiation—and, in the context of Ford's time, even the exemplary case—of chivalric ideals. De Mailles' telling of the history of Bayard works to unify these ideals in a single figure, fusing them through the constant, epithetic repetition of the phrase 'le Bon Chevalier.' Thus *l'Histoire de Bayard* represents a distillation of chivalric tradition: Shellabarger writes that “above all, it is unified by a definite conception of its hero expressed at the outset and maintained unvaried. It is the romantic and chivalric conception” (4). De Mailles' account of Bayard is thus a personification of chivalric virtue: de Mailles' 'Good Soldier' is to an extent a historical treatment of Bayard the individual, but primarily and enduringly, it is a *poesis* of

<sup>14</sup> 'You must know that when the good Knight was given as a page to Duke Charles of Savoy, this lady of Fluxas was was a young lady in the household of Charles' wife; and thus, as young people together often gladly do, they fell in love the one with the other, so much so that in all honesty, if they had been a matter only of their volition and with no regard for what could have resulted, they would have taken each other in marriage.'

chivalric life that fuses the conceits of feudal value in a single epithet, 'le Bon Chevalier.'

My suggestion in this chapter, then, is that de Mailles' text represents a treatment in considerable specificity of the attributes I have given under the general term 'feudal.' In this role it will serve to illuminate a reading *The Good Soldier*: when Ford brings de Mailles' text into play through the allusion in the title of his novel, the stakes of good soldiery—grace from God and a crown of laurels from the world—are put into question as well. What Ford's novel asks, in its relationship to de Mailles' account of soldiery, is the possibility of such a history in the modern world: is it not outdated, cliché, impossible to be a Good Soldier in 1914?

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that this consciousness of modernity as a threat to the possibility of soldiery is brought into play by Ford, for de Mailles is already conscious of it. Indeed, what marks de Mailles' Bayard as an exemplary pendant to *The Good Soldier* is the air of outdatedness that hangs over chivalric conceit, not only in 1914 but already in 1527.

Shellabarger writes that “to the Loyal Servant, Bayard represented a tradition fast becoming obsolete—that of chivalry with its romantic and religious connotations. He thinks of him in the heroic terms of knightly prowess and old legend” (10).

What ultimately succeeds in de Mailles' treatment of Bayard is a literary negotiation of this outdatedness that avoids cliché, pathos, or bad taste. Put more strongly, de Mailles' work succeeds at operating a certain literary or poetic transcendence of its historical moment. As Shellabarger writes: “The result [of de Mailles' work], however, is convincing. No foolish rhetoric, no archaic tinsel mars the treatment. De Mailles's romance is not superficially romantic ... he portrays the past transfused into the present” (11). This is the kernel of de Mailles' text: it is a successful literary objectification of the figure of the Good Soldier.

In presenting this other Good Soldier, Edward Ashburnham, Ford insists precisely on the failure of Dowell's poetic representation. In giving a chronicle of the life and death of Edward, Dowell attempts to do de Mailles' work. Like Bayard for *le Loyal Serviteur*, Edward represents, at least to a certain extent, a chivalric ideal for Dowell. Nevertheless Dowell's choices in literary representation fall flat: he is unable to create a text with the same aesthetic effect as de Mailles'.

In each case, it seems, Ford juxtaposes Ashburnham to Bayard, with Ashburnham falling always just slightly short. Where Bayard is a seasoned soldier, Ashburnham has retired young with heart trouble, and it seems that the extent of his heroism was being “twice recommended for the V.C. whatever that might mean,” in recognition of his having “twice jumped off the deck of a troopship to rescue what the girl called “Tommies” who had fallen overboard in the Red Sea and such places” (68). Where Bayard is concerned with the physical practice of soldiery, Ashburnham is concerned with its appearances. “The sort of thing he thought about [was] ... where you got the best soap, the best brandy,” Dowell writes, giving a particularly memorable description to “the profusion of his cases, all of pigskin and stamped with his initials E. F. A. There were guncases, and collar cases, and shirt cases, and letter cases and cases each containing four bottles of medicine; and hat cases and helmet cases. It must have needed a whole herd of the Gadarene swine to make up his outfit” (24-5).

As to romance, Bayard is dedicated—chastely—to a single mistress, while Ashburnham is dedicated carnally to quite a few. In charity, de Mailles has Bayard giving his last coins to help those poorer than himself; meanwhile, though Ashburnham does remit the rent of his struggling tenants and earnestly believes in “the feudal theory of a lord doing his best by his dependents” (98), his actions are swiftly undone in practice by Leonora, ever concerned with the manor's

financial stability as a result of Edward's excesses, in her quest to wring every dime out of the couples' resources.

But what is really vital here is not the difference between Bayard and Ashburnham—after all, one is fictional, and the other only known through mythicizing accounts. Instead, it is the differences in literary representation that is key. De Mailles is able to portray Bayard successfully as the Good Soldier; Dowell, on the other hand, incessantly lapses in his attempt, pointing out instead Edward's shortcomings against chivalric ideals of soldiery and romance.

The gap between our first and second *Histoires du Bon Chevalier*, then, is not in their subjects so much as their literary operation. In Dowell's telling of the Good Soldier story, there insistently appears something of extremely poor taste—a consistent (and intentional) failure on Ford's part to fully merge the feudal pretensions of the text with its practice. What de Mailles successfully manages in his text is not attempted, but not quite achieved, by Dowell: his treatment means to represent Edward in a chivalric light, but slips again and again into a representation that suggests more of the comic than of the heroic.

Of course, this failure is already exemplified in the ironic epithet “The Good Soldier.” Even for a reader unaware of de Mailles' text, Ford's title contains a sufficient poetic weight, independent of the Bayard story, to constitute an aesthetic standard against which Edward's character can be said to fail. Thus the 'fundamental joke' of the text is that Edward is no Good Soldier at all: Ford's novel is the account—in this reading—of a *merely comic* failure at chivalric representation.

What is lost in such a reading, however, is the complexity in Ford's treatment of Dowell's representation of Edward. Without a consideration of Dowell's role in the text and the parallels

he shares with writers like de Mailles, Edward would be a mere 'silly' comic figure—his juxtaposition against an ideal of soldiery would be Ford's mere ironization of Edwardian-era British officership, and not Ford's consideration of the problems of authorship in that context.

Instead, in treating *The Good Soldier* as a modern *mise-en-question* of the possibility of good soldiery, what must be emphasized is the determinative importance of literary mediation. This criticism is not a consideration of the 'real merits' of Bayard and Edward—instead it is simply a consideration of the literary treatment of the two. De Mailles, as we have already recognized, takes a vital role in converting the lived experience of Bayard into *l'Histoire de Bayard*, in changing *un bon chevalier* into *le bon Chevalier*. In essence it is the work of de Mailles *qua* poet that gives Bayard this value. Ford—showing an attentiveness to the structure of de Mailles' work—sets up *The Good Soldier* in parallel. Dowell is the 'loyal serviteur' of the novel: it is his role to set down the history of Edward; and such a role gives him enormous importance in determining its tone. In a word: the success or failure of Edward's life *considered as a text of good soldiery* is dependent on Dowell's treatment of it.

To a great extent, then, this is a consideration of Dowell as a modern author of chivalry. Is it possible, in 1914, to put lived experience through a poetic transformation that will render it, in Shellabarger's terms, “a household name to half the world?” Or is Dowell's attempt at such a *poesis* closer, in the end, to a tawdry 'poetification'—an attempt to see in Edward the legacy of a chivalric past that has been firmly eliminated?

Thus to consider *The Good Soldier* as a simple 'comedy of Edward' is to miss the seriousness with which it takes the idea of 'The Good Soldier.' The failure of Dowell's representation is not solely 'amusing' or 'pleasant:' it depends, as already said, on a certain galling

poor taste at the heart of Dowell's poetics. To read this as *merely* comic—or as amusingly comic—demands a certain deafness to what Ford signs as 'disgusting' or 'grotesque' in Dowell's inability to represent Edward as a Good Soldier. Dowell makes an attempt to do so—indeed, he almost succeeds—and thus it is all the more repulsive, to use a Fordian term, when ugliness irrupts through this depiction of Edward. Dowell's willing aesthetic blindness in hoping to see a *roman* in a life-story utterly devoid of romance thus provokes a certain 'horror of depiction:' to the reader of *romans* it suggests the possibility of a gap, at once both slight and absolute, between life and its representation.

It is this essential seriousness of the text, then, which is dependent on a co-reading with de Mailles' history of Bayard. It is necessary to be conscious of how Ford treats and critiques romantic depiction in order to understand the real force of *The Good Soldier*: it is not a novel on Edward's life so much as it is novel on the depiction of Edward's life; and that perspective is brought in by an awareness of chivalric context.

What remains to be delved into, then, is the complexity of Dowell's poetic failure vis-à-vis de Mailles' text. It has been suggested that Dowell succeeds, at least partly, in representing Edward in chivalric terms; and that despite or through—truly in the center of—this partial success, an embarrassing or grotesque inadequacy bursts out in Dowell's representation. In focusing on a comparison of de Mailles and Dowell, however, one major figure has gone ignored: Ford himself.

What is Ford's relationship to Dowell's failure at poetic representation? If Ford is critiquing Dowell's strategy of authorship, what does that mean, given the complex entanglement of authorial techniques shown between Ford and his fictional writer?



## II

Though *The Good Soldier* is, I have claimed, ultimately profoundly critical of Dowell's narrative technique, Ford is nevertheless inextricably entangled with Dowell: as discussed in the opening chapter, Ford's portrait of Dowell espouses a version of the same ideas of literary Impressionism that Ford laid out in his own critical manifesto. This entanglement was not accidental—on the contrary it is what gives Ford's critique of Dowell's narrative its force. Ford is not merely an ironist of Dowell's failure; instead, his treatment of Dowell's project carries serious weight for his own understanding of the possibility of modern tragic narrative.

Ford's ligature with Dowell, however, is not wholly on the level of literary technique. As briefly suggested in the opening to this chapter, Ford had a lengthy and profound attachment to French and German history. To his literary work, then, he brought a personal attachment to the medieval—demonstrated in his penchant for writing unabashedly historico-positive texts like *The Fifth Queen* (date) and *The Cinque Ports* (1900), which Ford describes in its dedication as “a piece of literature pure and simple, an attempt, by means of suggestion, to interpret to the passing years the inner message of the Five Ports” (v-vi). *The Good Soldier* is contemporary and not historical, but if the novel indeed sets itself in strong parallelism to *l'Histoire de Bayard*, it must be understood as a treatment of historical ideals. Were Ford writing in an extension of the spirit he suggested in the dedication of *The Cinque Ports*—that is, if he intended *The Good Soldier* as a simple translation of historical ideals into the modern era—we could expect *The Good Soldier* to consist indeed of straightforward *praise* for the historical, and of an attempt to *successfully* depict at Edward as embodying the 'modern equivalent' of Bayard.

This, of course, is not the case. Edward's failure to represent such an equivalent has been

clearly understood by critics of *The Good Soldier*, so much so that Edward's 'foolishness' has become perhaps too axiomatic in readings of the novel. But does the failure of Dowell's attempt to render Edward as 'The Good Soldier' mean that Ford was fundamentally unsympathetic to such a rendering?

Such a conclusion does not necessarily follow. It can be considered clear that Dowell's representation of Edward as 'The Good Soldier' fails while still considering the complexity and nuance of that failure. Dowell continues to hold Edward in considerable esteem even when his literary representation as the 'Good Soldier' does not succeed; and given Ford's complex attachment to Dowell, the novel's depiction of Edward, though fundamentally negative, cannot therefore be considered an abandonment on Ford's part of any possible sympathy for his 'Good Soldier' hero, or an abandonment of his love for the feudal.

Thus far from clear disavowal, Ford's relationship to Edward as 'chivalric hero' and to Dowell as 'poet of the chivalric' remains enormously complex. This is, after all, the same Ford that would write *A Mirror to France* (1925), a text in which, according to Arthur Mizener, "Ford begins to transform his early Pre-Raphaelite feelings about Provence into the theory that 'chivalric generosity, frugality, pure thought and the arts are the first requisites of a Civilization'" (348; citation quoted in Mizener from *A Mirror to France*, 14). And it is also the same Ford who would, rather suddenly, enlist as a British officer in the First World War.<sup>15</sup> Does this evidence support the claim that *The Good Soldier* absolutely disowned modernist idealization of the feudal, or that it represented Ford's absolute refusal to believe or ever participate in ideas of modern heroic warfare?

Instead, it seems, Ford remains significantly associated with Dowell, particularly

---

<sup>15</sup> Image 1: "The Good Soldier,' ca. 1915" (Mizener, 456).



*"The Good Soldier," ca. 1915.*

because of their common role as writers of modernist feudal narrative. It is thus historically entirely well-founded to suggest that the romantic ideas (authorship, soldiery) that Ford so forcibly critiques in *The Good Soldier* were the same ideas that he himself held—even those with

which he defined his own life—and that *The Good Soldier* is not merely detached irony, but a serious consideration of the practicability of Ford's own literary project.

Thus to consider *The Good Soldier* adequately represented with the judgment that Dowell's feudal narrative aesthetic fails would be a false start, for it would ignore the all-important ambiguity in Ford's association with Dowell. *The Good Soldier* is neither an uncritical production of 'feudal ideology' nor an entirely detached auto-criticism of Ford's love for the feudal. While the latter thesis—taking a detached, emotionally-distant Ford as its basic assumption—could be an approach to the novel, it would necessarily miss the great force of the text. Ford's constant emotional implication in the text's valuations and criticisms means that there in Dowell's and Edward's ridiculousness is not merely entertainment for the reader but Ford's own position in the text.

To arrive at an appreciation of this position, it is necessary to look more closely at the ambiguity of Edward's status as aesthetic object for Dowell. Is it possible, at least partially or intermittently, that Edward succeeds in representing feudal aesthetics—even that Dowell's representation of him succeeds in doing so? The possibility of this success has, I suspect, been insufficiently posed to date: Edward's failings as 'The Good Soldier' have been so apparent to critical readers of *The Good Soldier* that the idea of Edward as an actual Good Soldier has been almost written off as a subject of criticism.

This, I think, has been a mistake. In the rush to uphold Ford's 'real' or 'final' judgment on Edward, the significant degree to which he does represent an attractive version of 'le Bon Chevalier' has been overlooked. Edward does so sufficiently enough that he is a compelling figure or even a desirable one, to many of the women in the novel and to Dowell. He is even

insistently compelling, despite an awareness of his shortcomings, to Ford and the reader: to be sensitive to Ford's portrayal of Edward is to understand that, at least to an extent, his character *is attractive*.

An exemplary passage is Ford's description of Edward playing polo:

Once when we were at Wiesbaden watching him play in a polo match against the Bonner Hussaren I saw the same look come into his eyes, balancing the possibilities, looking over the ground. The German Captain, Count Baron Idigon von Lelöf, was right up by their goal posts, coming with the ball in an easy canter in that tricky German fashion. The rest of the field were just anywhere. It was only a scratch sort of affair. Ashburnham was quite close to the rails not five yards from us and I heard him saying to himself: 'Might just be done!' And he did it. Goodness! He swung that pony round with all its four legs spread out, like a cat dropping off a roof ...

Well, it was just that look that I noticed in his eyes: 'It might,' I seem even now to hear him muttering to himself, 'just be done'" (26-7).

The passage has an aesthetic quality that is compelling or even stirring: Dowell has in effect overlayed the polo match with the characteristics of a tournament; and it is this air of martialism that gives Edward's participation in a fairly Victorian, fairly bourgeois sport the faint echo of feudal combat. Through this willingness to read the feudal into the contemporary—and the heroic into the ordinary—Edward's fairly mundane phrase—the claim that 'it might just be done,' speaking of a polo match, is not necessarily possessed of ringing grandeur—becomes in Dowell's eyes a battle-cry, repeated for dramatic effect as Dowell has Edward 'swinging his pony round' to the chase.

And yet when Dowell so intentionally sets his description next to the culture of conflict and tournament in which *l'Histoire de Bayard* takes place, is there not something suddenly lacking in Edward's version? For Bayard, conflict carries the real risk of mortality—he is, unlike Edward, an active soldier, and even tournament 'mock-combat' was potentially lethal. For Edward, it is not even a question of combat: the tourney Dowell describes here is of polo, not

jousting; and the steeds involved are not battle-horses but ponies.

Thus suddenly and drily, Edward's polo match and the grim seriousness with which he counters Count von Lelöfifel begin to appear laughable. On a sufficiently careless reading, one comes away impressed with Edward's pony-mounted heroism; but on a second look, the comic under-proportionality of the scene in relation to the Bayard text becomes clear.

The kicker, then, comes with Dowell's metaphor: when Edward's pony spins around, legs spread in all directions, Dowell writes—in the midst of a carefully chosen syntax of heroism—that it is “like a cat dropping off a roof.” Feudal poetics grind to a halt: the metaphor itself, supposed to represent the act of poetic transformation, buckles into comic ruins when Edward's knightly prowess is compared to the poor feline victim of Dowell's literary imagination.

Thus Ford's use of comic poetic failure as a critical lens for feudal ideology is not in the least unsophisticated. The effect of this passage depends on Ford's ability—contingently—to really successfully write the poetics of feudal combat into a polo match. What separates this criticism for mere parody is Ford's refusal fully to disentangle himself from his relationship with the feudal. Edward's polo-playing shows the heart of this ambiguity: at the same time, Ford has both a real attraction to the rhetoric of danger and heroism and an appreciation of its comic weakness. It would be off-base to suggest that this ambiguity constitutes a short-coming of the novel. Instead, Ford gives a complex and incisive criticism of the relationship of feudal ideology to the modern—a critique that, in directing itself precisely toward his own emotional complicity in the ideology of the feudal, was unmatched among those of his artistic peers similarly interested in the modern-feudal relationship.

Ford's ability to critically evaluate the appeal of feudal ideology to modern artists—and

even, in Dowell's work as a case study, its actual deployment in poetics—is an enormous coup for him. Consider a passage in which Dowell enacts this transposition of the feudal onto the modern: “We never did take another look at Beaucaire of course—beautiful Beaucaire, with the high, triangular white tower, that looked as thin as a needle and as tall as the Flatiron, between Fifth and Broadway” (16). Here Dowell-as-author is very much with the times: the aesthetics markers of *contemporary* modern life—in this case, modernist architecture—are identified and *imbued* with the power, vitality, or beauty of the very early modern. Dowell's comparison—or metaphoric identification—between the Flatiron and Beaucaire fits perfectly next to Marinetti's metaphor, in the *Futurist Manifesto*, between a war-horse and a speeding car—and both, in the logic of *The Good Soldier*, are comparable with the equivalence Dowell sees between Ashburnham's polo match and 'deeds, acts, and triumphs' of Bayard. Each of these metaphors proposes to find the feudal within the modern—and the only separation between them is the ultimate lucidity, on Ford's part, in seeing the failure of this metaphor and the detachment between feudal representation and modern reality.

What sets Ford's text apart from the use of feudal reference and metaphor in Marinetti and his contemporaries, then, is its awareness of the failure of Dowell's transpositional project. Ford does not commit the error of literalism: Edward is, from the start, a failed attempt at the feudal, and his failure constitutes a critique of the feudal identifications or pretensions of high modernism.

At the close, however, this reading does not propose to weigh the historical and political position, context, and ultimately, responsibility of *The Good Soldier* against its contemporaries. Instead, they are cited here to give the comparison is raised primarily to highlight a literary and

perhaps far less definite question. What is lost to Ford's text through its lucidity? Does Ford's account of the feudal in *The Good Soldier* ultimately find something *de preulx*, as de Mailles' treatment does in Bayard?

The only answer possible, once the comedy of Edward's polo-match has burst out in Dowell's description, is that that value is utterly lost. In refusing a blunt—and necessarily blinkered—metaphoric equivalence between modernist representation and the feudal, Ford sacrificed the possibility of another *Good Soldier* that he might have written—an authentically stirring or noble account of modernist soldiery.

Thus Eliot's claim in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” on the relationship between past and contemporary representation—“You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead”—takes a new sense in Ford: That is, it cuts both ways: it is not only that value can only be *found* in comparison among the dead, but that it can be lost there as well. In setting Ashburnham next to Bayard, *The Good Soldier* moves above all toward this Eliotian research of the past; yet through it Ford does not ultimately arrive at 'value' but at its destruction.

The central point of departure for this chapter, then, has been to resituate Ford's novel into the context of a much older field of reference than has previously been considered. The depth of Ford's interest in the medieval, together with his decision consciously to title and structure *The Good Soldier* in reference to Jacques de Mailles' chivalric history *L'histoire du Bon Chevalier*, means that such an effort at 'feudal contextualization' is vital to a clear reading of the novel. Thus I have attempted to draw out, through an intertextual comparison with de Mailles' text, the



'feudal subconscious' of Ford's novel.

In particular, I have set Ford's protagonist Edward Ashburnham (the "Good Soldier" of the novel's title) in comparison with the Chevelier Bayard, the subject of Jacques de Mailles' history. The ways in which Ashburnham has been modeled after Bayard are considered first; and this comparison then allows the degree to which Ashburnham falls short of his predecessor. Where Bayard risks his life in battle, for instance, Ashburnham seems to risk very little in society polo matches; where Bayard is concerned with real action over appearance, Ashburnham takes great care in dressing himself and less for real soldiery; and where de Mailles' depiction of Bayard emphasize his romantic dedication to a single—physically unattainable—beloved, Ashburnham engages in a long series of middling affairs with his social inferiors.

Yet the comparison between the two texts is not limited to the relationship between Bayard and Ashburnham. The more crucial idea put into consideration is the differences in literary treatment in the two narratives. De Mailles, for Ford, is the model of a good narrator; he manages successfully to represent Bayard as a Good Soldier. Indeed, insofar as he conveys this sense to the reader, one could say that de Mailles is a Good Impressionist along Ford's lines. Thus Dowell's task in writing "the Saddest Story" is to be de Mailles: he hopes to represent Ashburnham, as de Mailles does for Bayard, as a worthy figure of mimesis.

This project, however, cannot succeed: the crux of Ford's authorial work is that Dowell's heroicizing descriptions sound lofty and ringing on a quick glance, but the more closer they are considered, the more they break down into a comic disproportion between Dowell's faux-chivalric prose and the deeply unremarkable reality of Edward. It is not so much that Edward is unable to be the Good Soldier—one wonders if he even imagines himself in that role, or if it is

solely Dowell's fantasia that brings up the parallel—but that Dowell tries so hopefully, so earnestly, and finally in such bad taste to distort him into equivalence with his namesake.

To a great extent, then, *The Good Soldier* is Ford's portrait of modernist authorship attempting to transform modern reality into equivalence with an idealized feudal heroism. This willful distortion—the same bad taste that makes Edward 'close enough' to a Good Soldier for Dowell to attempt to round up—is for Ford at its core the same error that made the Futurists consider modern warfare a form of contemporary heroism and the same error that would lead Pound to imagine Fascism as a modern Feudalism.

*The Good Soldier* is the evidence of Ford's willingness to go beyond these contemporaries by sacrificing his attraction to feudal metaphor for the sake of critical lucidity. Dowell may mistake Edward for Bayard, but Ford does not; and the novel stands as his critique of the attempt to do so in modernist representation. “The Good Soldier,” the title that makes the ligature between Edward and Bayard, is what Ford critiques: Dowell's use of this epithet is his fundamental attempt, as narrator, to poetically bridge the gap between history and the present and to transform Edward from reality to chivalric figure; and it is precisely that poetic transformation that Ford arrests, pulls apart, and subjects to laughter.

And yet was Ford merely a detached analyst of this failure of metaphor? Ford was a lover of the feudal and a narrator of the contemporary; and the logical confluence of these two—the attempt to create a modern narrative that epitomizes feudal ideals—is precisely what one would expect from his writing. Instead, it is what Ford, almost unremarked, shifts onto the shoulders of his near-double Dowell.

Thus it is the meaning of this shift—whether Ford successfully (and harmlessly)

distanced himself from Dowell, or whether he still suffered some loss in that disavowal—that must be considered further. At the heart of the question, we will see, is the function of laughter in *The Good Soldier*.

### Chapter III

#### 'Orgueil et aberration': Retaking *The Good Soldier* as Comedy

*Ce pauvre diable s'est au moins défiguré, peut-être s'est-il fracturé un membre essentiel. Cependant, le rire est parti, irrésistible et subit.*<sup>16</sup>

(Baudelaire, “De l'essence du rire”).

Baudelaire writes of laughter that “le rire ... vient de la supériorité” (340)<sup>17</sup>, and argues that this superiority is intimately linked to the inferiority or degradation of the object of comedy. Were one to apply Baudelaire's analysis to *The Good Soldier*, it would suggest that the novel's essential comic component—what provides the real fodder for the novel's laughter—is the degradation of its protagonists. This degradation, I suspect, was the real technique of Ford's comedy: it is the consistent failure of the novel's protagonists to be noble, beautiful, admirable that he gives to the reader to laugh at. This laughter is what profoundly separates *The Good Soldier* from a tragic novel; and at its most essential, it suggests the very impossibility of Impressionist narrative to convey modern tragedy to the reader.

In this chapter, I will argue that this particularly destructive laughter was Ford's *ars poetica*. The novel is certainly funny; but I hope to consider that humor systematically, by

<sup>16</sup> “The poor devil is at the very least disfigured, perhaps has broken a vital limb. Yet laughter bursts out, irresistible and sudden.”

<sup>17</sup> “Laughter, they say, comes from superiority.”

attempting to trace the comedy found at specific plot moments back to a sustained and consistent construction of the comic that is integral to the novel's characters, plot, and narrative. This 'sustained and consistent construction' is, as Baudelaire suggests, the inferiority or degradation of the novel's subject: Ford's comic treatment of the sad events and the feudal pretensions of the narrative serves to make them the object of laughter. In doing so, Ford detaches the reader's experience from what Dowell has intended to produce: the (emotional) impressions he attempts to convey are, through Ford's comic treatment, subjected to a critical rather than a sympathetic appraisal.

First, then, I will critically resituate the key term of discussion, comedy, as a 'serious' element of the novel. My point of departure is that previous critical readings of *The Good Soldier* have considered its comic elements only as entertainment; I will argue that an accurate reading of the novel depends on understanding this comedy as a destructive and critical force, one that is fundamentally abrasive to the central emotional conceits of Dowell's narrative (love, feudal virtue, sadness). This interpretation of 'serious comedy' will contextualize a reading of *The Good Soldier* with critical interpretations of laughter and comedy by Aristotle and Baudelaire, in order to out the quality of erosiveness that I have cited as fundamental to Fordian comedy.

I will then turn to close readings of several sections of the novel, in order to show how Ford uses the destructive quality of laughter to undermine what appear to be serious, central values or mores of Dowell's narrative. This reading and its theoretical context will illuminate the function of comedy in *The Good Soldier* at its most radical: an absolute undermining of Dowell's claims that his narrative is "the Saddest Story," which puts the novel's function as emotionally

compelling narrative—or as Impressionist narrative—completely in question. Finally, I will briefly consider the implications of this comedy for *The Good Soldier* as a novelistic project. What does Ford accomplish with the comic destruction of Dowell's serious novelistic enterprise? Does Dowell's narrative still produce some tragic sensibility in its reader, despite the laughter it provokes?

It may already be objected that to consider *The Good Soldier*' comedy as fundamentally serious is too great an interpretive liberty. On the face of it, the humor in *The Good Soldier* appears primarily in off-the-cuff, 'entertaining' comic passages. Are these not attached only spuriously to the 'real structure' of the novel? In such an interpretive system, the 'serious' events of the novel would constitute the real argument of the text and be read *independently* of the humor that pops up at its margins—and the tone of Dowell's narration only encourages such an interpretative choice, as Dowell uses comedy precisely to gloss over the gaps or aesthetically galling moments in his narrative.

Here, however, author and narrator must be clearly distinguished. Does Ford really share Dowell's proposition—that is, is Ford's use of humor intended merely to entertain, distract, and cover up the untidy margins of the work? My wager is that he does not—that Ford ultimately associates Dowell with this use of humor as entertainment, while he detaches his authorial position from that relationship in order to take a far more critical position.

Nevertheless, the idea that Ford used comedy merely for entertainment—merely to invite his reader comfortably into the text and win his admiration—is not without substance. Perennially in search of success with the reading public, and perennially in need of income from

book sales, Ford developed a mania for entertainment, manifested in a constant, overwhelming use of both melodrama and humor when writing in his own voice.<sup>18</sup>

Thus in Ford's own literary voice, both comedy and sadness are subsumed to the general necessity of interesting, entertaining, or captivating the reader—a necessity that springs from Ford's desire, both emotional and financial, for broad public success. In *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*, he writes that

We agreed on this axiom:  
The first business of Style is to make work interesting: the second business of Style is to make work interesting: the third business of Style to make work interesting: the fourth business of Style is to make work interesting: the fifth business of Style ....  
Style, then, has no other business (80).

Ford shows an ironic sensibility in his mock-personification of “Style,” for his argument is precisely that Style is invested in 'business,' that Style is used to attract the attention, the interest, and—Ford wished—eventually the goodwill of the reader. Humor is one of the many techniques that this type of style uses to keep the reader's attention, and it appears often as one of the lowest of them, a sort of cringing stand-in when good writing is no longer possible and Ford attempts a sort of comic banter with the reader.

The assumption that comedy serves only to entertain—which Ford advanced in his critical work, though not, I will argue, in *The Good Soldier* itself—has been the fundamental assumption of critical readers who discuss *The Good Soldier* as comedy. It provided the interpretative foundation of Mark Schorer's analysis “Comedy and *The Good Soldier*” (1948), the article which introduced the 'comic reading' of *The Good Soldier* as a critical principle for understanding the novel. The effect of Schorer's contribution a half-century later is the self-

---

<sup>18</sup> To follow a strict differentiation between author and narrator, it is Dowell's—not Ford's—sense of humor that appears in the *The Good Soldier*. “On Impressionism,” however, provides excellent examples of Ford's use of humor as a way to cozy up with his reader.

evidence of the novel's comic element, or in Schorer's words, the idea that *The Good Soldier* is a "great work of comic irony" (305); but this self-evidence has come at the price of criticism that 'takes comedy seriously.' In a word, Schorer's decision to consider *The Good Soldier* merely ironic, and not treat it on the level of criticism, has limited critics—however sophisticated their analysis might be—to consider the novel merely as entertainment, never as a more 'serious' thesis on modern narrative and its inability to convey human affairs—love, conflict, tragedy—with dignity.

It is worth at least a brief consideration of this critical text. Schorer writes: "As in most great works of comic irony, the mechanical structure of *The Good Soldier* is controlled to a degree nothing less than taut, while the structure of meaning is almost blandly open, capable of limitless refractions" (305). Schorer has only here introduced the idea that *The Good Soldier* is a work "of comic irony;" and yet already a great deal of ground has been covered—perhaps so much that the apparent self-evidence of his terminology has not been explored. In effect, Schorer skips straight from classification ("As in most works") to the question of the novel's meaning ("almost blandly open, capable of limitless refractions"), where he finds the dizzying moral confusion that results from Ford's introduction of comedy into—in Benjaminian terms—the fate-novel.

But is *The Good Soldier*, as Schorer writes, simply a work of 'comic irony?' Irony, after all, depends on a clean detachment between the author and the ironic claim: the humor value is precisely that the author is not present where he claims to be. As has been shown, Ford and Dowell have a considerably more complex relationship: Dowell is, like Ford, an enthusiast of feudal culture; he shares Ford's sensibility for tragedy; and he, like Ford, is an Impressionist



writer. Indeed, the whole sense of *The Good Soldier* is lost if one considers ironic detachment as the only form of comedy: it is precisely Ford's own penchant for the tragic that is at play in Dowell. Thus *The Good Soldier* is not simply comedy for comedy's sake: at stake in Ford's portrait of Impressionist writing—in his portrait of Dowell, that is to say—is the question of whether Ford's own writing could transform human life into literary tragedy.

Thus Schorer's error was to consider the term comedy itself excessively self-evident. He has identified *The Good Soldier* as a comedy, yet without a strict definition of comedy; and thus while his analysis criticism succeeds in a sort of raw classification by genre, it fails to illuminate the real sense or effect of Ford's use of the comic. Could *The Good Soldier* employ comedy in a far more serious way—as a critique of the ability of modern narrative to present any compelling, meaningful story—than the lightness of literary irony?

Thus the lack of specificity in Schorer's text on comedy is a point of departure for a far more active reading of the function of comedy in the novel. Let us suppose an alternate thesis: that the comedy of *The Good Soldier* is not in the least expendable but goes to the heart of what is 'serious' in the novel. It is in comedy that the failure of Dowell's narration to transform Edward, Leonora, and Florence into tragic characters—characters over whose fates we might feel sorrow. Precisely at the moment we begin to feel this sorry, their ridiculousness becomes apparent; and it is that ridiculousness that is at the heart of the comic.

In order to reframe this discussion of comedy, then, I would like to replace Schorer's fundamental assumption—that comedy, as entertainment, amuses by showing something intrinsically positive or 'happy'—with a negative definition of comedy, one that points to its dependence on ridiculousness, weakness, or aesthetic lapse as the source of laughter.

Aristotle's brief treatment of comic in the *Poetics* provides an opening for this redefinition. Aristotle insists strongly upon the importance of ugliness or lowness in comedy. Indeed for him it is the central or definitive element: "Poetry then became subdivided, according to the character proper to each kind of poet: serious people imitated fine actions and the actions of good men, whereas more ordinary people imitated the actions of inferior men" (414-15). The former—the imitation of the good and the beautiful—became tragedy, and the latter—the imitation of the low and the ugly—became comedy.

What is the importance of this ugliness? At the heart of laughter in Aristotle's definition is a certain disgusting or repulsive quality. In focusing precisely on this quality, then, comedy does a certain damage to its subject. *The Good Soldier*, as much as Greek comedy, is fundamentally concerned with what is wrong or deformed in its characters. In representing precisely that ugliness, comedy bars these characters from what Aristotle calls mimesis and what Benjamin calls the 'warmth of a stranger's fate': a character cannot be at once laughable and the object of profound association.

Nevertheless, Aristotle's main discussion in *Poetics* is of course of tragedy, and he dismisses comedy's imitation of ugliness, though harmful, as fundamentally unimportant. He writes:

As we said above, comedy is an imitation of inferior things and people. They are not absolutely bad, however; the point is that the laughable is part of the ugly. It is a sort of mistake, an ugliness that does not give pain or cause destruction. For example, the comic mask is something ugly and distorted, but causes no pain.

In essence, comedy poses no threat here. It does erode the value or nobility of its own subject as with the "ugly and distorted" mask; but that subject—"the actions of inferior men"—has already been lacking in value and nobility. There is thus no *loss* from the distortion of the comic: the

comic “causes no pain” because it shows the ugliness only of *that which is already low*, and never turns its gaze to what is held in esteem.

The destructive effect of comedy is thus perceptively noted by Aristotle; but he also holds it essentially *unimportant* because of the strict genre delineation between tragedy and comedy. Comedy imitates low actions and represents their ugliness; tragedy imitates “fine actions and the actions of good men” and represents their noble qualities. Because of this delineation between the two, tragedy is protected from the erosive effects of comedy's tendency to make its characters repulsiveness. It is the firm separation of genres, the careful investiture of the comic into the ritual and practice of comedy, that protects tragedy from coming face to face with the laughable. The comic mask can thus indeed be said to “cause no pain,” because the ugliness it shows is always expected, delimited, temporary. It is in a word “not absolutely bad”: comedy for Aristotle is never absolute, never intrudes into the general sense of life, but reserved in the sphere of the contingent, the temporary, the 'low.'

Thus Aristotle does not even need to articulate a concern that the comic might intrude into the tragic. Happy to avoid doing so: the involuntary intrusion of the comic into the tragic—or the escape of the comic from the delimited into the general—would bring a fundamental *tremblement* into his system of poetics. If “the actions of good men” are represented as a model for the lives of the audience, the intrusion of laughter does not only destroy the aesthetic effect of that representation but its *purpose* as well.

This point cannot be overstated. It is not merely that, if made comic, tragedy loses its tactical gains and must start over. Too much has already invested too much in the tragic to sacrifice it so freely: the actions of tragic heroes, if made laughable, do not merely cease to be a

didactic model, but go farther and become a source of horror.<sup>19</sup> This is one of the real effects of comedy in *The Good Soldier* then: the investment that Dowell has made in the importance, the value, and the sadness of its characters comes crashing down with the introduction of the comic, and the reader is mired in the pathos of tragic characters who are only laughable.

This strangely permanent horror comes from the sudden erasure of all investment made in the tragic. For Aristotle, tragedy consists most importantly of an *identification* with the actions of good men: when those actions suddenly become laughable, it is one's own identification with them that must be cut off or abandoned. It is for this reason that Bergson writes that “Il semble que le comique ne peut produire son ébranlement qu'à la condition de tomber sur une surface d'âme bien calme, bien unie ... Le rire n'a pas de plus grand ennemi que l'émotion” (*Le rire*, 3)<sup>20</sup>: the comic, when it is read 'safely'—as entertainment—depends for the reader's protection on the absolute separation between reader and comic subject. What dies absolutely in the comic is an identification with the subject of comedy: it is one's attachment, in Aristotle's language, to 'the good' and to 'the noble' that is sacrificed when one laughs at them.

This reading of Aristotle has already, however, gone as far as it can. Indeed, in forcing Aristotle's genre classifications to extend out of their natural domain in order to formulate the intrusion of comedy into the tragic, I have already taken his ideas significantly *à l'oblique*. To go farther it is necessary to move to a theorization of the comic that interests itself precisely in this involuntary intrusion and the damage it causes, a theorization which focuses *precisely* on the 'pain' that Aristotle holds absent from comedy, and one which, in the place of fixed genre-

<sup>19</sup> It is for this reason that Edward does not ever become—though we might prefer it—a simple comic buffoon. Instead his lowness does not merely amuse: there is a quality of fascination mixed with the horror he produces. If there is at the close of *The Good Soldier* thus a kind of tragedy, it is the tragedy of Edward's comicalness—the purely literary tragedy that the tragic hero cannot exist.

<sup>20</sup> 'It seems that the comic cannot produce its *ébranlement* [shaking, cf. *tremblement*] except on the condition of falling upon the surface of a fully calm and unified soul ... Laughter has no greater enemy than emotion.'

delimitation, insists precisely on *tremblement*—on the intersection between sadness and comedy that Ford brings about in *The Good Soldier*.

The exemplary text for this *tremblement*, then, is Baudelaire's *De l'essence du rire*: it is precisely in Baudelaire that one meets with the juncture of the bohemian—the figure of modern tragedy—and the restlessness of a comic sensitivity that does not allow for tragic sentiment; and on the link between ugliness and comedy, Baudelaire finds himself strikingly close to Aristotle. He writes:

Chose curieuse et vraiment digne d'attention que l'introduction de cet élément insaisissable du beau jusque dans les œuvres destinées à représenter à l'homme sa propre laideur morale et physique !<sup>21</sup>

Baudelaire's articulation of the comic shares an essential idea with Aristotle's: he describes comedy as fundamentally concerned with a depiction of ugliness—or to go slightly further, with the effort to find and *portray* the ugliness at the heart of the comic subject and its lofty pretensions. This, in brief, is the 'damage' done in comedy: comic representation takes a subject with pretensions to seriousness and introduces it: “Adventavit asinus, / Pulcher et fortissimus.”<sup>22</sup> In doing so, whatever value that might have been held suffers an absolute loss of their gravity. Here we begin to understand, perhaps, why Ford's perception of his own ridiculousness in Squerries Park only increased his misery: once his tragic performance had become comic, it was his ability to experience sorrow over his loss itself that was lost.

Baudelaire departs firmly from Aristotle, however, when he writes that comedy 'is destined to represent to man his own moral and physical ugliness,' rather than 'the moral and physical ugliness of others.' The latter is in essence Aristotle's claim when he writes of 'the

<sup>21</sup> ‘A curious and truly attention-worthy thing, the appearance of this elusive element of the beautiful even in those works destined to represent to man his own moral and physical ugliness' (334).

<sup>22</sup> “The ass arrived, beautiful and most brave.” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 15; translation given by Kaufmann.)

actions of low men:' comedy causes laughter, for Aristotle, over an ugliness that is entirely exterior to and *absolutely separated from* the viewing subject. Baudelaire insists instead on the firm connection between the reader and the subject of laughter: one's laughter is, for Baudelaire, always being turned inward; and the damage it does is never external or violent, but instead personal, infinitesimal, absolute.

How does this damage subtly return, then, from the object toward which comedy is directed back to the one who has laughed at it? Let us consider Baudelaire's very concrete example:

Pour prendre un des exemples les plus vulgaires de la vie, qu'y a-t-il de si réjouissant dans le spectacle d'un homme qui tombe sur la glace ou sur le pavé, qui trébuche au bout d'un trottoir, pour que la face de son frère en Jésus-Christ se contracte d'une façon désordonnée, pour que les muscles de son visage se mettent à jouer subitement comme une horloge à midi ou un joujou à ressorts ?<sup>23</sup>

In Baudelaire's example, we seem at first to find the most common example, not of comedy, but of tragedy: a man falls on the sidewalk, 'at the very least disfigured, perhaps having broken a vital limb.' The one who sees the fall—the falling man's equal as his 'brother in Jesus Christ,' and who could easily be the one who falls—should by all rights experience sorrow: in the brief story he sees elapse, it is the image of himself who is injured. Without being physically injured by the other man's fall, then, he should nevertheless feel *for* him. In Baudelaire's account, then, a 'good reader'—one who does not laugh—is defined by his ability to sympathize with tragic events, even those on the smallest scale.

And yet laughter breaks out. The man has, after all, only stumbled; and it seems—from Baudelaire's evidently hyperbolic account of broken limbs and disfigurements—that the source

<sup>23</sup> 'To take one of life's most lowly examples, what is so amusing in the sight of a man who falls on ice or over a cobblestone, who trips at the end of a sidewalk, that the face of his brother in Jesus Christ should contract wildly, that the muscles of his face should begin suddenly to play like a clock at noon, like a jack-in-the-box?' (341).

of this laughter is the onlooker's disbelief that something truly injurious has occurred. Or better, his unwillingness to believe in that injury: laughter bursts out at the moment that the onlooker, unmoved by the fallen man's injury, is utterly detached from the sympathy that he should feel.

Who, then, is injured by the onlooker's laughter? Not, it seems, the one who has fallen: his concerns are with his more immediate and more physical injury, to which laughter has little relation. Rather it is for the one who participates only from a distance—who suffers loss only, we could say, only insofar as he identifies himself with the man who falls in the drama played out before him—that something is lost. At the moment he laughs at the man's error in failing to see a raised cobblestone, he loses his ability to experience—to invest himself into—the man's pain.

Comedy thus necessarily blocks the reader's ability to associate with and to experience tragedy: in identifying the 'ugliness' of the comic subject and thus separating him from the reader—or forcing the reader to disown him—comedy makes the fundamental associative act of tragic reading impossible.

In the brief excerpt from Mizener's biography of Ford that appeared in the introduction to this text, it is the same comedy that interrupts Garnett's ability to experience or sympathize with Ford's moment of melancholy. Garnett is struck by the incongruity when Ford pauses to check his watch; and at the moment that he notes this comic sense in Ford's actions he is cut off from tragic sentiment.

Thus Baudelaire and Ford find themselves in accord here on one particularly fundamental point: real comedy is not, in its most proper sense, a purely literary game. Instead, it is necessarily a lived experience: the reader of a ridiculous tragedy is forced to laugh; it is this laughter that cuts him off from the text and denies him the possibility of sympathy or investment

with its claims to tragedy. Comedy thus stands between the reader and the experience of tragedy—and as the example of Ford's melancholy in the park showed, this experience is not necessarily literary. Just Ford attempts to identify the fundamental sadness in his own life, his awareness of his own ridiculousness as he checks the time cuts him off from doing so. It is for this reason that Baudelaire writes that the comic is “destined to represent to man his own moral and physical ugliness:” it stands in the way of experiencing sadness by pointing out what is mundane, what sticks out, what resists tragic depiction.

It is for this reason that Benjamin's theorization of the novel—a theorization that depends on the deeply personal relationship between reader and character—is so well-juxtaposed with Baudelaire's idea of the comic. What is lost, for Baudelaire, is all that is won from the novel by the reader: it is “the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about” (101) that is absolutely lost when the novelistic character is made laughable.

It is this discovery—that comedy profoundly undermines the possibility of experiencing tragedy—that Dowell will make in *The Good Soldier*. Overwhelmed with the melancholy of “the Saddest Story,” he finds that finds that comedy is the only way to *escape* the overwhelming sadness of his narrative. This is a barely-stated tenet of Dowell's writing: his dependence on comedy to smooth over the incongruities of his narrative and to ward off maudlin sadness at its most overwhelming is omnipresent, yet almost never acknowledged.

But in one of his most illuminating moments—almost buried in the text—Dowell explains the meaning of the comic treatment that appears so consistently in his narrative. “Forgive my writing of these monstrous things in this frivolous manner,” he writes; “If I did not I should break down and cry” (47). What more diabolic admission? What more surprising claim,



from the narrator of “the Saddest Story,” that he wishes to separate himself from sadness and retreat into the security of the ironic?

At the heart of what is shocking here is the realization that the comic tone in Dowell's writing—a tone which until now I have considered involuntary, *undesirable*, accidental—might properly termed a *strategy* in Dowell's narrative treatment. I had argued that the incongruities and disproportions of Dowell's attempt to transform Edward Ashburnham simply rise to the point of uncontainability and burst out into the text. And yet—even if it is not Ashburnham that he treats comically—is it not Dowell who has unleashed the forces of self-awareness, of separation, of un-tragedy?

Dowell is not alarmed at the outset, of course, by the anesthetic effects of laughter—using laughter to avoid excessive tragic emotion was after all his idea. And this carefree anesthesia would work, indeed, in a less careful reading: humorous moments offer themselves to be read over quickly, and it is precisely *because they are not to be taken seriously* that they are amusing. Like Baudelaire's onlooker, laughter is an escape from the unpleasantness of sorrow—and it is only much later that this laughter will be seen to impede, not only sorrow at that moment, but the very core of narrative tragedy.

Ford, however, refuses to let this failure of humor be glossed over. The longer a humorous moment is considered, the less productive of real laughter it becomes, but the more profoundly it seems to put the Dowell's fundamental assumptions—on feudal aesthetics, love, virtue—into question. Let us consider, then, a few moments where comedy appears—intentionally, it seems—in *The Good Soldier*, in order to show how Dowell critiques or comically 'deflates' the pretensions or postures of the other characters. The first—the easiest, perhaps—is

his portrayal of Florence:

I fancy his wife's irony did quite alarm poor Teddy; because one evening he asked me seriously in the smoking-room if I thought that having too much in one's head would really interfere with one's quickness in polo. It struck him, he said, that brainy Johnnies generally were rather muffs when they got on to four legs. I reassured him as best I could. I told him that he wasn't likely to take in enough to upset his balance. At that time the Captain was quite evidently enjoying being educated by Florence. She used to do it about three or four times a week under the approving eyes of Leonora and myself. It wasn't, you understand, systematic. It came in bursts. It was Florence clearing up one of the dark places of the earth, leaving the world a little lighter than she had found it. She would tell him the story of Hamlet; explain the form of a symphony, humming the first and second subjects to him, and so on; she would explain to him the difference between Armenians and Erastians; or she would give him a short lecture on the early history of the United States. And it was done in a way well calculated to arrest a young attention. Did you ever read Mrs. Markham? Well, it was like that ..." (33-34).

Here Ford is pursuing a number of comic threads within the same passage. One is a mockery of Edward's character—Dowell, we can assume, is engaging in hyperbole to an extent when he writes that Edward was worried over the possible effect of a few historical tidbits on his polo game; but the hyperbole is effective comically because its exaggeration points to a certain truth, the preoccupation of the 'sporting type' with physical ability to the neglect of intellectual pursuits. But Ford simultaneously subtly undermines the intellectual as well: the 'education' that Florence is giving Edward "under the approving eyes of Leonora and myself" is of course a double-entendre for the physical component of Edward and Florence's affair, and thus the supposed intellectualism that would detract from Edward's polo game is really another bodily pursuit. "Education" is dealt a particularly harsh blow: on the one hand it is almost visibly put in scare-quotes by the sexual metaphor, and on the other by the comparison of Florence's actual lessons to the Mrs. Markham books<sup>24</sup>.

Through the wordplay at work here, then, Ford gives a more complex critique of

---

<sup>24</sup> In a footnote, the Norton editor Martin Stannard describes Mrs. Markham the "writer of superficial history books for children" (34).

Florence's worldview. The central point of Florence's character is her dedication to *improvement*, given here as her drive toward “clearing up one of the dark places of the earth, leaving the world a little lighter than she had found it.” Yet this “clearing up” is entirely disingenuous: her real interest is *creating* a “dark place of the earth,” because it is precisely her affair with Edward that she wishes to keep hidden. What is really 'sickening,' to use a Fordian term, is that Ford establishes that Florence is not merely using 'education and improvement' as a pretext. If her act were merely instrumental, a sort of 'decoy morality' covering up her real motives, her character could even be called noble—in another context—for its dedication to romantic love. But instrumental it is not: 'education and improvement' sets the entire tone of Florence's relationship to Edward, because their sexual relationship, Ford has established, occurs precisely under the sign of 'education.'

Comedy here thus quickly advances from its entry-point, word-play, to show Dowell's absolute detachment from sympathy with his wife. Along the way, as the depth of the comic increases, its practical humor value is overtaken by its more significant destructive force. The entry-point of this passage—Ford's innuendo on education—is earnestly amusing; and yet the closer the passage is read, the less it inspires outward laughter and the more thoroughly it undermines Florence's moral system and self-representation. At the close it is only bitterly—that is to say, not in the least amusingly—funny: Florence's value to Dowell, we might choose to put it, has been absolutely lost.

In a second passage, we begin to move closer—that is to say, Dowell's comic disavowals and disattachments move closer—to the heart of Dowell's own convictions. Here it is Edward's self-articulation that comes in for critique. In the passage, Edward has met a Spanish dancer, La

Dolciquita, at a casino, slept with her, and in short order “discovered that he was madly, was passionately, was overwhelming in love with her” (106). La Dolciquita, more reasonable, asks for a “perfectly reasonable” hundred thousand dollars to continue the arrangement, and Edward, wrapped up in his fantasies of love, is inconsolable:

Edward went mad; his world stood on its head; the palms in front of the blue sea danced grotesque dances. ... She had once been his mistress, he reflected, and, by all the moral laws she ought to have gone on being his mistress or at the very least his sympathetic confidante. But her rooms were closed to him; she did not appear in the hotel. Nothing: blank silence. To break that down he had to have twenty thousand pounds. ...

He spent a week of madness; he hungered; his eyes sank in; he shuddered at Leonora's touch. I daresay that nine tenths of what he took to be his passion for La Dolciquita was really discomfort at the thought that he had been unfaithful to Leonora. He felt uncommonly bad, that is to say—oh, unbearably bad, and he took it all to be love. Poor devil, he was incredibly naif (107).

Edward—naïve and even childish as he is—imagines himself deeply, 'truly' in love with La Dolciquita. And were Dowell a less sensitive (a more 'faithful') chronicler, he might accept that self-assessment, depicting Edward's affair with the dancer as a compelling instance of sudden, selfless, romantic love.

But instead, Dowell is all too aware of Edward's personal history, and his narrative Edward's attraction to La Dolciquita, contextualized with the legions of his other affairs, is trivialized. Edward is, we imagine, unconscious of the comic contradiction in a would-be courtly lover who imagines himself to be in love with his social inferiors—and is not not even content to romanticize one Dulcinea, but instead projects his romantic fantasies onto each one he meets. Dowell, however, is entirely aware of these contradictions: indeed, it is his telling that emphasizes the comic deflation of Edward's romantic pretensions through hyperbole.

Thus what Edward perceives as real misery is, for Dowell, silly and weightless: his

conclusion that Edward “felt uncommonly bad, that is to say—oh, unbearably bad” bears the clear signs, in its tepid equivalence between the casual ('uncommonly') and the romantic ('unbearably') articulations of Edward's sadness, of simple comic detachment. Edward's tragedy is cliché for Dowell, and thus he does not feel whatever real pain is involved for Edward. Once again, then, 'the Saddest Story' is, for its narrator, absolutely devoid of tragic experience.

But both of these examples, it is clear, have been fundamentally minor instances of the destructive effect of laughter upon seriousness or sadness in *The Good Soldier*. In the first case—the most lightly treated—it is Florence's self-representation that is problematized by the humor in Dowell's description; in the second, it is Edward's idea of romance and self-idealization as a romantic suitor that Dowell's comic awareness renders untenable. In both cases, Dowell's ability to see the comic disjunctions or disproportions makes them laughable; but little loss comes to Dowell from it, because it is not his own belief-system—or his own experience of sorrow—that is put into question. In brief, what does it matter to Dowell if Edward's sorrow or Florence's sorrow is laughable, so long as the emotional reality proper to *him* is not made laughable?

Nevertheless, we see Dowell's comfortable separation from this comedy be increasingly shaken the closer it approaches to his own position. Indeed, his ability to take this comedy truly lightly depends on his distance from the character in question. Florence—for whom Dowell has the most intense dislike—is an easy subject for comedy: Dowell's distance from her is such that, in the Baudelairean scheme, he hardly feels the damage done in making her laughable, and the comic depiction is simply tossed off in his writing. In Ashburnham's case, considerably more time is spent in the representation; and it seems as though, even despite himself, Dowell feels a certain pain at the realization that Ashburnham's affairs are no high romance, but mere burlesque.

What happens, then, when Dowell's own experience of loss—when the ruination of his social circle, the essentially instantaneous disappearance of the whole context of his adult life—becomes subject to appreciation as comic? That is to say: if Dowell so swiftly perceives the failures, clichés, or misrepresentations in Florence's and Edward's self-pity, will he be able to experience his own? It is here—at the moment Dowell makes his own investment in the text subject to the comic—that laughter returns, as Baudelaire has predicted, upon its originator. Dowell's dedication to the idea of the text's sadness—a dedication that may, it seems, be his only motivation in writing the text—will be put into question at the moment his losses are, like the fallen man's injuries, considered merely laughable.

It is thus at the very close of the text—the Fordian 'masterstring'—that tragedy reaches its most intense pitch, and where laughter bursts out in its place. This moment comes as Edward prepares to commit suicide—first because of his failure to satisfy Leonora; then because of his inability to pursue Nancy; and finally because of his remorse for the death of Florence. His mind, Ford suggests, is full of tepid literary allusions appropriate for the moment:

Well, Edward was the English gentleman; but he was also, to the last, a sentimentalist, whose mind was compounded of indifferent poems and novels. He just looked up to the roof of the stable, as if he were looking to Heaven, and whispered something that I did not catch.

Then he put two fingers into the waistcoat pocket of his grey, frieze suit; they came out with a little neat pen-knife—quite a small pen-knife. He said to me:

'You might just take that wire to Leonora.' And he looked at me with a direct, challenging, brow-beating glare. I guess he could see in my eyes that I didn't intend to hinder him. Why should I hinder him? I didn't think he was wanted in the world, let his confounded tenants, his rifle-associations, his drunkards, reclaimed and unreclaimed, get on as they liked. Not all the hundreds and hundreds of them deserved that that poor devil should go on suffering for their sakes.

When he saw that I did not intend to interfere with him his eyes became sort and almost affectionate. He remarked:

'So long, old man, I must have a bit of rest, you know.'

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to say, 'God bless you', for I also am a

sentimentalist. But I thought that perhaps that would not be quite English good form, so I trotted off with the telegram to Leonora. She was quite pleased with it (162).

Here, then, is where Dowell should most like to break down into an overwhelming sorrow. In Edward's death, all the sadnesses in the novel—the failure at romance, the failure at marriage, the failure at soldiery—are once more restated; and Edward's death signifies the final irreversibility of their existence, the reality that for Dowell nothing, not even his friend's life, will be spared. That is to say, it is here that he should like, with Bertran de Born, to claim an experience of real, irreparable loss:

Estouta Mortz, plena de marrimen,  
 Vanar to potz quel melhor chavalier  
 As tolt al mon qu'anc fos de nula gen,  
 Quar non es res qu'a pretz aia mestier  
 Que tot no fos el jove rei engles.<sup>25</sup>

The experience of loss and death should be tragic for Dowell, and his description of them should be able to produce the same experience of tragedy in the reader. And yet what is lost—not only in Edward's death, but in Florence's as well, and in Nancy's madness, and in Dowell's estrangement from Leonora, all of which Edward's death represents as the final, climactic event of the plot—is his connection to the network of subjects that, through the whole length of the novel, he has carefully, minutely, irreparably treated with mockery. What is lost to Dowell then—simply to take him at his word—is nothing: in treating the other characters only as comic figures,

---

<sup>25</sup> Proud Death, full of grief,  
 Boast well you may that the best knight [*chavalier*]  
 Have taken from the world that ever was in any people,  
 For no thing exists of value  
 That did not belong solely to the young English king.  
 Pound's rendering:  
 O skilful Death and full of bitterness,  
 Well mayst thou boast that thou the best chevalier  
 That any folk e'er had, hast from us taken;  
 Sith nothing is that unto worth pertaineth  
 But had its life in the young English King.

Dowell has bound himself to represent their downfall not with tears but with laughter.

This is the reason, then, that the final lines of the text are so utterly unproductive of emotion for the reader. Of the moment that Edward's farewell might allow him some final poetic send-off to their friendship, Dowell can write only that "I didn't know what to say." He gives a token acknowledgment to what has become a mere pretext of emotionality, but waves it away ("I thought that perhaps that would not be quite English good form") with the lightness that only absolute disattachment—only the absolute lack of feeling—can provide. Finally, he writes, he "trotted off with the telegram:" it is no funeral march with which the text ends, but a caper away from death and away from somberness.

Dowell's originary decision to venture into the comic, then, inexorably undermines his attempt to find some kind of sadness—and some meaning—within the story. Comedy, far from producing 'entertainment' or 'distraction,' points precisely to what is serious and unnerving in *The Good Soldier*: the failure of Dowell's representation of 'The Saddest Story' to inspire admiration, empathy, or sadness. Fordian comedy is profoundly erosive to the attempt to produce these emotions in the reader—and the production of these emotions is the essential task of the Impressionism. Comedy thus seems to burst out unbidden in Impressionist writing: it is precisely where the most heavy-handed, maudlin sadness is insisted upon that laughter appears, and this laughter ruins the emotional effect absolutely.

Thus what is suggested, before the close of *The Good Soldier*, is an essential damage done to the possibility of modernist narrative. Dowell—for all that his narrative has succeeded so little—is no thoughtless or ignorant writer; and the material he worked with—the incredible failure of his marriage, to say little of the suicide of his wife and of his closest friend—certainly



does not lack for tragic import. Yet precisely in moving toward this tragedy, Dowell arrives in the end only at the tragedy of a life lived, in retrospect, with no value and no loss, but only the ugliness shown in humor.

In this chapter, then, I have attempted to radically advance a reading of *The Good Soldier* as comedy by linking Ford's comic treatment of the novel's plot with theoretical arguments on the function of laughter and comedy. Through a close reading of Schorer's text, it is my argument that while his sensitivity to the novel's fundamental tone led him to the right conclusion in calling it a comedy, he fundamentally misunderstood the functioning of such a comedy. For Schorer, comedy is necessarily, in the end, light-hearted: its purpose is to entertain. My understanding of the role of the comic in *The Good Soldier* is absolutely different. As I proposed in the introduction, the failure of Dowell's narration to furnish its characters' lives with a compelling 'fatefulness' is the point of entry to a clear reading of *The Good Soldier*. Comedy is at the heart of this 'failure of fatefulness': it is because Dowell's aesthetic sensibilities lead him into ridiculousness that his narrative cannot be taken as "the Saddest Story." In essence the laughter that Dowell produces prevents his novel from being taken as a 'serious novel' or 'novel of fate' at all.

Aristotle's analysis, that laughter springs from a profound ugliness in the comic subject, does not go so far as to suggest a transference of this ugliness toward the one who laughs. Baudelaire, however, suggests precisely this: his text implies that in laughing, one risks the destruction of the value one holds in all else. Thus laughter is at its most dangerous when involuntary—and this, then, is the reason that Dowell's initial choice to treat tragic plot events

with humor returns at the close to fundamentally undermine his attempt to cast the story as a tragedy.

Through a close reading of the novel's several passages, I have shown how a 'Baudelairean reading' of *The Good Soldier* functions in practice—leading from Dowell's initial humorousness toward the eventual collapse of his tragic narrative into comedy. A glimpse of humor—as in a pun on 'education,' or in the dry understatement with which Dowell 'trots off' from Edward's suicide—is the marker of a discontinuity in the text, a moment where Dowell's attempt to portray the characters' motivations *in serio* fails to entirely function and, in response, tries to cover the gap with humor.

Ultimately, the further this gap is plumbed, the further down it goes: what a careful reading understands at the moment of Edward's suicide is the absolute lack of sadness that Dowell can convey—or even experience—at the moment that should be his greatest loss. This, then, is what Baudelaire suggests to a reading of *The Good Soldier*. It is in representing man's 'moral and physical ugliness' to himself that comedy decisively erodes the possibility of sadness—for when that sadness should ultimately be provoked by human loss, it is only the loss of the comically ugly that is felt; and that loss is, ultimately, one over which neither Dowell nor the reader can be brought to tears.

### Conclusion: Narrative, Comedy, Tragedy

*Otros han litigado sobre el nombre, diciendo que no se avía de llamar comedia, pues acabava en tristeza, sino que se llama tragedia. El primer autor quiso darle denominación del principio, que fue placer, y llamóla comedia. Yo viendo estas discordias, entre estos extremos partí agora por medio la porfía y llaméla tragicomedia.<sup>26</sup>*

Fernando de Rojas, introduction to *La Celestina*.

In the introduction to this text, I suggested that *The Good Soldier* cannot be adequately understood if it is taken simply as a narrative or 'story.' This narrative-dependent criticism, which I associate with Walter Benjamin's idea of novelistic 'fate,' has an enormous capacity for illumination. Yet *The Good Soldier* works precisely to put that sense of narrative into question: the emotional sympathy with its characters that the reader of conventional narrative should experience is absolutely unavailable to a sensitive reader of *The Good Soldier* because of the sudden intrusion of the comic into Dowell's apparently 'tragic' narrative.

If that claim is correct, then, the key to a reading of *The Good Soldier*—the key to an understanding of the complex ligature and distance between Ford and Dowell—is the mechanism of the comedy that intrudes into what would otherwise be a conventionally tragic novel. Where Dowell's narration aspires to be high and lofty, where it hopes to bring sadness into the heart of

<sup>26</sup> 'Others have disputed the name, saying that it wouldn't do to call it comedy, since it ended in sadness, but that instead it should be called tragedy. The original author wanted to name it for its intention, which was pleasure, and called it comedy. I, seeing these discords, have now set out between the two extremes, through the middle of the discord, and called it tragicomedy.'

its reader, is precisely where the sensitive reader spots cracks in its very seriousness—a seriousness which is the necessary foundation for any tragic text.

I opened this discussion of *The Good Soldier* with a consideration of Ford's theory of literary Impressionism. This text is marked, I argued, by an inarticulated but fundamental concern with the threat of laughter to the very possibility of experiencing tragedy in literature. Ford argues that a mass of detail—the practical technique of Impressionism—is necessary to convey the full force of an impression. Yet at the same moment, this technique poses a threat to its own function: excessive insistence on detail in a text that means to portray overwhelming human tragedy necessarily feels out of place, even comically so.

Ford attempts to resolve this contradiction with a moment of ultimate textual unification—the deployment of the 'Impressionist master-string—at which this detail is brought together into a sudden, sweeping experience of a single story or single impression. And yet when Ford gives an example of this tragic denouement in his miniature Impressionist 'story of Mr Jones,' what breaks out at the moment of conclusion is instead a sudden, fundamental comedy. The Impressionist focus on minutiae is so necessarily opposed to emotional affectation that its appearance at the heart of a tragic narrative renders it utterly ineffective. Thus at the close of a theory that intends to articulate a means of transferring or producing emotional impressions, it is not affective sadness but rather laughter that bursts out.

To consider the function of this comedy in *The Good Soldier* in practice, I then discussed the major narrative choice made by Dowell, his decision to draft Edward Ashburnham as the 'Good Soldier' following the model of the *Bon Chevalier* as a model of feudal virtue. There, by

insisting on the comparisons Dowell sets up between the two 'Good Soldiers,' it was my conclusion that Dowell's attempt at a poetic representation of Ashburnham—one that could also inspire tragic sympathy in its reader—ultimately brought itself into an untenable position through the overstatement of Ashburnham's soldierly qualities. Because of the inherent comedy of Dowell's attempt to make Edward a real feudal hero, the text breaks under the strain. The laughter produced when Dowell compares Edward's pony to a falling cat is the marker of the failure of his text's attempt to directly equate the modern with the feudal.

In the final chapter, then, I turned to a deeper theoretical consideration of the consequences of laughter, through a reading of analyses of laughter by Baudelaire and Aristotle, in order to determine precisely how the comic works to undercut or anesthetize the tragic elements of a text. My foundational claim was that previous readings of *The Good Soldier* have not gone far enough in elaborating the implications of its understanding of comedy: to consider the text merely as ironic or amusing does not allow for a reading of the serious significance of the novel as considered as a critique of emotive or 'meaningful' narrative.

The suggestion I advanced through these two theoretical readings, then, was that the 'serious comedy' at play in *The Good Soldier* necessarily causes a simultaneous damage to the 'worth' or 'value' of its subject. Aristotle and Baudelaire agree on the idea that comedy inspires laughter by indicating what is *ugly* in the comic subject; and thus my claim in reading *The Good Soldier* is that the comic passages describing Edward, Florence, Leonora, and even ultimately the whole totality of the plot tragedy point directly towards the flaws and *lack* of value there. This laughter, then, is the symptom of the reader's loss of the worth that Dowell hopes to associate with his characters; and without that necessary element of value, the novel's eventual outcome—

the demise of several of its characters—produces no feelings of tragic in the already-alienated reader.

At the farthest reach of this analysis, Baudelaire's text suggests a kernel of intentionality in Dowell's use of comedy. As Dowell himself notes, his comic sensibilities are a form of protection at excessively tragic moments; and thus it seems that the aesthetic integrity of his tragic depiction is first cracked at those moments—with regard to Florence, for instance—where he uses his own poetic hyperbole to suggest failings. It is this usage of comedy, an ultimately intentional one, that gets out of control and wrecks his project to inspire real sadness in the reader.

At the core of the novel, then, is an unwilling slippage from tentative into absolute comedy. In showing the comic implications of the other characters' self-articulations, Dowell allows the hint of a joke into his text; but that joke seems to move relentlessly toward what should be the heart of the text, his own assignment of value to the actions he narrates. With Ashburnham's death at the very close of the novel, I argued, comedy has done its work: at the moment Dowell should be most overcome with grief, he merely 'trots off' wordlessly, and his telling inspires not pity but only a troubling detachment in the reader.

The comedy of *The Good Soldier* thus comes in the end to destroy tragedy. The tragedy of the characters' actions—the element on which Dowell insists with the title “The Saddest Story”—produces no effect on the reader, for all the reasons that have been discussed: there is simply, at the close of Dowell's narrative, no character and no action for which the reader can feel regret. If *The Good Soldier* is an anti-Benjaminian novel, then, the conclusion must be that it is one from which the reader can draw no warmth. It is a novel that consigns us to the cold; and

thus Baudelaire's trembling, *tremblement*, becomes in the end *un frisson*, a shivering. Were one to put *The Good Soldier* in Fordian terms, here its very end, it would be a novel that—for all the labor of its Impressionist technique—can produce no sadness in its reader: it represents the grand failure of Impressionism and emotional sensibility in narrative.

And yet if we have reached the end of this novel narratively, technically, theoretically—if we are now situated in that space properly after the novel, the space in which our impressions of its final effect coalesce—is it not the moment for another, a retrospective, judgment on the novel that has been put behind us? That is to say: if we have come, through a complex and a contorted reading of the novel, to the point where tragedy has lapsed into comedy and our once-sadness for Dowell's loss has itself been lost to us—what is our judgment, then, on the loss of sadness and on the lapse of tragedy?

It seems that Baudelaire has a final suggestion, a point of departure perhaps for this after-reading. He writes:

Remarquez que c'est aussi avec les larmes que l'homme lave les peines de l'homme, que c'est avec le rire qu'il adoucit quelquefois son cœur et l'attire; car les phénomènes engendrés par la chute deviendront les moyens du rachat.<sup>27</sup>

What can be made of this curious claim, coming as it does from a text so profoundly pessimistic towards the effects of laughter, that it is in the moment *after* tragedy has been washed away by comedy that the two become accessible once again, almost as a restitution for the harm they have done? Is it too late to speak of redemption for a comic text?

This idea of redemption points us toward Baudelaire's most difficult—and most nearly

---

<sup>27</sup> 'And note as well that it is with tears that man washes away the sorrows of man, that it is with laughter that he soothes and entices his heart at times; for the phenomena engendered by the fall will become the means of the redemption.'

invisible—claim in the text, one which we have passed over too briefly:

Chose curieuse et vraiment digne d'attention que l'introduction de cet élément insaisissable du beau jusque dans les œuvres destinées à représenter à l'homme sa propre laideur morale et physique !<sup>28</sup>

In applying Baudelaire's text to *The Good Soldier*, we have considered only the second clause, that comedy is 'destined to represent to man his own moral and physical ugliness.' And yet according to Baudelaire, what appears in the ugliness indicated by comedy is—suddenly and unexpectedly—the experience of an 'elusive element of beauty.'

This beauty, of course, appears in hindsight. Baudelaire writes of the one who laughs “qu'il s'arrête au bord du rire,” qu'il “ne rit en tremblant,” qu'il “tremble d'avoir ri” (361-2).<sup>29</sup> This grammatical slippage into the perfect tense indicates that “De l'essence du rire” is a text written after the moment of laughter: it is written from a position of regret. The sadness one experiences in this text, then, is of the second order: it is the sadness that wells up at the moment comedy has already destroyed the reader's capacity for valuation itself, a sadness even for the loss of sadness itself.

Thus Baudelaire seems to suggest first a comedy of the tragic—the destruction of tragic sentiment in laughter—and only then a tragedy of comedy, an experience of the loss inherent in laughter sufficiently profound to constitute its own, perhaps even more authentic, moment of sadness. This, then, is Baudelaire's '*rachat*:' it is an experience of tragedy in the loss of tragedy, a last fleeting moment of loss at the moment when attachment itself seems to have disappeared.

Why have I turned back to Baudelaire so late in this consideration? Is there still a link here to Ford's novel, a text that, I have argued, has already absolutely sacrificed the possibility of

<sup>28</sup> ‘A curious and truly attention-worthy thing, the appearance of this elusive element of the beautiful even in those works destined to represent to man his own moral and physical ugliness’ (334).

<sup>29</sup> That ‘he stops on the threshold of laughter,’ ‘he laughs only in trembling,’ ‘he trembles to have laughed.’



the tragic?

Yet the possibility of redemption depends, perhaps, on that absolute abandonment. It strikes me that, in Baudelaire's sudden rediscovery of the tragic in the moment after its assumed loss, there is still something of surprising aptitude for a reading of *The Good Soldier*. Is there not at the very close—or even after the close—of Ford's text, a sudden remorse—not for the death of Ashburnham, but for the lack of sadness upon his death? That is, could the tragedy at the close of the novel be a tragedy of narrative—a tragedy not of the loss of Edward, but the loss even of the possibility of the Good Soldier?

I have argued that at the close of the novel, the reader's experience upon Edward's death is one of detachment. The attachment the reader should feel is absent, because through laughter the novel has succeeded in irretrievably devaluing its hero. (That is to say, here we have completed the first step of Baudelaire's two steps: tragedy and loss have been irreversibly undermined by laughter.) And yet precisely in this experience of detachment, the reader has lost something real, something palpable, even something vital. In not feeling the loss of the Good Soldier, what is denied to the reader is loss itself: the experience of tragedy is undone by the text's comedy.

Here, then, is Baudelaire's final move. What reaction can one have here when, for having laughed, even loss itself no longer occasions sadness? Can one, if the death of the Good Soldier is absolutely unlamentable, do anything *but* cry?

It seems, then, that the loss of the possibility of tragedy itself might even, at the end of day, be a more authentic experience of the tragic than the 'real' loss it recuperates. Should we weep as hard for the death of Edward as we do upon discovering that there is, in the end, no

Good Soldier at all?

And this, it seems, might even be the situation of poor Ford at Squerries Park. At the moment where tragedy *fails* in comedy, a second—perhaps even a deeper—tragedy breaks out: the tragedy of the failure of loss itself to occasion sadness. What was Ford really weeping for? His own career, the train he would miss, the melancholy songs he sang? Or could it not have been, at the close, his detachment from them all—and his own laughability in sorrow—for which he was crying in Squerries Park?

And thus it could be, perhaps, that Ford manages to stage precisely the redemption of the irretrievable that Baudelaire has so tenuously indicated—and that at or after its close, in spite of its own refusal, *The Good Soldier* ultimately turns back toward tragedy. For it is this second—and perhaps deeper—tragedy that is given to the reader in *The Good Soldier*.

## Bibliography

- Anonymous. *Lazarillo de Tormes*. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1987.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. "The Philosophy of Aristotle." 413-431. Trans. Wardman and Creed  
NY: Mentor Books, 1963.
- Baudelaire, Charles. "De l'essence du rire." *Curiosités esthétiques*. Paris: Alphonse  
Lemerre, 1890.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Story-teller." *Illuminations*. 83-109. Trans. Harry Zohn NY:  
Schocken, 1969.
- Bertrand de Born. "Si tuit li dol e·lh plor e·lh marrimen." *Poems of Bertrans de Born*.  
James H. Donalson, ed. Online, accessed via [brindin.com](http://brindin.com) 4/22/11.
- Bergson, Henri. *Le Rire*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947.
- Champier, Symphorien. *Les Gestes ensemble la vie du preulx Chevalier Bayard*. Paris:  
Imprimerie Nationale, 1992.
- De Mailles, Jacques. *La tresjoyeuse, plaisante et recreative Histoire, composée par le  
Loyal Serviteur, des faiz, gestes, triumphes et prouesses du Bon Chevalier sans  
paour et sans reprouche, le Gentil Seigneur de Bayart*. Paris: Foucault  
Librairie, 1827. E-text, accessed via [voltaire-integral.com](http://voltaire-integral.com) 2/12/11.
- . *Histoire du Bon Chevalier sans peur et sans reproche le seigneur de Bayard*.  
Camille Rousset, trans. Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1872.
- De Tocqueville, Alexis. *De la Démocratie en Amérique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1951.

- De Rojas, Fernando. *La Celestina*. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1987.
- Eliot, T.S. *The Sacred Wood*. Seventh ed. NY: Methuen, 1983.
- Madox Ford, Ford. *The Good Soldier*. NY: WW Norton, 1995.
- . “On Impressionism.” *Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*. 33-55. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1964.
- . *The Cinque Ports*. London: Blackwood and Sons, 1900. Google Book Search. Retrieved 4/22/11.
- Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso. “The Futurist Manifesto.” Trans. R.W. Flint. Apollonio, Umbro, ed. *Documents of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*. NY: Viking Press, 1973. 19-24.
- Mizener, Arthur. *The Saddest Story: A Biography of Ford Madox Ford*.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Walter Kaufmann, trans. NY: Random House, 1966.
- Paulhan, Jean. *Les fleurs de Tarbes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990.
- Pound, Ezra. “Planh for the Young English King.” *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*. 508. NY: Library of America, 2000.
- Shellabarger, Samuel. *The Chevalier Bayard*. NY: The Century Co., 1928.
- Schorer, Mark. “*The Good Soldier* as Comedy.” *The Good Soldier*. 305-310.
- Watts, Ian. “Impressionism and Symbolism in *Heart of Darkness*.” *Heart of Darkness*. 311-36. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. NY: W.W. Norton, 1988.