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THE GOOD SOLDIER: COMEDY OR TRAGEDY?

BARRY D. BORT

If the reputation of Ford Madox Ford suffered long because of undeserved neglect, the last few years have brought a genuine renewal of interest. Both *Parade's End* and *The Good Soldier* have been the subject of appreciative and intense criticism. The latter novel especially has provoked a stimulating variety of commentary. It seems to me, however, that criticism of this novel has failed to explain sufficiently the significance of the central figure in this novel, Edward Ashburnham. As a result, the novel's unique importance as an anatomy of the world of English society just before the first world war has not been brought clearly enough into focus.

The novel concerns the lives of four characters and their wanderings among the elegant resorts of Europe in the early years of this century. A wealthy American, Dowell, narrates the friendship he and his wife strike up with Florence and Edward Ashburnham and concentrate particularly on Ashburnham's uncontrollable need for other women. The narrator's wife, Florence Hurlbird, as well as Mrs. Basil and Mrs. Maidan, all succumb to his charm. Only the innocent, convent-raised Nancy Rufford manages to retain her chastity, although her attachment to Ashburnham is so strong that, upon hearing of his suicide, she goes mad.

At the novel's end, Dowell blandly contemplates his bleak prospects as the owner of the Ashburnham estate, charged with the keeping of the incurably insane Nancy.

Mark Schorer, in his perceptive essay printed at the beginning of the Knopf edition, emphasizes the novel's parodic quality. "For, finally, *The Good Soldier* describes a world that is without a moral point, a narrator who suffers from the madness of moral inertia."¹

Since Schorer's essay praising the comic genius of the novel, critics have stressed what they take to be the serious and even tragic implications of the story. Such an emphasis can only be managed by taking Dowell as a responsible narrator. Elliott B. Gose, Jr. for instance, says, ". . . he is an essentially honest if not very passionate person whose attitudes toward the characters and events with which he deals is in constant evolution as the novel progresses."²

But John A. Meixner makes the most closely argued case for the novel as a tragedy with Ashburnham as a tragic figure.

"The Good Soldier arouses in the reader the cathartic emotions of pity and awe at the spectacle of its admirable, greatly suffering protagonist overwhelmed by hard cruelty in so terrible and unfeeling a way."³

In view of the disagreement between

Schorer's essay and later commentaries it is important to state the case for Ashburnham. Seen in this light, Ashburnham appears to be the novel's only vigorous and positive figure. He becomes the moral nucleus, ministering to others, always willing to give them something of himself. Compared with the sexless Dowell, the unprincipled Florence, and the icy Leonora, he manifests an abundance of warmth which magnifies his importance, and the occasional appearance he gives of cruelty or foolishness is simply the natural outcome of his firm adherence to a code which has begun to seem out of date.

If this is so, then his shortcomings derive from a genuine expression of emotion, at times dammed up behind the reserve of an English gentleman. Although his affairs of the heart turn out, at times, to be disastrous for the women involved, this happens through no fault of his, but because of some weakness in the woman, intensified by the hostility of Leonora. In the tradition of his class, he values generosity above solvency. He believes in comforting the troubled, aiding the needy, and solacing the women who are drawn to him. He fails because Florence, Maisie Maidan, Leonora, and Nancy Rufford all demand more than any one man can give. Pure of heart and responsive to appeals, he finds no one who understands the depths of his selflessness except Dowell, and Dowell's reserve keeps him from communicating his sympathy.

Ashburnham's faults, then, may be seen as the excesses of his virtues. His generosity to his tenants threatens to undermine the security of his estate; his willingness to rescue soldiers, crazed by the heat of the Red Sea and intent upon suicide, endangers his own life;

his troubles with women stem from an emotion that Dowell approvingly terms "sentimental." "Sentimentality in fact is Edward's basic human weakness, his fatal flaw—even as, ironically, it is the source of much of his virtue." (p. 184) The tragic flaw, in other circumstances, might be a virtue. Hamlet, informed by Iago of his wife's guilt, would have delayed until her innocence was clear. Othello, after an interview with the ghost, would have quickly dispatched Cladius. By the same token, Ashburnham, in the permissive world of the eighteenth century, blessed with a secure estate and an understanding wife, would have made a success of his life.

If understanding Ashburnham in this way is valid, it is possible to agree with Meixner that ". . . he is an extremely impressive, noble figure. By no means a perfect man—the tragic protagonist never is—he is a good man who has never been guided by base motives." (p. 184)

The public Ashburnham makes a striking and admirable figure. His *largesse*, his sense of *noblesse oblige* are emphasized. Dowell seems full of unqualified admiration for him:

"Edward Ashburnham was the cleanest-looking sort of chap; an excellent magistrate, a first-rate soldier, one of the best landlords, so they said, in Hampshire, England. To the poor and to hopeless drunkards, as I myself have witnessed, he was like a painstaking guardian." His purity of mind is emphasized. "And he never more than once or twice in all the nine years of my knowing him told a story that couldn't have gone into the *Field*. He didn't even like hearing them." "Was it the important point about Edward that he was very well built, carried himself well, was moderate at the

table, and led a regular life—that he had, in fact, all the virtues that are usually accounted English?” (p.151)

But such a view of Ashburnham leaves too many problems unresolved. The case against Ashburnham is at least as strong as the case for the defense because the shadow of ambiguity lingers about his every action.

Dowell insists his story has wide ramifications as a chronicle of the destruction of a way of life. “Permanence? Stability! I can’t believe its gone.” (p. 6) And an accident of history—the novel’s composition on the eve of the First World War—seems to reinforce such claims.

“Someone has said that the death of a mouse from cancer is the whole sack of Rome by the Goths, and I swear to you that the breaking up of our little four-square coterie was such another unthinkable event. Supposing that you should come upon us sitting together at one of the little tables in front of the club house, let us say, at Homburg . . . you would have said that, as human affairs go, we were an extraordinarily safe castle.” (pp. 5-6)

Dowell is a man whose conception of the ideal life is one in which the surface of social decorum is unruffled, a world in which trains never miss connections.⁴ He recalls the happiness of two couples: “Upon my word, yes, our intimacy was like a minuet, simply because on every possible occasion and in every possible circumstance we knew where to go, where to sit, which table we unanimously should choose . . .” His great joy is developing plans “for a shock-proof world” (p. 49). This order of the surface is immensely soothing to him: it is his goal in life and though he can be deceived for a time about the relations between his wife and his ideal, Edward,

nonetheless the maintenance of the properties is his goal. And only when these are disturbed does he become uneasy.

Taken at face value Dowell appears to be comically obtuse, but he is a complex character.⁵ His interpretation of the events of the story (which is belied by the events themselves) comes from his pathological need for a “shock proof” world undisturbed by conflict. This ideal world he compares to a minuet. “The mob may sack Versailles; the Trianon may fall, but surely the minuet—the minuet itself is dancing itself away into the furthest stars, even as our minuet of the Hessian bathing places must be stepping itself still?” (p. 6) And he, like Edward, is a victim of self-delusion, insisting on the wonderful serenity of their foursome, yet still aware too of its actual horror. The result is an evaluation of his experience in two utterly contradictory ways. “My wife and I knew Captain and Mrs. Ashburnham as well as it was possible to know anybody, and yet, in another sense, we knew nothing at all about them.” (p. 3) Having seen the impossible tension between husband and wife that drove Edward to suicide he nonetheless can say, “For I swear to you that they were the model couple.” (p. 8) “You would have said that he was just exactly the sort of chap that you could have trusted your wife with. And I trusted mine—and it was madness.” (p. 11)

Edward is not a hypocrite, for if hypocrisy is, as La Rochefoucauld said, the homage that vice pays to virtue, such a definition implies evil making a formal obeisance to the good. But Edward, in his bumbling way, is never really aware of the cleavage be-

tween what he wants to be and what he is.

The ludicrous misapplication of generous impulse is comic. Speaking of the fine geniality of Ashburnham, Dowell says, "He was so presentable and quite ready to lend you his cigar-puncher—that sort of thing." (p. 62) Ashburnham's impulses are immediate and often amusingly inopportune. He impulsively gives a young man a horse whose keeping is beyond the young man's means. The charitable impulses of the other characters may be more calculated, but they too verge upon the ridiculous. Florence's uncle, for instance set out for a voyage to the South Seas and felt the necessity of having something with which to make small presents. He took "I don't know how many cases of oranges." (p. 18)

"For, to every person on board the several steamers that they employed, to every person with whom he had so much as a nodding acquaintance, he gave an orange every morning. . . . When they were at North Cape, even, he saw on the horizon, poor dear thin man that he was, a lighthouse. 'Hello,' says he to himself, 'these fellows must be very lonely. Let's take them some oranges.'" (p. 19)

His death raises even more charitable problems, for it had been thought that, like his niece, he suffered from heart trouble. Instead he died of bronchitis. Should the money he planned for the relief of heart patients in his will now go to those afflicted with complaints of the lungs? The whole question causes a good deal of argument in the Hurlbird mansion. And Dowell explains that although this may seem amusing to the European, "these are serious matters in my country."

"We haven't got peerages and social

climbing to occupy us much, and decent people do not take interest in politics or elderly people in sport. So that there were real tears shed by both Miss Hurlbird and Miss Florence before I left that city." (p. 200)

Dowell's care for Florence is another example of misapplied charity. Florence, carrying on an affair with a young man named Jimmy, is interested in Dowell only for his position and money. As a result she denies him any intimacies, pleading heart trouble. Dowell, bereft of initiative or insight, willingly becomes her nurse. "For I was solemnly informed that if she became excited over anything or if her emotions were really stirred her little heart might cease to beat. For twelve years I had to watch every word that any person uttered in any conversation and I had to head off what the English call 'things'—off love, poverty, crime, religion, and the rest of it." (p. 16) The idea of carefully shielding a wife who carries on the most torrid affairs is surely humorous. Dowell performs his duties, catches trains, is present at the correct moment and, after the death of Florence, is even ready to propose for convenience's sake to another woman. All this he does out of admiration for Ashburnham and the way of life he stands for. But he is also pleased, as he says, to be "off duty."

"Why I remember on that afternoon I saw a brown cow hitch its horns under the stomach of a black and white animal and the black and white one was thrown right into the middle of a narrow stream. I burst out laughing. But Florence was imparting information so hard and Leonora was listening so intently that no one noticed me. As for me I was pleased to be off duty. . . ." "I suppose I ought to have

pitied the poor animal; but I just didn't. I was out for enjoyment. And I enjoyed myself." (p. 42) This distinction between public duties and private amusements runs through the book and is the key to understanding Ashburnham. In his public role, the figure he cuts at his club, the treatment of his tenants and people who have suffered misfortune, he is admirable, if sometimes misguided. But his private life is wholly unsuccessful for his supposedly generous impulses are usually directed toward young ladies and are really concerned with self-satisfaction. Dowell's physical description of Edward is hardly one to justify the qualities of heroism that critics of the novel have attributed to him. "So well set up, with such honest blue eyes, such a touch of stupidity, such a warm goodheartedness!" "His face hitherto had, in the wonderful English fashion, expressed nothing whatever. Nothing. There was in it neither joy nor despair; neither hope nor fear; neither boredom nor satisfaction." (p. 25) "And yet I must add that poor Edward was a great reader—he would pass hours lost in novels of a sentimental type—novels in which typewriter girls married marquises and governesses earls . . . And he was fond of poetry, of a certain type—and he could even read a perfectly sad love story. I have seen his eyes filled with tears at reading of a hopeless parting. And he loved, with a sentimental yearning, all children, puppies, and the feeble generally . . ." (p. 27) "I had forgotten his eyes. They were as blue as the sides of a certain type of box of matches." (p. 28) The choice of details—the hint of stupidity, the empty face, the willing lender of his cigar puncher, the sentimentalist's inability to relate his emotions effectively to

the reality of his own life: all this undercuts Dowell's admiration. Critics have cited Ashburnham's sentimentality as a positive quality, but this is what makes him ridiculous, for sentimentality is emotion separated from meaningful action. It may be enjoyment of emotion in itself or, as in Ashburnham's case, the misjudging of a situation with actions that result in a calamitous outcome. Ashburnham quixotically insists that "salvation can only be found in true love and the feudal system." (p. 161)

Edward's goal is the preservation of "virginity of his wife's thoughts . . ." (p. 57) Leonora in turn continually tries to keep up appearances in the hope of winning him back to demonstrate "that in an unfaithful world one Catholic woman had succeeded in retaining the fidelity of her husband." (187) She admits to Dowell that he is a "splendid fellow—along at least the lines of his public functions." (p. 96)

Everything about Edward is faintly ludicrous. His gallantry aboard a troop ship in the Red Sea leads him to jump off to save a soldier attempting to commit suicide in the heat. Leonora compliments him on it but when he jumps a second time and "the private soldiers seemed to develop suicidal craze . . ." she cannot get him to promise to stop jumping. (p. 171) And when Dowell recalls they are on the ship only because of Leonora's penchant for economy, the whole situation tumbles into absurdity. So too Ashburnham's words when Leonora has finally disposed of Nancy Rufford, and Dowell catches his faint words, "Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean," and remarks, "It was like his sentimentality to quote Swinburne." (p. 251) Or even his final words just

before his suicide: "So long, old man, I must have a bit of rest you know." Dowell's reaction caps the anticlimax of those words: "I wanted to say: 'God bless you,' for I also am a sentimentalist. But I thought that would not be quite English good form, so I trotted off . . . to Leonora." (p. 256)

The tone of Dowell's narration intensifies the anticlimax. Edward's choice of instrument for this suicide is a penknife (recalling the letter opener that Mr. Merdle of *Little Dorrit* chose to end his life with in another mock-heroic suicide). After telling us of Edward's ideal conception of love, he comments, "So you see, he would have plenty to *gurgle* about to a woman . . ." (my italics). (p. 27)

Nancy Rufford is the fitting catalyst for the final scenes of the novel for, although all the characters are in some way naive, Nancy is the most naive. She has small understanding of the meaning of marriage, divorce, and no awareness of sex. She innocently offers Leonora a tribute to her husband by saying, "If I married anyone, I should like him to be like Edward." (p. 222) This sends Leonora into a fit which Nancy interprets as a sudden manifestation of ill health. Later, when she does perceive something of the situation, she is bullied by Leonora (who wants Edward to get the girl out of his system) into offering herself to him.

"She didn't in the least know what is meant—to belong to a man. But at that, Edward pulled himself together. He spoke in his normal tones; gruff, husky, overbearing, as he would have done to a servant or to a horse.

"Go back to your room," he said. "Go back to your room and go to sleep. This is all nonsense." (p. 243)

Ford has set himself the most diffi-

cult of technical problems. He begins with a narrator whose outstanding quality is a doglike admiration for Edward Ashburnham, a man who is responsible for the death of two women (including Dowell's wife) and the madness of the third. All the major characters have affection for Ashburnham. And yet the events of the novel show him to be the most bungling and casually destructive of men, concerned—at least in his private life—only with a personal gratification that lays waste the little society of those who trust and depend upon him. (Edward's name indicates his destructive character—Ashburnham: Burn-Home-Ashes.)

Even were a man less self-deceiving to tell this story, it could hardly assume the cosmic proportions that Dowell insists upon. His sheltered view of reality precludes any scaling of tragic heights. In his hands *Othello* would be transformed into a comedy of muddle. People are constantly diminished in importance by Dowell's language. Maisie Maidan, one of Edward's disappointed mistresses, is comic in death. "She had died so grotesquely that her little body had fallen forward into the trunk, and it had closed upon her, like the jaws of a gigantic alligator." (p. 75) He recalls Edward calling Maisie a "poor little rat". (p. 75) Leonora in turn is "sound as a roach" (p. 100). Her marriage to Rodney Bayham after Edward's death (for the first time she is going to have a child and this suggests Edward's physical sterility) makes Dowell speak of Rodney as "rather like a rabbit" (p. 239) and recalls an earlier statement attributed to Leonora: "'Edward has been dead only ten days and yet there are rabbits on the lawn.'" The constant use of "poor" applied to

Florence (masking a deep-seated anti-pathology) and used at times for Edward, drains both of all tragic pretensions. (Imagine "poor" Orestes or "poor" Lear. Shakespeare reserves the word for someone like Yorick.)

"In my fainter way I seem to perceive myself following the lines of Edward Ashburnham. I suppose that I should really like to be a polygamist; with Nancy and with Leonora, and with Maisie Maidan, and possibly even with Florence. I am fainter. At the same time I am able to assure you that I am a strictly respectable person." (p. 237) He sees conflict between his rectitude and his unfulfilled desire because he lacks ". . . the courage and the virility and possibly also the physique of Edward Ashburnham . . ." (p. 253) Virtue that flows from impotence is hardly praiseworthy and Dowell is only a "faint" echo of a spurious original. Yet the society in which these figures move is nothing like the world of Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. That society permitted all manner of indulgence as long as the conventions were maintained. Laclos' depraved characters unlike Ford's have no illusions about themselves. None of the characters in *The Good Soldier* are irredeemably reprobate however selfish their aims; the novel is rather a comedy of characters groping about in the darkness of misapprehension. The one who tells the story is the blindest and he throws up his hands in despair near the end of his telling. "I am only an ageing American with very little knowledge of life." (p. 244) "I don't know. I know nothing. I am very tired." (p. 245)

These characters constantly deceive themselves. Edward can think of his infidelities as a noble search for the ideal love; Florence works unceasingly

to save her marriage in the hope of vindicating Catholic womanhood; and Dowell insists almost hysterically on good form regardless of what seethes beneath the surface. In the midst of the most devastating family infighting he can cling to the thought that "during my stay for that fortnight in the fine old house, I never so much as noticed a single thing that could have affected good opinion." (p. 246) Nancy Rufford in her madness repeating over and over again "Credo in unum Deum Omnipotentem". (p. 234) reminds one of Dowell's similar faith in his omnipotent deity, that exemplar of good form and the feudal order, Edward Ashburnham.

Dowell is blind, at least in part, by his own choice. He says that after "forty-five years of mixing with one's kind, one ought to have acquired the habit of being able to know something about one's fellow beings. But one doesn't." (p. 36) Only a singularly obtuse man would be deceived by Florence's ritual of a locked bedroom door to protect her heart. Dowell is deceived because he wants to be, because he acquiesces in the fabrications of those around him. Mr. Meixner suggests that his name comes from "dowel" and implies his function as a peg holding the story together but the name also suggest (do-well) that his ethical discernment is middling and insufficient.

If there is something amusing—and not at all sad—about the spectacle of man who manages not to be aware of his wife's unfaithfulness and charges his wife and not her lover the whole burden of guilt after her death, it would be wrong to think that Dowell cannot see the darker side of Ashburnham's character too. But he has

no way of reconciling the contradiction.

There is in both Dowell and Edward a disparity between ideal understanding of life and its inescapable actuality. Edward plays lord-of-the-manor role with generosity and compassion while his private life is a shambles of thoughtless cruelty. The Kilsyte affair is the one place in the novel where the public and private Edward meet. Edward, travelling third-class carriage (again in order to please Lenora by economizing) attempts to comfort a girl of nineteen who believes her young man unfaithful. "That was his job in life." (p. 150) "And he assured me that he felt at least quite half-fatherly when he put his arm around her waist and kissed her." The girl, "by the whole tradition of her class had been warned against gentlemen . . . She screamed, tore herself away; sprang up and pulled a communication cord." (p. 150) The magnanimous lord of the manor and pursuer of private pleasure meet her in a combination of lust and sentimentality.

The Good Soldier is not a tragedy, but a savage comedy of manners (its material is suicide, madness, and unrealized happiness) in which people are unable to cope with the world

because they have never learned to understand it. Leonora's convent education; Dowell's inflated admiration for the abstract idea of the English gentleman; Edward's blind certainty that he can live the role of the magnanimous landholder while pursuing his futile quest for the ideal woman: this is a combination that ends in disaster. But none of the characters attains a tragic-like knowledge of himself or of the others from this experience.

There has not been a novel so full of misunderstood intentions leading to thwarted desires since *Tristram Shandy*. The comedy arises from the incongruity of things as Dowell and the other characters want them to be and as they really are. A disparity between the ideal and unpleasant reality can, of course, be the material of tragedy, but when a character consistently confuses the sordid reality with the ideal, then the tragic theme becomes comic.

The Good Soldier is a novel of repeated misunderstanding, told by the person least equipped in point of maturity and intelligence to grasp its real importance, and the effect of this added dimension raises the novel to an almost cosmic level of miscomprehension.

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¹ *The Good Soldier* (New York 1951), p. xiii. All page references that follow are from this text.

² "The Strange Irregular Rhythm: An Analysis of *The Good Soldier*," PMLA, LXXII (June, 1957), 495.

³ *Ford Madox Ford's Novels* (Minneapolis, 1962), p. 184. Richard Cassell, in his book on Ford also approves of Edward when he says that the "plot revolves around the end of a line of good soldiers and gentlemen of honor . . . and his destruction by the women

who seek to possess him." At the conclusion of his treatment of the novel only Ashburnham stands, in his judgment, above the havoc. He is the "only one to meet a test of moral courage, he refuses to let passion overthrow social order and remains a sentimentalist and a gentleman."

Ford Madox Ford: A Study of His Novels (Baltimore, 1961), 201.

⁴ The most lengthy analysis of Dowell is that of Carol Ohmann, and she places the novel somewhere between the estimates of

Meixner and Schorer. "Ford sympathizes with his characters in *The Good Soldier*, but he has learned to judge them for their immaturity, their egoism, their foolish rejection of things as they are, and their headlong pursuit of an impossible conception of themselves."

Ford Madox Ford: From Apprentice to Craftsman (Middletown, Connecticut, 1964), 111.

⁵ The problem of how much the reader can know about what really happened—assuming the limitations of Dowell as narrator—is raised by Samuel Hynes in "The Epistemology of *The Good Soldier*", *Sewanee Review* LXIX (Spring, 1951), 225-235. For instance James Hafley in "The Moral Structure of *The Good Soldier*", *MFS*, V, (Summer, 1959), says, "It is vital to note that Ashburnham can be convicted of only one act of adultery—the one night he spends with La Dolciquita." (122) In addition Hafley finds the novel reflects ". . . a world as surprisingly traditional, as orthodox, in its values and meanings as any to be found in modern fiction." (128) The novel does imply such a world but in reality shows its inhabitants everywhere blundering

sightlessly while making only the most formal obeisance to the convention of that world of tradition.

Joseph Wiesenfarth in "Criticism and Semiosis of *The Good Soldier*," deals with some of these difficulties. (*MFS*, IX (Spring, 1963) 39-49). It seems clear to me that any coherent view of the novel demands that we accept the facts Dowell gives—however mixed up he may be about dates—but always be ready to challenge his interpretations of these facts.

There is an additional concern which might be mentioned here—the problem of the novel's relation to Ford's personal life. This will remain unclear until there is an adequate biography. Violet Hunt, who probably knew Ford as well as anyone said that "Edward Ashburnham and Mr. Dowell—are Joseph Leopold's [Ford's] Jekyll and Hyde . . ." Quoted in James Trammell Cox's essay, "The Finest French Novel in the English Language", *MFS*, IX (Spring, 1963), 92. V. S. Pritchett in a review of the novel upon its reprinting makes the fascinating suggestion that Dowell is Henry James. *New York Times Book Review* (September 16, 1951), 5.