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Oedipal Fantasy and Arrested Development in *The Good Soldier*

BRUCE BASSOFF

The Good Soldier is narrated by John Dowell, “an aging American with very little knowledge of life,”¹ whose limitations as a narrator have been debated in a considerable critical literature. But Dowell is really a caricature of tendencies that one sees in all the other characters: as “the laziest man in Philadelphia” (p. 15)—and anywhere else, for that matter—Dowell exaggerates the inertia of people like Florence, Nancy, and the Ashburnhams, who cannot help repeating their scenarios of misunderstanding and betrayal; as a sentimentalist unable to see things for what they are, he exaggerates the others’ tendency to talk like a book; as a man who has no self except the one which he acquires through Florence and the one with which he identifies in Edward Ashburnham, he exaggerates the others’ tendency to elicit their “characters” from each other. By using Dowell in this way, Ford reverses the strategy one sees often in Henry James: to use various characters in a tale or a novel as (sometimes conflicting) projections of the protagonist. Dowell, instead, distills the tendencies of others. By presenting Dowell, moreover, as a kind of passive-aggressive Oedipus, Ford is able to evoke the arrested development that he sees pervading his culture.

For one thing, Dowell parodies the anxious desire we see in the other characters for an eternal order to which they can belong. It is this desire that underlies his many (and pejorative) comments about Leonora’s Catholicism—something he knows virtually nothing about (he even believes that “Corpus Christi” is a Saint’s day). His real concern is expressed by the general category of “Nonconformists,” which he uses to include everyone who is not quite right in “temperament,” but

not to include himself even though he is a Quaker (with ironically little of his sect's "inner light"). He is a Conformist who, having found, he thinks, an eternal order in the "minuet" he shares with his wife and the Ashburnhams (p. 6), never entirely relinquishes the illusion of this order even when he perceives its rottenness:

And, if you come to think of it, isn't it a little odd that the physical rottenness of at least two pillars of our four-square house never presented itself to my mind as a menace to its security? It doesn't so present itself now even though the two of them are actually dead. I don't know. . . . (p. 7)

To be "good people," as Dowell phrases it, is to take certain things for granted, and to adhere stubbornly to moral and social clichés that make certain happenings "unthinkable" (pp. 219, 242). But the other characters also long for such an order—one embodied in the church in which Leonora, Maisie, and Nancy get their instruction, and parodied by Edward's "sentimental gurglings." Outside the convent in which she grew up, for example, Nancy wants to live forever with Edward and Leonora, whose relationship, she thinks, is perfect and immutable. Edward, moreover, is her savior: "It must have been as if a god had approved her handwork or a king her loyalty" (p. 112). When Nancy, goaded by disillusionment and by Edward's death, goes mad, she still repeats over and over: "*Credo in unum Deum Omnipotentem*" (p. 234).

Dowell, who begins the book with a self-conscious declaration of his storytelling role, "This is the saddest story I have ever heard," also parodies the other characters' tendency to talk like books. Dowell, who wants to be a real character in his story with real emotions, tells us, for example, that he loved Nancy very much and that Leonora knew it (p. 247), but he sounds as if he is repeating lines that have no meaning for him. Earlier, in fact, he tells us that he "wanted to marry her [Nancy] as some people want to go to Carcassonne" (p. 121). If his velleities do not really allow him to be the character he wants to be, Edward Ashburnham has a bit more success. Like Don Quixote, whose "virgin intelligence" (p. 137) was also filled with romantic fiction, Ashburnham learns to be himself by learning to be a character in a book (the literary quality of which Dowell judges according to his own feelings). Like Don Quixote with the whores of roadside inns, Ashburnham tries to convince the mercenary La Dolciquita, "a reasonable creature without an ounce of passion in her," that "salvation can only be found in true love and the feudal system" (pp. 160–61).

Even when Edward expresses what is presumably his deepest anguish, he seems to be repeating lines written for him by someone else:

"I am so desperately in love with Nancy Rufford that I am dying of it" (p. 250). Leonora, who says to Nancy, "Edward's dying—because of you" (p. 215), has presumably read the same book. She goes on to say, "He's worth more than either of us," as she plays (with some *self*-deception also) the noble, self-sacrificing heroine in order to induce Nancy to destroy Edward's romantic hope. Before this, however, she says, like Emma Bovary, "Oh, where are all the bright, happy, innocent beings in the world? Where's happiness? One reads of it in books!" (p. 46).²

Although Edward admires Leonora because she plays her role with such courage and efficiency, he cannot connect emotionally with her because she does not have the dark and mysterious mournfulness of the romantic heroine who must give him the "character" that he seeks. Nancy, for example, "made him out like a cross between Lohengrin and the Chevalier Bayard" (pp. 95–96). But a "character" that can be "made" or given can also be taken away—all the more vengefully if that "character" is betrayed by ignoble behavior: "He sat still and let Leonora take away his character and let Leonora damn him to deepest hell [the Pirandello-like hell of an actor who has lost his character], without stirring a finger" (p. 246). The romantic heroine, Nancy, is also a creature of literature—of Roman Catholic literature, to begin with: "I thought . . . I never imagined. . . . Aren't marriages sacraments? Aren't they indissoluble? I thought you were married . . . and . . ." (p. 220). Her sexual experiences, however, are so coded in romantic terms that they approach verbal unreality. In recollection of "chance passages in chance books," for example, Nancy experiences a "withering up in the vitals," though she has not the slightest idea what the "vitals" are (pp. 223, 225). In response to Leonora's sophistry, she tells Edward that she is ready to "belong" to him, though "she didn't in the least know what it meant—to belong to a man" (p. 242).³

Dowell's own "character" depends on the one he attributes to Ashburnham, who becomes his model:

For I can't conceal from myself the fact that I loved Edward Ashburnham—and that I love him because he was just myself. If I had had the courage and the virility and possibly also the physique of Edward Ashburnham I should, I fancy, have done much what he did. (p. 253)

The real qualities of Edward Ashburnham aside, Dowell, from the beginning of their acquaintance, identifies with and aspires to an ideal masculine charisma so complete and self-sufficient that women are drawn vertiginously to it:

It was most amazing [a word associated with the pathetic innocence of another character]. You know the man on the stage who throws up sixteen balls at once and they all drop into pockets all over his person, on his shoulders, on his heels, on the inner side of his sleeves; and he stands perfectly still and does nothing. Well, it [Ashburnham's sexual charisma] was like that. (pp. 28–29)

A great advantage of this ideal, moreover, is that Dowell can imagine that only a small change—like the one that reverses the flow of fortune in gambling—is necessary for his own passivity to become equally powerful: “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” (p. 237)—the women with whom Ashburnham has been associated. But Dowell's overestimation of his model is such that his desire is never fully drawn to the women designated by Ashburnham but remains partially fixed on Ashburnham himself: “I have only followed, faintly, and in my unconscious desires, Edward Ashburnham” (p. 237), he says with unconscious double meaning.

This extreme idealization points to a fundamental problem that besets all the characters to one degree or another: since religion and other social idealisms do not hold together their lives, they idealize and idolize one another. Nancy regards Edward as a knight in shining armor and Leonora as another Virgin Mary. When both figures begin to show chinks in their armor, Nancy does not change her ideas in order to make them accord better with reality; she simply internalizes the values she personified in her guardians. Like the knight in shining armor, she will rescue her mother from destitution and Edward from death; and like the Virgin Mary she will sublimate her own sexuality to a higher purpose. In both instances she will outdo her former mentors. For his part, Edward idealizes Nancy as a romantic heroine, as he idealized Leonora and Maisie, but he cannot solve the contradiction entailed by his desire: that he wants *both* passion and inaccessibility. For this reason he reveres Leonora for her “clean-limbed” efficiency and courage but hates her for the coldness with which they are manifested. He resists Nancy's naive offer of herself, which Leonora has manipulated her into making, for he realizes how ambivalent it is: a tribute, on the one hand, to the god he has been for her, and a contemptuous offer to the man Leonora has exposed. In addition, he has learned repeatedly that the women who do become accessible to him can only disappoint him eventually—like the pages of a book that has become familiar (p. 115).

What Dowell's extreme neediness points up in these relationships is that romantic desire is deviated religion. The lover aims beyond the other to some *metaphysical* ideal, something equivalent to the fullness and self-sufficiency of God. The other has an exchange value that displaces his value as a real person; he becomes, as Dowell says about Florence, "a problem in Algebra" (p. 120). "To have all that and to be all that!" Dowell exclaims about the Ashburnhams, who seem perfect to him, as they do to Nancy and to Maisie Maudslayi (p. 9). To *be* anything, Dowell must *have* the metaphysical qualities that he attributes to people like them—qualities signified by their apparent *self-possession*. Dowell's attraction to women like Florence and Nancy is neither sexual nor personal but impersonal and proprietorial, and the lack of sexual consummation helps them maintain their value: "For in Florence I had at once a wife and an unattained mistress . . . and in the retaining of her in this world I had my occupation, my career, my ambition" (p. 49). If for Ashburnham Florence is a difficult turn to be made in a polo match (p. 29), for Dowell she is a trophy, a symbol of the athlete's "chastity, his soberness, his abstentions, and of his inflexible will [which Dowell confuses with purpose]. Of intrinsic value as a wife, I think she had none at all for me" (pp. 91–92).

Since the other's prestige has little to do with any real qualities, it is subject to sudden change or reversal. If Dowell, for example, attributes to Florence a special light, a special brilliance, so that she becomes "positively electric" at times (p. 43), that brilliance is extinguished for him as soon as he learns of her sexual misadventure: he depicts her as looking "with a puzzled expression" at an electric-light bulb over her deathbed (p. 120). Immediately thereafter the nun-like Nancy takes her place in Dowell's affections. To use also the imagery of accounting that Dowell inadvertently suggests, when Florence's capital is exhausted, Nancy's is there to be drawn on:

It [the question of whether Florence is dead or alive] simply didn't *interest* me. Florence didn't *matter*. I suppose you will retort that I was in love with Nancy Rufford and that my indifference was therefore *discreditable*. Well, I am not seeking to avoid *discredit*. (p. 121, emphasis mine)

The prestige involved is so abstract that Nancy's mad cry of "shuttlecock" provides an apt image for it. Not only does it shift from person to person—like the kudos disputed by Homeric warriors—but it can be used as a weapon in the power struggles between people. Leonora, for example, punishes Edward with Nancy's "presence" (p. 212)—with the idealized purity that he can only relinquish or lose. By

forcing Nancy on Edward, Leonora wants to destroy the abstract value she has for him, as well as the abstract value he had for her.

In the midst of this "maze" (p. 183) of illusion and conflict is the figure of "Maisie Maidan," Edward's (forcibly) platonic love interest, who dies stereotypically of a broken heart. Her naïveté, which is displayed in her farewell note ("Oh, Mrs. Ashburnham, you knew the world and I knew nothing" [p. 74]), is reflected in the novel's frequent and punning variations on her name. Dowell's unconscious desire to marry Nancy, for example, is "a very amazing thing—amazing for the light of possibilities that it casts into the human heart" (p. 103). And the same naïveté is found in another "maidan," Nancy Rufford, who becomes a living riddle—a picture of perfect health and propriety signifying nothing (p. 254). Even earlier, she is surrounded by paradoxes that suggest something that is out of kilter: she is at times "exceedingly grotesque and at times extraordinarily beautiful"; she is tortured in appearance and yet possessed of "a quite extraordinary sense of fun"; she is a "miracle of patience who could be almost miraculously impatient"; and her education has been a "mixture of saturnalia and discipline" (pp. 123–24). What is the "clue" (p. 183) to this maze? What is the "key"?

She [Maisie] 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. The key was in her hand. Her dark hair . . . had come down and covered her body and her face. (p. 76)

The key in this Freudian emblem is phallic and debunks the benefits of civilization: "Now our renunciations have failed us," writes Philip Rieff; "less and less is given back bettered."⁴ When Dowell talks about the sacrifice of personal preference that one owes civilization, he calls it "the cock that the whole of this society owes to Aesculapius" (pp. 36–37). But he himself is impotent, and Nancy's cry of "shuttlecocks" suggests an extreme form of that sacrifice.

In fact, images of castration are everywhere in the novel. Nancy's sense of rectitude is described as "a knife that looked out of her eyes and that spoke with her voice" (p. 125), and both Nancy's mother and Leonora are "cutting" (p. 126). Dowell imagines a scene in which the "good people" gouge out each other's eyes "with carving knives" (p. 249). That sexual castration is also an analogue for social castration is shown by the fact that Nancy can be "unmanned" by her father's voice (p. 129), and by the fact that in the photo Edward sees of the innocent Leonora—raised, like Maisie Maidan and Nancy Rufford, in a

convent—the branches of a biblical apple tree “cut right across her face, which is all but invisible” (p. 138)—like that of Maisie in her death. Edward, who chooses this invisible face among the seven daughters available to him,⁵ wants to believe in the “chastity of Leonora’s imagination” (p. 57)—a castration, so to speak, of her potential as a grown woman. Ironically, it will be Leonora who castrates Edward by wresting control of his estate from him and by taking away his “character.” When the demoralized Edward kills himself at the end, “quite a small penknife” is all the phallic equipment he has left (p. 256).⁶

The stymied energy and growth that Ford suggests through these images of castration is also suggested by the “family romance” that pervades the book: a pattern of arrested development. All of the relationships in the story have an incestuous quality. Leonora, for example, looks at Dowell the way a mother looks at her son or a sister looks at her brother (p. 33); Edward and Leonora are father and mother to both Nancy and Maisie (pp. 63–64); and Edward feels “quite fatherly” toward the nursemaid he kisses (p. 150). All of this reminds one of Stephen Dedalus’ definition of incest as “an avarice of the emotions”⁷—a refusal, that is, to let one’s emotions extend beyond a closed circle of people, values, or ideas. This is Dowell’s eternal minuet, and the round table to which Florence refers at the beginning of the two couples’ acquaintanceship: “And so the whole round table is begun” (p. 33).

Like an oedipal scenario, Dowell’s vision of judgment is that of “three figures, two of them clasped close in an intense embrace, and one intolerably solitary” (p. 70). Although Florence is the solitary figure in this vision, each character fulfills that role equally well since each in turn feels excluded from happiness by the others. For this reason, for example, Leonora comes to hate Edward and Nancy and wants to destroy their “final virtue” (p. 203). For this reason also Dowell’s admiration for Ashburnham is contaminated by a good deal of resentment: “You see, I suppose he regarded me not so much as a man. I had to be regarded as a woman or a solicitor” (p. 28). That Dowell secretly *wants* to be treated as a woman by Ashburnham makes the latter’s attitude even more infuriating. When Dowell says that Edward’s eyes are “perfectly, perfectly stupid” (p. 28), he is attempting to debunk the quality—Ashburnham’s presumed imperturbability—that fascinates him and that excludes him from its privileged domain. When he goes on to talk about the “expression” of those eyes as “sinister,” he reveals his ambivalence more clearly.

At the end Dowell lets Ashburnham die as he earlier let Florence die. Because he does not yet know of his idol's betrayal of him, his attitude toward Ashburnham is different than it was toward Florence, whom he dismissed as a worthless piece of paper. He justifies his abandonment of his idol by the mawkish explanation that Ashburnham deserves to be released from his responsibilities and his sufferings. His claim that Ashburnham is not "wanted in the world" (p. 256) is both an idealized view of him as someone who is too good for the world and a devious rebellion against his overbearing figure. Unlike Oedipus' violent reaction to the arrogant figure at the crossroads, Dowell's reaction is passive-aggressive. Like Oedipus, however, Dowell ends up displacing his rival. As a case of arrested development, in a fantasy of arrested development, in a culture of arrested development, Dowell occupies Ashburnham's house at the end and is the custodian of Ashburnham's beloved.

¹ Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (New York: Vintage, 1955), p. 244. Page references will hereafter be included parenthetically in the body of the essay.

² For a brilliant analysis of *Edward* as *Madame Bovary*, see James Cox's "The Finest French Novel in the English Language," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 9, No. 1 (1963), 79–83.

³ Florence, the most voracious reader in the book, is also the most versatile actress. "Always playacting" (p. 119), she plays the part not only of Ashburnham's mistress, but also the part of Leonora's friend and confidante, who wants to use her good offices to bring the married couple back together.

⁴ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper, 1966), p. 5.

⁵ This combination of seven daughters and a suitor who likes to go hunting suggests the mythical Pleiades being chased by Orion.

⁶ One of the funnier Freudian jokes in the book is the scrap of paper Florence points to in the couples' educational trip to Marburg. As Carol Jacobs points out, the Articles of Marburg were the result of days of argument between Luther and Zwingli about the reading of the phrase "This is my body"—a phrase that Florence restores to vulgar literalness during the trip. See Carol Jacobs, "The (too) Good Soldier," *Glyph*, 3 (1978), 43.

⁷ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1986), p. 169.