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The Good Soldier and Die Wahlverwandtschaften

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## *The Good Soldier and Die Wahlverwandtschaften*

SCARCELY a month or a critical journal passes but what we are reminded anew of Ford Madox Ford's deep indebtedness to earlier novelists, of his inveterate borrowings in incident, character, and prose style from the fiction and journals of the already established. While he was no mere pickpurse of others' wit, it must surely be a momentary oversight that no one has yet discovered, for example, that the entire ending of *Mr. Fleight*, an early novel published in 1913, is an unblushing paraphrase of the closing scene in Flaubert's "Hérodiades," or that Ford took Flaubert's detailed description of the "citadelle de Machaerous" and transported it bodily to the setting of *The Good Soldier*, rechristening it "the ancient city of M---." These are small matters, undoubtedly to be rectified shortly, but they alert one to the possibility of more wholesale piracy.

Inevitably scholarly attention, at least that dealing with sources, has tended to concentrate upon *The Good Soldier*. We know, or we think we know, its probable genesis, just as we think we know what Ford hoped to accomplish in it. For these things we have Ford's own testimony, often uncritically seconded by scholars too quick to take Ford at his own word. One learns to be chary in this respect, remembering that Ford was, first and last, an impressionist—in his approach both to fiction and to autobiographical reminiscence. Hence his unfortunate, if partly deserved, reputation for mendacity.

Unquestionably much in *The Good Soldier* represents Ford's metamorphosis of character, incident, and setting remembered or misremembered from his life and reading. Consequently scholars have been encouraged to track down the autobiographical minutiae in which the novel abounds. But such transcriptions from real life are neither more nor less than what one would normally expect to find in the work of any

novelist; at most they testify to Ford's tendency, as an impressionist, to press as much life as possible between the pages of his fiction. But scholars have insisted that even the plot of *The Good Soldier* had its genesis in an actual incident: a brief anecdote Ford relates in *The Spirit of the People*, his early and impressionistic study of the English national character. Ford had been staying with some friends, a husband and wife, in the country. An unspoken affection had grown up between the husband and the young ward living in the house. The situation quickly became impossible and the young girl was shipped out of temptation's way:

It was all done with the nicest tranquility. Miss W--'s luggage had been sent on in advance; P-- was to drive her to the station himself in the dogcart. The only betrayal of any kind of suspicion that things were not of their ordinary train was that the night before parting P-- had said to me: "I wish you'd drive to the station with us tomorrow morning." He was, in short, afraid of a "scene."<sup>1</sup>

Scholars have tacitly accepted this incident as the source for the anguished tale Ford was to spin out in *The Good Soldier*. Taken by itself, the bare resemblance the anecdote bears to the novel would hardly be convincing. Why then the widespread assumption that it represents the origin of the novel? What has actually convinced critics is the appended analysis of the husband's behavior, which perfectly sums up Ford's habitual criticism of the English temperament—the stifling of natural passion behind the mask of social convention, muffling those "screaming hysterics" which threaten to overwhelm Dowell's sanity in the opening pages of *The Good Soldier*. As an incident in the novel the anecdote may well play a part, but it seems too thin to suggest the complexity of plot, structure, and character relationships in *The Good Soldier*. It would be wiser to let it rest for what it may well have been: an anecdote, an exemplum manufactured to bear witness to Ford's cultural diagnostics. On the other hand, the complexity of the geometrically balanced situations in *The Good Soldier* argues for a more daedalian origin than a merely situational event—especially when one recalls that amazing advance in structure, an area in which Ford's previous novels are admittedly weak. In both architectonics and narrative incident *The Good Soldier* reminds one of nothing quite so much as Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* or, as it is called in its English translation, *Elective Affinities*.

There is no evidence, either positive or negative, by which one can prove or disprove Ford's knowledge of Goethe's novel; nowhere in any of his critical writings, in his fiction, or his reminiscences does he

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<sup>1</sup> Ford Madox Ford, *England and the English: An Interpretation* (New York, 1907), p. 338.

allude to it. In *The March of Literature*, where he devotes several pages to Goethe, Ford never mentions it. This means that evidence of influence can only be circumstantial, based on the remarkable similarity in narrative incident and character juxtaposition, behind which there are glimpses of some form of deterministic fatality dogging all human volition, some personal *Weltanschauung* in the mind of each author. Moreover, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* perfectly anticipated the use of "the Affair," which was to become Ford's main structural device.

It will be helpful to define briefly the nature of "the Affair" and to recall the use to which Ford put it. Ford once wrote that in *The Good Soldier* he was hoping "to do for the English novel what in *Fort comme la mort* Maupassant has done for the French." What Ford admired in *Fort comme la mort* was the adroit handling of the technique which he termed "the Affair," those gradual and delicate exfoliations developed from "one embroilment, one set of embarrassments, one human coil, one psychological progression," as he described it. The emphasis, then, was to be on the working out of this "progression," as he and Conrad sought to subdue, in their collaborations, individual narrative incidents which might otherwise overshadow the single total impression they sought to achieve. This muted handling of potentially explosive situations in *The Good Soldier* does resemble that of *Fort comme la mort*, but the plot in Ford's novel is as unlike Maupassant's as it is the mirror image of Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, in which Goethe achieved his finest architectonics in creating a similar muted tragedy based on the principle of the Affair. In both novels there is the same narrowing of human relationships, the same development of one embroilment, the same geometric relationship between characters.

The plot situation in *The Good Soldier* may be briefly recalled. Edward Ashburnham, a landed aristocrat, warm, generous, and sentimental, is married to a woman with whom he has no temperamental affinity. Leonora Ashburnham is cold, prudent, and self-possessed and endowed with a graceless efficiency from which her husband seeks to escape into a series of affairs marked on his side by sentimental and improvident generosity. The family income and estate seriously reduced, Leonora steps in and takes over the management of both Edward's traditional responsibilities and his affairs. Into this uneasy impasse comes John Dowell and his shallow but very feminine wife, Florence, who quickly becomes Edward's mistress. The dramatic climax of the novel comes as Florence commits suicide and Edward is free to realize a long repressed love for Nancy Rufford, his wife's young ward, whom Leonora has imprudently introduced into the household. The coldly observant Leonora recognizes the strength of such an

idealistic and romantic attachment, all the stronger because it will never be consummated. Consumed with a growing sexual antagonism, her character deteriorates, while, conversely, Edward through on-forced self-discipline grows stronger, curbing his passion for the young Nancy.

Determined to destroy the idealistic nature of their love, Leonora reminds her young ward of the sanctity of the marriage vows and invokes the vision of Catholic damnation to fill the young girl with the moral horror of her attachment. Edward, unable to endure the agony of conflict between passion and personal honor, commits suicide, which in turn drives Nancy insane. Leonora is then free to marry Rodney Bayham, a man with whom she shares a temperamental affinity and with whom she once sought to have an affair, but for which she was psychologically incapable. Thus the cold, the efficient, the unsplendid types survive; and the noble, generous, and romantic natures like Edward and Nancy are marked out for extinction, which even the blunt-witted Dowell recognizes by the novel's end: "So Edward and Nancy found themselves steam-rolled out and Leonora survives, the perfectly normal type . . ."

The echo of some undefined evolutionary process at work can be heard rolling in the background of all Ford's novels, the idea that some inexorable force is forever at work grinding down the proud and unique, while singling out for survival the uncompassionate and mean-spirited. All of Ford's most characteristic protagonists, those ill-starred idealists and romantics like Ashburnham, Tietjens, and Katherine Howard, come to grief in a modern world that is not at all romantic. For all of them the time is somehow out of joint. It was a technique of character conflict which Ford hit upon as a young novelist and from which he never deviated to the end of his life. This pattern for conflict was based on a quasi-historical and deterministic theory, a deeply personal *Weltanschauung*, which he first articulated in *England and the English*, arguing that the development of Western man was a succession of differing psychological types, each type supplanting in turn the dominant type of the previous historical period. In nearly all his subsequent novels, Ford built his character conflicts on this "fanciful projection," as he honestly termed it. His procedure was to take a dominant psychological type, from one of the three historical periods he postulates in *England and the English*, and place that type in an uncongenial time slot where he inevitably comes to grief, because of the conflict between personal and public values. This theory of an evolutionary determinism, which worked through a process of social selection, served Ford admirably in his unremitting efforts to achieve that sense of inevitability which he and Conrad always sought in their novels:

Before everything a story must convey a sense of inevitability: that which happens in it must seem to be the only thing that could have happened... It must be inevitable, because of his character, because of his ancestry... or on account of the gradual coming together of the thousand small circumstances by which Destiny... will push us into one certain predicament.<sup>2</sup>

That predicament is, of course, the Affair and from that coil will grow all subsequent action. Thus events may unfold naturally, the laws of psychology will seem to play their just part, but always in the background hangs that dark Destiny which in the end wracks all of Ford's generous ones. And I think it significant that behind Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* there is an oddly similar deterministic theory which singles out and destroys characters remarkably like Ashburnham and Nancy in *The Good Soldier*, and which works through the complex web of the Affair.

Without raising again the question whether or not Goethe anticipated the mechanics of Darwinian evolution, we can assume that Goethe believed in some type of "forward thrust" in the world of nature, a progressive refinement based on mutation and subsequent change at both the organic and inorganic level. For personal reasons Goethe became increasingly unable to account for the perversity of human attraction and repulsion, and turned late in life to the theory of "elective affinities" set forth by the Swedish physicist Torbern Bergman, using that theory as an explanation for the inexplicable complexities of human relationships. In essence the theory states that certain types of people will be drawn ineluctably together, even as others will be as unconditionally thrust apart, as surely as with chemical compounds. In the face of this determinism reason, the will, social and ethical conviction and restraint—all of these stand helpless. In Goethe's novel, as in Ford's, this force or process works through the social milieu, matching individuals with compatible temperaments, sundering those with unlike; and in the end leaving certain types to flourish in the world while discarding others.

In *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* Eduard, a former army officer, and his wife Charlotte live together, if not passionately, at least compatibly enough to suggest the permanence and stability of their marriage. Like Edward and Leonora Ashburnham, they too have been the youthful victims of arranged marriages. Eduard, a member of the old landowning aristocracy, takes his greatest pleasure in the management of his ancestral estates, often with more enthusiasm than efficiency, threatening at times to exhaust his income. Later in the novel Charlotte will bring some degree of order out of this excess. She is the more efficient

<sup>2</sup> Ford Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (Boston, 1925), p. 218.

and hardheaded of the two, incapable of deep or spontaneous affections; in short, the antithesis of Eduard, whom Goethe describes as a romantic and a sentimentalist. Like Ashburnham, Eduard finds it increasingly difficult to respond to a woman psychologically incapable of returning the romantic male's need for extreme femininity:

Charlotte war eine von den Frauen, die, von Natur mäßig, im Ehestande ohne Vorsatz und Anstrengung die Art und Weise der Liebhaberinnen fortführen. Niemals reizte sie den Mann, ja seinem Verlangen kam sie kaum entgegen; aber ohne Kälte und abstoßende Strenge glich sie immer einer liebevollen Braut, die selbst vor dem Erlaubten noch innige Scheu trägt.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly Leonora Ashburnham, wrenched from her cloistral home life, has for her husband no "touch of magnetism," having been "handed over to him, like some patient mediaeval virgin. . . taught all her life that the first duty of a woman is to obey. And there she was."<sup>4</sup>

The thinly formal relationship between Goethe's husband and wife is such that upon the introduction of a third character, the apparently stable marriage relationship is easily shattered. Charlotte, early in the novel, prepares the reader for some such eventuality by recalling: "Mir sind leider Fälle genug bekannt, wo eine innige, unauf löslich scheinende Verbindung zweier Wesen durch gelegentliche Zugesellung eines dritten aufgehoben und eins der erst so schön verbundenen ins lose Weite hinausgetrieben ward."<sup>5</sup> This is Goethe laying the deterministic groundwork for the coming embroilment.

The fourth person introduced into the Affair is the wife's young ward Otilie, whom Charlotte, like Leonora, takes out of school and, with uncharacteristic shortsightedness, introduces into the family circle—just as Nancy Rufford is brought from the convent school into the Ashburnham household. As types of young, romantic womanhood they are cut from the same piece of goods. Both are described as young, innocent, bird-like creatures, docile yet capable of quiet activity, forever fetching and carrying, light-hearted and obliging; but somewhere behind each, a quietness, a silent sorrow with the maturity of ages behind it. It is a type which inevitably appeals to the romantic in both Eduard and Ashburnham. In both novels there comes a gradual disruption of human affections and a disturbance is set up in existing relationships which will result in a total realignment of characters.

Eduard falls progressively more deeply in love with his young ward and she with him; Charlotte at first quietly watches the transformation, too shocked to act, trusting that the demands of social conven-

<sup>3</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, in *Goethes Werke*, Hamburger Ausgabe (Hamburg, 1949-60, VI, 321.

<sup>4</sup> Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier*, Bodley Head Edition (London, 1962), I, 127.

<sup>5</sup> *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, p. 275.



tion will be sufficient to hold Eduard to her. It is the measure of both Charlotte and Leonora's naïveté that they should think the human heart operates in this fashion. Again like Leonora, Charlotte is denied even the solace of her own affair; in her, normal desire has been crippled by religious and social disapproval. Leonora, it will be recalled, in a single desperate moment tries to abandon herself to the embraces of Rodney Bayham, but her lifetime habit of self-examination and restraint enables her to regain her composure. It is as close as she can come to an actual affair, so long as her legal husband is alive; and it is the same with Charlotte. In an unguarded moment she submits to the embrace of a man who really loves her and for whom she feels a mutual affinity; but after the sole kiss, she pushes her lover away and retreats into conventional domestic morality:

Nun aber stand sie in ihrem Schlafzimmer, wo sie sich als Gattin Eduards empfinden und betrachten mußte. Ihr kam bei diesen Widersprüchen ihr tüchtiger und durchs Leben mannigfaltig geübter Charakter zu Hülfe. Immer gewohnt, sich ihrer selbst bewußt zu sein, sich selbst zu gebieten, ward es ihr auch jetzt nicht schwer, durch ernste Betrachtung sich dem erwünschten Gleichgewichte zu nähern . . .<sup>6</sup>

For the emotionally dispassionate, like Leonora and Charlotte, self-restraint is easily come by. For the Eduards and Ashburnhams of this world, they are not; and such men must pay the price of their romantic natures, which in these two novels involves the extinction of both—as well as the women they love. And in each novel the husband finds himself increasingly isolated from both estranged wife and alienated lover. Charlotte, like Leonora, at one point concedes to a divorce only to draw back and, instead, begin playing on the sense of religious and moral transgression in the young woman, leaving the husband in a state of suspended agony, from which only death offers an escape. And both men do die. While Ashburnham cuts his throat outright, there are only the rumors of possible suicide surrounding Eduard's death. Thus both affairs come to an end.

Paul Wiley once described the essential outlines of the Affair in this way: “. . . it concerns less the carrying through of an action than the disturbance or realignment of a set of already existing relationships, a progression inward to the center of an existing web.”<sup>7</sup> That same geometrical apposition of character and temperament, that same conflict between passion and honor lies at the heart of both Affairs, and the whole is hurried blindly onward by a natural determinism which makes kindling wood of social convention. One of Goethe's characters explains the process this way:

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Wiley, *Novelist of Three Worlds: Ford Madox Ford* (Syracuse, 1962), p. 15.



...diese Fälle sind allerdings die bedeutendsten und merkwürdigsten, wo man das Anziehen, das Verwandtsein, dieses Verlassen, dieses Vereinigen gleichsam übers Kreuz wirklich darstellen kann, wo vier bisher je zwei zu zwei verbundene Wesen, in Berührung gebracht, ihre bisherige Vereinigung verlassen und sich aufs neue verbinden. In diesem Fahrenlassen und Ergreifen, in diesem Fliehen und Suchen glaubt man wirklich eine höhere Bestimmung zu sehen; man traut solchen Wesen eine Art von Wollen und Wählen zu und hält das Kunstwort "Wahlverwandtschaften" für vollkommen gerechtfertigt.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of the novel both Eduard and Otilie, like Edward and Nancy of *The Good Soldier*, have "re-combined" and died, leaving Charlotte and her lover, as with Leonora and Rodney Bayham, to pursue what future combinations they will. In both novels the splendid, the resolute, the too passionate—these are discarded in favor of more normal if less admirable types, those whose dispassionate natures are pitched sufficiently low so that they will never disturb society. Dowell, at the end of *The Good Soldier*, provides Ford's oblique commentary on that all-pervasive determinism working behind the scenes of this world:

Conventions and restrictions I suppose work blindly but surely for the preservation of the normal type; for the extinction of proud, resolute and unusual individuals. Edward was the normal man, but there was too much of the sentimentalist about him and society does not need too many sentimentalists. Nancy was a splendid creature but she had about her a touch of madness. Society does not need individuals with touches of madness about them. So Edward and Nancy found themselves steam-rolled out and Leonora survives, the perfectly normal type...<sup>9</sup>

The most succinct statement of Ford's personal *Weltanschauung*, the passage would provide an equally appropriate footnote to *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, for the two novels bear a most striking resemblance to one another: the two sets of temperamentally mismatched lovers undergoing painful realignment, the similarity in narrative events, the geometrical structuring built on the outlines of the Affair. And, finally, both novels reflect those analogous—if pseudo-scientific—theories of biological determinism which can, at any given moment, turn apparent order and stability into chaos and darkness, for as Dowell says in the story: "It is all a great darkness." In the same manner, Charlotte near the close of *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* has come to a clearer understanding of those shadowy forces which make a mockery of human volition:

Es sind gewisse Dinge, die sich das Schicksal hartnäckig vornimmt. Vergebens, daß Vernunft und Tugend, Pflicht und alles Heilige sich ihm in den Weg stellen: es soll etwas geschehen, was ihm recht ist, was uns nicht recht scheint; und so greift es zuletzt durch, wir mögen uns gebärden, wie wir wollen.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, p. 275.

<sup>9</sup> *The Good Soldier*, p. 205.

<sup>10</sup> *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, p. 460.

However, Destiny in both Goethe and Ford is most usually operative through character and psychology ; but in both instances this psychology is based upon a deeply personal and quite tenuous theory of natural determinism which manifests itself in the conflict between man's passionate nature and social convention. In both novels, the *progression d'effet* drives forward relentlessly toward that vision of moral apocalypse in which man's passions will forever overwhelm all the social bulwarks he can erect against his own nature.

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