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Character in *The Good Soldier*

MICHAEL LEVENSON

The Good Soldier repeatedly asks, What is a character?, and to that question it gives more answers than may be tactful. Ford Madox Ford was a revolutionary with a bad conscience. He was reluctant to discard those traditions which he professed to scorn, and faced with competing alternatives, he habitually preferred both. This makes him a frustration to the theorist but a delight to the literary historian, who can uncover in his work the strata of earlier methods beneath the radical experiments for which he is known. Ford's interest, of course, is not simply archaeological. *The Good Soldier*, a novel so attentive to the problem of historical transition, itself dramatizes a transition in the notion of character. The ambiguities in that notion become resources of plot, and Ford's refusal, or inability, to employ a single consistent method discloses nuances in characterization which may yet provide some solace for the theorist.

Ford upheld the extreme realist proposition that the success of prose fiction depends on its power to create "an illusion of reality," and in explaining how that illusion might be achieved, he placed special emphasis on what he called "justification," by which he meant the task of granting motives and grounds to behavior that might otherwise appear obscure.¹ To justify is thus not to defend or to excuse. It is to submit action to a pattern that will make it, if not familiar, at least intelligible. For Ford this task involved devising a wide context, typically a personal past or a cultural disposition, which would invest a character with reasons and causes. It is not enough, he insists, to write that "Mr. Jones was a gentleman who had a strong aversion to rabbit-pie." One must "sufficiently *account* for that dislike": "You might do it by giving Mr. Jones a German grandmother, since all Germans have a peculiar loathing for the rabbit and regard its flesh as unclean. You might then find it necessary to account for the dislike the Germans have for these little creatures; you might have to state that his dislike is a self-preservative race instinct. . . ."² In his insistence upon justification, Ford locates himself in continuity with those Victorian realists whom he so often attacked. As dutifully as George Eliot, he demands rational explanations for surprising actions and requires general laws to

assimilate individual cases. He, too, held that behavior must yield to analysis and that a convincing illusion of reality required a transparency of motive and cause. Fordian justification is thus in the service of verisimilitude, and it belongs to that strain of realism which, in refusing to endow the isolated particular with any fictional weight, sets out to locate it within an expansive, and therefore reassuring, context. From this standpoint, a verisimilar character is a fictional instance of a real type.

Although one remembers Dowell's narrative for its insistent formal dislocations—its inversions, postponements, repetitions, reversals—it relies in significant measure on certain, highly traditional methods of characterization. At the center of the novel appears a patient and detailed exposition of the early upbringing of Leonora and Edward, which traces the unhappily contrasting effects of Irish Catholicism and English Protestantism on the course of their married life. Dowell employs social estimates of great generality; the emphasis on the typical aspect of the Catholic or Protestant personality might have appeared with scarcely any modification in a novel of Thackeray or Trollope. In brief, he provides background of the sort that Ford sketched for Mr. Jones, a set of circumstances that might “account” for Edward and Leonora. This method of characterization tends to what one might call the “justified self” which emanates from context and embodies the social will. Thus Leonora appears as “the perfectly normal woman”: “She desired children, decorum, an establishment; she desired to avoid waste, she desired to keep up appearances. She was utterly and entirely normal even in her utterly undeniable beauty.”³ Leonora, that is, does not merely yield to prevailing conventions; she actively desires them. The strictly justified self exists in perfect conformity with the moral norms of a culture, and thus Leonora begins as a living moral tautology who aspires to what she is made to be. “Conventions and traditions,” notes Dowell, “work blindly but surely for the preservation of the normal type” (p. 238). He might have added what he clearly implies, that the normal type works just as devotedly to preserve conventions and traditions.

The justified self is the *donnée* of *The Good Soldier*. It is accepted as both a standard of behavior and a norm of intelligibility, with the result that figures in the novel make justification one of their chief activities. They continually invoke general laws and abstract categories in order to understand the behavior of others and to explain themselves. Dowell, of course, is the capital instance. In line with good Fordian principles, he explains individual character by situating it within a wider class,

on the assumption that the best way to know a particular is to know its kind. The preeminent example is the rubric "good people," which appears frequently in the opening pages of the novel and furnishes a shorthand characterization for the four principals: "The given proposition was that we were all 'good people.' We took for granted that we all liked beef underdone but not too underdone; that both men preferred a good liqueur brandy after lunch; that both women drank a very light Rhine wine qualified with Fachingen water—that sort of thing" (p. 34). To refer to this example, however, is already to suggest the difficulties of justification. Conspicuously, the description "good people" fails to account for the characters it describes. It does not explain; it conceals; and the obvious incongruity between concept and character initiates far more subtle difficulties in the novel. For it becomes clear that the plot turns on this incongruity which characters exploit for their own ends.

Characters persistently engage in characterization, but more often to disguise, than to reveal, the secrets of personality. Notably, Florence confirms her seduction of Ashburnham by misdescribing his character. During the visit to the museum at M-, she descants on Ludwig and Luther the Courageous, and then, gesturing at the "pencil draft of the Protest," tells Ashburnham that "It's because of that piece of paper that you're honest, sober, industrious, provident, and clean-lived. If it weren't for that piece of paper you'd be like the Irish or the Italians or the Poles, but particularly the Irish" (p. 44). Leonora, who recognizes the infidelity that now impends, flies into a rage and nearly gives herself away to Dowell. She recovers by resorting to the methods of Florence, relieving Dowell's fears by concealing her jealousy under the guise of moral character: "don't you know that I'm an Irish Catholic?" Dowell, who writes that these "words gave me the greatest relief that I have ever had in my life" (p. 46), admits that: "Jealousy would have been incurable. But Florence's mere silly gibes at the Irish and at the Catholics could be apologized out of existence" (p. 67). Jealousy—an ineradicably personal emotion—is concealed beneath the reassuring impersonalities of cultural generalization. Justification no longer serves, as in Ford's critical proposal, to account for an action; it works now to disguise it. Florence calls Ashburnham "honest" and "clean-lived," while her eyes invite him to adultery. Leonora labors to preserve her status as a type, an "Irish Catholic," when what is at issue is not a general kind, but a particular passion.

Much of the drama of *The Good Soldier*, as Samuel Hynes has pointed out, turns on a struggle between convention and passion which

presents the characters with conflicting and irreconcilable demands; as Hynes puts it, passion “reveals the secrets of the heart which convention exists to conceal and repress.”⁴ One can extend the point. For, it is not only a question of competing values or a struggle between expression and repression, it becomes a matter of the stability of *character as such* and our capacity to understand one another at all. In *The Good Soldier* passion is not one mode of experience among others; it is an affront to intelligibility; it not only violates the “rules” which convention lays down; it challenges the very possibilities of rules that might govern human behavior; it is not simply that characters must choose between passion and convention; it is that character begins to lose integrity as a concept:

For who in this world can give anyone a character? Who in this world knows anything of any other heart—or of his own? I don’t mean to say that one cannot form an average estimate of the way a person will behave. But one cannot be certain of the way any man will behave in every case—and until one can do that a “character” is of no use to anyone. (pp. 155–56)

The notion of justification, as Ford develops it in his criticism, depends on the possibility of establishing “average estimates”: Mr. Jones as a German, Germans as averse to rabbits, and so on. *The Good Soldier*, however, relies on the procedure only to press it to its limit where justifications can no longer justify, where average estimates must hesitate before singular passions. By the end of the novel Dowell has tested the limits of rational explanation. He has interpreted character by religion, by nationality, by gender, and by the calendar, and then in a weary moment he concedes:

I don’t attach any particular importance to these generalizations of mine. They may be right, they may be wrong; I am only an ageing American with very little knowledge of life. You may take my generalizations or leave them. But I am pretty certain that I am right in the case of Nancy Rufford—that she had loved Edward Ashburnham very deeply and tenderly. (p. 244)

Dowell’s disillusionment follows the arc of modernism. He begins with presuppositions typical of much Victorian characterization: the individual conditioned by circumstance, composed of intelligible motives, susceptible to moral analysis—the justified self. Then, confronted with the singularity of desire, his “generalizations” totter and fall. He moves to a conception of character that will become predominant in modernist narrative: the self estranged from circumstance and no longer comprehensible in its terms, confounding familiar motives, beyond the reach of social explanation. When Leonora, that “perfectly

normal woman," finds herself in a "perfectly abnormal situation" (p. 240), then "for the first time in her life, she acted along the lines of her instinctive desires" (p. 203). But Dowell immediately adds that he does not know whether to think that in acting instinctively "she was no longer herself; or that, having let loose the bonds of her standards, her conventions, and her traditions, she was being, for the first time, her own natural self" (p. 203). How should he know? His confusion is that of one caught in the midst of an epochal transition, when it is unclear whether convention and tradition or instinctive desire is the ground of human behavior—well might he repeat, "I don't know." The passionate instant has overturned an entire history of familiarity. It defies standards of intelligibility, resists the generalities of social explanation, and rests its claim to our attention on one incontrovertible fact: it exists.

And yet, as Dowell's narrative proceeds, there emerges a surprising implication, which might be put this way. Passion, which has frustrated the attempt to justify human character, becomes finally its own justification. The first time that Ashburnham "falls" into marital infidelity, unsanctioned sexuality can still appear as anomalous, a "short attack of madness" (p. 173), a radical and unintelligible departure from the life of principle which he has been trained to lead. But by the fifth and sixth times, the erotic surge has ceased to be surprising. Ashburnham falls at regular intervals. Indeed, he deviates as consistently as he conforms. In removing the anomalous aspect of passion, Ford recognized what Freud had begun to stress: not the singularity of the sexual impulse but its repetitions, compulsions, and obsessions. Passion, that enemy of norms and conventions, lays down its own norms, even its own conventions: "poor Edward's passions were quite logical in their progression upwards" (p. 58). The "discovery" of sexuality in the modern period amounts finally to the recognition that what seemed to be the anarchy of desire was in fact a civil state.

The first, the simple, irony of *The Good Soldier* depends on the incongruity between inherited categories and the behavior that they are meant to describe. Social and moral conceptions fail to explain passion; personality eludes the justifications set in motion to account for it. The private individual remains, as it were, hidden beneath the cloak of social categories. But a second, and more distressing, irony, at which we have just arrived, reveals that when the deceptive vestments of traditional characterization are removed, one may uncover not a new freedom but a new constraint. Edward violates the duties of his station only to place himself at the mercy of his loins. What is more confining than social norms?—only, perhaps, private desires.

Few novels exploit the resources of the first person as thoroughly as *The Good Soldier*. Dowell changes repeatedly, changes distressingly, from a transparent medium to an opaque barrier. He sees and then is seen seeing. He is the one who engages in the persistent attempt to justify the behavior of others, who watches helplessly as "good people" give way to low passions, and who comes to regard the notion of character as "of no use to anyone." And yet, the difficulties become still more acute and the ambiguities more refractory when Dowell turns from the attempt to understand others and tries to understand himself.

Toward the close of the novel, he offers this notorious self-description:

In my fainter sort of 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 no doubt like every other man; only, probably because of my American origin, I am fainter. (p. 237)

It is not wounded national pride that leads one to reject that description, only the recognition that Dowell's many idiosyncrasies do not suddenly become coherent when placed within the class "American." The remark is an explanation only in form, and it reveals again the extravagant failure of justification in the novel. Dowell has displayed not even the mildest tremors of sexual desire, and there seems no reason to credit his extemporized salacity. Faced with such an improbable confession, one is tempted to interpret Dowell in terms of hidden motives or suppressed desires, and admittedly, it is difficult to confront his inconsistency, his passivity, and his sexual abstention and to resist the urge to diagnosis.⁵ Indeed, Dowell, like his critics, refers to "dual personality" and "unconscious self" (pp. 103, 104) as plausible lines of explanation. However, these classifications amount only to new attempts at justification for a novel which reveals that activity as particularly hazardous. "Dual personality" is scarcely more illuminating than "American" in explaining the "queer, shifty thing" (p. 248) that is Dowell. One might make better sense of him by granting the possibility that he is beyond justification, in a sense that I will attempt to explain.

A traditional view of fictional character, recently systematized by Seymour Chatman, holds that it is a compendium of traits revealed in the course of narrative, which gradually concatenate into a represented whole. The fictitious name serves as a bare peg to which qualities are

appended, and the qualities *make* the character who then exists, in Chatman's phrase, as a "paradigm of traits."⁶ Certainly such a view describes one norm of fictional representation. When Trollope introduces Dr. Grantly as "proud," "wishful," and "worldly," he prepares the reader to meet a man who exists primarily as an aggregate of traits, and Grantly's great struggle with Mr. Slope is less a struggle between characters than between attributes.⁷ But can every character be understood as a sequence of relevant adjectives? *The Good Soldier* asks precisely this. When Florence describes Edward as "honest, sober, industrious, prudent and clean-lived," she identifies a norm which fails thoroughly to obtain. The novel will reveal other traits—guilt, sentimentality, lubricity—which more accurately describe Edward and which belong to another order of description, individual and affective rather than social or religious. But this change in "paradigm" does not in itself threaten the notion of character as the sum total of characteristics. That more revolutionary task falls to Dowell.

No matter how generous our standards of behavior, as long as they are standards, they will not contain Dowell, who defies familiar notions of consistency and purpose, who credits the most implausible lies, whose moral valuations shift from sentence to sentence, whose memory leaks like an old man's, and whose attention wanders like a child's. He fails to experience emotion appropriate to the circumstance and fails to distinguish the essential from the trivial.⁸ As Schorer delicately puts it, his is a "mind not quite in balance."⁹ John Meixner, less delicate, calls him a "psychic cripple," "a severely neurotic personality."¹⁰ Still, Dowell would be less puzzling if he were only more so. If he passed thoroughly beyond the bounds of reason and ethics, then we could assign him to that comfortable rubric, Madness in Literature. The difficulty is that, although Dowell continually violates our expectations of rational behavior, he performs no act that would place him beyond the moral pale. He commits no physical violence, yields to no repugnant impulses, violates no taboos, causes no suffering. On the contrary, as Hynes has stressed, he seems the one character capable of selflessness.¹¹ He also manages to write a novel. In short, if he does not obey familiar norms, neither does he conform to our notions of lunacy. He occupies a strangely lit zone between tact and catatonia, and is no more intelligible as a madman than as a gentleman.

As a way of approaching Dowell, it will be useful to recall some well-known aspects of Fordian Impressionism. According to Ford, that reality whose illusion he sought to create was to be found in the

instantaneous apprehension of experience—not in the “rounded, annotated record” but in the “impression of the moment,” “the impression, not the corrected chronicle.”¹² Since the world appears to us only in “various unordered pictures,” the first obligation of the literary artist is a meticulous attention to that variety and disorder, to “the sort of odd vibration that scenes in real life really have.”¹³ Ford never denied that we ascend from perception to knowledge and from sensation to understanding but he regarded these as distinctly secondary activities. The world of solid objects and coherent events is subsequent and often spurious and is never to be mistaken for the patches of color, the fields of light, the noise, dust, and confusion out of which it arose. Not knowledge, but impression, sensation, and emotion constitute the foundation of experience. What is more, they constitute its essence. This, indeed, is a fundamental Fordian assumption with far-reaching consequences for the representation of character: that in the beginning of experience lies its essence.

“[T]he whole world for me,” writes Dowell, “is like spots of colour in an immense canvas” (p. 14). This statement should do two things. It should connect Dowell himself to the Impressionist sensibility, and it should remind us of his insufficiencies as a knowing intelligence. Furthermore, it should suggest a relationship between these two features of his position. Dowell, it is plain, is more than a character and more than a narrator in *The Good Soldier*; he is an instance, and to an extent a theorist, of literary Impressionist doctrine. He not only conforms to Ford’s principles of narrative; he defends those principles in Fordian terms, offering the familiar argument that, because neither life nor “real stories” follow an orderly sequence, a narrator who wants his stories to “seem most real” must proceed in “a very rambling way” (p. 183). Dowell meets the terms of his covenant. He disregards fact in favor of impression, follows the wanderings of memory, ignores chronology, allows unlikely juxtapositions, digresses freely. These formal dislocations have been well remarked, not least by Ford himself. What has been less well remarked is that these aspects of form become aspects of personality. Dowell’s narrative method is one with his psychological provocation. The refusal to provide structure, the passive acquiescence in confusion, the divigations of memory—these are not merely technical commitments, they are distinctive and disturbing aspects of character. Having described the world as spots of color in a canvas—a remark that might seem merely a pictorial observation in the vein of Pissarro—Dowell passes immediately to a confession of weak-

ness: "Perhaps if it weren't so I should have something to catch hold of now" (p. 14). The Impressionist's "various unordered pictures" become a measure of Dowell's own disorder. To the question, What ails Dowell?, it is tempting to answer: he is suffering from Impressionism.

In response to his early critics, Monet made the celebrated rejoinder, "Poor blind idiots. They want to see everything clearly, even through the fog."¹⁴ It is a forceful reply, but it should not divert us from a blunt question: Why do fog and dusk, twilight and movement, appear so prominently in work of the Impressionist school? These paintings frequently involve difficult perceptual circumstances; a cathedral seen through the mist, a haystack in the fading light, a confused street scene witnessed from a distance. The force of the painting often depends on the elusiveness of its image. This is not surprising; the momentary impression, however fundamental to the process of perception, displays itself only in rare circumstances; it is typically in times of perceptual stress that familiar objects decompose into the sensations of which they are made. Indeed, this is the paradox of Impressionism. In order to reach the foundation of normal experience, it must dismantle the normal structures on which we rely. It employs distorting contexts in order to disclose the truth of immediate experience. One might also speak of the pathology of Impressionism, for what begins as the perceiving self in unusual circumstances can quickly become a perception of the unusual self, and surely it is a telling fact that the Impressionist method in literature (one thinks of Conrad and Faulkner as well as Ford) serves so frequently to render emotional and moral aberration.

Monet used to say that he would have liked to have been born blind and then suddenly to have regained his sight "so that he could have begun to paint . . . without knowing what the objects were that he saw before him," and it is certainly noteworthy that a perceptual ideal would take the form of such a rigorous and improbable condition.¹⁵ One no longer finds critics who describe Impressionist painters as "lunatics" presenting the "frightful spectacle of human vanity working itself up to the point of dementia."¹⁶ But the hasty Impressionist rejoinder to their hasty critics—"this is how things appear"—cannot be a final answer, for it does not explain why realist principles should lead so naturally to the margins of experience, and why situations of strain and disorder should assist "real perception." A movement, which in its literary and pictorial manifestations claimed to offer a general theory of human perception, comes quite often to describe human perception

in extremis, and the most significant contribution of Impressionism to the history of sensibility may lie not in what it has taught us about the normal instance but what it has revealed about the marginal case.

Here, a point which has been submerged must be raised into plain view. For, it should already begin to be evident that the demand for "justification" rests awkwardly alongside the enshrinement of the "momentary impression." The call for an explanatory context sounds in no simple harmony with the cry for instantaneity. In effect, two realisms meet in *The Good Soldier*. On the one hand, as we have seen, Ford follows Victorian antecedents in identifying the real and the rational. The insistence upon justification is thus first of all a demand for intelligibility, guided by the conviction that literature can account for the apparent mysteries of character, that it can provide background and context which will furnish perspicuous explanations and that, in so doing, it will achieve a successful "illusion of reality." Ford, however, displays a second, more characteristically "Impressionist," emphasis in which the real is identified, not with the known and understood, but with the perceived and lived. The insistence on the "impression of the moment," the "odd vibration," the "queer effect" belongs to the attempt to reproduce experience as it first strikes the perceiving consciousness, before it assumes the shape of intelligibility. Within this emphasis, attention falls not on the rational pattern but on the immediate sensation.

In his criticism Ford suggested that these two realisms were complementary: "Your Impressionist can only get his strongest effects by using beforehand a great deal of what one may call non-Impressionism. He will make, that is to say, an enormous impression on his reader's mind by the use of three words. But very likely each one of those three words will be prepared for by ten thousand other words."¹⁷ He thus implies that the known past leads naturally to the lived present and that an intelligible history can "justify" a momentary impression. But Ford, like many others, imagines more finely than he methodizes. *The Good Soldier* reveals an incommensurability between life as known and life as experienced, and perhaps the most compelling aspect of its characterization is the flight of personality from the rational categories adduced to explain it.

Which is passion—known or lived? Certainly it would seem to be the decisive instance of lived experience refusing the canons of rationality. Indeed, it first appears that way in *The Good Soldier*. But in the further course of the novel, as I have argued, desire becomes routine and predictable—as much a matter of knowledge as sensation. Far

from an exuberant denial of all restriction, it becomes finally a constraint as severe as the moral conventions which oppose it. Passion comes to indicate, not so much originally lived, as obsessively reenacted experience. And yet, part of the trenchancy of *The Good Soldier* is that it imagines experience more immediate than passion. It imagines a region of character, not only before knowledge but before desire, and it does so, of course, through the figure of Dowell. Schorer sees the book's "controlling irony" in the fact that "passionate situations are related by a narrator who is himself incapable of passion."¹⁸ But the irony runs even deeper than Schorer indicates, because Dowell's lack of passion appears not simply as a deprivation but as an opportunity. Much as his great wealth frees him from material need, so his *accidia*, to use Schorer's term, frees him from the constraints of desire. He is divested of all want. And if one should argue that this makes Dowell a mere nullity, I readily concur, disputing only the qualifier "mere."

Dowell describes himself as having "no occupation," "no business affairs" (p. 78), "no attachments, no accumulations" (p. 21) and "nothing in the world to do" (p. 22): "I suppose I ought to have done something, but I didn't see any call to do it. Why does one do things?" (p. 15). Doing nothing, he feels nothing, and feeling nothing, he knows nothing: "You ask how it feels to be a deceived husband. Just heavens, I do not know. It feels just nothing at all" (p. 70). In important respects, let us recognize, Dowell *is* nothing. No "paradigm of traits" can describe him, because there is nothing substantial to describe: no determining past, no consistency of opinion, no deep belief, no stable memory. He cannot be "justified." There is no accounting for Dowell.

I have suggested that the problem of character in *The Good Soldier* is one with the method of Impressionism, and now I can give greater force to that claim. For, Dowell's "nullity" is simply the final consequence of the Impressionist pursuit of immediate experience, the attempt to render an aboriginal stratum of personality that exists before doing, feeling, and knowing take shape. At the instant of experience, one is neither humble, nor kind, nor greedy, nor wise. The notion of a trait, as a persistent attribute of character, cannot yet apply. Character exists only after the fact, and it is Ford's boldest stroke to imagine a personality virtually without attributes—subjectivity before it has assumed the articulations of character. In Dowell, Ford gestures at a nothing that precedes something in human personality, a formless, contentless, traitless self which does nothing, feels nothing, knows nothing, and which exists as a pure consciousness behind every one of its manifestations. Such a state, of course, must remain a bare ideal.

Even if it can exist (which one has reason to doubt) it certainly cannot persist. Dowell collides painfully into the world, not once but continually. The novel begins with his fall into consciousness, and falling into consciousness becomes his vocation. At every moment, he confronts experience as though for the first time, and to the last he remains *rudimentary*. Throughout, he appears as one who has just emerged from an absolute detachment and who must now take up the attitudes and values that constitute human character.

In his most provocative remark, Dowell writes at the end of the novel that

I guess that I myself, in my fainter way, come into the category of the passionate, of the headstrong, and the too-truthful. 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. He seems to me like a large elder brother who took me out on several excursions and did many dashing things whilst I just watched him robbing the orchards, from a distance. (pp. 253–54)

Wiley calls this “the ultimate in self-deception,” and Schorer “his weirdest absurdity, the final, total blindness of infatuation and self-infatuation . . . for observe the impossible exceptions: courage, virility, physique! What sane man could except them?”¹⁹ But is it a question of sanity? Or is it perhaps that still more difficult issue, the question of character as such? Dowell refuses here, refuses with a supreme negligence, to define himself in terms of traits. He regards courage, virility, and physique as secondary qualities, mere contingencies which scarcely bear on the problem of identity. He speaks of watching Ashburnham “from a distance,” but it is himself that he sees from a distance, examining his endowments as though they had only accidental relation to the being that possessed them.

One certainly recognizes the force in the opinions of Wiley and Schorer. If, all evidence to the contrary, Dowell can say that he is Ashburnham, then it would seem that he can say anything. Indeed he can, for in an utterly improbable way Dowell becomes a compelling image of the free man. His very incapacities, his lack of physical and moral passion, his hesitations and confusions, his insouciance in grave circumstances, his self-avowed “faintness,” release him from the definitions that circumscribe others. He is finally and frankly indeterminate, neither a creature of convention nor of passion. If this unsuits

him for the task of living, it prepares him for the act of writing. Being nothing, he can call himself anything. His deprivation coincides with his freedom. Dowell, the true man without qualities, can choose any qualities. Few readers will accept his assertion that Ashburnham was "just myself," and yet no reader can prevent the claim. Dowell cannot *be* Ashburnham, but he is extravagantly free to say so.

As a man, Dowell is weak and led by the nose, but as an author he is a free agent who can utter any opinion, no matter how unlikely, without fear of constraint. All else about Dowell may be doubtful, but one thing is certain: he writes, and part of the force of Fordian Impressionism lies in its recognition that character in narrative may be a late and clumsy reconstruction but narrating voice is prior and ineliminable. The passivity of the cuckold gives way to the restless activity of the writer, who asserts and retracts, confesses and denies, soliloquizes and apostrophizes, changes his story, changes his mind, and arrives finally at the point of exhaustion: "It is so difficult to keep all these people going" (p. 222). Within a novel that so frequently refers to the power of convention and circumstance, the act of writing becomes a way to recover autonomy. This is not the freedom of a heroic agent gloriously ascendant, who tramples conventions in pursuit of noble ends. Dowell's is free action in its most primitive aspect, an unformed self taking its first steps toward articulation and expressing only partly what it knows and mostly what it wants.

The moral agony of *The Good Soldier*, and its difficulty, depend in large measure on the way that this single fiction contains incommensurable principles of characterization. The novel which asks, What is a character?, makes drama out of its competing answers. The justified self, which personifies the cultural context and embodies its values, struggles against the passionate self which personifies and justifies only itself. This contrast would seem sufficiently grave, but *The Good Soldier*, as I have been suggesting, imagines a further refinement and a new provocation in Dowell, who appears less as a character than a voice, only faintly and incidentally attached to a body, a culture, a religion, and a history. Ford looks past the exigencies of circumstance and the urgencies of desire, past convention, past consistency, past justification, to character in its most irreducible aspect. The movement toward Dowell is like the movement toward the Cartesian *cogito*, but once Ford arrives at this spare foundation, he, too, begins the task of reconstruction. Dowell's freedom, tenuous though it may be, offers an escape from conventions that had burdened the novel as they had burdened English society, and it offers Ford an opportunity to confront character

at its inception. *The Good Soldier* opens by dramatizing the collapse of those moral and psychological categories by which we habitually live, but it continues by dramatizing those awkward and tentative acts by which morality and character are renewed. Out of "nothing" Dowell begins to choose a world. He thus reanimates the ethical sense that had languished in Edward, petrified in Leonora, and died in Florence. Morality, degraded by convention and thwarted by passion, hesitantly reappears in the simple judgments of a mind struggling to weigh its preferences. After the endless repetitions of "I don't know," Dowell says nay to Florence and Leonora and yea to Nancy and Edward. He may not yet know, but he *decides*, and in so deciding, he gives a picture of morality in its nascent state, founded not on inherited norms but on original judgments of value.

The temptation is great to see Dowell in a state of final disintegration, the coherence of the self lost in a shower of impressions. But what appears as the disintegration of character might better be regarded as a condition that oddly resembles it, namely the formation of character. Like Monet's blind artist suddenly given sight, Dowell comes confusedly into being. Each new utterance is a fresh collision between the mind and its environs. Assuredly, this is not a familiar condition, but neither is it madness. It is rather an imaginary posture of human consciousness that Impressionism is particularly suited to render: a radical innocence that perpetually rediscovers the world and posits itself in startled speech.

¹ Ford Madox Ford, "Impressionism and Fiction," in *Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Frank MacShane (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 43.

² Ford Madox Ford, "Impressionism and Fiction," pp. 44–45, my emphasis.

³ Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion* (1951; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1955), p. 240. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically within the text.

⁴ Samuel Hynes, "The Epistemology of *The Good Soldier*," *Sewanee Review*, 69 (Spring 1961), 233. Robert Green, on the other hand, argues that the novel "mediates a conflict between received conventions and urgent passional drives." Robert Green, *Ford Madox Ford: Prose and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), p. 98.

⁵ Carol Ohmann, for instance, writes "Dowell is not only incapable of sexual relationship with a woman; he is deeply afraid of it. . . . Unconsciously, he attempts to prove himself not a mature man but one who is *absolutely* chaste, whose feelings towards women are entirely innocent and childlike." Carol Ohmann, *Ford Madox Ford: From Apprentice to Craftsman* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1964), p. 88. Jo-Ann Baernstein discusses the "unconscious but recurrent transference of male and female roles" in the novel. See

her essay, "Image, Identity, and Insight in *The Good Soldier*," *Critique*, 9 (1966), 30.

⁶ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978), p. 126.

⁷ Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers* (1925; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 3.

⁸ Moser calls Dowell's tone "an almost indescribable combination of irony, sentimentality, cynicism and bafflement." Thomas Moser, *The Life in the Fiction of Ford Madox Ford* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), p. 155.

⁹ Mark Schorer, "An Interpretation," *The Good Soldier* (1951; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1955), p. x.

¹⁰ John Meixner, *Ford Madox Ford's Novels* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 159.

¹¹ Hynes, "The Epistemology of *The Good Soldier*," p. 230.

¹² Ford, "Impressionism and Fiction," p. 41.

¹³ Ford Madox Ford, "Joseph Conrad," rpt. in *Critical Writings*, p. 72; "Impressionism and Fiction," p. 42.

¹⁴ As reported by Jean Renoir in *Renoir, My Father*, trans. Randolph and Dorothy Weaver (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958), p. 174.

¹⁵ Lilla Cabot Perry, "Reminiscences of Claude Monet from 1889 to 1909," *The American Magazine of Art*, 18 (March 1927), 119–25; rpt. Linda Nochlin, *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism 1874–1904* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 35–36.

¹⁶ Albert Wolff, rev. of the April 1876 Impressionist exhibition in *Le Figaro*, rpt. Maria and Godfrey Blunden, *Impressionists & Impressionism*, trans. James Emmons (New York: World Publishing Company, n.d.), p. 110.

¹⁷ Ford, "Impressionism and Fiction," p. 46.

¹⁸ Schorer, "An Interpretation," p. vii.

¹⁹ Paul L. Wiley, *Novelist of Three Worlds: Ford Madox Ford* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1962), p. 200; Schorer, "An Interpretation," p. xi.