

“*[A] Novel Should Be the Biography
of a Man or of an Affair, and a Biography,
Whether of a Man or an Affair, Should
Be a Novel.*” Ford Madox Ford
and Modernist Experiments in Biography

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In a recent discussion of Ford Madox Ford’s novel *The Good Soldier* (1915), Catherine Belsey draws upon Jean-François Lyotard’s essay “Answering the Question: What is Post-modernism?” to proffer Ford’s sly novel as an example of the category Lyotard proposes: a form of post-modernism *within* modernism. With *The Good Soldier*, says Belsey, Ford had written a postmodern novel.¹ She notes that when Lyotard published his essay in the French journal *Critique*, it appeared with a footnote, dropped from the English translation, in which he spelt out “what is at stake . . . in postmodernist art.”² “His target,” she explains, “is the

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retreat from experimentation, the slide back into the reassuring lap of realism”:

Lyotard’s objection to realism was its propensity to protect consciousnesses from doubt. Whether in visual art or in writing, he argued, realism assumes that we recognize – or can be coaxed to recognize – an already existing reality. Perspective painting stabilizes the object depicted, places it in such a way that it is intelligible to the spectator from a given point of view, and invests it with a significance that is – or can be made – evident to everyone. The realist novel similarly invites recognition of a world seen as given. . . . By this means, Lyotard continues, realism encourages the reader to arrive without difficulty at a validation of his or her own identity in the course of experiencing the gratifying confirmation of an understanding shared with others. Communication takes place: heads nod. However surprising the events or the characters may be, however desolate the outcome, the perceiving subject and the objects perceived are in their proper places as evidence that the world depicted is possible, plausible, convincing as a replica of reality, the actuality we know as our own. . . .

Modernism, meanwhile, responds, he says, to “the withdrawal of the real,” a twentieth-century breakdown of confidence in what passes for actual. But the emphasis varies. Modernism, Lyotard proposes, either regrets what is lost or takes advantage of the freedom scepticism confers. In the first case, the work, nostalgic for the missing certainties, preserves the pleasures offered by good form; the second, which Lyotard identifies as the postmodern *in modernism*, refuses that solace and seeks out new modes of presentation, proceeds without regulations in order to uncover after the event the rules of “what *will have been done*.”³

Belsey argues from this that *The Good Soldier* can be seen as postmodern because it not only refuses to deliver consoling certainties but also challenges the rules of representation.

In this chapter, I shall make a comparable case for a less well-known but equally disconcerting book of Ford’s, his memoir entitled *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (1924), arguing that in it Ford develops his fictional experiments into similar biographical experimentation. Others, including myself, have suggested that the very qualities which problematise attempts to assimilate Ford to a modernist paradigm might better be seen as characteristics of a postmodernity *avant la lettre*—especially his playful engagements with fictionality, metafictionality, and pastiche as well as his generic and historical hybridity.⁴ The suggestion has

even been made before in relation to his book on Conrad.⁵ My aim here is to develop that suggestion in two ways: first, and mainly, by exploring the experimental nature of this extraordinary book; second, to tease out its implications for thinking about biography and its relation to fiction in the modernist period and to indicate briefly what bearing it might have on our understanding of modernist experiments in life-writing by other writers.

Conrad died on 3 August 1924. At the time, Ford was based in Paris and editing the modernist little magazine he had launched at the start of that year, the *transatlantic review*, publishing experimental work by Joyce, Stein, Hemingway, and Jean Rhys among others. He must have started writing his tribute to Conrad almost immediately, as it began appearing as a serial from the September issue (the issues normally being set the month before). The serial ran from September to December, at which point the magazine folded; the four instalments correspond to the first five sections of what became the first part of the book.⁶ By then, the entire book had been not only finished but also published, by Duckworth in the UK in mid-November and by Little, Brown in the US in either late November or early December.⁷ The book itself gives the composition dates as from “August” to “October 5th.” If those are accurate—and given that Duckworth would have had only five or six weeks to typeset the book and implement any proof corrections between 5 October and mid-November, it is hard to see how he could have finished it much later than that—then Ford must have written the entire book in almost exactly two months. It is not an enormous book—just under 57,000 words in total. But given that he was also editing and writing for his review, it is an astonishing feat. His comment that he had written it at “fever-heat” cannot be far off the mark.⁸ He even comments in the preface that “It contains no documentation at all; for it no dates have been looked up, even all the quotations but two have been left unverified, coming from the writer’s memory.” He tries to make a virtue of this, arguing that it is “the writer’s impression of a writer who avowed himself impressionist.”⁹ We shall return to this claim later, observing now that it is precisely the book’s presentation as undocumented and unchecked for accuracy which has caused many readers (and especially Conradians) to treat it with suspicion, as a careless, rushed job. From this point of view, its curious hybrid of memories of Conrad talking about his life before he became a writer, memories of Ford’s friendship and collaboration with Conrad, comments about their views on literature,

all jumping forwards and backwards in time, together with a section of technical advice about how to write novels, might well seem a muddle of random memories and opinions.

Certainly, if readers go to it looking for hard biographical facts about Conrad, they are going to be frustrated. The book starts by saying that when Ford was about to fight in the First World War he saw Conrad and asked him to be his literary executor and that they ended up talking about biographies:

We hit, as we generally did, very quickly upon a formula, both having a very great aversion to the usual official biography for men of letters whose lives are generally uneventful. But we agreed that should a writer's life have interests beyond the mere writing upon which he had employed himself, this life might well be the subject of a monograph. It should then be written by an artist and be a work of art. To write: 'Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski was born on such a day of such a year in the town of "So and So" in the Government of Kieff,' and so to continue would not conduce to such a rendering as this great man desired. (5)

That phrase “the town of ‘So and So’” is a little alarming—and more than a little in a biography—suggesting that the author may not know where his subject was born. When later on he is discussing Conrad’s cultural affiliations, we find this:

The most English of the English, Conrad was the most South French of the South French. He was born in Beaucaire, beside the Rhone; read Marryatt in the shadow of the castle of the good king René, Daudet on the Cannebière [*sic*] of Marseilles, Gautier in the tufts of lavender and rosemary of the little forests between Marseilles and Toulon, Maupassant on the French torpedo boats on which he served and Flaubert on the French flagship, *Ville d'Ompteda*. (70–71)

Of course, Conrad was not born in Beaucaire, or in France at all, but in Berdychiv, in what is now part of the Ukraine, though it had then belonged to Poland. Yet Ford certainly knows Conrad wasn’t born in France. As he says three pages further on: “He was born—not, of course, physically in Beaucaire, but in that part of Poland which lay within the government of Kiev—in Ukrainia, in the Black Lands where the soil is very fertile. He was born around 1858. At any rate he was old enough to remember the effects of the Polish Revolution of the early sixties—say

1862” (74). Well, Ford is nearly right about the birthdate; only a month out. Conrad was born on 3 December 1857. Ford is also slightly out about the Revolution, which began in January 1863, though correct that Conrad would have recalled his father’s involvement in the resistance in 1862, as the family had been exiled as a result in May of that year.

Ford’s guessing at the dates is an example of what he means about not checking or documenting facts. But what he does with Conrad’s birthplace is something different: first creating uncertainty; then telling us something definite; then disavowing that, and telling us something else, though again less precise; first the wrong town, then a region rather than the correct town. It is not entirely explicable by the “mad rush and muddle” theory. It is not just inaccurate or vague. It wants the inaccuracy and uncertainty to be part of the picture, and it goes out of its way to multiply inaccuracy and uncertainty. This is a strange strategy for something purporting to be a form of memoir. Why then does Ford do it?

Part of the answer is given in that “formula” he says they agreed about literary biography: “It should then be written by an artist and be a work of art.” Ford goes even further, provocatively describing the kind of work of art it is as a novel rather than a biography.

For, according to our view of the thing, a novel should be the biography of a man or of an affair, and a biography, whether of a man or an affair, should be a novel, both being, if they are efficiently performed, renderings of such affairs as are our human lives.

This then is a novel, not a monograph; a portrait, not a narration. (5–6)

However, novels do not all necessarily proceed with this kind of uncertainty. In a classic realist novel, we generally know exactly when and where things happen. The other part of the answer is to do with what kind of a novel Ford wants his biography to be. He called his method impressionism, and that is what he presents his Conrad book as exemplifying:

It is the writer’s impression of a writer who avowed himself impressionist. Where the writer’s memory has proved to be at fault over a detail afterwards out of curiosity looked up, the writer has allowed the fault to remain on the page; but as to the truth of the impression as a whole, the writer believes that no man would care – or dare – to impugn it. (6)

He must have known that people would immediately dare to impugn it; and so they did; not least Conrad's widow, Jessie, who challenged a number of its claims about Conrad.¹⁰ Again, note how Ford not only acknowledges that there may be inaccuracies (all acknowledgements pages do that, when they accept responsibility for any inadvertent mistakes) but also is saying he knows what some of the mistakes are yet has left them in anyway. This is the diametric opposite of the academic method, and perhaps the fact that Ford's father was an academically trained German of the philological tradition had something to do with that.¹¹ But again, the point appears to be not that Ford does not know about the errors, or does not care about them when he does know, but that his knowing and leaving them there are offered as a guarantee of an accuracy of another kind: accuracy to the "truth of the impression."¹²

The question is then: what is it about impressions that matter so much to him; why is their truth so important that he is prepared to risk the inevitable charges of laziness or carelessness or worse—such as that he is just plain wrong or he is lying or (as with Conrad's birthplace) trying to confuse us about whether he is telling the truth or not?

Again Ford's preface is the best guide: "*here . . . you have a projection of Joseph Conrad as, little by little, he revealed himself to a human being during many years of close intimacy*" (5). That word "projection" is interesting, perhaps conveying a general sense of "The action of throwing forwards or outwards"¹³ but also suggesting the filmic ways that can be done, either with a magic lantern or projector producing still images, or a movie projector. Either way, Fordian impressionism crucially combines two things: perceptions and process. Ford's impression of Conrad, that is, is not just the product of a single impression Conrad made upon him—say at first meeting or when saying one thing in particular. It is a compound or composite of all the impressions he received from him: "*as, little by little, he revealed himself . . . during many years.*" Ford's sense of Conrad is a product of that process and cannot be separated from the temporal extension of the process. This inclusion of the temporal aspect—this way of including it—is what distinguishes impressionism in literature from that in painting.

Ford is not attempting an objective statement of what Conrad did and who he was, in the style of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, concentrating on the external markers of public institutions and records such as birth, education, marriage, public honours, death; hence Ford's parodic dismissal of that form of biographical discourse: "born on such

a day of such a year in the town of ‘So and So.’” That way of writing about people bears little relation to what it is like to have known them, and it is the latter that he wants to convey here: not so much what Conrad was like in any objective sense but what it was like being Conrad’s close friend and collaborator and how Ford’s sense of who Conrad was developed over time and kept developing in retrospect.

It will not do to dismiss this as mere subjectivism, though, since what it really is is intersubjectivism: the attempt to get at how one person reveals himself to another. But there is also a much more powerful claim within this particular example: that this is the only way we ever know anybody else, through time, gradually, as we both change, surprise each other, reappraise each other. Also that what matters in art is not so much trying to project or fix certain human types but to convey what that process of knowing feels like.

There are two possible grounds for objecting that the reading so far offered of *Joseph Conrad* has not made the case for it as postmodern. One objection would be to argue that all that has been demonstrated is that what Ford is doing is *impressionism*—as he says—and that my account of the book has not added anything to warrant a redescription. Another line of objection would be to observe that everything I have said about Ford’s book on Conrad also applies to his best-known novel, *The Good Soldier*. That too is often described—indeed by me amongst others—as an impressionist work. But it is also seen as exemplary of modernism. What is so striking in that novel is the use of the narrator, John Dowell, who seems, at least to most readers, not to understand, or not to have understood, the story he has been living through. More suspicious readers have found further grounds for mistrust, suggesting that Ford calls his truthfulness into question.¹⁴ Either way, Dowell is often taken as an example of the unreliable narrator. That is exactly what we have been witnessing in the Conrad memoir: a narrator who keeps making us doubt what he is telling us. That appears to align the book with classic *modernism*—as we might expect, coming from the 1920s Paris of Pound, Joyce, Stein, Gide, and Proust. Ford on Conrad frequently sounds like Dowell mourning the darkness that is the heart of another: “It is that that makes life the queer, solitary thing that it is. You may live with another for years and years in a condition of the closest daily intimacy and never know what, at the bottom of the heart, goes on in your companion. Not really” (123).

A demonstration that the book is impressionist, or that it is modernist, or even that it is impressionist *and* modernist, does not amount to a demonstration of its *postmodernity*. The next section of this chapter will examine how *Joseph Conrad* might be said to take its techniques and procedures to a different level.

First, let us consider the structure. The book is divided into four parts. Part I deals with Conrad's life before their meeting and collaboration, as Ford gathered episodes from it over the course of their discussions. For all the doubts about Ford's reliability, he cannot but be one of the most important sources for Conrad's talk, or at least for what it was like to listen to Conrad talking. The collaboration lasted, on and off, for a decade. The two men met in 1898. Most of the work was done in the first five years on two novels: *Romance*, the pirate tale they had got together to work on; and *The Inheritors*, another story of Ford's—this one about invaders from the Fourth Dimension infiltrating British political life—which Conrad helped out with when they needed a break from the work on *Romance*. Then Ford had a breakdown and was sent off to Germany for a “nerve cure”¹⁵ in 1904. After that they worked on a novella, *The Nature of a Crime* (again based on a manuscript of Ford's). Conrad was also heavily involved in the planning of, and writing for, the literary magazine Ford launched in 1908: the *English Review*. After that Ford's marriage broke up; he left for London; he lost control of the *Review*; and he and Conrad fell out. They met and corresponded occasionally over the next fifteen years, but Conrad kept Ford at a distance. The memoir is thus an attempt to recover the phase of extraordinary intimacy, but above all, it is focused on their intertwined lives as writers during that period. After the introductory section, that is what it concentrates on.

Part II thus takes up the story of the collaboration. It focuses first on *The Inheritors*, then begins the discussion of *Romance*. However, the life-writing narrative (though it is never only that, being saturated with literary criticism too) is interrupted for Part III: a fifty-page section entitled “It is Above All to Make You See,” discussing the literary techniques they agreed upon (though it is never only that, being saturated with life-writing reminiscence too). Finally, Part IV resumes and concludes the discussion of their collaboration on *Romance*, closing poignantly with an anecdote Ford heard from a young woman who had interviewed Conrad a few days before his death. Conrad took her to Postling, showing her the view over the fields of The Pent—the house Ford originally leased

but let the Conrads live in—and across the Channel to France and saying: “this is the view I love best in the world” (247). The book also includes as an appendix a short impassioned elegy Ford wrote in French for Conrad immediately on hearing of his death and published in the *Journal Littéraire* on 16 August 1924.

Devoting a whole section to the techniques the two men developed is perhaps where Ford takes the greatest risk of making his book seem like a rag bag, stuffed with Conrad’s table talk and other odds and ends of reminiscence, especially given the way Ford presents it, introducing the material casually, at the beginning of the second chapter of Part III, as if it formed an arbitrary list: “It might be as well here to put down under separate headings, such as ‘Construction,’ ‘Development,’ and the like, what were the formulae for the writing of the novel at which Conrad and the writer had arrived, say in 1902 or so, before we finally took up and finished ‘Romance’” (179). That is what the rest of this part does. It analyses fiction-writing under a series of technical headings: “General Effect,” “Impressionism,” “Selection,” and so on. Ford actually addresses the possible objection from a reader that this breaks up the form, especially the attempt to present the book as a novel: “The reader will say,” he says, “that that is to depart from the form of the novel in which form this book pretends to be written. But that is not the case. The novel more or less gradually, more or less deviously, lets you into the secrets of the characters of the men with whom it deals. Then, having got them in, it sets them finally to work” (179). That is also exactly what he does in this book, this “novel”: let us into the technical “secrets” of these writer-characters and then set them to work, writing.

It is in those sections on “General Effect” and “Impressionism” that he gives the clearest account of how his impressionist narration differs from the more chronological and fact-based narrative of official biography or arguably of classic realism:

We agreed that the general effect of a novel must be the general effect that life makes on mankind. A novel must therefore not be a narration, a report. Life does not say to you: In 1914 my next-door neighbour, Mr. Slack, erected a greenhouse and painted it with Cox’s green aluminium paint.... If you think about the matter you will remember, in various unordered pictures, how one day Mr. Slack appeared in his garden and contemplated the wall of his house. You will then try to remember the year of that occurrence and you will fix it as August, 1914, because having had the

foresight to bear the municipal stock of the City of Liège you were able to afford a first-class season ticket for the first time in your life. You will remember Mr. Slack – then much thinner because it was before he found out where to buy that cheap Burgundy of which he has since drunk an inordinate quantity, though whisky you think would be much better for him! . . . we saw that Life did not narrate, but made impressions on our brains. We in turn, if we wished to produce on you an effect of life, must not narrate but render... impressions. (180–182)

Joseph Conrad exemplifies the method Ford describes in it under the heading “Surprise”: “on the whole, the indirect, interrupted method of handling interviews is invaluable for giving a sense of the complexity, the tantalisation, the shimmering, the haze, that life is” (191). The method is certainly suited to produce that effect: of shimmering complexity. One effect of that effect is to change what we mean by an “interview” or conversation; by an interruption; by a “story.” That is because, when the method works, you can no longer think of a unitary, linear story—Mr. Slack and his greenhouse—because it keeps getting interrupted by observations out of the corner of the narrator’s eye, or his free associations. Those observations and associations tell their own stories, and those stories are just as much part of *the* story. Or perhaps a better way of putting it is that there is no longer *one* story but a multiplicity of stories—as when Ford gives different accounts of Conrad’s “birthplace” and different ways of presenting it.

It is here, I think, that it makes sense to think of this book in terms of Lyotard’s category of the postmodern *in* modernism, for three main reasons. First, because of the way it introduces criticism into biography or novel. “The time has come, then, for some sort of critical estimate of this author” (167), says Ford at the start of Part III. Previous critical biographies (by Edmund Gosse, say, or G. K. Chesterton) had regularly provided that, but not in the form in which Ford provides it. In *Joseph Conrad*, the critical concepts described as the fruits of collaboration are brought to bear on the narrative of the collaboration. Ford, that is, uses Part III to heighten critical self-consciousness about the procedures of his own narrative.

Second, because the effect of having a multiplicity of stories rather than a monolithic story is to draw attention to fictionality. In a fine essay on *The Good Soldier*, Frank Kermode argued that it was a book that demanded to be re-read. “We are in a world,” he continues, “of which

it needs to be said not that plural readings are possible (for this is true of all narrative) but that the illusion of the single right reading is possible no longer.”¹⁶ The way Ford shows up that illusion is by dispensing with another illusion: that of the single right telling. In *The Good Soldier*, Dowell tries to tell the story from the points of view of the different characters, and in doing so he keeps changing his mind, or becomes unable to decide, what the story means. He imagines telling it to a sympathetic friend; writing it down like a diary; or like a novel or a tragedy.

In his Conrad memoir, Ford pauses his story of Conrad’s financial escapades to tell a parenthetical joke. It reads awkwardly now because it is a Jewish joke, of a kind Gentiles tell at their peril. It seems to me though to be more an example of Jewish humour than an instance of anti-Semitism and to deserve quotation here for the humour and beauty of the structure of the story:

(Do you know the story of Grunbaum who asks Klosterholm: Is it true the story that I hear that Solomons made forty thousand dollars in St. Louis in the retail clothing trade? Well, replies Klosterholm, the story is true, it’s the details is wrong. It wasn’t in St. Louis but in Chicago. It wasn’t in the retail trade but in the wholesale. It wasn’t forty thousand dollars, but a hundred and forty thousand. It wasn’t his money, but mine. And he didn’t make it: he lost it.) (112)

To deal with the question of anti-Semitism first: true, it invokes the stereotype of the association between Jews and money; but it does so in order to ironise it. Solomons is useless at business; and Grunbaum seems gullible rather than stereotypically wily. Klosterholm (whose name sounds more Scandinavian than Jewish)¹⁷ is surely the one making the joke rather than being the object of it. He’s being wry about the story in some way, about how distorted it has become by these kinds of Chinese whispers, or about Grunbaum’s inaccuracy, or about Solomons having covered up his failure with a lie about having been successful. So Klosterholm comes across as witty and the victim of someone else’s incompetence.

But the main point of the story isn’t about Jewishness, but story-ness. (“Do you know the *story* . . . : Is it true the *story* that I hear . . . ?”) Or it is about Jewishness only in that Ford relishes that ironic deadpan delivery that characterises a certain kind of Jewish humour.

“[T]he story is true; it’s the details is wrong.” This works so well as a joke because it doesn’t seem like it could possibly *be* the same story if *all* the details are inverted. But it is also a self-reflective joke about the method of impressionism. Ford thought you should change the details if it made it a better story. This got him into a lot of trouble when he was telling stories that involved his friends or acquaintances. He had an allegiance to story which overrode other considerations—which is another way of saying he was a natural novelist, or writer of fiction. Even when he was writing memoir, he wanted to tell a good story. He was not simply recording the everyday events of his life, like an unimaginative diarist.

The question is, how can a story possibly be “true” if all its details are untrue? How can it be the same story if you change all the details? One kind of response is the argument already made above: that we need to be talking not of a single story with a single truth but a world of multiple stories and multiple meanings. That can sound like a lazy or trivial form of postmodernism, which throws up its hands in the face of truth and meaning, deflecting all such questions by saying that all we have are stories. That is a counsel for apathy: there would be no point acting in the world if we did not know what we were acting for or why we were trying to act. The Fordian method of impressionism—albeit, as I am arguing, a postmodern impressionism—is better than that. For something does come across strongly in that little anecdote which is different from a scepticism about anything but story. You get a very strong sense of Klosterholm’s cynicism; his voice; the relish with which he demolishes the rumour. Also, you get a very clear sense of the world in which he and his associates move, dominated by this kind of unreliable rumour and gossip, perhaps malicious or devious, perhaps just envious.

The joke about financial loss is there in *Joseph Conrad* for other reasons too. Ford is talking about Conrad’s “city adventure,” saying “It was perhaps the third fortune that he lost.” Then he tells the joke about Solomons, as if to warn us that the details of his story about Conrad may be no more reliable and to suggest that such uncertainty is both inevitable and an appropriate tribute to Conrad, given his own tendency to reinvent aspects of his autobiography in conversation: “The outlines remained much the same, the details would differ” (82).

Thus, the sense of the multiplicity of stories—of their being tellable in different ways, of the details morphing into a shimmering haze—suffuses Ford’s biographical narrative about Conrad too. But—perhaps more surprisingly—it also suffuses the section dealing with technique.

Because what Ford does in Part III is not to give a dry analytic or theoretical or abstract account of how fiction works. He teaches by example, interspersing examples from Conrad’s work or their collaborations with parodic illustrations, like the one about Mr. Slack painting his greenhouse: passages from an imaginary novel; fictional fictions if you like, or, as postmodernists call them, metafiction. Ford makes great comic play with this, dropping in ever more sensational glimpses of the story of Mr. Slack’s neighbour. He has a daughter called Millicent, who seems to be up to no good: “and you will see in one corner of your mind’s eye a little picture of Mr. Mills the vicar talking—oh, very kindly—to Millicent after she has come back from Brighton.... But perhaps you had better not risk that” (181–182). A few pages later on comes a—surprise—mention of “the frightful scene with your daughter Millicent which ruined your life, town councillor and parliamentary candidate though you had become” (195). What this scene was about is not yet explained. But then, just as a deputation is about to arrive to invite the addressee “to represent your native city in the legislature of your country,” which should produce “the proudest emotion of your life,” “you learn that your daughter Millicent is going to have a child by Mr. Slack . . .” (209).

The fragments of illustration thus take on a life of their own and start turning into a novel within the novel. As they do so, they give an example of how a story can be built up out of fragmentary and disjunct impressions, as the whole of the book about Conrad is built up. So the Mr. Slack story is a *mise en abyme* of the book and its method. In a discussion of what Conrad called “justification”—providing everything with a back history that makes the plot seem inevitable—Ford says Millicent would have to be provided with an actress- or gipsy-grandmother who lived with someone unmarried, to account for Millicent’s sexual conduct. This grandmother’s lover will have to be “someone of eloquence,” such as a politician, to account for the narrator’s eloquence, which combines with the “artistic gifts” he gets from Millicent’s grandmother and “to which the reader will owe your admirable autobiographical novel” (205–206).

The story of Mr. Slack isn’t autobiographical in the sense that its narrator is like Ford. Ford’s two elder daughters were nothing like Millicent: one had become a nun, the other was training to be a vet in Ireland at the time. But both Ford’s mother and grandfather had been artists—painters. Also, the story touches on his biography obliquely, in that the narrator has something in common with Ford’s father-in-law, William Martindale, who bitterly opposed his daughter Elsie marrying

a bohemian with so little prospects as young Ford. Martindale became Mayor of Winchelsea and committed suicide while Ford and Conrad were working on *Romance*, so presumably felt something had ruined his life.

But Ford has written “autobiographical novels”: such as *The Good Soldier*, which almost takes the form of a fictional autobiography, with the narrator piecing together what had ruined his life and the lives of most of those closest to him. But more to the point, he has written one in *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*, the biography and autobiography written like a novel and like the kind of postmodern novel that continually directs attention to its own procedures—especially the fictionalising of reminiscence.

The third main argument for the postmodernism in Ford’s modernism or impressionism here is connected with this sense of the autobiographical and its imbrication with fictionality. If story is always a multiplicity of stories, then that is also true of autobiographical as well as biographical stories. To the extent that we think of selfhood as narrative—as constituted by the stories we tell about ourselves—then subjectivity is a multiplicity as well. The postmodernism in Ford’s method, then, also transforms the notion of the subject. It brings out the plasticity of selfhood: how it is continually cast and recast in different stories. He says of Conrad: “His ambition was to be taken for—to be!—an English country gentleman of the time of Lord Palmerston” (57), suggesting that we become the stories we tell about ourselves or the roles we play. It is a view of the self that leads to a more postmodern, and performative, sense of subjectivity as multiply fictionalised—especially when the people we come to know can be so mercurial, paradoxical, performative, as Conrad and Ford.

It is Conrad’s different ways of telling the stories of his life that, as Ford hears him repeat them to different listeners, build up a shimmering, hazy sense of what that life was like:

By that date the writer had heard enough of Conrad’s autobiography, sufficiently repeated, to have a rounded image of his past – such an image at any rate as Conrad desired to convey. For, like every inspired raconteur Conrad modified his stories subtly, so as to get in sympathy with his listener. He did it not so much with modifications of fact as with gestures of the hand, droppings of the voice, droopings of the eyelid and letting fall his monocle – and of course with some modifications of the facts. (73)

Again, the different versions cannot all be equally true, at least in relation to any objective standard of verifiable factual accuracy. But what their method does is ground truth in relation to stories, and to ways of telling them, to books, and to subjective perceptions and memories, rather than to external facts.

“The most English of the English, Conrad was the most South French of the South French.” A statement like that does not come about because Ford is not sure of the *facts* of Conrad’s nationality. It is provocative in a different way, making us see the roles Conrad played, his enthusiasms, his slightly caricatured identifications, and especially his lightning switches between such different identifications.

Ford gave a French title to the book’s first part: “*C’est toi qui dors dans l’ombre, o sacré Souvenir*,” which the collaborators used as the epigraph to Ford’s dedicatory poem at the start of *Romance* and which is from Victor Hugo’s poem “Tristesse d’Olympio.”¹⁸ “It is you who sleep in the shade, O sacred memory.” The allusion has a poignant, different meaning now that Conrad is sleeping in the shade (“It is an offering In Memoriam constructed solely out of memory”; 39). But the phrase “*o sacré Souvenir*” is multiply ambiguous. It is vocative: the start of the line suggests it is a direct address to the dead person—the “*toi*”—whose memory is sacred. But the person remembered is remembered in the memory of the remembrancer. Ford used to say that genius is memory, and may have intended the quotation to be addressed to memory itself rather than to the remembered person and thus also to stand as a celebration of human memory as a sacred power—that could summon back the dead, make them seem to be sleeping rather than buried.

These ambiguities of reference and address are indicative of another, and very curious, way in which Ford experiments with verbal and technical means to produce a postmodernism within modernism. In the following, penultimate, section, we move from structural to lexical considerations to touch briefly on three related tropes the book uses to achieve this.

One, which is discussed more fully elsewhere, is Ford’s disconcerting device of referring to himself repeatedly as “the writer.”¹⁹ At first it might appear simply a conventional avoidance of the first-person singular. He is writing about Conrad, knowing that most readers will think Conrad the better writer, so he does not want to obtrude himself all the time. But this book which is an impression of an impressionist is written about a writer, or rather about two writers. So rather than being an

awkward circumlocution or euphemism, “the writer” is a term that fuses Ford and Conrad together.

That “the writer” is neither simply Ford nor simply Conrad becomes clear in a second trope. When the collaboration was working well, Ford remembered Conrad saying: “By Jove, . . . it’s a third person who is writing!” (45). That notion that the collaboration seemed the product of a transcendent “third person” (the Trinitarian theological implication not quite dislodged by Conrad’s invocation of “Jove”) was one Ford felt was as important to Conrad as it was to himself:

The psychology of that moment is perfectly plain to the writer. Conrad interrupted with a note of relief in his voice. He had found a formula to justify collaboration in general and our collaboration. Until then we had struggled tacitly each for our own note in writing. (45)

For having got hold of that comforting theory Conrad never abandoned it. At intervals during our readings aloud that lasted for years he would say, always as if it were a *trouvaille*, that that was certainly the writing of a third party . . . He had to find at least an artistic justification for going on. We were both extremely unaccepted writers, but we could both write. What was the sense of not writing apart if there were no commercial gain? He found it in the aesthetically comforting thought that the world of letters was enriched by yet a third artist. (48–49)

The third trope appears when, for extended passages, Ford even writes in the grammatical first-person plural, which stands in for this collaborative third person—bizarrely, since the actions he is describing were Conrad’s, not his; though they become collaborative as Conrad performs them again, in reminiscences:

We had left Lowestoft and passed for master. . . . We made the voyage in the *Judea, Do or Die* – actually the *Palestine* – that you find narrated in *Youth*. In the East we passed so and so many years. You find the trace of them in the *End of the Tether*, to go no further outside the *Youth* volume. We commanded the Congo Free State navy – for the sake of *Heart of Darkness*. So we have the whole gamut of youth, of fidelity and of human imbecility. . . . And if the writer write “we” – that is how it feels. For it was not possible to be taken imperiously through Conrad’s life, in those unchronological and burning passages of phraseology, and not to feel – even to believe – that one had had, oneself, that experience. And the feeling was heightened by Conrad’s affecting to believe that one had, at least to the extent of knowing at all times where he had been, what seen, and what performed. (98–99)

“And if the writer write ‘we.’” Note the several kinds of fusion between persons in such passages. Between Conrad’s life and his fiction (“Conrad was Conrad because he was his books”; 25). Between Conrad’s stories and Ford. Between Ford and Conrad. Sometimes Ford even portrays himself as fusing with Conrad’s characters: “The writer, alas, alas, seems to become Marlowe,” he says (25; adding an “e” to the name of Conrad’s narrator): not in the sense of being the kind of character Marlow is but of offering a mode of narration like his—which implies that this is how Conrad told his story to Ford. Conrad fused into Marlow for Ford, and so Ford himself morphs into Marlow(e) as he retells Conrad’s stories.

That trope of the confusion of two identities—of the reader’s identity and experiences with those being read about—recurs in Ford’s criticism and sometimes is presented by him (as it is here) as a claim for vicarious experience grounded in realism, an injunction to the author to present the experience in such a realistic way that the reader will believe it is his or hers. But *Joseph Conrad* envisages another way of understanding the trope, reading it as further evidence of Ford’s experimentation introducing something postmodern into realism or impressionism or modernism. “The scenes of Conrad’s life as afterwards rendered, say in *Heart of Darkness*, are really as vivid in the writer’s mind from what Conrad said as from what Conrad there wrote” (99). His picture of Conrad recounting experiences he had also used in his books does not so much present a man dedicated to transcribing reality, as someone creating the experiences for himself, in words, as he tells the stories, whether in writing or conversation, “in those unchronological and burning passages of phraseology” (99).

All three of these tropes are versions of the combining of two identities into what seems like a third. That third person is arguably the narrator (“the writer”), and it is also really the subject of the book: collaboration; the magic whereby two individual visions managed to come together to produce something greater than the sum of their individual parts. In a sense, the book is itself a retrospective collaboration, using Conrad’s stories about his life, and his comments on their life together, as source material for a book, rather as Conrad had dictated chapters of his autobiographical *The Mirror of the Sea* to Ford and had worked on Ford’s stories with him. In this case, the stories, or most of them, are Conrad’s, mostly told by him, some about him. The notion of such collaboration beyond the grave is of course a fantasy, like the one Ford tells

of imagining he can still hear Conrad's voice discussing style as he sees the newspaper headline announcing his death (33). But that, in the end, is what makes the book so moving: its intense desire to collaborate with him again, to summon up his ghost to produce a new book, a new form.

I conclude with a brief provocation of another kind, by considering the implications of Ford's book for thinking about modernism and experiments in fiction and life-writing. The canonical examples of that fusion have become Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and *Flush* (1933) and Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) together with A. J. A. Symons's *The Quest for Corvo: An Experiment in Biography* (1934) and H. G. Wells's *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934). But shouldn't we be thinking instead of Ford's experiment in biography, written a decade before Symons's and Wells's, and before all of these books, as the real—and dual—pioneer?²⁰ Not just for introducing modernism into life-writing but for introducing postmodernism into modernist life-writing?

NOTES

1. Catherine Belsey, "The Good Soldier: Ford's Postmodern Novel," in *Ford Madox Ford's 'The Good Soldier': Centenary Essays*, eds. Max Saunders and Sara Haslam (Leiden and Boston: Brill and Rodopi, 2015), 31–45.
2. Jean-François Lyotard, "Réponse à la question: qu'est-ce que le postmoderne?" *Critique* 419 (April 1982): 357. "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?," in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 71–82.
3. Belsey, "The Good Soldier," 31–32. The quotations from Lyotard's "What is Postmodernism?" are from pp. 79 and 81.
4. See, for example, Elena Lamberti, "Writing History: Ford and the Debate on 'Objective Truth' in the Late 20th Century," in *History and Representation in Ford Madox Ford's Writings*, ed. Joseph Wiesenfarth (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), 99–110; and Martin Stannard's comment that "Criticism now more often sees him as a crucial figure of European modernism or as a proto-postmodernist": "Tales of Passion," *Studies in the Novel* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 106.
5. See, for example, Joseph Wiesenfarth, "Ford's *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* as Metafiction: Or, How Conrad Became an Elizabethan Poet," *Renaissance* 53, no. 1 (2000): 43–60.
6. See David D. Harvey, *Ford Madox Ford: 1873–1939: A Bibliography of Works and Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 241.

7. Ibid., 62–63.
8. In a December 1926 inscription in a copy now at Princeton University Library: see Harvey, *Ford Madox Ford*, 62.
9. Ford Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (London: Duckworth, 1924), 6. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
10. Jessie Conrad, letter to the editor, *T. L. S.*, 4 December 1924, 826.
11. Ford’s lifelong antipathy to academicism owes much to his grandfather Ford Madox Brown’s hostility to the Royal Academy. But it can also be seen as a reaction to Ford’s German father’s academic training. As Franz Hüffer, he wrote his doctoral thesis on the troubadour Guillem de Cabestanh. When he emigrated to London he changed his name to Francis Hueffer; published *The Troubadours: A History of Provençal Life and Literature in the Middle Ages*; and became a respected musicologist and music critic of the *Times*.
12. Cf. Ford’s *Ancient Lights*: “This book, in short, is full of inaccuracies as to facts, but its accuracy as to impressions is absolute. . . . I don’t really deal in facts, I have for facts a most profound contempt. I try to give you what I see to be the spirit of an age, of a town, of a movement.” Ford, *Ancient Lights* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1911), xv–xvi.
13. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. “projection,” last modified June 2007, <http://www.oed.com>.
14. See my introduction to *The Good Soldier* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), for a discussion of Dowell’s unreliability. For a more suspicious account, see Roger Poole’s provocative reading of the novel as a murder story: “The Real Plot Line of Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier*: An Essay in Applied Deconstruction,” *Textual Practice* 4, no. 3 (Winter 1990): 391–427; and “The Unknown Ford Madox Ford,” in *Ford Madox Ford’s Modernity*, ed. Robert Hampson and Max Saunders (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2003), 117–136.
15. Ford described this period in *Return to Yesterday* (London: Gollancz, 1931), 266–287.
16. Frank Kermode, “Recognition and Deception,” in *Essays on Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1983), 102.
17. Cf. *The Secret of Klosterholm* by “Betty” [Janson] (Chicago: The Covenant book concern, c. 1924), trans. from the Swedish by Signhild V. Gustafson.
18. See Raymond Brebach, “Conrad, Ford and the *Romance Poem*,” *Modern Philology* 81, no. 2 (Nov 1983): 169–172.
19. See Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), vol. II, 180–181.

20. Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) is often held up as the inaugural work of modern biography. But while it is true Strachey's mode is novelistic, his narrative mode is not notably modernist. See Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) for further discussion of modernism and life-writing.

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