



Ford Madox Ford and 'The Republic of Letters'

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LANGUAGE DISTURBANCES AND
FREUDIAN UNHEIMLICH
IN THE GOOD SOLDIER

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I

The ambiguity of the narrative in *The Good Soldier* has been the subject of many studies, as has been also the character of John Dowell, the story's narrator-writer-creator.

Indeed, we as readers would rightfully expect John Dowell to assume responsibility as storyteller for the narrative act he has taken upon himself. In such an act, the narrator becomes the centre around which the tale unfolds; everything is seen through his eyes. There is then a privileged "I" who may not cross the boundaries of his knowledge. The narrative authenticity depends on the narrator, on his obstinacy and his obsessions.

The act of storytelling presupposes then two entities: the narrator, or *destinator*, and the listener, or *receiver*, who can also be defined as encoder and decoder of meaning. The two entities share the same linguistic and social conventions, so that listening to the *message* it is possible to identify lexical units, as well as grammatical forms and syntactical rules that govern their association.

Yet, in the case of *The Good Soldier*, even though we share Dowell's social and linguistic codes, we stumble on a communication problem. Dowell's reticence takes the form of *aphasia*, and consequently the written rendition of his tale presents problems of *agraphia*. It is true that Dowell talks ceaselessly, that his discourse seems unrestrainable; yet what he says in one place is often contradicted pages later in a manner that is a cause of growing frustration for the listener/reader who continues decoding the "message" with rising suspicion and cannot but ask himself whether Dowell's memory betrays him or he consciously misinforms.

And in fact Dowell does not only demonstrate lack of memory (*amnesic aphasia*), but also an apparent lack of speech organizational skills (*semantic aphasia*).

Sigmund Freud published his essay on the interpretation of aphasias, *Zur Auffassung der Aphasien. Eine kritische Studie*, in 1891. And although it was translated to English only in 1953, we may safely assume that Ford had read it in German. At the time of the composition of *The Good Soldier*, Freud's essay was well known throughout Europe, and the subject would have been most compelling for a man of such inquisitive mind as Ford. We are not saying that Ford used Freud's work in a completely conscious manner. Yet, when we read Dowell's story, we cannot but hear the echoes of Freud's work – and wonder whether these echoes are intentional.¹

¹ Although there is no direct evidence that Ford had read Freud – besides "a passing reference to having known about [...] *The Interpretation of Dreams*", – Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford. A Dual Life*,

Though bibliography on the study of aphasic disturbances has been growing at a considerable pace since 1891, Freud's interpretation remains an important milestone. More recently, Jakobson and Halle, in *Fundamentals of Language*, defined normal language as based on a bipolar structure where linguistic signs can be arranged according to a paradigmatic or syntagmatic axis. The language of aphasic subjects, on the other hand, does not follow this structural bipolarity, but displays problems of similarity or problems of contiguity, according to the type of aphasia.

Dowell seems to defy this distinction in that his language, and its *written* transcription, displays problems of both similarities and contiguity. There follows that a thorough analysis of Dowell's verbal acts would have to take into account a discussion of the relationship between the written linguistic expression and the *oral* linguistic expression. Our aim is to point at a *possible* Freudian interpretation of Dowell's narrative and present evidence to support this claim.

Freud's works that constitute the basis for the analysis are the above-mentioned essay on aphasia and his study on the *unheimlich* or "*uncanny*" effect.²

II

Among the instances of *amnesic apahasia* we can count all the references to Nancy, to her fate and to her future. Who is she? Why does the narrator refer to her using the past tense (her name *was*)? Is she dead? Did she die during "that fatal trip to Brindisi," and that's why the trip is called *fatal*?

The poor girl is – as we all know very well – Nancy Rufford. But her name is made known to Dowell's "silent listener" only on p. 90³: "Nancy Rufford was her name" (thus inferring that she is actually dead). True, Ford's technique of delaying information to intrigue the reader has been discussed extensively, especially with reference to Nancy and her fate. But we are now underlining how this delay on the part of Dowell might be unintentional and how his mind might be too horrified by the 'whole' story to be able to narrate it in full.

Other references to Nancy worthy of note in our discussion of Dowell's amnesic aphasia are mostly connected to the idea of death:

And to think that that vivid white thing, that saintly and swan-like being – to think that... Why, she was like the sail of a ship, so white and so definite in her movements. And to think that she will never... Why, she will never do anything again. I can't believe it... (TGS 120)

(Oxford: O.U.P. 1996), p. 425, vol. I – we cannot overlook the fact that when Ford was chief editor of *The English Review* (1908-1910), another magazine headed by A.R. Orage, *The New Age* (1907-1922) was publishing essays on Nietzsche, Bergson and Freud, promoting their theories.

² Sigmund Freud, *Das Unheimliche* (1919). English translation (pp. 1-20) by Alix Strachey in: <http://www.williams.edu/go/Religion/courses/Rel301/reading/text/uncanny.html> [Hereafter cited in the text as DU, Page references are given in the text].

³ Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (1915), (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1977). [Hereafter cited in the text as TGS. Page references are given in the text.].

Here the amnesic aphasia is expressed and reinforced by punctuation, through the use of ellipses, a device Ford would use aplenty in the tetralogy *Parade's End*.

Edward is dead: the girl is gone – oh, utterly gone (TGS 210)

Though we will know this only later, the girl is not gone, only her mind is gone. to see [...] in a darkened room, my poor girl, sitting motionless, with her wonderful hair about her, looking at me with eyes that did not see me (TGS 210)

Of course by now Nancy is "his" poor girl.

The narrative of Florence's death follows a similar pattern dictated by *amnesic aphasia*.

Semantic aphasia on the other hand, is evident in the many instances of chronological discrepancies.⁴ Some of these are quite revealing. Think for example of the time it took him to discover the betrayal. At first he states:

I can't believe that that long, tranquil life, which was just stepping a minuet, vanished in four crashing days at the end of nine years and six weeks. (TGS 13)

But only a page later he affirms, with meticulous certainty, that he discovered the "rotteness" of the four-square friendship,

in nine years and six months less four days (TGS 14)

Another telling instance is the time that, according to his report, elapsed from the end of Florence's affair with Jimmy to the beginning of her relationship with Edward:

And, by the time she was sick of Jimmy – which happened in the year 1903 – she had taken on Edward Ashburnham. (TGS 86)

But we know that the two couples actually met only in 1904, or more precisely on 4 August 1904. This is also the date on which Florence's and Edward's affair began; and Dowell also wrongly attributes Maisie Maidan's death to it. Indeed, in Dowell's anxious mind, this date is the point in time where all fateful events started, a date of primordial horror.

We can say, then, that Dowell's memory suffers from semantic aphasia. His mind, where all painful memories have been shuttered away, now lets fragmentary narrative spill out in an unorganized form, displaying signs of lack of speech organizational skills, clearly evident, for instance, in the dyslexic sequence of numbers.⁵

Trying to interpret Dowell's verbal acts we are tempted to use other Freudian theories. In 1919, that is a few years after the publication of *The Good Soldier*,

⁴ Extensively examined from different perspectives by well-known Fordians, first and foremost R.W. Lid, *Ford Madox Ford. The Essence of His Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California Press, 1964).

⁵ The numbers are always the same, but they are arranged in different sequences: Dowell's uncovering of the betrayal takes '4 days, after 9 years and 6 weeks', but then becomes '9 years, 6 months less 4 days'; events reportedly taking place on 4/8/1904 are then said to have taken place in 1903.

Sigmund Freud published an essay *Das Unheimliche*, which he had previously written but had kept in his drawer for many years. In 1906 Dr. E. Jentsch had published his own work on the psychology of the *unheimliche*⁶ from which Freud's work takes its cue.

Freud's exploration of what is called *heimlich* (familiar, homely) and *unheimlich* (uncanny) goes a step further than Jentsch's. But what is *unheimlich*, and why are we discussing it here? For a Fordian scholar Jentsch's description – as quoted by Freud – of what can produce a feeling of *unheimlich* will certainly ring a bell:

In telling a story one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty [...] to do it in such a way that his attention is not focused directly upon his uncertainty, so that he may not be led to go into the matter and clear it up immediately. (DU 6)

To Jentsch the "uncanny would always [...] be something one does not know one's way about it" (DU 6). To Freud "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (DU 6).

In a long section, Freud lists the many diverse shades of meaning of the words *heimlich* and its opposite *unheimlich*, quoting various sources: *heimlich* is "homely," "friendly," "intimate," but also "concealed," "kept from sight," "withheld from other," and "something hidden and dangerous." This last definition suggests that *heimlich* "comes to have the meaning usually ascribed to *unheimlich*," "stranger," "unfamiliar," "hidden," "arousing gruesome fear," sinister. In Freud's words:

Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*. (DU 6)

The 'uncanny effect' in *The Good Soldier* is exactly what Freud defines as "a state of complete bewilderment" in which the reader is left after a revelation which, far from contributing to his enlightenment, actually precipitates him into confusion. The author, says Freud referring to Hoffman – but we can use his words just as well when analyzing Ford – "has piled up too much material of the same kind. In consequence one's grasp of the story as a whole suffers, though not the impression it makes" (DU 9).

III

Let's see now *which devices* are used to create the feeling of *unheimlich*.

In Freud's words, Jentsch "ascribes the essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness [*unheimlich*] to intellectual uncertainty" (DU 2). So the first 'devices' to be listed and later discussed in Fordian terms are: 1) Creating intellectual uncertainty; 2) Obsessive Repetition of the same thing or fact; 3) The phenomenon of the 'double': characters who look alike or behave alike; 4) The horror of the

⁶ E. Jentsch "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen", *Psychiat.-neurol. Wschr.*, vol. 8, p. 195.

familiar and the return of the repressed; 5) Blurring between imagination and reality, between appearances and reality.

Now, *how* are these devices employed in *The Good Soldier*?

1) As for the *intellectual uncertainty* in which the reader/listener finds himself, it is a device frustrated readers of Ford are long familiar with. Dowell does not allow us to know much. The reader is led by his words into a dark and obscure world. The whole first page is built so as to create this feeling of uncertainty, this uneasiness, this discomfort, and even when the reader knows, or thinks he knows, his knowledge "does not lessen the impression of uncanniness in the least degree" (DU 8). The repetition of the word "know" in the first page – which has been subject to a great number of analyses⁷ – actually sets up the inescapable atmosphere of uncanniness which dominates the novel and "forces upon us the idea of something fateful" (DU 11). In this particular case, but also in the case of Nancy's fate, the device of *leaving the reader in a state of intellectual uncertainty* is used in connection with the device of *repetition*.

2) In fact, *repetition* is what the novel is made of. Facts are not just told once, but are re-told with new or modified details. All the key scenes in the novel – the description of the first meeting of the two couples, the "excursion to M." (TGS 43), Florence's suicide and Edward's death – are told each time almost from a new perspective, throwing the reader off and casting an atmosphere of uneasiness. This device is also used in connection with the device of *blurring between imagination and reality* or *appearances and reality* (5).

3) But the most disquieting is perhaps the *phenomenon of the double*, "which appears in every shape and every degree of development," from the "mental processes leaping from one [...] character to another" to characters who look alike or behave in a similar manner. And this device is often combined with our previous device no. 2, repetition, of the same "crimes," or "vicissitudes" (DU 9).

Characters are presented in couples: Edward and Leonora; Dowell and Florence; Nancy and Maisie, who are both connected emotionally to Edward (one will die in a grotesque position, the other will plunge into madness); Florence and Edward (who will both commit suicide). Actually, the two male protagonists are one the double of the other: John Dowell's aspiration is to become a British gentleman, a sentimentalist, as he defines both himself and Edward; Edward embodies what John wishes to become. In the final page, Dowell will actually say:

I can't conceal from myself the fact that I loved Edward Ashburnham – and that I loved him because he was just myself" (TGS 227).

So in the end it seems only natural, but very *unheimlich*, that Edward must die and Dowell – the double – take on his role as landowner, live in his mansion, give orders to his servants and take care of his subjects. Indeed, these subjects,

⁷ Cfr. Frank Kermode, "Novels: Recognition and Deception", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 1, 1, 1974.

who according to Dowell did not deserve that "that poor devil should go on suffering for their sakes" (TGS 229), are now called by Dowell "My tenants" (TGS 227). Dowell has also become the companion of Nancy, Edward's love, now mute and reduced to an automaton. Nancy in Dowell's care will be affected by the most extreme case of aphasia: she will actually lose her language, her discourse, her "meaning".⁸

- 4) *The horror of the familiar; the return of the repressed.* That is to say that if we agree with the psychoanalytic theory according to which:

every affect belonging to an emotional impulse, whatever its kind, is transformed, if it is repressed, into anxiety, then among instances of frightening things there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which *recurs*. This class of frightening things would then constitute the uncanny; [...] if this is indeed the secret nature of the uncanny, we can understand why linguistic usage has extended *das Heimliche* ['homely'] into its opposite *das Unheimliche*; for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. [Confirming] Schelling's definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light. (DU 13)

The uncanny feeling here derives from the observation of the familiar, Jamesian atmosphere of the interiors, where nothing seems to have the power of disturbing the tranquil flow of events but is actually the scene where the most terrible crime can happen or – eventually – will happen in tranquillity and reported in a whisper. Dowell's whisper is the vehicle for the most uncanny feeling, it is itself a manifestation of uncanniness. And here once more the Freudian reading brings together the uncanniness of Dowell's speech with his language disturbances, that is aphasia, in that the 'content' of this speech tends to be repressed by so-called social and ideological values of decency, especially regarding sex. Facing his own desire the character not only refuses to claim it openly and outright, he has strong resistance to even admit it within his own conscience.⁹ This resistance translates into Dowell's aphasic attitude towards everything that might slightly regard sex.

⁸ It is worth pointing out that the figure of the 'doll', is discussed by Freud in his essay on the *unheimlich* following Jentsch's observations about E. T. A. Hoffmann's well known story *The Sand Man* (1816). Nathaniel, the protagonist, falls in love with Olympia, a doll created by the evil magician Spallanzani. To Jentsch, the theme of Olympia, a doll who looks and behaves like a living being, though not the *only* "element that must be held responsible for the quite unparalleled atmosphere of uncanniness evoked by the story (DU 6)," is certainly one of the most effective. And what could be more *unheimlich* than the 'doll' Nancy, staring "in front of her with the blue eyes that have over them strained, stretched brows" (p. 228), Nancy who would "utter the one word 'shuttlecocks', perhaps" (p. 228)? An additional element of uncanniness in the parallel Olympia-Nancy lies in the fact that Nancy *is* alive but has lost her speech ability, without however losing the "perfect flush of health on her cheeks," the "lustre of her coiled black hair," "the poise of the head upon the neck," "the grace of the white hands." Still "it all means nothing – [...] it is a picture without a meaning" (p. 228). Worth mentioning is the puzzling change of pronoun in mid-sentence: "*it* all means nothing," "*it* is a picture without meaning"; *it*, not *she*, not *Nancy*.

⁹ Cfr. Francesco Orlando, *Per una teoria freudiana della letteratura*, (Torino: Einaudi 1973), p. 75.

A good example of *unheimlich* derived from *the horror of the familiar* – among plenty others in the novel – is set at the end of Chapter II, Part I, where the effect is reinforced by the chiasitic structure framing a case of *amnesic aphasia*:

I tell you it was the very spirit of peace [*first term of familiar atmosphere*].

The girl [which girl?] was out with the hounds, I think. [*amnesic aphasia*]

And that poor devil beside me was in agony. Absolute, hopeless, dumb agony such as passes the mind of a man to imagine. [*second term, creating the unheimlich effect*] (TGS 26)

5) *Blurring between imagination and reality*, between appearances and reality. When the

distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the things it symbolises [...]. (DU 14)

I have stated above that the novel is made of “repetitions.” We may add that the contrast between what the silent listener, or even Dowell, *imagines*, what *appears* and what *is*, is the other pillar upon which the narrative rests, and upon which a good deal of *unheimlich* is created.

Where this device is most evident, is in the description of the relationship between the two couples: Is it “a minuet” or “a prison”? A “four-square coterie” or “a prison full of screaming hysterics”? And finally, how are we to read Edward’s character? Was he “a sentimentalist” or a compulsive womanizer?

The novel closes with Nancy’s silence and with the delayed narrative of Edward’s death – in Freudian terms, with a case of aphasia and the return of the repressed – thus leaving us with the burden of finally facing the “reality” behind the virtuosos narrative.