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**BETWEEN IMPRESSIONISM AND MODERNISM:
SOME DO NOT . . ., A POETICS OF THE
ENTRE-DEUX**

Isabelle Brasme

From its very title, *Some Do Not . . .* signals itself as a highly ambivalent and baffling work. The hiatus created by the suspension points hints at a silent meaning and suggests that the novel will be as much about what is left unsaid as what is being said. The unfinished, negative sentence – ‘some do not’ – also inevitably implies to our minds its positive counterpart – ‘some *do*’ –, and intimates that a Janus-faced and equivocal text is to follow. This dichotomy runs through Ford’s life and work, as has been highlighted by Max Saunders in his seminal biography of Ford, and as the title of his work – ‘A Dual Life’ – makes clear.¹ This paper investigates how such duality may be considered as the aesthetic mainspring of Ford’s writing in *Some Do Not . . .* – as indeed in the whole *Parade’s End* tetralogy.

Among the many ambivalences of the novel, that of the vacillation between tradition and modernity is fundamental. Ford’s writing in *Parade’s End* appears in many respects as operating an unfinished transition between tradition and modernity. I propose to examine in *Some Do Not . . .* how, while acknowledging his literary heritage and prolonging it through his practice of impressionism, Ford strives to negotiate with the process of breaking with the past and of radical innovation that underlies the ‘modernist’ movements. How is such indecision between tradition and modernity resolved – or perhaps deliberately left *unresolved*?

Despite a growing interest for his major contribution to the literary landscape of the early twentieth century, Ford still remains more widely known today for his role as editor and mentor of authors classified as ‘modernist’, than for his own literary work. While such dissymmetry is, happily, being increasingly amended, Ford’s critical essays do prove instrumental in getting a better grasp of the way in which writing is being thought in *Some Do Not . . .*. Ford’s novel

writing, however, does not so much depart from as sublimate his theoretical work. Indeed, although Ford was the main and perhaps sole theoretician of literary impressionism, I argue that, when brought to its uttermost point, impressionism leads to a deadlock. Yet the Fordian text itself certainly does not fall short, despite its being frequently identified (including by Ford) as a practice of ‘literary impressionism’. As a matter of fact, Ford’s critical essays are openly and deliberately tentative, if not contradictory at times, by Ford’s own account.² This is why the writing in *Some Do Not . . .* does not only exemplify, but also transcends Ford’s own aesthetic theory, and oscillates between impressionism and what may be sensed as a more ‘modern’ aesthetics. I believe that this apparent contradiction proves to be the very dynamics of the novel. Ford’s practice of literary impressionism in *Some Do Not . . .* both stems from nineteenth-century writing and points towards a modernist aesthetics. Tradition and modernism may appear as reconciled through Ford’s practice and perpetual surpassing of literary impressionism.

Ford’s Literary Impressionism

In his comparative study on literary impressionism, Todd Bender highlighted the influence of French pictorial impressionism on Ford’s and Conrad’s aesthetics, especially as regards the object of representation.³ According to Bender, the impressionist painter’s attempt to capture the act of perception of the world by a given consciousness is echoed in Ford’s literary theory. Ford’s view of literary history in *The March of Literature* revolves around the shift from a direct, ‘realist’ representation of the world to the representation of the impression left by the world on a consciousness. The novelist should render the process through which the characters – as well as the readers of the impressionist novel – apprehend the world ‘in growing concentric circles of understanding’, to use Bender’s own phrasing.⁴

This focus on the impression rather than the event may be seen in keeping with James’ notion of characters primarily as ‘reflectors’.⁵ Literary impressionism may therefore be traced back to Ford’s predecessors; consequently, its origins appear closer in time to Impressionism in painting than is usually considered.⁶ Ford’s aesthetics develops *in the wake* of earlier literary endeavours: far from achieving a clean break with nineteenth-century literature, it

establishes a continuity between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, up until the after-war period.

Should Ford be then considered a ‘traditionalist’, and be denied the ‘modernist’ label?

Let us examine a case when a same object is rendered by various characters or ‘reflectors’. Sylvia’s portrayal, which is chiefly achieved through the perspective of other characters, proves illuminating in that respect. Except for a brief appearance in the second chapter, Sylvia’s character in the first part of the novel is indeed merely rendered through the other characters’ thoughts or speeches, or through the way her past actions reverberate on the plot. Her real entrance takes place in the second part, where the first chapter is exclusively related from her point of view. However, the impression thus developing within the reader’s mind is once more inflected when she first appears to Valentine, during one of the Macmasters’ ‘Fridays’: for the first time in the novel, Sylvia is shown in a positive light, as her encounter with Valentine’s mother makes clear.

[Valentine] heard her mother say:

‘You’re a most beautiful creature. I’m sure you’re good!’ [...]

Valentine was crying. [...]. Beautiful! The most beautiful woman she had ever seen! And good! Kind!⁷

Sylvia is here described by Valentine as the exact opposite of all that she has hitherto seemed to be. The transfiguration doesn’t occur in ‘real life’ i.e. within the novel’s fictional world, but only within Valentine’s consciousness. What varies is the *impression* created by Sylvia. The coherent subject evolved by modern philosophy is therefore replaced by a new kind of subject, which is constantly shifting: the character’s identity keeps changing as the narration develops.

Valentine’s vision is superimposed over the previous perspectives on Sylvia. This layering of views makes the text work as a palimpsest. Ford elaborated several times on the phenomenon of superimposed impressions; in his first 1914 article entitled ‘On Impressionism’, he stated:

I suppose that Impressionism exists to render those queer effects of real life that are like so many views seen through bright glass – through glass so bright that whilst you perceive through it a landscape or a backyard, you are aware that, on its surface, it reflects a face of a person behind you.⁸

With such contrasting, or even contradictory perspectives, the concept of truth does not hold. Even though some points of view are favoured or recur more frequently in the course of the novel, no perspective can impose itself as normative. This indecision constitutes precisely the mainspring of the plot: within the society shown by the novel, each individual is defined by what public opinion thinks of him or her, not by his or her own intrinsic qualities. This is why Tietjens is constantly described as a libertine by the public, and Sylvia as an excellent and ill-treated wife. Gossip has become the new credentials for truth, no matter how approximate or indeed dishonest it may be. *Authority* is lacking: Ford keeps highlighting in his theoretical works the necessity for the author to stand ‘aloof’.⁹

A same event or character is thus reflected several times through various points of view that do not coincide. Instead of a traditionally realist narration where representation is stable, here the meeting point between the various perspectives remains vacant, since they do not converge, and thus leave the source of the impressions continually elusive. Such aesthetics breaks away from realism in that the centre of representation – in this case, the focal point where the various perspectives should concur – appears void. The reader’s own point of view – his knowledge of the events and of the characters – needs constant revising. This may indeed sound as a departure from the metaphysics of presence such as it has been defined by Derrida: in Ford’s text, the centre remains intangible.¹⁰

Furthermore, Ford’s impressionist principles lead to a break with diegetic conventions. The nineteenth-century realist conventions, according to which the narration establishes from the start all the elements that may help understand the plot and the characters, are rejected on behalf of a more ‘authentic’ form of realism that proposes to follow the characters’ consciousnesses in the closest and most immediate manner. In accordance with Christopher Baldick’s views, realism does subsist; yet its object has been updated.¹¹ Thus, since the novel’s chapters start *in medias res* – or rather, *in medias impressiones* –, characters or facts aren’t immediately identified. The principle of a narrative that follows the characters’ consciousnesses prevents the mention of details that are evident for the characters’ cognitive states. This principle may even lead to silence, and therefore threatens the text’s own existence. This is manifest in the muteness surrounding

Sylvia's elopement when the novel starts. The narration emulates the characters' minds and approaches this event in a peripheral manner.

However, unlike a fully Cubist aesthetics where the centrifugal dynamics is systematised and the focal point ultimately vanishes, in Ford's writing the centre of representation remains as a potentiality – it is continually hinted at as a presence-absence. The text keeps pointing towards a spectral meaning which is never fully revealed, yet underlies the various perspectives. There *is* an initial event that triggered all the characters' impressions; but since it is never directly narrated, and since the character's points of view on that event differ, it can never be fully unearthed and reconstituted. The centre in Ford's text remains spectral – the reader merely perceives its shadow, its trace, through the superimposition of the various perspectives which – as we saw – never fully coincide.

Such functioning – or indeed, deliberate *un*-functioning – may be considered in keeping with Barthes's notion of the *texte de jouissance* (text of bliss): Barthes considers that such a text is a 'living contradiction', that both enjoys itself and its own collapse.¹² As a matter of fact, it does appear that literary impressionism both enjoys and challenges itself.

Challenges of Impressionism

When wrought to its uttermost, literary impressionism such as it is theorized and practiced by Ford seems doomed to silence. When he established the prevalence of impressions in the construction of human understanding, Hume was nonetheless aware that such a view led to a communicational and linguistic deadlock. This is how Todd Bender accounts for the solipsism that stems from Ford's or Conrad's impressionism: 'The impressionist ends by locking us into our private mental prison houses, unable to see the world beyond our own individual impressions'.¹³

In the case of a *literary* work, the main problem is that of representing singular experiences through a language that is a 'necessary convention', to quote Ferdinand de Saussure.¹⁴ Saussure asserted that the act of naming depends on the consensus of the linguistic community. This challenges the rendering of individual and subjective impressions. That is why silence or pauses often seem better suited to render the uniqueness of an impression. It may also explain Ford's propensity to intersperse his prose with suspension dots.

Subjectivity can never be fully conveyed: any representation implies a modicum of distance and abstraction, so that it can be shared with an audience or a reader. The project of a fully 'impressionist' narration therefore bears within itself inevitable flaws. The narrative status proves indeed unstable in *Some Do Not . . .*. Asserting himself in the wake of Flaubert, James and Conrad, Ford advocates an impersonal or 'aloof' narrator; but the narrative stance in *Some Do Not . . .* is only irregularly obliterated. First, some style effects point towards a narrative voice above the characters' voices. This is manifest in the constant use within dialogues of interpolated clauses such as 'he said', or 'she said'. While those are necessary to the reader's understanding, they nonetheless disrupt the characters' flow of speech, and our own reading. Although it is intended as transparent, the narrative stance becomes self-reflexive as it halts the characters' voices.

The quest for an impressionist writing also spawns an aesthetic issue. This is particularly obvious in respect of the aim at 'justification' that is essential to Ford's literary aims, such as he presents it in his 1914 article on impressionism. Ford stresses the importance of creating an illusion in literary impressionism, and thus states:

in order to justify you must introduce a certain amount of matter that may not appear germane to your story or your poem. Sometimes, that is to say, it would appear as if for the purpose of proper bringing out of a very slight Impressionist sketch the artist would need an altogether disproportionately enormous frame; a frame absolutely monstrous.¹⁵

On the other hand, Ford repeatedly insisted on the importance of the reader's pleasure; yet, he acknowledges here that some digressions may be felt as 'monstrous'. It is highly significant that Ford himself was only partly satisfied with the outcome of his aesthetic principles. This discontentedness is symptomatic of his oscillation between a traditional 'beautiful' aesthetics, and a more 'modern' aesthetics that would question the norm of the beautiful and the ugly according to a criterion of pleasure.

Entre-deux

The aesthetics at work in *Some Do Not . . .* thus appears characterized by in-betweenness, by the *entre-deux*: not in the sense of uncontrolled vagueness, but of a deliberate refusal to oppose tradition and

modernity in an agonistic relationship. The writing in *Some Do Not . . .* is marked with an eclecticism in keeping with the perpetual back-and-forth movement between the present and the past. While he insisted on the crucial influence of tradition on his art, Ford was also open to the artistic experimentations of his own time. The text may thus appear as working like a *collage*, as Todd Bender demonstrated with precision. Ford used a peculiarly modern metaphor to describe the phenomenon:

Impressionism began with the [...] discovery . . . that the juxtaposition of the composed renderings of two or more exaggerated actions or situations may be used to establish [...] a sort of frictional current of electric life that will extraordinarily galvanize the work of art in which the device is employed.¹⁶

The collage technique is indeed often at work in *Some Do Not . . .*; and it is often used to juxtapose several temporal layers.

Let us examine again Valentine's response to Sylvia in the second part of the novel – particularly to Sylvia's smile when she sees her husband talking to Valentine: 'Valentine could not be sure whether it [i.e. Sylvia's smile] was kind, cruel, or merely distantly ironic' (*SDN* 254). 'Kind' refers to Valentine's feelings on first meeting Sylvia, a few minutes ago; whereas 'cruel' renders Valentine's impression of Sylvia before she met her, stemming from what she has *heard* about her. The phrase 'distantly ironic', on the other hand, introduces a new possible feature of the character. Sylvia's rendering positively vibrates with various points of view – it glitters with multiple facets. This scene where Sylvia meets the Wannops also offers a collage of various *techniques*. Mrs Wannop's kissing Sylvia, along with Valentine's tears, recall sentimental novels; whereas Valentine's subsequent feeling of uncertainty on seeing Sylvia's ambivalent smile gives a Cubist dimension to the description: Sylvia is simultaneously shown from several perspectives, just like a Cubist portrait where women are shown simultaneously full front and in profile. Predictable and familiar elements are decontextualised through unexpected twists.

Sara Haslam laid emphasis on the kaleidoscope metaphor to show how Ford's writing uses memories to 'make it new':

[The kaleidoscope] can be related to Ford's impressionist ethos, where he uses the reflective properties of light and glass to illustrate how the past co-exists with the present in ever-changing combinations.¹⁷

The kaleidoscope metaphor best encompasses how the writing operates in *Some Do Not . . .* . . . Kaleidoscopes are made not of mere glass fragments, but of multiple mirrors: new combinations are thus created from reflections from the past.

This process reveals the dynamics at work in the whole novel: the action is shown from several diverging angles, and the ‘cubist’ vision is generated in the *reader’s* mind, who juxtaposes and combines those various perspectives.

Indeed, in a novel like *Some Do Not . . .*, in which meanings, perspectives and aesthetic orientations radiate in every direction, synthesis may only take place in the *reader’s* mind. The multiple perspectives converge within the reader’s mental space – if not into a definite focus, at least into a *network* that establishes itself more and more convincingly through successive readings. The reader in *Some Do Not . . .* is certainly baffled by the narrative instability and the text’s shifting and deceptive character; but those very vacancies point towards a promise – that of having the plot, the characters and the aesthetic choices outlined, adumbrated in a peripheral manner, through the reader’s own progression, through his or her inferences and reconstitutions. In spite of the reader’s patient and never-ending synthesizing activity, some voids inevitably remain: but on this unfinished quality hinges the novel’s dynamics.

Max Saunders insisted that ‘Part of the great achievement of *Parade’s End* is to let order from confusion spring. [...] as in the magisterial command of syntax, there is always an architectonic intelligence at work’.¹⁸ The architectural metaphor is most relevant to *Parade’s End*; the tetralogy builds up a highly meaningful poetics of space.

The Poetics of Space

I would like to conclude by considering briefly in what way the text’s deliberate infinitude is metaphorised and illustrated by the poetics of space at work in *Some Do Not . . .* . . . To the confined interiors representing some of the characters’ obsession with a past shut upon itself and cut off from the present, are opposed open or transitory spaces. The location where Mark and Christopher Tietjens agree to communicate for the first time is highly emblematic:

They were in an open space, dusty, with half-timber buildings whose demolition had been interrupted (*SDN* 213).

Building sites are archetypal open spaces. The site in this passage, though, is not being *built*, but being demolished. This may evoke both the widespread movement of cultural and moral devastation brought about by the war, and the most radical literary and artistic movements of the time. As another twist deflecting the scene from our expectations, however, the ‘demolition ha[s] been interrupted’. Whilst the idea of construction contained in the word ‘buildings’ is being negated by the word ‘demolition’, this word in turn is deflected since the demolition is ‘interrupted’. In the same way as this ‘open space’ is being repeatedly re-qualified and its inferences cancelled, similarly, our *Erwartungshorizont*¹⁹ is being simultaneously adumbrated, taken into account and negated, or at least modified, inflected. This constant glittering between one aspect and its opposite, creating incessant shifts in the representation, epitomizes what we could term Ford’s *deliberate indecision*, his constant oscillating between an enthusiasm for literary experimentation and his acknowledgment of tradition.

Images of transport are peculiarly meaningful in *Some Do Not . . .* (as they are indeed in the whole tetralogy). Just as the novel opens on a much-noted train scene, so both parts of the volume end on an image of transportation. Tietjens sees Valentine go away in the knacker’s cart at the end of the first part (*SDN* 144); and the second part closes upon Tietjens catching a ‘transport lorry’ ‘outside the gates of his old office’ (*SDN* 288), which exemplifies his own self-questioning, liberating progress. The notion of transit is reinforced by the redundancy contained in the phrase ‘transport lorry’; it also reminds us of Mark’s promise to Valentine of transferring Christopher to the Transport services. One may indeed reflect along with Valentine: ‘Transport! There was another meaning to the word’ (*SDN* 275).

The novel may appear as a space traversed by the reader: in this respect, it meets Joseph Franck’s description of the modern novel as a spatial form. Writing about *Ulysses*, he observes:

The reader acquires [the] sense [of totality] as he progresses through the novel, connecting allusions and references spatially and gradually becoming aware of the pattern of relationships.²⁰

The tetralogy as a whole may indeed be read as a no man's land, a transitory space in which the reader, like the main characters, moves along an ever-undecided path. Similarly, the multiple and contradictory aesthetic orientations show a text *in progress*, and point to an author forever bent on refining his aesthetic project.

Ford's marginal position within 'modernist' literature may perhaps be ascribed, paradoxically, to his central position in modernist criticism – to his respect both for his predecessors and for each of the literary movements that were blossoming while he was editor of the *English Review* and the *Transatlantic Review*. Ford's eclecticism establishes a connection, a meeting point both between past and new aesthetics, and between the various modern aesthetics that found a voice in his reviews. It is in that regard that Ford's writing may truly appear as a poetics of the *entre-deux* – a poetics aiming at bridging gaps. The deliberate incompleteness speaks volumes about Ford's humility: his unwillingness to decide once and for all about what 'should' be done in art; his immense openness to and respect for his contemporaries' experiments; and his own unremitting journey towards constant improvement.

NOTES

- 1 Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 2 vols; henceforth 'Saunders'.
- 2 'It is as useful to have something that will awaken you by its disagreements with yourself as to live for ever in concord with somnolent elders. It gives you another point of view.' *The English Novel* (1930), Manchester: Carcanet, 1997 – henceforth *EN*; p. 6. Ford's subsequent analogy with an impressionist painter is most telling in this respect: 'I was once watching a painter painting a field of medicinal poppies which from where he sat appeared quite black. Suddenly, he grasped me by the wrist and dragged me up a small hill. From there that field appeared dark-purple shot with gold. I said: "It doesn't make any difference, does it, to your composition?" He answered: "No, it doesn't make any difference, but I wish the d—d things would not do it, for, when I have finished, I shall have to come up here and do them all over again!"' *Ibid.*
- 3 Todd Bender, *Literary Impressionism in Jean Rhys, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Charlotte Brontë*, New York: Garland, 1997; henceforth 'Bender'.
- 4 Bender, p. 6.

- 5 Henry James, in his preface to *The Wings of the Dove* (1909), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986, pp. 45-46.
- 6 Determining the historical origins and span of literary impressionism such as it was conceived of by Ford remains, however, a challenge. Max Saunders analyses these difficulties and establishes possible interpretations in his article 'Modernism, Impressionism, and Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*', *Études Anglaises* 57:4, Paris: Didier Erudition, 2004, pp. 421-437.
- 7 *Some Do Not . . .* – henceforth *SDN*; in *Parade's End*, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1982, p. 251.
- 8 'On Impressionism', *Poetry and Drama* 2.6 (June-December 1914), quoted in *Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Frank MacShane, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964 – henceforth *CW*; pp. 40-41.
- 9 See for instance *EN* 123, 137-139. Ford thus extols James, Crane and Conrad for their impersonal mode of writing: 'All three treated their character with aloofness; all three kept themselves, their comments and their prejudices out of their work, and all three rendered rather than told' (*EN* 137).
- 10 'The entire history of the concept of structure [...] must be thought of as a series of substitutions of centre for centre, as a linked chain of determinations of the centre. [...] The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix [...] is the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word.' Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, London & New York: Routledge, 1978, p. 353.
- 11 'Much of what we call modernism was [...] realism in a new manner, modulated by symbolist or expressionist devices, inflected by new psychological emphases, but still dedicated to puncturing false ideals and to telling the truth about the world as it is.' Christopher Baldick, *The Modern Movement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 401.
- 12 Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*, Paris : Le Seuil, 1973, p. 23: 'un sujet clivé, qui jouit à la fois, à travers le texte, de la consistance de son moi et de sa chute.'
- 13 Bender, p. 66.
- 14 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale (1906-1911)*, Paris : Payot, 1975, p. 25.
- 15 'On Impressionism', *CW* 44.
- 16 *The March of Literature*, quoted by Todd Bender, p. 41.
- 17 Sara Haslam, *Fragmenting Modernism: Ford Madox Ford, the Novel and the Great War*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 88.
- 18 Saunders, volume 2, pp. 220-221.
- 19 Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
- 20 Joseph Franck, *The Widening Gyre*, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1963, pp. 18-19.

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