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Towards an Ethics of Singularity:
The Shattered Mirror of Identity in Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End*

Isabelle Brasme

EMMA-University of Nîmes

Be it with *The Fifth Queen*, which centers around Henry VIII and court gossip, *The Good Soldier*, which deals even less obliquely with adultery, or *Parade's End*, whose whole plot revolves around the discrepancy between characters who have an outwardly righteous yet hypocritical conduct and those who, behind an apparently scandalous lifestyle, partake of a deeper, yet underground and unacknowledged moral sense, Ford Madox Ford seems to have been obsessed with morality in probably all of his fictional writing. This aspect has been dealt with by scholars on several occasions, often with parallels being drawn with the writer's own life and moral predicaments. Max Saunders in particular constantly highlighted such parallels in his biography of Ford.¹ Ann Barr Snitow related Ford's "uncertain" voice to his moral commitment to authenticity.² Philip Davis brought to light the moral concerns and predicaments of Ford's character Tietjens, whom he analyses as England's "saving remnant".³ Less directly obvious, though no less prevalent in Ford's work, however, is a tentative quest for an ethics of the relation to the other, and not least to this other that constitutes the self. I shall focus here on *Parade's End*, the set of four novels that Ford wrote in the early twenties.

In the first part of the tetralogy, which takes place before World War One, relationships between the characters appear doomed to failure. The main reason for this dysfunction is the rejection of alterity, which turns out to be a fundamental principle of the characters' behaviour.

¹ Max SAUNDERS, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

² Ann BARR SNITOW, *Ford Madox Ford and the Voice of Uncertainty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984).

³ Philip DAVIS, 'The Saving Remnant', *Ford Madox Ford and Englishness*, ed. Dennis BROWN and Jenny PLASTOW (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006) 21-35.

Identity in its etymological meaning of permanence of the same is extolled by the characters as an ultimate ideal that dismisses any form of alterity. Most characters in the novel refuse difference of any kind. Faced with the threat of instability and self-alienation, the deeply fragile subject in Ford's fiction rejects in the other whatever trait he fails to recognise in himself, and exclusively values in others what he can identify as a reflection of himself. *Parade's End* is thus pervaded with the mirror motif, which, among other things, emerges as a ruling principle both for the characters' relationships with one another, and for their own apprehension of themselves.

The characters' obsession with looking at themselves in mirrors is above all a rejection of otherness. This has direct consequences on their interactions with one another. In the first part of the narration, two characters—Vincent Macmaster and Edith Duchemin—stand out as representative of the way relationships typically work in *Parade's End*, to the point that they are presented as—or at least claim their role as—models for the rest of society to follow. The reflecting surfaces that are everywhere present in their home, from mirrors to 'polished panelling'⁴ and gleaming chandeliers, allow them to remain forever fixed in the contemplation of themselves. Vincent and Edith choose one another both because each sees the other as an epitome of self-reflection, and because each sees him or herself reflected in the other. Vincent first becomes enraptured by Edith because of the perfect reflexivity in her features: 'there was no doubt that Mrs. Duchemin's eyes, which were of a dark, pebble blue, were actually in the shadow of her blue-black, very regularly waved hair' (53). The adjectives 'dark' and 'blue' are reflected in a chiasmus through the compound adjective 'blue-black.' In a manner that itself mirrors Vincent's reaction, Edith delights in what she deems an ideal correspondence in Vincent between his eyes and his tie: 'steel-blue tie, true-looking gold ring, steel-blue eyes beneath black brows' (91)! The narcissistic fantasy of the two lovers is further illustrated by the fact that they both appear as a reflection of the other, since the palette that characterises each of them is dominated by blue and black colours. No wonder, then, that their first kiss is rendered as

⁴ Ford Madox FORD, *Some Do Not . . . , Parade's End* (1924; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) 230.

the culmination of their narcissistic obsession: as he clasps Edith, Vincent looks at himself in a mirror: ‘He began to see himself: [...] a round, eagle mirror reflected them gleaming: like a bejewelled picture with great depths: the entwined figures’ (103).

Significantly, the mirror has a round shape, and the two figures are intertwined as a Moebius strip. The profusion of colons in this passage is another instance of the mirror phenomenon, as though elements were being reflected from one side of the colon to the other. In an ever-deepening mirroring process, the figures themselves are ‘gleaming,’ and therefore turned into reflective surfaces. The circle paradigm already present in the mirror’s shape, in Edith’s formerly quoted ‘very regularly waved hair,’ and taken up again by the ‘entwined figures,’ thus epitomises a perfectly closed—but also perfectly sterile—dynamics. For there is no mistaking it: Ford highlights this process only to reveal its pitfalls for the subject. In this passage, Macmaster is not so much interested in his actual relationship with Edith as in their reflected image: the intimate relationship they have just initiated is quickly brushed aside through a mere pronoun—‘them’—to allow him to focus on the reflection itself.

The subject’s integrity seems to be jeopardised by this sterile fascination for its reflection. The paradoxical ‘great depths’ of the mirror signal an inverted dialectics of surface and depth: these characters experience life more fully when their actions are mediated by their reflection—when they remain engrossed in their own contemplation and dismiss the others’ singularity. While there is no space to develop this at greater length here, *Parade’s End* is teeming with characters that work in pairs, as doubles, or *Doppelgänger*. Freud, in his essay ‘Das Unheimliche,’ links the motif of the double with that of the Unheimlich:

Those motifs [...] involve the idea of the ‘double’ (the *Doppelgänger*) [...]—that is to say, the appearance of persons who have to be regarded as identical because they look alike. This relationship is intensified by the spontaneous transmission of mental processes from one of these persons to the other—what we should call telepathy—so

that the one becomes co-owned of the other's knowledge, emotions and experience. Moreover, a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other's self for his own. The self may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged.⁵

The concept of 'unheimlich' is particularly fertile in the Fordian context, as it is highly representative of the characters' obsession with sameness, with what feels 'at home'—*heimlich*—and conversely, with their fear of losing this feeling of sameness, of being lost in otherness—*unheimlich*. Tellingly as well, Freud explores the origins of the Doppelgänger motif: 'the 'double' was [...] an 'energetic denial of the power of death'⁶ (142). Likewise, the subject in Ford is so fragile—a fissured shell threatening to collapse at every minute—that anything ever so slightly hinting at instability, at impermanence is seen as potentially disruptive.

Yet, when pursued to an exceeding degree, the double's qualities become inverted: instead of being a safeguard against death, the double becomes its very signal.⁷ The double, and more largely the obsession for similitude, becomes an objectifying threat for the subject. Ford here comes close to canonical modernist concerns. The end of Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*,⁸ where Miss La Trobe concludes her play with a particularly meaningful use of mirrors, may help illuminate what is also at work in Ford's text. In her attempt to stage 'present time: ourselves,' Miss La Trobe chooses to confront the audience with its own reflection, having them look at a variety of mirrors and

⁵ Sigmund FREUD, *The Uncanny*, trans. David MCLINTOCK (1919; London: Penguin, 2003) 141-2. Original German text: 'Es sind dies das Doppelgängertum [...], also das Auftreten von Personen, die wegen ihrer gleichen Erscheinung für identisch gehalten werden müssen, die Steigerung dieses Verhältnisses durch Überspringen seelischer Vorgänge von einer dieser Personen auf die andere,—was wir Telepathie heißen würden—so daß der eine das Wissen, Fühlen und Erleben des andern mitbesitzt, die Identifizierung mit einer anderen Person, so daß man an seinem Ich irre wird oder das fremde Ich an die Stelle des eigenen versetzt, also Ichverdopplung, Ichteilung, Ichvertauschung'. Sigmund FREUD, 'Das Unheimliche' (1919), *L'inquiétante étrangeté et autres textes*, (Paris: Gallimard, Folio Bilingue, 2001) 76.

⁶ 'Der Doppelgänger war ursprünglich eine Versicherung gegen den Untergang des Ichs, eine "energische Dementierung der Macht des Todes" (O. RANK)'.

⁷ 'When this phase is surmounted, the meaning of the 'double' changes: having once been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death.' (FREUD 2003 142) Original German text: 'mit der Überwindung dieser Phase ändert sich das Vorzeichen des Doppelgängers, aus einer Versicherung des Fortlebens wird er zum unheimlichen Vorboten des Todes.' (FREUD 2001 78)

⁸ Virginia WOOLF, *Between the Acts* (1941; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

reflexive surfaces—among which, interestingly, are chandeliers. Here is the effect on this experiment on the spectators:

Out they leapt, jerked, skipped. Flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping. Now old Bart . . . he was caught. Now Manresa. Here a nose . . . There a skirt . . . Then trousers only . . . Now perhaps a face. . . . Ourselves? But that's cruel. To snap us as we are, before we've had time to assume . . . And only, too, in parts. . . . That's what's so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair. (165)

This passage is marked with a violence emphasised by the dentals and the fast accumulation of verbs being applied to the victims of the game. The mirrors seem to force the characters to adopt convulsive movements, in the manner of puppets; what is telling above all is the dismembering of bodies, which are only partly reflected. Just as in the afore-mentioned episode in *Parade's End*, mirrors 'ca[tch]' the subject within their frames. Simultaneously, they make the subject aware of this very fragmentation and objectification. Indeed, used as interface between the subject and oneself, mirrors lead one to become one's own object of perception, and therefore to become a stranger to oneself.

Ford was so fascinated by the mirror paradigm that he used the word in one of his titles—*A Mirror to France*,⁹ which he was, interestingly, working on at the same time as the *Parade's End* tetralogy. At the beginning of *A Mirror to France*, Ford voices the significance he ascribes to the mirror paradigm: 'Look at yourself in mirror after mirror. [...] You are capable of being so oddly viewed that you may well have misgivings about your real self' (8). Through an assimilation with its two-dimensional, mirrored image, the subject at the source of the reflection loses its appearance of reality. The mirror motif is thus turned inside out: as the subject focuses on his own reflection, his own integrity collapses and gives way to a feeling of alterity—an alienation—within his own

⁹ Ford Madox FORD, *A Mirror to France* (London: Duckworth, 1926).

self. There results a chasm between the subject and himself—the sense of otherness being now inscribed within the subject.

This ontological crisis is made more acute and blatant in *Parade's End* by the trauma of World War I. The self-alienation of the main character in *Parade's End*, Tietjens, is rendered as he views himself in a cracked mirror: 'An insolently calm man was looking at him, the face divided in two by the crack in the glass: a naturally white-complexioned double-half of a face, a patch of high colour on each cheekbone; the pepper-and-salt.'¹⁰ Tietjens is here a double to himself; not only does he see himself as a distinct object since he does not recognise himself; but his face is also cut in half due to the crack in the mirror. The accumulation of compound adjectives, deepening the notion of duality, come to emphasise the split identity: 'white-complexioned,' 'pepper-and-salt,' and the highly telling phrase 'double-half.' In *Parade's End*, the characters who reject singularity and favour only doubles of themselves are no longer whole individuals, but hyphenated beings: 'double hal[ves].'

The crack in the mirror, however, also metaphorises a turning point in this characters' relation to alterity: this passage stands in clear contrast with that formerly mentioned of Macmaster looking at his and Edith's reflection. Tietjens here uses the cracked mirror as a tool towards the realisation of his own alterity. He no longer 'see[s] himself,' as Macmaster did previously, but sees 'a man' who is 'looking at him.' The crack in the mirror serves as a signal of his own duality—pointing out the mirror's objectifying process, but also allowing him through this very realisation, if not to prevent it, at least to come to terms with it, and thus to gain some sort of mastery over his self-alienation. Although the mirror motif is still present, it is now shattered—no longer triumphant and overruling.

Beyond a realisation and an acceptance of one's deep-seated alienations, the First World War in *Parade's End* also generates a new awareness of the essential alterity of the other. Because they are unindividualised, handled as sheer units in a larger mass, and of course mangled by the constant

¹⁰ Ford Madox FORD, *No More Parades* (1925), *Parade's End* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) 447.

shelling, the soldiers come to be apprehended as sheer ‘matter;’ this radicalisation of alterity denies others their very humanity as a minimal common denominator one would share with them. This notion is prevalent in Ford’s writing on war, be it fictional as in *Parade’s End*, and non-fictional. Here is what Ford writes on the front, in 1916:

In battle—and in the battle zone—the whole world, humanity included, seems to assume the aspect of matter dominated eventually by gravity. Large bits of pot fly about, smash large pieces of flesh: then one and the other fall [...]. It is all just matter—all humanity, just matter.¹¹

The shells thus do not merely kill men, but annihilate their very humanity, as is emphasised by the parallelism between ‘large bits of pot’ and ‘large pieces of flesh.’

The impact of modern war technology on the singularity of humanity goes further: not only does it maim bodies beyond human recognition, but it provokes what Tim Armstrong calls ‘a wider statistical appraisal of the body and its value.’¹² This was a major concern of Ford’s. In the second volume of *Parade’s End*, he highlights this dichotomy between the administrative elite and the soldiers that are being used as cannon fodder. To him, the millions of soldiers are the government’s ‘play-things’¹³—yet another hyphenated word that bespeaks the soldiers’ objectification through the ‘things’ suffix.

This essential otherness experienced through the war is first sensed as traumatic and obscene, but eventually comes to be accepted and embraced by the main character. Tietjens’ initial alination from his fellow soldiers shifts into a realisation of the ethical necessity to sustain and preserve their singularity, which is being jeopardised by mass war. Through the narration in *Parade’s End* as through his non-fictional war writing, Ford stressed the tension between the desindividualisation of soldiers and the ever-increasing need for him—as for Tietjens—to preserve the individuality of each

¹¹ Ford Madox FORD, ‘A Day of Battle’ (1916), *War Prose*, ed. Max Saunders (London: Carcanet, 1999) 39.

¹² Tim ARMSTRONG, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 95.

¹³ ‘All those millions were the play-things of ants busy in the miles of corridors beneath the domes and spires that rise up over the central heart of our comity’ (FORD 1925 357).

and every one of the soldiers under his command. This is precisely where responsibility comes into play, for the protagonist of *Parade's End* Tietjens as for Ford confronted to the war. Ford repeatedly felt the imperative to sense, and give a sense of, those he called 'untold millions.'¹⁴ This imperative played a major role in the genesis of *Parade's End*. It may be considered to be encapsulated in the following passage, given from Tietjens's focalisation:

Men. Not just populations. Men you worried over there. Each man a man with a backbone, knees, breeches, braces, a rifle, a home, passions, fornications, drunks, pals, some scheme of the universe, corns, inherited diseases, a green-grocer's business, a milk walk, a paper stall, brats, a slut of a wife. (Ford 1925 297)

The enumeration recalls to our mind the dismembering process present in Woolf's passage that we formerly mentioned. However, the process here is the opposite: the idea is no longer to split and isolate, but on the contrary, to put together again the disparate elements that make a whole—that make an individual precisely indivisible. The other is no longer dismembered, but on the contrary re-membered—articulated, both in the physical sense and in the sense of being voiced—for Ford, this is how he conceived of his responsibility of telling the world about the 'untold millions' he mentions in his war prose. The process through which he manages this, of course, is literary impressionism—giving a true impression of the other through apparently disparate dabs of the brush.

Tietjens' salvation in the course of the novels is to be found in this deep experience of the other's individuality: from this acceptance of the radical singularity of alterity, can also emerge a reconciliation between the subject and his own alienations. On Armistice Day, Tietjens meets in London with his former fellow soldiers and his future lover to celebrate the end of the war. The scene, narrated at the very end of the third volume of *Parade's End*, is rendered through the focalisation of Tietjens's lover, Valentine:

¹⁴ 'Preparedness' (1927), *War Prose* 70.

The whole world round them was yelling and prancing round. They were the centre of unending roaring circles. The man with the eyeglass had stuck a half-crown in his other eye. He was well-meaning. A brother. [...]

Tietjens was stretching out his two hands from the waist. It was incomprehensible. His right hand was behind her back, his left in her right hand. She was frightened. She was amazed. Did you ever! He was swaying slowly. The elephant! They were dancing!

Aranjuez was hanging on to the tall woman like a kid on a telegraph pole.¹⁵

This dance constitutes an improbable congruence of beings at opposite poles of humanity—from various classes, backgrounds, histories, bearing impossibly different physical features: the frail Valentine and the immense Tietjens, repeatedly assimilated to an ‘elephant,’ a tiny man with a tall woman, hanging on to her ‘like a kid on a telegraph pole.’ The narration highlights the circling motion of the dance, the ‘unending roaring circles’ that integrate all these differences without erasing them in the least: the sterile, closed circularity embodied by Macmaster and Edith, which excluded difference, has been replaced by an integrating, all-encompassing, ‘unending’ circle. Furthermore, just as we saw earlier that the rejection of otherness was echoed by the subject’s fear of alteration, similarly, now, this reconciled being-in-otherness has its pendant in the subject’s acknowledgement of the inescapable split within himself; and in the realisation that this split is not necessarily negative. The soldier who wears a glass eye to replace the eye he lost on the front, bears a visible token of the incurable split within selves, of the alterity that the war has exposed and etched more deeply into the subject. During this same dance, this soldier chooses to flaunt this hybridity by playfully sticking a coin into his other eye. Through this self-derisive gesture, he embodies a humanity reconciled with its own singularities, which sublimates its own alienation by laughingly embracing it. This, in return, elicits in Valentine a feeling of brotherhood for him—which confirms that accepting one’s and the other’s alterity is the very condition for generating a

¹⁵ Ford Madox FORD, *A Man Could Stand Up—* (1926), *Parade’s End* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) 674.

successful relationship with others.

This scene constitutes to my mind one of the most fascinating pages in the whole tetralogy; beyond its thematic celebration of alterity, it may also appear to illustrate what Derek Attridge defined as the essential otherness that a work of literature presents us with: as the ‘staging of the fundamental processes whereby language works upon us and upon the world.’¹⁶ As such, it claims upon us a ‘responsible response’ to read it as radically different; to ‘cherish [it] not in spite of but *because* of its otherness.’ To some extent, Valentine’s mixture of bewilderment and acceptance of Tietjens’s dance may be read as a metaphor for the reader’s own puzzled, yet finally enthusiastic reaction to this elephant of a text.

However, this passage, which concludes the third volume of *Parade’s End* (and to a number of scholars concludes the whole of *Parade’s End*), ends on suspension dots: the circles are, indeed, unending. Moreover, the following (and final) volume may be read as a derisive—albeit jubilant—questioning of the first three volumes. As always with Ford, conclusions remain suspended; Ford’s writing merely adumbrates these potential interpretations. *Parade’s End*, with its four volumes and its over 1000 pages, is indeed this paradoxical massive literary endeavour that remains forever suspended in indecision; where no single idea is durably settled. This has to do with Ford’s refusal to ‘theorise,’ as he expressed in one of his essays on war—a refusal he actually links explicitly with the imperative of taking into account everyone’s singularity:

In any case, I can’t theorize—and it’s a marvel to me that anybody can. [...] Of course there are remote persons who stand aloof from humanity—but if you stand aloof from humanity how can you know about us poor people? [...] Just as every human face differs, if just by the hair’s breadth turn of a nostril, from every other human face, so every human life differs from every other human life if only by a little dimple on the stream of it. And the hair’s breadth turn of the nostril—the hair’s breadth dimple on the

¹⁶ Derek ATTRIDGE, *The Singularity of Literature* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004) 124.

stream of life when they come in contact with the lives of others just make all the difference—all the huge difference in the fates of men and women.¹⁷

¹⁷ Ford Madox FORD, 'Epilogue' [c. 1917-1919], *War Prose* 62-3.