

Literature Among the Ruins

by Thomas Fleming

“*M*on cher, c’est notre métier, le vrai métier de chien . . . Vous écrivez et vous écrivez . . . et personne, personne au monde ne comprendra.” Joseph Conrad’s complaint to his young collaborator, Ford Madox Hueffer, might have been put on Ford’s tombstone, when he died in 1939. You write, and you write, and no one in the world understands. Although the popular reputation of Ford Madox Ford (as he later called himself) now rests primarily on one book, *The Good Soldier*, his career is emblematic of 20th-century literature, its grandiose ambitions and its humiliating failures.

In his life Ford seems to have known nearly every writer worth knowing. Through his grandfather, the painter Madox Brown, and his uncle William Rossetti, he was connected to the Pre-Raphaelites. He knew Meredith and Hardy in his youth and came to be an intimate of Henry James and Joseph Conrad, with whom he collaborated on several novels; after the Great War, in which he served as a man in his 40’s, he worked closely with Pound, and as founding editor of the *Transatlantic Review* he published the best of his contemporaries. He was the rarest of critics, who could appreciate the talents of the two great literary antagonists of the early 20th century, James and Wells, and many a younger writer (Lawrence, for example) owed his start to Ford’s encouragements. The only writer, in his estimation, who never took revenge upon him for this kindness was Ezra Pound.

Most striking today is Ford’s devotion to good writing. As Pound wrote shortly after Ford’s death, he had been “a very gallant combatant for those things of the mind and of letters which have been in our time too little prized.” Pound shared with Ford a passion for “French clarity and simplicity in the writing of English verse and prose,” and together they strove to purify our literary language of archaizing and artificiality. Hemingway is inconceivable without Ford, and the most cursory comparison of *The Good Soldier* with the novels of Henry James shows that progress is occasionally possible even in the affairs of men.

Like Matthew Arnold, Ford had a faith in literature that came close to idolatry, although unlike Arnold he was a Christian. He had lofty ambitions, few of which he ever realized, and

vast pretensions, which his friends found both irritating and amusing. He was a byword for anecdotes in which he had the last word at the expense of the brilliant and powerful, and there has hardly ever been a tribute to him that did not dwell upon his unreliability. Pound appalled Wyndham Lewis by taking Ford at his own valuation, but Ezra, although more severe as a critic, shared Ford’s generous enthusiasms for the things they liked: “As a critic he was perhaps wrecked by his wholly unpolitical generosity. . . . Despite all his own interests, despite all the hard-boiled and half-baked vanities of all the various lots of us, he kept on discovering merit with monotonous regularity.”

Ford’s unreliability was a reflection of this “impolitic generosity,” which could look through a writer’s personal and technical flaws to find whatever lay buried. The virtues he discovered in Pound and D. H. Lawrence he also discerned in himself, and who is to blame him? I cannot think of a good writer whose fictions do not begin with his own life and character. But Ford understood himself and his limitations better, perhaps, than his critics realized. Fairly early in his career (in 1908), in a letter to Edward Garnett, who had been gossiping about his shortcomings, he wrote: “I can’t help my Olympian manner; it is due to a consciousness of high aims defended by a defiance concerning a conviction of miserable achievements tempered by resignation to the inevitability of failure and yr. Race (is it?), wh. won’t believe in high aims, observes smallness of achievement & hates resignation of any kind.”

Ford’s view of 20th-century literature was ambivalent. Striving for a plainness of language and perfection of form, he fostered the diverse talents of Lawrence and Hemingway, but he looked back with nostalgia to the giants of his youth: Hardy, Meredith, W.H. Hudson, and the isolated geniuses of the *fin de siècle*, Conrad and James. In his longing for literary society, he spent his time visiting writers and went to the great trouble of founding and editing two reviews—the most thankless task of which a literary man is capable—but he looked back with fondness to the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood whose intimacy haunted him to the end. The English writers of his youth, he complained, had been like so many isolated mountains, each of which attracted devotees, but between them there was hardly

any travel, much less communication.

Ford was not uncritical of Rossetti et Co., except, perhaps for Christina, whom he regarded as a saint. Looking back to their generation, he blamed them for leading English poets astray. Rossetti's *The Blessed Damozel* had the effect of "the numbing blow of a sandbag," in convincing writers that "writing was a matter of digging for obsolete words with which to express ideas forever dead and gone." Ford's obsession with plain language was his answer to the artifice of the decadents, but he also realized that his own generation of writers, however much they might improve upon their elders, could never be the "mountains" that Hardy and Conrad were, simply because they were not as lofty. Welcoming each stylistic innovation and new eccentricity, he still looked back in awe at the terrifying giants of the previous century. The new age was marked by every kind of advance in comfort and decency, and yet, in his 1911 memoir *Memories and Impressions*, he could not avoid the elegiac note:

We are unifying and unifying and unifying. We are standardizing ourselves and we are doing away with everything that is outstanding. . . . We are making a great many little people more cheerful and more bearable in their material circumstances. We are knocking for the select few the flavor of the finer things out of life. And the finer the flavor the longer we take to get used to it. So that that is going, and many, many, many little pleasures are coming. Whether you like it or whether you do not depends solely on yourself.

The note of humble skepticism at the end is typical of Ford, who as a Christian did not presume to declare what was best for other people. Welcoming all the liberal and progressive changes, including women's suffrage, which seemed to make life more bearable for ordinary people, his own cast of mind was aristocratic and even feudal. His greatest heroes are persons born into the wrong time and determined to live by an archaic code of honor that is shared by no one. In *Parade's End* Tietjens is abused and humiliated by a wife whom he continues to honor with chivalrous love, and he allows an intellectual and social inferior to claim credit for his own work. (Tony Last in Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* might be read as a comic parody.) His *Fifth Queen*, Katharine Howard, refuses to lie or politic even for the old religion; she despises both the reactionary Bishop Gardner and the timorous reformer, Archbishop Cranmer; she loves the king but would rather be his mistress than be party to a divorce; and she faithfully serves the Princess Mary, who alternately despises her and puts her life in danger; she loathes the men who would serve her interests, and she respects Thomas Cromwell for his single-minded devotion to King and Country, while yet hating him for his persecution of Catholics.

Ford was no sentimental reactionary, and he refused to blind himself either to the virtues of his own century or to the vices of the previous one. But the moral and spiritual decline he sensed even before the Great War, which is so often credited with demoralizing the upper classes of Britain and France, has proceeded inexorably. The periodic episodes of moral rearmament in the 1930's and 1950's were mere breathing-spaces dictated by circumstances like war and depression. So many years after Ford's death, we are tempted to look back nostalgically at recent periods that seem bright and sunny in comparison with these drab days, and there are times when I begin to

get wistful for the halcyon years of Jimmy Carter.

There is nothing less useful or more perilous than short-term nostalgia, because the generation of our fathers is more irrevocably gone and less relevant to our life than the age of Dante. We may well be heading into a period of petty provincialism and bloody vendetta, when we shall need Dante as our guide as badly as he needed Vergil, but the quiet life of nuclear families in the suburbs, laughing at *I Love Lucy*, going godlessly to church, joining the PTA and Boy Scouts to make the world a better place for other people's children—that world is gone forever, and with it is gone the middle-brow literature of the old *New Yorker* and the Book of the Month Club. There is no mass readership for new Marquands or Chandlers, whose places have been taken by Tom Clancy, Stephen King, and Dean R. Koontz, "writers" whose one trick is the ability to titillate without entertaining.

The very people who complain so loudly about the pornographic art funded by the NEA go home at night to watch television programs whose immorality would have horrified D.H. Lawrence and to curl up with books whose style would have embarrassed a schoolboy addicted to penny dreadfuls. It cannot be pornography per se that offends so many Republicans, or even the misappropriation of their money, so much as it is art itself, the very possibility that there is a dimension of life they cannot enter or appreciate, blinded and blunted, as they are, by their exclusive devotion to the second-best things in life that only money can buy. I do not know which group is more disgusting, the spayed and neutered pets of the NEA or the sanctimonious philistines who have set themselves up as guardians of public morality.

For the most part, great works of literature are not created by geniuses living in isolation. That is the great Romantic fallacy, their response to the development of commercial publishing and mass literature, and each new generation of English poets, with a few exceptions like Tennyson and Frost, strove to distance itself from an increasingly brutalized public. Ford was right to condemn the preciousness of the pre-Raphaelites and decadents, and his argument can be applied to his favorite modern writers, James, Pound, and Eliot. But a serious writer is in the position of the worthy and honorable woman who has been jilted for a strumpet. She is tempted to mope, to adopt an austerity that seems to say, "I never really wanted him or any man. Mine is too fine a nature to endure the coarseness of physical love."

The tendency to see artists as isolated geniuses is doubly unfortunate, first, in tempting us to see signs of hope in the emergence of rare talents—like Eliot, Pound, and Hemingway after the Great War—and second, in blinding us to the truth that great art is almost always the expression of a wider community. A reading public or audience is the baseline that sets limits on the elevation of literary and artistic accomplishment. Geniuses arise in response to their community, and it is no accident that between Vergil and Dante stretch 14 centuries in which there are many pleasant hills and valleys but none of the mountain tops that only rise from the high plains of a national public.

The *Iliad* is nothing more than the common culture of the Greeks turned into art. A lesser people has to content itself with Barbara Allen, and Anglo-American literature would not have attempted to reach the level it did had there been no reading public whose taste was schooled on Vergil and Horace, although there are probably not more than a half dozen lyric

poems in English worthy to be set beside an average Horatian ode. However, even the failures of English poetry are at a level higher than they might have been, if the only readers of verse had been illiterate stockjobbers with degrees in economics or business.

Ford wrote for that rarest of imaginary beings—more precious than the unicorn, more fatally mesmerizing than the basilisk, though by no means as indestructible as the hydra—the common reader, the man or woman who, through some flaw of character or upbringing, likes to read what others have written and has enough everyday learning to prize intelligence and craft above all the meretricious effects of the thrill-manipulators. If pressed, I might be able to provide some reasons why civilization and good language should be inextricably linked, but far more important than any *why* is the mere fact that they *are*. Tastes, of course, will vary from age to age—but even the rigidity of early 18th-century taste is an indication of the beautiful formality of that period, and if Coleridge could not properly appreciate Pope (nor, had their ages been reversed, Pope appreciate Coleridge), it does not mean that either poet did not write according to certain enduring and universal standards. That writers almost always fail to live up to their ideals only means that they have aimed sufficiently high. The abandonment of standards that marks all our postmodern literature is neither daring nor innovative, and it signifies nothing more interesting than effeminacy and sloth. We no longer have the energy to dress for dinner or calculate rhymes; so far from writing verse, we cannot even be put upon to read it.

There is a tedious literary debate on whether we are living still in the modern age, or have entered the postmodern age, or the post-postmodern age. This discussion, which would have delighted Ford, interests me no further than to observe that the hallmark of modernism in literature, the quality that is shared by such diverse writers as Pound and Proust, is an obsession with technique, a contempt for popular bourgeois standards, an ambition to make words do more they can do in our poor, uninflected languages. “Words slip, crack . . . perish under the strain.” While the best of living writers remain, for the most part, modernists—Cormac McCarthy, for example, and George Garrett—most arty literature of the 90’s represents not a continuation of the modernist impulse but a flight into inconsequence and solipsism. That nobody reads the literature published in literary reviews is a truism not worth repeating, but the reverse is also true: an educated readership (and by readership I am including critics, literature professors, and editors) would not tolerate what is passed off as poetry and fiction these days, and their demand for good writing would act like a magnet in drawing talent out of the obscurest corners of the English-speaking world.

Literary modernism *entre deux guerres* was the last mad charge of the serious artist against the hordes of vandals and huns whose wanton destruction has left hardly a blade of grass growing in their wake. Pound gave way to madness, Eliot grew ever more taciturn, and countless numbers of writers simply gave up—as a painter might cease to paint if all the world were suddenly blinded. Poor Ford, despite his generous enthusiasms for his contemporaries, despite all his plots and schemes for the advancement of himself as the leader of the modern school, despite the tributes from such diverse writers—to name only Americans—as Conrad Aiken, Louis Bromfield, Allen Tate, Glenway Wescott, and even Isabel Paterson—was already a fish out of water by the end of the Great War. He never ceased to

write, and not all of his later, prodigious output is unworthy of him, but in his failure we can read the failure not only of his generation of writers but of the entire century. Rather than give way to despair, Ford had kept up his little fight for serious literature. Graham Greene summed him up in his obituary: “I don’t suppose failure disturbed him much: he had never really believed in human happiness, his middle life had been made miserable by passion, and he had come through—with his humor intact, his stock of unreliable anecdotes, the kind of enemies a man ought to have, and a half-belief in a posterity which would care for good writing.”

In this belief, Ford Madox Ford was less than half-wrong. There are readers and writers who care as much about good writing as about good cooking, but they, or rather we suffer from the realization of how few we are, how outnumbered, and how inadequate to the task. The ancient music theorist, Aristoxenus of Tarentum, commenting on the degeneracy of music and poetry in his own day (the late fourth century B.C.) compared his situation to that of the people of Poseidonium, Greeks who had lived long enough in Italy to forget their very Greekness. Once a year they gathered to celebrate their past and went away lamenting. So we few who appreciate the classics, he concluded, gather together to remember the way things used to be. Aristoxenus, who was a scholar and philosopher, could afford his Miniver Cheevyism. A writer cannot, and nothing has been so deadly as the acedia that comes with the recognition that all one’s best efforts are probably futile. Ford never gave up, but he was lucky enough to die before the Second War. How long, I wonder, could he have kept up the act?

I remember back in my student days coming across a copy of Gregory of Tours’ *Historia Francorum*. Writing in the late sixth century, Bishop Gregory apologized in advance for any mistakes he might make in his bad Latin—it was, as his own book revealed, a violent and barbarous age, little inclined to good letters. This, at least, is what I remember, for I have never put my hands on a copy since, and to check the quotation I should have to make an hour’s drive to Madison, so barbarous is this city of 250,000 souls (the metro population) that its libraries contain so few good books. Ah, say the techno-prophets, books are obsolete and within a short time you will be able to find anything you want from the Internet. Perhaps. But who will pick the books that survive, and will that poor, pious barbarian be included? Who will type in the Latin? (Gregory’s Latin is probably less barbaric than any translation made in our time, and if some librarian points to the Penguin edition on the shelf, I can only say QED.) And, what is more to the point, who, apart from a few thousand medievalists, will know enough to call it up and print it out, and which of them can read any Latin without the aid of a trot? Ford’s Katherine Howard, a mere country girl, reads and writes Latin. In these barbarous times, the ability to write plain English is the rarest of accomplishments. It is denied to Presidents and their speech writers, to college professors and journalists, to novelists and poets. When I think of how well some of us might be able to write, if we took our craft seriously and if we really believed there were more than a few thousand people capable of appreciating the difference, and how far short we fall of our own limited ideals, I think of Poseidonium, whose people knew enough to mourn what they had lost. If you will go to Paestum (as it is now called), as Shelley did, and climb among the ruins of that insignificant Greek city, you will come away wondering if we shall ever give anyone cause to mourn our passing.

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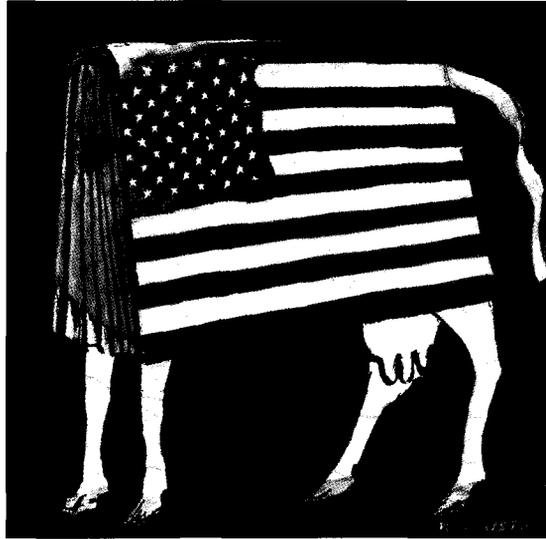
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The Country Writer

by Wendell Berry



James Kapusta

I am as grateful for this award as I am surprised by it, and I certainly did not see it coming. Obviously, it cannot be easy to feel worthy of an award bearing the name of T.S. Eliot, and so probably I ought to say that I am grateful, but unconvinced.

The etiquette attendant upon these occasions suggests that an award is a culmination, a recognition of work done. And that is true, of course, but to the awardee the matter is necessarily more complex. My wish today is to speak as steadfastly as I can from the point of view of the awardee. First, as I have already implied, the awardee had better allow for the possibility that he is being honored beyond his merit. He will recall that error in such a matter would not be without precedent. The awardee must next contend with the implications of the notion that he has “won” the award. The indispensable correction comes from William Blake: “I cannot think that Real Poets have any competition.” And that can be taken in two ways: either one is a Real Poet and does not feel competitive, or one wishes to be a Real Poet and therefore had better try not to feel competitive. Either way, the awardee will remember that however solitary he may be in his work, his art is communal. The work of one writer is made possible by the work of fellow writers, past and present, and by the work of many others who are not or were not writers.

That thought leads the awardee to an embarrassing question—embarrassing because he must ask it, is even fascinated by it, but cannot answer it: Putting aside inheritance, influence, inspiration, and many years of instruction, criticism, advice, help, and comfort from friends and loved ones, who remains to receive the award?

Finally, the awardee must look with some uneasiness on the fact, inescapable for the awarders, that the award is a recognition of work done. He will be aware of the very lively distinction

between “going to one’s reward” and receiving an award. He must see the award as a sign of expectation, something still to measure up to—as he must see work done as evidence of the capacity to do work. Where he stands is in his ongoing life, a difficult place, for he knows (by the time he is my age he cannot help knowing) that he cannot live in what he has done. He can live only in what he is doing, and with satisfaction only if what he is doing binds him to an order of meaning, significant to others as to himself, not in his work but in the world. He stands, that is (and here the awardee rejoins the awarders), in need of hope.

Though I am in no position to say how validly, I believe that my work has been in large part an effort to sustain hope. It may be that this is merely the natural result of the perspective that I have necessarily written from: the perspective of a country person attached to a rural community and a rural landscape. That is to say that I have had no subject not in need of defense—in need of far more defense, in fact, than I and my predecessors and allies have been able to provide. Times when the political and business leaders of the country have been celebrating the success of the economy have looked to me like times of catastrophe, for that success has depended upon, has virtually required, the plundering of rural neighborhoods such as my own. This state of things confronts the country writer with a rather bald choice between acceding to the cynicism and contempt with which country people and country places are now generally regarded or taking up their defense. To assume the defensive in a (so far) losing cause is to involve oneself in a long confrontation with despair, and, if one is to survive, in a continuous survey of the ground of hope. I can say that my work has given me some hope, sometimes—and I know that those qualifications are dire. They mean simply that nobody can be the source of his or her own hope. We must look elsewhere.

I was distressed to read in a recent issue of the *New Yorker* that some of the younger Russian writers are now repudiating their great writers of opposition and persistent hope such as Tol-

Wendell Berry was the 1994 recipient of the Ingersoll Foundation’s T.S. Eliot Award for Creative Writing, for which this was his acceptance speech.