EMPIRE, ETHNOLOGY AND THE GOOD SOLDIER

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Dark at Heart
If ever it had been innocent and unobtrusively referential, the word 'heart' ceased to be so in the very early years of the twentieth century. The Heart of the Empire – edited by C. F. G. Masterman – and Heart of Darkness, both published in close succession, are unequivocal indications that hearts have left the lexical area of individual emotions and conflicts only to be reborn in the semantic field of imperial discourse, even if with divergent and unstable meanings. Where to locate a heart of darkness which hovers uneasily between Africa and Europe is still an object of debate. If Masterman's heart is unambiguously set in London, it is equally wrapped in obscurity. Deprived urban areas are phrased as ‘unknown regions’ and ‘terra incognita’, and there is undoubtedly a strong ‘cartographic’ affinity between the explorers of the abysmal city and the Congo travellers: Marlow's childhood map with its many colours echoes London's ‘poverty map’ with its ‘blotches of black and dark blue that arise now in the midst of the red artisans’ quarters instead of in the yellow area of riches’.1 Darkest Africa competes with, or doubles or intersects, darkest London.2 Wherever they may be, hearts are shrouded in shadows and ‘unknowability’ and testify to a growing anxiety about space, an uneasiness which also finds expression in the recurring obsession with maps and mapping.

Though it becomes a commonplace cliché, the heart/darkness trope is nonetheless revealing in virtue of its conflicting denotations, and alerts us to a growing disturbance in traditional ethnocentric assumptions. In the light of a metaphorical cluster so ubiquitous in the English culture of the time, and given Ford's friendship with both Masterman and Conrad, the cardiological obsession of The Good Soldier appears no naive or random motive; indeed, all Ford’s hearts are discovered to have, for one reason or the other, constant associations with darkness and gloom. More than anything else,
perhaps, the idea of ‘Florence clearing up one of the dark places of the earth, leaving the world a little lighter than she had found it’ reads as a caustic reminder of the fuzzy wilderness/civilisation (or darkness/light) dialectic and of its spatial and ideological implications.

**Misreading *Heart of Darkness***

No surprise, therefore, if *Heart of Darkness* appears as one of Ford's subtexts; it is certainly no coincidence that numerous Conradian clues should be disseminated throughout *The Good Soldier*. One of the most intriguing and disruptive has to do with a long unexpected digression by the narrator about Brussels – the unnamed starting point of Marlow's journey to Africa. Incongruously and at great length, Dowell goes into the details of unsynchronised railway timetables and laments the difficulty for anyone arriving at Calais with the boat train to catch the Brussels connection, thereby implying that he and Florence had often undergone the experience of ‘running!–along the unfamiliar ways of the Brussels station’; an experience felt to be greatly dangerous for Florence's health: ‘My wife used to run [. . .] But once in the German express, she would lean back with one hand to her side and her eyes closed’ (*GS* 39-40). Since Florence is ‘medically’ not fit to cross the Channel, why is she catching the Calais boat-train, and why should she have to rush from one train to another pretending to play havoc with her fragile heart? This narrative contradiction is indeed enhanced a few pages later, when Dowell ponders on the fact that ‘even on the fairest day of blue sky, with the cliffs of England shining like mother of pearl in full view of Calais, [he] would not have let her cross the steamer gangway to save her life’ (*GS* 64-5). Unaware of the realistic tyranny of cause and effect or, much likelier, more than willing to subvert it, Ford rewrites the Brussels-Congo journey into a Brussels-Nauheim parody.

In more general terms, there is a consistent narrative and semantic osmosis from Conrad to Ford. The brief mention of an ‘Italian baron
who had much to do with the Belgian Congo’ (GS 88) winks at yet another colonizer: ‘All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz’. 4

The question of brutishness – a major problem in Heart of Darkness – is often debated: is Ashburnham a brute? A recurring problem which is given divergent answers; and Nancy's father is feared for his ‘brutalities’. While no unspeakable rites are to be found in The Good Soldier, a lot appears to be beyond the possibility of linguistic formulation: Leonora, for instance, often deems her husband’s behaviour ‘unspeakable’. Like the African jungle, Mitteleuropa has its terrors, more and more ‘horrors’ plague the world of the Ashburnhams as well as Dowell’s. In such a context, the surfacing of violence – in Maisie's ‘murder’, for example – or the open expression of contempt for the natives of Africa – ‘hang humanity’ – may remind the reader of more explicit exterminations (GS 88). Conrad's shadow even reaches beyond Congo reminiscences: Ashburnham jumping into the Red Sea to rescue a Tommy contrasts with Jim's cowardice, and Leonora's father confessing to being at the end of his tether evokes yet another of Conrad's stories and yet another father-daughter relationship.

This self-conscious embedding of Conrad's voices in The Good Soldier has been explored by Thomas C. Moser, who stresses the many Dowell-Marlow parallelisms:

Dowell is as close to Marlow as Ford could ever get [. . .his] choice of hero is Marlowian as well. Like Jim, Edward is a big, blond, handsome, inarticulate Englishman [. . .] Dowell, again, like Marlow, handles masterfully the meaningful, illustrative digression.5

However, beyond the consummate craft, the homage to the much admired master is also a deliberate misreading: Conrad's world is manipulated, turned upside down and inside out, scattered as if by the wind of a different syntax and divergent meanings. However blurred and unstable, for instance, the geography of Heart of Darkness retains some sort of distinction between here and there, Africa and Europe.
Ford, on the other hand, ignores this shadow line so entirely that the civilized minuet of the pre-war European spa-society continuously dissolves into the tropes and vocabulary of the wilderness: ‘perils for young American girlhood’ are supposed to be lurking ‘in the European jungle’ and Paris is ‘full of snakes in the grass’. In a ludicrous mimicry of tropical adventures, Maisie Maidan's dead body appears to be ‘closed between the jaws of a gigantic alligator’, and, when Ashburnham appears in the hotel dining room, his gait is such that he ‘might have been walking in a jungle’. Not surprisingly, then, the articulate drawing-room conversation shifts to ‘screaming hysterics’, and love-making is considered an activity akin to exploration and the ‘acquiring of a new territory’ (GS 62, 56, 24, 12, 79).

**Colonial Plots**

Beyond the subtle filiations of intertextuality, however, the trace of Conrad's dislocated and relocated imperial geography suggests that closer attention should be dedicated to the colonial plots which frame and criss-cross the narrative of *The Good Soldier*. The much-glossed title offers the first of many indications, apparently pointing to Ashburnham’s ‘imperial’ soldiership and anticipating the deployment of the implicit virtues of a faithful British subject: Ashburnham is, after all, ‘an excellent magistrate, a first rate soldier, one of the best landlords in Hampshire, England’ as well as ‘upright, honest, fair dealing, fair thinking’ (GS 14, 79). Edward embodies and, at the same time, deflates the official discourse of nationality and the manly and ethnocentric mystique associated with it: ‘Imperial consciousness opened out before you in vistas as dazzling as they were unexplored. You were furnished, without effort on your own part, with traditions of valour and physical perfection: you stood, a scion of the sole white race, on the pinnacle of a world occupied solely otherwise by the parti-coloured’.\(^6\)

Ineluctably, the good English soldier leads us to his battlefields – in Ashburnham's case more amorous and exotic than warlike.
Ashburnham’s military career, however, provides Ford with an occasion to take his readers on a sardonic colonial grand tour. India, where the characters are lured for sordid financial reasons, proves little more than a dream of oriental clichés, sensual gardens and sentimental moonlights. The South African war is briefly hinted at through the grotesque comedy of British soldiers leaving ‘hundred bottle cases of champagne at five guineas a bottle on the veldt’ (*GS* 113). Less remotely, imperial policy is also seen through the lenses of the Irish settlers, harassed by endemic troubles and poverty. Leonora’s birth in a family of Irish landlords unveils the drama of the ‘small beleaguered garrison in a hostile country’; there are various allusions to the then growing violence between Gaelic-Irish and Anglo-Irish; and, in such a context, the bitter religious conflict between Edward and Leonora acquires clear colonial undertones: ‘Those were troublesome times in Ireland, I understand. At any rate Colonel Powys had tenants on the brain—his own tenants having shot at him with shot-guns’ (*GS* 47, 97).

The relevance of the Irish plot is of course enhanced by the passionate interest Ford had in the emancipation process in Ireland, ‘The oldest colony of all’. Even the United States is viewed as an ex-colony rather than as the world-power it was about to become at the beginning of the twentieth century. The very name of the ship ‘Pocahontas’ is a clue to the past 'glories' of exploration; the Hulbirds left England in 1688; and repeated mentions of General Braddock recall the revolution – obviously a trauma for Florence's aunts who had ‘backed the losing side in the war of independence and had been seriously impoverished and quite efficiently oppressed for that reason’ (*GS* 59). The whole chain of colonial history – exploration, emigration, settlement, independence, through to the post-colonial era – is thus represented in miniature. It is difficult to be blind to the fact that private hearts have a lot to do with the public history of the Empire.
Deeply inscribed in the narrative of *The Good Soldier*, this shifting colonial map is, first of all, an invitation to place the novel where it also belongs, namely at the heart of the raging debate on nationality and empire, in full flow at the beginning of the century. It is also a good occasion to assess the political dimension of Ford's modernism and modernity. While remembering that the pre-war years were crucial for the ideological construction of Englishness, let us also not overlook the fact that Ford and many of his closer friends were actively involved in puncturing the balloons of national and imperial rhetoric. Quite a few indeed reacted strongly against the ‘new spirit which had been fostered by Mr Chamberlain, Mr Rhodes [. . .] and had become articulate in the vigorous doggerel of Rudyard Kipling’, and resented ‘the hypnotisation by the pomp and pageantry of war’. For all his sentimental Toryism, Ford definitely did his part to undermine, unfalteringly if humorously, the imperialist fallacy: ‘Being profoundly impressed by the uselessness to England of the British Empire [. . .] and wishing solely that South Africa might be returned to its real owners, the natives, and Kruger and Mr. Chamberlain hung on the same gallows, I was once chased for three quarters of a mile along Oxford St. by a howling mob of patriots. That was during the South African wars’. However, while Masterman and Ford, among others, thundered against the ‘callous scoundrels’ in Africa and welcomed the idea of a nation without an empire, other voices were arising to promote a muscular and masculine sense of national cohesion and expansion.

Robert Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys. A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship* (1908) launched a long-lasting process of shaping English minds and bodies and trying to convince younger generations that they ‘belong to the British Empire, one of the greatest empires that has ever existed in the world’. Between 1903 and 1910, *The Riddle of the Sands*, by R. Erskine Childers, went through three successive editions and established a grammar for the novel of invasion while mobilising paranoid fears of an enemy. More
The Society for Pure English, founded in 1913, aimed at preserving the language from the invasion of foreign and mongrel tongues. The motif of a ‘pure’ language incidentally throws an interesting light on the polyglottism of *The Good Soldier*, a novel where local accents and verbal modes loom large in the narrative conflicts: American English (‘Florence's nasty New York sayings’) or Dowell's Pennsylvania Duitsch accent contrast with the southern English of Ashburnham – who ‘talked like a good book’ (*GS* 28, 26). *The Good Soldier* thus echoes important issues in the debate then current on language, but its narrator also approaches the problems from a curiously misplaced and unsettled point of view. Far from volunteering statements or asserting opinions, Dowell's voice of uncertainty – to use Ann Barr Snitow’s words – expresses a decentered vision of the Empire and materializes the fragmentation of Standard English into a multiplicity of idioms. Precisely this helplessness exposes the cracks and flaws of imperial discourse and re-stages the dynamics of a faltering colonial and national identity.

The imperial theme and Dowell's stuttering utterance may hopefully lead us a step further into the understanding of Ford's puzzling epistemology. In a text saturated with the language of ethnology (primitive marriage, capture, polygamy, sacrifice, sex battle, sex instinct . . .), the interaction of an alien observer's stumbling prose with topical colonial allusions requires that *The Good Soldier* also be placed in the context of the young and energetic anthropological discussion then taking place in England. Ford – and Conrad, whose presence in the textual palimpsest is not to be forgotten – lived and worked in the years when British anthropology was striving to free itself from its colonial matrix and evolving quickly from the armchair method of the questionnaire to direct inquiry and field observation. The legitimation of anthropology as a scientific and academic discipline involved deep epistemological and ideological turmoil which no doubt reached the enlightened society then concentrated around Rye and Winchelsea. True, there seems to
be no record of Ford's knowledge of either armchair or field ethnology, but we know of strong affinities, not to say intertextualities, between Conrad, on the one hand, and Frazer and Malinowski, on the other. Apart from Conrad – whose intellectual encounter with Frazer took place in a moment of intense collaboration with Ford – likely mediations between Ford and the world of ethnology might have involved most of his friends and protégés, from H. G. Wells and W. H. Hudson to D. H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis and John Galsworthy.

No doubt, Ford's own curiosity and omnivorous reading must have acquainted him with the second edition of *The Golden Bough* (1900) and the discussion it lead to, which drew attention to Frazer's contradictions and sometimes doubtful reliability. It so happens, moreover, that Ford’s ‘The Mother, A Song-Drama’ was published in the April issue of the *Fortnightly Review*, which also included a long, analytic and polemical review of ‘Mr. Frazer’s Theory of the Crucifixion’, a section of the 1900 edition of *The Golden Bough* which was deleted from the subsequent reprints. Thanks to its author Andrew Lang’s obvious wish to expose Frazer’s many weaknesses, the review offers a wonderful insight into some aspects of ritual sacrifice and sacred harlotry. Had Ford’s curiosity been tickled, there was no shortage of ethnological literature to satisfy it: from Alfred C. Haddon's report of the Torres Straits expedition (1901) to Frazer's *Totemism and Exogamy* (1910) and Malinowski's *The Family among the Australian Aborigines* (1913).

This is unfortunately not conclusive data. It does, however, confirm that diffused anthropological moods, terminology and approaches to facts were then permeating much of English culture and that the data was easily available to Ford. When C. F. G. Masterman describes the ‘life and manners and habits of the aborigines’ as they may be observed ‘in the other London beyond the water’, and Grant Allen investigates the comic possibilities of ethnological distance in *The British Barbarians*, making light of ethnocentric axioms, they
both draw freely from the recently discovered reservoir of anthropological tropes. Ford himself was trying his pen at ethnological writing of a kind in the trilogy *England and the English: An Interpretation.*\(^{20}\) In spite of huge differences in depth and intention, Ford does share some methodological elements with field workers of a more academic stance: an objectifying tendency to classify, a questioning attitude in front of the customs of the tribe, a stress on observation from an external and displaced point of view. *The Good Soldier*’s debt to *The Spirit of the People* stands as evidence of the ideal continuity between ‘ethnology’ and narrative. Undoubtedly, the chapter entitled ‘Conduct’ – which starts with an unambiguous anti-colonial statement – has left a deep mark on some central motives of the novel: the ‘things’ that should not be mentioned in English culture (religious topics, relations of the sexes, poverty-stricken districts . . .), the repression of emotions, a sketch of the perfect Englishman as a mystical sportsman, the famous station episode which offers a first draft of Edward Ashburnham, all these motifs have migrated from essay to narrative with great ease (*SP* 143, 145, 146, 152). While in the process of defining its own scientific and academic status and discovering new modes of approaching otherness, anthropology was undoubtedly in the air, in the culture and in the language of England.

**The Customs of the Tribe**

Whether deliberately incorporated or absorbed in more surreptitious ways, anthropology seems, therefore, to have contributed to the making of *The Good Soldier*. A first inkling is to be found in an apparently discordant lexical choice. When the narrator recalls Edward’s desire to be a ‘polygamist’ (*GS* 125), the conventional story of womanizing, adultery and unfaithfulness is set to a new tune and displaced into an entirely different semantic field. In this light, ‘Edward carrying on intrigues with other women, with two at once, with three’ (*GS* 117) invites the reader to rethink the conflicts of the
novel in terms of social and cultural patterns rather than individual passions. Edward's 'polygamy' is echoed by Florence's 'polyandry' – a word not found in *The Good Soldier*, though the practice is: ‘And, by the time she was sick of Jimmy [...] she had taken on Edward Ashburnham’ (*GS* 65), while of course being married to Dowell. Dowell's ‘capture’ of Florence, thanks to the night and the help of a ladder, and his subsequent comment about ‘how primitively these matters were arranged in those days [...]’ (*GS* 60) reinforces these ethnological undertones. Marriages by capture or elopement, Malinowski explains, were common among the ‘violent forms of obtaining wives’.

The same conviction is to be found in Frazer: ‘There are signs to show that marriage by capture was once the rule’.

Latent polyandry – together with explicit capture and polygamy – sketch the underlying pattern of the novel and confirm its affinity with the anthropological discussion. Indeed, the group formed by the Ashburnhams and Nancy, so often questioned for its elusive internal relations, may perhaps be best understood if approached in terms of kinship. Malinowski – in a first book published a few months before Ford started writing *The Good Soldier* – gives us an initial insight into what was to become the ethnological question *par excellence*. After stating that ‘the class of kinship ideas [...] must affirm an intimate bond of some kind between the parties involved’, the ethnographer contends that kinship must not be confused with consanguinity, which it would be incorrect ‘to treat as a constant and indispensable constituent of parental kinship’. In Australia, as in the narrative country of *The Good Soldier*, blood-ties are simply not the relevant paradigm, whether they exist or not: Nancy is a ward, Edward a guardian, Leonora an aunt or a friend, all three of them implicated in the mysterious entanglements of primitive kinship. This suggestion is supported and further illuminated by the fact – generally acknowledged by most ethnographers, and originally pointed out by Malinowski – that ‘the majority of Australian tribes are wholly
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ignorant of the physiological process of procreation’.\textsuperscript{25} This comes as a strikingly appropriate clue to one of the much glossed enigmas of The Good Soldier: ‘Edward Ashburnham [. . .] at the time of his marriage and for perhaps a couple of years after [. . .] did not really know how children are produced. Neither did Leonora’ (GS 99).

In his perplexed appreciation of alien customs, the narrator even seems to follow Malinowski’s warning not to generalise but to read cultural fact in the light of geographical difference: ‘It is the law of the land’ (GS 151) which forbids Dowell to marry Nancy. Indeed, this ‘I cannot marry her’ is only one of a string of vetoes linked to marriage, an obsession that runs through the novel and bears an uncanny resemblance to Frazer’s thoughts on exogamy: ‘A community was bisected into two exogamous and intermarrying groups, and all men and women were classified according to the generation and the group to which they belonged. The principle of classification was not “Whom am I descended from”, but “Whom may I marry”’.\textsuperscript{26} A haunting question to everyone in The Good Soldier, to be sure. Mad women cannot marry allegedly healthy men, and marriage, as Nancy discovers with horror, is no ontological or irreversible affair: ‘I thought you were married or unmarried as you are alive or dead [. . .] That, Leonora said, is the law of the Church. It is not the law of the land’ (GS 141). Customs change according to the local community which originates them or, indeed, according to the totemic group one belongs to: what is possible for the Anglican Brands – as it had been for Henry VIII – is forbidden to the worshippers of a Catholic God. Exogamy, writes Frazer, is stern, pitiless, and puritanical, as Dowell no doubt agrees: ‘Not one of us had got what he really wanted’ (GS 151). In his bemused way, Dowell is groping in the dark to grasp, formulate and perhaps interpret the intricate cultural patterns of the English tribe, its customary and religious rules, norms, vetoes and fetishes; and, to do so, he has to decipher a system of facial and verbal expressions as well as the technicalities of English life.
Frazer's voice, however, is not limited to matrimonial norms. A suspicious – and seemingly gratuitous – piece of mistletoe (GS 135) alerts us to the fact that *The Golden Bough* had become a widely shared cultural currency, and that Nancy, a huntress repeatedly associated with horses, owes some aspects of her character to the Frazerian Diana, in whose ritual ‘fire seems to have played a foremost part’. Nancy's erotic fantasies are similarly ignited: ‘Flame then really seemed to fill her body [...] he was kissing her on her face that burned and on her neck that was on fire’ (GS 144). Or should we connect Diana to Leonora, since she also rides and hunts with Bayham, uses a riding whip and is worshipped by the would-be vestal Nancy as the Virgin Mary, who according to Frazer, is a Christian displacement of Diana: ‘The Christian church appears to have sanctified this great festival of the Virgin goddess by adroitly converting it into the festival of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin on the 15 of August’? (GB 14)

Other *personae*, however, gather around Nancy. She is also a likely candidate for sacred prostitution, an argument that fostered endless discussions after the second edition of *The Golden Bough*. To the girl, Edward is a godlike ‘precious lamb’, to whom she is ready to sacrifice her virginity – ‘I am ready to belong to you, to save your life’ (GS 154) – all this in a context where prostitution and harlotry are constantly evoked and alluded to. Enough, it would seem, to establish some kind of contiguity with the ‘servants or slaves of the gods’ who ‘in common parlance are spoken of simply as harlots’ (GB 320). Nancy's Frazerian affinities are moreover reinforced by her redundant and disconcerting involvement with Saturnalia (GS 85), a motif which reasserts the disturbing overlapping of so-called civilised order and pagan rituals as a time ‘when the whole population give themselves up to extravagant mirth and jollity and when darker passions find a vent which would never be allowed them in a more staid and sober course of civilised life’, in the form of ‘wild orgies of lust and crime’ (GB 630).
Finally, Edward's death, textualized as a sacrifice with strong ritual overtones, leads us to the Scapegoat theory. At first a Christ-like figure, Ashburnham is tortured by the two women: ‘I seem to see him stand, naked to the waist [. . .] and flesh hanging from him in rags’ (GS 152). Dowell's ever hesitating narrative then offers a more 'primitive' version of the same moment: ‘They were like a couple of Sioux who had got hold of an Apache and had him well-tied to a stake’ (GS 152). Whatever the mode of his violent death, Edward is implicitly sacrificed, because ‘society can only exist if the normal, if the virtuous, and the slightly-deceitful flourish, and if the passionate, the headstrong and the too-truthful are condemned to suicide and to madness’ (GS 160-61); ‘Edward must die, the girl must lose her reason [. . .] in order that a third personality, more normal, should have, after a period of trouble, a quiet, comfortable good time’ (GS 148-9). Ashburnham is the scapegoat upon whom the sins and evils of the people are laid, his death effecting a ‘total clearance of all the ills that have been infesting the people’ (GB 587, 589, 670).

The Ethnographer's Burden
Knitting together ethnology and fiction, The Good Soldier proves to be the fascinating – and in certain ways still not wholly explored – document of a close intellectual encounter between distinct cultural pursuits. The sole fact of using ethnological tools – traditionally employed in the context of ‘primitive’ societies – in a European plot creates much disturbance in the traditional geopolitical mapping of the globe. For it implies, of course, that Ford treats the European gentry that occupies the centre as he would the native people of the periphery. The novel literally shows us the English being ethnologized, a subversive affair, presumably, in 1915, though, we have seen, favoured by other writers. Moreover, Dowell's specific position as an American contributes to the further blurring of the boundary between the anthropologist and the native object he is studying. The detached glance of the anthropologist is directed by the
former colonial subject upon the European gentry. Dowell is an amphibious narrator who combines uneasily the status of the native with the detached glance of the would-be scientific observer, and in this sense interestingly anticipates Malinowski's prediction that the anthropologized would eventually appropriate the weapons of the ethnographer.

But the fact that different discursive modes are woven into the same narrative also raises the question of their relation. In other words, how does ethnology relate to fiction and fiction to ethnology? Post-modernity has alerted us to the problem of the heuristic status of history and the authority of scientific discourse. And authority, or the lack of it, is precisely the problem that Dowell's precarious ethnological fiction (or fictitious ethnology) obliges his readers to address. In this sense, his story shows an affinity with the preoccupations of contemporary ethnology, constantly assailed by the impossibility of self-legitimisation in its chase for cultural truth: ‘In short, anthropological writings are themselves [. . .] fictions; fictions in the sense they are something made, something fashioned [. . .] not that they are false, unfactual, or merely “as if” thought experiments’.29 Clifford Geertz's words are actually a welcome reminder that the truth/lie discussion around Dowell has lost whatever pertinence it had; as Ford, incidentally, well knew when he wrote that ‘books aim at renderings rather than statements’ (SP xvi). True to the constitutive ambiguity of fiction/ethnology, Dowell's narrative ‘renders’ the anxiety of a failing objectivity and the downfall of positivistic certitudes.

It also gives us a fresh insight into the famously confusing epistemology of a novel that stumbles from uncertainty to doubt ‘in a very rambling way so that it may be difficult for anyone to find their path through what may be a sort of maze’ (GS 119). Dowell finds himself in the awkward situation of the ethnologist who faces the alien other without knowing much of their language nor of their customs, and has to piece together raw data and fragmentary pieces of
information. He has to depend on informants whose reliability is dubious, and to follow indeed the methodological advice Malinowski offers in the first chapter of *The Family among the Australian Aborigines*. Many pages are dedicated, often in the interrogative form, to the assessment of the informants as well as to the method of asking questions in the right way and of weighing the evidence at length; it is essential to hear many opinions on the same subject, and once this is done, to find one's way in the maze of heterogeneous statements. What emerges very clearly in these beautiful pages is the hermeneutic – Malinowski actually uses this word – fragility of the observer whose interpretation must be, as it were, suspended: ‘Some of the statements may be regarded as untrustworthy. The correct interpretation of others may be determined; and thus the contradiction will vanish. Sometimes, it is impossible, the contradictions remain irreducible. Then they must be simply pointed out’.

Dowell, as an ethnologist, is trapped in a similar set of limitations. His informants are hardly dependable: ‘I asked Mrs. Ashburnham whether she had told Florence that and what Florence had said and she answered [. . .]’ (*GS* 14). He is forced into repetition (weighing his evidence?) and contradiction: is Ashburnham a brute or the ‘painstaking guardian’ (*GS* 14) to the whole world? Is Leonora the saint or the villain of the piece? That he reaches so few conclusions may prove that Dowell is bad at his job, but his approach to the European natives remains nonetheless close to the ethnological mode and doomed by the same epistemological frailties.

Much of this weakness is due to the double position of the observer, who is somehow part of the action he observes, as, with amazing perspicacity, Malinowski already knew in 1913. In his unwittingly double role, Dowell also performs the last act of the ethnographer's part, confusing his identity with Ashburnham's and experiencing the impossible desire of the anthropologist, the passion that ‘leaves his questions unanswered’: ‘I loved Edward Ashburnham [. . .] I love him because he was just myself’ (*GS* 161).
More than anything else, Dowell is caught in the painful process of translation – or, using Ford's terminology, ‘rendering’ – which is the lot of the ethnographer: ‘Ethnography is thick description. What the ethnographer is in fact faced with [. . .] is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular and inexplicit and which he must contrive first to grasp and then to render’.

Rendering therefore means synchronising chunks of data which have been given in no sequential order, a result Dowell tries hard to achieve, however unsuccessfully: ‘One goes back, one goes forward. One remembers points that one has forgotten and one explains them all the more minutely since one recognises that one has forgotten to mention them in their proper places and that one may have given, by omitting them, a false impression’ (GS 120). Dowell is thus, perhaps, given an *a posteriori* forgiveness for his illogical and disjointed narrative, since coherence, in ethnology or fiction, is not necessarily a positive value: ‘Coherence cannot be the major test of validity for a cultural description [. . .] there is nothing so coherent as a paranoid's description or a swindler's story. Nothing has done more to discredit cultural analysis than the construction of impeccable depictions of formal ordering whose actual existence nobody can believe’.

Translation also implies fixing the volatile data of oral communication and perception on the page and bridging the gap between the process of listening/speaking and writing. It is an uneasy voyage from one form to another and from field to page that Dowell invites us to, referring twice to his diaries and acknowledging he has been writing for months while addressing an ideal listener: ‘The ethnographer “inscribes” social discourse; he writes it down. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event which exists solely in its own moment of occurrence, into an account which exists in its inscriptions and can be re-consulted’. But this uneasiness – textualised into the tormented tropes of ethnological analysis – hypothesis, repetition,
oxymoron, suspension – is precisely the stuff of epistemic density. Dowell's failure to understand may well be the ethnographer's burden: ‘Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And worse than that, the more deeply its goes, the less complete it is. It is a strange science whose most telling assertions are its most tremulously based’. Losing his way in translation, Dowell formulates and addresses the crucial questions of twentieth century epistemology and ethnology; and if he fails to answer them, it makes him, and Ford, all the closer to us.

NOTES


quotes Ada Galsworthy’s notebooks where she mentions the regular callers at their home: among others, Hudson, Ford, S. Colvin, E. Gosse and G. Murray, who was in touch with the Cambridge group of ethnologists.

18. *Fortnightly Review*, 69 (April 1901), includes Ford Madox Hueffer’s ‘The Mother: A Song-Drama’, 741-6, as well as Andrew Lang’s ‘Mr. Frazer’s Theory of the Crucifixion’, 649-62.


24. Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Family among the Australian Aborigines*, p. 183. Malinowski adds: ‘What is essential is to point out that our peculiarly European idea of kinship, which necessarily involves consanguinity, cannot be applied to other societies without discussion [. . .] It would seem convenient to reserve the word ‘consanguinity’ to relationships based upon community of blood and to use the word ‘kinship’ to denote the parental relationship in general’; p. 179.

25. Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Family among the Australian Aborigines*, p. 232; see also pp. 179-81: ‘the most noteworthy cases in regard to the present subject are those whose fatherhood in its social sense is not consanguineous owing to the ignorance of the physiological law of reproduction [. . .] This ignorance is of general sociological
importance, because there are well-founded reasons for believing that it was once universal among primitive mankind.'


31. When he states that in field-work, the method of observation affects the final statement; *The Family among the Australian Aborigines*, p. 23.


34. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, p. 18.

35. Geertz, *ibid*.